

History of the Crusades.
Episode 132.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Siege Of Castelnaudary.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort fail in his ambitious attempt to take the city of Toulouse. Keen to recover from this setback, he took his army on a slash-and-burn mission through much of the territory held by the two men who had opposed him at Toulouse, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse and the Count of Foix.

The lands of the Count of Foix, a man disliked intensely by both Simon De Montfort and one of the chroniclers of the Crusade, Peter the Monk, were especially targeted. Simon's army rampaged through the County of Foix, doing their utmost to destroy or pillage anything of value they came across. The capital city of the County, the city of Foix itself, came in for special treatment. Simon and his army spent eight days in the region surrounding the city of Foix. While they didn't mount an attack on the castle of Foix itself, they burned crops in fields which were close to being ready to harvest; they burnt vineyards and uprooted fruit trees.

No doubt feeling better after this exercise, Simon de Montfort then needed to determine his next move. If you take a look at a map of southern France, the County of Foix lies to the south of the County of Toulouse. The city of Foix itself is almost as far south as you can go in southern France. Go any further south and you come to the border of the Kingdom of Aragon. So here is Simon, way down south with a sizeable army, many of whom are shortly due to complete their forty days service. What does he do? He marches them northwards. Way northwards, through the entire length of the County of Toulouse into the Quercy region, his destination, the city of Cahors.

Now the city of Cahors was an important place. It was the financial center of the region and traditionally the entire Quercy region, including Cahors, had been loyal to the Count of Toulouse. However, Simon received word that the Bishop of Cahors and some lords in the region were prepared to pledge loyalty to him, so Simon headed northwards to formally receive homage from them and accept their oaths of loyalty. Simon's army had traveled perhaps a quarter of the way to their destination and were resting at the town of Castelnaudary, when the Count of Bar decided he had had enough Crusading and that riding all the way to Cahors with Simon wasn't his idea of a great way to spend the rest of summer. In his book "The Occitan War", Laurence Marvin states that the Count of Bar's abrupt exit embarrassed Simon, and that the Count of Bar and his men were jeered as they departed. Simon and the remainder of his army continued northwards, burning the odd castle here and there as they made their way through the County of Toulouse, arriving at Cahors at the end of July in the year 1211

At Cahors he accepted oaths of loyalty from the three most powerful lords in the Quercy region, then marched even further north to the town of Rocamadour. This town lay pretty much in the border regions of southern France, and was just about as far north as you could go and still be in southern France. Understandably, it was at this town that the northern French Crusaders waved goodbye to Simon De Montfort and continued northwards back to their homes.

This left Simon with a tiny army. Here he was in the far north of southern France, far away from his base at Carcassonne, with a laughably reduced force. Anyone with even an inkling of an idea of military strategy could see that this would be a fine time for Count Raymond VI of Toulouse to muster his forces and go on the attack. But we need to remember that Raymond was not a fighter. Raymond hated battles. He hated attacking things, and to top things off he was really bad at it. But it was clearly time for Raymond to put his misgivings to one side. His County had been invaded, his capital city had even been besieged, and now Simon de Montfort's northern Crusaders had all packed up and gone home. Count Raymond could no longer ignore the pleas of his supporters. It was time for the Count of Toulouse to go on the offensive. It was time to strike back.

The first thing Count Raymond needed to do before attacking Simon de Montfort was to raise an army. This proved an easy assignment. The County of Toulouse had been invaded by northern Frenchmen. The general mood prevailing within the County was one of defiance, and given the opportunity most men were only too happy to take up their weapons and join Count Raymond's forces. When the men mustered by Count Raymond joined with the men mustered by the Count of Foix, who also had no trouble recruiting volunteers, along with other noble lords and their men, the result was a substantial army.

Although, not as large an army as that estimated by the chroniclers of the Crusade. William of Tudela stated that the final army of Count Raymond numbered more than 200,000 men, while Peter the Monk stated that 100,000 were gathered. These are clearly wild exaggerations, but they do indicate that the army was unusually large. In his book "A Most Holy War", Mark Pegg estimates that around 1,000 knights and 2,000-3,000 foot soldiers formed the core of Count Raymond's army, and those figures are probably more realistic.

It takes some time to muster an army of that size, and to gather all the wine, bread, and meat that such an army will require on the road. By the time Count Raymond's army was ready to leave the city of Toulouse, Simon de Montfort and his small force had made its way back from the north to Carcassonne. So Raymond and his army are in Toulouse, and Simon and his army are at Carcassonne. Between them stretches the old Roman road.

