



Making the Magna Carta

Magna Carta, meaning great charter, was not known by this name until 1217 when it was issued with the Forest Charter (the little charter).

One of the most frequently asked questions concerning the four surviving copies of Magna Carta is, "Which one is the original?" In fact, there is no evidence at all to suggest that a single, original Magna Carta was ceremonially sealed at Runnymede in June 1215, nor even that such a document ever existed. Rather, it seems that scribes in the royal chancery expanded and revised the draft settlement agreed at Runnymede by 19 June.

The first seven copies of the sealed grant produced by the royal chancery were delivered for distribution on 24 June. It is likely that, as with other royal grants, the acquisition of a copy of Magna Carta was dependent on the payment of fees by the recipient.

The issue of thirteen copies is recorded but exactly how many more copies were sent out from the royal chancery in 1215 is obscure. Only four are now known to survive. Two of the four are held in the British Library, one is preserved in the archives of Lincoln Cathedral and another in the archives of Salisbury Cathedral.

The charter was written in heavily abbreviated Latin. It was translated into the French Spoken by the Norman barons and may also have been translated into the English spoken by townspeople and peasants.

Magna Carta was written on sheets of parchment. The parchment was manufactured from sheepskin which was soaked in a bath of lime, stretched on a frame to dry under tension, and scraped to produce a smooth writing surface. The scribes wrote on the parchment using a quill pen made from a long feather and ink produced by mixing iron salts with a caustic liquid extracted from galls on oak trees.

The seal was made from beeswax and resin and was attached to the charter with plaited cords. Most medieval seals were single-sided but the royal Great Seal was a large and double-sided. Two circles of wax were prepared for the seal press. The two halves were aligned, the cords for attaching the seal to the document were laid between the two halves. The press was tightened, forming the impressions on both sides of the seal and joining the two halves together.



A scribe buys parchment



A medieval scribe



Medieval seal press



King John's Great Seal measured 95 millimetres (about four inches) in diameter; it added weight, both literally and symbolically, to the Magna Carta. The front of the seal, known as the obverse, illustrates the majestic power of the king, showing him crowned and seated on a throne, holding a sword in his right hand and an orb in his left. The reverse of the seal shows the king on horseback, prepared for combat, wearing a coat of mail and helmet, brandishing a sword in his right hand and a spear in his left.

www.burymagnacarta.org



Magna Carta is owned and loaned by Lincoln Cathedral.

