

ESCLARMONDE DE FOIX

Hélène Bernard, SRC

In her book entitled *Great Women Initiates*, Hélène Bernard, SRC, shares this short story of the life of one of the most prominent Cathars of the Languedoc in the south of France, a Good Woman or Bona Femna in every sense of the word.



In the year 1155, in the heart of the Occitan country, in a majestic castle overlooking the river Ariège, a second child was born to Lady Zebelia Trencavel de Carcassonne and Roger Bernard, Count of Foix. She was a little girl, and the wonderful and predestined name of Esclarmonde was given to her. It was from this haunt, like an eagle's nest perched on a mountaintop, that her father, a powerful man, managed his estates.

The house of Foix was of Iberian origin, all the way back to Adcantuan who had fought against Caesar. Heir to the manor of Foix through the counts of Comminges of Merovingian stock, it became, under the names of the counts of Carcassonne and Couserans, titular to the County of Foix around 1068. The feudal rule of the counts of Foix crept into the Ariège Valley and consisted of many manors, the majority of which were established under the reign of Charlemagne.

Through Andorra and Urgel, the county was directly connected with the Iberian Peninsula. In the central Pyrenees its sentinels on the steps of Spain were called *Montcalm*, *Vil-de-Soc*, *Siguer*, *Aston*, and *l'Hospitalet*, while *Aulus* and *Luchon* led to Gascony. Confident in the motto *Custos Summorum*,



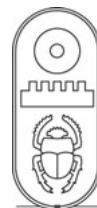
Located at the center of the triangle of Carcassonne-Toulouse-Andorra, Foix lies in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountain range in southern France. The town is dominated by the imposing tenth-century château des Comtes De Foix, shown here. This was once the home of Raymond Roger and his sister, Esclarmonde.

“guardians of the high plateaus,” and under the protection of powerful armories, the walls of the monumental and solitary dwelling sheltered the happy childhood of Esclarmonde.

Idyllic Days

In 1162, when Esclarmonde was seven years old, her father's eldest daughter, who was born from his first marriage to Cecile of Barcelona, was married. On the occasion of these magnificent wedding nuptials, the little girl saw for the first time the best of Occitan chivalry.

Esclarmonde's radiant beauty blossomed forth in this cultured and sparkling southern court, between her older brother, Ramon-Roger, nicknamed the *druz* (the initiate, the pure, the troubadour), and her little sister, Zebelia. In both summer and winter, the days were spent hunting and feasting. Travelers came and went, always enjoying the



open and warm hospitality of Roger Bernard and his family.

Immediately after sunset, with a fire crackling in the fireplace, guests were well-fed. Then, affected by the soft glow of candlelight, one listened, with open mind and soul, to the sacred texts and hidden words that the troubadours sang and declaimed from castle to castle in a secret language called the *Gai Savoir* (happy knowledge).

The Courts of Love

Troubadours! This name alone rouses us: *Trovare-Trouve* (found). They had found a truth and, garbed in the hermetic colors green, yellow, and red, they spread their knowledge. Secret ambassadors and the bearers of news among the influential people of the time, these initiates called *fideles d'amour*, became the disciples and secret propagators of Catharism in Occitània.

“Courts of love” flourished in Foix, Aragon, Cerdagne, Gascony, and the Languedoc. Divine science and asceticism were highly valued, and borrowing from ancient druid teachings, they honored the law of numbers. This ancient oral tradition had its ultimate origins in the “mystery” initiations of the old Egyptian religion which over time spread into communities throughout the Mediterranean basin.



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With a long lineage, extending through the Egyptians, Greeks, and Essenes, the Arabs became the keepers of this “science of the Magi,” and it was to seek this knowledge, rather than to conquer Jerusalem, that some of the first Crusaders started on their way, bringing back sacred knowledge from which Pyrenean Catharism was born.

But the proud knights also brought back a taste for luxury to which the Church of Peter and its servants had succumbed, for some bishops and abbots lived ostentatious lives, filled with the comforts of the best that money could buy. Esclarmonde watched and learned of the weaknesses of the clergy and the unvirtuous lives of many clerics.

Marriage

Her adolescence was marked by the appearance of a Bulgarian (Bogomil) bishop called Nicetas. His “mission” gave structure and formality to Catharism as he organized its clergy and the statutes of its dissident Catholics. The House of Foix welcomed him, and young Esclarmonde and her brother Ramon-Roger were highly impressed by his personality.

