

History of the Crusades.
Episode 120.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Siege of Carcassonne.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusaders descend upon the capital city of the Trencavel lands, the beautiful town of Carcassonne. We left last week's episode on Saturday the 1st of August 1209, with the bulk of the Crusader army arriving at Carcassonne and surrounding it.

Now, it had taken the main body of the Army quite some time to make the sixty mile journey to their destination. You might recall that an advance team of knights arrived at Carcassonne on Tuesday the 28th of July, but it wasn't until the following weekend that the rest of the army filed in. This was an army which wasn't in a hurry. Their victory at Beziers had been absolute, and they certainly didn't feel under any sort of threat. They could take their time along the road, pausing to ransack the abandoned towns they found on the Via Domitia, helping themselves to supplies and plunder, and wandering along to Carcassonne at whatever pace they pleased.

Their relaxed and confident attitude continued when they finally arrived at the city. They spent most of Saturday setting up camp and making themselves as comfortable as possible, and well, the following day was Sunday, the day of rest, so they took the day off. Finally, on Monday the 3rd of August, they turned their attention towards the job at hand, attacking the city of Carcassonne.

Their first target was entirely expected. The non-fortified suburb of Saint Vincent, which lay on flat land adjacent to the river. The defenders had predicted this move, and all of its inhabitants had already been transferred to the safety of the Old City. Now, although Saint Vincent was unfortified, it wasn't wholly unprotected. It was surrounded by deep ditches. The first person across these ditches was, wait for it, Simon de Montfort. Described by Peter the Monk in his "Historia Albigensis" as "Simon, the noble Count of Montfort", Simon threw himself enthusiastically into the ditch and was one of the first Crusaders to enter the suburb.

Interestingly, there was a musical accompaniment to this assault, which proved so popular that it was used repeatedly throughout the rest of the military campaign. Much in the same way as battle scenes in modern movies are set to a backdrop of stirring music, the Bishops, Abbots and members of the clergy accompanying the Crusade stood a safe distance away from the action and chanted the hymn "Veni Sancte Spiritus". This tune had been popular for some time with the Cistercians, and was trending in northern France. In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption describes it as "the anthem of the Crusade".

So to the rousing tones of "Veni Sancti Spiritus", the Crusaders crossed the ditch and poured into Saint Vincent. Raymond Roger, itching to attack some crusaders, led a sortie out to defend the suburb, but luckily for him, cooler heads prevailed and the defense, in the face of overwhelming Crusader numbers and a total lack of defendable infrastructure, was more token than actual, and probably consisted of no more than a bit of sword waving from a distance. A reluctant Raymond Roger was convinced to withdraw back to the safety of the walls of the Old City, and in the space of just two hours the Crusaders took the suburb. They set fire to the buildings and destroyed them, then occupied the taken land,

effectively cutting off access from the Old City to the river, which was the main water supply for the citizens of Carcassonne.

Now, since the Crusaders are going to have a bit of a rest before making their next move. I think now is the perfect time to take a closer look at Simon de Montfort, who has just taken his first step into the pages of history. Interestingly, he is described by the usually measured and reserved Christopher Tyreman in his book "God's War" as, and I quote "a self-righteous sanctimonious prig" end quote. That description alone is enough for us to ask the question: Who is Simon de Montfort? Well, at the time of the crusade against the Cathars, Simon de Montfort was in his mid-forties and had already led an interesting if undistinguished life. He was born into a noble family who held a fiefdom near Paris in northern France. His step-mother was an English woman, sister of the childless Earl of Leicester. In his younger days, he fought for the King of France against Richard the Lionheart, and in November 1199 Simon and his brother Guy took part in a major tournament, where they heard a cleric preaching the Fourth Crusade. The two brothers took the Cross, but abandoned the expedition at Zara, deciding instead to sail to the Holy Land. Simon's brother Guy ended up marrying into the Iblen family, taking Heloise Ibelin as his wife.

Guy remained in the Holy Land with his new wife while Simon returned to France, to the happy news that his uncle, the Earl of Leicester, had died, leaving Simon the County of Leicester (Woohoo!), and to the less happy news that King John of England had immediately confiscated the County from him (Ooh). Simon had been convinced to take up the Cross against the heretics of southern France by Guy the Abbot of Les Vaux-des-Cernay, uncle of Peter the Monk, and Simon's longtime friend, who had been with him when they left the Fourth Crusade at Zara. The Abbott of Les Vaux-des-Cernay had himself been inspired to take up the cross against the Cathars by one of its original recruits, the Duke of Burgundy.

