Eleanor of Aquitaine was one of the most powerful and fascinating personalities of feudal Europe. Eleanor was wealthy because she was the heiress of the duchy of Aquitaine, one of the greatest fiefs in Europe. In fact, Aquitaine was like a separate nation with lands extending in southwestern France from the river Loire to the Pyrenees.

Eleanor's court was also a trend setter in the medieval world, known for its sophistication and luxury. Heavily influenced by the Spanish courts of the Moors, it gave patronage to poets and encouraged the art of the troubadours, some of whom were believed to be in love with the beautiful Eleanor. One story is that in her effort to shed her rough knights of their unruly ways, she made up a mock trial in which the court ladies sat on an elevated platform and judged the knights, who read poems of homage to women and acted out proper courting techniques. The men wore fancy clothes - flowing sleeves, pointed shoes - and wore their hair long.

At the age of 15 Eleanor married Louis VII, King of France, bringing into the union her vast possessions from the River Loire to the Pyrenees. Only a few years later, at age 19, she knelt in the cathedral of Vézelay before the celebrated Abbé Bernard of Clairvaux offering him thousands of her vassals for the Second Crusade. It was said that Queen Eleanor appeared at Vézelay dressed like an Amazon galloping through the crowds on a white horse, urging them to join the crusades. While the church may have been pleased to receive her thousand fighting vassals, they were less happy when they learned that Eleanor, attended by 300 of her ladies, also planned to go to help "tend the wounded."

The presence of Eleanor, her ladies and wagons of female servants, was criticized by commentators throughout her adventure. Dressed in armor and carrying lances, the women never fought. And when they reached the city of Antioch, Eleanor found herself deep in a renewed friendship with Raymond, her uncle, who had been appointed prince of the city. Raymond, only a few years older than Eleanor, was far more interesting and handsome than Eleanor's husband, Louis. When Raymond decided that the best strategic objective of the Crusade would be to recapture Edessa, thus protecting the Western presence in the Holy Land, Eleanor sided with his view.

Louis, however, was fixated on reaching Jerusalem, a less sound goal. Louis demanded that Eleanor follow him to Jerusalem. Eleanor, furious, announced to one and all that their marriage was not valid in the eyes of God, for they were related through some family connections to an extent prohibited by the Church. Wounded by her claim, Louis nonetheless forced Eleanor to honor her marriage vows and ride with him. The expedition did fail, and a defeated Eleanor and Louis returned to France in separate ships.

On her way home, while resting in Sicily, Eleanor was brought the news that her fair haired uncle had been killed in battle, and his head delivered to the Caliph of Baghdad. Although her marriage to Louis continued for a time, and she bore him two daughters, the relationship was over. In 1152 the marriage was annulled and her vast estates reverted to Eleanor's control. In the papal bull for the next Crusade, the church expressly forbade women of all sorts from joining the expedition. All the Christian monarchs, including King Louis, agreed to this. But by this time Eleanor had problems of her own.
In a way Eleanor of Aquitaine’s life had barely begun after she returned to France from her travels on the Second Crusade. Obviously, her adventures on the Second Crusade severed her relationship with King Louis VII of France. However, within a short time Eleanor threw herself into a new and stormy relationship with Prince Henry of Anjou, the up and coming noble who was eleven years younger than she. Since their temperaments, as well as their wealth in land, were well matched, they were married and shortly afterward her new husband became King Henry II of England in 1154.

For the next thirteen years Eleanor constantly bore Henry children, five sons and three daughters. (William, Henry, Richard I "the Lionheart", Geoffrey, John "Lackland", Mathilda, Eleanor, and Joan). Richard and John became, in turn, kings of England. Henry was given the title "the young king" by his father, although father Henry still ruled. Through tough fighting and clever alliances, and with a parcel of children, Henry and Eleanor created an impressive empire. As well, Eleanor was an independent ruler in her own right since she had inherited the huge Duchy of Aquitaine and Poitiers from her father when she was 15.

