

A changing Roman world and its networks

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Introduction

It is the year 476, the Ostrogoths ransacked Rome, the eternal city. At the beginning of the fifth century, many tribes were on the move in the Roman Empire, searching for places to settle in the struggling Latin lands.¹ The former Empire became divided into different kingdoms ruled by individuals who did not identify themselves as Romans. A significant change politically and in translation to that, socially.

The fifth century is characterised by a great social and political change. For instance, old structure of taxes became more localised under the new non-Roman rulers.² More importantly, the social-political career stadia partially collapsed. Non-Romans became more powerful in secular positions, competing with the old Roman elite, who did not have their old prestige system (*digitas*) to back them up.³ So the possibility of secular positions became limited, forcing the Roman elite to seek their fortune in the ecclesial system of bishops and advisors of the new kings. This is an interesting political development, but it leaves out the social part of group forming and identity, which tells us even more about the functioning of these turbulent times.

Sidonius Apollinaris (431 – 489) and his nephew Avitus of Vienne (ca. 450 – 518) are giving historians insight into the socio-political changes in Southern Gaul, in this age of transformation. Both men became bishops due to nepotism; the old Roman elite monopolised the Episcopal seats from the last quarter of the fifth century. They are representatives of the old elite of the Roman empire in the new Gallic order. Not for the whole, torn Roman Empire as Allen Jones emphasises, only for southern Gaul between 450 and 520.⁴

Historians came up with different models to get a grip of the complex socio-political transformation in Southern Gaul. The first is an introverted Roman elite who become stronger gatekeepers of Roman culture, differentiate themselves with mastery of Latin literature and rhetoric.⁵ The elite is here competing with the new elite and banning them, as best as they can, from political

¹ Gavin Kelly and J. A. van Waarden, *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh 2020) 200 - 19. For a very detailed account of the political situation in Southern Gaul and neighbouring areas.

² Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven 2016) 26; William Bowden, Adam Gutteridge and Luke Lavan, *Social and political life in late antiquity*. Late antique archaeology, 1570-6893; vol. 3.1 (Leiden 2006) 107; Allen E. Jones, *Social mobility in late antique Gaul: strategies and opportunities for the non-elite* (Cambridge 2009) 5; Gavin Kelly and J. A. van Waarden, *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh 2020) 147. In the last fifty years, there is a vivid discussion of whether these invaders were barbarians. These tribes and lords did not call themselves Romans, and some Romans (Sidonius Apollinaris was one of them) called them barbarians (*barbari*). Most of the tribes were part of the Roman Empire for generations and adapted the Roman customs. And in part this was true, the larger complex tax system collapsed but was immediately adapted on a smaller scale by the new 'barbarian' kings.

³ *Digitas* is not only the political status, but more a social credit system based on prestige and family honour on which the political career stadia has its fundament.

⁴ Jones, *Social mobility in late antique Gaul: strategies and opportunities for the non-elite*, 5 - 7.

⁵ Leslie Dodd, '10 Kinship, conflict and unity among Roman elites in post-Roman Gaul', in: *Official Power and Local Elites in the Roman Provinces* (Oxfordshire 2016) 168; Jones, *Social mobility in late antique Gaul: strategies and opportunities for the non-elite*, 7 and 34; Ray van Dam, *Leadership and community in late antique Gaul*. The transformation of the classical heritage; 8 (1st edition; Berkeley 1985) 153 - 55; Peter Brown, *The world of Late Antiquity: from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London 1971) 129 - 31.

positions and stimulating segregation based on culture. The second is a model of assimilation.⁶ The Roman elite is not able to keep the monopoly on political positions and the new rulers become part of their network. These models can be tested with the epistles of Avitus and Sidonius to reconstruct their network over time.

