

History of the Crusades.
Episode 153.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
Exit King John.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort besiege the town of Casseneuil in the Agenais region. In order to breach the town's defenses, the Crusaders needed to cross a river to gain access to its damaged walls. After building two inadequate bridges, Simon's men constructed a unique piece of equipment, a siege tower with a wooden room at its base, which operated like a cat. Under the protection of the structure, they slowly filled in a section of the river and created a causeway, which they used to gain access to the walls.

Constructing two bridges and a cat siege tower takes time, and the siege of Casseneuil lasted from the 28th of June to the 18th of August 1214. Why did Simon de Montfort spend nearly two months besieging a town of little strategic value? Well, because a man he considered a friend, the Lord of the town, betrayed him by switching allegiance to King John, and Simon de Montfort isn't the type of person to forgive and forget. Fortunately for the men defending the town, they managed to somehow escape before the Crusaders breached the walls. No one, to this day, knows how they managed to do this, as the town was surrounded by either Crusaders or natural barriers on all sides. Regardless, they somehow managed to flee without being spotted by the northern Frenchmen. Peter the Monk, who was present at the siege, makes no mention of the Lord of the town being present when the Crusaders entered Casseneuil and set it on fire. They killed anyone they came across, then set about destroying the town itself. I think we can safely assume that the Lord of Casseneuil managed to escape with the defenders.

Now, by the time the siege came to an end in mid-August 1214, Simon de Montfort no longer had a King John problem. Why doesn't Simon de Montfort have a King John problem? Well, because towards the end of July, the Battle of Bouvines happened, and after the Battle of Bouvines, King John's priority suddenly wasn't to win back Normandy or to assist Count Raymond to push back Simon de Montfort. No, King John's new priority was to stop the French from invading England.

Okay, I think we need to backtrack a little. When we last saw King John, it was at the beginning of the siege of Casseneuil. Envoys from the town were begging King John to come to the rescue of the town, and King John, while making promises of assistance, was really doing no more than sword-waving from a distance. That was back at the end of June. King John then moved his men northwards.

While Simon de Montfort was besieging a town to teach a lesson to a former ally who had defected to the other side, King John decided to do the same. He took the city of Angers back for the English crown. This was a major morale boost as Angers was the main seat of the Angevin line, from which King John was descended. The city of Angers had been held by a one-time supporter of King John, William de Roches, who had defected to the French crown way back in 1202. Knowing that the city of Angers would be difficult to defend, William fled to a nearby castle, which he had spent a decade building, just in case this sort of need might one day arise. King John ordered his men to besiege the castle.

At this point in time, King John most likely felt pretty optimistic. Now, you might remember that the plan was for King John to attack King Philip's lands from the south, while the Holy Roman Emperor, Emperor Otto IV, would invade from the north. Now I should point out

that it wasn't just King John and Emperor Otto versus King Philip. No, the invaders were joined by the cream of European nobility, including the Count of Flanders, the Count of Holland, the Count of Lorraine, the Count of Boulogne, and they're just the main ones. All of these people were lined up against just one player, King Philip. With it looking like King Philip was bound to take a beating from this huge force of Allied luminaries, it was no wonder that King John believed that he was just a stone's throw away from taking back Normandy and Brittany, English possessions that he had previously lost to the French crown. And it wasn't just King John who was thinking this way. Suddenly, lords and lesser noblemen from Normandy and Brittany started hedging their bets, and John's envoys were happy to report that at least six noblemen from Normandy had changed sides, and had now pledged support to King John.

But King John should've learned by now that everything he attempts tends to go horribly wrong, and things were just about to go horribly wrong. King Philip was not going to let his kingdom be invaded without a fight. So while he mustered most of his forces in the north to counter Emperor Otto and the allied army, he sent his son Prince Louis southwards to deal with King John. Prince Louis, with an army smaller than the one commanded by King John, had made it all the way to Chinon, only fifty miles or so up the Loire Valley from the castle being besieged by King John. While at Chinon Prince Louis was joined by William de Roches, whose castle King John was busy besieging, who advised him of the situation. Prince Louis sent a messenger to King Philip to ask him what he should do. King Philip sent a reply back to his son, indicating that he should take his army, attack King John, and lift the siege.

