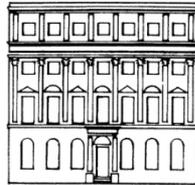


# German Historical Institute London



## BULLETIN

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*Magna Carta 1215: History and Myth*  
Conference Report  
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*Magna Carta 1215: History and Myth.* Eleventh Summer School in British History, held at the German Historical Institute London, 22–26 July 2013. Organizers: Cornelia Linde (GHIL), Michael Schaich (GHIL), and Jörg Schwarz (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich).

There is a long tradition of summer schools at the GHIL, but this year's event, attended by twenty students from different German universities, was the first on a medieval topic. It focused on one of the most famous documents of the Middle Ages: Magna Carta. Experts Nicholas Vincent (University of East Anglia), Hugh Doherty (University of Oxford), and John Gillingham (LSE) were invited to lecture. The main four themes they discussed were: the reign of King John; the barons and their influence on Magna Carta; its intellectual background; and the document's reception from the Middle Ages to the present day.

In his introduction Nicolas Vincent presented the historical background of King John's reign and highlighted certain aspects which cast a slur on his kingship. Starting in 1200, a number of events destroyed John's authority within his kingdom. In order to secure and gain influence in Gascony, John had married the heiress of Angoulême, Isabella. But there were objections to their marriage. While John had still been married to Isabella of Gloucester, Isabella of Angoulême had been promised to Hugh de Lusignan. By divorcing his own wife and making Isabella of Angoulême his queen, John provoked a rebellion of the barons who were joined by his nephew, Arthur of Brittany. John ultimately proved victorious but the public implications of this rebellion were disastrous. As Arthur never returned from prison, there were rumours that John had had him killed.

Another aspect discussed was John's loss of Normandy. Summoned to the court of Phillip of France, John refused to attend and respond to the accusations of Arthur's murder. The French king therefore occupied vast tracts of Normandy, with the result that John could retain only small territories in the south. His military defeat and obscure incidents in his marriage with Isabella irreparably destroyed John's reputation. But as Vincent emphasized in his lec-

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL's website <[www.ghil.ac.uk](http://www.ghil.ac.uk)>.

ture, things got even worse for John when he dared to break with the Pope by refusing to accept Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury. Their dispute culminated in the imposition of a papal interdict on England and Wales in 1208. One year later Pope Innocent III excommunicated John. As an outcast from the church, John was totally isolated, which marked the nadir of his reputation within his kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

John Gillingham looked at the sources for John's reign: the Charter Rolls, which are preserved for the entire period of his reign; and the Patent Rolls, which begin in the third year of his reign. These allow us to take a deeper look at the everyday business of government and life at the king's court, as they list earnings and expenses. The image of a king of bad character who lacked the ability to rule put forward by earlier scholars can be balanced after examining these documents. The Charter Rolls show that John was actually a highly capable king when it came to household affairs. This statement was supported by documents from the Exchequer, the last type of source Gillingham presented to the students. They show that John was, in fact, extremely rich. Gillingham also looked more closely at John's itinerary, which made clear that he only went to certain areas. He did not, for example, visit the northern territories at all, preferring to stay close to the forests of southern England and France. Considering John's great wealth, Gillingham spelled out one of John's tactical moves: he kept people in debt instead of demanding payment immediately. Because of his long absences from certain areas of the kingdom, John tried to create relationships of dependency, which he could use to his own advantage in order to secure the territories he rarely visited.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Gillingham's final statement emphasized that John was 'incompetent where it really mattered, in the management of his more powerful subjects',<sup>3</sup> as he could not keep his magnates content.

Finally, Hugh Doherty presented a new line of research which has not been published so far. He argued that the year 1212 marked the most important turning point on the way to Magna Carta. In finan-

<sup>1</sup> See Nicolas Vincent, *Magna Carta: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), 36–54.

<sup>2</sup> See John Gillingham, *The Angevin Empire* (London, 1984), 51–61.

<sup>3</sup> John Gillingham and Ralph A. Griffiths, *Medieval Britain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000), 36–7.

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cial terms, John was not a bad king at all. In fact, by ruling strictly in order to consolidate his reign, he accumulated an abundance of power. According to Doherty, even the papal interdict did not damage John's reputation. But, Doherty argued, John's crucial mistake was to implement certain reforms in 1212, leading him to reduce the pressure he had exercised on society for years. As his new behaviour was interpreted as weakness, opposition to the king increased and paved the way for the remission of Magna Carta.

The barons provided another thematic focus. As research has generally concentrated on King John, they have long been neglected. Doherty asked about the composition of this social group and discussed its spheres of influence. In general, the group could be divided into greater and lesser barons by specific criteria such as the size of their landholdings and the venerability of their families. Their spheres of influence depended on family identity, which therefore took first priority in their thinking. In second place, localities were also decisive. Their estates and castles demonstrated honour as another fundamental category of their thinking. The final factor on which baronial influence depended was their relationship to the sovereign. As they swore an oath of allegiance to the king, their sphere of influence to a large extent depended on this relationship.

As the barons obviously controlled huge resources, such as castles, they could afford to resist the monarch. While addressing the intellectual background of Magna Carta, Doherty and Vincent asked what share the barons had in the conception of Magna Carta. Vincent concentrated on Stephen Langton's character. The Archbishop of Canterbury, who returned from exile in 1213 after the disagreement between Innocent III and King John, became one of the most important thinkers of his time. His likely influence on Magna Carta is visible in multiple aspects. In 1214 Langton issued statutes on the behaviour of clerics in his diocese, which were echoed one year later in Magna Carta. Langton's understanding of rule also became clear in the debates in which he participated. In his view, kings had to commit themselves to maintaining law and justice, which is perfectly reflected in Magna Carta. But apart from substantive reasons, there are also formal ones that reflect his influence. Langton is named second after the king in the opening formulae. Furthermore, the first clause of Magna Carta granted freedom of church and ecclesiastical elections.

Doherty stressed that the barons' share in Magna Carta should not be underestimated. As their influence on the document has often been neglected in research, he pointed out that Magna Carta was a highly sophisticated document initiated by an elite. Because literacy was one of the typical attributes of the eleventh and twelfth-century elite, the literate barons very likely had great influence on the composition of Magna Carta.

The last topic discussed was the reception of Magna Carta. Vincent made clear that it has inspired people's imagination for centuries. In the seventeenth century, during the struggle between the Stuart kings and Parliament, Magna Carta was identified as an 'Ancient Constitution', as the lawyer Edward Coke put it. It was considered a document which represented law as something old and immutable that defined individuals' rights against the sovereign. In America, in particular, Magna Carta was rapidly adopted and 'cited as the inheritance of a legal system itself'.<sup>4</sup>

In their final statements on the reception of Magna Carta, all the experts agreed that the current opinion that Magna Carta marked the beginnings of democracy must be firmly rejected. Although the king's actions were defined by law and further restrictions were put on him, the traditional and conservative character of Magna Carta dominated. This is clearest in its visual form, as it was a royal charter granted by the king and sealed with his royal seal. Moreover, it has to be asked who benefited from its articles? On this point in particular it should be stressed that the document addressed only a small audience – not a modern understanding of democracy at all.

The participants in this year's summer school enjoyed a highly informative time at the GHIL. Work in the seminars was complemented by several excursions, for example, to the British Library and Temple Church. The friendly atmosphere during discussions was enhanced by the willingness of the experts to speak individually to students during the breaks.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent, *Magna Carta*, 98.