



From Hadrianic Persecution to Living Tradition: The Divergent Afterlives of the Trajan-Gregory and Eustace-Placidus Legends in the *Legenda Aurea*, Dante, and the Basilica di Sant'Eustachio in Rome

Giovanni Meledandri 

1. Human Science Department - Guglielmo Marconi University, 00193, Rome, (RM), (Italy)

Abstract: The early second century CE offers limited contemporary evidence for Christian persecution and martyrdom, centered on the Pliny-Trajan correspondence. The narratives in the *Legenda Aurea* (c. 1260), populated this era with vivid chronicles. This article compares two such stories set in the Trajan/Hadrian period: the legend of Emperor Trajan's posthumous salvation through Pope Gregory the Great's intercession, and the romance of Placidus/Eustace, his wife Theopista, and sons, who convert via a stag vision, endure trials, and suffer martyrdom in a brazen bull. While both exemplify hagiographic romance, they serve divergent functions—one enabling theological speculation on divine mercy and the salvation of virtuous pagans, the other modeling lay endurance and family fidelity. Dante Alighieri incorporates the Trajan legend prominently in *Purgatorio X* and *Paradiso XX* to dramatize God's inscrutable justice and the providential role of empire but omits Eustace entirely. Reception history reveals a contrasting afterlife: Trajan's story fuels high theology, while Eustace's sustains a living cult at Rome's Basilica di Sant'Eustachio, where iconography, statuary, and local tradition persist despite the 1969 removal of the feast from the General Roman Calendar. Drawing on source criticism, Dante commentary, Bollandist hagiography, and unpublished contemporary visuals and material evidence, this study illuminates how medieval legends bridged historical gaps and how critical scholarship and devotional practice continue to coexist in Catholic tradition.

Keywords: St. Eustace/Eustachius, *Legenda Aurea*, Trajan legend, Dante Alighieri, resurrection, salvation, Basilica di Sant'Eustachio, reception history, hagiography, religion, Rome.

INTRODUCTION

During the early decades of the second century CE, Christianity was still a minor, frequently mistrusted movement within the Roman Empire. Imperial policies toward Christians were inconsistent, varying by circumstance and local authority rather than strict persecution or acceptanceⁱ [1;2]. For this reason, scholarly analysis must focus on events and martyrs cited in incontestable historical sources, rather than those mentioned in later texts that may include legendary or questionable elements.

The most important contemporary documents—the exchange between Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan (c. 111-112 CE) [3] and the authentic letters of Ignatius [4], bishop of Antiochⁱⁱ—reveal that persistent profession of the *nomen Christianum* could lead to execution for obstinacy, yet Christians were not to be actively hunted. Hadrian's later rescript to Minicius Fundanus [5] reinforced procedural safeguards against arbitrary denunciations. Beyond these texts and a handful of references in Justin Martyr [6] and later

Eusebius [7], firm evidence for specific named martyrdoms in the 90-140 CE window is remarkably sparse. Timothy D. Barnes (2010) [8] and other scholars [1;2] have even revisited the traditional dating of Ignatius, sometimes proposing a slightly later Hadrianic context, but the core documentary base remains limited.

The Trajan legend centers on an act of imperial justice: while marching to war, Trajan halts his army to hear the plea of a poor widow whose son has been murdered. Centuries later, Pope Gregory the Great, moved by a visual representation of this scene in Trajan's Forum, prays fervently for the pagan emperor's soul. God responds by briefly resurrecting (or reviving the soul of) Trajan, allowing him to hear the Gospel, profess faith in Christ, receive baptism, and die again as a Christian, thereby entering Paradise. This narrative, rooted in earlier *exempla* and Gregory's *vitae*, offered a rare medieval mechanism for the posthumous salvation of a virtuous pagan without undermining sacramental necessity.

By contrast, the Eustace legend is a classic hagiographic romance. Placidus, a high-ranking general under Trajan renowned for mercy, encounters a stag bearing a crucifix between its antlers while hunting. The vision leads to his conversion, and that of his family, followed by a series of Job-like trials: loss of wealth and status, separation of family members by river, pirates, and misfortune, eventual reunion, and final refusal to sacrifice to the gods under Hadrian [10;11]. The family is martyred together by being roasted in a brazen bull on September 20 (traditionally 120 CE). Critical scholarship, from Hippolyte Delehaye [9] to the Bollandists [12], has long classified this *passio* as largely fictitious—a didactic fiction blending biblical motifs, Eastern tales, and stock hagiographic elements, with no verifiable 2nd-century core and a cult traceable only from the 7th-8th centuries onward.

