

NOBLE HEATHENS: THE SYNTHESIS OF THE CHRISTIAN AND THE  
PRE-CHRISTIAN IN *PLÁCITUSDRÁPA*

NOBILI PAGANI: LA SINTESI DI CRISTIANO E PRECRISTIANO NELLA  
*PLÁCITUSDRÁPA*

James Michael McIntosh<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Plácitusdrápa* is a twelfth-century skaldic poem based on the *Legend of St Eustace*. The *drápa* contains numerous kennings which allude to pre-Christian myth and legend. Scholars have largely dismissed these kennings as recycling material that had lost any cultural meaning as mere formal aspects of skaldic meter. An examination of the kennings and their distribution in the *drápa*, however, suggests that the skald was making conscious use of the material to embellish aspects of narrative and characterisation. Furthermore, the representation of heathen characters appears to have been influenced by the courtly *drápa* form. The relative positivity and negativity of the depiction of heathen characters appears to be tied to the nobility of their birth, with characters such as Emperors Trajan and Hadrian having more positive aspects. There is therefore evidence of a conscious two-way synthesis of Christian and pre-Christian material in *Plácitusdrápa*, rather than new Christian material being forced into a traditional secular form.

**Key-words:** Saints, Hagiography, Mythology, Skaldic Verse.

**Riassunto:** La *Plácitusdrápa* è una poesia scaldica del dodicesimo secolo basata sulla *Leggenda di Sant'Eustachio*. La *drápa* contiene numerose *kennningar* che alludono a miti e leggende precristiane. Gli studiosi hanno in buona parte ignorato queste *kennningar* considerandole come materiale di riciclo ormai privo di significato culturale e come parte degli elementi puramente formali della metrica scaldica. Un esame delle *kennningar* e della loro distribuzione all'interno della *drápa* suggerisce tuttavia che il poeta stesse facendo un utilizzo consapevole di quel materiale con l'intento di abbellire alcuni aspetti della narrazione e della caratterizzazione. Inoltre, la rappresentazione di personaggi pagani sembra essere stata influenzata dalla *drápa* in quanto forma di poesia di corte. La rappresentazione di personaggi pagani come positivi o negativi sembra essere legata alla loro nobiltà di nascita: personaggi come l'imperatore Traiano e Adriano, per esempio, presentano più aspetti positivi. La *Plácitusdrápa* dimostra quindi una sintesi consapevole e bidirezionale di materiale cristiano e precristiano, e non una semplice costrizione di nuovo materiale cristiano in una forma poetica tradizionale e profana.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD graduate student in the Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic Department at the University of Cambridge. E-mail: [jm827@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jm827@cam.ac.uk)

**Parole chiave:** Santi, Agiografie, Mitologie, Versi scaldici.

*Plácitusdrápa* is a versification in *dróttkvætt* of the *Legend of Saint Eustace* (BHL 2760), a saints' life which was widely circulated during the medieval period, as well as being translated and adapted into several vernaculars and literary forms (see MONTEVERDI, 1908–11, for a description of the tradition and various translations and adaptations). There is little evidence for St Eustace being venerated in Scandinavia, but nonetheless the *Legend* spawned both the *drápa* and four separate recensions of a prose Norse translation, known collectively as *Plácidus saga*, which contain varying levels of alteration to the original text. Only one recension of the saga (the fragmentary B-Recension) has an extant witness that is contemporaneous with the twelfth-century *Plácitusdrápa*. The D-Recension dates from the fourteenth century, while the most popular A-Recension has witness spanning the thirteenth through to the nineteenth centuries, while only nineteenth-century paper manuscripts attest the C-Recension (TUCKER, 1998, pp. xliii–xci). *Plácitusdrápa*, therefore, constitutes one of the earliest witnesses to the Eustace tradition in Western Scandinavia, and was certainly influential on the Scandinavian Eustace tradition, as the C-Recension of *Plácidus saga* was certainly influenced by the structure of the *drápa* (TUCKER, 1998, pp. ciii–cxxv). The main edition of *Plácitusdrápa* used in this article is found in LOUIS-JENSEN and WILLS (2007), although an earlier version of LOUIS-JENSEN's edition is also found in Tucker's edition of the four saga recensions (TUCKER, 1998).

Despite the early place of *Plácitusdrápa* in the written skaldic corpus, being conventionally dated to c. 1200 (LOUIS-JENSEN, 1998, p. 89) and therefore the only twelfth-century Norse poem to be preserved in a near-contemporary manuscript (LOUIS-JENSEN and WILLS, 2007, p. 179), it has largely been overlooked for literary analysis. This may be due to the Christian nature of the material, which could be seen to hold little value for scholars primarily interested in pre-Christian Old Norse culture. This is despite the frequent use of kennings which contain material alluding to Old Norse myth and legend. Katrina Attwood dismissed these aspects as “little more than formal” (2005, p. 53), arguing that they were empty embellishments carried over as structural aspects of the literary tradition with no deeper meaning attached to them. Roberta Frank, on the other hand, appears to have overlooked these

kennings entirely; in her summary of the early Christian *drápur* (*Geisli*, *Harmsól* and *Plácitusdrápa*), she sees this Christian phase as a necessary, sanitising step for the continuation of the skaldic art: “vernacular poets first slip into print by composing didactic Christian verse; only afterward is the native tradition exploited.” (1978, p. 30). An analysis of the distribution and use of this material in kennings, however, suggests that the skald was using connotations borne by the figures invoked to embellish aspects of the narrative and characters of *Plácitusdrápa*; he was in fact exploiting a tradition that was still culturally understood by his audience. What is more, just as the native Norse *drápa* form is being adapted to a new genre of narrative hagiography, the courtly background of the *dróttkvætt* metre in which *Plácitusdrápa* was composed likewise influences the skald’s representation of heathen characters based on their relative nobility. Far from a transitional stage of sanitising Norse literary traditions before they can be exploited, *Plácitusdrápa* represents a two-way synthesis of Christian and Norse material and literary tradition.

