Magna Carta

King John of England was forced to sign the Magna Carta, which means “Great Charter,” in 1215. Ideas from the Magna Carta still influence the systems of government in many countries around the world. Below are excerpts from 5 of the 63 articles of this important document.

1. We also have granted to all the freemen of our kingdom, for us and for our heirs forever, all the underwritten liberties, to be had and holden by them and their heirs, of us and our heirs forever. . . .

12. No scutage [tax] or aid shall be imposed in our kingdom, unless by the general council of our kingdom; except for ransoming our person, making our eldest son a knight and once for marrying our eldest daughter; and for these there shall be paid no more than a reasonable aid.

14. And for holding the general council of the kingdom concerning the assessment of aids, except in the three cases aforesaid, and for assessing of scutage, we shall cause to be summoned the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, and greater barons of the realm, singly by our letters. And furthermore, we shall cause to be summoned generally, by our sheriffs and bailiffs all others who hold of us in chief, for a certain day, that is to say, forty days before the meeting at least, and to a certain place. And in all letters of such summons we will declare the cause of such summons. And summons being thus made, the business shall proceed on the day appointed, according to the advice of such as shall be present, although all that were summoned come not.

39. No freeman shall be taken or imprisoned, or diseised [deprived], or outlawed, or banished, or in any way destroyed . . . unless by the lawful judgment of his peers, or by the law of the land.

40. We will sell to no man, we will not deny to any man, either justice or right.

—Magna Carta

Skills Assessment

1. In Article 1, who is granted the rights described elsewhere in the Magna Carta?
   A. only the king and his heirs
   B. only the general council
   C. all freemen and their heirs
   D. only nobles assembled at the signing

2. Approval by the general council was not required for any tax that would
   A. support the general council
   B. ransom the king
   C. fund the building of roadways
   D. pay for schools
   E. fine any tax that would require the reader to consult a dictionary.

3. Critical Thinking Making Inferences (a) What do Articles 14 and 40 suggest about royal abuse of power during this period of English history? (b) Think about the membership of the general council, as described in Article 14. Who is not included? What can you infer from this?

Skills Tip

Very old documents often contain unfamiliar words. Sometimes they are explained in brackets. Others, however, require the reader to consult a dictionary. Dictionaries often list several definitions for a word. Choose the most appropriate meaning for the context of the material in the reading. The right definition may not be the first meaning that is listed. The Skills Handbook at the front of this book also has a lesson that will help students with this feature.

Test Preparation

Have students read Article 14 on this page, and then answer the question below.

Using what you have read on the opposite page, into what did the “general council” in Article 14 evolve?
   A. the Parliament
   B. the Knights of the Round Table
   C. the King’s Council
   D. the House of Commons

Background

The Magna Carta was written in Latin on parchment. Copies of the document were sent to churches throughout England. Four times a year, the sheriffs had to read it aloud in the county courts. After John’s death in 1216, it was modified and reissued.

Activity

Interpreting the Primary Source

Use these questions to generate class discussion.

Critical Thinking: Comparing Article 20 of the Magna Carta stated that a free- man could be fined “only according to the measure of his offenses.” Which amendment to the U.S. Constitution reflects this same idea? (Amendment VIII) Article 28 of the Magna Carta protected people from government seizure of their goods. Which amendment to the U.S. Constitution reflects this same idea? (Amendment V)

Possible answers: (a) Requiring that meetings be announced far in advance suggests that the king used short-notice meetings to circumvent the council. Article 40 suggests that wrong-doers could buy their way out of trouble. (b) Common people, such as peasants, are not present or represented in the general council, which implies low status with no representation.

Answers 1. C 2. H 3. Possible answers: