

## Travels with Anzie – The Cathars

March 15, 2014

The first battle of the Crusade against the Cathars occurred in **Beziers**, close to the Spanish border. **Arnaud Amaury**, a Cistercian abbot designated to lead the Crusade, had arranged his men outside of the city walls to lay siege to the town. The men of Beziers were confident that their fortifications were secure. Harsh words were exchanged between the men on the walls and the crusaders. “They can’t say those things about my mother! Let’s go teach those #\*!!@\$s a lesson!” Suddenly the gates to the city opened, and a large band of Bezierians poured forth to do battle. Amaury’s forces made quick work of them. They then turned and discovered the Bezierians’ big mistake: they had left the gates open!

Can’t you just picture it? Ancestors of the Three Stooges must have been in charge of the city’s defenders.

Amaury immediately told his men to charge. One of his men asked: “How will we know which are Cathars?” Amaury replied with his famous quote: “Kill them all! God will recognize his own.”

The crusaders proceeded to slaughter around 7,000 citizens, including women and children – even those who had sought sanctuary in the Catholic church. This horrific incident represented not only the first of many to occur in the battle to stomp out Catharism, but it was the first crusade to occur on European soil. Most importantly, it was the first crusade that pitted Christians against Christians.



The Cathedral of Beziers  
where the massacre occurred.

### Who were the Cathars?

Catharism has been described as “the most successful heresy in history”. Why are we so interested? Because the South of France, where we are living for three months, was a center of Catharism back in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. This region, Languedoc, is also known as Cathar Country. “Pays Cathare” signs dot the countryside. One cannot drive far in any direction without coming upon the ruins of a Cathar fortress. Tours of these sites constitute a fair business. We were surprised to discover that where we live in the Languedoc was under the control of the Kings of Spanish Aragon in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In fact people to the west of us in “France” still speak Catalan Spanish.

“Cathar” is allegedly derived from the Greek word, *katharos*, meaning “pure”. The Cathars were also known as Albigenians, because one of their original convocations was alleged to have taken place in the town of Albi, France. The origins go back to the Zoroastrians of Egypt, the Agnostics, the Manichees and the Bogomils of Asia and Eastern Europe. Catharism was a dualist religion. They believed that God created Heaven, the Kingdom of Light where no Evil exists. Whereas the material world, where Evil prospers, was created by Satan. Man’s purpose is to free his soul from this “prison of flesh”, and re-unite it with the mind in the presence of God. This can only happen if the soul attains Knowledge, which was revealed to mankind by Christ, who was sent by God for that purpose. They believe that Christ was a prophet, not a Redeemer. This Knowledge is only attained through Baptism – not baptism by water, but baptism by “fire and spirit”, as Christ gave to his apostles. Failing this, when the body dies, the soul will pass to another body. This cycle will continue until Salvation is attained, and the soul is re-united with the mind in God’s presence in the Kingdom of Light. In other words, you stay in this cycle until you finally get it right.

The Cathars believed themselves to be “Good Christians”, or “Bon Hommes”. Their “priests”, both men and women, were called “Parfaits”, or “Perfects”, as in “perfect Christians”. They became Parfaits by undergoing three years of apprenticeship and the spiritual baptism, or *consolamentum*. The men and women who practiced the faith were called “believers”. Cathars did not believe in the church hierarchy of archbishops, cardinals and the Pope. They considered the Church decadent. You must remember that, during this period of history, the Catholic church was a bit scandalous: the clergy were living “large”; priests often mistook the word “celibate” for “celebrate”.

They did not believe in the sacraments, although they practiced a form of baptism. When a Parfait shared a meal with believers, he/she would break bread and bless it. This was called “supersubstantial” bread, and was then shared. They did not believe in the cross, statues or any other trappings of the Catholic faith. The Parfaits did not ask the Believers for monetary offerings, which had to be a huge selling point.

The Parfaits did not eat meat, drink alcohol or practice sexual relations. They lived and worked together. As there was no physical churches, they served as wandering ministers, preaching their beliefs based on the gospels. The ordinary believers were not subject to these strictures. They needed to have faith and prepare themselves to attain knowledge/enlightenment through the *consolamentum*, which would be given to them on their deathbed.

**“Where blessing has no value, the stick will be used.”**

The simple, trapping-free religion appealed to many, and Catharism grew in popularity. At the same time relations between The Count of Toulouse, Raymond VI and the Pope were deteriorating. Raymond had no problem with the Cathars. Yet he was telling the Pope what he thought the Pope would like to hear. In 1198, **Pope Innocent III** decided

that something must be done. He sent two legates to the Languedoc region: Raoul and Pierre de Castelnau, both monks from the **Abbey of Fontfroide**.



The Abbey of  
Fontfroide

Pierre, a former lawyer, had a real problem with empathy. Every time he attempted to convince people to abandon Catharism in favor of Catholicism, he seemed to tick them off. Then Raoul had to exercise diplomacy to repair the damage. Thus little was happening. Frustrated with the lack of progress, the Pope sent Pierre, “Mr. Hardball”, to talk some sense to Raymond VI. The meeting was a disaster.