In this paper, I will reconstruct the prosopographical network of Avitus and Sidonius based on their *epistulae* collection. The network of Sidonius is created by Ralph Mathisen.⁷ Here I will use the sociological phenomenon of homophily (EI index), measuring the ratio of individuals in a network with common characteristics against the counterparts, to measure the homogenesis of the networks.⁸ The hypothesis goes out to the second model, due to the influx of non-Roman folk and the influence of the non-Roman rulers. This paper tries to verify these models with the *epistulae* networks of both bishops. Comparing the ego networks of the bishops and testing the existing models may give insights into the reaction of the Roman elites to the transforming Roman social world.

Method and representativity

Comparing two historical figures to see differences in the society over time, requests similar parameters. Sidonius and Avitus share quite a few characteristics: they are family, they were bishops in the same region and shared the same education. Although they differ in ideals and personality, they make an acceptable comparison, compared with the other persona of which letters are handed down to us. So, the network comparison might give an insight in the differences over time.

Letters were used by the late Roman elite to keep relationships warm by using traditional rhetoric in the letters. These have a long-standing tradition in the Roman world.⁹ Therefore, it is a proxy for the network of the individuals. In addition, the people who are mentioned in the letters will deepen our understanding in the composition of the network. This will inherently be an incomplete network, due to three main factors. The first is the composition of the letters. The letters are collected and rearranged. Self-representation and legitimation heavily influence this composition. We know, for instance, that Sidonius did not consider non-Roman for administrative tasks.¹⁰ He might have censured his *epistulae* and excluded his contact with *'barbari'*. Furthermore, the most important letters are included, small administrative letters are not part of the corpus, Avitus did likewise.

Secondly, there is the transmission problem. Gregory of Tours (538 - 594) writes in his *Histories* about a copy of the letters of Sidonius (*Histories* book II 24), and uses it as a historical source.¹¹ Others in history needed to find a use in it in order to preserve and copy it. In this process many alterations occurred. The *epistulae* of Avitus for instance are transmitted to us in two different manuscripts with

⁶ Van Dam, *Leadership and community in late antique Gaul*, 181; Bowden, Gutteridge and Lavan, *Social and political life in late antiquity*, 109.

⁷ My gratitude is great towards Joop van Waarden and Ralph Mathisen, writers of *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris*. Due to their openness of heart, this research includes Sidonius as well as Avitus.

⁸ Andreas Kjeldsen, 'Conflict or Accommodation?' (2009) 11.; Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and James M. Cook, 'Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001) 415–444. The diversity score is the inverse of the homophily index.

⁹ Adam M. Schor, 'Becoming Bishop in the Letters of Basil and Synesius: Tracing Patterns of Social Signalling across Two Full Epistolary Collections', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 7 (2014) 302.

¹⁰ Van Dam, *Leadership and community in late antique Gaul*, 157.

¹¹ Gregory of Tours, Fik Meijer and M.A. Wes, *Historiën* (Amsterdam 2000) 199.

overlapping letters but differences in the selection of letters.¹² So a complete network of social relationships will never be accomplished.

Finally, a more philosophical problem arises: is the reconstruction of a letter network in late antiquity a reconstruction of a social network? According to Schor, it will never be an objective reconstruction, due to its alterations, but letters are valuable evidence of social interaction. Therefore, this paper will include the individuals who are mentioned in the letters to get a more nuanced picture of the social network. Besides that, the change in curation of the representation of the ego networks could also tell us something about the time itself. The conclusion needs to be more carefully drawn, but it is not theoretically impossible to look through three levels of clouded glass to see the historical 'reality'. Therefore, the compassions of these two gentlemen, with similar backgrounds, can give us an insight in their representation of their network and thereby indirectly tell us something about the social-political changes in medio to late fifth century Gaul.

