

# Medieval Sourcebook:

## Sidonius Apollinaris:

### A Civilized Barbarian and a Barbarous Roman

*Sidonius Apollinaris was a well-connected aristocrat from south-west Gaul, many of whose letters survive. These two are an interesting contrast: the first describes a "civilised barbarian" (the Visigothic king, Theodoric II, whose main residences were Toulouse and Bordeaux), and the second a "barbarous Roman" (Seronatus).*

#### **i. Sidonius to [his brother-in-law] Agricola (*Letters I.2*) (AD. 454?)**

You have often begged a description of Theodoric the Gothic king, whose gentle breeding fame commends to every nation; you want him in his quantity and quality, in his person, and the manner of his existence. I gladly accede, as far as the limits of my page allow, and highly approve so fine and ingenuous a curiosity. Well, he is a man worth knowing, even by those who cannot enjoy his close acquaintance, so happily have Providence and Nature joined to endow him with the perfect gifts of fortune; his way of life is such that not even the envy which lies in wait for kings can rob him of his proper praise. And first as to his person. He is well set up, in height above the average man, but below the giant. His head is round, with curled hair retreating somewhat from brow to crown. His nervous neck is free from disfiguring knots. The eyebrows are bushy and arched; when the lids droop, the lashes reach almost half-way down the cheeks. The upper ears are buried under overlying locks, after the fashion of his race. The nose is finely aquiline; the lips are thin and not enlarged by undue distension of the mouth. Every day the hair springing from his nostrils is cut back; that on the face springs thick from the hollow of the temples, but the razor has not yet come upon his cheek, and his barber is assiduous in eradicating the rich growth on the lower part of the face. Chin, throat, and neck are full, but not fat, and all of fair complexion; seen close, their colour is fresh as that of youth; they often flush, but from modesty, and not from anger. His shoulders are smooth, the upper- and forearms strong and hard; hands broad, breast prominent; waist receding. The spine dividing the broad expanse of back does not project, and you can see the springing of the ribs; the sides swell with salient muscle, the well-girt flanks are full of vigour. His thighs are like hard horn; the knee-joints firm and masculine; the knees themselves the comeliest and least wrinkled in the world. A full ankle supports the leg, and the foot is small to bear such mighty limbs.

Now for the routine of his public life. Before daybreak he goes with a very small suite to attend the service of his priests. He prays with assiduity, but, if I may speak in confidence, one may suspect more of habit than conviction in this piety.

Administrative duties of the kingdom take up the rest of the morning. Armed nobles stand about the royal seat; the mass of guards in their garb of skins are admitted that they may be within call, but kept at the threshold for quiet's sake; only a murmur of them comes in from their post at the doors, between the curtain and the outer barrier. And now the foreign envoys are introduced. The king hears them out, and says little; if a thing needs more discussion he puts it off, but accelerates matters ripe for dispatch. The second hour arrives; he rises from the throne to inspect his treasure-chamber or stable. If the chase is the order of the day, he joins it, but never carries his bow at his side, considering this derogatory to royal state. When a bird or beast is marked for him, or happens to cross his path, he puts his hand behind his back and takes the bow from a page with the string all hanging loose; for as he deems it a boy's trick to bear it in a quiver, so he holds it effeminate to receive the weapon ready strung. When it is given him, he sometimes holds it in both hands and bends the extremities towards each other; at others he sets it, knot-end downward, against his lifted heel, and runs his finger up the slack and wavering string. After that, he takes his arrows, adjusts, and lets fly. He will ask you beforehand what you would like him to transfix; you choose, and he hits. If there is a miss through either's error, your vision will mostly be at fault, and not the archer's skill.

On ordinary days, his table resembles that of a private person. The board does not groan beneath a mass of dull and unpolished silver set on by panting servitors; the weight lies rather in the conversation than in the plate; there is either sensible talk or none. The hangings and draperies used on these occasions are sometimes of purple silk, sometimes only of linen; art, not costliness, commends the fare, as spotlessness rather than bulk the silver. Toasts are few, and you will oftener see a thirsty guest impatient, than a full one refusing cup or bowl. In short, you will find elegance of Greece, good cheer of Gaul, Italian nimbleness, the state of public banquets with the attentive service of a private table, and everywhere the discipline of a king's house. What need for me to describe the pomp of his feast days? No man is so unknown as not to know of them. But to my theme again. The siesta after dinner is always slight, and sometimes intermitted. When inclined for the board-game, he is quick to gather up the dice, examines them with care, shakes the box with expert hand, throw rapidly, humorously apostrophizes them, and patiently waits the issue. Silent at a good throw, he makes merry over a bad, annoyed by neither fortune, and always the philosopher. He is too proud to ask or to refuse a revenge; he disdains to avail himself of one if offered; and if it is opposed will quietly go on playing.

