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Carcassonne: A Medieval Citadel Rich in Historical Eloquence

Bridget Hosey

Medieval Europe

Dr. Hicks

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The history of the middle ages is vast and expansive; it impacted Europe in countless ways. Although the many intricacies of this history cannot be compacted to just one region, there are certain areas of Europe that are especially representative of much of the middle ages. The reason most of these areas are such accurate representations is because they were so strategic to the events and occurrences of the medieval age. One such area of Europe that is especially representative of the history of the Middle Ages is a citadel known as Carcassonne in what is today southern France. This massive fortress was certainly strategic to anyone wishing to conquer and rule the region of Languedoc; it was built on a hilltop and on a crossroads between the Atlantic and Mediterranean, and it also encompassed a large population of people. For all of these reasons, many of the happenings that affected the heart of Europe affected this large citadel as well. Carcassonne has a rich history that eloquently represents that of the Middle Ages; this rich history involves the transition from Roman to Visigothic rule, conflict with Arabs, cementing of Catholicism within the region, and the coming of the crusades.

Carcassonne is a massive citadel that is today 3 kilometers in circumference and in the age of Knights, Barons, and Chateaus, it was considered impenetrable, complete with 30-ft tall walls, strategic turrets, and three suburbs outside of the actual fortress. Even today it is recognized as a monumental fortress, and is celebrated as a remnant of the heritage of the middle ages.¹ Carcassonne, otherwise known as le cite, was incredibly prominent in relations between Franks, the Aragonese, and the Arabs during the course of the Middle Ages; but it was also especially impacted by the spread and cementing of Catholicism within the region. This is represented by one of the structures featured prominently within the citadel: the basilica of Saint Nazaire and Saint Celse.

¹ Elizabeth L. Moore

The Basilica of Saint Nazaire and Saint Celse that stands today is a product of the reconstruction of the Basilica that occurred after the Albigensian Crusades; it heavily features Gothic architecture and is stylized similarly to other Cathedrals of its time. However the actual Basilica was originally begun in the year 1096, after the stones of the site were blessed by Pope Urban II, in the Romanesque style. It was actually built atop the old Visigothic (and Arian) cathedral, for the Visigoths had controlled Carcassonne in previous centuries. The Basilica was ordained by the Counts of Trencavel who were the rulers of Carcassonne at that time period. They actually began to build a new and stronger fort in the years after 1067, with the intention to replace the old fortress remains. It was within this same time period that the other notable architectural work within the citadel, the Count's Castle or Chateau Comtal, was also built. However the work on the Basilica was certainly given more dedication when they finally began to rebuild it in 1096. The Basilica is a cruciform church complete with a wide Roman nave and two side aisles of Roman arches.² The apse was demolished in the years after the Crusades, but was reconstructed in the years 1270 to 1320. At this time a choir with six chapels was added to the original Roman nave.³ There are twenty-two stained-glass windows; meant to represent the spiritual gift of light.⁴ The Tree of Life, the Tree of Jesse, and the Life of Christ are all beautifully represented in the artwork of the stained glass windows.

Even with the reconstruction in the Gothic style, there are still remnants of the Romanesque to be seen today. These two styles of architecture combine to form a unique component of the cathedral; in fact Eugene Viollet-le-Duc (the architect who reconstructed Carcassonne in the 19th century) described the two styles as such: “the Saint-Nazaire basilica

² Carcassonne.culture.fr

³ Carcassonne.culture.fr

⁴ Carcassonne.culture.fr

represents the invasion of the ogival style of the North into a Romance monument of the South.”⁵ His statement is incredibly accurate, for the gothic or ogival style was imposed by Northern Frenchmen after these Northern French crusaders came and conquered Carcassonne. The reconstruction of the basilica gives great insight to the religious climate in the years following the Albigensian Crusades. Carcassonne had harbored many “heretics” that were being crusaded against during these wars, and as a result the great fortress was sieged and conquered in the year 1209. It was at this time that Simon de Montfort, many of his vassals, and Catholics occupied the fortress after the original inhabitants were expelled. As Catholic influence again became the most prominent in the region, the new rulers sought to refurnish the Church with Gothic influence; perhaps to re-establish the authority of the Catholic Church in a city that was recently viewed as corrupt and heretic. The reconstruction of the Basilica was supported especially by papal authority and Catholics in the region. The Basilica was refurnished as well as the Count’s Castle and the walls, a rectangular wall was also added to the outer portion of the Castle.⁶

