

History of the Crusades.
Episode 146.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
The Battle of Muret Part 2.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Peter II of Aragon invade Languedoc, intent on confronting Simon de Montfort on the battlefield and driving the northern Frenchman and his Crusaders out of southern France. King Peter and the combined forces of the Counts of Toulouse, Foix and Comminges had taken the initiative, moving out of the city of Toulouse and besieging the nearby town of Muret. At the end of last week's episode, Simon de Montfort and his much smaller army were making their way to Muret to confront the rebel forces and rescue the besieged garrison. Simon and his men had stopped to rest at Saverdun, and Simon himself had risen early, attended a dawn Mass, made his confession, and had also drawn up his last will and testament.

As the morning progressed yet another Church service was held, at which the senior clergy accompanying Simon's forces excommunicated Count Raymond VI of Toulouse and his son, the Count of Foix and his son, the Count of Comminges, and every single person in the rebel army. The only person to escape the mass excommunication was King Peter himself, who, you might remember, could only be excommunicated by the Pope.

Believing it to be likely that the army would be attacked on their way to Muret, Simon divided his forces into three units, which Peter the Monk piously points out, reflected the Holy Trinity, and in battle formation they cautiously hit the road and slowly made their way to Muret. Simon really shouldn't have worried about placing his army into battle-ready positions, as King Peter's plan was to lure him and his army into the town of Muret itself, where the entire Crusader army could be surrounded and, so the theory went, defeated.

However, King Peter is having some trouble keeping control over the large and diverse rebel army, and making them stick to the plan. In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption reports that, at the same time as Simon and his Holy Trinity-inspired battle formation forces are making their way laboriously towards Muret, some members of the Toulousan militia decided to take things into their own hands, and attack the town on their own. They had assembled siege engines, which they had dragged upstream from Toulouse on barges, and they now put them into action, launching missiles at the walls surrounding the lower town of Muret, and firing some into the town itself. The thirty knights garrisoning Muret scrambled into action, but there's only so much that thirty men can do. Most of them ended up retreating to the better fortified upper town, which was a wise move, as the Toulousans actually managed to breach one of the walls and poured into the lower town, killing several knights who had decided to stay and defend it.

King Peter was advised that the militia from Toulouse had managed to breach the walls and had entered the lower town. Far from celebrating this victory, King Peter was furious. With Simon's army approaching, and his plan to let the Crusaders into the town unimpeded at risk, the militia were given terse orders to retreat. Various military historians over the centuries have shaken their heads in bewilderment at this move. With the walls breached and the lower town in their hands, the southern Frenchmen could have attacked the Crusader forces when they were at their most vulnerable, crossing the wooden bridge across the river and entering the gate to the lower town. I guess hindsight is a wonderful thing.

But King Peter stuck to his plan. As Simon de Montfort's army cautiously approached the bridge, they were surprised and happy to discover that they were able to cross it safely and unopposed. Streaming over the bridge and into Muret itself, they made it into the town with their army intact, much to the relief of both themselves and the besieged garrison.

So it's late in the day on the 11th of September 1213. The Crusader forces are all safely inside the walls of the town of Muret, and the much larger southern French and Aragonese army is camped some distance outside the walls. According to Peter the Monk, Simon's knights urged him to confront the rebel forces immediately, but Simon, knowing his men and their horses were tired from marching all day, decided to rest and wait until tomorrow.

That, of course, was a good decision. During the night, the northern French nobleman that Simon's wife Alice had managed to convince to rejoin the army despite having completed his forty days service, arrived from Carcassonne along with a very welcome contingent of thirty knights. Like Simon, they were able to pass over the bridge and enter the town unhindered. According to Jonathan Sumption, Simon's forces were now numbered around 800 horsemen, along with an insignificant number of foot soldiers.

The senior clergy accompanying the Crusader forces, which included amongst their number Arnold Amaury and the Bishop of Toulouse, decided to use this time to try and talk some sense into King Peter. King Peter was, after all, a vassal of Rome, and a man who had dedicated his reign to the service of the Church, so he might be amenable to the wise words of the Papal Legate and the other Church leaders. It was also hoped that the militiamen from Toulouse would be swayed by the arguments of their Bishop. Two priests volunteered to take the words of the Bishop and the Papal Legate into the enemy camp. They ended up spending the entire night with the rebels, returning through the gates of Muret just before dawn the following morning. Their efforts had been in vain. While some men had listened politely to their entreaties, King Peter had dismissed them from his presence, and no one had been persuaded to lay down their arms. The two priests gathered with the senior clergy in the church inside Muret to discuss their next move.

