Poblet Monastery cloister garden on the Al-Andalus border: aims and meaning of the restoration work

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Introduction

The royal monastery of Santa Maria of Poblet, the largest monastic complex in Western Europe, was the burial site of the kings of the Crown of Aragon during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is one of the most important monasteries in the Roman Catholic Church and is today inhabited and run by the same monastic order that founded it nine centuries ago. Its name derives from the Latin *populetum* for white poplar (*Populus alba*), a tree that grows abundantly along the rivers and streams of the area and whose white bark symbolizes the white habits of the Cistercian monks. The monastery, located at 500 m a.s.l. in the piedmont of the Serra de Prades, forms part of a Natural Site of National Interest created by the Catalan Government in 1984 to protect the landscape around the monastery, which was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1991.

Fig. 1. General aerial view of the monastery complex of Santa María de Poblet in autumn, with the leaves of the surrounding vines already beginning to change colour. The World Heritage Site covers 16 ha and consists of the whole of the area within the perimeter wall, including the gallery forest of poplars and ashes that lines the stream, el Torrent de Sant Bernat.

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At the height of its splendour, the monastery was home to over 300 monks and possessed numerous 'Cistercian farms' run by lay brothers that exploited its agricultural land and forests. The monastery's buildings cover around 12,000 m^2 and is surrounded by three concentric walls. The World Heritage Site includes all the medieval buildings and the walled gardens and orchards that today are mainly dedicated to viticulture (Fig. 1).

In 2012 work began on a diagnosis of all the monastery's gardens: within its walls there are over 40 different gardened spaces that in all cover more than 15,000 m^2 (Fig. 2). The monastery also has a number of indoor gardens, of which the most important are the medieval gardens of the main cloister, of the cloister of St Steven and of the Abbot's cloister.

This article concentrates on the garden in the main cloister, a jewel of sacred art stylistically situated in the transition between the Romanesque and the Gothic (thirteenth-fourteenth centuries) that historically has always been – and still is – at the heart of this monastic complex (Nº 1 in Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Situation of the gardens in the Poblet monastic complex in 2012.

The gardens of the three cloisters are numbered 1, 2 and 3. Also of note are the dark colour of the two ponds, one the millpond (18) and the other used to water the vegetable gardens (14), and the roof of the Abbot's Palace covered by solar panels (below 20).

A chance to replant the garden in the main cloister

In winter 2010–11, when work was carried out in the main cloister to solve problems of damp, the mandatory archaeological excavations undertaken at the same time involved earth movements that eliminated practically all the flower beds and garden plants – with the exception of the four tall cypresses – that had been planted in the twentieth century. This was seen as an opportunity for remodelling the gardens in this important part of the monastery. However, before entering into greater detail, it is worth reflecting on the function and importance of the cloister within the monastic complex as a whole.

The Cistercian monks based the floor plan of their monasteries on the idea of circulation around the cloister, the communication hub that linked all of the monastery's buildings (Altisent, 1974). Today, its function remains unchanged and it is still of vital importance for the monks that inhabit the monastery and who walk the cloisters in silence six times a day at Matins, Lauds-Eucharist, breakfast, lunch, Vespers-dinner and reading-Compline. Moreover, in summer, the monks meet at dusk in the cloister to listen to the reading of the Rule of St Benedict (480–547) and on solemn occasions there are processions such as the Procession of Brotherhood or of Corpus Christi. In addition to these communal uses, the cloister is also a place where monks and guests can go to meditate, pray or contemplate alone, either seated or as they stroll, at any time of day or night but especially just before or at dusk. In stark contrast, when the cloister at Poblet is open to the public, over 150,000 people visit annually.

Until 2011, the gardens of the monastery's main cloister did not differ greatly from any other garden to be found in the main monuments in Catalonia. The arrangement of the flower beds and grass, enlivened by a number of cypresses, has become commonplace in our country despite the fact that in this region, with its Mediterranean climate that requires plants to be watered during the dry months, there is no historical tradition of gardens in this style.

