

LEVELED BOOK • Z<sup>1</sup>

# The Great Charter



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Written by David Dreier

# The Great Charter



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## Focus Question

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

## Words to Know

abide

affixed

baptisms

barons

charter

feudal

humbled

imposed

justification

mercenary

nullified

oath

pacifying

scutage

solemn

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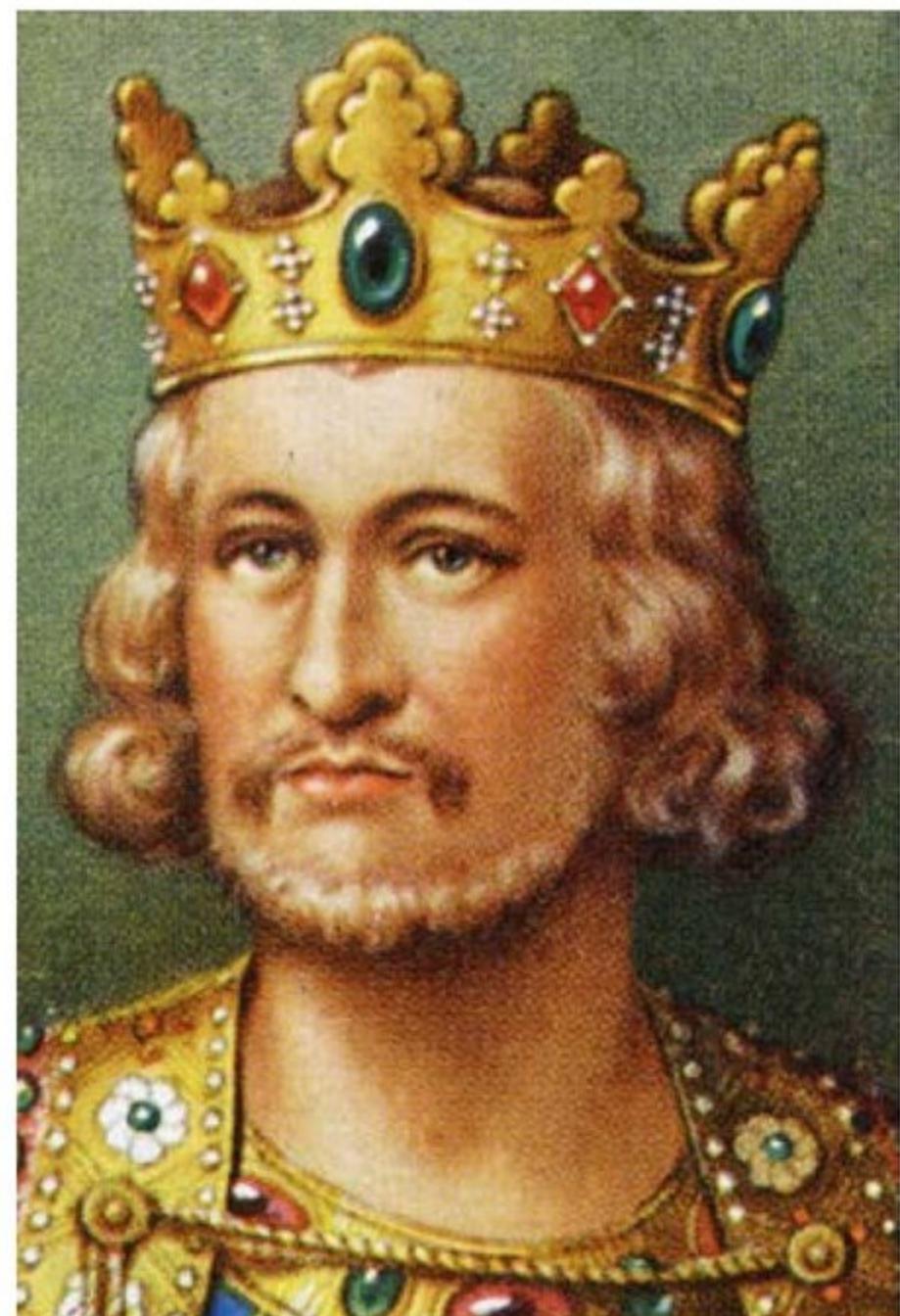
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## Detested King John

In the late 1100s and early 1200s, England suffered under the rule of two self-centered kings. The trouble started during the time of King Richard I, known as Richard the Lionheart. During his ten-year reign, England was nearly bankrupted. The king taxed the English people heavily to pay for his participation in the Third Crusade. While Richard was away at war, his youngest brother, John, tried to take the throne and failed.

