

History of the Crusades.
Episode 119.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
To Carcassonne.

Hello again. Last week we saw the first military engagement of the Crusade, culminating in a victory for the Crusaders, who sacked the city of Beziers and killed its entire population, men, women, children, Cathars and Catholics alike.

The Papal Legates, Arnold Amaury and Milo, wrote to Pope Innocent to inform him of the result. Interestingly, they didn't downplay the fact that so many innocent lives had been lost, most of them of the Catholic faith. On the contrary, they actually inflated the figures. Here's an excerpt from the letter that Pope Innocent received concerning the attack on Beziers. The letter uses the term "ribalds", and by this the Legate means the vulgarius numerus infinitus, or the Crusading rabble. Okay, and here is the excerpt from the letter, and I quote: "The ribalds, as well as other villainous and unarmed persons, attacked the city without waiting for orders from their noble leaders. To our wonderment, within the space of two or three hours, they surmounted ditches and walls, and the city of Beziers was captured, and these ribalds of ours spared no order of persons, whatever their rank, sex or age, and put to the sword almost 20,000 people. After this great slaughter, the whole city was despoiled and burnt, as divine vengeance raged marvelously." End quote.

Modern historians now believe the number of people killed at Beziers was more in the vicinity of 15,000 people, meaning the Papal Legates added around 5,000 people to the body count. As we heard in last week's episode, Peter the Monk also made no attempt to cover up the death toll at Beziers. He too, engaged in a degree of exaggeration. In his "Historia Albigenis" he lists the number of those killed while sheltering inside the Church of St Mary Magdalene as being 7,000, but modern historians have calculated that no more than 1,000 people could have physically squeezed into the building. It's safe to say that neither the leaders of the Crusade who were at Beziers nor the Catholic chroniclers who reported the event saw anything wrong with the fact that so many non-heretics had met a violent death at the hands of the Crusaders.

With the clear conscience of those who are carrying out the will of God, the Crusaders retreated back to their camp with their plunder and rested within the sight of the smoldering, blood splattered ruins of Beziers, planning their next move. Now, if the slaughter of the residents of Beziers was designed to terrify the residents of southern France into surrendering before the merciless onslaught of the Crusading army, then in the short term it was a successful strategy. The cleric William of Tudela, who wrote about the sack of Beziers shortly after it took place, was of the opinion that the leaders of the Crusade wanted to make an example of the people of Beziers to reduce resistance in other towns. He wrote, and I quote, "They would then find no one daring to resist them, so great would be the terror produced. That is why the inhabitants of Beziers were massacred. They were all killed. It was the worst they could do to them." End quote.

In his book "God's War", Christopher Tyreman writes that while this strategy worked well initially, in the long term it backfired. To successfully occupy and assimilate enemy territory for an extended length of time, it's helpful to win the hearts and minds of the citizens of the occupied area. The sack of Beziers ensured that the hearts and minds of the southern French were hardened against the invading Crusaders, making their long term goals harder to achieve.

In the short term, however, things seemed to be going swimmingly. The leaders of the Crusade met in the camp outside Beziers and decided to march on Raymond Roger Trencavel's capital, the well-fortified town of Carcassonne, which was around sixty miles away, down an old Roman road, the Via Domitia. They also formalized the strategy of terror explained by William of Tudela. That is, they unanimously agreed that any castle, town or village that did not instantly surrender to the Crusaders would have all its inhabitants put to the sword as soon as the stronghold was captured. Word about the massacre at Beziers was spreading. The Crusaders began their march to Carcassonne on Sunday, the 26th of July 1209. The Via Domitia first took them southwards towards the territory controlled by the Viscount of Narbonne, before veering to the west in the direction of their destination.

Mindful that the massive Crusading army was only around a day's march from the city of Narbonne, Aimeric IV, the Viscount of Narbonne, approached the Papal Legate Arnold Amaury on the road, and offered him the unconditional surrender of Narbonne. The Viscount of Narbonne undertook to deliver all the known heretics within his domain to the Crusaders, and donate the property of all Cathars and Jews to the Church. In addition, he promised to provide food free of charge to the Crusaders, and all the citizens of the Viscounty of Narbonne would pay a tax equal to one sixtieth of their possessions to the army, to go towards paying the expenses of the Crusade.

