

THE ORIGINS OF CASTELNAU DE MONTMIRAL

What is written below is the result of my efforts to sort out contradictions in the stories that were going the rounds when I first arrived in Castelnau de Montmiral in 1988. I cannot claim it to be a definitive history but it represents the best story I have been able to cobble together on the basis of the “facts” that I was able to unearth.

Preamble

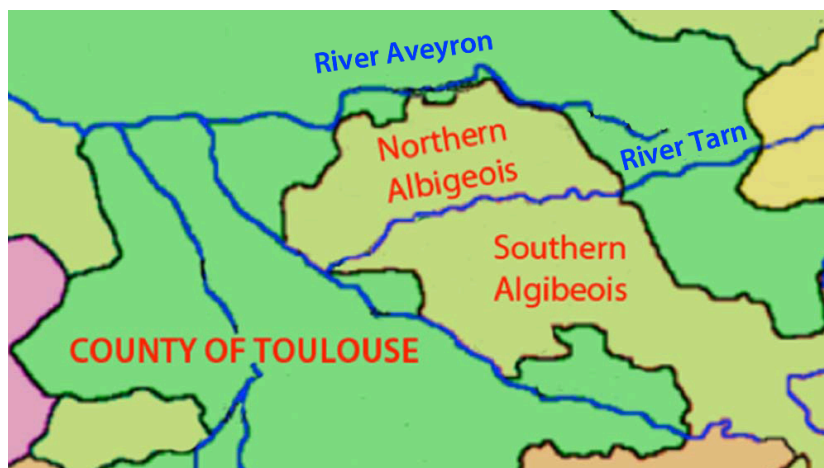
It took the inhabitants of Castelnau de Montmiral more than 20 years to complete the now tree-lined esplanade that today runs along its north-east facing side. It was ready in 1622, just in time to impress King Louis XIII who stayed there and, amongst other things, is said to have eaten plums in the street, now known as ‘rue Gambetta’. He was on his way to deal with a Protestant uprising that had occurred further South caused by the failure of the local Catholics to keep faith with the Edict of Nantes, which had legally guaranteed freedom of worship for the Protestants.

A main reason why the new esplanade took so long to put in place was that previously there had been a steep escarpment, sloping precipitously down from the still massive ramparts that encircled the town. It is difficult to imagine the quantity of earth and rocks that must have been moved to raise the ground level to its present height, the original rampart walls are seldom visible, as they are now largely obscured by houses that have been built in front of long stretches of where they were located.

Likewise the formidable slopes are hidden by the raised and levelled surfaces that were created when constructing the esplanade and the various roads below. All these necessitated great works made possible by men using buckets, wheelbarrows and oxen-drawn carts to move what must have seemed to them to be mountains of stone and earth.

If we imagine Castelnau de Montmiral before these heroic efforts, we realise that it would have been surrounded on three sides by natural defences of a kind that would have made any enemy think twice before attempting to attack it. Clearly its founder Raymond VII Count of Toulouse was intent upon creating a formidable fortress town when he founded it, along with Cordes sur Ciel, in or around 1222. It was one of his first projects after he succeeded his father Raymond VI, during a short period of respite in the fast failing fortunes of his still powerful family.

The most pressing reason for building these two strongly fortified towns was a consequence of disputed territorial claims. It was only recently that Raymond had joined with his father to win (they would said “reclaim”) by force the territory known as the “Northern Albigeois” (see map),



in which the two projected towns were be be situated. One consequence of this military activity was that Raymond was under a continuing active threat from those that he and his father had so recently dispossessed. But this was not all. Both in the short and the long term, he had reason to fear interventions from an unusually large number of rival claimants to overlordship, including the Pope, the Kings of Aragon, the Kings of France and the Viscounts of Albi, Carcassonne and Béziers. To clarify the situation it is necessary to go into more detail.

A complicated situation

In 1209 Roman Catholic Pope Innocent III called for a crusade against the Cathar sect who had established a strong presence in South-West France and who challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. At this date the de facto overlord of the Albigeois (roughly corresponding to the Tarn region of today) was Raymond-Roger Trancavel. He was also Viscount of Carcassonne and of Béziers, which meant that his domains extended to include a large part of what is now the Department of the Aude and beyond. However, there had been a long running dispute between the Trancavel Viscounts and the Counts of Toulouse concerning the seigniorial rights over the Northern Albigeois, the part of the Trancavel territory that lay between the rivers Tarn and Aveyron (see map).

Raymond-Roger was notorious for his support of Cathar sympathising subjects (his wife was said to be a Cathar) and it is not surprising that his domains were the first target of the crusaders. Very early in the campaign Raymond-Roger himself was taken prisoner and soon after died in captivity. At this juncture, feudal custom dictated that a seneschal (temporary governor) should be chosen to rule over what had been his territories during the minority of his young son. The crusaders took this task

into their own hands, which was a provocative decision since, according to feudal custom, the choice would have been more correctly made by one or other of several candidates higher up the feudal hierarchy, including Pope Innocent III, Pierre King of Aragon and Philippe August King of France. Turning a blind eye to the highly risky implications of these feudal/religious complexities, the crusaders selected Simon de Montfort, an able military leader. Under his command, they started the process of clearing the Trancavel lands of Cathar-sympathising lords (who once ousted came to be known as the "*Faydits*") and, once in their possession, they seized the opportunity for dividing them up amongst themselves.

