

History of the Crusades.
Episode 136.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Siege of Hautpol and the Siege of Saint-Antonin.

Hello Again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort attempt to regain lost ground in an unusual winter campaign. Unfortunately for Simon, by Easter in the year 1212 all he had to show for his hard work was the sum total of two towns recaptured from the southern French rebels. However, volunteer Crusaders were beginning to trickle in from the north, as a recruitment drive attracted some northern Europeans to the Crusade against the Cathars. Boosted by these new forces, Simon de Montfort decided to attack the small fortified village of Hautpol.

Hautpol was located high in the Black Mountains. It was so remote and inaccessible that Laurence Marvin, in his book "The Occitan War", points out that not many people lived in Hautpol back in 1212, and not many people live in Hautpol today. So why did Simon attack it? Well, firstly, it had rebelled against him back at the time of the Siege of Castelnaudary, so it needed to be taught a lesson; and secondly it looked down over a mountain pass which formed an important communications link between Castres and Cabaret, and any travelers on the road could be spotted from the heights of Hautpol from a distance of up to fifteen kilometers away. As you can imagine from its location, Hautpol was protected by formidable natural barriers, including ravines, crevices and cliffs. Simon's army moved out of Castres and arrived at Hautpol on Sunday the 8th of April 1212. Accompanying the army was a certain non-combatant, Peter the Monk.

The residents of Hautpol would have seen Simon's army marching towards them on the mountain pass. Men from the town armed themselves, and a group of them moved out to confront the Crusaders as they approached the town. They were forced back inside the town by Simon's men, who then proceeded to set up camp outside the city walls. Simon didn't have enough men to surround the town. Even if he did, the natural defenses of the town would have made it very difficult to besiege. Peter the Monk describes the town as follows, and I quote: "Hautpol is situated on the slope of a very high and steep hill, over huge crags which are virtually inaccessible. Its natural defenses are so strong, as I learned from my own experiences as an eyewitness, that even if the gates were opened and no resistance offered from inside, it would be impossible without the greatest difficulty to walk through the castrum and climb up to the keep" end quote.

After three days of hard work, the Crusaders had managed to construct a catapult machine close enough to the walls to score a hit on the town. As the catapult machine hurled rocks at the city walls, a group of knights decided to climb down into a ravine and try to break through the walls while the defenders were distracted by the flying missiles from the catapult. However, once they'd made it through the ravine and were scaling the steep climb up the other side, the townspeople spotted them and began throwing rocks down upon them. Other defenders joined in the rock-throwing until the knights were forced to turn back. To their horror, they found that an enterprising towns-person had lit a fire deep in the ravine, cutting off their retreat. The knights were forced to make a mad dash through the smoke and flames to safety.

Shortly after this event, the residents of Hautpol asked to meet with a representative from the Crusader army to discuss a possible surrender. However, they didn't want to meet with

just any representative. They specified a particular individual, a man in the Crusader army who was a relative of one of the residents of Hautpol. Not surprisingly, this particular Crusader out wasn't at all popular with the people of Hautpol. The offer of terms was apparently a trick to enable the citizens of Hautpol to seek revenge against the man for turning on his southern French brethren and fighting for the Crusader cause. As the man was talking at the gates with a resident of the town, he was shot with a crossbow bolt and severely injured, a move which Peter the Monk describes as, and I quote "a vile and cruel act of treachery" end quote.

The following day marked the fourth day since the catapult machine had started its bombardment. During the evening of that fourth day a dense mist formed and descended and settled around the town. As darkness fell the defenders, believing Hautpol would eventually be overrun by the Crusaders, decided to make a run for safety. Unfortunately, despite the darkness and the mist, their flight was noticed by some of Simon's men, who pursued them and killed any fleeing defenders they came across. When dawn broke Hautpol was deserted. Simon de Montfort decided to burn it to the ground.

In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption describes the defeat of Hautpol as a turning point for Simon. After Hautpol, everything seemed to work in his favor.

Well, nearly everything. A strange incident at Narbonne blotted Simon's copybook at this time, and demonstrated the depth of the feelings against him in Languedoc. The Papal Legate Arnold Amaury had been appointed to the position of Archbishop of Narbonne. This was a lofty station, the most prestigious appointment available within the Catholic Church in southern France. Simon's brother Guy and Simon's fourteen-year-old son Amaury was sent to represent Simon at the investiture ceremony. While Simon's son was visiting the Palace of the Viscount of Narbonne, he pushed an old window in an attempt to open it. Instead of opening, the window fell out of its frame and smashed down onto the road outside.

