

**"...OTHERWISE, YOU WILL BE MASSACRED."**

# THE BATTLE OF JARGEAU

The fight for Jargeau in 1429 was the second engagement in Joan of Arc's brief military career. After successfully repelling the English from their siege of Orléans on the Loire River, Joan sought to capitalize on the momentum that was growing in the French ranks and recapture the nearby English-held towns. The English attempted to hold on to the previous year's conquests, dividing their army across three cities – Jargeau, Meung, and Beaugency – on the same river. Six weeks later, the French captured all three cities. After the siege of Jargeau, the

French massacred most of the English. Over the years, historians have criticized the English and French strategies, while others have diminished Joan's culpability in the massacre. In their assessments, historians have tended to ignore common strategies and tactics of medieval warfare.

*By Scott Manning*



According to an attribution traceable only to the nineteenth century, this helmet was said to have been worn in battle by Joan of Arc and to have been given by her to the church of Saint Pierre du Martroi at Orléans, where it hung over the main altar. Although the legend is probably untrue, the helmet does have what looks like damage from use in battle.

© Metropolitan Museum of Art

**T**he siege of Orléans directly influenced the subsequent strategies of both the French and the English. By 1428, the English and their Burgundian allies controlled the northern half of France above the Loire River. The next phase of conquest was to capture the strongholds along the Loire, clearing the way to transport their armies into southern France. To isolate Orléans, the English captured Meung and Beaugency to the west and Jargeau to the east, hindering the transportation of reinforcements and supplies via the river. On October 12, the Siege of Orléans began, but the English lacked the necessary numbers to surround Orléans, having only 3,200 men against a city with upwards of 30,000 citizens. The besiegers built

fortifications around the city, from which they bombarded the walls with cannons and could strike at movements into or out of the city. The siege continued until Joan of Arc arrived with reinforcements, food, and cannons on April 29. The French took three of the English fortifications, effectively ending the siege by May 8.

## The English strategy after Orléans

Even though the eight-month siege of Orléans had failed, the English still held Jargeau, Meung, and Beaugency on the Loire. William de la Pole – the earl of Suffolk and commander of the English remnant – opted to divide his forces and spread them across these fortified cities. Though the original purpose of controlling them was to isolate Orléans, they now acted as the English front. Early medieval military historians, including Charles Oman and Alfred H. Burne, were critical of Suffolk's approach. Oman described Suffolk as a "most incapable commander" whose approach was a "gross mistake," arguing that "it would have been far better to keep the army together as a field force" and wait for reinforcements. Similarly, Burne used the word "stupidly" to describe Suffolk's approach. Yet, although open-field battles such as Crécy, Poitiers, and Agincourt have traditionally received most of the attention during the Hundred Years' War, medievalists such as Sean McGlynn now proclaim, "Medieval warfare quite literally centered on sieges." Sieges, however, were not central to French warfare at the beginning of the war in 1337.

The transition started in the early stages of the war. With the English stretched thin on foreign soil, the French king Philip VI pursued a defensive approach. He knew that an invasion by King Edward III of England was limited by the funds procured in his home country. During the siege of Tournai in 1340, Philip arrived to relieve the town, but instead opted to wait, knowing Edward did not have the resources to starve or assault the town. In response, Edward launched *chevauchées*, a medieval scorched earth tactic that focused on pillaging wide swaths of territory, burning fields and killing animals. Nine years later, Edward's son, the Black Prince, executed his own *chevauchée* in France and burned approximately 500 localities.

Acts like these drove the French armies out to fight and lose at battles like Crécy and Poitiers, but they also set off a chain of events that





The Duke of Alençon later recalled this famous scene at Jargeau:

*"Joan was on a ladder, holding her standard in her hand, when it was struck and she herself was hit on the head by a stone which broke her helmet. But she was thrown to the ground and raising herself, said to the men-at-arms: 'Friends, friends! Come on! Come on! Our Lord has condemned the English! Now they are ours; have good courage!' In an instant the town of Jargeau was taken and the English retreated towards the bridges chased by the French."*

© Marek Szyszek





Several scenes related to Joan of Arc in the late fifteenth-century *Vigiles de Charles VII*, an account of the Hundred Years War. From left to right: Joan with Charles VII during the Siege of Troyes; Joan chasing away the prostitutes that were following the army; and finally the Battle of Jargeau.