However all was not well between Henry and Eleanor. When her older sons were of age, her estrangement from her husband grew. In 1173, she led three of her sons in a rebellion against Henry, surprising him with this act of aggression, which was so unusual for a noble woman of her time. However, In her eyes it was justified. After two decades of child bearing, putting up with his infidelities, vehemently disagreeing with some of his decisions, and, worst of all, having to share her independence and power, Eleanor may have hoped that her prize would have been the right to rule Aquitaine with her beloved third son Richard, and without Henry. Unfortunately, the rebellion was put down and fifty-year-old Eleanor was imprisoned by Henry in various fortified buildings for the next fifteen years.

Then, in 1189, Henry died. On the accession of her son Richard I to kingship, Eleanor's fortunes rose again. Eleanor was immediately released from her now self imposed imprisonment, and returned to help guide her son in ruling the kingdom. When Richard was off fighting in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade, she repeatedly intervened to defend his lands - even against her younger son John. When Richard was captured on his way home, and his brother John plotted against his return, Eleanor used her considerable influence to help raise the ransom and secure Richard's release. Her relentless work on behalf of her favorite son increased her fame as an extremely able politician and endured her as the true protector of England.

In her later years, Eleanor traveled constantly, even in her old age. Running from one end of Europe to another, she often risked her life in her efforts to maintain the loyalty of the English subjects, cement marriage alliances, and manage her army and estates. By this time she had many grandchildren.

Possibly one of her wisest acts was to travel to Spain to chose and collect her thirteen year old granddaughter, Blanche of Castile, to become the bride of Louis VIII of France ( the grandson of her first husband Louis VII). Blanche eventually proved to be a rival to Eleanor in political influence and success as queen of France.
Eleanor also, when almost seventy, rode over the Pyrenees Mountains to collect her candidate to be Richard's wife, (Berengaria, the daughter of King Sancho the Wise of Navarre). She then traversed the Italian Alps, traveling all the way down the Italian peninsula, to bring Berengaria to Sicily. There, Eleanor places Berengaria on a ship and sent her to Cyprus, where Richard married her at Limossol on May 12, 1191.

Unfortunately, some of Eleanor’s political power and influence diminished when her eldest son Richard died, leaving the throne of England to his younger brother John. Upon rising to the throne, John “Lackland” proved to be a weak military commander and a cruel and self-centered ruler. After initially plotting against his brother Richard with the help of King Philip Augustus of France, John would lose all his families land holdings in Normandy (including his mother’s lands in Acquitaine) to the French monarch in exchange for French recognition of John as the rightful heir to the English throne.

As a result of her younger son’s failure to safeguard her lands, and her desire to separate herself from further political embarrassments, Eleanor retreated to the peaceful surroundings of the abbey of Fontevrault. Eventually, Eleanor died in 1204 at her house in the abbey. However, her colorful life and personal determination had won her an important place in the history of Medieval Europe.

Resources:
Who would have thought that a girl of the lowest class growing up in the slums of Byzantium would later become Empress and one of the most powerful women of medieval history? Theodora, wife of the Emperor Justinian, was no ordinary woman, even though she may have come from a poor family.

According to Michael Grant, Her father, Acacius, was a bear trainer of the hippodrome's Blue faction in Constantinople. Her mother, whose name is not recorded, was a dancer and an actress. After her father’s death, her mother brought her children wearing garlands into the hippodrome and presented them as suppliants to the crowd. Both John of Ephesus and Procopius (in his Secret History) relate that Theodora from an early age worked in a Constantinople brothel serving low-status customers; later she performed on stage. Lynda Garland in "Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527-1204" notes that there seems to be little reason to believe she worked out of a brothel "managed by a pimp". Employment as an actress at the time would include both "indecent exhibitions on stage" and providing sexual services off stage. In what Garland calls the "sleazy entertainment business in the capital", Theodora would earn her living by a combination of her theatrical and sexual skills.

