

APOLLINARIS SIDONIUS, A GALLO-ROMAN SEIGNEUR¹

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THE fourth century orator Symmachus in one of his letters (I. 64) has a sentence which might serve as an introduction to a paper on Sidonius. Though a pagan, he is for once writing on behalf of a Christian bishop and he prefaces his letter with this explanation: “*commendari a me episcopum forte mireris: causa istud mihi, non secta, persuasit*”: “you may perhaps be surprised at my recommending to your notice a bishop: it is his cause and not his creed that has influenced me.” The cause, for which Sidonius stood was the Roman tradition—Roman character, Roman duty, Roman culture. It is true that he belonged to the Christian faith, but in the earlier and more eventful part of his career Christianity meant to him little more than official conformity, and at no time in his life was it an enthusiastic faith like his faith in Rome. It is true that he became a bishop and for the last nine or ten years of his life exercised a wise and benevolent sway over his see of Clermont in Auvergne: but his claim to our attention is based less on his ecclesiastical eminence than on the fact that he records for us so much of Roman life in fifth century Gaul. His writings reveal the work, pleasures, duties and ambitions of an aristocratic Roman provincial, and—perhaps even more important—they give us some indication of his attitude to the barbarian federates who had been settled in parts of Gaul and who were steadily absorbing his country. Of his actual writings some account will be given later; but briefly, he was the most versatile *littérateur* of his age, and by his contemporaries was ranked with Pliny in prose and with Ausonius and Claudian in verse. An aristocrat by family, he was connected by birth and marriage with the most distinguished houses of Southern Gaul, and he had inherited, or acquired by

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dowry, large estates. He was an ardent politician, exerting by his position and his literary talent, a wide influence over Roman Gaul, and he himself had a varied career at the court of three Emperors. If we remember that, though born in A.D. 431, he did not become a bishop till 470, it will be seen that he had ample time in which to know the world and to be disillusioned by politics; and if later the Church promoted him *per saltum* to a bishopric, this change of sphere need not seem so very surprising. To an energetic and influential aristocrat with a capacity for government, the Church now offered the only *militia* which could give him scope. The Church needed a man like Sidonius, not as a teacher, not as a controversialist, nor as a commentator, but as a governor and ruler; and he gained the reputation which was later recognized by the honour of sainthood, not by any special sanctity or asceticism but by those characteristically Roman qualities of devotion, discipline and business-like ability which, 500 years earlier, would have made him a republican consul, and 500 years later might have made him a distinguished abbot. To the administrative routine of his see he applied himself with the same zeal which he would gladly have given to the State. It so happened that critical events in Auvergne demanded special heroism and self-sacrifice from the bishop: but he never thought of himself as fighting for the Church: he and his people are an outpost of the Empire, making a last stand against the encroachment of barbarism. Indeed, it was his pride in the *civitas Romana* which was always the strongest motive of his actions. His Roman ancestry, citizenship, and civilization were his most prized possessions. Again and again in his letters you will find him urging his friends to undertake some office of State which is their heritage and (he thinks) their duty: or he will be insisting on a constant study of the ancient writers, so that the Latin tongue may be kept free from the solecisms and innovations introduced by the ordinary people or by the half-civilized Burgundian or Visigothic federates. It became a passion with him—this love for Rome as the mother-city of Latin culture, this devotion to classical literature, and this high Roman seriousness in the performance of his duty; and after the cession of Auvergne to the Visigoths, when Sidonius had ceased to be a Roman in

name, it is almost pathetic to watch him applying himself with a new intensity to a study of the older writers as the only way left to vindicate his spiritual citizenship and distinguish himself from his barbarian rulers. If I were asked to sum up the interest of Sidonius, I should say that he was a notable Roman, at a time when loyalty to the Empire was neither popular nor expedient.

He was born to wealth and position. Both his grandfather (who, incidentally, had been the first of the family to conform to the Christian religion) and his father were of senatorial rank and had held the highest office of State open to a subject under the imperial bureaucracy—that of praetorian prefect of Gaul. His mother, too, was of good family: she was related to Avitus, who was later to be created Emperor by the Gallic nobility, and whose daughter, Papianilla, was to become Sidonius' wife. Their private fortune was ample: in and around Lyons they possessed remunerative estates; indeed, the very title "senatorial" had come to indicate the order of the great landowners. So Sidonius began life with every material advantage which could assist a young man in politics or society; but it was in literature that he first aspired to succeed. The cultured society of Gaul had a passion for literary pursuits: it firmly believed in the classical tradition: and though by the fifth century the invigorating spirit of antiquity had been lost and there was little originality of thought or treatment, yet it is not till twelve centuries later that we find in France another aristocratic society so devoted to the art of literature. Sidonius soon made a reputation as a polished writer of clever verses such as were fashionable in the literary circles of Lyons: for Lyons was a place of culture where even Martial had been pleased to have admirers of his poems, and in it was the famous rhetorical school of Eusebius, under whose care our author was educated. At this school Sidonius (as we are allowed to gather from his Letters) was one of the ablest pupils. His education comprised the usual grammatical and rhetorical training which had been the system of Roman schools since the last century of the republic. Under the grammarian he read the poets with great exactitude, giving more attention to syntax, modes of expression, prosody and archaeology than to what we should call the literary value of the works. But he read

all the major poets from Virgil onwards and appears to have been specially attracted by Statius and Claudian—judging at least by the frequency with which he imitates them. Under the rhetor he was trained in prose and acquired the intricate technique of oratory: with other members of the great families he made his set speeches—the *suasoriae* and *controversiae* which were as much a feature of the rhetorical education as is the essay of our own—and on subjects, too, which were equally traditional! And we learn that when he read his pieces in the Athenaeum of Lyons, they were received with much applause.

