Desiderius of Cahors: Last of the Romans

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In the fifth century, the western Roman Empire crumbled and was replaced by barbarian kingdoms. During and after this process, many persons have been identified as having been especially active in attempts to preserve or restore the Roman political, social, and cultural heritage, and, as a consequence have been endowed with the title “Last of the Romans”. Edward Gibbon, for example, suggested Boethius as “the last of the Romans whom Cato or Tully could have acknowledged for their countryman”.¹ Some recent novels nominate Fl. Aëtius, Romulus Augustus, and Belisarius (“the last Roman general”).² The French version of a German film based on the novel by Felix Dahn, Der Kampf um Rom,³ nominates as “Le dernier des Romains” a certain “Cornélius Cethegus, Prefect of Rome” (perhaps referring to the caput senatus of the same name), whose ambition was to recreate the western Roman Empire.⁴ And a 1997 video documentary nominates Justinian, a theme reprised in a 2002 book, with Justinian as “the last Roman emperor”.⁵ Other suggestions for this sobriquet include Stilicho in the early fifth century, Syagrius, and Aurelius Ambrosius in the late fifth century.⁶ The latest of the generally cited candidates for this title, it seems, is Pope Gregory the Great (590–604).⁷

But exactly a century ago there was another, even later, suggested contender for the title “Last of the Romans”, who has not made any of the current “top ten” lists. This candidate comes from Gaul, in the mid seventh century CE. In 1911, Anthyme Saint-Paul, in his Histoire monumentale de la France, nominated Desiderius,⁸ bishop of Cahors from 636 until 655, as “le dernier des Romains”.⁹

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¹ Gibbon 1776 [1860], 289.
² Store 2007; Murdoch 2006; Hughes 2009; note also Sivan 2011.
³ Dahn 1876–1878.
⁶ For a list see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_of_the_Romans.
⁷ Ibid.
⁹ “Le dernier des Romains”: Saint-Paul 1911, 52.
Now, Saint-Paul was speaking only from the perspective of Desiderius’ building activities, but one also could make the case that Desiderius deserves the title “last of the Romans” for a much wider range of reasons, and in order to do so, this study will present evidence relating to Desiderius’ family background, cultural credentials, and posterity.

I. Desiderius and His Circle

For someone living in this period, Desiderius’ life is remarkably well documented. We have the good fortune to possess not only a collection of letters written by and to him, but also a vita written perhaps a century after his death that made use of documents from his personal archives. According to his vita, Desiderius was born, perhaps around 590, at “Obrege”, an unidentified place that apparently was in the neighborhood of Albi. The name of his father, Salvius, suggests that he was descended from, perhaps a grandson of, Salvius, bishop of Albi c.574–584, who himself was succeeded by a Desiderius, which likewise suggests a family connection to Albi. In the first quarter of the seventh century, Desiderius and his two elder brothers Syagrius and Rusticus spent their youth at the court of King Chlothar II (584–629) in the company of the young prince Dagobert I (born ca. 603) and the scions of several other aristocratic families, including Paulus, Arnulphus, Eligius, and Audoenus. The ties that were formed there lasted a lifetime.

In 623, Dagobert became king of Austrasia, and on the death of Chlothar in 629 he became king of all of Francia, including Burgundy and Aquitaine. He thus became the most powerful Merovingian monarch of the seventh century and, indeed, the last one to hold real power. In 634, after a defeat by the Slavs, he was compelled to make his four-year-old son Sigebert III king of Austrasia, and Sigebert became king on Dagobert’s death in 639. Dagobert went down in history as “good king Dagobert” and a bronze throne attributed to him was used as late as the reign of

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10 The letters have been edited three times: (1) Canisius 1601, 461–523, repr. in PL 87, 247–66; (2) Arndt, MGH Epp. 3, 191–214, repr. in CCSL 117, 309–342; and (3) Norberg 1961. The vita likewise has three editions: (1) Labbe 1657, repr. in PL 87, 219–46; (2) Poupardin 1900; and (3) B. Krusch, MGH SS rer. Merov. 4, 547–602, repr. in CCSL 117, 343–401.