Meanwhile, in the rebel camp, discussions were also taking place. The leaders of the rebel forces rose just prior to dawn and met to discuss their strategy for the coming day. Count Raymond VI had come up with a plan, and no one who knew Count Raymond's history of fighting against the Crusaders to date would have been surprised to hear what it was. Count Raymond's plan was to build defences and fortifications around their camp, bunker down and wait for Simon to come out of Muret and attack them. Yes, it was exactly the same plan that Count Raymond had used to disastrous effect at Castelnaudary two years ago. King Peter's commanders were aghast at this suggestion, and discussions at the war council became rather heated. Count Raymond's strategy was howled down. One of the Aragonese lieutenants implied that Count Raymond was a coward. Count Raymond hotly denied the allegation, and King Peter was forced to intervene. In the end, Jonathan Sumption writes that King Peter rejected Count Raymond's suggestion outright, calling it, and I quote "unworthy of a knight" end quote. Count Raymond retreated to his tent to sulk, leaving King Peter and the Count of Foix to sort out the battle strategy.

At this time, the militiamen from Toulouse were camped right outside the walls of Muret, while everyone else was camped on a hill overlooking a field some distance from the town. King Peter's initial plan had been to lure Simon to Muret, then surround and besiege the Crusaders. That was a good plan. The plan that emerged after the War Council in the predawn hours of the 12th of September 1213 was not such a good plan. The plan the

War Council came up with was to get the army into a battle formation and meet Simon de Montfort in the field.

Now this really was a bit of a surprise. With the entire Crusading army holed up inside Muret the advantage was with the besiegers. All they had to do was either storm the already weakened walls and attack the Crusaders inside the town, or wait and starve them out.

But King Peter was sensing a hero moment approaching. With his last hero moment at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa fresh in his mind, he didn't want a messy fight storming the walls of Muret. Neither did he want a long, drawn out, and boring siege. Nope, he wanted a hero moment. He wanted to meet his nemesis Simon de Montfort on the battlefield, face to face, where, with his much bigger army, he would trounce Simon de Montfort for once and for all, scoring a decisive victory and sending the northern Frenchmen back to northern France where they belonged. Unfortunately, King Peter's hero moment is more of an overconfidence moment, and perhaps even an ego moment. In his book "The Occitan War", Laurence Marvin points out that at this time two cavalry forces from the Catalan region were making their way to Muret, and had sent word ahead so that King Peter could await their arrival before heading into battle. King Peter decided not to bother waiting for them.

King Peter also decided to place himself on the front line with his troops. Jonathan Sumption writes that at this time in history, where leaders who sent men into battle were expected to be present on the battlefield themselves, there were two ways in which a leader could do this. Simon De Montfort took the conservative approach, placing himself with the reserve forces, so that if things went wrong he could direct his men from a position of relative safety, without the distraction of being in the thick of the fighting. At Muret, King Peter decided to take a different approach. Following the pre-dawn War Council, he ordered his attendants to ready his ordinary set of armour, instead of his distinctive regal one. His place in the battlefield was not going to be at the rear with the reserve forces, but with his men on the front line, a decision which Jonathan Sumption describes as a pointless vanity.

Meanwhile, back inside Muret, the senior clergy were still holding out hope that a negotiated peace could be arranged with King Peter. Regardless of the fact that two priests had spent the night in the rebel camp to no effect, the clergy selected a small group of priests to return to King Peter's tent and plead with him to abandon the enemies of the Church. The priests left barefoot through one of the city gates, which was left open pending their return. The rules of warfare dictate that a truce operates while peace negotiations are underway, but it seemed that some of the rebel fighters didn't get the memo that negotiations had recommenced. A group of militiamen from Toulouse stormed through the open gate into the lower town, accompanied by a small group of knights. At the same time, arrows were shot into the town, as were missiles from a catapult machine.

Simon de Montfort hurried into the church where the senior clergy were stationed and advised them that he wished to attack King Peter's forces immediately, despite the fact that the peace envoy had only just left for the rebel camp. The senior clergy urged Simon to wait until the barefooted priests returned, but Simon decided to abandon them to their fate, and he ordered the gate to be closed. While Simon was in conference with the priests, a boulder launched from one of the catapult machines landed in the priory of the church in which they were meeting.

So Simon had at this time made the decision to leave the relative safety of the fortifications of Muret and take the battle to the King of Aragon and the rebel Counts. Ominously, a series of bad omens then took place. As Simon knelt before the altar of the church, having decided to hear Mass one last time before battle, the leather brace which held his chain mail leggings together broke. Returning to the citadel to prepare himself for battle, Simon left the church and mounted his horse, which had been patiently waiting with its attendant while Simon had been inside the building. Simon placed his foot in the stirrup and put his weight on to it, preparing to swing his other leg over the back of his horse, when the stirrup leather snapped. Apparently at this time, Simon was in full view of the Toulousan militiamen who were outside the castle walls. They saw the incident and began cheering and jeering. Bad things come in threes, so after the attendant had helped Simon scramble onto his horse without the snapped stirrup, the horse became agitated and threw its head up and back towards Simon, striking Simon so hard on his head that he was momentarily stunned. Cue more cheering and jeering from the crowds outside the walls. The knights and attendants surrounding Simon looked anxiously at each other, unnerved by these bad signs. But Simon's attitude was "Meh."

