

Episcopal Self-Presentation: Sidonius Apollinaris and the Episcopal Election in Bourges AD 470

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Sidonius Apollinaris was a fifth-century Gallo-Roman aristocrat who is one of our most important sources for that time – thanks to his poetry and his correspondence. Born in Lyons, he was a resident of Clermont, nowadays Clermont-Ferrand, in the Auvergne. After a career as a high government official (lately prefect of Rome), whilst at times leading a life of leisure as a land-owner and a poet, he became bishop of Clermont in 469/70. This is a surprising fact. It was unprecedented in Gaul for a prefect and patrician suddenly to abandon high office and become a bishop in a relatively unimportant provincial town. Sidonius himself is totally silent about his consecration. There may have been connections with the trial of one of his friends, the prefect of Gaul Arvandus, who was accused of high treason. Whatever the case, the sudden change affected him deeply: he began his episcopate with a severe illness. His career as a Catholic bishop is marked by the struggle with the Arian Visigoths. He organized the defence of the town against their attacks. Clermont was the last Roman outpost in Gaul; its defence was as heroic as it was hopeless. In 475 he was forced by the emperor Julius Nepos to capitulate. In 476 the Roman Empire in the West came to an end altogether.¹ After two years of exile, Sidonius was reinstated as bishop of Clermont by the Visigothic king. In the following years he published revised selections from his correspondence, which is deeply imbued with the urge to keep Roman culture alive and perpetuate the influence of both the Gallo-Roman nobility and the Catholic church – although he was fully aware that, from a political point of view, the times had changed radically. In the title of my commentary on book 7 of Sidonius' letters, I have styled his correspondence 'Writing to survive'.²

1 For a detailed account of the above, see Jill Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome AD 407-485*, Oxford 1994, 159-186 and 223-242.

2 Johannes A. van Waarden, *Writing to Survive. A Commentary on Sidonius Apollinaris, Letters Book 7. Volume 1: The Episcopal Letters 1-11*, Leuven 2010.

In this paper, I propose to examine an episcopal election which was conducted by Sidonius, and the way in which he presented it in his correspondence. I will concentrate on the person of Sidonius himself, his goals and his problems. Conducting an election gave the bishop who was entrusted with it a unique opportunity to 'invent' himself, to create a public persona. It will appear that Sidonius organized and presented the election carefully, and that both actions served a specific purpose. I will contend that the notion of 'self-presentation' can help us understand what he wanted to convey to his readers.

During the last decades, the concept of self-presentation, developed in social psychology, has also played an important role in the study of classics. As we are dealing with correspondence in this paper, it may suffice to mention its role in recent discussions of the letters of, e.g., Seneca and Pliny the Younger.³ For my purpose, I use Leary's definition of self-presentation as 'the process by which people convey to others that they are a certain kind of person or possess certain characteristics'.⁴ It is an aspect of what is called impression management, the activity of influencing other people's impressions of things in general, and it involves the processes by which people attempt to control the impressions others form of them.⁵

3 For Seneca, see, e.g., Marcus Wilson, *Seneca's Epistles reclassified*, in: *Texts, Ideas, and the Classics*, S.J. Harrison (ed.), Oxford 2001, 164-188. For Pliny, see Andrew M. Riggsby, *Pliny on Cicero and Oratory: Self-fashioning in the Public Eye*, *AJPh* 116, 1995, 123-35; Matthias Ludolph, *Epistolographie und Selbstdarstellung. Untersuchungen zu den 'Paradebriefen' Plinius des Jüngeren*, Tübingen 1997; Stanley E. Hoffer, *The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger*, Atlanta, GA, 1999; Ilaria Marchesi, *The Art of Pliny's Letters. A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence*, Cambridge 2008. See also Ruth Morello and A.D. Morrison (eds.), *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, Oxford 2007, for the letters of Cicero, Horace, Seneca, and Pliny.