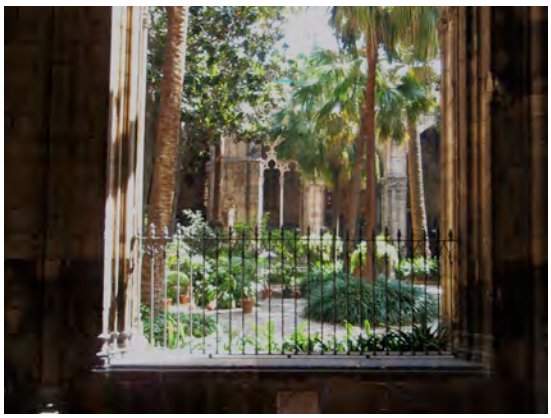
Fig. 3. The garden in the main cloister of Poblet before the work began, with featureless asymmetrical grass lawns, a few rose bushes and the tall cypresses.

One of the ideas proposed for the future of the gardens in Poblet was that it would be desirable to apply the same biblical and Mediterranean principals to all the monastery's gardens. It was decided that the gardens would be replanted following three criteria: they would be ecologically friendly and cheap to maintain; their design would be based on the biblical-monastic idea of plants; and they would be visually attractive. Thus, when replanting the gardens, care would have to be taken to use plants mentioned in the Bible, well studied by Michael Zohary (1982), and to plant species in a significant and symbolic way, that is, according to the function of each garden in the context of the monastic complex. In this way, both monks and guests and visitors would be able to enjoy their beauty and scents and to contemplate their symbolic significance. These ideas are compatible with the tenets of the ecological conversion that the Poblet monastic community adopted in 2009 in terms of both water saving and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, since most of the plants mentioned in the Bible are from arid regions with much poorer soils than those of Poblet and are as such hardy species that need little care and attention.

Historical references to the cloister gardens

As yet we are not sure what the original main cloister garden in Poblet would have looked like since there is no record of any description of the central part of the cloister, either when it was built or in subsequent centuries. According to the monastery's librarian-archivist, brother Xavier Guanter, there are no documents in the monastery's extensive library that can throw light on which plants were originally planted in the cloister's garden. Nevertheless, research into medieval and Renaissance gardens in Barcelona in the twelfth–sixteenth centuries has provided a considerable amount of information on medieval monastery and convent gardens that allow us to speculate about the original gardens of the Poblet monastery.

It is well documented that cloister gardens in Catalan monasteries were planted with orange and lemon trees that, despite originating from Hispano-Moorish gardens, "were considered to be characteristic of the medieval tradition of gardens in the city of Barcelona". We also know that gardens of medieval monasteries contained a considerable variety of ornamental and aromatic and medicinal herbaceous species (Parés, 2005). The investigations carried out by Anna M. Adroher (1978 and 2000) reveal the presence of orange and lemon trees in the cloister gardens in Barcelona from the fourteenth century onwards. For instance, the cloister garden of the monastery of Santa María de Jonqueres was divided into four flower beds that contained ornamental and medicinal flowers, while in 1494 the cloister garden of Barcelona Cathedral had orange and lemon trees and cypresses and to this day conserves the leafiness of the medieval garden.



Figs. 4 & 5: Leafy aspect today of the cloister garden in Barcelona Cathedral, with palms and orange trees. The presence of orange trees in this cloister was first documented six centuries ago.

The documents that talk of the plants used in medieval cloister gardens indicate that priority was given to attractive flowering trees, bushes and herbs that evoked the idea of Paradise. Indeed, the word 'paradise' comes from the Persian *paridaeza*, which means literally 'closed space', a phrase used in antiquity to describe walled gardens with geometrically straight lines. In Latin, these were called generically *hortus conclusus*, that is, sheltered gardens that greatly resemble the gardens found inside cloisters. The commonest tree species in medieval cloisters in Christian areas in the north-east Iberian Peninsula were cherry, apple, orange, pomegranate and lemons. Flowering plants included roses and lilies, species that are much cited in documents from medieval monasteries.

