

LEVELED Book • Y

# The Great Charter



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Written by David Dreier

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## Focus Question

In what ways did the Great Charter become a powerful symbol of freedom?

## Words to Know

barons

charter

civil war

Crusade

humbled

interdict

nullified

oath

rebellion

successor

taxed

tried

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## Detested King John

In the year 1199, England's King Richard I died in France. He died from an arrow wound that became infected. Richard had been fighting to hold on to French lands that had long been claimed by England's royal family. Before dying, King Richard named his brother John as his **successor** to the throne.

Richard had **taxed** the people heavily for the war in France and for his participation in a **Crusade**. The last thing the people of England wanted when John became king was to be taxed even more. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened.



John was the youngest of four boys and not expected to become king of England.

He imposed excessive taxes on the **barons** and also took much of their property. John was a bad king in almost every way. To protect himself from **rebellion**, John took many prisoners from the nobility, the leading families of England. The nobles had to pay to get their relatives released, but John sometimes killed the prisoners even after being paid.

John added to his offenses in 1203 with a terrible family crime. He had a fifteen-year-old nephew in France, named Arthur. His nephew was favored by King Philip II of France to be the ruler of England, so John wanted Arthur gone. His forces captured the lad, who then disappeared. John probably ordered Arthur to be murdered, and he may have killed the boy himself.

In 1204, King Philip defeated an army of hired soldiers that John had raised for a war in France. This victory allowed Philip to reclaim most of the French territory that had been held by England's royal family.

Meanwhile, John continued to stir up trouble wherever he could. In 1205, the archbishop of Canterbury died, and England needed to replace him. Pope Innocent III wanted the position to go to an English cardinal, Stephen Langton. John had his own ideas. He insisted that an English bishop obtain the post. When John didn't get his way, he began taking church lands.



King Philip II transformed France from a small feudal state into one of the most powerful countries in Europe.

John's actions resulted in a strong response from the pope: in 1208, Innocent put all of England under a ruling called an **interdict**. The interdict closed the doors of England's churches to everyone. During the interdict, priests could not perform masses, funerals, or other rituals.

When John still would not give in, the pope excommunicated him. People who were excommunicated were completely separated from the church and told they could not enter heaven. But that did not worry John. He continued to anger Innocent, seizing more property and money belonging to the church. The pope then joined forces with the French king, aiming to have Philip invade England and replace John as king.



Innocent III was pope for eighteen years.

John realized at this point that he was in a very serious situation. So in 1213, he finally agreed to allow Cardinal Langton to become archbishop. John didn't stop there, however. Surprising everyone, he **humbled** himself to Innocent and offered to become a servant of the pope. The delighted Innocent accepted the offer at once and pardoned the king. John's bold action was a very smart move. He went from being a cornered outcast to having a powerful friend: the Roman Catholic Church.

## The Barons

In medieval England, a baron was any noble who had received land from a superior in return for loyalty and military service. Higher-ranking barons received their land from the king, but they could in turn give parcels of their land to lesser barons.



