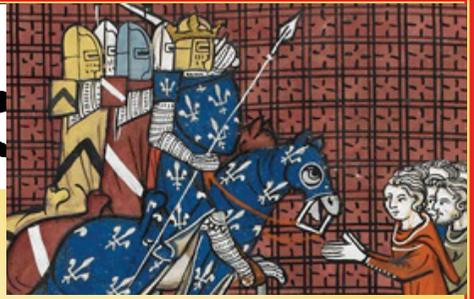




# Magna Carta



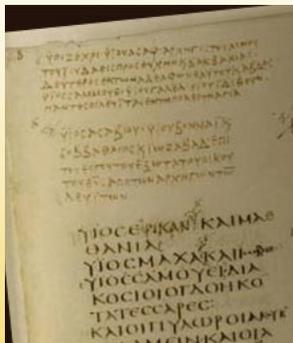
If I dig around in my early school memory, I can find the dregs of a history lesson about Magna Carta. 'Bad King John' was forced to sign it in 1215 after England had endured 16 years of his reign—a rule based largely on extortion, legal chicanery, blackmail and violence. Those who want to knock it point out that its beneficiaries were not oppressed serfs (who largely remained in slavery) but Anglo-Norman barons (themselves responsible for much of the oppressing) desperate to curb the monarch's excesses. And Magna Carta embodied neither jury trial nor habeas corpus — both came later and over time.

## *Human Rights*

But it was a vital milestone in what has made our country what it now is, and is often looked to as the foundation stone on which our concept of Human Rights is built. Ironically, perhaps, because King John's signature was extracted under duress! But that point was noticed by the Pope of the day, who annulled it (Europe was involved in our politics even then!).

## *Ancient texts*

The British Library has one of only 4 copies of this



document, which you can go and see for free (once it is back from the special 800th anniversary exhibition!). But while you are there, look at some of the other treasures they have on permanent display. One of them is Codex Sinaiticus. It dates from about 350AD and is the earliest complete copy we have of the Bible. If you want a document which has changed the world, look no further!

## *Human Wrongs?*

And if you were to read it, you would hear many of the same things which are important in Magna Carta: freedom, lawful rule and justice. Authorities and individuals alike are answerable to God for how they exercise their power. But I think you would learn less of human rights than of human wrongs, and more of human responsibilities. Yes, Human Rights are valuable and I agree that we need to stand up against injustice, but I think we tend to do that only when it is our own rights which are threatened. God's charter is to fight for other people, not ourselves, and as far as we are concerned, to recognise that with rights come responsibilities.

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