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**EPISTLES AS A MEDIUM OF LATE ANCIENT
LITERARY DEBATES
THE CASE OF SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS**

SUMMARY: The aim of the paper is to show the fundamental role that the epistles played in late ancient literary life and intellectual exchange. The main source for this phenomenon are nine books of the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris (430-486), an important representative of 5th c. Gallic high culture, who was at the same time an important Roman politician and the Catholic church hierarch. In the present paper I am concentrating on the sources showing an image of Roman literary culture (still rich and strong at that time) in Northern and Central Gaul, the territories specially endangered by barbaric incursions. The state of affairs in these areas is less known, because the scholarly efforts concentrate on studying the refined intellectual and literary culture of Southern Gaul with its great city centers in Lyon, Narbonne, Bordeaux and Vienne. The examples presented here are, obviously, just a small selection of the great number of sources presented by Sidonius.

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Sidonius Apollinaris was a *homo litteratus* typical for his times; in his letters, addressed to his friends, high state officials, clergy and wealthy landowners, he preserved an image of literary and intellectual culture still thriving and alive in spite of the dangers of barbaric incursions. For those men, the greatest danger was to be left alone and away from their homeland, caused all too often, in these times, by wars and by repressions caused by the barbarians. In such cases it was the exchange of letters that was the source of the feeling of belonging and cultural brotherhood; these facts are reasons for the popularity of epistolography in late Roman antiquity. The importance of Sidonius, however, goes beyond the fact that his letters and other writings are well preserved. He is, in many ways, a model character: his works show, in a specially poignant way, a cultural symbiosis that became a staple of elite Roman culture after Christianity became dominant in the *Imperium Romanum*.

For the modern historians the epistles of Sidonius are some of the most important sources for the study of the 5th c. in the West. They were written both before and, for the major part, after Sidonius was consecrated as the bishop of Clermont-Ferrand (*Augustonometum*) in 470. The period in question is marked by the growing emancipation of the barbarian tribes which were earlier given the status of the *foederati* within the borders of the Roman Empire; in time, they evolved into independent kingdoms, not respecting the rule of the emperor. The letters of Sidonius give us precious and unique set of facts and data concerning the events and situation in Western Roman Empire in the 5th c., about the attitude of local provincial aristocracy, about its culture and its political delusions. We get a glimpse on the world of education, the life of the clergy and, noticeably, on the barbarians: the Visigoths, the Burgunds, the Franks, the Saxons, the Huns.

The majority of Sidonius' letters used to be treated as a regular correspondence which was gathered by the author and given a literary treatment and stylization before being published. Thus they could

be numbered among the kind of letters called *accurate* or *curatius scriptae litterae*, artistic letters. These were letters meant for publication: Sidonius writes about it in his programmatic letter I 1, adding that his intention is not to imitate Cicero, but Pliny the Younger and Symmachus: *Diu praecipis, domine maior, summa suadendi auctoritate /.../, ut, si quae mihi litterae paulo politiores varia occasione fluxerint, prout eas causa, persona, tempus elicuit, omnes retractatis exemplaribus enucleatisque uno volumine includam, Quinti Symmachi rotunditatem, Gaii Plinii disciplinam maturitatemque vestigiis praesumptuosius insecuturus. Nam de Marco Tullio silere melius puto*¹.

The division of letters into nine books alludes to the Plinian order. The dominating style is the grandiose one, with a large number of epithets; the tendency of formalist verbalism, present also in Sidonius' poetry. The letters are full of *excursus*, phrases and prosopopoeiae, there are also numerous speeches, anecdotes and parables of satirical quality. Sidonius asks his friend and editor Constantius (*epist.* I 1, 4) to revise the letters thoroughly to cleanse them of all mistakes: *tuaeque examinationi has non recensendas (hoc enim parum est) sed defaecandas, ut aiunt, limandasque commisit*². Thus the letters are not spontaneous at all: on the contrary, they present well thought-out and moderate opinions moderated by the rules of epistolography. The letters in late ancient intellectual culture were indeed a basic form of replicating and sharing ideas, especially taken into account how dangerous travelling had become and how decrepit the educational system was. Official Roman post ceased to exist outside of Italy in the 4th c. and its functions were taken up by private messengers who risked their lives delivering the letters of their masters often to remote locations³. This kind of difficulty is known to us from the letter of Sidonius addressed to Faustus, the bishop of Riez (IX 3). Admiring the beauty of the bishop's diction and appreciating his friendship, Sidonius asks for indulgence: he was late in answering the bishop's letters, but it was due to the danger on the roads, caused by the passing barbarians.