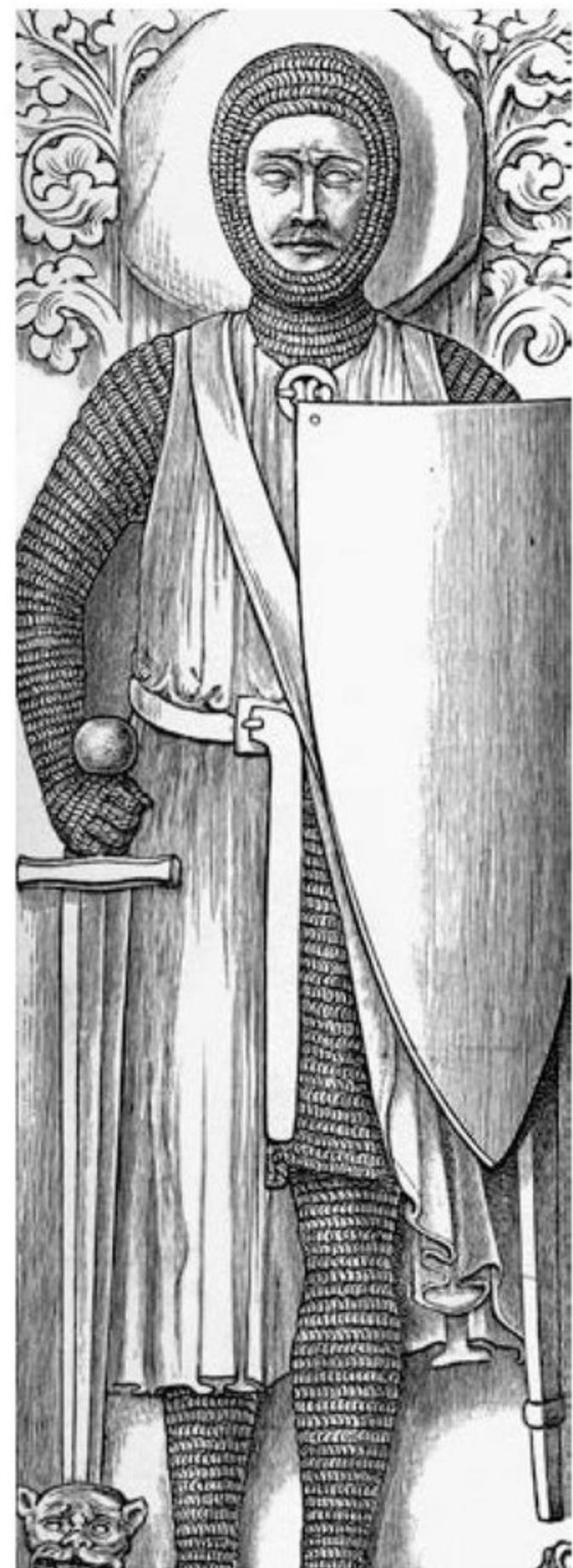
In 1214, the barons swore an oath to achieve fair treatment from the king.

## The Barons Organize

Archbishop Langton was still angry with King John, and he was determined that John must go. Langton became an adviser to a group of some two hundred barons who also wanted to get rid of the king.

Not all the barons were against John. A few wanted to find a way to improve relations with the king. Those barons included a famous knight named William Marshal. People respected Marshal for his good character and loyalty. He had served four kings, including John. Marshal became a go-between in the barons' relations with John.

The barons first met together as a group in July 1213. At this meeting, they decided to pressure John to uphold a document called King Henry I's **Coronation Charter**. That agreement had been approved more than a hundred years earlier. It spelled out the laws that the king would follow when dealing with the nobles, church officials, and the common people of England.



William Marshal's official title was the first earl of Pembroke.

John promised that he would obey the laws in the Coronation Charter.

When John broke his promise, the barons met again in November 1214 to discuss what to do next. Archbishop Langton said the Coronation Charter provided a historical reason for the barons' challenge to John. One of the barons, Robert Fitzwalter, became a leader of the forces opposing John and helped guide their plans.

At the 1214 meeting, the barons began to flex their muscles. They decided to pay no further taxes to John for his wars in France, and they went a step further. They drew up a list of demands to be presented to the king. The list was based on the Coronation Charter but also included other items. The additions stated that the king had to live by the same laws as all other people. If John refused to accept the barons' demands, they would rebel against him.

In January 1215, Fitzwalter and a few other barons met with John to present their list. John told them he would give them a reply by Easter, but he did not. The barons then moved forward with their plans to present John with a more formal list of their demands, and they also began preparing for war.

## Runnymede and a Faithless King

The *Magna Carta*, or the Great Charter, was the barons' final attempt to stop John's excesses before going to war. The first version of the charter—a Latin document known as the Articles of the Barons—listed sixty-three demands. Among them were demands shielding the barons from royal abuse and too many taxes. The document also called for protecting the rights of the English Church. It further said that no free citizens would be put in jail or punished without first being **tried** in a court of law. A group of twenty-five barons would see that the king obeyed the charter—using force if necessary.

The barons grew stronger. In May 1215, a group of them seized London, the most important city in England, further weakening John's position. The king then agreed to meet with the barons to be presented with the charter.

