

THE MONASTERY OF POBLET



THE MONASTIC BUILDINGS, TOGETHER WITH THE ROYAL ONES, MAKE POBLET THE MOST COMPLETE MEDIEVAL SITE OF ITS KIND IN EUROPE.

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The monastery of Santa Maria de Poblet, in the interior of the province of Tarragona, was founded in the mid-twelfth century. The land it stands on was donated by Ramon Berenguer IV, count of Barcelona, to the abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Fontfroide (Narbonne, France). The Cistercians are a branch of the Benedictine monks and follow the same rule as them; that of Saint Benedict. In donating the land, the count's intention was that the abbot of Fontfroide should send a team of monks there to found a Cistercian monastery in Catalonia for the glorification of God. At the same time, though, the count undoubtedly intended to advance the resettlement of the area in this way, since it was a sort of no man's land left over after Tortosa, Lleida and Siurana had been reconquered from the Moors (1148-1154). Poblet, then, was to be a house of worship, as well as a repopulating move and a sort of model farm, since

the Cistercians, at that time, were skilled at breaking-in barren land and possessed a highly efficient agricultural system. Indeed, before long, the monks of Poblet were working part of the land they had received (probably reclaiming some of it from the forest) and gradually introduced grazing stock (sheep and cows) and goats and had a small but well-organized stable for breeding horses. The first monks of Poblet must have built rudimentary provisional constructions in which to live and carry out their religious duties. About 1160, however, work started on the definitive buildings. The church, built in the purest Cistercian style (a slightly pointed central nave and two more pointed lateral naves), must have been completed in about 1200, along with the other essential buildings such as the refectory. On the other hand, the dormitory (a huge room with a wooden roof sloping on two sides and supported by arches resting on beautifully carved

corbels) was not built until the middle of the thirteenth century (over the eastern wing of the cloister, built shortly before), which means that for many years the monks used a provisional dormitory whose site is unknown to us. The rest of the monastery buildings were built during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (the definitive kitchen, the rest of the cloister, the chapter-house or meeting place for the community, etc.). On the other hand, the fifteenth century constructions (for example, the dome) could be called complementary. In addition, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Catalan rulers erected several buildings at Poblet, which are not, strictly speaking, a necessary part of the life of the community. These royal constructions are the tombs of many of the kings and queens, a palace, the walls and a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Rose and to Saint George. The twelfth century catalogue of books from the monastery library, listing only



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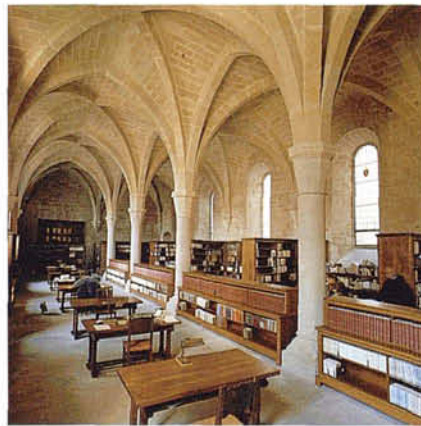
forty-two volumes, still exists. The reason for such a small number is that, as is known, books were written by hand, one by one, and their production was therefore very slow. It has been calculated that a copyist took a year to write a Bible. This scarcity of books points to a very different literary situation from the present one: books for private reading did not exist, and for that reason, a common practice in the monasteries (and also castles) was for someone to read aloud while the rest of the community listened. Therefore, when the so-called Church Fathers (bishops and theologians of the first five centuries, whether Greek or Latin) and the spiritual writers of the sixth and twelfth centuries wrote commentaries on the Bible, they very often referred not to a Bible they had read in private, but to one they had heard read to them during Mass or Matins (the first office of the day, held before daybreak and

composed of psalms, readings and hymns). Later, when professional copyists began to emerge who made a living copying texts for teachers and students in universities, books (which were still hand-written) began to sell more and become more common everywhere, including, of course, Poblet. At the same time, thanks to the renewed interest in the study of the ancient Roman Law (a revival which originated in Bologna, Italy, in the twelfth century), books appeared in libraries such as that of Poblet, which were not merely liturgical or religious but also covered legal matters. Finally, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, various monks from Poblet studied and taught in the universities of Montpellier, Toulouse and Paris, and the nominalist doctrines of Ockham, fashionable at that time amongst European intellectuals, were introduced into the community.

The monks and lay brothers worked the

land, carried out domestic tasks (cooking, cleaning, etc.), and, if specialized, wrote the manuscripts and documents necessary for the different aspects of the life of the community. Apart from this, there were obligations regarding prayer and spiritual reading and the intellectual tasks allotted to those monks who were best prepared for them. As regards financial organization however, it should be mentioned that, especially after the thirteenth century and for a variety of reasons (absence of vocation amongst lay brothers, completion of building work), the monastery had to change the financial structure of the community and acquire rights over the neighbouring villages.

In the fourteenth century, the king, Pere *el Ceremoniós*, had some elegant tombs constructed, with reclining alabaster figures, in which to bury two of his ancestors who had provisional graves in the church of Poblet: Alfons *el Cast*, who first united



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Catalonia and Aragon, and Jaume I *el Conqueridor*, who took from the Moslems the vital kingdoms of Majorca, a refuge for pirates and an obstacle to Mediterranean trade, and Valencia, fertile land which extended the shores of his territories southwards. At the same time as he had these tombs constructed (supported on flat arches), he had further tombs constructed—and the reclining figures carved—on the same arches, for himself and his son, the future Joan I, along with the statues of their respective queens. He also had walls built round the monastery, with two perfectly proportioned towers in the best military architectural style flanking the entrance. This gave Poblet the appearance of a fortress. He also gave the monastery his extensive library of historical works (headed, as always in those days, by the Bible, as the beginning of the history of the world). This donation of historical works has a connection with the building

and sculpture of the royal tombs and the fact that in 1375 the king decreed that from then on Poblet would be the dynasty's official and obligatory pantheon. The books donated were to make Poblet a sort of national public library in which (as the king himself wrote in a letter) one can read the heroic deeds of the dynasty and see how, from such modest beginnings, it had come to achieve such greatness.

Apart from those already mentioned, the royal buildings at Poblet include a palace built by Martí l'*Humà* (d. 1410), a palace whose interior arches were, for unknown reasons, left unfinished until recently; the work was stopped long before the death of the king. The idea of building a palace at the monastery (a medieval palace, very gloomy and not at all luxurious compared with Versailles) was to provide accommodation for the king and his court when they visited Poblet. In fact, in Catalonia, as

in Castile, France and England, the royal court had no fixed residence, but was itinerant and solved the problems of state *in situ* and, at least in theory, with a better understanding of them. Therefore, on their journeys, the kings and all the courtiers stayed in palaces (such as that in Barcelona), noblemen's castles and monasteries.

The monastic buildings, together with the royal ones, completed with a beautiful Gothic chapel situated outside the precinct and built in the fifteenth century by king Alfons *el Magnànim*, with other important additions in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, make Poblet the most complete medieval site of its kind in Europe.

The monastery of Poblet, a national monument, with its beautiful and varied architecture, is visited by almost 150,000 people a year, from all over the world. ●