

Magna Carta in Chronicles of Medieval Britain

The anonymous so-called “Barnwell chronicler”, writing in the 13th century, reports somewhat neutrally the signing of *Magna Carta* on June 15th 1215:

Videns igitur rex eos invalescere cœpit per quoscumque et maxime per archiepiscopum, quem plurimum verebantur, eos ad pacem sollicitare, secure pollicens quod non staret per eum quin pax quacunq̄ue conditione reformaretur. Assignato itaque loco, ubi partes commode convenirent, tandem post multas deliberationes amici facti sunt, rege illis omnia annuente quæ volebant, et per cartam suam confirmante.

Recepti sunt igitur in osculum pacis qui aderant, hominum et fidelitatem de novo facientes, comederuntque simul et biberunt, et præfixus est dies pactorum completioni, citra quem quæ ibi determinata erant perficerentur. Reddiditque in continenti rex unicuique jus suum, et obsides quos habebat, castella etiam vel tenementa quæ diu in manu sua tenuerat.

[...]

Deferebatur interim exemplar illius cartæ per civitates et vicos, et juratum est ab omnibus quod eam observarent, ipso rege hoc jubente.

[The king, seeing [the barons] gather strength, then began through certain people and especially through the archbishop, whom they greatly respected, to ask them for peace, promising faithfully that there was nothing which he could not do in the interests of obtaining peace. Having agreed upon a place where the parties could conveniently gather, after many deliberations they made peace with the king, and he gave to them all that they wanted, and confirmed it in his charter.

Those who had come were received there with the kiss of peace, and they did fealty anew, and they ate and drank together. A day was fixed for the completion of the peace, when they would finally achieve what they had determined on. And the king satisfactorily restored justice everywhere, lifting the sieges which he had begun and giving up the houses and castles which he held in his own hand.

[...]

A copy of the charter was circulated around the towns and villages and all who saw it agreed to it, the king himself having ordered this.]¹

In 1999, Richard Kay emphasized the fact that Antonia Gransden considered that the Barnwell Chronicle contained “the best, the fullest and most sophisticated annals” written in England for the years 1202-25, that William Stubbs had declared it to be “one of the most valuable contributions in existence to the history of that eventful period”, and that James Clarke Holt thought it was “the most perceptive” narrative source.² It is undeniable that one is struck by the chronicle’s moderate tone and its balanced account, the annalist even complimenting John for some of his decisions and undertakings³ or excusing his behaviour at

¹ *Memoriale Fratris Walteri de Coventria*, W. Stubbs (ed.), London: Longman, 1872, vol. 2, pp. 221-222. English translation by E. Hallam (ed.), *The Plantagenet Chronicles*, London: Phoebe Phillips Editions, 1986, p. 312.

² R. Kay, “Walter of Coventry and the Barnwell Chronicle”, *Traditio*, vol. 54 (1999), pp. 141-167, at p. 141.

³ One can read, for example, that “even amid such adversity King John set in motion a deed of great and laudable memory. For when the foresters harassed many in all parts of England with new exactions, the king seeing the misery of the afflicted, revoked them entirely and forced the forest officials to swear that they would only exact the amount which they had been accustomed to collect in the days of his father”, E. Hallam, *op. cit.*, p. 298. Or again, that “John began to eliminate evil customs from the kingdom with the advice and exhortation of the bishops, restraining the violations and hurtful exactions of his sheriffs and officials. This was because the sheriffs and lesser officials, when collecting the annual levy which alone they should have procured, elicited further moneys from the poor of the provinces. Removing those who practiced cupidity, he appointed others who would handle the people carefully, who would make use of the advice of prudent men and who would work for

a time when most writers were openly hostile to the king. Yet, as far as Magna Carta is concerned, one rather wishes there was more: no precise date is given, the meeting place remains undefined (Runnymede is not mentioned), nothing is said about the content of the charter (the king “gave them all that they wanted”). The preceding entries to the passage reproduced above only stipulate that in 1214 “there arose a dissension between King John and some of the nobles concerning a scutage which he sought from them and which they would not give” – which led the chronicler to point out that after all “the king demanded the aid which had been given to the Crown in the days of his father and brother” – and that “the barons brought forward a certain charter of liberties granted by Henry I which they demanded should be confirmed to them by the king”.⁴ As Antonia Gransden remarks in her *Historical Writing in England, c. 550 to c. 1307*:

Unlike dedicated historians, chroniclers rarely commented on events: they reported news, without editorial comments. The nature of annals is one reason why the attitude of contemporary historians to King John tended to be veiled and reserved. The author saw the outside world through a distorting lens, whenever it impinged on the monastery’s interests. And when the monastery’s affairs were not concerned he was inclined to ignore external events. It was left to Roger of Wendover and more especially to Matthew Paris to attack King John’s character with full-blooded, homiletic invective, and to attempt a coherent interpretation of the constitutional issues of the reign (...) for the contemporary historians lived too near events to see them in perspective.⁵

In reality, King John seems to have found favour in none of the other 13th century chroniclers’ eyes (at least those still known and read today). After a reminder of the content of these early sources – for this documentation has often been (and extremely well) studied by many academics – that will enable me to draw the king’s moral portrait as it emerged from these chronicles, I shall turn to 14th and 15th century national histories or *Brut* chronicles. As a matter of fact, the point of this paper is to bring out what late medieval English people (or rather writers) remembered and retained of Magna Carta: is it mentioned in these Middle English accounts of historical events? Is it granted great importance? What grievances and complaints were emphasized? Upon whom was the blame placed? Was the charter perceived to be significant? The answers to these questions will however have to be considered with a critical eye as the overview they will provide us with will necessarily be biased as the war between the king and the magnates was also one of propaganda.

John is held responsible for the conflict between him and the barons in all the surviving 13th century chronicles. He is first suspected of having murdered his nephew Arthur, Duke of Brittany and the son of his older brother Geoffrey, consequently the legitimate heir to the throne of England. Roger of Wendover reports that in 1202:

Audiens autem hæc rex Johannes perturbatus est valde, præcepitque ut Arthurus apud Rothamagum mitteretur et ibi in arce nova retrusus sub arctiori custodia servaretur; sed non

their fellow countrymen in peace and quiet and not by cheating with money. He even instituted a thorough inquiry on this matter so that it should be known how much from the exactions of his ministers he actually received. But this was never completed because terror and tumult intervened when all men were called to arms because of invasion by the French (*Ibid.*, p. 305).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁵ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing c. 550 to c. 1307*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974, pp. 320-321.

multo post idem Arthurus subito evanuit. Eodem anno rex Johannes veniens in Angliam apud Cantuariam coronatus est per manum Huberti, Cantuariensis archiepiscopi, decimo octavo kalendas Maii, et illico in Normanniam transfretavit; quo cum pervenisset, increbuit opinionem per totum regnum Francorum de morte Arthuri et per omnes nationes transmarinas, adeo quidem ut rex Johannes suspectus habebatur ab omnibus quasi illum manu propria peremisset, unde multi animos avertentes a rege semper deinceps, ut ausi sunt, nigerrimo ipsum odio perstrinxerunt.