To make this comparison, this paper will use ego networks of the Roman bishops.¹³ It will be a multi-layer second degree network, with on the one side individuals who received or sent a letter, on the other individuals who are mentioned in the letters, and the letters alone. Due to the inquiry of networks, the edge definition will be contact or mentioning a name, implying knowledge of an individual. Therefore, the network will be undirected. A mathematical definition of the importance of mentioning a name and sending a letter is impossible in historical research, because it would be case sensitive, and therefore not useful in meta-analysis. This paper will separate the two relations in the analysis of ethnicity.

The relations of individuals will be characterised by their ethnicity, based on the nomenclature and social context criteria of Ralph Mathisen.¹⁴ If individuals have Roman looking names and are active in the Roman environment, they are categorised as Roman. Ian Wood usually adds the ethnicity of an individual in his translation of the *Epistulae* of Avitus, which will be used. In case of doubt, the individual will be excluded from the analysis.

This will give a second-degree ego network with direct and indirect contacts, with ethnicity as its main feature. These networks will be analysed as non-dynamic networks, due to the difficulty of dating letters.¹⁵ The incompatibility of the software with data uncertainty, drove this research to an undynamic network analysis. On this chi-squared statistics will be performed and the contacts and mentions of individuals to see the difference in the networks and to give additional support for the existing models.¹⁶ The nature of the correspondence will not be considered, to avoid the risk of aniconism. So, every letter will be a proxy of the network of both Sidonius and Avitus.

The existing models canalise two hypotheses, which will be tested. Firstly, the change over time (Sidonius, 452 – 489 and Avitus, 499 – 518) in the number of individuals in the network will be calculated with χ^2 -test, based on their ethnicity (Roman and non-Roman). Secondly, the influence of the non-Roman kings on the homophily based on ethnicity will be tested with a paired t-test. This is

¹² Bishop of Vienne. Avitus Saint, Danuta Shanzer and Ian N. Wood, *Letters and selected prose*. Translated texts for historians; v. 38 (Liverpool 2002) 31 - 35. An overview of the letters' selection in the transmitted manuscripts. Chapter 2 of this book is devoted to the transmission and editions of the *epistulae*.

¹³ The visualizations are done with the Layout function ForceAtlas 2 in GEPHI.

¹⁴ Ralph Mathisen, 'Sidonius' People', in: *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris*, 32.

¹⁵ Johannes Alexander van Waarden and Gavin Kelly, *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Peeters 2013) 224 - 47.

¹⁶ Ryan Light and James W. Moody, *The oxford handbook of social networks*. Oxford handbooks (New York 2020) 44.

based on the intensity of contact, so a weighted degree calculation. To compare the difference with and without the non-Roman kings, the difference of the EI scores will be tested.

$$EI = \frac{External - Internal}{External + Internal}$$

EI Homophily Index (Kandel)

