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Finding Identities on the Way to Rome

Summary

The theme of the journey has a primary relevance in the first book of Sidonius Apollinaris' *Letters*. It represents not only an opportunity of personal growth, but also a way to rediscover the paths that lead to the very bases of *Romanitas*. In this sense, the *peregrinatio* shapes the life of travellers: on the way to Rome Sidonius Apollinaris, born in Lyon, really becomes Roman (Sidon. *Epist.* 1.5); Eutropius, who decides to remain in Gaul, refuses his cultural identity, turning into a *peregrinus* in his own land (Sidon. *Epist.* 1.6).

Keywords: journey; *peregrinatio*; Sidonius Apollinaris; *Romanitas*; identity

Das Thema der Reise ist im ersten Buch der *Briefe* von Sidonius Apollinaris von zentraler Bedeutung. Es zeigt nicht nur eine Möglichkeit des persönlichen Wachstums auf, sondern auch den Weg, der zu den Grundlagen der *Romanitas* führt. In diesem Sinne gestaltet die *peregrinatio* das Leben der Reisenden: Der in Lyon geborene Sidonius Apollinaris wird auf dem Weg nach Rom wirklich Römer (Sidon. *Epist.* 1.5); Eutropius hingegen, der beschließt in Gallien zu bleiben, lehnt seine ihm innewohnende kulturelle Identität ab und wird somit zum Ausländer (*peregrinus*) im eigenen Land (Sidon. *Epist.* 1.6).

Keywords: Reise; *peregrinatio*; Sidonius Apollinaris; *Romanitas*; Identität

Sidonius Apollinaris' journey from Lyon to Rome in AD 467,¹ described in letter 1.5 to Herenius, has a prominent relevance in his letter collection. The structure of the first book of Sidonius' *Letters* is devised in order to present at its core a thematic unit consisting of the letters 5–10, entirely devoted to the period spent by Sidonius in Rome and in Italy.² Once he arrived at the court of Anthemius in Rome as legate of his land,³ Sidonius pronounced a panegyric in praise of the Emperor, which led to his election as prefect of the city.⁴ Then, it is natural that Sidonius gives particular relevance to both the 'Roman period,' which is the acme of his political career, and to the journey (*peregrinatio*) that begins it. The latter represents not only the path that led him to the honor of the prefectural office, but also a pilgrimage to the sacred places of Roman identity, in the city that he defines in letter 1.6.2, as *domicilium legum, gymnasium litterarum, curiam dignitatum, verticem mundi, patriam libertatis*.

In the letters of the Roman period, the journey takes on different functions, all intimately connected. The journey from Lyon to Rome is an itinerary through history and literature. In retracing the different literary places, Sidonius travels through time, from the idealized past to the present, represented by Rome. The path taken also involves an interior process. The Gallo-Roman aristocrat gradually interiorizes the ideal of *Romanitas*, and, assuming his duties towards the community, embraces the republican values, perceived as the very essence of the Roman World.

It is telling that Sidonius opens both the letter to Herenius⁵ and the whole 'Italian digression' of the first book of the collection with the term *peregrinatio*, in this way giving a precise mark to the entire unit of letters 5–10. The word *peregrinatio*, with its semantic area, leads to different meanings, all connected to the adverb *peregre* ('abroad', 'in a foreign land'). In particular, *peregrinatio* means 'journey in a foreign land' and 'pilgrimage', while the verb *peregrinari* and the attribute *peregrinus* also refer to the condition of the exiled and to that of the foreigner, who cannot be considered Roman.⁶

1 The datation of the travel is linked to that of the election of Anthemius to the role of Emperor: Løyen 1970, 245.

2 After letter 1.5, the description of Sidonius' journey to Rome, and letter 1.6, an *exhortatio* to his friend Eutropius to have the same experience, Sidonius puts: the letter to Vincentius (1.7), concerning the process to the prefect Arvandus in Rome; the letter 1.8, an ironical description of Ravenna; the letter 1.9, the narration of the events that led the author to compose the panegyric in honor of the emperor Anthemius and obtain the position of *praefectus urbi*; the letter 1.10, where Sidonius refers to his responsibilities as *praefectus urbi* in Rome.

