

History of the Crusades.
Episode 144.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
Towards Muret.

Hello again. Last week we saw King John of England attempt to involve himself in the upcoming showdown between King Peter II of Aragon and Simon de Montfort. King John was keen to fight alongside the armies of England to support his former brother-in-law Count Raymond VI of Toulouse and King Peter, but he was prevented from doing so by "unfavourable winds". So King John was left to self-destruct in England, while the King of Aragon and the Count of Toulouse were forced to consider their next move.

Things in Languedoc at this time were very much in balance. Simon de Montfort was currently occupying most of Languedoc, and was intent on turning the region into a little part of northern France. He had imported northern French men to garrison the towns and had imported northern French laws to govern the territory. The King of Aragon and the three rebel southern Counts, Toulouse, Foix, and Comminges had a different plan. They wanted to boot Simon de Montfort and his northern Frenchmen out of the region and return it to its former status as a cosmopolitan, independent, troubadour-loving, and tolerant region, under the protection of the crown of Aragon, perhaps even turning the region into a little part of the Kingdom of Aragon, satisfying King Peter's ambitions to extend the influence of the throne of Aragon over the Pyrenees into Languedoc.

In May, Pope Innocent had confused matters mightily. He had previously declared for Team Aragon, but in May 1213 he sort of reversed that decision, telling King Peter he should not support the southern Counts. But Pope Innocent didn't go all the way and declare for Team Montfort. As a way of emphasizing that his new Crusading priority was to retake Jerusalem, Pope Innocent hamstrung Simon de Montfort's ability to achieve a total victory in southern France by failing to reinstate the Crusader indulgences for volunteers who traveled to Languedoc to serve in Simon's army. This was going to limit Simon's ability to field a large army, and was going to limit his ability to attack and defeat the remaining rebel strongholds.

So, between Pope Innocent's decision in May 1213 and Count Raymond receiving a message from King John in August that he would not be assisting the rebel cause, what was happening on the ground in southern France? Well, on the whole, things continued on as usual. Simon did his best to hold on to the territory he had taken, and the southern rebels did their best to wrestle it back from him. There were three particular events of note, however, which occurred during this time, which we should discuss.

The first event was the knighting of Simon de Montfort's eldest son Amaury, which took place on the feast day of John the Baptist on the 24th of June 1213. In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption points out that, in having his son knighted, Simon de Montfort was making an important dynastic statement, that the Montforts were in Languedoc to stay and that a long line of Montforts would be ruling the region. But the nature of the ceremony itself made it much more than a dynastic statement. The ceremony took place at Castelnaudary, and Simon ordered that pavilions be erected to ensure the many distinguished invited guests were shaded from the summer heat. What made this ceremony different from most other bestowings of knighthood is that Amaury was to be made a knight of the Church, dedicated to the service of God.

Simon de Montfort had been lobbying the Bishop of Orleans to bestow a knighthood upon his son for some time, but the Bishop had resisted, possibly because of the strange nature of the request. Knights were usually dedicated to the service of a secular feudal overlord; requesting that the Church itself bestow a knighthood was very unusual. However, eventually the Bishop relented and the ceremony proceeded.

Before a mixed crowd of knights, military men and men of the Church, Amaury was brought before an altar and, to the rousing soundtrack of the hymn of "Veni Creator Spiritus", was made a knight of the Lord. Peter the Monk, who was present at the ceremony, was moved to tears by the event. This event served as a statement by Simon that the Crusade against the Cathars was still proceeding, and was a Holy War which needed to be fought by men of God. Once the ceremony was over, Simon awarded his newly-knighted son the lands of the southern Counts, which Pope Innocent had recently ordered him to return to their rightful owners.

While Simon de Montfort was busy convincing everyone that the Crusade against the Cathars was still a thing, and that the Montforts, loyal servants of the armies of God, were here to stay, the rebels were doing their best to take back their lands and send the Montforts back to northern France where they belonged. That brings us to the second event of note: the siege of Pujol.

As we have stated previously, the city of Toulouse, at this stage, served as the centre for rebel resistance. Along with Montauban to the north, the city of Toulouse was one of just two towns still controlled by the southern French. Packed full of refugees, it provided a handy base from which packs of southern Frenchmen could go raiding out into the countryside, attacking any small groups of Crusaders they came across, and keeping a close eye on Crusader activity in the strongholds and fortifications dotting the countryside. Shortly after the knighting ceremony took place at Castelnaudary, the three rebel southern Counts were in the city of Toulouse when Count Raymond shocked everyone by coming up with a plan to attack a nearby castle. As we've seen, Count Raymond has done his level best to keep away from military action to date, and when he has been involved, it's been on the defensive side of things rather than the offensive side. So, when Count Raymond suggested going on the attack, everyone set up and listened.

His plan was described by Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War" as being, and I quote "modest but intelligent" end quote. His plan was this. Some seventeen castles had been attacked in the County of Toulouse by Simon's men some three weeks earlier. One of the castles, Pujol, was now being used as a base by three of Simon's most trusted knights, for making sorties and raids out into the Toulousan countryside. The castle was small and not very well fortified, possibly having suffered some damage when Simon's men had overrun it. It was garrisoned by sixty or so men and was less than an hour's ride away from the city of Toulouse. Count Raymond suggested that his own army, plus that of the Counts of Foix and Comminges, along with some Spanish soldiers from Aragon who were staying in Toulouse, and the city's militia, combined forces, ride to Pujol, and attack it. The plan was approved, and the southern French force rode out of the city of Toulouse towards Pujol.