Curiously, some of the best-documented and well-researched medieval cloister gardens are to be found in the Metropolitan Museum in New York in its *The Cloisters Gardens*. Here, three European cloister gardens – one of which is from Sant Miquel de Cuixà in the former Catalan county of El Conflent (today in the French *département* of Pyrénées Orientales) – have been reconstructed after having been transported stone-by-stone to New York. This cloister garden contains 66 different species, with a predominance of aromatic species selected and planted to ensure that some plants are in flower throughout the whole flowering period – despite the harshness of the New York winter (Bayard, 1985).

By contrast, gardens such as those at the abbey of Fontfroide (Languedoc), the mother house to Poblet, that have been restored in various Cistercian monasteries in Europe in recent decades are often very beautiful but tend to replicate neo-classical or even Baroque styles rather than medieval gardens. It is well known that most medieval cloister gardens differed greatly in appearance from the French or Italian neo-classical styles that today predominate in most medieval cloisters in the Mediterranean region, where grass-covered flower beds and gravel paths, cold and less aesthetically pleasing, are the norm.

Hispano-Moorish ornamental influence

Titus Burckhardt, the great expert in Islamic art, noted that "the Almohad (*Al-Muwahhidun* = the Unitarians) architecture that developed in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, which was consciously limited to essential and purely geometrical forms, has an obvious affinity with the contemporaneous art of the Cistercians in Burgundy". At the same time as the Cistercians introduced the pointed arch into European sacred architecture in the mid-twelfth century, the Almohad dynasty adopted it in the East and then introduced it into western Islamic art (*al-Magrib*) (Burckhardt, 1977). These ideas and forms were not restricted simply to architectonic forms but also extended to the decoration.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) advocated a simplification of architectural styles by eliminating the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures that were common in the decoration of Benedictine monasteries and, like the Almohads, reduced ornamentation to just geometric and phytomorphic forms. This stylistic convergence occurred in both in time and place in certain areas along the northern border of Al-Andalus where, in the Christian world, the refined Hispano-Moorish art was much admired. Thus, it is both understandable and logical that Christian benefactors contracted artisans, some of which may have been Mudejars, to decorate their monasteries (such as Poblet) that stood on the frontier with Al-Andalus. Likewise, it should come as no surprise that this stylistic influence should extend beyond the monasteries to the cathedrals (e.g. the cathedral cloister in Tarragona) and other sacred buildings, which were influenced by the momentous Cistercian reforms during a period that saw the development of one of the most solemn and elegant architectural styles in Christendom.

Despite being pure Cistercian in design and architecture, the cloister at Poblet is decorated with attractive Hispano-Moorish elements. Indeed, almost all the capitols contain stylized plant motifs, often characteristically interwoven like basketwork, or flower and fruit motifs that father Agustí Altisent, the monastery's official historian, believes to show a Hispano-Moorish influence. The capitols with basketwork-like design could be a reference to the Cistercian Order (*Cistercium* in Latin, *Cîteaux* in French), given that some authors link the etymology of 'Cister' to *cistella* (Catalan for 'basket').

Figs. 6 & 7. Capitols from the main cloister in Poblet (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). The capitols in the left-hand photograph have a basketwork-like design that evokes the name 'Cister'. On the right, capitols in an Al-Andalus style.

Moreover, we know that the Hispano-Moorish influences that we see in many of the monastery's corbels, roof bosses and capitols are also present in the paving stones and, almost certainly, in the cloth that would have adorned the walls of the cloister's galleries on feast days (Altisent, 1974). Indeed, the paving of the galleries of the main cloister were once more than just the solid stones that we see today and would have consisted of alternating stone slabs and squares of ceramic tiles decorated in colourful red and octagonal designs reminiscent of the interwoven patterns found in Al-Andalus. Fragments of this type of paving are conserved in the monastery's museum and in the Ceramic Museum in Valencia. According to González Martí (1952), these tiles were manufactured in Valencia (*Balansiyah*) when Guillem Agulló was Abbot (1361-1393).

It is important to remember that during its first centuries of existence the Cistercian monastery of Poblet maintained a cordial relationship with the neighbouring Moorish territories of the *Marca Superior* (*Al-tagr al-Ala*) as is shown by the aforementioned decorative elements and a number of documents written in Arab. One such document was emitted by the Almohad caliphate of Valencia in the thirteenth century and authorized the monastery's sheep flocks to graze in the Moorish-dominated parts of Valencia (*Xarq al-Andalus*) (Altisent, 1974).

