

Aaron Kerzner
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Dr. Michael Swanson

Magna Carta's Affect on the Class Structure in London



This photograph can truly speak a thousand words about London in 1215. Several class groups are apparent, the most predominant being the nobility and royalty. King John is contemplating before putting his pen to the paper, and his aides are advising him, along with members of the nobility. Looking over in the background are members of the clergy, extremely influential figures in London at the time. Lower classes, mostly merchants, are crowded together trying to get a glimpse of the monarch. Each member of these vastly different socio-economic strata are about to be rattled by the document on the table, the Magna Carta.

Before analyzing the Magna Carta's affects on London society, it is imperative to understand how it came to be, and *why* it includes the provisions it does.

The roots of the baronial rebellion lie in the year 1214 when John began to oppress the peasants of England and insisted upon waging an unwarranted war on Flanders. During the spring after a very harsh winter 1213-1214, John levied very high taxes on his estates- many peasants were reduced to eating rats and garbage because they could not afford any other food.

Across the country, fields were barren and general unruliness occurred- the King was losing control of his citizens as they were starving to death by the thousands. The King's seemingly causeless actions have puzzled Historians have not been able to find any sufficient evidence supporting a real reason for the King's decisions.



in this era of rule.

While his domestic front was crumbling, John started a war against Flanders, a region on the coast of Luxembourg. Flandish merchants were often seen in England due to the great trading in wool and duck feathers; John, weary of foreigners gaining economic power in his country, decided that Englishmen needn't to repay his debt to Flandish merchants.

The House of Plantagenet Armorial:
John was an early member of a long line

Jonh's economic insecurity ignited a small civil war, as patrons of the king seized the occasion to burn the Flandish section of London to the ground, while other people came to the Flanders' defense- further escalating a rift in society in England at the time.

All of these events finally came to a boiling point when the King's barons rose up and rebelled in the spring of 1215. The Royal army and the Barons had bloody battles throughout English countryside for months, with many perishing. Finally, in the forest of Runnymede, the King's forces succumbed to the Barons. To acknowledge the loss, King John was forced to sign the Magna Carta.





The Document

Impact on the King and his Court

The Magna Carta, Latin for “Great Charter”, contains sixty-four articles. Unlike our Constitution, many of the articles extremely specific: dealing with regulations the King *must* follow in certain parts of England. There exists some broader statements, similar to our own Constitution, that became the basis for English law for years to come. The preamble to the Manga Carta essentially neuters the King’s power: stating that, because his army was not able to stand up to that of the Barons’, he is now subservient to them. This section is known as the Notwithstanding Clause. It fundamentally changed the way that subsequent governments operated, and its implications continue to be debated today. Thus, the monarchical/royalty class has been turned completely on its head within



the first few lines.



Impact on the Church and Clergy

The second main group present in our first picture was the clergymen. How did this document change their lives? John, before 1215, had been notorious for interference in religious affairs- this led to the inclusion by the Barons of “To no one will we sell, to no one will we delay, to no one will we deny Christmas.”ⁱ This is referring to an event, occurring in 1213, where Ranulf de

Glanvill, a mercenary of John, forbade Christmas Mass from occurring in Nottingham.

Essentially, the Church wanted a secular state so they could be free to do as they wanted,

not to protect citizens from religions they don't believe in. London's clergy in a post-

Magna Carta world essentially operated autonomously, having their own hierarchy

separate from the governing body instead of being inherently intertwined as they had been.

Ramifications within the Peasantry

A third section in the document addresses the issue of taxation. In the original Latin:

"DISCIPULUS TUUS HUNC TRACTATUM NON SCRIPSIT."

Loosely translated to: "No taxation without representation."

Events before 1215, such as the taxation of peasants to the point of the burden being unbearable, led to this article. Peasants had no say in government yet had to withstand the highest taxes- this led to extreme discontent within that class, but revolutions could never form due to lack of organization.

This article 23, dealing with taxation without representation, led to the establishment of the Parliament of England, the first of its kind in the world. From this point forward, each shire in England was

allowed to choose two knights and two townspeople to represent their district in the House of Commons. Democracy in England had made its mark and once the peasants got a taste of having a say in government, it would be impossible to return to previous methods of

rule. The King could no longer decree laws when he deemed them necessary, instead everything must first be approved by Parliament.



John's actions involving the Flanders merchants invoked a provision assuring some rights for that class:

41. All merchants shall have safe and secure exit from England, and entry to England, with the right to tarry there and to move about as well by land as by water, for buying and selling by the ancient and right customs, quit from alle vil tolls, except (in time of war) such merchants as are of the land at war with us. And if such are found in our land at the beginning of the war, they shall be detained, without injury to their bodies or goods, until information be received by us, or by our chief justiciar, how the merchants of our land found in the land at war with us are treated; and if our men are safe there, the others shall be safe in our land.

This is the beginnings of a shift in power in England, from a feudal system where land meant power locally and in government, to a system praising merchants and encouraging the fostering of an economy.

Overall it is important to look deeply into the roots of the Magna Carta's main decrees.

Specific events can be tied to each of the main provisions affecting all of England's social classes. Each strata of the social ladder had their roles changed: governing power shifted away from the King and to the people, and focus began on mercantilism rather than land leasing. This document clearly made a sweeping impact on England, but when analyzed at the socio-economic level, it is much easier to understand why.

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