THE MEASURE OF THE VIRGIN’S FOOT

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In 1610, the Venetian engravers and print dealers Francesco Valegio (fl. 1598–1624) and Catarino Doino (fl. 1596–1641) were sent to prison and subsequently fined ten ducats for having printed and sold without licence the “forma intitolata Misura del sacratissimo piede della Madonna”.1 The proceedings were in the hands of the Esecutori contra la Bestemmia (Elders against blasphemy), a magistracy instituted by the Council of Ten in 1537, and which in 1543 had been given responsibility for the supervision of printed materials in Venice.2 Apart from Valegio and Doino, others had also been imprisoned at the same time for handling impressions of this print: Donato Graziosi, Giacomo Paulini (both described as printers) and Giacomo Penesi. Because their crime was simply to have offered the unlicensed print for sale, they each received a fine of only one ducat.

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The document was briefly noted by G. Pesenti, “Libri censurati a Venezia nei secoli XV e XVI,” La Bibbòfìla 58 (1956), p. 27.

The image in question, of which no impression has been traced, can be reconstructed at least approximately from surviving later works that are evidently closely related in subject matter. Among the large collection of woodblocks from the Modenese printing firm of Soliani, acquired by the Galleria Estense at Modena in 1887, is an image identified in lettering on the block as the *Misura del piede della beatissima Vergine*. A modern impression shows two angels kneeling on clouds holding an outline of what looks like the sole of a shoe (fig. 1). Above hovers the Virgin as intercessor. She stands on a cloud with her arms raised and extended in the ancient attitude of prayer.

It is clear from other examples that this was an indulgence image; the indulgence was to be gained by kissing the image and saying certain prayers. What seems to be the earliest traceable record of the indulgence is found on a page in Rivet’s *Apologia* of 1639, which shows a Spanish example of the image (fig. 2). The indulgence was said to have been granted by Pope John XXII to whomever kissed the *Misura* three times and said three *Ave Marias*. A similar marble version is found to the left of the altar of the Virgin in the oratory of the Madonna di Cimaronco near Arosio in the Ticino (figs. 3, 4). The marble relief of a footprint is set horizontally into a pier; above it is the outline of a sole, also of marble, with an inscription that translates: “The true measure of the foot of the Holy Virgin, Mother of God, taken from a shoe to be found in a nunnery at Saragossa in Spain. Pope John XXII conceded an indulgence of 700 years to whoever kisses it three times saying three

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3 Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Storici per le province di Modena e Reggio Emilia, *I legni incisi della Galleria Estense: Quattro secoli di stampa nell’Italia settentrionale* (Modena, 1986), p. 139, no. 126. The block measures 185 × 302 mm; the outline of the sole itself measures 195 mm in length and is 65 mm wide at its maximum.


5 André Rivet, *Apologia pro sanctissima Virgine Maria* (Leiden: Hegerus & Hackius, 1639), Book 2, chap. 9, p. 292:

ex figura soleae B. Mariae Virginis, quam in Hispania sculptam, typis expressam, et cum licentia impressam servo, hac forma, quam ad exemplar hispanicum imitantem curavirunt, cum inscriptione quae in medio soleae legitur, additis sequentibus verbis lingua vulgari, Hispanica: Medida del Pie sanctissimo de nuestra signora EL PAPA IVAN. XXII. Concedio Quien bezare tres vezes, y rezare tres Ave Marias devotamente a lu bendito honor y reverencia gana setecientos annos de pedon. Y es libre de much spoeligros. Tiendo la Bulla de la Sancta Cruzada. Impressa con licentia. Dirigida a la devoción del Cavallera de Gracia. On the foot itself: “Medida del pie sanctissimo de nuestra si.” I owe my knowledge of this image to the kindness of Tom Tolley.