¹ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistula* 1 1, 1-2.

² Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistula* 1, 3.

³ Cf. Gorce 1925.

Sidonius' comment on the dangers connected with sending letters is of crucial historical importance. The messenger passing through the territories controlled by barbarians was risking constant controls, revisions and even interrogations, directed at making him reveal supposed secrets, not committed to writing and thus absent from the intercepted letters⁴.

In the preserved collection of Sidonius' letters of special importance are the literary letters. They often contain the demands for poems and critical and aesthetic judgements on poetry and artistic prose; they inform about the possible forms of participating in artistic and literary life (*collegia poetarum*).

Let us start with the opinions concerning artistic prose. The critical and literary comments of Sidonius are often formulated in the context of his own epistolography; they are mainly addressed to Constantius, a clergyman and writer based in Lyon, to whom Sidonius dedicated a collection of the seven books of letters, published at the instigations of Constantius.

At the beginning of the letter 7, 18, when Sidonius presents a critical typology of his own epistolography, he mentions the fact that the collection is incomplete, because originally he had not planned the publication of the collection and some of the letters were lost. Whatever he managed to salvage, however, was given an additional, if hasty, redaction. In the composition of the collection Sidonius aims at preserving the principle of balance and even though his natural writing disposition included a proclivity for longer treatment of matters, he strove to adhere to the rule saying that the longer the letters in the collection, the less of them were to be placed in it.

Sidonius follows this with a comment that during the editorial work he tried to make the letters more proper and fitting to the subject matter: after all, he had to take into account the fact that his reader is a cultured and at the same time demanding person. Such a reworking would guarantee that the author of the letters was excused if the frivolity of the style was not to the taste of the reader. Sidonius hands Constantius his letters to be judged, and these letters are a real reflection of Sidonius' concepts and ideas; as real and as faithful as the reflection of a face in

⁴ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 9, 3, 2.

the mirror: *Commendo igitur varios iudicio tuo nostri pectoris motus, minime ignarus, quod ita mens pateat in libro, velut vultus in speculo*⁵.

Later on, Sidonius includes the typology for his letters, dividing them into admonishments, praises, instructions; some of them rather sad, more of them humorous and jocular: *Dictavi enim quaequam hortando, laudando plurima et alioqua suadendo, maerendo pauca iocandoque nonnulla*⁶. Once again, he reflects on the truthfulness and uncompromising nature of his letters and he recommends his letters to Constantius as a pleasant reading and a respite from the religious readings. At the end he adds one more important comment related to the composition of the collection and the letters' subject matter. They are a thematically defined collection, which makes it necessary to read them with care, but also without the feeling of boredom (VII 18,4).

Commenting on the style of his own letters, Sidonius speaks with certainty, but often also with excessive modesty. For example in Letter 4, 10, addressed to Felix, he talks about the uneven style of his letters: some books, as he remarks, are composed in a more refined style, some of them use the simple and everyday one. He adds that the refined style is not his forte, either, and that the doubts about the possibility of the publication of letters makes him reluctant to keep working on the phrasing (4, 10,2). Similarly, in letter 8, 16, addressed to Constantius and written after the publication of book 8 of the letters, he scolds his own style as harsh, unadorned and unrefined and he adds with determination that nothing in his writing is about to surprise the reader, because everything there is an imitation of existing models.

But is this severe self-critique deserved? The author himself seems not to treat it all too seriously, since in the letter 8, 6, addressed to the very same Constantius he notices, in the final conclusions, that whatever the facts, his style is appreciated by his friends; and that, according to the ideal of literary community Sidonius strongly believes in, is the most important thing. It does not matter, either, if their judgement is a result of competent critical reading or just a result of the friendship

⁵ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 7, 18, 2.

