

Magna carta's substance and significance

The grand myth of the Magna Carta is that it granted “freedom to the people.” Actually it granted freedoms to only the “free people” which did not include the peasant majority of the English population.

King John becomes the French King of England in 1199, but shortly thereafter King John loses his kingdoms in Northern France (Normandy and Brittany) to King Phillip of France. King John then raises his taxes against his English barons to support his war in France, but the barons revolt against this excessive taxation and this forces King John to compromise his absolute power by signing the “Articles of the Barons,” written in Latin, at Runnymede. The purpose of this was to gain financial support for the ongoing war in France which nonetheless would fail in return for a division of power between the lords and the King of England. A total of 63 Articles were drafted into the Magna Carta (1215) and these include the following:

- 1) the English Church shall be free and the King shall not interfere with it
- 2) the lands that the King had turned into estate forests are to be put back into normal usage under the lords
- 3) widows may not be forced to remarry
- 4) the Magna Carta articles extend to all “free people” (not peasants)
- 5) limits on the king's powers of various sorts are specified

Once the Pope learned of the Magna Carta's signing, the Pope declared its provisions to be all null and void and excommunicated King John. Nonetheless, the subsequent King's of England would reissue the Magna Carta and revise it with new provisions intended to bolster the political support of the lords. Four hand-written copies of the Magna Carta survive to this day but none of them are exact replicas. Two of the copies are now in the British Library.