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PROLOGUE

For more than eight hundred years, the monastery of Santa Maria de Vallbona has been the permanent home of a stable monastic community, made up of nuns. The community has always enjoyed the support, sympathy and complicity of the surrounding population and of the entire country, in general. Something that I perceived clearly when in September, 2007, in one of the commemoration ceremonies of the 850th anniversary, the presence of people from so many neighbouring communities made evident the emotions experimented inside those stone walls throughout history.

There is a reason for this popular support and recognition. It is partly due to the fact that the nuns have always worked towards the juridical, economical and social development of the territories within their domain. Thus, for instance, the granting of the Letter of Franchise to the people under their field of influence, which freed them from the consuetudinary abuses of *intestia*, where the lord kept a part of the property of the peasants who died without a will; *eixorquia*, similar to *intestia* and *cugucia* or confiscation of the properties of an adulterous woman. With their progressive and unusual attitudes, the nuns ran afoul of the feudal lords of the zone. The longevity of the monastery and the way the community reacted to those medieval issues, is a clear hint of the important role of these women during those times. You could say that their “social” approach has to be inscribed in the general context of the primordial role played by women in general, in the nation building of Catalonia.

In the 18th century, a monastic school was established; a place where young women could study music, grammar and calligraphy, besides other subjects of a religious nature. This made necessary a writing room, where the nuns could copy and decorate codices.

However, this fact, although absolutely normal in any other monastery, acquired a great importance here: it was something essentially abnormal. In the 18th century, education was reserved for very few people; hardly ever of the feminine gender. In the monastery of Santa Maria de Vallbona the pupils were women. Their education proved to be a valuable asset, not just for themselves, but for the monastic community and the whole society of their time, transforming the monastery into an important cultural centre.

So much so, that Pope Honorius III granted independence from the dioceses bishops to the nuns, cancelling their right to sue the nuns and their privilege of celebrating ceremonies in the monastic church without the consent of the abbesses. It was not always easy to claim those rights; conflicts were abundant, but the nuns finally prevailed. With their tenacity, constancy and the strength derived from their solid convictions, Vallbona's nuns have managed to survive all the bad times that have struck them to different degrees, through the centuries.

In addition to the popular support already mentioned, the monastery enjoyed the protection of the royal house, especially of James I and his second wife, Violant of Hungary, buried within the monastic walls. To the present day, the royal tomb has implied a permanent link between Catalonia and Hungary, as could be seen from the excellent show, *Princesses from far away lands*, that in 2009 travelled from Barcelona to Budapest with the exceptional inclusion of the magnificent statue of the Virgin of the Cloister, an image loved by believers and non-believers alike. However, in spite of the problems associated with the never completely accepted franchising of the populace, already on the side of the nuns, the nobility had no choice but to support the nunnery.

If a chronicle of Santa Maria de Vallbona, were to be written today, it could be assigned to several of the best historians in the country, who would apply their intellectual rigour and the best of their knowledge to the task. But Vallbona has never been a cold and impersonal space, situated in some remote spot of the national map, estranged from the people. To write about Vallbona, is not only to

study its historical vicissitudes in dust-filled scrolls; it means, above all, to love the place and the people and its inhabitants, giving life to it and providing human warmth and hospitality year after year, since almost nine centuries ago.

For that mission, nobody could be more appropriate than Josep Maria Sans i Travé, director of the National Archive of Catalonia, former head of the Archival Services of the Generalitat, a prestigious historian with an undisputed reputation. He is a man of the land; born near the monastery, in Solivella (Conca de Barberà). From personal experience, he knows of the positive influence Santa Maria de Vallbona has always exerted upon the neighbouring lands. This book is therefore, not only a history written with rigour, but also with love. Something that can be deducted from the fact that if science has no motherland, scientists do. And Sans i Travé is certainly a scientist.

It may seem like a tired cliché but the best part of the monastery is its nuns. Beyond the silent majesty of its cloisters and temple, the history accumulated over the centuries or the artistic wealth of its architecture, Santa Maria de Vallbona boasts something else that distinguishes it from the other monasteries.

