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Survey of the Magna Carta

Members of the English aristocracy composed the pivotal document known as the Magna Carta in the 13th century. The Magna Carta forced King John to obey the laws of England, and was reinterpreted by future generations to become the foundation of English and North American governments.

European Economics

During the early Middle Ages, the feudal system established in Europe created a wealthy class of land-owning barons. These barons had their own standing armies and controlled politics in their respective regions. These families battled one another over feudal disputes.

However, by the mid-1100's, the circumstances in Europe changed. As merchant activity increased and towns developed, a currency-based economy was established and gradually began to replace wealth that was based in land ownership. Also, the violent conflict between warring barons slowed as kings amassed more power over the barons.

Henry II (1154-1189) ended the Norman control of the English throne and started the Plantagenet family's reign. Henry used his administrative knowledge to centralize his nation's government by transferring power from separate nobles to the monarchy.

Henry's son, Richard the Lionhearted, succeeded his father as king. Richard was well respected and popular among most of his vassals in England. While he was king, Richard went on crusade in Palestine and spent very little time in England. He applied his

celebrated military skills and daring bravery in defense of the Latin Kingdom in the Holy Land. When Richard died, his younger brother, John succeeded him.

King John

The English aristocracy did not respect John as they did his brother, Richard. In their eyes, he was an opportunist and a failure.

John found himself in many conflicts with other European leaders. He provoked his feudal lord in France, Philip Augustus, causing war between the two countries. John lost most of England's holdings in France to Philip. Because of this failure, the English king's vassals began calling him John Softsword. John also quarreled with Pope Innocent III. This dispute caused John to claim land in England that officially belonged to the Church.

John was an able administrator. However, he used this trait to take advantage of his vassals and gain money for himself. John oftentimes broke the feudal laws of the day when it worked to his advantage. He angered his vassals by raising taxes, raising the price for avoiding military service, and instituting customs taxes on certain items. These and other policies did not gain John any allies.

By 1215, the barons were tired of John's foreign policy mistakes and his taxes. They met together at Runnymede, located near Windsor. Among them was the archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langston. Langston helped the angry barons legislate a way to stop John.

The group gave John an ultimatum. With their consolidated power, they demanded that John concede to their demands listed in the Magna Carta. John balked, hoping to find a way out through some supporter that would come to his aid. Unfortunately, he had alienated many people and he could find no help. He had no choice but to put his seal and signature to the agreement on June 15, 1215.

The New Laws

The Magna Carta, which contained 63 clauses, was primarily concerned with legislating guidelines for relations between the king and the barons. Some of these laws kept the king from levying taxes while others demanded that he obey feudal law.

One of the most important of the clauses dealt with the problem that John had made judgements in his court on a whim and not according to the law. These judgements oftentimes removed vassals from their land or ruined the vassal in other ways. The Magna Carta made it illegal for the king to ever make a judgement without the help of a jury. This clause later became the foundation for the due process of law in later English and North American history.

Another key clause in the Magna Carta formed an assembly of 25 barons who met regularly to ensure that the agreement was kept. If John did not follow all of the clauses, this council had the right to call their knights to arms against the king. The baronial council was the ancestor of the House of Lords, which led to the formation of the English Parliament still used today.

Approximately a year after he placed his seal on the Magna Carta, King John died. His nine-year-old son, Henry III, took over the throne. Because he was only a boy, his advisors helped him govern. These advisors did not encourage Henry to become a powerful man, but turned him into a weak king who was easily manipulated. These barons reissued the Magna Carta with his signature twice in 1217, and once in 1225, when Henry

came of age. Although these new versions of the Magna Carta revised some of the clauses, the main goal of keeping the king from abusing their power remained.

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By Sara Ann McGill

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