

History of the Crusades.
Episode 188.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
The Cathar Legacy.

Hello again. Last week we saw the demise of the Cathar faith, with the last major group of practicing Cathars in Languedoc rounded up by the Inquisition. But, no doubt to the intense dismay of the Crusaders and the Inquisitors who had worked so hard to wipe them out, the Cathars didn't vanish from the pages of history. In fact, Catharism has, in the last couple of centuries, undergone somewhat of a revival, and is now linked to regional identity and pride in modern Languedoc. Cathar sites, such as Carcassonne and Montsegur, attract vast numbers of tourists, and apparently there's a sign on the highway as you drive into Languedoc from the north via Avignon that declares and I quote "Entering Cathar country" end quote. There are also a reasonable number of people living in southern France today who identify as Cathars.

The story of the Cathar revival is an interesting one. By the 20th century, Catharism became linked with the search for the Holy Grail, and even today conspiracy theorists get themselves into a total lather if you mentioned the treasure of Montsegur. How did this all come about? Well, it all started back in the early 19th century with a man named Napoleon Peyrat. Napoleon Peyrat had been born and raised in the region that had once been the County of Foix, and had eventually made his way to Paris, where he was the pastor of the Reformed Church of France. Now Napoleon Peyrat was a gifted writer and amateur historian who, unfortunately also possessed a vivid imagination. As the dust was settling following the French Revolution, Napoleon Peyrat railed against the influence of the Catholic Church in France, believing it to be reactionary and oppressive. Being from southern France, Napoleon Peyrat was aware of the story of the Cathar faith, and in his mind it offered the perfect tool to reveal the injustices perpetrated by the Church of Rome.

I mean, really, everyone loves the story of the committed, small band of believers fighting valiantly against their oppressive, militaristic, well-organized overlords. It's a narrative that appeals to popular sentiment everywhere, and which we find in our own times in blockbuster movie franchises such as "Star Wars" and "The Hunger Games". So Napoleon Peyrat sat down at his desk in Paris, filled his quill with ink, cracked his knuckles, and began to write.

He wrote a history of the Cathars, which was embellished with myth and drama. Deciding he needed a female freedom-fighter to star in his narrative, he came up with Esclarmonde of Foix. Now Esclarmonde of Foix did exist. She was the sister of one of the Counts of Foix, and died in the burning pyre at Montsegur. However, not much at all is known about her from a historical point of view. But that didn't stop Napoleon Peyrat. He just made up her exploits as he went along. Napoleon Peyrat's Esclarmonde of Foix was the guardian of sacred Cathar texts and secrets, a beautiful warrior and martyr, loosely modeled on Joan of Arc. In Napoleon Peyrat's narrative, the treasure that was hidden just before the fall of Montsegur contained not just coins and items of monetary value, but sacred books revealing the secrets of the Cathar faith.

The story took off like wildfire. Esclarmonde of Foix began popping up everywhere. She made regular appearances in the seances held in fashionable Parisienne circles, and an opera was even written about her. From this time onwards, Catharism would be tied to the

occult, to secret societies, and to lost knowledge which the Catholic Church wanted to suppress.

Following the contribution of Napoleon Peyrat, the next figure to propel Catharism into the occult limelight was a man named Josephin Peladan. Josephin Peladan originally studied at a Jesuit college in Avignon but branched out of the Catholic faith into mysticism. Towards the end of the 19th century, Josephin Peladan drew parallels between the Grail legends and the Cathars, pointing out that the mountain in the Germanic Grail legends, as shown in Richard Wagner's final opera, *Parzifal*, which was hugely popular at the time Josephin Peladan was formulating his theories, must be Montsegur. As Stephen O'Shea points out in his book, *The Perfect Heresy*, it was here that the enduring legend of the Pyrenean Holy Grail had its genesis.

Okay, so now we have the Cathars linked to Germanic legends of the Holy Grail. And if we fast forward to the German occupation of France during the Second World War, that brings us to the inevitable question. Was Hitler a Cathar? The short answer is: No. The long answer, however, is more complicated.

