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Sidonius Apollinaris

The collected poems and letters of Sidonius Apollinaris comprise by far the most detailed extant source for mid-fifth-century Gaul. The ability to identify a single author and analyse his articulated sentiments across a thematically and chronologically broad array of documents has made Sidonius a particularly attractive subject for scholarly attention.¹ Ironically, the unique fullness of Sidonius's works and the significance this gives them has, however, served to obscure important aspects of his identity. Born in Lyon in 431/432 into an aristocratic Gallo-Roman family with a history of imperial office-holding,² Sidonius was a close and interested observer of many of what, at least from a modern perspective, were events of epoch-making importance: he lived through the reigns of the last men to openly claim to be western Roman emperors,³ delivering panegyrics on Avitus (455–456), his father-in-law, on Majorian (457–461) and on Anthemius (467–472); he served as prefect of the city of Rome (c. 468); he represented the *civitas* of Clermont and its inhabitants, the Arverni, as their bishop from c. 469/470; he witnessed the growing power and territorial expansion of the Visigothic kingdom of Toulouse under Theoderic II (453–466/467) and Euric (466/467–c. 484). In consequence, it is extremely tempting to treat Sidonius's career as a microcosm of the demise, or transformation, of the western Roman empire as a whole. Twenty-four poems and nine books of letters, touching on various personal and political topics and addressed to a mixture of rulers, colleagues, friends and relatives, bear witness to this career. They have, as a result, been heavily scrutinised to extract his attitudes and reactions to what modern observers see as the critical issues and concepts of his age: barbarian-Roman relations, imperial loyalism, cultural conservatism, etc. There are very few instances where Sidonius's account of a given event or circumstance can be compared with any other version more substantial than a laconic chronicle entry. It is therefore tempting to take his testimony at face value, despite our frequent ignorance about its context. This is perhaps justified with regard to some of the sentiments expressed in Sidonius's works, such as his doubtless genuine fury at the desecration of his grandfather's grave.⁴ It has led, though, to attempts to assimilate Sidonius's apparent feelings to the preconceived identities that modern observers feel he should have possessed. Here, it will be argued that this approach is fundamentally problematic and that it is generally impossible to reconstruct Sidonius's true feelings at any given point. The trouble, in essence, with Sidonius's ego is that, as reflected in his extant works, it is deceptively elusive: it appears to impinge constantly to reveal glimpses of Sidonius the Roman loyalist or Sidonius the barbarian apologist, troubled by his circumstances as a result of the values and imperatives that accompanied these perceived identities. As apparent inconsistencies in Sidonius's articulated attitudes hint, however, they seldom represent him straightforwardly engaging with events. Sidonius's works were written over a period of thirty or so years from c. 455 and bear traces of editing for successive collected volumes published over the course of a decade from c. 469.⁵ Both at the time of their original composition and when collected for publication, they served highly specific purposes and were tailored to their audience. Without a full knowledge of the contexts

¹ Sidonius has been the subject of several monographs: Charles E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris and his Age* (Oxford 1933); André A. Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire et l'esprit précieux en Gaule aux derniers jours de l'empire* (Collection d'études latines 20, Paris 1943); Jill D. Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome, A.D. 407–485* (Oxford 1994). He has also been an ubiquitous figure in many general accounts and collected volumes touching on fifth-century events; for example, see Peter J. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London 2005) 375–423; Marc Reydellet, *La royauté dans la littérature latine de Sidoine Apollinaire à Isidore de Séville* (Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 243, Rome 1981) 48–86.

² Harries, *Sidonius* 27–33, 36.

³ For an overview of these figures, see Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors: A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome 31 B.C.–A.D. 476* (London 2002) 298–302, 308–312, 315–326, 332–334.

⁴ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 3, 12, 1–3 (ed. William B. Anderson, *Sidonius: Poems and Letters*, Loeb Classical Library, London/Cambridge-Mass. 1935–1965) I, 330–II, 606, at II, 40–42.

⁵ See Harries, *Sidonius* 3–12.

for which Sidonius was writing, many of these purposes are now irretrievably lost. In some cases, however, enough can be reconstructed to reveal Sidonius's methods, sometimes undermining and even subverting his ostensible opinions. Several such cases will be explored here to demonstrate how Sidonius's works show him grappling with the various roles he was required to play, often in impressively manipulative ways. The picture that will emerge is one of Sidonius as a man often at the mercy of circumstances that seemingly troubled his identity as, for instance, a conservative Roman aristocrat. In fact though, such instances of apparent trauma reveal a person consistently characterised by pragmatic detachment. The critical element in this was, I suggest, Sidonius's identity as a satirist, which he himself cultivated. Viewing life's various vicissitudes with the same 'wry face' he claimed to have assumed when confronted with uncouth Burgundian *hospites*,⁶ Sidonius could invoke and discard concepts with an ease that is sometimes disconcerting to modern eyes, but which served him and his associates well.

Chief among the attitudes ascribed to Sidonius that have helped shape scholarly approaches to him is his supposed antipathy towards barbarians. The subject is therefore a good point from which to start exploring the difficulties of attempting to identify consistent aspects of Sidonius's ego from his works. The idea of Sidonius as an anti-barbarian chauvinist looms large in many general histories that invoke his testimony,⁷ and has been articulated in stark terms.⁸ This is understandable, since Sidonius repeatedly expressed distaste or contempt for barbarians,⁹ of which his infamous attack on 'the gluttonous Burgundian who spreads rancid butter on his hair' is merely the most prominent example.¹⁰ This has been seen as a corollary of his apparent loyalty to the Empire and concern for office-holding, exemplified in his perceived role in motivating Arvernian resistance to the Visigoths during their sieges of Clermont in the years 471–474.¹¹ Against this, however, must be set Sidonius's apparent flattery of Theoderic II,¹² his endorsement of barbarian control over portions of Gaul,¹³ and, most starkly, his praise for Euric after the fall of Clermont.¹⁴ Popular solutions to this problem have been to view such incidents of apparently pro-barbarian sentiment either as instances where Sidonius was forced to betray his true beliefs,¹⁵ or as reflecting changes in circumstances that altered his priorities as a supposed Roman loyalist. The latter approach has typically focussed on a perceived break in Visigothic policy at the accession of Euric, whereby Theoderic II's loyalty to the Empire was replaced by militant aggression and independence. For Sidonius, it follows, Theoderic was amenable to incorporation into a Roman imperial political and cultural framework.¹⁶ Euric, on the other hand, was initially resisted but, when successful, was resignedly accepted as a substitute emperor in a world where Romanness was cultural rather than political.¹⁷

⁶ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina* 12, 5 (ed. William B. Anderson, *Sidonius: Poems and Letters*, Loeb Classical Library, London/Cambridge-Mass. 1935–1965) I, 2–I, 326, at I, 212: *tetrico ... vultu*.

⁷ For example, see Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (2nd ed. London 2003) 133–134.

⁸ Reydellet, *Royauté* 58; Jill D. Harries, *Not the Theodosian Code: Euric's laws and late fifth-century Gaul*, in: *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, ed. Ralph W. Mathisen/Danuta R. Shanzer (Aldershot 2001) 39–51, at 50.

⁹ For example, see Sidonius, *Epistulae* 7, 14, 10, ed. Anderson II, 380.

¹⁰ Sidonius, *Carmina* 12, 6–12, 7, ed. Anderson I, 212: *Burgundio ... esculentus, infundens acido comam butyro*. See also *Epistulae* 8, 6, 13–8, 6, 15 (Saxons), ed. Anderson II, 428–432.

¹¹ For this interpretation, see, for example, Grant, *Fall* 46; Heather, *Fall* 418–419; Harries, *Sidonius* 227; Stevens, *Sidonius* 152–155; Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley-Cal./London 1988) 185; Ralph W. Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul: Strategies for Survival in an Age of Transition* (Austin-Tex. 1993) 78.

¹² Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 431–437, 440; 7, 450–457, 519; 23, 69–23, 73, ed. Anderson I, 154, 156–162, 286–288; *Epistulae* 1, 2, ed. Anderson I, 334–344.

¹³ For example, see Sidonius, *Carmina* 23, 69–23, 77 (Visigothic control of Narbonne), ed. Anderson II, 184; *Epistulae* 5, 6, 2 (Burgundian control of Vaison), ed. Anderson I, 286–288.

¹⁴ See Sidonius, *Epistulae* 8, 9, 5, ed. Anderson II, 444–450.

¹⁵ Hans C. Teitler, *Un-Roman activities in late antique Gaul: the cases of Arvandus and Seronatus*, in: *Fifth-century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?*, ed. John F. Drinkwater/Hugh Elton (Cambridge 1992) 309–317, at 316.