Thus, it is highly plausible that Hispano-Moorish ornamental garden features such as certain flower and plant species from the Mediterranean and Middle East that the Moors introduced into the Peninsula were present in the main cloister garden in Poblet, many of which, furthermore, are mentioned in biblical texts. This idea is even more credible if we stop to reflect on the symbolism of these interior gardens that appears in both Moorish and Christian traditions.

Interior garden courtyards in Moorish Al-Andalus symbolized the gardens of Paradise (*jannat al-firdaws*), which were represented using the classical Persian quadripartite division (*chagar-bagh* – literally 'four gardens') whose origin goes back at least five millennia to the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh (around 2,700 BC). This ancient quadripartite garden design with a fountain in its midst spread throughout the Moorish world, from the Caliphate of Cordoba (*Qurtuba)* to the Mongol Empire in the Indian subcontinent, and evoked the four rivers of Paradise described in the Qur'an and in the Book of Genesis through an attractive combination of flowers and shrubs, springs, ponds and fish tanks (Clark, 1977).

Nevertheless, it is likely that the changes imposed at various points in its history in the painting and decoration of the main cloister at Poblet, revealed during the recent restoration work, were mirrored in changes in the design of the garden. One of the periods in which these changes were most obvious is that of the reign of Martin the Humane, a great lover of gardens and a king who had a profound impact on the monastery. Documents state that it was this Catalan king who first laid out the garden in the Royal Palace in Barcelona in 1401, which became the model for many other gardens in the city. The King himself directed the work in the garden, which lasted for six years, and his letters reveal that, aside from showing how much care he took with the least detail, he planted orange, medlar, cherry, lemon, peach, grapefruit and apple trees, along with jasmines, myrtles, thyme and vines in the galleries that were allowed to climb up the walls. Although most of these plants were brought from Valencia, a few were imported from Moorish-controlled Cordoba and Sicily (Adroher, 1975).

Although the exact details of the changes that the main cloister garden at Poblet underwent over the centuries are unknown, we do know that they lasted until it was abandoned during the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1835. In his book *Història de la restauració de Poblet* (The story of the Restoration of Poblet) (1983), Joan Bassegoda i Nonell includes a photograph from 1901 showing the garden in a lamentable state of disrepair, with many of the fruit trees smothered by brambles and no cypress trees.

During the twentieth century the gardens were reformed twice without any respect for the rules of composition or the aesthetic principals of medieval cloisters: flowerbeds with rounded corners and of unequal shape and size were placed asymmetrically, while wide, equally asymmetrical paths crossed the centre of the courtyard. Plants were limited to cypresses, a few rosebushes, a couple of shrubs and grass (see Fig. 3).

An analysis of medieval European monastery cloisters dating back to the first surviving documents such as those from the Swiss monastery of Saint Gall (ninth century) show that cloister flowerbeds were symmetrical and that their design was linked to the symbolism of the quaternity: stability and the order and rhythm of the Creation is revealed in the four elements, the four seasons, the four parts of the daily cycle, the four ages of man, the four humours, the four rivers of Paradise (Genesis 2, 8-14) and even the four-sided lay-out of the New Jerusalem (Revelation, 21, 16) (Schimmel, 1993). In the centre of the cloister – be it in the geometrical or symbolic centre – there would be a fountain or a well, which symbolized Christ, the Water of Life (Revelation, 22, 1, 17).

As per the Cistercian style and for functional and symbolic reasons, the fountain in the main cloister at Poblet is not in the centre of the courtyard. Functionally, it is near the entrance to the refectory where the monks and their guests eat, while symbolically it is linked to the Incarnation of the Word and its proximity to the wing of the cloister that signifies the human corporal dimension. This symbolism is strengthened by the motifs of the capitols that join the fountain structure and the surrounding gallery, unique as the only ones with ornamentation with motifs of locally growing plants (oak and fig leaves, etc.). Despite not being in a central position, the symbolism of the water is expressed by the fountain's circular form: the circle represents perfection and its position in a beautiful hexagonal Romanesque structure represents the transition between the circular shape of

the fountain and the squareness of the cloister, and evokes the six days of the Creation according to the Book of Genesis and other similar symbols. It has been shown many times that the symbolic numbers that appear in the Bible played a fundamental role in both the structure of the church's liturgy and its architecture and other forms of sacred medieval art that include the gardens of its cloisters (Meyer, 1975).

