

History of the Crusades.
Episode 127.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Siege Of Termes.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort turn his attention towards Termes, a powerful rebel stronghold some thirty kilometers from Carcassonne. When we left last week's episode, in late August 1210, the siege engines had arrived at Termes, along with a sizable contingent of Crusaders from Brittany in northern France. Soon, other Crusaders started arriving, and Simon's army was bolstered by men from Germany, Bavaria and Saxony, from Provence and Normandy, and even from northern and southern Italy. These men all arrived at different times, with their forty days of Crusader service all starting from their varied days of arrival.

Now of course, the arrival of these men was very much welcomed by Simon de Montfort. When he had first arrived at Termes, his army was minuscule, much too small in fact to attempt a siege. To make matters worse, the defenders of Termes shouted down insults from the safety of the castle walls, mocking the small size of the army. In his book "A Most Holy War", Mark Pegg reports that the defenders of Termes even engaged in sarcasm, shouting "Flee from the sight of the army, flee from the sight of the army", while running around the walls in mock terror, much to the bemusement and annoyance of the admittedly very small force camped outside the walls. With the arrival of so many crusaders in late August however, the taunts seemed to have ceased.

Along with men from northern France, Germany and Italy, numerous holy men joined Simon de Montfort at Termes. One notable volunteer was a William, the Archdeacon of Paris. The Archdeacon had managed to recruit volunteers for the Crusade from northern France, and had accompanied them southwards to Termes. Once at Termes, not only did he preach rousing sermons to boost the morale of the Crusaders, he also took a strong interest in the workings of the siege engines. His interest in the workings of the catapult machines was so great that apparently he took it upon himself to instruct the carpenters and engineers on the construction of the engines, and came up with an ingenious plan to fill in one of the ravines close to the castle walls with rocks, timber, soil and other debris. so that an engine could be placed on it and be within firing distance of the battlements.

Joining the Archdeacon of Paris at Termes were other luminaries, such as the Bishop of Chartres, the Bishop of Beauvais, the Count of Dreux, and the Count of Ponthieu, all of whom were accompanied by an entourage of volunteer Crusaders.

Now the attack on the castle at Termes and the defense of the castle at Termes both relied heavily on the use of catapult machines and other siege engines. The attack on the castle began as soon as the Crusaders' catapult machines were assembled. With the rocky and uneven ground dotted by ravines and gullies, setting them up in a position close enough to the walls to be within range was a challenge, but with some creative thinking, such as that showed by the Archdeacon of Paris, the machines were constructed and the bombardment began. The defenders inside the castle constructed their own catapult machine, and it was put to use hurling stones and other missiles at the Crusaders' machines. In a nutshell, the attackers used their machines to pummel the castle walls, and the defenders used their machine to pummel the attackers' machines, with the odd boulder being fired into the Crusaders camp to keep them on their toes.

One innovative weapon possessed by the defenders was a ballista. This was a giant crossbow mounted on a wooden frame. The bow was pulled back by winches, and long, deadly bolts could be fired a considerable distance. If operated by a skilled marksman, these giant crossbows could be surprisingly accurate, and were used to good effect by the garrison at Termes.

With teams of men, led by the clergy, keeping the Crusaders' catapult machines readily supplied with stones and blocks of wood, the attack by the Crusaders began in earnest. Their first target was the suburb outside the castle walls. Being the most vulnerable part of Termes, the fortified suburb to the south of the castle was the obvious place to start the attack. Faced with almost continual bombardment, its walls soon crumbled and it was abandoned by the defenders, its residents presumably already sheltering within the safety of the much stronger walls of the castle.

The next target selected by the Crusaders was the tower of Termenet. As we stated in last week's episode, this tower was separate from the main castle, and while it remained in the hands of the men of Termes, it meant that the main castle couldn't be properly besieged. Simon de Montfort ordered the tower to be completely surrounded, effectively cutting it off from the main castle and isolating it in terms of communication, supplies, and reinforcements. A catapult machine was then constructed on rocky ground nearby. Aimed exclusively at the tower of Termenet, it insured that the walls of the tower were under constant bombardment, with the attacks only interrupted by the defenders' catapult machine scoring a hit on the Crusaders' machine.

Eventually, the men of Termes accepted the fact that the tower would soon fall into the Crusaders' hands. In the dead of night, its garrison crept away from the tower, making their way past the sleeping Crusaders into the safety of the main castle. Early the next morning, soldiers under the command of the Bishop of Chartres occupied the empty tower, and the Bishop's banner was mounted on top of the tower.