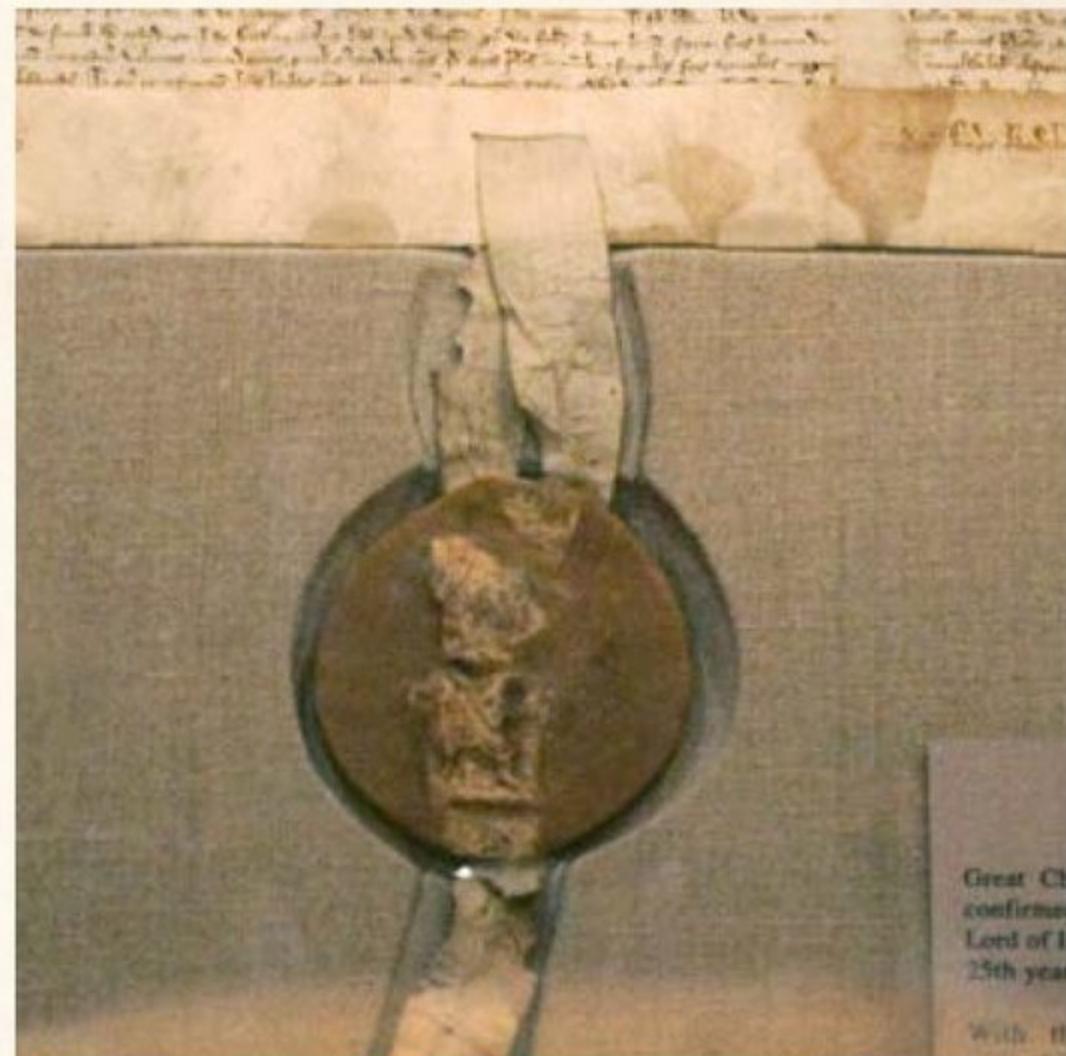
The meeting began on June 15, 1215, in a large meadow at Runnymede, a town near London. A tent with a small throne was set up for the king. When John arrived, he said he agreed with everything in the charter. He put his royal seal on the document and swore an **oath** that he would uphold it.

In the days after the meeting, copies of the Great Charter—also written in Latin—were sent out. Few people believed that the king would keep his oath to uphold the charter, however. John would break an oath easily. The barons feared that John would ignore the charter as soon as he could do so safely.

