

# Gaudí and some observations on the Modernist Garden at the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital

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**Summary.** Nineteenth-century Europe was characterised by a clear drive towards secularism, which provoked a religious reaction that reached its apex in the final decades of the century and was represented by artists such as Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926) or institutions such as the Güell Colony or the Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital. To understand this process of religious affirmation, it is also crucial to remember some significant movements, such as the new cult of Our Lady of Lourdes. The Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital Modernist garden contains architectural elements with some formal characteristics and symbolic content analogous or equivalent to different parts of the most important works Gaudí was constructing during the same period or immediately after completing the work of the Mental Hospital. [Contrib Sci 12(1):71-78 (2016)]

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## A construction beyond time and history

As we head west out of Barcelona towards the basin of the Llobregat River, amidst the immense agricultural landscape and the turbulent urban and industrial agglomeration we can find a Marian-inspired Modernist garden tucked away in the walled grounds of the former Mental Hospital in the town of Sant Boi de Llobregat. Built between 1905 and 1912, it has remained hidden over the passage of time and history.

As has been explained in various published articles [1,2,3,4,6], this Modernist site contains architectural elements with some formal characteristics and symbolic content analogous or

equivalent to different parts of some of the most important works Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926) was constructing during the same period or immediately after completing this work. To mention but a few, we find fragmented examples of an antecedent of the ceilings in the naves of the Sagrada Família Temple (1915–1921), the compositional structure of the floor plan at the Güell Colony crypt (1908–1915), formal aspects of the Casa Milà (1906–1912), and the cross-section and *trencadissos* (mosaics of broken tiles and glass) of the serpentine bench in Park Güell (1910–1914).

The Modernist constructions at the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital were erected in one of the centre's ex-

**Keywords:** Modernism · Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital · Our Lady of Lourdes · Book of Revelation · grotto · Gaudí, Antoni (1852–1926) · Güell Colony

pansion phases with the aim of landscaping the gardens in the enclosure. The work formed part of a pedagogical series of occupational workshops in which patients learned the bricklaying trade. The *Revista Frenopática Española*—a scientific magazine produced at the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital first published in 1903—and *Información y Noticias, Hermanos San Juan de Dios*—a publication by the religious brotherhood—contain information on the urban planning and architectural interventions carried out at the psychiatric centre. This documentation tells us that the first work in the institutional gardens took place between 1903 and 1904. The architectural ensemble of the Cascade Cave (*Cascada Cova*), a rocky construction in the shape of a cave with a slope crowned by a canopy, was built between the spring and winter of 1906 [11] before subsequent interventions in the garden in 1907 saw the addition of benches, waterfalls, bridges, etc. [12]. In 1910 a large reservoir with a central floating replica of Montserrat was built among the existing allotments [13] and between 1910 and 1912 the Flooded Chapel (*Capella Inundada*) was constructed, a grotto consecrated to

