

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 131.  
The Crusade Against The Cathars.  
The Siege Of Toulouse.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort and his army strike deep into the County of Toulouse. With the crusading force bolstered by the recently arrived forces of Theobald, the Count of Bar and Luxembourg, Simon de Montfort then headed down the road towards the jewel in the Toulousan crown, the city of Toulouse itself.

Now, of course, this isn't good news as far as Count Raymond is concerned. As we've seen before, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse is not much of a fighter. In a time where members of the nobility were expected to lead their men personally into battle, Count Raymond would really much rather sit back and watch others do the fighting. He managed to stay out of the action when he was part of the Crusade, and he'd really rather stay out of the action now as well. He's not a particularly talented fighter, and he's not a particularly talented leader of men. In fact, in his book "The Perfect Heresy", Stephen O'Shea describes Count Raymond as, and I quote "As wretched a general as can be imagined" end quote. So really, Count Raymond would rather find a diplomatic solution to any crisis. Trouble is, diplomacy isn't exactly one of his strong points, either.

Anyway, as Simon de Montfort and the Count of Bar are heading down the road towards the city of Toulouse, Count Raymond decides to intercept them and try and talk them out of their attack. He'd tried this tactic around a month ago. Just prior to the siege of Les Casses, he had sent word to Simon that he would be willing to place himself, and all his territory except the city of Toulouse, in the hands of the Crusaders and await their judgment. This offer had been rejected.

As Simon and his army are marching down the Roman road towards the city of Toulouse, Count Raymond decides to try and negotiate once more. He gathered together around one hundred knights and noblemen and rode out to meet the advancing Crusaders. In a characteristic diplomatic blunder, he included the Count of Foix in the negotiating party. The Count of Foix, of course, was just about the last person Simon would want to negotiate with. Just the sight of him would likely have sent Simon into a rage. Perhaps Simon did see the Count of Foix, because Raymond didn't even get a chance to start the negotiations. Before he could even open his mouth, Simon and a contingent of knights charged at Count Raymond and the negotiating party. According to a report later sent to King Peter II of Aragon, Simon and his men charged without warning, hoping to capture and kill Count Raymond. They didn't manage to catch him, but chased him for a league before giving up and returning to the main body of the army, to resume their march to Toulouse. Unfortunately for Count Raymond, his attempt to negotiate a peaceful outcome and avoid having to fight Simon de Montfort had come to nothing.

But there's still hope. The ever-independent city of Toulouse itself decided to send a delegation of concerned citizens out to meet with Simon de Montfort and the Papal Legates. Like the Count of Toulouse, their aim was to deflect Simon from his intended course of action. It seems that most, if not all, of the citizens who met with Simon were Catholics from the city. They were quite possibly members of, or supporters of, the White Brotherhood, as the leader of the White Brotherhood, the Catholic Bishop of Toulouse, Bishop Folquet, accompanied them.

The delegates protested to Simon that Toulouse had on many occasions, supported the Catholic cause and had provided assistance to the Crusader army. Simon demanded to know why the city of Toulouse still recognized Count Raymond as their legitimate overlord. He demanded that they expel Raymond from the city. The Papal Legates declared, and I quote "Expel the Count and his henchman from the city. Renounce your allegiance to him and accept instead whatever Lord the Church may appoint in his place. Otherwise we will crush you and you shall suffer the fate of heretics and their protectors." End quote. The delegation pointed out that they were oath-sworn to Count Raymond and could not break their word. Their objections went unheeded and the meeting was declared to be at an end.

Following this discussion, Bishop Folquet ordered the congregation of his cathedral to leave the city before the Crusaders arrived, along with the Catholic clergy of Toulouse. They did so, walking barefoot through the streets and out the city gates, bearing the Eucharist before them.

Meanwhile, Count Raymond prepared the city's defenses, gathered his men and awaited Simon's arrival. He didn't have long to wait. On the 16th of June the Crusaders reached the river near the city, which back in medieval times was a winding stream some two miles west of the town. The suddenness of the arrival of the army seems to have taken the defenders by surprise. The Count of Foix and the Count of Comminges had both moved their knights and soldiers into the city, and a number of minor lords from the surrounding countryside had also sought a refuge in the city from the approach of the invading army. Work had started on destroying the bridges over the river, but the job was not yet finished.

The first battle in the conflict took place near the partially dismantled bridge of Montaudran. Well, at least that's what may have occurred, as the sources discussing the siege of Toulouse disagree about how many skirmishes took place near the river, where they took place, and what exactly occurred. The sources do all agree on one thing however: the outcome of this initial conflict. Both sides fought a desperate hand-to-hand battle, with the defenders keen to prevent the Crusaders crossing the river, and the Crusaders just as keen to make the crossing. The chronicler William of Tudela puts the number killed on both sides as 180.

