

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 154.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
The Council of Montpellier 1215.

Hello again. Last week we took the narrative up to the end of the year 1214. With King John of England no longer threatening Simon de Montfort's conquests in the north, the Papal Legate Peter Curzon had taken advantage of the absence of his fellow Papal Legate Peter Benevento to formally recognize Simon's claims to land in Albi, the Agenais, and other areas in the north. A horrified Peter Benevento called for a Council of Bishops and Archbishops to meet to discuss the matter in January 1215.

Now, it would have been easier for Peter Benevento, and for everyone really, if Pope Innocent had convened his Ecumenical Council to sort everything out once and for all. Way back in 1213, following the Battle of Muret, Pope Innocent had declared that the status quo should be preserved in Languedoc until he could call an Ecumenical Council. Now it is 1215 and there's still no indication from Pope Innocent that the magical solution to everyone's problems, the Ecumenical Council, is any closer to being convened. So with the status quo having been blown out of the water by Peter Curzon's recognition of Simon de Montfort's expanded territory, Peter Benevento was left with no option other than to convene a smaller local Council to try and put things to rights. He chose Montpellier as the city to host the meeting, believing the town to be as close to neutral territory as he could get without leaving southern France altogether.

As a raft of Bishops and Archbishops traveled from across southern France to Montpellier at the beginning of 1215, it's tricky to see how Peter Benevento could view this council as helping to preserve the status quo, because really, the Montpellier counsel was always going to be hostile to Peter Benevento and favorable to Simon de Montfort. Why? Well, because the Bishops and Archbishops of southern France were all Simon's men. Many of them had Simon to thank for their positions and for the amount of power they wielded. Many of them had even accompanied Simon on his military campaigns.

So for Simon, the council wasn't a chance for the Church to reverse his recent conquests and place everything into a post-Muret holding pattern. No, for Simon de Montfort the Counsel at Montpellier was a chance for him to expand his territory. Simon's aim, and therefore the aim of most of the senior clergy of southern France, was to use the Council at Montpellier as a means by which he could finally be declared the ruler of southern France. The first step towards meeting this goal was to have himself replace Count Raymond VI of Toulouse.

That's right. Simon's aim in January 1215 was for him to leave the Council at Montpellier with a new title. He would no longer be just Simon de Montfort, Viscount of Beziers and Carcassonne. He would be Simon de Montfort, Count of Toulouse and Viscount of Beziers and Carcassonne. Since the Church, via Peter Curzon, had recently recognized Simon's conquests in Albi, the Agenais and other lands to the north, Simon was within a whisker of achieving his goal of being the undisputed ruler of a vast amount of territory, comprising most, if not all, of southern France. All he had to do was to get his buddies, the Archbishops and Bishops of Southern France, to all agree, and then his dream would be realised.

The actual Count of Toulouse, Raymond VI, had seen this coming. As soon as Peter Benevento declared his intention for the Council to meet, Count Raymond didn't make plans to travel to Montpellier. No, Count Raymond made plans to travel to Rome. It wasn't difficult to see that the Council at Montpellier was going to declare in favor of Simon. Count Raymond knew that being present at the Council and pleading his case would be a next to useless exercise. The only way he could think to counter what seemed to be a foregone outcome of the Council would be to get Pope Innocent to block Simon's attempt to usurp him. So Count Raymond mounted his horse and made the lengthy, and by now pretty familiar, journey to the Vatican while Simon de Montfort and the senior clergy of the South all headed east to Montpellier.

Now, you might remember that back in November 1213, the cities of Narbonne and Montpellier closed their gates to Simon and his Crusaders and refused to let them inside. Well, Montpellier still feels the same way about Simon de Montfort. As the Bishops and Archbishops of Languedoc were welcomed into the city and given lodgings, Simon was not. Refused entry into the town, he was forced to find accommodation in a nearby castle, and for the duration of the Council he would spend his days in a traveler's house kept by the Templar knights just outside the city gates, and he would return to the castle in the evenings. He was kept informed of events, and any senior clergy who wished to discuss Council business with him were forced to make an irritating journey out of the city gates to meet with Simon at the Templar hospice. I imagine that quite a few such meetings were taking place as Simon, despite the fact that he was not in attendance at the Council and was not even inside the city, seemed to be in control of the event, and was pulling all the right strings behind the scenes.

