

CREATING CULTURE AND PRESENTING THE SELF IN SIDONIUS

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1 *Renovatio*: Cultural Revival in the Style of Pliny

THE CRITERIA THAT defined the Roman senatorial aristocracy and determined its membership were not confined to personal rank, exercise of power, and relationship with the emperor: an important role was also played by cultural practices and habits of self-presentation. Birth and origin, education and lifestyle, landholdings and villas, social prestige and the memory of their ancestors (*memoria*) were the essential markers of identity.¹ *Amicitia* – the widely accepted belief that aristocrats not only held particular honours and pursued particular activities but also thought alike – was the ideal that underlay the sense of allegiance that individuals felt to this self-aware peer group in Gaul and fostered a feeling of solidarity among its members.² Their local or regional patriotism was closely bound up with their devotion to what they considered to be the best of the classical culture in which they had been educated.³ Sidonius and his friends lived in the midst of barbarians:⁴ Clermont looked west to Visigothic Aquitania, and east to Burgundian Lyon. From Sidonius' point of view, the settlement of Burgundians and Visigoths meant not simply loss of territory and homeland, but also the progressive erosion of civilisation and intellectual life. His greatest concern was that the purple of aristocratic diction (*nobilium sermonum purpurae*) might, if not nurtured, grow pale and disappear.⁵ When he invoked a celebrated passage of Horace's *Ars Poetica* (15–16), it was to illustrate to his readers the visual quality of the elaborate poetic language in which his fellow senators communicated, a language artfully and artistically fashioned from a

Chapters 5 and 6 have a joint theoretically substantiated introduction (ch. 5, sect. 1) and conclusion (ch. 6, sect. 7). See further ch. 5, note preceding n. 1.

¹ Rebenich (2008) 173–4. On self-perception and social discourses, see Hess (2019), and Meurer (2019) using Sidonius and Ennodius to represent Gaul and Italy.

² Mathisen (1993) 9–16: 'The Aristocratic Background of Late Roman Gaul', and Harries (1994) 246–50. Cf. ch. 5, sect. 2, sect. 3, and sect. 6.

³ Chadwick (1955) 302 and Harries (1994) 16–17, (1996) 34–5.

⁴ Sidon. *Carm.* 12.1–4 *me . . . inter crinigeras situm catervas / et Germanica verba sustinentem*, 'me, put up with long-haired hordes, having to endure German speech'. On the ubiquitous presence of barbarians (here in the Arras area), cf. *Carm.* 5.219 with Loyer (1960) 1.177 n. 38 (*barbaricus resonat hymen*, 'a barbarian marriage-song resounds'); Gennadius (*Vir. ill.* 92) makes a comparable statement: *inter barbarae ferocitatis duritiam*, 'amid the duress of barbarian savagery'.

⁵ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.10.1 *sic omnes nobilium sermonum purpurae per incuriam vulgi decolorabuntur*, 'so will all the purple ornaments of aristocratic diction be dulled by the slovenliness of the mob'. Also *Carm.* 22 *ep.* 6 *multis isdemque purpureis locorum communium pannis*, 'many as well as purple patches of stock phrases'. Here, note the contrast with *usualis sermo*, 'ordinary language' (*Ep.* 4.10.2), see Harries (1994) 2–3. See also *Ep.* 9.3.5 describing Faustus of Riez as *utranumque doctissimus disciplinarum*, 'an expert in both disciplines [i.e., theological and juridical usage]', and Alc. Avit. *Carm.* 6 *prol.* (MGH AA 6/2. 27), see Mratschek (2002) 47, 406–7.

complex intertextual weave of classical and biblical allusions, and the exclusive preserve of the cultural elite to whom alone it made sense.⁶ For Sidonius and his circle the beauty of the Latin language (*sermonis pompa Latini*) had long since faded from view in the Belgian provinces and the Rhineland; poetry had capitulated to the advancing Germanic language.⁷ Refined sensibility and the intellectual life were a bulwark against the barbarians and a last refuge from the progressive dissolution of the old order.

The hope was that mutual reassurance among those of one's rank as to the value of the shared cultural tradition, coupled with disparagement of those who shirked the effort involved, would safeguard the Latin language 'against the rust of vulgar barbarisms'.⁸ It was not by mere caprice that Sidonius lauded his friend Johannes as *litterarum quodammodo iam sepultarum suscitator, fautor, assertor*, presenting Johannes as the language's reviver, promoter, and champion, who had halted the decline of culture and revived a literature already dead and buried – echoing Pliny's praise for Titinius Capito, 'the restorer and reformer of literature in its decline' (*litterarum . . . senescentium reductor ac reformator*) in the age of Trajan.⁹ Like Pliny and Pliny's friends, Constantius of Lyon, to whom Sidonius dedicated his letter collection, was an 'enthusiastic patron not merely of literature, but of the creators of literature' (*immodicus . . . fautor non studiorum modo verum etiam studiosorum*).¹⁰ But the most meritorious achievement of all was that of Sidonius himself, according to Claudianus Mamertus, who, in line with his own agenda, extolled him as *veteris reparator eloquentiae*, resuscitator of the long-vanished art of rhetoric.¹¹ In aspiring to a revival (*renovatio*), Sidonius was seeking not to turn the clock back, but rather to retain and revitalise the old concepts and values in changed political, economic, and social circumstances.

⁶ Hor. *Ars* 15–16 *purpureus, late qui splendeat, unus et alter / adsuitur pannus*, 'one or two purple patches are so stitched on as to glitter far and wide'. Brink (1971) 95 glosses the disputed term 'purple patch' as meaning unity of descriptive writing and poetic narrative structure; Stoehr-Monjou (2013) 165 as an expression of the 'jewelled style', Rudd (1989) 15 as a 'form of decoration', esp. in descriptive passages, Newlands (2013) 74–5 as Sidonius' 'attempt to describe a new genre', Schwitter (2015) 145–6 as an 'intertextual mosaic structure' generating deliberate obscurity (*obscuritas*); contra Hardie (2019) 223–49. For differing interpretations of the complete Horatian intertext in Sidon. *Ep.* 9.16.4, see Loyer (1943) 114, who perceives contradiction, Peltari (2016), who detects irony, Condorelli (2008) 159–60 and Stoehr-Monjou (2013) 166–7, focusing on ring composition as a principle of unity, and Mratschek (2017), who interprets it in terms of a structural principle underlying his correspondence: Sidonius adopted the rules of the Horatian *Ars Poetica* (21–3) as a unifying model for his letter collection.

⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.17.2 (to Arbogastes, *comes* of Trier). On the sound of *Germanica verba*, see Mratschek (2020) on *Carm.* 12.4 and 9–11 (cf. this volume, ch. 5, sect. 6).

⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.10.1 *ut, nisi vel paucissimi quique meram linguae Latiaris proprietatem de trivialium barbarismorum robigine vindicaveritis, eam brevi abolitam defleamus interemptaque*, '[the number of slipshod people has so increased] that, unless there are at least a modest few like yourself to defend the exact use of the language of Latium from the rust of vulgar barbarisms, we shall shortly be lamenting its extinction and annihilation'. See Gemeinhardt (2007) 225.

⁹ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.2.1; cf. Plin. *Ep.* 8.12.1. See Krasser (1995) 66–8 and Mratschek (2008) 221–2.

¹⁰ Sidon. *Ep.* 1.1.3. Plin. *Ep.* 6.6.3 used the same wordplay in his recommendations for Iulius Naso: *erat non studiorum tantum, verum etiam studiosorum amantissimus*, 'he was a true lover, not only of literature, but also of creators of literature'. Note the echoes of the characterisation of Vibius Severus (Plin. *Ep.* 4.28.2): *studiorum summa reverentia, summus amor studiosorum*, 'the highest regard for literature, the greatest love of creators of literature'. Cf. Pliny's self-display as 'a supporter and recommender', *fautor etiam commendatorque* (*Ep.* 6.23.5). See Gibson in this volume ch. 11, sect. 3, on Pliny and Symmachus as 'primary models'.

¹¹ Claud. Mam. *Stat. an. praef.* (CSEL 11, 20.17), the letter in which he dedicates *De statu animae* to Sidonius. This view was widely held, e.g. Ruric. *Ep.* 2.26.8 (*eloquentiae flore*, '[Sidonius'] blooming eloquence') and Sidon. *Ep.* 5.2.1 to Mamertus on how the correspondents reciprocally enhanced each other's status. On the decline of rhetoric cf. Claud. Mam. *Ep.* 2 to Sapaudus (CSEL 11, 204.22–3). See Shanzer (2005) 91 and Gemeinhardt (2007) 225.

There was innovation as well as renovation. As Sidonius and his compatriot, the poet Rutilius Namatianus, observed: ‘The essence of rebirth is the ability to rise after misfortunes.’¹²

2 The Construction of History: Creating Identity from the Past

It was for this reason that Sidonius remodelled history to serve the needs of the present, illustrating it wherever necessary with highlights (*purpura*) from the epic repertoire of classical *exempla* from history and myth that Quintilian identified as supporting evidence for the moulding of opinion.¹³ Present-day protagonists thus became part of the exemplary past stretching back to Augustus and beyond him to the foundation of Rome. It suited Sidonius’ own self-presentation to expunge the heroic record of Gaul’s rising against Rome under Vercingetorix from the collective memory in favour of a dubious genealogy representing the Arverni as descended from Trojan (that is, Roman) origins. During the defence of Clermont he assumed the mantle of ‘the Decius of our day’ when calling, with all the epic fervour of Silius Italicus, for resolute resistance against the ‘barbarian’ Hannibal, now embodied in Euric, the Visigothic king.¹⁴ This idealised image of the resistance fighter was to acquire added lustre in the *elogium* of his epitaph, in which Sidonius, as head of the military force (*rector militiae*) and judge in the forum (*forique iudex*), not only overcame the onslaughts of the hordes from beyond the pale, but curbed the unbridled fury of the barbarians (*furor barbaricus*) through legislation.¹⁵

In the course of such processes of appropriation, myths presented as timeless verities became meaningful narratives, and historical *exempla* of virtue and vice became patterns capable of moulding collective action.¹⁶ Sidonius mobilised heroes from Rome’s mythical past, such as Serranus and Fabricius, and armed them with the invective of a Cato against Carthage, of a Cicero against the public enemy Catiline, so that they might stir the descendants of the

¹² Rut. Nam. 1.140 *ordo renascendi est crescere posse malis*; cf. Sidon. *Carm.* 7.7 *cui [Romae] fixus . . . / ordo fuit crevisse malis*, ‘it has been her [i.e. Rome’s] fixed destiny to grow greater by misfortunes’. See Hardie (2019) 246 and Schierl (2013) 245. On the concept of political and cultural renewal cf. also the ‘*reparatio Reipublicae*’ on coinage under Theodosius I reprised by Oros. *Hist.* 7.34.5, and the ‘*contomiaties*’ glorifying the Roman and classical past.

¹³ On *exempla*, see Stoehr-Monjou in this volume, ch. 9, sect. 3. Cf. Quint. 5.11 (on both historical and mythical *exempla*), esp. 6: *potentissimum . . . exemplum, id est rei gestae aut ut gestae utilis ad persuadendum id, quod intenderit, commemoratio*, ‘an example is the most effective [means of corroborating proof], that is to say the mention of an event which either took place or is treated as having taken place, in order to make your point convincing’. See Newby (2014) 263 n. 38. On the mythological apparatus, e.g. Sidon. *Carm.* 7.17–40 (council of the gods, with catalogue of the gods attending), 7.45–598 (the goddess Roma as an allegorical representative of the wishes of the city, and Jupiter’s speech); see Cameron (1970) 193, Watson (1998) 184–93, Kulikowski (2008) 338–9, Schindler (2009) 182–98, and Kelly (2012, 2013b).

¹⁴ Sidon. *Ep.* 7.7.2 is an echo not only of Luc. 1.429, but also of Hannibal’s capture of Capua in Silius Italicus and Livy, as shown by van Waarden (2010) 350–1, together with the new interpretation by Mratschek (2013) 249–71. Compare the story of the Trojan origin of the Franks, Woolf (2011) 117.

