

ABOUT THE LEGEND OF POPE JOAN



*Miniature showing Pope Joan, who has just given birth to an infant during a Church procession (c. 1450), in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Des Cleres et Nobles Femmes*. Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library.*

Pope Joan, or Johannes Anglicus, was thought to have held the papacy for a brief period of two years during the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Medieval legend tells the story of a young woman who disguised herself as a man and entered religious training, either to follow her lover or simply to study scripture. Distinguishing herself as a highly intelligent scholar, she was eventually elected pope. Her gender was revealed when she unexpectedly gave birth in the streets of Rome during a papal procession, where she subsequently died in childbirth or by being dragged through the streets and stoned. During the later Middle Ages, papal processions would avoid the supposed street where Pope Joan gave birth. The legend also sparked a medieval rumor, still espoused today, that the ceremonial porphyry

papal chairs with a hole in their seat were used to ensure the new pope's gender and avoid another female pope.

The existence of Pope Joan was widely believed in medieval Europe. The earliest accounts of a female pope are given by the French Dominican monks Jean

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de Mailly and Stephen of Bourbon in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Joan was accepted as part of Catholic history. Her inclusion in the literature of medieval authors such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Ranulf Higden attests to the popularity of her story. The collection of papal busts in the Siena Cathedral even briefly included a bust of Pope Joan. As there are no reliable accounts of Pope Joan during her lifetime, most historians now consider her to be a myth created and popularized by critics of the Catholic Church. However, today the legend of Pope Joan continues to spark both popular imagination and new scholarship.



*Porphyry Papal Chair.* Collection of The Vatican.