

History of the Crusades.

Episode 135.

The Crusade Against The Cathars.

The Winter Campaign of the Year 1212.

Hello again. Last week we saw things take a turn for the worse for Simon de Montfort and his Crusade Against the Cathars. Despite besting Count Raymond VI of Toulouse militarily, Simon lost vast amounts of territory as southern France rose in rebellion against their northern French occupiers. We left Simon at Christmas-time in the year 1211. Somewhat cheered by the arrival of both one hundred unexpected Crusaders and his brother Guy, who had journeyed back from the Holy Land, Simon planned his next move.

Now, ordinarily, winter wasn't part of the campaigning season. Winter was a time when you bunkered down in your castle, keeping warm, and munching your way through the fruits of the autumn harvest. But one hundred Crusaders had recently arrived, and the clock was ticking on their forty days of Crusader service. Despite the inclement weather, Simon was going to attempt a winter campaign.

Winter campaigns have their challenges. Keeping morale up while your men are cold and uncomfortable is one challenge, as is the problem of supply. Not much grows during winter, and foraging the countryside for food is a largely useless waste of time and energy. Food either has to be carried with you, or you have to procure it for yourself by raiding the winter stores of towns and fortifications you conquer. Simon de Montfort decided he would rise to these challenges, and try to wrestle back territory he lost in the Viscounty of Albi.

Now Simon was currently at Castres. He had spent Christmas there. Castres is located in the borderlands between the County of Toulouse and the Viscounty of Albi. The Viscounty of Albi at this stage had thrown off northern French rule in all but one place. Count Raymond had spent most of the autumn in Albi and his efforts had paid off. The only stronghold left in the Viscounty of Albi loyal to Simon de Montfort was, ironically, Bruniquel, held by Baldwin of Toulouse, Count Raymond's younger brother who had defected to the Crusaders. Sitting in the castle at Castres, Simon was surrounded by hostile territory: to the north was the Viscounty of Albi; and to the south was the County of Toulouse. Donning some warm clothes and gathering together his brother Guy and the one hundred visiting Crusader knights, Simon de Montfort elected to head north, deep into the region of Albi.

His target was the small village of Touelles. Why did he decide to attack Touelles? Well, first because it was a small village with few defences, offering an easy first target for the Crusaders, and secondly because the town belonged to Guiraud of Pepieux's father. Simon and his Crusaders marched to the town, attacked it and it soon fell into his hands. Simon executed the men defending the town, but didn't execute Guiraud of Pepieux's father. No, he took him prisoner, and would later exchange him for a northern French nobleman who had been recently captured in an ambush by the Count of Foix. Following this success, Simon rode to another town in the Albi region and decided to besiege it.

Now by this time Count Raymond had mustered his forces and, along with the Counts of Foix and Comminges and their men, had moved into the Albi region, intent on making Simon's life as difficult as possible. In true Count Raymond style, the southern Frenchman didn't actually attack the Crusaders, nor try to engage them in the field. Instead, they harassed and taunted them, disrupted their supply lines and generally tried to make life

miserable for them. And that really wasn't hard. It was mid-winter. The Crusaders were deep in hostile territory, trying to achieve ambitious targets with very few men.

Just how difficult this winter campaign was is borne out by the siege Simon is currently carrying out. Simon's men had surrounded the town. His goal was to take it, then use it as a base to attack the larger town of Gaillac, which was around nine kilometers away. Trouble was, Count Raymond and his supporters, and their very large army, decided to use Gaillac as a base to attack Simon. Whether Simon's men were just too uncomfortable standing around in the freezing weather conducting their siege, or whether they felt some degree of urgency due to the close proximity of the southern French forces, the siege only lasted two days before Simon made the bold decision to lift the siege and attack the town. The Crusaders stormed the defenses of the town, and its extensive stores of food fell to the Crusaders. There was enough food stored within the town to keep Simon's army provisioned for the next week, which was fortunate as the chances of supply trains making it to the siege through hostile territory, past Count Raymond's army, were slim.