¹⁵ Lütjohann (1887), vi, v. 4–9: *rector militiae forique iudex / mundi inter tumidas quietus undas / causarum moderans subinde motus / leges barbarico dedit furori, / discordantibus inter arma regnis / pacem consilio reduxit amplo*, ‘head of the police force, judge in court, quiet amid the world’s billowing waves, then managing the turmoil of lawsuits, he imposed laws on the barbarian fury; for the realms that were involved in an armed conflict he restored peace by his great prudence’. Sidonius was not involved in the redaction of the Codex Euricianus. On the role that Sidonius may have played in the peace negotiations between Visigoths and Burgundians in 476, see Prévot (1993b) 228; the negotiator’s role is ascribed to Sidonius’ son by Condorelli (2013a) 279. For further discussion of the epitaph and its problems, see in this volume van Waarden, ch. 1, sect. 2, point 1, Mathisen, ch. 2, sect. 10.7, and Kelly ch. 3, sect. 5.1.

¹⁶ Cameron (2011) 513, Leppin (2015) 1–18, Schmitzer (2015) 71–92, and Watson (1998) on the special charge acquired by myths in Sidonius.

leading statesmen of Gaul into committing themselves politically.¹⁷ Major landowners such as Syagrius, great-grandson of Fl. Afranius Syagrius, consul in 382, were expected to emulate role models from the distant republican past by forsaking the ploughshare and donning the toga, as Camillus and Serranus had done.¹⁸ Sidonius praised Eucherius, who later became the people's candidate for the see of Bourges, calling him, echoing the words of Pliny (*Ep.* 6.21.1), an *exemplum* for the present and an exceptionally effective operator (*vir efficacissimus*): at this point in history, with the empire disintegrating into ruins, Eucherius brought to mind such past luminaries as L. Iunius Brutus, who played a leading part in the expulsion of the kings from Rome, and T. Manlius Torquatus, dictator twice and consul three times, whose bravery and patriotism (*virtus ac pietas in patrem patriamque*) during the Gallic invasions of the fourth century BCE had become proverbial.¹⁹ Under Euric such conduct was no longer appropriate: no wonder a *vir illustris* of the calibre of Eucherius, from the days of a former empire, was put to death in a fitting manner in the kingdom of the Visigoths: at Euric's command, a section of ancient wall was made to topple and crush him.²⁰

Sidonius' epic panegyrics, a means of political communication in the style of Claudian,²¹ kept rulers mindful of the glorious past and its focus on expansion of the *imperium* by holding up a 'crisis mirror' of their own epoch, suggesting both decay and regeneration (*regeneratio imperii*).²² Praise combines with protreptic. The elaborate claim that the past is linked to the present must be seen against the background of civil war and usurpation. Trajan the conqueror, the very ideal of an emperor, from the perspective of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,²³ became the identification model for a Gaul menaced by Franks, Alamanni, and Burgundians. In a politically fragmented world, a remembered imperial genealogy provided the Gallo-Roman aristocracy with enduring paradigms of ethical conduct as a guarantee for the future. In his panegyrics on Avitus (*Carm.* 7.102–18) and Majorian (5.314–27), Sidonius held up a mirror for princes, as it were, by making the emperors file past for review.²⁴ In his judgement, a ruler

¹⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.8.1 (appeal to Syagrius) *Dic, Gallicanae flos iuventutis, quousque tandem ruralium operum negotiosus urbana fastidis?*, 'Tell me, you flower of our Gallo-Roman youth, how long are you going to busy yourself with rustic activities and disdain those of the town?' See *PLRE* 1, 862 (Syagrius 2) and Kelly (2016b) 213–14 distinguishing the Syagrii; on Fabricius in detail Stoehr-Monjou (2014); cf. Furbetta (2013a).

¹⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.8.2 *quid Serranorum aemulus et Camillorum cum regas stivam, dissimulas optare palmatam?*, 'why guide the plough handle in competition with Serranus and Camillus and yet forgo all ambition for the consul's robe?'

¹⁹ Sidon. *Ep.* 3.8.1 (to Eucherius) quotes Plin. *Ep.* 6.21.1 and continues with a triple litotes: *neque si Romana respublica in haec miseriarum extrema defluxit, . . . non idcirco Brutos Torquatosque non pariunt mea saecula . . . de te mihi ad te sermo est, vir efficacissime*, 'although the Roman commonwealth has sunk to such an extreme helplessness . . . it does not follow that my times never give birth to a Brutus or a Torquatus . . . I'm speaking to you about yourself, you marvel of efficiency.' On Manlius Torquatus' celebrated duel with the Celtic leader (361 BCE), see Liv. 7.10.4.

²⁰ Greg. Tur. *Hist.* 2.20. See *PCBE* 4, 658–9 (Eucherius 3), and Brown (2012) 406.

²¹ Cameron (1970) 193, Schindler (2009) 181–215, Ware (2012) 42–4, Rees (2012b) 46–8, Gillett (2012) on 'epic panegyric' as a new genre of communication (fig. 12.1), and Kelly (2012, 2013b) focusing on individual motifs.

²² The Latin word *panegyricus*, deriving ultimately from Isocrates' *Panegyrikos* from 380 BCE, seems to have been used first in Latin as the title for Isocrates' work by Cicero (*Orat.* 37) and Quintilian (*Inst.* 3.8.9; 10.4.4); see *TLL* 10, 1.203–4.

²³ E.g. Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 13.8: Trajan as *aequus demens patientissimus . . . perfidelis*, 'just, merciful, extremely patient, very loyal'; Amm. 30.9.1 *si . . . vixerat ut Traianus et Marcus*, 'if he had lived like Trajan and Marcus'. Cassiod. *Var.* 8.13.4 from 526 CE: *redde nunc Plinium et sume Traianum*, 'put off Pliny, and take up Trajan'. See Cameron (2016b) 481, Kelly (2015) 230–1, Watson (1998) 193; cf. von Moos (1988) 464–6 with n. 922 on the invention of the *Institutio Traiani* in the medieval period.

²⁴ A well-known anecdote places Magnus, Majorian's *praefectus praetorio Galliarum* in 458–9 and consul in 460, on the same pedestal as Licinius Sura, who was Trajan's most dependable friend (Sidon. *Carm.* 5.561): before the assembled senate, Trajan entrusted him with his sword; see Cass. Dio 68.15.4–16, Plin. *Pan.* 67.8, and Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 13.9.

found favour only if he had ‘merited’ the title: Trajan qualified, by his habit of winning, and Vespasian for similar reasons (*simili . . . labore*).²⁵ Anthemius, an emperor who came from the East, was welcomed implicitly as a superior alternative to the barbarian Ricimer on account of his compendious ‘Roman’ scholarship, which embraced all the *artes liberales* and the entire *παιδεία* of the past from the pre-Socratics to Tacitus.²⁶

In Sidonius’ public discourse with his audience, the political history of the aristocracy in Gaul reached its pinnacle with the reign of Avitus. In his panegyric of the emperor Avitus, when Roma, brought low, bemoans her downfall, only a ‘new Trajan’ is able to help her.²⁷ Until very recently, it was generally believed that the outbreak of hostilities between Goths and Romans prompted Avitus’ mission to the Visigothic court in Toulouse;²⁸ and this, indeed, was what Sidonius’ panegyric aimed to suggest to his senatorial audience. But according to Kulikowski’s thought-provoking interpretation, there was an imminent threat of civil war between the royal brothers and rivals Theoderic II and Frederic.²⁹ The traditional image of the Roman treaty being sealed by the brothers joining hands, with Avitus as peacemaker in the middle, reminded Sidonius of Romulus and Tatius, *exempla* from Rome’s early history. In the new reading, this points to the alliance (*foedus*) between the rightful king and his brother,³⁰ while the *communis opinio* is that the treaty is between Avitus and Theoderic.³¹ Sidonius’ distortion of historical reality, embedding Avitus in a glorious Roman past, is thus a legitimisation strategy: it deflects attention from the fact that it was these negotiations that led to the proclamation – in Arles, July 455 – of his own father-in-law as emperor, with armed Gothic support.³²

²⁵ Sidon. *Carm.* 7.116–7 *Traianum nescio si quis / aequiperet*, ‘I don’t know if anyone can match Trajan’; 5.317–18 *Traianum Nerva vocavit, / cum pignus iam victor erat*, ‘Nerva called Trajan to power when his son was already a conqueror’; cf. 5.326 (on Vespasian) *simili . . . labore*, ‘with similar exertion’; 7.110–11: *inclitus armis / Vespasianus*, ‘Vespasian, famous in war’. As in Pliny, the comparison (Trajan – Domitian) becomes a ‘guarantee of truth’; see Kelly (2015) 227 following Bartsch (1994).

²⁶ *Carm.* 2.155–92. On Anthemius’ ‘being appreciated for his potential by an enlightened state’, see Watson (1998) 195; on Aurora as a surrogate for Constantinople, Kelly (2012) 258–60, 264, (2013b) 187–9.

²⁷ Sidon. *Carm.* 7.116–8 *Traianum nescio si quis / aequiperet, ni fors iterum tu, Gallia, mittas / qui vincat*, ‘I don’t know if anyone can match Trajan, unless you, Gaul, should again send someone who surpasses him.’ On comparable ‘similarities’ between Trajan and Theodosius in panegyric literature, see Kelly (2015) 236–8.

²⁸ E.g. Gillett (2003), ch. 3: ‘The Hero as Envoy: Sidonius Apollinaris’ Panegyric on Avitus’ (84–112), esp. 86–7, 108–9.

²⁹ Kulikowski (2008) 335–52.

³⁰ Sidon. *Carm.* 7.435–8 *post hinc germano regis, hinc rege retento / Palladium implicitis manibus subiere Tolosam. / haud secus insertis ad pulvinaria palmis / Romulus et Tatius foedus iecere*, ‘then [Avitus] kept on one side the king, on the other side the king’s brother, and with joined hands they entered Toulouse, city of Pallas. In the same way, Romulus and Tatius established their treaty joining hands beside the couches of the gods.’ See Kulikowski (2008) 343–6.

³¹ On Romulus-Avitus and Tatius-Theoderic invoking the Livian hypotext (1.10–13.8), see Watson (1998) 188–9, Gualandri (2000) 105–29, Furbetta (2014b) 80–1, focusing on the comparison Avitus/Apollo, and Stoehr-Monjou (2014) 102–3 identifying Fabricius/Romulus as a model for Avitus. On Aeneas-Avitus and Evander-Theoderic (Verg. *Aen.* 8.51–5), see Jolivet (2014) 111–28.

³² Sidon. *Carm.* 7.516–9 (Theoderic to Avitus) *‘suadere meum est; nam Gallia si te / compulerit, quae iure potest, tibi pareat orbis / ne pereat.’ dixit pariterque in verba petita / dat sanctam cum fratre fidem*, ‘“I can only make suggestions; in fact, if Gaul compels you, as it has the right to do, the world would obey you in order not to perish,” he said, and right away, together with his brother, gave his solemn pledge in the required words.’ Marius Avent. *Chron. s.a.* 455 (MGH AA 11.232): *levatus est Avitus imperator in Gallias. et ingressus est Theodoricus rex Gothorum Arelatum cum fratribus suis in pace*, ‘Avitus was elevated as emperor in Gaul, and the Gothic king Theoderic peacefully entered Arles with his brothers.’ See Kulikowski (2008) 336–7, 347–8, Gillett (2003) 86–7 and (2012) 284.

3 Reading the Classics: Creative Elites in Gaul

Under Augustus, Vergil had considered the art of government to be the preserve of the Romans, leaving intellectual and aesthetic arts to the Greeks.³³ For Sidonius, as for the younger Pliny, the canon of typically Roman responsibilities also included preserving the cultural heritage, aesthetic sensibility, and education. Did he merely wish to surpass Vergil in demanding that the preservation of cultural superiority be seen as an enduring responsibility of the Gallo-Roman elites? Or did he and his friends reimagine posterity as the continued existence, not of civic community as such, but of a community of readers like themselves?³⁴ The essence of *eruditio* or *παιδεία* was familiarity with the classical authors, and such familiarity was a defining characteristic of the aristocrat and permitted shifts of status in the acculturation process of the barbarians: ‘The more you read,’ Sidonius asserted (*Ep.* 4.17.2), ‘the more you will come to appreciate, day by day, that the educated are no less superior to the unlettered than men are to beasts.’³⁵ An uneducated mind (*subagreste ingenium*), however, would exclude the individual from this circle, however lofty his position.³⁶ The senator Syagrius becomes a target for Sidonius’ teasing, having learnt to speak the Germanic language – a barbarian in his presence must fear producing a barbarism.³⁷ In contrast, the author discovers ‘traces of our vanishing culture’ in Arbogastes, the grandson of the Frankish general, and urges him to develop them through constant reading.³⁸ Reading the classics, and thus constantly reliving the past in the present, was an act that created identity, as is shown by the example of the rhetor Hesperius, ‘a jewel of friends and star of letters’.³⁹ On getting married, Hesperius received from Sidonius not a congratulatory telegram but a strong exhortation to persevere in his study of the past through incessant reading. His mentor reminded him of a whole series of renowned orators, from the republic to the present day, whose wives had supported their literary ambitions: what Marcia did for Hortensius, Terentia did for Cicero, Calpurnia for the younger Pliny, Pudentilla for Apuleius, and Rusticiana for Symmachus.⁴⁰ Sidonius’ efforts seem to have been crowned with success, for the *gens* maintained their leadership role as a consequence of the culture of reading. Ruricius, bishop of Limoges, was delighted to see his sons enrolled in the school of rhetoric run by Hesperius: ‘With the world in

³³ Verg. *Aen.* 6.847–52 *excident alii spirantia mollius aera / . . . vivos ducent de marmore voltus; / orabunt causas melius . . . / tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento / – haec tibi erunt artes – pacique imponere morem*, ‘others will beat out the breathing bronze more smoothly, coax features to life from the marble, plead cases with greater eloquence . . . : you, Roman, be sure to rule the world (these will be your arts), to crown peace with justice’.