[The king gave orders that Arthur should be sent to Rouen, to be imprisoned in the new tower there, and kept closely guarded; but shortly afterwards the said Arthur suddenly disappeared. In the same year, King John came to England, and was crowned at Canterbury by Hubert archbishop of that place, on the 14th of April, and after this he again sailed for Normandy. On his arrival there an opinion about the death of Arthur gained ground throughout the French kingdom and the continent in general by which it seemed that John was suspected by all of having slain him with his own hand; for which reason many turned their affections from the king from that time forward wherever they dared, and entertained the deepest enmity against him.]⁶

The story in the *Margam Annals* is far more straightforward. The annalist, writing in the mid-1230s like Roger of Wendover, does not beat about the bush; with him no rumour or “opinion”, no suspicion, no “it seemed that” but direct accusation:

Cum rex Johannes cepisset Arthurum, eumque aliquamdiu in carcere vivum tenuisset, in turre tandem Rothomagensi, feria quinta ante Pascha, post prandium, abrius et dæmnio plenus, propria manu interfecit, et grandi lapide ad corpus ejus alligato, projecit in Secanam.

[After King John had captured Arthur and kept him alive in prison for some time, at length, in the castle of Rouen, after dinner on the Thursday before Easter when he was drunk and possessed by the devil, he slew him with his own hand, and tying a heavy stone to the body cast it into the Seine.]⁷

Similarly, Ralph of Coggeshall voices his disapproval and horror when mentioning he heard John had given orders that young Arthur should be blinded and castrated while being under the guard of Hubert de Burgh in the castle of Falaise adding that this was “detestable” and “execrable” against one of so noble blood:

Cernentes autem regis consilarii quod multas strages et seditions facerent ubique Britones pro Arturo domino suo, et quod nulla firma pacis concordia posset fieri, Arturo superstite, suggererunt regi quatinus præciperet ut nobilis adolescens oculis et genitalibus privaretur, et sic deinceps ad principandum inutilis redderetur, ut vel sic pars adversa ab insania sedulæ expugnationis conquiesceret et regi se subderet. Exacerbatus itaque indefessa congressione adversariorum, et minis eorum et impropiis lacessitus, præcepit tandem in ira et in furore tribus suis servientibus quatinus ad Falesiam quantocius pergerent, atque hoc opus detestabile perpetrarent. Duo vero ex servientibus tam execrabile opus in tam nobili adolescente committere detestantes, a curia domini regis diffugerunt.

[The counsellors of the king, realizing that the Bretons were causing much destruction and sedition everywhere on behalf of their lord Arthur, and that no firm peace could be made while Arthur lived, suggested to the king that he order Arthur to be blinded and castrated, thus rendering him incapable of rule, so that the opposition would cease from their insane programme of destruction and submit themselves to the king. Enraged by the ceaseless attacks

⁶ Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, H. O. Coxe (ed.), London: Sumptibus Societatis, 1841, vol. 3, pp. 170-171. English translation by J. A. Giles, *Flowers of History*, London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849, vol. 2, pp. 205-206.

⁷ *Annales de Margam*, H. R. Luard (ed.), *Annales Monastici*, London: Rolls Series, 1864, vol. 1, p. 27. English translation by W. Greenway, “the Annals of Margam”, *Transactions of the Port Talbot Historical Society*, 1. 1, pp. 19-31.

of his enemies, hurt by their threats and misdeeds, at length in a rage and fury, King John ordered three of his servants to go to Falaise and perform this detestable act. Two of the servants, hating to do so execrable a deed on such a noble young man, fled from the king's court]⁸

John Gillingham has shown that contrary to what most modern historians have written, John's decline in reputation was to be found right from the first year of his reign and not in 1204 after the loss of Normandy.⁹ He remarks that:

Had John been able to keep Arthur at his court he would not have had to pay so high a price. [...] It is thought that John failed because of the way he strained every nerve and sinew to build up the great coalition of 1212-14, then there is a sense in which the turning point came not in 1204, but in the first autumn of his reign, when the distrust he inspired precipitated Arthur's flight to the French court, and led to the collapse of the great coalition he had inherited from his brother.¹⁰

The chroniclers do mention the loss of Normandy, of course. Ralph of Coggeshall emphasizes, and deplores, the fact that John considered that his own men were not trustworthy. During the siege of Château Gaillard in 1303, for example:

In Rupe erat constabularies Cestriæ, cum multis præclaris militibus et servientibus, qui diutius castrum illud strenue observaverant contra totia exercitus regis Franciæ virtutem ; sed, victualium inedita urgente, ulterius contra hostes decertare non poterant. Rege vero Johanne nullum præsidium ferre obsessis volente, eo quod suorum proditionem semper timeret, infra hyemen, mense Decembri, in Angliam transfretavit, omne Normannos in magna timris perturbation derelinquens.

[The constable of Chester was in the castle with many famous knights and serjeants, who for a long time strenuously held the castle against the force of the whole army of the French king. But when they urgently needed food supplies they could resist the enemy no longer. King John, indeed, was unwilling to send troops to the besieged because he always feared the treachery of his men, and in winter in the month of December he crossed to England leaving all the Normans in great worry and fear]¹¹

Other chroniclers are even harder on the king considering him a cause of great shame and dishonour. In *the Melrose Chronicle*, the entry for 1203 is very short. The deaths of 2 bishops and 2 abbots are recorded and the names of the successors given. The tone suddenly changes with the following biting remark: "Rediit Johannes rex in Angliam terris suis et castris transmarinis ignominiose satis amissis" [King John returned into England, after having disgracefully lost his lands and castles on the Continent]¹². The Barnwell annalist, in spite of all his moderation, also speaks of humiliation: "Johannes quipped, a suis destitutus, Normannia recesserat, malens ad horam cum quodam dispendio et nominis et rerum cederc, quam se cum suis omnibus exterminio trader" [having been abandoned by his men, John left

⁸ Ralph of Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, J. Stevenson (ed.), London: Longman & Co, 1875, p. 139. English translation, E. Hallam (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 276.