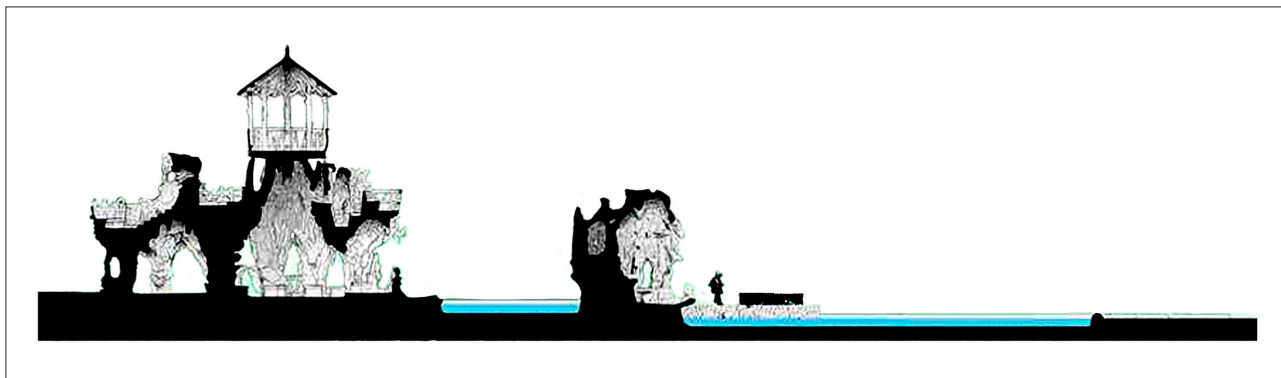
Our Lady of Lourdes in which mass was held twice a year from 1918 onwards [15]. Finally, in 1912 two plazas were landscaped and bordered by benches covered in *trencadis*. The archives of the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital (which is now the Sant Joan de Déu Healthcare Park) include dated glass-plated photographs which have been fundamental in accurately determining the years during which the different parts of this exceptional Modernist architectural ensemble were constructed (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

### The Güell Colony and the Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital: Two closely linked institutions

Now we shall turn our attention to the numerous and surprising connections and parallelisms which exist between the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital and the industrial “colony” of the Güells at Santa Coloma de Cervelló. The



Fig. 1. Contemporary postcard showing children next to the Cascade Cave.



**Fig. 2.** Cross-section of the architectural ensemble of the caves in the gardens of the former Sant Boi Mental Hospital. Drawing: Esteve Agulló-Galilea, David Agulló-Galilea and Felipe Buill.

latter is where Gaudí built what is considered to be his masterpiece, a church built between 1908 and 1915 that remained unfinished. Commissioned in 1898, the complex experimental work was undertaken in the colony's workshops and exhaustive analysis was done using photographs and structural calculations, resulting in the construction of a large funicular model.

During those years Gaudí would have established connections in Sant Boi de Llobregat as various artisan workshops in the town participated in the construction of the church at the Güell Colony. We know this due to the conservation of bills from these workshops signed by Gaudí and bills for the architect's journeys there by pony and trap. These bills are conserved in the Güell Colony rectory archives and include the José Molins mat makers, the Ramon Bruguérolas ironmongers and the José Elías café restaurant, all of which were located in Sant Boi de Llobregat. It is also worth emphasising that the master builder for the first phase of the Park Güell construction was Lluís Parés, who, along with many of his bricklayers, was born and worked in Sant Boi. This fact was provided by the research we carried out under the guidance of historian Guillem Fernández González at the Municipal Historical Archives in Sant Boi de Llobregat [8]. It is also highly relevant that there is a large building that still exists today within the grounds of the former asylum in Sant Boi which, although we have found no documents accrediting its authorship, presents several similarities in its formal and structural characteristics to the buildings by Francesc Berenguer i Mestres (1866–1914), Gaudí's right-hand man and among those who designed most of the constructions in the Güell Colony. This finding was confirmed and extended thanks to Manuel Medarde, archaeologist, industrial engineer and founder of The Gaudí Research Institute. During the years he dedicated to the Güell Colony project, Gaudí made the long

journey from Barcelona to the industrial hub by railway, arriving at the station in the town of Cornellà before taking a pony and trap to the town of Sant Boi de Llobregat. Just before reaching the colony, he would have passed the grounds of the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital where, between 1903 and 1912, an ensemble of grottos and benches were being built, which anticipate subsequent works by Gaudí.

As explained above, there is a geographical connection between the two institutions. Both are situated on extensive rural estates on the banks of the Llobregat River and lie within a few minutes walking distance of one another, thereby facilitating the establishment of a neighbourly relationship or interdependence. The first documentary evidence of this appeared during the research carried out by the team of Guillem Fernández González at the Municipal Historical Archives in Sant Boi de Llobregat, which shows that, owing to a cholera epidemic, hundreds of patients were transferred from the former Sant Boi de Llobregat sanatorium to the manor house on the Can Soler de la Torre estate, residence of the Güell family and the land on which the Güell Colony would be erected years later [9].

