

Joan of Arc. Warrior, Military Leader (c. 1412–1431)



Saint Joan of Arc, byname the Maid of Orléans, French *Sainte Jeanne d'Arc* or *La Pucelle d'Orléans*, (born c. 1412 CE, Domrémy, Bar, France—died May 30, 1431, Rouen; canonized May 16, 1920; feast day May 30; French national holiday, second Sunday in May), national heroine of France, a peasant girl who, believing that she was acting under divine guidance, led the French army in a momentous victory at Orléans that repulsed an English attempt to conquer France during the Hundred Years' War. Captured a year afterward, Joan was burned to death by the English and their French collaborators as a heretic.

Joan of Arc at the Coronation of Charles VII in Reims Cathedral, by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1854; in the Louvre, Paris. Photos.com/Jupiterimages . Joan of Arc Overview of Joan of Arc's life. Contunico © ZDF Enterprises GmbH, Mainz

Joan was the daughter of a tenant farmer at Domrémy, on the borders of the duchies of Bar and Lorraine. In her mission of expelling the English and their Burgundian allies from the Valois kingdom of France, she felt herself to be guided by the voices of St. Michael, St. Catherine of Alexandria, and St. Margaret of Antioch. Joan was endowed with remarkable mental and physical courage, as well as a robust common sense, and she possessed many attributes characteristic of the female visionaries who were a noted feature of her time. These qualities included extreme personal piety, a claim to direct communication with the saints, and a consequent reliance upon individual experience of God's presence beyond the ministrations of the priesthood and the confines of the institutional church.

Joan's Mission

The crown of France at the time was in dispute between the dauphin Charles (later Charles VII), son and heir of the Valois king Charles VI, and the Lancastrian English king Henry VI. Henry's armies were

in alliance with those of Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy (whose father, John the Fearless, had been assassinated in 1419 by partisans of the Dauphin), and were occupying much of the northern part of the kingdom. The apparent hopelessness of the Dauphin's cause at the end of 1427 was increased by the fact that, five years after his father's death, he still had not been crowned. Reims, the traditional place for the investiture of French kings, was well within the territory held by his enemies. As long as the Dauphin remained unconsecrated, the rightfulness of his claim to be king of France was open to challenge.

Joan's village of Domrémy was on the frontier between the France of the Anglo-Burgundians and that of the Dauphin. The villagers had already had to abandon their homes before Burgundian threats. Led by the voices of her saints, Joan traveled in May 1428 from Domrémy to Vaucouleurs, the nearest stronghold still loyal to the Dauphin, where she asked the captain of the garrison, Robert de Baudricourt, for permission to join the Dauphin. He did not take the 16-year-old and her visions seriously, and she returned home. Joan went to Vaucouleurs again in January 1429. This time her quiet firmness and piety gained her the respect of the people, and the captain, persuaded that she was neither a witch nor feebleminded, allowed her to go to the Dauphin at Chinon. She left Vaucouleurs about February 13, dressed in men's clothes and accompanied by six men-at-arms. Crossing territory held by the enemy, and traveling for 11 days, she reached Chinon.

Joan went at once to the castle of the dauphin Charles, who was initially uncertain whether to receive her. His counselors gave him conflicting advice; but two days later he granted her an audience. As a test Charles hid himself among his courtiers, but Joan quickly detected him; she told him that she wished to go to battle against the English and that she would have him crowned at Reims. On the Dauphin's orders she was interrogated by ecclesiastical authorities in the presence of Jean, duc d'Alençon, a relative of Charles, who showed himself well-disposed toward her. She was then taken to Poitiers for three weeks, where she was further questioned by eminent theologians who were allied to the Dauphin's cause. These examinations, the record of which has not survived, were occasioned by the ever-present fear of heresy following the end of the Western Schism in 1417. Joan told the ecclesiastics that it was not at Poitiers but at Orléans that she would give proof of her mission; and forthwith, on March 22, she dictated letters of defiance to the English. In their report the churchmen suggested that in view of the desperate situation of Orléans, which had been under English siege for months, the Dauphin would be well-advised to make use of her.

Joan of Arc answering the questions of the prelates.© Photos.com/Jupiterimages

Joan returned to Chinon. At Tours, during April, the Dauphin provided her with a military household of several men; Jean d'Aulon became her squire, and she was joined by her brothers Jean and Pierre. She had her standard painted with an image of Christ in Judgment and a banner made bearing the name of Jesus. When the question of a sword was brought up, she declared that it would be found in the church of Sainte-Catherine-de-Fierbois, and one was in fact discovered there.