© Bibliothèque nationale de France MS Français 5054 fol. 61v, fol. 60v, and fol. 58r



transformed France into a country of fortified cities. Before this, few towns were fortified and some of those defenses were simply old Roman walls. In response, Philip granted towns the right to collect taxes with the express purpose of building and maintaining fortifications, a policy that continued after his reign. This move did not just include major cities such as Paris and Orléans, but also mid-sized towns like Jargeau. The townsfolk needed little motivation to contribute to such a cause and the efforts bore fruit almost immediately. For example, the English victory at Poitiers in 1356 that resulted in the capture of the French king did not gain as much territory as the victory ten years earlier at Crécy. With the French population hiding behind their walls, the English could devastate the countryside and win open-field battles, but the people remained unconquered.

Thus, capturing fortifications was the key to conquest in France during the latter part of the war. After Orléans, both Oman and Burne

envisioned the English army maintaining a 'field force' outside of the protection and supply of a city. Had Suffolk followed Oman and Burne's advice, the French would have more easily captured Jargeau and the other towns on the Loire River. Without resources, Suffolk would then have had to retreat from the area and explain how he not only failed to capture Orléans, but also gave up three other fortified cities without resistance. This was clearly never an option for Suffolk, who established his headquarters at Jargeau, sending the rest of his troops to Meung and Beaugency. He then waited for reinforcements or a French assault, whichever came first.

Little remains of the 1429 fortifications of Jargeau. Contemporary descriptions confirm that the town featured walls, a ditch, and towers. The walls were as high as 30 feet, as this was the standard design until cannon fire proved capable of knocking down tall structures, and any higher would have been impossible for ladders to scale, as contemporary accounts described. Assuming the town followed typical medieval design, the towers would have been 40 to 60 meters apart. To provide better flanking opportunities for the defenders, the towers would have protruded outside the walls, would have featured a circular design that had been popular since the twelfth century, and would have had arrow slits and gun loops up and down the structure.

### The French strategy

After Orléans, the French did not immediately attack any of the other English-held towns along



© Tina Ross





the Loire, and the siege of Jargeau did not occur until June 11, more than a month later. Du-nois – the Bastard of Orléans and leader of the eight-month defense of the city – testified that he, Joan, and the other commanders traveled to meet the Dauphin “to ask him for armed bands with which to recover the castles and towns lying on the Loire river.” Joan pressured the Dauphin “most earnestly and frequently to hasten and delay no longer.” Perceval de Cagny, a sympathetic eyewitness, confirmed the story, but added that Joan also convinced the other French commanders to attack Jargeau first.

Unfortunately, no surviving contemporary sources explain the strategic importance, if any, of capturing Jargeau first. There are several possibilities, including the fact that the city was naturally cut off from Meung and Beaugency by Orléans. In addition, the city was closer to Paris, the nearest significant English stronghold with reinforcements. Capturing Jargeau before reinforcements arrived would force the English to march much farther to help the remaining Loire cities. Finally, Suffolk stationed his headquarters there. By taking out the senior commander of the English forces on the Loire, Joan may have theorized that Meung and Beaugency would be easier to capture, but this assumes she knew Suffolk’s location and no source confirms this.

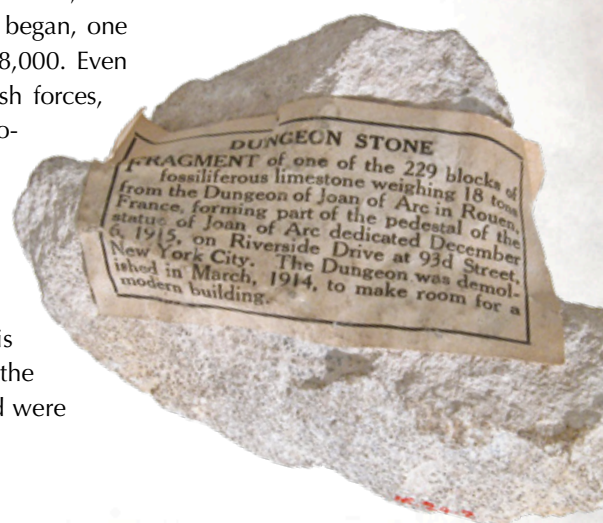
Regardless of why Joan targeted Jargeau first, it is clear from the Bastard’s testimony that although they had been successful at Orléans, they believed they needed more men to capture the remaining cities on the Loire, de-

