

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 145.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
The Battle of Muret Part 1.

Hello again. Last week we saw the rebels score a rare military victory at Pujol, their first successful siege of the entire campaign, and we also saw Simon de Montfort move his headquarters to the little inconsequential town of Muret. Muret may have been inconsequential prior to September 1213, but after that date the name Muret will be stamped in the history books, as the scene of the showdown between Simon's Crusader forces and the combined rebel forces of the Counts of Toulouse, Foix, and Comminges led by King Peter II of Aragon. In fact, so firmly will the name Muret be stamped in the history books that Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War" names it as one of the most important battles of the high Middle Ages, including it in the same sentence as the Battle of Hastings and Las Navas de Tolosa. But back in mid 1213 Muret was not yet a household name.

The town itself was located about eighteen kilometers south of the city of Toulouse, around a two hour ride away on horseback, and was situated on the banks of the River Garonne on a triangular piece of land where another, much smaller river met the impressively large river Garonne. The river Garonne also flows through the city of Toulouse, meaning that supplies to Muret can reach the town via barges sent from Toulouse. The town of Muret itself was fortified, and within its walls it contained a marketplace, a church, a few streets and dwellings, and a two hundred foot high castle keep, which, according to Stephen O'shea in his book "The Perfect Heresy", was so high that it could be seen from the city of Toulouse if the weather was kind. The castle at Muret may have been tall and visible for miles, but in comparison to other fortifications in the area it was not particularly strong, not particularly large, and not particularly impressive. The town had belonged to the Count of Comminges until it was taken by the Crusaders back in 1212, and it held an important strategic position as it was effectively the gateway to the County of Comminges.

In early September 1213 it was within Simon's territory and was being garrisoned by a small force of thirty knights and a handful of foot soldiers. Ever since the rebel's victory at Pujol in mid 1213, tensions have been rising, and it was pretty clear to everyone that Aragon was mustering its forces and was getting ready to invade Languedoc. Shortly after the events at Pujol, Simon sent two abbots on a mission to take the full text of Pope Innocent's latest decision to King Peter in Aragon, to inquire as to whether he intended to comply with the Pope's instructions. Coincidentally, it appears that around the same time as Simon's embassy reached King Peter's court, the King of Aragon also received a letter written directly to him by Pope Innocent, a letter about which Simon de Montfort was unaware. In this letter, dated the 4th of July 1213, Pope Innocent reminded King Peter of his obligations as a vassal to the Church and interestingly, confirmed a Papal bull issued by Pope Urban II, way back in 1095, which stipulated that no Legate could excommunicate a King of Aragon; such an action could only be carried out by the Pope himself.

Anyway, King Peter wasn't about to lay Simon's fears to rest. Far from confirming to the abbots that he had no intention of providing military assistance to the rebel Counts, King Peter sent an evasive reply back to Simon, to the effect that he would gladly fulfill any instructions made by Pope Innocent. The abbots delivered the response to Simon at Fanjeaux on the 16th of August 1213.

By this time, tensions across the County of Toulouse and the Counties of Foix and Comminges were reaching breaking point. Rumors abounded that the King of Aragon was about to sweep across the region with a massive army and drive out the hated northern French occupiers once and for all. The Counts of Toulouse, Foix and Comminges, from their base in the city of Toulouse, were doing their best to fan the flames of resistance, urging townsfolk to overthrow their northern French garrisons, encouraging dissent against the Church and the Crusaders, and telling everyone who would listen that their liberation was close at hand. A celebratory vibe was in the air in the city of Toulouse where its packed streets reverberated to the music of troubadours singing of the approaching destruction of the Crusaders.

Simon de Montfort recalled his recently knighted son Amaury from campaigning in Gascony. Amaury was in the process of besieging the town of Roquefort when he received word that he was to stop whatever he was doing, put the cheese back in the cave, and join his father without delay. According to Peter the Monk, Simon was concerned at this stage that, should King Peter invade he might seize Amaury, who had only a handful of knights with him. Amaury obeyed his father's instructions and raced to his side.

Peter the Monk has this to say about the feeling in Languedoc at this stage, and I quote. "The whole of the Albigensian area was now in a confused and unstable state. The enemies of the faith and the King of Aragon's knights, who had by now spent a considerable time at Toulouse, were visiting our fortresses and inviting the inhabitants to desert and surrender. Most of them did go over to our adversaries, because of the promise of protection offered by the King of Aragon, whose arrival they eagerly awaited." End quote.

Collectively, the whole of Languedoc held its breath and waited to see what would happen next. They didn't have to wait very long. At the beginning of September 1213, the army of the crown of Aragon crossed the Pyrenees, intending to march to the city of Toulouse. They emerged from a mountain pass into the Gascony region. As Simon de Montfort had recently withdrawn all his forces from this region, King Peter's men were able to move unimpeded through the area, cheered on by local men, many of whom joined the forces for their march to Toulouse.

Unsurprisingly, historians differ as to the exact size of the Spanish army, but Jonathan Sumption, in his book "The Albigensian Crusade", estimates that around 800 knights rode with King Peter, with the promise that a further 200 were on their way to join him. They planned to join forces with the combined armies of the Counts of Toulouse, Foix and Comminges, who between them could field around 600 knights. Jonathan Sumption reports that there were also an unusually high number of foot soldiers, mostly made up of very enthusiastic militia-men from the city of Toulouse. They had been busy preparing provisions and siege engines within the city of Toulouse, and had loaded the provisions onto barges ready to be dragged upstream on the River Garonne, to wherever they were needed. While the militia were numerous and very enthusiastic, Jonathan Sumption labels them as, and I quote "militarily incompetent" end quote. And it's true that really it's the number of knights you can field in battle that counts, rather than eager but inexperienced foot soldiers.