Peter the Monk's uncle, the Bishop of Carcassonne, Guy of Les Vaux-de-Cernay, was in attendance. Presumably, Peter himself was also there in his usual role as his uncle's scribe. Here is how he saw matters progressing. Peter begins by describing how the Papal Legate Peter Benevento addressed the gathering and then continues in what will be rather a long quote. Here we go, and I quote. "When they had gathered together, he addressed them thus: 'I ask and require you, calling to witness Divine judgment and reminding you of your duty of obedience to the Church, to cast aside all prejudice hatred or fear, and advise me faithfully and to the best of your ability on these questions. To whom would it be best and most useful to grant and assign the city of Toulouse, for the honor of God and the Holy Church, for the sake of peace in these lands, and to help eliminate the filth of heresy?' The same in regard to the other territories which the army of the Crusaders has occupied?' The Archbishops and Bishops deliberated long and conscientiously, each consulting the abbots in his diocese and the clergy in his entourage. They then set down in writing the advice they consider to be right and just. In the end, they agreed on one choice and one recommendation: that the Count of Montfort should be chosen as chief and sole ruler in the whole territory. What a wondrous outcome. When a Bishop or Abbott has to be appointed, even a few electors can hardly agree on one candidate. Here, in electing a ruler for such a large territory, the votes of so many important men were unanimously in favor of this great champion of Christ. Without doubt, this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." End quote.

So what did Peter the Monk say just happened? Well, Peter Benevento addressed the clergy present at the Council, reminding them of their duty of obedience to the Church, and asked them to decide who should rule the city of Toulouse and all the other regions the Crusaders had conquered. The clergy unanimously came up with one answer: Simon de Montfort.

It's safe to say that a unanimous vote for Simon de Montfort to be appointed Count of Toulouse was not the outcome Peter Benevento was hoping for. Really, you have to feel pretty sorry for Peter Benevento at this point. He was an Italian cardinal with a legal background who was a total novice at the game of politics and power, and here, in a meeting he had called to reverse Simon's territorial ambitions, he has just been completely outplayed, outmaneuvered, and outclassed by a consummate professional at the game of politics and power, Simon de Montfort. It seems that, reading between the lines, Peter Benevento may have believed that all he had to do was to remind the Bishops and Archbishops of their duty to obey the Church, then tell them of Pope Innocent's desire to rein in Simon de Montfort. Then he could place the problem of secular rule in Languedoc in their wise hands and watch as they voted to strip Simon of his titles. If Peter Benevento thought this would occur, it demonstrates a breathtaking naivety. Even Count Raymond, whose skill at diplomacy and politics left a lot to be desired, could see that Simon had the deck stacked in his favor. Simon's influence was so powerful and all-encompassing that he was able to take a meeting called by the Church, attended by men of the Church in a city that he was not even allowed to set foot in, and score a unanimous outcome in his favor that was actually contrary to the will of the Church. Even though I imagine I would dislike Simon de Montfort intensely if I met him, sometimes you just have to stand back, applaud, and shake your head in disbelief.

But there's no need to panic just yet. Peter Benevento has one card left up his sleeve. While he may be woeful at reading people's intentions, lobbying clerics and enforcing Papal policy, there is one thing he excels at: legalities. A bunch of Bishops and Archbishops have just elected Simon de Montfort to be the new Count of Toulouse. The question Peter Benevento is now asking himself is: do they have the legal authority to do this? While the clerics present at Montpellier were of the view that Peter Benevento simply just had to declare that all the territory of the Count of Toulouse should now be transferred to Simon, a view no doubt shared by Simon de Montfort sitting smugly in his hospice outside the city gates, Peter Benevento searched his letters of instruction from Pope Innocent, which he had been given back in January 1214, and declared that he didn't possess the legal authority to transfer the lands. The meeting then exploded into an uproar, with the clergy all urging Peter Benevento not to be so silly. Of course he had the authority, just because it wasn't specifically mentioned in his letters of instructions that didn't mean he couldn't do it, etcetera, etcetera. But, managing to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, Peter Benevento threw his hands into the air and said, No, he just couldn't do it. He couldn't transfer lands to Simon de Montfort because this was outside the limits of his power. The only person who could do this would be Pope Innocent himself. So someone was just going to have to travel to Rome to progress the matter further.

