

The Impact of the Magna Carta on Medieval English Politics

Yuxin Liu^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of History, Australian National University, Canberra, 2601, Australia*
a. u7690112@anu.edu.au
**corresponding author*

Abstract: This research examines the influence of the Magna Carta during the reign of King John, a time characterized by his authoritarian governance and fiscal requisitions. The study examines the impact of the Magna Carta, which arose from the rebellion of the barons against King John. It altered the balance of power by questioning the notion of the divine right of kings and laying the groundwork for the establishment of parliamentary systems and legal changes. The study emphasizes the Magna Carta's significance as not just a legal instrument, but also as a catalyst for change in English political history. The Magna Carta championed individual liberties and laid the foundation for a system of government where representatives are elected and the principle of legal governance is upheld. The research finishes by highlighting the modern relevance of the Magna Carta in government and education, and advocating for a more profound comprehension of its historical and present importance.

Keywords: Magna Carta, Medieval England, King John, Royal Authority, Parliamentary System

1. Introduction

The Magna Carta of 1215 emerged amid the turbulent background of King John's reign, responding to the monarch's uncontrolled authority and monetary demands, exacerbated by the significant losses of Normandy and Anjou in 1204 [1]. By 1214, accumulating frustrations culminated as John's failed attempt to reclaim his domains resulted in a massive financial drain and a severely ruined reputation. This cleared the path for rebelling barons to enforce the Magna Carta in 1215 as a method to restrain the King's excesses [1]. Despite outward sign of contrition, such as taking the cross "out of fear rather than devotion," doubts lingered regarding King John's genuine commitment to change [2].

Throughout King John's reign, a profound shift in power dynamics occurred. The traditional theocratic role of English royalty diminished, giving precedence to feudal contracts and duties, primarily as a result of John's personal tyranny [3]. The Magna Carta played a pivotal role in challenging the divine right of the English King, paving the way for a reevaluation of royal authority, the establishment of parliamentary systems, and a restructuring of the legal landscape. Analyzing documents like the letter dated 9 July 1214 provides insights into King John's legal views and governing strategies both before and after the promulgation of the Magna Carta. This study delves into the consequences of this crucial text on the political atmosphere of medieval England.

2. Literature Review

The Magna Carta, signed in 1215, holds a pivotal status in English history, prompting extensive examination by scholars seeking to unravel its ramifications and importance. One viewpoint, articulated by Petit-Dutaillis, emphasizes the pragmatic roots of the Magna Carta, claiming that the barons, at its inception, might not have fully grasped their substantial role in shaping English liberty [4]. Instead, their insurrection and the subsequent pressure on King John were motivated by immediate concerns and a commitment to safeguard their practical interests.

Holt emphasizes the Magna Carta's hallmark of inclusivity. While many medieval charters were dedicated to a particular class or group, the Magna Carta uniquely addresses "all free men of our realm," emphasizing its broader social objective and reach [4]. Despite this, as Johnson points out, the text is profoundly rooted in feudalistic beliefs. Numerous sections of the Magna Carta refer to "feudal incidents," providing insights into the prevalent feudal hierarchical system of the time. Obscure terms for contemporary readers, such as "scutage," "aid," and "escheat," illustrate the complicated dynamics of medieval English society [5].

Ullmann interprets the Magna Carta primarily as a compact between the monarch and the baronage, with its essence deeply rooted in feudal norms that define the duties and positions of each party. The covenant binds the monarch to perform within the confines of his feudal capacity [3]. When regarded from a theocratic perspective, the monarch usually stood outside and above such agreements, stressing the Magna Carta's uniqueness. Despite substantial scholarly attention on the Magna Carta, gaps persist, particularly about its broader impact on the political dynamics of medieval England. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing fresh insights into this age-old text.

3. Research Methods

The three methods employed in this paper have been tailored to ensure depth, precision, and distinctiveness. The major method, in-depth textual analysis, allows for a detailed evaluation of the language and content of the Magna Carta. This entails studying specific phrases, comprehending antiquated terminology, and discerning overarching themes. As Ullmann correctly points out, the Magna Carta's concepts resonate with feudal attitudes, reflecting the precarious balance of power and the growing legal constructs of the period [3]. Such an analysis is instrumental in determining the fundamental legal and political ideas encapsulated in the Magna Carta [3].

