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CAPTATIO BENEVOLENTIAE IN LATE ANTIQUE EPISTOLOGAPHY AS A MEANS OF PRESERVING COMMUNICATION OF THE INTELLECTUAL ELITE¹

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The article analyzes the epistolary collections of Late Antique authors of the IV–VI centuries: Ausonius, Sidonius Apollinaris, Ruricius of Limoges and others. These representatives of the Late Antique intellectual elite got a brilliant education, and were engaged in literary activities. The epistolary genre was popular among the highest aristocracy not only as a means of communication at a distance, but also as a field for manifesting its education and literary talent. Epistolary contacts connected various regions of the Mediterranean world into a unified network, the members of which supported their Roman identity (“Romanitas”) using a set of rhetorical rules and techniques. The purpose of this study is to reveal the literary trope “*captatio benevolentiae*” expressing the writers’ desire to belittle their merits. This rhetorical technique was used to win favor with the audience due to the authors’ modesty and to motivate the addressee to continue the epistolary dialogue. Lowering the level of their talent and education, as well as the quality of the texts, the authors of the letters forced the interlocutors to refute unfair self-assessment, thereby, maintaining epistolary communication and social ties, as well as forming a closed, elite community of like-minded people distinguished by a refined culture and high level of education and, thus, differentiating themselves from the masses of common people and barbarians.

Key words: Late Antiquity, intellectual elite, social ties, epistolography, rhetoric, *captatio benevolentiae*.

Nowadays we have many ways of communication – telephones, e-mail, social networks – that allow us to contact other person in no time. However, in Late Antiquity, as well as throughout many subsequent centuries, the exchange of letters was used as such a way. Letters allowed their authors not only to exchange news or express emotions caused by different events, but also to demonstrate literary talents, as well as position in the society. Social status was indicated not only by rhetorical education, which made it possible to write in a “high” style, but also by the addressees whom the messages were intended to. Usually, these were the representatives of the nobility who considered themselves as the intellectual elite of Late Antique society that is capable to appreciate the literary delights. Considering these factors, a special rhetorical code was formed in the correspondence, which all authors had to observe. Correspondence, sustained in rhetorical canons, made it possible to feel a sense of community with other members of the elite group against the background of global changes in Late Antique society, since the epistolary genre in its current form was available only to a select few. The rhetorical code included many necessary elements, such as quotations from classical works by Cicero, Virgil, Sallust, and others, as well as some literary tropes. We would like to devote our research to one of them – *captatio benevolentiae*².

The specifics of the development of rhetoric in the Roman period of Antiquity have repeatedly been the subject of study by scholars, for instance, E. R. Curtius, A. B. Kovel’man, G. A. Kennedy, S. S. Averintsev, M. L. Clarke, E. Gunderson, et al.; however, we have not found any certain works devoted to the phenomenon of *captatio benevolentiae* in Late Antique epistolography. In the monograph “*Captatio Benevolentiae: Strategien antiker Rhetorik im Prolog des Höfischen Romans*” written by Florian Schomanek [Schomanek, 2011], the author considers *captatio benevolentiae* as a necessary

element of the classical Roman rhetoric, which served, in his opinion, as a model of the prologue of a medieval courtesy novel.

In 2016, the article, which considers the role of *captatio benevolentiae* in the interaction between the speaker and his audience in Antiquity in comparison with modern rhetoric, was published by Marcela Andokova [Andokova, 2016]. The author explores the theoretical foundations of ancient rhetoric in relation to the *captatio benevolentiae* in the works of Cicero and Quintilian. Considering the Late Antique authors, M. Andokova refers in particular to Augustine of Hippo relying mainly on the text of “*De doctrina Christiana*” and Tyconius with his work “*Liber regularum*”. In contrast to this work, we focus on the epistolary practice of Late Antiquity demonstrating, on the one hand, real-life communication, on the other, based on classical rhetorical canons. We also see our task as tracing, from a historical perspective, the influence of the rhetorical figure under study on the cultivation of personal connections within a period when real communication was difficult due to the current political situation.