³⁴ Woolf (2012) 298.

³⁵ Cited below, n. 38. Note the chiasmus *beluis homines – rusticis institutos*. See Ward-Perkins (2005) 80–1 and Demandt (2007) 467. Cf. *Ep.* 7.14.10 (to Philagrius) *lectioni adhibes diligentiam, ego quoque*, ‘you devote great attention to reading; so do I’. Hernández Lobato (2012a) 250 concludes ‘that to Sidonius the entire world is *déjà lu*’.

³⁶ *Subagreste ingenium* (*Amm.* 30.4.2) refers to Valens rather than to Domitius Modestus; see Tränkle (2008) 505–8; contra Matthews (1989) 461 and Eigler (2003) 9–11, 118.

³⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 5.5.3 *quod te praesente formidet linguae suae facere barbarus barbarismum*, ‘that in your presence the barbarian is afraid to perpetrate a barbarism in his own language’. See Ward-Perkins (2005) 79–80.

³⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.17.2 *granditer laetor saltim in illustri pectore tuo vanescentium litterarum remansisse vestigia, quae si frequenti lectione continuas, experiere per dies, quanto antecellunt beluis homines, tanto anteferri rusticis institutos*, ‘I am very glad that at any rate in your illustrious heart there have remained traces of our vanishing culture. If you extend these by constant reading you will discover for yourself as each day passes that the educated are no less superior to the unlettered than men are to beasts.’ On his descent, see ch. 5, sect. 6.

³⁹ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.10.5 *opus est ut sine dissimulatione lectites, sine fine lecturias*, ‘you must read without distraction, keep reading without end’; 4.22.1 *Hesperius, gemma amiconum litterarumque*. See Eigler (2003) 126–7, Näf (1995) 137, and Krasser (1995) 79–89.

⁴⁰ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.10.5–6. Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 4.19.2 soon after his marriage to Calpurnia.

such universal upheaval, they would undoubtedly lose their nobility (*nobilitas*) did they not have you as their yardstick (*index*).⁴¹

Like Pliny before him, Sidonius maintained that his *patria* had produced a creative elite to which he had contributed substantially as an author and as the centre of a literary circle. Namatius, admiral of Euric's fleet, and owner of an estate at Saintes, filled his off-duty hours with literature, building work, and hunting on the Île d'Oléron.⁴² Sidonius sent him Varro's *Libri logistorici* and Eusebius' *Chronicle* to help him refine both his philosophical and Christian lifestyle and his literary manner – adding the sardonic rider that he should read them during his hours on watch.⁴³ Fl. Synesius Gennadius Paulus, an ex-prefect of Rome and *vir illustris*, and Heronius, delegate to the imperial court: high-ranking officials all, when their day's work was done would try their hand at composing poetry.⁴⁴ Bordeaux and Arles were famous for their *collegium poetarum*.⁴⁵ Horace's self-image as the immortal poet reappears in humorous multiple projection when Sidonius likens all of Gaul to a 'choir of singing swans' whose members he reviews one by one for the benefit of his readers.⁴⁶ The standard of excellence for the entire cultured elite is the grammarian and rhetor Johannes, who, as late as 478, has a first-rate knowledge of bilingual (that is, Greek and Latin) culture.⁴⁷ Sidonius prophesies (*Ep.* 8.2.2) that in the territory under Visigothic occupation Johannes' literary ability (*litterae*) will earn him immortal glory 'as a second Demosthenes' and 'second Cicero' in the eyes of contemporaries and posterity, and that he will be honoured with statues.⁴⁸ None comes close to him except Consentius' supremely cultivated father, the author of two works on grammar, and the son-in-law of the usurper Jovinus of Narbonne. Versed in such disparate *artes* as philosophy, mathematics, poetry, and rhetoric, Consentius' father combines Roman sternness with Attic elegance – *rigorque / Romanus fuit Attico in lepore* (*Carm.* 23.99–100), and in Sidonius' judgement outshines every poet and prose stylist since the Silver Age.⁴⁹ Proculus, a poet from Liguria, and only on the fringes of the circle, is even described as rivalling Vergil.⁵⁰ The intellectual pursuits of women, by contrast, seem to have been limited to the reading of edifying religious literature.⁵¹ Only Sidonius' cousin Eulalia ventured further. Where Pliny's wife

⁴¹ Ruric. *Ep.* 1.3 (an indirect reaction to Sidon. *Ep.* 8.2.2): *utique in tanta rerum confusione amitterent nobilitatem, si indicem non haberent*. See Mathisen (2001a) 102–3.

⁴² Sidon. *Ep.* 8.6.10–13.

⁴³ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.6.18, with Anderson (1965) 2.432–3, n. 2: *Varonem logistoricum . . . et Eusebium chronographum misi, quorum si ad te lima pervenerit, si quid inter excubiales curas . . . vacabis*, 'I send you the logistorian Varro and the chronographer Eusebius; if this refining tool reaches you, if you have got some spare time while keeping watch'. Probably the second Book of Eusebius' *Chronicle* translated by Jerome, but see Cameron (2011) 437.

⁴⁴ E.g., 1.9.7 (Heronius) *Clius tuae hexametris*, 'the hexameters of your Clio' (see Wolff (2012c)); 1.9.1 (Paulus *praefectorius*, identified by Mathisen in this volume, ch. 2, 'Prosopography', with the urban prefect before 467–8 (*PLRE* 2, 855 (Fl. Synesius Gennadius Paulus 36)), contra Loyen (1970) 2.214 n. 35, who thinks of the Paulus who was twice PVR in 438 and 443/50 (*PLRE* 2, 854 (Fl. Paulus 31)) *propositionibus aenigmata, sententiis schemata, versibus commata . . . facit*, 'he creates subtleties in his propositions, figures in his utterings, phrasing in his verses'.

⁴⁵ The president of the poetical society in Bordeaux was Anthedius, who excelled in *artes liberales* (Sidon. *Carm.* 22 *ep.* 2). On the *collegium poetarum* in Arles (*Ep.* 9.13.5), see Condorelli (2013b), and on a similar society dedicated to philosophy and Platonist learning in *Ep.* 4.11.1 (*collegium . . . conplatoniorum*), see Brittain (2001) 239–45.

⁴⁶ On Sidonius' catalogue of swans (*Carm.* 40 (*Ep.* 9.15.1) 15–34) and the productivity of his literary friends, see Mratschek (2017) 316–19; on their political agon Schwitter (2020).

⁴⁷ *PLRE* 2, 601 (Ioannes 30), and Kaufmann (1995) 315, no. 56.

⁴⁸ Kaufmann (1995) 233–4 considers Demosthenes and Cicero to be cultural and political role models.

⁴⁹ Sidon. *Carm.* 23.97–169. See Stroheker (1948) 161–2, no. 95.

⁵⁰ *Carm.* 40 (*Ep.* 9.15.1) 44–9 (Proculus). See Stevens (1933) 14–5.

⁵¹ Which filled the bookcases of Prusianum (*Ep.* 2.9.4): *sic tamen quod qui inter matronarum cathedras codices erant, stilus his religiosus inveniebatur*, '[the arrangement was] such that the manuscripts near the ladies' seats were of a devotional type'.

had listened to his recitations from behind a discreetly hung curtain, Eulalia even intimidated her father-in-law, Magnus of Narbonne, thereby earning herself from her amused uncle the oxymoronic epithet of ‘Athenian Minerva’.⁵²

Sidonius portrayed a society that could compete in terms of social and cultural accomplishments with the aristocrats of the past. Defining his own position, he said: ‘I feel deep respect for the ancients without on that account holding the achievements and merits of my contemporaries in low esteem.’ There is an echo here of Sidonius’ emulation of high cultural role models from the age of Trajan, giving new life to Verginius Rufus and Vestricius Spurinna, members of Pliny’s circle.⁵³ Sidonius supplied his political friends with a line of distinguished forebears against whom they might measure themselves. Tacitus is given an unexpected new role as ancestor of the eloquent praetorian prefect Polemius.⁵⁴ Leo of Narbonne, *consiliarius* at the court of the Visigothic king, who had by that time built up a reputation as orator, poet, philosopher, and lawyer,⁵⁵ turns out to be descended from the rhetor Fronto.⁵⁶ Both Leo and Polemius leave Tacitus in their wake and reduce such poets as Ausonius to impotent envy.⁵⁷

4 Powers of Persuasion: Literature as Argument

Discourse on the high culture of the past, with learned allusions to Pliny’s circle and contemporaries, and to the Augustan Golden Age, served a twofold purpose. On the one hand, reflecting Sidonius’ sense of competitiveness (*aemulatio*), it displayed the literary learning of the author and his allies in the culture war; on the other, it also proved in practice to be an

⁵² Perhaps an allusion to her sister-in-law ‘Attica’, see Sidon. *Carm.* 24.95–8 *hic saepe Eulaliae meae legeris* [sc. *libelle*], / *cuius Cecropiae pares Minervae / mores et rigidi senes et ipse / quondam purpureus socer timebant*, ‘here you [i.e. book of mine] will often be read to my [cousin] Eulalia, of whose character, worthy of Athenian Minerva, strict greybeards and even her husband’s father in the days when he wore the purple used to stand in awe’. On family ties, see Mathisen (2003b) 65–6 and 71 (stemma). Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 4.19.3.

⁵³ Sidon. *Ep.* 3.8.1 *Veneror antiquos, non tamen ita, uti qui aequaeuorum meorum virtutes aut merita postponam*. Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 6.21.1 *Sum ex iis qui mirer antiquos, non tamen, ut quidam, temporum nostrorum ingenia despicio*, ‘I am an admirer of the ancients but not, like some people, so as to despise the talents of our own times’; Tac. *Dial.* 41.5 *nunc . . . bono saeculi sui quisque citra obtrectationem alterius utatur*, ‘now let everybody enjoy the good of his own times without looking down on someone else’s’. See Gibson and Morello (2012), ch. 4: ‘Corellius Rufus, Verginius Rufus and the Limits of Exemplarity’, 126–35.

⁵⁴ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.14.1 *Gaius* (instead of *Publius*) *Tacitus unus e maioribus tuis, Ulpianorum temporum consularis*, ‘Tacitus, one of your ancestors, a man of consular rank from the times of the Ulpian dynasty’. He was as eloquent as his ancestor: an allusion to Tacitus’ funeral oration for Verginius Rufus in the year 97 (Plin. *Ep.* 2.1.1). Cf. the praise for Tacitus in Sidon. *Carm.* 2.192 (*qua pompa Tacitus numquam sine laude loquendus*, ‘the majesty of Tacitus, a name never to be uttered without praise’) and 23.153–4 (*et qui pro ingenio fluente nulli, / Corneli Tacite, es tacendus ori*, ‘you, Cornelius Tacitus, whom nobody should leave unmentioned because of your eloquence’).

⁵⁵ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.3.3 *illos carminum modos . . . perorandi illud quoque celeberrimum flumen . . . condatatissimas declamationes . . . foedus . . . sub legibus*, ‘those poetic rhythms . . . also that famous flow of oratory . . . much-acclaimed declamations . . . the treaty . . . by laws [concerning barbarians]’; 8.3.5 *virum . . . plurimis similem tui*, ‘a man [i.e. the philosopher Apollonius] who was in many respects like you [i.e. Leo]’.

⁵⁶ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.3.3 *suspende perorandi illud quoque celeberrimum flumen, quod non solum gentilicium sed domesticum tibi quodque in tuum pectus per succiduas aetates ab atavo Frontone transfunditur*, ‘suspend too that renowned flow of oratory which belongs not only to your clan but to your family, and which flowing on through successive generations from your own ancestor Fronto now discharges itself into your breast’.