⁹ "So far as I can see no one denies that in the end John was a failure, but they believe that he was a failure above all because he failed to recover Normandy and because the attempt to do so, in particular to raise money to fund the campaign of reconquest, led him into oppressive ways and so provoked barons and churchmen to rebel", John Gillingham, "Historians without Hindsight: Coggeshall, Diceto, and Howden on the Early Years of John's Reign", S. D. Church (ed.), *King John: New Interpretations*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹¹ Ralph of Coggeshall, *op. cit.*, p. 144. English translation in E. Hallam (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 278.

¹² *Chronica de Mailros*, J. Stevenson (ed.), Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1835, p. 105. Translated into English by J. Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, London: Seeleys, 1856, vol. IV, part 1, p. 148.

Normandy, preferring to yield for the moment with some loss of reputation and material rather than give himself and his followers over to destruction]¹³. King John is being criticized in the same way by several of the 13th-century chroniclers when they relate his submission to the Pope in 1213. Roger of Wendover, for instance, judges the king harshly:

Veniente vero die crastino, convenerunt omnes iterum ad sanctum Paulum in ecclesia cathedrali, ubi, post multos et varios de interdicti relaxatione tractatus, ante majus altare coram clero et populo exacta est a rege et innovata illa non formosa sed famosa subjectione, qua, in manum domini papae diademate cum regno resignato, tam dominium Hiberniae quam regnum subdidit Anglicanum.

[On the following day they all again assembled in the cathedral church at St Paul's, where after many and diverse discussions about the removal of the interdict, before the great altar in the presence of the clergy and people, that notorious though dishonourable submission was again exacted from the king, by which he resigned his crown and kingdom into the hands of the pope and surrendered the dominion of Ireland as well as the kingdom of England.]¹⁴

For his part, Ralph of Coggeshall assesses John's submission to the Pope as a prudent move, because it made him more difficult to attack for fear of papal reprisals. The king's taking of the cross is similarly presented as being tactical, Roger of Wendover, Matthew Paris, and the Barnwell chronicler pointing out that the sovereign did it "more by fear than devotion".¹⁵

Another grievance regularly expressed by the 13th-century chroniclers against King John concerns the habit he had of favouring aliens. Ralph of Coggeshall's patriotic, anti-foreign feeling is particularly pronounced and the Stanley, Dunstable, or Worcester writers all have a bias against foreigners. The Dunstable annalist blames John for sending for foreign troops in 1214: "interim etiam idem rex misit pro barbaris nationibus multis, ad fomentum guerrae inter se et subditos suos" [meanwhile the king sent again abroad to many barbarous nations, to foment war between himself and his subjects.]¹⁶ Among the reasons for the rebellion of the great English lords, the Melrose chronicler lists the fact that King John "placed over them foreign mercenary soldiers". Immediately after the signing of Magna Carta, the same chronicler notes that:

The king hereupon adopted a new mode of doing mischief; instigated by some Achitophel (by whom it is not known), he resolved that he would entirely eradicate from England all those of English descent, and that he would give the country to be perpetually held by foreign nations. But He who is the King of kings and Lords of lords and whose decree can never be set aside, had decreed otherwise.

Two other causes for the civil war listed by the chroniclers are heavy taxation and oppressive misgovernment. Most chroniclers agree that King John was overburdening his subjects. Yet they were not always unbiased in their criticisms. It mustn't be forgotten, indeed, that all the chroniclers were members of the clergy. The Cistercians had always been exempt from taxation. According to the terms of the treaty signed at le Goulet in 1200, King John conceded lands and castles to Phillip of France and granted him 30,000 marks. To raise the money John

¹³ *Memoriale fratris Walteri de Coventria*, *op. cit.*, p. 197. English translation by John Gillingham, "Historians with Hindsight", S. D. Church (ed.), *King John: New Interpretations*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999, p. 3.

¹⁴ Roger of Wendover, *op. cit.*, p. 275-276. Translation by J. A. Giles, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

¹⁵ "Et, ut sibi melius provideret, in die purificationis beatæ Mariæ, crucem Domini suscepit, timore potius quam devotione inductus" [And, the better to take care of himself he, on the day of St Mary's purification assumed the cross of our Lord, being induced to this more by fear than devotion], *Ibid.*, p. 296 & *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹⁶ *Annales prioratus de Dunstaplia* in H. R. Luard (ed.), *Annales Monastici*, London: Longman, 1866, vol. 3, p. 43.

imposed a heavy tax on England (3s on each carucate of land) but the Cistercian monasteries in the north resisted the tax, claiming they were immune to taxation. Ralph of Coggeshall, a monk of the order, gave vent to his indignation stating that “[King John] wished to oppress the order with the obligation of the tax. [...] The king was greatly irritated by their response. In anger and in fury he ordered his sheriffs that they should injure the men of that order by whatever means they could. They should persecute them, show them no justice in their injuries and law-suits and not help them in their disputes. [...] King John did not rid his mind of the animosity he bore towards them. [...] Then he crossed the sea, breathing threats and slanders against the disciples of Christ, complaining to the abbots overseas about the reply of the abbots living in England”. In late November 1200, the king eventually backed down. Ralph’s account immediately changes and the chronicler goes on insisting upon the good, wise, and pious king John had become “giving many thanks to Almighty God who had thus turned the spirit of the king to gentleness and reverence to the order”. Yet it is true that John levied far more taxes than the preceding monarchs because, after 1204, his priority was the recovery of Normandy and his other continental lost lands. Jane F. Hughes and Lynne Oats, together with many others, consider that “John’s fiscal ambitions, and the means by which he pursued them, provoked considerable resentment, an accumulation of grievances that was instrumental in precipitating the rebellion of barons that culminated in the famous Magna Carta”¹⁷. Stephen Church explains that to reclaim Normandy John “needed a big army and an alliance that would threaten the French King from two sides. Each of these required vast amounts of cash. [...] John began to milk his kingdom in a way that gained him the widespread criticism of his subjects. The chroniclers were most vociferous about the new tax that John levied in 1207: he wanted a thirteenth of all movables and revenues”.¹⁸ Gervase of Canterbury, for instance gives a long description:

The whole of England suffered this burden. The people were forced to pay at first a quarter of their money, then a third, then a half. Even the rents of the cardinals and whatever they had in England were taken away from them and Peter’s Pence, which the Roman Church had had since the time of Cnut, were withheld by the king. He especially imposed great afflictions on the men of the Cinque Ports who defended the coast against hostile invasion. For he hanged some of them and put others to the sword; he imprisoned many, bound them in irons and at length released them only in return for pledges and money.¹⁹

In 1210, the king “exacted an unheard-of amount of money from the English Jews” (Gervase of Canterbury) which shocked most chroniclers though themselves frequently prone to anti-Semitism. The Melrose chronicle gives a vivid picture of the Jews’ plight:

As for the Jews, he pillaged them of nearly everything they possessed, and drove them out of their houses; the eyes of some were plucked out, some he starved to death, and all of them he reduces to such an extremity of want, that they – though Jews – went from door to door, asking food from the Christians, in the name of Jesus Christ.²⁰

Both Gervase of Canterbury and the Dunstable annalist record the king’s extortionate taxation of the clergy in 1210. After the defeat of Bouvines in July 1214, Peter des Roches, the king’s

¹⁷ J. F. Hughes, L. Oats, “King John’s Tax Innovations – Extortion, Resistance, and the Establishment of the Principle of Taxation by Consent”, *Accounting Historians Journal*, vol. 34, n° 2, p. 4.