I am inclined to doubt whether he had any real knowledge of Greek. In one of his letters he does represent himself as comparing the plot of Menander's *Epitrepontes* with that of Terence's *Hecyra*: but nowhere else, either explicitly or implicitly, does he show any acquaintance with Greek literature or language. What knowledge he has of Greek poetry and philosophy consists of tabloid maxims such as might have come from the grammarian's lectures. A century earlier there is evidence in Ausonius that the study of Greek in the Gallic schools was dying out from lack of interest and scarcity of qualified teachers: and if in the Bordeaux of Ausonius, which had the most flourishing school of Gaul, Greek was moribund, I hardly think it would have survived so long in the less important academy of Lyons. By this time few students were bilingual either in the West or the East, and Sidonius is no exception: even the scientific words which Latin had taken from Greek he sometimes employs more for effect than for sense, and it is amusing here and there to catch him using words he does not understand and therefore talking pretentious nonsense.

In all his work this writing for effect is apparent. It is necessary always to remember that he was almost the last product of a rhetorical tradition which was five centuries old and which had exercised a continuous effect on Latin prose and verse. The straining after the smart and witty which is seen in Ovid, the attempt to create a novel and striking *sententia* which is such a feature of Lucan, the terse packed style of Tacitus, were all earlier evidences of the desire, implanted by the schools of rhetoric, to say things "with a difference", to express thought

not so much in a way that would be adequate and clear and true, but so as to surprise and delight the audience by epigrammatic point and subtle novelties of phrasing. By Sidonius' time the literary artist concentrated much more on his style than on his matter. The schools were marvellously successful in their limited aim of teaching the skilful use of language : but verbal ingenuity was more valued than original thought, and artificiality and mannerism of expression were cultivated to the detriment of substance and content. The mind of Sidonius, for example, is still interested in facts and he has many interesting facts to tell : but he is always draping them with the elaborate vestments which he regards as good style.

Here I may perhaps digress for a moment in order to state briefly the political situation in Gaul about the time of Sidonius' birth, so that we may be able to understand more fully the circumstances in which he lived and worked. And first as to the civil administration of Gaul. You will recall how Constantine had divided the government of the Empire, setting up two separate administrations, one at Constantinople and the other at Rome, each being the duplicate of the other both in military and in civil jurisdiction, and each having its own sphere of operation. With the East we need not concern ourselves ; but the West was divided into two sections called prefectures, over each of which was set as sole judicial and financial authority a praetorian prefect, responsible only to the Emperor : another prefect, of equal status, was appointed for the government of Rome and his jurisdiction extended for a hundred miles from the city. In due course Sidonius rose to be prefect of Rome and thus achieved his ambition of equalling in dignity his father and grandfather who had been praetorian prefects of Gaul. In the reign of Constantine the Gallic prefect comprised within his area of government all Gaul, Britain, Spain and N. W. Africa—as Gibbon says, “ his authority was obeyed from the Wall of Antoninus to the foot of Mount Atlas ”. For convenience of administration the prefectures were divided into large districts called dioceses, and over each diocese was a vicar, responsible to the praetorian prefect. Gaul, before the Germanic invasions, had four such districts—Britain, the two Gauls, and Spain ; and even

in Sidonius' day, when the Empire had lost so much territory, the original system remained in part, for we find him congratulating a friend on attaining the *vicarianus apex*, the dignity of vicar. As to the military force in the Western Empire, there were frontier posts along the outskirts of the Empire, but the central military force, by the time of the fifth century, was under the command of a single generalissimo, the *magister utriusque militiae*, who was stationed in Italy and controlled a mobile army intended to give immediate protection at whatever point the frontier might be threatened.

Such then had been the civil and military administration of the Western Empire and of Gaul in particular ; but early in the fifth century great changes had come about. You will remember how in 406 the Germanic invasion of Gaul began and how the country was overrun by the Vandals, Alans and Sueves from across the Rhine, who, after devastating Gaul, in 409 crossed the Pyrenees and occupied the greater part of Spain, an area which had till then been secure. The central government in Italy could help little because it was engaged in a desperate struggle of its own against Alaric and his Visigoths who, pushing Westwards from Illyricum, thrice between 402 and 410 invaded Italy and finally, in 410, captured and sacked Rome itself. Alaric died soon after : his Visigoths marched westward, overran Gaul, and swept south into Spain where they attempted to form a kingdom in the province of *Tarraconensis*. It was now Roman policy to use the Visigoths against the Germans : the Visigoths on the Roman behalf undertook to pacify Spain, thus bringing a temporary relief to the Roman army. But the assistance was hardly worth the price : they were rewarded by receiving the Gallic province of *Aquitania Secunda* with an adjacent part of *Narbonne* ; here a Visigothic kingdom was established with *Toulouse* as its capital, and here we now have the spectacle of a self-governing kingdom existing within the Empire and bound to the Empire by the very slender ties of temporary self-interest. This was the first permanent settlement of barbarians on the Roman soil of France and, though they were known as *foederati*, well-disposed associates, they were ultimately destined to abolish Roman authority in Gaul. The next thirty years show the