As historians have recently pointed out, there were additional reasons why Simon de Montfort could not have been legally made the Count of Toulouse at that meeting. The first of these reasons was the fact that Count Raymond VI had been formerly reconciled with the Church back in April 1214, and had been doing penance in exile for his misdemeanors. While the Church had created a power vacuum by exiling him, it had no grounds to now punish him further by removing all his titles and handing his lands to someone else. Secondly, the Count of Toulouse was a powerful secular ruler. With direct possessions and vassalages extending across a goodly portion of southern France, some powerful secular players, most notably Philip Augustus, King Phillip of France, who was overlord for most of the territory, but also the King of England, the King of Aragon and the Holy Roman

Emperor all had an interest here, and it was not really for the church to dictate to these Kings who the Count of Toulouse should be.

Regardless, Peter Benevento was more than happy to rely on a legality to hand-ball the issue back to Pope Innocent. So the Council ruled that the Archbishop of Embrun, who had been part of the Council and was considered a man of great learning, should carry a letter from Peter Benevento and the senior clergy to Rome. According to Peter the Monk, the letter from the senior clergy implored Pope Innocent to hand the territories of the Count of Toulouse to Simon. In Peter the Monk's words the letter, and I quote "urgently requested the Pope to grant them the appointment of the Count of Montfort, the unanimous choice, as lord and sole ruler of the territories" end quote.

Of course, as we all know, Count Raymond is also on his way to Rome and will arrive there much earlier than the letter-carrying Bishop. It will then be up to Pope Innocent to decide what to do.

Now the Council at Montpellier wrapped up a couple of days after the Archbishop was dispatched to Rome. During this time, for reasons unknown, Peter Benevento, along with the senior clergy at the meeting, invited Simon de Montfort to attend to the Council and meet with them. This, of course, required Simon to enter the city of Montpellier, which he had been denied access to by its citizens. Deciding the risk was worth taking, Simon, accompanied by some knights who served as bodyguards, along with his brother Guy and two of his sons, accepted the invitation, and they all made their way to the place where the Council was meeting. Deciding that listening to a bunch of blokes discuss Church business wasn't really their thing, the knight bodyguards decided to take themselves on a sightseeing tour of the city while Simon and his relatives attended the Council.

Taking full advantage of this turn of events, some citizens of Montpellier decided to assassinate Simon. Placing themselves strategically and quickly in places they thought Simon would have to pass to make his way back out of the city, they lay in wait, intent on killing Simon as he passed their hiding places. There seems to have been quite a few of them, not just one or two potential assassins. Peter the Monk describes them as a large group and says that some of them hid inside a church they thought Simon might visit; others secreted themselves around the gate he would use to get back to the hospice; and others found hiding places along the road to the gate. But it was all for nothing. Word was sent to Simon of the plot, and he avoided the assassins by simply taking a different route out of the city.

So the Council of Montpellier proved to be an action-packed event. At its conclusion, Simon decided to act as if the council had awarded him the title of Count of Toulouse. His first move in this regard was to secure the city of Toulouse and make sure it was garrisoned with men loyal to the northern French cause. The people of Toulouse, with their militia all but obliterated by the Battle of Muret, with a Count in exile, and with the Church having 120 of their citizens as hostages, decided to accept this turn of events without making a fuss. The traditional ancestral home and seat of power of the Counts of Toulouse was the Narbonnais castle. This imposing building was set over one of the city gates, the gate which led to the road running east to the city of Narbonne. Count Raymond's son was currently living there, but Simon kicked him out and instead installed Bishop Folquet, the Bishop of Toulouse. Now Bishop Folquet has always had a bit of a stormy relationship with the people of Toulouse. But now here he was, not in the Bishop's residence but elevated

to the lofty heights of the residence of the Count of Toulouse. Simon de Montfort and Bishop Folquet garrisoned the Narbonnais castle with men loyal to the Crusader cause.

Then Simon left Toulouse and did a rinse-and-repeat exercise, traveling to lands in the County of Toulouse which he now considered to be his own, booting out the local secular lord and replacing him with a Bishop. In this way, the Bishop of Nimes scored the village of Milhau, the Archbishop of Arles scored a raft of strongholds, castles and villages, and the Bishop of Uzes scored extensive land holdings around Carcassonne. Even though he was acting as if he were the Count of Toulouse, Simon was careful not to overstep the mark. In correspondence he wrote in early 1215 he didn't sign himself as the Count of Toulouse.

No, Simon is going to do the right thing and wait for Pope Innocent's decision on whether he should become the new Count of Toulouse. What will Pope Innocent's decision be? Well, you'll have to tune in next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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