

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 182.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
Montaillou.

Hello again. Last week we saw disaster descend for the Cathars of the County of Foix, in the form of the betrayal of the network established by the Authie brothers by one of their own. This week we are going to take some time out of the narrative to take a closer look at a village within the County of Foix, the village of Montaillou.

Now, most of the information I will be relaying to you in this episode comes from the fabulous book "Montaillou" by the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, who in turn gained most of his information from the Inquisition register of the Inquisitor Jacques Fournier, a zealous cleric who would later become one of the Avignon Popes, taking the name Benedict XII. Montaillou was in some ways a typical medieval village and in other ways, as we shall see shortly, it was entirely unique. Looking at Montaillou should give us a deeper understanding of how the Cathar faith affected people on a day-to-day basis, and it should also shed some light on what it would have been like to live in a small village in the Pyrenees in the early 14th century.

Montaillou is located high in the Pyrenees in the County of Foix, near the border of the Kingdom of Aragon. There were no roads leading to Montaillou in the 14th century, and it was accessible to the outside world only by mountain tracks, most of which were quite treacherous in bad weather. The village contained between 200 and 250 residents and was large enough to have a castle which looked down over the village. The main street in the village lead down to the church, which was built below the village, and below that was the cemetery and a small chapel.

You can visit Montaillou today. The castle is now a ruin, but the church and the chapel are still standing. I'll post a photo of modern Montaillou on the Facebook page. The village itself wasn't fortified, and in times of strife, the villagers were expected to make their way up to the castle, where they could seek refuge. The houses, as you would expect, were a mixture of structures, ranging from humble constructions to more complex buildings. Some houses had yards where they could keep pigs, chickens, or other animals such as oxen, mules, cows, and donkeys. It was too high in the mountains for many crops to grow, but the villagers did manage to grow oats and wheat, which were their staple grains, as well as a small range of vegetables, and hemp, which they used as a fiber. But probably the primary income for the village came from sheep. Shepherds were in high demand, and sheep would need to be constantly on the move, foraging from the pastures and forests in the countryside, and the animals would need to be taken down to the lowlands for the winter months.

The closest major town to the village was the town of Ax, and it was to Ax that the farmers would make their annual trek, loading pack animals with sacks of grain to be guided along the steep paths down the mountains to Ax, where the grain could be milled into flour. The flour would then be reloaded into the sacks for the long trek back up the mountains to Montaillou.

Money wasn't used much in Montaillou. Most people bartered with each other to get what they needed. The taxes which the village owed were paid by giving up a percentage of their harvest, so again no money was needed. If any of the villagers had excess produce,

such as eggs or vegetables which they couldn't offload within the village, they could make the arduous journey to Ax to trade the goods there, or use them to obtain trinkets from the occasional peddler who made his way to Montaillou. There were some luxury items, which were regularly trekked up from the lowlands into Montaillou by mule or pack animal. These included wine, salt and olive oil, but most of the food consumed within the village was produced by the village. Interestingly, there didn't seem to be any drive amongst the villagers to work hard to produce extra goods and to then use the excess produced to buy material possessions. Most people seem to be content just to produce what they needed, which resulted in a pretty relaxed day-to-day existence. There was plenty of time during the working day, depending on the season of course, to chat with neighbors and to take life at a leisurely pace.

Talking of taxes, what were the governing structures over-seeing life in Montaillou? Well, the people of Montaillou had obligations to three main overlords, the King of France, the Count of Foix, and the Church. To most people in Montaillou the Kingdom of France was a distant, meaningless entity, which ruled over them but which they didn't really know much about, other than the fact that it meant they had a King far away in northern France to whom they needed to pay taxes. The Church was held in a similar regard. The Church, of course, also lent structure to their everyday lives, with its myriad of saint's days and with church services being held in the village every Sunday. But again, it also meant their daily lives were ruled over by a faraway Pope, and it meant paying tithes to this faraway ruler. In contrast, the Count of Foix seems to have been held in high regard within the village, and the people would speak of the Count with a genuine fondness. There seems to have been an assumption that the Count would look after their interests, and would protect them against the excesses of both the Church and the French crown. The way these bodies exercised authority in the village of Montaillou were through its chatelain who lived in the castle, the bailiff who collected taxes and was in charge of maintaining law and order, and the priest who looked after Church business on behalf of the Bishop of Pamiers, under whose diocese the village fell.

During the particular period we are interested in, the authority within the town was tied up between two brothers, Bernard Clergue, who was the town bailiff, and Pierre Clergue, who was the town priest. The noble family living in the castle were the chatelain, Berenger de Roquefort, and his wife, Beatrice. Berenger died young, but his widow, Beatrice, stayed in Montaillou, running the castle and its estate with the assistance of a steward and some servants. Interestingly, although Beatrice was clearly the only person of noble birth in the village and therefore at the top of the feudal structure, that didn't seem to matter on a personal level. If she was walking through the village, she would often bump into a woman from the village with whom she was friendly, they would hug, and she would sometimes be invited into the village woman's house for a drink and a chat. I guess living in a small place like Montaillou made the social hierarchy a lot less rigid than those in the larger towns.

Now, at the moment, I'm guessing you're thinking, OK, that's all very interesting, but this just sounds like an ordinary village. Where's the drama? Where's the intrigue? Where's the connection to the Inquisition against the Cathars? Well, the fact that Montaillou was really not like any other village, and was in fact a place full of drama, intrigue and heretics, was largely due to the actions of one single man, and that man was the village priest Pierre Clergue. Now some people like to live quiet lives, while others thrive on being in a constant state of danger and excitement. The priest of Montaillou, Pierre Clergue, fell into the latter category. To start with, Pierre Clergue had a personality trait that was generally unusual in priests, that being he was a notorious womanizer.

