

BEYOND ARISTOCRATIC STRATEGIES: POPULAR AND SUBALTERN EXPERIENCES IN SIDONIUS' LETTERS (430–486 AD)

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Abstract

Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 430–486) letter collection constitutes an essential corpus for understanding the transformations that Gaul underwent as Roman rule retreated and other political entities took its place. The 146 letters addressed to 117 powerful and influential individuals allow us to learn about the strategies adopted by the elite to maintain their social privileges in a political scenario that much differed from that of the previous century. The epistolary exchange was part of a series of obligations aimed at maintaining bonds of friendship in an aristocratic world, but the daily life from which these messages emerged was a field permeated by the experiences of other social groups in such a way that the experiences of the non-elite, although rarely approached by scholars, could not be absent from the content of these letters. In this study, we will seek to understand, through certain case analysis in Sidonius' letters, how subaltern and popular groups experienced and dealt with the transformations of 5th century Gaul. We argue that new opportunities for agency arose, but their vulnerable situation exposed them to other instances of violence, and new and more rigid forms of control over these groups were put in place by the aristocracy.

Keywords: Gaul. Late Antiquity. Sidonius Apollinaris. Letters. Subaltern and popular groups.

Introduction

There are two main reasons why Ancient History is a field of study particularly susceptible to a "top-down" approach. First, the very nature of the written sources, produced in aristocratic circles for the amusement and instruction of their own members, leads us to see the Ancient World through the eyes of the elite, with all its prejudices and biases. Secondly, the idea that the historical genre is the narrative of a series of celebrated deeds of kings, emperors and generals, conquests of peoples and palace political intrigues, was an invention of Antiquity itself, whose historians served as an inspiration for the savants who established History as an academic discipline at the dawn of the modern era (Magalhães de Oliveira e Courrier, 2022, p. 2). More recently, Brazilian and international initiatives, such as the *Research Group on Subaltern Groups and Popular Practices in Antiquity* (GSPPA/USP), have proposed an approach "from below" to Ancient History, seeking to understand the experiences and possibilities of agency of subaltern and popular groups in Antiquity in order to overcome these apparent limitations.

Scholars interested in this theme in Antiquity have sought to overcome the difficulties of accessing the universe of the non-elite, recognizing the limitations and possibilities of different types of sources. Regarding literary sources, special attention has been given to the critical reading of sermons and letters which, due to their dialogical nature, carry valuable and unique information about political and social tensions, the circulation of people, information and rumors, and daily life in the regions from which they emerge. Consequently, thanks to the profusion of such texts from the middle of the fourth century onwards, Late Antiquity began to stand out as a promising field for research involving subaltern and popular groups.

We have at least 475 letters written by 45 influential Gallo-Roman notables surviving from the period between 420 and 520 (Mathisen, 1981, p. 95). This phenomenon has its *raison d'être* in the political and social transformations that followed the withdrawal of imperial power from Gaul and the subsequent choice to direct its efforts in the defense of Italian territories. From 461 onwards, large portions of the western territories came to be controlled by warlords who acted independently of the imperial power and whose dominance in practice had less to do with their increasingly nebulous offices and titles and was more based on the personalization of military power (Wijnendaele, 2017; MacGeorge, 2002, pp. 111–136). In Gaul, these individuals competed for dominance and interacted with the barbarian, or post-Roman, domains as well, and both often took sides in the political disputes that took place within imperial power in Italy.¹ Therefore, the Gallo-Roman elites, who depended on imperial patronage to maintain their privileged position within the social hierarchy (Halsall, 2006, p. 48) and enjoyed access to administrative careers, had to resort to the regional exercise of their power (Sundwall, 1915, pp. 42–49). This resulted in the loss of the political and institutional unity of Gaul.

