

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 110.  
The Crusade Against The Cathars.  
Languedoc in 1208.

Hello again. Last week we started the new series on the Crusade Against the Cathars with a short introduction. This week we will set the scene for the Crusade. This week we will take a closer look at a southern France in the early thirteenth century.

Okay, so it's January in the year 1208. The sack of Constantinople, the infamous outcome of the Fourth Crusade, occurred four years ago. Back in the Holy Land, young Maria of Montferrat is ruling the Kingdom of Acre under the guidance of her regent, John of Ibelin, and a delegation from the Kingdom is currently in France trying to find an appropriate husband for her. Over in England, Richard the Lionheart's annoying little brother John is nine years into his disastrous reign as King of England.

Four years ago, so the year 1204, was a particularly bad one for King John. Pretty much as soon as he was crowned, King John launched into a war against King Philip II of France. That war hasn't been going at all well for King John. At the beginning of his reign, the Kingdom of England extended over an extensive region of what is now France. Pretty much all of western France, from Normandy and Brittany in the north down through Poitou, Anjou and Aquitaine, was under the control of the English Crown. In 1204 however, King Philip conquered Normandy and advanced southwards to occupy both Anjou and Poitou. Also in that year, King John's formidable and dependable mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, died. Aquitaine is now the only remaining French possession in English hands. Convinced that the French King intended to invade England, King John managed to negotiate a truce. The truce is about to expire, and King John is currently working on plans to invade France and take back the Duchy of Normandy.

The Pope at this point in time is the highly intelligent, energetic and ambitious Pope Innocent III, who is doing his best to wrestle the kings and emperors of Europe into submission, and to elevate the Papacy into the position he believes it ought to hold, above royalty and up somewhere near God. Seemingly undeterred by the disastrous results of the last Crusade he instigated, that being the Fourth Crusade which resulted in the sacking of the Christian city of Constantinople, Pope Innocent is seeking other means by which the church can impose its authority.

Also at this moment in January 1208, Pope Innocent's Legate, a man called Peter of Castelnau, is in southern France. He has just left the castle of Saint-Gilles, where his stay was less than pleasant, for reasons we will go into in a future episode. He is riding with a few bodyguards towards the Rhone River. He's heading for Rome. However, unfortunately for Peter of Castelnau, and many thousands of residents of southern France, he won't actually make it to Rome. Why? Because he will be assassinated early tomorrow morning, sparking the bloodbath that is the Crusade against the Cathars.

Now the France that Peter of Castelnau is riding through on this brisk winter's morning in January 1208 is vastly different from the France of today. If I say the words "Kingdom of France", you might picture a country where everyone speaks the same language, French obviously, and everyone is governed by a set of laws laid down by the King, in return for which people pledge to the King their undying loyalty. Well, as far as France in the thirteenth century is concerned, this couldn't be further from the truth. The best you could

say about France at this time, was that it was ruled very loosely by King Philip II, via a bewildering and constantly shifting series of loyalties and allegiances. Ideally, the feudal system of the Middle Ages looks like a pyramid in structure, with the King right at the top, followed by the higher levels of nobility like princes, dukes, marquises, counts, viscounts and barons, and underneath them a larger level of lesser nobles, knights and land-owners, while on the bottom sits the lower rung of the peasants.

The feudal structure of the Kingdom of France in the early thirteenth century was nothing like this. The King of France only exercised effective control over a relatively small region, his seat of power in Paris, the Isle de France, part of Burgundy, and small and isolated royalist areas in northern and central France. In fact, when people spoke of France at this time in history, they generally meant northern France. The influence of the French King did extend further across regions in the north and the centre of modern-day France, but a lot of this influence was loose and shifting, and it's safe to say that at any given time it would be difficult for the king or his advisers to know precisely the extent of his actual authority. This, understandably, was not ideal from King Phillip's point of view. He, of course, was keen to see the whole region fall into line under his rule.

We've just mentioned that King Philip has recently made some inroads towards achieving this goal by conquering the duchies of Normandy, Anjou and Poitou, and thereby bringing them from possessions of the English crown into possessions of the French crown. But as we've also said, King John of England looked set to try and win them back, so who knew for how long they would stay French? To the south of these territories lay Aquitaine, which was definitely still ruled by King John. If we swing over to the east, the borders of the Holy Roman Empire ran right up to the river Rhone, making Lyon and Avignon border-towns. The entire region of Provence was, at this stage, part of the Holy Roman Empire.

And now we come to southern France. This is where things get really tricky. Southern France was completely different to northern France in almost all ways imaginable. Northern France was largely agricultural in nature and had a long history of warfare, gained primarily from centuries of incursions by the Vikings. The city of Paris, at this stage, was a thriving metropolis, around twice the size of its English counterpart, London. The population across Europe had exploded in recent decades and was just reaching a peak. The next century, however, would see the population plummet once more with the advent of the plague, or the Black Death. At the moment, though, the population of Paris is somewhere in the vicinity of 50,000 to 100,000 people. Unfortunately, I can't be more specific than that, as estimates vary wildly. At the moment, finishing touches are being made on the gorgeous cathedral of Notre Dame, which will be Paris' most iconic building until the advent of the Eiffel Tower, many centuries into the future.

In southern France, things were quite different. To start with, they spoke a completely different language to that spoken in northern France. The language of southern France was known as Languedoc, "d'oc" being the word for "yes" and "langue" being the word for "language", so the "language of yes", also known as "Occitan". The region in southern France in which Languedoc was spoken came to be known itself as Languedoc. However, it's important to remember that at the time we are interested in, it was not so much a cohesive region under the control of any one King or ruler, but a confusing jumble of principalities, counties and city states, each pretty much ruling themselves. In language and culture, the residents of southern France had a lot in common with their Spanish neighbors across the Pyrenees: the Kingdom of Aragon and its main city Barcelona. In

fact, they were even closer in language and culture to the Germans than they were to their northern French counterparts.

