

A Staggering Vision

The Mediating Animal in the Textual Tradition of S. Eustachius

Abstract

1. The name of the saint varies in the textual tradition. In this paper, it is consistently given as 'Eustachius,' the heathen name of the protagonist as 'Placidus.'

The paper concentrates on the story of St. Eustachius¹ and discusses the famous episode in which the protagonist is led to conversion through an epiphanic encounter with a stag. This episode, known as Eustachius' vision, highlights the semiotic polyvalence of the animal mediating between God and (Hu-)man. The paper analyses the discourse on animals in the vulgate version of the passion of Eustachius. It shows how the representation of the stag differs between redactions of the story, outlines the alternative readings of the vision episode suggested by this textual variance, and points out their relation to different contexts.

1 Animals in hagiography

In the proliferating scholarship on animals in medieval literature, saints' lives have for some time been identified as a natural habitat for beasts. Salisbury (147) comments that "[i]n their relations with animals [...], medieval saints served to define the nature of the animal world." The critical agenda of scholars who investigate the boundaries drawn by humans to distinguish themselves from other mammals and put them to their use might be one of the reasons why questions of identity, control over nature and on practices of power within the creational hierarchy (Cohen; Crane; Salter) have received special attention. However, as Alexander has pointed out, "[a]nimal and saint stories are not [...] in any primary sense records of medieval attitudes towards nature. They make up a highly versatile genre capable of expressing theological and spiritual concerns, while perhaps being usefully employed for immediate political purposes [...]" (19). One of the spiritual concerns which the cult of saints is 'about' and which saints' lives accordingly address as a genre, is mediation between God and men. Animals as mediators, however, have not yet figured prominently in the medievalists' animal turn.² The same can

2. For animal saints see Hobgood-Oster.

be said about studies that aim at a typology of animal motifs in saints' lives. In the list of functions of animal motifs compiled by Obermaier (46), the mediating animal does not appear.

The mediating function is manifest when intermediaries such as angels appear in the form of animals (the white birds in the *Navigatio Brendani* [ch. 11]) or in animal epiphanies. Schmidtke (1.151) defines animal epiphanies as episodes in which God becomes visible in the shape of an animal (the Lamb in the Book of Revelation [Apoc. 5.6–8.1], and the dove in the baptism of Christ [Matt. 3.16; Mark 1.10; Luke 3.22; John 1.32] which became interpreted as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit), and distinguishes these narratives from animal symbolism. He points out that apart from these canonical episodes, animal epiphanies of God occur rarely in religious literature, whereas the devil frequently appears in animal shape. Although mediating between God and the human saint is thus only a marginal function of animals in hagiography, it is the role that one of the most famous animals in this genre plays: the stag in the story of St. Eustachius,³ a saint less important to medievalists because of his cult than because of the fascination his story had for medieval authors writing in Greek, Latin, and the vernacular languages,⁴ as well as for artists into early modern times.⁵

3. A more frequent function of stags in hagiography is to guide the saint to a destined place, see Franz.

4. In his chapter on Eustachius, Salter 55–70 focuses on knighthood and treats the saint's passion as background to *Sir Isumbras*. The stag is not discussed.

5. On the iconography of Eustachius see Werner. The way in which animals figure in the treatment of this subject would deserve to be studied by art historians.

6. This version is often referred to as *vita* (*vita et passio* in the BHL), although Eustachius and his family are venerated as martyrs. This version (see below) is sometimes distinguished as *vita* from another version which is then called *passio* (BHL 2761), e.g. Ott 486. I will not distinguish between versions by using sub-generic terms as names, instead, I use the term '*passio*' or 'passion' for the hagiographic narrative, regardless of the fact that the plot deals in large parts with the conversion, separation and reunification of Eustachius' family. Weitbrecht 111 has shown that this narrative is best understood as the story of the sanctification of a family, not of a single saint.

