

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 186.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
The Last Cathar Perfect.

Hello again. Last week we saw the imprisonment, trial, and death of Bernard Delicieux. This week we will close the door on the Cathar Perfect in Languedoc in the 14th century.

We already saw, two episodes back, the execution of the Authie brothers and many of the Cathar Perfect from the network operating in the County of Foix. The brutal removal of the leaders of their faith caused a mass exodus of Cathars from the County of Foix, many of them making the journey over the Pyrenees into the safety of Catalonia in the Kingdom of Aragon.

However, most of the Cathars of Montailou stayed in Montailou after the execution of the Perfect, including the Cathar priest Pierre Clergue. By the year 1315, five years after the execution of the Authie brothers, things had returned to a state of relative normality in the town. Pierre Clergue was now middle aged, but still on the prowl for women in the village, juggling girlfriends while dodging angry husbands.

On Friday, the 10th of September 1316 the head Inquisitor of Carcassonne Geoffroy d'Ablis died, and was replaced by a man called Jean de Beaune. But if the Cathars who remained in Languedoc thought that life was about to get easier because of this event, they would be wrong, because six months later, on the 19th of March 1317, Jacques Fournier became the Bishop of Pamiers. We saw in last week's episode that, a year or so after his appointment, Jacques Fournier will preside over the trial of Bernard Delicieux. What the Cathars of Languedoc are yet to realize is that Jacques Fournier, a Cistercian, will go on to pursue the remaining Cathars in his domain with a zeal equal to, if not exceeding, that of the Dominicans.

Now, Jacques Fournier was an ambitious man. Pamiers was only a little place, but if Jacques Fournier had his way, it would rise in prominence, to be mentioned alongside the cities of Carcassonne and Toulouse. He had ambitions for Pamiers, and as Pamiers rose, so too would its Bishop. In order to become an important center for the persecution of heretics, Pamiers needed its own Inquisitorial prison. Otherwise, suspected heretics would need to be taken to Toulouse for questioning and detention, taking them out of the control of Jacques Fournier and into the hands of the head Inquisitor of Toulouse, Bernard Gui. So Jacques Fournier decided to build a prison. To finance his project he raised taxes, telling his new flock that they would now need to hand over one eighth of all their harvests and their livestock to the Church at Pamiers. If the people refused to pay, and quite a few did, then he excommunicated them.

Now, there were two types of excommunication doing the rounds at this time. If you were excommunicated because of failing to pay Church taxes, you would start off under the lesser excommunication penalty, meaning you would be banned from attending church. However, if you persisted in your refusal to pay, the penalty could be upgraded to Greater Excommunication. This meant that all contracts you had entered into were now now and void, and if you died, you would not be accorded a Christian burial. If a year passed and you're still a Greater Excommunicate, then a charge of heresy would be automatically imposed on you, and you would be turned over to the Inquisition. Needless to say, most

people ended up paying their taxes. By the end of the year 1318, Bishop Fournier's growing Inquisitorial empire was in full swing.

Despite the fact that a goodly number of Cathars were now living in exile in Catalonia, there were some Cathars who would soon find themselves in the cross-hairs of Jacques Fournier's Inquisitors. Most of the villagers of Montailou were still Cathars, and there was still one Perfect, still preaching the Cathar faith, the man known to history as the last Perfect, Guillaume Belibaste.

Now, Guillaume Belibaste was not quite of the caliber of the Authie brothers or the Perfect who had been within the Authie network, but considering the fact that he carried the Cathar flame alone, without guidance or support, he did a pretty good job. He had spent his early life as a shepherd working in the high country in the Corbieres, which overlooks the valley of the River Aude. However, in the year 1306 his life took an abrupt turn for the worse. He was brawling with another shepherd and ended up killing him. Thereafter he became a fugitive. He joined up with a fellow man-on-the-run, a Cathar who was fleeing from the Inquisition, and together they fled into the mountains.