Dante Alighieri, steeped in the *Legenda Aurea* and related traditions, makes strikingly selective use of these materials. In *Purgatorio* X (73-93) [13;14;15;16], he presents the Trajan-widow scene as one of God's own sculpted *exempla* of humility on the terrace of the Proud. In *Paradiso* XX (43-48), within the Heaven of Jupiter among the just rulers, the Eagle of divine justice explicitly recounts Gregory's prayer, Trajan's brief return to life, conversion, and second death, pairing him with the Trojan Ripheus (*Paradiso* XX, 7-72) as evidence that God's mercy can transcend ordinary human categories. Trajan thus becomes a powerful symbol of Roman imperial virtue redeemed by grace, harmonizing classical *pietas* with Christian theology and advancing Dante's vision of providential empire.

Eustace, however, is entirely absent from the *Commedia* [13;14;15;16]. The legend, while dramatic and morally exemplary, posed no pressing theological "problem" for Dante: its protagonists are already Christian after the vision and die as steadfast martyrs. It offered no exceptional mechanism for pagan salvation and did not serve Dante's political-theological project in the same way.

This selective appropriation raises broader questions about the functions of hagiography in the Middle Ages and its divergent afterlives. The Trajan story fueled sophisticated theological reflection on prayer, hope, divine beneficence, and the limits of justice—topics still explored in recent Dante scholarship. Perhaps the most authoritative voice raising doubts about Trajan's Christian, legendary legitimacy is that of Alessandro, who, in his *Osservazioni sulla Morale Cattolica* [17] (chapter III), rejects it, asking: "And why, in such a favorable judgment of Trajan, is the blood of Saint Ignatius and so many

other innocents, which weighs upon him, not taken into account? Why is he proposed as an exemplar?” (Author’s translation). The Eustace narrative, meanwhile, sustained popular devotion, iconography (the stag with cross remains its emblem), and a concrete material cult. Rome’s Basilica di Sant’Eustachio (Figure 1, left), located in the *rione* bearing the saint’s name, near the Pantheon, claims ancient roots as a *diaconia* (documented by the 8th century) on the traditional site of the family’s martyrdom. Its Baroque interior (Figure 1, right), Eastern-style family icons (Figure 2), prominent military statue of Eustace (Figure 3) with stag and palm, and informational panels (Figure 1, center) continue to present the 120 CE date and events as living tradition, even after the feast’s removal from the universal General Roman Calendar in the 1969/1970 post-Vatican II reforms due to the “fabulous character” of the *acta*. The saint remains in the Roman Martyrology (September 20) and enjoys continued local and Eastern veneration.

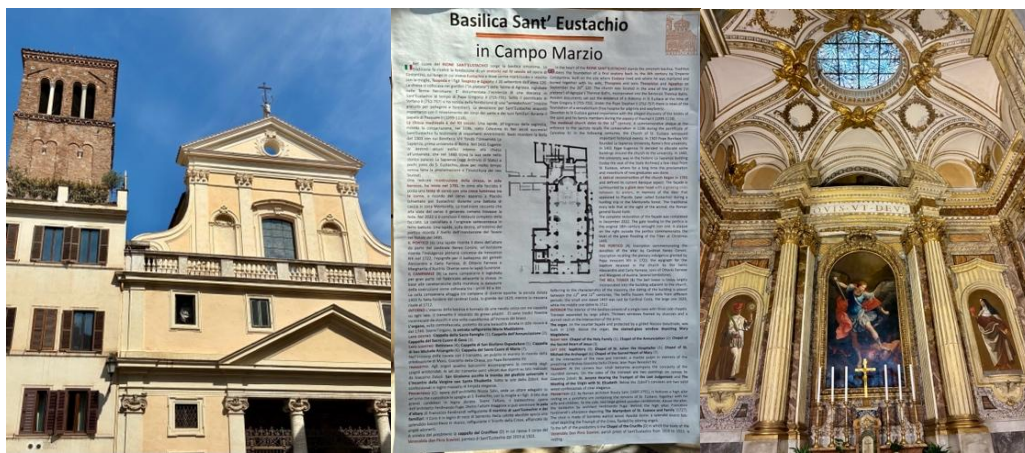


Figure 1: Basilica di Sant’Eustachio exterior, informational panel, and interior detail (photograph by author, 28 March 2026).



Figure 2: Polychrome statue of St. Eustace (Placidus) with stag, Basilica di Sant’Eustachio (photograph by author, 29 March 2026).



Figure 3: Eastern-style icon of St. Eustace and family (photograph by author, 29 March 2026).

