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“Humour and Power: The Personality and Career of Sidonius Apollinaris”

This paper aims to explore a recognised but underappreciated aspect of the personality of Sidonius Apollinaris, his sense of humour, and some of its implications for interpreting his extant collected poems and letters. By appreciating fully the importance of Sidonius’s perception as a humorist, not least by himself, we can see how it impinged on some of his most well-known, even notorious, comments. From his panegyrics on Rome’s last emperors to his descriptions of Visigothic kings, there were few instances in which Sidonius was unwilling to invoke irony to make a rhetorical point. Consequently, the evidence on which claims of, for instance, anti-barbarian chauvinism or staunch Roman loyalism are made for Sidonius and his contemporaries have to be reassessed. By doing this, however, we glimpse a more complex and engaging Sidonius, a man using humour as part of the armoury with which he sought to survive and shield himself from the vicissitudes of his age.

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