

History of the Crusades.
Episode 174.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
14th Century France.

Hello again. Last week we saw the decline of the Cathar faith in southern France in the last half of the 13th century. Next week we will begin our examination of the Cathars of Languedoc in the 14th century, but before we do so we are going to use this week's episode to take a step back and look at France as a whole in the 14th century.

Now imagine for a moment that you are the country of France. As you look back upon your illustrious history, what would you say are your worst years? You might ponder a moment about the chaos and dislocation caused following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, and there's no doubt that the first half of the 20th century was no picnic, but there is one standout century that will send shudders through you every time you think about it. And that century is, of course, the 14th century. For the Kingdom of France the 14th century was a series of monumental catastrophes, a 100 year period of such violence, upheaval and calamity that it almost doesn't bear thinking about. But think about it we must.

Now, just to set the scene and to give you an idea of what we are in for, let's take a look at a cautionary tale from this time. Cautionary tales are stories told to children designed to send them a message about the morality of the time, and to warn them of the perils that they may face should they make the wrong choices. These tales are generally a reflection of the vibe of the era in which they originate, and you can tell a lot about a particular time by looking at its cautionary tales.

Take, for example, a cautionary tale from our own time, the Disney movie "Frozen" from the year 2013. In this Oscar-winning computer-animated movie, a fearless Princess sets off on a journey with a group of loyal followers, one of whom is a talking snowman, to find her sister, who has accidentally condemned her kingdom to an eternal winter due to her quirky superpowers. In this film, everyone is well-dressed and well-fed, and they frequently burst into song, being able to belt out catchy tunes despite their predicaments. The central message of the movie is to "let it go", that old hurts and issues should be cast aside to enable you to become a better person. And, of course, there is merchandise available to purchase, a lot of merchandise.

Of course, back in 14th century France they didn't have merchandise. They didn't have Disney movies. They didn't have TV or YouTube. They didn't even have children's books. So back in 14th century France, cautionary tales were related by parents to their children as bedtime stories. In her fabulous book "A Distant Mirror, The Calamitous 14th Century", Barbara Tuchman describes a cautionary tale told by a Frenchman, La Tour Landry, to his daughters in the 14th century. It concerns a lady who ran away with a monk. The lady's brothers looked high and low for her and eventually found her in bed with the monk. So then the brothers, and I quote, "Took a knife and cut away the monks stones, and threw them in the lady's face and made her eat them, and afterwards tied both monk and lady in a sack with heavy rocks, and cast them into a river and drowned them." End quote. Moral of the story: Don't run away with a monk or your brothers will torture and kill you.

Here's another one. A husband and wife quarreled, and as a result, the wife left the marital home and went to stay with her parents. Her husband went to fetch her back, and while

they were traveling back to their house, the wife was attacked by a group of savage young men, who raped her, causing her to die of shame and sorrow. Her husband cut her body into 12 pieces and sent a piece to each of her 12 friends, along with a letter describing what had happened. The lady's 12 friends all sought to avenge her death, with the result that they descended upon the village in which she had been raped, and killed all of its inhabitants. Moral of the story: If you leave your husband, bad things will happen, really bad things, things like pack-rape, suicide and mass slaughter.

Right, so by looking at the nature of its cautionary tales, I think we can safely conclude that in comparison to our own time, the 14th century was almost unbelievably violent and unforgiving. We've already seen from our examination of the Middle Eastern Crusades and the Crusade against the Cathars that the couple of centuries preceding the 14th century were also pretty violent in comparison to our own time. But the 14th century just seemed to take the level of violence up a notch, and violence, more than ever, seemed to be a natural response to life events, and a normal way of dealing with problems.

But of course, it wasn't just an amplified level of violence which set the 14th century apart. No, some really horrible events occurred in this century, the first one being the return of the plague. Europe had its first major recorded exposure to the plague way back in the sixth century, and in the mid-1300's it returned to the continent with a vengeance. What arrived mid-century was a toxic brew of three variants of the disease: bubonic plague, septicemic plague, and pneumonic plague. Carried along the Silk Road trading route from Asia into Europe, the plague hit the unsuspecting population with a devastating force, with volumes of people coming down with one or a combination of the three variants of the disease. And it didn't hit just once. It hung around, breaking out around once every 10 years until the end of the century. To give you an idea of its effect, at the beginning of the 1300's the town of Beziers in southern France had a population of around 14,000 people. One hundred years later it had shrunk to around 4,000. Similar population reductions occurred in Carcassonne and Montpellier.

The plague was highly contagious. Its symptoms, which gave it the name the Black Death, included black swellings the size of an apple in the armpits and groin, which used blood and puss. Black blotches would appear on the skin, along with internal bleeding. The victim, depending on the variant of the disease they had caught, would suffer severe pain, and die anywhere between 24 hours and five days from the time they exhibited the first symptoms. No one, of course, knew the cause of the illness or how to prevent it. There is a general consensus nowadays that it was carried on the bodies of fleas living on rats, but in the speculation and panic that followed the arrival of the plague, that cause didn't get a look-in. Rumors circulated that poisoned air had escaped from the Earth, or that the planets had aligned in some malignant way so as to corrupt the atmosphere. One popular explanation was that the plague was due to the wrath of God, and parades of penitent citizens, barefoot and wailing, processed around the main towns, imploring forgiveness of their sins, but actually spreading the disease themselves as they paraded en-masse through the streets.