So at the start of July, Prince Louis and his army set out to march to King John's position. King John's scouts reported this fact to him, and King John told his men to get ready for battle. Then things started unraveling. A few of King John's local allies, including the highly influential Lusignans, refused to give him their support. The sources differ as to exactly why they decided they suddenly didn't want to fight beside King John against Prince Louis, but without their support King John was forced to give the order to abandon the siege, and retreat southwards. It seems that once this order was given panic ensued, and King John's army fled in disarray in an every-man-for-himself type fashion. Those on horseback got away first, and King John found himself with no one to pack up his camp or carry any of his stuff. So he was forced to leave behind his siege engines, his royal tent, his clothes and his valuables; everything was just left sitting outside the castle. The garrison, hardly daring to believe their luck, were able to plunder the royal possessions as they pleased. The hapless foot soldiers of King John's army, having watched the cavalymen gallop away into the distance, were left to fend for themselves. Understandably, they panicked as well, many of them drowning as they tried to flee across a river. When Prince Louis's army arrived, they found no one to oppose them. Prince Louis easily reclaimed the whole Angers region, and King John fled all the way back to his starting point, La Rochelle.

La Rochelle was where King John originally landed his army in Poitou, and from La Rochelle he sent a highly entertaining letter back home to England. Well, at least, I think it's entertaining, although, of course it wasn't meant to be. In his book "King John, Treachery, Tyranny, and the Road to Magna Carta", Marc Morris writes that King John's letter commenced with the words and I quote "Know that we are safe and well, and everything by the grace of God is prosperous and happy with us." End quote. The letter then goes on to beg the barons of England who had remained at home, to join him at La Rochelle without delay, and those who did would earn King John's undying gratitude and any past ill-will he bore them would be forgiven. So basically, the letter said "Everything is

fabulous here. Help! Please send help quickly." What effect did the letter have? Yes, you guessed it. None whatsoever. No one came. So King John had to quickly formulate a plan B.

Plan B involved mustering all the allies he still had left in Poitou and putting together a new army to oppose Prince Louis. The muster was set to occur on the 27th of July, 1214, but King John never got to implement his Plan B. Why? Well, because four hundred miles to the north, Emperor Otto's army, along with a variety of German, Flemish, Dutch and Boulognese cavalry, had invaded France and are about to come face to face with King Philip's forces outside the little village of Bouvines. The Battle of Bouvines has been described as one of the most decisive and momentous battles in the history of Europe. I won't go into the details of it here. If you want to know more, head over to Carl Rylett's podcast "A History of Europe, Key Battles". All we need to know is, in a battle which pitched King Philip against everyone else, King Philip won and everyone else lost. In doing so, King Philip earned himself the title Philip Augustus and pretty much created the foundations for modern France, turning the strange little kingdom he had inherited at the beginning of his reign, whose direct territory was limited to a laughably small region around the city of Paris, into one of Europe's major powers. I'll place a map on the Facebook page in the website showing King Philip's territory at the beginning of his reign and at the end of his reign. It's really very impressive. Anyway, understandably, the Battle of Bouvines sent shock-waves across Europe. One of its many outcomes was the demise of Emperor Otto, who was replaced by our old friend from the Middle Eastern Crusades: Stupor Mundi himself, Frederick II.

King John received news of the defeat of the Allied forces in the second week of August, when Simon de Montfort was a week or so away from winding up the siege of Casseneuil. His dream of reclaiming Normandy, Brittany and Anjou for the English crown vanished in a puff of smoke as soon as he heard the news. Those lands would, from that time on, be part of the new mighty Kingdom of France. Instead of returning valiantly home to cheering crowds, King John's popularity plunged to new depths, if that was possible, as he returned defeated, to a nearly bankrupt England, which was now seriously at risk of being invaded by France.

Just as the Battle of Muret removed King Peter II of Aragon from the Crusade against the Cathars, the Battle of Bouvines removed King John of England. The rebels now had to face the sobering fact that they were on their own; no kings would be lending their armies in support of their cause.

With King John now permanently removed from the conflict, Simon de Montfort's tasks became considerably easier. He was now unopposed in the north, and Simon, unsurprisingly, was going to take full advantage of this fact. News of the Crusader victory at the siege of Casseneuil, and the violent destruction the northern Frenchmen had unleashed on the town after the victory, spread, as did the news that King John was abandoning the region and fleeing back to England. Towns and fortifications in the Agenais region which had switched sides to King John were now kicking themselves for backing the wrong player, and bracing themselves to receive the full impact of Simon de Montfort's wrath. The occupants of most places that had decided to support the English crown fled before the approach of the Crusaders, which was a wise move as Simon showed little mercy, destroying and plundering abandoned strongholds, and doing his best to ensure that everyone realized that it wasn't a good idea to betray their new overlord.

