

Sara Fascione: *Gli ‘altri’ al potere. Romani e barbari nella Gallia di Sidonio Apollinare*. Bari: Edipuglia 2019 (Biblioteca tardoantica 12). 147 p. € 35.00. ISBN: 978-88-7228-896-2.

“Gli ‘altri’ al potere” is a highly readable monograph dedicated to Sidonius’ presentation of otherness in relation to Romanness. Sidonius is a vivid eyewitness to the increasing influence of Burgundians and Visigoths, whose presence had considerably altered the balance of power on the political gameboard of fifth-century southern Gaul. As rival non-Roman groups, they competed first within the Roman Imperial system and then as new political and territorial realities.<sup>1</sup> The tensions subsided in 475 when the emperor Julius Nepos struck a treaty with the Visigothic king Euric who thus officially seized control of Auvergne. And yet, the ‘others’ described by Sidonius are not exclusively Visigoths and Burgundians, as Fascione’s monograph shows. Mentions of Saxons, Britons and Huns, who were on the horizon, also reflect a dichotomy whereby the world is populated either by Romans or by outsiders. Just like the mentions of Visigoths and Burgundians, their descriptions are also stereotypical and heavily dependent on classical models and clichés regarding diversity of appearance and of manners.

The mentions of barbarians, as can often be said when it comes to Sidonius, require the reader to be alert and particularly learned in order to understand that allusions to them involve both a macroscopic and a subtextual level of comprehension. Take, for instance, the Herul in epist. 8.9.5 (vv. 31–33), whose grey-blue eyes (*glauci*) are said to be almost of one colour with the depths of the Ocean which he is wont to haunt. Fascione (27) highlights that his appearance is an extension of his being ‘a water creature’, hence a pirate, and points out that there are two levels of comprehension of the passage. On a macroscopic level the stereotyped representation of blue-eyed Germanic people is canonical; however, Sidonius adds a second level of interpretation which reinforces the topos: having spent his life at sea, the Herul pirate has the bodily traits of a sea animal.

1 On this topic see also (in continuity with Fascione’s research) S. Mratschek: *Sidonius’ Social World*. In G. Kelly/J. van Waarden (eds.): *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris*. Edinburgh 2020, 214–236, here 230–236. This Companion has been reviewed by S. Fascione: *Plekos* 22, 2020, 421–430, URL: [http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2020/r-kelly\\_van-waarden.pdf](http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2020/r-kelly_van-waarden.pdf).

The book opens with a helpful repertoire of *topoi* concerning the representation of barbarians in Sidonius' poetry and prose ("La rappresentazione della barbarie nelle epistole di Sidonio Apollinare", 11–50). The abundance of classical echoes concerning barbarians is admittedly a hindrance to the understanding of the extent to which the author had first-hand knowledge of the people described (Saxons, for instance), and yet Fascione convincingly argues that anachronisms are to be interpreted as intentional, because descriptions are bent to Sidonius' wish to enclose echoes of his favourite literary models. To this end, Saxons are described through allusions to literary models concerning Britons for the sole reason that they inhabit the costs of Britain. Fascione points out that by virtue of this literary device, the Saxon in epist. 8.9.5 (vv. 21–22) is called *caerulus* not only because of his nature as a sea marauder (and therefore as an aquatic creature like the Herul mentioned before) but also because of Caesar's description of Britons painting their bodies in blue in order to scare their enemies (Gall. 5.14). Sidonius could be attributing this feature to Saxons because that of Britons 'painted in blue' had become a *topos*, as Fascione points out. One could mention, as evidence in support of her suggestion, Martial's reference to *caerulei Britanni* (11.53.1) or Claudian's standardised description of a personified Britannia, clad in the skin of a Caledonian beast, with her cheeks tattooed and imitating the swell of the Ocean with an azure cloak: *ferro picta genas, cuius vestigia verit | caerulus Oceanique aestum mentitur amictus* (Stil. 2.248–249). Ultimately, to Sidonius, there is no need for historical exactitude when diversity from Romanness is involved. The conclusions reached in this opening chapter seem in particular deserving of scholarly attention, since Fascione defines Sidonius' idea of 'otherness' as a heterogeneous and mutable concept, which does not exclusively involve barbarians: quite the opposite. The "altri" of the title are not barbarians by birth as much as those who act barbarically, and this includes Romans who happen to be illiterates, parvenus, or worse, sycophants.

The second chapter, "Alterità e potere" (51–80), is dedicated to Sidonius' representation of Visigoths and Burgundians in positions of power. This section is a useful guide for both the occasional and the more experienced reader of Sidonius, covering all the barbarian rulers mentioned in his works. It is a good starting point for any scholar undertaking a more detailed study of a letter or of one of the passages mentioned. This catalogue is a step beyond what one usually finds in a prosopographical record, since Fascione

also detects the presence of commonplaces involving barbarity and thus allows one to fully understand the author's opinion, often concealed by the convoluted style. The chapter is in particular focused on the semantic patterns revolving around barbarian sovereigns, and highlights, for instance, how insistently the Visigothic king Theoderic II is represented as the champion of *civilitas*. Once the recurring features of barbarity are laid out, a reader may easily realise how strongly his portrait contrasts with that of his successor (and murderer) Euric, who is represented as the embodiment of otherness and as the negation of the good qualities of the former monarch. Euric is a *rex ferox* (epist. 1.7.5) and therefore, by nature, prone to rage. His inborn irascibility is a telling consequence of his barbarian origin. As Fascione points out, the expression of anger was a sign of barbarity, and it is possible to link it to the idea that, to Sidonius, the uncouth 'others' have a feral nature, which makes them more instinctive, brutal, and dangerous in their rage.

