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**“The Mad King and Magna Carta”**

**How did a peace treaty signed — and broken — 800 years ago become one of the world's most influential documents?**

We parked near a meadow, tramped through a damp cow field and stood in the shadow of one of Britain’s oldest living things. The Ankerwycke Yew is 2,000 years old: a gnarled beast of a tree with a trunk ten feet wide and thick branches spilling out fronds of spiny, dark-green needles. Romantic legend holds that Henry VIII courted Anne Boleyn beneath its boughs. It grows on the north bank of the Thames upstream from London, in the county of Surrey. Nearby are the ruins of a 12th-century priory, a couple of large water reservoirs and Heathrow Airport. Every 90 seconds a plane roars overhead. In the distance we could hear traffic on the M25, the motorway that encircles London, but across the river it was calm. Over there was Runnymede, a low-lying, lush green meadow cut through and watered by the Thames. The ground is soft and muddy; stand too long and your boots will start to sink. The foot traffic that morning consisted mostly of dog walkers. There was little to indicate that we were near the spot where, 800 years ago, King John agreed to a peace treaty with his rebellious barons. Today we call that agreement Magna Carta...

The world had written laws long before King John and Magna Carta. The commandments handed down by God to Moses, the Roman Code of Justinian and the Salic law of Germanic France had all laid out basic rules for human society, and they were kept in written form for reference in the case of dispute. Stone tablets survive from Mesopotamia bearing laws written in Sumerian around 2100 B.C. Magna Carta, which comprises 63 clauses spelling out in dense legalese some of the basic laws of medieval England, and which is often thought of as England’s first statute, fits into this tradition…

John was born in 1167. He was his father’s youngest son, and although the Plantagenet dynasty established by Henry II had lands stretching from the borders of Scotland to the Pyrenees, John as a prince had no territories to call his own. He was nicknamed John Lackland. He was called plenty of other names, too. The chronicler Gerald of Wales condemned him as a “tyrannous whelp.” [brat] William of Newburgh said he was “nature’s enemy.” The French poet Bertrand de Born judged that “no man may ever trust him, for his heart is soft and cowardly.” From a very early age John was recognized as sly, conniving [scheming], deceitful and unscrupulous.

Still, bad character was no impediment to being king. John inherited the throne in 1199, after his heroic and much-admired elder brother Richard I, “the Lionheart,” died of gangrene after he was shot with a crossbow bolt during a siege. Almost immediately things went wrong. The Plantagenet empire included or controlled the French territories of Normandy, Brittany, Anjou, Maine, Touraine and Aquitaine—about a third of the territorial mass of modern France and virtually the entire western seaboard. During the first five years of John’s reign the bulk of this was lost, in large part thanks to his insipid [bland] military command. The most traumatic loss was that of Normandy, conquered by the French in 1204. This was a terrible humiliation, and it had two important consequences. First, John was now forced to spend almost his entire reign in England (his father and brother had spent most of their reigns abroad), where his disagreeable personality brought him into regular conflict with his barons. Second, John’s determination to reconquer Normandy and the rest of his lost French lands drove him to an extortionate [greedy/violent like the Mafia] form of government. He devoted himself to squeezing as much money as humanly possible out of his subjects, particularly his barons and the Church.

John was a legal whiz. He knew the machinery of government inside-out and the best ways to manipulate it to take his subjects’ money. He would entangle his barons in massive debts to the crown and then use the courts to strip their wealth, often ruining them forever. As king he was entitled to charge his nobles fees known as “fines” for inheriting lands and titles and getting married. There was an understanding that these would be levied at reasonable rates, but John ignored it and charged some mind-blowing sums. In 1214 he charged one man £13,333—something like $17 million or more today—for permission to marry. John also set the military tax known as “scutage,” by which a knight could buy his way out of military service to the crown, at an exorbitant rate. And he charged huge fees for his subjects to obtain justice in his courts.

Besides this racketeering, John also earned a reputation as vindictive [revenge-seeking] and even murderous. It was believed that in 1203 he killed his nephew and rival, Arthur of Brittany. One chronicler heard that John had done the deed himself, “after dinner, when he was drunk and possessed by the devil,” and thrown the body into the Seine. In 1208 John fell out with a close associate named William de Braose and pursued his family to destruction, starving to death William’s wife and eldest son in the dungeons of his castle. (William died in exile in France.) John mistreated hostages given to him as security for agreements: The knight William Marshal said he “kept his prisoners in such a horrible manner and in such abject confinement that it seemed an indignity and a disgrace to all those with him.” And it was rumored that he made lecherous [creepy sexual] advances on his barons’ wives and daughters…

A typical judgment was given by the 13th-century writer Matthew Paris, in an epitaph for the king: “Foul as it is, hell itself is defiled by the fouler presence of John.”…

Rebels, calling themselves the Army of God, finally took up arms in the spring of 1215 and seized control of London. This is what forced John to agree to Magna Carta at Runnymede that June. The agreement followed lengthy discussions mediated by the archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. When it was written down it came to about 4,000 words, now conventionally divided into 63 clauses. They covered a wide range of issues. The king conceded that the English church would be free from government interference, as would the City of London. He promised to cap military taxes and the fines he levied on his barons for inheritance and marriage…

**Most important of all, in Clauses 39 and 40 he promised that “no free man is to be arrested or imprisoned or stripped of his possessions or outlawed or exiled or in any other way ruined, nor will we go or send against him** **except by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.** To no one will we sell, to no one will we deny or delay right or justice.”

The legend of Magna Carta began to grow… clauses from Magna Carta were written into statutes governing the American colonies from as early as 1639. Later, when the people of Massachusetts rebelled against the Stamp Act, they pointed out that it violated the core principles of “the great Charter.” When the colonies overthrew British rule altogether, the Declaration of Independence condemned George III for obstructing [interfering with] the administration of justice, “for imposing Taxes on us without our Consent; for depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury” and for “transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny.” Nearly identical complaints had been lodged against King John 561 years before. Magna Carta also influenced the state-building that followed. Article III of the Constitution stipulates that “the trial of all crimes, except in cases of impeachment, shall be by jury,” and Articles V and VI of the Bill of Rights—which hold, respectively, that “No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a grand jury...nor be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law” and that “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial”—are essentially paraphrases of Magna Carta Clauses 39 and 40.

Around the world, from Canada to Australia, other founding constitutional texts also leaned heavily on Magna Carta. Parts of the charter can be found in the European Convention on Human Rights and in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Eleanor Roosevelt called “a Magna Carta for mankind.”

**Write at least 1 page (Times New Roman, 12 point font, 1.5 spacing) answering these questions. Include relevant details and don’t forget to proofread.**

1. **Explain why King John was so unpopular.**
2. **Explain how the Magna Carta limited the King’s power.**
3. **Describe 1-2 ways the Magna Carta is important in today’s world.**