

The Economist

One ring to fool them all?

The twisting tale of “Joan of Arc’s ring”

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A MODEST, 15th-century silver ring for which an ambitious London dealer might ask £1,000 sold for an astonishing £297,000 at TimeLine Auctions on February 25th, a world auction record for a medieval European ring. There could not be a better example of the degree to which a stellar provenance affects the market value of an object: It was suggested, with the aid of documents sold with the ring, that the original owner of Lot 1220 was Joan of Arc, who led the French army against English invaders, a martyr and patron saint of France.

The high bidder was Puy du Fou, a history theme-park in central France created by Phillipe de Villiers. French media erupted in exclamation marks. Honour is saved! The ring is coming home! Hearts may swell and eyes tear; facts, however, remain. Or, perhaps, it is more accurate to say, an insufficiency of facts. There is a scarcity of the sort of archival evidence—wills, inventories, letters, diary entries—that scholars need to produce a solid provenance. And yet the conviction that Lot 1220 was Joan’s has taken hold. It is a tale in which politics, mistaken identity, passion, hope and mystery all play a part.

Joan was tried for heresy, found guilty and burned at the stake in 1431. During the interrogation which preceded this, in response to questions from Bishop Cauchon, the Maid of Orleans said that she had had two rings. The one given to her by her parents was by this time in the possession of the Burgundians, England’s allies, who had caught her. On it were the names of Jesus and Mary and also, she thought, there were three crosses. The other ring, given to her by her brother, is not described. That wasn’t necessary, after all, since it

was in the possession of her interrogators. After her death, that ring passed from Bishop Cauchon to the English Cardinal Henry Beaufort, who had been present at her execution. During the 500 years that followed there are no contemporary records of Joan of Arc's rings.



This changed in the early 20th century—a time when interest in Joan and her achievements, rekindled in the 19th century, was high; she was beatified in 1909. Lady Ottoline Morrell, a British aristocrat and a frequent hostess of the Bloomsbury group of writers, had a silver medieval ring she thought might have belonged to Joan. In time she gave it to Augustus John, a painter, who sold it in 1914. The first published association of the ring with Joan was three years later. Its then owner, F.A.H. Oates, included an illustration of it in the privately printed catalogue of his collection. It is the same ring as Lot 1220. Thirty years later, James Hasson, who owned it, commissioned a genealogy that traced Lady Ottoline's ancestry back to Cardinal Beaufort. The name of the person in each generation who would have owned the ring was highlighted. Dr Hasson was reassured by this of the ring's authenticity. The museums in France to which he loaned it seemed to agree. It was displayed as having been Joan of Arc's. And yet a family tree by itself is not a widely accepted provenance. It might have been; it could have been; this does not mean it was. The new owner of Lot 1220 evidently was not deterred by this.

Nicolas de Villiers, son of Puy du Fou's founder and president of the theme-park today, concedes that the attribution is hard to believe. However, he was convinced that the ring is Joan's after a telephone conversation with Jacques Trémolet de Villers, a lawyer, monarchist and author whose works include an account of Joan of Arc's trial. During the call, which took place only days before the sale, Mr Trémolet pressed him to buy the ring which he said matched Joan's "precise" description of it—the three crosses and all. After hearing this, and acting on "instinct", Nicolas de Villiers decided to go for it. A 36-hour canvas of his rich friends produced the war chest for his successful bid. On March 20th, Joan of Arc's ring, the prize, will be unveiled to the public at the park. Or will it?

There is no reason to believe that the ring with Jesus and Mary and the crosses that Joan described to Bishop Cauchon is the one he handed over to Cardinal Beaufort. There is no description to identify it. Well then, did the ring already possessed by the Burgundians, about which nothing more was recorded, suddenly reappear in the 20th century—effectively out of

nowhere—and land in the jewellery box of Ottoline Morrell? No one can prove that it did not, of course. But neither has anyone proven that it did. What can be said is that some believe that it matches Joan's description of her ring, closely, and that it is unique. Others, however, including the specialists consulted by this reporter, do not agree.

"I have yet to talk to a museum curator, an art dealer or an independent scholar who believes that the association with Jeanne d'Arc dates back to her lifetime," says Sandra Hindman, a medievalist, professor emerita at Northwestern University and dealer in medieval art and rings. "I personally believe that the attribution of the auctioned ring was part of the Jeanne d'Arc mania that begins in the 19th century and continues until about the mid-20th century." Her opinion was echoed by the other experts consulted by this reporter.

The attention given to the sale of Lot 1220 has brought international publicity to the auction house, which has posted a new video about it; its cataloguing of the ring as associated with the one given to Joan by her parents and later owned by Cardinal Beaufort remains unchanged. The theme-park has been widely publicised too. The vendor got far more for Lot 1220 than he expected. France bubbles with national pride, and may become even more joyful on hearing that the vanquished, next-highest bidder was Berganza, an English dealer. Politically, too, the ring is providing a boost: Joan of Arc is a particularly potent symbol for right-wing parties.

Indeed, some centrist and left-leaning Frenchmen feel that the Maid of Orleans, heroine of their schooldays, has been hijacked by the right. Every year on May 1st, the xenophobic and populist National Front gathers at her statue in Paris. Marine le Pen, its leader, tweeted "Thank you to @PhdeVilliers for bringing Joan of Arc's ring back to French soil." Was this a generous move, or a pre-emptive one? Philippe de Villiers is a leader of the Movement for France, a smaller rival to the National Front. Now his family appears to have won Joan of Arc for his followers. There is talk of national fundraising campaign to build a chapel at the theme park to house its precious relic. Whatever their politics, its millions of visitors will be awed. For many, it would seem, this tale has a happy ending—but not for all.

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