*Plácitusdrápa* is preserved in AM 673b 4<sup>o</sup>, which is dated to circa 1200 (LOUIS-JENSEN, 1998, p. 89). On account of errors in the text which indicate that the scribe was working from a copy, the composition of the poem is dated to between the years 1150 and 1200 (LOUIS-JENSEN and WILLS, 2007, p. 179). Such a composition date would make the skald a contemporary of Einar Skulason, composer of Christian *drápur* such as *Geisli*, not discounting the possibility that Einar himself composed *Plácitusdrápa*. Unfortunately, the manuscript is badly damaged, leaving only fifty-nine stanzas of an estimated seventy-eight legible. Sections from the beginning and the end of the poem are lost, estimated to constitute eleven stanzas from the opening *upphaf* and eight from the concluding *slæmr* (LOUIS-JENSEN and WILLS, 2007, pp. 179-181), while some of the extant verses are fragmentary and many rely on some level of readings supplied by later editors. In this article, the emendations and supplied readings that were accepted by Jonna Louis-Jensen and Tarrin Wills (2007) will likewise be accepted. Translations are based on Louis-Jensen and Wills with some modification.

### **The legend of St. Eustace**

In order to place the themes discussed in their context, the narrative of the Latin *Legend of St Eustace* upon which the Norse recensions are based will be summarised briefly:

Placidus, a rich and influential officer in the Roman army who, though pagan, is known for performing charitable deeds, sees a vision of Christ between the antlers of a stag he is hunting. Christ praises his good deeds and exhorts him to convert. Placidus and his wife, who has seen a similar vision, are baptised along with their two sons, and Placidus takes the name Eustace. In a second vision, Christ informs Eustace that he must be tested in a similar way to Job, and Eustace accepts the trial.

First, plague kills his servants and livestock and his house ransacked, so the family flees to Egypt. While sailing there, the heathen captain of the ship kidnaps Eustace's wife in place of a fare they cannot pay. Soon afterwards, while crossing a large river, Eustace's sons are carried off by a lion and a wolf respectively. Eustace then despairs and contemplates suicide (although this detail is omitted in *Plácitusdrápa* and "garbled", if not omitted, in the A-Recension of *Plácidus saga* (TUCKER, 1998, p. xci). Once this impulse is overcome, he rails against God, comparing his former life and current position with that of Job and claiming that he has been treated worse. He then reconciles himself with his loss, puts his trust in God, and takes up residence in a nearby town.

Fifteen years later, a barbarian army invades the Roman Empire. Emperor Trajan remembers his former commander's prowess before his mysterious disappearance and sends soldiers to find him. Two of his former soldiers encounter Eustace and see through his attempts to hide his identity. He is taken back to Rome in triumph and reinstated as head of the army. His sons, who have been miraculously spared and raised in the same town as one another, are recruited into the army. Eustace places them foremost in his service but completely fails to recognise them. During their campaign, the Romans camp in the same garden in which Eustace's wife now lives. She overhears her sons reminiscing and realising that they are brothers. As she observes their reunion, she realises that their story means that they must also be her sons. She then recognises Eustace when asking for passage back to Rome,

and the family is reunited. The war is then won and Eustace and his family return to Rome in splendour, laden with plunder and captives.

When they arrive in Rome they discover that Trajan has died and been succeeded by the more heathen Hadrian. When Eustace refuses to sacrifice to idols in thanks for his victory and the return of his family, Hadrian attempts to turn him and his family from their faith, before throwing them to lions. The lions refuse to harm them; instead, they bow to the saints adoringly. The saints make a final prayer before they are martyred by being roasted alive in an oven in the shape of a bronze bull. Their incorrupt bodies are found three days later, causing much horror in the Emperor and much rejoicing among the people, who subsequently bury the saints in a secret place and eventually raise a church in their memory.

Even a cursory glance at the narrative suggests that the *Legend of Eustace* is not a standard hagiography. Where traditional saints' lives involve a total rejection of worldly things and the performance of faith-affirming miracles, in the Legend there are no explicit wonders to speak of, apart from their miraculous reunion, and Eustace's return to his former secular position, with all its attendant wealth and power, is a far cry from more traditional pacifistic "soldier saints" such as St Martin of Tours. It could be argued further, in fact, that the quasi-romantic interest in nobility, wealth and warfare, that may have led to the Legend of Eustace being an early, if not the first, hagiography to be adapted to the *drápa* form. Such *drápur* were generally composed in *dróttkvætt*, i.e. the metre deemed appropriate for the *drótt* [royal court or noble entourage], taking its name from *drótt* and *kveða* [to speak], suggesting that it was composed for recitation in a courtly environment (GADE, 1995, p. 3). As such, *dróttkvætt* poetry chiefly involved the praise of noble patrons, specifically their success in war and their generosity (CLUNIES-ROSS, 2005, p. 44; see FRANK, 1978, pp. 120-53). While saints, including but not limited to Sts John, Peter and Mary, had extended *drápur* composed about them later, the story of Eustace provides material that is better suited to synthesis with the courtly focus of *dróttkvætt* poetry.

