

Pope Joan

Wikipedia
(edited & revised)



Origin of the Legend

The popular version of the Pope Joan story comes mainly from the 13th century Polish chronicler Martin von Troppau [or Opava; died 1278]. In the third recension of his *Chronicon Pontificum et Imperatum*, Martin writes:

“After... Leo, Johannes Anglicus, born at Mainz, was pope for two years, seven months and four days, and died in Rome, after which there was a vacancy in the papacy of one month. It is claimed that this John was a woman, who as a girl had been led to Athens dressed in the clothes of a man by a certain lover of hers. There she became proficient in a diversity of branches of knowledge, until she had no equal, and afterwards in Rome, she taught the liberal arts and had great masters among her students and audience. A high opinion of her life and learning arose in the city, and she was chosen for pope. While pope, however, she became pregnant by her companion. Through ignorance of the exact time when the birth was expected, she was delivered of a child while in procession from St Peter's to the Lateran, in a narrow lane between the Coliseum and St Clement's church. After her death, it is said she was buried in that same place. The Lord Pope always turns aside from the street and it is believed by many that this is done because of abhorrence of the event. Nor is she placed on the list of the holy pontiffs, both because of her female sex and on account of the foulness of the matter.”



Pope Joan giving birth during a procession

Thus, this event would have occurred in between the reigns of Pope Leo IV and Pope Benedict III, in the 850s. Versions of the story appear in sources earlier than Martin; the one most commonly cited is Anastasius Bibliothecarius (d. 886) a compiler of *Liber Pontificalis*, who would have been a contemporary of the female Pope. However, the story is not found in reliable manuscripts of Anastasius. In fact, only one manuscript of Anastasius' *Liber Pontificalis* contains a reference to the female Pope. This manuscript, in the Vatican Library, bears the relevant passage inserted as a footnote at the bottom of a page, out of sequence, and in a different hand, one that certainly dates from after the time of Martin von Troppau. In other words, this "witness" to the female Pope is likely to be based upon Martin's account, and certainly not a possible source for it. The same is true of Marianus Scotus's *Chronicle of the Popes* a text written in the 11th century. Some manuscripts of it contain a brief mention of a female Pope named Joanna, but all these manuscripts are, again, later than Martin's work. Earlier manuscripts do not contain the legend.

There are only two known authentic references to a female Pope that could antedate Martin von Troppau. The Dominican writer Jean de Mailly [John of Metz] wrote slightly earlier in the 13th century [c. 1240-1250]. In his *Chronica Universalis Mettensis* ["Universal Chronicle of Mainz"] he tells a very similar story of an unnamed female pope, giving added detail of her death. One day she was out on horseback when she gave birth to a son. An angry Roman mob bound her to the tail of a horse, dragged her round the city, then stoned her to death. De Mailly dates the incident not to the 850s but to 1099. Etienne de Bourbon (d. 1261), another Dominican, appears to have adopted de Mailly's tale and chronology into his work on the "Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit" [*De septum donis Spiritu Sancti*].

From the mid-13th century onwards, then, the legend was widely disseminated and believed. Bartolomeo Platina, the scholar who was prefect of the Vatican Library, wrote his *Vitæ Pontificum Platinæ* in 1479 at the behest of his patron Pope Sixtus IV and entered the story of Joan under "Pope John VIII." References to the female Pope abound in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance. The *Chronicon* of Adam of Usk (1404) gives her name as "Agnes" and mentions a statue in Rome said to be of her. This statue had never been mentioned anywhere by any earlier writer; presumably it was an actual statue that came to be taken to be of the female Pope. A late 14th century edition of the *Mirabilia Urbis*

Romae, a guidebook for pilgrims to Rome, tells readers that the female Pope's remains are buried at St Peter's. It was around this time when a long series of busts of past Popes was made for the Duomo of Siena, which included one of the female Pope, named as "Johannes VIII, Foemina de Anglia" and included between Leo IV and Benedict III. At his trial in 1415, Jan Hus argued that the Church does not necessarily need a Pope, because during the pontificate of "Pope Agnes" it got on quite well. Hus' opponents at this trial insisted that his argument proved no such thing about the independence of the Church, but they did not dispute that there had been a female Pope at all.