At the age of 16, she traveled to North Africa as the companion of a Syrian official named Hecebolus when he went to the Libyan Pentapolis as governor. She stayed with him for almost four years before returning to Constantinople. Abandoned and maltreated by Hecebolus, on her way to the capital of the Byzantine Empire, she settled for a while in Alexandria, Egypt. She is said to have met the Patriarch Timothy III in Alexandria, who was Monophysite, and it was at that time that she converted to Monophysite Christianity. From Alexandria she went to Antioch, where she met a Blue faction’s dancer, Macedonia, who was perhaps an informer of Justinian. It may have been Macedonia who provided Theodora to Justinian, presenting her as a person whom it would be useful to know and as a fellow aficionado of the Blues, as her father was on the side of this faction while working at the hippodrome, and Justinian was their supporter.

She returned to Constantinople in 522 and gave up her former lifestyle, settling as a wool spinner in a house near the palace. Her beauty, wit and amusing character drew attention from Justinian, who wanted to marry her. However, he could not: He was heir of the throne of his uncle, Emperor Justin I, and a Roman law from Constantine’s time prevented government officials from marrying actresses. Empress Euphemia, who liked Justinian and ordinarily refused him nothing, was against his wedding with an actress. However, Justin was fond of Theodora. In 525, when Euphemia had died, Justin repealed the law, and Justinian managed to marry Theodora.

When Justinian and Theodora married in 527, Justinian had expressed his wishes for the two of them to rule together legally. They were crowned on a double throne; the consuls and magistrates took the legal and religious oath which officially declared them equal rulers of Byzantium: "I swear on the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and on the Virgin Mary and on the four gospels which I hold in my hand, and on the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, to keep
faith with pure conscience to our most sacred Lord Justinian and Theodora his consort.”
(Bridge p54)

Theodora was one of the most powerful women of her time, and it is true to say that, as co-ruler of Byzantium with Justinian, she made many very significant changes to the Roman Empire and its government. A contemporary official, Joannes Laurentius Lydus, remarked that she was "superior in intelligence to any man". Justinian clearly recognized this as well, allowing her to share his throne and take active part in decision making. As Justinian writes, he consulted Theodora when he promulgated a constitution that included reforms meant to end corruption by public officials.

Not for a moment was she in the background of imperial life - she ruled Byzantium as an equal alongside Justinian and was his chief adviser. Besides this she also worked hard for many causes of her own, making her own significant contributions to the government of the Roman Empire. In the past, Empresses had tended to be uninvolved in the running of the country and in affairs of state (Norwich, p194) Theodora brought about a unique change to this tradition. Her intelligence and strong will enabled her to use the power of her high position to great effect. These traits also allowed her to exercise influence over her husband in times of crisis, and on at least on occasion she became the decision maker due to sheer decisiveness and strength of courage. What she achieved as Empress, particularly in the case of furthering women’s rights, was nothing short of incredible. Her achievements are especially interesting for the light they shed on her attitude towards her early life. One may suspect that the causes she fought for were of special significance to her due to her early life where she lived in the slums and discovered more than once the disadvantages of being lower class and female.

Many Historians consider Theodora to be a great pioneer of feminism, because of the laws she passed, increasing the rights of women. As a result of Theodora’s efforts, the status of women in the Byzantine Empire was elevated far above that of women in the Middle East and the rest of Europe. She lashed out against the unfair laws concerning stage girls and prostitutes, who were often trapped in their professions with no other way of earning an income. They were tied to unscrupulous employers who, especially in the case of prostitutes, took immense advantage of them. The stage girls often became hopelessly bound to their professions and employers, and were unable to leave the job even if they wanted to.

Theodora also passed new laws which freed girls from their positions, and under these laws 227 actresses left the stage for a new and freer life (Bridge p73). Prostitutes were even worse off. Pimps encouraged young girls to sign contracts that many of them didn't understand - by signing them the girls effectively signed away their freedom, and when they were no longer useful they were discarded with no further assistance from their employers.

