

History of the Crusades.
Episode 118.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Sack Of Beziers.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusading army march to the southern French town of Montpellier. There it was decided that the first target of the Crusade would be the town of Beziers, only two days march from Montpellier.

The Lord of Beziers was Raymond Roger Trencavel, who was not only the Viscount of Beziers but also the Viscount of Albi and Carcassonne, and overlord of the regions surrounding those towns. The two jewels in the Trencavel crown were the towns of Beziers and Carcassonne, two of the most prominent cities in Languedoc. Raymond Roger himself was 24 years of age at this time, considerably younger than his uncle Count Raymond of Toulouse, who was in his fifties. Raymond Roger had inherited his domains at the age of nine, and is described by Jonathan Sumption in his book "The Albigensian Crusade" as, and I quote, "a young man of considerable charm, but of greater pride than ability," end quote.

Experienced though the young Raymond Roger Trencavel may have been in administering his the extensive holdings, it's safe to say that nothing could have prepared him for what had happened over the last six months. You might remember that at the beginning of the year 1209 Count Raymond had tried to interest Raymond Roger Trencavel in forming an alliance against the Crusaders, but Raymond Roger had refused. It's easy to see why. At that stage Count Raymond had a massive target on his head, and it was clear that the focus of both the wrath of Pope Innocent and the coming Crusade would be Count Raymond and his city of Toulouse. It was understandable that Raymond Roger could see little benefit in putting his lands at risk by standing with his uncle against the might of the Church.

But in the last few weeks, events had been turned on their head. Count Raymond had now joined the Crusade, and Toulouse was off the Crusading hit-list. Instead, the official word was that this massive invading army would be descending upon one of Raymond Roger's key cities, the city of Beziers. How did Raymond Roger react to this news? Well, he tried to take a leaf out of his uncle's book. He traveled to Montpellier and met with Arnold Amaury and the leaders of the Crusade, intent on coming to a similar arrangement as that forged between the Church and his uncle, the Count of Toulouse. More specifically, Raymond Roger declared that the Trencavel family were now willing to submit themselves to the authority of the Church and that, like Count Raymond of Toulouse, he would promise to rid his lands of heretics. He asked that he be allowed to take up the Cross and join the Crusade.

Unfortunately for Raymond Roger, the response to his request to follow his uncle and take up the Cross was clearly going to be turned down, if only for the reason that had Raymond Roger joined the Crusade, then all his lands would fall under the protection of the Church, along with the lands controlled by Count Raymond, meaning that there would no longer be a Crusade, as all the potential targets would be under Papal protection. Combined with the fact that there was already considerable disquiet about Count Raymond's participation in the Crusade, and that the Trencavels were considered to be more heretical than even the Count of Toulouse, it should have come as no surprise to anyone when Raymond Roger's desperate offer was rejected.

Raymond Roger's only option now was to prepare his defenses against the upcoming attack. Unfortunately, time was against him. The Crusaders were intending to march to Beziers the following day. Ideally, Raymond Roger would need at least a week to raise an army and to prepare Beziers for a lengthy siege, but he didn't have a week, he only had a day. He left Montpellier immediately and rode through the night, arriving at Beziers at dawn the following day, on the 21st of July 1209.

Beziers, was located a couple of miles inland from the coast on a rocky escarpment overlooking the River Orb. The town was well fortified and was home to nearly 10,000 people. It had been a major town, even in Roman times, and many of its fortifications and vineyards dated from the Roman era. The massive walls surrounding the town were accessed via nine gates, and inside the walls the prominent buildings within the town included the Bishop's palace, the residence of the Viscount, four churches, the most impressive being the Church of St Mary Magdalene, one synagogue and the marketplace.

It was to the marketplace that the Viscount of Beziers rode after his desperate night journey. The townsfolk gathered in the square, and he told them the bad news, that thousands of Crusaders were heading their way, intent on attacking their town. He told them to defend the city as best they could, and wait for him to return with reinforcements. Raymond Roger himself would ride to Carcassonne to prepare its defenses, and raise an army to relieve the siege at Beziers.

Peter the Monk unsurprisingly attributes Raymond Roger's desire to leave Beziers to cowardice. In his book "The Occitan War", Laurence Marvin takes a different view, stating that Raymond Roger's solid conduct later in the campaign makes cowardice an unlikely reason for his decision to leave Beziers. His decision instead was likely a strategic one. In a time where the average person was no stranger to siege warfare, the citizens of Beziers knew how to defend their town. Its fortifications were sound and it was a reasonable assumption to believe that the town could withstand a siege from the approaching army. If the siege was prolonged and Raymond Roger remained in the town, he would be effectively isolated and cut off from the rest of his domain for the duration of the siege. It simply made more sense for him to order the townspeople to defend Beziers while he rode to Carcassonne to raise an army to come to their relief.