Now things really aren't looking that good for Simon at this stage. As men from the County of Toulouse answered the call to arms, rebellions broke out across the region. Towns and strongholds which had previously surrendered to Simon expelled their northern French garrisons, and pledged their support to Raymond. The rebellion had even spilled over the borders of the County of Toulouse into Beziers and Narbonne. As a sign of just how bad things were, some of Simon's supporters had gone on a massive recruitment drive across a vast swathe of territory in the Viscounty of Carcassonne. Disappointingly, only 800 men volunteered to join Simon's forces, and most of them deserted on the road to Carcassonne.

To add to his woes, Simon was growing increasingly concerned about his family. His wife, Alice, was at Lavaur, in the northern region of the County of Toulouse. Not so long ago that region had been firmly under Simon's control, but now things had changed. The nearby town of Puylaurens had expelled Simon's garrison and declared for Raymond, effectively isolating Alice and the town of Lavaur in hostile territory. His young son was at Fanjeaux, in the borderlands between the County of Toulouse and the Viscounty of Carcassonne. Simon had received word that his son was seriously ill, but neither Simon nor Alice were able to go to him. Simon's two year old daughter, Amicia, was just up the road from Fanjeaux, in the town of Montreal. None of the towns holding Simon's family

members currently looked secure. Rebellions could break out in any one of them at any time. These things were on Simon's mind as Count Raymond's substantial army ponderously made its way out of Toulouse and headed down the old Roman road towards Carcassonne.

When Raymond's army reached the town of Montferrand, which is around thirty miles from Carcassonne and is roughly the half way point between the two cities, Simon called a war council to try and decide what to do. He really had only two options. He could remain at Carcassonne, wait for Raymond's Army to take all the towns on the old Roman road, and then rely on Carcassonne's defenses to protect him and his forces, or he could move out and engage the enemy. Bunkering down inside Carcassonne and waiting for reinforcements to arrive from northern France seemed to be the most sensible option, but Simon was swayed by an impassioned argument by one of his more ambitious crusaders, Hugh de Lacey. Hugh was an experienced soldier. He argued that covering inside Carcassonne would send the wrong message to the citizens of Languedoc, and would lose Simon any advantages he had gained. The highly equipped and experienced northern French knights in Simon's small army worked best in open ground, and Hugh urged Simon to leave Carcassonne and take the fight directly to Raymond. After some consideration, Simon agreed.

Leaving a small garrison behind to guard Carcassonne, Simon and his army left the city and headed down the road towards the approaching army. Their destination was the town of Castelnaudary. You might remember Castelnaudary from Episode 130. It's the largest town on the old Roman road, and back in Episode 130 Count Raymond had done his best to destroy the town, as he realized that he didn't have enough men to hold it. Simon had extinguished the fires smoldering within the town and had ordered its blackened and partially demolished walls to be rebuilt. He had then garrisoned Castelnaudary with his own men. It was to Castelnaudary that Simon and his army now headed. It was there that Simon would make his stand.

Setting up his defenses within the town, Simon must have realized that this could all go horribly wrong. He only had a few hundred men. Estimates place the number of no higher than five hundred, compared to the many thousand strong army of Count Raymond. Castelnaudary itself wasn't particularly well fortified, and the degraded defenses had only been hastily repaired, and there was no water supply within the town. Added to this was the fact that the town itself, and the entire surrounding region, was clearly hostile to the northern French cause. Plus, it was miles from Simon's supply base back at Carcassonne.

As Count Raymond's army marched down the Roman road towards the town however, Simon received some welcome news. One of his trusted commanders was returning from the Crusade in Spain, with fifty knights to join Simon's small force at Castelnaudary. King Peter II of Aragon was heavily involved in the Spanish Crusade, and as his vassal, Simon de Montfort was obliged to provide men to support his cause. He had sent fifty knights to Spain, and in a stroke of good luck they were returning to southern France just when Simon needed them most.

Count Raymond's forces arrived at Castelnaudary in September 1211. Unfortunately for Simon, the arrival of the rebel troops coincided with mealtime, and his soldiers were heartily tucking into their food when Count Raymond's troops arrived. By the time they had gulped down their dinner, donned their armor, and grabbed their weapons, the fortified suburb to the south of the town had already fallen to Count Raymond. Its citizens

welcomed Count Raymond's men with open arms, and let them through the gates. Once inside, however, the army of the Count of Toulouse didn't seem to know what what to do. They scattered around the streets of the suburb, and it wasn't long before Simon's better-trained, better-led troops rounded them all up and expelled them from the town. It was a bad start for Count Raymond, and things were only going to get worse.

