

History of the Crusades.
Episode 137.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
The Invasion of Agenais.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort besiege and defeat two separate towns, the town of Hautpol and the town of Saint-Antonin. While the sieges were relatively minor events in the context of the Crusade as a whole, they were witnessed by Peter the Monk who relayed them in great detail in his chronicle of the Crusade, the "Historia Albigensis". Fresh from these victories and with two armies under his control, one in the north and the other under the command of his brother Guy in the Count of Foix's lands to the south, Simon de Montfort decides to march his army to the northwest, into the Agenais region.

Now, from a Crusading point of view and from a geopolitical point of view, this was an interesting move. The Agenais region was traditionally Plantagenet territory and had only come under the control of the Count of Toulouse relatively recently. As such, it didn't really have a Cathar problem. While there may have been the odd practicing Cathar here and there, it was pretty much acknowledged by the Crusaders that the region held no Cathar Perfect, and really there weren't any heretics in any significant numbers to vanquish. The region had been gifted to the Count of Toulouse by Richard the Lionheart when he married Richard's sister Joanna back in 1196. The current feudal overlord of the region was the English King, King John, so Simon de Montfort is going to be treading on some pretty distinguished toes by invading the region with his army.

So if there are hardly any heretics here, why invade at all? Well, firstly, because it does belong to Count Raymond and Count Raymond is Simon's enemy, and secondly, because it's a wealthy jewel of an area, which Simon wants to add to his territories. Now, the Agenais is situated in the border regions between territories held by the King of England and territories held by the King of France. As such, it was protected by very well fortified castles. Richard the Lionheart himself had designed many of the castles, with the intent that they'd be able to hold out against an invasion by the armies of the French King. Now these castles will have a chance to be put to good use against an invasion by the Viscount of Carcassonne and Beziers and the armies of the Church.

To Simon's delight however, as he entered the region he found little resistance. The loyalties of the local population were more aligned with their Plantagenet overlord than with the Count of Toulouse, and few local lords were willing to die for their southern French Count. As a result, as news of Simon's invasion spread, most towns and castles Simon encountered were either abandoned or were happy to surrender to the Crusading force. There is always an exception to any rule, and the exception to the rule that castles and towns in the Agenais put up little resistance to Simon's Army was the castle of Penne d'Agenais.

Now, the castle of Penne d'Agenais was one of the most significant strongholds in the region. It had been designed by Richard the Lionheart and featured a range of cutting-edge defensive innovations. Many of these have been expanded and improved upon by the current lord of the castle Hugh d'Alfaro, who was married to one of Count Raymond's many illegitimate daughters. Hugh had already made himself useful to the rebel cause during the siege of Toulouse the previous year, and unlike other lords in the region he was willing to make a stand on behalf of his father-in-law.

Peter the Monk accompanied Simon's army to Penne d'Agenais, and seemed quite taken with the castle and its location. Here's his description of it, and I quote. "Penne was the most notable castrum in the Agenais. It was situated on a pleasant hillside surrounded on all sides by broad and fertile valleys. On one side it was graced by rich and productive farmland, on an other by fertile vineyards, a source of joy. It was moreover, blessed by pleasant and healthy air and surrounded by a wealth of beautiful streams. The castle itself, built on a huge natural crag and protected by very strong walls, seemed to be almost impregnable. King Richard of England had made the castle very strong and had a well dug, because Penne was in effect the principal place in the whole of the Agenais, and the key to controlling it". End quote.

In addition to the design features of the castle created by Richard the Lionheart, Hugh had added a few innovations of his own. To ensure the castle would be a self-sufficient as possible during a siege he had ordered two blacksmith forges, a furnace, and a mill to be constructed inside the castle. This meant that he had the equipment on-site to make and repair tools and weapons, and to grind grain to make bread.