As the main sources for our paper we used the collections of letters of some Latin authors which represent the IV, V and early VI centuries. Among them, there are the representatives of the upper stratum of Late Antique society – government officials and bishops. Ausonius (circ. 310 – circ. 395) did not belong to the circle of the senatorial aristocracy, but achieved the highest social status thanks to his literary talents. As a tutor for the young emperor Gratian, the rhetorician had a brilliant career, reaching the pinnacle of it and gaining the consulate. Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 430 – c. 486) was a Gallo-Roman, a representative of the senatorial aristocracy, and had the highest ranks of *cursus honorum*. However, he abandoned secular activities in favor of Christian spiritual service as bishop of Clermont. Ruricius of Limoges (c. 440 – c. 510) also was a nobleman and, by the example of Sidonius, chose spiritual ministry as bishop of Limoges. All these authors got rhetorical education, corresponded extensively and, despite the individual content of the messages, adhered, in one way or another, to rhetorical rules. All of them were Christians, but the range of manifestations of religious fervor varied from almost zero in case of Ausonius Christianity, who only formally adopted it, remaining a pagan in his soul, to the highest level with elements of asceticism in case of Sidonius and Ruricius. In this regard, it is interesting to check whether the last two showed a tendency to use such a literary trope as *captatio benevolentiae*, since following the rhetoric, admiring the great writers of Antiquity did not go well with Christian views (it is enough to recall the textbook example of Jerome’s dream, after which he refused to follow the “Ciceronian” Testaments).

The main criterion for the reliability and validity of the research findings is an integrated approach to the sources. In addition, the research was based on “intellectual history” understood generally as “history of ideas”. We adhere to a broader interpretation of the research field in this area, proposed by American scholars, in which intellectual history encompasses not only the history of political ideas, but also all the diversity of forms of intellectual production [see Grafton, 2009]. We also turned to the achievements of ego-histoire as a new area of historical knowledge, a part of intellectual history that constructs identity and is based on ego-documents (memoirs, diaries and letters), while the ego-document is an information resource contained in sources of personal origin. This is a type of text, in which the author’s (subjective) component dominates, and personal life and experiences take center stage. A hermeneutic approach is necessary when working with source texts, as the text itself is presented as a problem requiring interpretation. Penetration into the deep, inner meaning, as well as opening of the subconscious, become the main goals of hermeneutics – “to understand the author better than he understands himself” [Schleiermacher, 1862; Hirsch, 1967 et al.]. With this approach, the language of the source becomes the most important element of the analysis, as one of the most relevant factors in the formation of mentality that creates different models of world perception.

As for our key subject, at first we can find the short description of the term “*captatio benevolentiae*” in Oxford Classical Dictionary: this phrase – “fishing for good will” – has no ancient authority as a technical term, but describes well what the ancient rhetoricians advise for the exordium of a speech. The hearer is to be rendered “attentive, teachable, and well disposed”: and the prescription for this last requirement involves a display of modesty and good manners on the part of the speaker³.

Cicero as the founder of the Roman epistolary tradition considered the ability “to win over those to whom we speak”⁴ as one of the three pillars, on which the entire building of oratory art is based. In the treatise “*De Oratore*”, he used the verb “*concilio*”, which means “to ingratiate yourself to anyone” (Cic. De or. II, 115, also II, 128). Cicero had spoken even more definitely earlier in his treatise “*De*

Inventione” (a handbook for orators): he advised to talk about one’s own actions and services without any arrogance; to tell the audience in detail about the difficulties that a person had to face; to ask for condescension; to show how high and honorable the reputation of the listener was, and so on (see Cic. *De invent.* I. 16).