Whereas Poblet is the expression and memory of the State, andMontserrat the emotional manifestation of the nation, Vallbona is the monastery of individuals: those who live and pray there and those who only stay for a few hours or days. Since, needless to say, there is no State or nation without people, I am a *vallbonista*; in the monastery, I have always been met with the warm welcome of a group of nuns capable of appreciating the small gifts of life, with the most sincere smile on their faces. The history of the nuns convent of Santa Maria de Vallbona is a patrimony of humanity, culture and society, without which it's impossible to understand the ancient, contemporary and future Catalonia.

It is a patrimony of humanity even more important than the architectural wealth, with its melange of Romanesque Cistercian, Gothic and Renaissance styles. The great labours of construction which

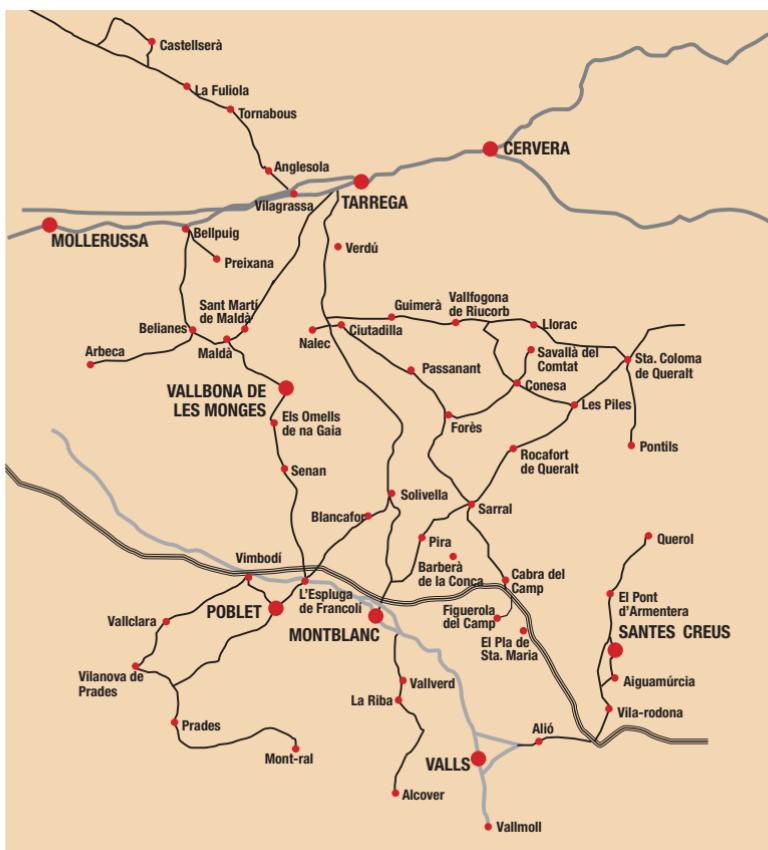
end up being the symbol of a country are usually started in times of economic bonanza. The Catalan Romanesque, Gothic and Art Nouveau are evidence of this rule. The monastery of Santa Maria de Vallbona was built during the time in which the old, Central Catalonia was expanding its frontiers towards the New Catalonia and beyond, uniting the House of Barcelona with the Crown of Aragon. It was a time when nobody made decisions for Catalonia at more than five hundred kilometres away.

Josep-Lluís CAROD-ROVIRA
Vice-President of the Generalitat of Catalonia

A LOOK AT THE PAST

1

LOCATION AND ESTABLISHMENT



The monastery of Santa Maria de Vallbona, belonging to the Cistercian order, is situated in the Catalan village of Vallbona de les Monges, in the region of Urgell, in the northeast corner of the Iberian Peninsula. Along with the monasteries of Poblet and Santes Creus; all three in the so-called New Catalonia —those territories conquered from the moors in the 11th and 12th centuries—, they constitute the most extensive Cistercian imprint in southwest Europe.

The origin of the Santa Maria de Vallbona's abbey is very different from the beginnings of the two fraternal monasteries of Poblet and Santes Creus.