The men of Toulouse, in the end, were unsuccessful. The Crusaders crossed the river and the defenders were forced to retreat back inside the city walls. During the retreat, one of Count Raymond's illegitimate sons, a man called Bertrand, was captured. He was stripped of his fancy suit of armor and was later ransomed back to Raymond for 1,000 Livres. The Crusaders set up camp outside the city walls and the siege began.

Now, right from the beginning, there were indications that the decision to lay siege to Toulouse had perhaps not been properly thought through. Why would we say this? Well, firstly, no catapult machines were used by the Crusaders at the siege. None were transported to Toulouse, none were constructed and none were used. This is really rather extraordinary, and no one can really explain why this was the case. Catapult machines were an essential part of siege warfare, and without them it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to breach the city walls. So why is Simon launching his most ambitious attack to date, on one of the major cities in southern France, without his catapult machines? Well, the reason is unclear. Historians have speculated that perhaps there was no time to either transport the machines to the site, or to construct them at the site, or perhaps the Crusading army at this point in time didn't have the resources to build and

maintain the machines. These arguments, however, are pretty much shot out of the water when you consider the fact that, only weeks earlier, Simon's army had made extensive use of catapult machines in its attack on the city of Lavaur, less than thirty miles from the city of Toulouse.

Instead, the reason catapult machines weren't put into play at the siege of Toulouse may have more to do with a personality clash between Simon de Montfort and the Count of Bar. The Count of Bar was an experienced soldier and had been an active participant in the Third Crusade. He was also descended from a long line of aristocrats, the County of Bar being a significant region in the north eastern corner of the Kingdom of France. He was also currently a Count of Luxembourg. In contrast, Simon de Montfort was from a relatively minor noble family, and he had only recently become a Count. It's quite possible that Simon believed he should defer to the Count of Bar in military matters, and it's quite possible that it was the Count of Bar's idea to attack the city of Toulouse without waiting for the catapult machines.

The 4,000 or so strong Crusader Army set up camp outside the Narbonne gate at the end of the old Roman road from Carcassonne. Now, already, there are some glaring problems emerging with the siege. Toulouse is a significant city, and its walls stretched around three miles. There was no way that an army of 4,000 could totally surround a city of that size, so the crusaders contented themselves to besieging a section of the wall between the Narbonne gate and the Saint Etienne gate. This section of the walls happened to be one of the oldest sections (it was built upon Roman and Visigothic foundations) and also one of the strongest sections of the fortifications. Without the benefit of catapult machines, it was difficult from the outset to see how the army would go about breaching their besieged section of the wall.

Because the attackers had failed to surround the city, the defenders inside were free to come and go as they wished. They could send raiding parties out of one of the non-besieged gates to attack the Crusaders, and supplies, reinforcements, and really anything at all they required could be brought into Toulouse. The final problem facing Simon de Montfort and the Count of Bar at the beginning of the siege of Toulouse was the fact that the Crusader army was much smaller in size than the combined forces of Count Raymond and the Count of Foix, which were defending the city.

These problems didn't seem to worry the Count of Bar. He led a contingent of northern Frenchmen in an attack on the city walls, possibly on the first day of the siege. The crusaders charged up to the walls, protected by large leather shields, intent on filling the ditches in front of the fortifications. Large leather shields are not much protection against rocks and other heavy missiles when they are hurled down at you from the top of walls. William Of Tudela reports that the combined casualties from this attack totaled 100 killed and 500 wounded. To add insult to injury, the defenders managed to capture three of the fancy leather shields, which they proudly displayed as trophies of war.

It was not a good start for the Crusaders, and really things just went downhill from there. The strategy of the Crusaders consisted of attempting to breach the section of the wall they were camped outside, by means of the siege engines that they had at their disposal. While they may not have had catapult machines, they did have covered wagons, which they used as cats, and siege towers which, once the ditches guarding the walls were filled in, could be transported to the wall in an attempt to breach the same.

The strategy of the defenders was to venture out of the city whenever they wished, and attack both the Crusader camp and any supply trains coming up the Roman road with provisions for the army. The Crusader army camp was situated happily in a section of the ground surrounding the city adjacent to orchards, which at the end of June 1211 contained the odd piece of fruit. It would be a few months before the trees started bearing properly; autumn was the time when most fruit was harvested. So, unhappily for the Crusaders, by the end of the first day most of the ripe fruit available had already been eaten. That meant that food had to be transported to the army through hostile territory. This appeared not to work so well, as it seems that meat, wine and bread were scarce during the siege, and the diet most men had to content themselves with consisted primarily of beans.

Unfortunately for the Crusaders, their camp was poorly defended and was subject to raids and attacks at any time of the day or night. Men from Toulouse even went so far as to attack the snoozing Crusaders during their siesta, the few hours after lunch in the hottest part of the day, behaviour which Jonathan Sumption in his book "The Albigensian Crusade" somewhat tongue-in-cheek calls un-gentlemanly. So the Crusaders had to be on constant guard inside their camp, which could be attacked at any time. The attempts by the attackers to breach the wall looked increasingly futile, and everyone was eating beans. It wasn't long before the Crusaders started wondering whether attacking the city of Toulouse had not been such a good idea after all.