¹⁶ See Reydellet, *Royauté* 69–80.

¹⁷ Reydellet, *Royauté* 81–85, esp. 85; Jill D. Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris, Rome and the barbarians: a climate of treason*, in: *Fifth-century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?*, ed. John F. Drinkwater/Hugh Elton (Cambridge 1992) 298–308, at 307; ead. *Sidonius* 241–242; Stevens, *Sidonius* 92–93, 164–166. Suzanne Teillet, conversely, sees Sidonius as supportive of the Visigothic kingdom for its power under both Theoderic II and Euric, downplaying the siege of Clermont; see Suzanne Teillet, *Des Goths à la nation gothique: les origines de l'idée de nation en Occident du V^e au VII^e siècle* (Collection d'études anciennes, Paris 1984) 190, 197–198.

That there were additional complexities involved in Sidonius's attitudes to both the Empire and barbarians has long been recognised. His links to, for instance, Gallic particularism,¹⁸ including the usurpers of the early fifth century, have been noted.¹⁹ More significant for understanding his overall outlook, though, is an appreciation of the extent to which Sidonius's words were governed by his audiences. Noted but played down by Jill Harries,²⁰ this can potentially revolutionise our understanding of his opinions and of the situations that shaped them. This is most apparent in Sidonius's letters railing against what he represented as an imperial abandonment of Clermont and the Auvergne to the Visigoths in c. 475.²¹ There, he luridly painted Euric as an Arian persecutor of the most militant kind. As Ian Wood has pointed out, though, these letters represent the sole convincing evidence that Euric was anything of the sort.²² Gregory of Tours, elaborating existing Merovingian Catholic rhetoric over a century later,²³ made them the centrepiece of a web of alleged episcopal depositions and banishments under Euric and Alaric II (c. 484–507) that cannot really withstand close scrutiny.²⁴ Admitting contemporary evidence alone, it looks very much as though Sidonius was employing tendentious rhetoric in a desperate effort to sway the Empire's episcopal negotiators with emotional blackmail.

It remains possible, however, that the letters of c. 475 represented a heartfelt appeal by Sidonius, freed to articulate an antipathy towards the heretical barbarians that he had hitherto needed, and would subsequently need, to conceal in the interests of expediency.²⁵ In deciding whether this was so, it is important not to jump to seductive conclusions. Sidonius's contradictory descriptions of Valentinian III (425–455) offer a particularly clear cautionary example that goes well beyond being merely 'a little curious', as Charles Stevens claimed.²⁶ Sidonius berated Valentinian as a 'mad eunuch' and 'boy emperor' when addressing the senate in 456,²⁷ but called him a 'good emperor' in 462–466/467 when addressing a certain Consentius,²⁸ whose civil service career had benefited from Valentinian's favour.²⁹ Having witnessed this flexibility, it is difficult to agree with, for example, Marc Reydellet's elaborate theory of Sidonius's opposition to the principle of hereditary monarchy.³⁰ Sidonius certainly criticised hereditary succession in Valentinian's case and downplayed it in Anthemius's.³¹ That he still mentioned the latter's distinguished ancestry,³² along with those of Avitus and Majorian,³³ suggests, however, that it was a question of rhetorical expediency. Rather than showing any strongly-felt antipathy towards the Theodosian dynasty in 456, Sidonius was simply pandering to his audience and working with what he had available to deliver a panegyric supporting Avitus as emperor.³⁴ Despite his distinguished ancestry, Avitus did not belong to the house of Theodosius, and so it was necessary to diminish its importance. Sidonius also had to find a scapegoat for the Empire's very real problems. The short-lived Emperor Petronius Maximus (455), whom other observers blamed,³⁵ and whose rule Sidonius himself was subsequently to criticise,³⁶ was not a suit-

¹⁸ Teillet, *Goths* 200–202.

¹⁹ Stevens, *Sidonius VIII*, 34–35, 64, 166; Harries, *Sidonius* 27–30; Reydellet, *Royauté* 63–67.

²⁰ Harries, *Rome and the barbarians* 298–300.

²¹ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 7, 6–7, ed. Anderson II, 312–331.

²² Ian N. Wood, *Gregory of Tours and Clovis*, in: *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63 (1985) 249–272, at 255.

²³ Wood, *Gregory* 259.

²⁴ Wood, *Gregory* 255–257.

²⁵ For this interpretation of Sidonius's sentiment, see Pierre Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire des grandes invasions germaniques* (Études augustiniennes, Paris 1964) 176–179.

²⁶ Stevens, *Sidonius* 20.

²⁷ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 359; 7, 533, ed. Anderson I, 148, 164: *semivir amens; principe ... puero*; see also id., *Carmina* 7, 597–7, 598, ed. Anderson I, 168. The senate probably held Valentinian indirectly responsible for the Vandal sack of 455; see Andrew Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, Fourth Series 55, Cambridge 2003) 95.

²⁸ Sidonius, *Carmina* 23, 215, ed. Anderson I, 296: *piusque princeps*.

²⁹ Sidonius, *Carmina* 23, 214–23, 232, ed. Anderson I, 296–298.

³⁰ Reydellet, *Royauté* 52–53, 55–56, 61. See also Harries, *Sidonius* 78.

³¹ Sidonius, *Carmina* 2, 216–219; 7, 541–7, 543, ed. Anderson I, 26, 164.

³² Sidonius even went so far as to link Anthemius to the fourth-century usurper Procopius; see Sidonius, *Carmina* 2, 67–2, 98; 2, 210, ed. Anderson I, 10–14; 24.

³³ Sidonius, *Carmina* 5, 107–5, 125; 7, 153–7, 161, ed. Anderson I, 68–70; 130.

³⁴ This can be compared with Sidonius's contradictory attitude to new men; see Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats* 12–13.

³⁵ For example, see Marcellinus, *Chronica* 455, 1 (ed. Brian Croke, *The chronicle of Marcellinus, Byzantina Australiensia* 7, Sydney 1995) 1–45, at 22.

³⁶ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 2, 13, 1–2, 13, 5, ed. Anderson I, 474–478.

able candidate. Maximus had sent Avitus on a mission to the Visigoths in 455, and may indeed have been married to his sister,³⁷ so Sidonius glossed rapidly over his rule and death.³⁸ Sidonius's criticism had, therefore, to fall on Valentinian, and hence cannot be taken at face value: even without a full knowledge of his circumstances and the potential scope of his allusions, we can see that they were governed by contingent factors.

Similar considerations apply to Sidonius's apparent anti-barbarian chauvinism. Although not all instances are readily explicable, some reveal themselves to be flattery and others carefully constructed rhetorical devices.³⁹ The best example of the latter is his comment about Burgundian haircare. As Guy Halsall has observed, this apparent proof of Sidonius's disdain for his Burgundian *hospites* needs to be seen in context.⁴⁰ It occurs in what purports to be a letter to the *vir clarissimus* Catullinus, the purpose of which was to excuse Sidonius's failure to supply a requested epithalamium.⁴¹ References to "German speech", "barbarian thrumming", the "reek of garlic and foul onions", and a crowd of "giants" exploited well-established stereotypes to justify his professed inability to invoke the requisite muses.⁴² This may reflect tensions in fifth-century Gallic elite identity, with barbarian groups subjected to racist jibes to reinforce Roman solidarity.⁴³ Perhaps more significant, though, is the insight it provides into a sadly neglected aspect of Sidonius's personality: his sense of humour.

Charles Stevens recognised the importance of personal amusement for Sidonius, discerning in him a "child-like desire to score off his opponents".⁴⁴ This valid, if uncharitable, observation is supported by the closing lines of the letter to Catullinus: "But already my muse is silent and draws rein after only a few jesting hendecasyllables, lest anyone should call even these lines satire."⁴⁵

The last clause is significant, recalling an illuminating incident described elsewhere. Sidonius's only other reference to Catullinus occurs in a letter written to an otherwise unknown Montius, apparently during the 460s, with which Sidonius closed his first book of letters.⁴⁶ Montius, having requested 'some satire or other', was playfully rebuffed with a cautionary anecdote.⁴⁷ In it, Sidonius related how, when Majorian was in Arles, there had circulated a work "full of satirical and biting lines, actually making the most savage use of undisguised names, and attacking vices a great deal but men still more."⁴⁸ Paeonius, an allegedly low-born former praetorian prefect of the Gauls, subjected to the satirist's attacks,⁴⁹ confronted Catullinus, recently arrived from the Auvergne, who, claimed Sidonius, "had always been my friend".⁵⁰ Catullinus's approval prompted Paeonius to conclude that the satire "was concocted with Sidonius as author and this gentleman as audience".⁵¹ On arriving in Arles, Sidonius was able to outmanoeuvre his accuser at a dinner party hosted by Majorian.⁵² Several points stand out in the narrative. Firstly, although Sidonius protested his innocence, he relished his reputation for satire: the accusations came "as if I were the only man in my generation who could write poetry";⁵³ he was

³⁷ T. Stanford Mommaerts/David H. Kelley, *The Anicii of Gaul and Rome*, in: *Fifth-century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?*, ed. John F. Drinkwater/Hugh Elton (Cambridge 1992) 111–121, at 112, 119.