In the mountains he met other fugitives, mostly Cathars hiding from the Dominicans. He became particularly friendly with one man, a Perfect from the Authie network. Over the next year or so, Guillaume Belibaste gradually converted to the Cathar faith and stayed in the company of his new fugitive Cathar friends until eventually, after a couple of years, he was inducted as a Perfect. He and his Perfect mentor were both captured on suspicion of being heretics in the year 1309, but somehow they managed to escape from the custody of the Inquisitors in Carcassonne. They then both fled to Catalonia. Guillaume remained in Catalonia, preaching to the Cathar refugees there, while his friend returned to Languedoc to perform his duties to the Cathars in the danger zone. However, he was arrested and subsequently burned as a heretic, around the same time as the Authie brothers and the other Perfect from the Authie network were suffering the same fate. So Guillaume Belibaste found himself alone, the sole surviving Perfect, caring for his flock of refugees in Catalonia.

Now, Guillaume was far from a perfect Perfect. In fact, it would probably be more accurate to call him an im-Perfect rather than a Perfect. Aside from the fact that he had killed someone in his youth, he had trouble keeping some of his vows, particularly the celibacy one. He kept up the pretense that he was celibate for around a decade, keeping discreet mistresses from time to time, but then he just seemed to throw his hands in the air and made the decision to stop pretending he was something he wasn't and openly began living with his girlfriend, a Cathar woman, who had lost track of her husband while fleeing to Catalonia and who had befriended Guillaume when she arrived in exile.

To Guillaume, there were four demons in the world who were trying to prevent the Cathar faithful from reaching their full potential. Those demons were: the King of France; the Pope; the head Inquisitor at Carcassonne; and Jacques Fournier, the Bishop of Pamiers. It was Guillaume's role to provide whatever comfort and guidance he could to the exiled Cathars and to protect them from these demons.

The demons themselves, of course, had a different view of the world. One of Guillaume's demons in particular, Jacques Fournier, had one particular goal in mind. What was that goal? To lure the last remaining Perfect, Guillaume Belibaste, back into Languedoc, arrest

him and execute him on the grounds of heresy, and by the end of the year 1319 he had come up with a way of doing exactly that.

Now, do you remember Sybille Baille? She was the dedicated Cathar whose house in Ax became the de-facto headquarters for the Cathar Perfect. You might also remember that she booted her husband from her house when it became apparent that he didn't share her Cathar beliefs, and she also booted her children out of the house once they became old enough to talk, in case their chatter endangered the Perfect who were staying with her.

Now, some of those children grew up to be faithful Cathars themselves, while others became bitter, and grew up loathing the Cathar faith. One of her children who grew up twisted and bitter, was called Arnaud Sicre. Arnaud had been taken to live with his father after his mother kicked him out, and they seemed to feed each other's bitterness, both blaming the Cathar faith for their misfortunes. Arnaud's father had taken his revenge on the Cathars by helping to organize the raid on Montailou in 1308. Sybille Baille herself had been burned alive as a heretic sometime in the dark years of 1309 and 1310, but her house and property had been forfeited to the Church, robbing Arnaud and his brothers of their inheritance.

By October 1319 Arnaud Sicre had come up with a cunning plan to both seek revenge against the remaining Cathars and get back his inheritance. He presented himself to Jacques Fournier, the Bishop of Pamiers, and offered to bring in the last Perfect, Guillaume Belibaste. It's also possible that, at this meeting, Arnaud alerted Jacques Fournier to a fact about which the Inquisitors before him had been unaware, that the little, unassuming village of Montailou was a hotbed of Cathars, existing under the protection of the village priest who was himself, shockingly, also a Cathar.

In his book "The Yellow Cross", Rene Weis points out that there is no conclusive proof that it was Arnaud Sicre who alerted Jacques Fournier to the activities of the Clergue brothers and the extent of Catharism in Montailou, but it is a fact that Jacques Fournier started making specific inquiries about Pierre Clergue shortly after this time, whereas for the past couple of decades the Clergue brothers and the Cathars of Montailou had managed to stay firmly below the Inquisition radar.

Anyway, Arnaud's plan to lure in the last Perfect was a simple one. He would travel to Catalonia pretending to be an exiled Cathar or Cathar sympathizer. With his obvious ties to the Cathar faith via his mother's service to the Cathar community, he believed it wouldn't be too difficult to convince the exiles of his sincerity. Once he had gained the trust of Guillaume Belibaste, he would find a pretext to lure him back over the border into the County of Foix, into the waiting hands of the Inquisitors. All he wanted in return was some financial support from the Bishop and the inheritance that the Church had forfeited from his mother. Unsurprisingly, Bishop Fournier readily agreed to this plan, and Arnaud made the trek over the Pyrenees into Catalonia.