### **Mythological and legendar material in Plácitusdrápa**

The representation of heathens in the *Legend of St Eustace* goes beyond the standard hagiographic dichotomy of good Christians and antagonistic heathens. Placidus-Eustace provides an exemplar of the “Noble Heathen”, who is Christian in all but name through his good deeds, but must be baptised in order to be fully saved. This was a central issue for Christian thinkers in the early middle ages, especially in cultures that had recently converted – how to deal with the issue that ancestors who were ostensibly good people who had never had the opportunity to hear the Word of God were essentially damned. This “Problem of Paganism”, as it was termed by John Marenbon (see MARENBON, 2004, 2012, 2015), is a key theme in the *Legend of St Eustace*, in that Eustace earns the vision of God that leads to his salvation through his good deeds. The example of Eustace suggested that there was hope for moral figures from the pre-Christian past. This issue was one that was also explored by Scandinavian writers; Lars Lönnroth has identified the theme of the “Noble Heathen” in several sagas, and made especial mention of the *Legend of St Eustace* as one of the “literary presentations in foreign legend and romance” through which the “medieval theme of the Noble Heathen” became “known very early to the Icelanders” (see LÖNNROTH, 1969, p. 11). Given the Scandinavian interest in their pre-Christian ancestors, as evidenced in extensive genealogical material in Icelandic sagas, it is perhaps unsurprising that St Eustace might have been appealing in the years following the conversion. As Louis-Jensen and Wills noted, it is possible that “as an example of a virtuous pagan, the figure of Placidus struck a chord in a society concerned with the fate of its own ‘noble heathens’” (LOUIS-JENSEN and WILLS, 2007, p. 181).

As is to be expected in hagiography, Eustace’s chief antagonists in the Legend – the shipmaster and Emperor Hadrian – are pagan. Other non-Christian characters, such as Trajan and Eustace’s former servants who discover him, are depicted in a more neutral manner. When we examine the depiction of non-Christian characters in *Plácitusdrápa*, however, we see that the skald treats non-Christian characters with somewhat more nuance. Furthermore, it should be noted that the skald is happy to use material from Norse mythology in kennings to describe the characters, especially Eustace. It is possible that twelfth-century Icelanders had

come to understand pre-Christian Norse gods euhemeristically as powerful men who had been mistaken for or misremembered as deities. This view was certainly espoused by Snorri Sturluson in the *Prologue* to his *Prose Edda* in the early thirteenth century, and can also be seen in Ari Porgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, which dates from the early twelfth century. The genealogy Ari provides for the Ynglings and the people of Breiðafjörðr includes both Njörðr and Freyr, the former of which is explicitly referred to as *Svíakonungr* [king of the Swedes] (JAKOB BENEDIKTSSON, 1968, p. 27). This might not, however, account for references to Fenrir and Miðgarðsormr which, being mythical beasts, cannot as easily be interpreted euhemeristically. The skald's comfort with mythological material may equally be a product of the composition of *Plácitusdrápa* during the twelfth-century "skaldic renaissance" which saw renewed interest in pre-Christian material and its reintroduction to the poetic corpus; indeed, the two contexts are not mutually exclusive. It is apparent that, in places, the skald is using mythological material to highlight aspects of the plot and characters of *Plácitusdrápa*.

Before proceeding with the analysis, some technical terms will be discussed. *Dróttkvætt* meter is a meticulous style of skaldic verse. It was described by Kari Ellen Gade as "the most stylized and prestigious meter of skaldic poetry" (GADE, 1995, p. 3) and was particularly used in panegyrics and *lausavísur* [stand-alone verses]. As noted above, it is particularly associated with a courtly audience and context, "depends on syllable counting and employs a strict system of internal rhymes" (GADE, 1995, p. 7), and also involves a rigid pattern of alliteration and both half- and full-rhymes within lines of six syllables (GADE, 1995, pp. 3-7).

Another distinctive feature of *dróttkvætt* and other skaldic meters were kennings. Kennings are convoluted metaphors, consisting of a base word and at least one determinant which narrows the metaphorical potential for the base word, enabling the kenning to be "solved" to produce the referent, that is, the literal object being discussed rather than the metaphorical object it is presented as (WHALEY, 2012, pp. cxli-cxlii). For example, if gold is described as "the fire of the sea", fire acts as the base word. Fire can be a metaphor for gold, being shiny, or a wound, since both burn. The determinant "of the sea" indicates that the intended meaning is [GOLD], as there are legends concerning gold being found or hidden in water. The stages of interpretation can be visualised in this way:

Base word + (determinant(s)) > [REFERENT]

Fire + (of the sea) > [GOLD]

Furthermore, kennings can often contain *heiti*, which act as poetic synonyms for figures or objects that frequently occur in skaldic verse, and often refer to mythological and legendary figures; *Yggr*, for example, is a common alternative name for Óðinn (WHALEY, 2012, p. cxxxix).

Since the metrical demands of *dróttkvætt* often spread kennings across one or more lines, the kennings will be quoted according to their prose word order unless they are being quoted as part of a stanza, where the word order of the *drápa* will be retained. In such cases, bold and italic text will be used to indicate the relevant words in the stanza for ease of reference.