This convoluted scenario was perceived by members of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy in different ways. Some, such as Namatius and Leo, placed themselves at the service of the kings as military commanders or legal advisors. Others, such as Sidonius, Ruricius and Faustus, opted for an ecclesiastical career and became bishops of their respective cities (Mathisen, 2020, *passim*). Certainly, the isolation of those individuals due to the political fragmentation of Gaul made it difficult to maintain the bonds of friendship that had become so characteristic of Gallo-Roman aristocratic life and held this elite together as a social class in the imperial period (Hanaghan, 2019, pp. 8; 25 and n. 35). Epistolary practice was the solution found to overcome these obstacles. Through it, these individuals recommended each other, gave news of their daily

¹ The Goths in Aquitaine (Delaplace, 2015, pp. 215–256), the Burgundians in the Rhône and Saône valleys (Wood, 2021), and the Franks in the north (Halsall, 2007, pp. 270; 303–310).

lives, exercised their literary skills, and demonstrated it, demanded favors or information, and thus created oases of "romanness" in which they made it possible to recognize each other, even if without ever meeting in person sometimes (Mratschek, 2017, p. 309). This intense epistolary activity has been widely explored by historians who have sought to understand the survival strategies – as a social class – of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy in a period of transition (Mathisen, 1993). More recently, Ralph Mathisen (2020, pp. 64–66) included in his prosopographic study of Sidonius Apollinaris' letters (fl. ca. 430–486) — the largest epistolary corpus of this period — a section on the less privileged, exposing the activities of a myriad of individuals who operated on the margins of the aristocratic social sphere. He points out that the fact that many of these people were not even named meant that they were repeatedly ignored in studies about the Sidonius' social universe.

Indeed, as noted by Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac (2016, p. 25), letters are documents that move on individual and collective paths, in such a way as to bear witness to both personal trajectories and social dynamics. But these "traces of History in crumbs" do not give us the past as it would have happened. After all, a letter is not an accidental document, produced in total sincerity, without intentionality or dissimulation, but a performance of the self in which the author plays an expected role in his social context. This is especially true in the case of Sidonius, who also edited his letters, organized them thematically into nine volumes, and had them circulated at different stages of its compilation (Mratschek, 2017, pp. 309–311). Sidonius' purpose in publishing his letters was certainly to show his literary abilities, his exceptional career as prefect of Rome in 468 and his activities as bishop of Clermont between 469 and 485, as well as to justify his political choices, such as the opposition to Seronatus, accused of collaborating with the Goths, veiled support for Arvandus, brought to trial in Rome for high treason in 468, and to the imperial candidate Eparchius Avitus, his father-in-law.²

Such an observation does not mean, however, that the careful choice of the letters, the choice of Pliny as an epistolary model (Gibson, 2013) and his subsequent "embellishment" have falsified all the information they might have carried or erased the subaltern and popular presence from their content. After all, these letters were messages that were once sent and read. Therefore, they are still messages that erupt in everyday life, like a "conversation with an absent person", and allow us to see the confluence of different social experiences in this sphere (Haroche-Bouzinac, 2016, p. 11). Thus, although all the recipients of Sidonius' letters were

² Sidonius' silences – intentional or not – reveal much about his motivations and attitudes in several of these cases, but make it difficult to establish precise biographical milestones (van Waarden, 2020). For the beginning of his episcopate, we follow the dating evoked in Mathisen, 2013, p. 224.

members of the aristocracy, the situations he reported often involved people who were not part of this elite and experienced these transformations of fifth-century Gaul very differently.

Freedom of movement and violence

On several occasions Sidonius (*Ep.* 4.2.1; 4.2; 5.12.1) complained to his correspondents that he was unable to see them in person because of the disputes that were taking place in his region. In fact, the indication of the will to meet the addressee is a commonplace in the epistolary writing of Late Antiquity (Amherdt, 2001, p. 98). However, the bishop of Clermont shows that he is fully aware that this impediment is mainly due to his social status when, for example, he recommends to his cousin Apollinaris that he postpone his plans for pilgrimage in the winter of 471/472 so as not to endanger his family (Sid. Apol. *Ep.* 4.6.3). After all, an illustrious hostage might become an important leverage in an eventual negotiation, as Theodorus, a relative of Eparchius Avitus, had been when he was captured by the Goths in 425/426 (Sid. Apol. *Carm.* 7.215–220).