The king proved to be just as faithless as everyone suspected he would be. He wanted no part of the charter and he called on his friend Pope Innocent for help. Innocent took John's side. In August 1215, the pope **nullified** the charter, freeing John from all its provisions.

## "Signing" the Magna Carta

Most illustrations depicting the meeting at Runnymede show King John signing the Magna Carta with a quill pen, but that is inaccurate. The Magna Carta was formalized with the king's seal. Virtually all medieval documents were made official in this way. An engraved design on a handheld seal or signet ring was pressed into a blob of soft, warm wax, which then hardened. A seal could be applied to the document itself but more often was placed on a ribbon or cord attached to the bottom of the document.



That was the final straw for the barons. Although some, including Marshal, remained loyal to the crown, a large group of them, led by Fitzwalter, launched a **civil war**. They invited Philip's son, Prince Louis of France, to join the fight. They intended to put Louis on the English throne once they were victorious. Louis raised an army and invaded England.

In late 1216, there was a completely unexpected development: both Pope Innocent and King John died. John's nine-year-old son, Henry III, then became king. Marshal, now aged seventy, became the administrator of the government because Henry was still too young to rule on his own. Marshal advised Henry to reissue the charter to show the barons that he would be a law-abiding king.

In many paintings Henry III looks just like his father, John I.



## Events of the Great Charter

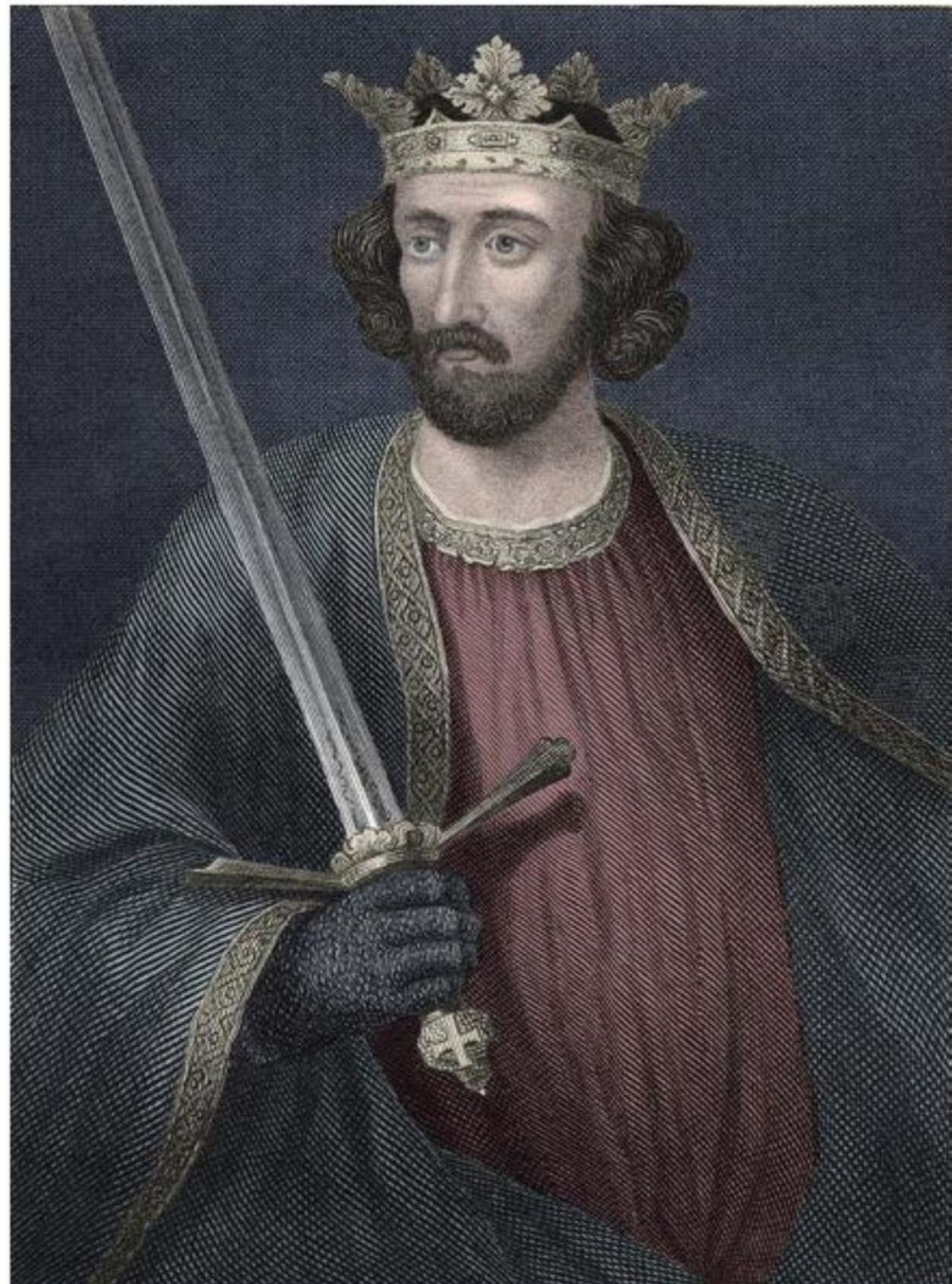
- April 1199**—John becomes king of England.
- July 1205**—Archbishop of Canterbury dies.
- March 1208**—Pope Innocent III lays England under an interdict.
- May 1213**—King John bows to the pope and allows Stephen Langton to become archbishop of Canterbury.
- July 1213**—The barons meet as a group for the first time in St. Albans.
- November 1214**—The barons meet as a group for the second time in Bury St. Edmunds.
- January 1215**—Robert Fitzwalter and a few other barons meet with King John.
- May 1215**—The barons seize London.
- June 1215**—King John signs the Great Charter.
- August 1215**—Pope Innocent III nullifies the charter.
- July 1216**—Pope Innocent III dies.
- October 1216**—King John dies and his son, Henry, becomes king of England.
- September 1217**—William Marshal defeats the barons and ends the civil war.
- November 1217**—King Henry III reissues the charter.