shrinkage of the Empire: Britain was abandoned; Spain was left almost entirely to the Alan and Suevian federates: N. Africa had been seized by the Vandals who crossed from Spain and established a Germanic kingdom. In Gaul the energy of one brilliant Roman soldier, Aetius, the *magister utriusque militiae*, barely managed to keep Roman territory intact. He was perpetually checking the encroachments of the Visigoths from Aquitaine who were determined to enlarge their possessions at the expense of the Empire, and whose rulers had hopes of a kingdom bounded on the north by the Loire, on the east by the Rhône and on the south by the Mediterranean. The Burgundians pressing S.W. from Upper Germany were another menace: in 443 they were appeased for the moment by being settled in Savoy as federates, but they immediately began to covet the province of Lugdunensis Prima with Lyons as its capital, and before Sidonius was thirty years old they had it. The centripetal shrinkage of the Empire from 380 onwards is nowhere more clearly seen than in the gradual withdrawal of the seat of the Gallic prefecture, from Treves on the Moselle to Autun in Burgundy, and from Autun to Arles at the mouth of the Rhône. It was here in Arles that Sidonius, as a lad of eighteen, assisted at the consular festivities of 449. Two years later Aetius repelled the worst danger of all in Gaul—the invasion of Attila and his Huns: again Aetius averted the danger in the desperate battle of Châlons. In 454 Aetius was assassinated and after a year of turmoil the Gallic nobility and army proclaimed as Emperor the father-in-law of Sidonius—Avitus, who as praetorian prefect had been Aetius' political counterpart and who had conciliated the Visigoths by his diplomacy. The young Sidonius began his political career by accompanying the new Emperor to Rome, and the verse panegyric which in January 456 he pronounced to grace Avitus' assumption of the consulship is one of the documents which throw some light on the obscure history of these years.

Yet in spite of these commotions the aristocratic society of which Sidonius soon became a prominent member seems to have been little disturbed. Young Sidonius appears to have had no doubts. Like every other member of his order he devotes himself to polite literature, to social intercourse, and to holding some

nominal office of State so as to maintain the family dignity. The nobility believed that it was incumbent on every young man with a proper sense of pride to hold some office of State, not necessarily for the experience of statecraft it might give him, but for the honour of the position and to prevent its passing to men of low birth and small means. Such a position need not occupy much of their time or prevent their enjoying life, but it conferred a distinction which it would be a pity to let go by default to upstarts from a lower class. A man of the people, a *novus homo* who had attained office and power, Sidonius could by no means abide: he was no egalitarian in this matter. As for the ordinary barbarians, Sidonius speaks of them with a half-humorous contempt, and he speaks with a playful scorn of Syagrius who has been so perverse as to learn their language; but, when diplomacy advises it, he gives a favourable picture of the Visigothic King, Theodoric II, with whom Avitus was on terms of friendship. Among his own class, however, things were quite different. Country life continued in its peaceful round. Complimentary letters were exchanged between house and house: friend sent his poems to friend for review and criticism: constant and lavish entertainment was afforded at all the villas; and if a noble went on a journey his progress was a kind of procession from house to house, in all of which he was constrained to stay and enjoy the master's boundless hospitality. Indeed, Sidonius tells us that once when he was on a journey two friends who wished to entertain him blocked all the roads with ambushes of slaves and clients, so that he could not possibly escape their attentions; and when they had caught him, there was almost a quarrel as to which should treat him first. All this is described in a letter to another friend who wants to know why he has not arrived sooner—"I'll come in a week," says Sidonius, "When I've given my stomach a rest." The time in such villas passed pleasantly: the master was expected to give a general eye to the management of his estate and to the planning of improvements: like any country-gentleman interested in his property, he would confer with his bailiff and, without appearing miserly, he would watch his accounts and revenues. At other times he read letters and poems his friends had sent him and acknowledged them in

extravagant terms of flattering ecstasy—for the cult of literature and especially of the Muses was a sacred duty among these aristocrats, and complimentary eulogies on a friend's effort were an addition to one's own output. For outdoor exercise he went hunting in the woods : he played ball with his friends beneath a shady tree, or dice if the sun became too hot for energetic sport : and he bathed in the elaborate baths which every wealthy man took a special pleasure in possessing. Or they might all gather for a consular celebration at Arles or for a meeting of the Gallo-Roman senators such as that which proclaimed Avitus emperor : or they might assemble with their wives and families in one of the towns where a new church was to be dedicated or the martyrdom of a Saint to be celebrated : and then they kept carnival : for the religious ceremony was not too exacting : there was time for other celebrations—for feasting and conversation and telling old stories : and all was festivity and good fellowship in a sort of hallowed provincial May-Week.

