

## THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR

Crossbows, Cross-Dressing and Claret: The Hundred Years' War, As It Happened

Untangling the long and brutal decades of fighting and intrigue that snuffed out the Middle Ages, chivalry and countless lives—but birthed the legends of Joan of Arc, the Black Prince and fine Bordeaux wine

History textbooks will tell you the Hundred Years' War flared up in 1337, but the trouble began much earlier.

In 1066, William the Conqueror, duke of Normandy, inextricably bound the interests of the crowns of England and France when he invaded the island to the north and overthrew its Anglo-Saxon ruler. His wife, Matilda, was granddaughter to the king of the Franks (later French). In one sense, everything that came after would be a family feud.

In the lead-up to the series of warring periods much later called the Hundred Years' War, “England” and “France” were not the nations we consider them today, but ever-splintering lineages of monarchs and their vassals that held ever-shifting territories and alliances on the continent and the island. Until the early 13th century, the kings of England, descendants of William by birth or marriage, also held much of the western and central parts of modern-day France, including Normandy, Anjou and Aquitaine; all spoke French as their mother tongue until Henry IV in 1399. But by 1259, only Gascony, the southwestern subregion of Aquitaine whose seat was and is Bordeaux, remained in the hands of the English crown.

Gascony had long been a thorn in the side of the French kingdom. The Gascons, a Basque people, had their own language and enjoyed the heady trade of tax-exempt wine to a thirsty island that largely left them alone in other matters. By the 14th century, Graves, on the Left Bank, and Entre-Deux-Mers had become the Bordeaux region's principal grapegrowing areas. (The Médoc, however, was wild swampland.) Every September, wine—red, white and “claret,” a cofermented rosé-type libation—went into casks, then onto ships sent north. By around 1300, Bordeaux pushed out some 22 million gallons per vintage, the equivalent of 9.3 million cases today.

1337: French King Philip VI (“the Fortunate”), like a number of his predecessors, has been pressuring Gascony with military incursions; in 1337, he simply declares it his. England's King Edward III prepares an army to defend the territory. The stage is set.

The factions first meet in a consequential clash at sea. In 1340, Edward's navy, a jumble of mostly jerry-rigged merchant ships, outmaneuvers the French in the Battle of Sluys, as the superior French fleet becomes entangled in wind and rain. While the major later battles would be pitched on land, the seas remain hostile throughout the century-plus of warring, and Bordeaux's wine trade suffers more with each passing decade.

1360: The Battle of Poitiers in western France in 1356 is a rout for Edward's son, later known as the “Black Prince,” and his rapid-firing longbow archers. England negotiates the Treaty of Brétigny, walking away with a chunk of territory from just south of the Loire to the northern border of what is now Spain.

The remaining decades of the 14th century and the first of the 15th are marked by skirmishes and strife. England and France box each other while stepping on their own rakes: uprisings and civil wars at home;

fruitless crusades against the Ottoman Empire; heads of state who are children or insane. It isn't all folly, or at least not all grim: The poet Geoffrey Chaucer, friend of the English court, draws some laughs as well. In 1374, King Edward would award the wordsmith a gallon-sized pitcher of wine. Redeemable daily. For the rest of his life.

1415: In 1413, Henry V inherits the English monarchy from his father and prepares to rev up the warring once again.

In the very north of France, not far from the Strait of Dover, the forces collide on Oct. 25, 1415 at the Battle of Agincourt. The English, tired and outnumbered perhaps 3-to-2 (estimates vary), nonetheless have their longbows; the field is muddy, knee-high for those in full armor. It would be a glorious English victory, with 6,000 French horizontal in the muck by day's end. Indeed, the English nearly consolidate their conquest of France when the 1420 Treaty of Troyes grants that Henry and his heirs will be the kings of France upon the death of the older and infirm Charles VI.

1429: The siege of Orléans, after six months, is very nearly a success for the English. But one of the would-be French King Charles VII's lieutenants has entertained a peculiar request: An illiterate teenage farm girl arrives with claims that she has divine visions urging her to fight alongside Charles, and return France to the French. The lieutenant is skeptical, but Joan of Arc, persistent—and Charles, out of options. Hoping against hope that God is, in fact, on their side, the citizens of Orléans and the French rank-and-file rally behind their charismatic banner-woman and drive the English from their bastions around the city.

Joan of Arc would be captured by the enemy Burgundians, tried for heresy (and “cross-dressing”) and burned at the stake two years later. But now England is on the back foot.

1453: With the Hundred Years' War in overtime, only the port of Calais and faithful Gascony remain in English hands.

There, veteran English commander John Talbot makes England's last stand. In 1453, his quixotic Gascony campaign reaches the town of Castillon, armed with bad intelligence. The French garrison awaits, armed with hundreds of guns in all sizes. Vanquishing Talbot, Charles forces the English off the continent, for good.

On hearing the news of losing Bordeaux, King Henry VI has a mental breakdown. His final indignation would be defeat at home, deposed by the House of York in the War of the Roses, and he'd die in the Tower of London, most likely by foul play. Charles, now styled “the Victorious,” would meet a less ignominious but perhaps more hurtful end, delirious with illness and betrayed by his own eldest son.

The unbroken monarchy of France would be extinguished in 1792, an ending that is particularly unpleasant for Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. And in 1801, the king of England also relinquishes his crown's long-claimed title—of King of France.

Source: The Hundred Years War, Jonathan Sumption, Faber and Faber, 1999