Shortly thereafter, Pierre was murdered while crossing the Rhone. Raymond IV was suspected of instigating the murder. That was the last straw for the Pope. Time to use the stick.

Pope Innocent III proceeded to enlist the Abbot Arnaud-Amaury to raise a company of crusaders. Amaury engaged noblemen of Northern France who brought together an army. The pardon of sins committed and land for the taking were enticements enough. In the interest of time, space and interest span, I will detail only a few of the many clashes that occurred

And so, the crusaders won their first victory at Beziers in July 1209. Then the *ost*, as the army of crusaders was called, proceeded to **Carcassonne**, a well-known Cathar haven.



La Cite de Carcassonne

The castle at Carcassonne is world famous. It has been used as a model for many King Arthur-type fables, such as “Camelot”. It has all the accoutrements necessary for a castle cum fortress: moat, drawbridge, portcullis, turrets, two concentric ramparts – one inside the other. At that time Carcassonne was located on the border with Spain; so the fortress had strategic military importance. At any rate, Carcassonne was never defeated, until now. The *ost* captured the town’s water source, and then waited. The townspeople became decimated by thirst and epidemics. The viscount of Carcassonne,

Raimond-Roger Trencavel, exited the fortress intending to negotiate peace. He was taken prisoner and thrown in jail. The people of Carcassonne fled the walled town, which was immediately occupied. Amaury cautioned his troops that there was to be no pillaging or killing. He did not want to replicate what happened at Beziers. Viscount Trencavel died in his prison cell in November, 1209.

Arnaud-Amaury sought a successor. He knew that many of his soldiers who had signed on for forty days were almost at the end of their allotted duty, and were ready to return north. The crusade was running out of steam; many of the noblemen refused the task. Finally, a nobleman from the Paris region accepted – Simon de Montfort.

**Simon de Montfort** was not a nice guy. He was described as “a cruel warrior”, “murderous”, “bloody”. He was also described as “courageous”, “brave”, having “undeniable tenacity with a real talent for military matters”. Almost sixty years old, he was an experienced crusader, anxious to acquire rich southern territory.

At this point he had only thirty knights with him. His first objective was to subdue the lands that had already been conquered while he awaited reinforcements. The results were mixed until March 1210 when, backed by a sufficient number of new crusaders, de Montfort was able to take the offensive once again. At **Bram** he inflicted exemplary punishment on those who dared to resist him. He ordered 100 prisoners mutilated – their eyes put out, their noses, lips and ears severed. He had them led by one person, who still had one eye, to the fortress of **Cabaret**, which was still unconquered. Although the message was a strong one, Cabaret did not succumb.

De Montfort then set his sights on **Minerve**. Situated on a butte whose steep walls ascend 200 feet from the two rivers that formed it, Minerve was difficult to besiege.



De Montfort had constructed four catapults. The largest, which they named “Malvoisine” – “Bad Neighbor” – was perched on top of a cliff. From there they slung 220 lb. boulders across the 75 yard gulch into the village. Most importantly they destroyed the covered walkway to the water supply. The siege lasted five weeks before the lord of Minerve gave up in order to save the townspeople, who were dying of thirst. Cathars were asked to recant their faith. 140 of them refused, and were burned to death in the flames of a pyre in July, 1210.

Water was a strategic element in these battles. In November, 1210 De Montfort attacked **Termes**. The citadel was able to resist for four months. The problem was the water supply. The town was about to surrender when rain re-filled the water tanks.

Great? Not so great. The tanks were polluted. Just about all the townspeople came down with dysentery, and the city fell.

Back to Raymond VI. **Toulouse** is the third largest city in France. It was also an important city in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The Count de Toulouse was ambivalent about the Cathars. Pope Innocent III demanded that he do something about the heretics. The Count talked a good game, but he took no action. Finally the Pope had enough; he excommunicated the Count, and pronounced Simon de Montfort Count de Toulouse. In June, 1211 de Montfort laid siege to the town. He was unsuccessful. In September, 1213 Montfort tried again. This time he was battling the forces of both Toulouse and **Peter of Aragon**, Spain. Here King Peter met his death. After that there was some confusion as to who was running the show. Simon de Montfort could have walked right into Toulouse and taken it over. However, he was called away to deal with problems in Provence. Although Montfort was titular Count de Toulouse, the townspeople looked to their Count as their leader.

In 1218 Montfort launched an attack on Toulouse yet again. He swore to take Toulouse or “die under its walls!” Simon’s brother, Guy, was killed by an arrow. Shortly thereafter Simon was killed by a boulder that was launched from his own catapult. Legend has it that the catapult was operated by women. Thus ended the life and career of “The Lion of the Crusade”.

The battle for Toulouse was not ended. In 1228 the Count, now Raymond VII, fearing that his people would starve because the crusaders had destroyed all the crops, signed the Treaty of Paris. He agreed to undergo a public flogging and relinquish half of his territory to the King of France. He kept Toulouse but paid a considerable fine. While he was subjected to other penalties, he was able to preserve Toulouse from serious damage. Today Toulouse is known as the “Pink City” with many red brick structures of that period still existent.