The work carried out

When the idea of restoring the cloister garden was first mooted, the Catalan government's General Directorate of Cultural Heritage placed three conditions on the work to be carried out. First of all, a 2.3-m-wide gravel path should be placed around the whole perimeter of the cloisters to help drain off the water that spouted from the overhanging gargoyles; secondly, the use of plant species requiring a lot of water should be avoided to prevent any build up of humidity; and thirdly, plants such as trees and tall shrubs should not interfere with the views of the cloister from the walkways. The work conducted has respected these conditions and can be justified historically and symbolically as a way of guaranteeing a harmonic balance between the resulting garden and the architecture of the cloister.

The project has brought back to life the original design and distribution of medieval cloister gardens through the use of species that reflect the symbolism of Paradise and, moreover, that of the four-sided Cistercian cloisters.

This quadripartite garden design is derived from the shape of the cross, the garden's most basic shape. The space inside the Latin cross is the best fit for the architectonic composition of the main cloister at Poblet, above all in the case of the fountain structure, which is off-centre and abuts the north wing.

Fig. 8. Restoration of the original quadripartite main cloister garden at Poblet, spring 2012.

The strips separating the flowerbeds and the paths and the perimeter gravel drainage area were all placed on top of a base of local sandstone from La Floresta, the same stone that was used to build the monastery. The paths that cross the garden were then covered with rounded marble chips. A crystalline stone was chosen because, symbolically, this type of stone is 'purer' since its constituent minerals are 'simplified' and reordered as crystals. In addition, from an aesthetic and practical point of view, crystalline stones are more resistant to weathering and thus will maintain their clean appearance for longer than a sedimentary rock such as a limestone. Thus, this type of stone was the most appropriate for symbolizing the rivers and the boundaries of a space intended to evoke Paradise (see Fig. 9).

The choice of the plant species planted in the flowerbeds was determined, logically, by the climatic features of the cloister since the aim was to prolong the flowering sequence for as long as possible during the growth period. As well, powerfully scented species were given priority to add sweet aromas to the cloister's characteristic peacefulness, its birdsong and the murmur of its fountain. Throughout the year, like the flowers, the perfumes change in accordance with the diurnal and seasonal rhythms of the plants, as would have occurred in many Hispano-Moorish gardens.

Fig. 9. View of the paths covered by rounded marble chips and the drip irrigation system before it was covered over.

The four tall cypresses in the garden form part of the group of cypresses that was planted at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although cypresses are not common in medieval cloisters, these four trees were left since they are well positioned, one in each corner, and because they are biblical species that evoke immortality, eternity, the righteousness of the just and wisdom. For example, when Wisdom compares itself with the plants, the second species that it mentions is the cypress (Ecclesiastes 24, 13). As well, despite being somewhat sombre in aspect, in the summer these trees are home to numerous songbirds that enliven the cloister with their joyous songs that blend in harmoniously with the melodies sung by the monastery's church choir during religious ceremonies.

The choice of species gave priority to wild over cultivated species for two reasons: firstly, wild plants without human intervention evoke the symbolism of Paradise more directly and, secondly, the presence of wild flowers helps meditation on the spiritual value of nature and the spiritual symbolism of flowers. The planted species are all from the Mediterranean or the Middle East as stated in the above mentioned guidelines of the monastery gardens.

In order to translate the symbolism of the Cistercian cloister into the flower arrangements, the medieval symbolism of colour was applied following Frédéric Portal (2003). The southern wing of the cloister abutting the church is the shadiest and corresponds to the spiritual dimension; here, white flowers were planted that represent uncreated light, the divine unity, perfection, purity and chastity. The east wing, which corresponds to the mental dimension, abuts the chapter house and contains yellow flowers since this colour symbolizes created light, inspiration and the faith. The north wing, the sunniest and corresponding to the physical or corporal dimension, abuts the refectory and the kitchens and is filled with red flowers that symbolize sanctification, sacrifice and blood. Finally, the west wing that abuts the doorway and entrance used by visitors and guests, which corresponds to the social dimension, is planted with blue flowers since this colour of infinity, and is the third primary colour after yellow and red.

