

Royal Power and Democracy

1. The Balance of Power
2. King John's Abuse of Power
3. The *Magna Carta*



1. The Balance of Power

- In dictatorships, one person, called a dictator, has all the power over everyone he or she rules
- Kings and queens in feudalism were not dictators
- They too had to obey the feudal code

- The feudal monarch had the power to make and change laws, to collect some kinds of taxes, to choose advisors, and to give titles and estates



- The king's power was kept in check by a small but powerful group of nobles called barons
- Barons were the wealthiest and most powerful nobles



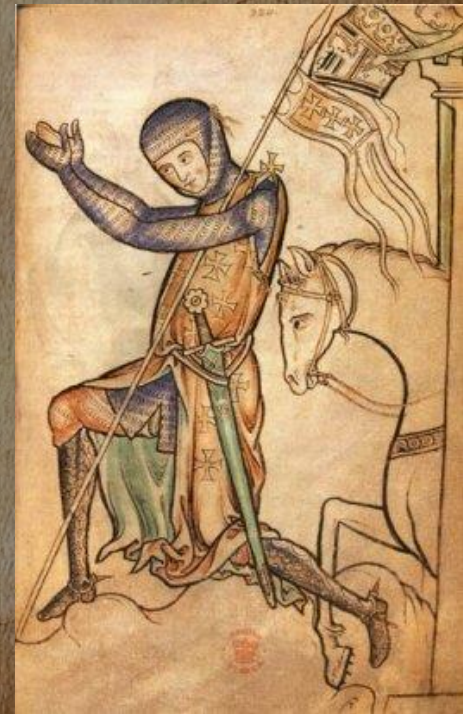
- If a monarch did anything to break the feudal contract, the barons would feel justified in making war on their sovereign



- Advantage for barons: they had castles and their vassals close at hand ready for war
- Disadvantage for monarchs: had to assemble vassals from all across the kingdom (which could take several weeks)



- Therefore, an unexpected rebellion by one or more barons could pose a real threat to the king
- For this reason, most monarchs went out of their way to fulfill their feudal obligations



2. King John's Abuse of Power

King John
1199 - 1216



King John in Hollywood



- John had never been a popular king, but his popularity took a severe hit when he was excommunicated by the Pope Innocent III in 1206
- The pope placed England under an interdict banning all Church services throughout the kingdom



- John saw his right to rule as coming from God and therefore considered himself above any feudal obligations
- He abused his power in many different ways



- Tore down hedges on other people's property so he could hunt better
- Imprisoned barons without trial, took away their property, and even sometimes took their family members as hostages and had them tortured



- He raised illegal taxes
- Hired foreign soldiers to fight his own people



3. The *Magna Carta*

- By 1214, King John was so hated that the barons rebelled
- The Church and ordinary townspeople also rose up against the king



Robin Hood



- On 15 June 1215, the barons forced John to sign the *Magna Carta* (“Great Charter”)
- It limited John’s authority



- Taxes could not be raised without the approval of a parliament
- No person could be arrested or thrown into prison without a proper trial



Some things you should know about the *Magna Carta*

i) The charter referred only to the King and the ruling classes (nobles). It was by no means a document which established rights for ordinary people



ii) John immediately, with the pope's blessing, decided that he was under no obligation to meet the principles of the charter

- This led to more uprisings which continued into the reign of John's son, King Henry III



iii) Over the centuries, the *Magna Carta* became more significant, and some of its chapters remain today on the books as British law (which was adopted by English Canada)

...imprisonment of
...hundred and
...Habeas Corpus
...post facto Law
...Law shall be



Textbook Questions

- p. 67 #1, #4

