

History of the Crusades.
Episode 172.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
Montsegur, 1244.

Hello again. Last week we saw southern France stage two major push backs against the two new powers in the region, the French crown and the Church. Count Raymond VII joined a rebellion against the French King, which was ultimately unsuccessful, while the commander of the Cathar stronghold of Montsegur led a sortie out of the castle, which tracked down and killed two Inquisitors and nine of their companions.

Somewhat surprisingly, both the Church and the French crown seemed happy to forgive Count Raymond. Shaking their heads at his persistent rebelliousness instead of squashing him like a bug and removing him from his title and lands, as was probably the outcome most were expecting, both the Pope and King Louis instead forgave and forgot. Count Raymond, with King Louis' support, was once again reconciled to the Church, and this act seems to have humbled and quietened Count Raymond. Any hopes the local southern French nobility may have had that the Count of Toulouse would once again rise up against the French crown vanished, along with the hopes of the Cathar heretics that Raymond might act as their protector and their sword against the Church of Rome.

After his failed uprising Count Raymond was a changed man. For the next seven years, until his death in 1249, Count Raymond will keep his head down and stay out of trouble, remaining firmly under the two thumbs of the Church and the French monarchy.

If the Church and the French crown were prepared to forgive and forget Count Raymond's last stand against them, they weren't about to extend the same virtue to the Cathars. Going to war against a monarch could be forgiven. Tracking down and murdering two Inquisitors could not.

The castle of Montsegur, in the County of Foix had been a Catholic stronghold since 1204. Back in 1204, in pre-Crusade Languedoc, some perceptive Cathars had a sense that the next few years may bring trying times for the people of their faith, and had requested the Lord of Montsegur, Raymond of Pereille, to renovate and re-fortify the existing structure at the site and turn it into a refuge for those of the Cathar faith.

Now, throughout this series on the Crusade against the Cathars, we've come across some pretty impressive defensive fortifications, from minor castles built on cliffs or rocky outcrops, to the nearly impregnable fortifications at Cabaret in the Black Mountains. Well, Montsegur puts them all to shame. Set in the foothills of the Pyrenees, the fortification of Montsegur is located on the summit of its very own mini-mountain, a 1,200 meter high piece of rock which dominates the surrounding countryside. The approach to the top of the mountain, which obviously was steep and treacherous, was peppered with a series of defensive walls and defensive gate-towers, making the castle easy to defend and all but impossible to attack. As a result, Montsegur had served as a successful and safe stronghold for those of the Cathar faith during the Crusades, sheltering such notable Cathars as Esclarmonde of Foix.

As the Inquisition spread across Languedoc, it took on a more formal role. Raymond of Pereille appointed his son in law, Peter Roger of Mirepoix, who had been a routier during the Crusades, as the commander of the castle, and the castle became a magnet for

Cathars, who were seeking a safe place from the long arm of the Inquisition. The founder of the fortress, Raymond of Pereille himself, was forced to seek shelter at Montsegur in 1237 after being pursued by the friars. In the early 1230's the Cathar Bishop of Toulouse Gilbert of Castres, approached Raymond of Pereille and asked if Montsegur could become the headquarters of the Cathar faith. The Bishop's request was granted, and a collection of small huts and caves around the castle became home to around 200 of the Cathar Perfect. Traveling Perfect and practising Cathars were both welcome to stay at the castle as well, either as a safe haven from the Inquisitors or as a respite from their life of constantly traveling and constantly looking over their shoulders, like that endured by Arnaud de La Motte, who we met back in Episode 167.

Talking of Arnaud, let's see what she's been up to. When we last left her, she was enjoying the protection of a Cathar nobleman in Toulouse and had settled in the city. Following the end of the Crusade and the signing of the peace treaty in Paris, Arnaud left Toulouse, accompanied by her sister and her elderly mother who were also Cathars, and she moved into a house owned by the Cathar nobleman in a little village some 12 miles from the city. The nobleman, being a prominent and well known Cathar, attracted the early notice of the Inquisition in 1234 and as a consequence, Arnaud moved out of the nobleman's village house into a humble dwelling outside the village. Then she moved with her mother and sister to an even more remote building, a farmhouse. Living in the cellar of the farmhouse and relying on donations of food and fuel from sympathetic locals to survive, times were hard, and Arnaud's sister became ill and died. Arnaud buried her sister in the nearby woods and left the district. For the next nine years Arnaud and her mother were constantly on the move, staying for brief periods with sympathetic house owners, sheltering in safe houses and camping in abandoned dwellings.

