

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 166.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
The Crusade of King Louis VIII.

Hello again. Last week we left the narrative in the year 1224, with the Crusade all but over. Amaury de Montfort had surrendered everything but his title of Count of Toulouse, and headed back to northern France, leaving southern France mostly in southern French hands.

With the Trencavels once again ruling in Carcassonne, and with most pre-Crusade ruling families restored to their pre-Crusade lands, the ownership of the lands and title of the Count of Toulouse was the only matter still in dispute. Raymond VII, of course, was keen to be reconciled with the Church and to be recognized as the true Count of Toulouse. Amaury however, was not ready to cede the title to him. The Church also was reluctant to let go of the lands gained during the Crusade, while King Louis, well King Louis was becoming increasingly interested in Languedoc. While his father, Philip Augustus, had been happy to keep the region at arm's length, the more King Louis thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea for the French crown to make a move on southern France.

So in February 1225, when Amaury de Montfort renewed his offer to transfer his land and title in southern France to the French crown, King Louis accepted the proposal. He quickly put into place a plan of action. He would use the wealth and resources of the Church to back a new Crusade against the Cathars, one that would regain all the territory recently lost by the Crusaders. He sent three bishops to Rome with a proposal to place before Pope Honorius. The proposal was this: King Louis would lead an army into southern France. Both King Louis personally and all the members of his army would enjoy the indulgences granted to Crusaders, while any person who opposed them, including any northern French noblemen who failed to send men and arms to support the Crusade, would be excommunicated. In exchange, the Church would fund the expedition to the tune of 60,000 Livres per year for the next 10 years. King Louis thought his offer was more than reasonable. He sent word to his allies in southern France that help was on its way, then set about making his preparations. He set his departure date for his Crusade for the 5th of May 1225.

However, everything fell in a big heap when King Louis received a letter from Pope Honorius in April, rejecting his offer. The Crusade against the Cathars of southern France, said Pope Honorius, would have to be postponed, as a new Middle Eastern Crusade under Emperor Frederick II was being arranged, and that needed to take precedence. By the time he received the Pope's letter, of course, Louis' preparations were well underway. Embarrassed and angry, he was forced to let everyone know that the Crusade wasn't actually going to happen after all. On the 5th of May, on the date he had fixed for the departure of his now defunct expedition, he summoned the Papal Legate Conrad into a public meeting of the nobility of Paris and told him that the French crown was now done with Crusading, and the subject of the Crusade against the Cathars was never again to be mentioned in the King's presence.

So, once again it looked like the Crusade was finally over. But once again it managed to resurrect itself. Raymond VII was busy making diplomatic overtures towards the Church, and Amaury received word that some of the Bishops of southern France were considering

making peace with him. Not yet prepared to see the county hard-won by his father slip out of his hands, an embassy of northern Frenchmen was dispatched to Rome to plead Amaury's case, and the party included Amaury's uncle Guy de Montfort. It appears that at this time, Pope Honorius and the majority of the cardinals in the Vatican favored coming to terms with Raymond VII and restoring him to his lands and titles. Guy de Montfort however, must have been both persuasive and persistent. Guy alleged that Raymond had illegally confiscated Church property in Languedoc and made a number of other allegations against Raymond. Guy was supported by a group of southern French Bishops who were concerned about losing the land and wealth they had acquired under Simon de Montfort. Slowly Pope Honorius started to be swayed to their cause.

In February 1225 Pope Honorius had appointed a new Legate to take charge of the matter, a feisty Italian Cardinal Romano Frangipani, and Romano sent a summons to both Amaury de Montfort and Raymond VII, ordering them to appear before a Church Council in Bourges in November 1225. At the council, both men were required to argue their case before the gathered assembly of Archbishops, Bishops and abbots.

Raymond VII went first, stating that all the lands he was accused of confiscating from the Church would be restored by him. He promised to actively persecute all Cathar heretics living within the County of Toulouse. He then promised to restore the authority of the Church across southern France, and to fulfill any other condition that Pope Honorius may require of him. All that he was asking in return was to be reconciled to the Church and restored to his lands and titles.

Then it was Amaury's turn. Producing the documents signed by Pope Innocent at the Lateran Council, Amaury pointed out that the Church had legally recognized his father, Simon de Montfort as the Count of Toulouse, as had Philip Augustus. It was clear then that the Church should now declare his son and heir Amaury to be the true Count of Toulouse.