11 Vita Desiderii 1, 1: “Igitur Desiderius Cadurcensis episcopus Obrege Galliarum oppido oriundus fuit”; Kirsch 1908 suggests a derivation of “Obrege” from the Antobroges, a Celtic people, but it may come from Nitiobriges, another local Celtic people; see also Cabie 1894.

12 Greg. Tur. Hist. 5, 45; see Duchesne 1907–15, 2, 43.


14 Vita Desiderii 2–3: Chlotharius autem pater inclyti Dagoberti monarchiam regni solus tenebat, a quo tres germani, id est Rusticus, Siagrius, et Desiderius, florentissime enutriti [...] Desiderius vero inter exercitassimini palatti ministeria sedulo Deo vacans die nocteque orationibus insistebat [...] habebat enim amicos bonae fidei viros, Paulum scilicet, Arnulphum, Eligium, et Audoenum; see Vacandard 1897.

15 For the political history, see Wood 1994.
Napoleon. Sigebert III, on the other hand, although he became a Christian saint, also became the first of the infamous *rois fainéants*.

Dagobert was known for having strong and generally dependable advisers around him from both secular and ecclesiastical backgrounds. Many of these were drawn from the friends of his youth, who not only served as advisers, government officials, and bishops, but also helped to counter the growing influence of powerful Mayors of the Palace. Many of these childhood friends became Merovingian VIPs in their own right, often finishing their careers as bishops. These included Audoenus Dado, first as *referendarius* of Dagobert and then as bishop of Rouen (640–684); Sulpicius as metropolitan bishop of Bourges (634–646); Eligius (588–60) first as royal moneyer and then as bishop of Noyon/Tournai; Arnulfus (c. 612–627) and his successor Abbo (c. 627–640) as bishops of Metz; and Paulus as bishop of Verdun (*†* 648/9), not to mention Burgundofaro of Meaux (c. 630–675); and Wandregesilus (c. 570–667), who after serving at court founded the monastery that later bore his name.

Thus, from Desiderius’ own family, Syagrius served as Count of Albi and patriarch of Marseilles, Rusticus as bishop of Cahors, and Desiderius himself as *thesaurarius* ("treasurer") of both Chlothar and Dagobert. In 635, Syagrius died, and Desiderius was appointed to replace him at Marseilles. In the next year, 636, Rusticus was murdered, and Dagobert confirmed Desiderius as bishop of Cahors. As bishop, Desiderius put great efforts into the city infrastructure, restoring the walls, building and repairing churches and monasteries, and even repairing the water supply system with subterranean wooden pipes. While staying at his villa at Vuistrilingo ca. 655, Desiderius fell ill and died; his body was interred in the church of St. Amantius at

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17 Scheibelreiter 1989.


19 See, e.g., Fouracre 1979.


21 *Vita Desiderii* 1, 4–5: *Itaque honestissimo genitore Salvio, ut dictum est, iam defuncto, fratre quoque Siagrio in fascibus constituto, Rusticus germanus eius episcopatum Cadurcae urbis adipsictur: decesserat enim ipso tempore Eusebius praefati municipii antistes, qui successor in episcopatum sanctae memoriae Ursicini fuerat [...] in anno autem septimo Dagoberti regis praedictus germanus eius Siagrius, dum Massilliae administracionem procuraret, deo iubente vitam finivit, pro quo rex Dagobertus gravi moerore persussus, solertissimum Desiderium loco praefecturae eius subrogare censuit. Rusticus episcopus cathedrae Cadurcinae praesidens, septimo autem et eo amplius anno pontificatus sui administrato, a perfidis et scelestis incolis interemptus est.*