Action at Orléans

French troops numbering several hundred men were mustered at Blois, and on April 27, 1429, they set out for Orléans. The city, besieged since October 12, 1428, was almost totally surrounded by a ring of English strongholds. When Joan and one of the French commanders, La Hire, entered with supplies on April 29, she was told that action must be deferred until further reinforcements could be brought in.

On the evening of May 4, when Joan was resting, she suddenly sprang up, apparently inspired, and announced that she must go and attack the English. Arming herself, she hurried to an English fort east of the city, where she discovered an engagement was already taking place. Her arrival roused the French, and they took the fort. The next day Joan addressed another of her letters of defiance to the English. On the morning of May 6 she crossed to the south bank of the river and advanced toward another fort; the English immediately evacuated in order to defend a stronger position nearby, but Joan and La Hire attacked them and took it by storm. Very early on May 7 the French advanced against the fort of Les Tourelles. Joan was wounded but quickly returned to the fight, and it was thanks in part to her example that the French commanders maintained the attack until the English capitulated. Next day the English were seen retreating, but, because it was a Sunday, Joan refused to allow any pursuit.

Victories and coronation

Joan left Orléans on May 9 and met Charles at Tours. She urged him to make haste to Reims to be crowned. Though he hesitated because some of his more prudent counselors were advising him to undertake the conquest of Normandy, Joan's importunity ultimately carried the day. It was decided, however, first to clear the English out of the other towns along the Loire River. Joan met her friend the Duc d'Alençon, who had been made lieutenant general of the French armies, and together they took a town and an important bridge. They next attacked Beaugency, whereupon the English retreated into the castle. Then, despite the opposition of the Dauphin and his adviser Georges de La Trémoille, and despite the reserve of Alençon, Joan received the Constable de Richemont, who was under suspicion at the French court. After making him swear fidelity, she accepted his help, and shortly thereafter the castle of Beaugency was surrendered.

The French and English armies came face to face at Patay on June 18, 1429. Joan promised success to the French, saying that Charles would win a greater victory that day than any he had won so far. The victory was indeed complete; the English army was routed and with it, finally, its reputation for invincibility.

Instead of pressing home their advantage by a bold attack upon Paris, Joan and the French commanders turned back to rejoin the Dauphin, who was staying with La Trémoille at Sully-sur-Loire. Again Joan urged upon Charles the need to go on swiftly to Reims for his coronation. He vacillated, however, and as he meandered through the towns along the Loire, Joan accompanied him and sought to vanquish his hesitancy and prevail over the counselors who advised delay. She

was aware of the dangers and difficulties involved but declared them of no account, and finally she won Charles to her view.

From Gien, where the army began to assemble, the Dauphin sent out the customary letters of summons to the coronation. Joan wrote two letters: one of exhortation to the people of Tournai, always loyal to Charles, the other a challenge to Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy. She and the Dauphin set out on the march to Reims on June 29. Before arriving at Troyes, Joan wrote to the inhabitants, promising them pardon if they would submit. They countered by sending a friar, the popular preacher Brother Richard, to take stock of her. Although he returned full of enthusiasm for the Maid and her mission, the townsfolk decided to remain loyal to the Anglo-Burgundian regime. The Dauphin's council decided that Joan should lead an attack against the town, and the citizens quickly submitted to the next morning's assault. The royal army then marched on to Châlons, where, despite an earlier decision to resist, the count-bishop handed the keys of the town to Charles. On July 16 the royal army reached Reims, which opened its gates. The coronation took place on July 17, 1429. Joan was present at the consecration, standing with her banner not far from the altar. After the ceremony she knelt before Charles, calling him her king for the first time. That same day she wrote to the duke of Burgundy, adjuring him to make peace with the king and to withdraw his garrisons from the royal fortresses.

St. Joan of ArcSt. Joan of Arc, French heroine and martyr, kneeling before the dauphin Charles (later Charles VII, king of France).© Photos.com/Jupiterimages

Ambitions for Paris

Charles VII left Reims on July 20, and for a month the army paraded through Champagne and the Île-de-France. On August 2 the king decided on a retreat from Provins to the Loire, a move that implied abandoning any plan to attack Paris. The loyal towns that would thus have been left to the enemy's mercy expressed some alarm. Joan, who was opposed to Charles's decision, wrote to reassure the citizens of Reims on August 5, saying that the duke of Burgundy, then in possession of Paris, had made a fortnight's truce, after which it was hoped that he would yield Paris to the king. In fact, on August 6, English troops prevented the royal army from crossing the Seine at Bray, much to the delight of Joan and the commanders, who hoped that Charles would attack Paris. Everywhere acclaimed, Joan was now, according to a 15th-century chronicler, the idol of the French. She herself felt that the purpose of her mission had been achieved.

