de Montefort.

Rome was well aware of the northern baron's envy in regard to the rich lands and cities to the south. The Pope exploited this envy and used the armies of the northern lords as his storm troops. The Holy Roman Church gave all on the crusade forgiveness of sins past and future and the right of ownership of all plunder. In 1209 an army of some 30.000 knights and foot soldiers from Northern Europe descended like a whirlwind on the Languedoc. In the war that followed the whole territory was ravaged. Crops were destroyed, towns and cities were razed, and a whole population was put to the sword. This was extermination on a vast and terrible scale.

In the town of Beziers alone, at least 15.000 men women and children were slaughtered wholesale, many whilst in the sanctuary of the RC churches. An officer, who asked the representative of the Pope how he might distinguish heretics from true believers, was told, "Kill them all. God will recognise his own". This typified the fanatical zeal and bloodlust with which the atrocities were perpetrated. After Beziers the crusade swept through the whole of the Languedoc. One after the other, Perpignan, Narbonne, Carcassonne and Toulouse fell, and where the victors passed they left a trail of blood, death and carnage in their wake

This war, which lasted for nearly forty years, is now known as the Albigensian Crusade. By the tine it was over the Languedoc had been utterly transformed, plunged back into the barbarity that characterised the rest of Europe, all this vicious cruelty to crush an idea.

By 1243 all major Cathar towns and bastions had fallen to the crusaders, except a handful of remote and isolated strongholds.

Chief among these was the majestic mountain citadel of Montsegur towering high and steeply above the surrounding valleys. The Lord of Montsegur was Ramon de Pereille, a staunch Cathar who drew together the remnants of Cathar resistance for one final stand against the onslaught. Technically their creed forbade them to bear arms, though many Parfaits ignored this. Also because of the backing of wealthy sympathetic landowners, they were able to employ large numbers of mercenaries, at considerable expense.

During the siege the attackers numbered more than ten thousand, and with this vast force they tried to surround the entire mountain to starve out the defenders, but they still lacked sufficient manpower to make the ring secure. The energies we described earlier had their effect on the crusaders, many of whom by now were sickened by the endless slaughter of innocents. There were many gaps left in the ring through which the Cathars were able to slip to and from, keeping the fortress supplied with food etc.

For two years the invaders besieged Montsegur. It withstood repeated assaults and maintained tenacious resistance until the attackers were able to erect a rock-hurling machine, after hoisting it up the sheer mountainside. With this direct attack at the ramparts of the fortress, the defenders capitulated. Catharism, at least ostensibly, ceased to exist in the south of France, although it took a further 100 years of terror tactics by the Holy Roman Inquisition unequalled by the Nazi Gestapo to finally stamp it out.

A series of mysteries surrounds the events and terms negotiated between the two

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