

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 140.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
King Peter II of Aragon, Part 2.

Hello again. Last week we discussed the creation of the Muslim Al-Andalus in the Iberian peninsula, and the establishment of the so-called Five Christian Kingdoms in the north of the peninsula. The landlocked Kingdom of Aragon secured its future by joining with its neighbor the County of Barcelona, and spread its influence further into southern France.

King Peter II of Aragon was forced to turn away from the military conflicts and political struggles of southern France in early 1212, because in early 1212 Pope Innocent III formally called for a new Crusade, a Crusade against the Muslims of Al-Andalus. Pope Innocent sent letters to every Bishop in France urging them to convince members of their congregations to go to the assistance of King Alfonso VIII of Castile who would be conducting the campaign. The new Archbishop of Toledo traveled across the Pyrenees to drum up support for the Crusade, affecting, as we've seen in the narrative previously, Simon de Montfort's ability to attract recruits for the Crusade against the Cathars.

The French volunteers, the King of Castile and his army, and King Peter II of Aragon and his army arranged to meet up in Toledo in late May 1212 to start the Crusade. The King of Navarre would join the Crusade later. The King of Leon, King Alfonso IX, didn't join the Crusade. Instead, he invaded Portugal, which had been thrown into chaos following the death of the Portuguese King Sancho I. Despite the fact that the Kings of Leon and Portugal were too busy fighting each other to join the Crusade, many of their subjects made the journey to Toledo to take part in the campaign.

Late May and early June in Toledo saw the arrival of a varied, enthusiastic and reasonably large Crusading army. There were a sizable contingent of French Crusaders, led by the Papal Legate himself, Arnold Amaury, and the Archbishop of Bordeaux. The military orders were also involved, as well as, of course, the Spanish Crusaders led by King Alfonso VII of Castile and King Peter II of Aragon.

The army marched south from Toledo on the 20th of June 1212, in the blazing heat of the Spanish summer. The French volunteers were the first to advance, making up the vanguard, followed by the King of Aragon and his army, then finally the instigator of the campaign, King Alfonso of Castile commanding the rearguard, which contained the Spanish Bishops and the Masters of the military orders, as well as the Castilian Crusaders.

Marching at the front of the force, the French contingent came upon the castle of Malagon on the 24th of June. They attacked the castle, slaughtered its garrison and manned it with Christians. Buoyed by this victory they then marched to the town of Calatrava, whose Muslim defenders surrendered after a brief siege. By this time, the rest of the Crusading army had arrived, and the King of Castile asserted his authority, praising the French for taking the town but refusing to let them sack, plunder or destroy it. Instead, he allowed the defenders to leave with their lives, and turned the town over to the Church.

This made the French very unhappy. With many of them struggling in the summer heat, they started having second thoughts about the whole campaign. If this was a sort of Crusade where you didn't get to pillage and plunder towns and secure some booty for yourselves, then they may as well head back to France and join one of the other

Crusades, one where pillaging towns was commonplace and where the Crusading volunteers were allowed to rampage, loot and destroy to their heart's desire. Hmm. The Crusade against the Cathars in southern France, that sounds like a better deal. Brushing themselves off and kicking themselves for picking the wrong Crusade, most of the French volunteers waved goodbye to their Spanish counterparts, and trudged back northwards to cross the Pyrenees into the milder climate of France. According to Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", only two Frenchmen remained the Crusade after Calatrava: Arnold Amaury, who was Papal Legate and the Archbishop of Narbonne; and a nobleman from northern France, Theobald of Blazon.

The Muslim Caliph, the Almohad Amir Muhammad al-Nasir, had plenty of time to prepare his army. He gathered his troops together and marched them to the level plain of Las Navas de Tolosa which, according to Richard Fletcher in his book "Moorish Spain" is just to the south of a pass through the Sierra Marina. In modern times, the main rail and road link between Madrid and Cordoba passes nearby. The Caliph's plan was to block a narrow canyon through which the army of the Spanish Kings would need to pass if it wished to march further into Al-Andalus. However, his plan unraveled when a helpful local shepherd directed the Christians to a hidden pass through the canyon, which Richard Fletcher speculates was so hidden that the Muslims were in fact unaware of its existence. The Spanish Kings and their armies traversed the pass and were able to set up camp on the same plain as that occupied by the Muslims.