Simon de Montfort was at this moment in Fanjeaux, which was closer to Carcassonne than Toulouse, and was around forty miles from the city of Toulouse. He had been assembling

his forces and getting them ready to head to Muret. Unfortunately for Simon, the combination of the approach of the cooler autumn weather and the fact that Pope Innocent had ended the Crusader indulgence for service in Languedoc meant that his combined forces were around half that of the combined forces of Aragon and the rebel Counts.

As the rebel forces assembled in the city of Toulouse, to the ecstatic cheering of the local people, the feeling amongst the army was decidedly upbeat. In fact, to say they were upbeat is an understatement. Most of the Spanish knights riding with the crown of Aragon were veterans of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, and were fully expecting another resounding victory under the leadership of their King. The rebel forces under the three southern French Counts had recently tasted success at Pujol. They all knew that they were superior in number to the Crusaders, and now it was just a matter of meeting Simon de Montfort's army, defeating them and driving the northern French out of the Languedoc area once and for all. Easy!

The plan was to march to Muret. Why Muret? Well, because it was small and garrisoned with only a handful of men, yet it was also strategically important. It was close enough to the city of Toulouse that the barges prepared by the militia could be dragged upstream to the town without too much difficulty, meaning that all their siege engines could be ready and assembled without too much fuss. Being so close to Toulouse also meant that feeding and provisioning the large army shouldn't be a problem. There was also the psychological factor. Muret was meant to be Simon's new headquarters and losing Muret to the rebels so soon after the Crusaders' defeat at Pujol would strike a significant blow against the forces of the Church.

According to Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War", the extended plan was to take Muret and entice Simon de Montfort to Muret from Fanjeaux. Once Simon and his army arrived to save Muret from the rebels, his entire army could be surrounded and besieged, and if all went well the Crusader forces could be annihilated in just one battle, leaving the King of Aragon free to take the rest of Languedoc, and place it under the care and control of the Kingdom of Aragon. Right? So that sounds like a good strategy. Let's see how it all panned out.

At this stage of the proceedings both sides were trying to find out what the other was planning, and spies and intelligence networks on both sides were in overdrive, trying to get as much information as possible. Simon's men hit the jackpot when they managed to intercept a messenger carrying a personal letter from King Peter to a lady in Toulouse. The letter was flowery and flattering and suggested to the lady that the King of Aragon was not invading Languedoc to drive out the northern French or for any other political reason, but solely because of his love for her. While we can all assume that this wasn't the reason why the forces of Aragon had mobilized, Simon de Montfort gathered together all the cavalry he could muster, around 700 men and decided to ride to Muret. Unknown to Simon was the fact that King Peter had already taken the town. On the 10th of September the 800 horsemen from Aragon, the 600 or so knights from the ranks of the rebel Counts, and the enormous number of volunteers militia from Toulouse, foot soldiers, and general hangers-on, arrived beneath the walls of Muret, along with a number of barges which they had towed upstream from Toulouse.

This must have come as a nasty shock to the garrison of Muret, which only consisted of thirty or so northern French knights and a handful of foot soldiers. The garrison manned the fortifications as best they could, and as they watched the hundreds upon hundreds of

Spaniards and southern Frenchmen set up camp in the marshes and fields surrounding the town, they bunkered down and hoped that Simon de Montfort was on his way to save them.

Simon de Montfort was on his way. A rider had delivered an urgent message to Simon, advising him of the siege when he was still twelve or so hours ride away from the besieged town. Incensed that King Peter had seized the initiative, Simon's first instinct was to gallop through the night to Muret, hopefully reaching it by dawn the following day. However his men were tired, and more importantly their horses were tired. The seven Bishops and three abbots accompanying Simon's forces suggested that they rest the night at Saverdun, then try to negotiate with King Peter.

Keen to broker a peace deal with a recent hero of the Church. It seems that the senior clerics accompanying Simon, along with the Bishop of Toulouse, opened lines of communication between King Peter, representatives from the city of Toulouse, and Count Raymond. Unsurprisingly, these negotiations amounted to nothing. When the clerics traveling with Simon sent a message to Muret requesting safe conduct so they could take the negotiations further, King Peter pulled the pin on the exercise, stating that priests who travel with armies shouldn't request safe conduct. With an all-out confrontation now looking unavoidable, Simon sent a message to his wife Alice, who was in Carcassonne, asking her to send as many men as she could find to Saverdun. Alice managed to persuade at least one northern French nobleman, who was relaxing in Carcassonne following the end of his forty days of service, to put his plans to return home on hold and to ride out to join Simon.

Now, as both sides are getting ready for the showdown, we're just going to take some time out for a moment to take a look at Simon's frame of mind at this point in time. Considering the fact that he's about to face a King in battle, a King fresh from a heroic victory in the Spanish Crusades, with an army only around half the size of his opponent and which had already seized the initiative by besieging Muret, it wouldn't be surprising if Simon de Montfort for was a bit rattled. Before he left Fanjeaux with his army, his wife Alice had a dream in which both her arms were gushing huge quantities of blood. Concerned that this may be a portent of bad things come, Alice told her husband about the dream. Simon's response can be summed up in one word: "Meh". Still, maybe Simon did have a touch of nerves. He rose early and attended dawn Mass at seven on the following morning. Then he made his confession. Then he drew up his last will and testament, before sending it onto a nearby Cistercian monastery for safekeeping. The sign of a cautious man who wants to cross all his t's and dot all his i's before he goes into battle? Or the sign of a man who feels his final days are close at hand?

Well, you'll have to wait until the next episode to see whether Alice's premonition was correct. Join me next week when Simon de Montfort and his Crusaders come face to face with King Peter II of Aragon and the southern French rebels, in the Battle of Muret. Until next week, bye for now.

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