⁶ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem*. Also cf. a detailed monograph on the typology of Sidonius' letters: Fernández López 1994; see also Garzya 1985: 347-375; Zelzer 1995: 541-551; Giannotti 2001: 27-38.

they feel for Sidonius: *Sed quid haec pluribus? Dictio mea, quod mihi sufficit, placet amicis. In quibus tamen utrumque complector, sive non fallunt examine seu caritate falluntur deumque quod restat, in posterum quaeso, ut secuturi aut fallantur similiter aut censeant*⁷.

If one wants to form an opinion on Sidonius' critical and literary opinions about the artistic prose of other writers, a text worth reading is, first and foremost, letter 9, 7, addressed to Remigius, a bishop of the Remi tribe in Belgica and the author of famous speeches. The story presented in this letter has some qualities of, to put it mildly, a literary fraud (*furtum*). According to the narrative in Sidonius, a certain member of the Arverni tribe, fascinated with the art of declamatory oratory, during his travels in Belgica had obtained (by abusing the trust of the bishop's librarian) a copy of Remigius' famous speeches. After his return to his native country, he was boasting about his prize and originally planned to sell the speeches; later on, however, as a loyal dweller of Auvergne, he brought the speeches to his bishop, Sidonius, as gift, which, as Sidonius comments, was in itself not illegal. The speeches became an object of instant interest among the literary-oriented intellectuals in Sidonius' circle; it was decided by common consensus that the not-quite-legally obtained speeches should be not only kept, but also copied: *Curae mihi e vestigio fuit hisque qui studeant, cum merito lecturiremus, plurima tenere, cuncta transcribere*⁸.

Later on Sidonius makes professional comments on the style of Remigius' speeches; he notices that it is not only his opinion, but a view shared by all those who read the declamations together with him. At the beginning Sidonius stresses the uniqueness of Remigius' style when compared with the present rhetorical production; the exceptionality of the style is rooted in masterful composition of the speeches, which in turn consists of exceptional planning of the problems presented (*dispositio per causas*), a proper disposition of letters (*positio per litteras*) and the artistically rhythmical combination of syllables (*compositio per syllabas*); all this was meant to give, as we presume, pleasant euphonic effects. Further on, Sidonius is fascinated by the appropriate choice of examples (*opportunitas in exemplis*), the

⁷ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 8, 16, 5.

⁸ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 9, 7, 1.

veracity of testimonies (*fides in testimoniis*), proper use of epithets (*proprietas in epithetis*), the elegance of rhetorical figures (*urbanitas in figuris*), strength of arguments (*virtus in argumentis*), seriousness of thought (*pondus in sensibus*), richness of diction (*fulmen in verbis*) and surprising effects in sentence closures (*fulmen in clausulis*)⁹.

From the opinion of Remigius' compositions Sidonius moves on to the discussion of style and language. He praises the compact structure of his sentences, resulting from the astute way of combining sentences; he also stresses the lightness, elegance and roundness of the diction (*lubrica et levis ac modis omnibus erotundata*¹⁰), a feature of special importance for the declamatory rhetoric; such a feature allows for an artistic imitation of natural speech, which allows the reader to easily articulate even the more difficult connections. The whole linguistic structure, polished and refined, is like a crystal or onyx wall, on which a human nail cannot feel a single crack. The text is very interesting, also due to the fact that it confirms that the practice of reading aloud was still alive at the times: *Structura vero fortis et firma coniunctionumque perfacetarum nexa caesuris insolubilibus sed nec hinc minus lubrica et levis ac modis omnibus erotundata quaeque lectoris linguam inoffensam decenter expedit, ne salebrosas passa iuncturas per cameram palati volutata balbutiat; tota denique liquida prorsus et ductilis, veluti cum crystallinas crustas aut oncyhitinas non impacto digitus ungue perlabitur, quippe si nihil eum rimosis obicibus exceptum tenax fractura remoretur*¹¹.

All the impressive qualities of Remigius' speeches, observed by Sidonius, make him an undisputed master of rhetoric: *Quid plura? Non extat ad praesens vivi hominis oratio, quam peritia tua non sine labore*

⁹ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 9, 7, 2: *Omnium assensu pronuntiatum pauca posse similia dictari. Etenim rarus aut nullus est, cui meditato par affatim assistat dispositio per causas, positio per litteras, compositio per syllabas, ad hoc opportunitas in exemplis, fides in testimoniis, proprietas in epithetis, urbanitas in figuris, virtus in argumentis, pondus in sensibus, fulmen in verbis, fulmen in clausulis.*

¹⁰ Cf. *rotunditas Symmachi*, stressed by Sidonius in letter 1, 1.

