

# The Image of Our Lady of Walsingham

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CENTURIES before the first pilgrims came to honour Our Lady in the Chapel built by Richeldis, pilgrims of a different kind had been coming here. There was in Walsingham a Temple to Mercury, and so many artefacts have been discovered that rather than being a small town with a Temple, the Temple seems to have been the very reason for Walsingham's existence. Moreover, the large number of seal-boxes and coins found on the site show that it was a pilgrimage centre of some importance and popularity.

It has been suggested that there may have been continuity between the Mercury Temple and the Catholic Shrine, but this is hard to prove. We do not know whether Christianity first came to North Norfolk in the Roman period, or only in the 7<sup>th</sup> century through the missions of St Felix and St Fursey. Nor do we know whether the Anglo-Saxons respected the Temple if it still existed when they invaded. Many pagan temple sites were of course Christianised. There is abundant evidence that some Roman temples in England were consecrated and put to Christian use. Churches were probably built on temple land at Witham in Essex, Icklingham in Suffolk, and Uley in Gloucestershire where there was a monastery in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Uley seems to present a classic case of religious continuity, a *Tradition of Sanctity*, as it has been called, from the Iron Age to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Like Walsingham's it had been dedicated to Mercury.

Pope Gregory the Great encouraged the rededication, rather than the demolition of pagan temples.

I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well-built, it

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<sup>1</sup> Watts Dorothy, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain*, Routledge, 1991, p. 107 ff

is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God.<sup>2</sup>

There is more to it than saving the cost of building churches. He goes on,

When the people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to places they are familiar with, but now recognising and worshipping the true God.

Not only will the people appreciate being able to continuing worshipping in a familiar place, but they should also maintain their religious festivals, and turn their shrines into centres of Christian pilgrimage and celebration:

And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifice to devils, some solemnity ought to be given them in exchange for this. So on the day of dedication or the festivals of the holy martyrs, whose relics are deposited there, let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of shrines, and let them celebrate the solemnity with religious feasts.

Bath offers the best example of a *Tradition of Sanctity*. The spring was already a major Celtic shrine to the goddess Sulis. The Romans respected its significance and potential and kept its dedication, adding their own additional consecration to Minerva. Nothing remains of the original Celtic wooden structure because the Romans overlaid it with much larger and substantial stone buildings. As well as bathing, pilgrims drank the spring-water, perhaps pouring it over afflicted parts of the body, and a number of pewter vessels for this purpose have been identified there, as at other shrines.<sup>3</sup> Bath was destined to have a great Abbey on the site and continued to be a healing shrine in which men bathed 'wholly naked with every garment cast off', to the great offence of King Henry VI among others!

Did the same happen in Walsingham? The jury is still out.

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<sup>2</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford University Press, 2008, I: 30-31, p. 57

<sup>3</sup> Miranda J. Aldhouse-Green, *Pilgrims in Stone. Stone images from the Gallo-Roman Healing Sanctuary of Fontes Sequanae*, Oxford, 1999, p. 79

From the very beginning the Church had to determine its attitude towards paganism. Indeed, it is remarkable that it was able to bind into one body both Jewish converts and pagan converts. Their religions were like chalk and cheese: Jews with their monotheism, Gentiles with their pagan pantheons and Greek myths. Jews with their strict moral laws, Gentiles with their fertility cults and sacred prostitution, though this should be balanced by the moral teachings of the Greek philosophers. Religious practice and ritual could not have been more different. How on earth did the Church reconcile believers from such disparate backgrounds?

When pagans were first being converted to Christianity some Jewish Christians insisted they be circumcised and made to keep the rigours of the Jewish law. But the apostles' ruling was to lay on them 'no greater burden' than was necessary.<sup>4</sup> St Paul was revolted by the idolatry he found in Athens, but this did not stop him admiring their 'sacred monuments', and using the altar to an Unknown God, to proclaim the God 'whom you already worship without knowing it.'<sup>5</sup> It was absolutely essential to make a clean break from idolatry, holding Christ in the Blessed Trinity to be the one true God. But in other respects the Church proved very flexible. Professor Luke Timothy Johnson observes that Christianity reached the Greco-Roman world very quickly, and it should occasion no surprise that Gentile Christians carried over into the worship of the Lord some of the assumptions, religious experiences and practices of Greco-Roman religiousness.<sup>6</sup>