You effect recovery of your men without obstruction on his side; he recovers his without collusion upon yours. You see the strategist when he moves the pieces; his one thought is victory. Yet at play he puts off a little of his kingly rigour, inciting all to good fellowship and the freedom of the game: I think he is afraid of being feared. Vexation in the man whom he beats delights him; he will never believe that his opponents have not let him win unless their annoyance proves him really victor. You would be surprised how often the pleasure born of these little

happenings may favour the march of great affairs. Petitions that some wrecked influence had left derelict come unexpectedly to port; I myself am gladly beaten by him when I have a favour to ask, since the loss of my game may mean the gaining of my cause. About the ninth hour, the burden of government begins again. Back come the importunates, back the ushers to remove them; on all sides buzz the voices of petitioners, a sound which lasts till evening, and does not diminish till interrupted by the royal repast ; even then they only disperse to attend their various patrons among the courtiers, and are astir till bedtime. Sometimes, though this is rare, supper is enlivened by sallies of mimes, but no guest is ever exposed to the wound of a biting tongue. Withal there is no noise of hydraulic organ, or choir with its conductor intoning a set piece; you will hear no players of lyre or flute, no master of the music, no girls with cithara or tabor; the king cares for no strains but those which no less charm the mind with virtue than the ear with melody. When he rises to withdraw, the treasury watch begins its vigil; armed sentries stand on guard during the first hours of slumber. But I am wandering from my subject. I never promised a whole chapter on the kingdom, but a few words about the king. I must stay my pen; you asked for nothing more than one or two facts about the person and the tastes of Theodoric; and my own aim was to write a letter, not a history. Farewell.

## **ii. Sidonius to his brother in law Ecdicius (*Letters*, II.1) (c.470)**

Your countrymen of Auvergne [the province in central Gaul, with its capital at Clermont (now Clermont-Ferrand) from which Sidonius himself came] suffer equally from two evils. "What are those?" you ask. Seronatus' presence and your own absence. Seronatus—his very name first calls for notice; I think that when he was so named, a prescient fortune must have played with contradictions, as our predecessors did who by periphrasis used the root of "beautiful" [bellus] in their word for war [bellum], the most hideous thing on earth [...] This Catiline of our day [a reference to the "criminal" from first-century BC Rome, described in Sallust's *Catiline Conspiracy*] is just returned from the region of the Adour to blend in whole confusion the fortune and the blood of unhappy victims which down there he had only pledged himself in part to shed. You must know that his long-dissembled savagery comes daily further into the light. His spire affronts the day; his dissimulation was abject, as his arrogance is servile. He commands like a despot; no tyrant more exacting than he, no judge more peremptory in sentence, no barbarian falser in false witness. The livelong day he goes armed from cowardice, and starving from pure meanness. Greed makes him formidable, and vanity cruel; he continually commits himself the very thefts he punishes in others. To the universal amusement he will rant of war in a civilian company, and of literature among Goths. Though he barely knows the alphabet, he has the conceit to dictate letters in public, and the impudence to revise them under the same conditions.

All property he covets he makes a show of buying, but he never thinks of paying, nor does he trouble to furnish himself with deeds, knowing it hopeless to prove a

title. In the council-chamber he commands, but in counsel he is mute. He jests in church, and preaches at table; snores on the bench, and breathes condemnation in his bedroom. His actions are filling the woods with dangerous fugitives from the estates, the churches with scoundrels, the prisons with holy men. He cries the Goths up and the Romans down; he prepares illusions for prefects and collusions with public accountants. He tramples under foot the Theodosian Code to set in its place the laws of a Theodoric, raking up old charges to justify new imposts. Be quick, then, to unravel the tangle of affairs that makes you linger; cut short whatever causes you delay. Our people are at the last gasp; freedom is almost dead. Whether there is any hope, or whether all is to be despair, they want you in their midst to lead them. If the State is powerless to succour, if, as rumour says, the Emperor Anthemius is without resource, our nobility is determined to follow your lead, and give up their country or the hair of their heads. Farewell.

**Source.**

From, Sidonius, *The Letters of Sidonius*, trans. O.M. Dalton, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1915), two vols. [As on University of Reading Website]