Hugh had been informed of the approach of the Crusading army and had plenty of time to prepare his castle for a lengthy siege. He gathered stores of wine, grain, and meat, and ordered a ready supply of wood and iron to be stored inside the castle, meaning he could also construct his own catapult machines. He also managed to hire four hundred mercenaries which, when added to a number of local nobleman who were prepared to assist in the defence of the castle, meant that his garrison was of an adequate size. To reduce civilian casualties, and to reduce the number of mouths that would need feeding during a siege, he expelled most non-combatants from the castle as the Crusaders approached, and then set fire to the un-walled lower town around the base of the castle, which, meant that he had an unobstructed view of the approach of Simon's army from the south, and also prevented Simon's army from taking shelter within the town.

The Crusaders arrived via the southwestern approach to the castle on the morning of the 3rd of June 1212 and set up camp in the burnt-out section of the lower town. Hugh immediately went into action, ordering his archers to fire at the Crusaders as they were preparing their camp. Not only did the Crusaders set up their tents, they also set up a catapult machines. A few days later when the catapult machines were ready, Simon put them to use. They scored a few hits on the upper town around the base of the castle, but failed to make any impact whatsoever on the thick castle walls. Meanwhile, Hugh had ordered his own catapult machines to be constructed inside the castle, and was busy hurling stones into the Crusader camp and at the Crusader catapult machines. Hugh also conducted the occasional raid on the Crusader siege engines, with small groups of mercenaries ranging from the castle into the Crusader camp, attempting to damage the catapult machines, and keeping the Crusaders on their toes.

As summer dragged on, so did the siege. The forty day period of Crusader service was fast coming to an end for many of the visiting European Crusaders, and Simon knew he needed more men, so he sent word to his brother Guy to bring his army up from the south to join Simon's force at Penne d'Agenais. Guy's army had been busy burning towns and causing mayhem within the County of Foix. He had then headed north into the County of Toulouse for more burning and destruction, and was in the region around the city of Toulouse when he received word that he was needed at Penne d'Agenais. He moved his army further northwards, pillaging, looting and destroying the odd castle and village here

and there as he went, until he eventually arrived at his destination, setting up camp on the eastern side of the castle.

The Archdeacon of Paris had been accompanying Guy's army. Remember the Archdeacon of Paris? He's the cleric who has a deep interest in and love of siege engines. Well, as soon as Guy's army had settled into the siege the Archdeacon of Paris started work constructing an enormous trebuchet, which the Crusaders hoped would break the siege. According to Jonathan Sumption in his book "The Albigensian Crusade", this was the largest trebuchet used to date by the Crusaders. It did do some damage to the keep of the castle, but nothing of significance.

Meanwhile, the forty day Crusader time limit ticked over for many of the men in Simon's army. They waved goodbye to Simon and headed home. Others decided to leave the siege and head to Spain for some more Crusader action, action that might prove more exciting than sitting around in the sun outside Penne d'Agenais for weeks on end. If Simon was wringing his hands at this point, worried about his dwindling forces and their ability to end the siege, he needn't have worried.

Inside the castle Hugh had more than a few problems of his own. By this time seven weeks had passed. The garrison of hungry men, including four hundred mercenaries, can eat their way through a fair amount of food in seven weeks, and Hugh's supplies were running low. Worse, in the heat of high summer, the wells inside the castle were beginning to run dry. He knew that realistically they couldn't hold out much longer. This, coupled with the fact that the trebuchet of enormous size was starting to score some nasty hits, and that Hugh had spotted reinforcements arriving from Carcassonne to bolster Simon's dwindling army, meant that things were looking grim for the defenders. The last straw though, the thing that finally drove Hugh to surrender, was the fact that his father-in-law Count Raymond didn't seem at all interested in his plight, and had neither sent words of encouragement nor much needed reinforcements. As Jonathan Sumption states, once the garrison realized that no assistance was going to be forthcoming from the Count of Toulouse, they didn't care to become martyrs for a cause that Count Raymond himself seemed disinterested in. If Count Raymond couldn't be bothered to muster some forces to come to the aid of the most strategically important castle in the Agen region, then his men couldn't be bothered laying down their lives in its defense.