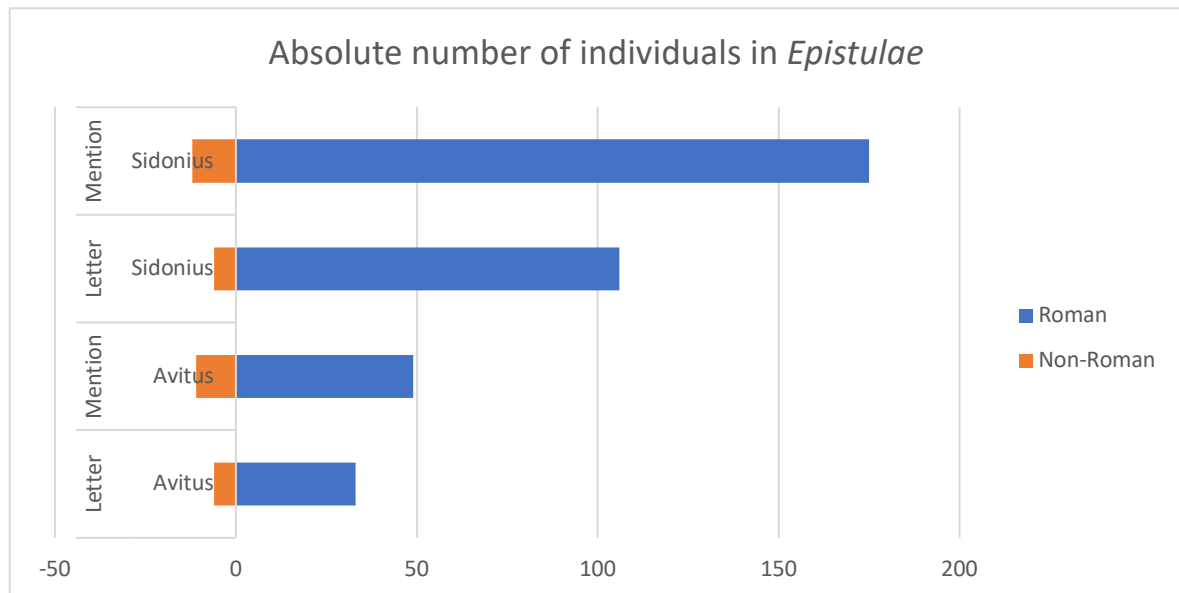
Results

Comparing the two networks of the bishops based on the *letter contact* and the absolute *mention degree*, gave the following results.¹⁷ From the χ^2 -test a significant difference is derived between the *Roman, non-Roman ratio* in the contact individuals of *Avitus of Vienne* and *Sidonius Apollinaris* ($\chi^2(1) = 10.20, p = .001$): Sidonius sent less letters to *non-Romans* than the expected, taking Avitus' ratio into account. But the effect is relatively weak ($\phi = .263$).

The individuals who are mentioned in the bishop's *epistulae* show similar results. From the χ^2 -test a highly significant difference is derived between the *Roman, non-Roman ratio* in the mentioned individuals of Avitus of Vienne and Sidonius Apollonius ($\chi^2(1) = 19.72, p = .00001$): Sidonius mentioned less *non-Romans* than the expected, taking Avitus' ratio into account. However, the effect is relatively weak ($\phi = .282$).

Individual in <i>Epistulae</i>	Roman	Non-Roman
Avitus' letters	33	6
Sidonius' letters	106	2
Avitus mentions	49	11
Sidonius mentions	175	12

Table 1: Number of letters sent to individuals and number of times individuals addressed in letters, characterized on their ethnicity.



Graph 1: Number of letters sent to individuals and number of times individuals addressed in letters, characterized on their ethnicity.

The differences between the weighted data where the non-Roman kings were excluded and included, looking at *Sidonius* and *Avitus* in *Letters* and *Mention*, were not able to reject the null

¹⁷ Both ego networks of Sidonius and Avitus with contacts and the mentioned individuals are to be found in the Appendix.

hypotheses. From the X^2 -test an insignificant difference is derived between the *Letters* and *Mention* in the degree of *Avitus* and *Sidonius* ($X^2(1) = -0.254, p = .386$): the influence of the kings was not significant for the data of *Sidonius* or *Avitus* in the contacts and the content of the letters. The effect is moderate ($\phi = .337$).

From the paired *t*-test for homophily index in the condition of the *difference in EI with and without kings* and the *persons* in the *epistulae* appeared to be a statistically non-significant difference ($t(1) = 1.14, p = .457, 95\%CI[-0.97;1.16]$). The mean of EI of *Avitus*' mentions and contacts ($M = 0.012, SD = 0.017$) was non significantly higher than mean of EI of *Sidonius*' mentions and contacts ($M = 0.179, SD = 0.178$). The effect is large ($d = 0.632$).

El index	Kings	Without kings	Difference
Avitus' letters	-0.833	-0.78	-0.053
Avitus mentions	-0.815	-0.51	-0.305
Sidonius' letters	-0.981	-0.981	0
Sidonius mentions	-0.944	-0.969	0.024

Table 2: The homophily measurement of the contacts of the *epistulae* and the times mentioned based on degree and ethnicity. The difference between the data with and without non-Roman kings is also included.

