

Sidonius Apollinaris as a Flexible Thinking Person of Fifth-Century GAUL¹

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Abstract

The paper deals with the personality traits of Gallo-Roman author Sidonius Apollinaris (~430–489) who was a representative of Late Roman nobility and clergyman as well. It wasn't unusual situation for 4th-6th century's Mediterranean world, when intellectual elite was a fueler for religious leaders. Nonetheless some of them underwent the crisis of identity, others continued to hold old values and way of life. Authors suggest the idea that Sidonius was a unique person who was able to rebuild his world perception, not breaking with the old attitudes associated with the aristocratic life, but at the same time accepting Christian morality with all his heart and becoming its proponent. It is possible if we consider him as a flexible thinking person on the base of achievements of psychology science. Sidonius was a flexible thinking person who react suitable on all changes without breaking, crisis of identity, because he saw the way how to adapt his old values and merits to new world. It means that antique and medieval culture aspects coexisted peacefully in his mind.

Keywords: Late Antiquity; Sidonius Apollinaris; Flexibility of Thinking; Identity.

1. Introduction

Among a vast number of Late Antique authors, Sidonius Apollinaris stands out by virtue of the undying interest of researchers to this ambiguous figure, which historians and philologists have been showing since the second half of the 19th century, to this day. Such close attention is explained by the fact that this Gallo-Roman aristocrat and bishop, combining in their worldview the features of classical and Christian traditions, left us a written heritage in the form of poems and epistolary collection. These works reflect not only the current historical events, but also the worldview dynamics. It proper to the generation of Late Antiquity, which is viewed

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by scholars as a transitional period with intricate conjunction of differently directed elements of culture. As the main factor that determined the painless change of world perception of Sidonius Apollinaris, we propose to consider the “flexibility of thinking”, a phenomenon studied in psychology and explaining the high adaptive abilities of some individuals.

The present study is an attempt to combine the achievements of history and psychology. The union of history and psychology is not a new scientific field. We know name of the initiator, German physician, physiologist and philosopher of 19-20th centuries Wilhelm Wundt. His “Völkerpsychologie” (10 Vols. from 1900 to 1920) or cultural psychology contains the study of development of thought, language, artistic imagination, myths, religion, customs, the relationship of individuals to society, the intellectual environment. It’s a very important and wide aspect of scientific knowledge useful for the restoration of the world landscape of different historical epochs.

2. Sources and Methodology

Sidonius Apollinaris was Gallic aristocrat of fifth century AD. He is a Latin writer, a representative of the highest provincial nobility, the son-in-law of Emperor Avitus (455-456), the prefect of Rome. Since 461, he lived in his estate in Auvergne. Since 470, he was ordained as a bishop of Clermont; in this capacity, he headed the defense of the city from the Visigoths (471-475). During two years from 476 Sidonius was in exile in Spain, and then came back to vicarial duties. Subsequently, Sidonius was canonized as a Christian saint.

We have 147 letters of Sidonius divided into 9 books and 24 poems. Correspondence continues the tradition of Pliny the Younger and Symmachus. These are thoughtfully compiled collections, where real letters with requests, congratulations, consolations interspersed with messages written on purpose for publication, panegyric or descriptive, interesting for the history of everyday life.

We can see the man in his successive stages of nobleman, ambitious careerist, disappointed politician, and self-conscious ecclesiastic as clearly as he must have appeared to Gregory of Tours a century later (Hist. Franc. II. 21-25).

The main question about Sidonius’ worldview and identity is who was he? Was he more Roman or Gaul, more pagan or Christian, secular-minded or bishop? These are things which can be revealed using his correspondence.

However, we must remember that we are not dealing with a living person, but only with his records. Indeed, his letters are ego-documents, but it can be characterized by a significant percentage of unreal, nonexistent minds and feelings dictated by author’s desire to create a certain image in the pages of his

correspondence. For instance, he is deeply conscious of his unworthiness, a thousand times exaggerated in the groveling protestations of unspirituality which he addresses by letter to his fellow-bishops. What does it mean? He thought this way or tried to persuade wider public in his repentance and transformation?

To answer these questions, we have to use a prosopographic method in which we study the biographies of historical persons belonging to a particular epoch, who share common political, social, ethnic, or confessional features. Prosopographic method in history is aimed primarily at the study of models of relationships and activities through the study of collective biography; it collects and analyzes statistically significant biographical data about individuals or a well-defined group of individuals, which makes it a very important tool for studying many pre-modern societies. In the simplest form, the prosopographic method is defined by Karl Werner as an analysis of a person's origin, his environment, and his social status in the context of the family and other social groups or places in which he acts and the functions he performs in society, thereby prosopography reveals connections of political and social history in long-term evolutionary processes (Werner, 1997).