One major area of potential conflict between the Jewish Christians and the pagans was in the use of images. Jews were forbidden by the Ten Commandments to make 'a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth.'<sup>7</sup> Idolatry was the danger. And how could you create an image of God who was invisible and unseen? No one could look on the Lord and live.<sup>8</sup> Pagans had no such inhibitions, and were very familiar with statues of gods and goddesses. But who should give way? Were Christians no longer bound by this commandment in the Decalogue?

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 15. 29

<sup>5</sup> Acts 17. 16-31

<sup>6</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 157

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20.4

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 33.20

Once St Paul had written, '(Christ) is the image (*Gk. Icon*) of the unseen God,'<sup>9</sup> it changed everything. God had revealed his likeness. The disciples had gazed on the image of God. In the Incarnation the Word was made flesh. God had taken on himself our human nature, was born of a human mother, and a tradition grew up that St Luke had painted her portrait. It opened up the glorious history of Christian iconography and art.

The oldest Christian paintings to have survived are found in the dust-dry catacombs of Rome, where Christians decorated their tombs and mausolea. Those Gentile converts continued to adorn their tombs and mausolea with the usual pagan decorations of flowers and trees, grazing sheep and stags, and peacocks, but alongside them are scenes from the Bible, and representations of Baptism and the Eucharist. You find many paintings of Orpheus (who in Roman mythology journeyed to the underworld and back) cheek by jowl with the raising of Lazarus, Jonah, and Daniel in the lion's den, as resurrection motifs. An Orpheus mosaic has been found in England in a Christian Roman villa at Woodchester.

Even the Good Shepherd surrounded by sheep, seen everywhere on walls and ceilings in the catacombs, and in the earliest statue of Jesus ever found (dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and now in the Vatican Museum), of him carrying home a lost sheep on his shoulders, was a pagan figure which Christians eagerly adopted as a perfect image of the Saviour. The Chi-Rho, which became a distinctive Christian symbol, and remains so, was originally pagan, and ironically is found stamped on the coins of Emperor Decius, one of the worst persecutors of the Church.



In the Vatican necropolis, beneath the basilica, not 15 metres from St Peter's tomb, is a mausoleum containing a stunning mosaic of Jesus in the guise of Apollo, the sun-god, his chariot rising in the sky. In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century it was thought completely appropriate for the Christian parents of Julius Tarpeianus to decorate his tomb in this way. The sun's daily journey in the darkness, and his victory over

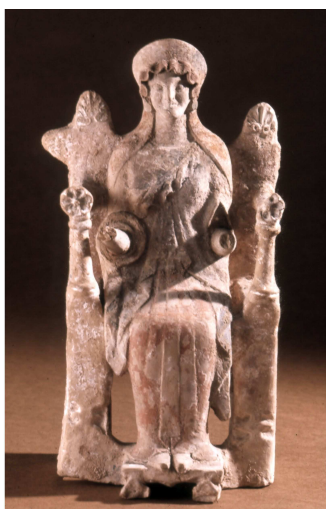
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<sup>9</sup> Colossians 1.15

it at the dawn of a new day was a fitting symbol of Christ's resurrection. Sunday, the day of the sun, was the day Jesus rose from the dead, and the day in consequence when Christians met to celebrate the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup>

Christians made pilgrimages to the tombs of martyrs, and they celebrated a *Refrigerium*, a sacred meal, beside them, just as they did when they visited the tombs of their loved ones, and as they had when they were pagans. Professor Luke Timothy Johnson observes that Christianity reached the Greco-Roman world very quickly, and it should occasion no surprise that Gentile Christians carried over into the worship of the Lord some of the assumptions, religious experiences and practices of Greco-Roman religiousness.<sup>11</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the earliest images of Our Lady that Gentile Christians made, bear a striking likeness to ancient statues of Greek and Roman goddesses.



The Mother goddesses, *Deae Nutrice*, holding one or two children, were probably objects of personal devotion, used by women in propitiation for fertility and in the difficulties of pregnancy and childbirth, in the same way as images of Our Lady became.