Discussion

Drawn from the first results, *Avitus* of Vienne had more contact with non-Roman than *Sidonius* Apollonius. This may have different implications. We know from *Sidonius* that he disliked the new Burgundian elite and did not want them near his villa, where *Avitus* did not formulate such aversion against the Burgundians.¹⁸ This could be a personal feature of *Sidonius* and could have nothing to do with the time. Nevertheless, historians have exploited this opinion and considered it as a common perception of the new elite.¹⁹ From other anecdotes we know that *Sidonius* wanted others to believe (or truly considers) that non-Romans are inferior in political and administrative work.²⁰ *Avitus* on the other hand, does not have the luxury of hating the '*barbari*' Rosenberg points out, due to his alliance with the Burgundians. But it is still not clear if this is due to the opportunistic approach of *Avitus* or the perception of the Roman elite in Southern Gaul at the turn of the 5th century.

Interestingly, *Avitus* does not mention non-Romans a lot in his letters to other Romans. And if he does, it is merely formal political letters in which matters need to be arranged for these non-Roman rulers.²¹ These Romans were usually located in the Eastern Roman empire, Burgundy or in Italy. Aside from the local politics, when the larger international network of *Avitus* was needed by the Burgundian kings, *Avitus* was called upon. In the letters of *Sidonius* non-Romans are mentioned even less, relatively. And when they do, it is normally in a negative way. For instance, the compliments to bishop Ferreolus for his success on Attila (Ep. 7.12) or convincing bishop Traumastus in plotting against the Burgundians (Ep. 5.6).²² *Sidonius* is less negative about Theoderic II, king of the Visigoths in his letters. So *Sidonius*

¹⁸ Harry Rosenberg, 'Bishop Avitus of Vienne and the Burgundian Kingdom, A. D. 494-518', *Quidditas* 3 (1982) 5.

¹⁹ Allen E. Jones, *Social mobility in late antique Gaul: strategies and opportunities for the non-elite*, 34.

²⁰ Gavin Kelly and J. A. van Waarden, *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris*, 200 - 1.

²¹ Jones, *Social mobility in late antique Gaul: strategies and opportunities for the non-elite*, 36. For instance in the mentioning of Gundobad to other Romans: Ep. 4, Ep. 30, Ep. 39, Ep. 44, Ep. 47, Ep. 54, Ep. 67.

²² The *epistulae* about King Chilperic II (Ep. 5.6 and Ep. 5.6) and Attila the Hun (Ep. 7.12 and Ep. 8.15). Theoderic II is portrayed more neutrally in Ep. 1.2 and Ep. 2.1.

talks less about non-Romans and dislikes them more than Avitus, or that is what he wants the audience of his published letters to believe. Similarly to Sidonius, Avitus is keeping the relationships in his local network with other Roman bishops warm with traditional amical letters.²³ Letters to thank people, sending poetry and inviting them for dinner are mostly sent to the local bishops and not to non-Romans.²⁴ This implicates a more separated network of bishops than the assimilation theory in this time of period assumes.

But, Avitus had a long-term plan with the new ethnic group in his part of Europe. He had an active campaign on converting the Arian population to the catholic faith. His well-studied *Epistula* 46, congratulating Merovingian king Clovis I with his baptism and the multiple conversations with Gundobad on the catholic doctrine are strong evidence of this ambition.²⁵ This contrasts with Sidonius who showed no interest at converting the *barbari*.²⁶ This can be explained by the lack of Sidonius' interest in herding his flock as bishop, described by Van Dam.²⁷ Or that it was clear for Avitus that the *barbari* were here to stay and that it was important to convert these, now powerful, heretics. Avitus was quite successful in the conversion: the successor of Gundobad, his son Sigismund became a Catholic and Rosenberg argued that the people of Burgundy blended more easily with Francia due to the catholic conversion by Avitus.²⁸ Pointing to a later Roman bishop who cares about the faith of his non-Roman superiors and subjects, which cannot be discerned in Sidonius. It seems that the new episcopal elite interacted similarly as the old Roman elite did in Sidonius time, with a strong cohesion, but also interacting with non-Roman elite on political level and concerning faith, especially the new rulers it seems.