Certainly, whenever possible, Sidonius seems to have preferred his letters to be delivered by friends and people of equal status, especially when there was a high-ranking correspondent (Mratschek, 2020, p. 227). However, the communication network through which Sidonius cultivated his friendships could only be maintained because individuals who were not as targeted as the aristocrats had a certain freedom of movement between territories dominated by different groups. At the same time, Sidonius (*Ep.* 4, 7, 3) shows that he was aware of this dependence, for he complained to Simplicius that messengers of lower social rank were "often despicable persons (*saepe personae despicabiles*)", but pondered that the duties of friendship would no longer be possible if they refrained from sending letters "because of the baseness of the bearers (*portitorum vilitate*)".

Although most of Sidonius' messengers are not known to us, it is not surprising that, of the 27 we are aware of, four were decurions, one *clericalis*, 18 plebeians, one freedman, and two slaves. More than half of these are unnamed, and eight were in clerical positions (two priests, two deacons, two lectors, and two occupants of unspecified positions). Three of the messengers are the only Jews mentioned in Sidonius' work: Gozolas, Promotus, and an anonymous one (Mathisen, 2020: 67). Faustinus, the only aristocrat of Sidonius' rank, carried only two letters (4.4; 6) from Clermont to Vaison to his cousins Simplicius and Apollinaris in 471–472. At the time, this route was still relatively safe for members of the elite (Amherdt, 2001, pp. 167–208).

However, the functioning of Sidonius' communication network, made possible because of the greater freedom of movement enjoyed by less illustrious individuals, should not obscure the fact that the competing powers impacted the daily circulation of these people in other ways. Sometime between 471 and 473³, a group of travelers sought Sidonius' help in repairing an injustice. In an ambush by the *Vargi* – a group of bandits operating in the region – a man was killed, and a woman captured. Years later, according to Sidonius himself (*Ep.* 6.4), the unfortunate (*laboriosa*) woman was sold openly (*palam sane venumdata*) and died in a house in the custody of the bishop's agent (*negotiator noster*), before the arrival of her relatives. Curiously enough, the travelers did not seek redress from Sidonius or revenge against his merchant, but to open a criminal case (*negotium criminale*) against a certain Prudens, who had the function of guaranteeing the suitability of the transaction (*adstipulator*). Since Prudens had moved to Troyes, Sidonius wrote the letter to the bishop of the city, Lupus, and entrusted it to the travelers to ask him to arbitrate the matter.

If Prudens acted in good faith, as Sidonius implies, the impossibility of verifying the free status or origin of the woman sold as a slave even years after her acquisition attests to the obstacles posed by the lack of cohesion of the bureaucratic institutions of the period. This is also reflected in the difficulty of her family members in locating her, since they only learned of her whereabouts after the event. However, given that it was not the *Vargi* themselves who dealt with Sidonius' agent, but men who were unknown to him (*ignoti nobis homines*), another possibility is the existence of a network of individuals who took advantage of this scenario and the activity of outlaws to profit from the capture and sale of individuals in vulnerable situations (Harries, 1994, p. 210). It is worth remembering that, although we cannot quantify the use of slave labor, there are indications that the slave trade continued to be a very lucrative activity in Gaul in the fifth and sixth centuries (Samson, 1992). In this scheme, Prudens may have been in charge of giving a veneer of authenticity to the transaction, circulating between different cities to make it difficult for him to be held legally accountable for dubious negotiations carried out in another region. The letter itself bears witness to this complication, as the captured woman's relatives had no choice but to resort to Sidonius' influence with Lupus, with whom he maintained an old friendship (*velusta necessitudo*), instead of the traditional legal system.

³ Few of Sidonius' letters were written in the context of precisely dated events. As a result, scholars use indirect methods to date them approximately, which may result in some discrepancies (Mathisen, 2013). Moreover, we will use the dates proposed by André Loyen for his edition of Sidonius' work for the *Belles Lettres*.

