

# Cathar Honour: “Paratge”



“Paratge” translates literally into English as peerage, but this gives almost no clue to the significance or meaning of the word in medieval Occitania.



Paratge denoted a whole world-view, almost a philosophy, as alien to the modern mind as it was to the medieval French Crusaders. The word meant something more than honour, courtesy, chivalry and gentility though our concepts of honour, courtesy, chivalry and gentility all owe something to the concept of “paratge”. For paratge meant nobility in every conceivable sense.

The word also carried implications of balance, natural order, and what is right. Paratge does not seem to have been a distinctly Cathar notion. The Count of Toulouse could reportedly use the word to the Pope in reminding him of his duty to paratge.

If it seems odd that we have even the faintest echo of the concept in English, it is well to remember that Occitan was the first language of many in England, including two queens (Eleanor of Aquitaine, and John's wife Isobel), and an English King, Richard I.

The nearest concept to paratge we know of elsewhere seems to be the ancient Egyptian idea of Ma'aht - another untranslatable word carrying suggestions of right, cosmic balance and natural order to which may be added ideas of contentment, joy and light. (Ma'aht was embodied as a goddess, and played a part in the development of Christian concepts of heaven and hell). In the modern world, the nearest we can come to it is probably in Eastern philosophies: the yin-yang and the Buddhist ideas of karma and what is “right”.

The word paratge was used extensively in Occitan writings, and it features heavily in the works of troubadours and especially in the Song of the Cathar Wars. If you knew that a man upheld paratge, then that was pretty much all you needed to know about him. Similarly, if you knew that he despised paratge then again, that was all you needed to know.

Here is an example from a famous coruscating indictment of a dead crusade leader, Simon de Montfort, referring to the epitaph on his original tomb at the Cathedral of Saint-Nazaire in Carcassonne. The inscription on it is now lost, but we know that it envisaged Simon as a saint enthroned in heaven, enjoying God's reward for his earthly deeds.

## ON CHURCH GLORIFICATION OF THE DEATH OF KILLER SIMON DE MONTFORT:



The epitaph says, for those who can read it,  
That he is a saint and martyr who shall breathe again  
And shall in wondrous joy inherit and flourish  
And wear a crown and sit on a heavenly throne.  
And I have heard it said that this must be so -  
If by killing men and spilling blood,  
By wasting souls, and preaching murder,  
By following evil counsel, and raising fires,  
By ruining noblemen and besmirching paratge,  
By pillaging the country, and by exalting Pride,  
By stoking up wickedness and stifling good,  
By massacring women and their infants,  
A man can win Jesus in this world,  
Then Simon surely wears a crown, resplendent in heaven.

Elsewhere the canso [laisse 147] reports that Simon's death filled the world with light and set paratge free.

The gulf between the original concept and our attempts at understanding it across the gulf of centuries is emphasised by trying to define it. Paratge is almost like an ethereal substance that pervades the universe. It can grow or diminish, and it can be extinguished. It can be exalted and set free, or brought low.

Laisse 137 and Laisse 141: On the defeat of King Peter II of Aragon and Raymond VI of Toulouse at the battle of Muret in 1213 -

~ It diminished the whole world, be sure of that, for it destroyed and drove out paratge. It disgraced and shamed all Christendom. ... It dishonoured the whole of Christendom and all humanity.

In many respects an upholder of paratge resembled a perfect knight and an ideal gentleman. King Richard I of England was familiar with the concept - he was from the Aquitaine himself, the son of Eleanor of Aquitaine and the great grandson of William IX the first troubadour. He was a fluent speaker of Occitan and must certainly have understood and respected paratge. He himself was a troubadour and was greatly esteemed in his time. Even his Moslem enemies called him Melek Ric - the True King.



Yet Richard was not the greatest embodiment of the ideal of Paratge. The two men remembered by English history who perhaps most embodied the ideals of paratge were both alive at the same time as Richard, and both knew him. One was William Marshall. The other was Al-Malik al-Nasir Saleh ed-Din Yusuf, better known to us as Saladin. Both were also renowned and honoured even by their enemies. Richard held them both in the very highest esteem - though he spent years fighting Saladin, and had once had to beg for quarter from William Marshall.

## HIS CHRISTIAN ENEMIES HELD HIM IN HIGH ESTEEM: SALADIN



On one famous occasion, seeing Richard's horse killed beneath him in battle, Saladin sent him another. We also know that Richard offered the hand of his sister in marriage to Saladin's brother. It was widely believed in the West that Saladin had been knighted by his Christian enemies.

William Marshall's surname was taken from his office. William, a younger son, became the finest warrior of his age and Marshal to Henry II. He was tutor in chivalry to Henry the Young King, and it was said that William had knighted the young Henry. It was also William who declined to kill the rebellious Richard when he had the means and opportunity.

Marshall served five kings — Henry II, Henry the Young King, Richard the Lionheart, John and Henry III. Before his death in 1219, he was made Regent of England for the child-king, Henry III. On his deathbed, William was accepted into the Order of the Knights Templars.

Above is an abbreviated and lightly edited version of an article by James McDonald.  
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