laying their offensive by a month. The push for more troops fell directly in line with medieval siege practices. Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*, one of the most advanced military writings in France at the time, attests to this. Written around 1410, it analyzes ancient writings such as Vegetius and combines them with contemporary opinions. In a theoretical siege of a fortification guarded by 200 men, the book recommends employing no fewer than 3,200 men with specific roles – 600 carpenters, 600 assistants, and 2,000 knights, soldiers, and squires. War rarely allows such an ideal situation, but ultimately Pizan recommended an overwhelming sixteen-to-one numerical advantage. Contemporary estimates vary from 300 to 800 English troops at Jargeau, while estimates of the French army range from 1,200 to 3,000 immediately after relieving Orléans. In addition, the English had just demonstrated at Orléans that besieging a city with too few troops could fail. The additional time paid off, and by the time the siege of Jargeau began, one source put the French forces at 8,000. Even at the highest estimate for English forces, it gave the French at least a ten-to-one numerical advantage.

Before reaching the city, the French commanders debated whether they should even attack. According to Jean II, the duke of Alençon, he and his fellow commanders believed the English “were very powerful and were

As the attached label explains, this chunk of limestone is believed to have originally been part of one of the blocks used in the construction of the dungeon that once held Joan of Arc while she was imprisoned in Rouen before her trial by the English. It was later used to construct the base of a statue dedicated to Joan in New York City.

© Metropolitan Museum of Art







The earliest known image of Joan of Arc is this sketch by Clement de Fauquembergue, secretary of the Parliament of Paris, in the margin of the official register he kept for daily events on May 10, 1429, after news of Joan's victory at Orleans reached Paris.

© Public domain

In 1874, the French government commissioned artist Emmanuel Frémiet to produce a gilded bronze statue of Joan of Arc in commemoration of the country's defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. Various copies were made of Frémiet's original work, and statues also stand in a variety of other cities around the world; the one shown here can be found in Philadelphia, near the Museum of Art.

© Smallbones / Wikimedia Commons

there in great numbers." However, Joan arrived at the council late and convinced them that "God was conducting their campaign." After more encouraging words, all the commanders overcame their concerns and agreed to attack. Modern historian Stephen W. Richey criticizes the French commanders, saying "that even at those odds, it took a pep talk from Joan to get them to follow through on their plans to attack Jargeau." This criticism assumes that the French were aware of the exact number of defenders, but Alençon's testimony confirms there was either unclear or no intelligence on the English strength. In addition, even with 8,000 men, the French still ideally needed more for Pizan's sixteen-to-one guideline, if the English numbered upwards of 800.

### The attack on Jargeau

There are numerous contemporary chronicles and eyewitness accounts of the events of Jargeau. The most detailed accounts come from the Duke of Alençon as well as the *Journal du Siège d'Orléans*, which includes daily reports from the siege along with other chronicles. Though each source provides different details, they do not contradict each other on events. Alençon provides arguably the most useful testimony since he was a commander of the French forces at the battle. In addition, his servant and fellow eyewitness, Perceval de Cagny, provides further insight.

The French decided to attack, starting with the suburbs outside the walls of Jargeau, where they would spend the night. Upon the arrival of the first French troops on June 11, the English ran outside the city walls to confront them; they were clearly not ready for a confrontation and faltered. When Joan saw her troops wavering, Alençon tells us she "went to the attack, exhorting the soldiers

to be of good courage." The troops followed her lead and overwhelmed the English, who withdrew behind the town walls.

