

The Great Esclarmonde of the Cathars



Richard Stanley, edited.

Part 1

The Cathars



Occitania between France and Spain was not a nation state as we currently understand a modern country to be, but a complex of dukedoms bound together by complex ties of blood and marriage. It was a culture advanced for its time. The high concentration of Jews and Muslims among the population bears silent testimony to an unusual degree of religious tolerance. Doubtless it was an overlapping of the cultures and the Muslim influence that gave rise to the South's artistic and scientific achievements. In Toulouse

was a school of medicine which became particularly favoured by Jews, and there was a school of mysticism in Salamanca. Several parts of the kabbalah were written during that period in northern Spain, and the area saw some fine flowering of gothic art and architecture. Occitania recognised the rights of women who were granted access to education and office, and democracy gained expression through the election of 'capitouls', or sheriffs, who acted as a check on equal justice for all and order. Above all, the citizens of Occitania embraced the code of chivalry...

Elsewhere in Europe knighthood was inconceivable without nobility, but the attributes of Occitan knighthood - accessible to anyone regardless of race, country or class - could be attained by exceptional achievement. A troubadour would swear fidelity to his lady as if he were her vassal and from then on she would receive him according to the statutes of chivalry determined by the 'Court of Love'. While respect and loyalty were cherished, acting in all situations honourably remained the essential quality of knighthood. An honourable knight could never fail in a single combat.



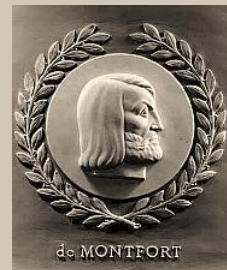
The Occitan Christianity recognised no clerical intermediaries between man and God. Reincarnation was central to the tenets and vegetarianism was taken for granted. A higher evolved Soul in incarnation accepts meat as fit to feed wolves and dogs, but not one-self, while the division between human and animal Souls is fluid. The difference between a higher animal and becoming human would be a matter of the continued growth of a Soul, whilst the reversal is the result of a Soul acting as a beast while in human form.

Some had Catharism for an older surviving form of Christianity, similar to the original faith said to have been practiced by John the Baptist and the Essenes, while others maintain it was essentially a form of Manichean Christianity introduced to the south in the 12th century by the Bogomil missionary Nicetas.



By the end of the 12th century the rise of Catharism in Occitania represented a genuine challenge to the hegemony of the Roman Church which was still trying to consolidate its hold over mainland Europe after the loss of the Holy Lands and the military fiasco of the Third Crusade.

In 1209 Pope Innocent III authorized a punitive military crusade against the so-called heretics that would become a war of extermination, ultimately, claiming some eight million lives, if including inquisitional deaths. The military strategist Simon de Montfort was placed in overall martial command of the crusade. De Montfort honed his talents during his time in the Holy Lands, where he showed an extraordinary aptitude for re-organizing and methodically asset-stripping conquered cities and nations. Religious authority became vested in the Spaniard Dominic de Guzmán who was later to be canonized as 'Saint Dominic' - founder of the Dominican order, the black garbed monks who oversaw the bureaucracy of the Inquisition: the system of terror, interrogation and persecution that would provide the template for the modern police state.



The short supply lines and Occitania's lack of a unified political identity promised an easy victory for de Montfort; yet it took the northern barons more than a generation to achieve their aims. By the time the dust settled, the kingdom of Occitania had been expunged from the map and its language and culture trampled into the ashes. Not only were libraries and records burned and the written word outlawed, but the race itself literally bred into extinction by new laws making it illegal to marry or procreate with anyone who did not eat meat or speak French. It is one of the darkest and bloodiest chapters in western history and rightly referred to by modern scholars as the 'death of chivalry'.

The last stand of the Cathars took place at Montségur, literally the safe or 'secure' mountain. It was the highest, oldest and least accessible of the castles in the area. The supreme act of resistance lasted more than a year and there were battles fought every day. Many of the great heroes of chivalry made their final stand there - men such as Lantar, Belissen and Caraman who rallied to the aid of Montségur's liege, Raymond de Pereilha, and the commander of the castle garrison, Pierre Roger de Mirepoix.