Near Senlis, on August 14, the French and English armies again confronted each other. This time only skirmishes took place, neither side daring to start a battle, though Joan carried her standard up

to the enemy's earthworks and openly challenged them. Meanwhile Compiègne, Beauvais, Senlis, and other towns north of Paris surrendered to the king. Soon afterward, on August 28, a four months' truce for all the territory north of the Seine was concluded with the Burgundians.

Joan, however, was becoming more and more impatient; she thought it essential to take Paris. She and Alençon were at Saint-Denis on the northern outskirts of Paris on August 26, and the Parisians began to organize their defenses. Charles arrived on September 7, and an attack was launched on September 8, directed between the gates of Saint-Honoré and Saint-Denis. The Parisians could be in no doubt of Joan's presence among the besiegers; she stood forward on the earthworks, calling on them to surrender their city to the king of France. Wounded, she continued to encourage the soldiers until she had to abandon the attack. Though the next day she and Alençon sought to renew the assault, they were ordered by Charles's council to retreat.

Further struggle

Charles VII retired to the Loire, Joan following him. At Gien, which they reached on September 22, the army was disbanded. Alençon and the other captains went home; only Joan remained with the king. Later, when Alençon was planning a campaign in Normandy, he asked the king to let Joan rejoin him, but La Trémoille and other courtiers dissuaded him. Joan went with the king to Bourges, where many years later she was to be remembered for her goodness and her generosity to the poor. In October she was sent against Saint-Pierre-le-Moûtier; through her courageous assault, with only a few men, the town was taken. Joan's army then laid siege to La Charité-sur-Loire; short of munitions, they appealed to neighbouring towns for help. The supplies arrived too late, and after a month they had to withdraw.

Joan then rejoined the king, who was spending the winter in towns along the Loire. Late in December 1429 Charles issued letters patent ennobling Joan, her parents, and her brothers. Early in 1430 the duke of Burgundy began to threaten Brie and Champagne. The inhabitants of Reims became alarmed, and Joan wrote in March to assure them of the king's concern and to promise that she would come to their defense. When the duke moved up to attack Compiègne, the townsfolk determined to resist; in late March or early April Joan left the king and set out to their aid, accompanied only by her brother Pierre, her squire Jean d'Aulon, and a small troop of men-at-arms. She arrived at Melun in the middle of April, and it was no doubt her presence that prompted the citizens there to declare themselves for Charles VII.

Joan was at Compiègne by May 14, 1430. There she found Renaud de Chartres, archbishop of Reims, and Louis I de Bourbon, comte de Vendôme, a relative of the king. With them she went on to Soissons, where the townspeople refused them entry. Renaud and Vendôme therefore decided to return south of the Marne and Seine rivers; but Joan refused to accompany them, preferring to return to her "good friends" in Compiègne.

Capture, Trial, And Execution

On her way back to Compiègne, Joan heard that John of Luxembourg, the captain of a Burgundian company, had laid siege to the city. Hurrying on, she entered Compiègne under cover of darkness. The next afternoon, May 23, she led a sortie and twice repelled the Burgundians but was eventually outflanked by English reinforcements and compelled to retreat. Remaining until the last to protect the rear guard while they crossed the Oise River, she was unhorsed and could not remount. She gave herself up and, with her brother Pierre and Jean d'Aulon, was taken to Margny, where the duke of Burgundy came to see her. In telling the people of Reims of Joan's capture, Renaud de Chartres accused her of rejecting all counsel and acting willfully. Charles, who was working toward a truce with the duke of Burgundy, made no attempts to save her.

capture of St. Joan of Arc St. Joan of Arc (c. 1412–31), French heroine and martyr. She was captured while trying to relieve Compiègne from an English siege in 1430. © Photos.com/Jupiterimages

John of Luxembourg sent Joan and Jean d'Aulon to his castle in Vermandois. When she tried to escape in order to return to Compiègne, he sent her to one of his more distant castles. There, though she was treated kindly, she became more and more distressed at the predicament of Compiègne. Her desire to escape became so great that she jumped from the top of a tower, falling unconscious into the moat. She was not seriously hurt, and when she had recovered, she was taken to Arras, a town adhering to the duke of Burgundy.