22 Desid. epist. 1, 13 (to Caesarius of Clermont): *Praeterea credo, quod nec vobis lateat qualem egestatem de aqua quam fons praebeat in hac Cadurcina civitate habemus. Sed voluntas nobis inest, si possis permettiti, ut per tubos ligneos substantaneo officio ad ipsam civitatatem aquam ducere debeamus, proinde quia novimus, quod peritos ex hoc artifices haberes, precamur, ut compendium de ipsos faciatis.*
Cahors. In his extant will (649–650), Desiderius gave all his possessions, including
his books, to the cathedral, the churches, and the monasteries of his episcopal city. 23
So far, then, we have a typical Merovingian *cursus honorum*, a favored secular offi-
cial who concluded his career as a bishop. 24

Things become rather more interesting when we look at Desiderius’ social cir-
cle. Later in life, Desiderius and the friends of his youth remembered their past times
together. 25 In one letter, Desiderius and Abbo of Metz reminded each other of the
“good old days” at court: “In secular garb, we used to exchange stories in the com-
pany of the most serene prince Chlothar.” 26 And on another occasion Desiderius
asked Audoenus Dado of Rouen to continue to grant to him “the one whom in the
very flower of our early youth you once offered with a singular love”, that is, Dado
himself. 27 Not to mention King Dagobert I himself, who also was part of this inti-
mate circle of friendship and recollection, and whom Desiderius reminded of their
“companionship, and the pleasure of the auspicious quality of youthfulness”. 28

II. Literature, Culture, and Education

What makes Desiderius circle of friends even more interesting is that they were
bound together not just by shared personal and professional experiences, but also by
shared cultural interests that were manifested in a literary circle that included an even
wider range of Gallic ecclesiastics and bolsters the claims of Desiderius and his cir-
cle to be “the last of the Romans.” And here, perhaps, one might smile and say,
“Right, literary culture in the middle of seventh-century Gaul.” For, unlike the fifth
and even the sixth century, the seventh century did not produce a large number of
surviving literary works of any genre, and those that were produced have not been
admired for their Latinity; nor was there a Gallic literary renaissance parallel to the
seventh-century burst of literary activity in Visigothic Spain. 29 The literary culture of
post-Roman Gaul in general and seventh-century Gaul in particular has not fared
well in the eyes of modern-day critics. At best, the few writers whose works survive
have been perceived as fighting a losing battle against an overwhelming tide of bar-
barism, soloeism, and stylistic infelicity. One is led to believe that the seventh cen-

23 *Vita Desiderii* 18–19.
24 See, e.g., Durliat 1979; Rey 1953; Sol 1936.
25 E.g., Desid. *epist.* 1, 10.
26 Desid. *epist.* 1, 9 (to Abbo of Metz): *Ut sicut nos sub saeculi habitu in contubernio
serenissimi Chlothari principis mutuis solem bus revelare*; and *epist.* 2.13, Abbo of Metz
to Desiderius: *Vos enim et in palatto regis, ubi innutriti fuisistis, bene cogniti estis.*
27 Desid. *epist.* 1.10 (to Audoenus Dado): “*ut quem quondam in ipso flore pramaevae juven tus
unico mihi amore praebuisti, semper concedere digneris illum meum Dadonem.*”
28 Desid. *epist.* 1, 5 (to King Dagobert): *Ipsa tamen recordatio contubernii, et deducedo auspi-
catae indolis pubertatis.*
29 Discussions of non-hagiographical aspects of seventh-century literature are rare, a few notable,
tury lies in the heart of the “Dark Ages”, and that Roman cultural and especially literary traditions were far in the past. H.-I. Marrou, for example, stated baldly, “in the sixth century the darkness of barbarism descended, and culture declined in the West and threatened to disappear altogether […] the Germanic invasions […] destroyed Roman culture.” Erich Auerbach asserted, “In Gaul, the last remnants of Roman culture collapsed” at the end of the sixth century. And speaking specifically of seventh-century Gaul, M.W. Laistner, disparagingly opined:

In truth, the literary output in Gaul between approximately 600 and 750 was deplorable both in quality and quantity. The notorious barbarism in style and language of Merovingian charters and other documents meets us also in the literary remains of that age. The hagiographical literature […] is exceedingly poor.