¹¹ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 9, 7, 3. A similar realistic metaphor of 'judging by the fingernail' (*unguis iudicium*) was used by Horace in *Ars poetica*, when illustrating the Callimachean norm of long polishing work necessary before the publication of a poem (*limae labor et mora*): *Vos, o / Pompilius sanguis, carmen reprehendite, quod non / multa dies et multa litura coercuit atque / praesectum deciens non castigavit ad unguem*". Horatius, *Ars poetica* 290-294.

*transgredi queat ac supervadere*¹². Such a situation, however, should not be a reason for excessive pride and for avoiding the literary judgement of friends, even if they were less educated or artistic: *Sed licet bono fulgeas ut conscientiae sic dictionis ornatissimae, nos tibi tamen minime sumus refugiendi, qui bene scripta laudamus, etsi laudanda non scribimus*¹³.

The critical analysis of Remigius' speeches shows us very clearly what Sidonius' concepts concerning declamatory rhetoric were. The author's fascination with well-composed speeches is obvious. In his opinion he includes not only the qualities traditionally connected with the composition of a speech, such as the selection of arguments, their careful planning, the roundness (*rotunditas*), of style, which is an equivalent of the Aristotelian term "to strongýllon", propriety of the means of expression, the lightness and elegance of diction; he also chooses to comprise in his opinion also certain features typical for late ancient aesthetics, such as euphonic choice of the letters, half-poetic rhythmization, refined sophistication in the choice of the figures of speech, grandiose way of thinking and surprising way of drawing conclusions, aimed at creating a state of certain shock in the reader (*fulmen in clausulis*). Sidonius also expresses his admiration for the blameless, perfect formal qualities of Remigius' speeches.

As a complimentary evidence on Sidonius' ideas on artistic prose we may recall the Letter 4, 7, dated at c. 471 and addressed to Arbogast, a governor of the Treviri tribe (*comes Treverorum*) settled near Moselle, and later the bishop of Chartres. In his carefully composed letter Sidonius treats Arbogast as a great authority in public, cultural and religious life. He expresses his thanks for Arbogast's letter, which is a perfect example of refined poetic art (*litterae litteratae*) and adorned with triple graces. The first of these graces is a result of the general content of the letter, the feelings of friendship towards Sidonius expressed in it and the understanding of the latter's literary and artistic shortcomings (*caritas prima*). The second grace is based on the author's humbleness (*verecundia*), while the third is based on Arbogast's unusual sense of humour (*urbanitas*), which allows him to present himself as a comedian who revels in the nonsense: he drinks the water of the Moselle on everyday basis,

¹² Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 9, 7, 4.

¹³ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem*.

but now, as he is drunk with the waters of Roman oratory, he spews out a veritable Tiber of words and, even though he is a friend of many barbarians, he never uses barbarisms; like the leaders of old, he is equally adept at military campaigns and rhetorical exercises: *tertia urbanitas, qua te ineptire facetissime allegas et Quirinalis impletus fonte facundiae poteris Mosellae Tiberim ructas, sic barbarorum familiaris, quod tamen nescius barbarismorum, par ducibus antiquis lingua manumque, sed quorum dextera solebat non stilum minus tractare quam gladium*¹⁴.

Sidonius believes that the perfection of Latin, long lost in the Belgica and on the territories near the Rhine, has been preserved in the speech of Arbogast, whose style is flawlessly correct, even though the linguistic knowledge in the provinces close to the borders has long been lost: *Quocirca sermonis pompa Romani, si qua adhuc uspiam est, Belgicis olim sive Rhenanis abolita terris in te resedit, quo vel incolumi vel perorante, etsi apud limitem Latina iura ceciderunt, verba non titubant*¹⁵. This testimony is of crucial importance for the historians of the Latin language, as it proves the disappearance of classical Latin in the northern provinces, conquered by the Germanic tribe of Franks¹⁶. The disappearance of Latin is discussed by Sidonius also in the letter to Hesperius (2, 10), written around 469-470. In this letter, while praising his young friend, a devoted student of literature, Sidonius notices with regret that a number of literary students have greatly diminished and that young men similar to Hesperius are exceptional; at the same time, it is them and them only who can guarantee the continuing existence of pure Latin, unblemished and unaffected by the stain of vulgar barbarisms, in the Gallic lands: *Illud appone, quod tantum increbruit multitudo desidiosorum ut, nisi vel paucissimi quique meram linguae Latiaris proprietatem de trivialium barbarismorum robigine vindicaveritis, eam brevi abolitam defleamus interemptamque: sic omnes nobilium sermonum purpurae per incuriam vulgi decolorabuntur*¹⁷.

