

History of the Crusades.
Episode 121.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Fall of Carcassonne.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Peter II of Aragon arrive at the siege of Carcassonne. King Peter was in a bit of a bind. He was a staunch Catholic and vassal to Pope Innocent III, and so had no interest in taking up arms against the Crusaders. However, he was also overlord to Raymond Roger Trencavel, and with Raymond Roger's lands providing a link between the Spanish Kingdom of Aragon and his landholdings in the counties of Montpellier and Provence, King Peter was keen to ensure that the Trencavel lands stayed in Trencavel hands.

So he was here to broker peace between the Church and Raymond Roger. King Peter, unarmed and accompanied by only three similarly unarmed Spanish knights, rode up to the western Toulouse gate of the city of Carcassonne. Upon gaining admittance into the city, he realized that the siege was not going well for the people of Carcassonne.

The problem lay with the water supply. Since the Crusaders had taken and occupied the suburb of Saint Vincent, some five days ago, the city had no access to its main water supply, the River Aude. There were wells inside Carcassonne, but they had only ever been used to supplement the supply from the river. Now, with the population of the city swollen with refugees from outlying areas, and in the heat of high summer, the wells were being overused. They were beginning to dry up. The first to be denied water were the animals. The city was filled with the sounds of distressed and dying creatures, and the streets were littered with the unburied corpses of animals who had succumbed to their thirst. The stench of the rotting carcasses in the summer heat was unbearable. The mood of the people was one of defiance, but also of desperation. They knew that when the wells dried up completely, they would be sharing the same fate as their animals.

To say that Raymond Roger was overjoyed to see his King is an understatement. Throwing aside royal protocol, he gave King Peter an enthusiastic hug. Assuming that the Spanish army would shortly liberate the city, Raymond Roger informed King Peter of the horrors inflicted upon his people by the Crusaders after the sack of Beziers. But Raymond Roger was about to be disappointed. Instead of receiving a commitment of military assistance from the King of Aragon, what he got was a dressing down. King Peter gently but firmly told his young vassal that he only had himself to blame for this mess, due to his failure to rid his lands of heretics. And no, the Kingdom of Aragon was not going to go to war against the Catholic Church to save him. The King would, however, assist him by negotiating terms of surrender between the city of Carcassonne and the Crusaders. Chastened, Raymond Roger agreed to let his overlord broker a peace deal on his behalf, and King Peter rode back out of the city to seek terms from Arnold Amaury.

Unfortunately for King Peter and Raymond Roger and the people of Carcassonne, Arnold Amaury was not in a negotiating mood. From his point of view, the siege of Carcassonne was proceeding really well. The Crusaders had already managed to take two suburbs and the food they had pillaged on the way to the city, plus the fact that they had managed to forage food from the farmland around Carcassonne, together with the fact that many of the local peasants who were sympathetic to the Crusader cause were happy to sell them bread and other staples, meant that their food supply was holding out really well. Really,

Arnold Amaury had no interest whatsoever in lifting the siege of the city, and the terms he offered reflected this.

What were the terms he offered? Well, the entire city of Carcassonne, along with all of its residents and all the refugees sheltering within its walls, must be offered up to the Church. This meant that every single thing inside the city would become Church property. Its people would no longer own their own clothes, their beds, their cooking pots or, indeed, anything. Raymond Roger could choose eleven people from the thousands inside the city and save them from this fate. He and his eleven companions could flee the city as cowards, with as many possessions as they could carry, leaving everyone else to the mercy of the Church. The terms were so poor that they were an insult, but it was all that Arnold Amaury was prepared to offer. A furious King Peter was heard to mutter that donkeys would fly before his vassal would accept conditions such as these.

King Peter rode back into Carcassonne, donkeys didn't fly, and Raymond Roger didn't accept the conditions. In fact, he said that he would rather be skinned alive than abandoned his people to the men who had massacred the residents of Beziers. The miserable and angry Raymond Roger then bade farewell to the equally miserable and angry King Peter, who took his one hundred knights and rode back to Spain.