Theodora issued further edicts to protect lower class females. Firstly, a daughter whose father had died was to receive as much money as any sons of the family. Secondly, a widow was allowed to reclaim her dowry if her husband had died, and thirdly, children born to a female slave were not bound to become slaves themselves (Bridge p 77). All her work towards women's rights certainly seems to indicate a dislike of her early days where, as an alleged stage girl, prostitute, female and lower class citizen, she was ultimately in one of the worst social positions possible.
In AD 532, She also proved her worth and strong character in a very famous event, the Nike Riots. When the people of Constantinople revolted against the Imperial Palace and began to rampage through the city, Emperor Justinian, terrified, wanted to abandon the city and go into hiding, but it was Theodora who insisted they stay where they were and honor their positions:

"Every man must sooner or later die; and how could and Emperor ever allow himself to be a fugitive? when you reach safety, will you not regret that you did not choose death in preference? I stand by the saying: the purple is the noblest winding-sheet." (Norwich p199)

Theodora was obviously not planning to relinquish her position and power without a fight, in contrast to Justinian, who was ready to abandon his throne. This story is given by Procopius of Caesarea, who wrote very critically about Theodora, so the impression of her strong will and determination is unlikely to be made up. Her strong will is shown in another incident. When Justinian fell ill with the plague, Theodora, according to Norwich (p233), exercised the supreme power alone during his illness, although her position was threatened by some of the army commanders. As an opponent she was a force to be reckoned with; according to Procopius, Theodora held grudges forever. Even after an enemy had died, their family was still subject to her wrath. When Justinian had recovered, Theodora sought out her chief opponents and according to Norwich, had one locked in the dungeons and the other accused of committing a false crime (Norwich, p233 and 234).

As a friend she was the epitome of loyalty and support who 'showered favors' on those she cared about. Ultimately, as an alleged stage girl/prostitute/lower class citizen/female, Theodora was in one of the worst social positions possible, and she grew up in the atmosphere of the Hippodrome, Byzantium's chariot racing track and the heart of Byzantine entertainment; a place "dedicated to violence, group aggression, mob excitement and the shedding of blood (Bridge p3) She quickly learnt to stand up for herself; self defense was a necessity in a place like this. According to one source, Theodora possessed notable courage, wit and judgment, (Bridge p4) while another source claims she had a ruthless mind (Francesco, p13). These qualities and her loyalties – Theodora never forgot her background, family or friends - were the basis of her whole character throughout her life, most prominently whilst she was Empress. Obviously her attitude was influenced by her past experiences on society's other side, but this could only be a good thing as she could see which aspects needed changing for the better of the lower classes and in particular, woman kind.

Resources:

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Maid of Orleans
The Biography of Saint Joan d’Arc

Jehanne (Joan d’Arc) was born on January 6, 1412 (Actual date was not recorded but historians have generally accepted this date) in the small village of Domremy in the region of France known as Lorraine. "Jehanne (Joan) busied herself like any other girl; she did the house work and spun and sometime- I have seen her- she kept her father's flocks." Jehanne’s parents Jacques d’Arc and Isabelle were simple peasants similar to most of the other people who lived in Domremy. Years later, one of Jehanne’s godmothers, for whom she was named, described them as: "Simple labourers, honest in their poverty, for they were of small means." Jehanne’s father Jacques did hold some type of public office in their small village.

Apparently even back then, godparents were largely a ceremonial role, as Jehanne says that only her mother taught her about the faith. All agree that she is an exceptionally pious child and raised a good Catholic. They all agree on her parents outstanding honesty and virtue. Some of the other children tease Jehanne for being "so religious". Jehanne is known to be very generous and comfort the sick. She often goes on Saturday to a chapel called the Notre Dame de Bermont to light candles and prays. She is excellent at sewing linen fabrics and spinning wool. When she hears the church bells ring, she goes to her knees to pray.