He rode to the castle and gave instructions for the 800 or so men of his army to gather in the marketplace and await his instructions. Later, when Simon addressed his army in the marketplace, he arranged them into three separate squadrons, possibly the same three groups in which they had marched down the road to Muret the previous day. The first squadron was to be led by William of Contres and the second by Bouchard of Marly - sorry, Lord Bouchard of Cabaret. Simon himself would lead the third group, which would be held in reserve. Simon ordered his men to stay in formation and not to be distracted by hand-to-hand fighting. The Bishop of Toulouse, holding a crucifix over his head, promised the glory of martyrdom to any Crusaders who should fall in battle. Then the three squadrons filed out of the town gate, crossed the river and rode to a nearby plain, where the armies of Aragon and the southern French Counts were lined up in battle formation, King Peter of course, mounted on his horse, waiting near the front line with all his men.

In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption writes that King Peter had the advantages of numbers and the terrain yet used neither of them. According to Jonathan Sumption, his men had been given no real orders about how to proceed in the upcoming battle. They just sat on their horses in their lines on the plain outside Muret, and waited for Simon's army to take the initiative. Simon's army was more than happy to take the battle to the rebels. William of Contres and his squadron went first. They galloped across the plain in full battle charge and struck in the centre of the Aragonese line with devastating effect. Jonathan Sumption reports that the Spanish riders were thrown aside like dust before a gale. As the first line of the rebel army was beginning to disintegrate, Bouchard of Marly / Cabaret made his charge. Galloping across the plain, the hundreds of riders under his command crashed into the battle.

The young future Count Raymond VII was watching the battle unfold from a nearby hill and reported that he could hear cries of "Comminges", "Aragon" and "Montfort" as the troops clashed. He also reported that the noise coming from the battlefield itself sounded like the hewing of a forest of trees. But it wasn't trees that were being cut down; it was the armies of his father's allies.

There are three separate accounts of the battle of Muret, and they differ as to what happened next. Peter the Monk reports that it was at this stage of the battle, after the

second Crusader squadron had joined the fray, that King Peter fell, lost in the confused melee of men being crushed by the Crusader charge. The two other chroniclers, an anonymous troubadour and William of Puylaurens, contradict this, stating that the king had been specifically targeted by the Crusaders in both their attacks. Despite the fact that King Peter himself was difficult to pick out in his nondescript suit of armor, his standard was easy to see, so the Crusaders may well have targeted the King's standard, and the men rallying around it. According to the anonymous troubadour, King Peter at one stage shouted out "I am King!", but his voice was lost in the crush and he was cut down and killed.

After the King's death, the rebel line broke and scattered. Simon's squadron of reserves then joined in, just as the Spanish and southern French rebels were beginning to retreat. Once again Simon's stirrup leather broke, but he managed to keep his balance and was able to fight on regardless. The Crusaders attacked the rebels as they fled. True to their instructions, the Crusader army was still pretty much in formation. The first two squadrons did most of the pursuing, while Simon's group followed at a more disciplined pace, staying in reserve in case the rebel forces rallied, turned back, and attacked. But the rebel forces didn't rally and attack. Deeply shocked by the death of the King of Aragon, they fled without making another stand.

Meanwhile, back outside the walls of Muret, the militiamen from Toulouse, having not joined the battle, which was fought predominantly by men on horseback, were blissfully unaware of the fate of their compatriots and were doing their best to breach the walls of the town. High in the citadel inside Muret, Folquet the Bishop of Toulouse had been watching the battle unfold. Concerned now about what would happen to the former members of his flock once the victorious Simon returned to find them launching missiles at the walls, he sent an envoy out to warn them. The priest who was acting as envoy carried with him the Bishop of Toulouse's personal Cistercian cloak, to convince the Toulousans that the message was actually from their Bishop. What was the message? That the allies had lost the battle, and that they should surrender or immediately cease attacking the town. Falling about, laughing at what they thought was a ridiculous ruse by their Bishop to trick them into laying down their arms, the Toulousans beat up the priest and sent him back into the town.

Shortly after this, the militia were overjoyed to see the banners of King Peter and the southern French Counts appearing in the distance on their way back from battle. Their relief at this sight turned to horror when they realised that the banners had in fact been captured, and that the army coming towards them belonged to Simon and not King Peter. They abandoned their attack on the walls, and their camp, and made a mad dash for the barges on the River Garonne. A handful of men made it to the barges, but the rest were either cut down by Simon's knights as they fled, or were drowned in the river.

The victory by Simon de Montfort at Muret was crushing and absolute. Writing to Pope Innocent after the battle, the Papal Legates advised that Simon only lost one knight in the battle at Muret. The losses incurred by the rebels were staggering, perhaps more than one thousand men. But of course, one death above all was felt more keenly than the others. It seemed almost unthinkable. The savior of the heretics, the hero of southern France, the King of Aragon, had fallen. Join me next week for an in depth analysis of the battle of Muret. Until next week, bye for now.

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