³⁸ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 360; 7, 376–8; 7, 442–7, 443; 7, 464–7, 468; 7, 545, ed. Anderson I, 148, 150, 156, 158, 164.

³⁹ For example, see Sidonius, *Epistulae* 3, 8, ed. Anderson II, 32–34. For the *topos* of literary decline in fifth- and sixth-century Gaul more generally, see Ralph W. Mathisen, *The theme of literary decline in late Roman Gaul*, in: *Classical Philology* 83 (1988) 45–52, at 46–49.

⁴⁰ Guy Halsall, *Funny foreigners: laughing with the barbarians in late antiquity*, in: *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Guy Halsall (Cambridge 2002) 89–113, at 94–96.

⁴¹ Halsall, *Funny foreigners* 95.

⁴² Sidonius, *Carmina* 12, 4; 12, 9; 12, 14; 12, 18, ed. Anderson I, 212: *Germanica verba; barbaricis ... plectris; allia sordidumque cepe; Gigantes*.

⁴³ Halsall, *Funny foreigners* 95–96.

⁴⁴ Stevens, *Sidonius* 56.

⁴⁵ Sidonius, *Carmina* 12, 20–12, 22, ed. Anderson I, 212: *sed iam Musa tacet tenetque habenas paucis hendecasyllabis iocata, ne quisquam satiram vel hos vocaret*.

⁴⁶ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, ed. Anderson I, 394–412.

⁴⁷ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, 1, ed. Anderson I, 394: *satiram nescio quam*.

⁴⁸ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, 2, ed. Anderson I, 396: *versuum plena satiricorum mordacium, sane qui satis invectivaliter abusi nominum nuditate carpebant plurimum vitia, plus homines*.

⁴⁹ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, 4–5, ed. Anderson I, 398.

⁵⁰ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, 3, ed. Anderson I, 396: *semper mihi ... familiaris*.

⁵¹ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, 4, ed. Anderson I, 398: *colligitur auctore illo [Sidonio], isto [Catullino] auditore*.

⁵² Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, 7–1, 11, 16, ed. Anderson I, 400–412.

⁵³ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 11, 7, ed. Anderson I, 400: *tamquam saeculo meo canere solus versu valerem*.

happy to hint to Paeonius's supporters that he had not yet completed his 'satire';⁵⁴ the reward he received from Majorian was licence to "write what I please about my accuser, short of offending the law".⁵⁵ In denying a connection to satire and ostensibly explaining this erroneous association to Montius, Sidonius coyly enhanced his image as a sly humorist, invoking Catullinus as an accomplice.

Sidonius's letter to Montius should be seen as representative of his broader attitude to satire. Although undated, it belonged to a period in which Sidonius was already at pains to deny a direct connection to the practice, yet also, as we have seen, playfully hinting at it. Similar protests occur in Sidonius's later works, with him wishing that the frivolous literary products of his youth could be forgotten.⁵⁶ He also declined in the later 470s to write a history, noting the propensity for 'the colour and flavour of satire' to bedevil such endeavours.⁵⁷ Anita Obermeier has noted that Sidonius likewise ostentatiously disavowed the composition of poetry as unbecoming of his episcopal status but demonstrably continued to do it.⁵⁸ She has justly seen in this an impulse on Sidonius's part to possess both "the fame of the laurel wreath and the respectability of the bishop's mitre",⁵⁹ but this was, I suggest, a by-product of something more fundamental. Both satire and poetry permitted Sidonius to control his dealings with the world. By ostensibly denouncing the two exercises, he could, as we have seen, excuse himself from certain activities. These might be relatively trivial tasks like Catullinus's epithalamium, rejected perhaps due to lack of time or interest, or they could be altogether more awkward or even potentially dangerous assignments. What made this tactic particularly effective was that every denial of satirical or poetic prowess merely drew attention to the instances in which it was exercised by Sidonius. Lest anyone forget, moreover, his former aptitude in these fields, they could always consult his published works.⁶⁰

In various situations throughout his career, however, Sidonius could not, due to personal connections or interests, make excuses. Even then, though, his inclination towards humour, if not overt satire, stood him in good stead. Although the most obvious expressions of Sidonius's sense of humour are the rather forced puns to which his readers were subjected,⁶¹ far more impressive are the subtle tactics he employed even (and perhaps especially) in sensitive contexts. In his panegyric on Avitus, for example, Sidonius faced the tricky task of justifying to the senate his father-in-law's assumption of the imperial crown at the urging of bodies other than themselves.⁶² One tactic was to invoke the concept of *renovatio* to justify the involvement of the Visigoths, stressing their barbarity,⁶³ as "skin-clad warriors",⁶⁴ to make them a worthy match for the savage peoples that Attila had led in 451.⁶⁵ There was, however, another motive for focussing on the Visigoths and their barbarian credentials. In 455, Avitus, sent to pacify a people allegedly bent on seizing Rome,⁶⁶ was described as encountering the Visigoths' "Scythian ... senate",⁶⁷ and Sidonius subsequently described the primitive costume of the "Gothic elders" in lurid terms.⁶⁸ Reiterating the "venerable ... poverty" of these "elders",⁶⁹ he then made them the chief audience to Theoderic II's insistence on Avitus's elevation. The Visigoths thus assumed the role of

⁵⁴ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 11, 8, ed. Anderson I, 402: *satiram*.

⁵⁵ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 11, 13, ed. Anderson I, 108: *praeter iuris iniuriam in accusatorem meum quae volo scribam*.

⁵⁶ Sidonius, Epistulae 9, 16, 3, 41–9, 16, 3, 48, ed. Anderson II, 602.

⁵⁷ Sidonius, Epistulae 4, 22, 5, ed. Anderson I, 148: *color odorque satiricus*.

⁵⁸ Anita Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages* (Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 32, Amsterdam 1999) 57–59.

⁵⁹ Obermeier, *History* 59.

⁶⁰ The publication of Sidonius's works will be discussed further below. For an overview, see Harries, *Sidonius* 3–10.

⁶¹ Stevens, *Sidonius* 177.

⁶² In both the panegyric on Avitus and those on Majorian and Anthemius, the need to justify irregular elevations has been seen as prompting a conservative approach stressing ancient procedure; see Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley-Cal./London 1981) 223–226.

⁶³ This has led to perceptions of Sidonius as showing his contempt for barbarians here; for example, see Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats* 43.

⁶⁴ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 349, ed. Anderson I, 148: *pellitae ... turmae*.

⁶⁵ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 319–7, 356, ed. Anderson I, 144–148.

⁶⁶ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 361–7, 362, 7, 398–7, 430, ed. Anderson I, 148, 152–154.

⁶⁷ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 403, ed. Anderson I, 152: *Scythicusque senatus*.

⁶⁸ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 452–7, 457, ed. Anderson I, 156: *luce nova veterum coetus de more Getarum contrahitur; stat prisca annis viridisque senectus consiliis; squalent vestes ac sordida macro lintea pinguescunt tergo, nec tangere possunt altatae suram pelles, ac poplite nudo peronem pauper nodus suspendit equinum*.

⁶⁹ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 458–7, 459, ed. Anderson I, 156: *honora pauperies; seniorum*.

the Roman senate, people and army, and Sidonius played on this with his skin-clad senators. The device may have functioned on several levels: the Gothic elders were, in a sense, the primitive Romans, emphasising the motif of rebirth. The notion was also, however, ridiculously incongruous, especially since Sidonius himself had underlined the Visigoths' barbarity as part of a broader motif of norms being inverted. Rome, for instance, ravaged by the Vandal King Geiseric (428–477) in 455, would now be avenged by her previous Gothic sackers.⁷⁰ This motif would certainly have been appropriate to the panegyric's occasion: the Kalends of January.⁷¹ That day marked the zenith of the ancient festival of Saturnalia, when society was turned upside-down, which remained popular in late Antiquity.⁷² In consequence, it was entirely appropriate for Sidonius to employ open irony and satire (*satira*) and that, I suggest, is precisely what he did.