2 Animal discourse in the passion of Eustachius

The textual tradition of the story of Eustachius, the origins of which remain debated (see below) is vast, and a comprehensive study of the Latin versions and their relation to the Greek is lacking (Batalova 326). There is no modern critical edition of the Latin vulgate *passio* (BHL 2760),⁶ which until today is accessible only in the *Acta Sanctorum* (Sep. 6.123–35; Ott 563–75) and in the collection by Mombricitus (1.466–73). The summary follows the Latin vulgate version (BHL 2760; AASS Sep. 6):

In the beginning, Eustachius has the name Placidus. He is a heathen and a military leader of the Roman emperor Trajan. One day, he is out on a hunt with his companions when they come upon a herd of deer. An especially large and beautiful stag separates from the herd, and Placidus follows it into the woods, leaving all others behind. Deep in the wilderness, they come to a halt. The animal climbs on top of a rock and

stands still, out of reach. Placidus watches the stag, pondering how to catch him. Suddenly he sees a shining cross and the image of Christ between the stag's antlers. Christ himself speaks to him through the mouth of the stag and tells him to become baptized. Placidus returns home and receives baptism, together with his wife and his two sons. Now named Eustachius, he comes back to the place where the stag had spoken to him. Again he meets Christ and is told that he will have to endure heavy losses but in the end will be rewarded with eternal life. Eustachius, in a manner that recalls Job's fate, loses all his possessions. The impoverished family secretly departs for Egypt. After crossing the sea, Eustachius is forced to leave his wife to the shipowner. Coming to a river, he also loses his children: Since he is not able to carry them both through the current, he intends to take them in turns. But when he has carried the first boy over and is on his way back to fetch the other, a wolf drags the child away. Simultaneously, the other boy is kidnapped by a lion. Eustachius is left in despair. He is not aware of his children's rescue: ploughmen rescue the first son and shepherds the other. Eustachius laments his fate, is consoled by God and wanders off to a village where he lives for fifteen years. After that time, Trajan is in need for his much-missed military leader. He sends soldiers to look for him and they finally arrive at the village. They recognize Eustachius and he enters again into service. When he himself sets out recruiting for the army, he unknowingly enlists his two sons. They camp in a town where a poor woman caters to them – she turns out to be Eustachius' wife, who had remained untouched by the shipowner. The two young men recount their childhood stories of being saved from wild beasts, and recognize each other as brothers. Their mother overhears the conversation and believes them to be her sons. She goes to see their captain, recognizes her husband and the family is reunited. Upon coming back to Rome, Eustachius refuses to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Trajan's successor Hadrian has the family arrested and, after a failed attempt at killing them in the arena, put into a furnace in the shape of a bull. Their prayer to God to receive them in the company of the saints is answered by a voice from heaven. Singing hymns, all four give up their spirits, but their bodies remain untouched by the fire. Their

relics are secretly buried by Christians, and an oratory is built over their grave where the memory of the martyrs is celebrated.

The story of Eustachius has been studied for its assemblage of motifs from scripture, folklore and Greek romance (Bousset, “Die Geschichte;” Bousset, “Wiedererkennungsmärchen;” Delehay; Gerould; Heffernan; Monteverdi). It has been noted by several authors that it can be divided into three narrative units: the conversion, the sufferings (or alternatively: the *anagnorisis*), and finally the martyrdom. The animal motif recurs in all three units. Whereas the stag is central to the conversion, the wolf and the lion who carry the children away are less conspicuous. Animals also appear in the martyrdom of the family: They meet a second lion in the arena who refuses to kill them. After that, they are put into the *machina* of the brazen bull. The animal motif is thus clearly important for the composition of the story (Thiébaux 64–65), but it goes beyond constituting a link between the narrative units. Through its development within the plot, it conveys a statement on the relationship between God, humans and animals.

The animal discourse of the *passio* can be read as a pledge for a cooperative relation between humans and animals as creatures of the same creator. This is not only played out through the theme of the hunt, but also in the following parts of the narrative. The wild beasts are checked in their doings by humans in compositional pairs: shepherds rescue the first boy from the lion, and ploughmen rescue his brother from the wolf. Gilhus (22–26) has argued that philosophers from Aristotle on had referred to agrarian life as model of the peaceful cohabitation of humans and animals, suggesting a contract which allows men to use domestic animals for production, and gives animals human protection against their eating enemies. In Eustachius’ story, the shepherds and farmers represent the agrarian life to which Eustachius and his sons will become accustomed. They serve as indicators of the peaceful cooperation of men and animals, and contrast with the protagonists’ former hunting customs. Eustachius’ children enter this sphere of human-animal cooperation and are educated in it, but Eustachius also spends his years of exile in this sphere: He is employed by the villagers as a guard for their fields (“posuerunt eum custodire agros suos” AASS Sep. 6.128). In this perspective, it is not so much the lowly status by which the convert atones for his former heathen life, but rather by establishing a new relationship to God’s creation. In this, he unites with his family, at

least his sons, whereas the woman seemingly does not need to be ‘educated’ in this way.