News of her capture had reached Paris on May 25, 1430. The next day the theology faculty of the University of Paris, which had taken the English side, requested the duke of Burgundy to turn her over for judgment either to the chief inquisitor or to the bishop of Beauvais, Pierre Cauchon, in whose diocese she had been seized. The university wrote also, to the same effect, to John of Luxembourg; and on July 14 the bishop of Beauvais presented himself before the duke of Burgundy asking, on his own behalf and in the name of the English king, that the Maid be handed over in return for a payment of 10,000 francs. The duke passed on the demand to John of Luxembourg, and by January 3, 1431, she was in the bishop's hands. The trial was fixed to take place at Rouen. Joan was moved to a tower in the castle of Bouvreuil, which was occupied by the earl of Warwick, the English commander at Rouen. Though her offenses against the Lancastrian monarchy were common knowledge, Joan was brought to trial before a church court because the theologians at the University of Paris, as arbiter in matters concerning the faith, insisted that she be tried as a heretic. Her beliefs were not strictly orthodox, according to the criteria for orthodoxy laid down by many theologians of the period. She was no friend of the church militant on earth (which perceived itself as in spiritual combat with the forces of evil), and she threatened its hierarchy through her claim that she communicated directly with God by means of visions or voices. Further, her trial might serve to discredit Charles VII by demonstrating that he owed his coronation to a witch, or at least a heretic. Her two judges were to be Cauchon, bishop of Beauvais, and Jean Lemaître, the vice-inquisitor of France.

The trial

Beginning January 13, 1431, statements taken in Lorraine and elsewhere were read before the bishop and his assessors; they were to provide the framework for Joan's interrogation. Summoned to appear before her judges on February 21, Joan asked for permission to attend mass beforehand, but it was refused on account of the gravity of the crimes with which she was charged, including attempted suicide in having jumped into the moat. She was ordered to swear to tell the truth and did so swear, but she always refused to reveal the things she had said to Charles. Cauchon forbade her to leave her prison, but Joan insisted that she was morally free to attempt escape. Guards were then assigned to remain always inside the cell with her, and she was chained to a wooden block and sometimes put in irons. Between February 21 and March 24 she was interrogated nearly a dozen times. On every occasion she was required to swear anew to tell the truth, but she always made it clear that she would not necessarily divulge everything to her judges since, although nearly all of them were Frenchmen, they were enemies of King Charles. The report of this preliminary questioning was read to her on March 24, and apart from two points she admitted its accuracy.

When the trial proper began a day or so later, it took two days for Joan to answer the 70 charges that had been drawn up against her. These were based mainly on the contention that her behaviour showed blasphemous presumption: in particular, that she claimed for her pronouncements the authority of divine revelation; prophesied the future; endorsed her letters with the names of Jesus and Mary, thereby identifying herself with the novel and suspect cult of the Name of Jesus; professed to be assured of salvation; and wore men's clothing. Perhaps the most serious charge was of preferring what she believed to be the direct commands of God to those of the church.

On March 31 she was questioned again on several points about which she had been evasive, notably on the question of her submission to the church. In her position, obedience to the court that was trying her was inevitably made a test of such submission. She did her best to avoid this trap, saying she knew well that the church militant could not err, but it was to God and to her saints that she held herself answerable for her words and actions. The trial continued, and the 70 charges were reduced to 12, which were sent for consideration to many eminent theologians in both Rouen and Paris.

Meanwhile, Joan fell sick in prison and was attended by two doctors. She received a visit on April 18 from Cauchon and his assistants, who exhorted her to submit to the church. Joan, who was seriously ill and thought she was dying, begged to be allowed to go to confession and receive Holy Communion and to be buried in consecrated ground. They continued to badger her, receiving only her constant response, "I am relying on our Lord, I hold to what I have already said." They became more insistent on May 9, threatening her with torture if she did not clarify certain points. She answered that even if they tortured her to death she would not reply differently, adding that in any case she would afterward maintain that any statement she might make had been extorted from her by force. In light of this commonsense fortitude, her interrogators, by a majority of 10 to three, decided that torture would be useless. Joan was informed on May 23 of the decision of the University of Paris that if she persisted in her errors she would be turned over to the secular authorities; only they, and not the church, could carry out the death sentence of a condemned heretic.

Abjuration, relapse, and execution

Apparently nothing further could be done. Joan was taken out of prison for the first time in four months on May 24 and conducted to the cemetery of the church of Saint-Ouen, where her sentence was to be read out. First she was made to listen to a sermon by one of the theologians in which he violently attacked Charles VII, provoking Joan to interrupt him because she thought he had no right to attack the king, a "good Christian," and should confine his strictures to her. After the sermon was ended, she asked that all the evidence on her words and deeds be sent to Rome. Her judges ignored her appeal to the pope and began to read out the sentence abandoning her to the secular power. Hearing this dreadful pronouncement, Joan quailed and declared she would do all that the church required

of her. She was presented with a form of abjuration, which must already have been prepared. She hesitated in signing it, eventually doing so on condition that it was “pleasing to our Lord.” She was then condemned to perpetual imprisonment or, as some maintain, to incarceration in a place habitually used as a prison. In any case, the judges required her to return to her former prison.

