

Magna Carta

On June 15, 1215, King John met with the rebellious barons at Runnymede, a meadow in southern England. They forced him to sign a list of demands known as Magna Carta. Some of these demands follow.

John, by the grace of God king of England, lord of Ireland, duke of Normandy and of Aquitaine, count of Anjou, make this proclamation to our archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justices, foresters, sheriffs, ministers, bailiffs, and faithful men.

2. If any one of our earls or barons or other men who hold land in a grant from the king should die, and if his heir owes us relief, he will be given his inheritance provided he pays the ancient relief. The relief shall be 100 pounds for an earl, 100 pounds for a baron, and 100 shillings for a knight.

12. Scutage or aid shall be paid in our kingdom only after the common counsel has approved it, except when a ransom must be paid for returning us safe after capture, when our eldest son is knighted, and when our eldest daughter is married. At these times, only a reasonable aid shall be taken. The same provision shall hold with regard to the aids collected from the city of London.

13. And the city of London shall have all its ancient liberties and allowed to collect its own customs, both by land and by water. Besides, we grant that all the other cities, boroughs, towns, and ports shall have all their liberties and be allowed to collect their own customs.

14. And in order to have a common counsel of the kingdom meet to determine the aid or the scutage which must be paid in all cases other than the three instances mentioned in Article 12, we will invite the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, and greater barons in letters sent to each individually. In addition, we will invite through a general proclamation to the sheriffs and bailiffs, all those who hold land in a grant from us. Our invitation will specify a certain day, at least forty days from the time the invitation was sent, and a certain place for the meeting of the common counsel. In all such invitations we shall state why we wish to call the common counsel together.

17. Civil lawsuits shall not have to be held in our court, but shall be held in some fixed place.

20. A peasant who is not a serf shall be fined for a small offense only according to the degree of the offense, and for a serious offense he shall be fined according to the seriousness of the offense, except that the fine shall not deprive him of all his land. And a merchant shall be fined in the same way, except that his merchandise will not be taken. A villein shall be fined in the same way, except that his

The Charters of England Complete; also Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, John Luffman, ed. (London: T. Evans, 1793), pp. 374-397. Language simplified.

When kings refer to themselves, they commonly use "we" or "our."

Relief was the sum a vassal paid to his lord when he took possession of his father's estate.

Aid, here, means a tribute paid by a vassal to his lord.

By this time in England, the distinction between villein and serf had practically disappeared, and the words were used interchangeably.