

History of the Crusades.
Episode 147.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
Muret Analysis.

Hello again. Last week we saw a massive setback for the southern French, with their crushing defeat at the battle of Muret at the hands of Simon de Montfort's much smaller army. Of course, the most devastating aspect of this blow to the rebel cause was the death on the battlefield of King Peter II of Aragon. Now, before we move on to the ramifications of the battle of Muret, we're going to take another look at the battle itself and try to work out why it unfolded as it did.

In a nutshell, the Battle of Muret can be summarized as follows. King Peter II of Aragon invades Languedoc and joins the army of Aragon to the forces of the three rebel southern Counts. They proceed to the small fortified town of Muret and besiege it. Their plan is to wait for Simon de Montfort, to come and rescue the besieged garrison, lure him and his army into the town, then defeat the Crusader forces. The plan works. Simon and his army make their way to Muret and are allowed to enter the town unhindered. The Toulousan militia surround the town, and Simon and his army are besieged. Then the rebels formulate a new plan. This plan involves the knights of Aragon and southern France lining up in battle formation on a field outside Muret, with the aim of tempting Simon to leave the relative safety of the town and face down the rebel army in the field. Once again, the plan works. Simon's army leaves Muret and rides out to clash with the rebel forces. However, the plan backfires spectacularly when Simon's much smaller army defeats the armies of Aragon and the Counts of Toulouse, Foix and Comminges, killing King Peter in the process.

One thing you can say about the Battle of Muret is that it didn't follow the rules of medieval warfare. The rebel forces, with an army at least twice the size of the Crusaders, had Simon's army pinned down inside Muret. In theory, when this happens the advantage is with the besiegers. Not only was the besieging army much larger than the army inside the town, it was well equipped with siege engines and the like. Supplying the army camped outside Muret wouldn't be a problem, as the rebel town of Toulouse was a manageable distance downstream on the river Garonne. Should the besiegers need supplies, they just had to board their barges, take them down the river to Toulouse, load them up and drag them back upstream to Muret. Simon de Montfort was inside Muret with eight hundred men and the garrison of the town. With no way for him to get supplies into the town, and with no outside forces on their way to rescue him, all the rebels had to do was to be patient and starve the Crusaders out; that is wait until they were so desperate for food that they would surrender. Simple. So why didn't the rebels follow the medieval warfare copybook?

Well, it appears that King Peter wasn't interested in the surrender of the Crusaders. He wanted to annihilate them, to slaughter every last one of them in a victory of apocalyptic proportions. To do that, he needed to go on the offensive, to attack Simon's men either inside Muret or out on the battlefield. Attacking the Crusaders while they remained inside Muret would give the advantage to the Crusaders. While it wouldn't be that difficult to breach the already weakened walls with the assistance of their catapult machines, the rebel army would be vulnerable as it stormed the town, and the Crusaders could have used the Citadel as a base to launch raids against the invaders. The advantage of having a larger army would be lost in the crowded streets and in the hand-to-hand fighting needed to slowly defeat Simon's forces. Losses would likely be high, and the battle would likely be

a messy and lengthy exercise. So if King Peter wanted a decisive victory, the best way to achieve this would be to lure the Crusaders out of the safety of their town, into a wide open area where the cavalry could operate as they were meant to, and where King Peter would have the advantage of choosing the place of battle to ensure that the terrain favored his forces.

Right. So we now know why King Peter made the fateful decision to lure Simon's army out onto the battlefield. The next obvious question is, why did Simon take the bait? And perhaps more interestingly, why did King Peter know that Simon would take the bait? Simon de Montfort was after all, relatively safe inside Muret. Yes, the walls had suffered some damage due to those pesky militiamen from Toulouse, but really inside the fortifications of Muret was where they were safest. According to the medieval warfare copybook, all Simon needs to do is to sit tight with his army, munch his way through their supplies and wait for reinforcements to arrive to rescue them.

