

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 162.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
The Siege of Toulouse, 1218.

Hello again. Last week we saw the city of Toulouse rise in rebellion, after Raymond VI arrived with a small army. The new Count of Toulouse Simon de Montfort raced to his main city, and after trying unsuccessfully to storm it, he began building a new town, unimaginatively called New Toulouse, which was most likely located to the south of the city walls near the Narbonnais Castle.

Now, before we proceed any further, I think we need to take a look at the layout of the city of Toulouse. For your convenience, I have placed a map of the city on the website and on the Facebook page. The town lay on the north eastern bank of the River Garonne. It was roughly circular in shape, with the southern part of the circle jutting up against the riverbank. The Narbonnais Castle, which you might remember was built around one of the gates leading out of the city, lay in the southeastern section of the wall, not far from the river. The River Garonne was wide at the point where the city lay and was forded by two bridges leading from the city across to an unfortified suburb on the other side of the Garonne, called the suburb of Saint-Cyprien.

Now this suburb, and the two bridges leading from the suburb across the river into the city, were causing Simon de Montfort some problems. Rebel reinforcements were able to enter the town via the suburb and bridges, while Simon and his men could do no more than watch from their position on the other side of the river. So as winter was setting in and the year 1217 was drawing to a close, Simon made the decision to split his army in two, leaving one half in New Toulouse while taking the other half over the river to occupy the suburb of Saint-Cyprien. Now, this was quite an undertaking. As I've mentioned, the river Garonne was formidably wide and couldn't be crossed without using the bridges. The Crusaders, of course, couldn't use the bridges as their entry points were inside of the city of Toulouse, and firmly in rebel hands. Historians have speculated that the Crusaders most likely rode all the way down-river to Muret, crossed the river there and then rode all the way up the western side of the river bank until they reached the suburb of Saint-Cyprien. The Crusaders were able to occupy the suburb without any resistance, although they couldn't cross over into Toulouse itself, as the two bridges were well fortified and men from the rebel army were stationed in the bridge towers to prevent the Crusaders from seizing them.

Simon's army was now split in two. Simon's son Amaury was placed in charge of the half of the army which occupied their previous position outside the Narbonnais Castle, while Simon himself led the second half now stationed at Saint Cyprien.

Now, the half of the army stationed in Saint-Cyprien was not happy. In his book "The Occitan War", Laurence Marvin reports that they were jumpy and anxious, which isn't surprising, as their position was exposed and they were under almost constant bombardment from rebel archers and missiles from rebel catapult machines. Laurence Marvin reports that the mood of the Crusaders inside Saint-Cyprien went from anxiety to semi-hysteria when rumors began to circulate that the Count of Foix was heading their way with a large contingent of men from Catalonia. Apparently, Simon had to personally intervene to try and calm his terrified men. Deciding that perhaps they could use a little distraction, he suggested to his military commanders that they make an attempt to storm

Toulouse via the two bridges, but this idea was dismissed as being almost certainly doomed to fail, so Simon was forced to make the only other decision available to him. It was time to abandon the suburb of Saint-Cyprien and head back over the river to New Toulouse.

Oddly, Simon decided not to ride down to the crossing point of Muret, but to board boats which would carry them down the river to Muret, where they could disembark and ride back to Toulouse. Really, this plan made no sense whatsoever and has had many historians scratching their heads about it over the years. Some have speculated that perhaps the boat ride would have been less fatiguing for the Crusaders and their horses, but I suspect there must have been other reasons why it was deemed unfavorable to ride to Muret.

Anyway, regardless of the reasons, the Crusaders rode out of Saint-Cyprien and lined up on the riverbank, waiting to board the boats, which would carry them down the river. Seeing what was taking place, the rebels charged across the bridges into Saint-Cyprien and began to attack the retreating Crusaders. This caused panic throughout the Crusader ranks, and very quickly things started going wrong. Horses don't like boarding boats at the best of times, but when they catch a whiff of fear and panic in the air, horses can become downright unmanageable. And that's what started to happen. The boarding of horses onto the boats slowed as the animals became frightened and reluctant to board, while the pushing of men from the back who were being attacked created a bottleneck at the riverbank.