In alignment with Ullmann's comprehension and analysis of the Magna Carta, the paper also conducts historical context analysis to contextualize the Magna Carta within its broader historical milieu. Examining documents like the letter dated 9 July 1214 reveals King John's perspectives, relationships with societal stakeholders, and the urgent challenges of his reign [6]. This approach sheds light on the external forces that impacted the construction and adoption of the Magna Carta.

Furthermore, the paper incorporates a case study analysis to delve into specific episodes and events surrounding the creation and implementation of the Magna Carta. For example, Vincent's depiction of the twenty-five barons provides a microcosmic assessment of the power dynamics and deliberations that underpinned the development of the Magna Carta [7]. Each approach is carefully selected to capture both the minutiae and the overarching themes of the Magna Carta's transformative impact on shaping the political landscape of medieval England.

4. Historical Context

To fully appreciate the significance of the Magna Carta, one must delve into the tumultuous political environment that prevailed in England before 1215. Prior to the sealing of this historic Charter, England was embroiled in conflict, warfare, and continuous power struggles within the political sphere. King John played a pivotal role in this turbulent period, experiencing both political and

military setbacks throughout his rule. Driven by substantial wealth taken from the Church and his barons, his ambitious campaign to reclaim territory in France culminated in a catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Bouvines in 1214. “Defeated in war and with his treasury exhausted,” John returned to England after this significant loss [1]. These setbacks, together with alleged betrayals of confidence and assurances, planted the seeds of discontent among his subjects.

This dissatisfaction was heightened by the King’s constant conflicts with both his nobles and the Church. As political pressure intensified, John found himself at crossroads. On the one side, he confronted a rebellious faction of disgruntled nobles, leading to their active collaboration with Prince Louis of France, who sought to capitalize on the ongoing upheaval [8]. On the other side, he grappled with demands for increased ecclesiastical autonomy. Against the looming shadow of the Clarendon Constitutions, John submitted to the “Freedom of Election Charter” in November 1214, acknowledging, for the first time, that church elections would be “free forever”—a noteworthy limitation on the Crown’s authority [9]. In this context, the Magna Carta emerged as a critical remedy, sealed at Runnymede on June 15, 1215, after extensive negotiations [10].

However, its significance did not end with its first sealing. The Magna Carta underwent republishing and alterations in subsequent years, with revisions emphasizing its dynamic and developing character in response to the political concerns of the time [11]. Beyond political treatises and charters, the era was marked by more everyday exchanges that provided insights into societal structures. Documents such as the gift to Gilbert Peche highlighted the complicated network of landholdings, loyalties, and feudal connections, shedding light on the broader socio-political background [12]. The Magna Carta did not emerge in a vacuum but rather as a result of its tumultuous era, reflecting both the challenges and aspirations of medieval England.

5. The Implications of the Magna Carta

In 1215, the Magna Carta emerged as a major legal instrument, functioning as a peace pact primarily aimed at curbing the King’s overriding authority and reestablishing harmony between the Crown and the realm. This Charter attempted to safeguard not only the customary rights of lords, heirs, and their dependents but also the liberties of the Church and the city of London [1]. Unlike other continental treaties, the Magna Carta “acknowledged non-baronial interests far more” and delved into a greater range of such issues [4]. In fact, Holt remarked, “The Great Charter is the first great public act of the nation, after it has realized its own identity [4].” In contrast to many contemporary continental treaties, which depended primarily on aristocratic concessions, the Magna Carta reflected a more expansive vision, revealing the rising national consciousness of the time.

However, the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Magna Carta did not witness universal approval. King John, the reigning monarch, faced considerable challenges. Internationally, Pope Innocent III, who wielded enormous ecclesiastical power, actively supported King John. During this time, papal decrees condemned rebel groups and chastised bishops like Langton for failing to take effective action against those challenging royal authority [13]. Furthermore, papal letters from March of the same year declared any alliances and conspiracies formed against King John since the beginning of the disagreement between the monarchy and the Church as illegal and void, emphasizing robust ecclesiastical support for the King [14].