There were associated legends as well. In the 1290s the Dominican Robert of Usèz recounted a vision in which he saw the seat "where, it is said, the Pope is proved to be a man." By the 14th century, it was believed that two ancient marble seats, called the *sedes stercoraria*, which were used for enthroning new Popes in the Basilica of St. John Lateran had holes in the seats that were used for determining the gender of the new Pope.* Not until the late 15th century, however, was it said that this peculiar practice was instituted in response to the scandal of the 9th century female Pope. Since the 14th Century, the figure of Pope Joan has taken on a somewhat saintly figure. There are stories of her appearing and performing miracles.



Pope seated on the *sedes stercoraria* while his sex is checked

In 1601, Pope Clement VIII declared the legend of the female Pope to be untrue. The famous bust of her at the Cathedral of Siena was either destroyed or recarved and relabeled, replaced by a male figure, of Pope Zacharias (Stanford 1999; J.N.D. Kelly, *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*).

Analysis

Most scholars dismiss Pope Joan as the medieval equivalent of an urban legend (see *U.S. News & World Report*, July 24, 2000). *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (1988) acknowledges that this legend was widely believed for centuries, even among Catholic circles, but declares that there is "no contemporary evidence for a female pope at any of the dates suggested for her reign." It goes on to say that, "the known facts of the respective periods make it impossible to fit [a female pope] in" (pg. 329).

The legend of Pope Joan was initially discredited by David Blondel, a mid-17th century Protestant historian. Blondel suggested that Pope Joan's tale may have originated in a satire against Pope John XI, whose brief reign in the 10th century was orchestrated by his notorious mother, Marozia, and effectually ended when the two of them were imprisoned by his brother. Through detailed analysis of the claims and suggested timings for the popess, Blondel argued that no such events could have happened. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* elaborates on the historical timeline problem:

"Between Leo IV and Benedict III, where Martinus Polonus places her, she cannot be inserted, because Leo IV died 17 July, 855, and immediately after his death Benedict III was elected by the clergy and people of Rome; but owing to the setting up of an antipope, in the person of the deposed Cardinal Anastasius, he was not consecrated until 29 September. Coins exist which bear both the image of Benedict III and of Emperor Lothair, who died 28 September, 855; therefore Benedict must have been recognized as pope before the last-mentioned date. On 7 October, 855, Benedict III issued a charter for the Abbey of Corvey. Hincmar, Archbishop of Reims, informed Nicholas I that a messenger whom he had sent to Leo IV learned on his way of the death of this pope, and therefore handed his petition to Benedict III, who decided it (Hincmar, ep. xl in P.L., CXXXVI, 85). All these witnesses prove the correctness of the dates given in the lives of Leo IV and Benedict III, and there was no interregnum between these two popes, so that at this place there is no room for the alleged popess.

"Further, it is even less probable that a popess could be inserted in the list of popes about 1100, between Victor III (1087) and Urban II (1088-99) or Paschal II (1099-1110), as is suggested by the chronicle of Jean de Mailly."

No source describing a female pope exists from earlier than the mid-13th century, almost exactly four hundred years after the time when Pope Joan allegedly existed. It is hard to believe that an event like a Pope unexpectedly giving birth in public and being stoned to death would not be mentioned by any writers or historians at the time.

It has been argued that manuscripts and historical records were tampered with in the 17th century, when Pope Clement VIII decreed that there had never been a Pope Joan. But this claim is highly unlikely. It would have required an immense effort to remove her name from all documents, in every library and monastery across Europe. Such a vast conspiracy would have been almost impossible to carry out. Moreover, any such tampering would be easily detectable by modern scholars. Either passages would have to be physically erased from manuscripts - something that obviously leaves marks - or the manuscripts would have to be completely destroyed and replaced with forgeries. However, scholars can date manuscripts quite accurately on the basis of the materials used, handwriting styles, and so on. There was no mass destruction, forgery or alteration of manuscripts in the seventeenth century. On the contrary, all the evidence of tampering in relation to the Pope Joan story indicates that books from before the thirteenth century were altered to put her in, not leave her out.