In the Catacomb of Priscilla was discovered the earliest known painting of Our Lady. Like many pagan statues, and Our Lady of Walsingham, she is seated and holding her Son. Also in this catacomb is a picture of Mary sitting with Jesus on her knee, receiving the Magi, the Wise Men. On a wall in the sacristy of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, in Rome, where guidebooks are sold, is a priceless treasure that once graced Constantine's Basilica of St Peter's. It is a stunning 8<sup>th</sup> century mosaic of the Epiphany. By that date the Epiphany to the Wise Men had become a favourite scene in Christian art, forever associating these seated images of the Blessed Virgin with the theme of wisdom.

<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apology*, lxxv-lxxvii, in Henry Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p.95.

<sup>11</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 157

The opening words of St John in his Gospel suggest that he was allegorically linking Jesus with Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, 'I was set up from everlasting from the beginning before ever the world was. I was with him, forming all things.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, for St Paul Christ 'is the power and the wisdom of God.'<sup>13</sup> But Wisdom is a female figure in the Old Testament and so it was not long before Wisdom was personified by Mary as well as by Jesus, and readings from the Wisdom books were read on her feasts.

Solomon is the uniquely Wise Man of the Old Testament, and much is made of his splendid throne:

The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with pure gold. The throne had six steps and a footstool of gold, which were attached to the throne, and on each side of the seat were arm rests and two lions standing beside the arm rests.<sup>14</sup>

There is an illumination in the 1130-1140 Eynsham manuscript of St Augustine's Commentary on Psalms 101-150 showing the Virgin and Child seated on a throne like Solomon's, with its lions.

Christian iconography received a huge boost with the definition of Mary as Θεοτόκος (*Theotokos*) at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In celebration of this definition Pope Sixtus III built the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome with its



stunning 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaics of the Annunciation and Epiphany. Mary is no longer the lowly maid from Nazareth, 'for he that is mighty has magnified me'. 'The Almighty has done great things for me.'<sup>15</sup> The mosaic celebrates the dignity to which God raised her, the crowned Virgin-Mother, and she is enthroned, holding her divine and human Son. She is an Empress. The maid of Nazareth has become a powerful and majestic figure, and her power, deriving from her Motherhood, is evident in

<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 8. 22-23

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 1.24

<sup>14</sup> 2 Chronicles 9.17-18

<sup>15</sup> Luke 1. 49

her powerful intercession with her Son, who would never refuse her requests. The mosaic clearly follows the Wisdom tradition of the early paintings associated with the Epiphany to the Wise Men.

The earliest recorded freestanding statue of Our Lady was made in 946 for the cathedral of Clermont (now Clermont-Ferrand) in southeast central France. Although it has been destroyed it survives in a manuscript.<sup>16</sup> Jesus is not a baby but a small adult, behind his head a cruciform halo, a sign of his imperial authority as Pantocrator, Ruler of All. His right hand is raised in blessing, the other extended. Sometimes, as at Walsingham, He holds a book in his left hand to signify He is the Word of God. His bare feet signify his humanity. In some Renaissance paintings one of the Wise Men kisses the child's bare foot, so the bare feet also evoke the ancient Wisdom motif. And the enthronement may also relate to Mary being of King David's House and line. For the same reason she holds in her hand the Rod of Jesse, if not a lily for her purity.

The image of Our Lady of Walsingham, and similar statues, also show Mary seated on a throne, a Seat of Wisdom. She is the crowned Virgin-Mother. The



Walsingham Ballad calls her the 'heavenly Empress'. But not only is Mary enthroned; Christ is enthroned on her knee. So she herself becomes the Seat of Wisdom. Christ is the Wisdom of God, and it is Mary who bears him.

These statues were first made in southeast France in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and during the 11<sup>th</sup> spread to Northern France. It is unsurprising that the de Favarches family, or perhaps the de Clares, should have chosen a French statue for Walsingham. We do not know when the statue was placed in the Holy House of Walsingham, but such statues were no longer made after the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the later Middle Ages a style more realistic and lifelike became popular, one of the most

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Boss, *Mary*, Continuum, 2003, p. 107

widespread being the Pietà, a statue of Jesus taken down from the cross reposing in the arms of his mother.