De Mirepoix had good looks which he claimed was the result of his family being descended from Belisenna – an obscure Iberian moon Goddess. In those days above-human ancestry was no joke with a great many monarchs and nobles believing they were literally the offspring of supernatural beings, or minor divinities.



De Mirepoix was as brave as he was learned with an abiding interest in alchemy that apparently led him to perfect a form of phosphorescent paint that was used to decorate the skin and armour of the garrison so that they would resemble ghosts or glowing skeletons in order to strike fear into the hearts of the superstitious Christian crusaders. It is thanks to de Mirepoix's efforts and the ancient traditions of Goddess worship surrounding the mountain of Montségur that the castle's defenders came to be known as the 'sons and daughters of Belisenna'.

At best the castle could have sheltered up to five hundred people, while the ranks of their besiegers numbered upwards of seven to ten thousand battle-hardened men in arms.

The weather took a turn for the worse in the spring of 1244 and shortly before the vernal equinox, the castle fell to betrayal by a man in arms acting as a shepherd. Brutally tortured, he showed the soldiers the secret path up the sheer side of the mountain by whence the defenders smuggled in their supplies. On March 16th 1244, the last of the Cathars, some 225 surviving men, women and children, were dragged down the mountain to perish on a massive bonfire built at the base of the mountain in a place that has come to be known as the 'Camp de Cremat' or the 'field of the stake'.

The events of the crusade against the south were suppressed by successive chroniclers who all too readily took their lead from the inquisitors. The castle's history as a revered symbol of resistance made it impossible for the conquering orthodoxy to Christianize, or take into the Holy Roman faith, as they did at Montserrat and countless other pagan sites.



It is thought that the Cathars sheltered a holy treasure within the walls of the castle. Some say it was a hoard of scrolls or manuscripts, the Book of Nicetas the Bogomil, or even the 'Book of Seven Seals' - an ancient magical grand grimoire whose opening would bring about the end of the world. Many believe that the citadel had housed the Holy Grail itself - the 'Cup of Abraham' or 'Cup of the Last Supper' said to contain the blood of Christ.



Edited in line with the Cathar tenets, Corascendea, Parfaite 2010.



Part 2:

Esclarmonde of Foix

(c 1151 – 1215)



According to legends, the sacred treasure was guarded by the last high priestess of the Cathars - the 'White Lady' of Montségur - the fair Esclarmonde whose very name betokens 'light of the world' in old Occitan. When all seemed to be lost, a dove is said to have descended from on high and split the mountain with its beak. Esclarmonde cast the treasure into the rock, which closed around it, before turning into a dove herself and flying away to the east.

The tale which with the passage of time confused two identities and merged them into one heroine, the Great Esclarmonde, found its way into song and story, providing the inspiration for Wolfram von Eschenbach's 13th century epic 'Parsifal' which in turn provided the backbone for Wagner's celebrated opera. Equally listenable, albeit somewhat lesser known, is Massenet's opera 'Esclarmonde', composed in the late 19th century and immortalized in recordings by Joan Sutherland.



In historically documented 'real' life the last high priestess of the Cathars was one Esclarmonde de Foix, the daughter of Roger Bernard I, Count of Foix and Cécile Trencavel. She was therefore sister to noble Raymond-Roger Count of Foix who stood in outspoken opposition to the Roman church and the French kings who coveted his land. She married Jourdain de l'Isle-Jourdain, Seigneur de l'Isle-Jourdain. Their children included Bernard who later inherited the County of Foix, Guillaumette, Olive, Othon de Terride and Bertrand, Baron de Launac.



She was widowed in October 1200. In 1204 she received the consolamentum from the hands of the Cathar Bishop Guilhabert de Castres, so becoming a Parfaite, a member of the Cathar Elect. The ceremony, at which three other great noblewomen (Aude de Fanjeaux, Faye de Durfort, and Raymonde de Saint-Germain) also received the consolamentum, took place at Fanjeaux in the presence of her brother Raymond-Roger Count of Foix. From this time on she would become a champion of the Cathar faith and became known as the 'Great Esclarmonde'.