¹⁸ S. Church, *King John: England, Magna Carta and the Making of a Tyrant*, London: Pan Macmillan, 2015.

¹⁹ Gervase of Canterbury, *The Deeds of Kings*, W. Stubbs (ed.), *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, Rolls Series 1880, vol. II.

²⁰ J. Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, p. 151.

chief Justiciar, demanded the heaviest scutage ever required. The northern barons²¹ who had already refused to serve in the campaign refused to pay. As James Holt famously remarked “Bouvines led directly to Runnymede”.²²

The idea that law should govern a nation was obviously in the air in 13th-century Britain and the chroniclers keep emphasizing the king’s wrongdoings and his abuses of power. Gervase of Canterbury mentions that some English nobles told the archbishop of Canterbury not to come to England, “for the king of England was so full of guile that he could scarcely keep faith with anything he wrote or said, for he upheld neither his promises nor his charters”²³; Matthew Paris reports that in May 1215, “the king concealed his secret hatred of the barons under a calm countenance, and planning revenge, caused the seals of all the bishops to be counterfeited and wrote word in their names to all countries, that the English were apostates and to be detested by the whole world”²⁴. The Waverley Chronicler sums up the situation recording that “nam quosdam absque iudicio parium suorum exhæredabat, nonnullos morte durissima condemnabat; uxores filiasque eorum violabat; et ita pro lege ei erat tyrannical voluntas” [as a matter of fact [the king] disinherited some without judgment of their peers, and he condemned others to a dire death; he violated their wives and daughters. His only law was his despotic will]²⁵ while the Melrose chronicle contains a fine political analysis:

The king, it is true, had perverted the excellent institutions of the realm, and had mismanaged its laws and customs, and had misgoverned his subjects. His inclination became his law. He oppressed his own subjects.²⁶

However long this list of mistakes, failures, and misdeeds, that concerning the king’s moral failings and defects of character is even longer! Natalie Fryde believes that “widespread dislike and suspicion of John from the beginning of the reign made trouble, if not rebellion, unavoidable”.²⁷ The chroniclers make, indeed, repeated attacks against the sovereign. Ralph of Coggeshall repeatedly stresses his duplicity because so “was his custom”, his cowardice (in 1216 John “fled in terror, weeping and lamenting” on seeing Louis’s army) as well as his quick-temperedness. King John is constantly said to be “irritated” or “in anger and in fury”. There is in Richard of Devizes’ chronicle a description of one of John’s terrible fits of anger occurring 8 years before the young man became king: “the Count, more than angry at the presumption of the Chancellor’s orders, became unrecognisable in all his body. Wrath cut furrows across his forehead; his burning eyes shot sparks, rage darkened the ruddy colour of his face”²⁸ The writer of the annals of Stanley abbey mentions John’s cruel treatment of the de Braose family²⁹; the Dunstable chronicler records the “martyrdom” of “the innocent and

²¹ Roger of Wendover adds “By this misfortune the English king ineffectually spent the forty thousand marks which he had taken from the monks of the Cistercian order during the time of the Interdict, thus verifying the proverb ‘Inglorious spoil will never end in good’”, p. 302.

²² J. Holt, *Magna Carta and Medieval Government* “The origins of Magna Carta”, London: Hambledon Press, 1985, p. 150.

²³ English translation, E. Hallam (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 293.

²⁴ P. 308.

²⁵ *Annales de Waverleia* in H. R. Luard (ed.), *Annales Monastici*, London: Longman, 1865, p. 282. English translation in N. Fryde, *Why Magna Carta? Angevin England revisited*, Münster: LiT Verlag, 2001, p. 34.

²⁶ J. Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, p. 158.

²⁷ N. Fryde, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁸ *The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes of the Time of King Richard the First*, J. T. Appleby (ed.), London, New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1963.

²⁹ “uxorem Willelmi de Brause cum Willelmp filio et herede illorum, cum uxore sua et parvulo filio, cepit et in vinculis tenuit: uxorem vero Willelmi senioris, scilicet Matildem de Sancto Walerico cum filio, apud castrum de

faithful Geoffrey of Norwich” in 1210 to which Roger of Wendover gives frightening details relating that:

[Johannes] misit Willelmum Talebot militem cum armata manu, qui ipsum archidiaconim comprehensum et vinculis asperrimis constrictum sub carcelari custodia recluserunt, ubi post dies paucos, rege præfato jubente, capa indutus plumbea, tam victualium penuria quam ipsius capæ ponderositate compressus migravit ad Dominum.

[King John] sent William Talbot, a knight, with some soldiers, to seize the archdeacon, and they, after he was taken, bound him in chains and threw him into prison. After he had been there a few days, by command of the said king a cap of lead was put on him, and at length, being overcome by want of food as well as by the weight of the leaden cap, he departed to the Lord.³⁰

This account of cruelty, and many others, has since been questioned. W. L. Warren explains that Geoffrey became Bishop of Ely in 1225 so because Wendover ‘has the wrong year, the wrong cause, and the wrong man, the odds are heavily stacked against his being right about the leaden cope’³¹ Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris paint a highly negative, terrible portrait of the king. In their chronicle, John is “cowardly, cruel, lecherous, tyrannical, duplicitous and irreligious”³². Record evidence from the Chancery rolls and the king’s private correspondence seems to call into question the view of John as a tyrannical ruler. There is still much debate among historians about the true personality of the king and whether John the tyrant is not popular fiction³³. Whatever the case, Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris were undoubtedly responsible for shaping the king’s image as a villain and it is this portrayal of John that entered British national consciousness. Once again, only the Barnwell chronicler was measured writing:

[King John] was indeed a great prince but rather an unhappy one and, like Marius, experienced both good and bad fortune. He was munificent and generous to foreigners but a robber of his own people. He confided more in foreigners than in his subjects and therefore he was deserted by his people before the end and was only moderately happy at last.