Beginning around 1224 the crusade was stuttering. The crusaders won some battles and lost others. Even when they conquered a town, as soon as they left, it reverted to the former leaders. Thus began a long period of diplomatic maneuvering. In Toulouse a monk named Dominic of Guzman, founded a monastic order, the **Dominicans**. Rome instituted a new tactic, the **Inquisition**, with the Dominicans – aka the “Black Friars” in charge. They were empowered to interrogate suspected Cathars using a variety of techniques, including torture. They were responsible for the deaths – usually by burning – of thousands of “alleged” heretics. Indeed, many years after St. Dominic reacted to the Cathars, the first Grand Inquisitor of Spain, Tomás de Torquemada, would be drawn from the Dominican order.

### **The End of the Cathars**

The Languedoc area is rugged, mountainous, tree-covered, riddled with caves. It offers countless places to hide. That’s where many of the Cathars took refuge. One fortress

where many of them gathered was **Montsegur**. Located atop a rocky spire in the foothills of the Pyrenees, it was virtually impregnable. Looking at it one might wonder how long it took to bring in groceries.



During May 1243 six thousand soldiers took up position at the foot of the outcrop. Inside the castle was about five hundred, including 15 knights. Despite this imbalance messages and supplies continued to pass through the lines, because the occupants knew the lay of the land. Weeks and months passed, and the soldiers were becoming demoralized. Finally, climbing by night, a band of soldiers succeeded in capturing an outcrop, the “Tower Rock”, that overlooked the castle. There they set up a catapult, similar to the one that the knights had built inside the castle grounds. The siege continued for another two months, through a cold Pyrenees winter, with many casualties on both sides. Food ran short; life became harder. Finally in March 1244, with no more relief in sight, the defenders asked for peace talks.

The crusaders, fatigued from this long siege, agreed to the defenders’ demand for 15 days to prepare to leave the castle. The conquerors stipulated that all defenders would be allowed to go free so long as they, each and every one, denounced the Cathar faith. Those who refused would be burnt at the stake.

We must assume that the Cathars used the 15 days to put their affairs in order. We understand that some of the knights converted to Catharism, knowing full well what fate awaited them. At the end of 15 days the Cathars walked bravely down the mountainside. At the bottom a huge bonfire awaited them. 225 of them climbed ladders, and threw themselves onto the pyre. Thus, Montsegur became an infamous legend.

Legend also has it that four Cathars escaped from Montsegur carrying the “Cathar Treasure”. Treasure? We understood that the Cathars lived lives of poverty. After all, the parfaits didn’t require tithing or periodic contributions from the faithful. This was one of the attractions of Catharism. However, when a parfait administered a deathbed *consolamentum*, the believer would often bequeath his possessions to the church. At Montsegur the defending knights were paid from this treasury. Stories vary as to the contents of the treasure: gold ingots and coins, sacred texts, even the Holy Grail. Here the Grail is often defined as the chalice containing the genuine blood of Christ. Stories also vary as to what happened to the Cathar Treasure.

After the fall of Montsegur, the pursuit of the remaining Cathars continued by the crusaders and the Inquisition.

**Guillaume Bélibaste**, the last known Parfait, was captured and put to death at the stake in **Villeroque Termenès** in 1321.



### **Epilogue: Fast forward to the late 1890's**

The scene is the mountaintop village of **Rennes-le-Chateau**. The church of Saint Mary Magdalene was founded in the ninth century. The noble Hautpol family maintained it for centuries until they died out. The church fell into ruin until Father **Bérenger Saunière** was assigned as pastor in 1885. Father Saunière began a dramatic reconstruction of the church, the adjacent residence, and the gardens. He also had built a beautiful tower overlooking the surrounding valley way below. The tower contained his impressive library. Father Saunière brought Rennes-le-Chateau back to life.



Magdala Library Tower and  
the Church Stoup Devil

Around 1898 questions began to be asked. From where was Saunière getting the funds to finance this huge renovation? Certainly not from the Church; his bishop was among the questioners. Word had it that, when bills became due, Father Saunière would disappear for a few days. When he came back, bills would be paid. And why was a statue of the devil in the Church?

So, what was the source of his funds? Was it Church money? Or had he uncovered a treasure? His bishop initiated a formal inquiry, which turned into a court case that hounded Father Saunière until his death in 1917. After his death the treasure stories multiplied. Some thought he had discovered a treasure of the ancient Visigoths. However, even more people gave credence to the legend of the Cathar Treasure. Some also think the devil possesses a secret code. To this day no one knows for sure. The author, Kate Mosse, wrote a series of historic novels based upon the Cathar legends. "Labyrinth" is a good read, and now a movie.

A la prochaine,

*Chuck & Anne*

## Bibliography

Auè, Michèle, "Cathar Country", MSM, 1992.

Auè, Michèle, "The Cathars", MSM.

Bély, Lucien, "Discovering the Cathars", Editions Sud Ouest, 2006.

Serris, George, "The Land of the Cathars", Editions Loubatières.