

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 143.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
We need to talk about King John.

Hello again. Last week we saw Pope Innocent surprise everyone by declaring a shock reversal of his decision to end the Crusade against the Cathars. In weighing up the choice between whether to support King Peter II of Aragon or Simon de Montfort, Pope Innocent largely came down on the side of Simon de Montfort.

Now, before we discuss the ramifications of the decision, we should take a closer look at the decision itself. As you all know, Pope Innocent has a legal background, and his change of mind was less of a simple backflip and more of a reverse quadruple somersault in the pike position. His priority at this time lay clearly with his new project, a Crusade to the Middle East to retake Jerusalem, and it's possible that he still held concerns that the Crusade against the Cathars had become less about persecuting, converting, or eliminating heretics, and more about empire building by Simon de Montfort. However, it was also clear that King Peter II of Aragon, had been engaging in empire building plans of his own, and his support for the heretic-harboring rebel Southern Counts had to end.

The lengthy letter sent by Pope Innocent to King Peter is largely conciliatory in tone, but while not being confrontational, it sets out in pretty clear terms the Papal demand that Aragon must not support the Counts of Foix and Comminges and Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, until they are all fully committed to expelling heretics from their lands and are fully reconciled with the Church. Here's an extract from the letter. Pope Innocent, in this part of the letter, is calling King Peter "Your Serenity". And I quote, "We have decided formally to instruct Your Serenity, in the name of the Holy Spirit and under the mantle of divine and apostolic grace, to abandon the Toulousans and their accomplices without delay. Any promises or undertakings given by them, or received from them, which are derogatory to the teachings of the Church, must not stand in the way. They and their allies must receive no advice, help, or favor from you or anyone else, as long as they remain in their present state." End quote.

Okay, so King Peter II of Aragon has been instructed by his overlord Pope Innocent III to drop his support for his brother-in-law Count Raymond, and his vassals the Counts of Foix and Comminges. But Pope Innocent's decision didn't go all Simon de Montfort's way. Wanting to free up the Crusaders of Europe to embark to the Holy Land to rescue Jerusalem, Pope Innocent didn't reverse his previous decision to end the indulgences for Crusaders traveling to southern France to assist Simon de Montfort in his military campaign. This meant that Crusaders fighting for Simon essentially weren't actually Crusading. They were just fighting as volunteers. Their sins wouldn't be remitted after forty days and their souls wouldn't be cleansed. All they would have gained is forty days of military service in sunny southern France.

So Pope Innocent hadn't actually given his total support to either party. Whereas prior to 1213 he supported Simon, and in January 1213 he switched to supporting King Peter, now he was pretty much sitting on the fence between the two men.

For Simon de Montfort, Pope Innocent's decision meant that the Crusade would proceed as usual, only with less volunteers.

For King Peter, though, Pope Innocent's decision meant that he was faced with two stark choices. He could comply with the decision of his overlord, which meant abandoning both the three Southern rebel counts to the feudal scrapheap, and his dream of extending the influence of the crown of Aragon across Languedoc. Or he could defy Pope Innocent. For a man who had just risked his life in the Spanish Crusades in service of the Church, and who had dedicated his throne and his crown to the Papacy, this would be a massive break with the past.

It would also be a massive risk. King Peter knew that Simon de Montfort was a skilled military tactician, a skilled fighter and a skilled leader of men. He also knew that Count Raymond possessed none of these qualities. The Count of Foix had some useful talents in this area, but the main burden of command would fall on King Peter's shoulders. If he was going to be taking on Simon de Montfort militarily, he was going to have to make sure he would win. To be defeated by Simon would not only be a humiliating setback. It risked the very crown of Aragon itself. If Simon de Montfort were to be victorious, his influence may well spread over the Pyrenees into Spain, and like Languedoc, Aragon and Barcelona may both become little pieces of northern France.