3 The reason for the embassy is not revealed. Sivan

1989 states that the delegation aimed at supporting Arvandus and his policy of cooperation with the Goths and Burgundians.

4 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.9.6.

5 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.1; for an account of the steps of the journey see Piacente 2005.

6 On the specific meaning of the term *peregrinus* in comparison with *advena*, *alienigena*, *alienus*, *barbarus*, *hostis* see Ndiaye 2005. In respect to the juridical differences between *cives* and *peregrini* see Liebeschuetz 1998. The scholar underlines that in the imperial constitutions, since the fourth century onwards, the term *peregrinus* refers to the condition of individuals not settled in their territory of origin rather than to the status of non-citizens or non-Romans living

That of the pilgrimage is a 'living metaphor'; this suggestive definition, proposed by Jacques Fontaine in an essay on the function of the *peregrinatio* in Augustine's works,⁷ also suits Sidonius' Letters. *Peregrinatio* is the term employed by the Gallo-Roman author to define his own exile from the Auvergne,⁸ his natural homeland; but it is also the word used for the path to the 'true' homeland, Rome,⁹ that leads him to the accomplishment of his mission of defender of the *Romanitas*. However, the verb *peregrinari* and the noun *peregrinus* still keep the legal connotation that refers to the status of foreigners in contrast with that of citizens (*cives*).¹⁰

The interest of the addressee of letter 1.5 for the places crossed by Sidonius is related to their strong evocative power due to their links with the past. All the Gallo-Roman aristocrat Herenius knows about the glorious past of Rome, and thus of his own origins, is in fact based on a mere bookish knowledge (*lectio*). It is only through the works of the poets, the monuments, and the commemoration of the famous battles, that the fifth-century *nobilitas* learns its history and feels part of it.¹¹ Sidonius, however, by passing through Italy, can testify to his friend that he has seen what Herenius has only read about in books, and that he has traveled through the cultural memory underlying the concept of Romanity.

Having left Lyon and crossed the Alps, the author begins both a physical and literary journey. It is a path through the memory¹² of the past of Rome, in which the reality and the literary dimension are melded. Therefore, Sidonius mentions only the places in some way connected with antiquity or with the literary tradition. He looks to the landscape that has been the scene of major events, or that has been described by the *auctores*, and interiorizes it. By doing this, he rediscovers his own identity and origins. The Po river, for example, gives him the opportunity¹³ to mention Ovid's *Phaetontiad*as

within the boundaries of the Empire; furthermore, the word is still used after the *Constitutio Antoniniana* to mark the distinction between the inhabitants of the Empire and those who lived beyond the Roman frontiers. On the contrary, Mathisen 2006, 1020–1021, states that the term *peregrinus* keeps its original juridical meaning in late antiquity.

7 Fontaine 1998.

8 See for example the use of the term with reference to the condition of exile in Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 7.16.1: *Facis, unice in Christo patrone, rem tui pariter et amoris et moris, quod peregrini curas amici litteris mitigas consolatoris*; 9.3.3: *per officii imaginem vel, quod est verius, necessitatem solo patrio exactus, hoc relegatus variis quaquaversum frangor angoribus quia patior hic incommoda peregrini, illic damna proscripi*. Born in Lyon, Sidonius had numerous family ties in the Auvergne, where he held the episcopal function from ca. 470.

The author feels a strong sense of belonging both to the place of his birth and to his elective homeland. See Bonjour 1980.

9 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.1.

10 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.6.2.

11 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.1: *sollicitus inquis ... quos aut fluvios viderim poetarum carminibus inlustres aut urbes moenium situ inclitas aut montes numinum opinione vulgatos aut campos proeliorum replicatione monstrabiles ...* The term *replicatio* expresses the action of unrolling the volumen on which a literary work is written; the historical battles are then commemorated through the reading of the *auctores* who mention them: see Köhler 1995, 187.

