

History of the Crusades.
Episode 152.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
The Siege of Casseneuil.

Hello again. Last week we saw the original aims of the Crusade met, when all the rebel Counts submitted themselves to the Church, along with the rebellious cities of Toulouse and Narbonne. With everyone bending to the will of the Church and agreeing to no longer support heretics, and with Pope Innocent's order that clerics no longer recruit for the Crusade still standing, on paper at least, it seems that the Crusade is finally over. But in reality, the conflict is far from over.

Southern France still has a Simon de Montfort problem, and Pope Innocent is beginning to realize that maybe he has a Simon de Montfort problem as well. Why? Well, because Simon de Montfort is still at war. Despite the original aims of the Crusade being met, he is still determined to conquer all of Languedoc and become the sole ruler of southern France. Pope Innocent's solution was to let it be known that all would be resolved when the Ecumenical Council was convened, which would put the whole Crusade against the Cathars matter to rest once and for all. Rumor had it that the Ecumenical Council intended to achieve peace in southern France by formally restoring the wayward, but now reconciled, rebel Counts to their lands.

While this, of course, was great news for the Counts and for southern France in general, it was not so good news for Simon. In fact, the idea of being forced to hand back his conquered territories was just not something that Simon could bear to think about. Simon's solution was to ensure that by the time the Ecumenical Council met, he would be the undisputed ruler of all of southern France. Then it would just be a matter of convincing Pope Innocent and the Council that chaos would ensue unless Simon was given the green light by the Papacy to carry on his good work. So Simon's aim now is to totally subdue all of Languedoc before the Ecumenical Council meets. When will the Ecumenical Council meet? Well, no one knows, as Pope Innocent is yet to set a date for it. Simon de Montfort is now Count of Toulouse in all but name. With Count Raymond VI of Toulouse and his son exiled and banished from southern France, Simon de Montfort didn't take any convincing to step into his shoes.

Trouble is, as countless Counts of Toulouse had discovered before him, being the Count of Toulouse doesn't mean that all of your subjects are going to meekly submit to your rule. No, in a place where independence and self-rule was valued, and where towns and fortifications were easily defended against outsiders, many residents of the County of Toulouse were used to doing their own thing, and if they were unhappy submitting their castle, fortifications, or town to Count Raymond, or to the many Raymonds who had come before him - well, you can safely bet that they are not going to be opening their arms and gates wide to welcome being ruled by a northern Frenchman, and not just any northern Frenchman, but the despised Simon de Montfort. No - for Simon de Montfort, ruling the vast territory controlled by the Count of Toulouse is going to be no easy task.

It would help, of course, if he had more men. Ever since Pope Innocent had decreed that the Crusades to the Middle East were now the Church's priority, the flow of men from northern France had been reduced to a trickle. Well, that's all about to change. For the past year, Peter the Monk's uncle Guy of Les Vaux-de-Cernay, who is currently the Bishop of Carcassonne, along with the siege-engine-loving Archdeacon of Paris, have been

travelling around northern France preaching the Crusade against the Cathars. Not only have they managed to convince a sizable number of northern Frenchmen to join the Crusade, they have also managed to recruit a Papal Legate. Yes, one of Pope Innocent's own men, a man named Robert Curzon, has been persuaded that, contrary to his instructions to preach the Middle Eastern Crusades in northern France, the more worthy cause was the Crusade against the Cathars. Robert Curzon then not only allowed the Bishop of Carcassonne and the Archdeacon of Paris to drum up support for a Crusade that Pope Innocent was winding up, he joined in and started preaching for the southern French Crusade himself. Between them, the three men managed to recruit an impressive number of volunteer fighters, although Peter the Monk's statement that 100,000 men showed up is a wild exaggeration.