One of the most delightful and most naturally written episodes in the whole of the letters is the description of such a festival held at Lyons to celebrate the anniversary of St. Justus. The letter is written to satisfy a friend who, being ill at the time, had missed the occasion and desired a full narrative of all that occurred. Sidonius is modestly charmed to oblige—not least because the letter will enshrine quite a notable little poetic triumph of his own. The scene opens with a procession before dawn to the church, which could hardly accommodate the vast crowd of men and women who had assembled to do honour to the Saint. We hear the antiphonal chanting of the Vigils by monks and priests : and with Sidonius we feel the oppressive atmosphere of the huge church, packed to overflowing and lit by countless lights : the night had been sultry, for it was still September : and, with Sidonius, we welcome the first crisp freshness of the autumn morning. When this part of the service was over, there came an interval until nine o'clock. The congregation dispersed, and Sidonius, with a large company of his fellow noblemen, sat down on the grass in the church grounds under the shade of a huge trellised vine close to the tomb of the consul Syagrius. "The talk", he says, "was delightfully enlivened with jests and

banter : above all, thank Heaven for it, there was not a word about State officials or iniquitous taxes, not an informer among us to betray, not a syllable that could repay betrayal. Everone was free to tell any story (provided always it was worth relating and of a proper tenor), and the audience listened appreciatively." But this good conversation becomes a little wearisome and they decide on more active amusement. " We split into two groups according to our ages—one party for ball, the other for the dicing board. I was the leader of the ball-players for you know that after my book the ball is my next best friend." " sphaerae primus ego signifer fui, quae mihi, ut nosti, non minus libro comes habetur "—which, in its way, would not seem a bad motto for a University golf club. " The chief figure on the other side was Domnicus who was rattling his dice in their box as if he wished to sound a trumpet call to play." So the game began, Sidonius and his party playing against a team of students " until ", as he says, " our stiff limbs were enlivened by the healthful exercise ". But now comes tragedy, or tragi-comedy : the illustrious, if somewhat portly, Filimatus feels impelled to join a game in which he had once been an expert, and he sturdily flings himself into the squadrons of players, like Virgil's Aeneas in the fifth *Aeneid* " daring to set his hand to the task of his youth ". But he was not agile enough to avoid the tackles and rushes of the impetuous students and time and again he was tumbled on the grass—at last to pick himself up and retire from the scrimmage " suffering from asthmatic wheeziness, from internal inflammation, and from a recurrent spasm in his side caused by dilation of the liver "—a particularity of symptoms which is characteristic of Sidonius who rather prides himself on his mastery of medical terms. Sidonius kindly escorts the old gentleman from the field, restores his equanimity by some flattering attentions, and fetches him a towel which was dangling on a line behind the porter's lodge, thus enabling him to mop his streaming face. As Filimatus was leisurely drying his cheeks, " I wish ", said he, " that you would improvise a stanza in honour of a towel that has done me such a noble turn." Sidonius was only too willing to consent : his power of improvisation was a talent of which he was immensely proud. Filimatus is nettled

by the poet's ready acceptance of his challenge and he tightens the conditions : the poem must contain his name—not an easy name metrically. “Agreed,” the poet answers, still with the same easy air of quiet competence. “Dictate away, then,” the other said. But Sidonius, too, must have his jest. He smiles urbanely and says that the Lady Muses are sure to be annoyed if he visits them, not alone as they would prefer, but bringing with him such an elderly chaperon as Filimatus. Whereupon comes the retort : “not half as much annoyed as Apollo will be if he finds that young Sidonius is tempting the Maidens to a secret meeting all alone.” After the applause that greeted these exchanges, the secretary is called up with his writing tablets and our poet dictates—nothing very fine or witty, but with a certain extempore facility that passed for much :

Mane novo seu cum ferventia balnea poscunt
 seu cum venatu frons calefacta madet,
 hoc foveat pulcher faciem Filimatus udam,
 migret ut in bibulum vellus ab ore liquor.

But now the bishop's procession appears and it is again time to pay further honours to the Saint.

The Church, with its services and festivals, appears to have had an important if subsidiary place in the aristocratic life of Southern Gaul, and you will not read far in Sidonius' letters before finding chance references to some ecclesiastical business or function : it may be the dedication of a new church, or the memorial inscription written for the tomb of a Saint, or, as we have seen, the description of an annual ceremony. Sometimes he tells of a great gift of land or wealth which has been bestowed on some brotherhood or church and, especially after his appointment as bishop, he employs the good example to encourage his friends in like manner to lay up treasure in heaven : for it is one of the firmest articles of his faith that Christian charity is a profitable and secure investment—“quidquid ecclesiis spargis, tibi colligis”, he says in one place, and the same practical sentiment not infrequently makes its appearance. So we need not wonder if, before Auvergne was ceded to the Visigoths, the Church was wealthy and powerful. But after the Gothic conquest things were not so pleasant : the Visigoths were indeed Christian, having been converted long

before in their ancient home Pannonia, but they were of the Arian heresy and had been separated from the Catholics by a bitter and prolonged controversy which concerned the consubstantiality of the Son of God. It is a remarkable fact that within thirty years of Ambrose's great purge of the Western Church, by which at the Council of Aquileia he re-established Nicene orthodoxy, the barbarian invasions brought hordes of Arians surging over the Empire so that the controversy was again revived—and all the more bitterly because the cleavage was political as well. We shall have cause to see how, in Sidonius' own experience, this combination of political and religious motives involved him in the greatest fight of his career.

