

History of the Crusades.
Episode 163.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
Lo Lop es Mort!.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort retake the suburb of Saint-Cyprien following a bout of inclement weather. He also held the Narbonnais Castle and the camp outside the castle walls. The Toulousans however, remained securely inside their city, and so the siege of Toulouse continued.

By June 1218 the siege had been underway for eight months, making it by far the most lengthy military operation in the Crusade against the Cathars to date. And the conflict wasn't getting any less brutal in its intensity. The anonymous troubadour reported that at this stage of the conflict, any Crusaders captured by the rebels were subjected to a cruel, merciless death. They were first tortured by having their tongues cut out or their eyes gouged, before then being executed either by hanging, by being dragged behind a horse, or by being burned alive. The siege of Toulouse was being fought by men on both sides, for whom victory was a desperate, all-consuming necessity.

At the beginning of June, the rebels received reinforcements in the form of a large group of routiers, perhaps as many as 500 men, from the northern reaches of the Agenais region. The arrival of these men was greeted with so much noise by the Toulousans that Simon crossed the river to Saint-Cyprien, hoping that the sound signified that one of the tower bridges had fallen to the Crusaders. He must have been sorely disappointed to discover that the noise was actually the sound of raucous celebrations and a joyous welcome for the rebels from the north. More celebrations were held a few days later when young Raymond arrived in Toulouse with his forces from the Rhone Valley.

All this, of course, was not good news for Simon. Clearly, the rebels had no trouble at all reinforcing themselves with supplies and men, and in this way the siege would continue indefinitely unless he found a way to break it. He took some of his crusaders on a slash and burn mission through the countryside surrounding the rebel city, burning crops and destroying any sources of food they came across, but clearly more action than this was required.

So Simon came up with a plan. He would build a huge cat tower which could be hauled over to the city wall. With a large group of crusaders inside the cat working to breach the wall, while archers on the top of the cat shot arrows into the city, perhaps the cat tower was the solution to ending the conflict. According to the anonymous troubadour, the cat tower was so huge that it needed to be reinforced with iron and steel and was intended to provide cover for up to 400 horsemen at a time, with 150 archers stationed on its roof.

While work was taking place on constructing the monstrous cat, Simon also ordered his Crusaders to reinforce the defenses around Saint-Cyprien, and to come up with a plan to capture a bridge-tower on the Toulousan side of the river. The plan they came up with was for a group of Crusaders to make their way over to the base of the tower by boat and to take the tower by force. The plan swung into action, but the Toulousans spotted what was happening and sent boats of their own out onto the water. Boat-to-boat combat ensued, but eventually the Crusaders prevailed and managed to overtake the tower. They destroyed the rope bridge that had connected it to Toulouse. However, the Toulousans dragged one of their catapult machines into position and began pummeling both the tower

and the Crusaders, both of whom were easily within range of the machine. Realizing that they would need to construct a solid bridge between the tower and the city if they were to use it to attack the city from Saint-Cyprien, and realizing that there was no way they could do this while the tower was within range of the catapult machines, the Crusaders abandoned the bridge-tower, setting it alight as they retreated.

The giant cat was now Simon's only hope, and his only means of breaching the city walls. Towards the end of June the cat was ready to be placed into position. Now, the plan was to drag the cat over to the Montolieu Gate, which was the nearest gate to the Narbonnais castle and was located to the north east. To put it another way, the Montolieu Gate was the next gate over from the Narbonnais Castle if you moved in a counter-clockwise direction around the city's outer wall. The top story of the cat towered over the wall, so the archers stationed on top of the cat would be able to fire unhindered into the city, while the men below, protected within the cat, would work on breaching the gate, and thus providing a means for the Crusaders to pour into the city.

But first the cat needed to be dragged over to the gate. This proved to be a challenging task. Presumably the cat had wheels or rollers, so didn't need to be physically lifted into position, but it was still enormous and therefore extremely heavy. With a massive combined effort the Crusaders managed to get the cat moving and everything was going OK until the cat moved into the range of the catapult machines stationed within the city. The cat, of course, posed a very easy target, and while the men inside the cat, and to some extent the men on top of the cat, were protected, the men pushing and pulling the outer parts of the cat were totally exposed.

A stone from the rebels' catapult machine hit part of the upper storey of the cat, ripping off a portion of its protective animal hides. Deciding that this damage needed to be repaired, the mission was aborted, and the Crusaders were ordered to turn the cat around and drag it back to the carpenters' quarters at New Toulouse for repairs. However, the cat was still within range as the laborious job of turning it commenced, and it copped another direct hit in its rear, killing some of the men inside and doing some more structural damage. According to Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War", a bunch of Crusaders who were helping to maneuver the cat decided that they had had enough at this point, and despite Simon de Montfort yelling at them to stay, they scampered out of range before the catapult could strike again. The men inside the cat were then forced to do all the moving themselves, and eventually they managed to get themselves and the cat out of range and back to the carpenters for repairs.

