

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 158.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
The Siege of Beaucaire.

Hello again. Last week we saw young Raymond travel to the small region of territory allocated to him by Pope Innocent and make the momentous decision to take on Simon de Montfort by besieging a castle under Simon's control. While his father, Raymond VI, traveled to Aragon to seek support from the court of young King James, and while the Counts of Foix and Comminges are in their Counties, keeping their heads down, nineteen year old young Raymond decides to take the banner of rebel resistance and run with it.

Now, from the outset, it's clear that young Raymond is facing some challenges. He has no military experience to speak of, so he will be forced to rely heavily on his army which, unfortunately for Raymond, is made up predominantly of men from his new domain, men he doesn't really know, and men whose strengths and weaknesses are a mystery to him. He does, however, have some factors working in his favour.

The first is the castle itself. Beaucaire has been a favored residence of the Counts of Toulouse for generations, and many Raymonds before him have graced its halls. It's not too far from Saint-Gilles, the ancestral base of the Counts of Toulouse, and young Raymond himself was born in the castle. As such, he is familiar with the building. This is a big advantage. Every castle has its own quirks, its own defensive weak points and structural characteristics, and knowing these factors can be a huge advantage.

The other advantage in his favor is local support. The region he is now Lord of, a relatively small territory to the east of the Rhone River, is devoid of heretics, has never come under attack by Simon, and is technically part of the Holy Roman Empire. As soon as he crosses the river to Beaucaire Castle, however, the situation is markedly different. The region around Beaucaire has been ruled by the Counts of Toulouse as far back as anyone can remember, and Raymond's ancestral ties with this area and its people are strong. The region has come under attack by the despised Simon de Montfort, and it's currently being occupied by the northern French. So, if disinherited young Raymond wants to fight Simon de Montfort and regain his county by force, will he have local support if he starts by besieging Beaucaire? You bet he will.

Now, Beaucaire itself is composed of four separate parts. The imposing citadel sits high on a cliff overlooking the River Rhone. Today, the citadel is mostly a ruin and the river, having changed course over the centuries, is quite some distance away. But back in the thirteenth century, a steep set of stairs lead from the citadel down the cliff-face to the riverbank. The citadel overlooks a fortified town whose dwellings had expanded beyond the town walls to an unprotected adjacent suburb called La Condamine. The area between the fortified town and the citadel was steep and forbidding, and protected by walls. However, to the northwest of the citadel, the ground was less steep. To prevent the citadel from being attacked from this obvious weak point an imposing triangular tower called the Redoubt had been constructed. So to attack the citadel from the north or west, you first had to attack the Redoubt. That in a nutshell, is the castle of Beaucaire.

The castle was situated across the river from the city of Tarascon, and it was common for the citizens of Beaucaire, which was part of the Kingdom of France, to make the journey by boat across to Tarascon, part of the Holy Roman Empire. Now, young Raymond and

his new army of men from Marseilles, Avignon, and Tarascon spent the best part of two months preparing and planning for the siege. It seems that the people of Beaucaire were in on the plan, but they managed to keep it a secret from the northern French garrison stationed in the citadel. In late April 1216, young Raymond and his army crossed the River Rhone and entered Beaucaire, as had been pre-arranged. Raymond entered the outer suburb of La Condamine and met with the town leaders, who arranged to open the gates of the fortified town to admit Raymond and his men. Men of fighting age from Beaucaire itself had positioned themselves strategically in the streets of the fortified town, ready to fight the northern French garrison. The boats Raymond used to cross the river were stationed at the foot of the stairs leading from the citadel, to the riverbank to prevent the garrison from using the river as a means of escape or supply.