However, one of the three potential overlords whom the crusaders had not consulted over the question of choosing the seneschal was Pierre, King of Aragon, Raymond-Roger's chosen royal protector. They can hardly have been surprised when he took umbrage and joined forces with Raymond VI of Toulouse with a view to asserting what he saw as his royal rights on the field of battle. However, his objective was not achieved for Simon and the crusaders were victorious at the Battle of Muret, leaving Pierre dead and Raymond much weakened. It was a victory that left the crusaders free to continue the work of ousting and replacing the Cathar sympathising lords throughout the Trancavel lands, including those residing in the Northern Albigeois.

After this process had been completed, Simon, with the enthusiastic support of the Pope, turned his attention to the cleansing of heresy beyond the borders of his governance as seneschal, starting with regions within the domain of Raymond VI of Toulouse. According to very deeply held conventions of Medieval land governance, this was a rash decision. Whereas, after the defeat of Pierre of Aragon and Raymond VI of Toulouse, Simon's legal entitlement to do more or less as he wanted in the territories over which he been chosen seneschal had never been seriously contested (except by the *Faydits*). However, his right to act in the same way in the domains of the Count of Toulouse was very much more questionable and his incursion into them was seen by the local nobility as highly provocative and worrying. Where would it all end? In their view it was a blatant case of an upstart usurping the acknowledged role of the incumbent Raymond of Toulouse to whom they now gave their support.

In important part due to this abuse of feudal convention, Simon's campaigning began to lose momentum. Although his prowess as a military leader sustained him for a while, it was not to be long before he met his death while conducting a siege of Toulouse in 1218.

Meanwhile Raymond VI, who had been joined by his now adult and able son, the future Raymond VII, was well on the way to reestablishing his family's power. A region to which the two Raymonds gave particular and successful attention was the Northern Albigeois where they ousted the crusaders, reinstated the Faydits and set about establishing their authority. Although there are no records to prove it, there can be little doubt that the reinstated Faydits would have sworn oaths of fealty to Raymond and given an undertaking that they would support his family in their claim to overlordship over the Northern Albigeois.

It is at this juncture that we can return to the reasons for the foundation of the fortress towns of Castelnaud de Montmiral and Cordes sur Ciel. The first of these, as already indicated, was the threat posed by the recently ousted crusaders who were far from admitting permanent defeat and who, at the time, still maintained footholds in the Northern Albigeois. For example, Simon de Montfort's son Philippe was installed just across the river Tarn from Albi, where Sicard Alaman, Raymond VIII's right hand man, would later build Castelnaud de Levis. Naturally, these dispossessed knights would be keen to do all they could to get back what they had come to believe to be their rightful possession.

Nor were their prospects without hope for they could rely on the help of crusader colleagues who had settled more securely in the Southern Albigeois and the counties of Béziers and Carcassonne. They might also persuade King Louis VIII of France to come to their aid on the basis of both religious and territorial arguments, for Louis, was both full of crusading ardour and keen to establish his overlordship in the disputed territories. Clearly, it was in the Faydits and their new overlord's interest to defend themselves against these threats. The building of two fortress towns was a logical next step.

But there was another twist to the situation, for one of the contributing factors to the decision to launch a crusade in the first place was the general weakness of top-down feudal authority in the region. It was a state of affairs which may explain Raymond VI's inability to fulfil his promises to abide by the pre-crusade injunction of Pope Innocent III that ordered him to rid his territories of Cathar sympathisers. The local lords under his suzerainty had been reluctant to cooperate. Now his

son found himself in the position of having helped these same unbiddable lords to resettle in the Northern Albigeois? In the circumstances, he could be excused for wanting to find ways strengthening his authority over them and, clearly the existence of fortress towns over which he had more direct control would help in this respect.

Accordingly the inhabitants of Castelnaud de Montmiral and Cordes sur Ciel were given charters by which they acknowledged the overlordship of Raymond VII in return for exemptions from local feudal dues. In this respect, Castelnaud de Montmiral and Cordes sur Ciel, were precursors of the “bastide movement” which got began to get under weigh very soon afterwards, in other parts of the domains of the counts of Toulouse. A significant difference was that the bastide towns virtually all came into being after the signing of the Treaty of Meaux in 1229 whose main purpose seems to have been to adjudicate on landowning questions, not least the hotly disputed ones relating to the Northern Albigeois.

