

I. Wood, *The silence of Sidonius*
Tempus Tacendi. Quando il silenzio comunica
ISBN 978-88-907900-9-6
DOI: 10.60973/TTWood90096.12
pp. 213-228.

The silence of Sidonius

IAN WOOD

Abstract

The silence of Sidonius. Students of Late Antiquity and of the Early Middle Ages are faced with a limited amount of source material. Naturally, therefore, they attempt to find ways of connecting the material that they have. More often than not they use each block of sources as a stepping stone, and move from one block to the next (the Germans have used the word *Trittsteine*). As a result they do not often stop to comment on what is not in the sources in front of them. A good example of this is the use of the writings of Sidonius Apollinaris to reconstruct the history of Gaul from 455 to 480. There are, however, reasons for thinking that Sidonius gives a misleading impression. The chronicle material emphasises issues that are not covered in his correspondence. Even more striking, his epitaph emphasises issues that scarcely appear in his letters. It is instructive to juxtapose the evidence of the epitaph, the narrative that can be reconstructed from the chronicles, and the information of Sidonius' correspondence, and then to go on to ask about the gaps in the correspondence. These allow us to see that Sidonius seems deliberately to have excluded material that related to particular issues, and thus to make some deductions about the circumstances in which the letter collection was made, and about the audience. It also suggests ways in which present reconstructions of the history of Gaul during Sidonius' lifetime require some modification.

Keywords

Sidonius, silence, Gaul, philology, Late Antiquity

Parole chiave

Sidonio, silenzio, Gallia, filologia, tarda antichità

Introduction

Students of Late Antiquity and of the Early Middle Ages are faced with a limited amount of source material. Naturally they attempt to combine the material into a coherent narrative. More often than not they use each source or block of sources as a stepping-stone, and move from one block to the next (the Germans have used the word *Trittsteine*).¹ But often in doing so they do not stop to comment on what is not in the sources in front of them, even though the gaps in the evidence may themselves be significant. A good example of this is the use of the writings of the

¹ Wood 2021a, pp. 41-59, at p. 41.

senator and, in his last years, bishop of Clermont, Sidonius Apollinaris, to reconstruct the history of Gaul from 455 to 480. Sidonius' letters and poems provide us with the most substantial body of evidence for central and southern Gaul in the third quarter of the fifth century. Yet for anyone trying to write a history of the period there are substantial gaps in the information they convey, although these have rarely been fully acknowledged. The bishop's epitaph, however, allows us to identify some issues that are not covered in his surviving writings. In the light of the information provided by the epitaph it is clear that Sidonius deliberately excluded information on certain periods and parts of his life from his letter collection. It is worth considering why they were omitted, when he himself collected his letters together. What follows is an identification of some of the bishop's silences, and the reasons for them. To what extent have those silences skewed the general interpretation of late Gallo-Roman history that has been derived from the writings of Sidonius? And what adjustments should be made to the current reading of the period, in the light of a recognition of the gaps in the record?

Sidonius' Epitaph and the reconstruction of his career

The standard image of Sidonius has been meticulously reconstructed from his correspondence. The result is a commonly accepted picture – his early career as an active member of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, which included his delivery of panegyrics of emperors, including his father-in-law Avitus in 456 and Majorian in 458/9, the second of which is in many ways an apologia for the stance taken by the city of Lyon following the downfall of Avitus;² his subsequent semi-retirement in what has been described as a phase of *otium*; his late career, beginning with his panegyric on the emperor Anthemius in 468,³ and culminating in his appointment as *Praefectus Urbis Romae*, one of the most distinguished offices of the Empire; his elevation to the bishopric of Clermont, following his return to Gaul from Italy, and his role in the defence of his episcopal city in the period of Gothic expansion; his exile to Liviana in the neighbourhood of Toulouse, after the transfer of Clermont to the Visigoths in 475; and finally his return to his diocesan city, and death,⁴ which should apparently be dated to 479.⁵ Certainly there are numerous points of detail that remain debatable, but the basic outline of Sidonius' life is agreed, as, to a large extent, is its significance for understanding the implosion of Roman Gaul, and the failure of the Empire in the West.⁶ The effect of this reading of Sidonius is to present a history of Gaul in which the third quarter of the fifth century, between the death of Majorian and that of Sidonius

² Oppedisano 2013, pp. 97-101.

³ Sidonius Apollinaris, ed. Oppedisano 2020.

⁴ Harries 1994.

⁵ Furbetta 2015, pp. 248-251.

⁶ Harries 1994; Kelly and van Waarden 2020. See also Oppedisano 2020.

himself, is seen primarily in terms of Visigothic history, culminating in Euric's take-over of much of Provence – although one should note the modification of this reading offered by Christine Delaplace, which presents a very much more sympathetic reading of the actions of the Visigoths.⁷

The agreed reading of Sidonius' career, however, is challenged by his epitaph, which can no longer be ignored, as it has been by the majority of scholars, despite the fact that the text was published by Christian Luetjohann in his edition of the works of Sidonius.⁸ Two relatively recent discoveries have meant that attention has to be paid to the bishop's funerary inscription. First, fragments of the inscription itself have been found and published,⁹ and second a new manuscript copy of the text has provided a date for Sidonius' death (479), which has important implications for interpreting the final years of his life – activity that used to be dated to the early 480s has now to be squeezed into the years 478-9.¹⁰ Moreover, the inscription makes it fairly clear that we are dealing with an epitaph composed and carved in the late fifth or early sixth century – and we might guess that it was commissioned by Sidonius' son, Apollinaris, not least because of Sidonius' own concern with the proper burial of his grandfather, and with his provision of an epitaph for what had previously been an unmarked tomb.¹¹ With such a precedent vividly recorded in his father's letter collection, Apollinaris may well have felt compelled to supply a memorial. That he revered his father's memory is clear from the letters of his cousin, Avitus of Vienne.¹²