It must be noted that the Güell Colony and the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital were conceived and later developed within the same conflictive cultural, political and social context, thereby making it possible to establish similarities between both entities and facilitating a better understanding of the Modernist constructions at the former sanatorium in Sant Boi. Hence, the Güell Colony was initiated when Joan Güell i Farré (1800–1872)—who had amassed a large fortune in Cuba and promoted several industries upon his return to Barcelona—founded the El Vapor Vell factory in the Sants neighbourhood of Barcelona (1846), the sole producer of corduroy in Spain. As a result of the labour disputes



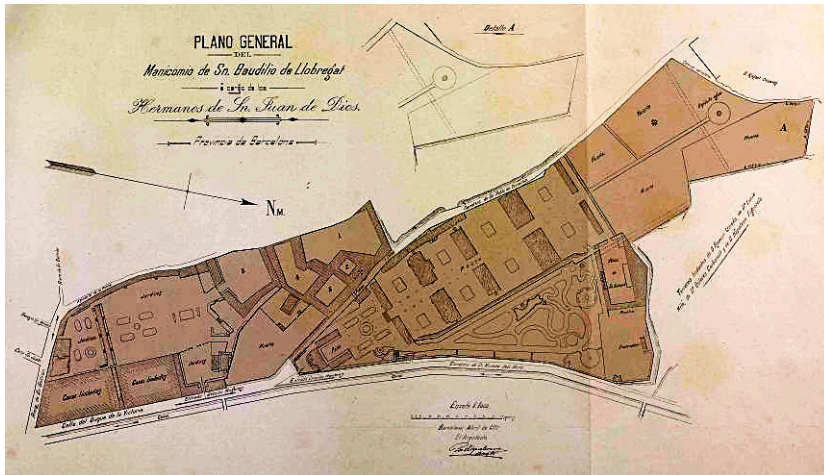


Fig. 3. Plan of the former Sant Boi Mental Hospital. Architect: Miquelerena, 1911.

in this textile factory, protests by the working classes spread to other large cities and represented a loss of control for the ruling classes. This, along with the difficulties of urban planning in Barcelona, drove industries to build outside the city, and in 1860 the business owner bought the Can Soler de la Torre estate in Santa Coloma de Cervelló and moved his corduroy industry there. Three decades after the initial industrial activity on this estate, on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1892, Eusebi Güell i Bacigalupi (1846–1918), son of Joan Güell i Farré (1800–1872), officially began textile production in the Güell Colony. The origins of what was known as the Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital can also be found in Barcelona, where Antoni Pujadas i Mayans (1812–1881), a doctor of medicine and surgery, managed the Healing House (*Casa de Curació*) on Canuda Street, a treatment centre for mental diseases. Owing to different conflicts between the patients and the local inhabitants as well as the possibilities for urban expansion which existed outside Barcelona, in 1854 the psychiatric centre moved to the town of Sant Boi de Llobregat, initially carrying out its work in the nucleus of a former Capuchin convent.

It is therefore evident that both the Güell Colony and the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital mainly originated from a desire to establish and recreate an isolated social model which allowed them to avoid a series of social conflicts, principally labour disputes and those arising from social coexistence, which were present in society at the time. Definitely, they were structured around a model organisational system in which collective work and religious life became the basic tools around which the operation of both institutions revolved.

In terms of the urban planning for both the industrial colony and the former asylum, hygienic criteria were applied

based on ideas originating in Great Britain in the early nineteenth century, providing a series of improvements to the surroundings and services with public spaces, a rationalisation of the urban planning and the implementation of systems with a high degree of organisational autonomy. In the case of the psychiatric centre, aside from the medical services we find a series of facilities linked to basic needs: a school, a library, a large agricultural colony and workshops for tailoring, carpentry, gardening, ironmongery, baking and printing.