The most interesting glimpse of ancient church-business concerns the process of electing a bishop, for it was an *election* in that the people as well as the clergy of the diocese took part in the choice, and the nominee need not be a churchman but was often of the laity. Sidonius describes two election scenes in two different letters (IV. 25 and VII. 9). In the first (at Châlons sur Saone) you have the *variae voluntates oppidanorum*, the various sections of the mob, crying "up" their own candidate: you have the *studia privata* of the candidates themselves, as they eagerly canvass support and seem to possess every qualification except those specially necessary for the position; one is proclaiming his noble birth—but of his character the less said the better: another has hired a company of *claqueurs* whom he has feasted and sent out to sound his praises: another has dropped the hint pretty widely that, if he succeeds, there will be rewards for faithful supporters out of the church property: and over and above all this chaffering you hear the hubbub of the excited crowd the *strepitum turbae furentis*—a situation only to be met by the appointment of two episcopal arbitrators. In the second letter, dealing with an election at Bourges, there again seems no other prospect of a settlement but to appoint an arbitrator with plenary powers to enforce the decision: the laity were persuaded and forego their claims in favour of an episcopal referee and the task of making a choice falls on Sidonius. On the day of the decision there is a huge gathering in the church: even there we hear the murmur and hum of eager conversation: the expectant candidates are all

present, two great pews of them, and there they sit with an air of mingled self-approbation and contempt for their neighbours—*omnes placebant sibi, omnes omnibus displicebant*. Sidonius is equal to the occasion : he mounts the pulpit and delivers a sermon of which he was not a little proud and which he remembered to publish in his selection of Letters. He scolds the people for their unreasonableness, rates the senior clergy for their bickering and jealousy in holy things : he refuses, on a score of excellent reasons, to have anything to do with the suggested candidates: and suddenly produces a dark horse, a personal friend of his own, Simplicius, whom with all formality he declares bishop of the diocese, laying great stress on the fact that he is a gentleman and an aristocrat ; and such was the prestige of Simplicius, both by his social standing and his rectitude of character, that though he had no experience whatever of ecclesiastical duties, the appointment was at once accepted with applause and without demur by people, clergy and candidates.

I have been trying to give what must, I fear, seem a rough and incomplete sketch of the political, social and ecclesiastical conditions existing in Gaul at the time when our author entered public life. He soon attached himself to the fortunes of his father-in-law Avitus, who, next to Aetius, was the most influential statesman in Gaul, and the one man whose diplomacy and character had been able to win the help of the Visigoths during the invasion of Attila. It was about this time that Sidonius visited the Visigothic court at Toulouse, and we have among his letters a minutely detailed description of King Theodoric II in what might almost be termed a prose panegyric—it is so admiring and eulogistic. But this is typical of our author's panegyrics. He is always an enthusiast in his praise and an extremist in his hatreds. He knows no gradations of colouring : all is intensely white or intensely sombre. When he is describing Theodoric, the friend and former pupil of Avitus, he can see nothing but good. Avitus certainly hoped for much from the Visigothic alliance : he was working for the peace of Gaul : and it has been suggested that he may have even imagined a united Gallic State in which the Goths would supply the military strength and the Romans the civilizing and governing spirit. As it happened,

Avitus was enabled by Visigothic support to seize the Emperorship. In 455 the line of Theodosius became extinct with the death of Valentinian III; it was felt in Gaul that Avitus, who could command the support both of his fellow noblemen and of the Visigothic alliance, was the strongest figure in the Western Empire and ought to assume the purple. So he was proclaimed Emperor and went to Rome, accompanied by Sidonius, to establish his government and save the State.

I have sometimes thought that the *Pro Archia* of Cicero, so often praised for its defence of literature, might no less aptly be praised as a treatise on the art of propaganda. *Archias* was valued by the consul Marius (a real philistine, *qui durior ad haec studia videbatur*) as the ancient equivalent of a press agent: and he accompanied L. Lucullus on his campaigns in the same capacity. Indeed the versifier was as useful then to a general or politician as the journalist with access now is to a modern statesman. He is the publicist, who explains or edits the great man's policy and actions. This is exactly the relation in which Claudian stood to Stilicho, and verse propaganda was one of the duties which young Sidonius undertook on behalf of Avitus. The new Emperor was unknown to the Romans. Our poet composed an elaborate verse panegyric which he pronounced on the day of Avitus' assumption of the consulship. With much detail he narrates his father-in-law's history, influence, policy, and hopes. The description is so favourable as to be suspect and one must always allow for exaggeration and overemphasis in assessing the historical value of Sidonius' statements. He was rewarded by having his statue placed in the forum of Trajan, an honour which half-a-century before had been similarly accorded to Claudian. But Claudian, in his limited range, was a poet with a fine mastery of words. Sidonius, on the other hand, has no natural force in poetry: the arrangement, the development, the phraseology are weak and imitative, and the sentiments never show the distinction either of the thinker or the stylist. It is a dull and lifeless poem and I very much doubt whether it contributed to Avitus' cause. At any rate the hopes which Sidonius placed for himself in his patron's advancement came to nothing. Avitus, who as praetorian prefect of Gaul had been a success, now as Emperor