Count Raymond has avoided taking part in any military action so far in this Crusade for a very good reason. He's absolutely terrible at it. To Simon's surprise, and likely to the surprise of his own men, Count Raymond didn't surround the city. He had enough men to do so, and usually siege warfare starts with the attackers surrounding a town or fortification, cutting it off from supplies and reinforcements. But Count Raymond ignored the basic instructions of Siege Warfare 101, and instead ordered his army to set up camp in a pleasant field on a hill to the north of Castelnaudary, perhaps as far away as half a league from the town. Once the camp had been set up, Count Raymond ordered his men to fortify it. Instead of spending their energy surrounding and attacking Castelnaudary, thousands of men toiled away, digging ditches, erecting palisades, building barriers and doing everything they could to protect themselves from the Crusaders.

This strange and unexpected defensive move by Count Raymond was, of course, very much welcomed by Simon de Montfort. It eliminated just about all of his disadvantages. His men were able to come and go from the town as they pleased: collecting water; receiving supplies from Carcassonne; and even riding over to Count Raymond's camp to check out his defenses. It was harvest season, and fruit was plentiful in the fields outside Castelnaudary. In full view of the southern French rebels, Simon's men were able to harvest grapes from vines growing outside the walls, and casually take them inside the town for consumption.

When Count Raymond's extensive defenses were complete, everyone sat back and wondered what would happen next. Someone may have pointed out to Count Raymond that they had bought a number of catapult machines with them, and perhaps they should use them to attack the already damaged walls of the city. This made sense, but the trouble was, Count Raymond's camp was too far away from the walls for the catapults to be of any use. They would have to be set up in the un-protected zones closer to the walls. This was most likely a bit of a "Doh" moment for Count Raymond, and it wasn't to be the last.

The siege engines were constructed and rocks were gathered as ammunition. The attacks by the catapult machines were largely unsuccessful. According to Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War", they didn't even scare the Crusaders, much less do any damage to the walls. Count Raymond then decided to roll out his big gun, the trebuchet. Even the trebuchet failed to make an impact. Count Raymond's men were able to find boulders large enough to place in the trebuchet, but they were of a type of rock which shattered on impact. So even if the trebuchet hit its target, the missile would just disintegrate, and caused no damage.

By this time, Count Raymond's men were getting restless and wanted to see some action. Peter the Monk points out that at this stage of the proceedings, Count Raymond's camp was so well fortified that, and I quote "They seemed more besieged than besieging, and their position more strongly defended and more difficult to approach than the castrum which was the object of their attack." End quote. With the defenses in the camp being raised to levels of awesomeness which couldn't be matched, and with the catapult

machines proving ineffective, the time Count Raymond had dreaded had arrived. It was time for his men to attack Castelnaudary.

The target of the attack was the fortified suburb which they had briefly occupied. At the beginning of the siege, Count Raymond's troops entered the suburb and, in true Count Raymond style, immediately began working on the suburb's defenses, fortifying the side of the suburb facing the castle with wooden fences and whatever other barriers they could find. They even knocked down part of the wall in the side of the suburb facing their camp, so they could make a speedy escape if attacked.

The next morning they were attacked. Simon de Montfort's men broke through the defenses without any trouble, and the holes that Count Raymond's men had knocked in the wall were put to good use, as the southern Frenchman fled through them back to their fortified camp. There was some good news from Raymond's side of the conflict, however. They had managed to source some boulders of the non-porous, non-sedimentary type for the trebuchet, and it was scoring the occasional impressive hit on the town's defenses. The trebuchet and the other catapult machines were now surrounded by a complex network of ditches, barriers and palisades. The trebuchet was causing so much damage that Simon de Montfort himself led a sortie out of the town to destroy the machine.

But Simon's mission was unsuccessful. Count Raymond's defensive obsession actually paid off in this instance, the defensive barriers and ditches built around the trebuchet being so formidable that Simon was forced to withdraw back into Castelnaudary without even having gotten close to the trebuchet. Hurray!

Join me next week as the siege of Castelnaudary drags on, and the Crusaders and the southern French rebels meet in the field, in the Battle of Saint-Martin-La-Lande. Until next week, bye for now.

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