4 Mark R. Leary, *Self Presentation. Impression Management and Interpersonal Behavior*, Boulder, CO, 1996, 17.

5 For a comprehensive introduction, see Barry Schlenker, *Self Presentation*, in: Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney (eds.), *Handbook of Self and Identity*, New York 2003, 492-518. I suggest to distinguish self-presentation from self-fashioning, although the terms are often applied indiscriminately, e.g. in Riggsby, *Pliny* (see note 3). Self-fashioning is about cultural identity: fashioning and educating the self in interaction with society, a close unity of 'authentic individual essence and ... social performance' (Claire Colebrook, *New Literary Histories. New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism*, Manchester 1997, 198). See, e.g., Yasmin Syed, *Creating Roman Identity: Subjectivity and Self-fashioning in Latin Literature. The 1995 Berkeley conference*, *ClAnt* 16, 1997, 5-7, and the papers of the 1995 Berkeley Conference which she introduces. The concept is rooted in New Historicism (see Colebrook, *New Literary Histories*) and became a buzz-word thanks to Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago 1980 (new edition with a pre-

The episcopal election in question is the one for the metropolitan see of Bourges (Central France) AD 470.⁶ We will study it at two different stages: the first in 470, by means of the letters which Sidonius wrote in connection with the election, and the second in 477, by means of the same letters in the different context of Sidonius' edition of his correspondence in that year.⁷

The episcopal election in question was a high point in Sidonius Apollinaris' career as a bishop. Being still a junior bishop, he grasped the opportunity to create a distinct profile for himself. Soon after his own election he was called upon to provide a solution for the complex situation created by the vacancy in Bourges, the metropolitan see of his own ecclesiastical province. Many dioceses in the southern part of Gaul, which was dominated by the Visigoths, were vacant because the new rulers did not allow the bishops – potential sources of resistance – to be replaced at their death. Hence, the procedure in Bourges was no routine, and the inexperienced bishop had to cope as best he could. It seems that the Visigoths had captured the town first but had then temporarily withdrawn, thus leaving room, unexpectedly, for the introduction of a new bishop. Beside the Catholics there was an Arian faction in the town – possibly there were even Arian candidates for the episcopate. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the office was hotly contested by clerics, monks and lay candidates. The town had not even succeeded in

face by the author, Chicago 2005). In an earlier version of this paper, I tried to apply the notion of self-fashioning to Sidonius' account of the election of Bourges. It turned out, however, that this concept is so intricately interwoven with the rise of early modern man and of Renaissance society, and is so concerned with modern individuality, that its application to Late Antiquity is artificial and disappointing. Self-presentation, on the other hand, seems to be a fruitful paradigm to elucidate Sidonius' intentions.

- 6 Fundamental analysis in C.E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris and his Age*, Oxford 1933, 126-129. See also Élie Griffe, *La Gaule chrétienne à l'époque romaine II*, Paris 1966, 138, 141 and 231-235; Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris* (see note 1), 233; Peter Norton, *Episcopal Elections 250-600: Hierarchy and Popular Will in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2007, 178-180. For details see Van Waarden, *Writing to Survive* (see note 2), introduction to Letter 5, 247-250.
- 7 In terms of communication science, the first stage comprises both the primary audience of each letter (its addressee) and its secondary audience (anybody who receives a copy of the letter, hears about it, is influenced by it, or, in his turn, exerts influence on the addressee). See M.E. Guffey – D. Loewy, *Essentials of Business Communication*, Mason, OH, 2007, 37. At the second stage, if an author publishes a collection of his letters, they reach a wider, third-order, audience, and may have additional or altered implications. For this, and a similar division in the case of Pliny, see Marchesi, *The Art of Pliny's Letters* (see note 3), 16-17. For an analogous situation in Claudianus' panegyrics see Jean-Louis Charlet, *Claudian et son public*, in: H. Harich-Schwarzbauer – P. Schierl (eds.), *Lateinische Poesie der Spätantike*, Basel 2009, 1-10.

drawing up a shortlist. Thus the election became a tangled web of clerical, theological and political controversy.

Sidonius has left us three letters about the events, Ep. 7.5, 7.8 and 7.9. Letter 5 is addressed to Agroecius, metropolitan of Sens. It describes the problems in Bourges where Sidonius is staying at the time, and invites Agroecius to come and oversee the procedure. Letter 8 is to bishop Euphronius of Autun. Sidonius tells him that by now he has in mind a suitable candidate in Bourges, namely one of the leading citizens, Simplicius. Can he continue with the procedure? Letter 9, finally, to Perpetuus, metropolitan of Tours, accompanies the dispatch of the address which Sidonius has made to the community of Bourges, in which he had announced his choice and given his reasons for it. The address itself is attached to the letter, and shows us the bishop in action as a public speaker. Perpetuus' role seems to be to 'audit' the proceedings after the event.

