

The story of Joan of Arc is one that many people have trouble believing the first time they hear it: A young woman claimed to hear voices from God and then led the French army into battle against the British in order to make sure the crown of France stayed in French hands. And she won! This impressive woman, however, was later abandoned by the French and put to death by the English for her actions against English leadership in France. Who was this legendary figure?

A Young Woman Called to Lead

Joan of Arc was born Jeanne Darc in 1412 in the small town of Domrémy, France. Her parents were loyal to the French crown, even though parts of the country were ruled by an English monarchy. At this time, France and England were engaged in the Hundred Years' War. The war had begun because of disagreement over whether Edward III, an Englishman, or the Count of Valois, a Frenchman, was the legitimate heir to the French throne after King Charles IV died.

In France, the people were split in their loyalties. The central region of Burgundy supported the English, while the Armagnacs in southwest France supported the French. A feudal system, where local lords ruled over the people living in a specific territory, existed throughout France. English lords attempted to control the French people in their territories. This, plus the struggle for power in France, eventually led to the Hundred Years' War. Joan's village bordered Burgundy, so she likely heard varying opinions of the long war from her parents and the people of Burgundy.

Although Joan followed her family's French loyalty, at the age of 13 she began to hear voices urging her to take more action for her country.

Three holy messengers appeared to her and ordered her to rescue the country from the English. Joan said that the archangel Michael appeared first, and then St. Catherine. St. Margaret appeared later with further instructions. The holy messengers had a plan to liberate France. Joan was a pious girl and felt that God commanded her to save the country. Therefore, she had no other choice than to lead the French army into battle against the English.



A painting of Joan of Arc during the coronation of King Charles VII in 1422

Leading French Troops in Battle

Joan left her village without telling her parents where she was going or what she was doing. She went to the French army commander Robert de Baudricourt and told him her visions. At first, he had her thrown out of the region, but he later agreed to take her to meet Charles VII. When they arrived, Joan was able to identify the dauphin, or ruler, even though he was disguised. The French court saw this as a divine confirmation that she was chosen to lead the French to victory.

The French military allowed Joan to lead about 5,000 soldiers into battle at Orleans. Joan carried an old sword that she had found near a saint's grave. She also carried her own banner that showed lilies on a white background. The siege of Orleans had already been raging for days. Joan was part of the reinforcements. Her group won each battle they fought. Joan was slightly wounded but refused to stop fighting. The French soon won, led by this young woman.

For more than a year, Joan led the French army. Her troops defeated the English army in many battles, including in the cities of Patay and Troyes. Charles VII, who was officially crowned king in July 1429, wanted peace in his kingdom. He tried to negotiate with the English by giving them control of some French land. Joan, however, disagreed with the king's attempt to use control of land as a way to resolve the conflict. She thought that the land belonged to France. Joan was not interested in claiming any part of England for France. She was loyal to her home country and wanted the French to maintain control of their lands. She continued to fight, but she soon began losing.

Joan of Arc on Trial

In May 1430, Joan was captured by the Burgundians in the Battle of Compiègne. Professors of religion at the University of Paris, which was on the side of the English, requested that Joan be turned over to the Church for judgment as a heretic—someone who holds religious beliefs that are different from official religious interpretation. The Burgundians turned her over to the Church in exchange for 10,000 francs. She was jailed and unable to help her country any



A painting of Joan of Arc by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Joan of Arc is seen here carrying a sword.

longer. During the time of her imprisonment, Joan was asked repeatedly about the charges against her and the actions she took against the English army.

Joan's actions had created many enemies among the secular, or non-religious, leaders in England. However, the English and their French allies decided to try her in religious courts. They charged her with heresy, or anti-religious beliefs. According to her accusers, her visions, her claims to communicate directly with God, and her unusual attitude and dress all showed disregard for the accepted teachings of the church. While imprisoned, she was treated harshly and became ill. The armies she left in France did not come for her, and the French King did nothing to assist in her trial by the English authorities. Charles VII was working toward a truce with the Duke of Burgundy, and helping Joan of Arc would have stopped negotiations between the king and the duke. At the trial, Joan was questioned about the visions she saw and the voices she heard. Joan continued to believe the voices that spoke to her in her visions. Many historians believe that the transcripts of her trial reveal a passionate and very intelligent young woman. Still, her arguments did not prevail. In 1431, she was turned over to the secular authorities and burned at the stake in the central market of the town Rouen.

Joan of Arc's Legacy

After Joan died, many people of France were very upset. She had loyally defended their king in battle, and the French military had abandoned her, leading to her death. Twenty years later, Charles the VII, who had captured Rouen, ordered one of France's top scholars to re-assess Joan's trial. Eventually, other scholars and church officials began to question Joan's execution. In 1456, Pope Calixtus III criticized the verdict of heresy and declared that her sentence be cancelled. This was very exciting for her supporters and for the people of France. The Catholic Church finally believed in Joan's visions. Joan's courageous actions at such a young age, her work to ensure the continuation of the French monarchy, and her dedication to God even under threat of death earned her sainthood nearly 500 years later.

Most important, Joan's actions allowed France to grow as its own country outside of English rule. French nationalism, or people's pride in their country, was a direct result of Joan's sacrifice for her country. The Hundred Years' War and Joan of Arc's role in it led France and England out of a feudal system where each monarchy fought for control. The French eventually removed all English rule from France and rallied behind the memory of Joan of Arc's leadership. After the war, the two nation-states of England and France emerged in Europe, leaving the feudal system behind.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** Why did Joan of Arc leave her parents to fight in battles?
 - A.** She was called by Charles VII to fight for France.
 - B.** She was tired of living under English rule.
 - C.** She believed holy messengers were telling her to fight for France.
 - D.** She did not want to be forced to work at the family business.

- 2.** According to the passage, how does the Catholic Church view Joan of Arc today?
 - A.** As a heretic
 - B.** As a saint
 - C.** As a witch
 - D.** As a traitor

- 3.** Why did the English put Joan of Arc on trial?
 - A.** for treason
 - B.** for witchcraft
 - C.** for war crimes
 - D.** for being a heretic

- 4.** The Hundred Years' War occurred before the English split with the Catholic Church. This meant that all of England was still Catholic. Why do you think the Church chose to persecute a young girl who said she saw holy messengers? Provide details from the passage and your own prior knowledge to support your answer.