12 On the meaning of the term *memoratus* in this context see Longobardi 2014.

13 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.3.

sorores;¹⁴ Cremona recalls Verg. *Ecl.* 1 and the figure of the shepherd Tityrus,¹⁵ while Rimini and Fano bring to Sidonius' mind Julius Caesar's revolt and the famous battle of the Metaurus.¹⁶

Ravenna, instead, does not arouse any kind of interest in the author. The city has nothing to do with the past idealized by Sidonius. Indeed, there is a contrast between the beauty of the river landscapes described a few lines before¹⁷ and the unhealthiness of marshy Ravenna.¹⁸ The journey, thus projected into the past, ends with the arrival in the *Urbs*. Its sacredness is immediately tangible: Sidonius crosses first the *pomerium*, the sacred enclosure for ancient Rome, and then arrives in the basilica of Peter and Paul, which represents the heart of Christian Rome.¹⁹

Thus, the account of the travel through the places of Roman identity comes to an end; in describing his activities in the city so painstakingly reached, Sidonius becomes suddenly biting. Once in Rome, he cannot accomplish his mission, the reason being the wedding of the Goth Ricimerus with the daughter of the emperor Anthemius, concluded *in spem publicae securitatis*.²⁰ It is impossible to establish whether the author is annoyed because the cumbersome marriage prevents him accomplishing his mission after the long journey, or because of the indignation with which the Gallo-Roman aristocrat perceives the wedding between a princess and a barbarian.²¹ What is, however, evident, is the clash between the dreamy dimension of the journey in rediscovery of the past and the disappointment with the reality of Rome's current events, which are so different from the idea he had dreamed of.²²

The sudden awakening in the present, so far removed from the expectations that many readings, the education received, and the same *peregrinatio* had built, is stressed by *nunc*, placed in an emphatic position to introduce the description of the celebrations that overwhelm the city (Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.10 *Igitur nunc in ista non modo personarum sed etiam ordinum partiumque laetitia* [...]). Furthermore, the anaphora of *iam*, which clearly imitates the style of the epithalamic poetry is not aimed in this case at highlighting the trepidation for the wedding ceremony and for the preparation of the

14 Ov. *Met.* 2.340.

15 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.3.

16 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.7.

17 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.4.

18 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.5.

19 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.9. For the representation of Rome in Sidonius Apollinaris' works see Behrwald 2012, 283–302.

20 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.10.

21 For the perception of 'mixed' marriages see Sivan 1996; Guidetti 2007, 165; Mathisen 2009. These marriages were not infrequent and were regulated

by specific laws; for example, *CTh.* 3.14.1 *de nuptiis gentilium* (370 ca.), which imposed capital punishment in the case of marriages between *provinciales* and *gentiles*. The unions between the exponents of imperial aristocracy and the warlords of German origin are widely attested: see Soraci 1974; Blockley 1982. Perhaps, in the case of the letter here analyzed, Sidonius' indignation could not, or at least not only, be caused by the marriage of a Roman princess to a Gothic military chief, but by its importance for the safety of the whole Empire.

22 Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.5.10–11.

bride. On the contrary, it expresses the anxiety with which the ambassador awaits the end of the celebrations, so that all the participants in the festivities could return to more important activities.²³

Rome seems to be taken by a paradoxical subversion of values, anesthetized by what is defined by Sidonius as an *occupatissima vacatio*.²⁴ In the *Urbs, per omnia theatra, macella, praetoria, fora, templa, gymnasia*, resonates the confusion of the *Fescennini* for the wedding of an imperial princess with a general of Germanic origin. On the contrary, as regards the activities through which Rome has built its greatness (*studia ... negotia ... iudicia ... legationes ... totus actionum seriarum status*) there reigns an unnatural silence (underlined by the verbs *silere ... quiescere ... conticescere*), so that every important and serious activity becomes 'a foreigner' (and here again we find the verb *peregrinari*) *inter scurrilitates histrionicas*. For the first time since the beginning of the letter, the theme of the *peregrinatio*, introduced by the verb *peregrinari*, reappears. However, the meaning of the verb in this context is opposite to that of the noun that opens the letter. The *peregrinatio*, namely the journey, is thwarted by the current events in Rome, where seriousness has become a foreigner (*peregrinetur*).

