THE OCCITAN WAR

In 1209 Simon of Montfort led a war against the Cathars of Languedoc after Pope Innocent III preached a crusade condemning them as heretics. The suppression of heresy became a pretext for a vicious war that remains largely unstudied as a military conflict. Laurence Marvin here examines the Albigensian Crusade as military and political history rather than religious history, and traces these dimensions of the conflict through to Montfort’s death in 1218. He shows how Montfort experienced military success in spite of a hostile populace, impossible military targets, armies that dissolved every forty days, and a pope who often failed to support the crusade morally or financially. He also discusses the supposed brutality of the war, why the inhabitants were for so long unsuccessful at defending themselves against it, and its impact on Occitania. This original account will appeal to scholars of medieval France, the Crusades, and medieval military history.

Laurence W. Marvin is Associate Professor of History at the Evans School of Humanities, Berry College, Georgia.
THE OCCITAN WAR

A Military and Political History of the Albigensian Crusade, 1209–1218

LAURENCE W. MARVIN

Berry College, Georgia
For the Raimondines
Raymond Ward Marvin, my father
Raymond Joseph Marvin, my son
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Abbreviations


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Maps and plans

1: Occitania, 1209
2: Noble zones of control, 1209
3: Béziers, 1209
4: Carcassonne, 1209. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd.
5: Minerve, 1210. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd.
6: Lavaur, 1211. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd.
7: Penne d’Agenais, 1212
8: Casseneuil, 1214
9: Beaucaire, 1216
10: Toulouse, 1217–1218

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Translation of names and places; calculation of distances

Until recently historians and other authors have simply anglicized most medieval personal names. Lately it has become more popular to leave names in their original form. For this book I have adopted a middle ground, perhaps pleasing no one but myself, but at least it should be clear to the reader. Just like current names, the spelling of medieval personal names often had no uniform spelling or rationale to it, so I have not imposed an absolute standard, though I have tried to be consistent in my inconsistency. French and Northern European personal names have been anglicized in the old-fashioned way. Occitan, Provençal, and Catalan names have been left in some form of the original, hence some people are called Peire and some Pere, both equivalent to “Peter.” If the reader should accuse me of purposely drawing a difference between regions, I plead guilty as charged. Too often the Albigensian Crusade is presented as if the major figures sprang from a common culture and language and inherently understood each other. This does an injustice to the variety of cultures and languages spoken by the people who crusaded and the people of the region in which the Occitan War took place. Leaving names like Peter in a more exotic spelling (at least to the anglophone eye) hopefully will give the reader a sense of the vast cultural differences that existed. Some names are rendered in so many ways that I had to adopt a standard on a case-by-case basis. Perhaps the best example of this is the name commonly translated “Fulk.” Depending on the author, either medieval or modern, Fulk is presented as “Folc,” “Folq,” “Folque,” “Foulque” or “Folquet.” I have adopted the last usage.

I have translated authors’ names on a case-by-case basis as well, but for simplicity’s sake have for the most part anglicized them. Thus two important southern authors come over as William of Tudela and William of Puylaurens, but James of Aragon is Jaume.

Place names are rendered in their modern equivalents.

I have been very careful about including distances to give the reader a sense of how difficult it must have been to traverse this region in an era
where roads were dirt and horses available only to the wealthy. Unfortunately calculating actual road distance would have been a project all on its own, and anyone who has traveled to the south of France knows what I am talking about. For those who have not, suffice to say that, particularly in places like the Black Mountains, the roads can be so curvy and full of switchbacks that places only a few kilometers apart straight line are in reality many further apart in terms of actual travel distance, not even factoring in road grades as steep as 13 percent. In order for the reader to follow easily, all distances have been calculated straight from point to point using Michelin maps # 234, 235, 240 and 246. All distances are reckoned from the medieval city center.
“But hasn’t that been done before?” was the question put to me by a colleague as we sat at dinner after the last session for the day at the International Congress of Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a few years ago. Like her, those familiar with the Albigensian Crusade will wonder how this book adds to what anglophone scholars such as Walter M. Wakefield, Joseph Strayer, Jonathan Sumption and Michael Costen, and multi-volume accounts in French like Michel Roquebert’s, have said in the last thirty-five years. That does not even count the contributions of popular authors like Zoé Oldenbourg, Stephen O’Shea, other novelists and rapidly growing Internet sites on the Cathars and the Crusade. The Crusade is certainly not unexplored territory, which is what my dinner companion really meant.