One of the Charter’s key provisions, namely Clause 14, defined the procedure for levying assistance and scutages, stressing the need for consultation. It demanded that major players, ranging from archbishops and earls to those directly holding land from the monarch, be convened to address any atypical charges [15]. This particular section highlights the Charter’s overarching objective: to ensure that the King’s acts were rooted in consensus rather than unilateral judgments. King John’s responses to the escalating demands were profound. In a missive scribed from La Rochelle upon his return, he urgently summoned his earls, barons, and knights to stand by his side and aid in the defense

of his rights [16]. This petition demonstrates the King's growing imperative to cement his authority and navigate the precarious post-Magna Carta landscape.

When Ullmann highlighted the Magna Carta's combination of feudal content within the framework of a monarchical concession [3], he accurately characterized its dualism. This dichotomy, in which the Charter recognized the rights of the barons while asserting the monarch's divine power, provides a comprehensive insight into the political environment of medieval England. Furthermore, when the final form of the Magna Carta was released in 1225, the presence of 20 abbots among the witnesses highlighted the Church's significance in this momentous event [17]. The Charter transcended mere secular agreements; it evolved into a treaty firmly ingrained in the theological and social fabric of the era. While the Magna Carta was a testimony to medieval political innovation, it was also a result of the tensions and dynamics of its time. Its ramifications reverberated throughout King John's reign, laying the groundwork for the evolution of democratic values and the establishment of the rule of law.

5.1. The Magna Carta's Impact on Royal Authority

One important aspect of the Magna Carta's influence lies in its transformative effect on royal power. The Magna Carta included a radical reconfiguration of the monarchy's power, with its articles seeking to limit the King's unchecked powers and position the royal office within a framework that embodied responsibility and equity.

Previously, the monarchy's unlimited powers extended to a variety of sectors of government. However, the Magna Carta greatly reduced this boundless power. Carpenter emphasizes the Magna Carta's revolutionary nature, stating that it sought to reform various aspects of royal governance. This included limitations on the King's ability to generate revenue arbitrarily, making the justice system more equitable, addressing the malpractices of local agents, and establishing guidelines against impulsive actions targeting individuals [18]. Such severe constraints reshaped the English administration, rendering it less vulnerable to the whims of a single sovereign.

Nevertheless, understanding the Magna Carta not just as an instrument for limitation but also as a monument to the monarchy's essential position as a lawgiver is critical. While the Magna Carta was portrayed as a charitable deed by the King, Goldman argues that it effectively reiterates the monarch's status as the ultimate source of justice and privileges. He claims that, rather than subjecting the monarch to the law, the Magna Carta portrays the King as the primary architect of the legal system [1]. This viewpoint emphasizes a nuanced reading of the Charter, implying a careful balance between reducing royal excesses and preserving the monarchy's central position.

Furthermore, the Magna Carta's influence was not limited to its stated terms but also to how it was repositioned politically throughout time. According to Johnson, after being rejected by both King John and the Pope, the Magna Carta was revived and reprinted in a modified form. This rejuvenation was intended to appease the barons while repelling foreign foes [5]. Such adjustments indicate that the Magna Carta was a living document adaptable to the urgent political requirements of the period.

The Magna Carta's desire to create clearer legal jurisdictions can be observed in Clause 24 [19]. While it did not necessarily deprive royal officials of all judicial powers, it highlighted that serious offenses should only be prosecuted in front of royal judges [5]. These apparently routine phrases emphasized the Magna Carta's dedication to the contemporary idea of the Rule of Law. The Magna Carta's consequences extended beyond documents and proclamations, influencing real-time political interaction. A poignant illustration is the correspondence between King John and Robert de Ros, a renowned rebel lord. This communication demonstrated not only an open dialogue between opposing factions but also the Charter's immediate aftermath, in which prominent rebels named in the Magna Carta engaged in negotiations and surrenders, demonstrating the Charter's tangible political ramifications [20].

Additionally, the Magna Carta underlined the link between government and consensus. Clause 12, for example, states that substantial financial impositions, such as scutages or assistance, may only be imposed with the collective counsel of the kingdom, with some exceptions [21]. Such provisions emphasize the importance of communal decision-making while curbing royal arbitrariness.