Agency and the effectiveness of the legal system

This same scenario of collapse of the legal system due to political fragmentation, on the other hand, may have benefited other social groups. In early 470, Sidonius (*Ep.* 3, 9)⁴ brought to the attention of Riothamus a case in which a master "complains that his slaves were smuggled away by Britons who seduced them (*mancipia sua Britannis clam sollicitantibus abducta deplorat*)." Riothamus, styled "king of the Britons" by Jordanes (*Get.* 45, 238), came to exercise his rule in Armorica with a force brought from Britain in the late 460s, possibly fleeing Saxon incursions towards the islands, but does not appear to have played an official role in the Roman administration. The warlord had concluded an alliance with Anthemius and placed himself at the service of the Empire earlier in 468 to meet the Gothic pressure northward in Auvergne, establishing his base of operations near Bourges. The setback came in the form of a crushing defeat at Déols, but not before 471 (Delaplace, 2015, p. 280).

The words chosen by Sidonius to narrate the episode leave no doubt that the slaves were not kidnapped by the chieftain's followers against their will, but fled to join Riothamus' troops. After all, life as a member of a possibly victorious mercenary group may have seemed better to them than the master's rule. This would not be an isolated case, but representative of a movement that had become fairly common as new political-military forces entered the scene. For slaves, leaving the Roman imperial apparatus' sphere of action allowed the glimpse of a life outside submission to the master and lower chances of recapture; to freeborn, but of lesser condition, this could mean the escape from the heavy burdens of the Roman tax authorities (Giannotti, 2016, p. 195).

If that was the case, the fugitives had to weigh the risks of being recaptured and decided to bet on Riothamus' victory. In this calculation, the difficulty one would face in recovering them through legal channels, given the fragmentation of legal authority, certainly weighed in the decision in favor of fleeing. The very way in which Sidonius addressed the warlord and asked him to judge the case confirms the expectation of the escapees. Although he refers to slaves by their legal term (*mancipia*), Sidonius does not judicially demand their restitution. On the contrary, the bishop composes a letter in a very exhortative and diplomatic tone in which he employs a series of devices to appeal to the moral and emotional side of Riothamus in order to convince him to listen to the master's complaint and mediate his case by sheer power of his personal authority among his followers.

⁴ André Loyen (2003, t. II, p. xv; p. 249) considers that Sidonius was not yet bishop of Clermont in 470. Other scholars (Mathisen, 2013, p. 222; Giannotti, 2016, p. 195) follow his view that Riothamus had already been defeated at Déols in 469 and sought refuge with the rest of his followers amidst the Burgundians.

Although he was well below Sidonius in the social ladder, the petitioner – who carried the letter himself – had all the necessary means to buy and keep slaves and was possibly a landowner in the vicinity of Clermont (Birks, 2004, p. 88). Yet, Sidonius describes him as a "humble, obscure and even despicable (*humilis obscurus despicabilisque etiam*)" man, putting together a scene, at last, in which the "poor, abject and rustic traveler (*abjectus rusticus, peregrinus pauper*)" must plead his cause "in the midst of armed, noisy and disorderly men (*inter argutos armatos tumultuosos*)". The bishop makes a point of showing that he trusts Riothamus' judgment, declaring that he does not know if the allegation has any foundation, but that he has already had the opportunity to see (*inspicio*) how the sentiments of honor (*pudor*) and modesty (*verecundia*) essential for pondering "from what is just and good (*ex aequo et bono*)" weighs on him. On his side, the complainant no longer relied on the legal institutions, but only on Sidonius' ability of persuasion and his familiarity⁵ with the warlord. The fugitives, in turn, were welcome additions to the contingents of Riothamus, who might not want to renounce them in the face of the imminent confrontation with Euric's forces.

Despite the lack of effectiveness in law enforcement, the Roman legal apparatus could still be used on other occasions. In another letter to Lupus dated 477 or 478, Sidonius (*Ep.* 8.11.3) sent him a poem he had composed to announce his arrival at the house of Lampridius, professor of rhetoric at Bordeaux. The verses have more than the nostalgic taste of a time when Sidonius could hit the roads and sail the Garonne to visit his friend. The tone is mournful, for Sidonius (*Ep.* 8.11.11) reports with regret that he was "attacked and strangled at home by the hands of his slaves (*domi pressus strangulatusque servorum manibus*)." The trigger that led them to murder Lampridius is not clear, but in Sidonius' description of Lampridius' qualities (*Ep.* 8.11.4), he had to use a Horatian reference, in a passage of difficult interpretation (Zoeter, 2018, pp. 69–71), to possibly lessen his friend's volatile character (*iracundia*), which bordered on cruelty (*crudelitas*), and transform it into mere austerity (*severitas*). The harsh treatment of the slaves, therefore, may have motivated the plot against Lampridius.