The link to the third narrative unit is constituted by the compositional correspondence of the wild lion and the lion in the arena who is ‘tamed’ by the sanctity of the martyrs. The lion in the arena, in refusing to attack the family, attests to Eustachius’ transformation from hunter to guard of agrarian creational peace. And since Eustachius’ family is so much in harmony with their fellow creatures, the emperor has to construct an artificial animal, a perverted imitation of God’s creation, in order to kill them effectively.

The animal discourse of the Eustachius story might be read with a focus on the dichotomy of ‘wild’ and ‘tame.’ In this view, the stages of the protagonist’s progress from convert to penitent to martyr-saint would indicate a progress in terms of domestication: the hunter is ‘tamed’ by the wild stag in the beginning and, after living humbly side-by-side with animals, is able to ‘tame’ the lion in the end. The animal discourse would in that case appear to be guided by the concept of domination and could be linked to a Christian doctrine of control of the passions. However, if the ‘sermon’ delivered through the mouth of the epiphanic stag is taken as the key to the animal discourse of the story, it is the aspect of creation, not of domination, which is at the heart of the matter: “Ego sum Jesus Christus, qui caelum et terram ex nihilo feci, qui indiscretam materiam distinxī, qui lucem oriri feci, et tenebras divisi” (AASS Sep. 6, 128; “I am Jesus Christ, who made heaven and earth out of nothing, who distinguished indistinct matter, who made light appear and separated it from the dark”). Cooperation and harmony, not the (self-)discipline of the individual underlie the construction of this story. This is evidenced by the collective conversion and sanctification of the family. Even plants are included in Eustachius’ life in harmony with creation: rather than having his protagonist plow with an ox under the yoke, the narrator gives Eustachius the occupation of guarding the crop.⁷

7. It might be noted that the symbolism of the shepherd is not employed either.

One might not be too surprised about such an optimistic view on the relationship between animals and humans in a story which features an animal saying the words ‘I am Christ.’ The discourse of creational harmony woven into the plot by the recurrent animal motif is closely connected to the idea of Christ addressing Placidus through the mouth of a fellow creature.

3 Stag semiosis

Scholars at the beginning of the last century debated whether the motif of the stag is of oriental, buddhistic origin or whether it is derived from Christian symbolism (Gaster; Petersen; Monteverdi). A more recent approach tries to trace the origins of the Eustachius legend back to a stag cult in the Middle East (Thierry), but the general influence of biblical narrative on the composition of the story cannot be overlooked (Heffernan 70–75). The stag appears frequently in scripture, but two passages are of special importance.⁸ In the Song of Songs, the lover's beauty is praised by his comparison to a graceful young deer (Cant. of Cant. 2.9). The second important passage of scripture involving the stag can be found in Psalms,⁹ where the soul's yearning for God is compared with the thirst of the stag that drives him to the water: "Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum / ita desiderat anima mea ad te Deus" (Ps. 41.2). Christian authors who commented the biblical passages involving stags frequently made use of their knowledge of natural history, building on what Pliny and Aelian had written about stags. Pliny states that stags are enemies to snakes (*Naturalis historia* 8.118),¹⁰ and Aelian describes how stags catch snakes and eat them (*De Natura animalium* 1.2.9).¹¹

There is hardly a more inviting combination for Christian allegory than the antagonism of an animal to the snake. The church fathers who interpreted the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs in terms of the relation between Christ and church understood the young stag to be a signification of Christ (Origen, *Homiliae in Canticum Cantecorum* 2.21.11; Ambrose of Milan, *De Isaac et anima* 1.4.31). For Ambrose, the enmity of the stag to the serpent is the final and strongest point of his argument that animals can signify Christ (*De interpellatione Job et David* 2.1.4–5).

The stag thirsting for water in Ps. 41.2 was often interpreted with regard to baptism (Puech 33–47), and there is evidence of stag iconography in the decor of Early Christian baptisteria (Domagalski 116–19). Augustine reads the snake-resisting stag as signifying Christianity. In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (41.3), he relates the stag's thirst to the animals' snake-eating habits – after devouring snakes, the stag feels hot inside and yearns for water. Augustine explains the stag as the church yearning for God, and also as the Christian individual who has to overcome his own vices, described as temptingly hissing snakes (41.1). The Greek *Physiologus* (48–52) quotes Ps. 41.2 and ex-

8. The species of the metaphorical animal is not fully certain (McCullough), it is referred to as *cervus* in the Vulgate.

