Between denial and exaltation
The materials of the miraculous images of the Virgin in the Southern Netherlands during the seventeenth century

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On the dangers of materials in Christian theories of images

In one of his Colloquia written in 1526 on the topic of ‘Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake’ (Peregrinatio religionis ergo), Erasmus of Rotterdam presents two individuals in conversation. The first, Menedemus, a sceptic, denounces the shortcomings of an excessively materialistic approach to religion, while the second, Ogygius, is a pious man whose superstitious attitudes are being mocked. After mentioning the pilgrimage to Mariastein (Virgo lapidea), the very name of which seems to bear witness to the material nature of the sacred image (though in fact the title refers to the rock on which this place of pilgrimage was built), the discussion turns to the pilgrimage that Ogygius undertook to the ‘Virgin by the Sea’, Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk. The purpose of the pilgrimage was to visit a miraculous statue of the Virgin, of which Erasmus had first-hand knowledge, as he had visited the shrine in 1512. When Ogygius tells of his meeting with the ‘sub-prior’, the question of the cult of materials is addressed with an explicit analogy to the world of relics:

He offered from his bag a piece of wood, cut from a beam on which the Virgin Mother was seen to stand. A marvellous fragrance proved at once that the object was an extremely sacred one. After kissing so remarkable a gift three or four times with utmost devotion, while prone and bareheaded, I put it in my purse.

In response to Menedemus’s mocking comments, Ogygius stresses how precious this simple sliver of wood is to him: ‘In case you don’t know, I wouldn’t exchange this tiny fragment for all the gold in Tagus. I’ll set it in gold, but so that it shines through Crystal’. So it is not the material of the image itself that is being venerated, but rather what we might call a relic of contact, something that has absorbed a little of the sacred nature of the Virgin herself, making it worthy of being embellished with the most precious materials. As for the statue of the Virgin of Walsingham, it clearly has no material or artistic value whatsoever. It is described in these terms: ‘a small image (...), unimpressive in size, material, and workmanship but of surpassing power’.

The contrast between the power of the image and its insignificant appearance is clearly shown here. We recognise in this