Let us now move on and tackle the criticism of poetry. Among the discussions on poetry I would like to concentrate on the examples

¹⁴ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 4, 17, 1.

¹⁵ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 4, 17, 2.

¹⁶ Cf. Banniard 1992 : 413 ff., see also Demougeot 1979: 676 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 2, 10, 1.

proving the great popularity of the post-Neoteric poetry, also known as the Alexandrian tendency. In letter 3, 4, addressed to Placidus, Sidonius dwells only on literary topics, concerning his own poetic work. The notion (passed on by friends) that Placidus finds the reading of Sidonius' works, both prose and poetry, very pleasant, makes the author exceptionally content. Sidonius here calls his poetic attempts *nugae*, games with words. Such a definition is surely meant to stress the author's artistic distance; at the same time, the term has broad and important literary connotations and ever since the times of the 1st c. BCE Roman Neoteric poets it grew to mean an elegant sort poem, written for a special occasion and exhibiting wit and elegance: *Quamquam te tua tenet Gratianopolis, comperi tamen hospitum veterum fido relatu quod meas nugas sive confectas opere prosario seu poetarum stilo cantilenosas plus voluminum lectione dignere repositorum. Gaudeo hoc ipso, quod recognovi chartulis occupari nostris otium tuum; sed probe intellego quod moribus tuis hanc voluptatem non operis effectus excudit sed auctoris adfectus, ideoque plus deo, quia gloriae punctum, quod dictioni negares, das amicitiae*¹⁸.

In the sentences presented above Sidonius emphasizes the importance of friendship as a basis for Placidus' positive attitude for his poetry. This promoting of poets sharing one's set of artistic values also is a post-Neoteric feature. Such an attitude led to rejecting criticism originating beyond one's literary circle, as it was believed to be unjust and unmerited¹⁹. Similar is the attitude of Sidonius towards the critics of his own works. He criticizes their false erudition and the lack of proper critical methodology – since their only aim seems to be the ruthless search for faults in a discussed poem, without taking into account its merits. Such a criticism, Sidonius believes, is deprived of any positive aspects and aimed only at malicious derision: *De ceteris studii nostri derogatoribus quid ex asse pronuntiem, necdum deliberavi. Nam qui maxime doctus sibi videtur, dictionem sanam et insanam ferme appetitu pari revolvit, non amplius concupiscens erecta quae laudet quam despecta quae rideat. Atque in hunc modum scientia, pompa, proprietates linguae Latinae iudiciis otiosorum*

¹⁸ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 3, 14, 1.

¹⁹ Cf. Styka 1994: 105 ff.

maximo spretui est, quorum scurrilitati negligentia comes hoc volens tantum legere, quod carpat, sic non utitur litteris quod abutitur.²⁰

The Alexandrian aesthetics can be noticed also in letter 4, 8, addressed to Euodius, and within this letter especially in chapters 4 and 5. In these, Sidonius tackles his friend's request for the twelve verse long epigram, the text of which can be adapted to fit a silver, conch-shaped vessel. It is not, in the strict sense, an Alexandrian *carmen figuratum*, but the concept is similar – the need to close the poem's subject matter in a shape of an elegantly decorated seashell. This elegant object is to be given by Euodius to queen Ragnahild, wife of the Visigothic king Euricus, who ruled the kingdom of Toulouse from 466 to 485: *Illicet, ut ad epistulae vestrae tenorem iam revertamur, post verba, quae primum salve ferebant, hoc poposcisti, ut epigramma transmitterem duodecim versibus terminatum, quod posset aptari conchae capaci, quae per ansarum latus utrumque in extimum gyri a rota fundi senis cavatur striaturis. Quarum puto destinās vel ventribus pandis singulos versus vel curvis meliore consilio, si id magis deceat, capitibus inscribere*.²¹