By this time, it was early January. It was at this time that Count Raymond sent a letter to Simon saying that they were about to leave Gaillac and attack the Crusaders. Going on the attack was contrary to Count Raymond's usual strategy, and of course he didn't mean it. Simon sent a small force to Gaillac to confront the supposedly attacking southern Frenchman, only to find that the Army had left Gaillac and had retreated back to Montegut. Simon and his army gave chase, but when they arrived at Montegut they found that, you guessed it, Count Raymond's army had retreated further, to the town of Rabastens.

Does Raymond have a strategy in mind here? Well, historians have speculated that he may have been trying to get Simon to chase him all the way back to the city of Toulouse, where presumably, deep in hostile territory, the Crusading army would then be attacked. Or he may have just been trying to tire Simon out, making him race through the short, cold days on a pointless mission. We'll never know if Count Raymond had an end-plan because Simon didn't take the bait. When Count Raymond fled further towards the County of Toulouse, Simon gave up the chase and returned to the town he had taken in Albi. There now seems to be a lull of a few weeks in the fighting, with everyone doing what they are meant to be doing in winter: conserving energy; keeping warm; and planning for the coming spring.

In February, Simon traveled to the city of Albi. Arnold Amaury was in the city, and Simon wished to meet with him to discuss his plans for the year ahead. Arnold Amaury suggested that Simon's next move should be to capture the town of Saint-Marcel in the northern region of the Viscounty of Albi. Simon de Montfort agreed that this would be a good idea, possibly because the town was currently under the control of the despised Guiraud of Pepieux. He headed north to besiege it.

Trouble is, at this point in time Simon doesn't really have enough men to conduct a proper siege. Despite this obvious short-coming, Simon and his small army, made up of his core permanent supporters, decided to go ahead and march to Saint-Marcel, perhaps because the idea of striking a blow to Guiraud was too tempting to pass up, or perhaps because Arnold Amaury had provided him with some intelligence about Catholic support in the area.

Following their arrival in Saint-Marcel, with too few men to surround the town, Simon had to content himself with besieging only a small section of the town's walls. This, of course,

meant that the townsfolk were free to come and go from Saint-Marcel as they wished. The Crusaders constructed a single catapult machine, but really the chances of them actually taking the town looked slim. These chances were reduced even further with the arrival of the three southern French Counts (Toulouse, Foix and Comminges) and their combined army. They entered San Marcel intending to assist in its defense, but their army was so big that many soldiers were forced to set up camp outside the town's walls, as there was simply not enough room to house them all inside the town.

At this stage, things weren't looking good for Simon. His attacks on Saint-Marcel were easily repulsed by the southern army, and to make things worse the Count of Foix kept leading raids out of the town, to attack the Crusaders sole catapult machine. But by far the biggest problem faced by Simon was one of supply. The closest town from which provisions could be purchased was the town of Albi, around twenty kilometers away. All the roads between Albi and Saint-Marcel were hostile to Simon, and were regularly patrolled by southern French rebels. Not only did Simon face an uphill battle getting merchants from Albi to agree to supply him with provisions, any supply train had to be heavily guarded by men from Simon's army if it was to have any chance at all of actually making it safely to Saint-Marcel. This of course, meant depleting his already pitifully small besieging force at Saint-Marcel, leaving those who remained at the siege vulnerable to attacks by the southern Counts. By Easter, the siege had been underway for a month, with Simon being no closer to taking Saint-Marcel. His men had been without bread for several days, and Simon bowed to the inevitable. He lifted the siege and marched his men back to Albi.

So let's just take stock for a moment. As at Easter in the year 1212, Simon's achievements from the hard slog of his winter campaign amounted to the taking of just two isolated castles in the Albi region. It really wasn't very impressive. To wrestle the Viscounty of Albi back from southern French control he was going to have to do much better than that.

