

King John and the Magna Carta

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The events leading up to Magna Carta

In 1209, John had been excommunicated in a dispute over the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He had used this as an excuse to confiscate church property and sell it back to his bishops at a profit.

Part of the money raised by these exactions was used to create a fledgling English Navy. John had used this to invade Ireland in 1210, and on 30 May 1213, the Earl of Salisbury destroyed a French armada poised to invade the British Isles at Damme.

However, it could also be used by his barons to justify their lack of support for his continental ventures. This delayed John's return to the continent until 1214, but following the success at Damme, John was able to launch an invasion of Poitou.

Once again, the Lusignans were pivotal. They were persuaded to switch allegiance to John, but at the critical point in the campaign, they refused to fight. John patched up a truce and retreated back to England, but once again he was tainted by the stain of cowardice through little fault of his own.

The rebels gather

This gave the discontented barony their opportunity. They chose as their leader the East Anglian baron, Robert FitzWalter, who styled himself 'Marshal of the Host of God and the Holy Church'.

From the start, they were a minority movement, as their choice of leader illustrates. FitzWalter was a somewhat unsavoury character with a series of grudges against John and a history of disaffection. He also had little regard for law or custom.

In a quarrel over property rights with St Albans, he had resorted to violence and only went to the law after this failed. Once when John tried his son-in-law for murder, FitzWalter had turned up at court with 500 armed knights. He had been prominent in the plots against John in 1212, and saw this as another means for him to strike at the king. Other barons in the lists had similarly disreputable histories.

By contrast, most of the barony simply did not want to get involved. Few of them declared for the king, but among those that did was William Marshal. His son joined the rebels, and this seems to have been the solution adopted by many baronial families.

The rebels declared against the king on 3 May 1215. Ironically, their demands were based upon the so-called 'Unknown Charter' developed from the laws of Henry I.

In their efforts to break away from the harsh Angevin régime created by Henry II, they were harking back to the same 'Golden Age' that he had used to justify his actions. Their attempts

to besiege Northampton Castle met with failure, but they scored a great coup when London opened its gates to them on 17 May (prompted in part by FitzWalter's castellany of Baynard's Castle in London itself).

John havered, engaging in protracted negotiations. It was these that eventually led to the signing of Magna Carta at Runnymede in June 1215.

Magna Carta

Magna Carta should not be seen as a sign of surrender. In John's mind, it was only ever a stalling action, intended to demonstrate his reasonableness to the undecided baronial majority in the run-up to inevitable hostilities. It was a bargaining chip: nothing more.

It probably meant little more to the rebels either, and the fact that they reneged on their agreement to surrender London after the signing demonstrates their disdain of the Runnymede proceedings. Still, the articles of the charter show that John had pushed his barony too far.

After an opening chapter guaranteeing the rights of the Church, the next 15 chapters were provisions designed to curb the king's exploitation of loopholes in feudal custom: limiting scutages and relief payments, and banning the abuses of privilege common in wardship. A further ten chapters dealt with finances, and another important block confirmed people's rights under the Common Law.

It is these latter that have been seen as crucial, as they subjected the king to the law of the land for the first time in Britain's history, and this clause is the only one that remains on the statute books today. Finally, they sought to ensure that the king carried out his promises, safeguarded the rebels from any comebacks, demanded that he fire his hated mercenary captains and tied the king to a council of 25 members in an effort to ensure his co-operation.

It was doomed to failure. Magna Carta lasted less than three months.

By November 1215, John had the rebels' backs to the wall. He had recaptured Rochester Castle (which had been surrendered to them in September), and was poised to strike at London.

The rebels, for their part, had offered the crown of England to Philip's son, Prince Louis of France, and he hurried reinforcements into London. John failed to grasp the nettle. Instead of striking at London in one final, decisive blow, he took the percentage option and began ravaging the rebels' heartlands.

This gave Louis time to muster an army, and on 22 May 1216, he landed at Sandwich. John had been ready to receive them, but overnight his navy was scattered by a storm and his supporters, unwilling to trust his largely mercenary force, advocated retreat. Once again, John played the percentages and withdrew.

Death of John

It was one withdrawal too many. Disenchanted by the perceived cowardice of their king, fully two thirds of the English barony threw in their lot with Louis. John was harried northwards, and it is during these dark days that the celebrated incident on the Wash occurred, where he lost his entire treasury and his collection of jewellery to the sea.

At this point, the fate of Britain hung in the balance. If John failed, not only would he have lost the Angevin Empire, but the kingdom of England would have fallen into French hands. It would have been the Norman Conquest all over again.

Yet in a pathetic twist of fate, John's final act was the ultimate percentage play. He contracted dysentery as a result of over-indulgence and died during the night of 18 October 1216. His death pulled the rug out from under the feet of Prince Louis.

With John out of the way, the regency council, led by William Marshal, declared John's son as king Henry III and reissued Magna Carta, removing a major part of the rebels' platform. All those barons who had been prepared to oppose John now flocked to his son's standard, and the conflict shifted from a civil war over baronial rights to a war of resistance against foreign invasion. Louis was defeated at Lincoln and Sandwich, by land and sea, and agreed to withdraw in September 1217.

It was the final ironic twist in the story of Henry II and his sons. By their own actions, they had won and lost an empire; and by his death, John saved the kingdom of England.