



A Teenage Hero

Joan of Arc was a 15th-century peasant girl who drove the English out of France

BY LISA DE NIKE

Few historical figures have captured and held the public's imagination as has Joan of Arc, the teenage peasant girl who—instructed by the voices of saints—left her home in the French countryside to lead her country's army to an amazing victory over the invading English in 1429 during the Hundred Years' War.

Joan may have lived and died—burned at the stake as a heretic—almost 600 years ago, but her story and courage in the face of astounding odds still resonates today. Not only is Joan a Catholic saint (she was canonized in 1920), but her tale also has served as inspiration for many of the world's most famous writers, composers and filmmakers.

Born “Jeannette” to a farm family in the town of Domremy on the border of the French provinces of Lorraine and Champagne, in 1412, Joan lived an ordinary life until the age of 12, when something extraordinary happened: she heard the voices of Saint Michael the Archangel and Saints Margaret and Catherine telling her to “be good and attend church often.”

Four years later, the voices were speaking to her daily, revealing that it was her divine mission to free France from the English by taking up arms to help Charles VII, the French dauphin, regain the throne. (The “dauphin” is the name given to the eldest son of a king of France, the heir apparent to the throne.)

At this time, the English—with the help of allies from the French region of Burgundy—had occupied Paris and all of France north of the Loire River. Henry VI of England was claiming the throne.

Despite the fact that she was an uneducated farm girl who knew much about sheep but nothing of warfare, Joan's voices were insistent: she must shear off her hair, put on men's clothing and pick up arms in order to drive the English from French soil.

Believing in her heart that her “voices” came from God, Joan obeyed. In May 1428, she traveled with her cousin Durand Lassois to the town of Vaucouleurs where she appealed to Robert de Baudricourt, the captain of the royal garrison there, to allow her to see Charles VII. Baudricourt was skeptical and rude, telling Lassois: “Take her home to her father and give her a good whipping.”

Chastened, Joan returned to her village, but her voices continued to plague her until she could no longer resist, and she returned to Vaucouleurs in January 1429. This time, she was able to convince Baudricourt of the veracity of (and divine inspiration for) her mission by her prescience: she predicted the stunning defeat that the French had suffered outside Orleans at the Battle of the Herrings, which was reported days later.

As a result, Joan was allowed to go to the castle in Chinon to see Charles VII. Charles was skeptical at first,

but Joan reportedly convinced him of the veracity of her mission by revealing secrets only he would know. Charles also had Joan examined by a church council—headed up by the Archbishop of Reims—and she apparently passed muster, because he gave her a suit of white armor and a sword and allowed her to lead his army.

Joan and her army entered the city of Orleans on the evening of April 29, 1429, and by May 8 had liberated that city. She began the “Loire campaign” on June 9, and drove the English out within 10 days. Next, she headed for Reims, and on July 17, Charles VII was crowned king of France there.

Following the coronation, fighting continued elsewhere in the country, and Joan was captured in a skirmish on May 23, 1430. Joan’s family did not have the means to ransom her (a common practice in those days), and for reasons that are unclear, Charles VII did nothing to help, despite the fact that he owed her his crown.

Seeing an opportunity, the English purchased Joan from her captors on November 30, 1430. Their objective was clear from the first: to discredit Charles VII as a “false king” by condemning Joan—the young woman responsible for placing him on the throne—as a witch and a heretic.

According to historical records, the case against Joan was stacked from the start. The English employed church authorities who were under their influence. Historians contend that trial transcripts reveal Joan’s amazing intellect: despite the fact that her inquisitors did their best to confuse and confound her, she remained calm.

Regardless, Joan was condemned as a heretic (both for her visions, which her inquisitors deemed false, and for her habit of dressing in men’s garments, which went against church doctrine) and was sentenced to death.

She was only 19 when she was burned at the stake in the Rouen market square on May 30, 1431. Eyewitnesses reported that the small peasant girl stood bravely as she was fastened by ropes to a pillar and flames were ignited at her feet. Her only request was that two clergymen raise a crucifix before her, so she could see it. She reportedly cried out the name of Jesus as the flames consumed her. Her ashes were scattered in the Seine River.

Twenty-five years later, the court’s findings were nullified by a different church court, and in 1920, the Catholic Church officially declared Joan a saint. Her feast day is celebrated on May 30, the day of her death. ■



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