Sidonius undertakes the task with great pleasure, at the same time discreetly criticizing Euodius that in the case of the seashell he pays more attention to the artistic work of the goldsmith than he does to the poetic work he ordered. He evokes the Callimachean (and Horatian) notion of a poet forging on the anvil of metre a true form of the poem and working on the piece of poetry ceaselessly, like a polisher, to achieve pure poetic perfection: *Famulor iniunctis quomodo- documque, non ut volebam; sed tuae culpae primus ignosce, qui spatii plus praestitisti argentario quam poetae, cum procul dubio non te lateret intra officinam litteratorum carminis si quid iuncus metrica produxerit non minus forti et asprata lima poliri*.²²

The poem enclosed with this letter is a real jewel of Neoteric charm. It starts with an image of Venus, originating in pagan iconographic tradition and showing the goddess resting in a large seashell

²⁰ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 3, 14, 2.

²¹ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 4, 8, 4-5.

²² Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem*. See also the interesting remarks by S. Condorelli: Condorelli 2006: 558-608.

based on the shoulders of a swimming Triton²³. The beauty of the shell cannot be compared to the perfect exquisiteness of the goddess; so Sidonius asks queen Ragnahild humbly to accept such a modest gift²⁴. This is followed by the praise of the queen's family, her royal husband and the good wishes for the future reign of their son. The poem ends with an exquisite praise of happy water, enclosed in the shell: the queen is looking at her reflection in the water and the radiance of her ideal face permeates the silver vessel: *Felices lymphae, causae quae luce metalli // ora tamen dominae lucidiora fovent! // Nam cum dignatur regina hinc tingere vultus, // candor in argentum mittitur e facie*²⁵.

A tendency towards very refined poetics is clearly visible in two other letters, dated at the last years of the author's life: an epistle to Burgundion (9, 14) from the year 477 as well as the letter addressed to Gelasius (9, 15), written c. 480-482. The letter to the otherwise unknown Burgundion is important proof of the functioning and popularity of the formalistic poetics, based on the need to create an original and surprising form of a poetic composition which often conceals trivial subject matter. Sidonius writes to a young friend who keeps asking questions concerning numerous literary topics. A crucial point of Sidonius here is to explain to the youth the nature of the so-called *versus recurrentes*, palindromes, typical for the formalistic poetry²⁶. Sidonius gives Burgundion very detailed explanations, giving numerous examples, also from his own poetry. Firstly, however, he gives a definition of *versus recurrentes*, as those which can be read forwards and backwards in the same metre without changing their meaning: *Igitur interrogas per pugillatorem, quos recurrentes asseram versus, ut celer explicem, sed sub exemplo. Hi nimirum sunt recurrentes, qui metro stante neque litteris loco motis ut ab exordio ad terminum, sic a fine releguntur ad summum. Sic est illud antiquum: 'Roma tibi subito motibus ibit amor'*²⁷.

²³ See also a similar image in 11, 34-41.

²⁴ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem*, *car.* 1-6: *Pistrigero quae concha vehit Tritone Citheren // hac sibi conlata cedere non dubitet. // Poscimus, inclina paulisper culmen erile // et munus parvum magna patrona cape // Euodiumque libens non aspernare clientem // quem faciens grandem tu quoque maior eris.*

²⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, *car.* 9-12.

²⁶ Cf. Polara 1989: 323-332.

²⁷ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 9, 14,4.

Continuing his argument Sidonius adds that the palindromes can also be considered such lines that can be read backwards and forwards, but taking into account not singular letters, but entire words. As an example he gives his own distich, describing the strength of a stream after heavy rainfall.

*Praecipiti modo quod decurrit tramite flumen
Tempore consumptum iam cito deficiet.*

Hoc si recurras, ita legitur:

*Deficiet cito iam consumptum tempore flumen
Tramite decurrit quod modo praecipiti*²⁸.

An important statement occurs at the end of the passage. It emphasizes the formalistic value of the poem, namely the sequence of syllables locked within a metric scheme; later on Sidonius adds that such poems would never teach anyone anything on the concept of sublimity, since they are not characterized by it; conversely, their value lies rather in formal finesse: *En habes versus, quorum syllabatim mirere rationem. Ceterum pompam, quam non habent, non docebunt*²⁹.