“Something [eventually] had to be done. In the event that ‘something’ turned out to be rebellion and Magna Carta”.³⁴ All our 13th-century chroniclers mention the meeting at Runnymede but not all of them grant it great importance. In the Melrose chronicle, the charter is defined as a “treaty”, the content of which is not given. The Dunstable annalist only specifies that “pax inter regem and barones” [peace (was signed) between the king and the barons] on that day “et confectæ sunt ibidem chartæ super libertatibus regni Angliæ, et per singulos episcopates in locuis tutis deposite” [and in that place charters about the liberties of the kingdom of England were drawn up and deposited in safe-keeping in each bishopric]. The annals of Waverley are as concise with this very brief entry: the king, the archbishop of Canterbury, the bishops, the magnates, and the barons met and the king “fecit eis ibi cartam libertatum, qualem volebant” [made them the charter of liberties they wanted]. The Stanley chronicle is more detailed. It tells of the meeting but, above all, quotes short extracts from Magna Carta mixed up with interjected phrases. It is listed and detailed by David Carpenter for the Magna Carta Project website and included in the 34 copies of the 1215 charter

Windlesores fame et miseria peremi”, R. Howlett, *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, R. Howlett (ed.), Rolls Series, 1885, vol. 2, pp. 511-512.

³⁰ Roger of Wendover, *op. cit.*, p. 229. Translation by J. A. Giles, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

³¹ Quoted by G. E. Seel, “Good King John”, *History Today*, vol. 62, issue 2, 2012.

³² G. E. Seel, *King John: an underrated King*, London, New York: Anthem Press, 2012, p. 6.

³³ See *Ibid.*

³⁴ D. Danziger & J. Gillingham, *1215, the Year of Magna Carta*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003, p. 183.

gathered on the page³⁵. Among these 34 copies, the only other versions to be found in chronicles are the St Albans Abbey versions – that is to say those included or derived from Roger of Wendover’s and Mathew Paris’s works. Roger of Wendover provides minute details: the names of all the people attending the assembly during which Magna Carta was sealed. It gives the full text of the charter as well as that of the charter of the Forest. As a matter of fact, Roger of Wendover reproduced Henry III’s 1217 charters attributing them to King John. Matthew Paris initially copied out Wendover’s charters but, at a later stage, became aware of the mistake and modified the text of his *Chronica Majora*.

The chroniclers comment upon the motives and attitude of the barons. Most of them are rather critical especially after the Pope condemned the magnates and annulled the charter. The Barnwell chronicler sides with the barons writing that

When this charter had been made public everyone agreed with those who had proposed it and they were all of one heart and will; namely that they were pledged to the defence of the house of the Lord and stood for the liberty of the Church and kingdom.³⁶

Roger of Wendover disapproves of the barons’ rebellion and makes the Pope’s views his own. He emphasizes the king’s predicament telling that the king considered that the barons of England had “exorted from him certain unjust laws and liberties”, and shows all the pope’s efforts in order to find a solution to the crisis. The pope is said to have asked the king “to do away with the abuses in the kingdom of England” but he also reproached the barons for having disregarded their oath of fealty, for acting as both judge and executioners, for their “wicked audacity”, and for imposing an agreement on the king that was “vile and base. [...] much to the disparagement and diminution alike of his rights and his honour”. Once civil war has begun, Roger of Wendover denigrates the barons who fail to help the besieged towns and prefer to go back to London where “they amused themselves with the dangerous game of dice, drinking the best of wines and practising all other vices”. Matthew Paris is particularly critical of King John, but also of Pope Innocent III (writing that the king “knew and had learnt by manifold experience, that the pope was beyond all other men ambitious and proud, and an insatiable thirster after money, and ready and apt to perform any sin for a reward or on the promise of one”).³⁷ But in spite of that he deplores and denounces the uprising of the barons considering they no longer knew their place in society. In the Middle Ages disorder, chaos was the image of Hell: contesting social order, chosen by God, was sinful. This is why Matthew Paris is scandalized by the barons’ audacity:

And the barons in their complaints and lamentations, uttered curses on the king and the pope, thus sinning without hopes of atonement, since it is written “Thou shalt not curse the king.” [...] They declared that the illustrious King John was a slave, when to be a slave to God is to be a king.³⁸

As for the Melrose chronicler, he saw the Runnymede settlement as the emergence of a new era. The verse account of the event begins thus:

³⁵ “This is the continuation of William of Newburgh’s chronicle, made at Stanley abbey and later copied at Furness abbey. It contains extracts from the 1215 Charter’s preface, and chapters on the church (1), on the removing from office of the kinsmen of Gerard d’Athée (50), and on the expelling of foreign soldiers from the country (51). The concluding dating clause is given in full”, D. A. Carpenter, ‘The Copies of Magna Carta: X. The chronicle of Stanley abbey (Wiltshire): Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I: volume II, ed. R. Howlett (Rolls Series, 1885), pp. 518-9.’, *The Magna Carta Project*.

³⁶ English translation in E. Hallam (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 308. Ralph of Coggeshall uses the same vocabulary calling the rebellious barons “the army of God”.

³⁷ Roger of Wendover, p. 286.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

A new state of things began in England; such a strange affair as had never been heard, for the body wished to rule the head, and the people desired to be masters over the king.³⁹

What remained of this “new state of things” in the 14th and 15th centuries? What did Anglo-Norman and late Middle English chroniclers retain of King John, the barons, and Magna Carta? The corpus under scrutiny includes Pierre de Langtoft’s French chronicle, the Anglo-Norman Prose *Brut* and seven Middle English *Brut* chronicles, all composed between 1300 and 1464.⁴⁰

It must be immediately noted that Magna Carta is particularly conspicuous by its absence in our late medieval chronicles. It is only mentioned in Robert of Gloucester’s *Chronicle* (written about 1300) and in the Anglo-Norman *Brut* chronicle (whose oldest version also dates back to the very beginning of the 14th century) and its literal translation into English – therefore only in the earliest works of our corpus. Robert of Gloucester does not go into particulars and does not quote the text of the charter. He merely indicates that

þe barons orne vpe king mid hor poer so vaste
þat he made of þe olde lawes is charter atte laste
To holde uor him & uor is eirs & aselede is vaste inou (10504-10506)
[The barons harassed the king with their force so great so that he eventually made of the old laws his own charter committing him and his heirs and sealed it tightly.]⁴¹

The Prose *Brut* chronicles are slightly more detailed, the Middle English version stating:

And forto cesse þis debate and sorwe, þe Kyng and þe Erchebisshop, and opere grete lordes of England, assemblede ham bifore þe fest of Seynt Iohn þe Baptiste, in a medowe bisides þe toune of Stanes þat is callede Romemedede. And þe Kyng made ham þere a chartre of ffraunchiseþ, soche as þai wolde axen; & in soche maner þai were acordede.
[And to put an end to this discord and hardship, the king and the archbishop, as well as other great lords of England, gathered before the feast of St John the Baptist in a meadow by the town of Staines that is called Runnymede. And there the kyng made them a charter of liberties as they demanded. And in this way, they were reconciled.]⁴²

Both chronicles list the claims of the barons in the conflict. Robert of Gloucester specifies that:

[...] in þe 3er of grace tuelf hundred & fiftene
Contek bigan bi tuene hom & no3t vor no3t ich wene.