One of the few to have anything good to say about seventh-century literature is Walter Goffart, who acknowledges Fredegarius as “a genuine historian, worthy of sustained study”. And Goffart also opines that the eighth-century Life of Desiderius of Cahors was of the same literary quality of Bede’s Life of Wilfrid.

But before one condemns the seventh century out of hand, one might look at some redeeming factors. First of all, literary activity in seventh-century Gaul did not come to a complete halt. Liturgical collections include the so-called Gothic and Gallican missals. A few stray sermons and saints’ lives, such as the late seventh century lives of Leudegarius of Autun and Eligius of Noyon, the Passio Leudegarii Augustodunensis and Vita Eligii Noviomensis, survive. At the same time, Defensor, a monk of Logiacum, compiled a Liber scintilarum, which was to become the medieval equivalent of a best seller. And works of a more secular nature include the “Fredegarius” Chronicle, not to mention Marculf’s collection of formulae, if it is in fact to be dated to the late seventh century. And of course there were legal documents, canons of canons councils, and some very significant Libri canonum, such as the “Albi collection”, which was created ca. 600 for bishop Dido of Albi by the

31 Auerbach 1965, 262.
32 Laistner 1931, 138.
33 Goffart 1988, 12.
34 Goffart 1988, 289–90.
35 Griffe 1951; Morin 1941; van der Mensbrugghe 1959; Cabié 1972.
37 CCSL 117, 1–234.
38 See Goffart 1988.
priet Perpetuus, who also might have been the writer of an unattributed *Fragmen-
tum mulomedicum* preserved in Paris.

Nor were educational opportunities quite as lacking or bad in the early seventh
century as often has been thought. Bishop Sulpicius II (c. 620–640) of Bourges, for
example, would have been a relative of the late sixth-century bishop Sulpicius I of
Bourges, who was praised by Gregory of Tours: “He is in fact a man very noble and
from the first-ranking senators of Gaul, well educated in rhetorical learning and,
truly, in the metric arts second to none.”

Desiderius of Cahors’s own cultural qualifications are stressed in his *vita* as if
they still meant something:

> Desiderius was raised with the greatest care by his parents; he was fully educated in liter-
ary studies; his diligence in these was augmented when after outstanding studies of litera-
ture and after Gallic eloquence, which are either most flourishing or exceptional, as a
young man he assumed the dignities of a royal association, and then he gave attention to
the investigation of Roman laws, so that the Roman gravity might temper the richness
and splendor of Gallic speech.

And if there was any doubt, in the next paragraph the author reiterates, “He was
educated to the full in literature.” In addition, the author of the *vita* clearly de-
sired to connect Desiderius’ educational experiences with the classical Roman
past, for his account not only draws on the tradition of Gallic nobles being edu-
cated in Rome – something not likely to happen in the seventh century and
which the author makes no claims did happen – but even quotes Jerome’s letter
about the education of the aristocratic Gallic monk Rusticus. Now, one might be
tempted to dismiss the account of the *vita* as a mere topos, but in the context of

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40 The original collection survives as the partially extant *Codex Tolosanus* 364, and is pre-
served entire in the Albi, *Bibl. mun.* 147 [olim 2]. See Ourliac 1978; Turner 1900–1901;
Galabert 1933; le Bras 1929.

41 Archives nationales Ms.AB.XIX.1737 VII, *Fragmentum mulomedicum*; see McKitterick
1981, 176.

42 For educational opportunities, see Mathisen 2005.

bene eruditus rhetorics, in metricis vero artibus nulli secundus.*

44 *Vita Desiderii* 1: *Desiderius vero summa parentum cura enutritus, litterarum studios in ad
plenum eruditus est, quamur diligentia auctus est ubi post insignia litterarum studia galli-
canamque eloquentiam quae vel florentissima sunt vel eximia, contubernii regalis adul-
cisce indidit dignitatibus, ac deinde legum romanarum indagatione studium dedit, ut *uber-
tatem eloquii gallici nitoremque sermonis gravitas romana* temperaret.