While Raymond Roger had only taken a night to ride from Montpellier to Beziers, the lumbering Crusader Army, with their pack horses, siege equipment and baggage would likely take a couple of days, so the townsfolk had ample time to flee if they wished to do so, or to decide to stay and fight. The fore-warning by their Viscount also gave people in the region surrounding Beziers time together their possessions and move to the safety of the town. Farmers wanting somewhere to hide their harvest, their livestock, and their stores were particularly welcome to shelter in the town, as every item of food would be needed should the siege drag on. In the end, most people decided to remain in the town. Of the 10,000 or so inhabitants of the town, around 700 were Cathars, and of those around 200 were of the Cathar Perfect. The Cathars elected to stay.

The Jewish residents, however, decided to depart with Raymond Roger and head to Carcassonne. The Jews played an interesting role in civic life in Languedoc in the thirteenth century. Much sought-after by the nobility due to their financial skills and their trading ties with the Jewish communities across Europe and the Middle East, they were also gaining acceptance in the wider community due to the esoteric nature of some of their

religious beliefs. Mysticism seemed to be trending all over southern France at this time, and Talmudic scholars and those learned in the Kabbalah were respected for their views and beliefs in a way which was unthinkable in northern France and the rest of mainland Europe. It had been pretty clear since the First Crusade left Europe, over 100 years ago, that Crusading and Jewish people were a bad mix. The memory of Jewish deaths at the hands of Crusaders passing through Europe on the way to the Holy Land would most definitely have been a factor in the decision by the Jews of Beziers to leave before the Crusaders arrived. The decision was a wise one.

For those people who remained behind, if some were anxious, many more were optimistic about their chances of success. The citizens believed they had enough supplies to last at least a month, and were hopeful that the size of the Crusading army would be its downfall. The Crusaders would have to eat as well, and with most of the available food in the surrounding region holed up safely inside the strong walls of Beziers, the townsfolk believed that the Crusaders would lift the siege and move on as soon as their food ran out. By the time the people from the surrounding regions had moved into the town, the population swelled to somewhere between ten and fourteen thousand people.

As the weary Raymond Roger and his equally weary horse departed for Carcassonne, followed by the Jews of Beziers, the remaining residents busied themselves bringing in supplies, digging trenches in front of the city walls, and shoring up their defenses. The Crusading army began to arrive on the western banks of the River Orb outside the fortified town later that evening. The Catholic Bishop of Beziers had joined the Crusade, and had been sent ahead to try and urge the town to surrender. He was admitted into Beziers and addressed the townfolk, probably in the Cathedral Church of Saint Nazaire. Helpfully bringing with him a list of 222 names, the names of the Cathar Perfect living within the town, the Bishop demanded that the town offer up the 222 individuals to the Crusaders, either by evacuating the town and leaving the Cathar Perfect behind, or by delivering the Perfect directly to one of the Papal Legates. If this was done, the town would be spared. Otherwise Beziers would be at the mercy of the Crusading army, the bulk of which would be arriving the following day.

If he was expecting to secure the first bloodless victory of the Crusade, the Bishop was about to be disappointed. Revealing just how optimistic they were about their chances of holding out against the Crusaders, the townspeople refused to hand over their Cathar Perfect. Instead, the bishop left the town empty handed, save for a small group of Catholic citizens who were swayed by his words and decided to leave their town. As an indication of how little sway the Bishop had in his own town, most of the priests from Beziers' four churches elected to remain with their flock.

As evening fell on the 21st of July, the townspeople, with the gates of Beziers shut tight against the invaders, settled in for the night, no doubt wondering what tomorrow would bring. Outside the town, on the hills and plains below, thousands of crusaders were arriving and setting up camp, pitching their tents, chopping down trees, lighting campfires and cooking their evening meal. They, too, were preparing for a lengthy siege.

The sun rose the following day, to a day that was usually celebrated within Beziers and in other towns across the land, the 22nd of July, the feast day of St Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was a saint dear to the hearts of many southern French Latin Christians. Local word had it that following the crucifixion, Mary and her brother and sister fled the Holy Land and arrived in Marseilles, which they used as a base for spreading their message

about Christianity throughout southern France. The Cathars also had a soft spot for Mary Magdalene, with their gospel of Saint John elevating Mary to the status of equality with the apostles. One of the four churches within Beziers was dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. What the citizens of Beziers weren't to know, as the day dawned on the 22nd of July, was that before the end of the day, the Church of St Mary Magdalene would be the scene of an almost unthinkable act of carnage and cruelty.