The epitaph, as preserved in the most recently discovered manuscript witness, is as follows:¹³

*Sanctis contiguus sacroque patri,
Vixit sic meritis Apollinaris,
Illustris titulis, potens honore,
Rector milicie forique iudex,
Mundi inter tumidas quietus undas,
Causarum moderans subinde motus
Leges barbarico dedit furori;
Discordantibus inter arma regnis
Pacem consilio reduxit amplo.
Hec inter tamen et facundus ore*

⁷ Delaplace 2015.

⁸ Sidonius Apollinaris, ed. Luetjohann 1887, p. vi.

⁹ Prévot 1993; Montzimir 2003.

¹⁰ Furbetta 2015, pp. 248-251.

¹¹ Sidonius, *ep.* III, 12. See Heinzelmann 1976, pp. 51-53.

¹² Avitus, *ep.* 43; Shanzer and Wood 2002, pp. 340-342.

¹³ Furbetta 2015, p. 251.

*Libris excoluit vitam parentis
 Et post talia dona gratiarum
 Summi pontificis sedens catedram
 Mundanos sobali refudit actus.
 Quisque hic cum lacrimis deum rogabis,
 Dextrum funde preces super sepulchrum:
 Nulli incognitus et legendus orbi
 Illic Sidonius tibi invocetur.
 Duodecimo Kalendas Septembris Zenone consule*

(Close to the saints and to the holy Father
 Thus Apollinaris lives by his merits,
 Noble in title, powerful in honour,
 Governor of troops and judge of the forum,
 Calm among the surging waves of the world,
 Moderator of lawsuits, and repeatedly moved.
 He gave laws to barbaric fury;
 To conflicted kingdoms in arms
 He offered peace with full counsel;
 But among this, eloquent in speech,
 He honoured the life of his parent in books,
 And after such gifts of thanks
 Sitting in the throne of the supreme bishop
 He restored worldly acts to his child.
 Whoever of you will beg God here with tears,
 Pour out prayers here on the fortunate tomb.
 Unknown to none, and worthy of attention in the world,
 There may Sidonius be invoked by you).

Other manuscript witnesses offer *Leges barbaros dedit furori* as an alternative reading for *Leges barbarico dedit furori* in line 7, while also providing a radically different version of lines 10-11 (*Haec inter tamen et philosophando / Scripsit perpetuis habenda seclis*: ‘Among such things, and philosophically, He wrote things to be preserved for all centuries’), and they describe Zeno as emperor rather than consul.

The epitaph opens with a reference to the dead man’s chief secular honours in the service of the Empire.¹⁴ *Rector militiae forique iudex* presumably alludes to Sidonius’ Urban Prefecture, even though the reference is oddly allusive, given the dignity of the office. There is a clear echo of the epitaph that Sidonius provided for the tomb of his grandfather, where he refers to *consultissimus utilissimusque ruris militiae fori cultor* (‘most informed and most effective husbandman of rural matters, troops and the forum’)¹⁵. But one can also note the lack of precision in the description of the younger man’s offices in comparison with the explicit references to the Praetorian Prefecture of his grandfather

¹⁴ Brown 2012, p. 406.

¹⁵ Sidonius, *ep.* III, 12, 5. Henzelmann 1976, p. 52: Condorelli 2013: Mratschek 2017, p. 315.

(*Praefectus... post praetoria recta Galliarum*) in the memorial composed by Sidonius himself.¹⁶ The allusive nature of the reference perhaps tells us something about the declining significance of the Urban Prefecture in the imagination of the Gallic aristocracy after the end of imperial rule. Having dealt with its subject's secular career, the epitaph refers to his literary output in a pair of lines which differ radically in the surviving transcriptions. I leave aside the lines 10-11 in the newly discovered copy, which refer to books about the life of a *parens*, since it is hard to see how they could fit with any known work of Sidonius (although this, of course, may point to another lacuna in our evidence). The alternative reading is easier to accept: *Haec inter tamen et philosophando/ Scripsit perpetuis habenda seclis*. There is then a reference to the episcopate of Sidonius (*Summi pontificis sedens catedram*), before a final invocation and dating clause.