Esclarmonde was too young to play a role in the management of a religion which called for nothing less than perfection. Nevertheless, she had much influence at the court of Foix. She was intelligent and refined and had famous troubadours as



Seal of the Count of Foix.

teachers. Witty and talented, at twenty years of age, her reputation as a woman of superior intelligence and knowledge attracted many admirers and suitors to her. But like many of her peers, she sacrificed herself to a union ruled by politics. So in 1175 she married Jourdan III de l'Isle Jourdain, who was related to the counts of Toulouse. The name Jourdain (Jordan) was a reminder of his crusading ancestors, who had probably taken their name from the river Jordan in Palestine.

Jourdain's education was based on a particularly fervent form of Catholicism, but Esclarmonde was a Cathar and maybe she had hoped to eventually convert her husband. If their marriage was not a complete spiritual union, it was nevertheless a very fruitful one! Six children were born in the family home where Jourdain ruled by the letter and Esclarmonde by the intellect. First, there were two daughters, Escarone and Obisca; then three boys, Bernard, Jourdan, and Othon; and finally a little girl, Philippa.

For twenty-five years Esclarmonde led a dignified life with Jourdain. She had given up trying to convince her husband of the cogency of Cathar doctrine but watched very closely the development of the situation in Occitània. She conducted courts of love and remained in touch with the greatest "heretical" personalities of the time. The Catholic Church tried in vain to reclaim the noble "lost sheep." At Albi, in 1176, a council reminded them of their capital sins, and a little later, the archbishop of Lyon condemned them and accused the future Raymond VI of Toulouse of protecting them. Finally, on March 20, 1179, Pope Alexander III excommunicated them all.

Courage and Compassion

In 1180, her little sister Zebelia married Roger I of Comminges. Their paths were different, but the two sisters respected each other and helped one another on several occasions.

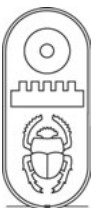


The adolescence of Esclarmonde was marked by the appearance of a Bogomil bishop called Nicetas, who gave structure and formality to Catharism. The Bogomils were Christian Gnostics from Eastern Europe. Pictured here is one of only three Bogomil gravestones in Bosnia.

In 1181, Cardinal Henri of Albano openly declared war on the Cathar "sinners" and Jourdain was dragged into this repressive crusade. As an insane torrent of hatred and violence raged throughout the region and with a firmness of conviction, Esclarmonde first protected and then led the condemned people to the County of Foix. The Cardinal of Albano was furious and continued his cruelty. Monks loyal to him spread the rumor that Esclarmonde was responsible for this "ravage by fire and the sword." They had not forgiven her for her firm stand and sought to influence her husband against her.

During these difficult times, Esclarmonde displayed an unusual strength and exhibited extraordinary feelings of social solidarity; a very rare thing in the twelfth century. In 1185 Pope Lucius III allowed the wounded country to heal its wounds, and Esclarmonde resumed her life as lady of the manor, attending to her children.

In the months that followed, she had the great joy of seeing her brother Ramon-Roger,



whom she loved dearly, marry the delightful Philippa de Moncade. Philippa loved and admired Esclarmonde and followed in her footsteps on the perilous path of Catharism.

For many years, in spite of the turmoil, the Count of Foix, Roger Bernard, maintained peace on his estates. In 1188 however, he passed on, and on the threshold of the thirteenth century a new pope, Innocent III, was elected to office. The first years of the new century were very trying for Esclarmonde.

Dove of the Paraclete

In 1203, her brother Ramon-Roger was taken prisoner, and in 1204, after twenty-nine years of marriage, her husband Jourdain de l'Isle Jourdain passed on. Having never ceased to love his wife, in spite of her "subversive" ideas, the clauses of Jourdain's will were in favor of Esclarmonde. His whole family was by now loyal to Catharism. Children, sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law felt a deep affection and a great admiration for Esclarmonde.

Having no regard for the material things of life, Esclarmonde left to her children the wealth and huge estates of their father, then returned to her native mountains and remained in Foix to rule there in her brother, Ramon-Roger's, absence. Free to assert herself in her faith, she surrounded herself with officers and friends of Ramon-Roger, and proclaimed herself dedicated to the Paraclete (in biblical terms the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus following the Crucifixion). The knights and the people from the surrounding area responded to her appeal for unity for a single faith. She selected trustworthy tutors

for her nephews and devoted herself, body and soul, to her vocation.

Known as the "Dove of the Paraclete" Esclarmonde established social institutions, workshops, centers of apprenticeship in various branches, and especially hospitals for the elderly and those wounded in the war, as well as lodgings for the ever-increasing number of refugees. Under her leadership, convents for "Perfect Ones" and schools where poor children were taught the new spirit were founded. Led by her, the "Perfect Ones" went to every home. They assisted outcasts and took care of the sick. Unconstrained, the people were won over by their caring, charitable ways, and their pure form of mysticism.