It is possible to see a contrast with the letter sent to Lampridius himself, dated 476, in which Sidonius (*Ep.* 8.9.3) responds negatively to the Bordelais' challenge to send him some verses. The annoyance has a reason: although Lampridius led the happy life of rhetorician who fell into Euric's favor, remaining a citizen (*civis*), Sidonius was bitter about the punishment of

⁵ Although we do not have other letters from Sidonius addressed to Riothamus, the beginning of the epistle suggests that both already had a well established communication (Giannotti, 2016, p. 196). Furthermore, Sidonius' involvement in the war and his acquaintance with Bourges (*Sid. Apol. Ep.* 7.5; 7–9) certainly led him to get to know Riothamus personally.

being an exile (*exul*). The diptych has as its theme the inevitable oscillations of fortune, recurrent in book 8, and the letter to Lupus has the clear intention of warning him about this (Zoeter, 2018, p. 27). The lightness of the poem, which evokes the bonanza of the past, is crashed by the cruelty of a murder that reminds them that, in the present, the happiness belonging to the fortunate few is not perennial. This has been interpreted by some scholars (Overwien, 2009, p. 111) as a veiled criticism of Gothic rule. Not even the king's protégés would be happy and safe in this new political order.

But Sidonius' greatest criticism seems, in fact, to have been directed at Lampridius' eagerness to know – and thus control – the uncertain future through astrology (Zoeter, 2018, pp. 29-30). We must pay attention to "that which is least sad in this misfortune (*haec in hac caede tristia minus*)," which for Sidonius (*Ep.* 8.11.11) was the swift resolution of a case that had all the signs of a murder. By stating that "the bandits themselves placed him face down, with the face of the deceased turned to the ground (*ipsi latrones ad pavimentum conversa defuncti ora pronaverant*), Sidonius (*Ep.* 8.11.12) implies that the slaves wanted to stage Lampridius' suicide, but that "the bluish skin [and] the protruding eyes (*livida cutis, oculi protuberantes*)" were clear indications of a violent death. In light of this, the instigator of the murder was quickly (*protinus*) captured, his accomplices were arrested and interrogated separately, and the fear of torture (*terror tormentorum*) caused them to confess to the crime. The culprits seem to have been executed, since Sidonius (*Ep.* 8.11.13) says that "the punishment certainly succeeded slaughter (*secuta quidem est ultio extinctum*)". One cannot help but notice a feeling of relief when Sidonius himself (*Ep.* 8.11.13), already reinstated as bishop of Clermont under Gothic rule, assumes that "to be avenged is not a remedy, but a comfort (*non est remedium, sed solacium vindicari*)", and that "these things are more useful to those who will continue to live (*magis prosunt ista victuris*)". Although the murder of Lampridius was not prevented, the quick resolution of the case made it possible for the new political leaders to demonstrate that they could make use of the legal institutions and were committed to maintaining a social order in which the privileged position of these elites, whose support was crucial, was guaranteed.

Personal power, social mobility and control

The absence of imperial patronage in Gaul meant that this rigid social hierarchy – secured on certain occasions by the competing political entities – had to be maintained by the

efforts of the very aristocrats who benefited from it. For the less fortunate ones who found themselves in the sphere of influence of such individuals, this may have been beneficial. In a letter sent to the neighboring landowner Pudens, Sidonius (*Ep.* 5.19.1) complains that "your wet nurse's son ran away⁶ with my wet nurse's daughter (*nutricis meae filiam filius tuae rapuit*)." The problem was the incompatibility of social status, because according to Sidonius (*Ep.* 5.19.2) "the girl is already free (*mulier (...) iam libera est*)", while the young man is described with a series of legal terms (*inquilinus originalis, tributarius, persona colonaria*) that suggest his status as a tenant registered in the tax rolls, therefore linked to the land (*origo*) under Pudens' responsibility.