The methodological guideline of this study is the prosopographic method in the interpretation of the British historian Katharine Keats-Rohan, who closely links it with biography and genealogy (Keats-Rohan, 2000). In this case, the prosopographic method contributes to the systematization of information about the central figure of our study, as well as about the circle of his communication and interests.

We also use the hermeneutic method for understanding and interpretation (Hirsch, 1967) of Sidonius' texts. The essence of this method is in the technique of text's interpretation on the basis of the inclusion of textual information in a wider context of knowledge with interpretation, i.e. "translation", with the supplement of additional meanings recorded in the text Schleiermacher' sentence "understanding in the highest sense" (Bowie, 1998).

3. Results and Discussion

It is necessary to begin with a brief overview of the main approaches to the perception of Sidonius himself and his written heritage.

Sidonius' figure was always ambiguously perceived in historiography. Thus, one group of authors perceived the works of Sidonius as a product of an unchanging, integral ("monolithic") personality with the focus on the first feature (Eshevskij, 1870; Stevens, 1933; Golenishchev-Kutuzov, 1972; Mamina, 1989).

On the contrary some scholars display the medieval approach, with an accentuation on the origin of new orientations, alien to classical Antiquity

(Kudryavcev, 1881). Thus, the American researcher Eric Goldberg considers Sidonius as a person who endured the real crash in his mind, the crisis of identity (similar to Prudentius or Augustine) and like repentant of his sins sprinkled ashes upon his head during the rest of his life (Goldberg, 1995).

The modern studies of Sidonius' works first of all have interdisciplinary nature, using the approaches and methods of not only historical knowledge, but also philology, cultural studies, and psychology (Mathisen, 1979, 1993, 2001, 2003; Van Waarden & Kelly, 2013; Mratschek, 2013, 2017; Condorelli, 2008; Jabbari et al., 2019). In one of our previous articles, we suggested to use the term "sociocultural modernization" as a reasonable balance between the changes taking place in society and the preservation of cultural traditions to explain dynamics of Sidonius' identity (Litovchenko; 2017; Nakhaee & Nasrabadi, 2019). Psychologists use for denomination of this phenomenon term "flexibility of thinking", which sounds originally as "cognitive flexibility" (Boger-Mehall, 1996; Moore & Malinowski, 2009). In historic context it is more common and more relevant to use the "flexibility of thinking".

Flexibility of thinking is the ability of a person to quickly react; it is easy to find the new ways in solving a problem that differ from each other. Ability to freely dispose of available resources (material, information), identify patterns, make associative connections, be able to think and act in a wide range of opportunities seen.

The flexibility of thinking is not just the ability to quickly find new strategies for solving particular problems, but first of all the ability to give up one's old views on something and accept new, more beneficial, more relevant views. This quality is especially important in the transitional epochs, because the future belongs to the elastic mind.

Transitional epochs are marked by changes in all public spheres which prompt the desire to protect yourself or to adapt to new circumstances. "To protect" means to keep untouched, to conserve old values, customs, etc. "To adapt" means to accept the innovation not disrupting the usual way of life. All these challenges the identity dynamics and flexibility of thinking helps to adapt to new circumstances. Here is the point where the flexibility of thinking and identity are interweaving.

Identity is the correlating of yourself with some category in comparison with others. Identity includes a person's name, gender, ethnic, religious identity, family and social status, occupation, and roles. Sidonius' identity is the subject being examined in the paper. All aspects of his identity existed in peaceful combination. Primarily, we consider the next aspects: Sidonius as a Roman and as a Gaul; as a nobleman; as a Christian; as a bishop.

Our hypothesis is outlined as follows; all aspects of Sidonius' identity exist at the same time in a peaceful, "synthesis" combination. All aspects don't come into conflict and don't replace each other in comparison with another Christian writer and clerics of Late Antiquity: Augustinus of Hippo, Paulinus of Nola, Faustus of Riez, Cesarius of Arles, Ruricius of Limoges and others (whose heritage is letter collection too).