The motive for Sidonius's cultivation of the Visigoths as emperor-makers lies in the second body involved in Avitus's elevation, the Gallo-Roman elite. Styled "the senate's devoted throng",⁷³ this body seems initially to be a legitimising force, bestowing Roman assent on a barbarian decision.⁷⁴ Gaul had, however, produced within living memory a string of what were from Rome's perspective usurpers,⁷⁵ and Sidonius's presentation seems to reflect this complication. Firstly, Avitus himself was distanced from the Gallo-Roman gathering that backed his accession, being described as "ignorant" of it.⁷⁶ Secondly, Sidonius's Gallic spokesman delivered a fundamentally apologetic speech, attacking Valentinian III and invoking the excuse of neglect.⁷⁷ Thirdly, the specification of the gathering's location, "the hall of Viernum" (Beaucaire),⁷⁸ seems suspicious. If Sidonius were merely attempting to give Avitus respectable Gallo-Roman support, it would have been better either to allude to it vaguely or to imply more forcefully that it was the imperially-instituted Council of the Gauls.⁷⁹ As it stands, Sidonius's Gallic assembly appears awkward, and the specific location suggests it was something of which his audience was already aware and which required justification. It is with this in mind that the fourth noteworthy feature should be considered, the passage connecting the Gallic assembly with preceding events at Toulouse: "But you, Avitus, departed in sadness, knowing it could not be hidden from the Gauls that the Goths could be at their service if you were Emperor."⁸⁰

Sidonius's intention was clearly to portray the Gauls as responding to a Gothic initiative, primarily to secure military support, with the veiled threat of the consequences of failing to do so. Overall, Sidonius's panegyric on Avitus represents an impressively multi-faceted legitimisation of his rule, with the Visigoths both analogues for Rome's ancient allies and ironic emperor-makers, their barbarism emphasised or downplayed as expedient. Although we have no way of knowing how well the panegyric was received by the Roman senate,⁸¹ or even if the extant version accurately reflects what Sidonius actually said, the work as it stands represents a piece of verbal sleight of hand. However much scholars might want to perceive indications of his loyalty to the Empire or willingness to tolerate barbarian rule, these were not Sidonius's main concerns. His rhetoric of Romans and barbarians served the considerably less abstract end of justifying an effective act of usurpation. This involved, among other strategies, minimising the role of the Gallo-Roman elite and using humour to deflect attention onto a group who were definitely, indeed comically, non-Roman.⁸²

⁷⁰ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 504–7, 508, 7, 556–7, 557, ed. Anderson I, 160, 164.

⁷¹ Stevens, Sidonius 32.

⁷² Julian fell foul of the Saturnalia in Antioch; see Maud W. Gleason, *Festive satire: Julian's Misopogon and the new year at Antioch*, in: *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986) 106–119, at 107–114, 118f. The festival was still arousing Bishop Caesarius of Arles' disapproval in the sixth century; see William E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought Fourth Series, Cambridge 1994) 216–217.

⁷³ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 572, ed. Anderson I, 166: *pia turba senatus*.

⁷⁴ Gillett, *Envoys* 106.

⁷⁵ For Gallic provincialism in the early fifth century, see Raymond van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 8, Berkeley-Cal. 1958) 7, 15–20, 23–56.

⁷⁶ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 523, ed. Anderson I, 162: *ignaroque*.

⁷⁷ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 532–7, 543, ed. Anderson I, 162–164.

⁷⁸ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 571–7, 572, ed. Anderson I, 166: *atria ... Vierni*.

⁷⁹ See Stevens, Sidonius 28; Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats* 25.

⁸⁰ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 519–7, 521, ed. Anderson I, 162: *discedis, Avite, maestus, qui Gallos scire non posse latere quod possint servire Getae te principe*.

⁸¹ Avitus's stay in Rome did not last long and ended acrimoniously; see Grant, *Roman Emperors* 311.

⁸² This separation was underlined by Avitus's refusal to act as a friend rather than a Roman to Theoderic I; see Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 223–7, 224, ed. Anderson I, 136.

Another instance in which Sidonius used humour as an important tool in his engagement with contemporary events occurs in the first proper letter in his collection, addressed to his brother-in-law Agricola. This is important both as an illustration of the subtlety with which Sidonius was capable of operating and because of the significance that has been given to it in determining his attitude to the Visigoths. Comprising a description of Theoderic II and his court, the letter has been dated to c. 455,⁸³ and considered an open letter supporting peaceful Roman and Gothic coexistence by emphasising the king's Romanness.⁸⁴ Despite Reydellet's conviction about this date,⁸⁵ there is no clear supporting evidence, and Harries has proposed a date in the mid-460s.⁸⁶ This is perhaps supported by the absence of any brother of Theoderic in the letter, in contrast to the panegyric on Avitus.⁸⁷ The fact that Sidonius's letters as extant were subject to collection, editing and dissemination by their author after their original date of composition is also significant here. The publication of successive versions of Sidonius's writings is too complex a subject to be discussed here.⁸⁸ In various introductory letters, he claimed that they were primarily intended as objects of stylistic interest for his acquaintances,⁸⁹ and evidence of their subsequent use suggests that this is how they were received,⁹⁰ at least until mined for historical details by Gregory of Tours.⁹¹ Naturally, political agendas have also been postulated, but in either case the collection would have served as a suitable showcase for Sidonius's rhetorical skills, including humour. The letter to Agricola illustrates perfectly the potential importance of Sidonius's editing process. No secure date can be assigned to the publication of the section of the collection containing the letter, but Harries has argued that it was not prior to c. 469, and may represent Sidonius's attempt to justify key aspects of his secular career.⁹² By his own admission, Sidonius altered his works for public consumption.⁹³ This is significant because any editing of the letter to Agricola would have occurred not under Theoderic, but Euric, who murdered his brother in 466/7. Harries, noting this, has suggested that the letter represents a manifesto to the uncouth and anti-Roman Euric recommending his brother's conciliatory policies.⁹⁴ This notion relies heavily, however, on assumptions about Euric's attitudes and about Sidonius's positive perspective on his predecessor.⁹⁵

Even a cursory survey of the letter throws up several potentially odd comments about Theoderic. His postponing or speeding through hearing litigants, for instance, looks laudable initially, but when the reader learns that he did so to inspect his treasure and horses before going hunting, a critical dimension appears.⁹⁶ Likewise, the excess of the Visigothic court on festal days or the occasional presence of low comedians, ostensibly either apologetic or emphasising the otherwise exemplary conduct of Theoderic's palace, could take on a darker

⁸³ Stevens, *Sidonius* 23; Reydellet, *Royauté* 71.

⁸⁴ Reydellet, *Royauté* 71–80, especially at 71–72.

⁸⁵ Reydellet, *Royauté* 96.

⁸⁶ Harries, *Sidonius* 128–130.

⁸⁷ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 435; 7, 519, ed. Anderson I, 154, 162. This brother was probably Frederic, who appeared as Theoderic's viceroy if not co-ruler in other sources; see John R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* 2, A.D. 395–527 (Cambridge 1980) 484.

⁸⁸ For discussions of Sidonius's editing process and motives, see Harries, *Sidonius* 3–26, 240–242, 246–248.

⁸⁹ See Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 1; 7, 18; 8, 1; 8, 16; 9, 1, ed. Anderson I, 330–334; II, 394–402; II, 494–504.

⁹⁰ For some linguistic and stylistic borrowings from Sidonius's works by his relative Bishop Avitus of Vienne, see Danuta R. Shanzer, *Bishops, letters, fast, food and feast in later Roman Gaul*, in: *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, ed. Ralph W. Mathisen/Danuta R. Shanzer (Aldershot 2001) 217–236, at 228–232; Ian N. Wood, *Avitus of Vienne, the Augustinian poet*, in: *Society and Culture* 263–277, at 264; Danuta R. Shanzer/Ian N. Wood, *Avitus of Vienne: Letters and Selected Prose* (Translated Texts for Historians 38, Liverpool 2002) 5, 27, 62–63, 66, 73, 280, 347. Both Avitus and Bishop Ruricius of Limoges, also related to Sidonius, expressed admiration for his epistolary productions and his son Apollinaris's study of them; see Avitus of Vienne, *Epistulae* 43, 51 (ed. Rudolf Peiper, MGH AA 6, 2, Berlin 1883) 35–103, at 73, 80–81; Ruricius of Limoges, *Epistulae* 2, 26 (ed. Christian Luetjohann, MGH AA 8, Berlin 1887) 299–350, at 332–333. Another admirer was Bishop Ferreolus of Uzès; see Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 6, 7 (ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SS rer. Merov. 1, 1, Hannover 1885) 31–450, at 276. The extant manuscripts of Sidonius's works are too late to be of much help in tracing their immediate dissemination; see Anderson, *Sidonius* lxxvii–lxxix; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae et Carmina* (ed. Christian Luetjohann/Friedrich Leo, MGH AA 8, Berlin 1887) VI–XXII, XXV, XLI, XLII.