proved a failure, dissipating his wealth in indulgence and alienating the Roman nobility by his provincial manners, his extravagance, and his bodyguard of Goths. Within a few months he was deposed, defeated, and driven to his death by Ricimer, a German in the Roman service, who after his successful campaigns against the Vandals from Africa, had been raised by Avitus to the position of *magister utriusque militiae*—a position which at this time was really the most powerful in the Western Empire. Ricimer, because of his German birth was personally excluded from the imperial succession, but for many years he was to be the power behind the throne, making and unmaking such rulers as he pleased. And now as successor to Avitus he appointed a general of his own, Majorian, who is described by Gibbon as the ablest, noblest, and most attractive personality of all these short-lived Emperors. Sidonius returned to Gaul bitterly disappointed and found the Gallic nobility as discontented and concerned as himself. They formed a conspiracy against the new principate. At Lyons, the centre of the revolt, they made an alliance with the Burgundian king and even accepted a Burgundian garrison into the city. The Visigoths, meantime, considered themselves released from their previous understanding and began to press their encircling movement on Narbonne. Majorian entered Gaul, defeated the rebels, cooped them up in Lyons and compelled the city to surrender. The punishment was severe—the walls and buildings were dismantled and an extremely heavy impost was laid on the citizens, prominent among whom was Sidonius. And now we may witness the fine spectacle of the poetic Muse rising superior to her difficulties. She, who not a year before had sung in honour of Avitus, now was inspired to sing the praises of his successor and right nobly she tackled her job. A second panegyric, even more elaborately flattering than the first, was quickly composed, and by the connivance of Majorian's secretary was publicly recited by the poet in the sacred presence. The effect was all that could be desired. The tax was remitted. Sidonius was welcomed to court, was created Count, and became a personal friend of the Emperor with whom, in the most charming letter of the whole collection (I. xi), we find him dining and conversing on terms of social intimacy. And if

you had protested to our author that the panegyric was strangely inconsistent when his wife was still mourning her father whom Majorian's associates had destroyed, he might perhaps have replied, with the wisdom of the ages, that political consistency is a fine sentiment but it paid no taxes and won no concessions.

But Majorian, too, was deposed and killed by Ricimer. When next we see Sidonius the politician, he is going on a mission to Rome to further the interests of his fellow countrymen by pleading their cause before the new Emperor Anthemius—a Greek from Constantinople nominated by the Eastern Emperor to fill the vacancy in the West. The journey is described for us in the fifth letter of the first book, and though the Latin is very crabbed and difficult, yet it makes entertaining reading to learn how he was transported across the Alps in the Imperial Post and was ferried down the River Po to the imperial city Ravenna, of which he gives a none too favourable account, with its marshes and filthy canals and hustling commerce. After a bout of fever in Calabria, he arrived in Rome just in time to witness the celebrations attendant on the marriage of Ricimer to the daughter of Anthemius—a political match which had no more permanent effect on the peace of the Empire than the similar arrangement between Caesar and Pompey. Sidonius comments with severity and impatience on the mirth and jollification which are carried on day after day and make serious business impossible. At last, by the intervention of friends, his opportunity comes. On New Year's Day he pronounces a third panegyric on a third Emperor—with such success that Anthemius made him Prefect of the City and President of the Senate—a double honour which he thought well worth the extravagant and fulsome flattery of his poem. The office he held was important but honorary: the real work was done by his staff, the permanent civil servants. He remained in Rome for two years, acting as a kind of High Commissioner to keep the cause of his Gallic countrymen before the notice of the government, and while there he witnessed the trial and condemnation of Arvandus, the prefect of Gaul, for treasonable correspondence with Euric, the Visigothic king, in which he advocated the abolition of Roman power in Gaul and a division of the

country between the Visigoths and the Burgundians. Arvandus seems to have been a realist: the plan he proposed expressed exactly the position in Gaul at this time. The central government in Italy was absorbed in its own problem of feeding its population, since sea-power had passed entirely to the Germanic Vandals in N. Africa. Euric was a vigorous, warlike, and ruthless monarch, restrained however by two sagacious advisers, Leo, his Gallo-Roman secretary, and Victorius, his commander-in-chief. His troops had overrun Brittany, he had penetrated little by little as far as the Rhône, and as the price of peace he was always receiving further concessions until only Auvergne in the central part of Gaul remained Roman—and on it he had fixed covetous eyes. The Burgundians, on the other side, by a policy of peaceful penetration had possessed themselves of Lyons: and it was the Emperor's intention, if he had not been distracted by troubles nearer home, to play one party against the other and so safeguard the Roman interests in Gaul. But in Italy the alliance between Ricimer and Anthemius, never more than a political arrangement, had now been almost completely broken. Ricimer referred contemptuously to the Emperor as "Graeculus", "an insignificant Greek", while Anthemius deplored the necessity which made him marry his daughter to a "skin-clad barbarian"—an exchange of compliments which would have warned a less sagacious observer than Sidonius that trouble was imminent. So we find him retiring in disappointment to Gaul, comforted a little by the title of Patrician bestowed on him as he departed, but seeing no prospect of help against the danger to Auvergne which now seemed so imminent. This was about the year 469, and it so happened that a little later the See of Clermont fell vacant and was offered to him by the unanimous will of the people and clergy—in itself no small tribute to his reputation and character. He accepted the offer, though with much spiritual misgiving and for reasons which we can only surmise. I do not think there was any question of vanity or ambition in the acceptance. But there was no longer a career for him at Rome, and his family pride prevented him from imitating many of his contemporaries who took service with the Visigoths in an endeavour to modify the new dominant power