Now, let us look at these letters with 'self-presentation' in mind whilst observing how Sidonius relates to the several powers at play. First the procedure. Sidonius apparently wanted to keep as close to a legal procedure as possible, but for that he had to improvise. He must have had in mind the procedure which his mentor Faustus had applied the year before in Chalon. According to this procedure, the local community had the right to propose three candidates from whom one was selected by the metropolitan and other bishops. In the case of Bourges, the community had not been able to unite on such a shortlist. Sidonius had taken over and made the people swear an oath that they forfeited their right and would abide by his decision. Then, by sending the afore-mentioned letters, he engaged a number of more distant bishops – representing the three adjoining church provinces – to make up for the deficient quorum in his own church province.

The procedure is very interesting in the light of the recent discussion about popular will in episcopal elections.⁸ Sidonius is very careful not to hurt the feelings of the population which were evidently very strong; yet he manages to channel their frustration into a mandate for himself to do as he pleases. The picture we get is clear enough: according to Sidonius, a good bishop is a strong leader who knows how to cope with popular dissent. To achieve this, clear procedures are essential. The example of senior bishops lends them authority; hierarchy is essential. And the bishop operates within a network of relationships with his colleagues. Sidonius looks to his senior Faustus with regard to the procedure; he invites a metropoli-

8 Norton, *Episcopal Elections* (see note 6).

tan, Agroecius, to come to Bourges as a supervisor (later, in the collection, he will put the letter to him first), and further engages Euphronius and Perpetuus; with them, in all probability, he assures himself of the support of a network of bishops who are united in the cult of St Martin of Tours (Sidonius and Euphronius had contributed towards the decoration of the new basilica built for the saint by Perpetuus).

In the letters under consideration, Sidonius presents himself in different ways at different moments: before the process to Agroecius, during the process to Euphronius, but after the process to Perpetuus. He accordingly changes his demeanour: deferential to Agroecius, more forceful in recommending a candidate to Euphronius, and a bit self-satisfied with the outcome to Perpetuus.

The profile which he implicitly creates of himself bears the imprint of the measures he takes: here is a new bishop who wants to embody strong leadership whilst cooperating with his fellow bishops on conditions which are both acceptable to them and favourable to himself. In terms of social psychology, Sidonius presents himself as 'privately self-conscious',⁹ determined and effective, as well as endowed with a keen political sense of balance and mutual dependencies.

And the future bishop of Bourges? In his address on the occasion of the nomination Sidonius tells the audience that he has not chosen a monk (people would say: 'pious but other-worldly') nor a cleric ('only concerned with precedence, not with excellence'). Instead, his choice is a layman, the local grandee Simplicius who is experienced as a negotiator both with Romans and with barbarians. Thus, Sidonius imposes a person of his own class, a *honoratus*. As far as he is concerned, the future of the church belongs to the Gallo-Roman nobility. And consequently, to Catholicism; the Arian elements are expertly ousted.

Now we come to the year 477. It is two years since the Visigoths have conquered Clermont; Sidonius has declared his allegiance, has been allowed to return from exile and is bishop again, be it under the watchful eye of a *comes* under orders from the Visigoths. The political odds have turned decidedly in favour of the newcomers. In this situation Sidonius publishes a selection of his earlier letters. He includes numbers 5, 8 and 9 and the address. He combines them with two letters from 475, the last

9 For the pair 'publicly' vs. 'privately self-conscious', see Schlenker, *Self Presentation* (see note 5), 505: 'People who are publicly self-conscious look to audiences to tell them who to be; they then present themselves in these ways. In contrast, privately self-conscious people look to audiences to tell them if they are coming across as they want to; they present themselves in ways that make them appear autonomous and change their behavior if feedback suggests they are not effectively creating that impression'.

year of Roman Clermont. He inserts them between the letters about the election in Bourges as numbers 6 and 7. Number 6 contains a vehement protest against the deplorable state of Catholicism in Gaul due to the Arian Visigoths, and number 7 ditto against the political betrayal of Clermont, and of Gaul, by the Roman administration. The effect of the combination is that the episodes reflect on each other.¹⁰ Here we have two bishops comparable to each other regarding their class and career, who suffered the same fate of banishment (as a matter of fact, Simplicius had not been bishop for long). This already results in as nice a piece of self-presentation as one could wish for simply by means of juxtaposition. The message is: 'I, Sidonius, may have declared my allegiance to the new order, I still consider myself a victim.'