### **Kennings alluding to Æsir**

There are several instances in *Plácitusdrápa* in which Christian characters are described with kennings that have pagan mythological figures as the base word. While Katrina Attwood described these as “little more than formal” (2005, p. 53), mere metrical building blocks of *dróttkvætt*, in *Plácitusdrápa* they appear to be deliberately placed and used to highlight aspects of the narrative. Similar usage of kennings has been noted in Norse poems such as *Ynglingatal* by Erin Goeres (2015; see especially Ch. 1), and it appears that the skald who composed *Plácitusdrápa* was similarly conscious of the effect that connotations borne by kennings could have on characterisation and narrative embellishment.

Theophista is described in four kennings that invoke pre-Christian goddesses:

<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 14:1-2	<i>Sjofn seims</i> [Sjofn <goddess> of gold [WOMAN]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 17:3	<i>hodd-Gefn</i> [hoard-Gefn <= Freyja> [WOMAN]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 24:6-7	<i>Jorð hørstrengs</i> [Jorð <goddess> of the linen-ribbon [WOMAN]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 50:3	<i>Pungra strengjar</i> [Pungra <= Freyja> of the ribbon [WOMAN]]

All four of these kennings relate to Theophista in the context of Eustace's trials, of which the loss of his family, beginning with his wife, is the hardest to bear. Both *Sjöfn seims* and *hodd-Gefn* invoke wealth as determinants (*seimr* [wealth] and *hodd* [hoard] respectively) which is appropriate to each kenning in different ways. In the former case, riches are invoked when Eustace insists he and his family leave home to humble themselves further, foreshadowing the loss of Theophista. In the latter, the wealth attributed to Theophista emphasises the captain's lust for her, as noted by Margaret Clunies-Ross (2005, p. 138 footnote 27). It also emphasises her value to Eustace, as her loss is the first by which he is saddened. This is reinforced by the other two references to Theophista in stanza 17 as his *kona* [wife] and *eiginbrúðr* [true wife], which stress her relationship with Eustace when he is about to lose her. Clunies-Ross' observation is reinforced by the reference to Theophista in stanza 24 as *Jörð hørstrengs* [Jörð <goddess> of the linen-ribbon [WOMAN]] when implied to be at risk from the heathens she lives among, as she is *ógnvist* [made quiet by terror]. Finally, in stanza 50, *Pungra strengjar* [Pungra <= Freyja> of the ribbon [WOMAN]] places her in apposition with a dangerous heathen; in the same stanza her kidnapper is described as *sendir látrs undins fránbauðs jarðar* [distributor of the ground of the shining ring of the earth [= Miðgarðsormr > GOLD > GENEROUS MAN]]. The captain's inhumanity is stressed, especially since the figures invoked (Freyja and Midgarðsormr) are on opposing sides at Ragnarök. This accentuates the risk he posed to her in life with her divinity, hence worth, again highlighting his lust for her.

Likewise, Eustace is referred to in kennings that mention several Æsir and other figures from Norse myth and legend.

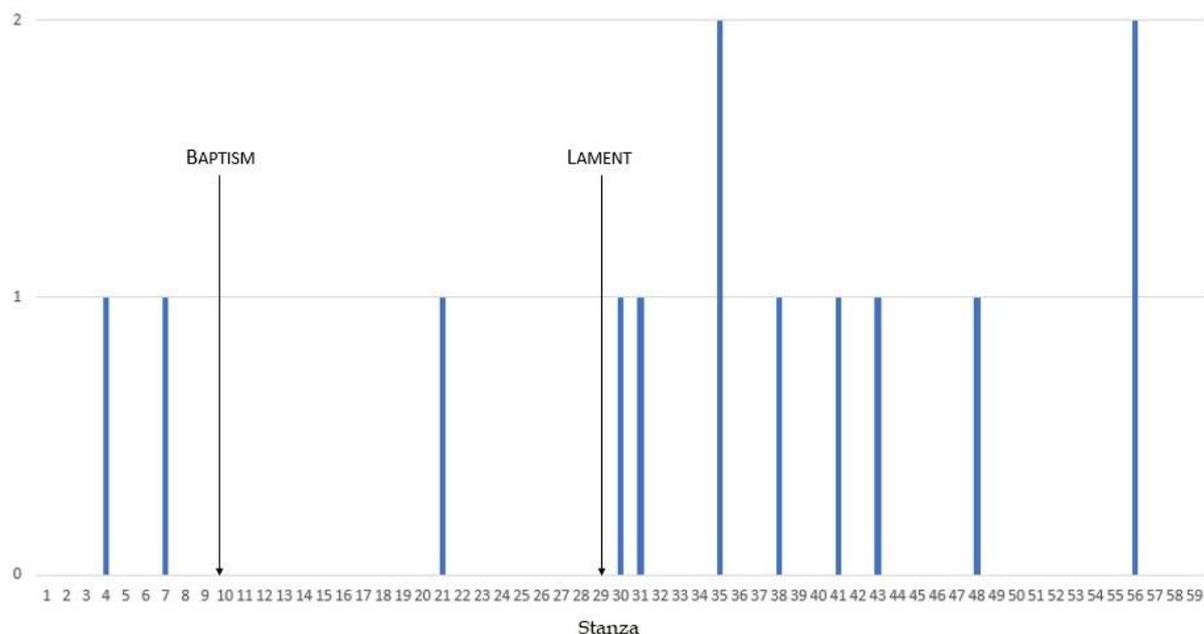


Fig. 1: The number of kennings referring to Eustace per stanza that contain legendary or mythological material

The distribution of these kennings in the saga suggests that they were being used consciously – of the thirteen kennings, ten occur following Eustace’s Lament in stanzas 26-28. This Lament forms the emotional turning point of the saga, when Eustace accepts that he must let go of worldly things and put his trust in God. It appears that at this point, when he has demonstrated his Christian worth, Eustace is more often described in elevated language.