More significant for my present concerns are four lines in the middle of the epitaph, which require careful consideration, not least because they appear to refer to activity which is not covered in any of Sidonius' letters or poems. What interests me are lines 6-9:

*Causarum moderans subinde motus
Leges barbaros dedit furori (or Leges barbarico dedit furori);
Discordantibus inter arma regnis
Pacem consilio reduxit amplo.*

The variant in line 7 is of no great significance, since either reading tells us that Sidonius was involved in legislating for barbarians. This reference to Sidonius' own lawmaking for barbarians hardly fits with the standard reading of the letter to Syagrius, where Sidonius describes his correspondent as a Solon of the Burgundians,¹⁷ a comparison which is usually taken to be comic or ironic.¹⁸ If Sidonius himself also acted as a legislator for barbarians, then we have to take the comparison with Solon rather as a compliment. On other occasions comparison with Solon in Sidonius' verse is unquestionably complimentary.¹⁹ That he paid some attention to the lawmaking of barbarian rulers is also clear from his comments on the Visigothic king Theodoric (*Qui dicat modo iura Getis, sub iudice vestro/ Pellitus rauum praeconem suscipit hospes*: 'who now gives laws to the Goths, under your judge, the skin-clad guest receives the hoarse herald')²⁰ – lines which seem to have been picked up by the author of the *Vita Patrum Iurensium* in his description of the Burgundian *Magister Militum*, the Gibichung Chilperic (*Nonne cernis, degener et infelix, ius fasque confusum, ob tuis tuorumque crebra in innocentium persuasione peccatis, mutari muriceous pellito*

¹⁶ Sidonius, *ep.* III, 12, 5. Condorelli 2013.

¹⁷ Sidonius, *ep.* V, 5, 5.

¹⁸ Harries 2000, p. 51.

¹⁹ Sidonius, *carm.* II, l. 160; XV, l. 47; XXIII, l. 108.

²⁰ Sidonius, *carm.* V, ll. 562-263.

sub iudice fascis: ‘Do you not see, degenerate and unhappy man, law and right confused, on account of your sins and the frequent exactions of your men against the innocent, and the purple-covered fasces handed over to a skin-clad judge’).²¹ There is also a reference in Sidonius’ letters to Euric’s legislation.²²

But when, in the standard interpretation of Sidonius’ career, did he act as a lawgiver for barbarians? When too did he help establish peace between discordant *regna*? On these issues Sidonius himself is silent, even though the next generation thought them worthy of record. It is clear from the structure of the epitaph that all this activity took place before he became bishop. However, it is not easy to find a conflict between barbarians in the period between 455 and 468 – unless we hypothesise some early aggression by Euric, immediately after his seizure of power in 466. It is possible to envisage that Sidonius played some diplomatic role in the aftermath of the defeat of British general Riothamus by the Visigoths in c. 469²³ – since Riothamus and his surviving forces seem to have been settled in Gibichung controlled territory, there might have been a stand-off between Euric and Chilperic. The British general had been acting in support of Anthemius, and Sidonius was clearly close to imperial circles at the time of his visit to Italy and immediately after. His letter to Riothamus²⁴ could antedate his elevation to the episcopate. It is even possible that the defeat of the British leader, and the settlement of his followers in the territory controlled by the Gibichungs antedates Sidonius’ departure for Italy – the chronology of the conflict is by no means certain. Another potential context for Sidonius’ activity as a peace-maker might be a conflict c.471/2, when Christine Delaplace has envisaged Visigothic support for Anthemius²⁵ – although that would be difficult to square with the chronology of Sidonius’ consecration, which remains opaque, but is not likely to be long after 469. Perhaps one point that we can conclude from the comment on his peacemaking in the epitaph is that Sidonius’ observations on the negotiations conducted between the bishops acting on behalf of Julius Nepos and the Visigothic king Euric in 475²⁶ would have been those of a man who had himself been involved in diplomatic negotiation.

As for his activity as a legislator, if it is to be dated before Sidonius’ election to the episcopate, as appears to be the case from the epitaph, we have to conclude that it was to the Gibichung *Magistri Militum* of the Middle Rhône valley that he gave legal counsel. For chronological reasons it would be difficult to argue that he was drawn into the body of men round Euric, who were responsible for the fifth-century legislation of

²¹ *Vita Patrum Iuvenisium*, 92.

²² Sidonius, *ep.* VIII, 3, 3.

²³ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, II, 18; Jordanes, *Getica*, XLV, 237-8; also Sidonius, *ep.* I, 7. Charles-Edwards 2013, pp. 59-60.

²⁴ Sidonius, *ep.* III, 9.

²⁵ Delaplace 2015, pp. 250-253.

²⁶ Sidonius, *ep.* VII, 6, and 7.

the *Codex Euricianus*, even though he was certainly aware of their work,²⁷ because he only became a subject of the Visigothic king after he was elected bishop. The phraseology of the epitaph, with the Burgundians being dismissed as *barbari* or a *barbarus furor*, might have been very attractive to a Visigothic audience. If Sidonius' involvement in lawmaking was associated with the government of the Gibichung *Magistri Militum*, we effectively have to place it before his journey to Italy to deliver the Anthemius panegyric in 468, and his subsequent tenure of the Urban prefecture in 468/9, in other words during his supposed period of *otium*. Certainly there is not much time between his return to Gaul and his election as bishop of Clermont in 469 or shortly thereafter. We can, therefore, be reasonably certain that his legal activity should be placed before his lengthy stay in Italy, even though it does not sit well with the normal picture of his period of *otium*²⁸ ('retraite studieuse' in the words of André Loyen,²⁹ or, in Ralph Mathisen's phase, 'first period of retirement').³⁰ This, of course, also has important implications for our understanding of early Gibichung legislation: Gundioc and Chilperic were acting as Roman officials – the first phases of Burgundian lawgiving are quite simply Roman, and Sidonius would have been advising them as a Roman official, even if some of the legislation was directed towards Burgundian or other federates.³¹