Even Burgundian rulers are not immune to being associated with this topos, although Sidonius' criticism is generally milder when Burgundian sovereigns are involved, in particular when they become patrons and allies opposing Euric's attempts to seize control over Clermont-Ferrand.<sup>2</sup> In epist. 5.6.2 Sidonius insists that his relative Apollinaris should inform him of his situation so that he may intercede for him, since there were rumours of him having encountered disfavour at the Burgundian court. The passing reference to the Burgundian Chilperic's *iracundia* Apollinaris may be facing should be read in light of the cliché of the sturdy barbarian prone to anger. Irascibility was not a desirable feature in a sovereign and for this reason it was distinctive of an un-Roman behaviour; therefore, although Sidonius may be formally deferential, he still thinks of Burgundians in terms of diversity. Fascione is also correct in highlighting the underlying ambiguity in Sidonius' mentions of Burgundians in epist. 5.6–8 and in epist. 6.12. Changing times required a certain flexibility in order to survive and prosper under new powers. This section owes much to the fundamental contributions of Gualandri (1979; 2000) and Fo (1999), and rightly so.<sup>3</sup> Fascione's study, however, does not

2 As is cogently argued by C. Delaplace: *La fin de l'Empire romain d'Occident*. Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531. Rennes 2015, 249.

3 I. Gualandri: *Furtiva lectio: Studi su Sidonio Apollinare*. Milan 1979 (Testi e documenti per lo studio dell'antichità 62); I. Gualandri: *Figure di barbari in Sidonio Apollinare*. In: G. Lanata (ed.): *Il tardoantico alle soglie del Duemila: Diritto, religione, società*. Atti del quinto Convegno nazionale dell'Associazione di studi tardoantichi. Pisa 2000, 105–129; A. Fo: *Sidonio nelle mani di Eurico (Ep. VIII 9): Spazi della*

merely adopt concepts established by these two scholars but also further develops them with acuity and competence.

After defining otherness, the book deals with Sidonius' concept of Roman identity ("Le espressioni di identità", 81–122). This chapter is introduced by a section on the dichotomy between the central power, which became increasingly indifferent towards the situation of Gaul, and local aristocracy as the true defender of Roman territories. Particularly worthy of mention is the detection of the literary trope of the *princeps clausus* in Sidonius' works: emperors were more and more detached from the needs of their subjects and entrenched in the security of their palace, surrounded by the comfort of the court. To Sidonius, it was up to senators to be actively engaged in the public and political life of their time. This praiseworthy conduct is exemplified by his brother-in-law Ecdicius, actively defending Clermont together with him and hailed as a hero for his merits on the battlefield. To what Fascione says one could add that in the laudatory self-representation of his family that is epist. 5.16.2, the figure of Ecdicius overshadows that of the emperor Julius Nepos, whose only acknowledged merit seems to be that of having granted Ecdicius the rank of patrician that had been repeatedly promised by the previous emperor Anthemius.

Following up on the premises of the first chapter, Fascione states that *Romania* cannot be enclosed within a geographical *limes* but rather a cultural one, and concludes her book with a section on *parilitas*, *verecundia*, and *caritas* as fundamental elements of aristocratic ethics. *Parilitas* is indeed a fundamental prerequisite for creating a solid friendship and, in support of what Fascione says – "avere pari ingegno e pari opinioni getta le basi per una solida amicizia" (100) – one could add that Sidonius invokes this idea of friendship by quoting Sallust Cat. 20.4 verbatim in epist. 5.3.1 (as is signalled at p. 97 n. 87) but also by re-asserting the same concept in epist. 5.9.1 and 5.9.4. *Caritas* is by far one of the most recurring concepts in Sidonius' letter collection, and Fascione correctly lists some of the numerous occurrences in books 4, 5, 8 and 9. Especially when he seeks the addressee's attention, Sidonius regularly recurs to *caritas*, which is akin to unconditional brotherly love. By calling upon the friend's or the relative's affection, he refers to a

tradizione culturale in un nuovo contesto romanobarbarico. In: M. Rotili (ed.): Memoria del passato, urgenza del futuro: Il mondo romano fra V e VII secolo. Atti delle VI Giornate di Studio sull'Età Romanobarbarica, Benevento, 18–20 giugno 1998. Naples 1999, 17–37.

specific code of communication shared with his Roman peers. Fascione therefore concludes that the love of the state (*caritas patriae*) and the love of friends and relatives are two facets of the same concept of *caritas*.

The comprehensiveness of reference, embracing both *Carmina* and *Epistles*, makes this monograph useful to decipher and fully understand Sidonius' otherwise obscure mentions of otherness. Given the number of references throughout the text, less proficient readers would probably have benefited from wider contextualisation and from translations of the cited passages; however, the overabundance of quotations is at the same time an element of strength which makes this piece of scholarship a *vade mecum* for the concept of otherness and identity in Sidonius.

---

Giulia Marolla, Università degli Studi di Bari "Aldo Moro"  
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici  
giulia.marolla@uniba.it

**[www.plekos.de](http://www.plekos.de)**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Giulia Marolla: Rezension zu: Sara Fascione: Gli 'altri' al potere. Romani e barbari nella Gallia di Sidonio Apollinare. Bari: Edipuglia 2019 (Biblioteca tardoantica 12). In: Plekos 23, 2021, 237–241 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2021/r-fascione.pdf>).

---