9. Other passages involving the stag, which are of less importance in this context, are e.g. Gen. 49.21; Job 29.4–7; Ps. 28.9; Is 35.6; Jer. 14.5; Hab. 3.19. For patristic exegesis see Puech 42.

10. Smoke from burning stag antlers expels snakes, stag embryos can be used for making an antidote to snake bites.

11. Aelian also describes how smoke from burning stag antlers expels snakes, this is repeated in *De Natura animalium* 2.9.20.

horts the individual Christian to squash and spit out the sins within him like the stag kills the snake. The stag's killing of the snake is then interpreted typologically as victory of Christ over the 'old enemy,' the devil. Thus, the *Physiologus* offers a synthesis of the two meanings of the stag established in the exegetical tradition: as Christian soul and as Christ himself.¹²

Supported by this long-standing allegorical tradition, it does not seem too daring a strategy of the unknown author of the *passio* of Eustachius to choose this animal as a manifestation of Christ, maybe even to construct the whole episode of the hunt resulting in a vision around the possibilities of playing out the multiple meanings offered by this animal: prey on the one hand, allegory of divine magnificence and baptism on the other.¹³ In fact, the symbolism of stag-as-Christ may have been all too evident for an intended literate audience. Nevertheless, the narrator of the *passio* goes to some length to explain the appearance of Christ-as-stag, albeit with no allusion whatsoever to its allegorical dimension. Instead, he introduces a whole bundle of comparisons between his hagiographic constellation and episodes from the Old and the New Testament:

Sed totius sapientiae & misericordiae Deus, qui cunctas vias ad salutem hominum providet, venantem venatus est: non sicut Cornelium per Petrum, sed sicut Paulum insequentem per suam ostensionem. Diu vero stante Placida, & aspiciente cervum, & admirante vastitatem ejus, & deficiente circa captionem, demonstrat illi Deus indicium tale, quod non timeret, neque supra suae virtutis esset magnitudinem: sed sicut sub Balaam, tribuens asinae verbum, arguit ejus insipientiam [...]. (AASS Sep. 6.124).

But in the full wisdom and mercy of God, who provides all the paths to human salvation, the hunter is [really] the hunted: not like Cornelius by Peter, but like Paul being tracked by his revelation. While Placidas was standing there for a long time, looking at the stag, admiring his magnificence and letting go of his intention of capturing him, God gave him a sign in such a way that he would not be afraid, and one that would not surpass his abilities by its magnitude: but like he does with Balaam, when by giving speech to the ass he shows him his lack of judgement.¹⁴

12. On the representation of the stag in medieval bestiaries see Hassig 40–51.

13. The symbolism of the love chase, well known in Greek mythology, might be considered as another influence in the choice of the motif. The figuration of the 'stag of love,' however, is younger than the Eustachius story; it is shaped in the context of courtly allegorical literature, see Thiébaux 103.

14. All translations, unless indicated otherwise: E.K.

Balaam's ass, the classical speaking animal of scripture (Num. 22.28–31), does not at all manifest Christ, it rather becomes entangled in a visionary encounter between the traditional mediators of the divine-human borderline: a prophet and an angel. In the episode told in the Book of Numbers, Balaam does not see the angel with the sword blocking his path, but the ass does and refuses to go on. Balaam hits her and the ass, whose mouth is opened by the Lord, complains to the prophet about her unjust maltreatment. Only then Balaam's eyes are opened and he is able to see the angel. In this episode, Balaam is taught a lesson in humility, by being surpassed and corrected by his own mount. The ass becomes the instrument of a communication between God and Man, but one that operates only indirectly.¹⁵ Throughout the episode, the ass remains nothing but an animal: she articulates her animal perspective when she complains of being hit. Therefore, when Balaam's ass is cited as the model of the speaking stag in the *passio*, this actually underlines the stag's nature as a creature.

15. On the differing interpretations of the episode in patristic, rabbinic and early medieval Christian writing see Roling 9–16. Roling (20–24) shows that Christian authors in the twelfth century began to understand the speech of the animal as being produced by an angel.

The central argument of the passage, however, does not rest on the reference to the ass. Rather, the explanation revolves around the rhetorical inversion of the 'hunter becoming the hunted.' The narrator evokes the comparison of Eustachius with Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 10). Cornelius is a rich and charitable Roman heathen who receives a vision and is among the first gentiles baptized by Peter. This analogy is drawn only to be dismissed immediately and to be replaced by a comparison even more flattering and significant in terms of the hagiographical construction of sainthood: Eustachius is 'tracked down' just like the apostle Paul was by his vision of Christ. (Acts 9.3–11).¹⁶ Paul was granted an immediate encounter with the divine, so by this parallel, the stag's revelatory character rather than his animal nature is underlined.