That night, the French camped in the suburbs and prepared artillery for bombardment. During this time, Perceval tells us that Joan commanded the inhabitants of Jargeau to leave or surrender, "otherwise, you will be massacred." The English ignored her threats and, in the morning, Alençon tells us the French "opened fire with their bombards and engines against the town." Three shots from one of the cannons knocked down the tallest tower in the city. The bombardment lasted at least a day according to the *Journal*, but Alençon indicated it lasted longer, saying it was "several days later" before the French gathered to determine the next steps. Suffolk sued for a two-week ceasefire, but Joan testified that she rejected it, demanding that the defenders leave immediately.

After the bombardment, the French assaulted the walls. The contemporary descriptions are brief but revealing. Both Perceval and Alençon described Joan as leading the assault, carrying her standard. The assault lasted approximately four hours. With ladders, the French began making their way over the walls. Overwhelmed, Suffolk purportedly sued for a ceasefire, but no one heard him through the chaos. Alençon testified that Joan inspired the final push as she was climbing a ladder and a defender struck her on the head with a stone, sending her to the ground. She got up and yelled to the French troops, "Up, friends, up! Our Lord has doomed the English. At this very hour, they are ours. Be of good cheer!"

The besiegers took the town, and the remaining English fled across the bridge north of the Loire. In the pursuit, the French captured Suffolk, but they also killed a consider-

### REMEMBERING JOAN OF ARC

Although Joan would be captured and executed less than two years after her victory at Jargeau, she would remain a powerful symbol for the French people. She would be praised by those who knew and fought with her, including the Duke of Alençon. In a deposition he would give at her second trial, the duke said "he had always held her to be an excellent catholic, and an honest woman because he saw her receive the body of Christ many times and when she looked at the body of Christ, she very often shed many tears... But she was very skilled in war, both in carrying the lance and in deploying the army, organizing combat and preparing artillery."







able number of English, including prisoners. The contemporary body count estimates vary but indicate that the French massacred all the English and possibly some of the town's inhabitants. Enguerrand de Monstrelet estimated that the English were 300-400 strong and he tell us the French killed 300 of them. Alençon estimated that 1,100 were massacred, which is devastating even against the higher troop strength found in *Journal du Siège d'Orléans* (600-700) and Perceval de Cagny (700 or 800).

Even with the presence of Joan of Arc, Jargeau was a bloody but typical siege. The English and French leaders applied strategies and tactics common in medieval warfare. Suffolk's move to hold onto the English fortifications on the Loire was his only choice when viewed in the context of how important fortifications were in France. The French delay to recruit more troops aligned with the military writings in France at the time. Likewise, the French commanders' concern over the strength of the English at Jargeau was valid.

Concerning the massacre, several historians have tried to distance Joan from any culpability. For example, Kelly DeVries theorizes, "It is possible that this was done without her knowledge, or that some of her soldiers took her threats of an English massacre more seriously than she intended, as neither of

the sources reporting the incident mentions her presence or knowledge of what had occurred." Similarly, Larissa Juliet Taylor questions Joan's ability to restrain "the lowest ranks of local men-at-arms who had suffered huge casualties and wanted to exact revenge."

Massacres after sieges were common, but this did not stop the English from wanting retribution after they had captured Joan and put her on trial. During the proceedings her prosecutors asked her "why she had not agreed to the treaty with the captain of Jargeau." The record of the trial tells us, "She also said for her own part, she told the people of Jargeau to leave with their doublets or tunics, and their lives safe, if they wished; otherwise they would be taken by assault." During her trial, the prosecutors did all they could to force Joan to admit wrongdoing in anything, and had she shown any remorse for the massacre at Jargeau they would have surely recorded it. Yet, they recorded Joan stating plainly that she offered the defenders a chance to leave with their lives, but they chose otherwise. In this respect, Joan of Arc was like most medieval siege commanders. **MW**

**Scott Manning holds master's degree in history and a bachelor's in military history, and he serves on the board of the Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association.**

A modern-day view showing the French town of Jargeau. The Loire River flows along the northern side of Jargeau. While few medieval remains are visible today, the church of Saint-Etienne (whose steeple is visible in the background) dates from as early as the fourth century, with additions and improvements made in both the ninth and twelfth centuries.

© Evan Frank / Shutterstock

Jean II, Duke of Alençon, dressed as a Knight of the Golden Fleece in this manuscript image from 1473. He would have been about 64 years old in this image.

© Public domain