He arrived at the community of exiled Cathars armed with the following story. He had been a devoted son and was devastated when his mother had been burnt as a heretic. He had been forced into poverty when his mother's property had been confiscated by the Church and was now searching the community of exiled Cathars, looking for his aunt, his mother's sister Alazais, who was a wealthy woman, and his brother, Bernard, with the wish that both himself and Bernard would be able to move in with Alazais. The ruse worked. Arnaud was able to meet with Guillaume Belibaste and the other senior Cathars, and befriend them. It

helped too that Arnaud was a skilled cobbler. He set up a cobbler's shop in the community of exiles and was able to be of service mending the shoes of the Cathar refugees.

Here are the recollections of a senior Cathar, a shepherd from Montailou called Pierre Maury, who had acted as a guide for the Authie brothers on many occasions. Pierre Maury arrived in the Catalan village of San Martel in early November 1318 and was told the exciting news by his sister that a son of Sybille Baille had arrived in the village nearly a month earlier, and had set up a cobbler's shop. When Arnaud arrived at Pierre's house, he was greeted warmly and Pierre asked Arnaud if he really was Sybille's son. When Arnaud confirmed this, Pierre stated, and I quote "You are the son of an upright woman, I wish I were where your mother's soul is now, because she was the best and most dedicated of all the faithful" end quote.

The two men shared some wine together, Pierre sharing his reminiscences of Sybille, whom he had last seen ten years earlier, and Arnaud telling Pierre the story of how he was in Catalonia looking for his aunt and brother. Pierre pointed out that it was good for the Cathars to stick together in Catalonia, where the last Perfect was available to give them the consolamentum if they needed it. He told Arnaud that he was unaware of the whereabouts of his aunt and brother, but if Arnaud found them, he should encourage them to move to Catalonia, where they could enjoy the community of their fellow Cathars. After discussing some other matters, including the fact that, unfortunately, Guillaume Belibaste was nowhere near as good a Perfect as the Authie brothers had once been, the men parted ways.

In his book "The Yellow Cross", Rene Weis confesses some astonishment about the fact that no one seems to have questioned Arnaud or been suspicious about his motives. There were enough Cathars living in Catalonia for someone at least to have known that Arnaud had been raised by his Cathar-despising father, and that his motives for being in Catalonia may not be as they seem. But, at this early stage at least, no one seems to have questioned Arnaud's story.

The bounty-hunting spy for the Inquisition would remain in the community of exiled Cathars for an astonishing two and a half years. During that time, he would be living with and befriending the people whom he intended to betray. Rene Weis describes Arnaud's plan as a superbly executed long-range sting, which it certainly was. Every so often, Arnaud would make the journey back to Pamiers to report to Jacques Fournier, but during the two-and-a-half years his cover was never blown. Towards the end of this period, Arnaud refined his story. He was now looking not only for his aunt and his brother, but also his younger sister, Raymonde; his beautiful, single sister who was looking for a Cathar husband.

By Christmas of the year 1320 Arnaud was ready to spring his trap. He had recently spent a couple of months in Languedoc. In reality, he had met with Jacques Fournier, who had provided him with a sum of gold coins with which to lure the Cathars back to Languedoc. However, he told the exiled Cathars a different story. What he told them was: "Good news. I found my aunt and she's just as wealthy and helpful as I had hoped she would be. Look, she gave me a pile of money to give to the Cathar cause. She's so pleased that you are all safe and well. She would love to come to Catalonia, but unfortunately she suffers from gout and can't travel. And guess what? More good news. I also found my sister, Raymonde, who is living with my aunt. She would also love to travel to Catalonia, but she has to stay and look after our aunt. But wait, there's more. My sister is engaged to be

married to Pierre Maury's cousin, Arnaud Maury, and she has asked me to invite the Maurys and Guillaume Belibaste to their wedding back in Languedoc in March. Hooray!" With Arnaud dropping subtle hints about how his aunt was keen to share her wealth with Guillaume Belibaste to advance the Cathar cause, the bait was set.