But in the year 1243 her luck ran out. She was attending a Cathar service in the woods outside the city of Toulouse, when the worshipers were rounded up by a group of men loyal to the Count of Toulouse. Arnaud was arrested and taken before the Inquisitors. Following her interrogation by the friars, Arnaud made a full and detailed confession. She ended up naming over 100 individuals who were either Cathars or sympathizers who had assisted her during her decades on the run.

Right, back to Montsegur. In May 1243, a year after the murder of the Inquisitors, a decision was made to attack Montsegur, using the combined forces of the French Crown and the Church. An army of several thousand men led by the Royal Seneschal of Carcassonne Hugues des Arcis, along with the troops supplied by the Archbishop of Narbonne and the Bishop of Albi, marched to Foix, intending to attack and overrun the Cathar stronghold. Of course, due to its location, and in particular the mini-mountain upon which it sat, this was going to be no easy task. The base of the mountain was too wide to be totally surrounded by the besiegers, so they had to content themselves with a partial siege. The attackers also found that the catapult machines were useless against the stronghold. The sides of the mountain were too steep for the catapults to be constructed upon, and any missiles launched from a machine located at the base of the mountain didn't have the range to strike the fortification on its summit. Apparently undeterred by these challenges, the attackers set up their camps and settled in, hoping to either starve the Cathars and their supporters into submission or come up with a means of attacking the fortress.

Inside the fortress, Peter Roger of Mirepoix supervised the defense of the stronghold. Montsegur was at this time sheltering around 400 men, women and children, however

most of the men inside the castle belonged to the Cathar Perfect, and having sworn to live their lives as vegetarian pacifists, they were unable to fight. So at the beginning of the siege, Peter Roger had less than 20 knights with which to defend the castle. While 20 knights versus several thousand royal troops and Church fighters sounds like a recipe for disaster, it actually turned out to be not so bad. The massive natural advantages of Montsegur as a defensive fortification meant that Peter Roger's knights could easily spot any royalist or Church attackers who were silly enough to attempt to mount a sortie up the side of the mountain, and they could easily be picked off by means of crossbow bolts or catapult missiles. Also, the defenders inside the castle and their supporters in the surrounding countryside were familiar with all the hidden pathways which led up the side of the mountain into the castle. While the main access to the castle was heavily fortified and guarded by a mind-boggling array of walls and gates, the craggy ravine-like sides of the mountain, complete with handy bushes of gorse, which helped to conceal climbers from those watching below, contained a number of alternate routes to access the fortress, and those in the know were able to slip through the partial cordon at the base of the mountain and traverse these pathways, to provide supplies of fresh food and fighters to the people sheltering within the castle.

In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption reports that right up until the final weeks of the siege, groups of Cathar Perfect freely came and went from the castle, accompanied by escorts who would guide them up and down the mountainside. The Perfect were able to carry messages with offers of assistance and letters of support from Cathar communities across Languedoc. Likewise knights and noblemen who were keen to support Peter Roger's defense of the castle also scrambled up the concealed pathways to bolster the fighting force of the defenders.

The summer of 1243 came and went, and autumn was beginning to cool into winter, when the attackers scored their first breakthrough. In November of 1243 the Bishop of Albi, perhaps keen to follow in the footsteps of the siege-engine-loving cleric of the Crusades, the Archdeacon of Paris, came up with a plan to construct a catapult machine in a small depression on the eastern side of the mountain. In what must have been an impressive display of both persistence and engineering, his plans were carried out, and the newly-built and probably precariously-placed machine began pummeling the eastern tower of the castle, causing significant damage to its walls.

As winter closed in, Peter Roger decided to withdraw his defenders from the eastern tower. Even with the reinforcements that had been arriving, Peter Roger didn't have many men at his disposal. When you have a handful of knights facing an army of thousands, every fighter is precious, and with the missiles hitting the eastern tower with worrying regularity, Peter Roger decided not to risk placing any of his men there. The side of the mountain located below the eastern tower was particularly treacherous and was more like a sheer cliff than a traversible rock face, so Peter Roger decided that the risk of one of his men being taken out by a catapult missile far outweighed the risk of the attackers breaching the eastern tower. So he gave the order for his men to withdraw to a section of the castle beyond the range of the catapults. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a bad call.

Early in the new year of 1244 a group of mountaineers from the Basque region volunteered to attempt to scale the cliff below the eastern tower. In the dead of night, carrying their weapons, and moving quietly and cautiously, the men slowly made their ascent. They managed to make the climb, and finding the eastern tower unguarded, they took it without difficulty. A chronicler reported that as dawn broke, the mountaineers looked

down at the cliff they had just climbed, and were aghast that they had managed to make the ascent. They apparently swore that had they attempted the dizzying climb in daylight when they could fully appreciate its treacherous nature, they probably wouldn't have made it. But they had made it, and they set up a permanent position inside the eastern tower.