The consolamentum was a form of initiation by the laying on of hands thought to go back all the way to the time of Christ and the apostles. It was bestowed upon Esclarmonde de Foix after she had lived a full life as a wife and a mother.

She took up residence in Pamiers and it is thought that she was responsible for advising Raymond de Pereilha to refortify the Castle at Montségur in preparation for the likely assaults by the French Catholic Crusaders.

In 1207 she took part in, and probably organised, the Colloquy of Pamiers (also called the Colloquy of Montreal) the last public debate between the Cathars and the Roman Catholic Church whose representatives were led by Dominic de Guzmán (later Saint Dominic). It was at this debate that Esclarmonde famously tried to speak, only to be admonished by a representative of the Roman Church: "go to your spinning madam. It is not proper for you to speak in a debate of this sort". The churchman's faux pas, as obvious to an educated Occitan audience as it is to most people today, was not at all obvious to Saint Dominic and his supporters. The Catholic Church's treatment of such a prestigious figure as Esclarmonde could only have had the opposite effect to that intended. Till this day the Church seems to not understand why their representatives lost in these debates so comprehensively, or so consistently. Catharism is the true teaching of God and it defines the true path of Christ.



Esclarmonde de Foix with her sister-in-law Philippa jointly ran a House for Parfaites at Dun in the Pyrénées. A sort of prototype convent, it functioned as a school for the education of girls and as a sort of retirement home for aged Parfaites. Esclarmonde is credited with opening a number of hospitals, schools and Cathar convents - something the Roman Church had not done previously, but started to do later as part of its concerted effort to win credibility as an organization of faith. Dominic Guzmán's first Dominican friary can still be seen at Prouille, within sight of Fanjeaux in the Languedoc.

Esclarmonde is believed to have died in 1215. The fact that she has no grave is hardly surprising considering the lengths to which the heretics were forced to go to hide the bodies of their loved ones from the crusaders who, believing in physical resurrection at the end of time, were prone to dismembering, or otherwise violating the remains of those who escaped them in life.

Esclarmonde of Foix has become something of a role model for feminists. According to at least one Gnostic Church she was a Cathar Archdeaconess in life and is now a Saint.

Surviving records show there was an Esclarmonde who perished on the Camp de Cremat, but she was the sickly daughter of the Castle's Lord. Esclarmonde de Pereilha was barely in her teens and already at death's door when she was carried down the mountain and heaved into the flames. The child was probably named after the celebrated high priestess, and historians argue that popular memory has confused the mature and the child Esclarmondes, merging them into the single figure of Esclarmonde de Foix.



Part 2 with additional special thanks to James Mac Donald:
http://www.cathar.info/120516_esclarmonde.htm



Esclarmonde of Montségur

(1205 – 1244)



myth that has grown around her.

Her identity against the saintly Esclarmode de Foix was acknowledged in the English speaking world by Richard Stanley, when noting the fact that all English language historian seems to have drawn their data from the same French language sources. It seemed that not one has examined the Occitan surviving songs and troubadour 'romances' of the period, such as the ballads of Guilhelm Montanhigol, a first-hand witness to the events he describes. This led to the discovery of a younger Esclarmonde, one who far more ably fitted the larger than life

Esclarmonde de Montségur was the illegitimate niece of Esclarmonde de Foix. Esclarmonde d'Alion - or 'Esclarmonde the bastard' had the blue eyes of her forefathers, wore her hair in three long shoulder length braids and at the time of the siege was still young and ravishingly beautiful...

Her father Raimond Roger, the Comte de Foix, was one of the great heroes of the South, who in youth had romanced Etienne de Penautier, the 'loveliest woman in the Languedoc' and was remembered by his subjects as 'Raimond Drut' or 'Raymond the Beloved'. In the autumn of 1204 the Comte became lost while hunting a wolf in the forests of the Ariège and coming across a building with high white walls banged on its gate to demand admittance. It turned out he had come to the door of a convent and Raimond the 'Beloved', who was in a cold relationship with wife Philippa, started a secret love affair with the tender abbess Na Ermengarda he met that evening.