This article argues that the contrasting trajectories of the two *Legenda Aurea* legends—both rooted in the same sparse historical period—illuminate the flexible role of hagiographic romance in bridging evidentiary gaps. One legend lent itself to high literary-theological innovation; the other to embodied, devotional continuity. By examining the 2nd-century context, the medieval texts, Dante’s poetic choices, and the modern cult at *Sant’ Eustachio* (including material evidence from a 2026 visit), the study contributes to ongoing conversations in early Christian history, medieval hagiography, Dante studies, and the dynamics of “living tradition” in Catholicism. It demonstrates that critical scholarship and popular piety need not stand in opposition but can fruitfully coexist, each addressing different human and spiritual needs.

The following sections proceed chronologically and thematically: first the historical limits of 2nd-century documentation, then a parallel analysis of the legends in the *Legenda Aurea*, Dante’s selective engagement, and finally the material and liturgical afterlife at the basilica. In doing so, the article seeks not to debunk legends but to understand their enduring cultural and spiritual power.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: 2ND-CENTURY PERSECUTIONS AND THE LIMITS OF DOCUMENTATION

The evidentiary foundation for Christian experience under Trajan (98-117 CE) and Hadrian (117-138 CE) is narrow but revealing. The most authoritative contemporary source remains the correspondence between Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia-Pontus, and Emperor Trajan (Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.96-97, c. 111-112 CE) [3]. Pliny describes encountering Christians through anonymous accusations and local trials. He interrogated suspects, offering repeated opportunities to recant by sacrificing to the emperor’s image and cursing Christ. Those who persisted he executed for what he termed “obstinacy and inflexible stubbornness” while those who denied the faith and performed the required rites were released. Pliny notes the economic impact—revived temple sacrifices—and the apparently harmless nature of Christian practices, pre-dawn hymns to Christ “as to a god”, moral oaths, shared meals (*Ep.* 10.96.7), yet, looking to investigate deeper, he tortured two female deaconesses and concluded the movement represented just that “a perverse and extravagant superstition”, “...*nihil aliud inveni quam superstitionem pravam, immodicam*” (Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.96.8, author’s translation).

Trajan’s reply (Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.97-98) established enduring imperial policy: Christians were not to be sought out proactively; anonymous denunciations were to be disregarded; proven cases warranted punishment, but repentance through worship of the Roman gods secured pardon. This rescript treated the *nomen Christianum* itself as potentially criminal but left enforcement to local initiative and popular pressure rather than centralized persecution.

It is worth recalling a famous and, according to Pennaⁱⁱⁱ [18], much-debated text by C. Suetonius Tranquillus, (*De Vita Duodecim Caesarum: Claudius*, 25) [19], that illustrates broader suspicion towards Christians also in the mid-1st century. Suetonius (69-140 CE), served as secretary “*ab epistulis*” to Emperor Hadrian (119-122 CE). Suetonius wrote: *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*. (“The Jews, who were continually causing disturbances at the instigation of a certain *Chrestus*, he (Emperor Claudius) expelled from Rome” (Author’s translation). This report by Suetonius is echoed in

Cassius Dio (*Hist.* 60,6,6) [20] and finds confirmation in the Acts of the Apostles (18:2) [21]: “...the order of Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome.” (Author’s translation).

Hadrian later refined Trajan’s approach in his rescript to the proconsul of Asia, Minicius Fundanus [5], preserved in Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 4.9) [7] and Justin Martyr, (*First Apology* appendix) [6]. It insisted on proper judicial procedure, evidence of actual crimes rather than mere outcry, and punishment of false accusers. Together, these documents portray 2nd-century persecutions as sporadic, reactive, and driven by civic order, refusal to participate in imperial or local cults, and social tensions rather than systematic empire-wide hunts, the latter emerging only under Decius in the mid-3rd century.

Within this framework, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch [4] provide the most vivid personal testimony of martyrdom. Arrested in Antioch, Ignatius was transported under guard to Rome for execution by beasts in the arena. His seven authentic letters (the “middle recension”) to churches in Asia Minor and Rome reveal a theology centered on ecclesial unity under the bishop, the Eucharist as medicine of immortality, and eager embrace of martyrdom as imitation of Christ. Traditional dating (following Eusebius) places the events c. 107-110 CE under Trajan. However, Timothy D. Barnes [8] has persuasively argued for a later context, probably in the 140s CE under Hadrian or early Antoninus Pius, on grounds of textual dependencies, logistical considerations, and broader literary culture. This redating situates Ignatius within the same broad 90-140/150 CE window traditionally assigned to the Eustace legend in the *Legenda Aurea*, highlighting the chronological overlap that medieval compilers exploited when populating the era with dramatic narratives.

