

Unit 2. The Disastrous Reign of King John (1199-1216)

Class activity: Was King John a bad king or just unlucky?

This activity will encourage pupils to think about different interpretations of King John's reign. Explain to the class that historians who have written about King John at different times in history have viewed him differently from one another.

- In the sixteenth century, historians of the Tudor period praised John for standing up to the pope (like the Tudor King Henry VIII) and criticized the barons for rebelling against him.
- In the nineteenth century, Victorian writers criticized King John for being an evil and incompetent king, basing their portrayals of him on medieval chronicles by monks such as Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris.
- In the 1950s and 1960s, historians began to examine the government records for John's reign more closely than before, and argued that John was a hardworking king and an unlucky ruler. These historians dismissed the work of chroniclers like Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris as unreliable because they were written after John's death and were prejudiced against him.
- Since the 1980s, historians have had more varied views about King John, and some modern writers have been more willing to acknowledge John's personal role in bringing about the disasters of his reign than earlier historians.

Divide the class into small groups. Next, ask each group to read the worksheet below and think about which statements support the view that John was a hardworking king, which support the view that he was a bad king and which support the view that he was an unlucky king. Then ask the groups to look at when each extract was written and think about (1) where it sits in the history of writing about King John, and (2) whether there are similarities of views.

<p>The reasons for the French invasion of Normandy, 1202-1204.</p> <p>David Carpenter, <i>The Struggle for Mastery</i> (2003), p. 264.</p> <p>'In August 1200, having divorced his first wife, John married Isabella, daughter and sole heir of the count of Angoulême.... But instead of compensating Hugh de Lusignan, the great Poitevin noble to whom Isabella had already been engaged, John tried to bully him into submission. Hugh appealed for justice to the king of France, and thus gave Philip his chance. His [Philip's] court in the spring of 1202 sentenced John to forfeit all his continental fiefs'.</p>	<p>Good, Bad and/or Unlucky?</p>
<p>The quarrel between Pope Innocent III and King John, 1205-1214.</p> <p>Nicholas Vincent, <i>Magna Carta: A Very Short Introduction</i> (2012), p. 47.</p> <p>To John's catalogue of crimes, after 1205 was added a final self-inflicted injury: an open breach with the Church. Since the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170, although obliged to tread warily, the kings of England had been allowed very much their own way in appointments to bishoprics. In 1205, for example, and despite some resistance, John had been able to secure Winchester for his henchman Peter des Roches. Determined to prevent another such infringement of ecclesiastical privilege, in the following year the pope, Innocent III, refused all inducements to promote a courtier as successor to the late archbishop of Canterbury, Hubert Walter. Instead... the pope secured promotion to Canterbury for a scholar in late middle age... Master Stephen Langton'.</p>	<p>Good, Bad and/or Unlucky?</p>

<p>How England was governed by King Henry II and King Richard I.</p> <p>J. C. Holt, <i>The Northerners</i> (first published 1961), pp. 145-6.</p> <p>‘It would be a mistake to imagine that 1204 [the loss of Normandy by King John] marked a rough dividing line between lawful and reasonable government on the one hand, and increasingly harsh tyranny on the other. The government of Henry II and Hubert Walter had already placed heavy burdens on the country. Since 1194 especially, with the dual burdens of King Richard’s ransom and the crisis in the Norman wars, the strain had become intolerable; England paid dearly for the vainglorious military luxury of Château Gaillard [an expensive castle Richard built] and King Richard’s soldierly energy’.</p>	<p>Good, Bad and/or Unlucky?</p>
<p>King John’s approach to government.</p> <p>W. L. Warren, <i>King John</i> (first published 1961), p. 258.</p> <p>‘Throughout his reign John’s overriding objective was to rule his inheritance in peace: to be able to ride, like his father, from the Cheviots to the Pyrenees, wearing his crown in undisputed majesty, receiving the homage of his vassals, doing justice. ‘Greatest of earthly princes’, Richard fitzNigel had called Henry II. His father’s position appeared to John not so much a challenge as a birthright.... From the moment he [John] began to rule, rivals and traitors conspired to cheat him of his inheritance. His reaction was a display of ruthless determination: anyone who impeded him ruling as his father had done was his enemy, be he baron, king of France, or pope; but as he wrestled with one, more foes sprang upon his back.... It could have been an epic struggle, but the story is marred by flaws in the character of the protagonist’.</p>	<p>Good, Bad and/or Unlucky?</p>

<p>King John's approach to government.</p> <p>D. M. Stenton, <i>English Society in the Early Middle Ages</i> (1951), p. 46.</p> <p>'John was the true son of the king who devised writs to bring business to the royal court of justice, who watched over the Exchequer, and supervised the justice his judges administered in the shires.... Like his father, John kept watch on the Exchequer officials, sometimes sitting at the Exchequer board, sometimes ordering special inquests [investigations] into moneys owed to the Crown. No king has ever known England better than John, for no king has ever been so continuously moving up and down its roads'.</p>	<p>Good, Bad or Unlucky?</p>
<p>John's behaviour towards his English subjects.</p> <p>J. R. Green, <i>Short History of the English People</i> (first published 1875).</p> <p>'In his inner soul John was the worst outcome of the Angevins.... [John's] punishments were the refinements of cruelty, the starvation of children, the crushing of old men under copes of lead.... He scoffed at priests and turned his back on the mass, even amidst the solemnities of his coronation...'.</p>	<p>Good, Bad and/or Unlucky?</p>