As is usual during times of fear and uncertainty, communities turned on the "other", or the outsiders in their midst, desperate to take out their vengeance on someone, even though these people were totally blameless. As was the case so often in European history, the "other" at which the finger of blame was pointed were the Jewish populations. Rumors began to circulate that the plague was caused by Jews poisoning the water supply. The first Jews in Europe to be killed as a result of the plague were those in Narbonne and

Carcassonne. In the spring of 1348 Jewish residents of these towns were dragged out of their houses and thrown onto bonfires. By the end of the year 1348 the massacres of Jews across Europe as punishment for supposedly bringing the plague had gotten so out of control that Pope Clement issued a Papal Bull, declaring that Christians who blamed the Jews for the plague had been seduced by the devil, and that the charges of well poisoning against the Jews of Europe and the resulting massacres were a, and I quote "horrible thing" end quote. This reduced the attacks in the Papal States, but elsewhere the persecution of the Jews continued unabated. In February 1349, before the plague had even reached the city, the citizens of Strasbourg rounded up their 2,000 Jewish residents and burnt alive all those who refused to convert. Of course, murdering the blameless Jews did nothing to halt the pestilence, and the plague swept across Europe, leaving in its wake orphaned children, piles of un-buried bodies, and grief stricken communities.

It's hard to imagine today the impact of the Black Death on medieval towns and settlements. It suddenly became clear to everyone just how vital some of their citizens actually were. A town could cope with the deaths of some of its noble folk, but if the baker, the miller, or the blacksmith died suddenly without having passed their skills to others, it left a giant gap in the community. Interestingly, for everyone, it was the loss of peasants which seemed to be the most keenly felt. The peasants cleared and hoed the fields, planted and tended crops, and harvested the food. Without a blacksmith, there was no one to repair tools or to shoe horses. Without a miller, there was no one to grind the grain to make flour. Without a baker, there was no one to turn the flour into bread. But without peasants, there was no food.

All of a sudden, everyone needed more peasants to replace those who had died of the plague. The nobility suddenly began to notice just how important peasants were within the structure upon which society was built, and more importantly, the peasants began to notice how important peasants were. People who had been right at the bottom of the feudal pecking order suddenly found themselves in high demand and, well, to cut a long story short, the inevitable outcome was peasant revolts.

Okay. So, so far in our romp through the 14th century, we have come across a load of violence, the Black Death, persecution of Jews, and peasant revolts. But really, we're only just getting started. Next up, in the horrors spawned by this Century from Hell is the Hundred Years War, fought between England and France from the year 1337 to the year 1453. Now it's an easy thing to say "The Hundred Years War", but a war which lasts more than 100 years is a truly horrible thing. Just imagine fighting in a war that your grandchildren's children will still be fighting, and even then there will be no end in sight. Now the battlefield for most of this war was France, and the country of France and its people really, really suffered. England repeatedly invaded France, and each time they did so, their soldiers were kept happy looting, pillaging, raping, killing, and generally laying waste to the countryside. Sometimes the English would land in France, then travel through the countryside, and apparently content with the amount of booty they had scored, would return to England without ever meeting the French army on the battlefield.

But the French citizens didn't have to just contend with the English invaders. In an age filled with an astonishing amount of violence and warfare, many French males of fighting age made a career for themselves fighting in the endless wars. Trouble was, they couldn't really make a living from this, so between battles, what did they do? Well, they raided the countryside, pillaging, raping, and looting, and taking whatever they needed to thrive and survive, without a care for their fellow countrymen. Pity the average French citizen.

Not surprisingly, the politics of this era were also toxic and cutthroat. In fact, for those of you who are fans of the "Game of Thrones", rumor has it that the author of the "Game of Thrones", George Martin, took as his inspiration a series of books by the French author Maurice Druon called "The Accursed Kings". "The Accursed Kings" is a set of six historical novels set in France in the 14th century. So, welcome to Westeros, everyone.

Now, I guess you are all probably shaking your heads and thinking, "Gee, 14th century France sounds like a terrible place, but at least I suppose they had the Church to turn to in their time of despair." Wrong. The 14th century saw the Catholic Church spiral into a death spin of avarice and greed, before pretty much imploding. The Inquisition, which we now know began in the years following the Crusade against the Cathars, amped up a few notches, extending its reach to those accused of witchcraft and sorcery, and using torture to great effect in extracting confessions to all sorts of heretical behavior, catching even the Knights Templar within their ever-extending nets.