Realistically, to win more towns he really needed more men. This might be a problem. 1212 was a massive year on the Crusading front. There were, of course, the dwindling Latin Christian possessions in the Holy Land, which were always looking for Latin Christian volunteers; we've covered them. There was the Crusade against the Cathars in southern France; we're covering that. There were also the Baltic Crusades to the north; we haven't covered them, yet. And there were the Spanish Crusades, in particular the Castilian Crusade, which had been proclaimed in January 1212; and we haven't covered them, yet. And, of course, the new Latin Christian Empire in Constantinople, created after the Fourth Crusade, was also always looking for Latin Christian settlers. Even if you were a youngster, you could do your bit by setting off on the Children's Crusade, which was about to depart from Europe; although I wouldn't advise it. So my point is, if you were a resident of Europe in the year 1212 and had a yearning to embark on a Crusade, you were spoiled for choice. The Crusade against the Cathars was just one of many military campaigns you could sign up to. So Simon de Montfort had to cross his fingers and hope that prospective Crusaders in northern France chose to make the short journey south to fulfill their Crusading ambitions, instead of one of the many other options on offer.

To try and drum up as many recruits for Simon as possible, some prominent clerics went on a recruitment drive, including the Archdeacon of Paris, who you might remember had an unusual love of siege engines. The Spanish Crusade was attracting a lot of northern French volunteers, and the preachers for the Crusade against the Cathars had more success in Germany, Austria and Italy, where the promoters of the Spanish Crusade

weren't quite so vocal. However, there were still a smattering of northern Frenchmen offering their services to Simon. All these volunteers made their way to Languedoc to join Simon's army for forty days.

In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption writes that many of these crusaders endured hardships before they even made it into battle. Apparently they were all told to head to Carcassonne, where they would then be directed to wherever Simon happened to be, which could be anywhere in the Viscounty of Albi, the County of Toulouse, the County of Foix, or the Viscounties of Beziers and Carcassonne. We take GPS and Google maps pretty much for granted today, but back then even basic maps were somewhat of a rarity. And even if a map was available most men were unable to read or interpret them. So the volunteers would be told, in hopefully not too vague a manner, where they were meant to be, and how they were meant to get there. They would then set off, through often mountainous, hostile territory, hoping they were taking the right roads to lead them to Simon. It was pointless asking the locals for directions, as most of the northern Europeans wouldn't have spoken Occitan, and regardless, most of the locals would have been hostile to the Crusading cause, and would have been happy to see the invaders get as lost as possible. Consequently, exhaustion, lack of water and food, and exposure to the weather claimed the lives of a number of volunteers before they even reached the Crusading army. The Count of Foix and his men became notorious for picking off groups of lost Crusaders and slaughtering them wherever they found them. In contrast, Simon's wife, Alice, apparently came across a group of exhausted and lost Crusading volunteers when she was riding to join her husband. She rode with them into the Crusading camp, even hauling one spent Crusader up onto her horse, where she rode pillion with him.

Eventually, enough crusaders from Germany, Austria, northern France and Italy completed the hazardous journey and rendezvoused with Simon's army for him to go on the offensive once again. He moved out of Albi and marched his new forces to Castres, around thirty kilometers south of Albi, arriving there on the 8th of April. It was at Castres that he decided on his next move.

Now, before we finish up this week's episode, there's one further event of note that we need to discuss, that event being the appointment of the new Bishop of Carcassonne. The new Bishop appointed to become the chief cleric in Simon de Montfort's key town was none other than Guy of Les Vaux-Cernay. When he journeyed to Carcassonne to take up his new position, Guy was joined by his nephew, Peter of Les Vaux-Cernay, a man who we better know as "Peter the Monk". For the next year or so, Peter the Monk will shadow his uncle, new Bishop of Carcassonne, possibly acting as his secretary. As such, he will become an eye-witness to the events that he will later chronicle. As a result, some upcoming events, although relatively minor in the context of the overall Crusade, are recorded by Peter in exquisite detail. The minor siege of Hautpol, which occurs a week or so after Simon de Montfort arrives at Castres, is one such event, and we will see it through Peter's eyes in our next episode. Until next week, bye for now.

End