The abbess fell pregnant and when Na Ermengarda's position at the convent became untenable, she returned to her family lands in Telho where in the fullness of time she begat twins - the girl was named Esclarmonde after her pious aunt and the boy was christened 'Loup', perhaps after their father's exploit the evening their parents had met.

The twins grew up without their mother's embrace. After a long journey north and weakened by separation from those she loved, Na Ermengarda succumbed only days after childbirth.

The infants were given over to a wet nurse.

Loup was sent to a monastery to receive an education befitting his station, while the young Esclarmonde was sequestered in the strange octagonal tower on her father's Belpech estate where she was cared for by the Comte's loyal retainer, the aging Roiax. The old man's and the child's Souls met. Roiax and the girl soon shared their passion for all things outdoors, while Esclarmonde displayed an innate understanding of animal behavior.



According to the superstitious tales of her times, the young sorceress was rumoured to have been seen wandering naked in the woods consorting with wild creatures and 'certain dethroned pagan divinities' whose language she spoke and whom she was supposed to have 'called down from their homes in the mountains to do her bidding'.

She is said to have had no fear of men. Although born into the body of a tender girl after her mother, in Esclarmonde's Soul were budding Hiawatha, the great legendary Native American leader, and the future Jacques de Molay, the no less famous last Grandmaster of the Knights Templar.

Raimond Drut, the Comte de Foix, died in 1223, apparently from of a stomach ulcer while directing the siege of Mirepoix. Some believe he was poisoned, although his death was most probably the result of natural causes exacerbated by the constant tensions of the preceding years. After her father's demise, Esclarmonde developed a bond with Bernard d'Alion, who was twenty years her senior. In a gesture of chivalry Bernard, lord of Usson, took under his wings the orphaned female knight by marrying her. That safeguarded vital supply lines to Montségur that had been granted to Esclarmonde as part of her dowry.



Inquisition documents allege that heretics fleeing the siege of Montségur were granted sanctuary at her husband's castle and for a while Usson served as a crucial staging post for the citadel's defenders.



Leaving her lifestyle and regal clothes behind, Esclarmonde left for the trackless woodland of the Capsir Mountains, where she was reunited with her brother Loup, who had run away from the monastery to become one of the leaders of the partisans. Clad in mans' armour she supported him in countless encounters, lit the night beacons that were the only means of communication between the refugees, and helped the men to push over the rocks that crushed the crusaders as they marched through the gorges below.

Many a knight dreamed of the ardent girl and according to the poet Maurice Magre 'she gave herself to more than one of them, beside her horse and her sword, in the shade of the Pyrenean pines...' She was the 'tabernacle of the spirit' and a 'living embodiment of youth and freedom'.

To the crusaders she was the Antichrist incarnate, the avatar or 'living tabernacle' of the Elder Gods set in diametric opposition to the patriarchal hegemony of the Holy Roman Church or, as Magre succinctly puts it, the 'saint of saints' of an unknown religion'.



Bernard d'Alion knew 'paratge'. http://www.dhaxem.com/data/handt/Cathar_Honour.pdf It is historically recorded that shortly before the end of the siege of Montségur he paid a significant amount of money (150 'livres melgorien') to the Spanish mercenary Corbario, a notorious man in

arms whose Aragonese troops took up position in Usson. Some historians speculate that he might have been intending to break through the crusader lines and relieve the siege and that this was one of the reasons the defenders negotiated a ceasefire in the spring of 1244. http://www.dhaxem.com/data/handt/The_Return_of_the_Cathars.pdf More realistically, he will have intended to aid the escape of his wife and her people. But by March 1244 many defenders at Montségur had been injured, in addition to the children and the very old that would not have made it. The leading parfaits refused to abandon them, and Esclarmonde joined them.