Now, at this time, as we've seen, Simon was having trouble attracting crusading volunteers. As a consequence, Laurence Marvin states that the large army which departed from the city of Toulouse was probably bigger than the sum total of all the Crusaders currently in Languedoc at this time, and unfortunately for Simon his men were

scattered all over the place, garrisoning southern towns and fortifications across Languedoc.

Arriving safely at Pujol, the southern forces, which may have amounted to more than 2,000 men all up, immediately surrounded the fortification and began assembling a range of catapult machines as well as a number of cats, the cats, of course, being used as shelters for the sappers who would get to work on undermining the castle walls. The defenders did their best, throwing stones and rocks at the attackers and pouring boiling water on to the cats, but eventually the garrison were forced to retreat into a single tower within the fortification, and one of the three knights who had been placed in charge was killed when he received a direct hit to his head by an arrow. The remaining two knights indicated that they wished to surrender the castle, on condition that the lives of all the defenders be spared. But before terms were agreed, word came in that Simon's brother, Guy de Montfort, was riding towards Pujol with an army.

From then on, things became quite messy. The sources differ as to what exactly took place. But it seems that the Count of Foix's son, either unaware of the fact that the Crusaders had offered to surrender, or perhaps choosing to ignore this fact, managed to overrun the tower. Then one of the two remaining knights Simon had placed in charge was killed by a group of militia men from the city of Toulouse. Amidst the chaos, news came in that Guy and his Crusaders were only around twenty kilometers away, and orders were given to evacuate the castle and returned to Toulouse.

Unfortunately, it appears that some southerners decided to massacre as many crusaders as they could before they departed. Again, the sources differ as to what exactly happened next, but it seems that members of the garrison, who had been placed in the dungeon of the castle, were hauled out of their cells and executed. Others were seized and hanged, while the bodies of Simon's three knights were dragged around the countryside behind horses until they were unrecognizable. It's generally agreed that every single northern Frenchman inside Pujol was killed.

Laurence Marvin has this to say about the massacre, and I quote "Just as I have made no attempt to absolve the Crusaders, there is no absolution for southerners who participated in the torture and massacre of prisoners. Yet it is understandable, given the circumstances. For four years, the people of the south had seen their homes invaded and their armies consistently lose against Simon of Montfort. Since 1211 the Chief Crusader had been at war with the city of Toulouse. He kept it under a loose blockade for months, and the citizens had suffered greatly. Unsurprisingly, in the wake of a rare victory, the winning side exacted vengeance on the losers." End quote. And when Laurence Marvin says that this was a rare victory, he means that this was a rare victory. This was actually the first successful siege by the southern rebels in the entire conflict. No wonder they all went a little bit berserk afterwards.

Laurence Marvin emphasizes that the effect of the victory on the southerners cannot be overstated. While their victory at Pujol may have been dismissed by Simon de Montfort as just a tiny glitch in his plan to enforce northern French rule over Languedoc, the psychological effect of Pujol on the rebels was startling. It made them believe that Simon's men weren't invincible. It made them think that, with the assistance of the King of Aragon, maybe they could take on Simon's army and defeat them in the field. As for King John of England, well, who needs King John of England?

In the first week of September, after Count Raymond had received word of from King John about his "unfavourable winds", King Peter II of Aragon crossed the Pyrenees with the cream of his fighting forces from Catalonia and Aragon. Marching into the city of Toulouse, the King and his fighting men paraded through the streets to the cheers of its southern French citizens, celebrating the victory by the southern French Counts at Pujol, and daring to dream of better days ahead, of days where the whole of Languedoc celebrated the defeat of the northern French Crusaders and the warm embrace of their new saviour and overlord, the King of Aragon.

There was however, a third event of note, which had occurred back in late 1212. At the tail-end of the campaigning season of 1212 Simon de Montfort had captured the small fortification of Muret. Muret was around twenty kilometers south of the city of Toulouse and was close to the borders of both the County of Foix and the County of Comminges. Muret had belonged to the Count of Comminges, and its fortifications, which were nothing to boast about to start with, had been damaged. When Simon's men took the castle, Simon set his men to repairing its defences. And just after his son was knighted, he moved his headquarters to Muret.

Why, of all places would Simon de Montfort decide that this little insignificant castle should be his base? Well, mainly because of its location. Simon didn't yet have enough men to attack the city of Toulouse, but the few men he did have at his disposal could be put to good use going on raiding missions, destroying property, burning crops, and generally making life as miserable as possible for the people living around the city. Being only around twenty kilometres from the city of Toulouse, Muret provided a convenient place for Simon to base himself and his men to carry out this task.

Muret was also handy to the two Counties held by the rebel Counts Foix and Comminges. There was a significant amount of traffic and communications passing between the Counties of Foix, Comminges and the city of Toulouse at this time, and being based at Muret gave Simon ample opportunity to disrupt these communications.

Finally, Simon could feel the tension building. Rumor had it that King Peter was mustering the armies of Aragon, and that an attack was imminent. Simon's forces at this stage were reduced and scattered. Pope Innocent's failure to reinstate the Crusader indulgences was having its desired effect. Less volunteers were coming to join Simon's forces from the north, the pious fighters of northern France deciding instead to direct their energies into a conflict which was fully endorsed by the Church and which would result in the cleansing of their souls. If the armies of Aragon were going to invade Languedoc, then Simon needed to place himself in a position where he could intercept the army before it reached the city of Toulouse. Muret was the perfect place in which to do this.

Join me next week as we see King Peter's army march across the Pyrenees and take on Simon in the field, in one of the most significant and epic battles of the medieval era, the Battle of Muret. Until next week, bye for now.

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