

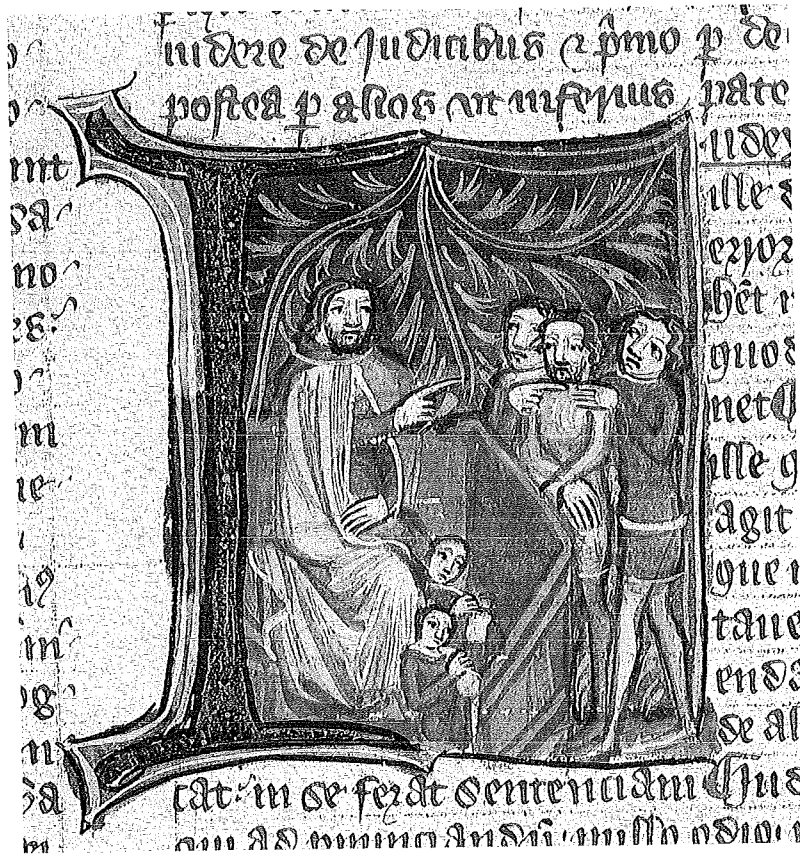
Breay, C. Magna Carta: Manuscripts & Myths, 2002.
The Feudal King

Warfare has always been an expensive business and the series of battles which John fought to defend his continental inheritance, together with his extensive use of mercenaries, placed an intolerable strain on his Exchequer in a period of rampant inflation. To make matters worse, each time John lost lands in France, he also lost a source of revenue so that the burden of supporting the next military campaign fell on an ever-shrinking number of subjects. In addition to his continental wars, John also pursued campaigns in Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Although more successful, these further military engagements inevitably made his financial crisis even more acute. In an attempt to meet the crippling cost of these wars, John directed his energies to wringing as much revenue as possible from all royal sources of income. He extracted money from administrative office-holders, from the courts and from the feudal system of land tenure.

The sheriffs made an annual payment, known as a farm, to the king. This farm was a compounded payment of all the Crown's ancient rents and dues from its lands in the counties. Sheriffs were prepared to pay huge sums of money to hold the office, because it afforded many opportunities for personal profit, but John antagonised the sheriffs by forcing them to pay ever greater sums on appointment and by adding surcharges to their farms of the counties.

The king also made money from the justice system. Quite apart from the complex system of fines for both infringements of the law and procedural irregularities, litigants sometimes offered large sums in the hope of a favourable decision in the king's courts. In addition to the main system of justice, medieval kings also profited from the laws governing the royal forests. These forests covered vast and relentlessly increasing areas of countryside set aside for hunting by the king and his followers. They were governed by a separate set of especially severe laws, whose punitive fines could be particularly lucrative for the Crown.

The feudal system of land tenure offered even greater opportunities for extortion to an unscrupulous king who was prepared to disregard the constraints of custom. In the feudal hierarchy, all land was ultimately held 'in fee' from the king, in a complex web of tenancies and subtenancies which stretched down from the king's tenants-in-chief, through a series of