To add to their woes, tensions seem to be building between the leaders of the expedition, Simon de Montfort and the Count of Bar. The sources are silent as to the exact nature of their dispute, but it's not hard to conclude that it likely concerned disagreements about how to progress the siege and whether it had been a good idea to attack the city in the first place.

In his book "The Occitan War", Laurence Marvin provides an outline of one of the skirmishes which occurred during the siege. He states that on the 27th of June, a group of southern Frenchmen, under the leadership of Count Raymond's son-in-law, Hugh of Alfaro, rode out of the city while the Crusaders were having their siesta, their objective being to intercept a supply train which was coming up the road towards the camp. They split into two groups. One was sent to create a diversion by attacking the snoozing bean-filled Crusaders, while the other group rode down the road towards the supply train. Two northern Frenchmen who had been escorting the supply train had ridden ahead towards the Crusader camp. Now, isolated from their compatriots, they were set upon by the men of Toulouse. One was hit by a spear and killed, while the other managed to escape. By now, the Crusaders had come to the realization that the main objective of the attack was in fact the supply train, and had sent men out to save it. The men from Toulouse retreated back into the city, looting part of the Crusader camp on their way.

After only a couple of weeks, it was clear to the Crusaders that the attack on Toulouse was not going to succeed. No one wants to besiege a city on a diet of beans surrounded by other men who are on a diet of beans, and the fact that they were subject to an attack at any time by the defenders and were poorly equipped to breach the walls meant that really, only one outcome was sensible. On the 29th of June, the people of Toulouse woke to find that the Crusader army had decamped and retreated during the night. After a siege of only two weeks' duration, Count Raymond and his men had successfully defended their city. In a final act of revenge and frustration, Simon de Montfort ordered his men to destroy fruit trees, vines and crops as they retreated, affecting the ability of the people of the city to

feed themselves well into the future, and making Simon and his northern Frenchman even more unpopular than they already were.

Really, the siege of Toulouse in 1211 was a massive tactical blunder. Before the siege, Toulouse was a city divided, between those loyal to the Catholic Church and the White Brotherhood, and those more aligned with the Cathar cause, who's militant supporters called themselves the Black Brotherhood. Now, with the Bishop of Toulouse and his staunch Catholic supporters abandoning the city prior to the commencement of the siege, with the city pulling together under the leadership of Count Raymond, with the Crusaders not only failing in their bid to take the city, but making themselves unpopular by doing long-term damage to the orchards and food baskets of Toulouse prior to their departure, Simon de Montfort had managed to do something that the Counts of Toulouse had been struggling with for generations: he had managed to unite the city of Toulouse.

Not only did the city come together in the face of the northern French enemy, they also seemed to be happy to unite under one leader, Count Raymond of Toulouse. From here on in, the city of Toulouse will remain steadfast and loyal in their dedication to and support of their Count.

Purely from a military point of view, the failed siege of Toulouse affected Simon de Montfort in a number of ways: it slowed the momentum he had built since his victory at Termes; and from a purely practical point of view, it resulted in an unnecessary loss of northern French lives, while also taking fourteen precious days out of the forty day period of Crusader service being performed by the Crusaders in the army of the Count of Bar.

Hmm, the Count of Bar. How did he emerge from the Crusader face-plant that was the 1211 siege of Toulouse? Not so well. Unfortunately, we don't have anything concrete to show us exactly what the Count's role was in the siege, and whether he, instead of Simon de Montfort, ought to be blamed for the defeat. All the main sources for the siege give us are mutterings of discontent and disappointment about the Count of Bar. Remember, the Count of Bar appeared in southern France with a solid reputation as a soldier and Crusader, and with an impeccable northern French noble pedigree. Expectations about what the Count could achieve in the Crusade against the Cathars were understandably high.

Here is what Peter the Monk had to say about the Count of Bar following the siege: "No good was spoken about the Count of Bar, since everyone in the army held a poor opinion of him. What a just judgment of God. It had been hoped that he would do great things. Men had expected more than was reasonable from another mortal, but the Lord, who said through the mouth of his prophet "My glory I will not give to another", knew that if our side achieved great success in the siege it would be attributed entirely to man and not to God, and for this reason did not wish great things to be done there." End quote.

Whether it was through divine will or just plain mortal incompetence, one thing was clear. The most ambitious military campaign to date, the plan by the Crusaders to take the city of Toulouse had ended in an embarrassing failure. Join me next week as Simon de Montfort cheers himself up, and cheers Peter the Monk up, by marching his army southwards from the city of Toulouse into territory held by the Count of Foix, where he will slash and burn his way back to Crusader contentment, as we continue our look into the busy year of 1211. Until next week, bye for now.

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