The link between the Nazis and the Cathars was forged by a man called Otto Rahn. Otto Rahn was born in 1904 in the beautiful little German town of Michelstadt. Now, Michelstadt is a gorgeously picturesque place, full of well-preserved medieval half-timber buildings, including a stunning Gothic medieval town hall which overlooks the town square. It's easy to see how young Otto developed an interest in all things medieval. As a young man, Otto developed two obsessions: the Germanic Grail legends; and the Cathars of southern France. His obsession with the Cathars was such that he became utterly convinced that he was descended from Cathars, which is a little strange considering his solid German heritage.

After graduating from Heidelberg University in the early 1930's, he traveled to the Pyrenees to undertake some personal research about the links between the Grail legends and the demise of the Cathars. He spent a great deal of time at Montsegur exploring the caves in the region, and became convinced that Montsegur was the Temple of the Holy Grail. He ended up writing a book entitled "*Crusade Against the Grail: The Struggle Between the Cathars, the Templars, and the Church of Rome*", which was published in 1933 when Otto was 28 years old. Basically, the book takes the Grail legends set out in Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic 13th century work "*Parzifal*", and superimposes it on top of the struggle between the Cathars and the Catholic Church. In Otto's mind, the story which unfolded in *Parzifal* wasn't the product of the author's imagination, but was in effect, a code. The characters in *Parzifal* were actually historical Cathar figures, and the places described in *Parzifal* were in Southern France. Otto became convinced that if you analyzed *Parzifal* correctly using Cathar history to unlock its secrets, it would lead you to the Holy Grail.

"*The Crusade Against the Grail*" didn't hit the best-seller lists, but it did attract the attention of a political organization which was growing in power and influence at that time, the Nazis. Apparently, Otto was in Paris, trying in vain to find someone who would translate his book into French, when he received an anonymous telegram offering to pay him the sum of 1,000 German marks if he wrote a sequel to his book. Intrigued, Otto made his way back to Germany, where he discovered that the author of the telegram was none other than Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS. The two men met, and Himmler offered Otto a position in the SS as a civilian historian and archaeologist. At that time, the SS were keen

to explore Germanic links to past glories across the globe, and Otto became a rising star in the Reich's propaganda machine, giving lectures about the Cathars and their links to Germanic mysticism.

However, as things began to heat up towards the end of the 1930's and war looked more and more likely, Otto seemed to start channeling his inner Cathar. He didn't want war at all. Like the Cathars, he was a pacifist and he didn't share the Nazi vision of an all-conquering Third Reich. Instead, in Otto's mind, the perfect future would be a peaceful united Europe, ruled according to neo-Cathar values. Gradually he began to gravitate towards people who were opposed to war, and then towards people who were opposed to Adolf Hitler himself. Disenchanted with the Third Reich, which he thought was behaving more and more like the Catholic Church behaved in southern France against the Cathars, he quit his job in early 1939. He died not long after. While there are conspiracy theories suggesting he was assassinated by the SS, it seems that his death was more likely an elaborate suicide. It appears that he went hiking in the Austrian Alps, never intending to return. There is speculation that he took himself through the rituals of the consolamentum before he died.

Unfortunately, Otto's legacy was that the Nazis became inextricably linked to the Cathars in popular consciousness, right up until the 1970's. In his book "The Perfect Heresy", Stephen O'Shea provides a list of some of the rumors during the rounds of the time. The first one, obviously, was that Hitler and his closest advisors were actually Cathars and were active members of a neo-Cathar pagan secret society. Apart from the fact that Hitler was a vegetarian, I think we can safely say that he didn't share the pacifist world view essential to Catharism, and I think we can safely dismiss this claim.

There were also rumors that the Nazis organized a fly-by of the ruins at Montsegur on the 16th of March 1944, which was the 700th anniversary of the fall of Montsegur, and of course, that German engineers excavated Montsegur during the occupation and discovered the Holy Grail, "Raiders of the Lost Ark" style. As we have stated previously, these rumors had an impressive staying power and stubbornly persisted for decades after World War Two. In 1978 a group of German Boy Scouts sparked a diplomatic incident between France and Germany when they were found trying to remove blocks of stone from Montsegur. Accusations arose that the boys were neo-Nazis who were continuing the work started by the Third Reich. The incident eventually blew over when it became clear that the boys were just plain old Boy Scouts having a bit of a lark.