Now, in a little place like Montailou, which only contained a couple of hundred residents, there were only a certain number of women present. Pierre Clergue seems to have had relations with a goodly portion of them. It's not clear from the records whether the priest was the predatory type, with the women of the village submitting reluctantly to his advances because of his position of authority, or whether he was an attractive and charming individual to whom the women enthusiastically returned his affections. Due to the sheer number of women he managed to seduce, including the chatelaine of the Castle, the widow, Beatrice, I would guess it's probably the latter.

Now, in a place like Montailou, which had a limited number of residents and was largely closed off from the outside world, the effect of all Pierre Clergue's relationships caused quite a deal of drama. Not only were there conflict and tensions between Pierre's current girlfriends, his former girlfriends and his possible future girlfriends, there was also a great deal of tension between Pierre and angry husbands, fathers and brothers, and spurned girlfriends. But this wasn't the only means by which Pierre Clergue upset the tranquility of this little village in the Pyrenees because, and I would actually urge people who were driving whilst listening to this to grab tightly to your steering wheel, because you're in for a bit of a shock, the priest of Montailou, Pierre Clergue, was also a Cathar.

Yes, you heard right. The man tasked with administering the Catholic religion in Montailou, and the representative of both the Pope and the Bishop of Pamiers, was not actually a Catholic at all. He was a heretic, a Cathar. Now, if having a priest who has an eye for the ladies caused ructions in this isolated village, well having a priest who was actually a Cathar had even greater ramifications.

Now, I should point out that this wasn't something that Pierre Clergue broadcast freely to all and sundry. He still undertook all his priestly duties, including giving a sermon every Sunday, but it was an unspoken fact that the priest was actually a heretic. Now, of course, at this period in history, it was very dangerous to be a Cathar. But if you were living in a nearly inaccessible village in the Pyrenees, and the village priest was a Cathar, well, it was less dangerous. Pierre Clergue kept his ear to the ground, and for a while at least was able to play both sides, gathering inside knowledge about the activities of the Inquisitors, while keeping his flock protected as much as he could. As a result, many of the residents in Montailou became Cathars.

Despite the fact that they had their priest looking out for them, converting to the Cathar faith was still a dangerous undertaking, one that placed your entire household at risk of being interrogated by the Inquisitors. As a result, it became almost standard practice for an entire household to make a collective decision to all become heretics together, rather than one individual converting to the Cathar faith while the rest of the family stayed in the Catholic fold.

When one of the Cathar Perfect visited the village, the Cathar households would compete to see who could offer the Perfect the most luxurious lodgings. Only the wealthiest families could afford to add a special loft to their houses, in which a Perfect could be hidden, and hosting a Perfect seemed to be equivalent to hosting a rock star or celebrity. The Authie brothers and Prades Tavernier, the Perfect who was caught by the Inquisition and then escaped in last week's episode, were regular visitors to Montailou. Prades Tavernier was particularly welcome as he was a talented weaver, and the ability to turn sheep's wool into clothing was a highly sought-after skill.

The ability of the Perfect to make the arduous journey up into the mountains to the village was much admired. In January 1305, one of the villagers became ill and seemed close to death, so a hardy messenger was dispatched from Montailou to Ax, most likely to the house of Sybille Baille, to find a Perfect. Guillaume Authie was located, and the Perfect and the messenger made the arduous trek through a blizzard in the middle of winter up to Montailou. According to Rene Weis in his book "The Yellow Cross", even by the trekking standards of the time, this was seen as an impressive achievement, and the admiration of the Cathars of Montailou for the Perfect increased even further.

Now, as you may imagine, there was bound to be considerable conflict between the Cathars living in Montailou and the Catholics living there. It would have been very easy for any one of the Catholic residents to travel to the lowlands and report the startling fact to the authorities that not only were there a heap of Cathars in Montailou, the priest was one of them. So there was a great deal of tension. Neighborhood disputes could quickly escalate into religious conflicts, and outsiders were looked upon with distrust by the Cathar residents. Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie relates a story in his book "Montailou" about a young woman who arrived in Montailou to be married into one of the local families. One night she knocked on the door of the house of the priest, Pierre Clergue, in a distraught state, telling him that she suspected her new husband and his family may be heretics. Pierre Clergue managed, somehow, to have the young woman quietly expelled from the village.

As you could imagine, life became increasingly treacherous for Pierre and the other Cathars in Montailou as the Inquisition grew in size and power. Pierre Clergue's brother, Bernard Clergue, was the bailiff and the enforcer of law and order, which was handy for Pierre and the other Cathars. There was an incident in the early 1300's when one villager had his tongue cut out by Pierre Clergue, while his brother, Bernard, turned a blind eye to the crime. There isn't a lot of information available about this incident, but it appears that the villager had either started freely talking about Pierre's Cathar faith, or had threatened to denounce him as a heretic.

In the year 1304, scandals within the village reached new heights when the Clergue's neighbor, a wealthy man and faithful Catholic who had a well known aversion to Cathars, was found mysteriously murdered. Several local Cathars were suspected of the crime, but the bailiff Bernard Clergue managed to sweep it all under the carpet, with the result that the murder was not thoroughly investigated, and no one was charged.

Now, with the eyes of the Inquisitors in Languedoc all turning to the County of Foix and the heretics under the care of the Authie brothers, you may get the feeling that things are going to get rather interesting for the people of Montailou, and of course you would be exactly right. Join me next week as we return to the narrative, taking a look at how the Cathars fared in the County of Foix following the betrayal of Guillaume Peyre. Until next week, bye for now.

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