In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption quotes a Norman chronicler who stated that the inhabitants of southern France were, and I quote, "as different from the Franks as chickens are from ducks", end quote. They even operated under different laws. For reasons I have been unable to discern, the Southern French tended to follow the old Roman laws, particularly in relation to matters of succession. This meant that women could inherit property, and generally women enjoyed a more prominent role in society in the south than in the north. The climate and surrounds were also markedly different in the south. The dry, hot and rocky environment was unsuited to large scale agriculture like that operating in the north, although olives and vineyards did supply oil and grapes which could be traded. And that was the key to the south: trade. Conveniently situated on the Mediterranean, sea, the towns of southern France were able to take full advantage of the flourishing sea trade between Europe and the Middle East. With trade, of course, comes new ideas and new ways of thinking.

While the southerners had not had to mobilize armies to repel external invaders like their northern counterparts, they more than made up for this by fighting amongst themselves. The biggest and most powerful city in the region was the city of Toulouse and amongst the most influential of the nobleman in the area were the Counts of Toulouse. The trouble was, the Counts of Toulouse kept on being lured away from building and maintaining their power base in southern France by, you guessed it, the Holy Land. Like moths to a flame, Count after Count made their way to the Holy Land. Most of them would never return. Raymond IV joined the First Crusade and ended up founding the County of Tripoli. His illegitimate son Bertrand also embarked for the Middle East, leaving the six year old Alphonse Jordan in charge of the family fortunes back in France. Alphonse Jordan himself eventually grew old enough to take up the Cross, which he did, only to die tragically in questionable circumstances, as we saw way back in Episode 36. Raymond V, who succeeded Alphonse Jordan, was the first Count of Toulouse in half a century to actually stay in Toulouse and not take off for the Holy Land.

Raymond V might have wished that he had followed the lead of his previous Counts, because all of this holy war stuff meant that things had really been neglected back in Toulouse. The ambitious House of Barcelona was busy trying to convince the Count's vassals to side with them. This all came to a head in the year 1150, when the powerful Trencavel family decided to transfer their allegiance to the Count of Barcelona, meaning that a great swathe of land in the center of southern France suddenly fell under Spanish control, splitting the Count of Toulouse's area of influence almost in two. To make matters worse, King Henry II of England, who had recently become the ruler of Aquitaine due to his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, decided that he too would like a piece of southern France, and the region was fought over between the Counts of Toulouse and Barcelona and the King of England, like three dogs fighting over a bone. By the year 1208, when Peter of Castelnau is riding away from the castle at Saint-Gilles, Raymond V's son, perhaps unsurprisingly named Raymond VI, is the Count of Toulouse. England no longer has the desire to take his territory, but many of the county's former vassals, from places such as Montpellier and Narbonne, are now under Spanish control, and some will remain under Spanish control until the seventeenth century.

Now I've placed a map on the website, and I'll post it to the Facebook page, of the region of Occitan or Languedoc in southern France, on the eve of the Crusade against the

Cathars. Looking at that map, you will see just how confusing this whole situation has become. The map itself is in French, but that's not what makes it confusing. It divides the region into areas controlled by the Count of Toulouse and the areas that are under vassalage to the Count of Toulouse. It also shows the areas that are controlled by Spain under the House of Aragon or the Count of Barcelona, and the areas that are under vassalage to the Spanish. And if you're driving or otherwise occupied and can't look at the map at the moment, let me just tell you that it is a mess. There are a bewildering array of counties, viscounties, and other regions scattered across Languedoc, all having different allegiances, with no apparent pattern emerging anywhere. To make matters worse, even in the regions that are marked helpfully on the map as being under the control of the Count of Toulouse, there is no guarantee that all the noblemen within the area actually are answerable to the Count. The southern French are a very independent-minded people, and many of the structures built to house noble families, or even to house a village, are impressively fortified. If a noble family who has built an impressive castle on top of an almost unclimbable mountain in your region suddenly decides that they don't want to be ruled by you anymore, there's not an awful lot you can do about it. In fact, much of the reign of Raymond V and Raymond VI has been taken up with trying to bring their noblemen into line, and even trying to force entire villages to accept their authority. No wonder then, that the Holy Land was such a temptation for their predecessors.

To give you an idea of how this of vassalage problem worked in practice, consider this. If you traveled back in time to January 1208, and hiked up to the top of a random fortress on a random hill somewhere in an area within the County of Toulouse, and questioned the owner about his allegiances, the conversation might go something like this. You would ask, "Who is your King?" The man would look relieved to have been asked such a simple question and would answer "King Philip". You would then say "So, if King Philip requested your assistance in his battle against the English, would you send men and arms to his aid?" The man would likely then look at you as if you are insane, and not even bother to answer the question. You would then ask "Who is your overlord?" Depending on which fortification you happened to choose, the owner might confidently and proudly state "The Count of Toulouse", or he might mumble "the count of toulouse" while shuffling and looking at his boots. Or he might call his guards to come and have you thrown into the dungeon. That's how confusing things were.

So there you have it. Southern France in January of 1208 is an independent, free-thinking, but fractured place marked by shifting allegiances. What about the Cathars? How do they fit into the picture? And what do they have to do with the upcoming murder of the Papal Legate Peter of Castelnau? Join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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