

SIDONIUS ON THE REIGN OF AVITUS: A STUDY IN POLITICAL PRUDENCE

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In A.D. 455, after the death of Petronius Maximus and the Vandal sack of Rome, the Gallic aristocrat Eparchius Avitus momentarily was able to seize the western throne. On January 1, 456, he assumed the consulship at Rome, and his son-in-law, the young Arvernian aristocrat Apollinaris Sidonius, delivered the panegyric, which gave a detailed account of Avitus' career up to that point.¹ In October of the same year, however, Avitus was deposed by the *magister militum* Ricimer and the *comes domesticorum* Majorian, both of whom were implicated in his death. In 457, Majorian himself became emperor, and he spent a good part of the years 458–461 in Gaul, where he soon developed a close rapport with the Gallic aristocracy, with one of his chief supporters being Sidonius himself.²

For Sidonius and his Gallic aristocratic cousins, their involvement with Avitus would have been a source not only of unpleasant memories, but also of potential political embarrassment, and Sidonius' response seems to have been a suppression of virtually all references to Avitus and his reign after the publication of the panegyric.³ The following discussion will point out examples of this suppression and examine several instances of how the

¹For a discussion of these events see, *inter alios*, J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (London 1923) 323–30, and C. E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris and His Age* (Oxford 1933) 19–40. For texts of Sidonius, see W. B. Anderson, *Sidonius*, 2 vols., Loeb edition (Cambridge, Mass., 1936 and 1965), and A. Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire*, 3 vols., Budé edition (Paris 1960 and 1970). Along with the panegyric, *Carm.* 7, Sidonius wrote two other poems associated with Avitus at the same time: *Carm.* 6, the preface to the panegyric, and *Carm.* 8, a cover letter for a copy of the panegyric that Sidonius sent to Avitus' relative, the *vir praefectorius* Priscus Valerianus, to be circulated in Gaul.

²For Sidonius' very favorable views on Majorian, see *Carmina* 4, 5 and 13, which may have been written under some duress, and *Epist.* 1.11, which was not.

³Note that in the publication of all three of his panegyrics, the one on Avitus, although first chronologically, is last in order. The best source on the events of Avitus' reign is not Sidonius but the fifth-century Spanish chronicler Hydatius (*Chron.* 163–83), published most recently in A. Tranoy, *Hydace: Chronique* (Paris 1974). Hydatius, surprisingly, paints a very favorable picture of the Gallic emperor.

failure to recognize them has led to misinterpretation of the history of the period.⁴

In the surviving versions of his works written after Avitus' reign, Sidonius not once mentions Avitus by name, and on the two occasions where he does refer to him directly, he uses the circumlocution *socer*.⁵ In the few instances where Sidonius speaks in the context of Avitus' reign, and these when he could not avoid doing so, he studiously maintains silence on the emperor himself, and makes only euphemistic references to his reign. For example, in his panegyric delivered to Majorian in December of 458, he glosses over the period between the death of Valentinian III in early 455 and the accession of Majorian in 457 (*Carm.* 5.310–14):

. . . ferri mala crimina ferro
solvit et in vestrum plus concidit ille ruinam.
iam tunc imperium praesentis principis aurea
volvebant bona fata colu; sed publica damna
invidiam fugere viri.

The meaning of this passage has caused translators some trouble in the past, but this is not surprising when one realizes that Sidonius probably had in mind here a double meaning.⁶ To Majorian, the *publica damna* would have implied the confusion between Valentinian's and his own reign, but to Gauls the "public misfortunes" would have called to mind the tragic reign of Avitus in particular. Likewise, in his panegyric to Anthemius of 468, when Sidonius mentions Ricimer's defeat of the Vandals at Agrigentum in 456, there is no hint that it took place during Avitus' reign.⁷ In the same context Sidonius, significantly, refers to Ricimer as *invictus Ricimer, quem publica fata / respiciunt*, i.e., "the unconquered Ricimer, whom the public fates watch over."⁸ The phrase *publica fata*, like *publica*

⁴For Sidonius' obscurity on this period, see G. Chianéa, "Les idées politiques de Sidoine Apollinaire," *Revue d'Histoire du Droit* 47 (1969) 354; A. Coville, "Sidoine Apollinaire à Lyon," *Revue d'histoire de Lyon* 3 (1904) 198; H. Rutherford, *Sidonius Apollinaris, l'homme politique, l'écrivain, l'évêque* (Clermont-Ferrand 1938) 11; and Stevens (above, note 1) 36.