As well as standing in churches, the statues were used in processions and pageants in which clerics would dress up as the Wise Men and go in search of the child. When they found him they would fall down and worship him. 'So when worshippers look upon an image of this kind, they are being enjoined to stand in the place occupied by the Wise Men in St Matthew's Gospel. It is now we who fall down and worship the child and offer him our gifts.'<sup>17</sup> And the Greek word used by St Matthew is προσήνεγκαν, which literally means the Wise Men fell prostrate before him. It is deep obeisance, adoration, homage.

The image of Our Lady of Walsingham thus stands in the long tradition of the Wisdom and Crowned Virgin images. But there are three features, not found on any other statues, which make her unique.

There are seven rings on the sides of her throne, three on one and four on the other. Obviously the number is significant or they would have been balanced. The usual explanation is that they stand for the seven sacraments. If this is so the statue has to be dated post 1160, for it was only in that year that the number seven was determined.<sup>18</sup> It is more likely, however, that they pick up the Wisdom theme. Peter Damien, a friend of Pope Gregory VII, preached on the Nativity of Mary:

First a house had to be built, into which the King of heaven would come down and deign to be a guest. I mean the house of which it is said through Solomon, 'Wisdom has built herself a house, she has set up her seven pillars' (Proverbs 9:1). For this virginal house is supported by seven pillars because the venerable Mother received the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

The second feature of the medieval image of Our Lady of Walsingham, which makes her unique, is of great interest, and is not unconnected with Solomon's Temple (or

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Boss, *Mary*, p. 109

<sup>18</sup> Leeming Bernard, S.J., *Principles of Sacramental Theology*, Longmans, 1956, p. 568

<sup>19</sup> Sermo. 45. Cited in Gambero Luigi, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, Ignatius Press, 2005, p. 96



at least the second Temple). On the Priory seal are what seem like two looped curtains around the statue, and it is a shame that these have not been reproduced around the statues in the Anglican and Catholic Shrines today. For they are not decorative drapes, as may be assumed, but represent the veil of the Temple that was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment Jesus died on the cross.<sup>20</sup> The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses allegory to explain that ‘through the blood of Jesus we have the right to enter the sanctuary, by a new and living way through the curtain, that is to say, his body.’<sup>21</sup> Exactly the same torn curtain in the Temple is found in a ceiling at the Shrine in Loreto.

Hidden behind the veil of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, within the Holy of Holies, stood the Ark of the Covenant, which the Israelites dated back to the time of Moses and in which he placed the stone tablets on which God had engraved the Ten Commandments, and in a later tradition a sample of Manna also. The Ark was a chest made of acacia wood covered inside and out with purest gold. It was revered as a throne on which God was invisibly enthroned between two cherubim. Here God had chosen to dwell and the Ark was the sign of his Presence. The *Shekinah*, the bright cloud of glory, overshadowed it. No one was allowed to touch the Ark. Wherever the Israelites travelled they carried the Ark on poles until eventually King David brought it to Jerusalem, which henceforth become known as ‘Zion, City of God.’ But before doing so he asked, ‘How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?’ and it spent three months in the hill country of Judah in the house of Obed-edom, whose family were blessed by its presence.<sup>22</sup>

Approaching the Ark, King David leapt and danced before the Lord, and shouted in great rejoicing. David was not the man chosen to build the Temple on account of his sins, but his son, Solomon, the Wise, built the Temple and enshrined the Ark within the Holy of Holies, screened from view by the veil. Once again the *Shekinah*, the cloud and glory of the Lord overshadowed it.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 27.51

<sup>21</sup> Hebrews 10.19-20

<sup>22</sup> 2 Samuel 6.9-11,16

<sup>23</sup> 1 Kings 8.10

It is probable that St Luke had all this in mind when he drew up his account of Mary's annunciation and her visitation to Elizabeth.<sup>24</sup> The Ark was overshadowed by the glory of the *Shekinah*, the bright cloud, and so was Mary overshadowed. Like the Ark, Mary spent three months in the hill country of Judah. Like David the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy. Like David asking how the Ark of the Lord could come to him, Elizabeth asked, 'Why is this granted me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?'