This dating of Sidonius' legislative activity may have implications for our understanding of his Italian journey. I have argued elsewhere that we have to understand Sidonius' delivery of the Anthemius panegyric in the light of the current situation in Italy and Gaul.³² We are not simply dealing with the personal decision of a Gallo-Roman senator to travel to the imperial court. The choice of Sidonius as panegyrist and his subsequent appointment as *Praefectus Urbis* cannot have been made without some acquiescence on the part of the Burgundian *Magister Militum per Gallias*, Chilperic, all the more so because of the strong connections between the Gibichungs and the *Magister Militum Praesentalis* Ricimer. The latter was the brother-in-law of Gundioc,³³ Chilperic's brother and predecessor as *Magister Militum per Gallias*. And Gundioc's son, Gundobad, who would emerge as Ricimer's heir in 472, may already have been at the side of his uncle in Italy by 468.³⁴ In fact the panegyric has a disproportionate amount to say about the marriage of Anthemius' daughter to Ricimer – at times it comes close to being an epithalamium.³⁵ It is a panegyric for the regime as a

²⁷ Sidonius, *ep.* VIII, 3, 3.

²⁸ Harries 1994, pp. 103-124.

²⁹ Loyen, ed. Sidoine Apollinaire, vol. 1, 1960. p. xvi.

³⁰ Mathisen 2013, pp. 221-247.

³¹ Wood 2016; Id. 2017.

³² Wood 2019; Oppedisano 2020.

³³ Priscus, fr. 64, 65, ed. Blockley 1981, vol. 2, pp. 372-375.

³⁴ Wood 2021b, pp. 16-17.

³⁵ Wood 2019, p. 369.

whole. This rather confirms the likelihood that behind Sidonius' voyage to Italy, his delivery of the Anthemius panegyric, and even his appointment as *Praefectus Urbis*, lay the political alignment of Anthemius, Ricimer, Chilperic and Gundobad. Moreover, if Sidonius had already been providing legislative guidance to the Gibichung *Magistri Militum per Gallias* before his departure for Italy, this would have been significant preparation for his role as *Praefectus Urbis*. However we solve the problem of Sidonius' peacemaking, his activity as a lawgiver means that we have to modify the picture of his 'first period of retirement', or *otium*. Jill Harries noted Sidonius' silence over his elevation to the episcopate,³⁶ and indeed carefully unravelled the allusive way in which he deals with other awkward events and problematic individuals, most notably Arvandus,³⁷ but his failure to say anything about his own activity as a peacemaker and a lawgiver is surely far more significant. Recognition of this aspect of his career calls into question the notion of Sidonius' first retirement, and it also suggests that we should give more credit to the Roman administration of the Gibichung *Magistri Militum*.

What is there to fill out the claims of the epitaph? Outside the letters, there is unfortunately nothing in the so-called *Leges Burgundionum* or in the Gallic Chronicles, that provide clear evidence of Sidonius' diplomatic and legal activity between 461 and 467. The *Liber Constitutionum* of the Gibichungs, as we have it, which is better-known as the *Lex Burgundionum*, is derived from a legal collection made in 517, although it seems to have incorporated an earlier lawbook which was probably issued in c.500, and which itself apparently contained earlier laws issued by Gundioc, Chilperic and Gundobad.³⁸ If we excavate the various strata of the Code, we might be able to point to legislation influenced by Sidonius. The same is likely to be true if we were to examine the other Burgundian lawbook, the *Forma et Expositio Legum*, which is more usually, but incorrectly, known as the *Lex Romana Burgundionum*, and which would seem to be a collection made c.500.³⁹ It is a compilation of laws from the *Codex Theodosianus* as well as later Novels, some of which have been edited to suit current circumstances. It is possible that some of the laws included in the collection had been identified by Sidonius and Syagrius as being of particular relevance to the situation in Gaul in the 460s.

But while the laws do no more than allow us to speculate on the identification of Sidonius' contribution to Gibichung lawmaking, there are some references to connections with the Gibichungs in Sidonius' letters which allow a little more certainty about his dealings with the Burgundian leadership. There is the reference to the relations of Chilperic with bishop Patiens of Lyon – the *Magister Militum* liked the

³⁶ Harries 1994, p. 12.

³⁷ Harries 1994, pp. 13-15.

³⁸ Wood 2016, § 8; Id., 2017, p. 10.

³⁹ Wood 2016, §§ 17-18; Id., 2017, p. 11.

bishop's feasts, while the general's wife liked the cleric's fasts.⁴⁰ Sidonius' knowledge seems to imply close contact with the household of the *Magister Militum*. More important, Sidonius was extremely concerned for the safety his relatives Apollinaris and Thaumastus in 474, when they were regarded as favouring the new emperor Julius Nepos, whose elevation was rejected by Chilperic.⁴¹ Although we learn little of what happened, it would appear that Sidonius was able to intervene with the *Magister Militum per Gallias* to protect his uncles.

