

History of the Crusades.
Episode 138.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
The Siege of Moissac.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort turn the Crusader armies to the north and invade the Agen region. The Agen was part of Count Raymond VI of Toulouse's domain, but contained few heretics. Its overlord was King John of England. By the end of last week's episode, only two significant towns remained to be conquered in the region: Moissac and Montauban. Both these towns were located on river crossings where major roadways conjoined. If Simon was to have any hope of keeping the Agenais under his control he would need to take and hold both these towns.

Simon decided to tackle Moissac first, and he arrived at the town with his army on the 14th of August 1212. Now, Moissac was located in a picturesque and fertile valley on the River Tarn. It was a traditional resting place for pilgrims traveling on their way to Santiago de Compostela, and the town was dominated by a large monastery, the monastery of St Peter. The Abbot of the monastery was currently at odds with the townsfolk and with the town's overlord, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, and it's not difficult to see why. Count Raymond was at this point an enemy of the Church, and yet here was the Abbott, an avowed and dedicated servant of the Church, having to suffer Count Raymond as his overlord. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between the Abbot and Count Raymond was tense, and only a few days before the arrival of the Crusader army, men loyal to Count Raymond had confiscated some papers and baggage owned by the Abbot. The outraged Abbott had been preparing to travel to Paris to complain to Count Raymond's overlord, King Philip of France, about this appalling behavior, when he received the welcome news that the armies of the Church, under the command of Simon de Montfort, were approaching and had Moissac in their sights.

His joy, however, was short lived. The people of Moissac decided to side with Count Raymond. They didn't like being told what to do by the Abbot, and were more than happy to be ruled by Count Raymond, who lived miles away and really, within reason, let them do whatever they pleased. So the citizens of Moissac banded together, expelled the Abbot from the town, and managed to hire for themselves 300 mercenaries. Count Raymond sent some of his men to the town to further bolster their defenses. And purely to aggravate the Abbot, the townspeople insisted on ringing the bells of the Church in the abbey on an hourly basis, in defiance of the interdict placed by Pope Innocent over Count Raymond's lands.

Peter the Monk arrived at Moissac with the Crusader army on the 14th of August, which he usefully points out is also the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and he watched as the Crusaders began to besiege the town. Here is what he observed about Moissac itself, and I quote. "Moissac was situated at the foot of a hill on level ground near the River Tarn. The site was very fertile and pleasant. Its name is derived from the word "mois", which means water, since there is an abundance of clear springs inside the walls." End quote

Now, although Moissac was located on low ground adjacent to the river, it was strongly fortified. Its walls were thick and high, and to start with, there weren't enough Crusaders to entirely surround it. This meant that, while the Crusaders were busy constructing their siege engines, under the ever-watchful instructing eye of that expert in their operation the

Archdeacon of Paris, the defenders were able to move out of the fortifications, to an adjacent hill which was within firing range of the Crusader camp. From there, they could fire crossbow bolts at the Crusaders, while their counterparts busied themselves inside the fortifications constructing their own siege engines with which to defend their city. The crossbow archers were crack shots, and the Crusaders suffered heavy casualties from their attacks. Simon de Montfort himself was wounded in the foot by an arrow and Peter the Monk's uncle, the Bishop of Carcassonne, also had a couple of close calls, as the defenders made a practice of firing bolts into crowds of Crusaders as they gathered to hear the Bishop preach.

Peter the Monk himself was nearly cleaned up by a crossbow bolt. I'll let him tell you what happened, and I quote. "I must record that before Moissac was surrounded, the mercenaries used to come out and climbed the hill, and when they saw the Bishop of Carcassonne preaching to the army, they would fire bolts from their crossbows into the crowded audience, but by God's grace, they did not succeed in harming anyone. On another day, I myself, a mere monk of the Cistercian, went quite close to the castrum to encourage the Crusaders who were supplying the catapults. One of the mercenaries in Moissac, showing no respect for my calling, fired an extremely sharp bolt from his crossbow at maximum power and tried to hit me. I was on my horse at the time. The bolt pierced my robe, missed my flesh by a finger's width or less, and fixed itself in my saddle. Through God's grace neither I nor my horse was harmed. This I do not attribute to my own merit; rather, it seems that Divine Clemency ensured that the enemies of religion would not be able to rejoice in striking a monk as if this were a significant victory, and thus justify continuing their attacks on our men." End quote.

