

History



King John and the Barons

Who Was King John?

Born in 1167, John was the last child of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Often referred to as John Lackland, he trained as a knight in the household of his elder brother, the future King Richard I, and also studied administration with his father's Justiciar – a powerful officer of the court and representative of the King.

John's relationship with his brother Richard was tumultuous. He even conspired against him at one point with King Philip of France. However, upon his death in 1199, King Richard I named John as his heir.

John became King of England, but struggled to maintain control of his dominions on the European continent, part of his father's original Angevin empire. By 1205, he had lost his strongholds in Normandy and Anjou to the French King. In the years that followed, one of King John's chief goals was to recover these and other lost territories.



King John hunting on horseback

Trouble with the Barons

In seeking to regain the lands he had lost, King John engaged in expensive military campaigns in Normandy and France. In order to fund these activities, he raised taxes and demanded extraordinary customary payments from his barons, including scutage payments, which rose steeply at this time.

King John developed a reputation as a harsh ruler. He imposed new monetary penalties, seized castles and holdings from barons who displeased him and even imprisoned their family members.

While King John's father, King Henry II, had introduced judicial reforms and strengthened the royal courts during his reign, his son used the existing justice system to extort money from the barons and suppress his opponents.

In addition, many of King John's Anglo-Norman barons were displeased with his military failures on the continent, which had also cost them lands and holdings.



Did you know?

It is thought that King John's nickname – John Lackland – was related to his early prospects. As his father's youngest legitimate son, he was not expected to hold or inherit much land or power. It was only as a result of his brothers' early deaths that John's prospects improved.

Legacy

From the Articles of the Barons to Magna Carta

Following a decisive defeat at the Battle of Bouvines in 1214, King John returned to England to find that many of his barons were now openly rebelling against him. On May 17, 1215, the rebel barons captured the Tower of London. With few options remaining, King John agreed to meet the barons in a field at Runnymede, beside the River Thames, on June 15, 1215.

Seeking Redress

The purpose of the rebellion and the meeting at Runnymede was not to overthrow the King. The barons wanted instead to force the King to agree to limits on his royal authority. These limits would require the King to stop abusing his rights under feudalism and to recognize the rights of others when dispensing justice.

The Articles of the Barons

The barons listed their demands in a document known as the Articles of the Barons, which they used as a basis for their negotiations with the King. They were aided by Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who acted as an intermediary between the two sides. As the negotiations progressed, the Articles of the Barons ultimately became a draft settlement.

Once the barons had reached an agreement in principle with the King, the Chancery – a royal writing office – fine-tuned the language and rephrased and reordered certain clauses. The end product became known as Magna Carta.



The Articles of the Barons, 1215

The Sealing of Magna Carta at Runnymede in June 1215

After several days of negotiations, King John agreed to the final provisions of Magna Carta by affixing his royal seal to the document. The barons then formalized their peace agreement with the King by renewing their oaths of loyalty to him. This historic moment marked the first time that an English King had allowed detailed limits to be placed on his royal authority.

King John Revokes Magna Carta

Within months of the meeting at Runnymede, King John reneged on the agreement and asked Pope Innocent III to annul Magna Carta. The Pope consented, declaring the agreement invalid and claiming that it had been made under duress. This led to the eruption of the First Barons War in the fall of 1215. This new unrest only subsided when King John died the following year and was succeeded by his

nine-year-old son, King Henry III, under the control of an appointed regent.

Although Magna Carta was essentially a failed peace treaty in 1215, it would survive to be reissued by subsequent monarchs and to influence the development of justice, law and democracy in later centuries.



Nineteenth century illustration depicting King John signing – not sealing – Magna Carta



Did you know?

It is often assumed that King John agreed to Magna Carta by signing it. However, medieval kings endorsed official documents through the application of a royal seal, not a handwritten signature.