The attack on the main castle then began in earnest. As with the attack on the outer suburb and the tower of Termenet, the Crusaders' method was to pummel the walls ceaselessly with stones hurled from their catapult machines, until such time as one of the walls was damaged enough to enable a breach by the attackers. They re-positioned their catapult machines, and the bombardment began.

One catapult machine was erected in an isolated area some distance away from the main Crusader camp. In recognition of this fact, Simon de Montfort ordered it to be guarded by three hundred men and five knights. One evening, eighty men from the castle launched a raid on the machine, hoping to set it alight and destroy it. Taken utterly by surprise, all three hundred of the men guarding the catapult fled as the attackers approached, leaving only the five knights behind. As the men from Termes drew nearer, four of the five knights also retreated, leaving just one man, William of Ecureuil to defend the machine. William of Ecureuil deserves to be remembered. He single-handedly repulsed the attacks launched by the eighty men. The men from Termes repeatedly lit fires under and around the catapult, all of which William repeatedly managed to extinguish, while simultaneously using his sword to good effect in defending himself.

By this time, the rest of the Crusader camp became aware of his lone stand. The rough terrain and the inaccessibility of the area in which the catapult had been placed, meant that the Crusaders were unable to quickly come to his aid. Instead, they created a

diversion, attacking a vulnerable part of the main wall of the castle. The diversion worked. The eighty men from Termes turned their attention towards this new threat, leaving William alive and the catapult machine intact.

The walls of the castle of Termes were strong, and despite the almost ceaseless bombardment they stood up well against the attack. Occasionally, a section of wall would crumble, but the men of Termes would race to fill the gap with stones and timber, ensuring the breach was blocked against incursions by the Crusaders. Days turned into weeks, and weeks dragged into months. The defenders inside the castle seemed to be holding up well. Despite the psychological impact of being under almost constant attack. They didn't have a lot to complain about. Their food supply was holding up well and, all things considered, things were going OK for them.

Things were different however, for the Crusaders. The camp was within striking distance of the castle's catapult machine. To make things worse, the ballista, the giant crossbow, would also occasionally score a hit and take out an unlucky crusader. The target most prized by the men of Termes, of course, was Simon de Montfort. They almost hit him twice. On the first occasion, Simon was chatting to a knight adjacent to one of the castle walls. The Crusaders had built a siege cat, and had dragged it to the base of one of the walls to see whether it could be undermined. Simon was inspecting the site, and was standing close enough to a knight to be able to place his hand on his shoulder, when the knight was suddenly struck on the head by a stone hurled from the walls above, and was killed. The next near miss for Simon occurred while he was attending Mass one Sunday inside his tent. A bunch of knights had gathered inside Simon's tent to hear the ceremony, when a bolt from the giant crossbow machine shot through the walls of the tent, striking a knight standing behind Simon and killing him.

In addition to the constant threat present within the camp, another factor of irritation for the Crusaders was their food supply. All food had to be carted in along narrow, dangerous roads, and the baggage carts were in constant danger of being ambushed by southern French rebels. As a result, food within the Crusader camp was far from plentiful. Simon de Montfort himself reportedly went without food on some days, so the situation for the common soldiers must have been dire.

The siege of Termes had commenced in August. By the time October rolled around, things were looking a little grim for Simon and his Crusaders. The forty day crusading period had expired for the men who had joined Simon at the beginning of the siege, and they had all unsurprisingly packed up their belongings, waved good bye and headed home. Other volunteers had arrived to replace them, but as the weather turned colder the enthusiasm of the new arrivals was beginning to wane. With the food supply being sporadic, with the autumn weather making life uncomfortable within the camp, and with the walls of the castle of Termes looking as strong and as impenetrable as ever, two Bishops and two Counts, along with their considerable contingent of men, decided to return home before their forty days of service had expired. This of course was terrible news for Simon. He pleaded with them to stay, and his wife Alice even threw herself at their feet, imploring them to serve out their forty days. Only the Bishop of Chartres was moved. He elected to remain with his men until the end of the forty days, but the others packed up and left. With others within the Crusader camp looking like they were tempted to follow suit, Simon decided it might be time to come to terms with crusty old Raymond of Termes.