In addition to nearly hitting Peter the Monk, and injuring Simon de Montfort, the crossbowmen managed to kill a noble woman who was accompanying Baldwin of Toulouse. The nephew of the Archbishop of Reims met an even worse fate. He was captured by the defenders, taken into the town, and killed. He was then dismembered, and bits of him were fed into the town's catapult machines, and shot back over into the Crusader camp. While all this drama was unfolding, priests in the Crusader camp provided an appropriate soundtrack, marching solemnly through the Crusader lines, barefoot, chanting the hymn "Veni Creatus Spiritus".

By early September, additional reinforcements arrived at the battle in the form of northern French Crusader volunteers. As soon as Simon believed he had enough men present to surround the city he did so, wanting to both cut the town off from supplies and reinforcements, and to prevent the crossbowmen from leaving the fortifications and climbing the nearby hill to seek some tempting targets within the Crusader camp. Once the town was surrounded, the Crusaders set about attacking it with renewed vigour, launching missile after missile at the city walls, and constructing a cat which they covered with fresh cow hides to prevent it from catching alight. Under cover of the cat, the Crusaders hoped to approach the wall, with a view to undermining it.

However, between the cat and the city walls was a deep and wide defensive ditch filled with water. Peter the Monk reports that the defenders, who were watching the construction of the cat from the battlements, managed to dig another ditch between the cat and the walls and construct palisades, in effect creating an extra two barriers between the cat and its destination. To complete the defenses, they also assembled a catapult machine between the two ditches, enabling them to hurl missiles at the cat as it approached.

Seemingly undeterred by these formidable obstacles, Simon de Montfort ordered the cat to advance. The Crusaders managed to fill in the first ditch and crossed it without too much drama. The Crusaders must have been confident that the cat could negotiate the second ditch with similar ease because at this stage of the attack both Simon de Montfort and his brother Guy were inside the cat, helping the crusaders to fill in the second ditch, protected to some extent by the shelter provided by the cat. Perhaps the defenders were aware that the leaders of the Crusader forces were both inside the cat, as that evening a group of defenders carrying torches and anything else flammable they could find - wood, straw, fat, oil, and even salted meat - attacked the cat with renewed vigor, attempting to set the cat alight and burn alive those inside. As the flaming objects rained down upon them, Simon, his brother Guy, and the other unfortunate men inside the cat desperately extinguished every fire as it started, using water, wine and even dirt to put out the flames, while others used iron hooks to haul burning lumps of salted meat and wood from the roof of the cat.

With the cat damaged by the flames, and with the men inside the cat shaken by the attack, the cat retreated and its advance was called off until the following day. It must have been mightily unpleasant to be sheltering within the cat as the defenders tried to set it alight. Peter the Monk states of those inside, and I quote "The anguish caused to them by the heat and their exertions was beyond belief and could scarcely be witnessed without tears. But in the end, our men dragged the cat from the flames." End quote.

The next day, the Crusaders threw everything at the town's defenses. Donning their armour, the knights of the Crusade managed to break the palisade protecting the second ditch, while the catapult machines attacked various points along the walls. The attack was successful on several fronts. The cat was able to inch closer to the walls, and the walls themselves were weakened in several places. Peter the Monk attributes this success not so much to the fighting men, but to the chanting clerics whose loud rendition of "Veni Creatus Spiritus", he says, filled the defenders with divinely-inspired fear, causing them to retreat from the defenses back into the safety and silence of the town's castle.

By the end of this attack, it was clear to the Crusaders and the townspeople that a breach of the wall was perhaps only days or even just hours away. Word of the imminent fall of Moissac had spread to the surrounding towns, whose citizens had some tough decisions to make. As Jonathan Sumption points out in his book "The Albigensian Crusade", the citizens of these towns were anxious not to be massacred, and the likely imminent victory of the Crusaders had them scrambling to reconsider their positions. In the end, just about every town in the region, except for Montauban, sent a deputation to Simon, offering the unconditional submission of their towns.