Simon tried to restore order by forcing his way through to the riverbank to try and take charge of the situation. However, his efforts to try and restore calm went dramatically pear-shaped when both he and his horse fell into the river. Now it's not clear what exactly Simon was attempting to do. Was he attempting to assist someone to board a boat, or did his horse simply lose its footing on the riverbank? We don't know. But whatever the reason, Simon and his horse, both fully armored, slipped into the river and sank out of sight. A mad race then ensued to try and fish Simon out of the river before he drowned. Peter the Monk excels himself in his description of this event in his "Historia Albigensis", stating that divine intervention caused Simon to rise magically out of the water, his hands, and I quote "clasped together and raised to heaven in sincere devotion" end quote. Peter the Monk then describes how men hauled Simon out of the water into a boat, which is the more likely of the two scenarios. Simon was saved, but his horse drowned. After this dramatic start to the evacuation, the rest proceeded relatively uneventfully, with the Crusaders managing to board the boats, then disembarking at Muret, after which they rode back to Toulouse, reuniting with the other half of the army outside the Narbonnais Castle.

Simon's army is now all in one place, but that doesn't give him any great advantage. As winter tightens its grip, and as conditions in Toulouse get more and more miserable, Simon really needs more men. He doesn't have enough crusaders to properly besiege the city of Toulouse, so the Toulousans, warm inside their houses, are able to bring food, fuel, and supplies into Toulouse, making their lives nice and comfortable, in comparison to the miserable and cold conditions endured by the besiegers.

Unfortunately, winter is a terrible time of year to attract volunteers, and Pope Honorius' emphasis on the Middle Eastern Crusades was going to make any recruitment drive quite challenging. But regardless, Simon knew he needed to try. A bunch of senior figures from the Crusade, including the Bishop of Toulouse Bishop Folquet, and Simon's wife Alice,

traveled to northern France and began to drum up support for Simon's blockade of Toulouse. In January 1218, the first trickle of volunteers began arriving, but it wouldn't be until spring that any significant numbers would show up to reinforce Simon's men.

It was around this time too that the new Papal Legate Bertrand wrote to Pope Honorius, informing him of the situation and requesting assistance. While the Pope was unwilling to divert men from the Middle Eastern Crusade, he did contribute to the cause by writing to Philip Augustus and the Bishops of northern France, urging them to provide Simon with assistance. He also wrote a stern letter to young Raymond reminding him of the bounty and compassion shown to him by the Church, and urging Raymond and the southern Counts to submit to Simon de Montfort.

Meanwhile, back in the rebel camp things were progressing quite nicely. With the Crusaders not looking like they were intending to attack the city anytime soon, work continued on improving the city's defenses and on constructing more siege engines. A catapult machine was built just opposite the Narbonnais Castle and, being an easy target for the rebels, the castle took a pounding from this catapult machine, day and night. The Narbonnais Castle, of course, had been constructed with its defensive side facing outwards over the city walls. But the Crusaders were using the castle in reverse. For them, the safe side of the castle was the side facing New Toulouse, whereas the vulnerable side was the one facing into the city. The walls of the castle which now faced the rebel catapult machine were thin, and not built to withstand heavy bombardment. They were also decorated with the windows and galleries, making them filled with defensive weak points. The Narbonnais Castle itself dated from the Roman era and was imposing and uncomfortable at the best of times. In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption describes the castle as, and I quote "a huge, rambling, unutterably gloomy Roman fort, which the Counts of Toulouse had, with good reason, visited as infrequently as possible" end quote. The Papal Legate Bertrand was now the main resident of the castle, and he was under constant fear for his life due to the castle's frequent bombardment, and not without reason. The chapel within the castle took a direct hit while he was saying Mass, and one of the chaplains was killed by falling masonry.