General view
of the town of
Vallbona

Whereas those last two were born with the intention of creating a set of Cistercian abbeys —the first one, promoted by the Count of Barcelona Ramon Berenguer IV (1131-1162), who granted a territory in the Conca de Barberà to the Abbot of Fontfreda; and by the Catalan nobleman Guillem Ramon of Montcada with the donation to the Abbot of Grand Selva (Languedoc) of land in Valldaura (Cerdanyola del Vallès)—, the monastery of Vallbona was an eremitic community of women who incorporated themselves into the Cistercian discipline. It was part of a mixed group of hermits founded half way through the 12th century in the northern ridges of the mountain of Tallat, under the inspiration and guidance of a saintly hermit called Ramon. Quite probably, he and his followers were part of the



group of hermits evicted in 1150 by Count Ramon Berenguer IV from the municipal district of Poblet, when it was ceded to the Abbot of Fontfreda.

Once settled in Vallbona —in 1154, a woman was interred there—, Ramon directed the hermit's community that gathered around him, while propagating this new type of religious congregation in other parts of the New Catalonia.

One of the first problems faced by Ramon in his effort to establish a hermitical mode of life in the place was related to the ownership of the land where he wanted to settle. He realized he had to guarantee a legal right, unless he wanted to be eventually evicted from it, as had happened in Poblet. The eminent domain of the place belonged to Ramon of Cervera, the lord of, among other dominions, Es-

A map of Poblet kept in Vallbona, with the toponym of les Ermites ("the hermitages"), next to the municipality of Vimbodí.

Main gate
of the
monastery
of Escaladei



pluga de Francolí and the sector of Tallat. Near the dominion of Aguda (ascribed to the original hermit's chapel), Pere of Aguda, a vassal of the Cardonas, lords of the castle of Maldà and the lands around it, also held some rights. In 1157, Ramon wrestled from both noblemen the cession of their respective rights. In July, the first nobleman's clan ceded; and in October, the second's.

In that same year, the Count of Barcelona Ramon Berenguer IV compensated the three hermits evicted from Poblet (Ramon among them) through the donation of some land in Cérvoles, under the range of la Llena, so that they could build a monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary under the Benedictine rule. The concurrence of the monastery of Poblet, on the one hand, where the presence of another congregation nearby was not looked kindly upon, and the hermitical inclinations of Ramon, on the other, determined that on April 1, 1171, Ramon, the last surviving member of that group, reach an agreement with the monastery of la Conca, whereby he ceded his rights to the place in the Garrigues in exchange of some compensation.

The monastery promised to feed and clothe Ramon and his pupil Bernat, building them a chapel and a cell where they could spend the rest of their days; once they passed away the property would revert to the monastery.

The agreement, however, foresaw another aspect which would be very relevant in the future: Ramon and his disciple became part of the Poblet fraternity, and were thus entitled to the same funerary honours as the rest of the religious members of the community. Through this link to the Cistercian order, not entailing their entry in the monastery, Poblet agreed to provide Ramon with items very useful for a man who travelled between the communities he had founded: two pairs of sandals and a round hat each year, in addition to a tunic, a cape and a scapular. Bernat, his disciple, received only one cape a year. From that moment on, Ramon's looks changed radically: he got rid of the animal pelts with which he used to cover himself and protect his feet, and started to wear the Cistercian habit and sandals. It was a hint of what soon was going to happen to the hermit community of women formed under his auspices around Vallbona.