⁵⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.22.2; 4.14.2 (on Leo and Polemius) with Amherdt (2001) 345–6: *nam tuorum peritiae comparatus non solum Cornelios oratores sed Ausonios quoque poetas vincere potes*, ‘for if comparison is made between your skill and that of your ancestors you will win the palm not only from prose writers like Tacitus but from poets like Ausonius’. See Stevens (1933) 14–15.

effective instrument for moulding opinion, in particular for influencing prominent members of the new political ruling class, which was made up of high-ranking imperial officials, advisers to the Visigothic king, and young senators. With a mastery such as Sidonius possessed of the codes by which, in accordance with the rhetorical guidelines of Demetrios, letters might lay bare the writer's affective life and his character traits like a 'mirror of the soul', he was perfectly placed to deploy these codes to manipulate his correspondents.⁵⁸ Depending on whether he chose to imitate his predecessors or to take a new line of his own, Sidonius would be offering his contemporaries either an identification model or guidelines to help them cope with current problems. So he was able to instil expectations of both in his audience, of profitable and challenging as well as entertaining reading.⁵⁹

In the difficult period for Roman power, when Clermont alone, in all Aquitania I, was still defying the Visigoths, Sidonius felt painfully bereft of the support (*beneficia*) he had received from Polemius, the last praetorian prefect of Gaul.⁶⁰ When Polemius broke the rules of late antique communication with his long silence in 472,⁶¹ Sidonius wrapped his censure in a discourse on friendship derived from an anecdote of the Trajanic period (*Ulpianorum temporum*). In his letter (*Ep.* 4.14.1), the bishop reproduced almost word for word the speech attributed in Tacitus' *Histories* (5.26.2) to the rebel leader Iulius Civilis, who stayed true to his friendship with Vespasian even during the Batavian war, in which the two fought on opposite sides.⁶² The reproof over the breach of code was the more painful for having arisen in a friendship between two correspondents of equal social ranking (*collegae*) – that is, between the praetorian prefect and the former prefect of Rome.⁶³ Using a Vergilian quotation, Sidonius alludes to the respect formerly accorded to his position (*nomenque decusque*) and reminds his reader of the conflict between Palamedes and the wily Odysseus, who had tried to evade participating in the war.⁶⁴ But it is the Palamedes model that Sidonius expects Polemius to follow in future, human solidarity in the form of deeds (*humanus in factis*).⁶⁵ The letter's epigrammatic ending is

⁵⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 7.18.2 *minime ignarus, quod ita mens pateat in libro velut vultus in speculo*, 'well aware that one's thoughts are exposed in a letter collection like a face in a mirror'. On the epistolary topos, cf. Demetr. *De eloc.* 227 εἰκὼν τῆς ψυχῆς, 'mirror of the soul', and Paul. Nol. *Ep.* 13.2 with Mratschek (2002) 416: *sermo enim viri mentis est speculum*, 'for a man's letters are a mirror of his mind'; also Thraede (1970) 23–4, 157, and Zelzer (1995) 542. See also Gibson in this volume, ch. 11.

⁵⁹ On benefit (*docere*) and pleasure (*delectare*), his double intention of literature, see Sidon. *Ep.* 8.10.1 *Esse tibi usui pariter et cordi litteras granditer gaudeo*, 'I am very glad that literature is both useful and congenial to you.' On aristocratic competition see Schwitter (2020)

⁶⁰ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.14.1 (to Polemius, *PPO Galliarum* 471/2) *biennium prope clauditur, quod te praefectum praetorio Galliarum non nova vestra dignatione sed nostro affectu adhuc vetere gaudemus, qui, si Romanarum rerum sineret adversitas, aegre toleraremus, nisi singulae personae, non dicam provinciae, variis per te beneficiis amplificarentur*, 'for almost two whole years I have rejoiced to see you praetorian prefect of Gaul – not because of your new rank but because of our old friendship; and if the unpropitious state of Rome's fortunes gave scope for such things, I should be distressed if each individual, let alone each province, were not enriched by various favours from your hands.'

⁶¹ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.14.2: Polemius was *avarus in verbis*, 'stingy with his words'. On the rules observed in correspondence and friendship (Symm. *Ep.* 7.129), see this volume, ch. 5, sect. 3.

⁶² Sidon. *Ep.* 4.14.1 *cum Vespasiano mihi vetus amicitia; et, dum privatus esset, amici vocabamur*, 'I have a long-standing friendship with Vespasian, and while he was an ordinary citizen we were called friends.' Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 5.26.2 *erga Vespasianum vetus mihi observantia*, 'I have a long-standing relationship with Vespasian.'

⁶³ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.14.4 *proinde si futura magni pensitas, scribe clerico, si praesentia, scribe collegae*, 'accordingly, if you attach importance to the future life, write to your cleric; if you value things present, write to your colleague'.

⁶⁴ Verg. *Aen.* 2.89–90 (said by a *comes* of Palamedes) *et nos aliquod nomenque decusque / gessimus*, 'we, too, bore some name and renown'. Cf. Apollod. *Epit.* 3.7; Philostr. *Her.* 11.2, *Schol. Lykophr.* 815. See Hunger (1959) 299, 277 s.v. Palamedes and Odysseus.

⁶⁵ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.14.2 *qualiter futurus fueris humanus in factis, qui perduras avarus in verbis*, '[I should like you to tell me] how you would have been liberal with your deeds, when you are so persistently stingy with your words.'

an appeal: on taking up office, one should never discard old friends for new, as this is to treat them like flowers, things that please only while still fresh.⁶⁶

It was Leo, the *vir spectabilis*, adviser to the Visigothic king at his court in Toulouse, whose intercession secured the release of Sidonius from exile in Livia in late 476. Two letters illustrate how he reacted to this. On being advised by his patron to switch from epistolography to the sublime style of historical writing, Sidonius simply turned the tables on him, with a nod to the past (*antiquitus*), by slipping modestly into the role of Pliny's pupil and extolling Leo as *Tacitus redivivus* (*Ep.* 4.22.2):

namque et antiquitus, cum Gaius Cornelius Gaio Secundo paria suasisset, ipse postmodum quod iniunxit arripuit, idque ab exemplo nunc melius aggredieris, quia et Plinio ut discipulus assurgit et tu vetusto genere narrandi iure Cornelium antevenis.

For we know that in ancient times Gaius Cornelius (Tacitus) once gave similar advice to Gaius Secundus (Pliny the Younger), only to take that delegated task later upon himself; and were you to emulate your respected predecessor by so doing, you would discharge it better than I. For I see myself merely as a pupil of Pliny: but in your mastery of the archaic historical style you excel Cornelius (Tacitus).

As a justification for his *recusatio*, Sidonius quoted *modica gratia, maxuma offensa* to refer Leo to Pliny's declaration (*Ep.* 5.8.12) that historical writing about the past is fruitless, while writing about the present 'earns little gratitude and causes grave offence'.⁶⁷ This rebuff to Leo, delivered under the semblance of praise, is rounded off with a barbed pun on the name of Tacitus, imagining him transported to the present age to judge the writings of his epigone for himself. But there is an ambiguous and ironic note to this praise, placing Euric's reign on a par with Domitian's, if we recall that Pliny was responding to Tacitus' reference in the proem to his *Histories* to that former period of enforced silence:⁶⁸

qui saeculo nostro si revivisceret teque qualis in litteris et quantus habere conspicaretur, modo verius Tacitus esset.

were he alive today to see what kind of an author you are and the great literary prestige that you enjoy, he would now more truly become a Tacitus – a man reduced to silence.

⁶⁶ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.14.4 *et hanc in te ipse virtutem . . . qua sodales vetustos numquam pro consequentum novitate fastidas. porro autem videre sic amicis uti quasi floribus, tamdiu gratis, donec recentibus*, '[cherish] this virtue in yourself which will keep you from ever scorning old comrades for the novelty of later ones: otherwise you will seem to treat your friends like flowers, which are pleasing just as long as they are fresh'.

⁶⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 4.22.5 *quia . . . praeterita infructuose, praesentia semiplane, turpiter falsa periculose vera dicuntur, est enim huiusmodi thema, in quo bonorum si facias mentionem, modica gratia paratur, si notabilium maxuma offensa*, 'because the account of things past is profitless, that of things present is only half complete; and while it is shameful to utter falsehoods, it is dangerous to tell the truth; for it is an undertaking in which any reference to the good earns little gratitude, and any allusion to the infamous causes grave offence'. Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 8.14.5 *dicere quod velles periculosum, quod nolle miserum esset*, 'as saying what one wished was dangerous, and what one did not wish pitiable'; 5.8.12 *vetera et scripta aliis? parata inquisitio . . . intacta et nova? graves offensae, levis gratia*, 'history written by others? The material is there . . . Recent times which no one has handled? Serious offence and small thanks'.

⁶⁸ Plin. *Ep.* 8.14.5 (above) is a response to Tac. *Hist.* 1.1.4 *rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*, 'because of the rare good fortune of an age in which we may feel what we wish and may say what we feel'. Cf. *Agr.* 2.3, and see Whitton (2010) 126–7 on the complex intertextual web. For similar wordplay on Tacitus' name and the *Histories* as the 'temporarily silenced work' in Plin. *Ep.* 9.27.1–2, cf. Gibson (2015) 201–2 and Whitton (2013) 67.

For the sake of this barb, we forgive Sidonius for taking some historical licence: it was in fact Titinius Capito who put the question to Pliny; Tacitus merely asked him for an authentic account of his uncle's death in the eruption of Vesuvius.⁶⁹ Leo, for his part, was an even more voracious reader than the educated empress Iulia Domna, universally referred to by her contemporaries as 'Iulia the philosopher'.⁷⁰ Philostratus had made her the dedicatee of his *Life of Apollonios of Tyana*. Sidonius expressed his gratitude to Leo by accompanying his compliment with a transcription of Philostratus that he, Sidonius, had personally revised:⁷¹ the finest author of our ancestors' time (*maiorum temporum*) meets the only reader worthy of him in my generation (*par saeculo meo . . . lector*).⁷² In the biography's recitation, Leo followed in the footsteps of Apollonios in a quest for wisdom which took him to the end of the earth to meet the gymnosophists of India.⁷³ Sidonius' shift of genre, however, and his sending Leo the manuscript of Philostratus were a skilful diplomatic ploy to avoid celebrating the conqueror Euric in historical writing.⁷⁴

Even in a letter written in a time when he had just been ordained bishop (8.10),⁷⁵ Sidonius in oratory, like Pliny before him, looked up to Cicero as the unattainable standard of excellence.⁷⁶ Like all Christians writers he was adept in the 'rhetoric of paradox'.⁷⁷ By emphasising the unsuitability of his eloquence as a topic of discussion among friends, he drew attention to the exceptional praise (*ingentes praeconiorum titulos*) he had received from Ruricius, the senator and later bishop of Limoges.⁷⁸ He also cited three classical *exempla* as evidence that hopeless cases had ultimately enabled the very finest of orators – Cicero, Fronto, and Pliny – to achieve their breakthrough (*Ep.* 8.10.3):

Marcus Tullius in actionibus ceteris ceteros, pro Aulo Cluentio ipse se vicit. Marcus Fronto cum reliquis orationibus emereret, in Pelopem se sibi praetulit. Gaius Plinius pro Attia Viriola plus gloriae de centumvirali suggestu domum rettulit, quam cum Marco Ulpio incomparabili principi comparabilem panegyricum dixit.

⁶⁹ Plin. *Ep.* 5.8.1 (to Titinius Capito) *Suades, ut historiam scribam, et non suades solus; multi hoc me saepe monuerunt*, 'You suggest that I should write history, and you are not the only one to do so: many people have repeatedly given me the same advice.' Plin. *Ep.* 6.16 and 20 were to provide material for Tacitus' *Historiae* (6.16.1): *Petis, ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam, quo verius tradere posteris posse*, 'You ask me to describe my uncle's death so that you can leave an accurate account of it to posterity'; 6.20.20 *haec nequaquam historia digna non scripturus leges*, 'this is not important enough for history, and you will read it without using it'. See Wolff (2012b) 44–5, Mratschek (2008) 370–1, and *Ep.* 9.14.7 on Sidonius' ignorance of history, annotated by Cameron (2011) 524–5.

⁷⁰ Philostr. *Vit. soph.* 2.30.1 φιλόσοφος . . . Ἰούλια.