The garrison appeared to have been taken completely by surprise by the arrival of Raymond and his army. It was only when Raymond and his men had moved into position within the fortified town that they seemed to realize what was happening. Quickly mounting their horses and gathering as many foot soldiers as they could spare, the garrison raced from the citadel down into the town, leading their battle charge with a cry of "Montfort". With the answering cry of "Toulouse", Raymond, his men from across the Rhone, and the local men from Beaucaire all rushed into battle, with hand to hand fighting, breaking out in the narrow streets of the town. The fight was over pretty quickly. It soon became clear to the northern French garrison that they were heavily outnumbered, and that some savvy planning had gone into the attack. Using the town buildings to their advantage, men from Beaucaire raced to the upper floor of buildings next to where the fighting was taking place and hurled rocks and whatever else they could find onto the northern French garrison, while Raymond and his men pushed them back towards the citadel. The commander of the northern French garrison gave the order to retreat, and the northerners returned to the safety of the citadel.

Now in control of the fortified town, Raymond gave the order to secure the town, and a barricade of sharpened stakes were positioned across the access road to the citadel, blocking the passageway from the citadel into the town. Young Raymond then set up his headquarters in the church and monastery of Saint Paque, a building handily located in the northern part of the fortified town, near the road leading up to the citadel.

With the town and suburb of Beaucaire under their control, with a secure base established within the town, and with the northern French garrison holed up in the citadel, young Raymond had to decide what to do next. The decision was an easy one. The citadel couldn't be attacked from the town as the access was too steep, and blocked by defensive walls. The best way to attack the citadel would be to leave the town altogether and approach it from the northwest, where the slopes were less forbidding. The access to the citadel from the northwest was protected by the Redoubt, so the plan was to attack the Redoubt. Sometime within the next couple of days, the rebel forces approached the Redoubt under a hail of arrows, crossbow bolts, and stones, and managed to completely surround it. The Redoubt was being manned by a garrison of northern Frenchmen, and deciding that storming the tower was too risky, a decision was made to smoke the defenders out. Fires were built around the base of the Redoubt. The sources don't mention what fuel was placed on the fires, but whatever it was it produced a thick, noxious cloud of black smoke. Overcome by the fumes, the men inside the Redoubt surrendered, and the tower fell into Raymond's hands.

With the road into the town from the citadel blocked and guarded, with the river access under the control of boats patrolled by Raymond's men, and with the northwestern entry to the citadel now also under Raymond's control, the siege began. The northern French garrison inside the citadel sat back to wait for Simon to rescue them, and the southern rebels also prepared themselves for a lengthy siege. But the southerners didn't sit around, idly waiting for the citadel to surrender. Concerned by the prospect of the arrival of the Crusader army, Raymond ordered a defensive wall to be built. Its function would be to prevent the Crusading army from approaching the citadel, and to protect Raymond's men from the Crusaders. According to two sources, Peter the Monk and the anonymous troubadour, the wall was built from wood and stone and was an impressive structure, complete with at least one tower and a protective ditch in front of it. As an indication of the support he enjoyed within the town, everyone from Beaucaire pitched in to help to build it. People of noble birth mixed with tradesmen and workers from the town, wives worked alongside their husbands, and their collective effort meant that the wall was completed in an impressively short space of time.

The sources, while giving descriptions of the wall, failed to mention where exactly it was built. Modern historians disagree vehemently about exactly where the wall was positioned, with each being very definite about where the wall was, despite it being a total guess. I'm not going to enter into the debate. All I will say is that the wall was built somewhere near the citadel, and it seemed to be an impressive one.

Now, as the wall was under construction, news of the siege eventually made its way to Simon and his Crusaders. Simon was busy enjoying superstar status in northern France, so the news reached his brother Guy in the city of Toulouse first. Simon's eldest son Amaury was also in Toulouse, and the two men ordered an urgent message to be sent to Simon in northern France. Then they mustered the Crusader forces and began the 250 kilometre journey to the east to Beaucaire, to stop the upstart, young, disinherited Raymond from taking one of Simon's castles. Fortunately for us, the bishop of Carcassonne, Guy of Les Vaux-de-Cernay, traveled with the Crusader army along with his trusty scribe, Peter the Monk. Once Simon de Montfort received the unexpected news of the siege, he recruited a bunch of northern French knights, not volunteers this time, Peter the Monk mentions the fact that they were offered high rates of pay, and he headed southwards.

