

History of the Crusades.
Episode 128.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Flight of St Martin's Bird.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort score a hard-won victory when he captured the rebel stronghold of Termes after a lengthy siege. The siege ended at the end of November in the year 1210.

As Simon and his band of Crusaders descended from the mountains and made their way back to Carcassonne, village after village surrendered before them. The fall of Termes came both as a shocking blow to the Cathars and their supporters, and as a major victory for Simon. The fortunes of war now favored Simon, and he was keen to build on the momentum that his victory at Termes had brought him. He remained in Carcassonne only long enough to see his wife Alice safely ensconced in the citadel and to see his prisoner, crusty old Raymond of Termes, safely imprisoned in its dungeons. He then left Carcassonne and headed north.

Now, by this time it was December. The weather however, was unseasonably mild. In fact, some days at the commencement of winter were so warm that they were downright summery. Simon took full advantage of this to press forward, receiving surrender after surrender from his now subdued subjects. His two most satisfying victories during this period came when he marched into the region around the city of Albi. Two strongholds to the south of Albi, Castres and Lombers had rebelled against him during the previous year. Showing just how much the fall of Termes had altered the will of the rebels, Castres submitted to Simon with only a murmur of protest, and the men of Lombers fled at Simon's approach, abandoning their castle and leaving it full of supplies. Simon garrisoned it with his own men and moved on. In hardly any time at all Simon had recovered all rebel territory in the region of Albi, south of the river Tam.

Really, his defeat of the stronghold at Termes was a game-changer for Simon. His previously unruly subjects were now lining up to pledge their loyalty to him. King Peter II of Aragon, was now forced to rethink his decision not to accept Simon as his vassal, and as the pendulum of success swung in Simon's direction, it swung away from Count Raymond of Toulouse.

Count Raymond traveled to Albi to meet with Simon in December. The meeting did not go well. Count Raymond included within his entourage men whom Simon considered to be traitors to the Catholic cause. Simon objected to their presence, and the meeting broke off on hostile terms before it even really started. Simon returned to Carcassonne for Christmas to a celebration which was no doubt deeply satisfying for him and his supporters.

The year 1211 is described by Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War" as perhaps the most militarily active of the entire conflict. For Simon de Montfort and the lords of southern France, the year 1211 will be a busy one. It started, however, not with battles but with diplomacy. In January, as King Peter II of Aragon, was on his way to Montpellier, he stopped at Narbonne, where the main players in the conflict came together for a frank discussion. Joining the King of Aragon at the meeting were Simon de Montfort, Count Raymond of Toulouse, Arnold Amaury and his co-Legate Thedisius, the Count of Foix, and according to Peter the Monk, and I quote "many other wise and virtuous men" end quote.

The first item on the agenda was Simon de Montfort's status as Viscount of Carcassonne and Beziers. To date, King Peter of Aragon had resisted accepting Simon as his vassal, but Simon's victory at Termes made King Peter realize that Simon was likely here to stay. If Simon managed to quell resistance to his rule and establish a permanent power-base in southern France, then it would be in Aragon's interest to ensure that there was Spanish oversight in the region. Much in the same way as the Trencavels operated to preserve the interests of Aragon, if Simon de Montfort was King Peter's vassal, then perhaps he could achieve the same aim.

Still, the decision must have rankled King Peter. Simon's recent military successes most likely didn't alter the fact that the King of Aragon personally disliked the man. Accepting him as a vassal meant consigning the Trencavels to the feudal scrap heap. The late Raymond Roger Trencavel's infant son would now never inherit his father's lands. In addition, the decision sent a message to the Church that King Peter was okay with the fact that his overlord Pope Innocent had effectively moved in militarily and removed King Peter's vassal from power. King Peter was not okay with this, but accepting Simon as his new legitimate vassal pretty much signaled that all was forgiven between the Church and the throne of Aragon.

Despite all this, King Peter II of Aragon took a deep breath and, in front of all those assembled, declared Simon de Montfort to be the true and legitimate viscount of Carcassonne and Beziers and vassal to the throne of Aragon. The deal was sealed the following week when the King of Aragon agreed to the betrothal of his three-year-old son and heir, James, to Simon de Montfort's two-year-old daughter, Amicia. In true medieval style, King Peter took his young son to Montpellier and handed him over to Simon. Young James would be raised in the Montfort household in the citadel at Carcassonne, a hostage to Spanish interests and a living reminder of the permanent bond now established between the throne of Aragon and the newly-affirmed Viscount of Carcassonne and Beziers.

Now, much as this act may have rankled King Peter, it did place him in a position to seek concessions from the new Viscount. The first concession he sought concerned his brother-in-law, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, who he wished to see reconciled to the Church on reasonable terms. The second concession concerned his troublesome vassal, the Count of Foix. Peter wished to see the peace treaty currently in place between Simon de Montfort and the Count of Foix turned into something more permanent.

In relation to Count Raymond, the Papal Legates were prepared to grant Count Raymond a portion of the land confiscated from the heretics of Toulouse, on the condition that he start actively persecuting the heretics. A Church council was to be held in a week's time at Montpellier. All the important personages currently attending this meeting at Narbonne would also be attending the council at Montpellier. Count Raymond, still reluctant to attack the Cathars of Toulouse, did not agree to the Church's demands.