The most productive area was the bricklaying workshop, in which patients learned the trade in order to work on the different expansions carried out in the asylum grounds, resulting in the construction of pavilions, service buildings or annexes in the gardens. It is worth highlighting that there was even a brickyard, where the bricks used to build the various pavilions and additional edifices were made. As mentioned above, there was also structured urban planning at the Güell Colony and, while the presence of architects from Gaudí's studio is documented from 1893, the earlier urban project for the colony is attributable to Francesc Berenguer i Mesures, co-worker and right-hand man of Gaudí himself. Here too a series of services were included—athenaeum, cooperative, café, schools, chemist's, theatre, parish church, etc.—which meant the colony became a system with a high degree of autonomy comparable to the asylum in Sant Boi. Moreover, aside from the parish church, the Güell Colony had a series of religious orders and associations which ran the social activities in the community. These included the Carmelite Sisters of Saint Joseph, who lived in the colony itself and worked to heal the sick and teach both children and young female workers, the Venerable Third Order of Saint Francis of Assisi, and the Saint Louis Workers' Board, where the cate-



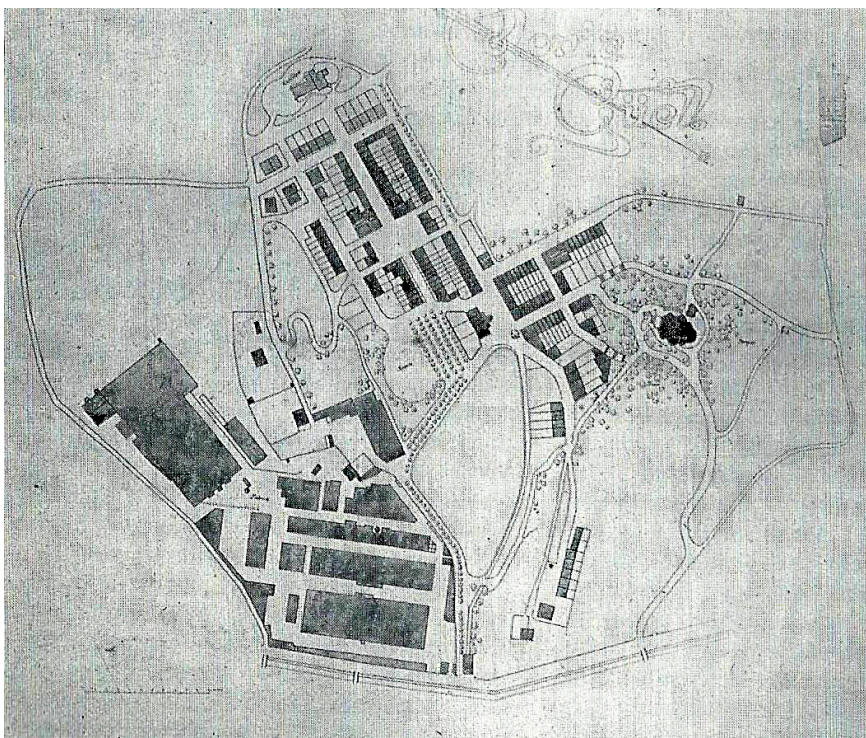
chism and Bible studies were taught. From the outset the former Sant Boi Mental Hospital, which was created around a framework based on hygienist theories, had its own parish church in which patients could participate in religious services (Fig. 3 and Fig.4).

In 1895 the San Juan de Dios Hospital Order took over the Sant Boi Mental Hospital, leading not only to the implementation of new regulations in which Catholic thinking became more prevalent but also to the incorporation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Congregation of Hospital Sisters to take care of the female patients. This subsequently led to the separation of the sexes and was the starting point for the creation of two different institutions.