Peter the Monk traveled with his uncle to Nevers, and accompanied the volunteer crusaders as they marched through Lyons and made the trek southwards to the mustering point at Montpellier. The Archdeacon of Paris and the Papal Legate Robert Curzon met their recruits at Bourges, and they intended to take a different route to Montpellier. They'll arrived at Montpellier in early May and marched to a castle near Beziers, where they were met by Simon de Montfort. Now Peter the Monk asserts that at this point, and I quote, "there were about a hundred thousand of us, taking mounted men and foot soldiers together" end quote. Historians are united in agreeing that this is a gross overstatement, with the actual numbers most likely being in the vicinity of about five thousand recruits. Still, it's a sizable number of volunteers to fight a war that the Church believes is over, and Simon is intent on making good use of them.

Now the recruits are all eager to make a start on finding, capturing and burning some pestilential heretics (as Peter the Monk calls them), but Simon needs the Crusader volunteers for more earthly concerns. His primary threat at the moment is King John and the English army. King John is moving through Simon's territory in the border regions of the Agenais, and Simon needs to travel north with his army to put a stop to this. Trouble is, the Agenais is just about totally devoid of Cathars. Strangely, no one seems to have raised a concern about this.

In the end, though, everyone got what they wanted. Simon de Montfort had to leave the volunteer Crusaders, to journey back to Carcassonne to witness the marriage of his son Amaury to Beatrice of Viennois in early June. This, it would not surprise you to learn, was a very advantageous match. Beatrice was the niece of the Duke of Burgundy, and her family was a powerful force in Provence. Should Simon achieve his dream of ruling Languedoc, the marriage alliance between his son and Beatrice would see his influence extend over Provence as well.

Anyway, while Simon was delayed in Carcassonne, the volunteer Crusaders, under the leadership of Simon's brother Guy de Montfort and the Bishop of Carcassonne Guy of Les Vaux-de-Cernay headed north. Luckily for us, Peter the Monk was with them, so we have an eyewitness account of events. The army proceeded through the Quercy region, laying waste to the territory of the enemies of the faith until they were halted by a castle which refused to submit to them. They laid siege to the castle, and eventually it surrendered. Inside the castle, to everyone's surprise, were seven members of the Waldensian sect: not Cathars, but pestilential heretics just the same. According to Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War", it had been years since any Cathars had been burned alive, and of course, the Waldensians weren't exactly the target of the Albigensian Crusade. But the men were declared enemies of the Church and were burned alive in front of the jubilant

Crusader Army. Here's how Peter the Monk records these events, and I quote "I must record that we found seven heretics of the Waldensian sect. They were at once led to the Legate and confessed their unbelief freely and fully. The Crusaders seized them and burned them, with great rejoicing." End quote.

With the 'burn heretics' box firmly ticked, Simon rejoined the army and marched them up towards the army of England, intent not on confronting the English outright, but on providing a show of force to any locals who were thinking of switching sides and throwing their lot in with King John, and on retaking fortifications and villages which had switched sides, and meting out appropriate punishment. In his book, "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption describes Simon de Montfort's campaign against the English in the spring and summer of 1214 as, and I quote "cautiously shadowboxing with King John" end quote, and I think that's a good way to describe it. Simon de Montfort had no interest whatsoever in confronting the English King and his army on the battlefield. To do so would likely lose him a lot of men with the gain of little or no territory. So Simon's tactic was to dart around, making his presence known, supporting the northern French garrisons of castles and towns, besieging and conquering those which had expelled their garrisons and switched sides, and generally looking after his conquests in the region without facing off against King John directly.

Now, as Simon moves north, his ultimate destination is the town of Casseneuve in the Agen. But making good use of his time on the road, Simon detoured to destroy two fortifications whose residents had assisted the rebels to take down Baldwin of Toulouse. Unfortunately for Simon, by this stage the volunteer crusaders who had travelled south with Peter the Monk's uncle had completed their forty days of service and had returned to the north. But still, although his army was much reduced, Simon was able to besiege castles, threatening and cajoling as he made his way through the Agen.