16. The "quid me persequeris" of the stag (see below) quotes Paul's vision in Acts 9.4. On biblical parallels and quotations see Heffernan 70–75.

Thus, the vision in BHL 2760 highlights the different dimensions of the stag: he is a creature that can be subjected to exegesis, and he embodies the creator speaking through his creation, *i.e.* the condition of extending exegesis to nature. The speaking stag is therefore not a 'simple' folkloristic motif. In the interplay of hagiographic narrative and biblical references, he becomes a dynamic, miraculous figuration of the different ways Christians were taught to encounter God in the word and the world.

As if to make sure that simple, ready-made allegory is not sufficient to understand the complexity of the stag saying 'I am Christ' in this text, its visual appearance is further developed by the narrator:

[...] sic & huic demonstravit inter cornua cervi formam sacrae Crucis supra claritatem solis splendentem, & in medio cornuum imaginem Domini nostri Salvatoris Jesu Christi. Qui etiam humanam vocem imponens cervo, advocat Placidam, dicens ei: O Placida, quid me insequeris? Ecce tui gratia veni, in animali isto ut appaream tibi. Ego sum Christus [...]. (AASS Sep. 6.124)

[...] and in this way [God] revealed between the horns of the stag the shape of the holy Cross shining brighter than the sun and in the middle of the antlers the image of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Who also giving human speech to the stag called out to Placidus and told him: "O Placidus, why do you chase me? Behold, I came for your sake, into this animal where I make myself visible to you. I am Christ [...]."

This puzzling description keeps the cross and the image apart from each other, it is not said that the image of Christ appears on the cross, nor what kind of image – the crucified body? his face? – we are to imagine. Iconography and also other versions (as well as scholarship) simplify this complex and overdetermined arrangement to a crucifix between the stag's antlers, whereas in this description it is not even clear that cross and image appear at the same place 'above' or 'on' the animal. This peculiar description brings three different types of signs into a configuration: the iconic sign of the image, the symbolic sign of the cross, and the allegorical sign of the stag, all three bound together by the figuration of Christ, himself not a sign of God, but God incarnate.

The reasons for this astonishing effort at bolstering the stag with biblical allusions and semiotic complexity cannot be ascertained, especially since the origins of the story are not clear. It is usually assumed that the passion of Eustachius is of Byzantine origin. Heffernan has pointed out the appeal of this story in a Byzantine context:

The earliest mention of St. Eustace is contemporary with the iconoclastic controversy, and moreover is by John of Damascus, the leading opponent of the iconoclasts. Damascus was an ardent supporter of the belief that it was in images that God made the invisible readily visible, and considered visual representation a valuable pedagogical tool. It seems likely that

the Eustace legend with its use of miraculous images, especially that of the stag, would be favored by this anti-iconoclastic faction of the clerical hierarchy fresh from their triumph at the Second Council of Nicea (787). (Heffernan 67)

Heffernan's point is the story's interest as material for preaching. In the following part, I will take a closer look at the stag in the context of John Damascene's treatise and compare it with another early version in Latin.

4 Meta-image and mirror image: the vision in John Damascene's *De imaginibus oratio* and in BHL 2761b

The supposedly earliest Greek testimony of the textual tradition of Eustachius concerns exactly the semiotic configuration of the stag discussed so far: the episode of the vision (and only this episode from the Eustachius legend) can be found in the third and probably latest redaction (Kotter 5–7; Louth 208) of John Damascene's *De imaginibus oratio*, in which he develops his defence of images against iconoclasm in Byzantium. This third treatise is dated later than 730. Like the other two treatises, the argument of John's text is followed by a florilegium which assembles extracts from the Fathers and other sources considered authoritative for the argument, including hagiographic material. The florilegium of the third treatise is preserved in a singular manuscript from the thirteenth century, the *codex unicus* which alone preserves all three of John's treatises in full (Kotter 25). This situation has led some scholars to suggest interpolations (Louth 212), however, this question has not been extended to the extract that is given from the *martyrion* of Eustachius-Placidus (*De imaginibus oratio* 3.83). The seventeenth century editor of the Greek passion of Eustachius, Combefis, noted the identity of John Damascene's extract with his version (BHG 641.4).