## Aftermath

Marshal once again proved his worth to the English throne. In 1217, he defeated the rebel barons and sent Prince Louis back to France. Henry reissued the Great Charter, satisfying the barons who worried that his reign would not be much different from John's.

Henry turned eighteen in 1225. That year, he again reissued the Great Charter, thereby reinforcing his promise to be a good ruler. Henry accepted the idea that even the king of England must obey the law. The charter was reissued one more time, in 1297, during the reign of Henry's son, King Edward I.

Edward I confirmed the charter because the barons believed he was not governing as a good king should.





The four remaining copies of the Magna Carta were together in April 2015, for the first time, to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the charter.

The Great Charter became a powerful symbol of freedom and the idea that no one is above the law. It served as the foundation for English Common Law, England's legal system. According to the charter, people charged with a crime must be treated as innocent until proven guilty in a trial by jury. Many of the ideas presented in the charter deeply influenced political thinking in Europe. They also influenced the American colonies in the 1700s, when they broke away from British rule to create the United States. Many of those same ideas found new expression in the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

## Glossary

<b>barons</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	men holding low rank in European nobility (p. 4)
<b>charter</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an official document defining the rights and responsibilities of a person or group (p. 8)
<b>civil war</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a war in which groups of people from the same country fight against each other (p. 12)
<b>Crusade</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	any of the military campaigns during which European Christians traveled to Jerusalem, or the Holy Land, to try to take control of it (p. 4)
<b>humbled</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	made lower in power or prestige; made to feel modest or less proud (p. 7)
<b>interdict</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a punishment within the Catholic Church that prohibits a person or group from receiving holy sacraments or Christian burial (p. 6)
<b>nullified</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	made to have no effect, value, or legal power (p. 11)
<b>oath</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a formal promise (p. 10)
<b>rebellion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a fight against authority or power (p. 4)
<b>successor</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a person who follows another in a job or elected position (p. 4)
<b>taxed</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	collected a fee to pay for government services, operations, or functions (p. 4)
<b>tried</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	judged in court following a legal investigation (p. 10)

# The Great Charter

A Reading A-Z Level Y Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,513

## Connections

### Writing

Do you think King John was a good ruler? Write a paragraph to support your position including citations from the text to support your claim.

### Social Studies

Compare and contrast the influence of the English royal family and the church in the creation of the Great Charter.

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