⁹¹ Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2, 24–2, 25; 4, 12, ed. Krusch 70–71, 142; see Wood, *Gregory* 252, 255.

⁹² Harries, *Sidonius* 7–8, 13; ead., *Rome and the barbarians* 299.

⁹³ For example, see Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 1, 1, ed. Anderson I, 330.

⁹⁴ Harries, *Sidonius* 144.

⁹⁵ For a further positive reading of the letter, see Teillet, *Goths* 196–197.

⁹⁶ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 2, 4–1, 2, 5, ed. Anderson I, 338.

hue.⁹⁷ There is also a more concrete indication that Sidonius's letter was not as positive as it appears. Sidonius supplied a detailed word-portrait of Theoderic's physical appearance.⁹⁸ Superficially, all is strength and virtue, but there is one striking phrase: "Every day there is a clipping of the bristles that sprout [*pili fruticantes*] beneath the nostril-cavities."⁹⁹

The verb *fruticari* is not common, and its use with *pilus* had one conspicuous precedent: "Hairs are sprouting [*fruticans pilus*] all over your dirty neglected legs."¹⁰⁰ This accusation was directed in Juvenal's ninth satire at the male prostitute Naevolus by his master/client. Sidonius was familiar with Juvenal, whom he explicitly termed a "satirist",¹⁰¹ and so this correspondence seems unlikely to have been coincidental. It was also in no conceivable sense complimentary. The precise implicit slur on Theoderic is unclear, since Naevolus served both male and female clients,¹⁰² ministering to his male interlocutor,¹⁰³ yet also impregnating his wife.¹⁰⁴ It is notable that no extant source mentions any spouses or children of Theoderic, but whether Sidonius's allusion was to homosexuality or to heterosexual promiscuity (or both) is uncertain. Likewise unclear is whether this was originally part of the letter or added for publication. What is clear, however, is that, as extant, the letter to Agricola is at least partly satirical.

This observation allows us legitimately to read the letter's ambiguous elements in a hostile sense. It also necessitates the work's reappraisal for gauging Sidonius's attitude to the Visigothic kingdom under Theoderic II. Both the target of the satire and its audience are problematic. The denigration was aimed either at Theoderic personally, or at the Visigothic regime in general.¹⁰⁵ At the risk of making arbitrary decisions about sincerity, I suggest that the letter broadly accepts the Visigothic court as it finds it, indulging in barbed comments about Theoderic without detracting from his successor. The well-known observation that Theoderic's devotion to his Arian faith was "a matter of routine rather than of conviction",¹⁰⁶ usually seen as pandering to Catholic Gallo-Romans,¹⁰⁷ may also have complimented Euric, whose own commitment to Arianism Sidonius was, ironically, later to exploit for quite the opposite purpose. Reydellet has justly contended that the letter illustrates Sidonius's conception of royalty as a quality that transcended Roman-barbarian divisions.¹⁰⁸ It does so, however, not as evidence of his willingness to laud Theoderic II's conciliatory attitude, but of his readiness to undermine him personally whilst, and by means of, praising Euric's court. A possible audience for this were the Gallo-Roman nobles in Euric's service with whom Sidonius maintained correspondence.¹⁰⁹ More than anything, it is salutary to note that Sidonius's perceived apologetic stance on Roman-barbarian collaboration may have been incidental at most to diplomatically disentangling himself from one ruler under another who was both his brother and murderer.

Sidonius's letter to Agricola highlights his need and ability to operate within difficult political contexts, as well as his methods for doing so. To understand why tactics like humour were so appealing to Sidonius, it is important to appreciate the extent to which his writings were the products of situations he was compelled to enter rather than doing so entirely voluntarily. We have already glimpsed some of the ways in which a reluctant Sidonius sought to evade certain commissions, even when they afforded potential opportunities to display talents of which he was proud. This ambivalence, and the ramifications it has for interpreting the opinions expressed in Sidonius's works, is most apparent in his relationship with one particular interest group: the Arverni. Appearing intermittently in Sidonius's work, they were the inhabitants of the city of Clermont and its

⁹⁷ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 2, 6, 1, 2, 9, ed. Anderson I, 340, 344; see Shanzer, Bishops 232.

⁹⁸ See Reydellet, Royauté 69–70.

⁹⁹ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 2, 2, ed. Anderson I, 336: *pilis infra narium antra fruticantibus cotidiana succisio*.

¹⁰⁰ Juvenal, Satires 9, 15 (ed. John R.C. Martyn, D. Iuni Iuvenalis satirae, Amsterdam 1987) 84: *sed fruticante pilo neglecta et squalida crura*.

¹⁰¹ Sidonius, Epistulae 8, 9, 1; 8, 16, 1, ed. Anderson II, 440, 496: *satur; satiricus*; see also id., Carmina 9, 271–9, 273, ed. Anderson I, 192.

¹⁰² Juvenal, Satires 9, 25–9, 26, ed. Martyn 85.

¹⁰³ Juvenal, Satires 9, 37–9, 45, ed. Martyn 85.

¹⁰⁴ Juvenal, Satires 9, 70–9, 90, ed. Martyn 86–87.

¹⁰⁵ For the latter interpretation, see Reydellet, Royauté 73.

¹⁰⁶ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 2, 4, ed. Anderson I, 338: *pro consuetudine potius quam pro ratione*.

¹⁰⁷ For example, see Reydellet, Royauté 73.

¹⁰⁸ Reydellet, Royauté 70–76, 79f.

¹⁰⁹ For example, there were Leo of Narbonne, Lampridius and Namatius; see Martindale, Prosopography 656–657, 662–663, 771.

territory. Although linked to Clermont through his mother's family, Sidonius was born in Lyon and his connection to the Auvergne rested principally on his wife Papianilla, the daughter of Avitus.¹¹⁰ Over his career, the Arverni were to exercise an influence on Sidonius that has been underestimated in its consistency, although not altogether ignored.¹¹¹ This influence is best illustrated by means of a brief summary of Sidonius's known public activities, the first of which was his journey to Rome to deliver his panegyric on Avitus.¹¹² Even then Sidonius praised the Arverni, crediting Avitus's homeland for his martial prowess.¹¹³ Thereafter, despite acting as *de facto* ambassador for the city of Lyon to Majorian and being personally associated with the emperor,¹¹⁴ Sidonius seems not to have held any official position, and spent the 460s indulging in *otium* on his own estates and those of his friends.¹¹⁵

Sidonius's re-entry into public life is particularly illuminating in terms of how he attempted to juggle his own interests alongside the various pressures to which he was subject, revealing once more a pragmatic reticence. In 467 he journeyed to Rome in support of "the petitions of the Arvernian deputation",¹¹⁶ but ended up being appointed urban prefect and narrowly avoiding having to try his friend Arvandus for treason. The trial of Arvandus, of which Sidonius's testimony provides the most detailed extant narrative, is a complicated subject and has accordingly received considerable scholarly attention.¹¹⁷ Here, however, our concern lies more with Sidonius's conduct and attitude, with his very presence in Rome being far from straightforward. Sidonius's own account of his journey has him leaving Lyon (not Clermont) and travelling via the *cursus publicus*, but also dallying at friends' houses and, perhaps, indulging in sightseeing.¹¹⁸ As Harries has noted, there is no sense of urgency, and this may be deliberate.¹¹⁹ Sidonius opened the first letter concerning his Roman experiences, addressed to an enigmatic Heronius, by noting that he had anxiously inquired "whether the objects of my journey are prospering according to our common plan".¹²⁰ All Sidonius actually offered was a rambling account of his travels, complaining about hardships and illness,¹²¹ before announcing that he has not seen Anthemius due to his daughter Alypia's wedding.¹²² The letter is effectively one long excuse for failing to achieve anything of note. A follow-up letter likewise said nothing of Sidonius's designated business beyond the oblique reference to Arvernian petitions, instead waxing lyrical about his new friends and urban prefecture.¹²³ Sidonius's panegyric on Anthemius, which he credited with securing the position,¹²⁴ barely mentioned Gaul and ignored the Auvergne.¹²⁵ We can only speculate about the object of the Arvernian petitions, but a connection to Anthemius's potential relations with Euric seems likely. It is uncertain whether Sidonius carried out this mission whilst urban prefect, since our knowledge of his incumbency is scant.¹²⁶ His own correspondence suggests, however, that he was in no hurry to discharge his task, giving excuses to those who had sent him and pursuing his own advancement.

The Sidonius Apollinaris who became prefect of the city of Rome in 468 should, therefore, be seen as an unenthusiastic messenger evading his responsibilities whilst advancing his own career. In consequence, he was justifiably distressed by the fall of Arvandus, Gallic prefect for two terms from c. 463, who had been arrested

¹¹⁰ Sidonius was apparently a native of Lyon, but became increasingly closely tied to Clermont, the *patria* of his wife's family; see Harries, Sidonius 34.

