The Allegation of Erasmus’ Syphilis
and the Question of His Burial Site

by John B. Gleason

In 1928 the pathologist Andreas Werthemann examined what he believed to be the body of Erasmus; his 81-page report, published in the following year, included his hypothesis that Erasmus “very possibly” (350)1 had contracted syphilis (congenital syphilis was ruled out by other evidence [358-59]). The occasional hesitation voiced by medical writers has passed almost unnoticed,2 and Werthemann’s finding has increasingly assumed the status of fact; indeed, as Werthemann himself observed a generation later, it attracted more attention than any other conclusion reported in his monograph.3 Yet Werthemann acknowledged that nothing in Erasmus’ correspondence necessarily supports this finding: the only disease Erasmus describes in detail that bears any similarity to syphilitic infection could at least as likely have been an attack of the plague, and in fact the plague was the diagnosis of the physicians who attended him on that occasion, men who had ample professional experience of both diseases. Nor did even Erasmus’ enemies, vituperative on other subjects, accuse him of having syphilis. The evidence for the finding of syphilis comes solely from the examination of what was believed to be Erasmus’ body.

2 E.g., C. R. Pfister, “Zur Krankheit des Erasmus,” Schweizerische medizinische Wochenschrift, 56 (1936): 846, discusses the suggestion of W. F. R. Essed, Over den Oorsprong der Syphilis (1933), that the symptoms brought forward to support a diagnosis of syphilis might be explained by Erasmus’ suffering from framboesia tropica, brought back to Europe by the Portuguese (see the summary by Jean-Claude Margolin, Quatorze années de bibliographie érasmienne (1936-1949) [Paris: Vrin, 1969], 324, and index references under “Werthemann”). The present writer is not competent to evaluate competing palaeopathological diagnoses; nor is it necessary to do so, since a thesis of this paper is that Werthemann examined the wrong body, and therefore his conclusions, right or wrong, have nothing to do with Erasmus.
The main purpose of the present paper is to investigate critically the grounds for Werthemann's finding of probable syphilis. Until recently this would have meant simply to restudy the evidence provided by Werthemann in 1928; and, in the present case, to provide facts of which he was unaware. Quite recently, however, the syphilis question has become intertwined with the question of where Erasmus was actually buried. For another body has been discovered nearby which some scholars argue is that of Erasmus. Were this identification accepted the first question posed in the title of this paper would soon be answered. The body in the second grave, disinterred only in 1974, is badly decomposed and the skull much damaged. Even the sex cannot be determined with certainty. This body provides no foundation for a diagnosis of syphilis. Like the determination of Erasmus' syphilis, which it would render baseless, the new determination that Erasmus was actually buried in the 1974 grave has in its turn become the prevailing wisdom or something close to it. As late as 1982 an account published under the auspices of the minster's Building Commission still located Erasmus' grave in the same spot where it had always been thought to be, but four years later the new theory had gained so much ground that the minster authorities, now perplexed as to which body actually was Erasmus', buried them both together. This rather inelegant solution represents the present state of affairs.

I

The key evidence for identifying the 1974 grave as Erasmus' is the presence in the grave of a copy of a bronze medallion commissioned by Erasmus according to designs by Quentin Matsys, a find interpreted as proof that the body in that grave was his. This discovery sent the leading proponent of the new theory, Dr. Beat Rudolf Jenny, back to the contemporary documentation of the burial and gravesite, to find whether that evidence was compatible with the new theory. He satisfied himself that it was, and his accounts of the question will be drawn on in the exposition of the new theory which now follows.

4 Cf. Das Basler Münster, ed. Münsterbaukommission and Peter Heman (Basel, 1982), 33.