And so the siege dragged on. As the long, hot days passed by, it became pretty clear to the leaders of the Crusade that to take the next suburb on their hit list, the southern Castellare suburb and then to take the city itself was going to take quite some time, and would no doubt result in a considerable amount of damage being done both to the defensive walls and the structures inside the city. Carcassonne was a fine city, everyone was agreed on that point, and the leaders of the Crusade wished to take it intact. Memories of the smouldering ruin of the city of Beziers was a stark reminder of what might occur if the city was taken by force. Should the city surrender, however, then the Church would be rewarded with an intact, fortified city from which they could subdue the surrounding regions.

Ravens, vultures, and other birds of prey could be seen circling in the skies over Carcassonne, keen to feed on the rotting corpses lying in the streets, and when the winds were right, the stench wafting over from the city was nauseating. Arnold Amaury started to change his mind. Maybe it was time to re-open negotiations with Raymond Roger, and this time offer him something he could accept.

Meanwhile, inside the city, things were really starting to get desperate. The wells had now completely dried up, and it was not only animals who was succumbing to dehydration. People were dying as well. The weight of responsibility fell heavily on Raymond Roger's shoulders. He thought he could save the people of Carcassonne from sharing the same fate as the citizens of Beziers by keeping them safe inside the city walls. But now, with no end to the siege in sight and with no water supply to speak of in the heat of high summer, his people were dying. Raymond Roger's thoughts, too, were turning towards surrender.

In the end it was the Crusaders who made the first move. A distant relative of Raymond Roger had joined the Crusade, and he was chosen to approach Raymond Roger and offer him safe conduct outside the city walls so that negotiations could commence. On the 14th of August, accompanied by a large retinue of heavily armed knights, the Crusader rode to the Toulouse gate of the city and relayed his message to the defenders.

Historians differ as to what happened next. Everyone agrees that Raymond Roger was invited to leave Carcassonne and meet with the leaders of the Crusade in the pavilion of the Count of Nevers, who had set up camp close to the city walls. Some historians described Raymond Roger as being accompanied by only nine of his knights. They state that as soon as terms were negotiated, Raymond Roger was seized, in breach of the terms of safe conduct. Other historians have Raymond Roger, accompanied by one hundred knights from his garrison, and then inexplicably surrendering himself into the custody of the Crusaders at the conclusion of the negotiations.

Whatever interpretation is the correct one, this much is clear. Raymond Roger agreed to terms and was led away in chains. What terms did he agree to? Well, unfortunately for the Viscount and the people of Carcassonne, he was really in no position at all to strike a favorable deal. He knew, and the Crusaders knew, that if they simply maintained the siege for a few more weeks without even attacking the city, their work would be done. The people of Carcassonne would be dead or dying of thirst, and the city would be theirs. To save his people from this fate, Raymond Roger had to agree to whatever terms were offered, however harsh. Unfortunately, we don't know exactly how the negotiations unfolded, although all the major sources agree on the terms of the deal that was struck. From Raymond Roger's point of view his main goal was to secure the release of the people inside Carcassonne. From the Papal Legate's point of view, and that of the leaders of the Crusade, their main concern seemed to be the elimination of the Viscount and the securing of an intact Carcassonne together with all of its wealth.

Oddly, the goal of eliminating heretics or singling out the Cathars of Carcassonne for punishment seems not to have been a factor in the considerations. It seems, so far as the attack on Carcassonne was concerned, the goal of the Crusade was a secular one, the gaining of a foothold to power in the region of Languedoc. For this to occur, they needed Raymond Roger gone, to be replaced by a man chosen by the Church, a devout Catholic who could rule over Raymond Roger's domain from Carcassonne.