45 *Vita Desiderii* 2: *Ad plenum litteris fuerit eruditus.*

46 E.g., *Vita Germani Autissiodorensis* 1: *Ab ipsis infantiae rudimentis studiis liberalibus
institutus, in quo doctrinae confluent cum ingenii ubertate consentiens, eruditissimum du-
plicito bono... atque in eum perfecto litterarum plena conflueret, post auditoria gallicana
intra urbe Romam iuris scientiam plenitudini perfectionis adiecit.*

47 Jerome, *epist.* 125, 6: *Post studia Galliarum, quae vel florentissima sunt, misit Roman,
non parcens sumptibus, et absentiam filii, spe sustinens futurorum, ubertatem gallici niti-
oremque sermonis, gravitas romana condiret.*
this discussion one also might suggest that the very use of the topos validates the continuing importance of the classical tradition, and the importance that the vita’s author attached to Desiderius’ Roman identity.

Nor did the classical educational tradition stop there. Circa 640, the young aristocrat Bonitus of Clermont, whose mother’s name, Syagria, recalls the name of Desiderius’ brother, received a traditional classical education. According to his vita, “He was imbued with the elements of grammar and trained in the Theodosian decrees, and excelling the others of his age, he was examined by the sophistae (“sophists”) and advanced”. The presence of sophists, schoolmates, and examinations, not to mention the teaching of grammar and law, suggests the presence of a secular school even in the seventh century. Bonitus then followed the same career trajectory as Desiderius and many of his friends, being made “princeps pincernarum” and then referendarius (“referendary”) by Sigibert III (634–656), “praefectus Massiliae prae- mae provinciae” by Theoderic III (673–698), and then, in 690, bishop of Clermont (c. 690–706) in succession to his brother Avitus (676–690), who likewise had been described in Bonitus’ vita as “a man learned in wider studies and in sacred literature.”

And at about the same time, Leudegarius, future bishop of Autun (660–679), according to his vita, was engaged “in the diverse studies that secular potentes are accustomed to study, he was fully polished in everything by the touchstone of discipline”. The monastic author of the vita may not have known exactly what these secular studies were, but he realized it was important to mention them.

III. Epistolography and Classical Culture

Furthermore, most modern study of the cultural climate of the seventh century has lacked any discussion of one of the most evocative and significant seventh-century literary genres: epistolography. This is most regrettable, for some of our best evidence for the continuity of classical culture in seventh-century Francia comes from Desiderius’ letter collection. The collection survives in only a single manuscript, the Codex Sangallensis 190, which also preserves the only copy of the letters of Ruricius of Limoges, the only copies of some of the letters of Faustus of Riez, and originally included a collection of letters of Sidonius Apollinaris. Desiderius’ letters are di-

48 Vita Boniti 1–2 (MGH SS rer. Merov. 6, 119–139): Inclita Bonitus progenie Arvernicae urbis oriundus fuit, cuius pater Theodatus, mater vero Syagria vocitata est, ex senatu Romano dum-taxat, nobili prosapia [...] postea vero cum natus adolevisset et esset praefata cum parentibus in urbe constitutus, grammaticorum inbutus inicis necnon Theodosii eductus decretis, ceter-osque coetaneos ecellens, a sophistis probus atque praelatus est.

49 Vir exterioribus studiis eruditus sacrisque litteris, (ibid.). Riché 1976, 192, drops the last two words, and consequently masks the distinction between the two kinds of learning.

50 Vita Leudegarii 1 (CCSL 117, 529): Fuiisset strenue enutritus et ad diversis studiis, quae saeculi potentes studire solent, adplene in omnibus disciplinæ esse lima politu.

51 See Mathisen 1998.
vided into two books, the first containing sixteen “Letters of lord Desiderius, bishop of Cahors, directed to diverse persons”, and the second comprised of twenty-one “Letters of diverse persons sent to lord Desiderius.” In addition, five other letters from Desiderius’ archive, not included in the letter collection, are inserted into his *vita*. The earliest letter in the collection (*Epist. 2, 2*), dating to 629/630, goes back to Desiderius’ days in the palace, where as *thesaurarius* he received a letter from the abbot Bertegyselus asking for help in a legal matter.