So now we are in the 1970's, and not surprisingly, the myths and legends surrounding the Cathars took on a new bunch of fans in the form of hippies, New Ageists, and spiritualists. You can kind of see the appeal. Cathars were vegetarian pacifists, and so were the hippies. Women had been allowed to be Perfect on the same basis as men, and this appealed to proponents of the burgeoning feminist movement, and the Cathar Perfect didn't believe in marriage. For some hippies, this fact enabled them to reach the surprising conclusion that the Cathars were proponents of free love, which was way short of the mark, but still groovy, man. So bunches of flower-powered New-Ageists tucked French phrase books into their denim flares, donned their headbands and tie-dyed shirts and piled into their combies for the trip to Languedoc to check out those rad Cathar cats. Imaginative pagan ceremonies were performed at Montsegur, and people measured the cosmic vibrations of the site of Cathar castles. It was all so groovy, baby. Peace, man.

And then came the 1980's. Flower-power was swept aside in favour of power suits as a decade of excess and the "Me" generation arose. You may think that the Cathars wouldn't have much to offer the 1980's, but you would be wrong, because in 1982 three men, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, published their insanely successful book "The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail". Described as, and I quote "an explosively controversial international bestseller" end quote, the book continued the narrative about connections between the Cathars and the Grail legends, but took the idea to a whole new level. The authors pondered upon the treasure taken from Montsegur before its fall. They then asserted that, following the Crusade against the Cathars, a number of Cathars joined the Knights Templar. To cut an extremely long story short, the authors proposed that the Holy Grail kept by the Cathars wasn't in fact a cup, but a secret, the secret being that Jesus, after the Crucifixion, had made his way to southern France and had started a family. The secret of the bloodline was kept by the Cathars, and then by the Knights Templar, and then by a secret society called the Priory of Sion.

If that story sounds familiar, it may be because Dan Brown stole the idea and used it as the basis for his blockbuster novel "The DaVinci Code". The authors of the Holy Blood and the Holy Grail assert that in the 19th century, a priest in the village of Rennes-le-Chateau in Languedoc found the treasure hidden by the Cathars after the fall of Montsegur. In addition to containing a sizable amount of Visigothic gold, the priest also found proof about the bloodline theory, and used it to blackmail the Vatican. The book also hinted that not all the treasure had been found. The book's publication led to an explosion of interest in both the Cathars and in Cathar sites around southern France. Rennes-le-Chateau still draws treasure hunters today, many of whom dig fruitlessly in the ground around the village, hoping to unearth the remains of the lost Cathar treasure.

Oddly, according to Stephen O'Shea in his book "The Perfect Heresy", a landing pad for UFOs was even constructed near the village. He doesn't explain the reason for this, but who knows? Maybe the legends about the Cathars have extended to interplanetary dimensions, and perhaps southern France is now on extraterrestrial tourist maps.

And that's really where we are at today. The Cathar sites still attract tourists to Languedoc, a mixture of historians, mystics, and conspiracy theorists, and maybe aliens.

There are also a growing number of people in southern France who identify as being part of the Cathar faith. Now I don't mean it's like the old days. There are no Cathar Perfect anymore, and there are no formal gatherings of Cathars. It seems to be more of an internal belief system. Yves Rouquette, in his book "Cathars", described how he converted Catharism in the 1990's. One of his friends, also a resident of southern France, had asked him twenty years earlier "Are you a Cathar?" Yves responded by saying "No, I'm not." Then his friend said "How can you say that? How can anyone not be a Cathar?" That comment sent Yves on a personal spiritual journey, which resulted in him eventually adopting dualist beliefs and identifying as a Cathar.