Even though they were much closer to the action than Simon, 250 kilometres is still a long way for an army to travel, so it wasn't until the 3rd of June 1216 that the Crusader army, under the command of Guy of Montfort, reached the city of Nimes, which was located around fifteen miles to the west of Beaucaire, with Simon arriving in the city a few days later. The garrison inside the Citadel had now been besieged for more than a month. But with enough food stored in the citadel to last around two months, their supplies were holding out well, and they were optimistic that they would shortly be rescued by the Crusader army. After spending the night at Nimes, Simon's brother and son rose early, heard Mass and made their confessions, then gathered the army and prepared to ride to Beaucaire. On the road however, they received word that the nearby castle of Bellegarde had risen in rebellion, expelled their northern French garrison and now endangered the approach to Beaucaire. So the crusaders diverted to Bellegarde, where they successfully recaptured the castle. They spent the night at Bellegarde and rode to Beaucaire the following morning.

Arriving at Beaucaire, it was pretty clear that Raymond's forces were fully in control of the siege. Raymond's army way outnumbered the Crusaders, and they had positioned themselves strategically all around the base of the citadel and behind their defensive wall. The Crusaders, hopelessly outnumbered and not wanting to fight the cleverly placed forces, did a bit of sword-waving and yelling from a distance, while Raymond's men, perhaps fearing the reputation of the smaller Crusader army and not wanting to give up their defensive positions, did the same. Deciding that they needed some time to think things over, Guy ordered the Crusaders to ride back to Bellegarde.

Peter the Monk was an eyewitness to this event, so I'll let him tell you what he saw. He takes up the story when the Crusaders leave Bellegarde to travel to Beaucaire, and I quote. "At first light we left Bellegarde and made for Beaucaire. Our men were ready for the fight, drawn up in three lines in the name of the Trinity. When we arrived at Beaucaire, we found a huge multitude of the enemy besieging our knights and sergeants in the castle. Their vast numbers were in contrast with our much smaller forces, but even so they did not venture to come outside the lower walls of the castrum, despite the fact that our men stood close to the walls for a long time and kept inviting them to join battle. After waiting for the enemy for a long time, and repeatedly challenging them to come out, our men realized that they had no intention of fighting. Accordingly, they returned to Bellegarde, intending to go back to Beaucaire the next day. Whilst we were at Bellegarde, the Count of Montfort reached Nimes on his way from France to Beaucaire." End quote.

While Guy and Amaury were in Bellegarde and Simon was resting up in Nimes, young Raymond and his army took advantage of the withdrawal of the Crusader forces to strengthen their defenses, tighten the siege, and move their catapult machines into position. Raymond also sent messages to local noble families in the region, as well as to families across the river in Provence, encouraging them to send men to join the rebel forces.

Meanwhile, Simon sent word to his brother not to bother coming to Nimes to meet with him. Instead, both forces would ride to Beaucaire and meet up the next day. And so it was that Simon's forces rode from Nimes and Guy's forces rode from Bellegarde, and they met up at Beaucaire on the afternoon of 6th of June 1216. The Crusaders immediately set up camp outside the fortified town and fortified their camp with sharpened stakes.

Now, at this moment in time, Simon is feeling exasperated. Fresh from being feted as an all-conquering hero in northern France, here he is in some backwater at the far edge of his new empire, because some teenage upstart just wouldn't accept the will of the Church and go quietly into his state of disinheritance. Really, it was all just too irritating for words. What Simon wanted was to just end the siege quickly, teach young Raymond what happened when rebellious youngsters stepped out of line, and get back to ruling his vast, vast new empire. So Simon did something he didn't often do. He made an impulsive decision to make an ill-planned, poorly thought-out attack on Beaucaire.