The importance of the Basilica accurately portrays the degree to which religion was ingrained in Medieval Society. Those living in the Medieval Ages were constantly reminded of their duty to Christ but especially to the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church was considered the cornerstone of all proper society, and it provided the background to all Medieval life. People were bound first to the Church; were supposed to be willing to give their lives for the Christian cause, they were expected to pay their dues both literally and figuratively, and they were expected to live their lives within the confines and rules of the Catholic Church.⁷ However the Medieval Churches should not be seen in only an unsavory light, for many in Medieval society were true Christians who lived their lives admirably rather than legalistically, and sought to

⁵ Midi-france.info

⁶ See appendix 1.

⁷

spread the Gospel to other peoples such as the Vikings and the Kievan peoples. Many such people dedicated their lives to the monastery, where they resided in caves or high mountain fortresses away from society in confinement so they could focus their lives in prayer. Many of these monks also copied manuscripts to which much scholarship is attributed. In addition to this, there were also other sects of Catholicism (Franciscan, Dominican, etc.) that sought to be in the world spreading the Gospel rather than living out their days in confinement. There were also many “heretics” that periodically sprang up in differing parts of Europe. Some of these being the heresy of Albigensians and Waldensians. (Discuss what Albigensians believed here)⁸The “heresy” of the Albigensians became especially ingrained in the history of Carcassonne and caused the fortress to be targeted during the Albigensian Crusades, also known as the Cathar Wars.⁹ Religion was the driving force behind societal standards, multiple wars and crusades, architecture, and even politics. Every day life in Medieval Europe was constantly revolving around the duty one had to the Catholic Church, and to the intellectual religious movements, and nothing better represents this (ingrainment-diff word) than the many Gothic and Romanesque Cathedrals such as the Basilica of Saint Nazaire and Saint Celse that were created in the 12th through 14th centuries.

The Basilica is especially important to the context of the Middle Ages for it represents the true dependence that medieval society had on religion. It was created to represent and remind Medieval society within the city of Carcassonne of their duty to the Church. At that time, the Basilica was also the Cathedral seat of the Diocese and as such it was the leading Cathedral of the area, the seat where the Bishop resided. The Cathedral itself was prominent in the region as was the actual Citadel. In fact, Carcassonne itself is equally important to this

⁸ textbook

⁹ The perfect heresy

context because as stated earlier, much of the happenings of the Middle Ages occurred also in Carcassonne. The foundations and chronology of this massive citadel remarkably and eloquently parallel the chronology of events of the Middle Ages.

The massive fortress Carcassonne, today a UNESCO World Heritage Site,¹⁰ was originally a hilltop fort build above the River Aude in the region of Languedoc. It is thought that the hill fortress was originally occupied by Celtic peoples, in 500 BC, archaeological remains have been found that indicate this.¹¹ It had been recognized even at that early date as a strategic position for trade networks for it was positioned on a traditional route from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and also on the crossroads between the lands that would later be known as France and Spain. It was also strategic because it was positioned just above the River Aude and yet was on a hilltop which would provide protection from invading armies. Approximately 400 years later, circa 100 BC, the Romans finally conquer Gaul and it is at this time that they also capture the oppidum of Carcassonne. In the 3rd and 4th centuries they fortified a 1200 meter wall the remains of which can still be seen today, in fact much of the present walls of Carcassonne follow the same outline of these original Roman walls.¹²

Although Carcassonne was a prominent fortress even before the middle ages, most of it's history begins alongside and at the same time of that period that traditionally indicates the start of the Middle Ages: the fall of Rome. As Rome fell, Carcassonne (along with many other European lands) became under the rule of Barbarian peoples. Notably the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and the Lombards. In 453 AD the Visigoths conquered Carcassonne and the previously Roman fortress was ruled by Theodoric II. The Visigoths in turn added to the architecture and reinforced the walls and original structures of the fortress. They also built a Cathedral although