Quite possibly Catharism in modern-day southern France is also connected to a sense of regional pride and regional identity. The neighboring region of Catalonia in Spain is currently making moves to separate itself from Spain and to become an autonomous state. In September 2017 there will be a referendum on Catalanian independence, despite the fact that Spain, unsurprisingly, opposes the move. As we've seen from our examination of the Cathars, historically Languedoc and Catalonia have a lot in common. Will Languedoc also make a move at some time in the future towards independence from France, and will

a growing interest in the Cathar faith act as a catalyst for this movement? I guess only time will tell.

As you can see, despite being effectively wiped off the map by the Catholic Church via a combination of Crusading and Inquisition, the Cathars have continued to exert some influence over southern France across the centuries, and still do today.

But for me personally, their legacy isn't bound up in conspiracy theories or searches for lost treasure or the Holy Grail. For me, their legacy is more fundamental. The Cathars didn't harm others, with the occasional exception. They held strongly to their faith, despite massive risks to their personal safety, the safety of their families and their homes. Even when armies were sent against them. And even when they were hunted down, tortured and burned alive, they held fast to what they believed in.

Friar Bernard Delicieux deserves a shout out here, too. He wasn't a Cathar, but he believed what the French Crown and the Inquisitors of the Catholic Church were doing to the Cathars was wrong, so he railed against it. Unwaveringly, persistently, vocally and in every way he could think of, he stood up for the persecuted Cathars, and pointed an accusing finger at both the Church and the state. In the end, his actions cost him his liberty and his life, as he must have known they would. But his actions also gained him the respect of countless admirers down the centuries. A state or a church which chooses to persecute a section of the community based on their race or religion rarely finds itself on the right side of history. Instead, it's the people who stand up against these mighty powers against overwhelming odds, and who rail against what they perceive as injustice, as something which is simply, plainly, and fundamentally wrong. It's they who end up being seen by people looking back from the future as deserving of our admiration and our deep, deep respect.

And there ends our series on the Crusade Against the Cathars. A series that I initially estimated would run for around 30 episodes ended up blowing out to 80 episodes. That's some serious podcast creep.

Now, before we leave the Cathars, the nice people at the Cathar Castles website let me use images from their page on the podcast Facebook page and my website, and in return, I said I would mention the fact that they ran tours across Cathar sites in southern France. So if you want to get yourself to Southern France to check out the places we have been discussing in this podcast, and you think it might be a good idea to have an English speaking guide with a thorough knowledge of the history of the area, check out their website at catharcountry.info. They offer a range of tours covering both the Crusade sites as well as Montailou, all of them concentrating on the historical aspects of the places they visit. They even have a horseback tour, which I think is clearly the way to pick up the medieval vibe. So check them out. Once again, you can find them at catharcountry.info.

Talking about websites, I have a new website. Yes, that's right. I've been beaver away, creating a whole new website for the podcast, not only containing links to episodes, but links to our new merchandise. I know, "merchandise". I had initially decided that the planet had enough T shirts, but a listener came up with a fabulous idea for a design, and my next-door neighbor, Chris, is a graphic designer, so he came up with some really nice images. He also designed the website, by the way. So we ended up with a Cathar Cross known as the Cross of Toulouse over the quote "Lo Lop es Mort", which, of course, is

Occitan for "The Wolf is dead", the catch-cry that went up after Simon de Montfort's death in the Siege of Toulouse. Underneath is a small podcast logo.

People who follow the podcast Facebook page already have the heads-up on the merchandise. I myself purchased a hoodie from my own merchandise collection, and I was so happy with it that I posted a picture of it on the Facebook page. Should you wish to buy a T-shirt or a hoodie, head over to the Web page, which is - this is a dramatic pause - crusadespod.com, and follow the link to the extras page. Or you can go to redbubble.com, which is the website of the people who are stocking the merchandise and do a search for Cathars. I'm pretty sure I'm the only person on there stocking Cathars T shirts, so you should be able to track them down with no trouble.