We have no such task to go deep into the classical rhetorical technique, but we can remind, for a start, that the correspondents observed the following rules in their messages: usage of typical formulas of greeting / farewell at the beginning and at the end of the letter; manifestation of interest in the affairs of the addressee and his health (by the way, the content of the letter could be limited to this (Sid. Epp. IV. 5; IV. 19; *Rur. Ep.* II. 54 etc.); citing the classics of ancient literature; expressing their complaints or grievances about the lack of response or letters in general, news, attention to the life of a friend (*querellae*), for example, *Symm. Ep.* I. 14; *Aus. Epp.* 24, 28, 29; *Sid. Epp.* IV. 12; IV. 5, etc.); hard work on the letter deep into the night (*lucubratio*), *Aus. Epp.* 21, 22) or – on the contrary – on the run dictated lines, explaining the possible imperfection of the text, on the one hand, and showing the remarkable skills of the letter’s author, who is able to compose an epistolary masterpiece in a short time, on the other hand (*Hier. Ep.* 64). Seeking favor (*captatio benevolentiae*) had a similar purpose. Expressing literary modesty, deliberately belittling their abilities and knowledge of rhetoric, the authors forced the reader to passionately refute this kind of speech and, arguing, praise the friend’s eloquence. There was a large number of stereotyped phrases for the protestations; Ernst Curtius wrote following: “The author apologizes for his style (*sermo*) or his talent (*ingenium*) or both; they are dry, hard, thin (*ariditas, siccitas, ieiunae macies orationis*); artless (*rudis, simplex, communis, incompositus, incomptus, incultus*); crude (*impolitus, scabies*); rusty (*rubigo*); unclean (*sordidus*); paltry (*egestas, inopia, paupertas, exilitas, sterilitas*). These writers are also especially fond of accusing themselves of *rusticitas*, i.e., of a rustically crude and faulty style” [Curtius, 1953, p. 411]. *Captatio benevolentiae* is a rhetorical formula for humiliation of literary talents, common in Latin literary texts (usually at the beginning or in the preface), designed to win the favor of the public, showing that the author puts himself far below the recognized authorities and, thus, causing the audience’s goodwill.

It was a kind of game, its rules were well known to the participants and they followed them with mutual pleasure. Only initiates could play this game, which emphasized their belonging to a narrow circle of connoisseurs of fine literature, rallied against the background of the impoverishment of culture and spread of barbarism. Epistolary literature became the only field, apart from episcopal activity and service to barbarian kings, where the representatives of Late Antique aristocracy could show themselves, stand out and oppose their education to the ignorant masses. *Captatio benevolentiae* literally forced the addressee to take part in a dialogue, thereby, guaranteeing a reply and continued correspondence.

When Sidonius Apollinaris published his personal letters, he, like Pliny, claimed to have revised them from a stylistic point of view, meaning that the letters did not match the level of brilliance expected by his educated audience when he sent them to addressees (*Plin. Ep.* I. 1; *Sid. Ep.* I. 1). Sulpicius Severus was dissatisfied with the publication of his personal letters and documents, which, in his opinion, were not written in a suitable “representative” style (*Sulp. Sev. Ep.* 3. 1–3). The statement that there were written texts that had to be revised by the author’s friend or by the author himself for literary reasons was the most common variation of *captatio benevolentiae* (e.g.: *Sid. Epp.* I. 1, 3; VIII. 16; IX. 11). Nevertheless, such statements were actually supposed to improve the reader’s understanding of the formal perfection and stylistic brilliance of the letter collection. Talking about style was a popular way to define and reinforce the boundaries of friendship, by celebrating the correspondent’s *sermo cultus*, on the one hand, and by writing equally refined response letters, on the other. “The more time consuming the letter composing was the more affection it communicated to its addressee. Senatorial letters were indeed “textualized social performances”, which combined literary expression with practical needs” [Schwitter, 2017, p. 68].