Arguments went back and forth for sometime, then the Papal Legate Romano decided that every member of the Church Council should place their opinion on the matter in writing. They did so, and Romano considered their submissions. He then announced the decision of the Church: Amaury de Montfort was the true and legal Count of Toulouse.

From there, things moved pretty quickly. Romano formally called upon King Louis to lead a Crusade into southern France. In return, King Louis and his army would receive Crusading indulgences, while the expedition would be partly funded by a 10% tax on Church revenue. On the 28th of January 1226 the Church officially renewed Raymond VII's excommunication, and Amaury de Montfort officially transferred his rights in Languedoc to the French crown. On the 30th of January 1226, King Louis VIII formally took the Cross. The departure date for King Louis' Crusade was set for the 17th of May 1226, just a smidge over a year since his last muster date.

Now, in his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption makes some interesting observations about the nature and composition of the army that mustered under King Louis in May 1226. King Louis himself had called on the people of northern France to serve in his expedition, and by reason of their feudal obligations, noblemen and knights were obliged to answer the call, or to pay for mercenaries to take their place. So in feel and in composition, the army was different than those composed by people who had volunteered their service in response to the preaching of clerics. As one English chronicler

noted, the army had come together due to, and I quote "fear of the King, not faith in God" end quote.

There were, of course, many clerics in the Army, and Jonathan Sumption reports that thousands of elderly and sick people, as well as women and children, responded to the muster, hoping to gain Crusader indulgence as camp followers. However, those who couldn't fight were released from their vows by the Papal Legate and were sent home.

As the Crusader army was mustering in the north, back in Languedoc, Raymond VII was scrambling to find a way of bolstering his own forces. Rumors of the size of King Louis' army were circulating, and Raymond contacted King Henry III of England, to ask for assistance. Now, King Henry had recently lost the port city of La Rochelle to Louis, and the thought of taking it back while Louis was busy Crusading appealed to him greatly. Consequently, King Henry ordered his brother, Richard of Cornwall, to sail to Gascony with an army. When Pope Honorius heard word of this he was furious, and dispatched an urgent letter to England reminding King Henry that King Louis's expedition was heading to Languedoc under the Church's command and that Henry should not side with Raymond VII, who himself was excommunicate from the Church and was a protector of heretics. King Henry was prepared to laugh this letter off, but his royal councilors were more cautious. The royal astrologer was consulted, and when the astrologer confidently predicted that King Louis' Crusade would be disastrous and would end with King Louis' death and the French kingdom in chaos, King Henry rubbed his hands together in anticipation, and decided to let events play out for themselves. So the English army remained in England, and Raymond VII was left scratching his head and deciding that his army would have to be composed of men from southern France.

And that's when things started falling apart. To say that the people of southern France were sick of warfare was an understatement. Many, faced with a choice of fighting King Louis or surrendering to him, were choosing to surrender. Raymond could rely on some of his old friends and allies, such as the Count of Foix and the people of the city of Toulouse, but lords of small towns, and then lords of larger towns, sat down and wrote humble letters of submission to the King of France, hoping perhaps to save their citizens from further warfare or from sharing the fate of the people massacred at Marmande.

By this time, King Louis and his Crusaders were on the march, joined by Amaury de Montfort and his uncle Guy de Montfort. Taking the well-trodden Crusader route down the Rhone Valley, his first foray into enemy territory came at the city of Avignon, which of course had been fiercely loyal to Raymond VII when he was just a disinherited kid with a crazy dream to retake the County of Toulouse from Simon de Montfort. Now, it is as the French Army approaches Avignon that a series of unfortunate events occurs; a strange and bewildering set of unfortunate events about which there are still a lot of questions and conjecture.

Okay, so as best as we can tell, the saga went something like this. As King Louis approached Avignon with his massive army, its citizens were clear on two factors. Firstly, they didn't want this huge rabble within their town, and secondly, they didn't want to go to war with King Louis. While some residents were no doubt still very fond of young Raymond, he was no longer their overlord, with Pope Honorius having stripped him of the land he acquired following the Ecumenical Council. So Avignon didn't feel that it had to get itself obliterated by the approaching huge army for Raymond's sake. But it was also

absolutely certain that it didn't want thousands upon thousands of hungry, carousing, plunder-seeking northern French soldiers entering their town.