Hugh sent word to Simon that they would be willing to seek terms of surrender. Initially, Simon wanted nothing less than unconditional surrender of the castle, with that surrender being secured under threat of his Crusaders storming the castle. However, some of his men pointed out that his army was diminishing daily, with the forty day requirement coming to an end for many soldiers, and that storming the castle was not really an option. In the end, on the 25th of July 1212, Simon agreed to a compromise. Penne d'Agenais would be handed over to the Crusaders in exchange for the safe passage of all its defenders. Hugh and his garrison walked out of the castle and the Crusaders moved in. They repaired the walls that had been damaged by the trebuchet and made the castle their own.

As soon as Penne d'Agenais was secure, Simon marched his army 27 kilometers to the north, to the castle of Biron. Why did he go to the relatively insignificant castle of Biron? Well, it was for reasons of personal retribution and revenge. Who was the target? It was one Martin Algai. Now you might remember Martin Algai. He was the Crusade commander who lost his nerve during the battle of Saint-Martin-La-Lande and fled the field, taking twenty knights with him and seriously threatening the Crusader position. Martin had later

stated that he hadn't fled the battlefield at all, it only looked that way. No no no, he had been chasing a bunch of southern French or rebels who had just happened to be also fleeing out of harm's way. And he didn't return to the battlefield after the chase because ... ah ... yeah.

Actually, no one believed this story, probably least of all Martin himself. He knew that he had totally burnt his bridges as far as Simon de Montfort and the Crusaders were concerned, so after the battle of Saint-Martin-La-Lande turned into an unlikely victory for the Crusaders, Martin decided to retire to a little castle way to the north, where he would not likely be of bother to anyone. He approached Count Raymond, made peace with him, and rode to Biron, where he could forget about Crusading, battles, and heretics and just live in peace in his little castle, far away from the politics and chaos of Crusading. In some ways Martin had earned his retirement. He had had quite a busy military career. Early on, he was aligned with the Plantagenets, campaigning alongside Richard the Lionheart in Aquitaine and serving briefly as seneschal to King John in Gascony. In 1211 he joined Simon de Montfort, only for things to go horribly wrong at Saint-Martin-La-Lande.

Things were about to go horribly wrong once again. Simon de Montfort was not one to forgive and forget, and with Martin having fled the battlefield, and then having the affront to retire peacefully to a castle in Count Raymond's lands, meant that Martin needed to be hunted down; hunted down and taught a lesson.

Martin's castle at Biron was only a minor fortification and was an easy target for the Crusading army. Almost as soon as they arrived they managed to take the outer wall of the castle, and its garrison, seeing that the defences were no match for Simon's forces, were keen to surrender. Simon informed them that they could surrender: they could exchange their lives for the life of their overlord, Martin. The garrison apparently thought that that was a pretty fair deal, so they handed Martin over, and were allowed to walk free. Martin was not allowed to walk free. Peter the Monk describes what happened to Martin after he was handed over to Simon, or "the Count", as Peter calls Simon, and I quote "On taking him the Count offered him the opportunity to confess his sins, such had been his practice as a good Catholic in dealing with other condemned men. He then had him tied to a horse and dragged through the army and finally hanged from a gibbet, It was a fate in keeping with his crimes." End quote.

Having dispatched Martin and taught him a lesson that no one was likely to forget in a hurry, Simon returned back to Penne d'Agenais. There were now only two towns of strategic importance in northern Languedoc, which were not under Simon's control, the towns of Moissac and Montauban. Simon would need to secure both these towns if he wished to hold on to the Agenais region for any significant length of time. Join me next week as Simon tackles the first of these towns in the siege of Moissac. Until next week, bye for now.

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