Taking all of his men, he ordered them to storm the walls of the fortified town, possibly at the gate closest to their camp, in broad daylight, in full sight of the defenders. The attack ended nearly as soon as it started, with the defenders easily repelling the Crusaders' attempts to breach the walls. As an extra insult, on top of the fact that Raymond's forces had just won the first round of the conflict, a captured Crusader knight was executed, then hung from a tree in full view of both the castle and the Crusader camp. Thinking that they

may as well take the insult even further, the rebels chopped off the Crusader's hands and feet, then shot them into the citadel with one of their catapult machines.

Getting the feeling that things weren't going too well, Simon de Montfort called a war council to decide his next move. With much sighing and rolling of eyes, it became clear that the only way to progress things further, was to conduct a counter-siege. So, with much reluctance, Simon de Montfort ordered the Crusaders to surround the rebels who were besieging the castle, and bunker down for a lengthy, time-consuming, mind-numbingly boring siege of the besieging rebels. Once his men were in position, Simon ordered them to construct siege engines, then everyone settled in and waited for someone to get so hungry, thirsty, or desperate that they would surrender.

Almost immediately, things started going wrong for Simon. To start with he didn't have enough men to completely surround young Raymond's army, and Raymond was able to keep them supplied using his collection of boats on the river. Then Simon started having supply issues of his own. As news of the siege spread, so did the rebellion, and soon most of the roads leading to the two nearest cities of Saint-Gilles and Nimes were in rebel hands. This meant that Simon had to send a large force of knights to guard the baggage train and supply carts travelling between Beaucaire and local cities, to ensure that the supplies made it safely through to the Crusaders. And, of course, it should have been obvious to everyone that the first group to run out of supplies and surrender would be the northern French garrison inside the Citadel. The siege dragged on to the end of June and into July.

It was at some stage in July that the garrison raised a black flag over the keep of the citadel as a signal to Simon that things were getting a little desperate. But of course, there was nothing Simon could do. The besiegers, and the besiegers of the besiegers, busied themselves making adjustments to their catapult machines and hurling things at each other and the fortifications, and Raymond's men had a brief glimpse of success, using a battering ram to knock holes in the foundations of the lower walls of the Citadel, until an ingenious flaming stink bomb, a bag full of sulfur and other goodies, dropped down on the attackers from above and put an end to the excavations. The garrison inside the citadel then hung an empty bottle and napkin from the keep, in case Simon didn't get the message the first time.

Simon then decided to launch another assault on the besiegers. Again gathering the Crusader army, this time he attacked from the west, near the road leading to the redoubt, most likely where the rebels had built their wall. Again he attacked in broad daylight; again the Crusaders encountered heavy resistance; and again, after an embarrassingly short period of time, they were forced to retreat. Later that same day, Simon ordered an additional attack on one of the gates leading to the fortified town. Again the Crusaders were easily repelled. By this time, the garrison had stopped sending hints that things were getting dire and had started to eat their own horses. One of Simon's military commanders then came up with a cunning plan. Why didn't they pretend to attack one of the gates to the town, but use that as a diversion, concealing the real attack, which would take place on a different gate? Simon agreed, and the Crusaders gave the plan their best shot, but to their horror, they found that the defenders were manning both gates with knights, crossbowmen and archers.

The Crusaders had now mounted four attacks on Beaucaire, all of which had been complete and utter failures. Guy de Montfort eventually had to sit down and have a

man-to-man chat with his brother. It was time, he said, for Simon to do the unthinkable, something that the Crusader forces hadn't yet contemplated in the Crusade against the Cathars. It was time to surrender and hand Beaucaire over to young Raymond.

Join me next week as Simon de Montfort asks for terms of surrender from the teenage rebel with zero military experience. Until next week, bye for now.

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