Later that day, an unruly mob of citizens confronted Simon's son and accused him of having broken into the Viscount's palace. The allegations were false, but the mob was clearly angry and out for blood. A riot ensued, and suddenly any northern Frenchman found out on the streets was in danger. Simon's brother Guy was staying at the Palace and sensibly stayed indoors until the riot had played out. A number of northern Frenchmen, however, were not so lucky and were killed by the rioters, including two of Simon de Montfort's personal squires. Despite the fact that the Viscounty of Narbonne had never been directly attacked by the Crusaders, anti-Simon de Montfort feelings were clearly running high, and for the next few months Simon will ensure that those feelings ran even higher.

The campaign season started shortly after the victory at Hautpol and the window incident at Narbonne. During the month of May, volunteer Crusaders from all over Europe poured into southern France. As well as the expected bunch of men from northern France, the chroniclers mentioned men from Saxony, Westphalia, the low countries, Italy, and even medieval Yugoslavia. So many men arrived to start their forty days of Crusader service that Simon was able to field two separate armies, one commanded by himself and the other by his brother Guy.

Guy took most of the northern Frenchmen and led them southwards into the County of Foix. Their first conquest was the town of Lavelanet, which they defeated, after which they massacred the population. After this move, the army swept through the county of Foix, with the local population fleeing before the arrival of the force. Guy's army plundered, burnt, and destroyed the hastily abandoned towns and villages they came across, as well as destroying anything else of value they found, and laying waste to the land.

Simon de Montfort led the Germans, Italians and Yugoslavians on a similar mission through the northern regions of the County of Toulouse and the Viscounty of Albi. Now, at the beginning of this campaign, towns, villages and fortifications in the path of the Crusaders sent delegations to Simon seeking terms of surrender. But Simon was no longer interested in negotiating with these pesky southern French turncoats. Time after time, he had heard the citizens of Languedoc swear undying loyalty to him when confronted by his invading army, only to turn back to their rebellious ways as soon as the army departed. Well, this time he wasn't here to win the hearts and minds of the southern French, nor to accept their worthless pledges. He was here to teach them a lesson.

In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption describes how the citizens of Saint-Marcel approached Simon at the start of his campaign and threw themselves at his mercy. Simon reminded them that Saint-Marcel had previously sworn loyalty to him, but had turned against him only a few months later. The delegates from Saint-Marcel returned to their town, and when Simon's army reached it, it was deserted. He ordered his army to destroy the town's fortifications. Then he set fire to its wooden houses. The army marched to another similarly deserted town a few miles down the road, and it received the same treatment.

Soon the townsfolk could see a pattern emerging. They realized that Simon wasn't here to gather pledges of loyalty, but to kill the defiant citizens of southern France and destroy their towns. They also knew, from experience, that even worse punishment would befall them if they defended their town against the Crusaders, so they grabbed all they could carry and left before the arrival of Simon and his army. They knew Simon would do his best to destroy their town, but at least they would have their lives.

For the members of the Crusading army, it was unchallenging, simple work: turn up at a deserted town, pillage, plunder, burn, and destroy, then march to the next deserted town and repeat. Simon decided that this type of crusading could just as easily be done by Raymond's brother, Baldwin of Toulouse. He handed Baldwin the task of continuing to destroy deserted towns, then marched his army into the northwest, into the Agenais region.

On their way to the Agenais, the Crusaders encountered one town, namely Saint-Antonin, which to their shock, actually offered some resistance. When the Crusader army arrived, expecting deserted streets and an empty town ready to be burned and destroyed, they instead found the city gates barred against them. The defiant Lord of the town barricaded himself within the castle of the town, letting anyone who would listen know that he was unwilling to turn over his town to a bunch of northern French stick-carriers.

Hmm, "stick-carriers". This was apparently an insult designed to make the Crusaders angry. Some of the Crusaders who were more into the pilgrimage aspect of the Crusade rather than the combat aspect, carried a staff or large walking stick, the age-old symbol of a pilgrim, designed to assist them in their long treks. By sending word to Simon that he

was not going to surrender his town to a bunch of stick-carriers, the Lord of Saint-Antonin was in effect telling Simon that his army was composed of a bunch of useless, stick-carrying pilgrims, and there was no way that he was going to let them all in and destroy his property. No doubt relishing the chance for a bit of action, Simon rubbed his hands together and ordered his army to besiege the town.

