

LEVELED BOOK • Z²

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	justification
affixing	mercenary
baptisms	nullified
barons	oath
charter	pacifying
excommunicated	penitent
feudal	regent
grievances	scutage
humbled	tyranny

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Fountas & Pinnell	Y-Z
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	70+



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Detested King John

In the late twelfth century, the people of England suffered greatly under the rule of several kings who seemed not to care about anyone or anything but themselves. The troubles 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 unsuccessfully to take the throne. On his way home from the failed crusade, Richard was captured and held prisoner in Austria. His captors demanded an enormous ransom 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 respect. He infuriated the **barons**, not only through heavy taxation but also by seizing their property and insulting the honor of their wives and daughters. To protect himself from rebellion, John took many hostages from noble families. When he needed gold, he would ransom the hostages back to their families. Sometimes he killed them—even if the ransom had been 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.



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

John added to his offenses in 1203 with a terrible family crime. His fifteen-year-old nephew in France, Arthur, was favored by King Philip II of France to be the ruler of England. Arthur was thus a rival for the English throne, which John could not tolerate. John's forces captured the lad, who then disappeared. It was generally assumed that John ordered Arthur murdered, and there were rumors that John committed the vile act himself.

In 1204, John suffered a major defeat in France. That year, Philip defeated a **mercenary** army of John's and reclaimed most of the French territory that had been held by England's royal family. John's loss of the French lands caused him to be scorned as well as hated by many of his subjects.

Meanwhile, John continued to stir up trouble wherever he could. In 1205, the archbishop of Canterbury died, and England needed a new archbishop. 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. He was adamant about it, and when he didn't get his way, he began persecuting the English clergy and confiscating church lands.



John de Gray was one of the few men that King John trusted throughout his life, so he was given an elaborate tomb in York, England.

John's rebuke to the pontiff resulted in a strong response: in 1208, Pope Innocent laid all of England under an interdict, closing the doors of England's churches. No church clergy could perform masses, nor could they marry anyone or perform **baptisms** or funerals. When John still would not relent, the pope **excommunicated** him. Nonetheless, John continued to alienate Innocent, seizing more property and revenue belonging to the church. In exasperation, the pope created an alliance with the French king, Philip, with the aim of invading England and deposing John.

John realized at this point that he was in a dire 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. The delighted Innocent accepted the offer at once and pardoned the **penitent** king. John's bold move was a masterstroke, as overnight he went from being a cornered outcast to having a powerful friend and ally: the Roman Catholic Church.



Innocent III was pope for eighteen years.

The Barons Organize

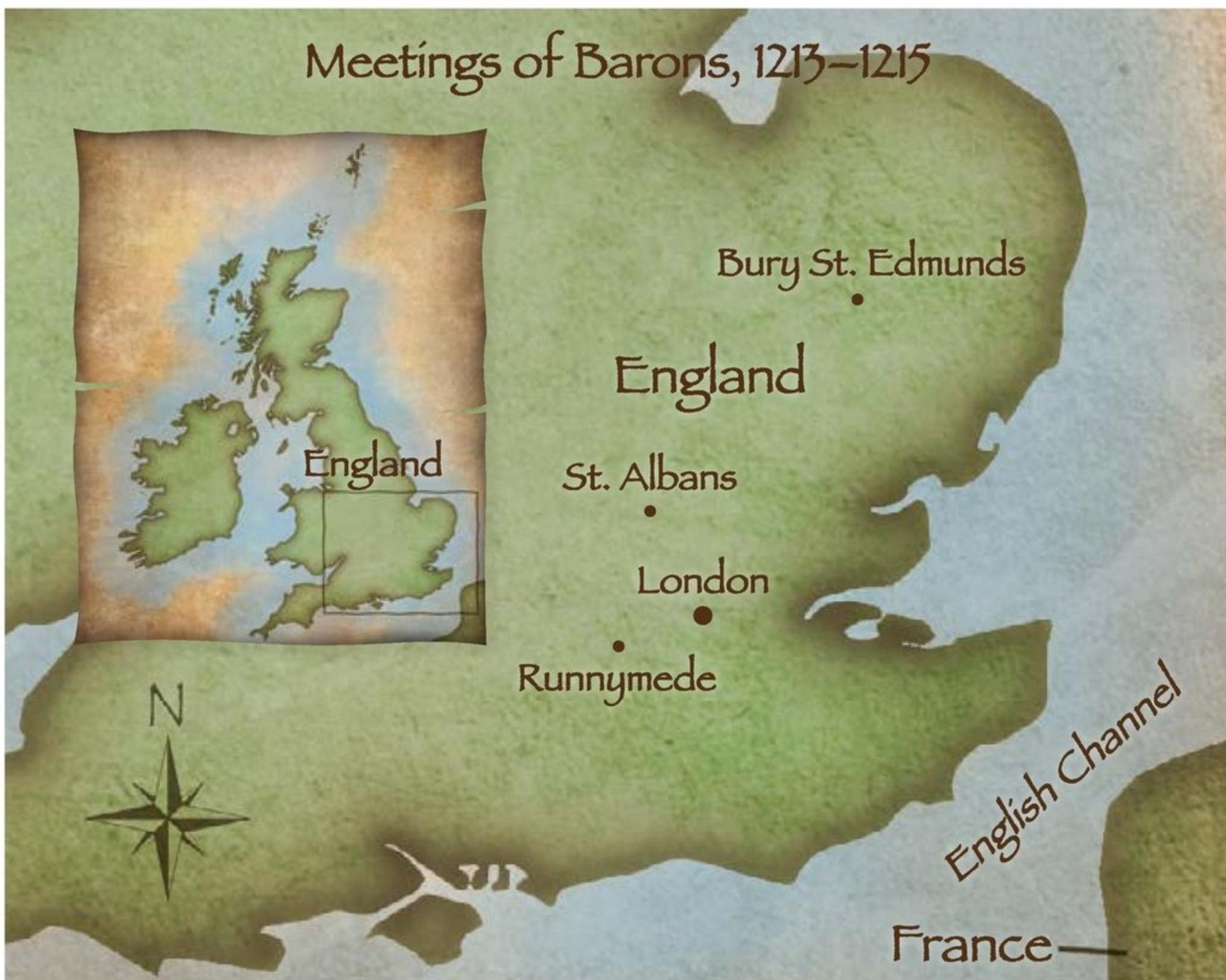
Archbishop Langton had been an ardent opponent of John's early on, and he remained one. Despite the pope's newfound affection for John and Langton's own elevation to archbishop, Langton was determined that John be removed from power. Langton became an advisor to a group of some two hundred barons who also wanted to get rid of the king.

