

History of the Crusades.
Episode 125.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Siege Of Minerve.

Hello again. Last week we saw a resurgent Simon de Montfort slowly start to claw back some of his lost territory, following the arrival in southern France of his wife Alice, and a contingent of knights from northern France. We left last week's episode with the Papal Legate Arnold Amaury, arriving in Toulouse in March 1210, and along with King Peter II of Aragon, seemingly taking a renewed interest in the politics of the region. Now, as we mentioned last week, the city of Toulouse at this time was becoming more and more divided, and more and more violent. The Bishop of Toulouse had formed a militia, the White Brotherhood, to attack heretics and support the position of the church within the city. Other citizens, who didn't agree with this stance, had formed themselves into the Black Brotherhood, and the rival groups had been clashing on the streets of the city.

Now, you may remember, as part of the concessions provided to Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, Pope Innocent III had directed that both Papal Legates must travel to Toulouse and lift the interdict which Arnold Amaury had imposed on the city. The Pope specifically ordered that Arnold Amaury was not to meet with the citizens of Toulouse by himself, but must be accompanied by Thedisius, his co-Papal Legate. Yet, in March 1210 Arnold Amaury strode into Toulouse alone, without Thedisius. It was not a good start to the negotiations. Not surprisingly, the members of the council who had clashed with Arnold Amaury before refused to meet with him, stating that they would only negotiate with Thedisius. The Bishop of Toulouse intervened, and brokered an agreement in which the council would pay one thousand pounds to Arnold Amaury as an indication of their support for the Crusade and their dedication to the Church. One thousand pounds was a staggeringly large sum of money, equal at that stage to one tenth of the city's wealth. Unfortunately, this arrangement sparked riots within the town, with members of the White Brotherhood clashing with the Black Brotherhood, with the result that only half of the agreed amount could be raised. Once again, the Bishop intervened and Arnold Amaury agreed to delay payment of the remaining five hundred pounds until August, with ten hostages from the town accompanying Arnold Amaury when he left, as a sign of their intention to comply with the agreement. When the Papal Legate departed, the town was left in a state of division and unrest.

A few weeks after this event, King Peter II of Aragon crossed the Pyrenees into southern France and agreed to meet with the leaders of the resistance. Those leaders of course, were keen to submit themselves to King Peter. If he were to become their overlord, then they could call on military assistance from Aragon to help them in their battles against Simon de Montfort. King Peter, understandably, was reluctant to make such a decisive move. Being the vassal of Pope Innocent, he didn't wish to defy the Church, and allying himself with the enemies of Simon de Montfort would most certainly be doing just that. He was also concerned that his finances wouldn't stretch to cover a prolonged war in southern France.

It was clear however, to the leaders of the resistance, that King Peter was no friend of Simon. He was still refusing to accept him as his vassal. So the leaders of the resistance, Peter Roger Lord of Cabaret, Raymond Lord of Termes and Aimeric Lord of Montreal, crossed their fingers and set up a meeting between themselves and King Peter at Montreal. However, so keen were they to strike a deal with the King of Aragon that they

met him on the road and offered their allegiance to him. After some discussion, King Peter agreed to become their overlord on the condition that they immediately hand the castles of Cabaret over to him, and transfer any other castles in their lands to him whenever he requested. This was apparently a condition that the southern lords weren't expecting, and they were reluctant to agree to it. They suggested that King Peter travel to Montreal, the original venue planned for the meeting, so that the negotiations could continue. King Peter responded by saying that there was no point journeying on to Montreal unless they first accepted his condition regarding the castles. The lords weren't happy to accept this condition, so the negotiations were declared to be at an end and, as stated by Peter the Monk, and I quote "Everyone left the meeting place in confusion" end quote.

Meanwhile, Simon de Montfort decided to make his presence known by besieging a castle nearby. He would have liked to have marched on the city of Montreal itself, but he didn't have enough men. Instead, he had to content himself with attacking the small castle of Bellegarde, some thirteen kilometers from Montreal. He besieged the castle, and none of the southern lords meeting with King Peter came to the castle's aid. In the end it fell to Simon de Montfort, causing other castles in the immediate vicinity to also capitulate to him.

It was during the siege of Bellegarde that Simon received a note from King Peter, requesting a truce between Simon and one of his vassals, the Count of Foix. You might remember the Count of Foix from a few episodes ago. He had been so unpopular with his subjects that many of them welcomed Simon as a liberator. He capitulated to Simon when his army deserted him. Well, since that time, the Count of Foix has been busy making a nuisance of himself. Far from meekly submitting to Simon's rule, the Count of Foix has been busy stirring up trouble, not only with Simon but with Count Raymond. King Peter, who is the Count of Foix's overlord, has already been forced to intervene to broker peace between the Count of Foix and Count Raymond of Toulouse, and now he is attempting to do the same in regard to his vassal's conflict with Simon. Luckily for the Count, Simon is only too happy to accept the deal, and agrees to a peace treaty lasting until Easter 1211.