Inside the castle, things had also taken a turn for the worse. While the food supply was holding out well, lack of fresh water was beginning to become a problem. Like many such strongholds, there was no access inside the castle of Termes to a fresh water source, the fortification being built on solid rock. Instead, the residents of the castle stored their water inside cisterns and barrels. With the castle having been besieged over the past couple of months, the only way their supplies could be replenished was with rain water. Unfortunately, with the siege starting in late summer, the rains hadn't come, and by October the water was beginning to run out.

With both sides of the conflict suddenly having an interest in bringing the siege to an end, Simon de Montfort and Raymond of Termes met to discuss terms. Crusty old Raymond had a novel suggestion to put to Simon. The suggestion was this: that Raymond temporarily transfer ownership of Termes to Simon until Easter the following year, at which time Simon would give the castle back to him and things would revert back to normal. The proposal wasn't a particularly tempting one for Simon, but he felt he had no choice but to agree. The two men agreed that Raymond would hand over his castle the following day, and the pair returned to their respective positions.

That very night however, the southern French weather provided a game changer, because that night it rained. It didn't just rain, it poured. By the time dawn broke, the two main cisterns servicing the castle of Termes were full to the brim, and in addition, the defenders of the castle had gathered their own supplies of rainwater in barrels or other handy containers. It was clear to old Raymond that he could now hold out much longer, and perhaps even defeat the dwindling Crusader army. But he had given his word that he would hand over his castle. What was he to do? Well, Raymond was an old battle axe. He was an elderly warrior who was used to picking fights with his overlords. Deciding to view the deluge of water which had come his way as a sign of divine favor and of divine intent that Termes should continue to oppose Simon de Montfort, Raymond of Termes broke his word, refused to hand over his castle, and settled back for a continuation of the siege.

This, of course, was not good from Simon de Montfort's point of view. To make matters worse, the Bishop of Chartres, who had been pivotal in the taking of the tower of Termenet, departed the following day along with all of his men. As Simon was escorting the Bishop away from Termes, some defenders from the castle rode out to attack one of the Crusaders' catapult machines. Simon was forced to bid the Bishop an abrupt goodbye. He then raced back to Termes to rally his men in a counter attack. They managed to force the raiders back into the castle, but Simon must have felt rather despondent at this point.

Well, he shouldn't have worried too much. Firstly, two men from the garrison at Termes changed sides and pledged their support to Simon. Back in medieval times, in the age of chivalry, a person's word meant quite a bit more than it does in modern times. The disquiet within Termes at their Lord Raymond breaking his pledge to hand over the castle had disturbed some men so much that they decided that Simon was the more worthy man, and they withdrew their support from Raymond. Secondly, an entirely unexpected event occurred. A reasonably sized contingent of men from Lorraine strode into the Crusader camp, eager to begin their forty days of service. Simon wasn't expecting any volunteers to arrive this late in the season, and their numbers boosted both morale and the fighting capacity of the Crusaders. They responded by redoubling their efforts, manning the siege engines around the clock to ensure that the walls of Termes were bombarded day and night.

The siege dragged on in this way until the feast day of St Cecilia, the 22nd of November, when the Crusaders scored a breakthrough. They managed to create a covered trench at the base of one of the walls, and it seemed likely that a breach of the wall was imminent.

This was troubling news for the garrison. Why? Well, firstly, they were worried about what would happen to them if the Crusaders stormed the castle. Simon de Montfort wasn't exactly known for his mercy or leniency to those who had opposed him, and with crusty old Raymond having broken his word to surrender, well, it just didn't bear thinking about. Secondly, many of the men of the garrison were seriously ill with an attack of dysentery. Dysentery wasn't at all uncommon in the unsanitary surrounds of medieval Europe, but some historians have speculated that perhaps the rainwater collected within the barrels had become contaminated.

Anyway, as a result, the garrison met inside Termes on the night of the 22nd of November, and decided to flee the castle. They elected to leave the women behind, surmising, luckily for the women correctly, that Simon would be merciful to them, as they hadn't participated in the fighting and hadn't broken any oaths. Everyone else would take their chances and try to sneak past the Crusader camp to safety. Tramping quietly through the mountainous region of southern France, in the middle of the night, just before the start of winter, would be challenging even if you weren't seriously ill with dysentery. Not surprisingly, most of the garrison were either captured or perished. Raymond of Termes himself was captured, and died a few years later in the dungeons of the citadel at Carcassonne.

Against all odds, Simon de Montfort had succeeded in taking the rebel stronghold at Termes. Join me next week as we see what the new year, the year 1211, brings. Until next week, bye for now.

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