Furthermore, the Magna Carta's commitment to fairness can be observed in Clause 21, which stipulates that earls and barons can only be compelled by their peers and only in proportion to the gravity of their transgression [22]. This dedication to proportionality and peer assessment was pioneering, ensuring that the rule of law was more than simply a concept but a practical reality. The Magna Carta had an indisputable effect in redefining royal power. While it put extraordinary constraints on the monarch, it also recognized and reaffirmed the monarch's intrinsic status as the ultimate lawgiver. Through its terms and subsequent political applications, the Magna Carta played an important role in reshaping the political landscape of medieval England, ushering in a new age of government principles of based on responsibility and fairness.

5.2. The Evolution of Parliament

The signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 marked a watershed moment, not only in restricting the monarchy's unrestrained powers but also, although indirectly, in catalyzing the formation of the English Parliament. The provisions of the Magna Carta produced new paradigms in the relationship between the sovereign and its subjects, contributing to the evolution of the governmental framework.

A conspicuous impact of the Magna Carta on legislative development is its control of crucial topics. Maddicott stated, "The regulation of these issues in Magna Carta was adventitious to shape the way in which parliament evolved for much of Henry III's reign" [23]. By the conclusion of King Henry III's reign, the Parliament had taken on the approximate form that it would remain throughout the Middle Ages.

The Magna Carta's impact extended beyond the elite to the "middling men of the shires." Maddicott characterizes these minor landholders as a political class with interests distinct from the baronage, gaining influence [23]. This growing political engagement accelerated the evolution of the parliamentary system, ensuring broader representation beyond the upper echelons of society. Maddicott further elucidates that understanding the connection of these minor landholders reveals how the middlemen of the shires came to have a voice at the center and, eventually, in the parliaments of following reigns [23].

This development was not without difficulties. The unexpected death of King John in 1216 triggered a chain of events. The monarchy passed to a youthful Henry III while King Louis was in London. Amid the subsequent political instability, the Magna Carta was reissued as a manifesto, but with the omission of radical passages, notably those on taxes and the infamous 'security clause' [1]. This revision of the Magna Carta positioned the instrument as a charter of rights rather than a set of responsibilities for the monarch. Despite these changes, the essential ideals of the Magna Carta remained unchanged. Its entrenched provisions come to reflect key ideals of government. For example, the provision that "No sheriff[s], constable[s], coroners, or other of our bailiffs are to hold the pleas of our crown" emphasized the significance of checks and balances – a principle critical for any representative society [19].

In evaluating broader ramifications, Ullmann claimed that the Magna Carta was critical in creating a clear line between substantive and procedural law [3]. This distinction underlined that arbitrary royal decrees or whims could not override the King's feudal responsibilities. Such a view of governance would be critical in the development of a parliament designed to operate as a check on royal power.

The enduring significance of the Magna Carta was evident in Henry III's Confirmation of the Magna Carta in March 1265 [24]. This confirmation reemphasized the Charter's ideals, requiring the

ruling authority to behave within the law and supporting a constructive relationship between the ruler and the ruled. The Magna Carta had an indisputable impact on the history of Parliament. The document's articles and concepts paved the way for a more inclusive and balanced English governing system, whether via direct legislation or the development of political classes. Through its sophisticated combination of rights, obligations, and legal delineations, the Magna Carta grounded the fledgling English parliamentary system in the rule of law and representation, assuring its expansion and stability throughout the Middle Ages.

5.3. Legal Reforms and the Magna Carta

The Magna Carta also played a pivotal role in shaping transformative developments in English legal practices. Prior to 1215, legal methods were often imprinted with the direct personal influence of the monarchy and its officials, with a concentration on keeping peace and complying with the King's express commands. Protests against these practices typically centered on "the continuing personal impact of the king and his officials upon justice" [25]. Customary norms enabled the royal court to selectively address certain sorts of complaints depending on possible threats to peace or disobedience to the King's instructions [25].

However, by 1215, discontent with these legal norms had reached a crescendo. According to Hudson, widespread dissatisfaction originated not just from individual grievances but also from "whole communities" that paid for particular privileges, anticipating the broader rights that the Magna Carta would eventually offer [25]. Thus, the Magna Carta emerged as a reaction to an articulated criticism of a royal government increasingly perceived as disconnected from its citizens.