Once this news reached the citizens of Moissac, it made them too reconsider their stance, with a view to also avoiding a massacre. For the garrison of Moissac, the mercenaries, and Count Raymond's men who had been fighting valiantly to repel the Crusaders, the position was clear. If Moissac fell into Simon's hands, they knew they were dead men. From their point of view, the only way forward was to continue to defend the city and hope for reinforcements to arrive from one of the southern French counts.

The citizens of Moissac came to a different conclusion. They didn't want to share the fate of the garrison, and the fact that just about every other town in the region had laid down their swords before the Crusaders, sealed their decision. Without the approval of, or perhaps even the knowledge of the garrison, a delegation of citizens met with Simon and offered to open the gates of the city to Simon and his men, in return for sparing the lives of

the citizens within the town. Simon accepted the offer. The citizens also paid Simon one hundred gold marks to protect their houses and property from being pillaged by the Crusaders. The citizens opened the gates. The Crusaders entered Moissac, slaughtered the garrison, the mercenaries, and Count Raymond's men, and took the town.

Now, the Abbot of Moissac had watched the battle unfold from the Crusader camp. His delight in the Crusader victory quickly turned to dismay. He hadn't been party to the surrender negotiations, and hadn't contributed to the one hundred marks paid to ensure protection of property. So one of the few places within Moissac that the Crusaders were able to pillage was, you guessed it, the abbey. Remember that just prior to the siege of Moissac the Abbott had been in the process of preparing to travel to Paris to meet with King Philip to complain about the town's overlord, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse? Well now, as soon as Simon de Montfort had secured Moissac, the Abbott sat down to write to King Philip to officially complain about his new overlord, Simon de Montfort and his bunch of monastery-pillaging Crusaders.

With Moissac securely in the hands of the Crusaders, and with the surrounding towns having surrendered to Simon, there was only one town holding out in the region, the town of Montauban. While Simon had been otherwise occupied during the siege of Moissac, the Count of Foix's son had ridden north with 100 knights to assist in the defense of Montauban. As a result, the city was well defended, well manned, and well prepared for a lengthy siege. It was now September. The weather was beginning to cool, and Simon had no wish to start a lengthy siege this late in the season. Deciding that the now isolated outpost of Montauban could wait for another day, Simon gathered his army and marched back into southern Languedoc.

By this time, Simon had been absent from the southern part of southern France for nearly a year. During this time, his supporters had been busy. With Simon subduing the North, the momentum had swung back in the Crusaders' favor. The three southern rebel Counts, Toulouse, Foix, and Comminges had all done their best to fan the flames of rebellion, but large-scale resistance in the Counties of Toulouse, Foix and Comminges had died down. The northern French garrisons across the Counties had been strengthened by the arrival of groups of northern Crusaders, and local bishops and clerics had successfully urged the local populations to submit to northern French rule. As Simon rode through the previously rebellious Counties, remaining resistance seemed to falter and die. Towards the end of the year 1212, all of Languedoc had been subdued, save for the two towns of Toulouse and Montauban, and a handful of isolated fortresses in the mountainous regions of the Counties of Foix and Comminges to the far south.

Oh dear, is this the end of the Crusade against the Cathars? Has Simon De Montfort won the war? Well, although things do look exceptionally bleak for the southern French Counts, all hope is not lost. At the tail end of the year 1212, a savior for the southern French cause will cross the Pyrenees to lend his support to Count Raymond, and that savior is King Peter II of Aragon. We haven't heard from King Peter II of Aragon for a while. That's because he's been busy Crusading in Spain. With King Peter about to make a dramatic entrance back into the Crusade against the Cathars, we are going to take some time out from southern France and travel over the Pyrenees into Spain.

Join me next week for the first of two special episodes, in which we take a closer look at Spain, at the Reconquista or the Spanish Crusade, whatever you would like to call it, at the

Kingdom of Aragon, and at the soon-to-be man-of-the-moment, King Peter II of Aragon.
Until next week, bye for now.

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