Further evidence of the effect of the massacre at Beziers confronted the army as they marched along the Via Domitia. The road and its surrounds were eerily silent. The sixty mile stretch of road was dotted with around one hundred hamlets, villagers, castles and strongholds. Every single one of them had been abandoned. Fortified villages were now ghost towns. The Crusaders could walk unopposed through the open and unmanned town gates, into deserted streets. All the citizens had taken what they could carry and, even packing chickens into wicker baskets and herding livestock before them, they made their way into the relative safety of the surrounding forests. The Crusaders found the granaries of the towns full, and were able to plunder and pillage at will, taking whatever they fancied from the empty houses and stores to replenish their supplies.

Up ahead of the army, in Carcassonne, preparations for the city's defenses were proceeding at a frantic pace. Now, to say that Raymond Roger Trencavel was shocked at the outcome of the attack on Beziers is an understatement. Putting aside the fact that he would have personally known many of those slain, and had effectively left them to die by ordering them to defend the city by themselves, the massacre of the citizens of Beziers left a gaping hole in the population of the region over which he ruled. The loss of an entire town to an invading army would be an appalling blow in our era, but back in medieval France, with its population vastly smaller in comparison to today's numbers, the toll must have been especially heartfelt. To put the loss of the fifteen or so thousand citizens of Beziers into context, the city of London in 1209 was home to probably 20,000 to 25,000 people. The city of Paris was more than twice the size of the English capital, but still 15,000 people would have accounted for a significant portion of its population. The Viscount of Beziers, Raymond Roger Trencavel, was left reeling from the loss.

But there was no time to mourn the dead. Desperate both for revenge and to ensure that the citizens of Carcassonne escaped the fate of their compatriots in Beziers, Raymond Roger raced to prepare Carcassonne's defenses. Now, today, the town of Carcassonne is a premier tourist attraction in the Languedoc region, its beautifully preserved medieval

structures and walls being so impressive that they were added to UNESCO's World Heritage Listings in 1997. Viewing Carcassonne today, it's not difficult to imagine what it looked like as it awaited the crusading army back in 1209.

In 1209, the city consisted of a core center and three surrounding suburbs. The center of the city had been constructed on a steep escarpment above the river Aude, and was surrounded by an impressive set of walls which dated back to the time of the Visigoths in the fifth century. The walls were between eighteen and thirty five meters high, and two to three meters thick. Although clearly very old, the walls were sturdy and had been kept in excellent repair by successive generations of the Trencavel family. The walls were dotted by twenty six separate towers and the impressive fortified citadel, which was home to the Trencavels, formed part of the wall. In recent times, the city had expanded beyond its walls. Two of the resulting suburbs, the Bourg to the north and the Castellare to the south, sat adjacent to the old walls and were themselves fortified, being surrounded by stone walls and ditches. The remaining suburb, named Saint Vincent, was unhappily situated in the marsh lands and flat ground adjacent to the river. Saint Vincent was not fortified and was considered indefensible, so all of its residents, including those in the Jewish Quarter, were busy transferring themselves to the relative safety of the Old City.

Inside the city, preparations for the forthcoming siege were well underway. Carpenters were working around the clock, constructing wooden galleries high on the battlements, which would enable the defenders to better protect the wall from under-miners. Part of the Cathedral inside the city had even been demolished, so it's stone could be put to use, and even the wooden stalls inside the building were being sawed up for use in the battlements or to strengthen the existing fortifications. Noblemen, knights and fighting men from towns and regions surrounding Carcassonne, who had heard about the massacre at Beziers, were filing into the city, offering their support to Raymond Roger and doing all they could to lend a hand.