The Ark contained the Word of God in stone, but the womb of Mary contained the Word of God made flesh. Mary is the Ark of the new Covenant. She is covered with purest gold within and without because she is sinless, pure and incorruptible. No one was allowed to touch the Ark, it was sacred, consecrated, set apart for God alone, and so was she.

The identification of the Ark with Mary was fulfilled by St John. The Ark of God disappeared when the first Temple was destroyed in 587 BC. The Israelites had a tradition that it was rescued by Jeremiah and hidden in a place of safety in the desert, in a cave on Mount Nebo.<sup>25</sup> On the last day it will appear again. John saw its reappearance in a symbolic vision:

The sanctuary of God in heaven opened, and the Ark of the Covenant could be seen inside it. Then came flashes of lightning, peals of thunder and an earthquake, and violent hail. Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown. She was pregnant and in labour.

Then a huge red dragon tried to kill the child (as Herod had done), but she gave birth to a male child,

the son who was to rule all the nations with an iron sceptre (not gold, for he came as a servant), and the child was taken straight up to God and to his throne, while the woman escaped to the desert, where God had made a place of safety ready . . . The dragon was enraged with the

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<sup>24</sup> Luke 1.39-45

<sup>25</sup> 2 Maccabees 2.4-9

women and went away to make war on the rest of her children, that is, all who obey God's commandments and bear witness for Jesus.'<sup>26</sup>

First the Ark appears, the prefigurement, and then the reality in Mary. At the foot of the cross St John tells us that Mary became John's mother, but not only John's. She is the mother of all 'who obey God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus.' At the foot of the cross she becomes the Mother of the Church. And the woman who appeared in heaven signifies both Israel and the Church. Like the Ark, Mary escaped to a place of safety in the desert.

Early preachers and writers saw Mary as the Ark. In a homily attributed to St. Athanasius of Alexandria (c.296-373):

O noble Virgin, truly you are greater than any other greatness. For who is your equal in greatness, O dwelling place of God the Word? To whom among all creatures shall I compare you, O Virgin? You are greater than them all O Ark of the Covenant, clothed with purity instead of gold! You are the Ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the true manna, that is, the flesh in which Divinity resides.<sup>27</sup>

The Catholic Catechism picks up the theme:

Mary, in whom the Lord himself has just made his dwelling, is the daughter of Zion in person, the Ark of the Covenant, the place where the glory of the Lord dwells. She is 'the dwelling of God . . . with men'.<sup>28</sup>

Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury also reflected on it:

From the sanctuary of heaven, from the terrifying emptiness between the cherubim of the ark, God enters another sanctuary, the holy place of a human body . . . Jesus enthroned between the cherubim; Jesus enthroned on Mary's lap: the utterly astonishing fact of God's glory fully living in a human being, with all the startling effects that has on how we see and understand what it is to be human.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Revelation 11.19 - 12.17

<sup>27</sup> Athanasius, *Homily of the Papyrus of Turin*, 71: 216

<sup>28</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2676, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p. 570

<sup>29</sup> Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things, Praying with Ikons of the Virgin*, Canterbury Press, 2002, pp. 63, 67

The veil is torn apart so we can gaze, even touch now, Mary, the Ark of the Covenant holding the Word of God for us all to see, worship and embrace. Such is the image of Our Lady of Walsingham.

The third unique feature in the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, again not reproduced on modern statues, we learn from Erasmus, the priest, scholar, and Catholic reformer, who came on pilgrimage to Walsingham in 1512. To him we owe the only description of the Holy House and statue that we have. He tells us that beneath the feet of the Virgin is what the French called a toad-stone, a green jewel on which was imprinted a toad. On being asked in his colloquy why they attach a toad to the Virgin, Erasmus explains, 'because all filthiness, malice, pride, avarice, and whatever belongs to human passion, has been by her subdued, trodden underfoot, and extinguished.'<sup>30</sup> In the Book of Genesis, in the Garden of Eden, God says to the serpent, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel', but the iconography goes back to the Vulgate translation, which reads, not He but 'She will crush your head, and you will lie in wait for her heel', linking up in a way with the idea in St John of the dragon being enraged with the woman.

