

Monarchical Power and the Beginnings of Democracy



The High Middle Ages was a time of Kings and the Church, but it was also a time of people consolidating themselves into what is now known as a **state** and a time in which people tried to limit the power of kings.

The Early Middle Ages was a time of Feudalism. It was time when Kings held supreme power, meaning that they could do whatever they wanted, and were supported and influenced by the Church. A King, even with the help of the Church, however could not manage an entire country or state, and needed the help of local lords or nobles to govern and rule over the people. Feudalism worked great in the beginning. It provided an alternative to independent warring tribal groups by consolidating power around a single leader who demanded loyalty from other leaders or nobles to enforce his will. As the economy grew and nobles became richer and more powerful they began to challenge the authority of the King. Also, as the nobles began to educate themselves; they became both literate and numerate and they began to hire their own people who could read and write rather than rely upon priests, they then became more and more empowered and sought to challenge or at least curb or restrict the power of Kings.

Today, Canada is a **constitutional monarchy**, meaning that the current Queen is officially our head of state. The powers of the Queen however, are limited by our constitution, meaning that the Queen cannot do anything that she wants. The idea that a country or a state can have a King or Queen that has limited powers in what she or he can do started in the High Middle Ages.

Barons and Their Influence

Barons were some of the richest and most powerful nobles. The Barons could counter the influence and power of the **monarchs** because by this time the nobles were creating so much wealth that they could afford to maintain their own armies. No single Baron could challenge the power of a King or Queen, but all the Barons could. This idea that a ruler can be held accountable to others is sometimes called a "check" or a "check and balance", meaning that the power of one can be checked or balanced by the power of another, in this case a group of others.

King John

King John of England is often known to many as the villain in the legend of Robin Hood. King John was not a very effective ruler and he upset many in England. John quarreled with the Pope which resulted in the Pope excommunicating him and placing all of England under an official **interdict**. This interdict effectively meant that the people of England could not be properly married, baptized or buried by the church and therefore put their eternal souls at risk. Needless to say, in a time when everyone believe exactly what the Church was telling them, to have their ruler put their eternal soul at risk was a very big deal.

State - another name for a country, or a politically independent nation.

Constitutional Monarchy - A democratic state that still recognizes the institution of a monarchy. Countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden are all constitutional monarchies.

Monarchs - Kings or Queens

Interdict - an order from an authority like the church or a court to ban or stop something.

The Pope even went so far as to encourage the French King to invade England. Upon hearing this, King John of England quickly backed down and instead became a vassal or a servant of the Church. All of this mismanagement angered the Barons of England, many of whom didn't like the influence of the church in managing the affairs of the Kingdom. In the early 13th Century, 1214 to be exact, the Barons rose up against their King. King John knew he was defeated. The people hated him, the Church hated him and the most of all, the Barons hated him. On June 15, 1215 King John was forced to sign the **Magna Carta**.



The Magna Carta

The Magna Carta was an official document that the King signed which stated that everyone, including the King himself, was subject to the law. This was a very big deal because Kings *were* the law. At this time, Kings could literally do what they wanted. At this time, it was definitely "...good to be King", but the Magna Carta changed all that.

The Magna Carta is still referenced today as being the first step towards what we now know as modern democracy and the rule of law. There were many clauses within the "Great Charter", but perhaps the most important was the 39th clause which stated that all "free men" are to be provided with the right to justice and a fair trial. To limit the power of the King in this way was an incredibly huge step on the road to modern day democratic principles. The Magna Carta is *the* document that will lay the groundwork for other great foundational legal documents such as the American Bill of Rights, the Canadian **Charter of Rights and Freedoms** and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The term "rights" really began with the Magna Carta.

Human rights as we know it will not be extended to everyone for centuries to come but the Magna Carta is an important step. It is one of those great moments in history where people are beginning to challenge the power and authority others have over them. It is important to remember that during the Early Middle Ages, Europe was a loose group of fiercely independent tribal groups who were first consolidated into Kingdoms and then into the beginnings of what we now call nation-states. Along the way people had been oppressed and harmed by those more powerful than they were, but the Magna Carta is the first step in placing a "check" on that power. The western world would never look back from this point in history and today we as a global society are still looking for ways in which people can limit the power that a state has over them.

Magna Carta - the 13th century document that was signed by King John that limits the power of English monarch and most importantly states that even Kings and Queens are subject to the rule of law.

Charter of Rights and Freedoms - The document that is attached to the Canadian constitution that outlines the limits of government and the rights and freedoms guaranteed to citizens.

Royal Power and the Beginnings of Democracy

Directions: READ the handout entitled; "Monarchical Power and the Beginnings of Democracy" and then answer the following questions;

- a. In your own words, describe why the Magna Carta is such an important part of human history. What is a modern day equivalent to the Magna Carta? (2 marks for quality of response and evidence of insight)

- b. Class Magna Carta - Use the blank scroll provided to create a class Magna Carta that outlines the rights and responsibilities of the students and teacher. Your charter must outline at least 5 different rights or rules that both the teacher and the students respect and obey.

You will be marked out of 5 for quality of work and evidence of thought.

Total: _____ /7