⁷¹ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.3.1 *quam, dum parere festino, celeriter eiecit in tumultarium exemplar turbida et praeceps et Opica translatio*, 'in my haste to obey your wish, I hurriedly flung it [i.e. the *Life of Apollonios*] into a haphazard copy, making a wild, precipitate, barbarian transcription'. This was a transcription in Greek rather than a Latin translation; see Cameron (2011) 546–54, Stevens (1933) 162, and Stirling (2005) 146, in opposition to *PCBE* 4, 1789 (Sidonius) ('translation'); on this point, cf. Paschoud's (2012) 367–9 more nuanced position and the discussion in van Waarden (2010) 9, n. 15. For different views see in this volume van Waarden, ch. 1, sect. 3, point 5, and Prchlik (2007).

⁷² Sidon. *Ep.* 8.3.6.

⁷³ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.3.4 *si cum Tyaneo nostro nunc ad Caucasum Indumque, nunc ad Aethiopum gymnosophistas Indorumque brahmanas totus lectioni vacans et ipse quodammodo peregrinare*, 'if you travel, so to say, with our man of Tyana, now to the Caucasus or the Indus, now to the gymnosophists of Aethiopia and the Brahmins of India, totally immersed in reading'.

⁷⁴ As Harries (1996) 42–3 shows, 'Sidonius sheltered behind Pliny'.

⁷⁵ Dated to 470 by Mathisen (1999a) 114–15, published c. 478/9, see Kelly in this volume, sect. 5.1.

⁷⁶ On the *aemulatio* of Cicero, see Vict. *Ars rhet.* 26–7; on Cicero as inimitable literary icon (e.g. Plin. *Ep.* 1.5.12; Sidon. *Ep.* 1.1.2), see Sogno (2014). See also Hernández Lobato in this volume, ch. 22.

⁷⁷ On this concept and phenomenon, see Cameron (1991) 178–88; also Mratschek (2002) 423–4 with examples.

⁷⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.10.1 *ingentes praeconiorum titulos moribus applicas*, 'you apply to my character great screeds of eulogy'.

Marcus Tullius, while in other pleadings he surpassed all other speakers, in his defence of Aulus Cluentius surpassed himself; Marcus Fronto won distinction by his other orations, but excelled himself in his speech against Pelops; Gaius Plinius, after his speech for Attia Viriola, came away from the centumviral tribunal with more glory than when he delivered a panegyric that was matched against the matchless emperor Trajan.

Cicero pleaded a case against A. Cluentius Habitus in 74 BCE, and eight years later successfully defended him, having satisfied the judges with regard to his own change of role.⁷⁹ Fronto, the most successful professor of rhetoric under Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, surpassed himself in his declamation on a fictitious mythological tale, and in Late Antiquity was regarded as the one orator who could be mentioned alongside Cicero.⁸⁰ Comparison of the inimitable ‘incomparability’ of the model emperor with Pliny’s unsung forensic speech for Attia Viriola (*Ep.* 6.33.2) favoured the latter over his imperial panegyric to Trajan.⁸¹ Pliny himself (*Ep.* 6.33.11) had rated the plea – in an allusion to Demosthenes’ oration – as his own ‘On the Crown’. To put it plainly: Ruricius could congratulate himself on having praised Sidonius, for by doing so he had ensured his own success as a rhetor. The patterns of behaviour portrayed in the high culture of the ages of Trajan and Augustus might either fuel a discourse of excessive self-presentation or one of critical introspection in Sidonius’ social circles. Projected from past into present, they were diagnosed and rendered useful for the future.⁸²

5 The Aesthetics of Visualisation and Aristocratic Identity: Avitacum

The stage that Sidonius constructs for these elites in his letters and poetic recitations is generated by his references to their opulent villas and libraries. Despite protracted scholarly controversy over whether Sidonius’ metaphorically charged villa descriptions are fictive or describe real western European villa architecture, one possible approach to resolving the issue has remained unexplored. Recently, Balmelle, Percival, Dark, and others have argued that Sidonius accurately described real places.⁸³ But as a villa also constituted a focus for elite display, rural production, and culture, it is quite possible that the villas conjured up in Sidonius’ descriptions were two things at once: typical residences of the late Roman rural elite with their complexes of elegant baths and granaries like Pontius Leontius’ *Burgus*,⁸⁴ defining the ‘archaeological structure’, but

⁷⁹ Cic. *Cluent.* 164–6, 169. See Fuhrmann (1989) 76–7.

⁸⁰ *Pan.* 8[5].14.2 Fronto, *Romanae eloquentiae non secundum sed alterum decus*, ‘Fronto, not the second but the other glory of Roman eloquence’. See Nixon and Saylor Rodgers (1994) 133, Rees (2012b) 7, 31, 33, and Nixon (2012) 223–4.

⁸¹ Here Sidonius subtly alludes to the principle that is fundamental to Pliny’s panegyric, that there is no praise without comparison (*Pan.* 53.1): *alioquin nihil non parum grate sine comparatione laudatur*, ‘every praise without comparison is insufficient in the first place’. On Attia Viriola’s case before the *centumviri*, see Gibson (2015) 203 and Shelton (2013) 232–3.

⁸² Eight centuries before, Thucydides (1.22) had identified the ability to infer the correct ‘prognosis’ for the future from a ‘diagnosis’ of the past as the key quality in a writer and in a politician. Cf. Thuc. 1.138 (Themistocles as ‘best calculator of what the future holds’). See Luce (1997) 113–18 and Grethlein (2013) 29–52.

⁸³ On the gap between text and archaeology and the shift from luxury residences to practical purposes, see Percival (1997), Harries (1994) 10, 131–2, Hutchings (2009) 66–7; on the positivist perspective: Percival (1992), Balmelle (2001), Dark (2005). See the overview in Hanaghan (2014) 147, nn. 4–5, and Bailey (2016) 68.

⁸⁴ Sidon. *Carm.* 22.128 *splendentes . . . per propugnacula thermae*, ‘the splendid baths below the battlements’; 180 *thermibus hiemalibus*, ‘winter baths’, 187 *horrea . . . opaca*, ‘shaded granaries’. See Balmelle (2001) 38, and 144–5 on the architectural details.

also – and here they vied with their literary role models – social spaces used for the self-staging of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, so that the classicist ideals of the past and the enjoyment of Golden Age literature might be given new life.⁸⁵

In the world of the Roman elites, no marker of identity is more revealing than the villas privately owned by Sidonius' relatives and literary friends. As in Pliny's letters, the villas relate to each other, standing proxy for their owners; literary taste was close to contemporary taste in art, as mirrored in the villas' collections of mythological sculptures.⁸⁶ Sidonius (*Ep.* 8.4.1) conjured up a timeless enclave of the house where the erudition and good taste of the owner could be gently cultivated in a circle of like-minded friends: he wrote that a house was 'not so much your own property as that of your friends. It feeds your guests with feasts and you with guests; moreover, its layout charms the eye of the beholder.'⁸⁷ Echoes of Cicero's Tusculanum and Pliny's country residences point to the villa as a 'poetic place': it was hard to decide which was more assiduously cultivated, the owner's land or his intellect – *domini plus sit cultum rus an ingenium*.⁸⁸ Sidonius' letters and invitations circulated between his current location and the country estates in and around Nîmes – Prusianum, Vorocingus, Trevidon, and Cottion; also Tres Villae outside Narbonne, Decaniacum, south of Limoges, and Taionnacus, near Autun. Many of the letters were written long before the letter collection as such came into being: composed in compliance with epistolary theory, according to which current political topics were taboo,⁸⁹ they shine out with the serene glow of the intact intellectual and social world of the landowners of Classical Antiquity. However, with only two exceptions – the fortress-like Burgus on the Garonne near Bordeaux and Octavianum on the coast at Narbonne – all the owners of the houses named were Sidonius' own relations.⁹⁰

Sidonius' own Avitacum, a paradise of idyllic peace on the banks of Lac d'Aydat, twelve miles south of Clermont, which he acquired when he married the daughter of the later emperor

⁸⁵ Cf. Cic. *Off.* 3, *praef.* 1 *ita duae res . . . illum acuebant, otium et solitudo*, 'thus, two things stimulated him [i.e. Scipio Africanus]: leisure and isolation', 4 *nos autem . . . ad hanc scribendi operam omne studium curamque convertimus*, 'I, for my part, apply all possible energy and care to this activity of writing.' On this see Woolf (1998) 164, n. 2.

⁸⁶ Henderson (2004) 67, 71. On furnishings and decor, see Stirling (2005) 141; on juxtaposed baths Hanaghan (2020).

⁸⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.4.1 (villa of Consentius, alluding to Cic. *Off.* 1.139) *Umquamne nos dei nutu, domine maior, una videbit ille ager tuus Octavianus, nec tuus tantum quantum amiconum? qui . . . hospites epulis, te pascit hospitibus, praeter haec oculis intuentum situ decorus*, 'My honoured lord, will that property of yours Octavianum ever, by God's grace, see us united? It is indeed not so much your own property as that of your friends. It feeds your guests with feasts and you with guests; moreover, its layout charms the eye of the beholder.' See Elsner (1998) 44 and Mratschek (2019).

⁸⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.4.1 with verbal reminiscence of Cicero's famous comparison of land (*ager*) and mind (*animus*); see *Tusc.* 2.13 *cultura animi philosophia est*, 'philosophy is the cultivation of the soul'. Thematically, see Pliny's paean to 'inspiring otium' (*Ep.* 1.9.5 on his Laurentinum): *verum secretumque μουσειον*, 'a veritable hidden *Mouσειον*'. See Whitton (2013) 220–1; *Ep.* 5.6.45–6 (on the Tusci estate) *altius ibi otium et pinguius et securius . . . nam studiis animum, venatu corpus exerceo*, 'peace is more profound there, fuller and more untroubled . . . for I train my mind with work and my body with hunting'. See Mratschek (2018a).

⁸⁹ Julius Victor takes his lead from Cicero's definition (*Fam.* 2.4.1) of *epistularum genera duo: unum familiare et iocosum, alterum severum et grave*, 'two kinds of letter: the one familiar and funny, the other official and serious'. On writing about politics: *ut neque ea, quae sentio, audeam neque ea, quae non sentio, velim scribere*, 'so that I do not venture to write what I really think nor feel like writing what I do not think'. See Zelzer (1995) 541–51.

⁹⁰ The villa owners had various family connections to Sidonius. *Vorocingus*: Apollinaris, cousin; *Prusianum*, *Trevidon*: Tonantius Ferreolus, great-grandson of Fl. Afranius Syagrius of Lyon, married to Papiamilla and related to Sidonius through her, and also to Syagrius; *Cottion*, *Cuticiacum*: Avitus, cousin; *Tres Villae*: Thaumastus, cousin and brother of Apollinaris; *Decaniacum*: Ruricius of Limoges, related to Sidonius' and Avitus' families through his wife Hiberia; *Taionnacus*: Syagrius, great-grandson of Fl. Afranius Syagrius and related to Tonantius Ferreolus. The villas belonging to non-relatives are *Burgus*: Pontius Leontius, *vir inlustris*; *ager Octavianus*: Consentius the Younger, poet, friend of the emperors Valentinian III and Avitus. On their localisation, cf. Loyer (1956) 62–4.

Avitus, conveys a sense of unreality (*Ep.* 2.2).⁹¹ This feeling is enhanced by the resonance of the names of the addressee and the sender concerned, Domitius and his host, (Sidonius) Apollinaris, which echo those of the Domitius Apollinaris to whom Pliny wrote his famous villa letter (5.6).⁹² The author enjoyed playing this intellectual game of ‘literary interactions’. Sidonius produces a two-layered ‘literary topography’,⁹³ for over the whole L-shaped villa with its three bathrooms, one in the form of an apse, its swimming pool, weaving room and dining room, and its portico with lake view – the typical features of a late Roman rural elite residence⁹⁴ – he casts a loose-woven net of classical allusion.⁹⁵ Raphael Schwitter has rightly described this linking of intertexts as an ‘intertextual jigsaw’ for his recipient and wider readership to solve.⁹⁶ Sidonius’ minutely detailed portrait of the late Roman villa that he loved most drew inspiration from not one, but three villas owned by the younger Pliny: Tusci, Laurentinum, and a third called ‘Tragedy’, perched high above Lake Como. The author’s imaginative recall flits effortlessly from one to the other, gleaning allusions for his text wherever they are prompted by this or that feature of the layout and architecture of his own Avitacum.⁹⁷ Pliny conducts Domitius on a virtual tour of his airy hillside villa; Sidonius urges his own Domitius to flee the pestilence-ridden and oppressive summer heat of the city for a spell in the country. Literary allusions are used to generate foreboding and to urge the prospective visitor to avoid delay:⁹⁸ the sight of the grammarian Domitius and his pupils, their faces stricken with the ‘mortal pallor’ of heat and dread (*discipulis . . . pallentibus*), evokes the image of Martial’s patron Domitius Apollinaris fleeing the same mortal pallor on the faces of the crowd (*pallida turba*) in Domitian’s Rome and seeking refuge in the countryside.⁹⁹

⁹¹ Harries (1994) 10 has characterised Sidonius’ villa descriptions as ‘seriously open to question’, Percival (1997) 281 as ‘having little or no basis of reality’, Dewar (2014) 94, 104, as an ‘enactment of a precious continuity’ and a ‘paradise’; the opposite view is taken by Balmelle (2001) 156, 178, 200, 299 and others (n. 83) who link them to the archaeological evidence. On the localisation of Avitacum 20 km southwest of Clermont (modern Aydat), see Harries (1994) 10 and Stevens (1933) appendix B ‘Avitacum’ 185–95.