In addition to this, the groupings of the kennings appear thematic. We see two kennings that refer to Æsir in stanzas 30 and 31, which relate to Eustace’s Christian almsgiving in exile and the promise of his return to fortune. Three other such kennings, in stanzas 41, 43 and 48, refer to Eustace’s return to and fulfilment of his secular military role. The reunion with his wife and sons in stanza 56 also twice refers to Eustace in kennings relating to Æsir.

An examination of the kennings for Eustace that contain Æsir-names as referents also reveals a conscious use of them on the part of the skald, in terms of the connotations that each name bears. There are eight such kennings in *Plácitusdrápa* (here normalised to the nominative):



<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 7:2	<i>unnar elg-Þrótttr</i> [Þrótttr of the elk of the wave [SHIP > SEAFARER]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 30:2-3	“vigg-Baldr vídrar foldar Þvinnils” [Baldr <god> of the horse of the wide land of Þvinnill <sea-king> [SEA > SHIP > SEAFARER]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 31:3-4	<i>lypti-Móð[i] farms leggjar</i> [bearing-Móði of the cargo of the arm [GOLD > MAN]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 41:5	<i>Baldr hodda</i> [Baldr of hoards [MAN]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 43:5-6	<i>Þróttar þingbeiði</i> [demander of the assembly of Þrótttr [BATTLE > WARRIOR]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 48:2-3	[o]dda þings hyr-Þrótttr [Þrótttr of the fire of the assembly of spears [BATTLE > SWORD > WARRIOR]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 56: 1, 3	<i>N[jø]rð[r] elda handa</i> [Njörðr of the fire of hands [GOLD > MAN]]
<i>Plácitusdrápa</i> 56:5, 7	<i>Beiði-Þror armlinns</i> [bearing-Þror of the arm-snake [RING > MAN]]

The *heiti* in these kennings are worth considering, if only for the connotations they bear. Diana Edwards has argued that Óðinnic *heiti* were broadly descriptive and less bound to the person of Óðinn *per se* (1982-5, p. 41), while Roberta Frank suggested that these *heiti* became acceptable via a literary euhemerism as they could also act as abstract nouns (1978, p. 71). However, not all of the Æsir mentioned by the skald carry such tangential connotations, and the distribution of the kennings suggests that they were being used as a conscious form of elevated language.

*Þrótttr* is used as a base word or referent in kennings concerning Eustace three times and means “strength, valour, fortitude” or “the strong/valiant/brave one” (CLEASBY and VIGFUSSON p. 747). It is generally accepted as a *heiti* for Óðinn due to the contexts in which it appears (FINNUR JÓNSSON, 1931, p. 648). The connotations of strength and valour are especially appropriate to the two uses of this *heiti* in kennings for Eustace in military situations:



he is *Próttar þingbeiði* [the demander of the assembly of *Próttir* [BATTLE > WARRIOR]] when Trajan places him at the head of the Roman army and *[o]dda þings hyr-Próttir* [the *Próttir* of the fire of the assembly of spears [BATTLE > SWORD > WARRIOR]] when leading the victorious army in pursuit of their fleeing enemies.

The earliest example, however, does not fit this warlike pattern. When Eustace follows God's injunction to return to the mountain to receive his second vision, he is described as *unnar elg-Próttir* [the *Próttir* of the elk of the wave [SHIP > SEAFARER]]. The solution to the kenning is not military, as in the other cases, and neither is the context; nevertheless, the values of valour and fortitude are appropriate to the image of Eustace as a seafarer seeking a new life in God. This could be related to the Christian conception of life on earth as a pilgrimage, with the goal being the homeland of Heaven. This idea of pilgrimage was often related to the idea of a sea-voyage, and has been related to poems such as the Old English *Seafarer* (see POPE, 1974, p. 82 and GREENFIELD, 1966, p. 156). The image of Eustace as a bold seafarer correlates nicely with this image of a sea-bound quest for salvation.

Eustace is linked to Baldr twice. Baldr was seen by some Norse writers as a pseudo-Christ, in that he was slain but reborn after Ragnarök (MAGERØY, 1985), and so can be seen as an appropriate way to refer to a Christian who has recently undergone a rebirth through conversion. Eustace is described as *vigg-Baldr* [horse-Baldr] while in exile in Dadissus in a kenning that is unique in the poem for combining an *Æsir*-related referent with a determinant invoking a legendary sea king; this will be discussed in further detail below. Eustace is subsequently described as *Baldr [h]odda* [Baldr of hoards [MAN]] when summoned back to Rome in stanza 41:5-8:

Hodda Baldr til hildar  
 hugfylldr koma skyldi  
 alla tígn ok eignask  
 endr þá es lét af hendi.

The brave Baldr of hoards [MAN] was to come to the battle and regain all the honour which he had previously abandoned.

The linking of Eustace with a divine pseudo-Christ figure in a description of his being returned to his former status and glory is interesting as, rather appropriately, it contains connotations of rebirth. At this point in the narrative, Eustace is being reborn into his secular role, albeit this time as a Christian with a correct understanding of his relationship with God taking precedence over worldly things.