⁵*Carm.* 23.430, a reference to Consentius of Narbonne as *intra aulam soceri mei expetitus* (see also note 9 below), and *Epist.* 1.3.1, included in a list of Sidonius' office-holding relatives, *pater socer avus proavus*.

⁶On the problems of this passage, see D. R. Shackleton Bailey, "Notes, Critical and Interpretive, on the Poems of Sidonius Apollinaris," *Phoenix* 30 (1976) 244; see also note 19 below.

⁷*Carm.* 2.367, *Agrigentini recolit dispendia campi*. In the immediately preceding line Sidonius refers to the *damna priorum*, a reference to the defeat of Ricimer's enemies, a group which would have included Avitus.

⁸*Carm.* 2.352–53. Sidonius' use of double entendre in these, the most important political speeches of his career, shows his rhetorical acumen at its sharpest.

damna, may be a Sidonian code-word for Avitus' reign, for Ricimer certainly had risen to power at the expense of Avitus. Furthermore, the only other occurrence of the phrase *publica fata* in Sidonius' corpus refers even more conclusively to the reign of Avitus. In a poem to Consentius of Narbonne, who had served as Avitus' *cura palatii*, Sidonius states that Consentius would have been able to obtain a peace treaty with the Vandals *si publica fata non vetarent*, and when he comes to Consentius' career under Avitus, Sidonius awkwardly breaks off with the words *chartis posterioribus loquemur*.⁹

Sidonius' policy of silence on Avitus extends also to the emperor's family. In letters and poems to and about Avitus' children, sc. Ecdicius, Papianilla who was married to Sidonius, and Agricola, Sidonius never mentions their father.¹⁰ A reference to Sidonius' mother-in-law only by inference refers to Avitus' wife.¹¹ And in a letter to another Avitus, from Cottion, which discusses his relationship to Sidonius, there is no specific reference to Avitus the emperor, who would have been related to them both; Sidonius merely mentions that they both were *isdem* . . . *principibus evecti*, one of which *principes* was surely Eparchius Avitus.¹² Another possible allusion to Avitus in a family context occurs when Sidonius praises his uncle Apollinaris' wisdom in not attempting a dangerous pilgrimage to the tomb of the martyr Julian at Brioude, although *si quid secus viantibus accidisset, laetaturae fuerint quoddam se pro martyre tolerasse martyrium*.¹³ Now, Avitus himself was buried in this very tomb, and in a sense many Gallic nobles would have felt that he too had suffered a form of martyrdom.¹⁴

Such examples of omission and allusion indicate that Sidonius' silence on Avitus in his published works was deliberate. One should not, however,

⁹*Carm.* 23.255 and 432. This discussion of Consentius' career under Avitus, if it was ever written, does not survive; Sidonius may have felt it was more prudent to leave this promise unfulfilled.

¹⁰Ecdicius: *Epist.* 2.1, 3.3, *Carm.* 20, note also *Epist.* 5.16.1. Papianilla: *Epist.* 5.16, note also *Epist.* 2.2.3, 2.12.2. Agricola: *Epist.* 1.2, 2.12.

¹¹*Epist.* 8.9.2.

¹²*Epist.* 3.1. This Avitus had inherited the influence of Eparchius Avitus with the Visigoths, see *Epist.* 3.1.5 and cf. *Carm.* 7.214–29, 295–310, 328–56, 392–521.

¹³*Epist.* 4.6.2.

¹⁴Gregory of Tours, *H.F.* 2.11. See also *Carm.* 24.16–19:

hinc te suscipiet benigna Brivas
sancti quae foveat ossa Iuliani
quae dum mortua mortuis putantur
vivens e tumultu micat potestas.