As to the troublesome Count of Foix, Simon proposed that the peace between them be made permanent on the condition that the Count not attack any Crusaders and refrain from hindering the Crusade against the Cathars. King Peter offered to maintain a garrison in the castle at Foix. The garrison would be ordered to turn the town over to Simon de Montfort, should the Count breach the terms of the agreement. Taking his cue from Count Raymond of Toulouse, the Count of Foix also failed to agree to these terms.

Now, just before we move on to the Church council at Montpellier, I think it's worth pausing for a moment to reflect on just how much Peter the Monk disliked the Count of Foix. Now, as I've mentioned in a previous episode, Peter the Monk's "Historia Albigensis" is divided into paragraphs, which have headings. Following his discussion of the meeting at Narbonne, Peter the Monk inserts a large section into his narrative, preceded by the heading, and I quote "On the barbarity and malice of the Count of Foix" end quote. The information provided by Peter the Monk under this heading runs to pages, even though Peter states that the atrocious behavior of the Count of Foix is so extensive that he hasn't been able to deal with even a hundredth of it. The accusations leveled by Peter the Monk against the Count of Foix include the allegation that he consorted with actors and harlots; that he locked the abbot and monks of a monastery within his county inside the monastery for three days after the abbot refused to hand the keys over to him; that he destroyed Church property; and even that he once cut the arms and legs off a sculpture of the crucified Christ and used them to grind pepper and herbs.

Before we move on, I just want to read to you Peter the Monk's conclusions on the character of the Count of Foix, and I quote. "This most cruel dog committed many other crimes against the Church and God. Even if I wished to record them all, I would not be equal to the task, nor would any reader easily believe me. His wickedness exceeded all bounds. He pillaged monasteries, destroyed churches, excelled all others in cruelty. Always, he panted after the death of Christians, and never lost his thirst for blood. He disavowed humankind, copied the savagery of beasts and became the worst of wild animals, a man no longer. After this brief account of his wickedness, let us return to our main narrative." End quote.

Yes, let's return to our main narrative. Where were we? Ah yes, the meeting at Narbonne. Despite the extensive negotiations which took place amongst the various parties, the only thing concrete to come out of the meeting at Narbonne was the confirmation of Simon de Montfort as vassal of King Peter. Not to worry, as I've already stated, all the important personages attending the meeting at Narbonne were due to convene at the Church council meeting at Montpellier the following week. The week rolled by and on the 4th of February 1211, the Church council duly took place.

Now, remember that Count Raymond of Toulouse had rejected an offer, by the Church at Narbonne a week earlier, to be reconciled on the single condition that he started persecuting the heretics of Toulouse. If Count Raymond rejected this deal because he was holding out for a better agreement at Montpellier, he was about to be disappointed. Very disappointed. An offer was made by the Papal Legates to Count Raymond, but its contents were staggering. To say they were harsh is an understatement. Among the many conditions listed, Count Raymond had to dismiss all the mercenaries within Toulouse within twenty four hours, and all his castles and strongholds had to be demolished. In addition, the noblemen of the city of Toulouse who had been causing headaches for the White Brotherhood had to leave the city and take up residence in the countryside. The army of the Crusade was to be entitled to free food and accommodation anywhere within Toulouse. Count Raymond was ordered to withdraw his protection from all heretics and Jews living within his county. No tolls could be collected within the county and - the icing on the cake - Count Raymond himself had to join one of the military orders, either the Knights Templar or the Knights Hospitaller, and exile himself without delay to the Holy Land.

The conditions were read to Count Raymond, and he listened to them with growing disbelief and consternation. According to one account, Raymond was so amazed by the conditions that he burst out laughing, believing it to be an elaborate joke. However, when no one else joined in, the reality of the situation started to sink in. He then apparently beckoned to King Peter II of Aragon stating, and I quote, "Come here, my Lord King, listen to this document and the strange orders the Legates say I must obey" end quote. The document was duly read out to King Peter, after which he said quietly, and I quote "Almighty God in heaven, this must be changed" end quote.

But the document wasn't changed. Clearly the Legates never believed that Count Raymond would agree to its terms. Instead, it was designed to send him a clear message: you no longer have the favor of the Church, and we have no interest in offering to you any reasonable terms. The document placed Count Raymond in a "damned if you, do damned if you don't" situation. If he failed to agree to its terms, he would likely be excommunicated again, and his county placed under interdict. If he agreed, while he himself would be happily reconciled to the Church, he would be in this happy situation as a monk in a military order in the Holy Land, while his county, devoid of mercenaries and stripped of its urban nobility, would be ripe for the taking by Simon de Montfort. In a daze, Count Raymond left the meeting with the toxic document clutched in his hand. He sent word to the Legates that he would consider their offer overnight and let them know of his decision the following day.

However, as the day dawned the following morning, Count Raymond was nowhere to be found. Like many people in medieval times, Count Raymond believed in auguries, and in particular the telling of fate by the flight or behavior of birds. Count Raymond had seen a Saint Martin's bird flying to the left. So dire was this omen that he left Montpellier immediately, without discussing the offer with the Legates, nor taking leave of his brother-in-law, King Peter.

The flight of the bird of Saint Martin proved to be a correct fore-teller of Count Raymond's fate. Within two days, the Legates once again excommunicated the Count of Toulouse, and placed his lands under interdict. This time Pope Innocent would not save him. Instead, Count Raymond found himself with two new formidable enemies: the Catholic Church and the Viscount of Carcassonne and Beziers, Simon de Montfort. Join me next week as the Crusade against the Cathars enters a new phase, with Simon de Montfort invading the County of Toulouse. Until next week, bye for now.

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