Raymond Roger, hoping to starve the Crusading army into submission, had ordered all the crops and stores in the area surrounding Carcassonne to be either gathered into the city or destroyed. Realizing that the Crusaders were taking full advantage of the abandoned granaries they had encountered on the Via Domitia, Raymond Roger made the heart breaking decision to destroy all the water mills operating on the river Aude, meaning that the Crusaders would be unable to grind their stolen grain into flour to make bread. Like the citizens of Beziers before him, Raymond Roger hoped that the massive Crusader army would lose interest in continuing the siege when it ran out of food. So it was vital that the citizens within Carcassonne were well-stocked with supplies, and the surrounding countryside was as depleted of food as the short preparation time would allow.

Now it was clear to Raymond Roger, and it would soon become clear to the Crusaders, that Carcassonne had two major weaknesses in its defenses. The first concerned its water supply. Most of the town's water came from the River Aude. However unlike Beziers, where the bridge across the river outside the city was technically within arrow shot of the city walls, the bridge across the river outside Carcassonne was too far away from the walls to be defended. This would mean that, unlike Beziers where the Crusaders kept to the far side of the river, there was nothing to stop the crusaders crossing the River Aude and setting up camp on the city side of the river bank. If that occurred, the citizens of Carcassonne would lose access to the river as a water source, and would have to rely on deep wells contained within the city for all their water.

The second weak point was the fortifications around the two suburbs, the Bourg and the Castellare. While the walls around these suburbs were impressive, they were nowhere near as strong or as high as the walls surrounding the Old City, and there were few towers from which the walls surrounding the suburbs could be defended. Raymond Roger was concerned that if the walls of one or both of the suburbs were breached, the Crusaders could use the protection of houses and other buildings inside the suburbs to mount an assault on the massive walls of the Old City.

So these were the things occupying the mind of twenty four year old Raymond Roger Trencavel as the massive Crusader army was marching towards Carcassonne along the Via Domitia in late July 1209. Due to its size, the army was stretched out along the road, and some of its members, particularly enthusiastic knights riding well-bred horses, traveled faster than others, who were slowed by heavy baggage and siege equipment. On the evening of Tuesday the 28th of July 1209, just as the bells were ringing for Vespers, members of the garrison, high up in the walls of the city, spotted a small group of Crusading knights making their way towards Carcassonne. The defenders sounded the alarm, and Raymond Roger gathered his best knights around him.

The population of Carcassonne at this stage was slightly smaller than that of Beziers, around 9,500 people, but that number had swelled with refugees hoping that the legendary walls of Carcassonne would protect them, and with fighting men brought in from outlying areas by sympathetic noblemen. Many of these noblemen were highly skilled warriors with years of military experience, and the young Raymond Roger had gratefully made room for them inside the citadel in Carcassonne. One of these noblemen, Peter Roger, Lord of Cabaret, was about to prove his worth.

Seeing the approaching crusaders, Raymond Roger was understandably keen to seek revenge for the attack on Beziers. He quickly gathered together 400 of the most experienced knights in Carcassonne, and according to Mark Pegg in his book "A Most Holy War, The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom", he addressed them, stating, and I quote "Lords, get your equipment, put on your armor and mount your horses, all of us together against the host in a common attack" end quote. However, the assembled knights didn't move, but just shuffled awkwardly and looked at each other uncomfortably. The experienced and wise Lord of Cabaret then gently pulled Raymond Roger aside and told him what the assembled knights already knew. The group of Crusading knights would be followed by many thousands more men. To risk 400 of his best defenders by racing out of the safety of the city walls at this stage of the proceedings was a plan of the utmost folly. As dusk fell on the evening of Tuesday the 28th of July, Raymond Roger reluctantly put aside his desire to race out and kill some Crusaders, and the gathered knights dispersed.

The decision was a wise one. Over the next few days, others who had galloped ahead of the main army trickled in and began setting up camp outside the city walls. On Saturday, the 1st of August, the main body of the army arrived, and thousands of men spread across the area, surrounding the city. The siege of Carcassonne had begun.

Join me next week as we examine the siege of Carcassonne. Until next week, bye for now.

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