In stanza 31, Eustace is referred to with the name *Móði* when God provides comfort, marking the beginning of his return to his fortunes. *Móði* was a son of *Pórr*, and his name could be translated as “the courageous one” (FINNUR JÓNSSON, 1931, p. 411). An allusion to a divine figure following Eustace’s overcoming of his despair and his living of a good, Christian life through charity (in stanzas 28-30) displays Eustace’s renewed worth. Additionally, the connotations of courage both reflect the trials that he has overcome, the martyrdom that is to come following God’s provision of comfort through his return to secular power, and eventual conflict with Hadrian.

Finally, the key narrative moments of recognition that lead to Eustace’s return to fortune and the reunion of his family are highlighted with kennings that allude to *Æsir*. The first occurs in stanza 40 and is the only instance of non-Christian characters being described by a kenning with a mythological base-word. When the soldiers who formerly served under Eustace recognise him, they are described as *hyr-Þróttar hjaldrserks* [Þróttar of the fire of the war-shirt [MAIL-SHIRT > SWORD > WARRIORS]]. This is a pivotal moment in the narrative, as it catalyses Eustace’s return to fortune, which is part of God’s reward to him for enduring his trial. As such, the positive depiction of these figures need not be seen as anomalous in the pattern. The two soldiers are not referred to as being Christian or heathen explicitly, as other characters generally are (barring Trajan, although the opening section where his paganism is criticised are missing from the fragmentary extant *drápa*). Furthermore, though not explicitly Christian but essentially acting as agents of God’s will, the two soldiers can be seen as “Christian-adjacent”; at best, they are potential noble heathens; at the very least, they are figures performing the will of God, however unknowingly.

In stanza 52, when Eustace’s sons begin to tell their stories, which will lead to their mutual recognition, they are described as *æski-Nirðir* [wishing-Nirðir (the plural form of

Njǫrðr]). Likewise, the pivotal stanza 56 contains two kennings referring to Eustace at his family's reunion: Theophista explains the events *Nirði elda handa* [to the Njǫrðr of the fire of hands [GOLD > MAN]], while Eustace is the *Beiði-Þror armlinns* [bearing-Þror of the arm-snake [RING > MAN]] when he acknowledges his sons. The sea-god Njǫrðr is mentioned explicitly in both stanzas, while Þror is an attested *heiti* for Óðinn (*Óðins nafn*, p. 751). The invocation of two major Æsir at pivotal moments of family reunion cannot be a coincidence. The general noble connotations of Æsir may simply be being used to elevate a key scene. Njǫrðr, however, being a god of the sea, may be a deliberate choice, given the misadventures of Eustace's family solely occurring around water; his wife is kidnapped at sea, while Eustace is in a river when his sons are carried off. In any case, it is apparent that the skald was using Æsir-related base words and determinants in a way that suggests that they were more than simply empty embellishment.

It should be noted that there is a single kenning alluding to one of the Æsir that does not directly refer to any character but that is indirectly linked to Eustace. In *Plácitusdrápa* 34:1-4, Trajan remembers his former general's prowess:

Minntisk gramr, þás gumna  
 gunndjarfra vas þarfi,  
 Yggjar leik hvé auka  
 endr Plácitus kenndi.

When he was in need of battle-bold men, the king recalled how Plácitus once knew how to intensify the game of Ygg [BATTLE].

Yggr is a well-attested *heiti* for Óðinn (JÓNSSON, 1931, p. 632). Here, though, it is not the base-word in a kenning for Eustace, as in the other examples above, but the determinant in a kenning relating to an activity for which he is needed. This elevated language emphasises the prowess of Placidus in Trajan's mind and, hence, the prestige with which Eustace is seen in the eyes of the world, both when absent and when present.

### Kenning referring to legendar material

There appears to be a similarly conscious use and distribution of kennings that contain legendary material. This is especially true of those kennings that refer to legendary sea-kings. There are five of these and, significantly, these only occur in what we might consider secular perspectives. The first takes place before Eustace's baptism, when he is *Vinnils viggþollr* [the tree of the horse of Vinnill] while recounting his vision to his wife. Another appears in stanza 30 when he is in exile. At this point, he is living a Christian life in secret, and it is implied that his neighbours are unaware of his faith. The other three are clustered in stanzas 35 and 38, when Eustace's former servants are looking for him:

Brœðr riðu **Byrfils skíða**

**beitis** tveir at leita

ár, þeirs ítrum vǫru

endr Plácito á hendi.

Fundu *Gylfa grundar*

*glaðríðanda* umb síðir;

*unnar furs* né ærir

afrendan *þor* kenndu.

Two brothers, who were formerly in the service of the glorious Placitus, rode out early to look for **the steerer of the skis of Byrfill** <sea-king> [SHIPS > SEAFARER]. At length they found *the rider of the ground of Gylfi* <sea-king> [SEA > SEAFARER]; the messengers did not recognise the powerful *tree of the fire of the wave* [GOLD > MAN].

and

**Útbeiti** frá **Áta**

undrask brœðr, þás fundu,

**skíðs**, á skrautvals beiði

skokks áhyggju þokka.

I have heard that the brothers wondered at the **steerer of the ski of Áti** <sea-king> [SHIP > SEAFARER] when they sensed a disposition of anxiety in the demander of the adornment-horse of the deck-plank.

The skald uses all three of the “sea-king” kennings as if from the perspective of the servants. The skald subtly plays with this; the servants clearly have expectations concerning Placidus (as the object of their search he is referred to in terms of figures of heroic legend), yet when they fail to recognise him, he is instead described in more typical kennings, such as *bor furs unnar* [tree of the fire of the wave [GOLD > MAN]]. This distinction implies that the eyes of the world see Eustace in a certain way, underscoring the difference between his Christian and secular vocations by elevating their expectations, albeit by referring to figures that do not have the same divine connotations as the Æsir used in other kennings.