Over the course of the next couple of months, a stalemate ensued. The mountaineers were unable to advance further into the main keep, but the defenders also weren't able to eject them from the castle. As the weeks passed, Peter Roger began to realize the seriousness of their position. Rumors of outside armies riding to save the Cathar stronghold circulated regularly, but none ever came to fruition. Meanwhile, with the eastern tower under royal control, sections of catapult machines were winched up the mountainside, and once assembled they began pummeling the main sections of the castle. The Cathars began seeing the writing on the wall.

On the 2nd of March 1244 Montsegur surrendered. In his book "The Albigensian Crusade", Jonathan Sumption speculates that it was the garrison of the castle who were determined to surrender, and not the Cathars, and the generous terms offered by the attackers to the fighters inside the castle lend some credence to this theory. Despite the fact that they had resisted the attackers for nine months, causing hardship to thousands of men who were forced to besiege Montsegur during the hard months of winter in the foothills of the Pyrenees, the garrison of Montsegur were all allowed to walk free, even those who admitted taking part in the murder of the two Inquisitors back in Avignonet. The only penalty the garrison had to endure were light sentences imposed by the Inquisition.

For those Cathars inside the castle however, who refused to renounce their heretical ways, the situation was much different. Strangely, while it was agreed that the Church and the French King would take control of Montsegur after its surrender, the actual passing over of the castle was delayed for a period of fifteen days. Jonathan Sumption notes that the reasons for this are unclear, with the usually very thorough records of the Inquisition failing to shed any light on it. What occurred during those fifteen days inside the castle? Well the atmosphere must have been solemn and eerie. Everyone knew that those who did not renounce their faith at the end of the fifteen days would be burned alive as heretics, so no doubt there was much prayer, preaching, and soul searching. 190 of the Perfect inside the castle made the decision to die for their faith, and they were joined by a number of men from the garrison, perhaps as many as 20. The men from the garrison received the consolamentum, and were inducted into the Cathar faith as Perfects.

Now, during the night before the fifteen-day period was due to expire, the commander of the castle, Peter Roger of Mirepoix, did something which has had conspiracy theorists and seekers of the Holy Grail gnashing their teeth to this day. After the eastern tower of the castle had fallen to the attackers some two months earlier, Peter Roger had ordered the treasure of the Cathars, which had been stored within the castle, to be removed to a cave in the Sabarthes. Two senior figures from the Cathar faith took possession of the treasure, which allegedly contained a significant amount of gold, silver and the Holy Grail. OK, don't get excited, I just made that last bit up. The two men then made their way in secret down the mountain, probably escorted by some fighters from the garrison. They managed to make it through the besiegers' cordon without being noticed, hid the treasure safely in the cave, and returned to the castle. Now, on the night before the expiry of the fifteen-day period, Peter Roger of Mirepoix ordered three or four Cathars to flee under cover of darkness, go down the mountain to the cave, and deal with the treasure.

Other than the fact that the small group of Cathars safely made it out of the castle, nothing further about them is known. Did they make it safely to the cave? Did they remove the treasure from the cave and take it elsewhere? Or is the treasure still in the cave? Where exactly was the cave? What exactly was the nature of the treasure? No one knows the answers to these questions, but as you can imagine, this hasn't stopped people speculating wildly about it over the centuries.

The following morning, Peter Roger and the garrison gave themselves up, handed the castle over to King Louis' Seneschal, accepted their penances from the Church, and left. The fate of the Cathar faithful, including the newly-converted Perfect, was much different. The Royal Army had constructed a massive bonfire in the plain below the castle. On the 16th of March 1244, all the Cathars within the castle who had refused to renounce their faith were placed in chains and were led out of the castle down to the bonfire. The group, numbering between 210 and 215 people, included the current Cathar Bishop of Toulouse, Bertrand de Marti and the daughter of the Lord of Montsegur, Esclarmonde de Pereille. Once at the bonfire, the Cathars were released from their chains, and men from the church begged them to save themselves by converting to Catholicism. No one took up the offer. Instead, en-masse, they voluntarily threw themselves into the pyre. The stakes which had been set aside to tie up the Cathars and force them into the flames were not needed. Within a few minutes, more than 200 Cathars had freely accepted their fate and had chosen to commit their bodies to a fiery death in order to remain faithful to their beliefs.

And on that somber, although also admirable, note, that's where we will leave things for this week. Join me next week as we see the effect of the fall of Montsegur on the Cathar religion. Until next week, bye for now.

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