On his way home from the unsuccessful crusade, Richard was captured and held prisoner in Austria. The people holding him prisoner demanded an enormous amount of money for his release. After gaining his freedom, Richard forgave his brother and imposed more taxes for a war in France to defend his holdings there. He died in France in 1199 from an arrow wound. Before dying, he named John as his successor to the throne.



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

The last thing the people of England wanted when John became king was to be squeezed for more taxes. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened. John turned out to be a terrible king in almost every way. He angered the **barons**, not only through heavy taxation but also by taking their property. To protect himself from rebellion, John took many prisoners from noble families, who had to pay to get their relatives released. However, John sometimes killed the prisoners even after being paid.

## 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.

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. John wanted to get rid of Arthur. His forces captured the lad, who then disappeared. John probably ordered Arthur to be murdered, and he may have killed the boy himself.



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



Innocent III was pope for eighteen years.

In 1204, King Philip defeated the **mercenary** army that John had raised, which 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, John de Gray, obtain the post. When John didn't get his way, he began taking church lands.

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, meaning no priests could perform masses, nor could they marry anyone or perform **baptisms** or funerals.

When John still would not give in, the pope excommunicated him. Excommunication meant that people were completely separated from the church and told they could not enter heaven. But excommunication 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.

John realized 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; to the amazement of all, he **humbled** himself to Innocent and offered to make the pope the **feudal** overlord of England. Delighted, Innocent accepted the offer at once and pardoned the king. John's bold action was a very smart move. Overnight, he went from being a cornered outcast to having a powerful friend and ally: the Roman Catholic Church.

## The Barons Organize

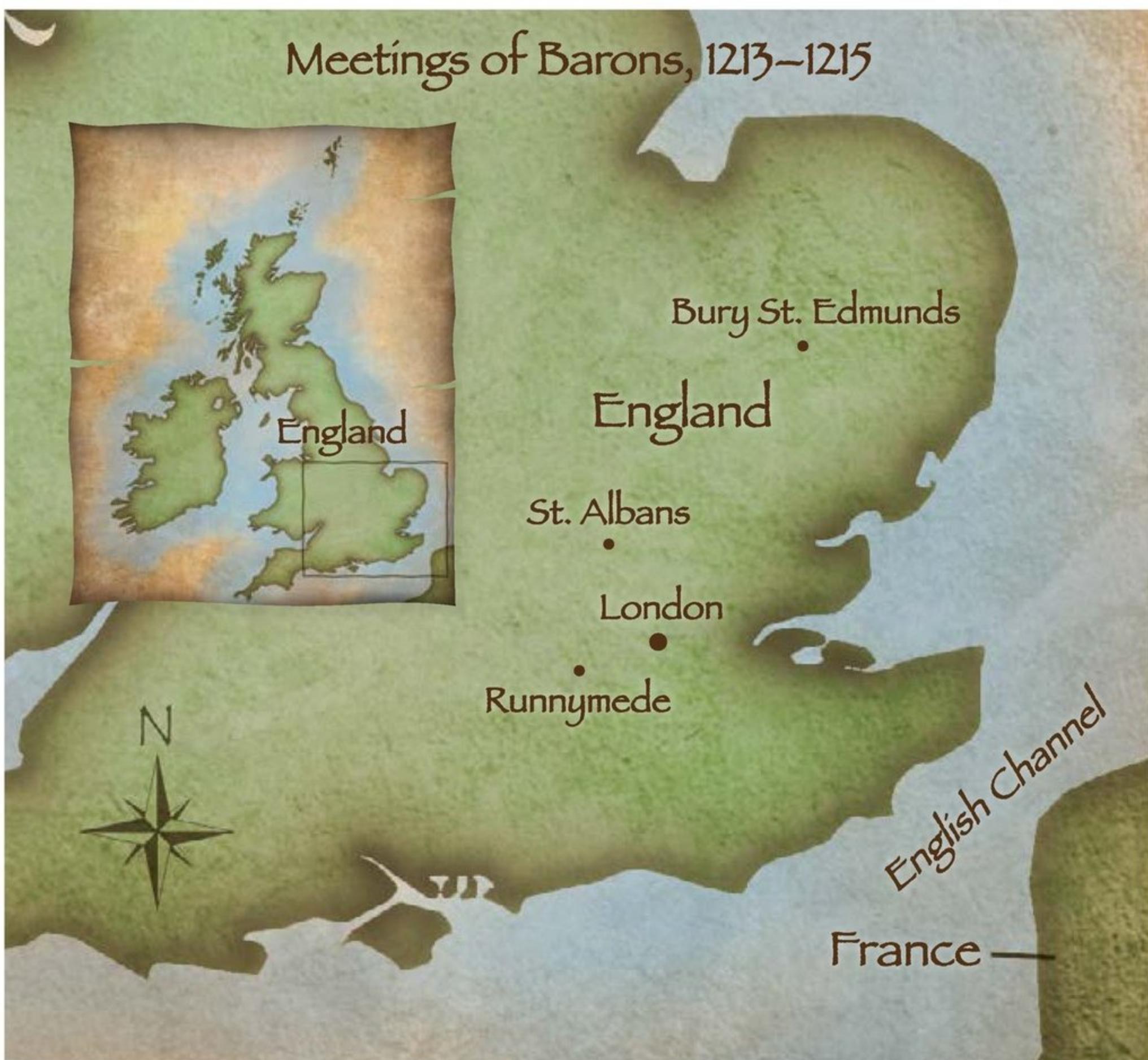
Archbishop Langton continued to strongly oppose King John. Despite the pope's new affection for the English king and Langton's elevation to the position of archbishop, Langton was determined that John be removed from office. Langton became an adviser to a group of some two hundred barons who also wanted to get rid of the king.