¹¹¹ For example, see Harries, Sidonius 144.

¹¹² Stevens, Sidonius 29–32.

¹¹³ Sidonius, Carmina 7, 148–7, 150, ed. Anderson I, 130; see also id., Carmina 7, 248, ed. Anderson I, 140.

¹¹⁴ For example, Sidonius, Carmina 5, 571–5, 586, ed. Anderson I, 110–112.

¹¹⁵ Stevens, Sidonius 63–79.

¹¹⁶ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 9, 5, ed. Anderson I, 388: *legationis Arvernae petitionibus*.

¹¹⁷ Andrew Gillett, The accession of Euric, in: Francia 26, 1 (1999) 1–40, at 26f.; see also Harries, Rome and the barbarians 301, 306–307; ead., Sidonius 159–166; Teitler, Un-Roman activities 309–317.

¹¹⁸ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 5, 2–1, 5, 9, ed. Anderson I, 352–360.

¹¹⁹ Harries, Sidonius 143. The optimism detected by Stevens, if present at all, may have been the product of hindsight; see Sidonius 95–96.

¹²⁰ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 5, 1, ed. Anderson I, 352: *an secundum commune consilium sese peregrinationis meae coepta promoveant*.

¹²¹ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 5, 6; 1, 5, 8; 1, 5, 9, ed. Anderson I, 356–360.

¹²² Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 5, 10–1, 5, 11, ed. Anderson I, 360–362.

¹²³ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 9, ed. Anderson I, 383–390.

¹²⁴ Sidonius, Epistulae 1, 9, 8, ed. Anderson I, 390.

¹²⁵ Gaul was referred to in passing when Ricimer's achievements were listed; Sidonius, Carmina 2, 378, ed. Anderson I, 40.

¹²⁶ We lack, for instance, any of the official *relationes* he presumably composed as prefect; see Harries, Sidonius 151.

and brought to Rome by several aristocrats representing “the province of Gaul”,¹²⁷ all of whom Sidonius knew well.¹²⁸ Beyond Sidonius’s friendship with Arvandus, the trial was probably also problematic for Sidonius because it concerned issues related to the mission he was trying to avoid. Either way, Sidonius was careful when informing his friend Vincentius about the trial to couch his sympathy for the condemned in terms that could not be construed as condoning Arvandus’s alleged conduct.¹²⁹ Even so, he had, he claimed, been somewhat careless and incurred disfavour from the affair, being burned by the flame of Arvandus’s fall.¹³⁰ Indeed, it is tempting to see Sidonius’s account of the trial, as included in his collected letters, as a defence of sorts for his conduct.¹³¹ Viewed in context, Sidonius’s Roman sojourn seems not to have been wholly successful, despite his assumption of one of the highest magistracies in the Empire. Entrusted with a mission for the Arverni, he dawdled, made excuses, got appointed to an office of no direct use to anyone in Gaul, and finally left Rome with his friend on trial for treason. Soon afterwards, he was elected bishop of Clermont. It has long been recognised that Sidonius was conspicuously reticent about his ordination. He was certainly a pious layman, and probably a deacon,¹³² and he took his episcopal office seriously, even if not the most accomplished theologian.¹³³ Posterity also looked kindly on his incumbency.¹³⁴ The silence, however, concerning his accession and hints that it was unexpected have prompted suspicions that it was not altogether voluntary.¹³⁵ The event’s context strongly supports this: Sidonius, apparently still living in Lyon, was expected to support an Arvernian legation to Rome, but had achieved nothing by the time of his appointment as urban prefect (if he ever did) and got involved in a treason trial in which both sides were made up of his friends. Sidonius’s Roman holiday showed the Arverni that he could operate successfully at the highest levels of imperial politics, but that he needed to attend to the task at hand, rather than pursuing personal advancement and courting potential ruin. As the citizens of Auxerre had realised regarding St. Germanus some five decades earlier, episcopal election offered a straightforward solution, although the exact timing resulted, naturally, from the death of the previous incumbent, Eparchius. With Sidonius as bishop, the Arverni could exploit his connections to Lyon, Rome and elsewhere whilst forcibly determining his *patria* and physically tying him to Clermont.¹³⁶

The portrayal of the Arverni in Sidonius’s letters supports the attribution of such faintly sinister self-assertion. Although he doubtless cared about his congregation, an incident that occurred soon after Sidonius’s ordination shows how it could both look after itself and enlist its bishop as spokesman. In c. 475, Bishop Sidonius recounted to his colleague Graecus of Marseille how the Arverni, “out of love for the state, did not fear to hand over Seronatus to the law when he was lavishing provinces on the barbarians”.¹³⁷ Like Arvandus, Seronatus has attracted attention as an apparent example of a high-ranking Roman selling out to the barbarians.¹³⁸ If we examine Sidonius’s complaints whilst Seronatus was still in office, however, a more complex picture emerges. Writing to Ecdicius, the son of the Emperor Avitus, in c. 469–470, Sidonius complained about Seronatus’s treatment of his countrymen the Arverni,¹³⁹ invoking several anti-barbarian stereotypes.¹⁴⁰ These attacks, however, formed a comparatively minor element of a stream of insults intended not to label Seronatus a barbarian

¹²⁷ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 7, 4, ed. Anderson I, 368: *provinciae Galliae*.

¹²⁸ They were Tonantius Ferreolus, Thaumastus and Petronius; Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 7, 4, ed. Anderson I, 368–370.

¹²⁹ Sidonius was careful to condemn both Arvandus’s rapacity and alleged treason; see Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 7, 3; 1, 7, 5, ed. Anderson I, 368–370.

¹³⁰ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 7, 1, ed. Anderson I, 366: *propter ipsum [Arvandum] nuper mihi invidia conflata, cuius me paulo incautiorem flamma detorruit*.

¹³¹ See especially Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 7, 6, ed. Anderson I, 370.

¹³² Harries, Sidonius 104–107, 114–117, 174–176.

¹³³ Harries, Sidonius 108–113, 194–196, 205–206, 210–221; Stevens, Sidonius 131–138.

¹³⁴ Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2, 21–2, 23, ed. Krusch 67–69; see Harries, Sidonius 207–208.

¹³⁵ Stevens, Sidonius 130; Harries, Sidonius 170–172.

¹³⁶ Harries, Sidonius 169; Stevens, Sidonius 139.

¹³⁷ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 7, 7, 2, ed. Anderson II, 326: *amore rei publicae Seronatum barbaris provincias propinquantem non timuerunt legibus tradere*. Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire* 175, assumed that Ecdicius was behind the move, but he was not in fact mentioned by Sidonius.

¹³⁸ Teitler, *Un-Roman activities* 314–316.

¹³⁹ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 2, 1, 1, ed. Anderson I, 414.

¹⁴⁰ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 2, 1, 2, ed. Anderson I, 414: *calumniatur ut barbarus ... palam et ridentibus convocatis ructat inter cives pugnas, inter barbaros litteras...*

or collaborator but to emphasise his fundamental contrariness by invoking various ridiculous juxtapositions.¹⁴¹ This is underlined by another letter purportedly written during Seronatus's lifetime,¹⁴² in which, despite subjecting him to a torrent of invective,¹⁴³ Sidonius made no mention of barbarians whatsoever. What Sidonius's testimony regarding Seronatus inadvertently reveals, I suggest, is how, under Arvernian pressure and perhaps anxious to avoid the awkwardness of Arvandus's fall, he gradually transformed an oppressive official into a traitor. Working with the Visigothic court in Toulouse,¹⁴⁴ Seronatus was highly vulnerable to such accusations. Strikingly, Sidonius complained to Graecus that "the state ... scarcely had the courage to put him to death after his conviction".¹⁴⁵ Perhaps the authorities in Rome had been reluctant to let the charges stick. Whether or not Sidonius shared the Arvernian antipathy towards Seronatus, in moulding him into a barbarian collaborator he was responding to the demands of circumstance rather than simply following an imperial loyalist impulse.