For their time, the legal provisions of the Magna Carta were groundbreaking. They attempted to create a balance between the Crown's authority and the rights of its people. According to Johnson, one such rule stated the actual contributions owing to the Crown, establishing explicit monetary boundaries and limiting arbitrary taxes [5]. Carpenter emphasizes the relevance of these clauses further, noting that the King's "exploitation of his new feudal rights" had been a constant subject of contention, as indicated by concessions in the Magna Carta and even earlier in the Coronation Charter of 1100 [18]. Notably, Clause 39 of the Magna Carta established an injunction that would reverberate throughout legal history: No free man shall be detained or imprisoned except by the legitimate judgment of his peers or the law of the nation [26]. This provision emphasized the essential principle that legal measures against individuals must be equitable, fair, and transparent.

Furthermore, the Magna Carta established measures to combat lords' unrestrained authority in legal concerns. Carpenter emphasizes a provision that prevents cases from being transferred from local courts, demonstrating the Carta's drive for decentralization and equal access to justice [18]. According to Ullmann, the Magna Carta restricted the King's overwhelming "monarchic 'instincts,'" forcing a shift toward a system in which the monarch had to operate in harmony with his "natural" advisors. The change in legal standards concerned both the substance and the spirit of the law [3].

Despite a trend towards greater royal control over legal proceedings from 1215, as evidenced by the Crown's increased readiness to prosecute [25], the underlying principles of the Magna Carta remained steadfast. Henry III's reaffirmation in 1265 defended the "grants and concessions of the aforesaid liberties" as fair and durable [24]. The Magna Carta, with explicit clauses such as ensuring proportionate penalties and the commitment not to "sell, deny, or delay right or justice" to anyone, heralded an era of legal reforms that profoundly influenced the course of English jurisprudence [27,28].

6. Discussion

The impact of the 1215 Magna Carta on the political landscape of medieval England are wide-ranging and diverse. Summarizing the results in relation to the study goals elucidates that the signing of the Magna Carta had enormous effects, not only on immediate political events but also on the shaping of later political systems. The reissue of the Magna Carta during the regency council's stay after John's rule was intentional; it damaged Louis's support base, forcing him to rely on foreign allies and further alienating himself from English support [8]. Gillingham's perspective emphasizes the document's tactical use in political maneuvering, extending beyond its primary legislative objectives.

The Magna Carta exerted an unquestionable impact on later political structures. Carpenter mentions the continent's issue, implying that it was crucial in the establishment of the Magna Carta in England [18]. The document's principles became touchstones in political discourse; according to Carpenter, by 1250, Henry was exhorting sheriffs and magnates to follow its ideals, highlighting the Magna Carta's rising importance in government [18]. Furthermore, its provisions about the behavior of the King's judges in shire courts attest to the influence of local knights, showing an effort to combine centralized royal authority with local competence and ambitions [18]. The Magna Carta, however, was more than simply a tool for power dynamics; it also included provisions aimed at safeguarding individual rights, such as measures to preserve the rights of baronial widows and male heirs against possible seizure by later marriages [18].

As Johnson argues, the Magna Carta stands out for its clarity amid the legal intricacies of its time, including sophisticated King's courts and complex property laws [5]. Furthermore, the Charter's focus on the freedoms and privileges of the Church in its opening sentence reveals its desire for permanent liberties not just for the clerical body but for "all the free men of our kingdom" [29]. This commitment to a broader democratic spirit ensures its indelible place in political history.

7. Conclusion

The signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 stands as a watershed moment in English history, establishing the foundation for democratic governance and the establishment of the rule of law. This inquiry has shed light on the Magna Carta's profound significance, transcending its role as a legal document to emerge as a transformative force that reshaped the political dynamics and institutions of medieval England. Its importance goes beyond a mere agreement between the King and the nobility; it codified principles advocating for individual rights and attempted to limit arbitrary authority.

Given the Magna Carta's pivotal role in shaping democratic ideals, policymakers should be encouraged to examine its tenets as they contemplate contemporary governance, ensuring that the essence of its articles is reflected in present-day laws. In the field of education, there is a clear need to stress the Magna Carta's ongoing influence in curricula, ensuring that future generations understand its importance and the underlying ideas it introduced. Furthermore, scholarly research should go further into understanding the sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to this groundbreaking document and explore how its principles can be applied to address current governance challenges. The enduring legacy of the Magna Carta warrants a continued exploration and application of its principles to foster a more just and democratic society.

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