

History of the Crusades.
Episode 109.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
A Short Introduction.

Hello again. Thanks to the money raised from the "King Peter of Cyprus and the Last Crusade" fundraising episode, I'm back, and ready to embark on a new series of episodes on the Crusades, not in the Middle East this time but in southern France. To each and every one of you who purchased the fundraising episode, particularly those who paid more than the five dollars asking price, and or left lovely messages, thank you so much. This is for you. To those of you who were listening and thinking "What fundraising episode?", I recorded an hour long episode which covers the events following the Fall of Acre and the Crusade of King Peter of Cyprus in 1365, The Last Crusade in which the object was the recovery of Jerusalem. If you still want to purchase it, you can. You can find it at HistoryOfTheCrusades.bandcamp.com.

Right, now, in the History of the Crusades Podcast series, we concluded, of course, with the Fall of Acre in 1291. To start our examination of the Crusade Against The Cathars, we not only have to change our geographical setting, from the Middle East to southern France, we also have to go back in time. When we start our chronological look at the Crusade against the Cathars we will kick off in the early years of the thirteenth century, so some ninety or so years before the Fall of Acre. And a word of warning, this series of episodes is going to be considerably darker than the episodes set in the Middle East. As you all know, when the Latin Christians of Europe decided to conquer the Holy Land in the name of Christendom, they were opposed by the Muslims of the Middle East. Those Muslims were more than a match for the Crusaders, and in the end they prevailed and reclaimed the territory won by the Latin Christians.

The Cathars, on the other hand, are pacifists. They don't have the resources or the military know how, or even the will to defend themselves in battle. While others who do will take up their cause, it's safe to say that things are not going to end well for the Cathars. While the Crusade against the Muslims of the Middle East was about one word, or maybe two, "Holy Land", the Crusade against the Cathars is about a different H word: "Heresy". The persecution of the Cathars ushers in some dark times for medieval Europe, times of terror and inquisition, times when people were tortured and burned alive in public executions for their beliefs, and it all starts here, with a Crusade against the Cathars.

Now, one of the things we need to discuss before we proceed much further is terminology. You say "tomato", I say "tomato", you say "potato", I say - no, I don't actually say "potato". You say "Albigensien", I say "Cathar". The Crusade against the Cathars is also known as "The Albigensian Crusade". One way of explaining the difference between the terms is to say that the Cathars are the people whom the Crusade was directed against, and the term "Albigensian" denotes the geographic area in which it took place. The French town of Albi is just about smack bang in the middle of the region about which we are concerned, and one of the earliest Bishoprics of the Cathars was also located at Albi in the twelfth century. As far as I can tell, at the time the events took place, the Crusade, if it was called anything at all, was described as being against the Cathars. Early historians started calling the persecution "The Albigensian Crusade", and the name stuck until the twentieth century, where it reverted back to being known as the Crusade Against the Cathars. As you've probably already noticed, I'm going to be calling it the "Crusade Against the Cathars",

firstly because it keeps me on trend, and secondly because I prefer it. So the "Crusade Against the Cathars" it is.

Next we need to discuss the issue of sources. The good news is that there are some eyewitness accounts of many of the events that took place. The bad news is that they are pretty much all written by the people persecuting the Cathars. One of the bonuses of being the victor is that you get to ensure that your version of the events is the one that prevails. From the nineteenth century onwards, there has been a concerted effort by historians to sketch in the missing pieces, in short, to provide a perspective from both sides of the conflict. Fortunately for us, in recent years some excellent work has been produced by historians who have spent their entire careers trying to provide a fuller narrative of the events, but of course we still have to approach the subject with a great deal of caution.

Another reason to proceed cautiously is the degree of myth and legend surrounding the Cathars themselves. Just as the Knights Templar managed to find themselves emerging in popular culture in the twentieth century as keepers of the Holy Grail and other secrets, the Cathars have been elevated to a similar position. As the French writer Jean Cocteau once wrote, and I quote "History is facts that become lies in the end. Legends are lies which become history in the end," end quote. We need to do our best to disentangle the facts from the lies. Unfortunately, where the history of the Cathars is concerned, this is no easy task. While on one hand you need to keep a safe distance from the mystical status acquired by the Cathars during the last century, there are some recent historians who have taken scholarship on the Cathars to the other extreme. In his 2008 book "A Most Holy War, The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom", Associate Professor of History Mark Pegg controversially argues that the Cathars never actually existed. I'll be keeping this view in mind as we move forward, although the comment in the introduction to his book that, and I quote "History is more art than science", end quote, should perhaps sound a note of caution.

So, between people using the Cathars to pin down the location of the Holy Grail, to academics questioning their very existence, where do we start in our examination of this Crusade? Well, that's easy: we start in the German city of Cologne in the year 1163. A group of Cathars had arrived in Cologne from Flanders. When they failed to attend Church they were brought before the Church Court and questioned about their beliefs. They failed to repent, and a chronicle of the event, written some sixty years later, relates what happened next, and I quote: "On the fifth of August, four men and a girl were taken outside the city and burned. The girl would have been saved by the sympathy of the people if she had been frightened by the fate of her companions and accepted better advice, but she tore herself from the grasp of those who were holding her, threw herself into the flames, and was killed." End quote.

"Ah well", I hear you say, "It was the Middle Ages. People were being burnt alive for their beliefs all the time." Not so. At this point in history, the year 1163, burning people alive for their beliefs was actually highly unusual. In fact, in the 600 or so years following the fall of the Roman Empire, not one heretic was punished by death. The first recorded instance of a heretical execution was in the year 1022, in France. According to Professor R. I. Moore in his recent book "The War on Heresy", between 1022 and the burning of the Cathars in Cologne in 1163, heretics had only been executed on six other occasions. Professor Moore points out that the burning of the Cathars in Cologne was a turning point. From that time onwards the persecution of heretics, and their execution, became much more

frequent, and in fact continued unabated throughout the remainder of the medieval period, right up until the seventeenth century.

So, who were the Cathars and why were they being persecuted? Well, to answer those questions, we will first need to take a closer look at southern France in the thirteenth century. Join me next week as we do exactly that, in our first full episode on the Crusade Against The Cathars. Until next week, bye for now.

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