from within. But the Church offered work to men of experience who would serve it. For exercising a moral and diplomatic influence Sidonius was well fitted: but he had none of the spiritual gifts which distinguished Ambrose, or Jerome or Augustine. Nowhere in his letters do I feel that he is inspired with a passionate enthusiasm for the heavenly kingdom such as possessed and energized these great Fathers of the Church. He is vaguely conscious of this lack: he was never quite easy in his episcopal robes: he accuses himself of worldliness: he abandons poetry as a sinful frivolity: in writing to his fellow-bishops he grovels in an agony of spiritual self-abasement: the letters of Books VI and VII, which are practically all addressed to bishops after his election, are full of humility and consciousness of sin: yet a *rhetorical* humility and an *epigrammatic* consciousness of sin, the very hyperbole of which must have given the sinner a melancholy pleasure. But the Church had not selected him for his spirituality. It saw in him a man fitted by nature and training to rule one of its provinces, and it welcomed the qualities which he could contribute—a Roman devotion to duty, the charity of a wealthy and gracious seigneur, and the public voice of a trained orator. Here was a man who would stand by his people in their hour of danger, who would defend their rights and be full of pity for their distress. His See of Clermont and the whole territory of Auvergne was then the most threatened part of Gaul, coveted by King Euric and hated because it thwarted his ambition, harassed by roving bands of Visigoths and ignored by the distant Roman power: and above all there was the religious peril, for Euric was such a bigot in his Arian beliefs and hated the Catholic faith so intensely that, as Sidonius says, “he seemed not so much the ruler of a people as the head of a sect”. I cannot help thinking that the man who, at such a time, accepted the bishopric of Clermont, had in him some elements of unselfishness and courage.

The year before the Visigothic attack on Clermont was indeed anxious. One finds plentiful evidence of it in the letters. In Auvergne raiding parties of Visigoths infest the lonely roads, and no one knows if he will safely reach his journey's end. It is only now and again that you will find a hardy traveller who puts

business before safety—and he will undertake to carry a letter to a friend. You almost dread to receive an answer lest it should disclose a disaster. The social intercourse, the rounds of visits, the sumptuous banquets, the sports, are almost all given over. One can never make plans ahead, for who knows what catastrophe may have intervened. The Church festivals are now occasions of prayer and fasting, if by any means God may avert the danger : and Sidonius actually writes to warn certain friends that it seems foolhardy for them to start out for a festival “ lest in coming to honour the martyr they should themselves be martyred ”. In the city there is the same restless anxiety : many are fleeing before the danger : some are for making peace with the Visigoths : there is much intercession in the churches, and many an anxious eye is cast towards Italy where the Emperor seems to have forgotten their peril. Sidonius, nobleman, bishop and Roman patriot, called together his aristocratic friends who believed as he did, and trusting in themselves without other assistance they put Clermont in a state of defence, raised a militia, repaired and manned the walls and determined that for their part the Gothic invasion should not be undisputed.

Of course, we can now see that the issue was never in any doubt. The victorious Euric with his military resources was sure before long to overcome a company of patriots and volunteers defending the city at their own cost : and yet in the end it was not by act of war, but by the betrayal of friends, that they passed under Visigothic domination. The struggle began in 471 and ended probably four years later. The enemy beseiged the city every year, retiring on the approach of winter. Of the actual siege I need not give you a long account, though in the letters of the man who endured the whole of it, heartening and comforting his people, the description does not lack vivid intensity.

For four years the townsmen, though hampered by a Gothic faction within the walls and weakened by scarcity of supplies, repulsed every attempt of the enemy to storm their city. As the distress caused by the protracted siege became more acute, the defeatist party increased their agitation for peace. The bishop was greatly perplexed : he could not understand why relief did not come and he began to wonder whether some public sin against