To reduce the risk of this happening, if he was going to consider defying Pope Innocent and taking up arms against Simon, King Peter needed an ally, preferably an ally who was a King and able to command a vast army. The ally would also need to be someone who wouldn't mind making an enemy of Pope Innocent and placing their realm in conflict with the Church. It would also help if they had a personal interest in seeing Simon de Montfort eliminated. There was one European monarch who met these requirements perfectly: King John of England.

Now, while the Crusade against the Cathars has been progressing in southern France, King John of England has been busy doing his level best to ensure that he would take his place in history as one of the worst English monarchs of all time. At the beginning of his reign, you could journey from the borders of Scotland all the way through England, across the channel to France, and continue all the way down the west coast of France until you reached the borders of Navarre, high in the Pyrenees, without ever stepping on land not under the control of the English crown. But by the end of King John's reign, most of northern England was occupied by the Scots, the Welsh had likewise raided into England from Wales, and the remainder of England was involved in a bitter civil war, except for the southwest of England, which had been conquered by the French. Of his lands in continental Europe, well, King John had managed to lose most of them to the French crown as well. For the moment, though, most of King John's major disasters are a few years away. He will in fact die in four years time.

Now, in May 1213, King John is about to be approached by King Peter with a request to join him in a possible military campaign against Simon de Montfort. You can see why King John was an obvious choice. He had a history of defying Pope Innocent and was desperate to seize some land. Conquering parts of southern France may well make up for some of the vast territory he had lost in northern France. King John also sympathizes with the rebel cause. Count Raymond of Toulouse had strong ties to the Plantagenets, and had once been married to King John's sister Joanne, and King John would have been pleased to renew his ties with the southern French Count. In addition, Simon de Montfort had recently conquered the Agenais region, where King John was overlord, and it's not hard to see that King John would like to wrestle this land back.

But there was another reason why King John would dearly like to see Simon de Montfort vanquished. King John's failures as a king were not limited to his inability to hold onto land he had inherited from his brother Richard the Lionheart. No, the items on his list of regal flaws were really quite numerous. He taxed his subjects to an extent that was really quite mind-boggling, and which had caused serious hardship not only for peasants but for many noble families. He meted out punishments to the Barons of England and their families in a seemingly arbitrary manner, showing stomach-churning cruelty to those who had opposed him. Leaving people to die a long, slow, agonizing death from starvation in his prisons was one of his favored methods of punishment, and this wasn't restricted to fighting men. In one notorious incident, a woman of noble birth, Matilda de Braose, and her oldest son William, were both forced to slowly starve to death after Matilda's husband was unable to pay a ransom of 50,000 marks for their release, 50,000 marks being the equivalent to King John's entire annual revenue from across his kingdom, a sum, of course, that King John knew was beyond the ability of the de Braose family to pay. And even if you were a nobleman who was basking in King John's favour, that wouldn't stop him from seducing your wife or daughter. Really, if they were popularity polls taken in medieval times, King John would have achieved record levels of dissatisfaction from his subjects.

As most tyrants across the ages have discovered, there's only so much misery and hardship you can impose on your subjects before they start to push back, and in mid-1213, that's exactly what was happening in England. According to Marc Morris in his book "King John, Treachery, Tyranny, and the Road to Magna Carta", back in 1212, some members of the noble families of England started plotting to remove King John from power.

Also back in 1212, Peter the Hermit predicted that King John's rule would come to an end on Ascension Day 1213, on the 14th anniversary of his coronation. No, no, no, don't get all excited. This is a different Peter the Hermit. This Peter the Hermit was more commonly known as Peter of Wakefield, an English hermit with reported powers of prophecy. This prediction cheered the people of England up no end. People were speculating on how the King would die, and for his trouble, Peter the Hermit was arrested and thrown into prison. Apparently unperturbed by the prophecy, on the day he was prophesied to die, Ascension Day, which was the 13th of May 1213 (around the same time that Pope Innocent reversed his decision to support King Peter's plan for Languedoc) King John threw a big party. As his guests no doubt watched eagerly to see whether King John would choke on a chicken bone, drink poisoned wine or be struck by an assassin, King John partied on, and the day passed without incident. With his prophecy having been proved inaccurate, the hapless Peter the Hermit was taken out and executed. For good measure, King John ordered that his son be executed as well, because why not?