In trying to gauge the nature of Sidonius's relationship with the Arverni it is worth noting how he described them collectively. According to Gregory of Tours, Sidonius was ultimately to suffer a rebellion against his episcopate led by two of his own Arvernian priests,¹⁴⁶ and even before then not everything he wrote was complimentary. The *curiales*, he complained, were "brawling pettifoggers",¹⁴⁷ whilst the rustics were crude and borderline barbaric, even when serving him.¹⁴⁸ During the Visigothic siege of Clermont, cracks appeared in the façade of Arvernian solidarity, but, otherwise, Sidonius stressed their group identity rather than singling out sections of the populace.¹⁴⁹ Arvernian identity in fact dominated Sidonius's rhetoric regarding Clermont, both negative and positive. Writing to Ecdicius, Sidonius applauded his efforts to encourage the "leading families" to abandon the "scurf of Celtic speech".¹⁵⁰ Rather than a desperate gesture against declining Latin literacy,¹⁵¹ this was light-hearted exaggeration, but it testifies to a certain perceived distance between Sidonius and his adoptive compatriots, despite Ecdicius's alleged success in making them "Latins".¹⁵² We need not envisage the resurgence of a genuine pre-Roman linguistic identity, although this was not impossible.¹⁵³ When Sidonius solicited imperial support for Clermont's resistance to the Visigoths in c. 475, moreover, he did so not by portraying the city's inhabitants as Romans, but as Arverni, bound to the Latins by common Trojan descent.¹⁵⁴ These were all rhetorical flourishes, but together they reflect an embryonic ethnic identity for the Arvernians, complete with their own language and origin myth. All in all, the impression of the Arverni given by Sidonius is one of a group that, whatever the exact nature of its composition and leadership, seemed to him to possess a potentially intimidating level of assertiveness.

The Visigothic siege of Clermont is particularly useful for gauging Sidonius's attitude to his compatriots and congregation, despite the problems posed by the fact that his is the only substantial testimony we possess. At times, Sidonius played the part of a loyal bishop well, alleviating the inhabitant's sins with rogations from Vienne and securing material and moral support from Lyon.¹⁵⁵ Several hints appear, however, to suggest that the apparent accord between the bishop and flock was not perhaps as straightforward as it appears at first glance. Sidonius stressed that the main resistance to the Visigoths came from the Arverni, who "were their own leaders as well as soldiers".¹⁵⁶ Although identifying himself with Clermont's citizenry through the first person

¹⁴¹ Sidonius, Epistulae 2, 1, 2–2, 1, 3, ed. Anderson I, 414–416.

¹⁴² This letter was written to an otherwise unknown Pannychius; see Sidonius, Epistulae 5, 13, ed. Anderson I, 212–214.

¹⁴³ For example, Seronatus was likened to *ballaenarum corpulentiam*; see Sidonius, Epistulae 5, 13, 1, ed. Anderson I, 212.

¹⁴⁴ Sidonius, Epistulae 5, 13, 1, ed. Anderson I, 212.

¹⁴⁵ Sidonius, Epistulae 7, 7, 2, ed. Anderson I, 326: *quem convictum ... res publica vix praesumpsit occidere*.

¹⁴⁶ Gregory, Libri historiarum 2, 23, ed. Krusch 68.

¹⁴⁷ Sidonius, Epistulae 4, 3, 10, ed. Anderson II, 78: *rabulas*.

¹⁴⁸ It is notable that the *rusticus* messenger described by Sidonius was linked to the consumption of onions, as were the Burgundians elsewhere; Sidonius, Epistulae 4, 7, 2, ed. Anderson I, 88; see Sidonius, Carmina 12, 14, ed. Anderson I, 212; Stevens, Sidonius 81.

¹⁴⁹ Wolfram, Goths 184, suggests that the Arvernian nobility had an unusually strong grip on their tenants.

¹⁵⁰ Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 3, 2, ed. Anderson II, 12: *nobilitas; sermonis Celticis squamam*.

¹⁵¹ Stevens, Sidonius 82.

¹⁵² Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 3, 3, ed. Anderson II, 12.

¹⁵³ See Wolfram, Goths 184.

¹⁵⁴ Sidonius, Epistulae 7, 7, 2, ed. Anderson II, 324–326. For an earlier use of this notion by a rhetor of Autun, see van Dam, Leadership and Community 11.

¹⁵⁵ Stevens, Sidonius 64, 152–155.

¹⁵⁶ Sidonius, Epistulae 7, 7, 2, ed. Anderson II, 326: *tam duces fuere quam milites*.

plural, Sidonius's appeal to Graecus of Marseille was clearly phrased as being on their behalf rather than his own.¹⁵⁷ There are also hints that force was employed to maintain Arvernian solidarity, with Sidonius describing how in 473/4 Constantius, a priest of Lyon, found "the city made desolate no less by civic dissension than by barbarian assault."¹⁵⁸ Although Constantius received a rapturous reception, the "dense crowds ... of every class, sex and age" comprised the same people who were credited with sending Seronatus to his death.¹⁵⁹ Ecdicius's celebrated temporary relief of the siege in c. 471 was lauded by Sidonius as having prevented the Arverni from becoming "barbarians".¹⁶⁰ The letter in which these observations were made, however, opened by invoking Ecdicius in the name of the "Arvernians" and appealing to his affection for his birthplace.¹⁶¹ He was also, like Constantius, subjected to an ostensibly ecstatic, but potentially intimidating, welcome by the citizenry of Clermont.¹⁶² Most significantly, the letter closes as follows:

"So, if you consent to the petitions of your townsmen, hasten at once to sound a retreat back to your native town, and be quick to withdraw your duteous attendance from the dangerous intimacy of princes [regum familiaritas]; for the most experienced observers well compare their friendship to the behaviour of flames, which illuminate what is a little way off, but consume that which comes within their reach."¹⁶³

This comment is significant in several respects. Firstly, it reinforces the impression that the Arverni were the main force behind the letter. Secondly, the allusion to Ecdicius's familiarity with *reges* probably refers in part to his receipt of the titles of *magister militum* and *patricius* from Julius Nepos, of which Sidonius himself heartily approved,¹⁶⁴ whilst also perhaps discouraging too close an association with Euric or the Burgundian King Gundobad (c. 473–516). Thirdly, Sidonius's phrasing recalls his own experience with Arvandus, and we may compare this appeal with the Arvernian measures to secure his own services. Arvernian concerns about Ecdicius's commitment to their cause may well have been justified. According to Jordanes, writing in c. 550, he was ultimately to depart the Auvergne for "safer places".¹⁶⁵

Sidonius's admonition to Ecdicius shows him striving to act in the best interests of the Arverni as he saw them and also gives the lie to more simplistic interpretations of the positions occupied by both the Auvergne and himself. Both were effectively trapped. As Sidonius observed, Clermont was caught between the Goths and the Burgundians,¹⁶⁶ with the Empire itself an unpredictable third party, especially with the rapid turnover of emperors.¹⁶⁷ Nothing could be taken for granted and mistakes could easily be made. Sidonius's own uncles were accused of committing just such an error by conspiring to hand over Burgundian-held Vaison to Julius Nepos in 474/5.¹⁶⁸ Intervening on their behalf with the Burgundian King Chilperic, Sidonius strove to undermine their accusers, rather than justifying their actions.¹⁶⁹ Sidonius's personal history was conducive to a flexible attitude towards legitimacy, an impression supported by his willingness to bestow imperial status on the early fifth-century usurper Jovinus. What with hindsight has been seen as Clermont's noble but vain stand against an unstoppable barbarian flood, led by the city's conservative bishop, was no such thing. The actions of the Arverni can be explained by the simple desire not to have their city sacked. In 475 the surrender of Clermont to the Visigoths was probably objectionable not in its own right, but because of a potential counter-attack

¹⁵⁷ Sidonius, Epistulae 7, 7, 2–7, 7, 6, ed. Anderson II, 324–330.

¹⁵⁸ Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 2, 2, ed. Anderson II, 8: *civitatem non minus civica similtate quam barbarica incursione vacuatam*.

¹⁵⁹ Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 2, 1, ed. Anderson II, 8: *ab omni ordine sexu aetate stipatissimus*.

¹⁶⁰ Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 3, 3, ed. Anderson II, 14: *barbaros*. Many modern commentators also characterise Ecdicius's actions as anti-barbarian; for example, see Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats* 57.

¹⁶¹ Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 3, 1–3, 3, 2, ed. Anderson II, 12: *Arvernus*.

¹⁶² Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 3, 5–3, 3, 6, ed. Anderson II, 14–16.

¹⁶³ Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 3, 9, ed. Anderson II, 20: *igitur, si quid nostratium precatibus adquiescis, atutum in patriam receptui canere festina et adsiduitatem tuam periculosae regum familiaritati celer exime, quorum consuetudinem expertissimus quisque flammaram naturae bene comparat, quae sicut paululum a se remota inluminant, ita satis sibi admota comburant*.

¹⁶⁴ Sidonius, Epistulae 5, 16, 1–5, 16, 2, ed. Anderson I, 220–222.

¹⁶⁵ Jordanes, *Getica* 45, 240–45, 241 (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 5, 1, Berlin 1882) 53–188, at 119f.: *tutiora ... loca*.