Beyond Pliny, Trajan’s rescript, Hadrian’s reply, Ignatius’s correspondence, and scattered references in Justin Martyr, firm documentation for specific named martyrdoms in this period is strikingly limited. No contemporary or near-contemporary sources corroborate mass executions or the detailed *acta* later attached to many figures. Later ecclesiastical historians like Eusebius (4th century) preserve traditions but often rely on oral or legendary material. This evidentiary sparsity created fertile ground for medieval hagiographers. Into the gaps left by sparse Roman administrative records and early Christian self-testimony, the *Legenda Aurea* and related *exempla* collections inserted morally compelling stories that blended historical-sounding Roman settings with biblical, folk, and romance motifs. The two legends examined here—the Trajan-Gregory intercession and the Eustace family martyrdom—exemplify this process while serving distinct theological and devotional purposes.

THE TWO LEGENDS IN THE LEGENDA AUREA

Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* (c. 1260) [10;11] standardized and popularized a vast repertoire of saints’ lives for preaching and devotional reading. Two entries set in the Trajan/Hadrian era stand out for their shared Roman imperial backdrop and miraculous elements, yet they diverge markedly in narrative structure, theological emphasis, and implied audience function.

The **Trajan legend** (Figure 4) appears primarily in the chapter on St. Gregory the Great. It opens with a paradigmatic act of pagan justice: while leading his army to war, Emperor Trajan halts to deliver judgment for a poor widow whose son has been unjustly

slain. Centuries later, Gregory, walking through Trajan's Forum in Rome and contemplating a visual representation of this scene (a statue or relief), is moved by the emperor's *pietas* despite his paganism. Gregory prays fervently for Trajan's soul. Divine response follows: God briefly revives the soul of Trajan, enabling him to hear the Gospel, profess faith in Christ, receive baptism, and die again as a Christian, thus entering Paradise. Variations exist—some emphasize Gregory's tears alone, others the temporary resurrection—but the core mechanism provides a medieval loophole for the salvation of a virtuous pagan through saintly intercession and extraordinary grace.



Figure 4: Noël Hallé, *The Justice of Trajan* (1765). Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

This tale functions as theological speculation. It underscores divine mercy transcending ordinary sacramental timelines, the power of prayer and justice, and the compatibility of classical Roman virtue with Christian redemption. It appealed to audiences interested in questions of predestination, hope for the unevangelized, and the providential role of empire.

In contrast, the Eustace (Placidus) legend receives its own dedicated chapter. Placidus, a high-ranking general under Trajan celebrated for mercy and good works, encounters a stag bearing a crucifix between its antlers while hunting. The vision converts him, his wife Theopista, and their sons Theopistus and Agapius. Subsequent trials mirror the Book of Job (Greenstein, 2019) [22]iv: loss of wealth and status, separation of the family (by river crossing, pirates, and servitude), years of suffering, and eventual miraculous reunion. Under Hadrian, the family refuses to sacrifice to the gods and is martyred together by being roasted in a brazen bull on September 20 (traditionally 120 CE). The narrative emphasizes steadfast faith amid adversity, family unity in conversion and martyrdom, and lay sanctity.

Critical hagiography has consistently classified this *passio* as a hagiographic romance rather than genuine historical *acta*. Hippolyte Delehaye [9] and the Bollandists [12] have identified it as didactic fiction, integrating biblical motifs (such as Job), Hellenistic hunting narratives, Eastern folkloric elements, and common martyrdom tropes including familial separation and reunion, as well as dramatic executions. There is no textual, epigraphic, or archaeological evidence from the 2nd to 7th centuries supporting the specific narrative; the cult is firmly established only from the 7th-8th centuries onward. N. Thierry (2017)v

proposed an Eastern origin, suggesting the iconography developed in Cappadocia, where early rock-cut churches feature numerous depictions of the vision. The motifs of the brazen bull and stag vision appear in other legends—such as those of Saint Antipas of Pergamum (martyred under Emperor Domitian in 92 CE) and Saint Pelagia of Tarsus (burned in 287 CE)—primarily serving purposes of moral instruction rather than historical documentation.

The comparative analysis highlights several shared characteristics: both narratives are situated in the Trajan/Hadrian era, depict virtuous pagan Romans engaging with the divine, and incorporate miraculous interventions. Each was widely disseminated through sermons, art, and exempla. However, their underlying purposes differ significantly. The Trajan account addresses a theological dilemma—namely, how a pre-Christian paragon of justice may attain Paradise—by invoking posthumous grace and intercession. In contrast, the Eustace narrative serves to exemplify *imitatio Christi* for the lay faithful, emphasizing themes of conversion, perseverance through adversity, and ultimate martyrdom within a Christian family context. While one narrative prompts reflection on divine mercy and imperial power, the other encourages imitation and offers consolation amid suffering.