This semantic game cannot be fully understood without a comparison with the letter 1.6 to Eutropius, which represents a *pendant* of the letter to Herenius. The reason why Sidonius writes to the Gallo-Roman nobleman while he is still on the way to Rome is of vital importance.²⁵ The author wants to divert the friend from his domestic tranquillity and persuade him to join the court of the emperor in the eternal city. Since Eutropius is healthy in body and strong in soul, as well as equipped with horses, clothes and servants,²⁶ Sidonius does not understand why he is afraid of going abroad (*in aggredienda peregrinatione*); a nobleman like Eutropius, the author immediately adds, cannot consider a real *peregrinatio*, a journey to a foreign land, the path that would lead him to Rome, his true homeland, *in qua unica totius orbis civitate soli barbari et servi peregrinantur*.

In the same paragraph, there is a threefold recurrence of *peregrinatio/peregrinari*, which produces an amphibological game that clearly connects this letter to the previous one. The term *peregrinatio*, meaning 'journey', opens both letters; furthermore, in both cases there is a passage to the verb *peregrinari* in the sense of 'to be or act like a stranger'. Moreover, this passage is related in both cases to the fulfilling of public duties and is put in a context that recalls the 'cumbersome' presence of the barbarians. Thus, the letter 1.5 to Herenius and the letter 1.6 to Eutropius are parts of a diptych, whose link is represented by the function of the journey to Rome for the inclusion in the *Romanitas*.

23 Sid. Apoll. Epist. 1.5.11: *iam quidem virgo tradita est, iam coronam sponsus, iam palmatam consularis, iam cycladem pronuba, iam togam senator honoratus, iam paenulam deponit inglorius*

24 Sid. Apoll. Epist. 1.5.11.

25 Sid. Apoll. Epist. 1.6.1: *scribendi causa vel sola vel maxima*.

26 Sid. Apoll. Epist. 1.6.2.

This comparison also highlights that going to Rome takes on particular significance in the eyes of Sidonius, not only in terms of linkage with the Roman cultural and literary past, but also for its social and political implications. It is evident that, in order to be considered a true Roman, the journey to the core of the Roman world is not enough. It is also necessary to embrace the main principles of *Romanitas* and, among these, the political militancy, that civic engagement which is obligatory for the *boni*, who have the duty of taking care of the community.

Right at the beginning of letter 1.5, Sidonius writes that his *peregrinatio* to Rome has been made *secundum commune consilium*. The term *communis* in this context can be referred to the author and the addressee ('our decision'), or to the wider community of friends and Lyonnese aristocrats ('joint decision'). The scene where Sidonius leaves, surrounded by friends and relatives who hug and farewell him, has considerable similarities with the image of the Arvernian *civitas* that tightens the heroes Costantius and Ecdicius, respectively in letters 3.2 and 3.3. With his words, Constantius restored harmony to the community divided into factions and exhausted by the siege of the Visigoths; Ecdicius defeated in battle the Visigoths who surrounded the city. Moreover, these 'twin' passages allude to Pliny's panegyric, where the Emperor Trajan is surrounded by an adoring crowd on his return from the war.²⁷

The comparison between the letter 1.5 to Herenius, the letters 3.2 and 3.3 in praise of the two Gallo-Roman noblemen Costantius and Ecdicius, and the common reference to Pliny, clearly put Sidonius' journey in a communal dimension. The author aims to represent himself as the ideal aristocrat who seeks to serve the State with his qualities and means, derived from his education and his social position.