Seventh-century epistolographers such as Desiderius and his friends represent part of a long chain of ancient epistolography extending back to the Hellenistic period and before, and their topics of discussion present insights into the nature of contemporary literary culture that can be found nowhere else. The ties that Desiderius and his friends had formed in their youth bound them together in later life, and were manifested by their exchanges of letters, many of which came from this circle. In addition, as a result of the letter-exchange process, others were drawn into the circle, such as Constantius of Albi, who co-authored a letter to Desiderius with Audoenus Dado of Rouen, and Verus of Rodez, whose letter from Sulpicius of Bourges was included in Desiderius’ collection along with two letters from Sulpicius to Desiderius himself.

In their letter exchanges these friends also mentioned each other, cementing the circle of friendship. In one letter, Desiderius recalled to Audoenus Dado their friendship with Eligius “in aula terreni principis”, and, while regretting the loss of his brothers Rusticus and Syagrius, he rejoiced that they still also enjoyed the friendship of Paulus of Verdun and Sulpicius of Bourges. Desiderius’ eighth-century *vita* mentions additional bishops who were included in the extended circle of friends, several of whom also were among Desiderius’ correspondents. These friendships also appeared in other literary works connected with this circle; the late seventh-century *Vita Eligii*, for example, mentioned Eligius’ special friendships not only with Audoenus Dado but also with King Dagobert.

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52 E.g., Desid. *epist.* 2, 16 (Verus of Rodez to Desiderius): *Accepimus una cum exemplari de litteris domni Sulpitii.*

53 Desid. *epist.* 1, 10: *Igitur debito obsequio humiliter exhibito, illud peculiarius peroro, ut quem quondam in ipso flore primaevae iuventutis unico mihi amore praebuisti, semper concedere digneris illum meum Dadonem. maneat pristina inter nos atque illum tuum, imo nostrum Eligium inconvulsa charitas [...] et licet de nostro collegio duos iam amiserim germanos, habemus pro his venerabilem Paulum, nec minus praedicabilem meritis Sulpi- cium.*


55 *Vita Eligii* 8–9: *Quod cum vir sanctus sodali suo Audoeno nomine, cognomento Dadoni, quem sicut animam suam diligebat, secretius enarrasset [...] mortuo interea Clotario rege Francorum, Dagobertus filius eius monarchiam regni solus obtinuit, a quo Eligius tanta familiaritate habitus est, ut plurimorum eius felicitas ingens gigneret odium. The vita sometimes is attributed to Audoenus himself.*
Another extant letter from the same period that can be connected to Desiderius’ literary circle is found in the *Codex Sangallensis* 917, which preserves a fifteenth-century copy of a lost manuscript, perhaps of Carolingian date, that contained a letter written ca. 620/650 by the aristocrat Venerandus to Constantius, bishop of Albi, the same Constantius who appears in Desiderius’ letter connection. Venerandus had founded a monastery at Altaripa, presumably in the territory of Albi, under the Rule of St. Benedict, and he forwarded to Constantius a copy of the rule – its earliest attested use in France – to be kept in the church of Albi. And here, one cannot but note the recurring role of Albi as a center of literary productivity at this period.

These letters were written at a time when other historical sources are few and far between. Briefly, one is transported back to the days of Sidonius Apollinaris, Ruricius of Limoges, and Avitus of Vienne, when Gallic aristocrats exchanged multitudes of letters. The fact that Desiderius’ collection, like that of Ruricius of Limoges, includes letters written by Desiderius paired with letters written to him, indeed even a greater number of the latter, means that one has multiple perspectives on contemporary life. The seventh-century letters serve much the same purpose as those of the fifth and sixth. First and foremost, they provided a means for isolated Gallic aristocrats to maintain their ties of friendship with each other: A letter from Sulpicius of Bourges reflected on the role of epistolography, “Therefore, nothing is lost to absence because the present works in [your] presence. Your Beatitude always does its