The exact date in 1424 when Jehanne first hears voices from God is not known. It occurs in midsummer in her father’s garden. At first she is afraid. She sees a light off to her right and hears the angelic voices. "When I was thirteen years old," she stated as part of her testimony during her trial. “I had a Voice from God to help me govern my conduct. And the first time I was very fearful. And came this Voice, about the hour of noon, in the summer-time, in my father's garden; I had not fasted on the eve preceding that day." Jehanne d’Arc testified at her trial that the first Voice to visit her was Saint Michael who came to her to give her guidance and counseling. He was soon joined by Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret on subsequent visits. Jehanne also testified that: "I have seen them with my corporeal eyes as plainly as I see you, and when they went away from me I wept and I greatly wished they had taken me with them."

At first the voices tell her to be good and to go to church. Later on they will tell her she must go into France to repel the English and crown Charles the king. She sees and hears them two or three times per week. At first Michael the archangel comes to her. Later on, he says that Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret will come to her with instructions from her Lord Jesus. She is able to touch them with her right hand, the hand that bears the ring with the inscription "Jhesus Maria" and was a gift from one of her parents. She says that they have a lovely aroma. Sometimes she kisses the ground they stand on to do them reverence. She says that when they depart, she wishes she could go with them.

By May 1428, Jehanne’s voices are more insistent that she goes into France. She must reach the king by mid-Lent (approximately 10 months away). Jehanne requests to visit her uncle Durant Lassois in Burey (really the husband of her cousin), some 10 miles away from Domremy. Once there, she asks her Uncle Durant to take her to see Robert Baudricourt, the military captain of the nearest town loyal to France, because she knows that he had dealings with Baudricourt before in representing the town on official business. As a result of her Uncle’s influence, Jehanne gains an audience and tells Baudricourt she must go to see the King. He dismisses her and tells Durant to take her home and administer a beating to restore some
sense to her. By now Durant’s wife is pregnant and expecting in January, so Jehanne knows she will have another opportunity to return to Vaucouleurs at that time.

By January 1429, Jehanne’s voices are now vehemently urging her to go to Baudricourt to get an escort into France. At her trial, she testified that, “Two or three times a week this Voice exhorted me to go to France. My father knew nothing of my going. The Voice kept urging me until I could no longer endure it. It told me I would raise the siege of Orleans. It told me to go to Captain Robert de Baudricourt and he would give me men to come with me.”

As a result of the voices, Jehanne went to visit her Uncle Durand Lassois and wife at Burey, telling her parents and friends that she went to help the family with the birth of their child. However, she was really using this a springboard to get to Vaucouleurs and see Robert Baudricourt. Once she arrived in Burey, Jehanne had to make three visits to Robert de Baudricourt.

She testified that she told Baudricourt, "I have been commanded to do two things on the part of the King of Heaven: one, to raise the siege of Orleans; the other, to conduct the King to Reims for his sacrament and his coronation." She also tells Baudricourt that, “the Kingdom of France is not the Dauphin’s but my Lord’s. But my Lord wills that the Dauphin shall be made King and have the Kingdom as a fief. The Dauphin shall be King despite his enemies, and I shall lead him to his anointing." However, it wasn’t until she accurately predicted the French loss at the Battle of the Herrings that Robert Baudricourt finally agreed to aid her.

While in Vaucouleurs, Jehanne met two knights (Jean de Metz and Bertrand de Poulengy). Jean believed absolutely in Jehanne, whose words inspired him with a love of God equivalent to her own. Bertrand added that she was as good as if she were a saint herself. Ultimately, these two would help escort her to Chinon. Before their departure, Jean asked her if she expected to depart in her red dress. Jehanne answered that she preferred to wear men’s clothing. He outfitted her from his servant’s clothes of pants, a jacket and a hat.

Sometime in February, Jehanne decided to depart for Chinon (about 400 miles away from Vaucouleurs). In her testimony, she stated that "from Vaucouleurs I set out, clad as a man, wearing a sword which the captain had given me, without other arms. Accompanied by a knight, a squire, and four followers, I directed my course toward St. Urbain, and found shelter that night at the abbey." The next day they continue on their journey and by March 4th, they have arrived at Sainte-Catherine-de-Fierbois near Chinon.