Simon then rode back to Carcassonne and set about planning his military campaign for the summer season. His small army had recently been bolstered by nearly three thousand volunteers from northern France and Germany, who had traveled to southern France for the summer, and were keen to kill some heretics. Simon de Montfort was keen to assist them to fulfill this goal, so he concocted an ambitious plan to attack one of the centers of rebel resistance, the fortified town of Minerve.

Why Minerve? Well, firstly, because it was harboring many of the Cathar Perfect and the Cathar faithful. Its Lord, William of Minerve, was known to be sympathetic to the Cathar cause, and the incredibly well fortified town of Minerve was seen by many Cathars as a safe place of refuge. The second reason Minerve was chosen as a target was because the Viscount of Narbonne had specifically requested that it be placed on the top of Simon's list of places to attack. Minerve was located in the Viscounty of Carcassonne, around thirty five kilometres from the city of Carcassonne, near the border with the Viscounty of Narbonne. Men from Minerve had conducted a number of raids into Narbonne over the winter, but with the town of Minerve being so well fortified, the Viscount of Narbonne had been unable to stop the raids, nor had he been able to punish the people of Minerve for the attacks. So he pledged his full support to Simon de Montfort should Minerve be chosen as a target.

Now it's easy to see why the Viscount of Narbonne believed Minerve to be impregnable. The town is located on a river bend and is surrounded on three sides by the river. What makes this so impressive is that the banks of this river are in the form of steep cliffs, hundreds of feet high. So on three sides, Minerve is protected by formidable natural barriers. Its remaining side, to the north, is also impressive from a defensive point of view. The only way to approach the northern side of the town was via a narrow isthmus of land which was protected by a well-constructed castle. The approach to the castle was also difficult, the land being dotted with ravines and steep gorges.

Minerve did have one defensive weak spot, though its water supply. There were water tanks within the town, but in summer, if it hadn't rained for a while, the town relied on a single well for its water. This well was located at the edge of one of the cliffs adjacent to the river, nearly two hundred fifty feet above the water. The well was surrounded by thick walls, and access to it was via a covered walkway. Simon de Montfort decided that all he needed to do was surround the town, take out the well, and wait for the stronghold to surrender. Unfortunately for the town of Minerve, while the cliffs surrounding the river were steep, the river itself wasn't terribly wide. So Simon and his men set up camp on the opposite side of the river to the town, which was well within range of his catapult machines. The men from Narbonne surrounded the northern approach to the town while the visiting northern French and German Crusaders spread out around the remaining areas.

Then, atop the cliffs, Simon ordered his main weapon to be assembled and put to use. This particular weapon was at the cutting edge of military technology at the time. What was this weapon? It was a trebuchet. What is a trebuchet? I'm glad you asked. A trebuchet is a catapult machine, but unlike catapult machines which had come before it, a trebuchet contains a counterweight. The counterweight can be shifted along the arm of the machine to alter its range and trajectory. Operated by skillful personnel, a trebuchet could hit a target with a degree of accuracy not able to be achieved by earlier catapult machines. At the considerable expense of 21 livres per day, Simon employed the operators of the trebuchet, and requested them to aim their catapults at a particular target, that target being the well and its covered walkway. Two fun facts before we move on. This appears to be the first time a trebuchet had ever been used during a Crusade and secondly, this particular trebuchet had a name: "Mauvoisin", which was Occitan for "Bad Neighbor". Other catapult machines were set up at other locations around the town, and the siege began.

Six weeks later, things were looking a little grim for the people of Minerve. Their food supplies were running low, and nearly every building in the town had suffered some sort of damage, including the residence of William, the Lord of the town. The biggest problem, from the defenders' point of view, was the trebuchet "Bad Neighbor".

So one night in early July 1210, a group of townsfolk decided to go and burn it down. This was going to be no easy task. First, in darkness, they needed to climb down the cliffs from their town into the river, and then up the other side of the gorge, into Simon de Montfort's camp. This sounds easy, but it can't have been. The men were carrying the equipment they needed to destroy Bad Neighbor, as well as their weapons, and laden with these burdens they had to scale cliffs hundreds of feet high, in darkness and in silence. Impressively, they managed to do so. They found Bad Neighbor unguarded and set about surrounding it with dry straw, flax and tinder, which they had brought with them in baskets,

and smearing it with animal fat. They then set it a light with some glowing embers that they had also carried with them.

Unfortunately, they were spotted by one of Bad Neighbor's siege engine crew, who had fortuitously decided to walk out from the camp towards the engine to answer a call of nature. He was able to sound the alarm, before being felled by a spear. The Crusaders rushed from their camp to find the fire around the engine beginning to take hold. They were able to extinguish it, and Bad Neighbor was saved.

In the weeks following this event, it became clear to Lord William of Minerve that his position was now desperate and untenable. Not only had the buildings of his town suffered damage, and not only were the food supplies run low, but after having been saved from destruction, Bad Neighbor had finally achieved its objective. The covered walkway to the well had collapsed, making access to the well a life-threatening proposition. In addition, the great castle guarding the northern side of the city had been damaged to such an extent that it might not hold up to an assault by the Crusaders.