One notable attack which took place at this time concerned the castle of Marmande. This castle had been at the extreme end of the lands controlled by Count Raymond, and it had later been claimed by Simon de Montfort. In the spring of 1214 however, it had switched allegiance to King John, and its garrison was now being commanded by an Englishman, Geoffrey of Neville. As the small Crusader army approached, Geoffrey hoisted his personal standard, ensuring it flew over one of the towers of the castle as an indication of his defiance. Most of the citizens within the castle had decided to play things safe and had fled before the Crusaders arrived. Geoffrey put up a spirited defense, but he didn't have enough men and was eventually forced to retreat, along with the garrison, into one of the towers of the castle. Eventually he surrendered and was allowed, along with the garrison, to walk away from the castle. Simon allowed the Crusaders time to loot and pillage, then he garrisoned the fortification with his own men and continued on to Casseneuve, arriving there in late June 1214.

So why has Simon been intent on reaching Casseneuve? Well, because it's a sizable fortified town in the Agen, and because it switched allegiances and threw its support behind King John in the spring of 1214, and because it's become a magnet for refugees and rebels fleeing the Crusaders in the area. Its secure walls sheltered all manner of undesirables. As Peter the Monk states, and I quote "most of its inhabitants were heretics, thieves and perjurers, full of iniquity and sins of every description" end quote. Importantly for Simon, the Lord of Casseneuve, Hugh of Revigan, brother of the Bishop of Agen, had once been a firm supporter of Simon, so much so that Simon had believed him to be a

personal friend. His act of betrayal in supporting the English and rejecting northern French rule was something that Simon couldn't let go unpunished.

Casseneuil was protected by a rocky outcrop to the northwest and was bordered on another two sides by the river Lot, and its tributaries. Its only unprotected side was fortified and surrounded by deep ditches. Simon didn't have enough men to fully surround the town, so his men besieged only one part of the walls, the part facing the rocky outcrop. The Crusaders constructed siege engines and commenced bombarding the walls with missiles.

Fortunately for Simon, a small group of volunteers arrived from northern France to commence their forty days' service. Simon decided that as a result, he had enough men to split his forces in two. Leaving his son Amaury in charge of the forces on the hillside with the Bishop of Carcassonne to assist him, Simon took a contingent of men down to the part of the walls that were on flat ground near the river, protected by the ditches. He set up catapult machines, and the Crusaders were able to attack the walls from two points at once.

Simon's decision to split his forces nearly ended in disaster. Peter the Monk, who was an eyewitness to the event, reported that just before dawn one night, some defenders from the town sneaked out of the walls and into the Crusader camp commanded by Amaury. As some of the men began to attack the camp, others raced to Amaury's tent, hoping to capture or kill Simon's son. However, they were driven back by the Crusaders and Amaury was left unharmed.

By this time, King John had been made aware of the siege at Casseneuil. A number of messengers had managed to sneak out of the town and had sent word to King John, pleading with him to intervene and break the siege. In response, King John sent messages back to the town, encouraging the townsfolk to resist the Crusaders and promising to send assistance. Seemingly intent on providing such assistance, he turned the English army around and started making his way towards Casseneuil.

However, historians have questioned whether King John ever really intended to fulfill his promise to confront Simon de Montfort and raise the siege. His men were in France to fight King Philip and regain Normandy and Brittany for England. King John's priority and that of his army lay to the north. Also, the Papal Legate Robert Curzon, the man who had been persuaded by the Crusaders to set aside instructions from Pope Innocent to preach for the Middle Eastern Crusades, and start recruiting for the Crusade against the Cathars instead, had met with King John to try and negotiate a peace treaty between the English and French crowns. Robert Curzon was an Englishman, and unsurprisingly, he also attempted to dissuade King John from attacking Simon's forces. Following a meeting with King John on the 26th of June, the Papal Legate declared that King John, and I quote "was prepared to stand by the orders of the Pope and the advice of the Church in all matters in regard to all castra and towns belonging to him in the Diocese of Agen and Cahors." End quote.