Within this framework of a significant religious presence in the Güell Colony and the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital, we must mention two important events which allow us to link them both chronologically and ideologically. On 23 February 1905 a child labourer fell into one of the dye vats containing boiling water in the Güell Colony workshops, leaving him with severe burns on his legs. The boy, Josep Campderrós, also known as *“el Pepet de la pell”* (Pepet of the skin), was immediately transferred to the Sacred Heart Hospital in Barcelona where, thanks to a skin graft donated by fourteen of the colony’s workers and by Eusebi Güell’s own children, Claudio and Santiago, they were able to save his injured legs in an operation without anaesthetic [7].

His recovery was considered to be a genuine miracle and the story was published in almost every Barcelona newspaper; from that moment on the Güell Colony was idealised and viewed as a benchmark social organisation. In 1906, a year after the accident and just as the *“miraculous”* cure was appearing in the press and being widely talked about, construction work began on the Cascade Cave in the gardens of the former Sant Boi Mental Hospital, just a few metres from the Güell Colony. Full of formal references to the church in the colony and having the same experimental characteristics, the Cascade Cave formed part of a group of grottos designed for use by children and dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, the ultimate symbol for miracle cures.

The recovery of the boy from the Güell Colony led to the implementation of a series of propagandistic actions, which culminated in Pope Pius X (1835–1914) granting the Pontifical Diploma and the Benemerenti Gold Medal to the donor labourers. Thus, in 1911, and in the presence of the Bishop of Barcelona, Mgr. Juan José Laguarda (1866–1913), the Diocesan Board of Catholic Action awarded these diplomas and medals in the colony itself. Perhaps not coincidentally, in the same year construction of the Flooded Chapel began at the former sanatorium in Sant Boi. Situated to form the symbolic and geometric centre of a set of grottos in the asylum grounds, the architectural feature consisted of a grotto with the functions of a chapel and was presided over by a sculp-



**Fig. 4.** Plan of the Güell Colony, drawn by Francesc Berenguier and published in 1910.

ture of Our Lady of Lourdes. Meanwhile, in the same year further cases of cures considered to be miraculous appeared in the Güell Colony. Two sick workers, for instance, were healed after the colony's chapel invoked the intervention of Pius X and the Holy Trinity. It is noteworthy that these "miraculous" events caused many members of the clergy to make a pilgrimage to the industrial colony; this even included a visit from Rome by Mgr. Francesco Ragonesi (1850–1931), in representation of Pope Pius X.

Therefore, in the Güell Colony and the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital we find two institutions which are closely connected both physically and ideologically, a fact which allows links to be made between the events and activities which took place at the two sites, as well as making it evident that the construction of the Modernist edifices at the sanatorium is not a casual or isolated occurrence. This entire set of connections and analogies can be illustrated with an event from 1910. Among the acts which took place in Barcelona to celebrate the "V Social Week in Spain"—congresses at which the Church debated the social question—the speakers made a visit to the Güell Colony. During this visit, Mgr. Laguarda, Bishop of Barcelona, asked Eusebi Güell if, given its exceptional and exemplary nature, he would erect "a very thick, very high wall (around the colony) so that the doctrines of socialism would never penetrate" it. Such a wall already existed around the grounds of the Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital, making normal relations with the outside world surrounding it very difficult.

## The great Catholic resurgence in late Nineteenth- and early Twentieth-Century Europe

The construction of the garden dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes at the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital responds to and forms part of a dynamic which was present in the context of a period of significant political, economic and social change in Europe. Western culture underwent a complete transformation in the nineteenth century due to the radical advances in all areas of knowledge and as a result of all manner of revolutions. While the economy experienced two great industrial revolutions, in the political sphere the ideas from the Enlightenment of the previous century gave rise to bourgeois and proletariat uprisings. Philosophy produced the foundations for contemporary thinking: absolute idealism, dialectic materialism, nihilism, rationalism, etc. From the world of the arts came Romanticism: founded on