Yet more intriguing is the letter which recounts the arrival of the barbarian prince Sigismer, who was to marry the daughter of the *Magister Militum*.⁴² Historians have tried to identify the origins of Sigismer, without any success. A more fruitful line of approach might be to juxtapose the letter on Sigismer with that written by Sidonius to the courtier and poet Secundinus.⁴³ André Loyen gave the two letters significantly different dates, for no reason.⁴⁴ It is clear, from what Sidonius has to say, that Secundinus had written court poetry and that it even covered a significant marriage. I would suggest that Secundinus delivered official verses on, among other subjects, the marriage of Sigismer. Certainly the letter must raise the likelihood that the court of the Gibichungs was a venue for poetry as much as was that of Euric. That being the case we need to ask whether Sidonius himself delivered poems for Gundioc and Chilperic. The answer is surely yes, despite the absence of any surviving verse. Certainly Sidonius was composing poems throughout his life, as is apparent from the verses included in his letters.⁴⁵ One might guess that the description of Chilperic and his wife as a new Lucumon and Tanaquil had its origins in some complimentary verse.⁴⁶ However, the one poem dealing at length with the Burgundians that does survive in the author's *œuvre* is his famous satire addressed to the *vir clarissimus* Catulinus,⁴⁷ where the barbarians are depicted as uncouth, noisy and smelly.

Sidonius was not alone in writing satirical verse: he encouraged Secundinus to continue writing satire against the *tyrannopolitae*, though whether the tyrants have been correctly identified as the Burgundian rulers (as, for instance by Loyen)⁴⁸ is questionable. The only other known use of the word *tyrannopolita* comes in a near-contemporary law

⁴⁰ Sidonius, *ep.* VI, 12, 3.

⁴¹ Sidonius, *epp.* V, 6 and 7.

⁴² Sidonius, *ep.* IV, 20.

⁴³ Sidonius, *ep.* V, 8.

⁴⁴ Loyen, ed. Sidoine, vol. 2, pp. 155, 186.

⁴⁵ Sidonius, *epp.* II, 8; II, 10; III, 12; IV, 8; IV, 11; IV, 18; V, 17, 10; VII, 17; VIII, 9; VIII, 11; IX, 13; IX, 14; IX, 15; IX, 16.

⁴⁶ Sidonius, *ep.* V, 7, 7.

⁴⁷ Sidonius, *carm.* 12.

⁴⁸ Loyen, vol. II, p. 187, n. 27.

of Glycerius, where is it directed against bishops.⁴⁹ There were plenty of powerful people other than the Gibichungs who were misusing their authority – we meet one in the *Vita Patrum Iurensium*, who is actually reprimanded by Chilperic.⁵⁰

Why did Sidonius not include in his letter collection correspondence relating to his peace-making and his legal activities? And why did he hide his close links with the Gibichung *Magistri Militum*? A possible answer might be that they were actually not very important. One might argue that the major Roman official in Gaul was the Praetorian Prefect, who was usually resident in Arles, and Sidonius certainly did have significant connections with most of them, including Tonantius Ferreolus,⁵¹ Priscus Valerianus,⁵² Paeonius,⁵³ Magnus,⁵⁴ Arvandus,⁵⁵ and Magnus Felix.⁵⁶ The fate of Arvandus, accused of treason, was something that concerned him in particular.⁵⁷

It is true that Gundioc and Chilperic make few appearances as Roman officials in any of our sources. For Gundioc as *Magister Militum* we are dependent on a single letter contained in the *Epistolae Arelatenses Genuinae*,⁵⁸ where we discover that in informing pope Hilary about the matter he played a role in dealing with the problematic episcopal election of Marcellus of Die. For Chilperic as *Magister Militum*, we have a few references in Sidonius' own correspondence, with regard both to his relations with Patiens of Lyon, and to his reaction to the elevation of Julius Nepos as emperor in Italy.⁵⁹ In the *Vita Patrum Iurensium* we see him as an active judge, and not surprisingly as an official involved in the settlement of barbarians.⁶⁰ Moreover, since a law of Gundobad makes it clear that more than one of his predecessors was a legislator, we can be certain that both Gundioc and Chilperic issued law.⁶¹ Although their lawmaking has to be excavated from the surviving *Liber Constitutionum* and *Forma et Expositio Legum*, we have to understand that as *Magistri Militum* they were also issuing law for the wider population, and not just for their barbarian followers.⁶² But we can also be certain that both men were active as

⁴⁹ Salzman 2021, pp. 218-219.

⁵⁰ *Vita Patrum Iurensium*, 92-94.

⁵¹ Sidonius, *carm.* 24; *epp.* I, 7, 4; II, 9; VII, 7, 12; VII, 12.

⁵² Sidonius, *carm.* VIII, *ep.* V. 10, 1.

⁵³ Sidonius, *ep.* I, 11.

⁵⁴ Sidonius, *carm.* 14; 15; *epp.* I, 11, 10; II, 15.

⁵⁵ Sidonius, *ep.* I, 7.

⁵⁶ Sidonius, *carm.* IX; *epp.* II, 3, III 4, III, 7; IV, 5; IV 10.

⁵⁷ Sidonius, *ep.* I, 7.

⁵⁸ *Epistolae Arelatenses Genuinae*, 19.

⁵⁹ Sidonius, *epp.* V, 6, 2; 7, 1; VI, 12, 3.

⁶⁰ *Vita Patrum Iurensium*, 92-4; Wolfram 1997, pp. 181-183.

⁶¹ *Liber Constitutionum*, 8.

⁶² Wood 2016.

military leaders. We see them on campaign in 455-6,⁶³ and it is therefore likely that they were involved in protecting their area of jurisdiction from outside threats. They were surely ultimately responsible for the defence of Clermont, even if, in Sidonius' account, the military hero was his own brother-in-law Eccidius.⁶⁴ We should also note the Sidonius comments on Eccidius' close relations with kings (*regum familiaritati*).⁶⁵ In other words, both Gundioc and Chilperic were figures of significance. Sidonius' failure to say much about them calls for some explanation, not least because for a good deal of time he and they were to be found in the same city, Lyon.