However, this was not confirmed in the second results. The paired *t*-test resulted in a non-significant result in the difference of EI measuring the influence of the non-Roman kings on the network of both bishops. This means that the reduction of the contact degree and mentioning to the EI are paired and combined in a mean. Secondly, the means of the bishops were paired in the paired *t*-test and did not give a significant result. I argue that the *t*-test is not suitable for this data due to the eventual measurement, resulting in a test on two data points (*df* = 1): the mean of the mentioning and contacts, as a homophily difference of the absence of the kings in the network. Thereby, three conditions are measured at once, making the paired *t*-test insufficient and not suitable for the data. Unfortunately, a better statistical test, which matches the assumptions, is not available to my knowledge. This can be a subject for prospective inquiries.

Conclusion

The fifth century is a turbulent century for the West-Roman Empire. Avitus of Vienne and Sidonius Apollinaris have been valuable teachers for this period in social and political history. The social world

²³ Schor, 'Becoming Bishop in the Letters of Basil and Synesius', 301 - 3.; Sigrid Mratschek, 'Sidonius' Social World, in: Kelly and Waarden, *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh 2019) 214 - 237, q.v. 219.; M. P. Hanaghan, *Reading Sidonius' epistles* (Cambridge 2018) 18 - 20.

²⁴ Ep. 15, Ep. 73, Ep. 74, Ep. 62, Ep. 81, Ep. 60, Ep. 63, Ep. 64, Ep. 82, Ep. 83, Ep. 84. Except for Ep. 85 to Ruclo, a layman of Burgundy.

²⁵ Ian Wood, 'Discussions with Kings: The Dialogues of Avitus of Vienne', in: *Discussions with Kings: The Dialogues of Avitus of Vienne* (De Gruyter 2019) 301; Ian Wood, 'The Latin Culture of Gundobad and Sigismund', in: *The Latin Culture of Gundobad and Sigismund* (De Gruyter 2013) 369 - 72.

²⁶ Rosenberg, 'Bishop Avitus of Vienne and the Burgundian Kingdom', 7.

²⁷ Raymond van Dam, *Leadership and community in late antique Gaul*, 156 - 67.

²⁸ Ibid.

changed, and the political structure changed. Historians came up with two models to pour the social reaction of the old Roman elite to comprehend the new non-Roman elite. A model of cultural exclusion and a model of assimilation. This paper has tried to verify these models with the *epistulae* networks of both bishops.

The problem with these *epistulae* is the nature of self-representation and transmission. The network is not complete and is not a representation of the historical reality but the reality of their legacy. Therefore, comparing the two will be an indirect reflection on non-Romans in different times. Also, the networks are different. Sidonius significantly engages less with non-Romans than Avitus. This is either a personal preference, or a change in time. Both gentlemen write the Roman elite in the traditional way, keeping contacts warm and restrictively practising the *epistulae* culture with bishops. Avitus does write more to non-Roman kings for political reasons and is less engaged in the old Roman culture with them but is heavily invested in the conversion campaign for Burgundy. These results indicate the tendency of the first model of exclusion, but in Avitus' time he reacts as if this social behaviour is not durable, implying the second model. He knows the world has changed and that the non-Romans are here to stay.