Fig 10. Work underway on the garden in spring 2012. In all, 60 species of plants of the required colours were planted, of which around a third were bulbs.

Bearing in mind the desire to have plants in flower for as much of the year as possible to guarantee a rich diversity of colours, as well as the limiting effects of the climatic conditions of the cloister, it was decided that the transitions between the four colour spaces would be gradual rather than sudden. Thus, flowers of intermediate colour were also planted: between the white and blue flowers, a strip of sky-blue flowers was planted; between the red and blue there is a strip of purple and violet; between the red and yellow, a strip of orange; and between the yellow and white a

mixed straw-coloured strip of these two shades. Plants are grouped or mixed according to their physiology and, for example, the bulbs, which give beautiful spring flowers before disappearing for the rest of the year, have to be mixed with annual species to prevent the appearance of bare patches.

To ensure that all are visible, plants were placed with the smallest on the outside of the flowerbeds and the largest towards the inside. In the centre stand the rose bushes and so all the plants can be admired from the Romanesque and Gothic arches of the galleries that surround the garden.

Fig. 11. Summer aspect of the area next to the fountain structure, with yellow flowers on the right (the mental wing) and white on the left (the spiritual wing).

A number of reasons justify the placing of a rose bush in the centre of the garden that is situated in the heart of the monastery. Firstly, there is the symbolic link between the rose and the Virgin Mary, the patron of the monastery, and the mystical rose of the Litany of Loreto. In fact, the walled garden itself symbolizes the Marian garden and the rose, as was shown by C. Beaune (1998). Furthermore, the rose is undoubtedly the most important symbolic plant in Christian art; it represents spiritual receptivity and the chalice that catches the blood of Christ, and is also linked to liturgical practices such as the rosary and to architectonic features such as rose windows. The rose-ochre colour of the roses in the cloister garden is blended from white, yellow and red, the three colours, as mentioned above, that correspond to the three wings of the cloister symbolizing the three dimensions of the human being: corporal, psychological and spiritual. Finally, this variety of rose is scented and was selected intentionally for the monastery and today bears the name *Abadia de Poblet* (Poblet Abbey).

The explanation given to visitors to the monastery regarding the symbolism of the garden and the cloisters will be included in the audio-guide that will shortly be made available as part of the attempt to improve the quality of the visiting experience.

On 17 May 2012 the Abbot of Poblet, Rev. P. Josep Alegre, blessed the new garden with the following words of Jesus:

> *Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Therefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'Wherewith shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek.) For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof* (Matthew 6, 28-34) (21st century King James Version).

Figs. 12 & 13. The planting of the rose *Poblet Abbey* in the centre of the garden. This variety of rose was presented to the monastery by a Valencian nursery specialized in the selection and growing of roses.

A few days after the planting of the roses in the centre of the garden (Figs. 12 & 13), the vast majority of the other 60 species was planted in flowerbeds according to the abovementioned criteria. More plants of species that have adapted well to the garden have been planted in subsequent years. A garden of this complexity takes time to reach a state of plenitude and full beauty that all who visit it can enjoy.

It is appropriate to finish by recalling the words of Emma Clark in *The Art of the Islamic Garden* (Clark, 2004) who highlights the essential coincidence in symbolism and functionality between Christian cloister gardens and the Moorish *Chah-Bagh*. Here we have another example of the links in the essential dimensions based on the artistic and natural beauty of these indoor gardens that unite the World's two main religions. These gardens are ideal places to enjoy a profound sense of peace and to contemplate – two qualities that the world today is in need of perhaps more than ever.

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Photographic credits

Figure 1 is from the archive of the Poblet Valley Natural Site of National Interest. Figures 4 & 5 are from the Poblet Monastery archive. The remaining photographs are by the author.

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