And there we come to the crux of the matter: reinforcements and supplies. The trouble for Simon was reinforcements weren't going to arrive. He had his entire army with him inside Muret. His only real ally outside Languedoc was the Church, and the man the Church would likely call upon for assistance in this sort of situation, well, that would be their loyal vassal King Peter II of Aragon, who was currently lined up outside Muret with murder in his eyes and vengeance in his heart. So for Simon, there was no point bunkering down inside Muret waiting for assistance, because assistance wasn't going to come.

Besides which, it's quite possible that Simon just didn't have enough supplies for a prolonged siege. It's clear from the sources that there were no provisions inside Muret itself. When Simon came to the rescue of the besieged garrison the men guarding Muret only had enough food inside the town to last them twenty four hours. So Simon would have had to bring a substantial baggage train with him, carrying enough food and provisions to feed eight hundred men indefinitely should he wish to conduct a lengthy siege. To my knowledge, there's no mention in the sources of a substantial baggage train, and it's likely that there wasn't one.

So really, Simon needs to do everything he can to break out of the siege. Facing an army on a battlefield would be a much better option for Simon than being besieged inside Muret, even if the opposing army was twice the size of his own.

Now we come to the final interesting question. If the rules of medieval warfare dictate that Simon should remain inside Muret, why was King Peter so sure that Simon would leave the safety of the town and come out to meet him on the battlefield? Lining your army up in battle formation in a field, where the opposing force is safely inside a fortified town, is a pretty strange move, and, well, the rebel forces could well have been lined up in the sun all day, while Simon watched them in amusement from the safety of the citadel inside Muret. Having to just pack up and go back to their camp after a day lined up waiting for an army which never came would be a strange and awkward experience. To save the troubadours making humorous songs at his expense, you would think that King Peter wouldn't have ordered his army to line up in battle formation all by themselves unless he was pretty sure that Simon would leave Muret and be lured into battle.

So what made him convinced that Simon would leave the safety of Muret and chance his much smaller army against the rebel forces? Well, perhaps King Peter knew that Simon wasn't equipped for a lengthy siege. It was pretty easy to discern that no armies would be

coming to Simon's rescue. King Peter had his finger on the pulse of regional politics, and he knew that Simon had no powerful allies who would be currently racing towards Muret with their armies to lift the siege. So Simon would need to have substantial supplies holed up inside the town to survive what would be a lengthy or indefinite siege. King Peter's spy network was extensive, and it's not unlikely that he may have been aware that prior to Simon's arrival Muret had barely enough food to sustain its garrison of thirty men. Simon's army and baggage train were allowed to pass unopposed into the town in full view of the rebel forces, so estimates of Simon's supplies from the size of the baggage train wouldn't have been too hard to assess.

But if King Peter knew that Simon was running low on supplies and could therefore be easily lured out of Muret onto the battlefield, then surely an easier and more certain victory could have been assured had King Peter contained Simon and his Crusaders within the town, and patiently starved them into submission.

Well, I guess we'll never know exactly why King Peter and Simon de Montfort did what they did, so onto the next question. What went wrong for the rebels? With their army all but annihilated by the much smaller Crusader force, with King Peter numbering amongst the dead on the battlefield, and with the Crusaders possibly only having lost one man, why was the defeat so absolute?

Well, most historians point to one cause: tactical bloopers by King Peter. While it was true that the cavalry of the rebel forces outnumbered the Crusader knights two to one, the numbers could have been even greater, had King Peter delayed and waited for the Catalan contingent, who were on their way to Muret from Spain. In addition, Jonathan Sumption in his book "The Albigensian Crusade" notes that Count Raymond and his men weren't actually on the battlefield. Count Raymond stayed well away from the action, and King Peter didn't order him to line up with his compatriots, or wait for him to join the line up. Also, King Peter failed to make use of the numerous and very eager Toulousan militiamen. Rather than allowing them to remain back outside the walls of Muret doing their own thing and attacking the fortifications, Jonathan Sumption argues that they could have been put to good use on the battlefield. The use of massed infantry against cavalry charges had been successfully used as a battle tactic in the Middle Eastern Crusades and in a number of other significant clashes previously in the medieval era. The Toulousan militia may well have been able to deflect, or at least slow, part of the Crusader attack, had they been directed to do so.