John Damascene, living near Jerusalem, wrote in response to the first iconoclastic policy that was initiated by emperor Leo III. Although his writings were not much echoed in the controversy that ensued until iconoclasm was condemned in 843 (Louth 197–98), John was recognized as one of the foremost defenders of images and anathematized by the Synod of Hieria in 754 (Mango 3). One of the lines of reasoning which John establishes in his treatises, especially

in *De imaginibus oratio* 3, is the systematic development of what he considers as an image (εἰκῶν: 3.17–24). An image is not to be reduced to a man-made representation, as posited by the iconoclasts, but according to John, a concept intrinsic to God's predestination, creation and work of salvation (3.26). In his third treatise, John distinguishes six types of images (Louth 215–16): the natural image (the Son of God as image of the Father: 3.18), the images in God's mind of what will be in the future (3.19), human kind created in the image of God by imitation (3.20), figures and forms by which humans are able to imagine the spiritual world (e.g. angels) and also elements of the visible world which humans can perceive as images of the Divine (the sun, the light and the beam as images of the Trinity: 3.21), types of the Old Testament (3.22), and finally images that recall the past and are used for instruction (3.23). Under the latter category, written words are described as images in two ways: because letters are images of spoken language, and because written representations of exemplary men imprint their portrayals in the minds of the readers for emulation. Barnard (12) summarizes the list as six hierarchical stages evolving from God, descending from Christ, the direct image of God down to the historical icon.

The configuration in Eustachius' vision brings together different images in John Damascene's conception. Christ as the natural image of God speaks to Eustachius in a dialogue prefigured by the episodes of Balaam and Paul; Eustachius heeds him as man made in the image of God and able to imitate Christ. The stag is an element of the visible world that in a flash becomes perceptible as revealing God. In combination with the cross and the epiphanic (but silent) image, the configuration of the stag demonstrates "the way in which the visible world finds its reality in the spiritual world and images it forth" (Louth 216). The stag-as-Christ can thus serve in John's treatise as a meta-image, being "the manifestation and display of the hidden" (Louth 215; *De imaginibus oratio* 3.17: Πᾶσα εἰκῶν ἐκφαντορικὴ τοῦ κρυφίου ἐστὶ καὶ δεικτικὴ). The animal, however, is only one element in this assemblage of images, which in itself is an image in John's humblest sense: a written image as a recollection of the past and a model of virtue.

Whereas the semiotic splendour of the stag in the Greek text (BHG 641) makes a perfect *exemplum* for John's argument of the divine sanctioning of images, it seems that a more sober representation of the animal was preferred in a different context. The 'Byzantine' version of Eustachius' vision was the most influential during the

17. Batalova posits that this system needs a revision.

18. The texts vary in the date of the liturgical feast, giving either the 20th of September or a day in the beginning of November or 20th of May. An early manuscript from St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek (Cod. Sang. 561, 152–62, written around 900) does not mention the date of commemoration, but has Eustachius between Genoveva and Agnes, both commemorated in January. As Heffernan (67) observes with regard to the variance of the date in liturgical sources, “these inconsistencies reflect wide popularity and local manifestations of piety.”

19. I will refer to this text by ‘Cass.’

20. Meyer, “Der Rythmus” 232–34, posited that the story of the Roman martyr was written in Latin in the fifth or sixth century, was slightly expanded in the seventh century, and was then more thoroughly revised and elaborated by a Greek hagiographer in the eighth century. The resulting Greek version (*i.e.* BHG 641) was soon translated (back) to Latin and became the most widespread version in the Middle Age (*i.e.* BHL 2760). The basic reason for his argument is that Roman martyrdoms were usually recorded in the Roman language and could have been translated in Greek-speaking communities, *e.g.* in the south of Italy. He thus opposes the equally wholesale basic argument brought forth by Monteverdi (396) for a Greek origin of the text: the general priority of Greek texts (biblical, apocryphal and patristic literature) in the Christian tradition to Latin translations. A controversy between Bousset, “Die Geschichte;” Bousset, “Wiedererkennungsmärchen;” Meyer, “Die älteste lateinische Fassung” ensued on the question of textual origin. Delehaye (208) dismissed Meyers theory. Heffernan (70) remarks: “Though exceedingly interesting and of considerable importance, Meyer’s thesis is highly idiosyncratic and has a great number of opponents.”