The Intended Audience of Sidonius' Correspondence and the Visigothic Court

Here we need to consider the audience of his letter collection. The first seven books are addressed to Constantius, who is often described as a priest of Lyon.⁶⁶ It does seem that he was buried in Lyon, if he is rightly associated with an epitaph that survives in the church of St Ireneus,⁶⁷ although it is by no means clear that he was a priest. Sidonius notes that he was a poet.⁶⁸ He was also the author of the *Life of Germanus of Auxerre*.⁶⁹ From Sidonius we learn that he was active in the territory of the Gibichung *Magister Militum* at the time of Euric's siege of Clermont.⁷⁰ The eighth book of Sidonius' letters is dedicated to Petronius⁷¹ (although the final letter of the book is again addressed to Constantius),⁷² and the ninth to Firminus.⁷³ The dedication to Constantius at first sight suggests a Lyon audience for the letter collection – and certainly Sidonius did have such an audience in mind, even if it was only secondary. Petronius and Firminus, however, suggest an audience in Visigothic territory since they are both associated with the city of Arles.⁷⁴ An audience within Euric's kingdom might also be implied by the dating of the collection. Sidonius would seem to have put together the first seven books while in exile at Liviana, between 475 and 477.⁷⁵ Books 8 and 9 were put together soon after, perhaps

⁶³ Jordanes, *Getica*, 231.

⁶⁴ Sidonius, *ep.* III, 3.

⁶⁵ Sidonius, *ep.* III, 3, 9.

⁶⁶ Sidonius, *ep.* I, 1; VII, 18.

⁶⁷ Borius 1965, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Sidonius *ep.* II, 10, 3.

⁶⁹ Borius 1965.

⁷⁰ Sidonius *ep.* III, 2.

⁷¹ Sidonius, *ep.* VIII, 1.

⁷² Sidonius, *ep.* VIII, 16.

⁷³ Sidonius, *ep.* IX, 1; 16.

⁷⁴ Stroheker 1948, pp. 174-204.

⁷⁵ Mathisen 2013, pp. 227-228.

while Sidonius was still in exile, or otherwise immediately after his return to his episcopal city of Clermont. Since his epitaph probably provides us with a death date of 479 (taking Furbetta's insistence that it is dated to the consulship of Zeno),⁷⁶ all nine books of the collection must be placed in the five years from 475 to 479. In other words, despite the dedication to Constantius, Sidonius' immediate audience was to be found among the senatorial figures of the Visigothic kingdom, and by extension among the leading men of the Visigothic court. Indeed the Visigothic nature of the collection is immediately made clear in the second letter of Book One, the lengthy description of the court of Theodoric II.⁷⁷ Effectively the letter is given pride of place among all those gathered together. Jill Harries rightly stressed the significant placing of the letter within the collection,⁷⁸ but without noting any connection with the context in which the collection made.

The Visigothic court is also at the heart of other letters. Sidonius sent Lampridius a verse description of Euric's court, in a letter that surely belongs to his period of exile,⁷⁹ and he supplied Evodius with a poem to accompany a gift for the Visigothic queen Ragnahild, in a letter that has been dated to the late 460s.⁸⁰ He also wrote to Leo of Narbonne, who would seem to have been one of Euric's closest Gallo-Roman advisers.⁸¹ There are no equivalent letters or poems dealing with the Gibichung court, even though Sidonius clearly had close connections with Gundobad and Chilperic for far longer than with Euric. Indeed there are strikingly few letters that can be firmly dated to the 460s.⁸² Yet in all probability Sidonius' association with the Gibichungs went back to the attempt by the city of Lyon to challenge the rule of Majorian, following the overthrow of Avitus, who was, of course Sidonius' father-in-law.⁸³ We do not know who was in charge of the Burgundian forces within the city, when it held out against Majorian, but we may guess it was either Gundioc or Chilperic. Exactly what role was played by Sidonius himself in the episode is unclear, but the panegyric to Majorian implies that he had been deeply implicated in the city's opposition to the new emperor: effectively he was faced with having to offer excuses for the city's actions. As we have seen, despite his near silence on the matter, he surely had dealings with both Gundioc and Chilperic when they held the office of *Magister Militum per Gallias*, and were frequently resident in Lyon, which was indeed where Sidonius himself was usually to be found before 468. And as bishop of Clermont he certainly continued to have dealings with them, up until the moment that his episcopal city was handed over to Euric. Despite all this, the Gibichungs and the

⁷⁶ Furbetta 2015, pp. 248-251.

⁷⁷ Sidonius, *ep.* I, 2.

⁷⁸ Harries 1994, p. 13.

⁷⁹ Sidonius, *ep.* VIII, 9.

⁸⁰ Sidonius, *ep.* IV, 8.

⁸¹ Sidonius, *ep.* IV, 22; VIII, 3. Stroheker 1948, p. 187.

⁸² Mathisen 2013, p. 222.

⁸³ Harries 1994, p. 31.