⁹² Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.3 (to Domitius) *Avitaci sumus; nomen hoc praedio, quod, quia uxorium, patrio mihi dulcius*, ‘we are at Avitacum; this is the name of the estate, which is dearer to me than my paternal property, because it is my wife’s’. Sidonius preferred it to his townhouse in Lyon. A different view is taken in Loyen (1943) 217 n. 9. Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 5.6.3 (to Domitius Apollinaris): *accipe temperiem caeli, regionis situm, villae amoenitatem*, ‘let me tell you about the climate, the countryside, and the lovely situation of my house’. On the wordplay around the name, see Harries (1994) 10, and, in greater detail, Gibson (2013b) 349, Mratschek (2008) 373–4, and (2018a) 222.

⁹³ Schwitter (2015) 206.

⁹⁴ Percival (1997) 281, Balmelle (2001) 178, Dark (2005) 336–7, Uytterhoeven (2007) 59. To wait for Sidonius’ villa to be excavated (Stevens (1933) 186) is probably a forlorn hope.

⁹⁵ A point already made by Harries (1994) 10. See also Hanaghan’s (2014) complete lexical list of allusions (150–205) and Dewar (2014) 93–4.

⁹⁶ Schwitter (2015) 207, 146.

⁹⁷ On intertextuality with Plin. *Ep.* 5.6 (Tusci) and 2.17 (Laurentinum), see Harries (1994) 10, 131, Whitton (2013) 36, Hanaghan (2014) e.g. 147, Visser (2014) 27, Schwitter (2015) 206. Connections with the Lake Como villas have received little attention: for the comparison with Baiae and its hilltop location (*cothurnatus*) in Sidon. *Carm.* 18.1–4 (Avitacum) and Plin. *Ep.* 9.7 (Tragoedia), see Furbetta (2013b) 245–51; cf. Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.3 (*mons . . . arduus*) and Plin. *Ep.* 5.6.13 (*ex monte prospexeris*); the sight of the anglers (Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.12; Plin. *Ep.* 9.7.4); the rocky stretch of river where it enters the Lac d’Aydat (Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.17) and of the spring flowing into Lake Como (Plin. *Ep.* 4.30.2).

⁹⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.20 *veniendi celeritas*, ‘a speedy arrival’. The coalescing of an imagined over-long description of the villa (*ne relegentem te autumnus inveniatur*, ‘lest the autumn should find you still reading’) with the villa itself or with a real visit to it is an echo of Pliny (*Ep.* 5.6.4–40). See Mratschek (2018a) and my conclusion below (sect. 7).

⁹⁹ Mart. 10.12.9–10 *et venies albis non cognoscendus amicis / livebitque tuis pallida turba genis*, ‘and you will come back unrecognisable to your whey-faced friends; the pallid throng will envy your cheeks’. See Mratschek (2018a). Sidonius here refers not to the summer retreat of some random Licinianus (Mart. 1.49, thus in Hanaghan (2014) 156–7), but to that of Pliny’s (*Ep.* 5.6) and Martial’s homonymous addressee Domitius Apollinaris.

Beyond the vestibule the beholder (*inspector*) sees a spacious covered passage extending inwards. Good pupil of Pliny that he was, Sidonius calls this the *cryptoporticus*.¹⁰⁰ Situated on the east side of the complex, the gallery commands a view over the sea-like waves of the lake (*pelagi mobilis campus*) reminiscent of the maritime vista from Pliny's Laurentine villa – and in the reader's imagination it summons up a 'Baiae' in Gaul.¹⁰¹ From the *piscina*, likewise on the east side, bathers revel in the sight: 'Though the body merely swims within the pool, the viewer's eyes, inebriated with delight, swim over the expanse of our lake.'¹⁰² Set in its idyllic landscape among shade-giving hills, surrounded by water, and blessed with a temperate climate, Sidonius' Avitacum is, like Pliny's Tusci, both a summer residence and an embodiment of the classical *locus amoenus*: the vale of Tempe.¹⁰³ But there is no precedent in Pliny for the change of perspective when Sidonius turns from the villa to the surrounding countryside and from the visualisation of space to the evocation of sound. Where Pliny brings the pleasing colours of his bucolic scenery to the reader's eye with his 'jewelled wild-flower meadows' (*florida et gemmea prata*) and the rustic setting,¹⁰⁴ Sidonius goes further by generating audiovisual effects: from morning until far into the night the choir of cicadas, frogs, and nightingales alternately fills the air in harmony with the shepherds' pipes played in the style of the Vergilian Tityrus.¹⁰⁵ The outdoor swimming pool is fed by a mountain stream, its waters issuing with a deafening roar from six lion-headed pipes.¹⁰⁶

Descriptions in classical texts of the opulent lifestyle of the fifth-century landowning class have been challenged as implausible. But Avitacum had been passed down through generations of the Aviti. The younger Pliny had inherited the Tuscan villa from his uncle, and Sidonius had similarly received his Avitacum from his father-in-law, as part of his bride's dowry.¹⁰⁷ The snow-white walls of the *frigidarium* and the absence of richly coloured frescoes were not signs of diminishing prosperity,¹⁰⁸ but, given that time future is contained in time past, stemmed from the

¹⁰⁰ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.10–11. Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 2.17.17, 19, 20, and 5.6.28. The words *diaeta*, 'living room', and *cryptoporticus*, 'arcade', are borrowed from Pliny, as indicated by Harries (1994) 186, and subsequently Visser (2014) 35–6 and Hanaghan (2014) 178–80. On the visualisation, see Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.16 *vestigio inspectoris*, 'the footstep of the onlooker'.

¹⁰¹ On the view and the Lac d'Aydat: Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.10 *ab ortu lacum porticus intuetur*, 'in the east a portico overlooks the lake'; 2.2.16 *pelagi mobilis campus*, 'the moving plain of open water'; *Carm.* 18.8 *aequora . . . nostri . . . lacus*, 'the waters of our lake'; 18.12 *quisquis ades, Baias tu facis hic animo*, 'whoever you are, visitor, you can create a Baiae here in your fancy'. Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 2.17.5 *a fronte quasi tria maria prospectat*, 'it seems to look out on three seas'; 2.17.20 *cubiculum autem valvis cryptoporticum, fenestra prospicit mare*, 'there is also a room which has folding doors opening onto the arcade and a window looking out on the sea'.

¹⁰² Sidon. *Carm.* 19.3–4 *et licet hoc solo mergatis membra liquore, / per stagnum nostrum lumina vestra natant*. Quint. 11.3.76 (*oculi . . . natantes et quadam voluptate suffusi*, 'the eyes swimming and covered as it were with passion') uses *natate* to mean 'inebriated with pleasure'. So I prefer Loyen (1960) 1.129 here to Anderson (1936) 1.257 n. 5. On the location of the swimming pool, see *Ep.* 2.2.8 *piscina forinsecus . . . ab oriente connectitur*, 'externally, a swimming pool is attached on the east side'; on the portico, 2.2.10.

¹⁰³ E.g. Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.2 (*clementissimo recessu*); cf. Plin. *Ep.* 5.6.4 (*mira clementia*). See Mratschek (2018a) also on what follows.

¹⁰⁴ Plin. *Ep.* 5.6.11. Statius' *Silvae* are described as *gemmea prata* ('jewelled meadows') by Sidonius (*Carm.* 9.229); cf. Newlands (2002) 202–3, (2013) 75, and Roberts (1989) on the 'jewelled style'.

¹⁰⁵ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.14. In detail, Loyen (1943) 57 and Hanaghan (2014) 189.

¹⁰⁶ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.9 *strepitus caduci fluminis*, 'the roar of the falling stream', captured onomatopoeically in *Carm.* 18.5–6 *garrula Gauranis plus murmurat unda fluentis*, 'the chattering water babbles more busily than the streams that flow from Gaurus'.

¹⁰⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.3. On the inheritance of Pliny the Younger, see Gibson and Morello (2012) 202–3, 223–4.

¹⁰⁸ Thus Harries (1994) 132, Percival (1997) 286; cf. Ward-Perkins (2005) 104; a different view is taken by Dark (2005) 335 and Fowden (2004) 59–60; cf. Etruscus' deluxe bathhouse (Mart. 6.42; Stat. *Silv.* 1.5).

(future) bishop's decision to deny his surroundings the naked beauty of painted bodies in pagan mythological or erotic scenes. This was consistent with his definition of the *frigidarium* as a basilica and the swimming pool as a baptistery – in brief, with a 'godly prospect'.¹⁰⁹ He compensated for this lack of paintings with an innocuous verse inscription of his own composition, a kind of 'anti-ekphrasis' of missing pictures within the ekphrasis, and also with the help of the superabundance of light enclosed within the room (*lux inclusa*), which (the intratextual link suggests) gave one the impression of 'being more than naked'.¹¹⁰ The Aquitanian aristocrat Paulinus had referred to the resplendent buildings of his monastery at Nola as his 'hut', and Sidonius modestly follows suit for his villa (*tuguria* and *mapalia*).¹¹¹ Marked – as in Pliny – by the rhetorical device of *praeteritio*, the catalogues of the missing frescoes (2.2.6) and of the foreign marbles not used in the construction (2.2.7) demonstrate Sidonius' strict avoidance of any display of over-luxurious living, and indeed set an example of elegant restraint in the description of his property.¹¹² Yet he cannot resist mentioning that the middle pilasters of the passageway from the 'hot room' to the swimming pool are of porphyry, the purplish decorative stone greatly admired in Late Antiquity, and usually the prerogative of emperors.¹¹³ Is he perhaps seeking to remind readers of the status of the emperor Eparchius Avitus, the villa's previous owner, in the same way as he uses the

¹⁰⁹ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.5–6 *interior parietum facies solo levigati caementi candore contenta est. non hic per nudam pictorum corporum pulchritudinem turpis prostat historia, quae sicut ornat artem, devenustat artificem*, 'the inner face of the walls is content with the plain whiteness of polished concrete. Here no disgraceful tale is exposed by the nude beauty of painted figures, for though such a tale may be a glory to art it dishonours the artist'; 2.2.8 *luic basilicae appendix piscina forinsecus seu, si graecari mavis, baptisterium ab oriente connectitur*, 'attached to this basilica [hall] is an external appendage on the east side, a piscina [swimming pool], or, if you prefer the Greek word, a baptisterium'; 2.2.7 *nihil illis paginis impressum reperitur quod non vidisse sit sanctius*, 'there will not be found traced on those spaces anything which it would be more proper not to look at'. The term 'baptisterium', an allusion to Pliny's bath descriptions (*Ep.* 2.17.11, 5.6.25), became established in Sidonius' time in the Christian sense of 'baptismal font'; see *TLL* 2, 1719.72–20.23, s.v. *baptisterium*.

¹¹⁰ On the verse inscription, see Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.8 *quia eos nec relegisse desiderio, nec perlegisse fastidio*, 'although they inspire no longing to read them again, they can be read through without boredom'. On the anti-ekphrasis *Ep.* 2.2.6, see Hanaghan (2014) 165, on the light effect 2.2.4 (cf. Plin. *Ep.* 2.17.7) *intra conclave succensum solidus dies et haec abundantia lucis inclusae ut verecundos quosque compellat aliquid se plus putare quam nudos*, 'within the heated chamber there is full day and such an abundance of enclosed light as forces all modest persons to feel themselves something more than naked'. Note the intratextuality; on the context, Visser (2014) 34 and Schwitter (2014) 174.

¹¹¹ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.7, cf. Paul. Nol. *Ep.* 29.13 (*tugurium . . . nostrum*, 'my hut'); see Mratschek (2002) 550–1.