While they are at Sainte-Catherine-de-Fierbois, Jehanne writes a letter to Charles asking him to receive her, stating that she has traveled 150 leagues (about 330 miles) to come to his help; that she knows a great many things for his good; and that she will be able to recognize him among many others. During the next two days, Charles sends church advisors and counselors to question Jehanne. They bring back a divided opinion concerning the authenticity of her visions and voices. Some say she is mad, others say to at least hear her out. Meanwhile, Charles receives a letter from Baudricourt that may have tipped the scales in Jehanne’s favor. One historical document records that Jehanne knew from her voices the day of this major French defeat and informs Robert Baudricourt. When Baudricourt hears the official news of the defeat several days later, dispatched a messenger to Chinon (date unknown) with a letter to inform Charles of the accuracy of Jehanne’s claims.
Jehanne is allowed to see Charles in the late afternoon of March 9th, 1429. "After dinner, I went to the King, who was at the Castle. When I entered the room where he was I recognized him among many others by the counsel of my Voice, which revealed him to me. I told him that I wished to go and make war on the English." Charles VII, always shrewd when it came to his own survival, tested Jehanne by hiding himself among the crowd in hall of his palace but Joan was not fooled and immediately found him and fell to her knees before him. Joan of Arc's first words to Charles VII were: "Very noble Lord Dauphin, I am come, being sent on the part of God, to give success to the kingdom and to you." Charles was a cautious man, after he listened to what Jehanne had to say about her mission from God, he had Jehanne tested to determine if she was indeed physically pure and sent from God. Her examinations took several weeks while she was examined by the ladies of court and by the church theologians at Poitiers.

When Jehanne was finally asked why she needed soldiers if God wished to deliver France, "In God's name, the soldiers will fight and God will give the victory" is the famous response she gave. After gaining approval from the Church theologians that examined her, Jehanne was given command of the French army by Charles and proceeded to the town of Blois to prepare for battle. Upon her arrival, Jehanne took great pains to sanctify her army from sin. She banned all camp followers (prostitutes) and directed that anyone living with a mistress must either marry them or send them away. She prohibited taking God’s name in vain, but does allow two expressions of an oath "In God’s name" and "By my staff". She told the soldiers they must not loot and pillage when they occupy a town. She encouraged them all to receive the Eucharist, but first they had to confess their sins to God. When she was satisfied that the spirits and souls of her soldiers were prepared, the army of some three to four thousand men and the relief supplies, left Blois for Orleans on March 27th, 1429.

Jehanne’s (Joan d’Arc's) military campaigns are among some of the most historic in French history. Her victory at Orleans is one of the great victories in the history of warfare and was the final turning point in the Hundred Years War. In only three days of fighting Joan was able to compel the English to retreat from the city ending their siege of nearly seven months. Having fulfilled the first part of her mission, Jehanne immediately went on the offensive in a march through the Loire Valley to clear the way for the coronation of Charles VII at Reims. At the battle of Patay, Jehanne won her greatest military victory by annihilating a much larger English army, killing thousands while losing only a few of her own soldiers.

Upon her success at Orleans and Patay, Jehanne sent word to Charles: "Noble King, now is accomplished the will of God, who desired that I should raise the siege of Orleans, and should bring you to this city of Reims to receive you holy coronation, thus showing that you are the true King, him to whom the throne of France must belong."

With the coronation of Charles VII as King of France, Jehanne (Joan of Arc) reached the height of her success. She accomplished her impossible prediction "to conduct the King to Reims for his sacrament and his coronation" in only a matter of months after she had arrived in Chinon as a simple maid with an unbelievable mission from God.
SOURCES:

1. Saint Joan of Arc by Vita Sackville-West, copyright 1936.


5. Joan of Arc in Her Own Words compiled and translated by Willard Trask, copyright 1996.

6. The Trial of Condemnation translated by W.P. Barrett done in 1932

7. Joan of Arc by Mary Gordon, copyright 2000