Not all the barons were against John. A few wanted to find a way to improve relations with him. 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' negotiations with John.

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



## Meetings of Barons, 1213–1215



The barons first met as a group in July 1213 in the town of St. Albans, near London. At this meeting, the barons decided to pressure John to uphold a document called King Henry I's **Coronation Charter**. That agreement had been approved more than one 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. John promised that he would obey the laws in the Coronation Charter.

When John broke that promise, the barons met again in November 1214 in the town of Bury St. Edmunds to discuss what to do next. Archbishop Langton said that the Coronation Charter provided a historical **justification** 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.



Stephen Langton (center, in purple) was the archbishop of Canterbury for almost twenty-two years.

At that meeting, the barons began to flex their muscles. They decided to pay no further **scutage**, a kind of tax, 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 with some additional provisions. 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 take up arms 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 proceeded with their plans to present John with a formal document listing their demands, and at the same time they began preparing for war.

## A Despised Tax

One form of taxation used to excess by King John and hated by the barons was called *scutage*. This was a payment made in lieu of military service by barons who declined to join the king in a war. John used the funds raised from scutage to pay for mercenaries to fill out his ranks.





The barons met with King John several times to present their ideas and needs.

## Runnymede and a Faithless King

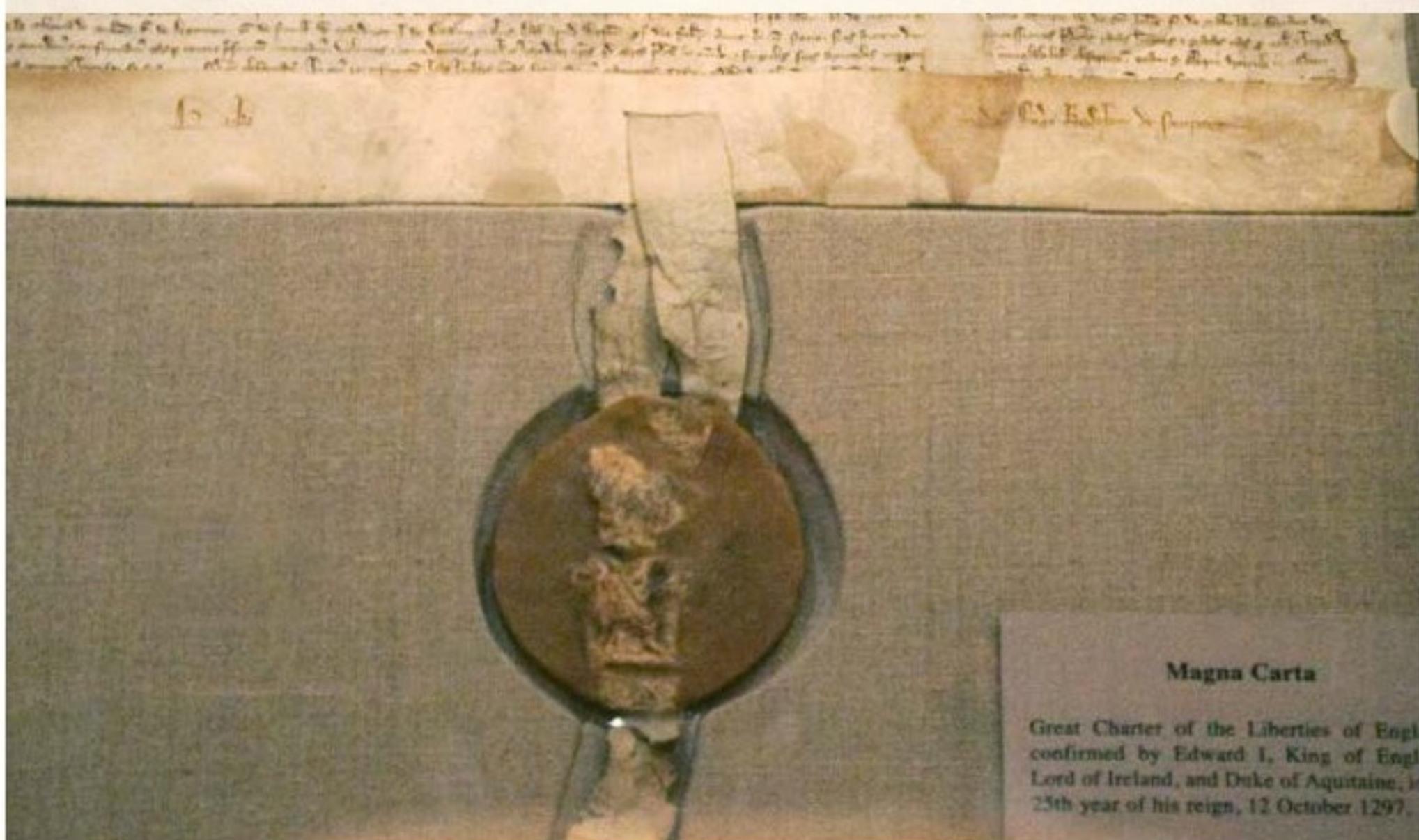
The *Magna Carta*, or the Great Charter, was the barons' final attempt to stop John's excesses before resorting to war. The first version of the charter—a Latin document known as the Articles of the Barons—listed sixty-three demands. Among the demands were ones shielding the barons from abuses and excessive taxation. The document also called for protecting the rights of the English Church. It specified that no free citizens would be imprisoned or punished without first being tried in a court of law. The charter provided for a group of twenty-five barons who would force the king to comply with the barons' demands. It authorized them to use force if necessary.