In spite of all the complex debate around the late antique colonate, or even Sidonius' knowledge about that fiscal device, he seems to consider that there was a relation of personal dependence between the young man and Pudens that bordered on slavery, since he suggests (*Ep.* 5.19.1) as a solution that his neighbor release him (*solvo*) from this bond, becoming "hence patron instead of master (*pro domino iam patronus*)". The only way to make the girl not appear to have been "given over to ridicule, but received in marriage (*non ludibrio addicta sed assumpta coniugio*)" would be, according to Sidonius (*Ep.* 5.19.2), to make the boy "quickly a client instead of a tributary (*mox cliens (...) e tributario*)", thus elevating him to the status of a plebeian (*persona plebeia*).

To the unsuspecting reader the problem seems insignificant, but the absence of any kind of *salutatio* indicates the seriousness and urgency with which Sidonius treats the case. For him, only the change of social status and the subsequent marriage "corrects the outrage (*meam (...) contumeliam emendat*)" committed against him. Sidonius does not appeal to the imperial or ecclesiastical court, which may indicate that he was not yet a bishop, but he sought to solve the problem personally, mainly because his motivation seems to have been more personal. As Cam Grey (2008) notices, as the free daughter of his wet nurse, certainly a freedwoman, the girl was a protégée of Sidonius, which made the case a matter of honor that threatened his social position, the prominence of his family and to a certain extent the very ideal of Roman family that Sidonius sought to preserve. From the young man's point of view, running away with his beloved may have been the most effective way to force a situation in which Sidonius had to

⁶ The use of the verb *rapio* and the designation of *stuprator* that the boy receives later on do not mean that the episode involved sexual abuse. Nothing in the remainder of the letter suggests that there was any violence. The terms, then, allude to relationships that occur outside the marital sphere and that could lead to the forced marriage of those involved (Grey, 2008, p. 289).

arbitrate on his behalf, improving the condition of his arrangement with Pudens and making the marriage possible.

In cases of greater social difference, the ending may not have been so happy. In a letter to Ambrose, dated about 480, Sidonius (*Ep.* 9.6.1) tells of a young aristocrat, supposedly known to both of them, who was "in the intimate company of a shameless slave girl (*contubernio ancillae propudiosissimae*)." The bishop, of course, views the relationship as an obscene intimacy (*consuetudo obscene*) and asserts (*Ep.* 9.6.2) that it was the slave girl who seduced the innocent young man as the Sirens seduced Ulysses, steering him almost to his ruin. Later, he says (*Ep.* 9.6.3) that he is relieved because the young man became aware of his possessions, descendants and reputation, broke off the relationship with her and sought to marry a well-born girl. Although Sidonius makes it seem that the young man has awakened from a spell that had been cast on him by the slave girl, we can conclude from the very language of the letter that the weight of moral judgment on the two lovers and the obligation of compliance with the rigid rules of conduct indispensable for the maintenance of the local social hierarchy were the primary factors that compelled the young man to abandon his companion. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the letter that allows us to know the fate of the slave girl who had fallen in love with the young aristocrat.

The relationship of dependence upon the aristocrats' personal power and their need to assert their prestige locally also brought the less fortunate under their arbitrariness. Sidonius himself was the protagonist of a situation in which he abused his prominence to inflict summary punishment on a group of disadvantaged individuals. On horseback from Lyons to Clermont in 469, the bishop (*Ep.* 3.12.1–3) saw from the top of a hill a "sacrilegious hand (*manus profana*)" about to violate the tomb of his grandfather Apollinaris. Angered by the situation, Sidonius charged down to the trespassers and inflicted severe physical punishment on them. Worried about the reaction of the bishop of the city, since he would have disregarded his attributions, the aristocrat writes his account and an apology still en route, claiming that he should have taken the alleged criminals to their due trial. The bishop, who is not named, replied that Sidonius' action was just, "affirming that, according to ancient custom, it seemed to him that those guilty of such a great audacity were justly beaten (*pronuntians more maiorum reos tantae temeritatis iure caesos videri*)."⁷

⁷ Indeed, as Joop van Waarden (forthcoming) notes, the fact that the violation didn't happen was certainly a mitigating factor to a possible death penalty, which may indicate that Sidonius, despite his ambiguous language, did not kill the gravediggers.