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57 Constantius’ otherwise-unknown uncle Fibicius likely was his predecessor as bishop of Albi; this would have had to have been the case for Fibucius to have exercised any authority over the monastery. For Constantius, see Duchesne 1907–15, 2, 43–44. One notes that Benedictine monasteries seem to have been particularly active in the preservation of classical culture: see Bischoff 1994; and Lehmann 1960.
duty in sending letters''. The letters are rife with precious realia of seventh-century life that, briefly, allow Desiderius and his friends to speak directly to us. They are replete with the politesse and exchange of favors that greased the wheels of day-to-day existence: help in legal cases, support for travelers, assistance in the carrying out of administrative functions, the passing on of news (such as the date of the next church council), or just the general provision of good offices.

Writ large, Desiderius’ collection also has much to say about the social world of seventh-century Gaul. In the corpora of Sidonius, Ruricius, and Avitus, one encounters only a sprinkling of persons with barbarian-looking names, and very few barbarians with any claim to literary learning. By the time of Desiderius, however, there is no indication of any divide, social or cultural, between Romans and barbarians. One now sees a completely integrated society. But that does not mean that old ways did not die hard. A look at the hard core of Desiderius’ literary circle still shows a predominance of Roman sounding names, suggesting that, irrespective of what the actual ethnicity of these persons was, there still was a connection to the Roman past.

IV. The Case for Desiderius as Last of the Romans

So far, the case for Desiderius as “last of the Romans” has been based on the ways in which he and his circle of friends continued to manifest aspects of the cultural traditions of the Roman past: literary circles comprised primarily of individuals who at least looked Roman, and attempts to preserve the literary traditions of the past. But what is significant for Desiderius in particular as “last of the Romans” are several circumstantial considerations. In addition to the geographical proximity of Cahors to Limoges and Clermont, it has been suggested that Desiderius had a family connection to the other epistolographers preserved in the Sangallensis 190, Sidonius Apollinaris and Ruricius of Limoges. For example, in the 530s, Sidonius’ daughter and daughter-in-law, Alcima and Placidina, went into exile from Clermont to Cahors. And a sister of Desiderius was named Avita, suggesting a tie to the Aviti of Clermont, to whom Sidonius was at least doubly related. In addition, it may be significant that Ruricius’ family property was located not in the territory of Limoges, but at Decaniacum, in the civitas of Cahors. Given these connections, one might propose that the letters to and from Ruricius, the letters of Sidonius, and the

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58  Desid. epist. 2, 1: Ergo nihil perdet absentiam, quod praesentialiter laborabit praesentiam. semper in dirigendis apicibus beatitudo vestra solvit officium, ut plus debeat reddendum ag-minis famulatum, quam meritis consideret debitorum.
61  For the interrelation among these families, see Mathisen 1979–1980, 260–273, 283–298, 463–464, 716; and Idem, “Epistolography”. Desiderius’ other sister was named Selina: Vi-ta Desiderii 1: Sororibus aderant: quarum una Selina, alia vero dicebatur Avita.
62  See Mathisen 1999, 20, 47.
letters to and from Desiderius formed part of an epistolographic collection preserved by the family and literary circles of first Ruricius and then Desiderius.

In addition, it would seem that these seventh century ecclesiastics were well aware of their heritage, and a continued value was attached to being able to speak the language of the past. Sulpicius of Bourges, for example, wrote to Desiderius, “But all virtue suddenly is lacking in my words; I, whom the material of such a great topic overcomes, and, when I weigh the immense studies of such great readings in the scales of my mind, I succumb, overcome, by the mass of its magnitude”. But his use of the rare word “anagnostici” suggests that Sulpicius was not nearly as shy as he made out to be. On the other hand, Felix of Limoges, perhaps with greater cause, apologized for his lack of politesse: “It shame me to have expressed myself uncautiously in a sense less cultivated and a style of unpolished speech.”