Chronologically, the earliest of our authors was Decimus Magnus Ausonius (c. 310 – c. 395). Most of the moments when he spoke disparagingly of his work can be found in the more than twenty prefaces and dedications in both verse and prose that he appended to his poems [McGill, 2014, p. 123]. For example, in the preface to the cycle of poems “*Parentalia*” Ausonius wrote: “I know my poems are such that they are boring to read; serves me right! Except that sometimes their subject matter is curious or their title is attractive, so that their amusement makes it possible to overcome all their clumsiness⁵...” (*Aus. Par. Praef.*). This Ausonius’s modesty is so exaggerated that it acquires an ironic

character and creates an unmistakable impression that the reader is not supposed to regard the poet as an ungifted person: "... this clumsy booklet (*illepidum, rudem libellum*), / all these trifles, and nonsense, and rubbish, / whom would I trust to take care of this?" (Aus. Eclog. Lib. Aus. Drep. 1).

In the introduction to the poem "*Technopaegnion*" Ausonius wrote: "I send you *Technopaegnion* – the useless fruit of my idleness" (Aus. Techn. Praef. Aus. to Paul. 1). He prefaced his verses "Riddle of the Number Three" with the words: "There was one miserable thing among my knick-knacks ..."; after that, he said to his close friend Axius Paulus: "Finally, this absurd book, which was hidden by myself, but passed from hand to hand, will reach you..." (Aus. Griph. Tern. Num. Praef. Aus. to Symm.).

In each case Ausonius reckoned on the "*indulgent hearing*" ("*ares indulgentissimas*": Techn. IV. Praef. mon. tant. 5) of the addressees, and was aspired not only to receive a letter response, but to hear criticism and praise: "You, like an Aesculapius, revive it [book] to life, or, as a Plato with the help of a Vulcan, save it from dishonor, if the fame is not given to it" (Aus. Griph. Tern. Num. Praef. Aus. to Symm.).

For all that, the works of Ausonius were highly valued by the poet's contemporaries, as Symmachus classified Mosella as equal to the poetry of Virgil, and Paulinus of Nola expressed serious doubts as to whether "Tullius and Maron" could be in the same team with his venerable teacher. In one of his letters, Symmachus wrote to Ausonius: "I hesitate to decide why I am more surprised, the refinement of your lips or your feelings. In any case, you have surpassed everyone in your eloquence so much that I am afraid to answer ..." (Aus. Ep. 1, 4–7).

We did not set out to study the letter collection of Symmachus. However, since he was in correspondence with Ausonius, we will mention the motive *captatio benevolentiae* in his writings. In a letter to Ausonius, in which Symmachus reproached him for not sending "*Mosella*", the Roman senator wrote: "...I know well all the squalor of my gifts and, therefore, it is dearer for me to strive for laconic brevity than page after page to flaunt my verbal impotence..." (Symm. Ep. I. 14).

Sidonius's *captatio benevolentiae* had its own peculiar features. In the introduction to the first book of letters, Sidonius includes an obligatory passage stating the fact that he takes the most modest place that he occupies among his fellow epistolographers: «...I should be following, though with presumptuous steps, the path traced by Quintus Symmachus with his rounded style and by Gaius Plinius with his highly-developed artistry. Marcus Tullius, indeed, I think I had better not mention, for even Julius Titianus in his fictitious letters of famous women failed to produce a satisfactory copy of that writer's epistolary style ... I have always been horribly conscious how far I fall short of these great examples; I have consistently claimed for each the privilege of his own period and genius» (Sid. Ep. I. 1, 1–2)⁶. The rhetoric of this passage is not new: Horace who is one of the favorite poets of Sidonius, wrote almost five centuries ago in the introduction to his odes: "If you include me among the lyre singers, / I will lift my proud head to the stars" (Hor. Od. I. 35–36). Another poet, Statius, allusions to whom can be repeatedly found in Sidonius texts, in the epistolary introduction to the *Silvas*, similarly expressed anxiety about "these trifles that are not worth publishing" (Stat. Praef. Ad Luc. Arr. Stella).