In the early months of 1218, before significant numbers of Crusader volunteers began showing up, only two events of note occurred. The first was that the Count of Foix's main city of Foix was finally handed back to him by the Church. But the hand over was made on one condition, that condition being that the Count of Foix leave the siege of Toulouse. As the Count of Foix returned triumphantly to his restored lands, the Crusaders may have been hoping that having a major player leave the rebel camp might improve things for the Crusader cause. But they were about to be disappointed. The Count of Foix's son was a competent military commander. The demand by the Church that the Count of Foix leave Toulouse didn't apply to his son, so the Count of Foix's son remained in Toulouse, in command of his father's men.

The second event of note was a rebel uprising in Montauban. Now the success at Beaucaire and the siege of Toulouse was causing a significant amount of unrest across Languedoc, with southerners keen to join the rebellion and throw off their northern French occupiers. After Toulouse itself, the city in southern France with the most rebel support was the town of Montauban, so I guess it didn't surprise anyone when the city began to show signs of rebellious intent. Montauban was only 49 kilometers from Toulouse, but Simon was unable to spare men from his blockade to go and reinforce the garrison at Montauban. Instead, he ordered some northern French knights currently posted in the

Agenais to travel to Montauban and placed the city firmly back under Crusader control. A small group of men answered the call and stationed themselves inside Montauban.

Word reached Raymond VI that the city could use some rebel reinforcements, and he was able to send a reasonable force to the city, perhaps as many as 500 men. Following the arrival of Raymond's men in the city, the rebels launched an attack on the occupying Crusaders in the middle of the night, hoping to barricade the Crusaders inside their dwelling, then capture or kill them. But the Crusaders fought back and eventually managed to drive Raymond's men from the town. In retaliation for this event, they took a leaf out of Simon's book and set part of the town on fire.

As the weather started to warm, both sides began to ready themselves for a busy season ahead. In April the Toulousans went on the attack, attempting to take New Toulouse by surprise while the Crusader military leaders were in a meeting. New Toulouse itself had proved a bit of a flop, far from the solid permanent town that had been dreamt of, as winter moved in it seems that New Toulouse pretty much resembled any other military camp at the time, a mish-mash of tents and other hastily erected structures. The dream of building a new permanent city outside Toulouse's walls may well have been thwarted by a lack of manpower, and difficulties obtaining the necessary building materials from the surrounding hostile countryside. Anyway, the southerners decided it would be great if they could seize the Crusaders' camp before reinforcements arrived. And it would have been great, but it didn't happen. The surprised Crusaders were able to hurriedly don their armor, and managed to repel the rebels from New Toulouse before it was overrun.

In the first weeks of May, Simon's wife Alice and Bishop Folquet returned from the north with a large army of volunteer Crusaders. Wasting no time, Simon decided to utilize his new forces immediately, taking half of the now significant Crusader army and marching them southwards, intending to cross the River Garonne and reoccupy the suburb of Saint-Cyprien. However, when the Crusaders arrived at the suburb, they found, to their shock, that the rebels had managed to fortify and defend the suburb. It was now completely surrounded by deep ditches, which were wide enough that a fully armored Crusader horse was unable to jump across it.

As soon as the Crusaders approached the suburb, the rebels sprang into action. Putting into place a plan that had clearly been well thought through. The son of the Count of Foix led his men over the bridges from Toulouse into the suburb, placing archers and crossbowmen into position covering the roads into the suburb. These roads were, because of the ditches, the only route now available to the Crusaders as entry points to the suburb. Other rebel troops took up defensive positions along the river bank, and in the gardens and houses of residences within the suburb. Simon did his best to force the Crusader army into the suburb, but after some fierce fighting, he retreated and instead set up camp further down the river, still on the river bank, but outside Saint-Cyprien.

