



Joan of Arc (1412-1431)

by Andrew Matzner

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Joan of Arc by
nineteenth-century
French painter J. A. D.
Ingres.

Joan of Arc is one of the most documented personalities of pre-modern history. A fifteenth-century French peasant girl who assumed military leadership in the fight against English occupation, Joan was eventually captured and executed. Because she dressed in men's clothing, historians have focused much attention on Joan's sexuality and gender presentation. Although condemned to death by the Inquisition of the Catholic Church precisely for her cross-dressing, almost five hundred years later Joan was canonized by the Church as a saint.

Joan of Arc is believed to have been born on January 6, 1412 in the village of Domremy in the province of Lorraine, located in eastern France. At Joan's birth, France was in the midst of the Hundred Years' War with England. During this time, a civil war also broke out between pro- and anti-English factions of the French royal family.

King Henry V of England invaded France in 1415, claiming his family's right to the French throne. In the space of two years the English king caused the French significant losses and conquered much territory. In 1419 the French duke Philip-the-Good recognized Henry V as the legitimate king of France and dismissed the claims of Prince Charles of Ponthieu, who, as a member of the dynasty that had ruled France since 1328, should have been the rightful new king.

In 1429, Joan, who had been having visions of saints since she was 12 years old, followed their instructions to seek an audience with Prince Charles. Her goal was to lead an army against the English and pro-English French armies. Because of her growing reputation as a religious visionary able to predict the outcomes of battle, Joan was able to secure a meeting with Charles, who at this time was in dire straits militarily. The prince, convinced of the veracity of Joan's mission, allowed her to take command of his army.

Joan's first target was the city of Orleans, occupied by the English. Within several weeks Joan and the army had driven the English from the area. Believing that she was divinely inspired, Charles, his advisors, and the rapidly growing peasant army all accepted Joan's leadership.

Prince Charles's troops, with Joan at their head strikingly dressed in male armor, continued to rout English and pro-English forces throughout the French countryside. Joan then counseled Charles to advance to the city of Reims to be proclaimed officially as the king of France. Charles took Joan's advice, and was crowned on July 17, 1429, with Joan standing proudly by his side.

Joan resumed her military campaigning, but was captured on May 23, 1430 by the Burgundians, who were allies of the English. The Burgundians transferred Joan to the English, who then turned her over to the Inquisition. After she spent four months in prison, her trial began on January 9, 1431.

The Inquisitorial tribunal condemned Joan for witchcraft and cross-dressing. The former charges were later dropped because they were difficult to prove, and the judges instead focused on Joan's assertions that her visions--which she believed were of a higher authority than the Church--had instructed her to adopt men's

clothing.

By the end of April, 1431, under intense mental and emotional pressure and physical deprivation, Joan signed a confession in which she admitted that her cross-dressing broke the Church's rules. Included was a contract that stipulated that she serve a life-long prison sentence and never again wear men's clothing.

However, it is not clear whether Joan, who was illiterate, fully understood the document that she signed, or, for that matter, whether the inquisitors truthfully disclosed to Joan what was in the document. At any rate, in a matter of days Joan disavowed her confession and resumed wearing male dress. The court denounced her as a relapsed heretic beyond hope of redemption, and sentenced Joan to death.

On May 30, 1431, the nineteen-year-old Joan of Arc was burned alive at the stake in Rouen. Approximately twenty years after her death, authorities who believed that Joan had actually been a holy person began the process of investigating the legality of her trial. An inquisitor named Jean Brehal subsequently announced that Joan had been unjustly convicted and that she was in fact a martyr. In 1909 Joan was beatified, and finally canonized as a saint in 1920.

Because Joan wore men's clothes and armor, scholars have speculated about her gender identity and sexuality. Did Joan wear male apparel because she was transgendered? Or did she do so in order to be taken seriously by the men whose support she needed to carry out the orders given by her visions? Was Joan a lesbian or bisexual, if those English terms may be applicable to a French woman living almost six hundred years ago? What relationship did her gender expression have with her sexuality? What about Joan's emphasis throughout her life on her virginity?

It is difficult adequately to address these personal issues based on the historical evidence that we now possess. It is clear, however, that Joan's cross-dressing was a significant part of her life, and that as a cross-dressed warrior and military leader she was venerated by French royalty, soldiery, and peasantry alike.

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