¹⁶⁶ Sidonius, Epistulae 3, 4, 1, ed. Anderson II, 20–22: *aemulorum sibi in medio positi lacrimabilis praeda populorum, suspecti Burgundionibus, proximi Gothis, nec impugnantum ira nec propugnantum caremus invidia*.

¹⁶⁷ For the confused political situation in southern Gaul in this period and the difficulties in reconstructing it, see Maria Cesa, *Ennodio: Vita del beatissimo Epifanio vescovo della chiesa pavese* (Biblioteca di Athenaeum 6, Como 1988) 165–168.

¹⁶⁸ Sidonius, Epistulae 5, 6–5, 7, ed. Anderson II, 184–194; see Harries, *Rome and the barbarians* 305–306.

¹⁶⁹ Sidonius, Epistulae 5, 7, 1–5, 7, 6, ed. Anderson II, 187–192.

from either the Burgundians or the Empire, should the latter change its mind and decide to reconquer the city. In such a situation, Sidonius's pragmatism, aided by a flexible attitude towards imperial legitimacy,¹⁷⁰ came to the fore: he appealed to Ecdicius's Arvernian patriotism and to Roman loyalism and Catholic solidarity to sway Graecus and his colleagues. Whether Sidonius acted out of affection or fear (or both), he aimed not to prevent barbarian rule, with which he was perfectly familiar, but to preserve Clermont's ability to play the major powers in central Gaul off against each other by being nominally Roman but practically autonomous. This allowed the Arverni to postpone the potentially disastrous consequences of a wrong decision, which they had experienced after the fall of the usurper Constantine III (407–411),¹⁷¹ and would subsequently incur for meddling in Merovingian dynastic politics.¹⁷²

This vision of Sidonius as a man using his rhetorical talents and training to manoeuvre around various pressures and the sentiments they compelled him to articulate by no means eliminates somewhat arbitrary judgments about his sincerity. It does, however, remove many of the perceived contradictions that dog other visions. Rather than the siege of Clermont triggering Sidonius's long-repressed true feelings about barbarians, it involved simply what he and his contemporaries had already been doing for years. They employed the rhetoric of the barbarian-Roman dichotomy, of religious conflict, and of imperial decline and renewal, to negotiate their way through a minefield of potential loyalties and identities. This continued even after Clermont's subjection to Visigothic rule, which led to Sidonius's temporary exile to the Gothic-held fortress of Livia and Bordeaux. Although it is impossible to gauge for certain the sincerity of Sidonius's ostensibly vehement complaints about his treatment,¹⁷³ it is salutary to observe that some of his most elaborate laments on the miseries of exile occurred, as with his complaints about Burgundians, in the context of excusing his failure to write.¹⁷⁴ It should really come as no surprise that Sidonius was prepared to laud Euric, with whom he needed to rehabilitate himself. Circumstances had changed, but it was not the end of the Empire so much as a change of immediate audience that affected Sidonius. Having coped with similar vicissitudes throughout his career, he took it in his stride, although not everything worked out entirely satisfactorily. There is, for instance, no reason to doubt the sincerity of Sidonius's regret for the physical inaccessibility of Rome, even if the shadow of flattery once again looms large.¹⁷⁵ Sidonius also had an oft-repeated regard for imperial offices, and their decline, including the lapse of the Gallic prefecture, cannot have been welcomed. This is indeed the most likely explanation for Sidonius's lament in a later letter that, amidst the shipwreck of Latin arms:

“Now that the old degrees of official rank are swept away, those degrees by which the highest in the land used to be distinguished from the lowest, the only token of nobility will henceforth be a knowledge of letters.”¹⁷⁶

It is significant, however, that the context for this was a piece of flattery aimed at a scholar, again exemplifying Sidonius's pragmatic approach to perceived crises, and we should therefore be cautious in interpreting it. Harries, in organising a chapter of her monograph on Sidonius around this passage and entitling it “*Umbra imperii*”, has inadvertently shown this.¹⁷⁷ The phrase is a Sidonian quote. It relates not, however, to the years after 475, but to the reign of Valentinian III.¹⁷⁸ Turning the rhetoric of decline, and specifically of Gallic neglect, to his advantage had been Sidonius's stock in trade since his earliest extant work.

¹⁷⁰ For example, he accorded recognition to the early fifth-century ruler Jovinus; see Sidonius, *Carmina* 23, 173–23, 175, ed. Anderson I, 294. Jovinus was considered a usurper by Sidonius's near-contemporary Polemius Silvius; see Laterculus (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 9, Berlin 1892) 518–551, at 523.

¹⁷¹ Harries, Sidonius 28.

¹⁷² Sidonius's grandson Arcadius was involved in a scheme to transfer Clermont from Theuderic I to Childebert I and Arvernians were subsequently associated with the pretender Chramn; see Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 3, 9; 4, 13; 4, 16–4, 17; 4, 20, ed. Krusch 106, 144–145, 147–150, 152–154.

¹⁷³ For Sidonius's complaints about his accommodation whilst in exile, see *Epistulae* 8, 3, 1–8, 3, 2, ed. Anderson II, 406.

¹⁷⁴ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 9, 3, ed. Anderson II, 508–516, especially at 9, 3, 3, ed. Anderson II, 510.

¹⁷⁵ See Sidonius, *Epistulae* 9, 14, 3, ed. Anderson II, 580–582. It must be noted that it is not clear if Sidonius saw this as a temporary or permanent state of affairs.

¹⁷⁶ Sidonius, *Epistulae* 8, 2, 2, ed. Anderson II, 404: *iam remotis gradibus dignitatum, per quas solebat ultimo a quoque summus quisque discerni, solum erit post hac nobilitatis indicium litteras nosse.*

¹⁷⁷ Harries, Sidonius 243. See also Mathisen, *Literary decline* 51.

¹⁷⁸ Sidonius, *Carmina* 7, 540–7, 541, ed. Anderson I, 164.

In all of this, it is impossible to say with any confidence what Sidonius's true feelings actually were at any given point, much less over the thirty or so years spanned by his surviving works. With regard to the barbarian inhabitants of Gaul, do his contemptuous allusions to their barbarity reflect his attitude any more accurately than his praise of Euric, or his appreciation for the martial spectacle of the barbarian prince Sigismer?¹⁷⁹ What I have explored here is the sometimes astonishing degree to which Sidonius responded to the demands of context. This was also an important aspect of the identities of the leaders with whom he engaged. Emperors could possess barbaric ferocity and barbarians could be learned and pacific, yet swiftly revert to skin-clad savages when the situation demanded. With his sense of humour, Sidonius was perhaps an unusually detached observer, employing irony and expecting his audiences to appreciate it. That this applied to the Roman-barbarian dichotomy has been demonstrated above and can also be seen in Sidonius's use of the concept as a rhetorical weapon against Roman opponents.¹⁸⁰ How far ironic detachment governed Sidonius's own engagement with life cannot be known for sure. Perhaps he found skin-clad senates, or at least situations that allowed him to invoke such images, genuinely amusing. Such an attitude would certainly have been helpful in addressing the vicissitudes of his world and would help explain the various, even contradictory, sentiments articulated in his works. If, for instance, Sidonius's praise of Euric was ironic,¹⁸¹ then it was no more so than many of his other actions. By appreciating Sidonius the humorist, we can better understand such other apparent identities of his as those of Arvernian spokesman, imperial panegyricist or barbarian apologist. Rather than seeing in Sidonius's career the ego of, say, a conservative Roman aristocrat being buffeted by the storms of a world in turmoil, we should recognise instead an ego shielded behind its 'wry face' from the very real dangers and discomforts of its circumstances by a sense of distance.¹⁸² If this has troubled and misled modern observers searching for the real Sidonius, it probably helped to spare him the fate of Arvandus and Seronatus.

¹⁷⁹ The otherwise unknown royal youth Sigismer was described entering a city that was probably Lyon; he was probably marrying a Burgundian princess and was perhaps a Frank himself; see Sidonius, *Epistulae* 4, 20, ed. Anderson II, 136–138. For Sigismer's identity, see Stevens, Sidonius 94; Martindale, *Prosopography* 1008. Another of Sidonius's friends, Eutropius (sometime praetorian prefect of the Gauls), possessed *equis*, [et] *armis* of his own; see Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1, 6, 2, ed. Anderson I, 362.

¹⁸⁰ For example, see Sidonius, *Epistulae* 5, 7, 1; 5, 7, 4, ed. Anderson I, 186–187, 190–191.

¹⁸¹ It was delivered in a letter to Sidonius's friend Lampridius who was subsequently murdered by his own slaves; see Harries, Sidonius 18.

¹⁸² Sidonius, *Carmina* 12, 5, ed. Anderson I, 212: *tetrico ... vultu*.