The Sidonius's correspondence was marked by "false modesty when he speaks of himself and hyperbolic praise when he speaks of the others; these two attitudes are inherent in the rules of civility and courtesy evoked by Sidonius himself" [Wolff, 2020, p. 405]. Thus, in the letter to Claudianus Mamertus⁷, Sidonius wrote in the manner of Ausonius: "I considered the dedication to me as a priceless gift: the glory, which my own books will never have, will now be immortalized by your work" (Sid. Ep. IV. 3, 2). Sidonius wrote to a bishop Lupus that "modesty is better for a writer than assurance", and that "diffidence with a much larger probability will rather receive a voice of strict critic than impertinence." (Ibid. IX. 11, 4). In this letter, we can find other examples of *captatio benevolentiae*: Sidonius believes that Lupus should "feel fatigue from immersion in empty and tasteless verbiage" (Ibid. IX. 11, 5) and asks to excuse him for "disgrace of letters" (*neglegentiam litterarum*) (Ibid. IX. 11, 7).

All these maxims of Sidonius are intended only for one thing – to arise in the addressee a desire to respond and to refute Sidonius's statements about his modest talents; to throw a bridge from one message to another, as well as to continue epistolary communication. The letter from Claudianus Mamertus confirms this statement. Claudianus assessed the literary style of Sidonius as "exquisite" (Sid. Ep. IV. 2). At the same time, one more goal was achieved – to differentiate oneself from the mass of ignorant people (*multi*), unable to appreciate the subtle literary game. In this sense, the words

of Sidonius addressed to Arbogastus are illustrative: "...you have drunk from the well of Roman eloquence, and no sips of the Moselle can take away the taste of the Tiber from you. You are familiar with barbarians, but abstain from barbarism..." (Ibid. IV. 17, 1).

Captatio benevolentiae is easily found in the letters of Ruricius. Ruricius was a younger contemporary of Sidonius, whose active correspondence falls on the period from the late V to early VI centuries. He tried to fit the literary model of Sidonius, but he admitted that he had difficulties with the rhetoric of his famous fellow (Rur. Ep. II. 26). This is probably why the expressions that Ruricius used to belittle his literary talents were much harsher than those of his cult-hero – Sidonius.

In the letter to Hesperius, Ruricius wrote: "...as one who has adhered to the ancient rules so far, according to which it is preferable to be silent than to speak, [I] would prefer to hide my ignorance in silent modesty rather than brazenly show it in clumsy speech..." (Rur. Ep. I. 3). He regarded his speech as "slurred" (Ibid.), "poor" (Rur. Ep. I. 10), his language as "rough" and "chatty" (Ep. I. 3), and his talent as "sterile" (*sterili ingeniolo*: Ep. I. 9). Ruricius modestly remarked more than once that he should not "open his tongueless or speechless mouth" (*os elingue reserauit*) (Ep. I. 3, also in Ep. I. 12), so as not to "injure the ears" of his correspondent (Epp. I. 3; 9).

However, traditionally he followed rhetorical rules using antitheses, conversions (Ep. I. 8), and chiasmus (Ep. II. 26); additionally, he demonstrated knowledge of mythology (e.g. Ep. I. 3). Beyond that, there are certainly opposite characteristics in the reply letters. Thus, Sidonius Apollinaris wrote to him: "In your letter there was all the sweetness of love, all the grace of natural eloquence, all the skill of style" (Sid. Ep. VIII. 10). Thus, despite the fact that the literary talents of Ruricius are clearly more modest than those of his older colleague Sidonius, the first, following the rules of *captatio benevolentiae*, deliberately belittled his literary abilities and educational results and achieved the goal he needed – to continue correspondence and receive praise of his brilliance.

A brief excursion to the epistolography of the Latin elite of the IV–VI centuries showed that the representatives of Late Antique nobility, following generally rhetorical rules of correspondence, considered it necessary to use the technique of *captatio benevolentiae* both for demonstrating modesty and for a guaranteed answer, in which the indignant addressee would praise the correspondent. This, in turn, served as a means to continue the correspondence even in a situation where there was no news. The thesis is proved both by fragments from the letters of Ausonius, Sidonius and Ruricius, and by the answers of their correspondents. "False modesty" is not so pronounced in the collection of Sidonius's letters, in comparison with the other two authors, apparently due to the fact that he had a high background, a trail of noble ancestors, kinship with the emperor, as well as the post of bishop. Ausonius, being a talented writer, could not boast of his origin, and Ruricius, having a high social rank and occupying the episcopal see, had a much more modest gift in literature.