Dr Sarah Boss points out that 'the motif of the woman trampling the serpent underfoot was applied to Mary's immaculate conception, since her freedom from sin was a sign of the devil's total defeat.'<sup>31</sup> Quoting the art historian, Maurice Vloberg, Boss affirms that the earliest certain representation of the Virgin trampling on the head of a serpent is a wooden statue ordered for the church of St Mary of Cremona in 1407. It was not uncommon in France for animals to be carved on a jewel, but it is quite extraordinary to find a toad or serpent beneath the feet of Our Lady on what is most likely a 12<sup>th</sup> century statue. If the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham represents the Immaculate Conception it would be early indeed. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, images representing the Immaculate Conception depict Mary as a solitary figure, sometimes standing on a serpent, sometimes standing on the moon, yet it was from her divine motherhood that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception derived and, as Sarah Boss has commented, 'it could be argued that any symbolic

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<sup>30</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Perigrinatio religionis ergo*, J. G. Nichols (trans.), *Pilgrimages to Saint Mary of Walsingham and Saint Thomas of Canterbury*, Westminster, 1849, pp. 37, 41

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Boss, *Empress and Handmaid*, Cassell, 2000, p.142

depiction of the Immaculate Conception should incorporate a representation of Christ.’<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, the Feast of Our Lady’s Conception is forever associated with England. It originated in the East at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, but there was great reluctance to celebrate it in the West. It reached England before anywhere else in the West, perhaps from the many Greek monks in Southern Italy, or through Anglo-Saxons living in Constantinople. We also know of a Greek monk, Constantine, in Malmesbury Abbey in 1030.

The Feast was celebrated on 8<sup>th</sup> December, nine months before Mary’s birthday on 8<sup>th</sup> September, at Winchester Abbey and Canterbury, monasteries greatly affected by the Gregorian Reform, and it spread to Ramsey Abbey, which is only sixty miles from Walsingham, through the appointment, in 1062, of Aelfige as acting-Abbot. He was also Abbot of St. Augustine’s, Canterbury, after having been a monk of the Old Minster, Winchester. Anselm, in his collection of Marian miracles, gives a lovely account of how it came to be celebrated in Ramsey Abbey. Aelfige was sent to the King of Denmark by William the Conqueror, to ensure peace with the Danes:

After he had spent much time there, he asked and received permission from the king to return home, and setting out on the sea with his companions he flew swiftly over the smooth surface of the sea. And when he was sailing calmly in this way, suddenly a violent storm rose in the sea and, when hope of safety or getting away or escaping disappeared, they turned to God and thus called for help: ‘O Almighty God, have pity on us in this ordeal lest, devoured by the sea, we are united in eternal punishment.’ When they had finished speaking this and many similar prayers, suddenly they saw a person, decorated with episcopal insignia, near the ship. He called Abbot Aelfige to him and addressed him in these words: ‘If you wish to escape from the danger of the sea, if you wish to return to your native country safely, promise me in the presence of God that you will solemnly celebrate and observe the feast-day of the conception of the mother of Christ.’ Then the abbot answered: ‘How can I do this or on what day?’ The messenger said: ‘You will celebrate it on the eighth day of December, and will preach it wherever you can, that it may be celebrated by everybody.’ Aelfige said: ‘And what sort of divine service do you command us to use on this feast?’ He replied to him: ‘Let every service, which is said at her nativity, be said also at her conception. Thus, when her birthday is

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<sup>32</sup> Boss, *Empress*, p.145

mentioned at her nativity, let her conception be mentioned at the other celebration.' After the abbot agreed this, he reached the English shore with a favourable wind blowing. Soon he made known everything he had seen and heard and wherever he could, and he ordered in the church at Ramsey, over which he had presided, that this feast be celebrated on 8 December.<sup>33</sup>

The Feast probably had the support of Archbishop Stigand, because he was a close associate of Abbot Aelfige, and held the sees of Winchester and Canterbury in plurality. Stigand, incidentally, held lands in Walsingham. But in 1070 he was deposed under the ecclesiastical changes after the Norman Conquest. Llanfranc became the new Archbishop. He reformed the calendar and abolished the Feasts of the Presentation and Conception of Our Lady.