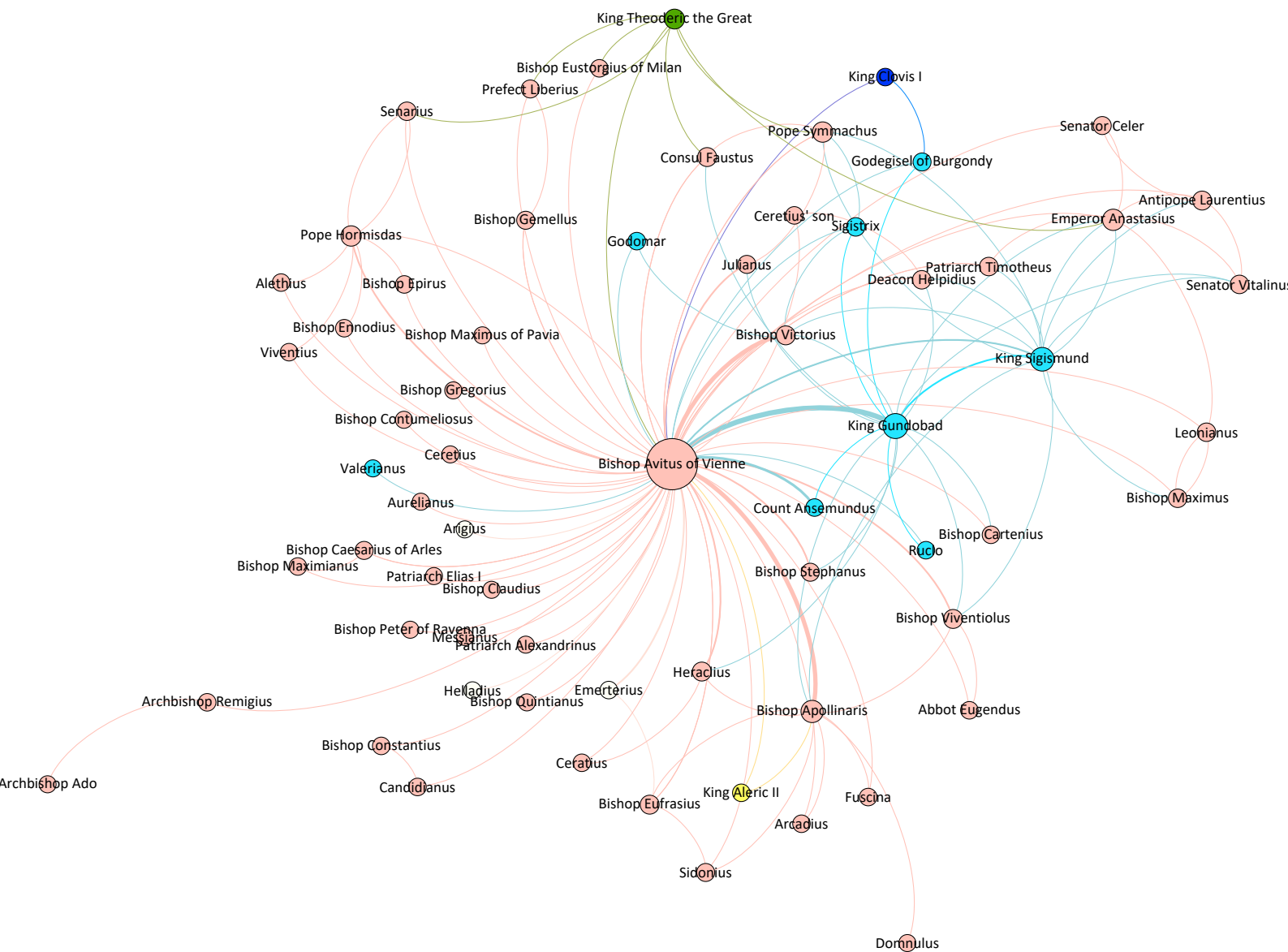
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Letters and mentioned individuals of Avitus of Vienne



■	Roman
■	Visigoth
■	Sueve
■	Burgundian
■	Ostrogoth
■	Hun
■	Unknown
■	Frank
■	Beton

Letters and mentioned individuals of Sidonius Apollinaris