Paulus of Verdun, on the other hand, thanked Desiderius for sending him five amphorae of Falernian wine when he had asked only for one – and small matter that this Falernian most likely was only a Gallic ersatz for the Italian original. In another letter to Desiderius, Paulus casually dropped a Vergilian tag, from book six of the *Aeneid*. And on another occasion, Desiderius wrote to bishop Felix of Limoges in an attempt to clear up an unspecified enmity that had arisen between them, saying in one alliterative section,

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63 Desid. epist. 2, 1 (Sulpicius to Desiderius): Sed universa subito virtus defecit in verbis, quem exsuperavit tantae materia dictionis, et, dum immensa tantarum anagnosticorum studia animo librante pensarem, ipsius magnitudinis molem victus subcubui.

64 For the word *anagnostes* as a reader or an educated slave, see Cic. Att. 1, 12, *Fam.* 5, 9, 2; Corn. Nep. Aristides 13, 14 (“pueri literatissimi”); Aul. Gell. 3, 19; 18, 5.

65 Desid. epist. 2, 21, from Felix of Limoges, Me tamen poenitet incaute et minus inculto sensu vel impolito sermone styllum exarasse.


67 Desid. epist. 2, 12: Caeterum ut ad vestra beneficia mentis oculos reflectam, nec si lingua clamet ferrea, ut quidam poeta alit, aut centena sonent spiramina, nullatenus potest quis tanta narrare dei magnalia, quantum eius in viscera vestra diffunditur gratia; cf. Verg. Aen. 6, 625–626: Non, mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum, / ferrea uox, omnis scelerum comprehendere formas.

68 The lemma to the letter reads, *Epistula domini Desideri ad Felicem Narbonae urbis episcopum*, but Arndt, MGH Epp. 3, 202 n. 1, and Norberg 1961, 40 n. 1, asserting that no Felix is known to have been bishop of Narbonne at this time, disregard the lemma and identify the addressee as the Felix who was bishop of Limoges ca. 650 (Duchesne 1907–15, 2, 52). Given Desiderius’ connections to the area of Limoges, this is an attractive alternative, but it does not explain how such a fundamental error could have arisen. And
But if, however, the usual matters endeavor to vex me with accusation, I believe that it must be taken care of, and I choose to trust to your judgment that viperous poisons and the, so to speak, lethal hiss of the song of the Sirens do not overwhelm your ears [...].

In the mid seventh century, therefore, the Sirens continued to sing their seductive song, even in the presence of the “precepts of Christ”.

We have here, therefore, a coterie of literary minded bishops with a shared educational background and political/ecclesiastical careers – looking very much like the aristocratic social-cultural coteries of the late Roman Empire. In their own way, these seventh century Gallic litterati kept the classical tradition flickering in Merovingian Gaul. Seventh-century writers knew that they were the representatives of an unbroken sequence of literary culture going back to Vergil and Homer, and their literary efforts, however imperfect they may seem in our eyes, reflect that conviction. But Desiderius and his circle were remarkably few in number. The sources refer over and over to the same people, a small circle constantly turning back in on itself, indicating that only a few very few individuals were participating in seventh century literary society, and suggesting to us how very valuable that their contributions and efforts were in maintaining the tenuous chain connecting classical antiquity to the Middle Ages.

But Desiderius had no successors. No further line of family descent be identified – save for apocryphal documents such as the *Genealogia domus carolingicae*, which lists a Desiderius among the children of Gamardus cognomento Babo, which itself suggests the degree to which the late antique past had become the stuff of fable.70 And the path of continuous literary transmission likewise stopped here. With Desiderius’ letter collection, we come to the end of an unbroken chain of not only literary style but also cultural and social connection that can be traced back to Cicero and before. This was the end of the line. Subsequent letter collections of the Carolin-
gian period are marked not by direct continuity with their Merovingian predecessors, but by an antiquarian spirit lacking a direct, organic, and conceptual connection to any ancient models. For Gaul at least, then, Desiderius and his friends were the “last of the Romans”, and it therefore is with good cause that we often say that this period also marks the end of Late Antiquity.

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