In May 1215, a group of barons seized London, the most important city in England, further weakening John's position. Reluctantly, the king 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, in a tent with a small throne that was set up for the king. When John arrived, he wasted little time with formalities. He declared that he agreed with the entire contents of the charter. John **affixed** his royal seal to the document and swore an **oath** that he would uphold it.

## “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.



In the days after the meeting, copies of the Great Charter—also written in Latin—were copied out by scribes and distributed. Few believed that the king would **abide** by his oath to uphold the charter. John could break a **solemn** oath without a second thought. The barons feared that John would disregard 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 called on his ally Pope Innocent for help. Innocent took John's side, and in August 1215 the pope **nullified** the charter, freeing John from all its provisions.

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 1216, there were completely unexpected developments. Pope Innocent died in July from a fever. In October, John also died, felled by the illness dysentery while confronting Louis's forces.

John's nine-year-old son, Henry III, then became king. Marshal, now aged seventy, became regent—administrator of the government—as Henry was still too young to manage affairs on his own. As regent, Marshal advised Henry to reissue the charter and prove to the barons that he was not like his father.



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

## Aftermath

Marshal once again proved his worth to the English throne. In 1217, he brought the rebel barons to heel and ejected Prince Louis from England. Henry reissued the Great Charter, **pacifying** the barons who had doubted that his reign would differ much from John's. They trusted Marshal's word that the king would abide by the charter.

Henry turned eighteen in 1225. That year, he again reissued the Great Charter, thereby reinforcing his pledge to be a law-abiding ruler. Henry accepted that no one was above the law—not even the king of England. The charter was reissued one more time, in 1297, during the reign of Henry's son, King Edward 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.



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 liberty and the principle that no one is above the law. It served as the basis 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>abide</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	to accept or conform to an agreement or circumstance (p. 15)
<b>affixed</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	stuck or fastened something to something else (p. 14)
<b>baptisms</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	religious rituals in which people are doused with or submerged in water to become Christian (p. 8)
<b>barons</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	men holding low rank in European nobility (p. 5)
<b>charter</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an official document defining the rights and responsibilities of a person or group (p. 10)
<b>feudal</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	of or relating to a European system of government in the Middle Ages that was based on the rights and obligations between landowners and the people who worked the land (p. 8)

<b>humbled</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	made lower in power or prestige; made to feel modest or less proud (p. 8)
<b>imposed</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	required by force or authority (p. 4)
<b>justification</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a good reason for doing something (p. 11)
<b>mercenary</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	hired to fight (p. 7)
<b>nullified</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	made to have no effect, value, or legal power (p. 15)
<b>oath</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a formal promise (p. 14)
<b>pacifying</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	soothing or calming anger or dissatisfaction (p. 16)
<b>scutage</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a feudal tax that could be paid to excuse one from performing military service (p. 12)
<b>solemn</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	serious or sad (p. 15)

# The Great Charter

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,680

## 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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