With no one to oppose him, Simon de Montfort pushed north into the Perigord region, an area considered to lie on the southern borders of Aquitaine, a region, of course, under the control of the absent King John, having been inherited from his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine. This region really didn't contain any Cathars, or heretics of any sort. Peter the Monk attempted to convince his readers that the area contained routiers and, and I quote, "enemies of the peace and faith" end quote. But it's difficult to see Simon's move into the region as anything other than a blatant land grab.

In September 1214 Simon, having extended his northern borders beyond the Agenais, returned to Penne D'Agenais, to some very welcome news. While he had been busy using the Crusader army to gain territory to the north, the Papal Legate Robert Curzon had been using diplomacy and guile to gain him territory to the south. You might remember that Pope Innocent had given his newly appointed Italian Legate Peter Benevento strict instructions to preserve the status quo in Languedoc until an Ecumenical Council could meet to determine the fate of the region. Basically, this was an instruction aimed at ensuring Simon de Montfort didn't gain any more territory before the Church had time to organize itself and make a decision about the region. Well, Peter Benevento had departed for Aragon shortly after he had taken oaths of loyalty from the southern French rebels back in April. Why did he go to Aragon? Well, to oversee the installation of young James of Aragon on the throne, and to assist in the appointment of an appropriate regent to rule on young James' behalf.

To say that Robert Curzon and the senior clergy of southern France took advantage of his absence is an understatement. You might remember that Pope Innocent had appointed Robert Curzon to preach the Middle Eastern Crusades throughout northern France. However, he had been persuaded by proponents of the Crusade against the Cathars to start preaching that Crusade instead. Having followed his new recruits to southern France, Robert Curzon became an enthusiastic convert to the Crusade against the Cathars. He visited Simon de Montfort briefly on campaign in the north, and was present for a short time at the siege of Casseneuil. He had then made his way back south to see if he could help out Simon de Montfort there, and it's safe to say he achieved his aim. Acting on behalf of the papacy, Robert Curzon formally granted Simon de Montfort the Diocese of Albi and the Agenais and parts of the northern Diocese of Rodez and Cahours. Basically, this meant that the Catholic Church now recognized Simon de Montfort's conquests in the north, and acknowledged that his territory extended far beyond the Viscounties of Carcassonne and Beziers, across the Viscounty of Albi and way to the north in the Quercy and Agenais regions. Hmm, Peter Benevento will not be pleased.

As the weather began to cool, Simon didn't let up his momentum, spending the remainder of autumn consolidating and securing his new northern border, and extending it eastwards. By December 1214 he had moved out of the Quercy region over to the Viscounty of Rodez, which was located in the top northeastern corner of Languedoc. Having secured for himself some key strategic castles and strongholds, including the town of Severac, one of the towns at the north-eastern limit of territory controlled by the Count of Toulouse, Simon drew his northern campaign to a close.

The siege of Severac, conducted far from the Crusaders' supply base, in freezing, hostile, mountainous country, had taken its toll on the small Crusader army. Simon de Montfort offered generous terms of surrender to the defenders of Severac, and the Lord of Severac, about as keen to conduct a lengthy winter siege as Simon was, accepted the terms, and Simon marched his cold and exhausted army back to more familiar territory in the south.

Now, at the end of the year 1214, when Simon was returning to Carcassonne, Peter Benevento returned from Aragon to the not-very-welcome news about Robert Curzon's activities during his absence. With Pope Innocent's instructions for him to preserve the status quo now having been breached by his fellow Legate, and with the Ecumenical Council which Pope Innocent hoped would fix everything not having yet been called, Peter Benevento needed to take some action. So on the 7th of December, a summons was issued, calling for a council to meet at Montpellier, fifteen days after Christmas 1214.

So, with the Bishops and Archbishops of southern France all preparing to travel to Montpellier in January, we come to the end of the year 1214. What will the year 1215 bring? Will the Council of Montpellier sort things out, and will the Crusade finally come to an end? Join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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