³⁹ J. Stevenson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁴⁰ Part 2 of Robert of Gloucester’s *Chronicle* written about 1300; Thomas of Castleford’s *The Boke of Brut* completed shortly after 1327; Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Story of Inglande* written between 1327 and 1338; *The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle* composed around 1320-1340; the Middle English Prose *Brut* (written at the very end of the 14th century or beginning of the 15th century); John Capgrave’s *Chronicle of England* (he brings down his History to the year 1417); John Hardyng’s *Chronicle* completed in 1437 and revised in 1464.

⁴¹ W. A. Wright (ed.), *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1887, (Rolls Series n° 86), p. 712. My translation.

⁴² F. D. Brie (ed.), *The Brut or Chronicles of England*, Oxford, 1906-1908 (Early English Text Society n° 131 and n° 146), chapter 153. My translation.

Robert of Gloucester never details the “gode olde lawe” he mentions several times. As Sarah Mitchell writes:

He continually uses the key term the *gode olde lawe* in the text, never giving any further definition of it. This phrase could be merely a casual reference to a code of law belonging to a perceived past golden age (used in the manner of the modern phrase ‘the good old days’ for example) but it becomes clear that it is understood to refer to a recognized code of law, which are found encapsulated in the Magna Carta.⁴⁵

So what elements, what events of King John’s reign did late Middle English chroniclers emphasize? They all give much prominence to young Arthur’s death leading to the loss of Normandy. All the chroniclers insist on the fact that John should not have succeeded King Richard for Arthur was the legitimate heir: emphasis is laid on the question of right and justice. Thomas of Castleford, for instance, highlights the barons’ disapproval:

Þe archebischope of Kent, Hubert,
He dide þe office full apert –
Noght paisablie, to vnderstande,
For many gretteste of þe lande
Saide Arthur, his eldest broþer son,
Sulde be nexte heire to þe coron,
And helde þam fra þe coronement;
Þai walde noght be þarin present (35767-35774)

[The Archbishop of Kent, Hubert, performed the office publicly; not serenely, one can presume, for many of the greatest lords of the country said that Arthur, his older brother’s son should be the next heir to the crown. They stayed away from the crowning, they refused to attend.]⁴⁶

Thomas Castleford relates how Arthur disappeared from his uncle’s court and that no one knew what had become of him, “how he was slane wel fone men wiste” (35791) [how he was killed very few people knew]. Hardship struck King John “þat feloneslie so hade misetane” (35808) [who had committed that treacherous crime] for the king of France “putt þe kyng Iohan out” [put King John out] of Normandy. Later on the kings and lords of Ireland refuse to obey him “for he his broþer son hade slane” [for he had killed his brother’s son]. Pierre de Langtoft states he broke the ban imposed by his master and insisted on accusing King John of his nephew’s death:

Pur la mort Arthur, fiz sun frère Geffroun
Counte de Brettayne à ky la regyoun
Par drayt devait descendre; si tuez fust ou noun,
Mon mestre me suspende à dire en moun sermoun ;
Noun pur ço ben say sa mort fust la chesoun
Par ount le uncle avait la possessioun,
Ke aver en devayt le nevu par resoun
Ço fu le cas le rays saunz condicioun.

[For the death of Arthur, the son of his brother Geoffrey, / Count of Brittany, to whom the kingdom / Ought by right to descend; whether he were killed or not / My master prevents my saying in my discourse; / Nevertheless I know well his death was the cause / Whereby the

⁴⁵ S. Mitchell, “Kings, Constitution, and Crisis”, C. Weineberg, D. Scragg (ed.), *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the 13th to the 20th century*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England n° 29, 2000, p. 45.

⁴⁶ C. Eckhard (ed.), *Castleford's Chronicle or the Boke of Brut*, London, 1996 (Early English Text Society n°305 and n°306).

uncle had the possession / Which by right the nephew ought to have. / This was the king's case without qualification.]⁴⁷

All the other chroniclers insist in the same way on the murder of the young prince⁴⁸, even adding that of his sister sometimes called Isabell and some other times Bertha, Margaret, or Helianore according to the writer.

The greatest part of all the accounts of King John's reign in our late medieval chronicles deals with the sovereign's conflict with the Pope and the Holy Church for it is the Interdict and John's submission to Pope Innocent III that came to be seen as the central issue in the history of his reign. They lay much emphasis on the quarrel with the pope over who should be Archbishop of Canterbury, the various legates sent to England, John's persecution of the Cistercians, the placing of the kingdom under general Interdict (1208-1214), and John's eventual submission (yet not presented as a personal and a national humiliation). Robert Mannyng of Brunne mentions the reconciliation with the Archbishop of Canterbury (Stephen of Langton) and the lifting of the Interdict and immediately furthers his narrative with the king's death, nothing being said about the conflict with the barons. *The Short English Metrical Chronicle* summarizes John's political and religious choices in the extreme only stating:

King Richard regned here
Fourtene ful 3er.
After him sone anon
Regned þe king Jon.
In his time al Ingland
Was entredit in his hond,
For an erchebischop,
A wise man & no sot,
Steuen he hete of Langtone,
Þe king him nold not vnderfone.
(2187-2196)

[King Richard reigned here / Fourteen complete years / Immediately after him / reigned King John. / In his time all England / was under Interdict because of him / For an Archbishop / A wise and knowledgeable man / Called Stephen of Langton / The king refused to accept.]⁴⁹

This chronicle being more of the romance genre, it tells the rest of King John's reign (89 lines) through picturesque anecdotes. The king's villainy is highlighted through his tearing out an eye from an arrow-maker and his imprisoning of a priest. The greatest part of the text concerns the king's death in Swinehead after eating poisoned plums.

⁴⁷ T. Wright (ed., + trans.), *The Chronicle of Pierre de Langtoft from the Earliest Period to the Death of King Edward I*, London: Longman, 1868, vol. 2, pp. 124-125. Robert Mannyng of Brunne's translation into English goes as follows:

[...] If Ion his dede had dight
My maister nouht he wrote, to write he me forbede
Noþeles wele I wote, siþen þe child was dede,
Ion had right þertille, þe lond to haf in ward
Þat Arthur suld bi skille haf bien heyre next Richard

I. Sullens (ed.), *Robert Mannyng of Brunne: the Chronicle*, Binghamton University, 1996, (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies n°180).