Perfect One

In 1206, after three years in captivity, Ramon-Roger rejoined his court. At last Esclarmonde could devote herself to the life she had been yearning for. She retired to Castellar de Pamiers. The high Cathar officers had nothing more to teach her, and Guilabert de Castres, her teacher and faithful friend, deemed her worthy to be raised to the rank of a "Perfect One" and Archdeaconess.

Accompanied by Auda de Fangeaux, Fais, the Countess of Dufort, and Ramonda Miro, Esclarmonde received the "Consolamentum" in Fangeaux. This purifying ceremony strengthened the new Archdeaconess in her faith, and she devoted all her time and vitality to the establishment of Cathar communities. Along with her activities, Esclarmonde undertook, with Raimon de Perelha, her knight-servant, and other dignitaries such as Guilabert de Castres, the reconstruction of the fortress of Montségur. Relations with the Church were becoming bitter.

Church Scorn

Innocent III issued a sharp anathema against the innovators but Esclarmonde could not idly stand by while the South was so badly treated. The papal malediction



The Bogomil/Cathar expansion across medieval Europe.



The “Perfects” or “Good Friends” as they called each other, spread the Word to the faithful. Bound by very strict rules of conduct, they had taken a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

only strengthened her convictions. In April 1206, for nearly one month, the seventh contradictory cross-examining council was held in Pamiers.

The Church had the fiery new bishop of Toulouse as its main representative. Esclarmonde, surrounded by Philippa and her beautiful daughters, Ermessinde and Indie de Fangeaux, participated passionately in these debates. She demanded complete equality between men and women, an established fact in the “rebellious” religion. Already prejudiced against women in general through his religious training, the prelate of Toulouse, annoyed by the intellectual abilities of his rival, challenged her: “Madam, go and spin your wheel; it does not become you to argue in such debates!”

Conflict and Persecution

On November 17, 1207, the pope ordered the King of France to arm his soldiers and march against the “infidels,” as the Cathars were called. Indulgences and promises of salvation were granted to them. Esclarmonde prepared Montségur as the major center of resistance and moved the treasure of the Paraclete up to the high rock.

Surrounded by the deacons and the “Perfect Ones,” she often looked down toward the forests of Belena (a reminder of the Celtic deity of Light) and of Quier (the priest of the mistletoe). Soon, files of refugees

arrived, fleeing from the brutality of Simon de Montfort. For years, terrible repressions were carried out by his forces. The bishop of Foulques founded a brotherhood whose members were recruited among the most fanatical and violent enemies of the Cathars. Simon de Montfort murdered “heretics” by the thousands in a bloody frenzy, sparing none. The occupants of Béziers took refuge in a church upon the arrival of the tyrant and his mercenary abbots. It was then that the abbot of Citeaux cried out: “Kill them all, God will know His own!” And there, in that place of worship, these unfortunate people were burned alive, like so many others.

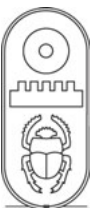
Finally, the King of France became disenchanted with the bloody, dishonorable way in which Simon de Montfort and his acolytes had led the crusade. Innocent III remained caught between his personal temperance and the growing ambitions of his subjects. The principle of the Holy War could not hide reality: a policy of conquest. For years, pillages, murders, and pogroms continued. But in 1227, Occitània experienced a period of respite.

Cathar Revival

Having weathered the bloody times, Esclarmonde, almost in her eighties by now, believed the time was ripe to restore



Expulsion of the Cathars at Carcassonne in 1209.



good order within the Cathar religion. She helped and cared for the faithful adepts, and reorganized the clergy. Communities, hospices, and workshops were established throughout the area. The Archdeaconess conferred the Consolamentum and baptism, and supervised numerous convents. Catharism rose again from its ashes.

However, as late as 1229, the Cathars continued to be persecuted, and many lived deep in the woods or as discreetly as possible. Some found sanctuary with sympathizing noble people and a great solidarity was established despite the ceaseless repression. In August 1232, Guilabert de Castres and Esclarmonde returned to Montségur.

The Dove of the Paraclete was spared the pain of seeing the fall of her beloved castle, the sight of the final defeat, the martyrdom of her friends, and the final subjugation of her free Occitània, for in 1240 at Montségur, the Cathar princess passed on and “journeyed to the stars.” Guilabert de Castres had the mystical joy of secretly burying the great Esclarmonde, his faithful companion through times of joy and times of trial. From good times to bad times, they had served the good.

“Great Esclarmonde! A dove has flown away, but in the Cathar country your name remains forever engraved.”—Light of the World!



The Dove of Peace, by Jacquelyn Paull, SRC.