Middle Ages, it was translated into Latin and spread in the West, and it was used also by Jacobus de Voragine in his Golden Legend. However, Jacobus does not only re-tell the story according to this version, but also records information for preachers who will be using his collection as a manual. Thus, Jacobus comments the stag episode: “Alii tamen dicunt, quod ipsa imago Christi, quae inter cornua cervi apparuit, haec verba protulit” (*Legenda Aurea* 2.2068.21–22; “Others say, however, that it was the image of Christ itself that appeared between the antlers of the stag, which spoke these words”). Jacobus is aware of the existence of two different versions of the story, which are, among other aspects, distinguished by the way in which the animal is involved in the epiphany.

Before I come back to this difference, some observations on the Latin textual tradition are necessary to explain the position of the text that will be discussed next. In the grouping introduced in the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*,¹⁷ the tradition of Eustachius is headed by the reconstructed text edited in the *Acta Sanctorum* (the *vulgate* passion summarized above) given the number BHL 2760. It is a Latin translation of a Greek passion (BHG 641), represented by the texts edited by Combefis and in the *Acta Sanctorum*, the vision episode of which parallels the extract in John Damascene’s Florilegium 3. The Latin texts that are affiliated to this translation have the longest manuscript tradition (from the ninth to the sixteenth century).¹⁸

A second group of shorter texts is headed by number 2761 in the BHL table, given to a text which is recorded in a relatively late manuscript of the eleventh-twelfth century from Montecassino. It has been printed in the *Bibliotheca Casinensis* (3, Florilegium, 351–54; Ott 575–80).¹⁹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars debated the origins of the Eustachius tradition. A minority position was proposed by Meyer: he believed that the texts of the second group represented the original passion.²⁰ The question of origin notwithstanding, Meyer (“Der Rythmus” 270–71) identified the Montecassino text as a later redaction of a version recorded in earlier manuscripts. The earlier version (*recensio antiquior*) is given the number BHL 2761b, it has been edited with variants by Meyer (“Der Rythmus” 272–87). In a follow-up publication, Meyer added the variants of another early manuscript: München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4585 (ninth century).

The fact that the texts belonging to the second group (BHL 2761) differ from texts of the other groups in respect to the representation of the stag has not been noted apart from Meyer’s argument on textual origins. In the texts of group 1, as in BHG 641, it is the stag who

21. "Acta græca S. Eustathii" 66–112.

speaks the words: I am Christ. In the texts of group 2, Christ speaks in the manifestation of the image that appears between the stag's antlers, as Jacobus tells us. Other versions listed in the BHL, such as the *passio Eustachii* of the *Legenda Aurea* (BHL 2762), of Jacob's predecessor John de Mailly (BHL 2771) and of the *Gesta Romanorum* (BHL 2763) also have the speaking stag and seem to belong to the 'family' of group 1. There is also an interesting Greek text that has the speaking image (BGH 642),²¹ but the relation to the Latin version is not clear. Its editor van Hooff (66) observes that the author of this version which has been attributed to Symeon Metaphrastes, seems to correct its source where he deems it implausible, and he points out the speaking stag as an example.

What difference does it make whether Christ speaks to Placidus through the mouth of the stag or through the image above the animal's head? I will discuss this question by using the text of 2761b (Meyer, "Der Rythmus" 272–87). Eustachius, having followed the stag into the woods, watches the animal standing on an elevated rock, but does not let go of his hunting intentions at all: "[...] stetitque cogitans qualiter posset capere eum." (Meyer, "Der Rythmus" 273 [2], "[...] and he stood thinking about how he might catch him"). In this redaction, there is no lengthy comment of the narrator on Balaam's ass and also no reference to the Acts of Apostles. The narrative goes on:

22. In this passage, the wording of BHL 2761b is identical to BHL 2761.

Et dum consideraret magnitudinem eius, ostendit deus magnum miraculum super cornua eiusdem cervi; et apparuit signum sanctae crucis super claritatem solis illustrans se. Et vidit inter media cornua eius imaginem salvatoris. Cuius vocem audivit dicentem sibi: O Placidus, quid me persequeris? ego sum Ihesus [...]. (Meyer "Der Rythmus" 273 [3])²²

And when he considered his magnitude, God revealed a great miracle above the antlers of the stag, and the sign of the Holy Cross appeared, shining brighter than the sun. And he saw between the middle horns the image of the Saviour, whose voice he heard, saying to him: 'O Placidus, why do you chase me? I am Jesus [...].'