Now, I guess at this point you are all wondering "Is this it? Am I going to finish up again, or will there be another series in the pipeline?" Well, there is another series in the pipeline. I've done the Middle Eastern Crusades and the Crusade against the Cathars, and since I called this podcast "History of the Crusades", I can't really stop until I've covered all the major crusades. Otherwise, I'd have to go back and change the title to "History of some of the Crusades", and that would just be a nuisance. So next up are the Baltic Crusades, also known as the Northern Crusades. I will need to take some time, of course, to research this whole new set of crusades, which, interestingly, involve a military order we haven't spent a lot of time on, the Teutonic Knights, and their forays into what is now modern-day Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. I'll probably be ready to start posting episodes in a couple of months' time, my best guess is around late February next year.

But wait, don't press the stop button just yet, because the exciting part is still to come. You see, I've been pondering for some time about how to make this podcast a long-term sustainable venture. Your wonderful donations to date have meant that the podcast is now self-funding, which means that it's not actually costing me money anymore, which is great. But I'm going to have a shot at taking it to the next level. As a result, I'm going to be running a subscription feed, in addition to the current free feed.

There have been quite a few topics that are really interesting, but which I haven't been able to touch on because they're just too far off the beaten track of the main podcast. So I thought to myself, "Why not turn these topics into little miniseries podcasts, which people can then subscribe to?" So, I've set up a page at Patreon, and for the princely sum of \$1 US per month, you can become a financial supporter of the podcast, and you will be rewarded with a special episode every fortnight. There is a link to the Patreon page from Crusadespod.com. So if you're interested, you can access it from there.

Should you decide to join up, your first subscription episode is ready and waiting for you. It's the first in a short series of episodes about the Holy Lance (or Lances). Remember the Holy Lance, found in Antioch during the First Crusade? Well, that's not the only Holy Lance currently in existence. All the Holy Lances have fascinating histories, and I will be following the paths of all of them, from their first appearance in the history books until today. It's actually pretty interesting.

Now, these subscription episodes will appear every fortnight for those who have subscribed. The free feed, as I've said, will resume its weekly appearance every Friday towards the end of February, and the subscription episodes, for those who pay their \$1 per month, will be posted every second Wednesday. Future topics may include Joan of Arc's role in the Hundred Years War, and the Muslim incursions into southern France in the

eighth century. I'm also open to suggestions. I'm hoping that over time, if enough of you subscribe, the podcast may one day be able to provide an income for my daughters and myself, which means that I will be able to keep podcasting indefinitely. Whohoo. Again, if you're interested in subscribing, go to crusadespod.com and click on the Patreon Link.

Now, before I go, I just want to thank everyone who's donated to the podcast to date. For all those fabulous people who purchased the bonus episode on Bandcamp, your contribution made this eighty-episode series on the Cathars possible. For all those who have donated by the Paypal link, your contributions have meant that the hosting site fees get paid, and that I have the text books and resources to create the episodes.

A special thanks goes out to the two Dave's who make monthly contributions to the show. I didn't even know you could do that, but these two people, with no encouragement from me, set up some sort of system where they make a donation via Paypal to the podcast every month, which really is so fabulous, and when I get notified by Paypal of their donation each month, it just makes me absurdly happy. In fact, it was this monthly donation which gave me the idea for the subscription episodes, because I thought "What if there were lots of Daves (who didn't obviously have to be called Dave), who made monthly contributions, and what if I could give something back in return, like extra episodes." And Wham! There's my long term sustainability podcast plan hatched, right there. So Daves, if you're listening, thanks so much. And please transfer your monthly payment over to the Patreon page so that you can join in the rewards.

Whoo! That's just about brought us to the end of this episode and this series. If you are looking around for more podcasts over the holidays, I recommend you check out a new kid on the block, "The Land of Desire". It's a really well-produced podcast on the history of France. It doesn't follow a chronology, but examines little interesting snippets of French history. Just search for "land of desire" using your favorite pod-catcher.

Well, that's a wrap, folks. Have a fabulous Christmas, or if Christmas isn't your thing, have a fabulous time, whatever you're doing. And remember to check out the new webpage "crusadespod.com". Until next year, bye for now.

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