It was likely shortly after this time, having dodged a prophetic bullet, that King John became aware of a plot by one of England's many unhappy Barons to overthrow him as King, and replace him with Simon de Montfort. Apparently one of England's noble families, having been exiled by King John, had made their way to southern France, where they had met Simon de Montfort, and had been impressed by him and his achievements. Marc Morris writes that a chronicler from Dunstable Prior alleged that a plot was hatched to overthrow King John and place Simon de Montfort on the English throne. Rumors abounded around England to this effect, and it's certainly not unreasonable to assume that King John was aware of the rumors. So when King Peter II of Aragon sounded King John out about coming to Southern France and meeting Simon de Montfort on the battlefield, it's no surprise that King John jumped at the chance.

But of course it was no use having King John turn up all by himself. He needed to arrive at the head of a large army. Unfortunately for King John, and King Peter, England, of course, didn't have a standing army. Like all other national armies at this time, it comprised volunteers, men whose feudal obligations and respect for the crown made them put aside their daily tasks, grab their armor, weapons, horses, and squires, and head off to follow their monarch on whatever venture he had chosen to involve himself in. Not surprisingly, the monarch who held the strongest ties to his subjects, and who inspired high degrees of loyalty, could muster the most men from the available population. In 1213, King John was well on his way to becoming the worst monarch in English history. He didn't inspire loyalty. Many Englishmen had followed him to France before, only to find themselves on the wrong end of a thrashing by the King of France. King John was going to southern France, but he was going to have a difficult time finding an army to accompany him.

In his book on King John, Marc Morris reports that as early as June 1213, King John was making preparations to depart for Poitou in order to join King Peter and Count Raymond in battle, and he ordered England's knights to make their way to Portsmouth without delay to join him. Once at Portsmouth, they would board ships to take them to Poitou, or if the royal fleet had already departed, they were to sail with all due haste to France to join their monarch. So King John issued his order, and nothing happened. Everyone stayed home and no one got ready to leave for France. The excuses given by the knights and barons were varied: they were too busy; they were too poor; some tried to find legal loopholes in their feudal obligations; but really, most people simply disliked their monarch intensely and had no desire to lay down their lives for him, in some battle in France which would most likely be as successful as all the other battles King John had fought in France.

Possibly unable to believe that this was actually happening, King John traveled to Portsmouth and made all his preparations regardless, hoping beyond hope that enough people would show up for him to field an army in France. But no one showed up. According to Marc Morris, one source has King John putting out to sea on his royal ship, in a Monty-Python-esque move to see if, magically, a bunch of knights will materialize, board ships, and sail out to follow him. But no ships did follow him. After some awkward moments drifting around off Portsmouth, King John was forced to face the facts. He had no army, and there was no point embarking on a military campaign without an army. In August 1213, he wrote to Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, stating that, and warning, dramatic cough coming up, he had fully intended to join the campaign but he couldn't do so because the (ahem) winds were unfavorable.

The winds continued to blow unfavorably for King John for the rest of his reign. Some highlights include England's capital city of London being taken by a force of rebel Barons, and King John managing to lose the crown jewels shortly before he died. King John, racked by dysentery, had been fleeing from his enemies in East Anglia, when he decided to take a short cut across the great tidal estuary of The Wash. Heavy baggage trains aren't designed to traverse treacherous marshes, and the part of his baggage train containing the royal treasure and crown jewels was sucked into the sand and never seen again. Just another face-plant moment in a reign full of face-plant moments. Incidentally, if you're in East Anglia and have a metal detector, head down to The Wash this weekend, and see if you can find the treasure. Someone's bound to find it one day, and it might as well be you.

Okay, so much for King John. It looks like King Peter II of Aragon and the rebel southern French Counts are on their own. Join me next week as we begin the build-up to the inevitable showdown between the two sides, King Peter and the southern Counts in one

corner, and Simon de Montfort for in the other. Believe me, you won't want to miss it. Until next week, bye for now.

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