¹¹² Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 2.17.4 *atrium frugi nec tamen sordidum*, 'a hall, unpretentious but not without dignity'. On Pliny's anxiety to avoid ostentation, as an offence against social norms and good taste, see Hoffer (1999) 29–44 and Lefèvre (2009b) 233; cf. Whitton (2013) 220: 'He constructs his own *Romanitas* of moderation between luxury and asceticism.'

¹¹³ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.8 *nec pilae sunt mediae sed columnae, quas architecti peritiores aedificiorum purpuras nuncupavere*, 'the middle supports are not pillars but columns, of the kind that high-class architects have called "purples"'. Loyen (1960) 1.17 relates this to Luc. 10.116 *purpureus . . . lapis*, 'purple stone'. The 'Ethiopian stone' mentioned in the catalogue of marble varieties (2.2.7) and in the description of the steps to Roma's throne is not porphyry but *lapis Syenites*, a red granite from Aswan, a coarse rock, sprinkled with white quartz crystals and adjacent black inclusions (*Carm.* 5.34–6); see Anderson (1936) 1.422 n. 2, 62 n. 2, and, in greater detail, Marcheì in Borghini (1989) 122, cf. 226–7 fig. 74 (red granite) and 274 fig. 116 (porphyry). Delbrueck (1932) xxi, 29 n. 94, is incorrect. Porphyry is otherwise only mentioned in the context of the rich Aquitanian Pontii, where it is used as wall cladding in thermal baths at Pontius Leontius (Sidon. *Carm.* 22.141, see Delhey ad loc.: *purpura* is a metonym for *saxa*) and when describing the altar slab above the martyrs' graves in the basilica at Fundi, which was founded by the ancestor of the Pontii, Paulinus of Nola (*Ep.* 32.17, v. 18 *regia purpureo marmore crusta*, 'a royal slab of purple marble [covers the bones of holy men]'). In the tetrarchy and the Constantinian era porphyry was the stone of choice for imperial artworks and palaces, and later also for churches; see Elsner (1998) 62 fig. 29 and Delbrueck (1932) 11, 24–9, on porphyry as a royal prerogative.

traditional Lac d'Aydat boat race to remind them of the Trojans' boat games and the fictitious Roman ancestry of the Arverni?¹¹⁴

The ekphrasis of Sidonius' Avitacum is not so much a naturalistic description of landscape or a reliable architectural plan of a late antique country estate as a discourse employing visual imagery from classical writers as a code decipherable only by the author, his learned neighbour Domitius, and his highly educated circle of readers.¹¹⁵ In this, the owner of Avitacum aligns himself with the *otium litteratum* of the younger Pliny.¹¹⁶ But he does not neglect to devise subtle performative strategies of differentiation designed to do himself justice in his changing roles as bishop, Roman citizen, heir to the emperor Avitus, and author of refined taste and discernment. The picture that Sidonius creates, purportedly of his favourite villa, is in reality a portrait of his cultural identity – an elegant construction providing an appropriate setting for its owner.

6 The Self-Staging of the Gallo-Roman Aristocracy: Media and Representation

In contrast to Sidonius' bathhouse, where the absence of images is presented as a new sign of Christian identity, the villa – a suitably imposing place for the aristocratic elites to meet, and at the same time the most intimate of the public spaces – would usually be full of pictures. The education of the elite classes included familiarisation with a fixed repertoire of imagery integrated in a complex network of learned allusions and artistic commentaries that remained impenetrable to the less educated.¹¹⁷ Like the Younger Pliny and Philostratus, Sidonius exploited the communicative scope offered by visual narration. Speaking pictures were not mere art for art's sake. They provided a visual representation of the pagan past, demanded precise historical knowledge, and helped in the reconstruction of cultural and social identities. In an eleven-line ekphrasis, Sidonius (*Carm.* 22.158–68) presents the dramatic events of the Third Mithridatic War on a wall painting (*pictura*).¹¹⁸ The cycle of paintings portrays the incursion of Mithridates VI Eupator, king of Pontus, into Roman-claimed Bithynia, which ended with the recall of Lucullus. Certain scenes have lodged in the memory of the observer: for instance, the sacrifice of a horse to Neptune carried out by Mithridates (22.158–62), and the siege of Cyzicus in winter 74/3 BCE, when a messenger from Lucullus showed great daring in swimming between the enemy navy's ships to exhort the city's inhabitants to continue their resistance.¹¹⁹

While visiting the Pontii Leontii at their villa in Burgus,¹²⁰ Sidonius had seen the painting on the portico wall in the inner courtyard. The siting of the picture creates a link between

¹¹⁴ On the boat race, see Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.19 with its allusion to Verg. *Aen.* 5.151–243; for detailed comment on this, see Hanaghan (2014) 199–201; on the origins of the Arverni, see *Ep.* 7.7.2, with a new interpretation in Mratschek (2013).

¹¹⁵ Cf. Anderson (1936) 1.416: 'the description does not supply adequate material for a plausible plan of the buildings'. On Apollinaris, see Sidon. *Ep.* 2.2.2, when he quotes Terence for his pupils, *Eun.* 107.

¹¹⁶ Mratschek (2018a), also Visser (2014) 40–1: 'a mirror of Sidonius' values and the values of his ingroup' and 'a place of *otium*'.

¹¹⁷ On *παιδεία* as a 'code' and its images, see Brown (1992) 42, Stirling (2005) 141, and Zanker (1995) 300.

¹¹⁸ A wall painting rather than a mosaic, see Delhey (1993) 151 and Balmelle (2001) 144, as against Loyen (1960) 1.195 n. 20 and (1956) 88.

¹¹⁹ Depicted in App. *Mith.* 70 (horse sacrifice), and Fron. *Str.* 1.13.6, Oros. *Hist.* 6.2.14, Flor. 1.40 (3.5).16 (Cyzicus); see Delhey (1993) 151–6, Balmelle (2001) 117, 144–6, 152, 203, and Stirling (2005) 77.

¹²⁰ *Burgus* (castle), Bourg-sur-Gironde near Bordeaux, was probably the *villa Veregini* of the descendants of Pontius Meropius Paulinus. See Mratschek (2002) 114–18.

history and the present. The historical painting is an instructive example of an attempt to generate identity out of the past: visual means are used, together with the homonymy of the villa owners' family name, to construct a fictitious ancestral line reaching back to the republic and linking the origins of the Aquitanian Pontii to the kings of Pontus in Asia Minor.¹²¹ Even *Dionysus*, Sidonius' nickname for Pontius Leontius by which the villa owner was known in their literary circle of Bordeaux, echoes the *cognomen* of Mithridates VI Eupator *Dionysos*, the central figure on the wall painting.¹²² The nickname was a humorous pun on one of Leontius' real names, Meropius (from *merum*, 'undiluted wine'), a name borne in earlier times by his ancestor Pontius Meropius Paulinus, Paulinus of Nola. An earthly epiphany of Dionysus or Bacchus, the lord of Bourges resided above the vineyards on the banks of the Garonne, and also above his cellar, famous for its Bordeaux wines.¹²³ The encounter between the two 'gods', Bacchus/Leontius and Apollo/Sidonius,¹²⁴ provides a narrative frame in prose for the poem, the foundation myth and poetic ekphrasis of Burgus. Celebrating Leontius as the god of wine and feasting, the poem invests Burgus with the aura of a mythical palace; it was intended as a gift for the owner, to be read at his symposia.¹²⁵ It relates how Apollo, the god of poetry on his way from Hellas, encountered Bacchus/Dionysus, arriving from India in his tiger-drawn chariot,¹²⁶

¹²¹ Sidon. *Carm.* 22.158–68, esp. 162–4 *et occisis vivit pictura quadrigis. / Ponticus hinc rector numerosis Cyzicon armis / claudit*, 'the picture is alive from the teams that have been killed. On this side, the Pontic rule encloses Cyzicus with countless weapons.' For a different view, see Delhey (1993) 151.

¹²² E.g. Sidon. *Carm.* 22 ep. 2 (Dionysus), 5 (Bacchus). See Mathisen (1991b) 35–7. On the surname *Dionysos* of Mithridates VI Eupator, cf. Cic. *Flacc.* 60 *Mithridatem dominum, illum patrem, illum conservatorem Asiae, illum Euhium, Nysium, Bacchum, Liberum nominabant*, 'they called Mithridates lord, called him father, called him Asia's preserver, called him Euhius, Nysius, Bacchus, Liber'; on his being worshipped as 'Mithridates Dionysus' at the heroön of Delos in 102/1 BCE (*IDelos* 1562; *OGIS* 370), see McGing (1986) 90, n. 5, 96–7; on the association with Dionysus, as depicted on silver coins, (a) Obverse: portrait of the ruler, end of diadem resembling a lock of Dionysus; (b) Reverse: wreath of ivy and grapes (tetradrachm: *BMC* Pontus, 44, no. 4–5) or head of Dionysus the wreath (didrachm: *SNG* Great Britain 9 British Museum 1, no. 997), see Bendschus (2019) Catalogue nos PON15–16, also 53 and 55. On comparable self-staging in Hellenistic rulers, see Fuhrer (2011) 375–6.

¹²³ Sidon. *Carm.* 22.5 (love of wine), 279–80 (*apotheca*, 'cellar'), 230 (*laeta* . . . *vineta*, 'rich vineyards').

¹²⁴ I would like to suggest a new solution to the scholarly debate over the identification of the two Phoebi in the prose preface (Sidon. *Carm.* 22 ep. 2): *habes igitur hic Dionysum* (i.e. Pontius Leontius) . . . , *habes et Phoebum, quem tibi iure poetico inquilinum factum constat ex numine* (i.e. Sidonius as 'dweller in your house'), *illum scilicet Phoebum Anthedii mei perfamiliarum*, 'here, then, you can find Dionysus, you can also find Phoebus, who, certainly, through a poet's privilege, from a god has become an inmate of your house – that same Phoebus who is a great crony of my friend Anthedius'. The poetical society's second Phoebus was probably Lampridius, who like Anthedius believed in astrology (*Ep.* 8.11.9) and was styled 'the singing swan' in allusion to the Horatian metaphor (8.11.3 *canorus cygnus*; *Ep.* 8.11.8 *post Horatianos* . . . *cygnos*); cf. Sidonius' self-deprecation as *ravus anser*, 'a honking goose', in contrast to the Horatian metaphor of *canorus cygnus* (8.11.3; *Ep.* 9.2.2; *Carm.* 40 (*Ep.* 9.15.1) 19–49) and Sidonius' self-presentation as 'Apollo' (*Ep.* 8.11.3). See Condorelli (2008) 152 and Mratschek (2017) 316–19; we must reject the interpretation offered by Anderson (1936) 1.194 n. 2, Delhey (1993) 48–9, and Loyen (1960) 1.193 n. 3 (where the two Phoebi are Pontius Leontius' son Paulinus and an anonymous person). The postscriptum (*Carm.* 22 ep. 5) contains an author–reader dialogue: *nec iniuria hoc . . . flagito* (i.e. Sidonius), *quandoquidem Bacho meo* (i.e. Leontius) *iudicium decemvirale passuro*, 'I do not ask this unlawfully, since for my Bacchus who is to undergo a trial at the Ten-Men court'.

¹²⁵ Sidon. *Carm.* 22 ep. 5 *ecce, quotiens tibi libuerit pateris capacioribus hilarare convivium, misi quod inter scyphos et amyntidas tuas legas*, 'look, I have sent you something to read amid your bumpers and toasts whenever you choose to cheer the feast with extra-large cups'. On the convivial atmosphere, see Schwitter (2015) 193–9.