A final kenning alluding to legendary material appears during Eustace’s abortive attempt to cross a river with his sons when he is described as *hristir skins Hlakkar* [the shaker of the gleam of Hlökk [SWORD > WARRIOR]] (*Plácitusdrápa* 21:3-4). Hlökk was the name of a valkyrie (JÓNSSON, 1931, p. 268), and the invocation of a figure associated with battle, both in terms of victory and death, is interesting in this context. At this point in the narrative, Eustace is about to lose his sons through his inability to protect them. The depiction of him as a bold warrior could be read as ironic, while the connotations of the slain being carried from the battlefield are appropriate to the apparent fate of Eustace’s sons. In both cases, the legendary imagery accentuates an emotive passage with dramatic irony in an artful manner.

It is apparent, therefore, that the skald who composed *Plácitusdrápa* was perfectly happy to incorporate material from Norse myth and legend in the depiction of Christian saintly characters. Not only that, there appears to be a conscious intent behind this usage, rather than it being simply poetic embellishment without any deeper meaning.

### **The depiction of heathens in *Plácitusdrápa***

The heathen characters in *Plácitusdrápa* can be roughly divided into a high-status and low-status group. High-status heathens are represented by Emperors Trajan and Hadrian, while the lower-status heathens are represented by the shipmaster who kidnaps Theophista and the townspeople with whom Eustace lives between his Lament and his return to fortune.

### Low-status heathens

The most prominent heathen character who is depicted negatively is the captain who kidnaps Theophista. He is introduced in stanza 16 as being *heiðni kenndan* [known for heathenism] and *bølgjarni* [evil-eager]. The first kennings referring to him connote violence – he is described as *stirðs herleiks hyrlund* [the tree of the fire of army play [SWORD > WARRIOR]] and *fetrjóðr jóða Fenris* [the paw-reddener of the offspring of Fenrir [WOLVES > WARRIOR]]. In the same stanza as these violent kennings is the contrastive description of Eustace as *[s]tǫðva stríða* [the calmer of distress [HOLY MAN]]. It is also significant that two kennings refer to the captain by invoking antagonistic figures from Norse mythology: Fenrir in stanza 16, and Miðgarðsormr in stanza 50. As noted before, this is emphasised by placing Theophista in mythological apposition with the shipmaster.

We would expect the depiction of the shipmaster, as one of the forces behind Eustace's Trial, to be depicted negatively. The depiction in stanza 30 of the townspeople, with whom Eustace lives for several years and who are not otherwise agents of negativity, is therefore significant:

Ok til aumra rekka  
 atvinnu gaf Þvinnils  
**vigg-Baldr vídrar foldar**  
 verkkaup, þats sér merkði.  
 Fast helt lundr ok leyndi  
 linnvengis trú sinni  
*hlunndýrs heiðna runna*  
 hǫttæfr goð sǫttum

And the **Baldr <god> of the horse of the wide land of Þvinnill <sea-king>** [SEA > SHIP > SEAFARER] gave the wages, which he had set aside for himself, for the support of poor men. The virtuous tree of the serpent-ground [GOLD > MAN] held fast to his agreements with God and concealed his faith among the heathen *trees of the animal of the launching-roller* [SHIP > SEAFARERS].

The kenning describing Eustace is considerably more elevated than that which describes his non-Christian neighbours, even though they both ultimately have the same referent of [SEAFARER] or [SEAFARERS]. Where Eustace is associated with the pseudo-Christ Baldr and the legendary sea-king Pvinnil, his neighbours are *hlunndýrs heiðna runna* [heathen trees of the animals of the launching-roller [SHIPS > SEAFARERS]] The townsfolk are explicitly referred to in terms of their non-Christian faith, while at the same time being dehumanised as *hlunndyr* [launching-roller-animals].

This depiction of Eustace's neighbours as being negative or inferior is not common in other reflexes of the Legend, nor is the added implication that they may be dangerous to Eustace, in that he is described as concealing his faith from them. Theophista is also described as doing this while in her own exile, as noted in stanza 24, which states that she kept her Christian faith *ogntvist* [muted by terror]. *Plácitusdrápa* definitely contains the sense that they do not feel safe being open about their faith.

### **High-status heathens**

What is interesting, however, is that the high-status heathens are depicted in a more positive manner in *Plácitusdrápa*, albeit not exclusively so. It should be noted that the loss of the opening, which introduces Trajan, and the end of the poem, which depicts Eustace's conflict with Hadrian and resulting martyrdom, mean that we cannot have a full picture; but the evidence of what we do have suggests that the class of the heathens being described does affect their depiction.