The two decades of 1150 and 1160 saw a flurry of activity on the part of Ramon, promoting the hermit's way. In Vallbona, in addition to Santa Maria, he had organized another group, a couple of kilometres away: the Holy Spirit. Not long after July of 1164, thanks to the donation of the castle of Colbrers and the Church of Sant Joan, he founded another centre for hermits. In Cérvoles he had yet a second one, where we find records of the presence of his pupil Bernat. Further south, in Poboleda, he organized another community on the land given in

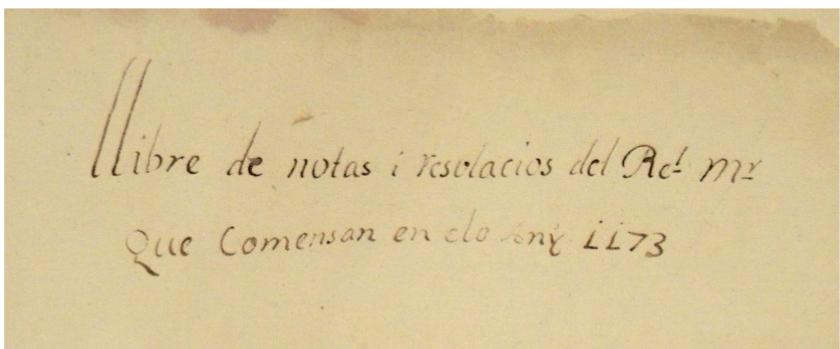
1164 by the lord of the castle of Siurana Arbert, by order of Alphonse I.

The group that settled in the Montsant would be the seed of the future charterhouse of Escaladei.

Although Ramon spent much time managing the different groups of hermits and travelling between their locations, he dedicated special attention to the original mixed community of Vallbona, with an emphasis on the hermitage section.

He thought that the best way to insure the survival of the community was to link the nunnery to a monastic order. The agreement entered with Poblet on April 1 of 1771 eased the way; in September of the same year, in the General Chapter of Cîteaux, the Abbot of Poblet submitted a request for the admission of the women hermits in the Cistercian order. Once granted, Ramon obtained that in order to train and educate the women novices in the spiritual values and the usages and practices of the order, in October of 1172 Òria (who would later become the first Abbess), two nuns and a couple of waiting-maids traveled from Tulebras (Navarra), to the first women's monastery created by the Cistercian order in the Iberian Peninsula. The traditional history of the monastery confirms that

A manuscript from the monastery's archives with the date traditionally accepted for the establishment of this Cistercian convent.



Libre de notas i resolucions del Adm. msr
que comensan en el any 1173

on an indeterminate day of the year 1173, the elderly women hermits took vows in the order, thus launching a new run of Santa Maria de Vallbona's abbey as a Cistercian monastery.

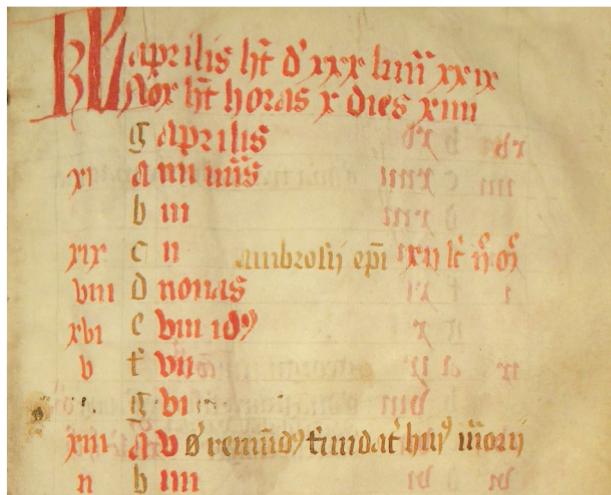
Ramon, the founder of the groups of hermits in the neighbourhood of Vallbona, still lived for three more years which he spent coordinating and managing their religious activities. However, with the passage of time, the women's group developed a personal profile. It was comprised of two communities: one in Colobrers, at the head of the valley, under Abbess Òria, who faithfully followed the discipline of the order; and another community grown around the original kernel, at the bottom of the valley, where the discipline of the order accommodated the traditional hermit way of life. This last community was ruled by a prioress. In addition, there were a few male hermits probably living in Sant Esperit, who, in spite of the advice given to them by Ramon de Vallbona did not enter the monastery of Poblet nor moved to



Ruins of the
Mas Déu
church and
landmark



Calendar
of the
monastery
with the
date
(April 9 of
1176) in
which "Ramon,
founder
of this
monastery"
died



the mountains of Montserrat, remaining where they had started their hermitages, choosing to continue their lives of solitude, penitence and prayer.