On Monday, the 16th of July 1212 the two opposing armies clashed, and the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa commenced. The Spanish commander, Diego Lopez de Haro, led the center of the Christian forces, with King Peter II and his army to his left, and King Sancho VII of Navarre, who had recently joined the Crusade with his army, to the right. Behind them all was King Alfonso VIII of Castile and the military orders. While Diego charged at the Muslim forces, King Peter and King Sancho operated together in a pincer type movement, then King Alfonso charged forwards, breaking the Muslim lines. King Sancho managed to make it all the way to the Caliph's tent. By this time, the Muslims were being cut down in their hundreds, if not their thousands. The Caliph fled from the battlefield, and his flight cemented his force's defeat.

To say that Las Navas de Tolosa was a major victory for the Crusaders is an understatement. Thousands of Muslim fighters lay dead on the battlefield. The contents of the Caliph's personal tent fell to the victors, as did an impressive amount of booty. The Caliph's elaborate and impressively-wrought battle standard was seized by King Alfonso as a symbol of the Crusaders' victory. He later donated the standard to the Monastery of Las Huelgas, where it still stands on display today.

King Alfonso sent a lengthy letter to Pope Innocent, describing the extent of the victory. Here are a couple of paragraphs he wrote, and I quote "On their side, one hundred thousand armed men or more fell in the battle, according to the estimate of the Saracens whom we captured. But of the army of the Lord incredible though it may be, unless it be a miracle, hardly 25 or 30 Christians of our whole army fell. Oh what Happiness. Oh what Thanksgiving. Though one might lament that so few martyrs from such a great army went to Christ in martyrdom." End quote. And here's another paragraph from the same letter, and I quote "In order to show how immense were the numbers of the enemy, when our army rested after the battle for two days in the enemy camp, for all the fires which were needed to cook food and make bread and other things, no other wood was needed than

that of the enemy arrows and spears which were lying about, and even then we burned scarcely half of them." End quote.

So it was clear to those who were present at the battle that it was an overwhelming and crushing victory for the Crusaders. What they couldn't have realised at the time were the long-term consequences of the victory. The victory by the Crusaders at Las Navas de Tolosa marked a major turning point in the Reconquista. Before the battle the balance of power between the kingdoms of the Spanish Kings to the north and to the Muslim Al-Andalus to the south was pretty even. Las Navas de Tolosa upset that balance. After the battle the Spanish kingdoms no longer feared an invasion into the north by the Muslims. Instead, the invasion by the Christians into the Muslim south was fast tracked. Within a relatively short a period of just forty years after Las Navas de Tolosa, most of Al-Andalus would fall to the Christians, and would thereafter be ruled by the Kings of Aragon, Castile and Portugal. But all of that, of course, is in the future. For the moment, all the Spanish Kings know is that this is a major victory for them and for the Catholic Church. And of course the heroes of the day were the leaders of the expedition, the Christian Kings.

King Peter II of Aragon was singled out for distinction. His leadership of the left wing of the army was thought by many to have played a vital role in the victory. Pope Innocent, of course, was overjoyed. Finally a Crusade had worked out how he had planned. After the victory, King Peter's star rose within the Catholic Church. In his book "The Perfect Heresy", Stephen O'Shea describes his rise to favor as follows, and I quote "In victory Pedro became a secular saint, an untouchable paladin of the Church. His faithful annual payment to Rome, his respect for ecclesiastical rites, his warrior valor placed in the service of the Holy Cause, no cleric could now even try to tarnish the glittering reputation of the 38 year old monarch of Aragon. Troubadours sang of his gallantry, monks of his piety and ladies bestowed their favors on this most Christian of heroes." End quote.

