

## **The document that established civil society in Britain**

*Magna Carta*, manuscript on parchment from the first half of the thirteenth century, in the version of 1215. 21 1/4 inches x 16 5/8 inches (540 x 422 mm), single sheet.

*Magna Carta* is a document of extraordinary importance because it marks the beginning of civil society in Britain after the Romans. It was written in 1215 during the reign of King John, a despot who imposed extortionate taxes to pay for his continual losing wars in France. He was evil and ineffectual, and succeeded in antagonizing the Pope, the barons, and the populace. Before *Magna Carta* there were effectively no limits to the king's power to plunder, and justice was a commodity to be bought and sold. On June 15, 1215, at Runnymede, the barons presented *Magna Carta* to the king and forced him to swear an oath to uphold the principles there embodied. The enduring significance of the document lay not so much in its actual provisions as in its implied recognition that civil society is impossible to maintain without some assurance of justice. It is a manifesto against the survivalist ethos that prevails when a civilization lacks at least some such touchstone as *Magna Carta*.

This momentous manuscript was formerly in the collection of the antiquary John Eliot Hodgkin, who acquired it in the 1890s, and is described in his *Rariora*, 3 vols. (London, 1902), I, 26. It was reserved by his family from the 1914 auction of his collections and given by them to the Bodleian Library in 1926.

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