The new monastic life entailed a radical change in the economy. Sustaining a new and larger community and building a monastery in accordance with the rules of the order which would substitute the old hermit cells required a larger income.

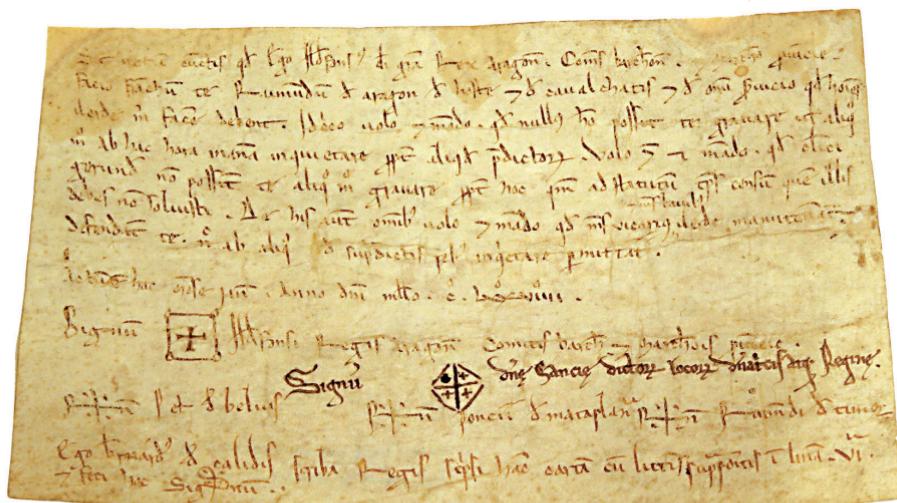
The simplicity of the life lead by the women hermits never needed great quantities of money. However, Ramon sought to enlarge the original property and acquired new terrains for them, either through outright purchase or by donations from the incipient patrons. In August of 1114, Ramon and the nuns of Vallbona bought a *dominicatura* (the rights of serfdom over a certain land) in Vilamanyanor from Berenguer of Cardona. He paid 500 Barcelona sous. The following year he obtained a piece of flat land in Anglesola, at Llagostera. A few years before, in 1169, he had obtained a vegetable orchard and a piece of land in Llorenç (contiguous to the proper-

ties of the monastery) from Pere de Aguda and his family.

The duplication of women's centres in the same spot entailed a certain difficulty towards a future consolidation. For this reason, on April 8 of 1776, the day before he died, in front of two of his most loyal followers, Ramon dictated that it was his will to strengthen the valley's community, leaving the ultimate decisions to the nuns concerned. He was buried in the church of that community. He also dictated that the Abbess of Colobrers be entitled to lead the community of Santa Maria de Vallbona. However, if she chose to remain in Colobrers, she would have to respect all the properties and rights of the community of Santa Maria de Vallbona, which could elect its own prioress to direct it, remaining subordinated to the Abbess of Colobrers.

On April 9, 1176, as indicated by the old necrology registry book of the monastery, the “founder Saint Ramon” met his maker and was buried in Santa Maria de Vallbona. On July 11 of the same year, his reputation of saintliness led his disciples to exhume

Deed of privilege granted by Alphonse I in 1179 in favour of the convent. It shows the emblems of the monarch and his wife Sancho



his remains and bury them again under the main altar of Santa Maria's church, called "the Old" to distinguish it from a new church built later on in the monastery. As we shall see, the mortal remains of Ramon remained there until 1665, the year in which they were moved to the monastic temple, where they were kept in a wooden casquet.

Òria, overcoming the reluctance of certain nuns, followed the advice of Berenguera of Cervera, a noble lady who was a patroness of the community of Santa Maria, decided to direct the group of nuns in the valley. In the fall of 1176, a few months after the reburial of the founder, Òria officially became the Abbess of Santa Maria de Vallbona. There is a document dated on October 17 of that year attesting to it.

Verdú's
castle, a
property of
the lord of
Berenguera