Back inside the city, the rebels now, of course, realised that the Montolieu Gate was the cat's target, so they set to work improving its defenses. While many rebels, of course, must have been disturbed by the Crusaders' giant cat, it seems that there are at least some people inside the city who found it hilarious. In his book "A Most Holy War", Mark Pegg states that a troubadour named Raymond composed a duet between two singers, one called Lady Cat and one called Trebuchet. The Lady Cat and the Trebuchet duel back and forth, until the Lady Cat breaks down weeping, asking the Trebuchet to stop wounding her. The Trebuchet responds gruffly, informing the Lady Cat that she is going to die. Another joke doing the rounds inside Toulouse at this time involved the Dame Traitor Cat attempting to catch the Toulousan rats, while the Toulousans scamper around yelling, "You'll never catch rats." Anyway, enough frivolity.

After a few days, repairs to the cat had been completed, and once again Crusaders lined up to haul the cat into position. This time, though, they sheltered behind wicker shields, which may have made them feel slightly better protected from the stones being hurled in their direction. Once again, the cat sustained damage before it reached its destination, and once again it was hauled back to New Toulouse for repairs.

It was at this stage that the rebels came up with a plan. They would venture out of the city under cover of darkness to New Toulouse, where they would set fire to Simon's cat and destroy it for good. The raid was set to occur in the pre-dawn hours of Monday the 25th of June 1218.

Now, even though it was very early in the morning, not everyone in the Crusader camp was asleep. The men who were posted on watch were, of course, doing their job, and Simon de Montfort himself was up and about. In fact, Simon was listening to matins, which was being sung due to the fact that it was Sunday night, and the liturgy was due to finish at dawn. A Crusader noticed that a bunch of knights, nobles and men and from Toulouse had started congregating around the Montolieu Gate, and a messenger was dispatched to inform Simon. Simon didn't seem concerned about the news. He took his time donning his armor, and as he was on his way to the Montolieu Gate he paused at the chapel inside the Narbonnais Castle so he could hear Mass. By this time, the rebels had exited the Montolieu Gate and had begun advancing on the Crusader position, resulting in fighting breaking out in three separate places. Another messenger was dispatched to Simon, but this time he was in the middle of his church service and didn't wish to be interrupted. A second messenger then burst into the chapel, and Simon, telling both men to calm down, muttered a quick prayer before being led out to his horse, which was waiting for him outside the castle. He then rode to the Montolieu Gate.

The scene that confronted Simon was chaotic. His brother Guy was in the thick of the fighting. As soon as Guy saw Simon, he wheeled his horse around, intending to race over to Simon's position. But his horse was shot in the head and went down, taking his rider with him. The day then went from bad to worse for Guy de Montfort, who was then shot in his groin by a crossbow bolt as he struggled to disentangle himself from his horse. Simon went over to Guy, who apparently joked that he would now have to consider joining the Hospitallers, since chastity would no longer be a problem for him. Simon laughed and bent down to help his brother.

A short time later, Simon de Montfort was lined up with his Crusaders near the gate, when a stone from one of the catapult machines, manned by a group of women from Toulouse, whistled through the air, heading straight for him.

Right, for dramatic effect, I'm going to switch over to Peter the Monk for a minute. I'll let him take over the narrative as the stone is speeding through the air towards Simon de Montfort, and I quote. "Will anyone have the strength to record or listen to the account of what followed? Who will be able to write it down without grief? Who can repeat it without tears? Who can hear it without grieving? Who indeed can fail to dissolve in tears with the sorrow of the wretched? With him fallen, all else crumbled. With his death, all else died. He was the comforter of those beset by grief, a tower of strength for the weak, balm for the afflicted and a refuge for the wretched. Therefore, we must continue with our lamentable task." End quote.

Okay, back to the narrative. The stone flies through the air and hits Simon squarely in the face, smashing both his helmet and his skull, and killing him almost instantly. According to Laurence Marvin in his book "The Occitan War", two Crusader knights immediately threw a cloak over Simon's body, hoping to conceal from everyone for as long as possible the fact that the leader of the Crusaders had just died.