By this time, only seven years after the founding of Castelnaud de Montmiral and Cordes sur Ciel, the power-game involving kings and counts had shifted significantly in favour of the young Louis IX (later known as St Louis) and against Raymond VII of Toulouse. As a result, Raymond was forced to cede: his eastern provinces to Louis, the Marquisat de Provence to the Pope, and those parts of the former Trancavel lands that lay south of the river Tarn to the crusaders. However, there was compensation for Raymond as the treaty confirmed his rights (as well as those of the reinstated Faydits) in the Northern Albigeois and, therefore, to his overlordship of the new fortress towns of Castelnaud de Montmiral and Cordes sur Ciel.

Another aspect of the Treaty of Meaux of interest in the present context, was a clause that expressly forbade any future building of fortress towns in Raymond’s domains, its purpose being to minimise the risk of armed resistance to royal authority. This provision makes it clear that while, as we have seen, Castelnaud de Montmiral and Cordes sur Ciel were primarily military in conception, the newly founded bastide towns were not. Rather they were market towns, based on a model first tried out in England and then Northern France (where they were called “villeneuves”). Their dual purpose was to weaken the influence of the local landowning class relative to their overlords and to stimulate economic growth. They were successful on both counts because they created:

- Opportunities for the profitable development of virgin land.
- Work for the unruly bands of unemployed, hungry and desperate vagrants who had been causing widespread disruption.
- Wealth for the newly installed market-town communities and local landowners.
- Improved top-down control for the Count of Toulouse and his recently acknowledged overlord the King of France.

In short they were conceived as engines of economic growth and social management, not as fortress towns, as was the case with Castelnaud de Montmiral and Cordes.

Summary

The extremely complex events touched upon above reveal a deeply unstable situation and many different reasons why, immediately upon his succession, Raymond VII would have wanted to shore up his authority by building fortress towns. The most immediate of these was to provide centres of defence to deter the return of the ousted crusaders, coming from the south. Another reason, also mentioned above, was to strengthen his authority over the newly reinstated Cathar-sympathising lords. A third, more distant one (because the Trancavel claimant was still only a child), was to resist any future attempt by the Trancavel Family to lay claim to what the St Giles family considered to be their territory. A fourth, was to strengthen his position should he feel the need to take sides in any future disputes involving royal overlords whether Spanish, French, English or ecclesiastical.

In particular, a potentially imminent threat that could not be ignored was the possibility that the very religious Louis VIII of France would take action both to help the dispossessed crusaders and to assert his own claims as royal overlord of the Trancavel lands including the Northern Albigeois. Unfortunately for Raymond VII, the feudal powers of the King included the right to summon his vassals to support him in battle, so when Louis came down with an army Raymond VII found himself isolated and in no position to do anything else but capitulate. Luckily from Raymond's point of view, the King died in the nick of time, but the stage was set for his successor to impose the Treaty of Maux upon him.

Footnote on the fortifications of Castelnau de Montmiral

As mentioned above, the Treaty of Meaux stipulated that bastide towns should not be fortified. The reason was that the advisors of the young Louis IX were intent upon reducing the risk of future military resistance to royal authority. Even more aggressively, another clause required that the fortifications of Toulouse should be razed to the ground. Why then did the Treaty remain silent on the subject of the newly built ramparts of Montmiral and Cordes? And why five years after its signing was Sicard Alaman the chief advisor of Raymond VII of Toulouse allowed (or more likely encouraged) to found the fortified town of Castelnau de Levis? The obvious answer is that it was thought desirable to bolster the Northern Albigeois against the risk of future threats from the south, whether coming from the former crusaders, including Philippe son of Simon de Montfort, who were legally dispossessed of the lands in the Northern Albigeois and given territories to the south of the river Tarn, or from a resurgence of Trancavel power, that could be expected to happen when the children of Raymond Roger and his overlord Pierre of Aragon, came of age.

The possibility that the building of Castelnau de Levis was an act of defiance by Raymond and Sicard seems remote for all sorts of reasons. If it had been, would not Alphonse of Poitiers, King Louis IX's brother and Raymond VII's successor have dispensed with Sicard's services when Raymond died? If fact Sicard was asked to continue in his existing leading administrative role.

Footnote on the tree-lined esplanade

Two questions that arise are (1) "Why so much time and trouble was being dedicated to the creating of the esplanade at the outset of the seventeenth century?" and (2) "Why at this particular date?" The answer is that France was entering a time of prosperity after the depredations of the religious wars. This was reflected not only in the growing international influence of France but also in the aspirations of the citizens of provincial towns like Castelnau de Montmiral. In this context it is plausible to suppose that when the Montmiralais found themselves enjoying growing resources, they felt the urge to give their town an uplift and that the esplanade was conceived as a symbolic early step in doing so. It can also be speculated that the Montmiralais felt that the visit of Louis XIII and his troops represented the royal seal of approval on their efforts. It also seems clear that it was due to the same

combination of new affluence and civic confidence that the present character of Castelnau de Montmiral owes so much to 17th century building projects.

Book List

Michel Roquebert, 1995, "l'épopée cathare", Privat.

Dorothy Stenton, 1951, "English Society in the Early Middle Ages" (1066–1307), Pelican.

Maurice Keen, 1968, "Medieval Europe", Penguin.

Elizabeth Hallam, 1980, "Capetian France", Longman.

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