These distinct functions have influenced the subsequent evolution of each tradition. The legend of Trajan has lent itself to elaborate literary and theological reinterpretation, whereas the Eustace romance has retained popular resonance through its vivid iconography—such as the stag bearing a cross—and the formation of local cults. Dante’s selective treatment of these stories, as examined in the following section, further demonstrates this divergence.

DANTE’S SELECTIVE APPROPRIATION

Dante Alighieri’s engaged with the *Legenda Aurea* in a way that is both extensive and highly selective. Steeped in the compendium’s moral and theological exempla, he draws on it repeatedly for vivid, divinely authored imagery in the *Commedia* [13-16]. Yet of the two legends examined here, only the Trajan-Gregory narrative is elevated to the level of poetic theology; the Eustace romance is omitted. This choice is not accidental but reveals Dante’s priorities: the Trajan story supplies a precise mechanism for the salvation of a virtuous pagan, thereby advancing his intertwined themes of imperial justice, divine mercy, and the providential role of Rome. The Eustace legend, while morally compelling, offers no comparable theological “problem” requiring poetic resolution.

In *Purgatorio* X, on the terrace of the Proud, Dante describes three marble reliefs carved by God as *exempla* of humility. The central panel presents the Trajan-widow episode with detailed clarity (X.73-96). Trajan, leading his army with banners and eagles displayed, pauses to listen to the widow’s appeal for justice concerning her murdered son. The emperor’s assurance— “Now comfort thee, for I must satisfy thee ere I go” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s translation, 1867)^{vi} [23]—demonstrates classical *pietas* and the virtues of Roman administration. In this context, Dante’s depiction elevates a medieval *exemplum* into a timeless lesson; it suggests that even a pagan authority can exemplify the humility required to overcome pride. The relief serves not merely as ornamentation but as a divinely authored visual homily, integrating the ideals of imperial justice with the process of Christian moral development. Figure 5 contains an illustration of this scene as rendered in G. Dorè’s 1898 engraving.



Figure 5: Gustave Doré, engraving of *Purgatorio X* (Trajan scene), c. 1868 (public domain). Dante and Virgil observe three white marble bas-reliefs celebrating humility: the Annunciation, David dancing before the Ark, and, finally, Trajan. In the scene the widow grabs the reins of Trajan’s horse, demanding vengeance. Although the emperor is setting out on a military expedition, he agrees to grant the woman justice before proceeding, demonstrating a virtue that will ultimately lead him to salvation in Paradise. The Doré’s engraving (created around 1868) emphasizes the contrast between the majesty of the Roman army and the petite, desperate figure of the widow.

The full theological payoff appears in *Paradiso* (XX.1-72), in the Heaven of Jupiter among the just rulers. Here the souls of righteous monarchs form the eye of an immense Eagle, symbol of divine justice. Trajan is explicitly identified as “the one who comforted the widow for her son”^{vii} (XX.43-48), echoing *Purgatorio*. The Eagle then recounts the Gregory legend in full (XX.100-117): Gregory’s prayer, moved by the Forum relief, prompts God to grant Trajan a brief return to bodily life. Trajan hears the Gospel, believes, is baptized, and dies again as a Christian, entering Paradise. Dante underscores the episode’s doctrinal boldness: Trajan illustrates that God’s ways “exceed all human limits to understanding.”^{viii} The emperor is paired with Dante’s own invention, Ripheus the Trojan (drawn from a single line in Virgil’s *Aeneid* [24]^{ix}), to demonstrate that divine predestination and mercy can operate outside ordinary sacramental or chronological constraints.

This placement serves multiple interlocking purposes in Dante’s cosmos. First, it harmonizes classical Roman virtue with Christian grace, reinforcing the argument of *De Monarchia*^x [25] that the Roman Empire was providentially ordained. Second, it dramatizes the power of intercessory prayer and the hope of salvation for the unevangelized topics of intense scholastic debate. Third, it allows Dante to explore the inscrutability of grace while remaining faithful to a widely accepted medieval tradition preserved in the *Legenda Aurea*. Scholars such as Robert Hollander [26] and Charles Singleton [13] have long noted that the Trajan episode is one of the *Commedia*’s most striking theological innovations, made possible precisely because the legend already supplied the mechanism of temporary resurrection and baptism. In contrast, the legend of Eustace is absent from the *Commedia*. Dante refrains from referencing Placidus, the vision of the stag, the tribulations experienced by the family, or the martyrdom by brazen bull. This deliberate omission is significant. The

narrative of Eustace presumes Christian protagonists following their miraculous encounter; their journey centers on perseverance and lay martyrdom rather than the extraordinary conversion of a pre-Christian pagan. For Dante, this story presents no pressing theological challenge, as steadfast faith in adversity is already demonstrated amply by canonical martyrs and the souls depicted in Purgatory. Furthermore, the romance motifs—such as familial separation, captivity by pirates, and reversals akin to the trials of Job—are more closely associated with popular preaching and iconographic tradition than with the sophisticated theological framework of the *Commedia*. Dante selectively includes only those legends that contribute meaningfully to his synthesis of Empire and Church within a political-theological context. Consequently, the Eustace tale, despite its edifying qualities, remains relegated to devotional literature and visual art, rather than attaining the status of poetic canonization.