Whilst the Count of Foix's son was busy repelling Simon and half the Crusader army on the far bank of the Garonne, the rebels took advantage of Simon's absence to renew their attack on the Narbonnais Castle on the city side of the river. Two trebuchets were moved into position inside Toulouse, both of them aimed at the castle. With teams providing piles of rocks and stones and hauling on the ropes of the machines, the trebuchets launched a hailstorm of missiles at the castle, damaging its gates and ramparts, and even knocking out the stones around the arrow-slits in the castle walls. Not surprisingly, morale in the

Crusader camp began to plummet, but they shouldn't have worried because their bleak situation was about to be saved by a freak weather event.

Late in the afternoon of the day of the Crusaders' failed assault on Saint-Cyprien and the attack by the Toulousans on the Narbonnais Castle, it began to rain. Then it rained some more, and then it started absolutely pouring. Initially, it looked like the Crusaders would be negatively affected by the downpour, as it made setting up their camp outside Saint-Cyprien difficult, and made the conditions inside New Toulouse deplorable, with a number of tents being washed away. But as the rain continued to bucket down, it began to become apparent that this was no ordinary storm. The ditches outside Saint-Cyprien filled to the brim with water, and then the River Garonne itself broke its banks, flooding part of the city of Toulouse, destroying mills that the besieged city relied on for making flour, and sweeping away some of its defenses. But worse was to come. As the river rose and turned into a torrent, both bridges across the River Garonne were lost, effectively isolating Saint-Cyprien from the city of Toulouse and stranding the men who had been stationed in the bridges' defensive towers.

Now, just so you get the complete picture about the situation, we should take a quick look at these bridges. They were built in the style common to defensive bridges at this time. Piles of masonry had been sunk into the riverbed, then atop these piles were constructed two large and imposing towers, one on each side of the river, relatively close to the banks. The towers came complete with a portcullis each, which could be lowered to ensure that no one could enter the tower or bridge. The towers were large and tall enough to contain men who could use them as cover to shoot arrows over to the riverbank or onto the bridge below. Wooden beams and planks were used to construct a road across the river between the two towers and down onto each riverbank, and voila! There's your bridge.

Now, during this flash flood, the wooden roadway between the two towers on both bridges were swept away, leaving the men inside the towers completely cut off from dry land. As soon as the flood waters began to recede, Simon rose to take full advantage of the situation. He gathered the army stationed on the far bank and stormed into the suburb of Saint-Cyprien, taking it with relative ease. He then began to construct several catapult machines, all of which were aimed squarely at the isolated bridge-tower closest to the suburb.

Back over on the other side of the river in the city of Toulouse, people gathered on the riverbank, scratching their heads, trying to work out how to rescue the men in the towers, or at least send them some food and supplies. The situation was saved by a knight from Aragon, Peron Domingo, who scampered out over the debris left by the flood and, leaping from one floating log to bits of broken debris and anything else that could take his weight, he managed to make it to the base of the nearest bridge-tower. Tying a rope to a post or piece of masonry, he then managed to repeat the feat in reverse, and made it back to shore. Using the rope the Toulousans were able to construct a simple bridge, which they used to ferry supplies to the stranded men. Unfortunately though, this only assisted the tower closest to the bank. The tower on the other side of the river, closest to Saint-Cyprien, began to be bombarded with missiles from Simon's catapult machines, and once it began to sustain heavy damage, it was abandoned by its defenders, who presumably boarded boats and were ferried back to safety inside Toulouse.

And so, with Simon in charge of Saint-Cyprien and with the other half of the Crusader army camped outside the Narbonnais Castle, we will leave it there for this week. Join me

next week as we venture into June 1218, into what is known as the final phase of the Second Siege of Toulouse. For Simon de Montfort, for it will be the final phase in more ways than one. Until next week, bye for now.

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