Through epistolography, in general, and the method of *captatio benevolentiae*, in particular, social ties were constructed and maintained, forming a closed, elite community of like-minded people, distinguished by a refined culture, a high level of education, and, thus, differentiating themselves from the masses of ordinary people and barbarians.

In the future, this research can be extended with the analysis of the epistolary collections of other authors who have remained outside the scope of this article. Among the several epistolary corpuses of Latin West of the IV–VI centuries, it is advisable to consider the correspondence of Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, Paulinus of Nola, St. Jerome, Avitus of Vienne, and others.

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² Seeking benevolence of the audience – a rhetorical term first proposed by Cicero (De invent. I, 16, 21) and following him Quintilian (Inst. orat. IV, 1, 5). E. R. Curtius names *captatio benevolentiae* as "affected modesty" [Curtius, 1953, p. 411].

³ (2005) "Captatio benevolentiae", in Hornblower, S. & A. Spawforth (eds.), *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3 rev. ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, available at: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198606413.001.0001/acref-9780198606413-e-1357> (accessed: 20.08.2021).

⁴ “Ita omnis ratio dicendi tribus ad persuadendum rebus est nixa: ut probemus vera esse, quae defendimus; ut *conciliemus* eos nobis, qui audiunt; ut animos eorum, ad quemcumque causa postulabit motum, vocemus”.

⁵ The translation belongs to the author, unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ Here is translation of W. B. Anderson, 1963, p. 331, 333.

⁷ The author of the theological work on the nature of the soul “De Statu Animae”, in which he debunked the thesis about the corporeality of the soul, proposed at one time by Faustus of Riez.

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**«СНИСКАНИЕ БЛАГОСКЛОННОСТИ»
(CAPTATIO BENEVOLENTIAE) В ПОЗДНЕАНТИЧНОЙ
ЭПИСТОЛОГРАФИИ КАК СРЕДСТВО СОХРАНЕНИЯ
КОММУНИКАЦИИ ИНТЕЛЛЕКТУАЛЬНОЙ ЭЛИТЫ**

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В статье анализируются эпистолярные коллекции Авсония, Сидония Аполлинария, Руриция Лиможского и других позднеантичных авторов IV–VI вв. Период поздней античности важен для анализа, прежде всего, по причине переходности всех общественных процессов, при котором некоторые традиционные черты классической античности консервировались в общественном сознании, свидетельствуя о континуитете, другие трансформировались в новые, средневековые. Именно в контексте континуитета рассматривается переписка представителей позднеантичной интеллектуальной элиты. Получив блестящее образование, выпускники риторических школ, так или иначе, занимались литературной деятельностью. Эпистолярный жанр был популярен в среде высшей аристократии не только как средство коммуникации на расстоянии, но и как поле для проявления своей образованности и литературного дарования. Эпистолярные контакты связывали различные регионы Средиземноморского мира в единую сеть, члены которой поддерживали свою римскую идентичность («Romanitas») при помощи свода риторических правил и приемов. Целью настоящего исследования является выявление литературного тропа *captatio benevolentiae*, выражавшего стремление литераторов умалить свои достоинства. Этот риторический прием применялся с целью снискания расположения аудитории своей скромностью и мотивирования адресата на продолжение эпистолярного диалога. Принижая уровень своего таланта и образованности, а также качество текста, авторы писем вынуждали собеседников опровергнуть несправедливую самооценку, поддерживая тем самым эпистолярную коммуникацию, сохраняя социальные связи, образуя закрытое, элитарное сообщество единомышленников, отличающихся рафинированной культурой, высоким уровнем образованности и таким образом дифференцирующих себя от массы простых людей и варваров.

Ключевые слова: поздняя Античность, интеллектуальная элита, социальные связи, эпистолография, риторика, *captatio benevolentiae*.

Примечания

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