With the help of her brother she continued to resupply the stronghold of Montségur until the very last. They strived to attain together, as defined by their tenets, the abode where matter has no weight, water no fluidity, fire no heat and where is enjoyed the blessedness of loving endlessly. Esclarmonde's name did not appear among the dead, or those who gave themselves up to perish on the Camp de Cremat when the castle fell on March 16th 1244.

Esclarmonde died as she lived. On the 16th March she defended in arms the Cathars till her last breath. She finished her own life on the rocks of Montségur, where she met the man in whom she recognised the representative of God on Earth. Bertrand Marty, the spiritual leader of the Cathars reached and between 1242 and 1244 shared with 330 Parfaits at Montségur the first human comprehension of God. Esclarmonde, who maintained the garrison's contact with the outside world, readily conveyed the tenets to everyone she met.

Sympathizers initially hid Esclarmonde's body to preserve it from mutilation and burning. Later Corbario's men retrieved it. Esclarmonde of Montségur received a regal burial in the cave in which the fleeing Cathars hid. Shortly after the expiry of the ceasefire Bernard d'Alion was arrested, tried and publically burned in the town square at Perpignan.



At the Camp de Cremat "...The flames rose so red to heaven, the smoke so high and straight that the men of Toulouse and Albi, who were looking in the direction of the Ariège with anxious hearts, knew by this flaming sign that their brothers had died and the hope of the south had been oppressed. The chateau of Montségur was destroyed. There was nothing left save calcinated stone, save for the name of Esclarmonde which survived and in the popular mind and in legend Esclarmonde the Saint and Esclarmonde the Hero were blended into a single person – The Great Esclarmonde..."

Napoleon Peyrat, the local pastor whose 'Grande Histoire des Albigeoise' served as a source for Magre and others, recounts how the refugees were remorselessly hunted through the mountain passes by packs of trained hounds before being cornered in the grotto of Ormolac by troops under the command of the Seneschal of Toulouse.



The cave had two entrances, both of which were surrounded, but the Albigensians climbed ladders which they then withdrew to a yet deeper and more inaccessible cave. It seemed to the Seneschal impossible to attack them there. He thought it

wiser and perhaps also more humane to substitute for torture and the stake a silent death in the darkness. He had both entrances solidly walled up. For some time he camped on the banks of the Ariège. He waited. He listened for some sound to reach him from the granite interior. Then he left the mountain which had become a tomb.

The Albigensians must have lived for some time in the darkness, for they had turned the cave into a granary. Several bishops and many adepts were among them. In the silent darkness no doubt they stretched forth their hands over bowed heads in an invisible gesture of their togetherness, as their struggle had come to an end. The mountains above the Ariège kept the secret of their departure.

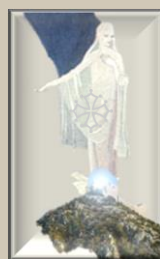


It would appear sensible to concur with historian Elie Kercob who, writing in the Cahiers d'etudes Cathari (Notebooks on Cathar Studies) number 27 suggests, that the survivors of Montségur would have made for Usson where Corbario's mercenary army awaited them. The possibility of a sanctuary in the Aude valley, whose liege Raymond d'Aniort was married to Marquesia, the sister of Pierre Roger de Mirepoix, would also have been considered. The d'Aniorts' fate was tied to that of Montségur and Raymond is known to have taken part in the ceasefire negotiations that followed the castle's fall. It is conceivable that he may have offered safe passage to the defenders...

After eight centuries, Esclarmonde's presence can still be felt in the tower at the ruins of Montségur. Truth does not change. What was once true remains so. Esclarmonde de Montségur came into this world to strive for perfection and in doing so she forfeited her earthly lives.

*Edited as conveyed by Lysseus, my Spirit Guide, who was Bertrand Marty.
Corascendea, 14th June 2011.*

Acknowledgement to:
<http://shadowtheatre13.com/whitelady.html>



www.dhaxem.com

More on the Cathars at Dhaxem.com:

http://www.dhaxem.com/elementary_read.asp