bourgeois idealism, this movement eventually led to the beginning of the avant-garde towards the close of the century. All these momentous shifts brought about a definitive and complete secularisation of society accompanied by a gradual decline in the traditional ways of life. As a consequence of and in response to these changes, the Catholic Church, and particularly Pope Pius X, decided to refute them with an ideological discourse. It was expressed through the proclamation of the *Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* (1854), the promulgation of the encyclical *Quanta Cura* with its *Syllabus errorum* appendix (1864) and the convening of the Vatican Council I (1869 to 1870), which, among other aspects, condemned the new doctrines and decreed papal infallibility with the common aim of reasserting the meaning of true Christianity.

During the same period there were many apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Europe, the first of which was in 1846 in La Salette, France, where the Virgin announced in an apocalyptic tone the punishments God would wreak on humanity and prophesied the imminent arrival of the antichrist. Once these apparitions were approved by Philibert de Brouillard (1765–1860), Bishop of Grenoble, devotion to Our Lady of La Salette extended very rapidly across Catholic Europe, particularly in Barcelona. Not only were nearly a thousand sanctuaries soon built throughout the continent, but also Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903) elevated the status of the temple at La Salette to a minor basilica. The most transcendent Marian apparitions, though, occurred in 1858 in a grotto in Lourdes, France, where, according to Bernadette Soubirous (1844–1879), the Virgin asked her to give penance and pray, to drink from a source which would spout clean water if she dug under a rock, and to erect a temple, predicting that pilgrims from all over the world would arrive. As a result of these apparitions, the image of Our Lady of Lourdes began to be venerated from 1864 onwards, with thousands of chapels throughout Europe building replicas of the grotto where the vision had appeared. Consequently, during the great Catholic resurgence in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, the grotto and the Virgin Mary became an iconic place of pilgrimage to rediscover a sacred place, which had to coexist with what was by then a completely secularised contemporary world [14].

As for Catalonia, the process of change towards modernity and contemporaneity definitively began in the second half of the nineteenth century. Already governed by a liberal political system and a fully capitalist economy, these decades were characterised by rapid economic and industrial growth, which culminated in two large projects: the 1888 Universal Exhibition and the Cerdà Plan, which marked Barcelona's de-



finite transformation and urban expansion. This new reality also implied a progressive secularisation of Catalan society and in response to this phenomenon the Catholic Church, which viewed liberalism as the source and origin of all evils, delivered a discourse to remind Catalans of the Catholic influence in the nation's history and promoted large numbers of pilgrimages and devotions with the aim of maintaining a collective consciousness in order to remind citizens that Catholicism had to be actively exercised and professed. At the same time many fundamentalist Catholic groups appeared, who responded with a discourse of confrontation against the significant and traumatic changes produced by modernity. It was in this context that the Spiritual Association of Devotees of Saint Joseph, founded in 1866 by Josep Maria Bocabella (1815–1892), began to design and build the Sagrada Familia Temple, conceiving it as an expiatory temple, a place financed by donations through which society could achieve social and spiritual redemption.

The last decade of the nineteenth century was a period of tension in all areas of society, principally arising from the severe economic and social inequalities which existed due to various factors, including the collapse of numerous banks, the loss of colonial markets, the agricultural crisis caused by the hemipteran phylloxera (*Dactylosphaera vitifoliae*), the re-assessment of economic protectionism and two significant terrorist attacks by anarchists (at the Liceu Theatre in 1893 and on Canvis Nous Street in 1896). All this social tension was also reflected in the ecclesial sphere, in this case as a conse-