To an extent, each party achieved their goal. The people inside Carcassonne were allowed to leave with their lives; their lives and not much else. Catholics, Jews and Cathars alike would be forced to strip to their undergarments and could leave through a single gate, walking in single file so they could be inspected to ensure they weren't trying to smuggle out any jewelry, food, tools of trade, or mementos. According to one chronicler, anything of the value of a button or above was taken from the citizens. Left to wander the scorching countryside, barefoot and homeless, with no possessions, no clothes and no livelihoods, the unfortunate citizens were dependent on the mercy of the people of Languedoc. The former citizens of Carcassonne scattered far and wide, some making their way to friends or family within Languedoc, and others crossing the Pyrenees, hoping to make a new life for themselves in Spain. As for Raymond Roger Trencavel, well, he sacrificed his freedom either negotiating his imprisonment in order to secure the release of his people or being led away in chains contrary to the terms of safe conduct. He would never be free again and would die in the dungeons of his own citadel later that year.

By the 15th of August, the terms of the surrender had been met. Carcassonne was lying vacant, having been evacuated by its unfortunate inhabitants, and Raymond Roger was securely manacled to a wall in the dungeon of his citadel. The Crusaders poured through the gates, sidestepping the human and animal corpses to secure booty for themselves, while the noblemen raced to secure the best mansions.

Worried that the plundering might get out of hand, or the city might be damaged or destroyed, Arnold Amaury hastily convened a meeting in the public square of the city. Addressing the massed Crusaders, he pointed out that God had given the Crusaders another victory. This comment was no doubt met with much cheering. The Papal Legate then went on to say that it was God's will that none of the spoils of victory be handed over to the Crusaders. Everything, instead, would be kept in common, and given to the new ruler of Carcassonne. This was likely met with less cheers. The Papal Legate indicated that he was serious about his decision by stating that if any Crusader kept anything of value from the town, even something as small as a piece of charcoal, then he would be excommunicated and cursed by the Church. The Crusaders were ordered to take anything of value they found, and place it in a pile in a central place where it would await the appointment of the new ruler of Carcassonne. Some trustworthy knights were appointed to guard the growing pile of silver, jewelry, family heirlooms and the like. However, three months later, these knights were excommunicated on the charge of having stolen goods worth 5,000 livres from the pile of wealth they were meant to be guarding.

The next task faced by Arnold Amaury was to appoint one of the Crusaders to be the new leader of Carcassonne. The position was first offered to the Duke of Burgundy, who refused it. It was then offered to the Crusade's second original recruit, the Count of Nevers. He also refused it. Why were these northern French noblemen turning down the offer of the beautiful city of Carcassonne and the accompanying extensive land holdings in southern France? Well, they both held significant domains in the north. They knew the work entailed in keeping such a domain under their control. Trying to rule a southern land-holding by force, when its Viscount was being held in the dungeon of his own citadel and its people might not take too kindly to northern rule, seemed like a lot of hard work, particularly when you consider that their lands back home were also no doubt needing some attention as well. As other Crusading lords lined up to also refuse the honor of ruling Carcassonne, an increasingly desperate Arnold Amaury appointed a committee of two Bishops and four knights, who were given the task of selecting the new lord of Carcassonne.

The committee eventually settled on a man who was of noble birth but only a minor landholder. He was a popular man, an experienced military leader, who had also shown valor and bravery during the campaign to capture the city. He also had gorgeous hair. Yes, the man the committee chose to rule the beautiful city of Carcassonne was none other than Simon de Montfort. The committee presented its findings to Arnold Amaury, and the Papal Legate, together with the Duke of Burgundy and the Count of Nevers, approached Simon de Montfort, and asked if he would accept the position. According to Peter the Monk, Simon refused, stating that he was inadequate for the job and unworthy. Peter the Monk then describes the Papal Legate and the Duke of Burgundy throwing themselves at Simon's feet, and imploring him to accept. When he still refused, Arnold Amaury was forced to use the authority of his position as Papal Legate to order Simon to comply with the will of the Church. Some modern historians have questioned Peter the Monk's version of events, pointing out that Simon de Montfort was an ambitious man, and that securing a wealthy town like Carcassonne was an ideal outcome from his point of view, and one that he would have jumped to accept.

However it happened, one thing is clear. Simon de Monfort is the new Viscount of Carcassonne. Join me next week as we see Simon take up his new position. Until next week, bye for now.

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