Her question was a valid one, and she listened patiently as I explained the necessity of one more book on the Albigensian Crusade. The crusades to the Middle East have always had their long-view adherents, like Hans Eberhard Meyer and Jonathan Riley-Smith. They have also been the subject of multi-volume projects like those edited by Kenneth Setton. These long looks remain essential to understanding how the crusading concept began and evolved, the outline of political and military events, the individuals involved, and to tracing the development of East–West relationships over two hundred years. At the same time, the perennial interest both scholars and the general public have shown in the crusades has allowed historians to take the short-term approach to individual crusades such as the First, recently the Second, the Fourth, and the Fifth (the Third Crusade still eludes its monographer), events which by themselves took place over only a few years. Discussing these individual crusades in depth allows us to understand one distinct crusade as it unfolded over a couple of years without compressing the information and losing nuance in order to get through hundreds of years of history.

The Albigensian Crusade has not received the same treatment. Almost always it has been written about in the long view. The works of Wakefield, Strayer, Sumption, Costen, and Roquebert discuss the crusade from the
mid-twelfth century, long before it began, to at least 1271, when the Count of Toulouse’s lands escheated to the French crown. While this is historically sound, all of these accounts miss two important things. First: their emphasis is so broad that the military campaigns appear as a sideshow to two main events: the birth, development, and description of Catharism, and the Inquisition which eventually destroyed it. Recent scholarly accounts of the Albigensian Crusade like those of Malcolm Barber and Michael Costen relegate the military aspects to little more than a chapter. The historians mentioned thus far wrote the history they thought needed to be told. Their works remain pivotal to understanding the time, era, and historiography of the Albigensian Crusade, and my debt to all of them remains considerable. Still, make no mistake: particularly between 1209 and 1218, the Albigensian Crusade was a war, and some believe a very nasty one even by medieval standards. It does not take much of an imagination to see that for the people who participated or lived through it, the war took center stage over every other consideration. Yet we tend to de-emphasize it in accounts of the crusade.

The second limitation of scholarship on this subject is of this long view and broad brush. The Occitan War was a complex series of military campaigns and not as easy to understand as some would have us believe. It is a story that deserves to be told without the obligation to tell it as part of a several-hundred-year period and in conjunction with innumerable other factors. The years 1209—1218 were by far the most militarily active, and the period when the political and military situation was most fluid. It is also for these years that the sources for the war are at their best. In other words, just as individual crusades to Outremer have their “numbers” or phases, so does the Albigensian Crusade. The beginning of active military operations, in 1209, to Simon of Montfort’s death in 1218 definitely constitute a distinct phase. Although warfare continued for some years after the sustained entrance of the French crown into the mix, the war changed from what it had been since 1209 into a more purely secular political struggle. This book then, is the history of a nine-year span, when war and all its attendant misery engulfed a region and captivated historians and novelists forever after. The Cathar heresy, the darling of those who study “the other,” plays a very small role in this account, just as it did once the broadswords were withdrawn from their sheaths and the first crossbow bolt shot before the walls of Beźiers in 1209.

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I offer my greatest thanks for the support and example of my family. I dedicated this book to two people though I acknowledge three here. My father showed me the nobility of hard work no matter what the task. My son showed me the virtue of pursuing a noble goal even in the face of adversity. Not only did my wife Alicia draw the maps for this book but more than twenty years ago she took a leap of faith to follow me from a small town in Wyoming to the Ivory Tower. I thank her for more than two decades of marriage and the love and confidence she has given me.

ROME, GEORGIA
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Maps and plans
Figure 1. Occitania, 1209
Figure 2. Noble zones of control, 1209
Maps and plans

Figure 3. Béziers, 1209
Maps and plans

Figure 4. Carcassonne, 1209
Maps and plans

Figure 5. Minerve, 1210
Maps and plans

Figure 6. Lavaur, 1211
Figure 7. Penne d’Agenais, 1212
Figure 8. Casseneuil, 1214
Figure 9. Beaucaire, 1216
Figure 10. Toulouse, 1217-1218