So, on the 22nd of July, Lord William left Minerve and made his way to Simon's camp to seek terms. Lord William and Simon de Montfort began thrashing out the terms of the agreement and had almost finalized their discussions when they were unexpectedly joined by Arnold Amaury and his co-Legate Thedisius. The agreement they had all but concluded was this: Lord William would offer Minerve and all his lands to Simon, in exchange for the lives of all the inhabitants of Minerve, and a minor fiefdom which Lord William could retire to and call home. So it was similar in nature to the terms agreed at the fall of Carcassonne. Simon, who after all was only Viscount due to the actions of Arnold Amaury, diplomatically said that he would only sign the agreement if it had the approval of the Papal Legates.

This put Arnold Amaury into a bit of a bind. He didn't actually like the agreement. He wanted to see the Cathar heretics burnt alive, but being a man of God, he didn't really feel that he could come right out and say this. Even Peter the Monk is unusually forthright about the conundrum that Arnold Amaury (or as he likes to refer to him, "the Abbot") found himself here. This is what he had to say about Simon's reaction when the Legates unexpectedly interrupted the negotiations, and I quote "Our Count, ever discreet and reliant on good council, declared that he would take no action in regard to accepting the surrender of the castrum, unless it had the approval of the Abbot, the appointed leader of the whole of Christ's business. Hearing this, the Abbot was greatly troubled. He wanted the enemies of Christ to die, but as a monk and priest he did not dare condemn them to death." End quote.

So what did Arnold Amaury do to try and secure the death of the heretics, without actually stating that he sought the death of the heretics? Well, first, he tried a bit of subterfuge, by asking both Simon and Lord William to write down the terms upon which they wished to agree. The Papal Legate was hoping that this would cause some conflict between them and cause them to revoke the original agreement. However, Lord William refused to play ball, and just stated that he would be happy to agree to whatever terms Simon wished. Simon asked Arnold Amaury what terms he would like included, and the Papal Legate came up with a nifty condition that would lead to the result he was after, without making him look so bloodthirsty. Arnold Amaury stipulated that all the inhabitants would be allowed to leave, so long as they first agreed to be reconciled with the Catholic Church and obey its orders. Of course, this wouldn't be a problem for the Catholic residents of Minerve, but it would be a problem for the Cathars. Arnold Amaury knew this. He knew that the majority

of the Cathars within the town would not comply with this condition, leaving the Papal Legates no option other than to punish them as heretics.

The leaders of the Crusade who had ventured down from northern France also wanted to kill some heretics. They hadn't come all this way, and laid siege to Minerve for so long, just to see a bunch of Cathars convert to Catholicism and walk free. The Papal Legate soon put their fears to rest. Peter the Monk describes what happened, and I quote, "Robert Mauvoisin, a noble and dedicated Catholic, was present, when he heard what was happening, with the implication that the heretics might be freed, whereas the Crusaders had come for the very purpose of destroying them, he became very concerned that once they were captured, fear would lead them to promise to do whatever our side demanded. He therefore opposed the Abbott to his face, declaring that our soldiers would not tolerate such an outcome. The Abbott replied, Forget your concern. I believe very few of them will accept conversion." End quote.

And the Papal Legate was correct. Despite the best efforts of the Catholic clergy, the Cathars refused to convert. One hundred and forty Cather Perfect were then led out to a massive fire that had been set outside the castle at Minerve. To the astonishment of the onlookers, the Perfect didn't need to be secured to the fire nor forced into it. Steadfast in their belief that their death would transport them from the wicked realm of the material world to the pure world of the spiritual, they cast themselves into the flames. Three women were held back from the fire by a mother of a French crusader, who himself was being held prisoner at Cabaret. The lady convinced the three women to save themselves and swear allegiance to the Catholic Church, so they could walk free from Minerve with its remaining residents. This event, which is sometimes referred to as the "Holocaust of the Perfect of Minerve", strangely occurred on the 22nd of July, the Feast of St Mary Magdalene, the same day upon which, a year earlier, the massacre following the sack of Beziers had occurred.

The Holocaust of the Perfect of Minerve was a watershed event, signaling a more savage approach by the Church to the punishment of heretics. The days of letting heretics walk free from a siege, such as those allowed to leave from Carcassonne, were now over.

Join me next week as Simon de Montfort turns his attention towards the next rebel stronghold on his list, the fortress of Terme.

Just before I go, I should just clarify something. The name of the knight who spoke out and objected to Arnold Amaury's perceived leniency during the peace negotiations was called Robert Mauvoisin. Did this name sound familiar to any of you? It might have done, because a "mauvoisin" means "bad neighbor" in Occitan, and was also the name given to the trebuchet used at the siege of Minerve. Historians have been scratching their heads over the centuries about this odd coincidence, so I thought I just should mention it. Until next week, bye for now.

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