Dante’s discerning integration thus underscores the distinct functional roles of the two *Legenda Aurea* narratives. One provides a platform for nuanced exploration of themes such as justice, empire, and grace; the other serves as an exemplar of familial loyalty and heroic persistence. This differentiation persists into the modern period, where the Eustace legend finds its most prominent expression not through literary channels but within ongoing religious practice and material culture.

LIVING TRADITION: THE BASILICA DI SANT’EUSTACHIO AS MATERIAL AND LITURGICAL AFTERLIFE

While the Trajan legend was absorbed into high theology via Dante, the Eustace legend has sustained a continuous, embodied presence in Roman devotional life. The most tangible expression of this afterlife is the Basilica di Sant’Eustachio (Figure 1) in the *rione* that bears the saint’s name, located near the Pantheon, in the heart of the ancient Campus Martius. The artwork titled “The Martyrdom of Placidus/Eustace and His Family”, by Francesco Ferdinandi (1727), (Figure 6), is in the High Altar Altarpiece of St. Eustace Basilica, in Rome.



Figure 6: Francesco Ferdinandi, *The Martyrdom of St. Eustace and Family* (1727), high altar, Basilica di Sant’Eustachio (photograph by author, 29 March 2026). The artwork unfolds across three distinct planes. In the foreground to the right, Eustace, having removed his helmet and donned a red cloak that symbolizes martyrdom, is pushed by a

soldier towards his execution. On the left, an elderly man, representing pagan authority, urges Theopista, the saint's wife, to pay homage to a statue embodying a pagan deity; her resolute refusal is unmistakably depicted. In the middle ground, their two sons are shown: Theopistus is already inside the furnace shaped like a bull, while Agapitus is about to be thrown in by an executioner. At the top, on the third level, an angel prepares to hand the palm of martyrdom to the saints, who remain steadfast in their faith in Christ even at the brink of deathxi.

The basilica's own historical narrative, displayed on an informational panel inside the church, explicitly claims that the site marks the location where *Placidus*/Eustace lived with his wife *Theopista* and sons *Theopistus* and *Agapius*, and where the family was martyred and buried on 20 September 120 CE under Hadrian. Although critical scholarship regards this date and the detailed *passio* as legendary, the basilica functions as a living witness to the power of hagiographic tradition to shape sacred space and communal memory.

The documented history of the church [27] (see also Figure 1, center) originates in the early Middle Ages. By the 8th century, it is recorded as a *diaconia*—a charitable institution providing support to pilgrims and the impoverished—during the papacies of Gregory II (715-731) and Stephen II (752-757). Medieval sources associate this *diaconia* with an earlier oratory, possibly founded in the 4th century on a site traditionally linked to the saint. A church dating from the 12th century was consecrated in 1196 under Pope Celestine III [28]; over subsequent centuries, the church established academic affiliations—notably Boniface VIII's founding of *La Sapienza* University of Rome, in 1303 nearby—and underwent several restorations. The present Baroque edifice, distinguished by its impressive dome, gilded high altar, and elaborate interior, largely reflects substantial 17th-18th-century reconstruction while retaining the medieval plan and original dedication.

The material culture within the basilica effectively sustains the legend of St. Eustace. An Eastern-style icon depicting the saint and his family (Figure 3: modern Eastern icon of St. Eustace, *Theopista*, *Theopistus*, and *Agapius*. Photographed by the author, March 2026) represents the four individuals with halos and Greek inscriptions, underscoring their collective identity as a martyred household. A life-size polychrome statue of Eustace in Roman military attire—accompanied by a palm branch, cross, and the characteristic stag (Figure 2: statue of St. Eustace with stag, photographed by the author, March 2026)—is prominently displayed in a side chapel. The stag's antlers encircle a small crucifix, directly referencing the vision at Eustace's conversion. The high altar painting and adjacent frescoes further illustrate the family's tribulations and martyrdom. These visual elements serve a didactic purpose, continuing the medieval tradition of the *Legenda Aurea* by rendering the narrative accessible to worshippers.