In his autobiography, entitled "Book of Deeds", King Peter's son James had a crack at trying to discern why his father had suffered such a massive defeat at Muret. In his book "The Occitan War", Laurence Marvin summarizes James's conclusions as follows, and here Laurence uses the Catalan version of the name that I have anglicized as James, and I quote. "Jaume believes that his father had failed to impose unit discipline on his knights, and that each Lord or knight fought on his own, without coordination. He attributes the coalition loss to a combination of bad order, his father's many sins, and how hard the Crusaders fought." End quote.

James also reported in his memoirs that King Peter had spent the night before the battle with one of his many mistresses, and that he was so tired and hung-over on the day of the battle that he could barely stand. Now, I'm not sure that too much should be made of this point. We should remember that at the time of the battle of Muret, James was only five years of age and wasn't present at the battle but was back in Carcassonne. We should

also keep in mind that he's not a huge fan of dear old dad. His last memory of King Peter was likely when King Peter handed him over to Simon de Montfort, so he could be raised in Simon's court, and groomed as a future husband for Simon's infant daughter. Then King Peter left young James to his fate when he declared Simon was no longer his vassal and went to war against him. As an adult, James was a pious, god-fearing, judgmental man, who no likely was appalled when he became older about his father's reputation as a lady's man, despite being married to James' long-suffering mother Marie de Montpellier. When you also consider the fact that had King Peter felt so poorly on the day of the battle, it would be likely that he would have placed himself with the reserve forces and not on the front line, James' depiction of his father's state of health should really be taken with a grain of salt.

One factor that did play a part in the rebels' defeat was the quality of the Crusader army. In his book "The Occitan War", Laurence Marvin states that although Simon de Montfort was clearly a competent commander who made sound decisions at Muret, he did nothing of brilliance. He had observed that attacking a cavalry force aggressively in its centre in a decisive and forceful manner would lessen its ability to react and give him the advantage, but really argues Laurence Marvin, it was the Crusader knights in Simon's army who won the day. Simon wasn't getting many volunteers signing up from the north, so his knights at Muret consisted primarily of his core army, and men who had considerable experience on the battlefield. Laurence Marvin describes Simon's army as a small, compact force, mostly consisting of veterans who had served the Crusader cause for some time. King Peter, in contrast, not only had his own Aragonese forces to command, but also the forces from southern France, men who had little experience on the battlefield and who, save for their recent venture at Pujol, had only known defeat.

Peter the Monk, of course, has a different explanation for the outcome. Simon de Montfort won because God was on his side. The death of King Peter, while regrettable, shows what happens when you err and side with the enemies of the Church. Following the extraordinary victory at Muret, the Bishops and abbots who were present at the conflict, along with the Papal Legate and Archbishop of Narbonne Arnold Amaury, penned a letter to Pope Innocent III in which they described the battle and its outcome in detail. The letter concludes with the following paragraph, and I quote. "Let all Christendom give thanks to Christ for the victory of the Christians with sincere and heartfelt devotion, for He, through a few of the faithful, has overcome an innumerable multitude of the faithless, and granted His Holy Church a happy triumph over His enemies. Honor and glory be His to all eternity. Amen. Given at Muret on the morrow of our glorious victory on the sixth Feast day preceding the octave of the nativity of the blessed Virgin Mary, in the year of our Lord, 1213." End quote.

Join me next week as the dust settles on the battlefield and we take a look at the aftermath and consequences of the Crusader victory at Muret. Until next week, bye for now.

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