One of the *mortui*, of course, would have been Avitus. See P. Allard, "Sidoine Apollinaire sous les règnes d'Avitus et de Majorien," *Revue des questions historiques* 83 (1908) 438, for the suggestion.

attribute this silence to a lack of character on the part of Sidonius.¹⁵ He is, in fact, known to have indulged in the writing of "satires" which contained vitriolic character assassinations of important political figures. Few of these, however, were included in his published works.¹⁶ In a letter to his friend Constantius of Lyon, Sidonius commented on his own outspokenness (*Epist.* 7.18.3):

Si me uspiam lectitavisti in aliquos concitatiores, scias . . . numquam me toleraturum animi servitutem . . . nam ut timidi me temerarium, ita constantes liberum appellant. inter quae ipse decerno satis illius iacere personam, cuius necesse est latere sententiam.

On the other hand, however, Sidonius was well aware that being too outspoken in published works could be dangerous, and he declined an invitation to write a history because *turpiter falsa periculose vera dicuntur* in such works.¹⁷ The texts which he did publish, moreover, were carefully edited before they were put into general circulation. His first book of letters, for example, was put together *retractis exemplaribus enucleatisque uno volumine*, and was then submitted to his friend Constantius *non recensendas . . . sed defaecendas, ut aiunt, limandasque . . .*¹⁸ Thus, if any direct reference to Avitus did exist in the originals of any of the published letters, they would have been deleted, and more inoffensive references perhaps inserted.

With Sidonius' literary method with regard to Avitus now more clear, it may be possible to gain some idea of his true feelings toward his fallen father-in-law by reading between the lines of some of his published passages. In his panegyric to Majorian he makes what appears to be a general observation on the neglect of Gaul by the Italian imperial court ever since the reign of Theodosius I (*Carm.* 5.356–57):

. . . mea Gallia rerum
ignoratur adhuc dominis ignaraque servit.

¹⁵For discussion of Sidonius' character in this context, see Chianéa (above, note 4) 375–76; A. Loyer, *Sidoine Apollinaire et l'esprit précieux en Gaule* (Paris 1943) 39; Rutherford (above, note 4) 13; and Stevens (above, note 1) 49–50.

¹⁶For two that were, see *Epist.* 5.13 (on the *vicarius septem provinciarum* Seronatus) and *Epist.* 3.13; for one that was not, see *Epist.* 1.11.2, where Sidonius is accused of being the author of a work *versuum plena satiricorum mordacium*. The accusation was probably justified, see *Carm.* 12.22; note also *Epist.* 4.18.6. On Sidonius' outspokenness, see also Chianéa (above, note 4) 367–68.

¹⁷*Epist.* 4.22.5.

¹⁸*Epist.* 1.1.1–2. For similar editing of other books, see *Epist.* 7.18.4, 8.16.1, 9.11.6, and also Stevens (above, note 1) 60–63.

A few lines later, he then goes on to say (*Carm.* 5.361–63):

. . . contempta tot annos
nobilitas iacuit: pretium respublica forti
rettulit invidiam.

No Gallic aristocrat hearing these words in 458 could have failed to associate the *invidia* with the hostility met by Avitus in Italy, and the *fortis*, which is unexpectedly singular rather than plural, with the fallen emperor himself. This bitter allusion by Sidonius is all the more remarkable given that it was spoken to an emperor who not only was fully implicated in Avitus' fall but who also had yet to decide the fate of Sidonius' city.¹⁹

Perhaps the best indication of Sidonius' attitude to the reign of Avitus, however, is to be found in a letter which ostensibly concerned Petronius Maximus, Avitus' equally illegitimate predecessor who came to an equally unfortunate end. Sidonius' qualifying phrase *hic si omittamus antecedentium principum casus vel secutorum* . . . is only the verbal expression of his otherwise unspoken policy toward references to Avitus.²⁰

If this letter is read as a commentary on Avitus' unsuccessful grasp at imperial power, Sidonius' outwardly hackneyed and worn-out clichés on the mutability of fortune and the miseries of absolute power assume a special poignancy (*Epist.* 2.13.1,8):

sed sententiae tali numquam ego assentior, ut fortunatos putem qui rei publicae praecipitibus ac lubricis culminibus insistent . . . quapropter ad statum huiusmodi, domine frater, nescio an constet tendere beatos, patet certe miseros pervenire.