According to the ethics underlying Sidonius' letters, the noble and the Roman appear as such only when they come out of their private state to fulfill the duties that their birthplace and their studies require.²⁸ Illustrative in this regard is Sidonius' exhortation to his friend Syagrius,²⁹ who, despite being the successor to an illustrious Gallo-Roman family, prefers to remain in his country estates rather than pursue a political career (Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 8.8.2: *Redde te patri, redde te patriae, redde te etiam fidelibus amicis ... !*). Behaving *ut bubulcus* (Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 8.8.1), Syagrius does not deserve the good name of his family, to belong to the aristocratic circle represented by his friends and, above all, inclusion in the *patria*. Ignoring his civic duties, the aristocrat loses the tie that connects him to his ancestors and makes him worthy of the privilege of friendship with the other members of the *nobilitas*; he loses the right to be considered a citizen of the land for

27 Plin. *Pan.* 22; Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 3.2.1; 3.3.5–6. On the influence of Pliny's model on this passage see Giannotti 2016, 125.

28 For the relevance of the *officia* for late antique Gallo-

Roman aristocrats see Sivonen 2006, 10–31.

29 We have little information about Syagrius: see Jones and Martindale 1971, 1042 (Syagrius 3); Kaufmann 1995, 349–350.

which their ancestors and friends served and fought. Therefore, it appears clear that the sense of belonging to the homeland is determined by ethical-behavioral features, which are only partly linked to the rights of birth or ethnic origin.³⁰ It is, instead, a privilege acquired by respecting a system of cultural, ethical, and political norms. It is, though, a privilege that can be easily lost; the noble who does not endeavor to obtain the *toga palmata* is similar to a foreigner or exiled (*peregrinus*), an outsider by his own choice.

Furthermore, it is necessary to underline that the expression *se reddere patriae* in letter 8.8 also recalls the idea of returning home. It is noteworthy that the theme of the *reditus* is also present in the *incipit* of letter 1.9. The letter, addressed like letter 1.5 to Herenius, explains Sidonius' vicissitudes in Rome after the wedding of Ricimer³¹ (Sid. Apoll. Epist. 1.9.1: *Post nuptias patricii Ricimeris, id est post imperii utriusque opes eventilatas, tandem reditum est in publicam serietatem*). After the festivities, which have undermined the order that should have reigned in Rome, after the marriage is concluded *in spem publicae securitatis*, and, above all, after the temporary *peregrinatio* of the *res publica* and its seriousness, Rome returns now *in publicam serietatem*; the city awakes and goes back to the criteria that the ideal of Romanity imposes.³² Also in the letter to Syagrius, then, Sidonius depicts the image of a path, this time from a foreign territory to the homeland – as if, through the choice of becoming *consul*, Syagrius could return home after having distanced himself from the *Romanitas*.

Once again there is a path to take. Letter 1.5 opens with the *peregrinatio* to Rome, the journey from the native land to the real homeland, while letter 1.9 opens with the *reditus* of Rome from its temporary 'exile' to its true condition. Not surprisingly, it is in the second letter to Herenius that Sidonius tells how, having returned the public seriousness, he received the honor of the prefectural office. Sidonius' *peregrinatio*, therefore, undertaken for the common good, allows the author himself, with his own service in favor of the community, to reach the heart of the *Romanitas* and embody the ideals this represents. The author, however, faces a paradoxical situation. He embarked on a journey to rediscover his true homeland, Rome, and what it stands for, and found instead a place where the Roman institutions had been relegated to the condition of foreigners.

Contrariwise, Eutropius does not want to go to the *Urbs* because he does not understand that this is his true home, and thus, remaining in his villa, he behaves more like a farmer than an educated aristocrat, sharing the condition of those barbarians and slaves who are the only ones who can be considered *peregrini* in Rome. Therefore, Eutropius

30 Writing on the 'deterritorialization' of the Roman concept of *patria*, Herescu 1961 underlines that already in Cicero's works the sense of belonging to Romanity is created by behavioral factors more than by territorial ties.

31 The two letters are probably parts of the same epis-

tle: see Köhler 1995, 265.