The value of formalistic polymetric poetry is also stated in the aforementioned letter to Gelasius (9, 5). The letter is an enthusiastic praise of the metric excellence – a real *ars iambic Sidoniana*. The text states that Gelasius was complaining about the fact that Sidonius had not included any letter addressed to him in his letter collection. He also criticized Sidonius for adorning his epistles with too many hendecasyllabics and thus requested from him some lines in iambic senars: *Praeter hoc quereris paginam meam, si resolvatur in lusum, solis hendecasyllabis frequentari. Qua de re trochaica garrulitate suspensa senariolos aliquos plus requiris*³⁰.

²⁸ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem* 9, 14, 5-6: *Praecipiti modo quod decurrit tramite flumen / Tempore consumptum iam cito deficiet*. Read backwards, the lines are: *Deficiet cito iam consumptum tempore flumen / Tramite decurrit quod modo praecipiti*²⁹.

²⁹ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem*.

³⁰ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 9, 15, 1.

To make up to his friend for this omission Sidonius sends him a prosometric letter, containing a long poem in iambic senars so highly valued by Gelasius. Lines 1-15 of this poem are an explanation of iambic metric technique, itself presented in iambic senars: *Iubes amice, noster per volumina // modis resultet incitatoribus // ferox iambus, ut trochaeus hactenus, // pigrasque bigas et quaterna tempora // spondeus addat, ut moram volucripes // habeat parumper insitam trimetria, // resonetque mixtus ille pes celerrimus, // bene nuncupatus quondam ab arte pyrricha, // loco locandus undecumque in ultimo; // spondam daturus et subinde versui, // modo in priore parte, nunc in extima // anapaestus, ipse quamquam et absolutius // pronuntietur, cum secuta tertia // geminae brevique longa adhaeret syllaba*³¹.

Such a perfect knowledge of metric techniques and perfect control of vowel length in the situation when the natural recognition of long and short vowels was already in decline is rather amazing. In the quoted fragment we can observe not only the natural talent for verse-making that Sidonius had, but also a result of long studies and the practice in composing poetry. In the following verses he states with fake humility that he himself is not able to follow all those complicated rules and that only Gallic poets of such renown as Leo of Narbonne and Concentius are able to fully adhere to them, but it seems plain and obvious that Sidonius' *modestia* rings rather hollow.

The Muse of small and fine Alexandrian poetry was dear to Sidonius for the entire duration of his poetic career. The critical opinions and some poems preserved in the letters prove convincingly that Sidonius was always prone to poetics based on the aesthetics of charm and formal refinement, notwithstanding his earlier epic and grandiose panegyrics, following the aesthetics of the sublime.

The critical and literary letters of Sidonius, discussed above, add key information to our understanding of literary life in 5th c. Gaul, away from the main southern centers, best known to Sidonius, where the organized *collegia poetarum virorumque doctorum* were active. The letters provide vital information on the situation of the Latin literary culture, especially in the northern territories controlled by the Franks and Burgundians, where the fall of the civilization, due to the destruction of Roman

³¹ Cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *ibidem*, versus 1-15.

administration and school system, was the fastest and most advanced. The barbarization of society was a rapid process, as proven by the decline of fluency in classical Latin, noted by Sidonius. On the other hand, one should notice a growing role of the church administration and clergy as sentinels and guardians of Roman tradition – as demonstrated by the character of Remigius, bishop of the Remii in Belgica, who was a man steeped in refined Latin culture and a master of declamatory rhetoric.

The literary letters of Sidonius present an example of the special artistic connection, caused by common poetic ideals and colored with friendship as well as patriotism, love for the beauty of classical culture and classical language. Sidonius strongly stresses the importance of positive literary critique, which should be marked by kindness, but also by professional knowledge of literary matters. Sidonius' epistolography presents to us an image of cultural actions and behavior which is strictly elitist in its character and directed to a cultural minority; it is clearly marked with a distance in relation to both the barbarian world, but also towards the uneducated Romans, allowing themselves to be culturally barbarized. The Gallo-Roman elite had a strong sense of being alienated in the world of incoming barbarity; the stronger was its need to cultivate the epistolary ties with the like-minded³².

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³² Cf. Gradowicz-Pancer 1996: 273-293.

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