¹⁰ UNESCO site

¹¹ UNESCO or Chateau Comtal

¹²

it is unsure where it was built because no remains have been found; it is thought that the Basilica of Saint Nazaire was built on top of this original Aryan church. The structure of Carcassonne was further reinforced and fortified to strategically inhibit any invaders or conquerors. In the mid-500s, as Frankish peoples were seeking to unify the region under one ruler, they attacked Carcassonne but failed to penetrate the walls. The fortress Carcassonne stood independent of Frankish or Aragon rule for another 200 years, until it was finally conquered by the Arabs in 724. Again this is representative of the strife going on in Europe and its outlying lands at the time: they were constantly feeling the threat of the new Arab invaders. Carcassonne was sieged in the years following this (conquering?) and it is at this time that the famous legend of Carcas originates from:

“To save Carcaso from Charlemagne and his army, the widow of the Saracen, Balaak, Dame Carcas, used a stratagem to defend the city. She ordered a well fattened pig to be thrown down from the ramparts to give the impression that the city had ample provisions, the attackers are said to have given up and departed promptly. To announce the good news and spread it to the surrounding area, Dame Carcas is said to have had the town bells peal (sonner). And thus the name “Carcas sonne” was born.”¹³

As appealing as this legend is, it has quite a few fallacies; for one thing, Carcassonne had been called in various forms of its original name: Carcaso since its foundings, so it should not be determined that the name Carcassonne was a creation of this legend only, also Charlemagne could never have attempted to siege this fortress because he did not come to power until the years 768 and by that time the fortress was out of Muslim rule. However this legend is still valuable because it represents the political climate of the Medieval age; a time in which various kings and rulers were all seeking to establish and conquer various lands. The legend also shows the reputation of impregnability that Carcassonne was amassing. By this time of the Middle

¹³ Carcassonne.culture.fr

Ages, Carcassonne was already a symbol of pride for the Languedoc region. It was a representation of a fortress that could not be conquered, and represented the resilience and independence of the region. For southern France had yet to be conquered by Frankish powers. However that was soon to change, for Christian leaders in the rest of Europe did not like to see Arabs living within what they considered should be Catholic lands. In 759 AD Pepin the Short, the Frankish King, sieged the fortress and wrenched it out of Arabic hands. The Merovingian Kings gave the lands of Carcassonne to the Counts of Toulouse (another region in Southern France) and these Counts once again became independent rulers of the French crown. The counts who ruled the region passed through the marriage of a woman to the Trencavel clan who ruled the citadel of Carcassonne for the next couple of centuries. In 1067, the counts decided to rebuild the fortresses of the old Visigothic fort. They also built the inner castle and began work on the Basilica in 1096.

Once again, the rule of Carcassonne would not last longer than a few centuries; just as the town began to prosper, grow, and ____, the town became a target of religious scrutiny. This was a consequence of the ideals of Raymond Roger Trencavel, viscount of Carcassonne from __ to __. Although Trencavel was himself a Catholic, he did not criticize or condemn the “heretic beliefs” of the Albigensians that were becoming prominent in the Languedoc region during this time. The Pope issued a decree to eradicate this heresy and in July of 1209, a crusading army massacred a population of 20,000 people residing in the town of Beziers, men, women, and children.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly this massacre generated much fear throughout Languedoc, and especially in Carcassonne for this fortress was undoubtedly the next stop on these crusaders’ agenda. It is estimated that 40,000 refugees flooded the citadel of Carcassonne.¹⁵ Roger

¹⁴ The perfect heresy

¹⁵ War in South by Marvin

Raymond, 24 at the time, welcomed them all even in the midst of Summer and with only one well in the city. The Crusaders first attacked the suburb of Bourg, the only part of the city without a notable defense, after conquering Bourg they strategically cut off Carcassonne's supply to the River Aude.¹⁶ The Crusaders then began to attack the two fortified suburbs of Carcassonne very soon making their way to the walls of Carcassonne itself.¹⁷ They then proceeded to besiege the citadel, soon after children and infants had died, water deprivation, and dysentery had set in, the viscount rode out to the Crusaders' camp, by himself, and attempted negotiations. His negotiations did not go well and are only recorded by chroniclers biased toward the Crusaders, so we do not know for certain what the negotiations were.¹⁸ However after it was all said and done, Roger Raymond was taken captive and shut away in his own dungeon where he would soon die of mysterious circumstances. Meanwhile, all of the residents of Carcassonne were expelled from the fortress forced to leave all their possessions and find life outside the city. This left plenty of loot for the army, and prevented another massacre similar to that at Beziers. This would be the end of independence for Carcassonne, for soon after Simon de Montfort conquered Carcassonne, he would die, and his son would secede the lands to the French King in 1224.