Gibichung court are almost entirely missing from Sidonius' letters and poems, especially in comparison with what he has to say about the courts of Majorian,⁸⁴ Theodoric II,⁸⁵ and Euric.⁸⁶ In the light of the evidence of the epitaph, this is surely deliberate: Sidonius has excluded material that would point to his association with Gundioc and Chilperic, and that is scarcely surprising, given that he was compiling the first seven books while under house arrest in territory whose ruler was at war with the Gibichungs. But this means that we cannot take the silence of Sidonius with regard to his life at the very end of the 450s and in the early 460s as evidence for a period of retirement or *otium*. Absence of information is likely to reflect Sidonius' wish to edit the record, so as to imply non-involvement in contemporary affairs, rather than to reflect a genuine period of retirement from politics. In the language of André Loyen he was not a *résistant* but a *collaborateur*⁸⁷ – although, of course, the phraseology reflects attitudes from the period following the 1939-45 War, and is, in truth, not helpful for an understanding of the fifth century.

What does this imply for our reconstruction of the history of Gaul in the third quarter of the fifth century? Most obviously, we have to be aware that Sidonius may have been a regular adviser to the Gibichungs from the fall of Majorian onwards. He was unquestionably involved in their early lawmaking. His involvement in the initial opposition of Lyon to Majorian would have endeared him to Gundioc and Chilperic, and perhaps also to Ricimer. This involvement must surely provide some of the background to the Anthemius panegyric. More generally, we should allow that the Gibichung *Magistri Militum* of the Rhône valley had a more important role to play than is usually acknowledged. The standard reading is, of course, a reflection of the infrequency with which Gundioc and Chilperic appear in Sidonius's writings. Indeed only one letter allows us to identify the office held by Chilperic,⁸⁸ while, for Gundioc's tenure of the magistracy we are dependent on the *Epistulae Arelatenses Genuinae*.⁸⁹

Conclusions

Sidonius' silence has almost inevitably had an impact on modern readings of the period. Exactly how did the authority of the Gibichung *Magistri Militum* relate to that of the Praetorian Prefects of Gaul? Was the distinction one of spheres of action? Or did they have different geographical spheres of influence, with the Prefect based in Arles

⁸⁴ Sidonius, *epp.* I, 11; IX, 4; *carm.* IV and V

⁸⁵ Sidonius, *ep.* I, 2.

⁸⁶ Sidonius, *epp.* IV, 8; VIII, 9.

⁸⁷ Loyen 1963.

⁸⁸ Sidonius, *ep.* V, 6.

⁸⁹ *Epistolae Arelatenses Genuinae*, 19.

and the Master of the Soldiers in Lyon? Was the *Magister Militum* based in Lyon because the city was closer to possible threats from the north than was Arles? It is, moreover, clear that the authority of Gundioc and Chilperic was not limited to the military sphere: Gundioc was active in reporting a disputed episcopal election, while Chilperic dealt with legal complaints⁹⁰ as well as the political fall-out from the arrival of Julius Nepos.⁹¹

One Praetorian Prefect, Arvandus, features prominently in several of Sidonius' letters, because he was accused of colluding with Euric.⁹² The episodes of Arvandus and Seronatus need to be considered in the light of the position of the Gibichungs. Sidonius makes no reference to the Burgundian officials in the letters concerned with Arvandus and Seronatus,⁹³ but is it likely that they had no involvement in the political crises surrounding the two men? And then there is the question of the association of the Gibichungs with Ricimer. Should we understand the Gibichungs primarily as Ricimer's agents in Gaul? They were related by marriage. They came to prominence more or less at the same times as Ricimer himself, although initially they belonged to different factions – Ricimer being involved in the overthrow of the emperor Avitus, while the Gibichungs seem to have supported the followers of the deposed emperor. The appointment first of Gundioc and then of Chilperic as *Magister Militum per Gallias* must have been proposed by Ricimer, not long after the marriage of his sister to Gundioc. And Gundioc's son Gundobad had emerged as Ricimer's political heir by 472.⁹⁴

All this also provides the background for Sidonius' journey to Italy to deliver his panegyric in honour of Anthemius, and for his subsequent appointment as *Praefectus Urbis*. But this background has to be reconstructed without the aid of Sidonius. His silence must be deliberate, and it is reasonable to conclude that it reflects his desire to construct a Gallic history in which the old senatorial world passed directly into Visigothic control, with no acknowledgement of the political realities of the years between 461 and 467, in which he himself had been involved. The skill with which he constructed his history has blinded historians to the significance of his silence, which can only be understood with reference to the context in which he collected his letters. Without his epitaph we would have no reason to question the image of his life and times which he himself constructed in collecting his prose and verse, and which has become the staple for modern historians. At a more general level we are back with the old conundrum that 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence'. It is always important to attempt to identify silences, and once they have been identified, to ask what they might mean.

⁹⁰ *Vita Patrum Jurensium*, 92-94.

⁹¹ Sidonius, *ep.* V, 6 and 7.

⁹² Sidonius, *ep.* I, 7.

⁹³ Sidonius, *ep.* II, 1; V, 13; VII, 7, 2.

⁹⁴ *Chronicle of 511*, 650, s.a. 471/2; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Romana*, 15, 3-4. See Wood 2021b, pp. 16-17.