A realization of the selectivity of Sidonius in his choice of topics in his published works should make readers particularly cautious in interpreting him, especially in references of uncertain chronology. Arguments *ex silentio*, moreover, should be shunned even more than usual. An example of the disagreement among scholars that has arisen because of Sidonius' selective lack of specificity is seen in discussions of his own *cursus*. Even though, while his own father-in-law was emperor, he not only was in Rome but even delivered the panegyric for the emperor's consulship, some scholars refuse to grant Sidonius an official office under Avitus because he makes no specific reference to one.²¹ But once Sidonius' avoidance of just

¹⁹On the revolt of Lyon and its subsequent capture by Majorian, see Stevens (above, note 1) 45–50. The *invidia* mentioned here is probably intended to be parallel to that in *Carm.* 5.314: Avitus suffered it, but Majorian did not; see also note 6 above.

²⁰*Epist.* 2.13.3.

²¹As Anderson (above, note 1) l.xxxvii and J. Sundwall, *Weströmische Studien* (Berlin 1915) 133.

such specifics is taken into account, the likelihood that he was, e.g., a *tribunus et notarius* under Avitus is increased greatly.

The careers of other aristocrats who served with Sidonius can also be clarified. In one letter to Eutropius, who became praetorian prefect of Gaul c. 470, Sidonius exhorts him to come to Rome with him *ad capessenda militiae Palatinae* and promises to be his *socius adiutor, praevius particeps*; in a later letter, written after Eutropius became praetorian prefect, Sidonius mentions their *veteris commilitii*.²² This earlier office-holding of the two is sometimes dated to the time of Majorian, or even Anthemius, but Sidonius' policy of silence on Avitus' reign, coupled with the mention of a Palatine office and a promise to be an *adiutor*, which he could do best if his father-in-law were emperor, all indicate that both Sidonius and Eutropius held their first offices under Avitus.²³

A few other such examples also deserve mention. The reference previously discussed to Sidonius and Avitus of Cottion being *isdem . . . principibus evecti* would probably indicate that both held offices under Avitus the emperor.²⁴ Likewise, the reference in an event of 461 to Sidonius' friend Catullinus as *praecipue commilitio recenti familiaris* probably refers to their joint service under Avitus rather than under Majorian, as has been suggested.²⁵ Similarly, other references in Sidonius to the holding of offices at unspecified times, as to the *vir tribunicus* Turpio and the *palatinus* Maximus, may concern office-holding under Avitus whose dates have been obfuscated by Sidonius' reticence regarding Avitus.²⁶ Likewise, Sidonius' obscurity on the members of Avitus' family has resulted in a continuing, but unwarranted, debate on whether or not Ecdicius actually was his son.²⁷

Sidonius' tendency to edit politically sensitive references from his published works was not limited solely to Avitus, but occurs in other contexts as well, as in his lack of mention of the revolt of Lyon against

²²*Epist.* 1.6 and 3.6.

²³*Epist.* 1.6 has been dated to 460 as by Anderson (above, note 1) 1.362 note and to 467 as by Loyen (above, note 1) 2.245, note 6, as well as to 455.

²⁴Note 12 above.

²⁵*Epist.* 1.11.3. Anderson's dating of this letter to c. 461 requires the introduction of an awkward and arbitrary "anachronism" (above, note 1, 1.396 note); the objection that *recens* could not refer to an event five years in the past is also ill-founded: see, for example, canon 1 of the council of Riez in 439, where the synod of Turin of 398 is described as *recentem* (*Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina 148.64).

²⁶*Epist.* 4.24.

²⁷Loyen (above, note 15) 66; suggested recently by M.-B. Brugière, *Littérature et droit dans la Gaule du V^e siècle* (Paris 1974) 26. For Ecdicius, see Jordanes, *Getica* 240, Gregory of Tours, *H.F.* 2.24, and note 10 above.

Majorian in 457 and 458 and his own involvement in it.²⁸ There are certainly other instances of such censorship in Sidonius' works, and it is important that readers be aware of their existence when making use of Sidonius as a historical source.

²⁸For discussion, see Stevens (above, note 1) 181–85.