Conclude the rest using either intro or no. 3 on page... way to go! Add more footnotes and appendixes perhaps...

¹⁶ Marvin

¹⁷ See Appendix 2

¹⁸ The perfect heresy

Annotated Bibliography

Marvin, Laurence W., "War in the South: A First Look at Siege Warfare in the Albigensian Crusade, 1209-1218." *War in History* 4 (2001): 373-95.

This journal article describes the siege warfare in the Albigensian Crusades. One of the first sieges of the Crusades was that of Carcassonne, shortly after the Beziers massacre. It very fully investigates the reliance of the Crusaders upon sieges; there were 45 sieges but only 4 actual field battles. This article was used in the paper to discuss the siege of Carcassonne in 1209, it provided a wealth of information including numerical statistics that were very helpful in understanding the context of this event.

Moore, Elizabeth L., "Carcassonne Celebrates Her Two-Thousandth Anniversary." *The French Review* 5 (1929): 405-9.

This resource describes the environment of Carcassonne in 1929 when the citadel celebrated its two-thousandth anniversary. The author went to the city and gives a firsthand account of the celebrations at that time. The source is not heavily used in the research paper because it does not discuss much of the history of the city. However it certainly discusses the importance of Carcassonne to the region of Languedoc; the citadel was and still is deeply ingrained in the pride and heritage of the people of this area, which is used in the paper to give insight to the remaining importance and fascinating history of this area.

The Middle Ages: Myth and Reality, the Walled Town of Carcassonne. “The Ancient Saint-Nazaire Saint-Celse Cathedral.” Accessed: April 23, 2015.

<http://www.carcassonne.culture.fr/index.html>

This is one of the few resources that could be found that specifically discussed the architecture and chronology of Carcassonne. It is a website promoted by the actual government of France, and it gave a factual account of the many events concerning Carcassonne from the ancient to the modern era. This website particularly discussed the Basilica, and this is where all the information written in the paper is found. This resource was used to further understand the chronology of Carcassonne, and especially to understand the Gothic and remaining Romanesque architecture of the Basilica.

O’Shea, Stephen, *The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Death of the Medieval Cathar*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004.

This source provided a deep understanding of the events of the Albigensian Crusade. The book itself focuses on the Crusades as a whole and details the religious and political climate of the early 13th century. The section referenced and used in this paper is that of the pages 88 to 103, which details the siege of Carcassonne. However this chapter does not solely discuss military tactics; in fact it heavily emphasizes the actions of the Viscount Raymond Roger Trencavel and the forced expulsion of the inhabitants of Carcassonne. It is used in this paper to help the reader more fully understand the events of the siege and fall of Carcassonne.

Rosenwein, Barbara H., *A Short History of the Middle Ages*, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

This source is a vast survey of the Medieval Age. In fact it hardly discusses the Albigensian Crusades because of the short length of the textbook. However it does discuss Gothic architecture as well as the beliefs of the Albigensians. The details of Gothic architecture were used in the paper to provide evidence for the similarities between the Basilica and Gothic Cathedrals of the time, it was also used to discuss the beliefs of the Albigensian “hereticals”.

UNESCO World Heritage Organization. “Historic Fortified City of Carcassonne,” Accessed: April 21, 2015. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/345/>

This resource is one of the few that actually discusses the history of Carcassonne from its foundations to the reconstruction of the city in the 19th century. It is used to give substantial evidence to some of the points of the paper; that the modern walls were built atop the old Roman defenses, and that the fortress was originally in the hands of Celtic peoples. The UNESCO site gives a broad but still relatively detailed survey of the history of Carcassonne and also determines why the site qualifies as a World Heritage Site.