It is also notable that enemies of the Papacy in the 9th century make no mention of a female Pope. For example, Photius I of Constantinople, who became patriarch in 858 and was deposed by Pope Nicholas I in 863, was understandably an enemy of the Pope. He vehemently asserted his own authority as patriarch over that of the Pope in Rome, and would certainly have made the most of any scandal of that time regarding the Papacy. But he never mentions the story once in any of his voluminous writings. Indeed, at one point he mentions "Leo and Benedict, successively great priests of the Roman Church."

Against the weight of historical evidence to the contrary, then, why has the Pope Joan story been so often believed, and so often revisited? Some, such as writer Philip Jenkins (*The New Anti-Catholicism*, 2005) have suggested that the periodic revival of what Jenkins calls this "anti-papal legend" has more to do with feminist and anti-Catholic wishful thinking than historical accuracy (pg. 89).

Related Issues

Encyclopedia Britannica online, in analyzing the legend of Pope Joan observes that, "This myth shares much with modern 'urban legends.' Notice especially the importance of circumstantial details which seem to lend credence to the tale and the story's usefulness as etiology (seeming to explain the origin of verifiable facts)." Let us examine some of these circumstantial details.

The thrones with holes in at St John Lateran's did indeed exist. In fact, one is still in the Vatican Museum today, and it does indeed have a hole in the seat. The reason for the hole is disputed, but as both the seats and their holes predated the Pope Joan story, and indeed Catholicism by centuries, they clearly have nothing to do with a need to check the sex of a pope. It has been speculated that they originally were Roman bidets or imperial birthing stools, which because of their age and imperial links were used in ceremonies by popes intent on highlighting their own imperial claims (as they did also with their Latin title, Pontifex Maximus).

Medieval Popes, from the thirteenth century onwards, did indeed avoid the direct route between the Lateran and St Peter's, as Martin of Troppau claimed. However, there is no evidence that this practice dated back any earlier, let alone that it originated in the ninth century as a deliberate rebuff to the memory of the female Pope. The origin of the practice is uncertain, but it is quite likely that it was maintained because of widespread belief in the Joan legend and that it was thought genuinely to date back to that period.

Although some medieval writers referred to the female Pope as "John VIII", the real Pope John VIII reigned between 872 and 882, and his life does not resemble that of the fictional female Pope in any way.

A problem sometimes connected to the Pope Joan legend is the fact that there is no Pope John XX in any official list. It is sometimes said that this reflects a renumbering of the Popes to exclude the woman from history. In fact, shortly after Pope John XXI became Pope in 1276, there arose a legend that there had been an "extra" Pope John between Pope John XIV and Pope John XV in the 10th century. Martin of Troppau mentions this Pope in his chronicle. In reality, the Antipope Boniface VIII occupied the Papal throne at this time. However, John XXI accordingly renumbered himself (when he should really have been John XX) and all Popes John since XIV to take account of this legendary "extra" Pope John. This discrepancy in Papal numbering thus has nothing to do with the Pope Joan story.

* The thrones with holes in it at St John Lateran's do indeed exist, and were used in the elevation of Pope Pascal II in 1099 (Boureau 1988). In fact, one is still in the Vatican Museums another at the Musée du Louvre. They do indeed have a hole in the seat. However, the reason for the hole is disputed, but as both the seats and their holes predated the Pope Joan story, and indeed Catholicism by centuries, they clearly have nothing to do with a need to check the sex of a pope. It has been speculated that they originally were Roman bidets or imperial birthing stools, which because of their age and imperial links were used in ceremonies by popes intent on highlighting their own imperial claims.

The humanist Jacopo d'Angelo de Scarparia who visited Rome in 1406 for the enthronement of Gregory XII in which the pope sat briefly on two "pierced chairs" at the Lateran, said: "the vulgar tell the insane fable that he is touched to verify that he is indeed a man." ("Top 5 Myths About the Papacy," *Listverse*).



Sedia stercoraria in Lateran Museum