So they came up with a proposal. They would let the army cross the Rhone at Avignon on the condition that the army stayed outside the city walls. King Louis himself would be permitted entry into Avignon, along with a small group of retainers, but everyone else had to keep out. In return, they were willing to hand over a bunch of hostages to King Louis as a sign of their good faith, along with Beaucaire. Beaucaire, of course, did technically belong to Raymond, but he had mortgaged it to Avignon, so they believed it a fair trade. King Louis accepted the conditions and agreed to the terms. The hostages were handed over, as was the citadel and town of Beaucaire, and everything looked great, until King Louis and his army actually got to Avignon.

Now the bridge over the Rhone at Avignon at this time was a beautifully built stone structure called the Bridge of Saint-Benezet. Trouble was, you had to enter the city of Avignon to use the bridge. As King Louis and the citizens of Avignon had just agreed that the army could not enter Avignon, well then the army couldn't use the bridge to cross the Rhone. Clearly, this wasn't going to sit well with King Louis, so the residents of Avignon kindly and thoughtfully constructed a temporary bridge made of floating rafts upstream of Avignon, so the army could safely cross.

King Louis' advance guard did make it safely across, but then things started going wrong. When the next column of Crusaders, a group under the leadership of Walter of Avene, attempted to use the bridge, for reasons inexplicable at the time and still inexplicable today, a group of armed men raced out of the city of Avignon and began attacking Walter's men, killing several and wounding many. The men from Avignon refused to let any more Crusaders use the raft bridge, with the result that King Louis' advance guard was stuck on one side of the Rhone and the rest of the army on the other.

Now, as I've mentioned, it's not clear why the men from Avignon decided to attack the Crusaders. Accusations and finger-pointing started almost immediately, with the men from Avignon accusing King Louis of renegeing on his agreement, while some Crusaders who wrote an explanatory letter to Emperor Frederick II (because, as you may recall, Avignon was part of the Holy Roman Empire) they alleged that the hostages offered by Avignon turned out to be unsatisfactory people of low birth, and that they had shut the city gates in King Louis' face when he tried to enter the town. In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption suggests that the most likely reason was probably a dispute between the citizens and King Louis about the exact route the King would take through the city, with King Louis being dissatisfied with the undignified and dangerous route chosen by the townsfolk.

I guess we'll never know the exact reason, but what we do know is, as a result of this event King Louis decided to use his army to besiege the city of Avignon. Unfortunately for King Louis, Avignon was a substantial town with formidable defenses. The city itself was surrounded by not one but two walls, protected by two massive gate-towers. The defenses of the town were well-manned by a well-trained and competent garrison paid for out of the town coffers. As a result, three months later, the siege was still underway, with no end in sight.

Now, King Louis' expedition left northern France in May. Consequently, the siege of Avignon occurred during the summer of 1226, and the summer of 1226 just happened to

be one of the hottest in living memory. Chroniclers at the time reported seeing corncobs roasting before they could be picked, and the unusually hot weather adversely affected the harvest of the surrounding countryside. As a consequence, food had to be shipped in by barge on the Rhone River, an extremely costly exercise. So, by the beginning of August 1226, King Louis' Crusaders were bored, hungry and impoverished. They were also getting sick. Billeting thousands of men in makeshift quarters with no sanitation, in the summer heat, generally leads to the spread of illness, and King Louis' siege of Avignon was no exception, with dysentery taking a heavy toll, so much so that the bodies of deceased Crusaders field up the open pits dug to contain them. So a decision was made to just toss them into the river.

Worse, however, was to come. In early August, King Louis received news that the English had attacked La Rochelle, and Louis started to suspect that some northern French noblemen were plotting against him. But of course he was powerless to do anything. He was stuck besieging Avignon, trying desperately to starve its citizens into surrender.

Fortunately for King Louis, by the end of August, the citizens of Avignon sent word that they were prepared to start negotiating terms of surrender. They had, it has to be said, held out pretty well. They had no fore-warning of the siege and therefore no chance to stock up on supplies. Still, they had managed to last three months before throwing in the towel. On the 9th of September the city formally surrendered to the French King. King Louis didn't allow his men to pillage or loot within the town, but the terms of surrender were still pretty harsh. 150 hostages were handed over. Louis confiscated all the weapons and siege engines within the city and demanded an immediate payment of 6,000 silver marks. The city agreed to fund the expedition of 30 Crusaders to the Holy Land, and also agreed to let Louis build an enormous royal fortress on the French side of the Rhone, to be paid for of course by the city of Avignon.

So, three months into his Crusade, King Louis VIII has managed to take the city of Avignon. Woohoo. Join me next week, as King Louis' Crusade finally arrives at its destination, Languedoc. Until next week, bye for now.

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