As the morning progressed, more and more Crusaders arrived and began to set up camp. Trees were being felled to make enclosures to stable the horses and pack animals, pavilions were being erected for the noblemen, banners were flying, and siege engines were being assembled. The leaders of the invading army did an inspection of the city walls, ensuring that they kept a safe distance away so that they wouldn't be struck by any stray arrows. Everyone outside the town seemed to be busy setting themselves up for a long siege. Inside the town, those who weren't occupied shoring up the town's defenses were gazing down on all the activity below, from the safety of the city walls. If you had selected a random crusader and a random resident of Beziers at this point and told them not to bother with all this activity because the siege would be over by the end of the day, they would have thought you were crazy.

But it was true, the siege ended during the afternoon of the feast day of Saint Mary Magdalene. How did this happen? Well, the exact events are a little unclear, but it may have gone something like this. The walls of Beziers look down over a bridge which crosses the River Orb. I'll post a copy of a photo of the town and the bridge on the Facebook page and website, and you'll be able to see that the bridge is within shouting distance of the walls, and if you were a skilled marksman, within arrow-shot. While the Crusaders were busy setting up camp, some of the vulgarium numerus infinitus, or the rabble lowly Crusade-followers, started lurking around on the bridge, yelling insults up to the defenders on the walls, taunting the townspeople, and encouraging them to try and strike them down with their arrows. One individual in particular, stood in the middle of the bridge and even stripped off his top to provide a more tempting target. The spectacle was attracting quite a bit of interest, both from the city walls and from the rabble gathering on the safer Crusader side of the bridge.

Now, in order to approach the city walls, you first had to cross the bridge. Since no Crusaders were on the Beziers side of the bridge, a group of over-enthusiastic young hotheads from Beziers decided to open the gate in the city walls nearest to the bridge, and go down to the bridge and teach the taunting Crusader a lesson. They managed to do exactly that. Swarming onto the bridge, they beat him senseless and threw him over the side of the bridge into the river. The Crusader's friends and other onlookers on the army side of the river saw the Crusader hit the water. They also saw a small group of townsfolk armed only with spears and clubs. They also saw the open gate in the city walls behind the group of townsfolk. Yelling at other crusaders to spread the word. They rushed to the bridge, overwhelmed the townsfolk, then crossed over the river and raced up the hill towards the open gate. High on the walls of the town, the townsfolk could see what was about to happen, but it was too late. The Crusaders burst through the gate and into the town.

Then the killing began. All the townsfolk who were found on the streets were cut down where they stood. Doors of houses were forced open, the residents were killed, and their possessions plundered. More and more Crusaders streamed into the city as word of the breach spread. No one was spared. The most vulnerable people inside Beziers, the

women and children, fled to the only place where they thought they would be safe. After all, what could be safer on the feast day of Saint Mary Magdalene than a church dedicated to the saint herself? Crusader chroniclers later estimated that 7,000 people crammed into the Church of St Mary Magdalene, seeking sanctuary and safety from the slaughter happening outside. Current historians, taking into account the size of the building, believe only around 1,000 residents would have managed to squeeze in.

Outside, no attempt was being made to distinguish between Cathar and Catholic victims. According to one chronicler, a group of concerned Crusaders asked Arnold Amaury whether they should try and sort out the heretics from the faithful within the city. The chronicler has the Papal Legate replying, and I quote, "Kill them. Truly God will know his own." End quote. So with this apparent Papal sanction, the Crusaders systematically slaughtered every person within the city. The terrified women and children inside the Church of St Mary Magdalene, being prayed over by their priest, were not to escape this fate. Crusaders entered the building, and armed with swords and daggers, relentlessly slashed their way through the packed masses. Ensuring that they would leave no survivors, the men set fire to the church as they departed. Any women and children who were injured or still alive were taken by the flames.

In the end, it took just three hours. Three hours to kill every single person inside Beziers, and to set fire to many of the wooden structures inside the town. Beziers was left a smoldering, annihilated ruin.

One of the texts I've been using to research these podcasts is a book called "Cathars" by Frenchman Yves Rouquette. Yves has spent the past 25 years living and working in Beziers. He says that the people of Beziers still reflect upon what happened on that day back in 1209, and he draws comparisons between the event and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War Two. The Church of St Mary Magdalene still stands in Beziers today, having undergone quite a few restorations and renovations during the past 800 years. Yves reports that the building is still dear to the hearts of the people of Beziers, and is known locally as "the Church of the Massacre of the Innocents."

The Papal Legate and the leader of the Crusade, Arnold Amaury, was delighted to report back to Pope Innocent that the first military engagement of the Crusade against the Cathars had been a resounding success. Join me next week as the Crusaders turned their sights upon the next town on their hit list, the town of Carcassonne. Until next week, bye for now.

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