Not all the barons were against John. A few, including his advisor William Marshal, were committed to working for a reconciliation between the nobility and the king. Many people thought Marshal was the most formidable knight in England and respected him for his character and loyalty. He had served four kings, including John, and became a liaison between the barons and John in negotiations.



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 considered—then rejected—the idea of killing John. They decided to try more peaceful means of obtaining their ends. They pushed John to uphold King Henry I's **Coronation Charter**, which had been approved more than one hundred years earlier. The Coronation Charter spelled out the basic laws that the king would follow when dealing with the nobles, church officials, and the common people of England. John agreed that he would uphold Henry's Coronation Charter and **abide** by the laws set forth in it.

When John broke his promise to uphold the Coronation Charter, the barons met again in November 1214 in the town of Bury St. Edmunds to discuss their options. To support their cause, Archbishop Langton cited relevant passages of the Bible and the Coronation Charter, which included some protections from royal **tyranny**. Langton argued that it provided a historical **justification** for the barons' challenge to John. Robert Fitzwalter, a baron on Langton's side who became the leader of the barons, was instrumental in guiding their plans.



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

At the Bury St. Edmunds meeting, the barons began to flex their muscles. They decided to pay no further **scutage** to John for his military campaigns in France, and they went a step further by drawing up a list of demands to be presented to the king. The list was based on the Coronation Charter with some additional provisions stating 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 express their unhappiness with his reign and to present the

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.

draft of their charter. The negotiations did not go well. John told them he would reply to their **grievances** by Easter, but he did not. The barons then proceeded with their plans to present John with a formal list of demands, and at the same time they began preparing for war.

Runnymede and a Faithless King

The *Magna Carta*, or Great Charter, was the barons' final attempt to curb John's excesses before resorting to war. The initial Latin document—known as the Articles of the Barons—listed sixty-three demands. Among the many clauses of the articles were provisions shielding the barons from abusive royal power and excessive taxation. The document also called for protecting the rights of the English Church and specified that no free citizens would be imprisoned or punished without first being tried in a court of law. To make certain that John would honor the charter, it provided for an elected committee of twenty-five barons who would be authorized to assure the king's compliance—with 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 discuss their grievances.

The meeting began on June 15, 1215, in a large meadow at Runnymede, a town on the River Thames west of London. Archbishop Langton mediated between John on one side and Fitzwalter, about forty other barons, and several leading churchmen on the other. A tent with a small throne was set up for the king. When John arrived, he wasted little time with formalities, declaring that he agreed with the entire contents of the charter and **affixing** his royal seal to the document, swearing an **oath** that he would uphold it.

In the days after the meeting, copies of the Great Charter—also written in Latin—were copied out by scribes and distributed. Few

“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.



believed that the king would abide by his oath to uphold the charter. John could break a solemn oath as easily as snapping a dry twig. 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 he called on his ally Pope Innocent for help. Innocent took John's side, and in August 1215 the pope **nullified** the charter, thereby 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 and invited Philip's son, Prince Louis of France, to join the fight with the intention of putting him on the 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 dysentery while confronting Louis's forces. John's nine-year-old son, Henry III, then became king. In service to his fifth king, Marshal, now aged seventy, became **regent** to the young king, who

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.