Additionally, the basilica's informational panel (see Figure 1: informational panel, photographed by the author, March 2026) presents the martyrdom of 120 CE as historical fact, connecting the site to the ancient *Terme di Agrippa* (“*in platana*”) and recounting the story of conversion, adversity, and execution by brazen bull. This narrative is presented alongside critical academic perspectives: St. Eustace's feast was removed from the General Roman Calendar during the 1969/1970 post-Vatican II reforms after hagiographers, including the Bollandists [12], assessed the *acta* as entirely fictitious. Nevertheless, the saint and his

family remain listed in the Roman Martyrology, commemorated on September 20, and the basilica maintains full local and liturgical observance. Eastern Christian calendars frequently continue to celebrate the feast with notable prominence^{xii}.

The persistence of the cult illustrates that *living tradition* within Catholicism functions across diverse levels. Critical hagiography enhances historical insight while maintaining devotional significance; the basilica, through its architectural features, iconographic elements, and ongoing liturgical practices, transforms the *Legenda Aurea* narrative into tangible expressions of prayer, pilgrimage, and communal identity. Even amid academic skepticism, the *rione Sant'Eustachio* and its associated church demonstrate that hagiographic traditions continue to create sacred spaces and impart spiritual meaning. The unpublished photographs, dated 28 March 2026, document this continuity in the 21st century: motifs that once inspired medieval preachers and Dante's contemporaries remain integral to contemporary Roman Catholic observance.

CONCLUSION

Hagiography, Scholarship, and Devotion

The distinct posthumous legacies of the Trajan-Gregory and Eustace-Placidus legends, both situated by medieval compilers within the sparsely documented Trajan/Hadrian era, highlight the adaptable and multifaceted nature of hagiographic romance. The *Legenda Aurea* furnished compelling narratives that addressed evidentiary gaps left by limited contemporary sources—such as Pliny's correspondence, the rescripts of Trajan and Hadrian, and Ignatius's letters—while simultaneously fulfilling diverse theological and devotional roles. The legend of Trajan provides a rare medieval framework for the posthumous salvation of a virtuous pagan via Gregory's intercession and temporary resurrection, facilitating theological reflection on divine mercy, the efficacy of intercessory prayer, and the reconciliation of Roman virtue with Christian grace. In contrast, the Eustace legend presents a comprehensive narrative akin to Job, encompassing conversion, familial adversity, and martyrdom, thereby serving as an exemplar of perseverance and lay sanctity for the faithful.

Dante Alighieri's selective engagement with these traditions underscores their differing relevance: he integrates the Trajan narrative significantly in *Purgatorio* X—as a divine example of humility—and in *Paradiso* XX—as evidence of God's mysterious justice amongst the just rulers—advancing his vision of a providentially guided Roman Empire redeemed through grace. Conversely, the Eustace narrative is notably absent from the *Commedia*, as its protagonists are already Christian following the stag vision; thus, the story neither offers a unique opportunity for pagan salvation nor aligns with Dante's thematic objectives. This exclusion reflects not a dismissal of its moral significance but rather its orientation: the legend operates primarily within a popular, devotional, and iconic register rather than a high-theological one.

The continued material and liturgical presence of the Eustace legend at the *Basilica di Sant'Eustachio* in Rome illustrates that hagiographic traditions may persist independently of literary canonization. Despite the removal of the feast from the General Roman Calendar in 1969—attributed to the “fabulous character” of the *acta* and consistent with Bollandist [12] and Delehayan [9] critical approaches—the saint and his family remain recognized in

the Roman Martyrology (20 September) [29]. The basilica's origins as an 8th-century *diaconia*, its successive medieval and Baroque phases, and its rich iconography (including the prominent stag-with-cross statue and Eastern-style family icon) continually manifest the legend within sacred space. Informational panels within the church maintain the traditional narrative and martyrdom date of 120 CE without reservation, exemplifying how devotional practice and academic scholarship can coexist within a living tradition. Unpublished photographs taken on 28-29 March 2026 attest to this continuity, documenting the enduring presence of visual motifs originating in medieval manuscripts and sermons that remain vital for modern worshippers, pilgrims, and residents of the *rione Sant'Eustachio*.

Early Christian history and medieval hagiography have been received through two distinct yet complementary modes. The first mode—represented by the Trajan legend—facilitates advanced literary and theological developments, enabling authors such as Dante to interrogate nuanced issues of justice, empire, and grace. The second mode—seen in the Eustace family tradition—fosters widespread piety, influences visual culture, and cultivates localized cults that establish sacred spaces and communal identities over centuries. Both frameworks compensate for the limited evidence of the 2nd century and respond to persistent human aspirations: the pursuit of moral exemplars, confidence in divine mercy, and the need for visible faith expressions during adversity.