But despite their efforts, the news spread. Stunned Crusaders abandoned their positions and headed back to New Toulouse. Over in the suburb of Saint-Cyprien panic erupted at the news, and the occupiers of the suburb fled in haste, abandoning all their equipment, tents, pack animals, and even personal possessions in their rush to leave their position. The peal of church bells, cheering, and shouts of joy from inside the city signaled that the people of Toulouse had heard the news. As many rebels celebrated, others kept their heads, and burned weapons and equipment abandoned by the retreating Crusaders. Catapult machines, defensive structures, and even the giant cat were all put to the torch. All through the streets of Toulouse, one phrase kept being repeated over and over: "Lo lop es mort. Lo lop es mort." The wolf is dead. The wolf is dead.

As celebrations erupted within the city, Simon's body was moved to the chapel within the Narbonnais Castle, the silence and downcast looks of the Crusaders contrasting with the sounds of trumpets, singing and bell-ringing coming out of the city.

The next day, the Crusader commanders held a war council to determine the best way forward. They decided to appoint Simon's eighteen year old eldest son, Amaury, as his successor. It was decided that the Crusade would continue and that the Papal Legate Bertrand would arrange for a recruitment drive in northern France, while Amaury would take command of the siege at Toulouse. But really, people's hearts just weren't in it anymore. The Count of Soissons immediately declared that his forty days of service was about to expire, so it was time for him to pack up and leave with his men. Others in the Crusader army did the same, and Amaury found his force dwindling as each hour passed.

With the troops that he had left, Amaury made a couple of attempts to storm the walls, but when they failed he declared the siege at an end. On the 25th of July 1218 he ordered the siege engines, the buildings in New Toulouse, and the defenses around the Narbonnais Castle to be burnt. Then taking Simon's body with them, the Crusaders left Toulouse and headed to Carcassonne.

Simon de Montfort's body was interred in the Church of Saint-Nazaire at Carcassonne shortly after they arrived. An epitaph was placed over Simon's body, describing him as a saint and a martyr. However, it's safe to say that many people in southern France didn't agree with this assessment. The anonymous troubadour penned a song about the epitaph on Simon's tomb which became very popular.

Here, in the words of the anonymous troubadour, are the posthumous thoughts about Simon de Montfort from the rebel side of the Crusade, and I quote "The epitaph says, for those who can read it, that he is a saint and a martyr, and that he shall breathe again and inherit and flourish in marvelous joy and wear a crown and be seated in the kingdom. And me, I have heard that this must be so if, by killing men, and by spilling blood, and by squandering souls, and by sanctioning deaths, and by trusting evil counsel, and by setting fires, and by destroying barons, and by dishonoring parrage, and by seizing lands, and by nourishing pride, and by lauding evil and mocking the good, and by massacring ladies, and

by slaughtering children a man can win over Jesus Christ in this world, then the Count of Montfort wears a crown and shines in heaven." End quote

Now, Simon's remains were eventually taken back to northern France, but his memorial slab within the Church of Saint-Nazaire in Carcassonne remains. The final word on Simon de Montfort and his legacy I will give to Yves Rouquette, author of the book "Cathars", which has been one of my research texts for this series. Yves is a native of southern France and identifies as a Cathar. When he was ten years old, in the year 1957, he and two friends climbed the drainpipes outside the Church of Saint-Nazaire in Carcassonne, entered the building, and then all three children urinated on Simon de Montfort's tombstone. Now, as Yves notes, the feeling against Simon de Montfort in southern France was still pretty strong nearly 800 years after his death. At the time all three ten-year-olds were good Catholic boys, and they risked getting into a serious amount of trouble to do what they did.

However, now that he is an adult, Yves' feelings for Simon have softened somewhat. He states in his book, and here comes a long quote, and I quote. "It seems to me now that we were carried away by short sighted local patriotism. If Montfort had escaped the stone that crushed his skull at the siege of Toulouse, if he had been firmly installed as Count, there is no doubt that Catharism, would have been destroyed. But what we call Occitania would certainly not have become so quickly a mere province. There is time for being a respectful vassal and another for founding a dynasty, and that is surely what Simon de Montfort would have done sooner or later. The man was a nasty piece of work, but fascinating for all that. This sanctimonious bully was capable of throwing a man on the pyre with his bare hands, ordering a Viscount to be strangled in his cell, and treating a Cathar as a cockroach to be crushed, but he had some of the stuff of an Alexander or a Julius Caesar." End quote.

So I guess what Yves is saying is that you could admire Simon de Montfort's military skills without actually liking the man. And on that note, there we will leave Simon de Montfort.

So I guess now you are all wondering, does the Crusade continue now that Simon de Montfort is dead? Well, you'll have to tune in next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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