Owing to the abiding influence of St Augustine who, though he believed in the sinlessness of Mary, taught that original sin was transmitted through the procreative seed, there was huge resistance to celebrating the conception of Mary, on the grounds that she, like all human beings, must have been conceived in original sin. Even St Bernard, that great devotee of Our Lady, rejected its celebration. Expressing surprise at its observance in Lyons Cathedral in 1125, he wrote to express his disapproval, asking, 'How indeed was sin not present where lust was not absent?'<sup>34</sup> St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109, had opposed Augustine's view of Original Sin. For Anselm, what original sin means, is that through the Fall human nature is, in the words of the Catholic Catechism, 'deprived of original holiness and justice'.<sup>35</sup> His great pupil Eadmer, a monk of Canterbury, protested against the suppression of the Feast of her Conception. Freed from the constraints of Augustine, he wrote a Tractate on the Conception of Saint Mary, in which he argued that an immaculate conception of Mary was perfectly possible and fitting.

The most important theological objection to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was raised by St Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 74) who argued that Christ alone did not need to be redeemed. It was Duns Scotus who opened the way for

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<sup>33</sup> Cited in Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 48–9

<sup>34</sup> Cited by Sarah Boss, *Empress*, p. 127

<sup>35</sup> *Catholic Catechism*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, 418, p. 93

Mary's Immaculate Conception to be celebrated, by his understanding of original sin affecting only the will, a faculty of the soul, rather than the Augustinian view of original sin being transmitted in the seed or flesh. Duns Scotus argued that God, who washes away by Baptism the guilt of original sin, could remove it by some other way he chooses. He could, therefore, have given Mary this special grace at the moment of her conception. Christ redeemed Mary in this unique and fitting way. Gradually the celebration of the feast gained ground, but it was not until 1476 that it was formally approved.

We do not know when the statue of Our Lady was placed in the Holy House at Walsingham, but if it was as early as the time of St. Anselm it is not impossible that the toad beneath the feet of Our Lady of Walsingham may have been intended to be a powerful early statement of her Immaculate Conception, rather as at Lourdes Our Lady proclaimed herself to be the 'Immaculate Conception'. It would be good, in any case, for it to be restored on the statues in the Shrines, for whatever meaning is attached to it, it does signify the trampling down of evil.

Finally, just one more thought about the image of Our Lady of Walsingham we love and know so well. Images like Our Lady of Walsingham are stylised, iconographic, and with theological content. As with icons there is meaning in the details. Medieval statues gave Mary huge and far-seeing eyes. Sarah Boss picks this up:

As you gaze on the image, the Virgin in particular might give the impression of looking into you and through you, so that explicit tokens of lordship, such as the throne, are undergirded by the impression of some power, which is greater than the political, but less easily defined. As the viewer of such an image, you might feel to be the object of the statue's gaze, and to be in some way subject to its uncanny authority.<sup>36</sup>

It is thus an image intended to raise up the worshipper to the true dignity of being one of the children of God, to instil in us a sense of the sacred, and of our own worth. It is an image of the Incarnation, the central mystery of the Shrine in Walsingham, the awesome truth that

the human woman who gives her body to divinity becomes the Mother of God, and is thereby exalted to a position which is higher even than that of the all-spiritual angels, for she is enthroned as Queen of Heaven. The

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<sup>36</sup> Boss, *Empress*, p. 1-2

willingness of the spirit to be united with matter, the potential of matter to receive the spirit, and the bonding of divinity with the physical creation: these are the truths, which the Virgin and Child embody.<sup>37</sup>

It acclaims the truth that we are all called, in the words of St Peter, ‘to become partakers of the divine nature.’<sup>38</sup> And in the prayer of the Roman Liturgy, that we ‘may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.’<sup>39</sup> Our destiny is to be crowned, like Mary, in the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>37</sup> Boss, *Empress*, p. 4

<sup>38</sup> 2 Peter 1. 4

<sup>39</sup> Prayer in the Roman Mass, at the mingling of water and wine in the chalice.