And just to top things off, two Popes went to war against each other. At the beginning of the century, back in 1305, a French Pope who took the name Clement V was convinced by the French king to be formally crowned as Pope not in Rome, but in a French town, one under the control of the Roman Church. That town was, of course, Avignon. Acceding to the King's demands, Pope Clement was not only crowned at Avignon but based himself there. For the next 70 years, Avignon would be the seat of the Papacy, and while Europe in general and France in particular staggered under the burden of the Black Death, the Church at Avignon, staggered not under the burden of suffering and death, but under their ever increasing power and wealth.

Here is a long quote from the book "The Bad Popes", in which the author, E. R. Chamberlin tells of the wealth of the cardinals at Avignon. Okay, here we go, this is a long quote, but I think it's worth relaying, and I quote. "The cardinals' wealth was enormous. In addition to the gifts from European monarchs, the cardinals were directly connected to that elaborate system which sucked gold from all over Europe. Half the revenue of the Holy See was theirs by right. At every election, the Pope, by custom, gave each cardinal handsome gifts in specie. Each held a plurality of benefices by right: a church in an English town; a cannery in a Scandinavian city; a Bishopric in Italy. All over Europe, peasants and merchants, fishmongers, dukes, prostitutes, kings, contributed their great or little to the 20 odd streams of gold, each of which found its destination in a cardinal's coffer. It was gold that counted; gold, not in the form of a symbol, but as actual metal. Between them, the cardinals disposed of a vast weight in bullion. When Cardinal Hugh-Roger died, his executors found in his house a horde that represented almost every currency in Europe. In a red chest, there were 21 bags of gold, each containing mixed coins. Elsewhere they found, in bags, purses, boxes, or wrapped in cloth, 5,000 Piedmontese gold florins, 5,000 old gold crowns, 2,000 Aragonese gold florins, 4,500 gold crowns of England, 855 gold francs, 500 gold angels, 97 gold ducats, 363 of the pure florins of Florence, 511 Sicilian florins, and 900 gold florins of the mint called du Grayle. This was the horde of but one cardinal, not particularly important, not particularly miserly. In the Avignon for which they now pined, they had lived in splendor, their palaces and gardens forming a separate pleasure city, Villeneuve on the further bank of the Rhone. Their progress through Avignon itself had been not so much like princes as kings, for their long trains of attendants would not have disgraced a monarch of France or England. Some of the onlookers revelled in the glory brought to the city. Others raged at it." End quote.

The Avignon Popes were predominantly French and their cardinals mostly French as well. Of the 134 cardinals created during this period, 112 were French. So it came as a shock to everyone when Pope Gregory XI, another Frenchman, decided to return to Rome in 1377. Pope Gregory did return to Rome, but died a year later. Desperate for the Papacy to remain in Rome and not return to France, the citizens of the Holy City exerted a great deal of pressure on the cardinals to choose, not a Frenchman, but an Italian for the next Pope. Pope Urban VI was duly elected. An unassuming Italian administrator with a working class background, Pope Urban was meant to be easily pliable, steadfast and the perfect yes-man. However, to the shock of the cardinals, he turned out to be anything but. The power of the Papacy seemed to go straight to Pope Urban's head, and he turned from being a mild-mannered, slightly boring Vatican accountant into a raging, violent megalomaniac, who not only refused to bow to the will of the cardinals, but argued with them, abused them, and in some cases physically attacked them. And then came the final straw. He threatened to curb their financial excesses. Unable to cope with this turn of events, a mere six months after electing Pope Urban, the cardinals fled from Rome and made their way back to Avignon. There they elected a new Pope, who took the name Pope Clement VII.

Pope Clement was an interesting choice for Pope. In a true reflection of the time, he had previously been known as the Butcher of Cesena, not for his skills in rendering animal carcasses fit for human consumption, but because of a massacre he oversaw in the city of Cesena, where over a period of three days up to 5,000 citizens were slaughtered following an armed uprising.

So now we have two Popes, one Italian Pope in Rome who frequently flies into rages and is volatile and unpredictable, and one in Avignon, a Frenchman with a violent past. This starts the period known as the Papal schism. Both Popes effectively went to war with one another, each attracting the backing of various kingdoms, each excommunicating the followers and countrymen of the opposing Pope, meaning that pretty much every Christian in Europe was at some stage living under the threat of eternal damnation by one Pope or another, something which did nothing to ease the already troubled minds of the unlucky citizens living through the perils of the 14th century.

Since Papal revenue was effectively halved, and since both Popes needed to gather enough resources to try and defeat the supporters of the opposing Pope, taxes soared, and the coffers of the rich and poor alike were drained to enable the Papal battles to continue. The schism continued for around forty years, and did nothing to enhance the Church's reputation amongst its long-suffering members, and everything to lay the foundations for future protests and rifts against the Church.

Right, well, I think that just about wraps up our brief look at France in the 14th century. Now anyone with even an inkling about what was set to unfold during the 1300's would understandably run screaming in the opposite direction if invited to step into this era. But steel yourselves, people, for we're not going to be running away from the perilous 14th century. Join me next week, as we take a deep breath and tread gingerly into the year 1300. Until next week, bye for now.

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