For example, Trajan is depicted as more confident in the face of invasion. Where in the standard text of the Legend of Eustace that other versions follow he is *in nimio tumultu* [in a great state of perturbation] (BHL 2760, p. 130), in *Plácitusdrápa* he appears much bolder, being *vígteitr* [battle-glad] (*Plácitusdrápa* 34:6). Where other reflexes of the Legend suggest that Trajan is defenceless without Placidus, in *Plácitusdrápa* the invasion happens “áðr tíginn Trájánuðs mætti vel verjask ráni” [before the noble Trajan could properly defend himself against plundering] (*Plácitusdrápa* 33:3-4), in response to which ‘þurfti gramr samna her trautt’ [the prince had to gather an army with difficulty] (*Plácitusdrápa* 33:2-3). Trajan is capable of

defending himself but is in need of more time and more support. This is in contrast to being powerless in other versions; in the base *Legend* of BHL 2760, he is not only *in nimio tumultu*, as noted above, but also, when recalling Placidus' military prowess, "tristabatur de subita ejus mutatione" [he despaired about his sudden change (in circumstances)] (BHL 2760, p. 130). Moreover, in the A-Recension (the earliest complete version) of *Plácitus saga*: 'tók Tarianus at fá mikils hersaga þessi ... Ógladdist konungr at ný af brotthvarfi Plácídi" [this war news began to trouble Trajan very much ... The king grew sad once more at the disappearance of Placidus] (*Plácitus saga*, pp. 41, 79). While the Norse prose version lessens Trajan's sorrow, *Plácitusdrápa* omits it entirely.

Likewise, when Eustace returns as commander, the capability of Trajan and his army is increased in *Plácitusdrápa* 44:1-4:

Enn bað ungra manna  
 ítr gramr fira samna  
 fljótt, ef fámeðr þættisk  
 ferð, Plácitus verða.

The glorious king then asked the men to gather a troop of young men quickly, if Plácitus found himself short of men.

Trajan, described positively as *ítr gramr* [glorious king], instigates the recruitment in case they lack men, whereas in the base *Legend* Eustace sends for more recruits because he identifies this lack.

When Hadrian is introduced to the *Legend of St Eustace*, it is invariably in a negative light. In the base *Legend* he is "gentilem ipsum pejorem impietatibus" [himself a heathen worse in impieties] (BHL 2760, p. 134), while in the A-Recension of *Plácitus saga* he is *grimmari höfðingi* [a more severe leader] (*Plácitus saga*, pp. 63, 84); his heathenness is omitted, but there is still a sense of his potential as an antagonist. In contrast, all the references to Hadrian that can be gleaned from the fragmentary end of *Plácitusdrápa* are more positive. If we accept the readings supplied to the texts, we see that Hadrian is described as *ítrstyrkr* [gloriously powerful] (*Plácitusdrápa* 58:6) and *[s]narfengr þengill* [a vigorous prince] (*Plácitusdrápa* 59:2).

The former emendation was proposed by Jón Helgason (1932-3, pp. 167-8), and the latter by Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1833, pp. 34, 65). The only extant references to Hadrian's heathenism are his instructions that Trajan be remembered with a(n) [ó]þorfu erfi [harmful funeral-feast] (*Plácitusdrápa* 58:5); it should be noted that [ó]þorfu can also be translated less judgementally as "unnecessary" (as þorfu can mean "need" or "necessity" [CLEASBY and VIGFUSSON, 1874, p. 736] and is here combined with the negative prefix ó-). Nonetheless, "harmful" is the likelier reading given the tone of the passage. The only description of Hadrian that could possibly be interpreted as negative is his being *gramr* [inn grimmi] [the fierce (or severe) king] (*Plácitusdrápa* 59:5) when insisting that Eustace sacrifice to idols (the point at which Hadrian becomes antagonistic to his victorious commander). Even this choice of description could be due to metrical considerations and does not necessarily have to be read as negative. It also relies on an extensive reading supplied by Finnur Jónsson (1887, p. 244). The loss of the ending of *Plácitusdrápa* leaves an incomplete picture of the skald's intentions, and there can be little doubt that Hadrian would have been depicted negatively as he became the focus of dramatic tension with the Christian Eustace. The evidence provided by the extant form in which *Plácitusdrápa* survives, however, does indicate a pattern. Both high-status pagans are depicted with some approval, whereas lower-born non-Christians are depicted negatively. This is especially clear in the case of the townsfolk, who are usually depicted in a more neutral fashion.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the skald who composed *Plácitusdrápa* did not regard material from pre-Christian Norse literary and cultural tradition as empty stock phrases. His use of kennings invoking Æsir and legendary Norse figures to refer only to Christian or Christian-adjacent characters, and in so doing using the connotations of the names to embellish their characterisation, rather suggests an active engagement in a living tradition, if only a learned antiquarian one at this stage. In addition to this, the relation between the social status of heathens and their depiction in *Plácitusdrápa* is telling. Aristocratic heathens are largely positive figures, or, at least, are allowed positive attributes in spite of their heathenism, but the captain and the townsfolk are dehumanised and, in the case of the captain, made explicitly

evil and antagonistic. It is apparent, then, that the courtly drápa form influenced the depiction of the source material as much as the drápa form was being adapted to a new genre of hagiographic narrative. It is difficult to tell whether the skald was inherently inclined to depict aristocratic figures more positively, regardless of their religious affiliations, or whether this is solely due to the conventions of *dróttkvætt*. It should also be noted that while we can expect a positive depiction of the aristocratic Placidus-Eustace as the protagonist of the *drápa*, neither Trajan nor Hadrian, the positively-depicted heathens, are the focus of the main narrative. This would suggest, therefore, that the skald shows a greater inclination that we might expect to portray aristocratic figures in a positive light. It is also potentially suggestive of a more aristocratic intended audience, although the oral history of the poem difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, while the exact source of the skald's depiction is unclear and, perhaps, unrecoverable, it is apparent that the skald was aware of the tension between his source material and the poetic form. Furthermore, he actively utilised this tension to embellish the narrative and characterisation, rather than being constrained by the traditional aspects of his form.

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