Now, as military actions go, the siege of Saint-Antonin was pretty minor in the context of the larger campaign against the Cathars, but Peter the Monk was traveling with his uncle, the new Bishop of Carcassonne, who himself was traveling with Simon's army, so Peter was a witness to the siege and described it in detail in his "Historia Albigensis". So let's take a look at the Siege of Saint-Antonin through Peter's eyes.

Saint-Antonin is located in a picturesque valley bordered by a large river on its southern side and a smaller river on its western side. Unlike many other fortified towns in Languedoc, it's situated on flat ground, making it relatively easy to besiege and attack. Peter the Monk states that the Crusaders set up camp in front of the main city gates, while also occupying an area of ground on the other side of the town. Peter states that almost as soon as the Crusaders arrived, they came under attack from archers within the town. During the evening of their first day camping outside the town, so the evening of the 20th of May 1212, some of the defenders crept out of the town, and with their targets now a little closer, fired arrows directly into the camp.

Now, this was all too much for the vulgarium numerus infinitus who formed part of the Crusader army. Remember them? They are the rabble, the impoverished, weaponless armour-less members of the Crusading army. Now you can sort of see why the rabble are about to lose the plot entirely and go on an undisciplined violent rampage. They have likely left behind their drudging existences as peasants or labourers in the north, and made the long, arduous journey on foot to southern France to take up their forty days Crusader service. The forty days Crusader service must have presented a tempting opportunity for these people. They have been told that, for a period of forty days, they can kill heretics with impunity. Not only that, they can do so with a clear conscience, and after their period of service their souls will be cleansed of sin. Imagine their disappointment then, when accompanying Simon's army all they've been coming across is deserted towns. Plundering, looting and destroying property can have its own rewards of course, but what the rabble really wants to do is to attack some heretics.

Now here they are, camped outside a town in a pleasant valley, while heretics shoot arrows at them. Now the heretics have come out of their town and are firing arrows at them at close range. It was all just too much for the rabble. Without the orders of, or even the knowledge of, Simon de Montfort or the other army leaders, the rabble went on the attack. Unable to find any of the archers, who sensibly must have retreated back inside the town or kept well away from the frenzied mob, the rabble attacked the barbicans outside the city walls.

What are barbicans? Well, they are a bit of a newfangled invention at this time. The gates of a fortified town are generally its defensive weak spot, so someone came up with the idea of building a defensive sort-of gatehouse around each gate. So to get to the city gate, you would need to pass through a walled passage projecting out from the gate. These passages, known as barbicans, were designed to provide both an additional obstacle that an attacker would have to overcome to reach the gate, and were also designed to provide

a place where archers could conceal themselves above an invading force, and attack them as they approached the gate.

Right, so within the space of only one hour, the frenzied bunch of Crusading peasants has captured three separate barbicans. Now keep in mind the fact that these men have no armor and no weapons, no swords, no shields, nothing. And they have no plan of attack. They're not following orders, and they're not being led. With stones and just their bare hands as their only weapons, they overran the barbicans, pushed through the gates, and entered the town. The armed Crusaders and knights followed them in, and many of the townspeople fled through an alternative gate near the river, some of them jumping into the river and swimming to safety. Any fleeing townspeople who could be caught were killed by the Crusaders.

Peter the Monk stated that when he entered the town after this event, he saw with his own eyes chunks of walls of houses broken away by stones hurled by the rabble. Peter the Monk goes on to describe the surrender of the town. It's quite a long quote, but I think it's worth relating. Just keep in mind that when he refers to the Count, he means Viscount Simon de Montfort. And I quote: "After the capture of the barbicans our Crusaders withdrew from the attacks. Daylight was fading and night imminent. The Lord of Saint-Antonin realized that the loss of the barbicans meant that the castrum was as good as captured, and about midnight sent to the Count to say that he was ready to surrender the place provided he could go free. The Count refused these terms. The Lord sent again to say that he would surrender himself and the castrum unconditionally. At first light, the Count ordered all the inhabitants to be brought out. A consultation with his comrades led to the conclusion that if he ordered the defenders, who were mere untutored countrymen, to be killed, the castrum would be devoid of inhabitants and become desolate. So wiser council prevailed, and he released them. The Lord of the place, the cause of all the trouble, he ordered to be shut up in the depths of the keep at Carcassonne, where he was kept in chains for some time. A few knights with him were committed to prison." End quote.

Hmm, the dungeons at Carcassonne must be getting pretty crowded. Join me next week, as Simon de Montfort marches his army into new territory, into a place almost entirely devoid of Cathars, the wealthy Agenais region. Until next week, bye for now.

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