The letter with the account was addressed to his nephew Secundus and was constructed in such a way as to make it appear that the beating of the gravediggers, the sending of the letter to the bishop, his favorable reply, and the composition of the final poem in honor of Apollinaris to be his new funerary inscription took the time of a day, when in fact all these events may have dragged on for a few days. This narrative strategy, which presents a rapid series of complications and resolutions, is certainly designed to keep the text succinct and engage the reader's interest (Hanaghan, 2019, pp. 69–70). However, even though he had some time to reflect upon what happened, compose the letter and edit it for the collection, Sidonius did not suppress expressions of outrage (*pro dolor!*), nor his personal judgment about the group that disturbed his grandfather's tomb. In the part where he talks about the beating, Sidonius calls them thieves (*latrones*), but it is not clear that the group's intention was to steal the ornaments or potential precious objects from the grave. On the contrary, Sidonius reports that the cemetery was so full of ashes and bodies that there was no more room for new graves and that the typical mounds of burials had flattened out due to snow and rain. He himself acknowledges that "it was for this reason that the gravediggers dared to violate the place with their funeral hoes as if it was vacant (*quae fuit causa, ut locum auderent tamquam vacantem corporum baiuli rastris funebribus impiare*)."

Certainly, at least since the end of the third century, damaging human remains has been considered a crime (Rébillard, 2009, pp. 57–70), although there is evidence that the practice of violating tombs to bury new bodies in already crowded cemeteries, especially near the tombs of saints, continued to be a problem (Bond, 2013, pp. 143–148). Sidonius was well aware of this, for he characterizes the action of the gravediggers as a public crime (*publicum scelus*), therefore subject to trial by the bishop, who by this time had already become the civil authority of the city. While acknowledging that he should have led the suspects to their due trial, Sidonius praises the bishop for being a good and just man who gave reason to his exasperation (*vir sanctus et iustus iracundiae meae dedit gloriam*). In the end, the gravediggers were not allowed to present their defense or had a chance to explain any misunderstanding, but they were given summary punishment by an individual who still took advantage of his influence and connections to avoid any problems that such arbitrariness might bring him (Mathisen, 2020, p. 65).

Conclusions

Throughout this study, we were able to verify that the scenario of weakening imperial power in Gaul, political fragmentation and the collapse of the legal system did not impact and was not experienced in the same way by different social groups. In terms of mobility, the great geopolitical scenario does not seem to have been a factor that affected the transit of individuals of lower social status, making it possible to exchange letters even between regions dominated by different groups, while aristocrats were exposed to risks of a political nature. On the other hand, the insecurity resulting from the disputes for control over Gaul left individuals and groups that did not belong to the elite exposed to other types of aggression ensuing from their situation of social vulnerability. The breakdown of the unity of the legal system and the difficulty in enforcing the laws, in turn, opened possibilities of action for individuals who were kept in a subaltern position by the force of Roman institutions. However, the legal system could still be mobilized by the new political forces in favor of its protégés against insubordination. On the other hand, the local exercise of power by aristocrats could even benefit those individuals who were less fortunate in their sphere of influence, but it gave rise to greater control over social conduct and even led to abuses of authority, given the need of this elite to maintain the social hierarchies that privileged them.

When we look beyond the aristocratic strategies and see the subaltern and popular experiences in the letters of Sidonius, we can conclude that the transformations that Gaul underwent in the fifth century brought new opportunities and possibilities of agency to subaltern and popular social groups. But this was not a universal and ubiquitous phenomenon, like a "spring of emancipation for the oppressed", as we also perceive the emergence of new forms of violence and social control at the local level.

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