⁴⁸ See Robert of Gloucester's chronicle, lines 10112- 10113 and 10120-10127; John Hardyng's chronicle (H. Ellis [ed.], *The Chronicle of John Hardyng*, London: G. Woodfall, 1812, p. 270; John Capgrave's chronicle (C. Hingeston [ed.], *The Chronicle of England*, London: Longman, 1858, p. 147.

⁴⁹ E. Zettl (ed.), *An Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, London, 1971, Early English Text Society n° 196). My translation.

The quarrel with the pope and Stephen of Langton enables all the various chroniclers to emphasize the king's wickedness, his easily-angered, and wrathful nature. The king's evil reputation, indeed, is never questioned, it is even rather accentuated. The writer of the *Short English Metrical Chronicle* goes as far as considering that "þerfore in helle he has his mede. / He was ful wroþ & grim" (2224-2225) [therefore in Hell he has what he deserves / He was acrimonious and cruel]. Thomas Castleford shows a king constantly in conflict with his own subjects (35961-35967) and who is particularly ferocious with his enemies in Scotland, Wales, or Ireland. Once the war against the barons begins, he is described as absolutely obstinate (36164-36169). Robert Manning of Brunne takes up again the portrait of the immoral, sinful being initiated by Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris:

He lyued in wo & strife, & in tribulacioun.
 He was of licherous life, þorgh what his nacioun
 Partie ageyn him ches, & wild haf born him down.
 (...)

He was a fole of lif, & vsed lichorie,
 Both mayden & wif alle wild he ligge bie.

[He lived in adversity, discord, and tribulation. He led a licentious life, through which his nation moved into contention against him and furiously oppressed him. (...). He led a lecherous life, was lustful. He wildly raped both maidens and wives]

John Capgrave's portrait is of the same type and the king seems to have had no good point. He becomes a caricature of evil, the pantomime villain he will never really cease to be over the centuries. The chronicler piles up the king's moral failings:

[Richard] assigned his brothir son, wech hite Arthure, for to be Kinge aftir him. For Jon, his brother, was so fals unto him, and odious to the puple, that no man desired him. (...) For this inobediens, and many myschevous dedis which he did in manslauth, gloteny, and lecchery, and specialy robberyng and spoiling of monasteries, the pope cursed the kyng, and assoiled all his lich men fro his obediaunce.

[(Richard) designated his brother's son, who was called Arthur, to be King after him. For John, his brother, was so disloyal to him and malignant towards the population that nobody wanted him. (...) For this disobedience and many evil deeds which he did including manslaughter, gluttony, lechery, and in particular the robbery and plundering of monasteries, the Pope excommunicated the king and released his liege men from his rule.]

Contrary to Matthew Paris who had severely criticized Innocent III, none of the 14th and 15th century chroniclers in our corpus question the Pope's decisions. They all consider he was right and acting wisely and that his various legates took great pains to explain to John he was mistaken.⁵⁰

So what about Magna Carta? Was it already forgotten?

Magna Carta is in fact mentioned many times but under King Henry III's and Edward I's reigns when the charter was re-issued:

⁵⁰ See Robert Mannyng of Brunne, p. 211:

Pandolf proued þe kyng, in his disputeson,
 He mayntend wrongfulle þing, & wild to no reson
 He proued þorh wisdom in ilk manere cas,
 Pat þe king misname, & did grete trespas.

| Year of reissue | Robert of Gloucester | Pierre de Langtoft / Robert Mannyng of Brunne | Thomas Castleford | <i>Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle</i> | Anglo-Norman / Middle English Prose <i>Brut</i> | John Capgrave | John Hardyng |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---|-------------------|---|---|---------------|--------------|
| 1216-1217 | X (1218) | | | | X (“4 th year of reign”) | | |
| 1225 | X | | X | | | | |
| Provisions of Oxford 1258 | X | X | X | | X | X | X |
| 1297 | | X | X | | | | |

In November 1216, a new version of Magna Carta was issued followed in November 1217 by a second version of the charter, now described as *Magna Carta*, together with a second charter known as the Charter of the Forest. These early reissues are only mentioned in Robert of Gloucester’s *Chronicle* and in the Prose *Brut* chronicles but in both cases the dates are wrong, Robert of Gloucester mentioning 1218 (line 10635) and the Prose *Brut* the 4th year of Henry’s reign, that is to say 1220. The Prose *Brut* emphasizes the fact that the young king accepted what his father had rejected and adds a brief note of topicality:

And aftirward þe kyng & þe Erchebisshope, & Erles & barons, assembled ham at London, at Michelmasse þat next þo sewede, & helde þere parlement. & þere were þo renewede alle þe Fraunchises þat Kyng Iohn hade grauntede at Romemed; and Kyng Henry þo confermede ham by his chartre, þe which 3itte beþ holden þrou3-out Engeland.
 [And afterwards, the King, the Archbishop, the Earls and the Barons met in London at the next Michaelmas and held a parliament. And there all the franchises that King John had granted at Runnymede were renewed; and then King Henry confirmed them (they are still enforced throughout England) with his charter.]

Robert of Gloucester once again speaks of the charters as the good old laws of the past:

Tuelf hundred in þe 3er of grace it was & eiztetene
 þat wiþ þe 3onge king hii speke þat was isene
 Vor to abbe as we sede er þe gode olde lawe
 Þe king made is charter a grantede it wel vawe
 Þe gode laws of forest & oþere þat wule were (10635-10639)
 [It was in the year of grace 1218 that they were seen discussing in order to obtain, as we said before, the good old law. The king made his charter and granted it very gladly. The good laws of the forest and other laws that existed formerly.]

According to the Prose *Brut*, the king “toke of euery ploughe of londe ij s” [took 2 shillings for each carucate of land] in exchange for the charter. For the 1225 reissue, Thomas Castleford explains that “alle Engelande gaf unto þe kyng / þe fiftende parte of þar catel, / of al kins mobles to þam fel” [all (the people of) Engand gave to the king the fifteenth part of their moveable goods of all kinds]. The Prose *Brut* states that the people of England “3af to þe

Kyng Ml marȝ of siluer” (chapter 158) [gave to the kyng 1000 silver marks]. Robert of Gloucester also mentions this tax yet adding that the 1225 agreement “[...] as me ssal ihure lute wule it laste” [as shall be heard did not last long].