Rather than operating in isolation, critical historiography and devotional tradition serve to mutually reinforce each other. Bollandist-style source criticism improves our comprehension of 2nd-century persecutions without diminishing the spiritual and cultural significance of legendary narratives. Likewise, active cults such as that at *Sant' Eustachio* highlight that hagiography was designed not merely for historical documentation but primarily for preaching, comfort, and creative theology. As contemporary scholarship continues to navigate the interaction between historical accuracy and religious interpretation, the differing paths of these *Legenda Aurea* stories provide a meaningful example of tradition's enduring relevance.

Further research may benefit from applying this comparative lens to additional *Legenda Aurea* figures featured by Dante, investigating the East-West transmission of the Eustace cult, or analyzing similar interactions between critique and devotion at other Roman titular churches. In conclusion, although many medieval legends may be deemed fictitious by modern standards, they remain influential across Christian imagination, literature, and sacred geography in complex and lasting ways.

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ENDNOTES

- i Lepelley, Claude. 2003. *I Cristiani e l'Impero Romano*, pp. 225-259.
- ii Traditional dating (following Eusebius, HE 3.36) places Ignatius arrest and execution under Trajan c. 107-110 CE (or up to 116-117 CE in some reconstructions tied to Trajan's eastern campaigns). He was sentenced to the beasts in the Roman arena. The *Martyrdom of Ignatius* (an account possibly by eyewitnesses Philo and Rheus Agathopus, though its final form may be later) describes the trial before Trajan and the journey. Scholarly consensus still favors an early-2nd-century date under Trajan, though a minority (e.g., Timothy Barnes, some recent analyses) argue for the 130s-140s under Hadrian since possible literary dependencies and chronological reconstructions. The letters themselves remain the strongest contemporary evidence of a high-profile execution for the faith.
- iii Penna, Romano. 2012. *L'ambiente Storico Culturale delle Origini Cristiane - Una Documentazione Ragionata*, pp. 270-282.
- iv The Book of Job is a canonical wisdom book in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and Christian Old Testament, likely composed between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE.
- v Thierry, Nicolas. 2021. *The institutional and vernacular cults of the military saints in the western Caucasus: Image-mediated diffusion and body shift in the cult of St Eustace*. Kevin Tuite, Université de Montréal, CESS Conference 2017. Accessed 27-04.-26.
- vi Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867. The lines are typically found in the later part of Canto XI, or end of X/beginning of XI, specifically where the spirits are speaking to Dante to request prayers.
- vii Ibidem.
- viii Ibidem.
- ix Virgil, *Aeneid* II, 426-8. As said, in his *Divine Comedy*, Dante placed Ripheus in Heaven, in the sixth sphere of Jupiter, the realm of those who personified justice: *Paradiso*, XX:1-72.
- x Key passages where Dante writes of Christian grace and divine intervention include Book II, Chapter IV (*Divine Aid to the Empire*): Dante argues that the Roman Empire was willed by God and aided by miracles (grace) to create the necessary peace and unity (the *pax romana*) for Christ's incarnation and the spread of Christianity. Book II, Chapter X (*Christ's Birth under Roman Authority*): Dante emphasizes that Christ willed to be born under a Roman census, validating the legality of the empire and showing that the empire was necessary for the punishment of original sin (the atonement). Book III (*The Separation of Powers*): Dante discusses grace by limiting the scope of papal authority, arguing that the Church's true authority is spiritual and derived from grace, not from earthly property or imperial power. Book III, Chapter XVI (*Concluding Remarks*): Dante distinguishes between the two ends of man—temporal happiness (guided by philosophy) and eternal life (guided by spiritual teachings and grace). He argues that the Emperor's power is directly

ordained by God and not derived from the Pope, a claim linked to his view that God gives grace directly to both spiritual and temporal authorities.

xi Menegaldo, Antonio; Francia, Vincenzo. 2012. *Basilica di Sant'Eustachio in Campo Marzio - Roma*, pp. 33-34.

xii Following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI reformed the universal liturgical calendar with the apostolic letter *Mysterii Paschalis* (1969). Reason: Many saints whose stories were considered legendary or lacking documented historical basis were removed from the universal calendar so as not to overload the liturgy and to give priority to the seasons of the liturgical year. The Case of Eustace: Saint Eustace was excluded because his *Passio* is considered a hagiographic adaptation of fictional narrative themes, lacking certain historical corroboration. His feast day, celebrated on September 20, ceased to be obligatory for the universal Church. Despite his exclusion from the universal Mass calendar, Saint Eustace has not been “de-canonized” nor removed from the list of saints (2004). In the latest edition of the *Roman Martyrology* (2001/2004), Saint Eustace is still listed for September 20. Liturgical note: The modern text specifies that his memorial is linked to an “ancient diaconia of the City” (the Church of Saint Eustace in Rome), thus acknowledging the antiquity and importance of his historical cult in the city of Rome, while admitting doubts regarding his biography.