However, I think that the public persona of himself which Sidonius aimed to create with his 'Selected Letters' is even more complex. In letters 6 and 7 he had fathomed the depth of the loss of religion and power, and had desperately tried to prevent this one last time. In letters 5, 8 and 9 (including the address) he had pointed to the only hope: a sound hierarchy, with the bishop as the key player in the community, and the anti-Arian *honorati* forming the backbone. The publication of these documents, and in this combination, in 477, under an Arian Visigothic king, so soon after the change in power, and so soon after Sidonius had been pardoned himself, was nothing less than a provocation. The regime change might be an accomplished fact, Sidonius presented himself to the reader (and to the king!) as still the right man in the right place, intent on preserving as many of the interests and ideals of Gallo-Romans and Catholics as possible.¹¹ The message is: 'I, Sidonius, although a victim, am loyal to the new order, on condition that the Catholic nobility be recognized as its indispensable backbone'.

Sidonius' social world was unstable. Power was shifting, people were readjusting to existing authorities as well as to new ones. The subsequent anxieties strained loyalties and changed images of self.¹² Sidonius also had to adjust to the new order, and this he did. His position as bishop of

10 As has been noted by Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris* (see note 1), 16. Many ancient letter collections from Pliny onwards mix together letters of identifiably different date. This is quite contrary to the instincts of modern readers and editors, who are used to a strict chronological ordering. For the chronology of Sidonius' letters, see Van Waarden, *Writing to Survive* (see note 2), 44.

11 Note how especially the address, detached from its original context, now takes on the added significance of advertising Sidonius' rhetorical skill and his effectiveness as a public speaker.

12 On the various questions raised by this shift of power, see John Drinkwater and Hugh Elton (eds.), *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?*, Cambridge 1992.

Clermont had always been fragile, and it remained so. It is characteristic of him, however, that he was not only conscious of his weakness, but that he made it into a political weapon by giving voice to it, explicitly as well as implicitly.¹³ His self-presentation remains remarkably constant over the years: basically stable against all odds. He kept priding himself on his class and on the accomplishments of Roman culture, and loathed the 'barbarian' way of life and the Arian 'heresy'. In profoundly changed circumstances, he had the courage to advocate a conservative stance as the best cultural policy and to stretch the limits of what was politically possible. He did so by means of literature, by what he wrote and how he wrote it, sometimes overtly, mostly by hints and the arrangement of his material – his art an instrument to determine his place within society, his letter collection a literary public persona.

Sidonius did not live to see the success of the aristocratic bishops, and Roman culture survived in Europe in ways which he cannot have dreamt of, but with hindsight his correspondence and the commitment which it embodies have been essential in shaping the future. At this point it is tempting to talk about 'decline and fall' versus 'change and continuity', but that of course is another discussion.¹⁴

13 At this point I would like to underline an important difference between Sidonius' and Pliny's correspondence. Sidonius' correspondence is to a large extent modelled on Pliny's as he himself tells us (Ep. 1.1.1), and modern research exploits the resemblances (see, e.g., Roy K. Gibson, *From Constantius and Clarus to Firminus and Fuscus: reading Sidonius and Pliny by the book*, in: B.J. Gibson and R.D. Rees (eds.), *Pliny in Late Antiquity*, forthcoming). There is, however, one fundamental difference which should not be forgotten, viz. the incommensurable political circumstances in which they lived. In an age of peace and affluence, Pliny could afford to be self-confident. His 'anxieties', if any, have to be read between the lines, as has been done by Hoffer, *Anxieties* (see note 3), who introduces his book as follows (p. 1): 'The leading trait in Pliny's epistolary self-portrait is his confidence: confidence in himself and his friends, in their writings and activities, in the Roman government, and in the emperor. Pliny presents a man and a world that have the fewest possible anxieties.' Sidonius' age, however, was profoundly insecure. Anxiety was a daily reality. Sidonius made it into an essential component of his self-presentation. Though he, too, was basically self-confident, it was a self-confidence which was constantly threatened.

14 I am grateful to Prof. Roy Gibson for some useful suggestions.