Guillaume Belibaste and the Maury brothers agreed to undertake the nine-day trip to accompany Arnaud Sicre back to his fictitious aunt in Languedoc. It was on day four of the journey that the Cathars started to question whether Arnaud Sicre was being truthful about his wealthy aunt and decided to put him to the test. They were staying in a tavern in a village, still in Catalonia but on the road to Languedoc, when the Cathars decided to spike Arnaud's drink, hoping that when thoroughly intoxicated, Arnaud may reveal whether there was an aunt waiting for them, or whether he was going to betray them. Unfortunately, Arnaud was on to them from the get-go. He noticed them mixing his drinks, and only pretended to drink the whole lot, then fell down next to the table pretending to be drunk. One of the Maury Cathars then carried Arnaud outside and whispered to him "Arnaud, why don't we trick Guillaume Belibaste and take him to the Inquisitors in the Sabarthes? He's a poor excuse for a Perfect anyway, and we could make at least 50 or 100 pounds, and live like kings."

The not at all intoxicated Arnaud pretended to be outraged by this suggestion, and said that there was no way he would stand by and let Guillaume Belibaste be betrayed. He then stormed inside and threw himself onto his bed, pretending to fall asleep. The Cathars then discussed the evening events amongst themselves, not realizing that Arnaud was listening to every word. They came to the conclusion that Arnaud could be trusted and wouldn't betray them. The next day, they asked Arnaud, who was feigning a bad hangover, what he remembered of the past evening. Arnaud replied that he could remember drinking some wine and then he could recall nothing until he was in bed.

Now, on day six of the journey, the Cathars in the party had an unsettling experience. They saw a magpie on the road, and it crossed three times in front of them. This was a bad omen, and it made the Cathars anxious and quietened their chatter on the road. To make matters worse, a local fortune teller had warned Guillaume Belibaste, before they departed, not to make the journey. He had prophesised that if Guillaume left Catalonia, he would never come back. With two bad omens now having been presented to them, they all felt uneasy. Guillaume asked Arnaud, in a joking manner, to confirm that he was taking them to a good place. Arnaud said that he was and the journey continued.

By day eight, they had reached familiar territory. One of the Cathars began to get suspicious, as no other Cathar relations of Arnaud Sicre were there to greet them. However he did overhear Arnaud say to the bailiff of the town "It will be alright". This seemed to comfort the Cathar, and they all settled down for the night in their lodgings.

The next morning, the bailiff entered the house where the group was staying and arrested everyone, including Arnaud Sicre. Arnaud told the bailiff to let the ordinary Cathars, the Maurys, go, saying that it was only Guillaume Belibaste who needed to be detained. The Maurys scampered off back to Catalonia, and Guillaume and Arnaud were shackled together in leg irons, a practice which apparently was quite common to prevent false allegations being made. Guillaume called Arnaud a viper and a Judas, but Arnaud managed to calm Guillaume down with more lies, saying that he needed to keep his strength up, in case an opportunity arose for them both to escape.

While the shackled last Perfect and his bounty hunter were taken to the town of Ax, the two Cathars from the Maury family raced back to their community in Catalonia, and I mean raced. The journey back to their community in Catalonia was completed in half the time as their outward journey. They informed the devastated community of the betrayal of Arnaud Sicre and the arrest of the last Perfect, Guillaume Belibaste. Worried about their safety, the community scattered, many fleeing to Majorca, or deep into the interior of the Kingdom of Aragon, or even further afield to other parts of Spain.

Guillaume Belibaste was burnt alive as a heretic in the autumn of the year 1321. There is no record of his trial, and little is known about what occurred between his arrest and his execution, which took place at Villerouge Termenes, overseen by the Archbishop of Narbonne. Today, if you visit Villerouge Termenes, apparently there is a moving display paying tribute to the last Cathar Perfect, who was executed there in the year 1321.

With the last Perfect executed, the only job left for the Inquisition is to now clear out the remaining Cathars in Languedoc. Join me next week for what will be the second last episode in this series, or if you like fancy words, the penultimate episode, an episode entitled "The Last Cathars". Until next week, bye for now.

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