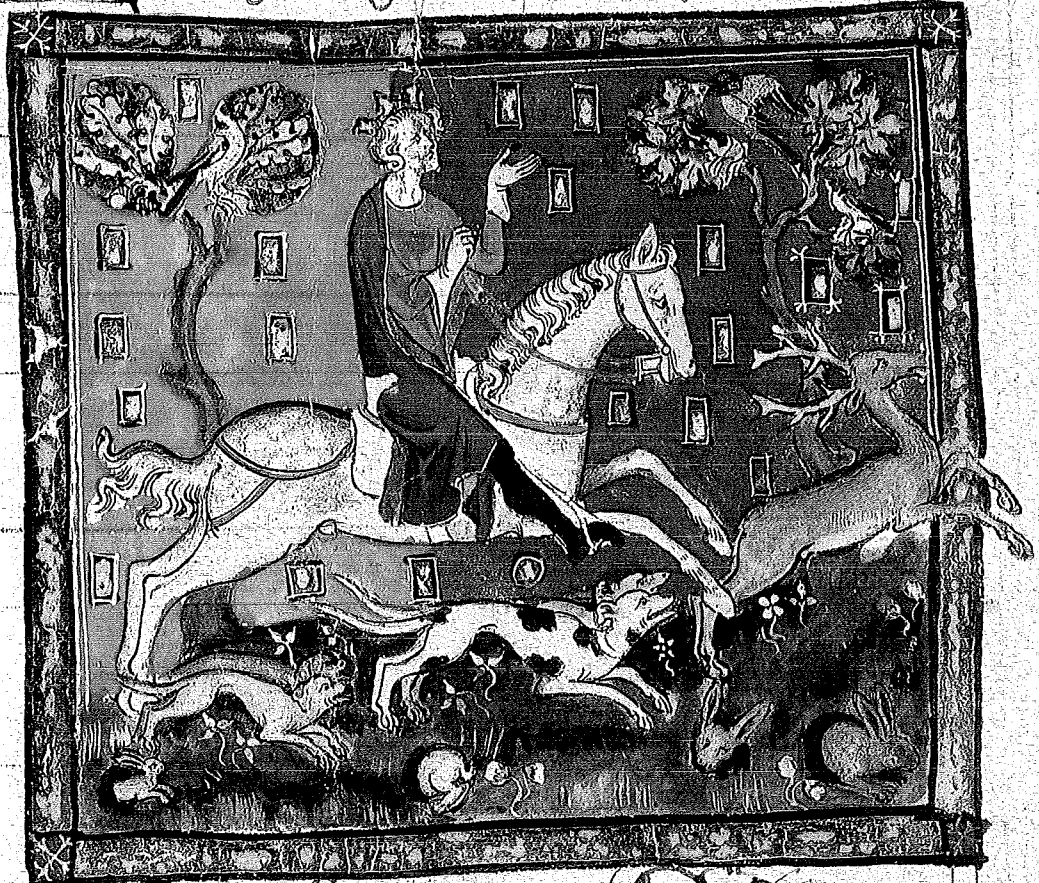


A judge and prisoner in court, mid-fourteenth century
BL Royal MS 6 E. vii, f. 345r

lesser lords, to the rural peasantry – known as the villeins – at the foot of the pyramid. Everyone in the hierarchy, from the king to the villeins, possessed rights and owed obligations, both of which were regulated by long-established custom. King John fell foul of the barons by repeatedly breaching custom in his extortionate demands.

The king made money from the return to the Crown of the lands of tenants who died without heirs and the forfeiture of the lands of convicted felons. These continual returns, known as escheats, provided him with a regular supply of land available to grant to others. This source of income was valuable but could not easily be increased by the king. However, he was also entitled to 'feudal incidents', a series of the payments due to him from his tenants-in-chief. Two such incidents were payments called 'aids' and 'reliefs', and John exploited his right to these payments to the full. The king could demand an aid in an emergency or on an occasion such as the marriage of his eldest daughter, whilst heirs and heiresses had to pay a relief

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King John and hunting

in order to succeed to their estates. For example, King John required Roger de Lacy to pay £4,500 to succeed to his father's lands. This figure was an enormous sum, equal to almost half the king's annual income from the sheriffs' farms of the counties. Nicholas de Stuteville was forced to pay the even greater relief of £6,666 for succession to his lands. In order to meet the demand, Nicholas had to lease some estates, sell others and surrender Knaresborough and Boroughbridge to the king to guarantee payment.

Another feudal incident was the right of wardship which arose when a tenant died leaving an heir who had not yet come of age. Rights of wardship were very profitable and could be sold by the king to the highest bidder who was then free to exploit the heir's estates for his own short-term gain, even if this left a ruined estate for the heir to inherit when he came of age. The death of tenants also gave the king control over the marriages of their widows, heirs and heiresses. Widows who wished to remarry someone of their own choosing had to pay for the right to do so; some even had to pay for permission to remain unmarried. John's desperate need for income encouraged him to extract as much profit as possible from these rights of wardship.

John also exploited 'scutage' beyond the bounds of custom. Scutage was the payment owed by feudal tenants in lieu of the provision of knights for military service. The revenue it generated was used to help meet the ever-inflating cost of paying mercenaries to fight abroad. Whereas John's father, Henry II, had sought only eight scutages in thirty-four years, John demanded eleven in only seventeen years on the throne. As well as exacting scutage much more frequently than had been customary, he also set it at rates never before seen. For example, in anticipation of his attempt to reconquer lands in France in 1214, John levied scutage at the unprecedentedly high rate of 3 marks (£2) per knight's fee. The money was due at the end of September but, following the humiliating defeat at Bouvines, many refused to pay.

In his desperation to increase his revenue, John became increasingly unscrupulous in the collection of debts. He enforced his exactions by seizing land, taking hostages and imprisoning defaulters. William de Braose, an important baron in Sussex and the Welsh Marches, failed to keep

*Opposite King John
hunting with dogs
St. Cotton, Clauhaus D.ii.
. 1. 16r*

*Opposite: Map of
Britain by Matthew
Paris, monk of
St Albans, d. 1259
BL Cotton MS Claudius
D. vi, f. 12v*

up payments for lands in Ireland and castles in the Marches. In 1209, John forced him to pledge his lands, surrender his castles, and give hostages in an attempt to recover the debts. William tried to resist the king by force: he raised a rebellion in Wales in 1210 and was pursued through Ireland by John but died in France the following year, his wife and son having allegedly been starved to death in Windsor Castle.

The king's willingness to ignore custom and abuse his rights eventually led other baronial victims of his behaviour to rebel against him. He was justifiably nervous of plots by malcontents, and in 1212 there was an unsuccessful conspiracy to assassinate him involving Robert Fitz Walter and Eustace de Vesci, who were prominent in the rebellion of 1215. This plot seems to have had scant effect on his treatment of the barons, and the more unjustly he behaved, the more he encouraged his opponents to organise themselves against him.