

Unit 1. Life in England under the Angevin Kings

Class activity: What was a king expected to do in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries?

This activity will help pupils to understand the roles and responsibilities of the Angevin kings. In the Middle Ages, important government documents were not signed by the person authorising them. Instead, documents were sealed which meant that a special decorated disc made out of coloured beeswax was attached to the document. The images, symbols and words used on medieval seals offer important clues about the role, identity and status of the person issuing the document. Seals were, after all, important as visual images of authority at a time when most ordinary people were unable to read or write. What do the images on both sides of the great seal of King John reveal about the role of the Angevin king? (Figures 1 and 2 below) How does the king's seal differ from that of the seal of the great baron Robert fitzWalter? (Figure 3 below)

Figure 1: The Great Seal of King John (Front)



Image: The great seal of King John [© Canterbury Cathedral Archives, CCA-DCC-ChAnt/C/109, reproduced by kind permission of the dean and chapter of Canterbury Cathedral]

Figure 2: The Great Seal of King John (Back)



Image: The great seal of King John [© Canterbury Cathedral Archives, CCA-DCC-ChAnt/C/109, reproduced by kind permission of the dean and chapter of Canterbury Cathedral]

Figure 3: The Seal of Robert fitzWalter, a leading Northern baron



Image: The seal die of Robert fitzWalter, 1213-19, showing a knight fighting a dragon [British Museum, available at https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/s/seal-die_of_robert_fitzwalter.aspx]