So with his main concern laying with King Philip to the north, and having received warnings from the Church to back off, all King John was really prepared to do to save the town of Casseneuil was some sword waving at a distance, despite the promises he had made to the envoys from the town.

Without King John's coming to save them, the siege continued. Simon de Montfort's forces kept pummeling the walls from two directions with their catapult machines, until eventually it was decided that they were weakened sufficiently to make an attempt to storm them. The problem Simon now faced was how to get his men close enough to the walls to climb over them. A bridge had once stood over the river next to the castle, and this would have been the preferred means of approach. But unfortunately for the Crusaders, the defenders had burnt it and destroyed it as the Crusading army had approached. Simon's solution? Easy. They would just build a new bridge.

Building a bridge across a river sounds like a relatively simple task, and the carpenters present at the siege agreed to give it a shot. However, it turned out that for these men, whose abilities were more attuned to constructing siege engines, building a bridge was outside their skill set. Peter the Monk described their attempts. It's quite a long quote, but I think it's worth repeating. Now, at this stage, the bridge had been constructed on dry ground and was ready to be placed across the river. Okay, long quote, here goes, and I quote. "As soon as the bridge was completed, our men put on their armor ready to attack and rolled the bridge up to the waters edge. However, as soon as the bridge reached the water its own weight, and the fact that the bank at that point was high and not level enough, caused it to plunge under the surface of the water with such force that it could not be drawn back or lifted up. So all our work on the bridge came to nothing in a single moment. After a few days, our men constructed another bridge of a different kind in the hope that it would enable them to cross the water, and also made ready a few small boats which would allow part of our force to cross, albeit at great risk. When all was ready, our men put on their armor and dragged the bridge to the water, whilst some of them boarded the boats. The defenders kept up a heavy bombardment. What more, our men pushed the bridge across the water, but achieved nothing, since the bridge proved to be too short and quite inadequate. Our men were greatly dejected, the enemy quite delighted." End quote.

Possibly desperate to save face after building two hopeless bridges, the chief engineer then came up with an original and quite novel design for a siege engine. His plan was to construct something like a cross between a siege tower and a cat. The towering structure was designed to contain a protected room at its base, which would house a crew of men whose job it would be to fill in the river and make a causeway, to enable the Crusader army to cross the river safely to the base of the walls. Who needs a bridge when you can construct a causeway? The massive structure was built and duly dragged to the edge of the river. The men inside began frantically hauling baskets of dirt, scraps, rocks, debris, and anything else they could find to the edge of the river and tipping it in, to slowly and painfully construct the causeway, all while they were fired upon by the defenders, high up on the walls, who lobbed rocks, fire arrows, and anything else they could lay their hands on at the structure. The structure held, and slowly and laboriously the Crusaders constructed their causeway over the river.

It takes a long time to cross a river in this way, so it wasn't until mid-August that the Crusaders were within a few feet of finishing their causeway. Simon de Montfort was concerned that with the cat tower now so close to the wall, it might be destroyed, so he ordered his men to prepare for a surprise assault on the castle wall that evening. To the rousing chant of "Veni Creatus Spiritus", the Crusaders punched a hole through the back wall of their cat-tower and jumped over the last couple of feet of water to the far bank of the river. The carpenters then worked on constructing ladders to enable the Crusaders to scale the walls. As this was taking place, most of the defenders inside the town took the chance to escape. No one to this day knows exactly how they managed to do this, but it

was a sensible move. On the 18th of August, the Crusaders breached the walls, killed as many people as they could find, set fire to the town, and destroyed as much of it as they could.

We will conclude this episode with the words of Peter the Monk, and I quote "In this way, Casseneuil was taken and destroyed on the 18th of August. In praise of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and honor, with the Father and Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen." End quote. Join me next week as Simon de Montfort continues his campaign in the north. Until next week, bye for now.

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