Peter the Monk, nephew of Abbott Guy, has this to say about Simon de Montfort, who he knew personally, and I quote. "First he was of illustrious birth and of outstanding courage and extremely experienced in warfare. Moreover, to turn to his physical appearance, he was tall, with a splendid head of hair and fine features, of handsome appearance, broad shouldered with muscular arms, of excellent physique generally, agile and nimble of hand and foot, quick and active. Indeed, there was not the smallest fault that even an enemy or envious person could point to. To go on to his more important qualities, he was eloquent of speech, eminently approachable, a most congenial comrade in arms, of impeccable chastity, outstanding in humility, wise, firm of purpose, prudent in council, fair in giving judgment, diligent in the pursuit of military duties, circumspect in his actions, eager to set about a task, tireless in completing it, and totally dedicated to the service of God." End quote.

Wow. So to summarize Peter the Monk's description of Simon de Montfort, he was a brilliant bloke with fabulous hair. Yet to Christopher Tyreman he was a self-righteous, sanctimonious prig. Well, I guess we'll just have to judge Simon de Montfort for ourselves, on the basis of his actions as we proceed along the narrative.

Talking about the narrative, where were we? Ah yes, the Crusaders had just taken the suburb of Saint Vincent, with Simon leading the charge across the defensive ditches. The Crusaders spent the rest of the day destroying buildings within the suburb and using the rubble to fill in the defensive ditches. The following day, the Crusaders turned their sights

upon their next challenge, the suburb of the Bourg. The Bourg was surrounded by high walls, which were themselves surrounded by deep ditches, making it much harder to attack and much easier to defend than Saint Vincent. Nevertheless, the Crusaders were confident of victory, so confident in fact that they decided not to bother using siege engines. Instead, they planned to cross the ditches, then climb the walls using scaling ladders, after which they would enter and take the suburb. Easy.

For the citizens of Carcassonne, however, this was their time both to defend their city and to have a crack at something that Viscount Raymond Roger Tranceval had been itching to do ever since the sack of Beziers: attack some Crusaders. Their method of defense was crude but very effective. As the Crusaders were struggling to cross the deep ditches in front of the walls, the defenders hurled stones at them, impeding their progress. A lot of stones. Even Peter the Monk had to concede that the defenders' strategy was an effective one. Here's how he described the event, and I quote, "Seeing how easily they had taken the first suburb our men thought they might be able to capture the second suburb, which was much more strongly fortified, by a similar assault. Accordingly, on the following day they advanced to the wall, but as they started to press their attack, the Viscount and his followers defended themselves so fiercely that our men were compelled, by a very heavy bombardment of stones, to retire from the ditch they had occupied." End quote.

The Crusaders actually incurred pretty heavy casualties during this assault, their first losses of the military campaign. They ended up withdrawing, but not before Simon de Montfort distinguished himself once again, by rescuing a fallen knight who was unable to climb out of a ditch during the retreat because he had broken his leg. Dodging the hail of stones, Simon de Montfort and his squire returned to the ditch and carried the injured knight to safety.

With their plan to take the suburb using scaling ladders clearly having failed, the Crusaders came up with Plan B. They spent the next three days constructing siege engines with which to batter the walls, catapult machines and mangonels, which would hurl boulders and large stones at the walls, and a cat. You might remember that a cat is a mobile enclosure, generally a wooden frame on wheels, covered with animal hides, which the attackers pushed to the base of the walls. Sappers can then work to undermine the wall, protected, in theory at least, from missiles, boiling oil and arrows being rained down on them from above, by the cat.

Three days later, the siege equipment was ready for action. The clergymen, standing a safe distance away, cleared their throats and belted out a rousing rendition of "Veni Sancte Spiritus", and the catapult machines began their bombardment of the walls. During the next couple of days, the missiles gradually weakened the stone structures. Then it was time to use the cat. The cat was wheeled over to the base of a wall, and the sappers frantically began working on the stones at the bottom of the wall, chipping at them and prising at them in order to loosen and remove them. Once the defenders became aware of the cat beneath them, they knew exactly what to do. Rocks, blazing logs and really anything at all heavy to hand, was hurled down onto the roof of the cat. Under such a heavy bombardment, the cat didn't last long, and gradually disintegrated. Luckily for the Crusaders, the sappers had managed to remove enough stones from the base of the wall that they were all able to squeeze into the resulting hole and continue their work.

On the following day, the 8th of August, the weakened wall finally collapsed. The defenders withdrew to the safety of the Old City, and the victorious Crusaders entered the

Bourg, intent both on plundering the suburb and using it as a base to mount an assault on the walls of the Old City of Carcassonne. However, the confidence of the victorious crusaders made them complacent. The bulk of the Crusader army returned to spend the night in their tents, leaving only a small group of men to guard their nearly-won suburb.