quence of interpreting all the existing social, economic and moral problems as nothing more than a struggle between God and the devil. Pope Leo XIII himself supported this idea and in the 1890 encyclical *Humanum genus* he promoted the pious practices of reciting exorcisms in private and adding prayers of an exorcistic tone to the end of every mass. Consequently, it was a period in which liberalism, the labour movement, the popular classes and the Church experienced a conflict of interest on economic, social and moral issues. This subsequently triggered major events in the first decade of the twentieth century: the first general strike in Barcelona in 1902, which was met with an excessive repression by the government and employers; numerous attacks by anarchists, such as the one against President Antonio Maura (1853–1925) in 1904 or the 1905 attack on Cardinal Casañas (1834–1908); the political rise of the Republican Alejandro Lerroux (1864–1949), who was against Catalan autonomy, was anti-clerical and promoted workers' rights; and finally the incidents that unfolded during the Tragic Week in 1909 [10].

In the face of this series of changes, which inevitably led to a society governed by the parameters of rationalism and science, the French grotto also served as a reference for conservative Catalan Catholics to reconstruct their entire symbolic and religious world. Hence, the cult of Our Lady of Lourdes gradually spread across Catalonia and grottos dedicated to the Virgin were built in many gardens. One of the most representative works built during this period was the Our Lady of Lourdes Chapel in Pedralbes, constructed in Bar-



Fig. 5. Monks and Holy Mass at the Flooded Chapel of the former Sant Boi Mental Hospital.



celona around 1890 by the architect Joan Martorell i Montells (1833–1906), who had restored the Pedralbes Monastery in 1897 and with whom Gaudí had collaborated. We must also refer to the Nativity façade of the Sagrada Família Temple, particularly the Biblical scenes and the portrayal of the coronation of the Virgin Mary framed in a grotto. The entire sculptural work faces east, as do the Marian grotto and the Modernist architectural ensemble at the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital. Also worth mentioning from this period is the façade of the Casa Milà, which has forms that evoke a set of grottos: these were to be crowned by a large sculpture of the Virgin but in the end it was not erected for fear of attacks by anarchist and anticlerical groups.

The Modernist creations at the former Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital, built between 1906 and 1912 and dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, included a sculpture of the Virgin Mary, grottos, fountains, all types of plants, and images. The images were created in *trencadis* and located on the underside of the existing bridge, and were therefore only visible in the reflections on the water in the lake. All of the features created a sequence of Marian symbolism. The most significant symbolic element, however, is an east-facing chapel which formalises a grotto containing a statue of the Virgin Mary and from which emanates water that forms a lake, seemingly alluding to the spring where the apparition of the Virgin took place. This grotto, which has Our Lady of Lourdes wearing the twelve-starred crown from the Book of Revelation (unlike the original Lourdes statue), also features an abstract dragon with two expressive eyes which, by extending its tentacles and opening its mouth, spouts water from within. This allows us to establish the symbolic reference of this entire architectural ensemble to the passage of the woman and the dragon in Revelation, which tells the story of the Virgin Mary being pursued by a large dragon until it finally vomits its water once defeated (Fig. 5).

In conclusion, we can say that nineteenth-century Europe was characterised by a clear drive towards secularism, which provoked a religious reaction that reached its apex in the final decades of century and was represented by artists such as Gaudí or institutions such as the Güell Colony or the Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital. To understand this process of religious affirmation, it is also crucial to remember some significant movements, such as the new cult of Our Lady of Lourdes. All of this took place within a transcendent and complex historical process. To mark the culmination of the 1854 proclamation of the *Dogma of the Immaculate Conception*, in 1905—a year before work began on the Modernist ensemble at the Sant Boi de Llobregat Mental Hospital—

Pope Pius X performed the symbolic act of inaugurating the Lourdes sanctuary in the Vatican gardens complete with grotto and temple to the Virgin Mary, further clear evidence of the importance of this symbol during this period of history. ■

**Acknowledgements.** The author would like to thank Sarah Marshall for the translation of the original manuscript, Adriana Velásquez for the coordination of the translation, and Manel Guardia, architect and professor ETSAB (UPC), for their assistance during its elaboration.

**Competing interests.** None declared.

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