The vice-inquisitor had ordered Joan to put on women’s clothes, and she obeyed. But two or three days later, when the judges and others visited her and found her again in male attire, she said she had made the change of her own free will, preferring men’s clothes. They then pressed other questions, to which she answered that the voices of St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Margaret of Antioch had censured her “treason” in making an abjuration. These admissions were taken to signify relapse, and on May 29 the judges and 39 assessors agreed unanimously that she must be handed over to the secular officials.

The next morning, Joan received from Cauchon permission, unprecedented for a relapsed heretic, to make her confession and receive Communion. Accompanied by two Dominicans, she was then led to the Place du Vieux-Marché. There she endured one more sermon, and the sentence abandoning her to the secular arm—that is, to the English and their French collaborators—was read out in the presence of her judges and a great crowd. The executioner seized her, led her to the stake, and lit the pyre. A Dominican consoled Joan, who asked him to hold high a crucifix for her to see and to shout out the assurances of salvation so loudly that she should hear him above the roar of the flames. To the last she maintained that her voices were sent of God and had not deceived her. According to the rehabilitation proceedings of 1456, few witnesses of her death seem to have doubted her salvation, and they agreed that she died a faithful Christian. A few days later the English king and the University of Paris formally published the news of Joan’s execution.

death of St. Joan of Arc. St. Joan of Arc (c. 1412–31), French patriot and martyr. Tried for heresy and sorcery, she was burned at the stake in a marketplace at Rouen, France, on May 30, 1431. © Photos.com/Jupiterimages

Almost 20 years afterward, on his entry into Rouen in 1450, Charles VII ordered an inquiry into the trial. Two years later the cardinal legate Guillaume d’Estouteville made a much more thorough investigation. Finally, on the order of Pope Calixtus III following a petition from the d’Arc family, proceedings were instituted in 1455–56 that revoked and annulled the sentence of 1431. Joan was canonized by Pope Benedict XV on May 16, 1920; her feast day is May 30. The French parliament, on June 24, 1920, decreed a yearly national festival in her honour; this is held the second Sunday in May.

Character And Importance

Joan of Arc’s place in history is assured. Perhaps her contribution to the history of human courage is greater than her significance in the political and military history of France. She was victimized as much by a French civil conflict as by a war with a foreign power. The relief of Orléans was undoubtedly a notable victory, which secured the loyalty of certain regions of northern France to the régime of Charles VII. But the Hundred Years’ War continued for a further 22 years after her death,

and it was the defection of Philip the Good of Burgundy from his alliance with the Lancastrians in 1435 that provided the foundation upon which the recovery of Valois France was to be based. The nature of Joan's mission, moreover, is a source of controversy among historians, theologians, and psychologists. Innumerable points about her campaigns and about the motives and actions of her supporters and enemies are subject to dispute: for instance, the number and dates of her visits to Vaucouleurs, Chinon, and Poitiers; how she was able to win the confidence of the Dauphin at their first meeting at Chinon; whether Charles's perambulations after his coronation at Reims represented triumphant progress or scandalous indecision; what her judges meant by "perpetual imprisonment"; whether, after her recantation, Joan resumed men's clothes of her own free will and at the bidding of her voices or, as one later story has it, because they were forced upon her by her English jailers.

Later generations have tended to distort the significance of Joan's mission according to their own political and religious viewpoints rather than seeking to set it in the troubled context of her time. The effects of the Western Schism (1378–1417) and the decline of papal authority during the Conciliar Movement (1409–49) made it difficult for persons to seek independent arbitration and judgment in cases relating to the faith. The verdicts of the Inquisition were liable to be coloured by political and other influences; and Joan was not the only victim of an essentially unjust procedure, which allowed the accused no counsel for the defense and which sanctioned interrogation under duress. Her place among the saints is secured, not perhaps by the somewhat dubious miracles attributed to her, but by the heroic fortitude with which she endured the ordeal of her trial and, except for one lapse toward its end, by her profound conviction of the justice of her cause, sustained by faith in the divine origin of her voices. In many ways a victim of internal strife within France, condemned by judges and assessors who were almost entirely northern French in origin, she has become a symbol of national consciousness with whom all French people, of whatever creed or party, can identify.

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