

Veronika Egetenmeyr: Die Konstruktion der 'Anderen'

Barbaros uitas, quia mali putentur; ego etiamsi boni (Sidon. *epist.* 7, 14, 10). This passage, commonly interpreted as an expression of Sidonius Apollinaris' hostility towards barbarians [1], constitutes the starting point of Veronika Egetenmeyr's volume on the rhetorical representation of otherness in Sidonius' Letters. In fact, Sidonius' statement raises several questions: How can we conciliate his blatant dislike with the positive portrait of other 'barbarians' in the collection and in the poems? Does the distinction between identity and otherness overlap with the dualism Romans vs. barbarians?

Egetenmeyr addresses these research questions complementing her expertise as a historian with the strategies of investigation and the theoretical approach of cultural studies. In this respect, she builds on the results of postcolonial theory on 'othering' to present the relationship between 5th century Galloroman aristocracy and the so-called 'barbarians' as a case study on the creation of otherness through literary and cultural constructs. According to this view, the image of the barbarians and the very concept of *barbaries* emerging from Sidonius' *Letters* is shaped by his highly rhetorical narrative, depicting his world as polarized between the 'self' and the 'others'.

The volume is particularly appealing for scholars interested in the dynamics of inclusion and marginalization in cultural contexts of crisis - whether the crisis is perceived or real. The overwhelming quantity of information provided on the common places on barbarians from Homer to the 5th century AD, on the political events leading to the creation of the barbarian kingdoms within the boundaries of the Western Roman Empire, on Sidonius' life and oeuvre, might be of minor relevance for experts on Sidonius' works, or on late antique literature or history; on the other hand, it offers a much-needed context for those who deal with the topic of 'otherness' in Antiquity and with late antique culture for the first time. Due to this search for completeness and contextualization, the author steps into the main topic of the volume on page 133, dedicating over one hundred pages (chapters 1-3) to introducing the addressed readers to Sidonius' world and society.

From chapter 4 onwards, she deals with the topic of representation of otherness in Sidonius' *Letters*: she shows that the opposition *us vs. them* does not coincide with the contrast *Romans vs. Barbarians* (133-136), scrutinizes Sidonius' use of the *topoi* on 'otherness' (137-278), and then analyzes the portraits of individual people mentioned in the collection who might be associated with the concept of *barbaries* or otherness either for their ethnicity or for their behavior (279-366).

The work is well-informed and calls for further investigation on the topic. However, the originality of the investigation and results is overwhelmed by the number of references to existing studies. On the other hand, the author wants to present her work as the first-ever study on the literary representation of otherness in Sidonius' *Letters* and to propose new insights thanks to her different perspective on the subject. Maybe for this reason, although her main purpose is to show to what extent Sidonius' representation of the barbarians is influenced by the literary tradition, Egetenmeyr does not duly consider philological studies as precedents for her own investigation, which is quite striking. Even if she clearly intended to address scholars in the field of cultural studies, an analysis of Sidonius' use of literary strategies in the creation of 'otherness' cannot ignore even recently published literary investigations addressing the same specific topic, nor avoid taking into account the century-old literary tradition behind Sidonius' work. For example, when reading *Letter* 5, 7 (333), the author argues that Chilperic's profile has a positive characterization. Nonetheless, she bases this on a passage that, in fact, re-elaborates a common *topos*, widely attested from Tacitus onwards, according to which the good ruler is transformed by bad counselors and companies into a sort of tyrant. A late antique precedent, in this respect, is Ammianus Marcellinus' representation of Gratian (31, 10, 18): When he was young, the emperor had the potentiality to be a wise, good emperor like Marcus Aurelius, but in the end, due to bad influences, he becomes a new Commodus. The same *topos* has multiple occurrences in the *Historia Augusta*, where weak emperors are led by their counselors to isolation, indolence and even madness. These two examples just aim to show to what extent comparison with other literary texts and dialogue with pertinent bibliography would have positively impacted the author's still good observations. In other cases, readings of philological studies would have helped avoiding oversights. For instance, Egetenmeyr identifies Sidonius' reference to the famous episode of Damocles' sword as a case of *obscuritas* in late antique Galloroman literary culture (194-195). However, this reading is misleading, since Sidonius here refers to Cicero, *Tusc.* 5, 18 ss. [2] Since Cicero was widely read in late

antique schooling since the earliest stage of education, this cannot be seen as evidence of either Sidonius' elitism or of obscurity, because anyone with basic literary knowledge would have understood the allusion to this extremely famous episode.

In conclusion, the volume is remarkable [3] for its use of different methods of investigation and for the accurate portrait of Sidonius' time and society. Although the originality of the topics is not always clear and the bibliography presents major gaps, the work offers a useful tool for those who are interested in the process of 'othering' and are looking for an insight into 5th century Gaul from a cultural studies perspective.

Notes:

[1] Any reference to concepts like 'barbarians', 'Germans', 'barbarian kingdoms' is made with awareness of the inaccuracy of this terminology, resulting from the century-old scholarly tradition on the topic; nonetheless, these terms express the point of view emerging from the investigated sources and must be considered in any discussion on the process of othering.

[2] See Marisa Squillante: *La felicità e il potere: l'exemplum di Damocle nella rielaborazione tardoantica*, in: *Incontri triestini di filologia classica* 7 (2007-2008), 249-260.

[3] I would suggest correcting for further reprints the considerable number of typos, especially in Latin words (e.g. 88: *grauus* instead of *grauis*; 140: *feriae* instead of *ferae*; furthermore, ethnonyms, toponyms and derived terms are almost always written with initial small letters (e.g.: *romanitas*; *getae* and *geticas*, 302); even *Roma* can be found in small letters (18: *roma aeterna*).

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