The main facts we know about Sidonius' life are the next: his origin (from Gaul and senatorial family, c. 430) (Sid. Epist. I. 3, 1; III. 12; V. 9, 2), his marriage on Papianilla a daughter of emperor Avitus (around 452) (V. 16; Carm. XXIII. 430), his communication with emperor's court, his brilliant rhetoric education, eloquence and literary activity, habitual (=Roman) way of life (hunting, feasts, duties of the owner of the estate, etc.) Also we know about his administrative efforts and career steps such as the prefect of Rome (from 467 or 468 to 469) (I. 9, 1 etc.), the bishop of Clermont (since 470) (III. 1, 2; IV. 3, 9; VII. 9, 6), participation as an influencer in episcopal elections in Bourges (470) (VII. 8), establishing defenses of Clermont from the Visigoths (471-475) (Martindale, 1980, p. 118), etc.

His pagan background is confirmed by his origin which helped him marry profitable, get a post of prefect, and become a bishop (among the Gallic Bishops of the 5th and 6th centuries the majority were representatives of the Roman nobility, Ruricius of Limoges, Caesarius of Arles, Faustus of Riez, Avitus of Vienne and others). Here we can include the elections in Bourges, where Sidonius' protection helped to take the bishopric by the man of his social circle.

Another one fact of paganism existing in Sidonius' consciousness is the communication with emperor's court and administration which allows him to be in the center of all political events. And as a bishop he was the leader in his province in the situation of central power's weakness.

His brilliant rhetoric education, eloquence and literary activity glorified him as a talented panegyrist as well as helped him in pontifical career. Here we must notice one significant moment: he wrote panegyrics and poems exclusively before his bishopric, after that he produced only letters, counting that frivolous poetry is the sign of paganism, but sometimes he put short verses in the correspondence. A few years later he had to back down from this rule and wrote a panegyric in honor of King Euric (Ep. 8.9.5: Carm. 34), who banished him to exile for organizing the defense of Clermont from the Visigoths. But in such case the writing of panegyric was a necessary measure, which also led to the desired result: having mercy, Euric allowed Sidonius to return.

Roman way of life must be perceiving chronologically: after 470 he lived more modestly due to his bishopric, but it wasn't complete rejection of things of this

world, it wasn't the ascetic life. Sidonius still communicated with friends, was engaged in the affairs of his estate, went to visit, received guests, honed his eloquence in letters, and performed managerial functions as a bishop (I. 1; I. 2; I. 9; I. 12; II. 2; II. 4; III. 13; IV. 3; IV. 14; V. 17; VII. 9 etc.) as well as promoted worthy people in obtaining their positions both secular and ecclesiastical (I. 3; 6; IV. 25; VII. 9).

As a Christian he knows Scripture, uses the Christian terminology in his correspondence, he admires of persons who have an ascetic lifestyle, observes of Church rituals (to pray, to attend service), but he does not see any difference between Christian poets and writers of the classical era, for example, he appreciates Prudentius on a par with Horace (II. 4, 9).

As a bishop he defended Auvergne as a diocese and as a part of Roman territory from the Visigoths; he had a spiritual power (his advices to friends and fellow-bishops); he works for charitable causes, he sold his silver dishes for poor distribution, anyway Gregory of Tours told about.

These different duties and roles coexist in his mind peacefully. It is possible only in one case; he was a flexible thinking person who react suitable on all changes without breaking, crisis of identity, because he saw the way how to adapt his old values and merits to new world. We have not seen in Sidonius' sources the evidence of the crisis of identity, because of his flexibility of thinking (Kurmanali et al., 2018; Leung & Chan, 2016; Bakhshandeh et al., 2015).

4. Summary

The psychological term "flexibility of thinking" is very effective for use in historical science. The phenomenon of flexibility of thinking lies in the ability of a person to adapt to new socio-political conditions, accompanied by a change of paradigms of world perception, without breaking with the traditional attitudes prevailing in consciousness. As an example of a flexible thinking person, we considered a Late-antique nobleman and bishop Sidonius Apollinaris. His secular and spiritual positions and occupations, the general spirit of his correspondence, make it possible to state that Sidonius, unlike some of his colleagues and like-minded associates, did not experience an identity crisis. He wasn't dissimulating, translating in words the commitment to new Christian values, while remaining in reality an apologist for traditional pagan attitudes. Antique and medieval culture aspects coexisted peacefully in his mind. This direction of studying the personality and works of Sidonius Apollinaris seems to us promising. In this article, we only outlined the general direction; in the future, it is necessary to detail each position, examining the Sidonius' letters based on the hermeneutic method, in order to confirm our ideas by textological analysis.

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