Heaven might not be responsible for their condition. He instituted special prayers in the churches to avert the evil: to encourage his people he brought from Lyons an old friend, Constantius, a saintly priest whose sermons inspired them with new assurance and resolution. There is one specially stirring letter in which he tells how Ecdicius, called the Hector of Clermont, burst through the ring of besiegers with a handful of men and entered the city amid the enthusiastic cheering of the townsfolk; and then we are told how Ecdicius reorganized the defence, how the walls were patrolled day and night, and how sallying parties made sudden raids on the Goths until in the autumn Euric retired baffled. But what he lost in the field, he gained by negotiation. It had been Roman policy to buy a temporary appeasement by ceding territory and to ease the pressure in one area by withdrawing in another. Now a committee of four Gallic bishops was appointed to bargain with Euric and it concluded peace in 475 by surrendering the whole of Auvergne in return, as far as we can learn, for the small corner of Provence which included Arles. And so Sidonius and his Arvernians, by the decision of the Empire, ceased to be Romans and their brave vindication of their citizenship had been for nothing. The disillusionment and anger at the betrayal were intensely bitter. It is all revealed in a passionate letter written to one of the negotiators, where Sidonius for once abandons his affectations of style and speaks out clearly and manfully. "Our ancestors need no longer glory in the name of Roman—they have now no children to bear it. Oh! break this infamous peace at any cost—you have pretexts enough. It will be a *joy*, if need be, again to endure the siege and starvation. But if we are betrayed, we whom force failed to conquer, we shall know beyond a doubt that this barbarous and cowardly transaction was inspired by you." But neither protest nor anger could help: the country was handed over: Sidonius, as the most uncompromising of the defenders, was imprisoned first in the fortress of Livia on the Spanish frontier and later in Bordeaux. At last in 477, by the intercession of Euric's secretary, Leo, and thanks to a poem of characteristically extravagant hyperbole in praise of Euric, he was released from prison and restored to his bishopric.

It was now, when he returned to his See a disappointed man who had lost what he most esteemed in life, that his friends persuaded him to make a contribution to Roman culture by collecting, revising and publishing, after the manner of Pliny and Symmachus, the many letters which he was known to have written ; and to this task he devoted himself with an ever increasing interest till his death probably in 480. We have, after the example set by Pliny, nine books of letters or 147 letters in all, varying in length from half a page of Teubner text to as much as six or seven pages, having many occasional poems interspersed, and including every topic on which a man of Sidonius' manifold interests might be expected to write. I have already indicated a good many of his subjects, for practically all I have told you comes from the letters. You have letters to commend a friend's poems or introduce his own : you have elaborate letters of introduction given to a friend for presentation to some distant patron : there are detailed descriptions of a villa, or a journey, or some notability, or some amusing incident, the whole structure built up with a laboured attention to detail which betokens infinite care in composition but which makes the Latin extremely difficult and obscure. And indeed the style of Sidonius, which he thought his chief glory, is in reality his chief drawback. If one can penetrate the tortuosity of his expression, the thought and matter are interesting. But to read him requires an unceasing and close concentration, for he seldom drops his formal mannerisms : he lived in an epoch when literary taste demanded style, even style divorced from thought and ideas ; and it is not unfair to say that Sidonius is interesting in spite of his style. He is always straining himself to be brilliant in a new way, to write *paulo politius*, and he is far less concerned with what he has to say than with the accessories and externals with which he will say it. Hence he abounds in forced antitheses, verbal jingles, puns, extravagant metaphors, obscure allusions, unusual words and collocations of words, odd periphrases for a simple idea, archaisms, daring turns of phrase and novel uses of common words—or to sum up in one of his own expressions—he is concerned more with the *spuma verborum quam medulla sensuum*. He is never so frigid and affected as when he aims at wit or the grand manner : he is

never so charming as on the rare occasions when, absorbed by his subject, he forgets to be on his best behaviour and speaks naturally. In addition, he had a thorough knowledge of classical Latin—not what we should call an appreciative and sympathetic understanding of the literature, but rather a verbal knowledge which had stored up in a retentive mind hundreds of the more unusual words and phrases for imitation as occasion demanded. Everywhere, both in the Letters and especially in the Poems we get these deliberate reminiscences which give his style the appearance of mosaic or patchwork. His plagiarisms from Pliny and Symmachus are countless, and when given his own particular twist become what I can only call enigma variations. Pliny's interest and clarity we all recognize: Symmachus could say conventional nothings in delicate and graceful idiom: when one first sets out to read Sidonius, one feels that his Latinity has lost the true Roman flavour and that the disintegration of the late Empire has set in. And yet he believed himself an apostle of Roman eloquence and was constantly writing and working to redeem the language from the corruption of vulgar idiom and the intrusion of Celtic and Gothic words. We know that some of his friends had learnt German and he counsels them to keep up their acquaintance with the classics lest their style should be vitiated. This abhorrence of the debased plebeian Latin may explain his own literary procedure. He is so resolved not to be vulgar that his very classicism appears grotesque: indeed it is almost a proof of good writing to be strange and unintelligible. "*Nova ibi verba quia vetusta*", he writes when desiring to pay a high compliment to the style of his friend Mamertus—"there are many strange words in the book—strange because they are classical"; and so out of contrast with the popular speech he will ransack the pages of antiquity to find words and phrases which, by their very stamp of genuineness, will redeem his style from the charge of impurity. Our English poet, Edmund Spenser, for very different reasons sought out and used archaic words: and though no one will accept Ben Jonson's dictum that Spenser, in imitating the ancients, "writ no language", yet the saying might well be applied to the usage of Sidonius: he is neither ancient nor modern, but in spite of himself transitional, and therefore

difficult, wordy and obscure. In brief, he has never learned the grace and charm of simplicity. His wealth of ornament offends because in it all there is no restraint, no economy. This is his greatest fault as a writer, this lack of economy, this unbalance between the matter and the expression : though he has, in spite of himself, much interest for us moderns as a writer in an age which without him would indeed be dark.