

Imago Aliorum. The Construction of "Otherness" in the Epistolography of 5th century Gaul

Throughout history, all human communities have been in contact with foreign groups and perceived them as "others". From this contact stereotypes, prejudices and "ethnic portraits" emerged, which have been and still are dominating the ways identity is constructed and alterity is perceived, but also the ways in which further contacts are organized and regulated. Already in the 18th century, philosophers like Hegel thought about how self-awareness is linked to the construction of "otherness" (Hegel 1807, 114–128) and from that time onwards, scholars have been investigating how the representation of the "other" is a crucial and essential component of how we perceive and describe the "self" (for example Said 1977; Conolly 1985; Spivak 1985; LeVian 1995). This applies also to Late Antiquity and it is a central tenet for interpretation of the so-called "Migration period".

In the last years, scholars have recognized that the traditional view of "Barbarians" is not valid anymore, as the "Barbarians", "Germans" or even "Romans" did not exist as a fixed collective, but were represented as such in the sources. Especially "the Barbarians" were used in the Roman literature as a tool for imperialistic politics as they often served as cause for a *bellum iustum* due to their uncivilized and violent behaviour. Through their depiction as a threat for Rome, wars against them seemed to be justified – Caesars' *De Bello Gallico* is only one example of many. The picture of a brute savage, without education or laws, was drawn throughout Roman antiquity and these stereotypes were still in use during Late Antiquity (e.g. in Vegetius, Ammianus Marcellinus, Gallic Chronicle, or in the epistolography). I want to investigate how single actors of the Gallo-Roman elite have perceived the "others" and how they described them in the epistolography against the background of the political and social alterations of the 5th century. How have different authors pictured the "Barbarian other"? Can we see a homogenous group behind the epistlers, and consequently gain an idea about the so-called "Gallo-Roman" elite? How important were metaphors and *topoi* in the depiction of the "Barbarians"? Firstly, I propose that metaphorical language in the letters was used to refer to "otherness" and specifically the "Barbarian others", (see Schwitter 2013). Secondly, these metaphors were also used to showcase education and consequently a certain "*romanitas*", since the letters were not only written in a roman tradition and circulated within a specific circle of recipients (Eigler 2013), but sometimes even published for a broader audience. Therefore, the question considering the meaning of "*romanitas*" for late antique Gaul has to be

included in my studies, since the perception of “others” is a process of self-identification (see Dauge 1981; Hall 1989; Chauvout 1998; Isaac 2004).

The main focus of my research lies on the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris in comparison to the ones from Ruricius of Limoges and Avitus from Vienne. These authors are not only sharing a common social and local background, but were also in correspondence with one another. Additionally, these three authors lived in different overlapping decades of the 5th century, which will provide the opportunity to study possible alterations in the view of “Barbarians” through time. With a thorough comparison of the three authors, I expect to identify differences in their perception of “Barbarians” and therefore differences and changes in the perception of the “self” during the 5th century in Gaul.