You can probably guess what's going to happen next. Yes, that's right. Under cover of darkness the defenders moved out from the Old City into the Bourg. Taking the Crusaders completely by surprise, they were quickly overrun. The men of Carcassonne then set about burning and destroying many of the houses and other structures within the Bourg, denying the Crusaders both plunder and cover from which they could mount an assault on the walls of the Old City. With their work done, the defenders retreated back into the main city of Carcassonne.

Now, while the siege of the Bourg is taking place, another interesting event is occurring, not an event of military interest but of political interest. That event comes in the form of a visit to the siege of Carcassonne by King Peter II of Aragon. Now to say that King Peter has conflicting interests in the events taking place here is an understatement. He has strong ties with all parties involved, from the Church to Count Raymond VI of Toulouse and to Raymond Roger Trencavel. His connection to the Church is probably his strongest one. When he came to the throne, his first move was to swear loyalty to the Roman Church, a move which he formalised by pledging his Kingdom to the Holy See, making him a vassal of Pope Innocent III. In his mid thirties at the present time, he is a pious, committed Catholic with zero sympathy for the Cathar heretics.

He also has a connection with Count Raymond VI. He demonstrates this by making his first port of call, when he arrives at Carcassonne, not the tent of the Papal Legate Arnold Amaury, but the luxurious pavilion of Count Raymond. Why? Well, because Count Raymond is King Peter's brother in law, Count Raymond being currently married to the lucky Eleanor, King Peter's sister. The marriage was the formalization of an alliance between the Count of Toulouse and the King of Aragon, which was made around ten years ago.

Now, just as an aside here, you might be wondering, "What has Count Raymond of Toulouse been doing during this Crusade?" The answer is: "Not a lot." At the moment he is relaxing in the luxurious surrounds of his pavilion. Erected in a prime location on the riverbank under the shade of some trees, Raymond really has nothing to do, other than to sit back and enjoy watching the proceedings unfold. The contemporary accounts of the Crusade to date just don't mention him at all, which has led some historians to speculate that he was not taking an active role in the events, but just sitting back and watching the northern Frenchmen deal the Trencavels some pretty nasty hits.

Right, back to King Peter. So with strong ties to the church and to Count Raymond and with zero sympathy for the heretics, I guess by now you're thinking that King Peter would be siding with the Crusaders. Wrong. No, King Peter actually also has strong ties to Raymond Roger Trencavel. King Peter has been slowly building a presence in southern France. His brother is currently a Count of Provence, and King Peter himself is the current Count of Montpellier.

Now, if you take a look at a map of the region, you'll see that King Peter's realm in Spain extends to the coast of the Mediterranean on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees. Far to the east in southern France, his brother's land in Provence lies on the coast, and his County of

Montpellier lies nearby, also near the coast. Stretching between these two Spanish possessions are the lands belonging to Raymond Roger Trencavel: the Viscounty of Carcassonne and the Viscounty of Beziers. At the moment, Raymond Roger is under vassalage to King Peter, so with the Trencavels under fealty to him, the domain of the King of Aragon currently extends all the way from Spain, across the coast of southern France, into the Holy Roman Empire in the form of the County of Provence.

So as far as King Peter is concerned, it is absolutely essential that the Trencavels keep hold of their lands. The absolute worst case scenario, from King Peter's point of view, would be if the Crusaders succeeded, and some northern Frenchman took over the Viscounties controlled by the Trencavels, leaving Montpellier and Provence isolated and cut-off from King Peter's realm in Spain. This of course, places King Peter in a tricky position. His heart lies with the Church and with the cause of the Crusaders, but his head lies with Raymond Roger Trencavel and the lands he brings to the Spanish cause. For King Peter, the only scenario that would work for him was if Raymond Roger surrendered to the Crusaders, on terms which left him retaining his rule over the Viscounties of Beziers and Carcassonne. So that's what King Peter is here to do: to broker a truce between Raymond Roger and the Papal Legate Arnold Amaury.

Having shared a meal with Count Raymond of Toulouse, who no doubt regaled him of the events in the Crusade to date, including the sacking of Beziers, King Peter then went to meet with Arnold Amaury and the other leaders of the Crusade. Pointing out that Raymond Roger was his vassal and that it would be best for everyone if a truce was negotiated, King Peter requested permission to enter the besieged city. King Peter had brought with him one hundred knights, not enough to pose a threat to the Crusaders, but enough to remind Arnold Amaury of the might of the throne of Aragon. Not wanting to see the heretic-harboursing Raymond Roger Trencavel receive any military assistance from King Peter, but also mindful of the fact that King Peter was a strong ally of the Roman Church, to whom it was important he give no offense, Arnold Amaury gave his consent. King Peter, riding his palfrey and not his warhorse, wearing no armour and carrying no weapons, would be allowed to enter Carcassonne, accompanied only by three of his similarly unarmed knights.

Can King Peter broker a deal that will save Raymond Roger and bring the Crusade against the Cathars to an end? Join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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