32 An interesting comparison can be made with Mart. Epigr. 2.11–12, where the end of Nero's tyranny is presented as a restitution of Rome to itself: *Reddita Roma sibi est et sunt te praeside, Caesar, / deliciae populi, quae fuerant domini*.

is paradoxically a foreigner, a *peregrinus* in his own homeland, while travel abroad (*peregrinatio*) would make him feel really at home. Rural tranquility is, for the aristocrat, a way to waste the chances that birth in a senatorial family could offer, and to miss the opportunity to cultivate himself.

The linkage between letter 1.5 and letter 1.6, which makes them complementary, has been perhaps undervalued by scholars. It is clear that the two letters are connected by the topic and their context. The first is the description of the journey to the *Urbs*, the second an *exhortatio* to have the same experience, composed on the way to Rome. However, the relationship between the two letters is deeper. Without the letter to Eutropius, the letter to Herenius is just a *reportage* of a journey between reality and fiction. The following epistle, however, clarifies the primary function that this journey has, as seen from Sidonius' point of view; that is, the intimate appropriation of Romanity. The result of the *peregrinatio* is not only a list of literary *loci* experienced in reality, but also an active civic engagement in favor of the public community – even in the fifth century, the period of the Empire's deepest crisis, when the republican values are mere ideals.

The relationship of complementarity between the two letters is also emphasized by the reference to Horace's satire 1.5. It has already been noted by scholars that letter 1.5 (addressed to Herenius), in terms of position, theme, and textual references, recalls Horace's description of the *iter Brundisinum*.³³ Also letter 1.6 to Eutropius seems to be connected to satire 1, 6, although in a less direct way. This focuses on the theme of the superiority on the rights of birth of moral nobility, which must be shown with actions, while Sidonius in his letter encourages his friend Eutropius to deserve the privileges that a noble birth offers.

Then, the *peregrinatio* is a path that leads man from the condition of foreigner to that of true Roman, a way not only to improve himself, but also the political and social *status quo*. This is exemplified by the case of Eutropius. Sidonius in his letters continues to follow his friend's journey to the core of Romanity. In letter 3.6 the author states that Eutropius, having just become prefect, is now worthy of his nobility because of his actions. By doing so, he overturns the topic of the first letter to the friend, letter 1.6 (note that the two letters are in the same position in each book): Eutropius is no longer a *peregrinus* but a real Roman, and so he has restored the order that, in the previous letter, had been broken.

In conclusion, being or not being a real Roman, is for Sidonius a matter of choice. It is no coincidence that letter 1.6 ends with the term *confinis*, used by the author in the sense of 'near',³⁴ when he says that he does not want to be a passive witness to his friend's

33 See Gualandri 1979, 50–52; Mazzoli 2005–2006, 174.

34 Editors have given different translations for the

word *confinis*: see for example Anderson 1936, 367: "I have nothing to do with such wickedness"; Loyer 1970, 20: "je ne suis ni de près ni de loin complice

extreme negligence (Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.6.5: *sin autem ... mavis, ... Epicuri dogmatibus copulari, ... testor ecce maiores, testor posteros nostros huic me noxae non esse confinem*). The use of a metaphor concerning space in this context is significant. In a letter, whose main topic is the definition of the criteria of inclusion in the *Romanitas*, the word *confinis* indicates the boundaries of the *patria*. For the fifth-century aristocrat, this consists in the choice of finding his own identity and cultivating himself in order to pursue the highest good. This, it is now clear, can only happen on the way to Rome.

de telle perversité”; Köhler 1995, 63: “dann rufe ich unsere Nachkommen als Zeugen an, daß ich an dieser Untat keinen Anteil habe!”; Bellès 1997, 170: “jo no tinc res a veure amb aquesta perversitat”. The translation ‘near’ here proposed tries to render

the spatial metaphor produced by the combination of the verb *determinare* (‘demarcate boundaries’) and *confinis* (literally ‘boundary’). For the metaphor see Köhler 1995, 229.

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