Ian Wood
School of History
University of Leeds
I.N.Wood@leeds.ac.uk

Bibliographical References

- Avitus of Vienne, ed. R. Peiper, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, 6, 2, Berlin, 1883.
- Brown 2012: P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, Princeton.
- Chronicle of 511, ed. R. W. Burgess, *The Chronicle of 511: a new critical edition with a brief introduction*, in R. Mathisen, D. Shanzer, eds., *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, Aldershot, 2001, pp. 85-100.
- Condorelli 2013: S. Condorelli, *Gli epigrammi funerari di Sidonio Apollinare*, in M.-F. Guipponi-Gineste, C. Urlacher-Becht (eds.), *La renaissance de l'épigramme dans la latinité tardive*, Paris, pp. 261-279.
- Constantius, *Vita Germani*, ed. R. Borius, *Constance de Lyon, Vie de saint Germain d'Auxerre*, Sources Chrétiennes 112, Paris, 1965.
- Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum II*, 1, Hannover, 1951.
- Priscus, ed. with English trans. R.C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire, Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, 2 vols., Liverpool, 1981.
- Epistolae Arelatenses Genuinae*, ed. W. Gundlach, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae III*, Berlin, 1892.
- Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. F. Giunta and A. Grillone, *Iordanis de Origine et Actibus Getarum, Fonti per la Storia d'Italia*, Rome, 1991.
- Liber Constitutionum*, ed. L.R.V. Salis, *Leges Burgundionum, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Leges nationum Germanicarum II*, 1, Hannover, 1892.
- Paul the Deacon, *Historia Romana*, ed. H. Droysen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*, Berlin, 1879.
- Sidonius Apollinaris, ed. C. Luetjohann, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi* 8, Berlin, 1887.
- Sidonius Apollinaris, ed. A. Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire, Oeuvres*, 3 vols., Paris, 1960-70.
- Vita Patrum Jurensium*, ed. and trans. F. Martine, *Vie des Pères du Jura, Sources Chrétiennes* 142, Paris, 1968.
- Borius 1965: R. Borius, ed., *Constance de Lyon, Vie de saint Germain d'Auxerre*, Sources Chrétiennes 112, Paris.
- Charles-Edwards 2013: T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064*, Oxford.

- Delaplace 2015: C. Delaplace, *La fin de l'Empire romain d'Occident. Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531*, Rennes.
- Furbetta 2015: L. Furbetta, *L'epitaffio di Sidonio Apollinare in uno nuovo testimone manoscritto*, Euphrosyne 43, pp. 243–254.
- Harries 1994: J. Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome*, Oxford.
- Harries 2000: J. Harries. *Legal culture and identity in the fifth-century West*, in S. Mitchell and G. Greatrex (eds), *Ethnicity and culture in Late Antiquity*, London, pp. 45-57.
- Heinzelmann 1976: M. Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft in Gallien*, Munich.
- Kelly and Waarden 2020: G. Kelly and J. van Waarden (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris*, Edinburgh.
- Loyen 1963: A. Loyen, *Résistants et collaborateurs en Gaule à l'époque des grandes invasions*, Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé, pp. 437-450.
- Mathisen 2013: R. Mathisen, *Dating the letters of Sidonius*, in J. van Waarden and G. Kelly (eds.), *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris*, Leuven, pp. 221-251.
- Montzimir 2003: P. Montzimir, *Nouvel essai de reconstruction matérielle de l'építaphe de Sidoine Apollinaire*, Antiquité Tardive 11, pp. 321-327.
- Oppedisano 2020: F. Oppedisano, *Sidonio, Antemio e il senato di Roma*, in F. Oppedisano (ed.), *Procopio Antemio imperatore di Roma*, Bari, pp. 100-119
- Oppedisano 2013: F. Oppedisano, *L'impero d'occidente degli anni di Maiorano*, Roma.
- Prévot 1993: F. Prévot, *Deux fragments de l'építaphe de Sidoine Apollinaire*, Antiquité Tardive, 1, pp. 223-229.
- Salzman 2021: M.R. Salzman, *The Falls of Rome, Crisis, Resilience, and Resurgence in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2021.
- Shanzer and Wood 2002: D. Shanzer and I. Wood, *Avitus of Vienne, Letters and Selected Prose*, Liverpool.
- Stroheker 1948: K.F. Stroheker, *Der senatorische Adel im spätantiken Gallien*, Reutlingen.
- Wolfram 1997: H. Wolfram, *Neglected evidence on the accommodation of barbarians in Gaul*, in W. Pohl (ed.), *Kingdoms of the Empire: the integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, Leiden, pp. 181-183.
- Wood 2016: I. Wood, *The legislation of magistri militum: the laws of Gundobad and Sigismund, La forge du droit. Naissance des identités juridiques en Europe (IVe-XIIIe siècles)*, Clio@Themis, 10, <https://cliothemis.com/Clio-Themis-numero-10>.
- Wood 2017: I. Wood, *Burgundian law-making, 451-534*, Italian Review of Legal History 3, pp. 1-27.
- Wood 2019: I. Wood, *Sidonius and the Burgundians*, in D. Moreau and R. González Salinero (eds.), *Academica Libertas. Essais en honneur du professeur Javier Arce*, Paris, pp. 365-371.
- Wood 2021a: I. Wood, *The selective memory of Jonas of Bobbio*, in S. Scholz and G. Schwedler (eds.), *Creative Selection: between emending and forming medieval memory*, Berlin, pp. 41-59.
- Wood 2021b: I. Wood, *The Making of the Burgundian Kingdom*, Reti Medievali, 22, pp. 1-31.

Ascolta l'audio