After the victory, King Peter headed back to Aragon and basked in his victory, until Count Raymond VI of Toulouse came and rained on his parade. Count Raymond made the journey over the Pyrenees into Aragon in September 1212. He was, of course, bearing dire news about Simon de Montfort's recent victories. As we described back in Episode 138, Simon had now conquered pretty much the entirety of Languedoc, with the city of Toulouse and the town of Montauban the only major centers holding out against him. The Count of Foix was currently holed up in Montauban, and had made the occasional raid out of the town, apparently at one time venturing as far south as the area around Carcassonne. Likewise, some rebels had conducted raids out of the city of Toulouse, but really, when the campaign season of 1212 in southern France came to an end, Simon de Montfort was the clear victor.

Following the end of the campaigning season, Simon came up with a new way of subduing his new territories. No doubt learning from his past experiences that the conquered towns of Languedoc could quickly become un-conquered again, Simon de Montfort came up with a new set of laws which he imposed on his newly conquered lands. His aim was to put to an end the unique system of southern French laws, which enabled heretics, Jews and other undesirables to hold office and to generally thrive in Languedoc. That pesky law which allowed the women to inherit property on an equal footing to men was annulled as well. Instead, Simon's aim was to transplant the much more sensible laws of northern France into Languedoc: laws that would favor the Catholic Church; laws that would

encourage heretics and Jews to leave the region; laws that would assist Simon to assert control over his new territory.

The laws were pretty harsh. Attendance at Mass on Sundays was made compulsory. Any Cathar houses of religion were to be confiscated and given to the Church. Any person who allowed a heretic to live on land controlled by him would automatically forfeit that land, and one law which must have gone down like a lead balloon: noble women, widows or girls of noble birth, especially those who held significant property, were not allowed to marry southern Frenchmen except with the express permission of Simon de Montfort himself. They were of course allowed to marry any northern Frenchmen they chose. All in all, Simon decreed that 46 new laws and customs were to operate across Languedoc. And with that, Simon declared the year 1212 a resounding success, and prepared to settle down and relax for the winter.

King Peter II of Aragon and Count Raymond VI of Toulouse were not relaxing. They were concocting a plan. As usual, King Peter's allegiances were torn. Theoretically, as a vassal to Pope Innocent, he should have been thrilled that one of his own vassals, Simon de Montfort, was seemingly prevailing over nearly all of Languedoc in the name of the Church. But he wasn't. Two of his other vassals, the Count of Foix and the Count of Comminges, had effectively been usurped from their lands, and his brother-in-law Count Raymond was also taking a pounding from Simon. If King Peter had ambitions to extend the influence of the Kingdom of Aragon into Languedoc, those ambitions were being thoroughly thwarted by Simon de Montfort. Somehow, he needed to restore the Counts of Toulouse, Foix and Comminges to power, and curtail the influence of Simon. Militarily, Simon de Montfort was at the height of his power.

So instead of invading Languedoc with the armies of Aragon and confronting Simon on the battlefield, King Peter decided to try something different. Cashing in on his new-found status as a Crusading superstar basking in the favor of the Church, he decided to approach Pope Innocent to complain that Simon, by invading lands pretty much free of heretics, had overstepped his mission and needed to be stopped. King Peter would ask the Pope to restore the southern Counts to their rightful places, and install King Peter as ward over Count Raymond's lands. As a concession, Count Raymond's adolescent son, Raymond VII, would be educated in the ways of pious governance at King Peter's court in Aragon, and as soon as he came of age Count Raymond VI would hand his son the reins of power. King Peter would point out to the Pope that Simon's victories were only really made possible due to the fact that King Peter was away Crusading in Spain on behalf of the Church, and that Simon had taken full advantage of this fact, pushing his armies into new territory without having to worry about being opposed by the absent army of Aragon.

King Peter briefed the Bishop of Segorbe and one of his royal notaries on his arguments, and then dispatched them to Rome with orders to meet with Pope Innocent and persuade him to suspend the Crusade against the Cathars. Then, just after Christmas in the year 1212, King Peter crossed the Pyrenees into Languedoc, intending to meet with the man who had recently Crusaded with him in Spain, Arnold Amaury, to convince him of the validity of his arguments.

Join me next week for the final episode of 2015, as we resume the narrative and see whether King Peter can persuade Pope Innocent to bring the Crusade against the Cathars to an end. Until next week, bye for now.

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