

Magna Carta (1215)

John, King of England, and his Barons

Historical Background

During the reign of King John of England (1199 – 1216), the king faced a rebellion of the nobility, or barons. The barons accused King John of tyranny and protested the imposition of higher taxes, the king's submission to the Pope, and loss of baronial lands during wars they did not support. Between 1209 and 1212 many of King John's barons began to conspire against him. In the past barons had successfully deposed and replaced monarchs, but this rebellion did not seek to replace King John. Instead, the barons began to articulate their grievances, many of them specific to and endemic of feudal society. They set out their vision on parchment, creating a document that would limit the powers of the monarch and protect the rights of the barons. In 1215, in a field in Runnymede, England, they demanded that King John agree to and sign a great charter or "Magna Carta." To avoid the prospect of civil war the king acquiesced, agreeing that his rule was subject to the law of the land. Although the charter was denounced at once by the pope and failed to alleviate the grievances of the barons, it came to be cherished by Englishmen as a crucial affirmation of their liberties and was reissued a number of times after King John's death.

Historical Significance

The Magna Carta remains a foundational document for both Britain and the United States. Denying that royal power is absolute and affirming the principle of limited government, it declares the right of free men to be judged by their peers and in accordance with the law of the land. Checking power in this manner paved the way for constitutional monarchy in Britain and in the British Empire. In their struggle to secure their rights as equal subjects of the British crown, the American colonists appealed to the Magna Carta. After independence they embodied its principles in their state and federal constitutions, for example with the provision of the Fifth Amendment in the Bill of Rights that every person will have the right of due process of law.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: rule of law, limited government, constitutional government, judgment by one's peers, due process of law.

On completion of this lesson, students will be able to

summarize the major grievances in the Magna Carta;

identify the seeds of democracy in the appeal of the nobility;

explain the how the protection of property and money became foundational to the idea of liberty.

Questions to Explore

What is the Barons' understanding of fairness? Give some examples. Compare their understanding with our own understanding of rights.

In what ways do the demands of the barons express universal concerns that are shared by people everywhere, and in what way are they particular to their time and place?

How does the Magna Carta demand due process of law?

What is the role of the Archbishop and the church in the document?