It must also be noted that our chroniclers put more emphasis on the Charter of the Forest than on the Charter of Liberties. Concerning the 1225 reissue, Thomas Castelford specifies:

Chartre of franchise to folk he gaf
For euermare forth to halde and haf.
Of þe forestes, he grantede þat tim
þat na man sulde lose life ne lim
For takyng of his venison,
So þai bifore ofte siþes wer won,
Bot of his godes anens skille
Raunsonde be to þe kynges wille
Wiȝ oþer pointes writen to halde
Now Chartre of þe Foreste es calde. (3657036579)

[He gave a charter of franchises to the people to be held forever. Concerning the forests he granted that time that nobody should lose life or member for taking some of his venison as was often the case before. Instead, depending on their own means, they would be fined according to the king’s will. Other items to be held were included. It is now called the Charter of the Forest.]

However, *Magna Carta* is totally outshone in our chronicles by the Provisions of Oxford which are systematically mentioned. Pierre de Langtoft, for instance, devotes a long passage to them:

A cel parlement sopist la destauce,
Al ray et ses hayrs en desheritaunce
Des gares et relefs, des terres de tenaunce,
Al countes et barouns, chivalers et sergaunce,
Ke tenent del ray, partye par chevaunce,
Partye en chef desaltres of l’aportenaunce
A chascun seynur demort garde et chaunce,
E le ray privé de tut l’appendaunce. (vol. 2, pp. 136-138)

[At this parliament, the dispute is appeased. / To the disinheriting of the king and his heirs / Of wards and reliefs, of land of tenancy; / To the earls and barons, knights and sergeants, / Who hold of the king, part by chevance, / Part in chief of the others with the appurtenance. / To each lord remains ward and cheance, / and the king deprived of all the appendance.]⁵¹

John Hardyng and John Capgrave record the fact that the statutes “put the kyng under the gouernaunce of certayne lords” (J. Hardyng), and that “ther wer chose eke xxiii lordis, which

⁵¹ Vol 2, p. 136-138. Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s English version of the same passage goes as follows :

AT þis parlement rested þat distauce,
For þer was it ent, aliens to auauce.
þe kynges state here paires, þorgh conseil of baroun,
To him & his heyres grete disheriteson.
Of wardes & relefe þat barons of him held,
þer ne was ore of chefe, tille him no þing suld ȝeld;
& oþer þat held of þam, þer þe kyng felle be partie,
Nouht of þat suld claym of all þat seignorie.
Tille ilk a lordyng suld ward & relefe falle,
Bot tille þe kyng no þing, he was forbarred alle. (p. 214).

schuld governe the kyngdam” (J. Capgrave, p. 158). Some of the chroniclers link *Magna Carta* and the provisions of Oxford such as Robert of Gloucester:

So þat atte laste þe king her to hii drowe
To remue þe frensse men to libbe bi 3onde se
Bi hor londes her & þer & ne come no3t a3e
& to graunti gode lawes & þe olde chartre al so
Þat so ofte was igranted er & so ofte vndo (11015-11019)
[So that, at last, they persuaded the king / To send back the Frenchmen overseas / for them to
live on their various lands and not return / And to grant good laws as well as the old charter
that was so often granted before and so often revoked.]

All the chroniclers address the question of the foreigners. Both King John and King Henry are bitterly criticized for their hiring alien mercenaries and for handing over many castles to alien lords during the civil war. Robert of Gloucester and Robert Mannyng of Brunne clearly state that the English were denied their rights and that the responsibility lay unequivocally with “þat folc of normandie þat among vs wonieþ 3vt” [these people of Normandy that among us still live]⁵² as Robert says. Chris Given-Wilson remarks that:

[Robert of Gloucester’s] aim is to relate the sufferings of the English under the “Norman yoke”. He considered that the Normans were responsible for the manifest inequalities of English society. [...] By about 1200, resentment at Norman subjugation seems to have abated somewhat, but, by the late 13th century it was once again becoming a powerful theme in English literature, with the French now identified as posing the same threat to English liberty as their Norman “predecessors” had done more than two centuries earlier.

This is probably why Robert Mannyng of Brunne relating the Anglo-French war of 1295 and the fact that King Edward I was demanding half of the goods of the clergy and the 6th penny of the citizens and burgers exclaims that is better to pay (so as to make sure the English king be successful) rather than submit to the French and using the present tense explains:

For alle þis þraldam, þat now on Inglond es,
Þorgh Norman3 it cam, bondage & destres,
& if þei now powere had of us, wite 3e wele,
Streiter we suld be lad bi þe tend dele
Better us is to giue, & saue vs fro deisceite,
Pan with our fo men lyue in seruage so streite
[For all this thralldom that there is now in England / Came from the Normans who brought
bondage and distress. / And if they should overcome us, know you well, / We would be
subjugated ten times more. It is better for us to give and be saved from treachery rather than
live as the fettered slaves of our enemies]⁵³

One can apply Sarah Mitchell’s remark about Robert of Gloucester to all of our chroniclers when she writes that “he reminds of the audience of his chronicle that their country has an ‘English past which predates recent Norman-usurped history, and which is into the bargain, a past enshrining values of good, and Godly, governance which has, unhappily for the people, been corrupted.’”⁵⁴ We have seen that part of this good governance implies that *Magna Carta*

⁵² P. 5.

⁵³ One finds a similar passage in Pierre de Langtoft’s chronicle, Robert of Mannyng de Brunne’s direct source, even though Pierre de Langtoft was writing in French.

⁵⁴ S. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

is considered to have been based on Edward the Confessor's laws and that the idea of the Anglo-Saxon past as a Golden Age of the Law was influential and widespread in late-medieval England. What also characterizes our late medieval chronicles are some patriotic, anti-foreign feeling, and a sharp, conscious sense of Englishness. The barons' revolt is not condemned by these 14th and 15th-century chroniclers: according to the Prose *Brut*, for instance, the magnates rebelling against King Henry only wished to enforce "a lawe in emendement of þe reaume" (chapter 158) [a law for the improvement of the kingdom]. Improving the kingdom meant reforming kingship by granting "à clers et as barnes / Les peticiouns ke furent veez" [to the clergy and to the barons / the petitions which were laid before him] (Pierre de Langtoft, p. 303), even by "putting the kyng under gouernaunce / Of certayne lords, wystem and most parfyt" [put the kyng under the control of certain lords, the wisest and the most perfect] (John Hardyng), but also "exil(ing) alle alienes" [exiling all aliens] (John Capgrave), that is to say those who were not native-born. Once the war resumes between young Henry III and the barons, the chroniclers criticize Louis de France very harshly for his numerous depredations. He is the enemy that has come to destroy the English people. The chroniclers show that *Magna Carta* was demanded by the English people each time the king needed money for his overseas wars or for his battles against the Scots. The charter of liberties, consequently, also came to be regarded as an emblem of nationhood, as a reminder of Englishness. Paradoxically unity derived from opposition, confrontation and conflict.