Whereas in BHL 2760 the narrator gives his audience the perspective of God, who turns the hunter into the hunted and captures him by an overfraught vision, the narrator of BHL 2761b focuses on Eus-

tachius watching his game turn into a miraculous animal, brilliantly marked by the sign of Christ. I would argue that this version, by giving the voice of Christ to the image, also uses a different semiotic configuration which suggest a different reading of the stag. Although the animal is still at the centre of the revelation, he is not an ‘animal epiphany’ in the strict sense. Throughout the vision, the mute animal remains nothing but a creature, looking back in a mirroring glance at its fellow creature, man. Although the allegorical tradition allows an interpretation of the stag as Christ, this meaning is not foregrounded. Rather, the stag-as-creature evokes the exegesis of Ps. 41.2 that interprets the stag as signifying the Christian individual. With the light of the Cross shining on it, the stag of the vision can also be read in the context of baptism, as the neophyte craving for God, in line with the exegetical tradition. In this configuration, the allegorical stag is an image of Placidus’ hidden, ‘alien’ self (already serving Christ in his charity, but not yet Christian), and at the same time an image of what he is to become (Eustachius, the convert) in effect of his conversation with Christ. Thus, in the version of BHL 2761b, Eustachius encounters God in the ephiphanic image of Christ and himself in the mirror image of the stag.

The narrator of BHL 2761b seems less concerned with the semiotic intricacies of mediating between God and Man. Instead, the theme of conversion takes center stage, and the stag iconifies conversion, as his turning back to the hunter initiates a series of turns and returns, finally leading Eustachius and his family to their place in the *communio sanctorum*. I suggest that a context for this rendering of the vision can be found by looking at the monastic culture in which the earliest manuscripts of this version were written.

The earliest witnesses according to Meyer (“Der Rythmus” 272; “Die älteste lateinische Fassung” 794) are the Munich codex Clm 4585 (f. 59v–65v), and the manuscript Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 5771 (f. 228v–231v). The Munich codex, a collection of saints’ lives, is described by Meyer as coming from Benediktbeuren. It consists of three parts (Glauche 140), the first of which that contains Eustachius’ passion is dated to the first half of the ninth century. Its origin has been located in Regensburg by Bischoff (206) and attributed to the circle of Baturich, bishop of Regensburg and prior of St. Emmeram, where the manuscripts of this circle were written. The Vatican manuscript was kept at the monastery of Bobbio (Poncelet 141) and is thought to have originated there (Gamber 593).

The early tradition of BHL 2761b is thus connected to Benedictine houses with an active literary production. Whether this text is an abridged redaction of the ‘Byzantine’ version, as most scholars think, or whether it witnesses an even earlier and ‘original’ text, as Meyer has proposed, is not to be decided here. More important is the question in what light the monks of Bobbio and St. Emmeram might have read ‘their’ narrative of Eustachius’ vision.

In Benedictine monastic culture, the Psalms accompanied the monks through day and night. The Psalms were used as material for the liturgy in the offices, and the *regula Benedicti* (18) ordered the monks to repeat the Psalter in its entirety every week. Leclercq has described how the rule of continual prayer resulted in a “deep impregnation with the word of Scripture that explains the extremely important phenomenon of reminiscence whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke whole quotations” (Leclercq 73). It can be assumed that for the literate monks to whom the passion of Eustachius’ was read in the refectory, the stag would trigger echoes of scripture, and especially of Ps. 41.2. Praying the Psalms meant giving one’s own voice to their ‘speaker’ and modelling one’s own reverence and desire on his, in Ps. 41.2 comparing one’s own desire for God with the stag’s thirst for water. The stag as the *momentum* of conversion in Eustachius’ vision could have a special appeal to monastic communities for whom conversion was a mental practice to be continually rehearsed in a habitus of humility and compunction (Leclercq 29–32).

The different readings that can be unfolded by following the seemingly minor differences in the versions of Eustachius’ vision lead to some general observations on animals in saints’ lives. It is true that spiritual matters, not animals in their own right, are the primary concern of these stories. However, the spiritual or theological meanings of animals in hagiography cannot be ‘fixed’ by the reference to allegorical traditions, even if these traditions have produced long-lasting and powerful *topoi*. Hagiography is a textual practice that consist of re-writing even more (in a qualitative and a quantitative sense) than of writing. The re-writing, even the copying of the lives and passions of the saints, is deeply embedded in immediate pragmatic contexts, and it is with regard to these that the meanings of animals in hagiography can be traced.²³

23. In the context of this volume, a Hebrew spell making a reference to Eustachius ought to be mentioned. The spell is preserved in a manuscript from the Cairo Genizah (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary Library, ENA 2672.20, f. 20b/2–10; Marmorstein 294–98). For a discussion of the fragmentary and obscure text with regard to the story of Eustachius see Leicht.

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