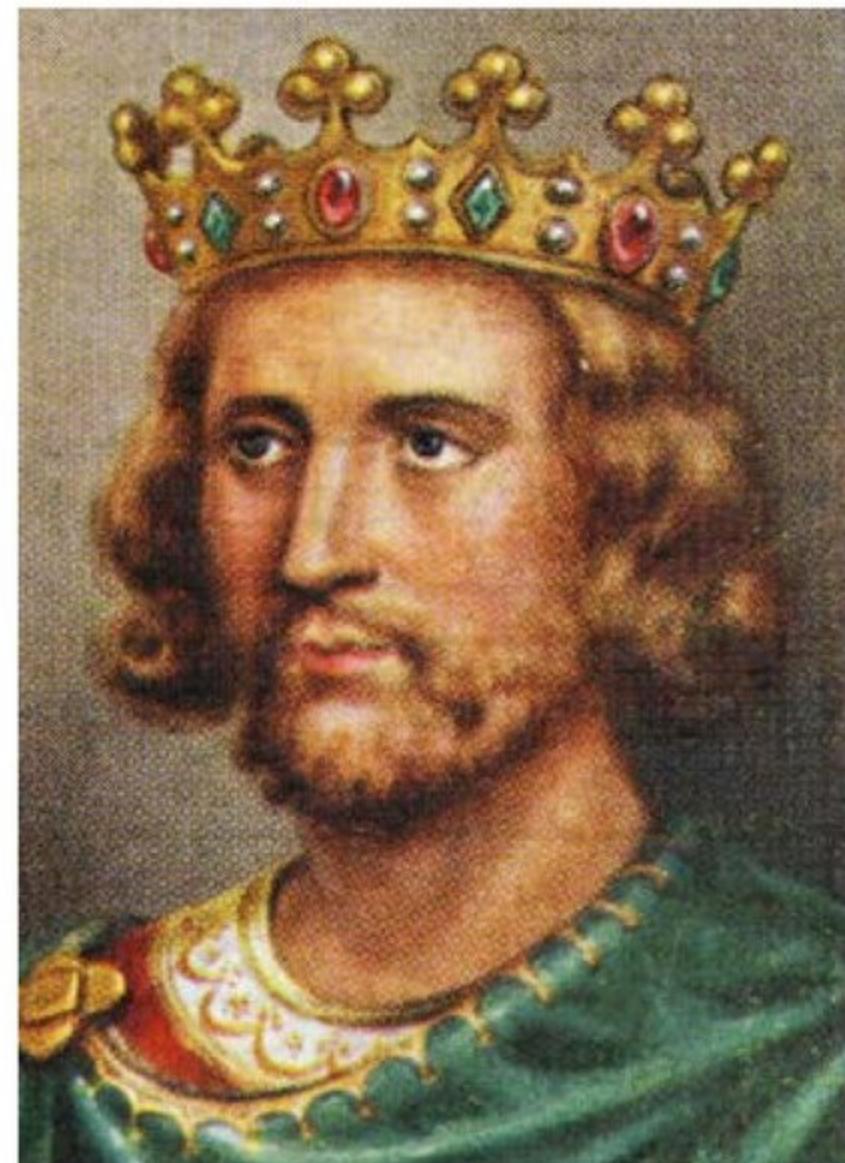
July 1216—Pope Innocent III dies.

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.

was too young to understand the dangerous situation he was in. Henry relied on Marshal's experience and guidance to bring the rebellion to an end. Nonetheless, the civil war continued. 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 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 and 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.



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 with its clauses detailing that everyone must be treated as innocent until proven guilty and that everyone is entitled to a trial by a jury of their peers. Many of the ideas presented in the charter deeply influenced political thinking in Europe. More than five hundred years later, when the American colonies 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

abide (<i>v.</i>)	to accept or conform to an agreement or circumstance (p. 10)
affixing (<i>v.</i>)	sticking or fastening something to something else (p. 14)
baptisms (<i>n.</i>)	religious rituals in which people are doused with or submerged in water to become Christian (p. 8)
barons (<i>n.</i>)	men holding low rank in European nobility (p. 5)
charter (<i>n.</i>)	an official document defining the rights and responsibilities of a person or group (p. 10)
excommunicated (<i>v.</i>)	expelled from a church community (p. 8)
feudal (<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)
grievances (<i>n.</i>)	official complaints about something thought to be wrong or unjust (p. 13)

humbled (<i>v.</i>)	made lower in power or prestige; made to feel modest or less proud (p. 8)
justification (<i>n.</i>)	a good reason for doing something (p. 11)
mercenary (<i>n.</i>)	hired to fight (p. 7)
nullified (<i>v.</i>)	made to have no effect, value, or legal power (p. 15)
oath (<i>n.</i>)	a formal promise (p. 14)
pacifying (<i>v.</i>)	soothing or calming anger or dissatisfaction (p. 17)
penitent (<i>adj.</i>)	feeling bad or showing regret for wrongdoing (p. 8)
regent (<i>n.</i>)	a person who reigns over a kingdom in place of a monarch who is unable to rule (p. 15)
scutage (<i>n.</i>)	a feudal tax that could be paid to excuse one from performing military service (p. 12)
tyranny (<i>n.</i>)	harsh or cruel acts by a person or group in power (p. 11)

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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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