

Did St. Joan truly exist?

“Joan, the good girl from Lorraine, who the English burned at Rouen.”
-François Villon, *La Ballade des dames du temps jadis*, 15th century.

Although everywhere around the world people know about Joan of Arc, there are few who have read the fundamental texts about her and her life in order to get to know her better. In fact, there are people who think that she hasn't existed at all. For others, Joan of Arc is a myth, conjured up by the royalist to remain a ruling power in France. There's also a widespread public opinion that Joan's history was construed throughout the centuries without any real documents to substantiate it and that it would be impossible to know who the real Joan of Arc was.

Most of the time, St. Joan's story is summed up along these lines: “Joan of Arc was a poor farmer's daughter, born in Domrémy in Lorraine, where she looked after her father's sheep. She heard voices that told her to chase the English from France. She recognized the king hidden between his courtiers and later saved Orléans, after which she was burned in Rouen.”

However, there are many documents from her time that enable us to really get to know Joan's life.

First of all we still have the official transcripts from her trial, and later her trial of rehabilitation. The first trial, for heresy, was processed in the city Rouen, after Joan was captured at Compiègne by Burgundy on May 23, 1430. This trial in matters of the faith was opened on January 9, 1431 and completed on May 30th that same year, presided over by bishop Pierre Cauchon and the Vice Inquisitor of the Faith in France, Jean Le Maître. Joan was burned alive at the stake the day her trial ended.

The trial of rehabilitation, or more precise: the trial of annulment of the conviction, took place after Charles VII was triumphantly greeted in Rouen in 1449. Before this, the king and his entourage could not consult the acts of the trial in which Joan was condemned, as Normandy was in British hands. When they saw the documents, it seemed prudent to verify the findings of the court, in order to understand why Joan was burned to death, wearing a paper mitre with the words *heretic*, *schismatic* and *relapse* on it. Many doctors were appointed by the King of France in order to investigate this between 1450 and 1455.

This constituted a new trial that was opened on November 7, at the request of Isabelle, Joan's mother, and Pierre and Jean, her brothers, at the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. Isabelle cried: “Once I had a daughter, born in a legal marriage, which I raised worthily with the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. I raised her to fear God and to respect the traditions of the Church, as far my humble state allowed. She grew up amidst the fields and regularly visited the church and received the sacrament of the Eucharist every month after confessing, despite her young age. And she spent her time with other children and with praying. She had a great devotion and zeal for the needs of others, no matter how large, for who she felt compassion with all her heart. Although she never thought or acted contrary to the faith, her enemies had put her on trial, despite the facts against them, which they withheld and repressed. Her innocence was never offered any assistance in this false, violent and unjust trial, and she was condemned in a criminal manner, without even the appearance of justice. They made her undergo a cruel death by fire to condemn her soul.”

In order to have a decent trial, they called witnesses to the stand that testified about Joan's life. One hundred sixteen people appeared before the tribunal. They had to answer the notaries under oath with regard to Joan, her motivations, her acts, and so on. These people made their statements protected by full immunity, as the King had declared he would not prosecute anyone that took part in the trial of condemnation, seeing how he wanted full honesty and openness in the matter. Witnesses from her childhood, civilians from Orléans, princes of royal blood, soldiers, all testified about Joan. These testimonies resulted into the annulment of the trial for condemnation, as well as a rehabilitation for Joan.

Other documents of note are the chronicles of the 15th century. The most important being the records of Charles VII, but also records from the English-Burgundy side, both offering a very clear image of Joan's life.

There are even more documents that could be cited: letters written or dictated by Joan herself, letters of private civilians, bills from Italian merchants, like the Venetians who lived in Bruges, bills that give us an insight into Joan's staff and her acts; Letters of Pancrazio Giustiniani that were added to Antonio Morosini's diary and show an interest in the epos of Joan's life.

Since the liberation of Orléans, Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris and refugee in the convent of the Célestines in Lyon, had written a tractate on Joan of Arc, dated May 1429, one year before her death.

Then there is another tractate, written by Jacques Gélou, Archbishop of Tours and refugee in Embrun in the lands of the Dauphin, about Joan's personality. There are poets such as Alain Chartier or Christine de Pison who contributed to Joan's fame even in her own days.

Finally, there are many administrative documents in the archives of Orléans, with information about the money spent on Joan's clothes, or bills from the Count of Warwick, who held her captive in Rouen for over a year. These texts give us information that enables us to give a reliable image of St. Joan's life from beginning to end.

It is not correct to say that we cannot know Joan of Arc. Or even worse: that she'd never existed at all! The many witnesses, archives and libraries in France, England and other countries, and the documents written by many historians really do enable us to get to know Joan's life.