¹²⁶ Sidon. *Carm.* 22 ep. 2 *habes igitur hic Dionysum inter triumphi Indici oblectamenta marcentem*, 'here, then, you can find Dionysus bemused amid the delights of his Indian triumph'; 22.22–46 (visualisation). Cf. Eur. *Bach.* 14–23 (travel and conquest), the famous Roman sarcophagus in Baltimore (Indian triumph, with elephants and tigers), and for a focus on India even as late as the fifth century, the *Dionysiaka* of Nonnos from Book 13 onwards. See Morav (2011) 244–5 and Boardman (2014) chs. 3–4.

and persuaded him that they should both settle in Aquitania, at the confluence of the Garonne and the Dordogne, and thus uphold continued Roman rule.¹²⁷ Constructing new identities in a way which suggests a lineage going back to the Pontic kings and the gods themselves¹²⁸ was part of a process of mythification in which the *gens* and the *memoria* of the aristocratic Pontii were revalued and upgraded, and obsolete pagan and historical lore was unobtrusively tailored to suit current trends.¹²⁹

The villa's furnishings and artworks created an atmosphere that spurred visitors to familiarise themselves with the identity and position of the owner – his view of the world, his social status and his ambitions. Tonantius Ferreolus, praetorian prefect of Gaul in 451, chose the name of 'Prusianum' for his villa near Nîmes in memory of the famous rhetor and philosopher Dio of Prusa, whom the emperor Trajan had honoured with an invitation to ride with him through the streets of Rome in the triumphal chariot.¹³⁰ In country villas the library would serve as reception room for visitors and friends.¹³¹ It would be richly and artistically furnished to display the owner's wealth and sophistication. Recitations bore witness to the continuity of social rituals and to the self-presentation of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy.¹³² Library walls were adorned with portraits (*effigies*) of classical orators and poets in mosaic or wax paint, accompanied by annotatory epigrams,¹³³ to suggest continuity between the present custodians of learning and their predecessors. The goddess of wisdom, Minerva, might well be an appropriate patroness of one of these private scholarly libraries, as in the villa at

¹²⁷ Sidon. *Carm.* 22.99–100 (speech of the Delian Apollo): *cordi est si iungere gressum, / dicam qua pariter sedem tellure locemus*, 'if you feel like accompanying me, I shall tell in what land we should make our joint habitation'; 22.117–19 *quem generis princeps Paulinus Pontius olim, / cum Latius patriae dominabitur, ambient altis / moenibus*, 'some day, when his land will be Roman territory, Paulinus Pontius, the founder of the family, will surround this hill with walls'. The epic prophecy of the Roman right to rule, with its triple alliteration on 'p', recalls that of Phoebus in Delos for Aeneas (*Aen.* 3.97 *hic domus Aeneae cunctis dominabitur oris / et nati natorum*, 'here, Aeneas' house and his children's children will rule all lands'). Mithridates VI, too, had assumed the role of protector (προστάτης) of Greek culture against the barbarians (Strab. 7.4.3).

¹²⁸ This practice of creating a fictitious lineage of royal and divine ancestors is reminiscent of Caesar's claim to be descended from the Marcii Reges and Venus in the *laudatio funebris* for his aunt Iulia (Suet. *Iul.* 6.1).

¹²⁹ On the creative powers of memory, see Hose (2002).

¹³⁰ On Ferreolus' Prusianum, see Sidon. *Ep.* 2.9.7 *si Prusiani (sic fundus alter nuncupabatur)*, 'if the Prusianum (that was the name of the other estate)'. Dio Chrys. 46.7 (country estates at Prusa) ἔστι μὴν γὰρ χωρία μοι καὶ πάντα ταῦτα ἐν τῇ ὑμετέρᾳ γῆ, 'though I have a real estate, all in your territory too'. Cf. Philostr. *Vit. soph.* 1.7 (triumph). Dio of Prusa and Apollonius of Tyana were friends.

¹³¹ Sidon. *Ep.* 2.9.4 (on Ferreolus' library) *vix quodcumque vestibulum intratum . . . ; huc libri adfatim in promptu (videre te crederes aut grammaticales pluteos aut Athenaei cuneos aut armaria exstructa bybliopolarum)*, 'hardly had I entered one or the other vestibule . . . ; books in any number were ready to hand (you might have imagined yourself looking at the shelves of a professional scholar or at the tiers in the Athenaeum or at the towering cases of the booksellers)'. See Gerth (2013) 206–8 and Rossiter (1991) 200–1.

¹³² Sidon. *Ep.* 8.4.2 (on the younger Consentius) *igitur hic tu . . . citos iambos, elegos acutos ac rotundatos hendecasyllabos et cetera carmina musicos flores thymumque redolentia, nunc Narbonensibus cantitanda, nunc Biterrensibus, ambigendum celerius an pulchrius elucubrasti*, 'here then you produced (both rapidly and beautifully – one cannot tell which most) rapid iambs, pointed elegiacs and smooth hendecasyllables, and your other verses all fragrant with the Muses' thyme and flowers, to be eagerly sung, now by the people of Narbonne, now by those of Béziers'.

¹³³ Rustic. *Ep. ad Eucher.* (CSEL 31, 199), early fifth-century: *nam cum supra memoratae aedis ordinator ac dominus inter expressas lapillis aut ceris discoloribus formatasque effigies vel oratorum vel etiam poetarum specialia singulorum autotypis epigrammata subdividisset*, 'for as the designer and owner of the above-mentioned house had applied individual explanatory texts under each of the portraits of orators or also poets which were fashioned and made of little stones or various colours of wax'. See Wendel (1954) 252, 264–5, Zanker (1995) 296, 300, Vessey (2001) 278–97, and Stirling (2005) 79, 151.

Castelculier, near Agen.¹³⁴ The catalogues of the Seven Sages in Sidonius (*Carm.* 2.156–65, 15.42–50) suggest not single portraits as in Pliny,¹³⁵ but whole galleries of herms or busts of philosophers.¹³⁶ This tallies with a relief discovered in the Chiragan villa southwest of Toulouse which shows Socrates before a herm of Dionysus, an allusion to the *otium* of philosophical pursuits.¹³⁷ Ausonius and Augustine might be considered further possible mediators for Sidonius' collections of philosophers.¹³⁸ Images and literary testimonies show Socrates as Plato's hero and a martyr in the eyes of Late Antiquity, and the Seven Sages, for their part, as prophets of the coming of Christ.¹³⁹

In reality, the number of book collections mentioned by Sidonius says less about the educational attainment of their owners than about their concern for self-presentation. Gaul's estate libraries served both as storage media supporting discourse with the past and as aristocratic status symbols.¹⁴⁰ The selection made provides an insight into the *thesauri bibliothecales*,¹⁴¹ the cultural highlights of the library holdings which constituted the collective memory of Sidonius' generation. The bookcases at Prusianum contained popular contemporary Christian writings side by side with pagan classics, Augustine and Prudentius rubbing shoulders with Varro and Horace.¹⁴² Ferreolus' friend Claudianus Mamertus owned a *triplex bibliotheca* at Vienne, a library renowned for uniting Roman, Greek, and Christian literature, that is to say, all three strands of high culture.¹⁴³ Private libraries were both a forum for communication and a store in which the knowledge gathered in the past was preserved for future generations.¹⁴⁴ Unlike public libraries, they were the exclusive preserve of a specific social stratum, and provided the basis and the code for communication between its members: a survival strategy, after nobility no longer came from political office, for in Sidonius' judgement it was literary

¹³⁴ Stirling (2005) 67–8 fig. 33 and 79; cf. the Minerva in the library of the temple to Apollo (Plin. *Nat.* 7.210). On the humorous identification with Sidonius' well-read cousin, the Minerva of her time, see my previous chapter, sect. 3.

¹³⁵ Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 4.28.1) ordered portraits of Transpadane intellectuals, the biographer Cornelius Nepos and the Epicurean philosopher T. Catus, for a friend's library.

¹³⁶ Stirling (2005) 79: 'philosopher portraits'. Hebert (1988) 528–38: 'cycles of philosopher images' and sketches in the form of 'picture-books'. Zanker (1995) 288–305, esp. 293: 'widespread throughout the Roman Empire'. Engels (2010) 103–16: 'statues, portrait herms, wall paintings and mosaics'. The finds in Gaul include e.g. a bust of Socrates near Toulouse, a conjectural portrait at Séviac, and the gallery of portraits of philosophers at Welschbillig, outside Trier; cf. the philosopher mosaic at Cologne (third century). See Stirling (2005) 69, 250, nn. 281–4; but cf. doubts expressed by her and Percival (1997) 279–92.

¹³⁷ Bergmann (1999) 69, plates 3–4, and Stirling (2005) 69. 'Socrates and the Seven Sages are the most popular', see Zanker (1995) 300; e.g. 290–1 fig. 167 (mosaic 362/3, Apameia: Socrates teaching the Sages); 301 fig. 174 (portrait c. 300, Ephesus).

¹³⁸ Aug. *Civ.* 8.2; 6; Auson. *Ludus septem sapientium*, see Snell (2014) 145–61; see also Luxorius' *Septem sapientium sententiae* (*Anth.* 1.1.351 Riese). See Cameron (1970) 323–5.

¹³⁹ On their 'religious aura', see Snell (2014) 162–73 and Zanker (1995) 288–91, 302.

¹⁴⁰ E.g. Sidon. *Ep.* 2.9.4, 4.11.6, 8.2.2.

¹⁴¹ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.4.1 (library of the younger Consentius).

¹⁴² Sidon. *Ep.* 2.9.4 *nam similis scientiae viri, hinc Augustinus, hinc Varro, hinc Horatius, hinc Prudentius lectitabantur*, 'for it was usual to read authors of similar mastery, an Augustine, a Varro, a Horace, a Prudentius'. See Eigler (2003) 117 and Gerth (2013) 206–8.

¹⁴³ Sidon. *Carm.* 30 (*Ep.* 4.11.6) 4–5 *triplex bybliothea quo magistro, / Romana, Attica, Christiana, fulsit*, 'under his teaching three literatures shone, Roman, Greek, and Christian'. See Vessey (2001) 286, Eigler (2003) 103–4, Mratschek (2008), Gerth (2013) 174–7, and Schmitzer (2015) 91.

¹⁴⁴ On the function of libraries as 'external storage media' for cultural memory, see Assmann (1999) 19–23 ('externe Speichermedien'), 140–2 ('Speichergedächtnis').

education (*litterae*) alone that in the Gaul of his day remained a true mark of aristocracy (*solum indicium nobilitatis*).¹⁴⁵

7 Conclusion: *Artifex lector*, the Artful Reader

Sidonius Apollinaris, scion of the highest aristocracy and champion of letters, saw himself as part of ‘a world already senescent’ (*mundus iam senescens*).¹⁴⁶ His god was an ‘artful god’ (*artifex deus*) who made men capable of attaining reason.¹⁴⁷ Few, he wrote, were in a position to maintain ‘the excellence in the arts’ (*virtutes artium*) in public service and in literature with which the Ruler of all the ages had endowed his ancestors; few had the ability to create anything ‘remarkable or memorable’ (*mirandum ac memorabile*).¹⁴⁸ Sidonius claimed to be one of these few. Before his letter collection was published, he could already point to success within his own exclusive circle: ‘My diction pleases my friends; with that I am content.’¹⁴⁹ Sidonius’ constant self-reassurance as to his cultural and intellectual superiority over the ‘barbarians’ clearly reflects his efforts, by artistic and psychological means, to cope with the trauma inflicted by the military and political catastrophe of the year 476 and to formulate ways of living in the new kingdoms of western Europe.¹⁵⁰ He used the retrospective invocation of an idealised cultural tradition to generate an alternative world to safeguard his independence and to provide refuge from the victorious Visigoths. His virtuosic blending of past (*prisca saecula*) and present (*hoc tempus*) enabled him to weave a variety of portraits and scenes into an artistically composed virtual autobiography for the benefit of later generations. The images used may themselves become period markers,¹⁵¹ may evoke utopian and mythically charged timelessness,¹⁵² or may trigger dynamic time experiences.¹⁵³ It is not only the architecture and style of the younger Pliny’s epistolography that we find reflected in the process of reading and re-reading, but also the semiotic tension between Sidonius’ social milieu and that of his great predecessor.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁵ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.2.2. See Mathisen (2001a) 102–3, Mratschek (2002) 48, Näf (1995) 137, and Stirling (2005) 141.

¹⁴⁶ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.6.3 (cited below, n. 148).

¹⁴⁷ Sidon. *Ep.* 7.14.8 *rationi, cuius assequendae substantiam nostram compotem deus artifex . . . fecit*, ‘reason which God the creator has made our substance capable of attaining’.

¹⁴⁸ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.6.3 *namque virtutes artium istarum saeculis potius priscis saeculorum rector ingenuit, quae per aetatem mundi iam senescentis . . . parum aliquid hoc tempore in quibuscumque, atque id in paucis, mirandum ac memorabile ostentant*, ‘for the Ruler of the ages chose to implant the talents for such arts in bygone ages; but now, in an era when the world is growing old, they produce little that is remarkable or memorable in anyone, and even that only in a few’. The wording derives from Prud. *Ham.* praef. 17–18 (*mundum . . . iam senescentem*), the underlying meaning from Pliny, *Ep.* 8.12.1 (*litterarum iam senescentium*) and 6.21.1 (*neque enim quasi lassa et effeta natura nihil laudabile parit*, ‘it is not true that the world is too tired and exhausted to be able to produce anything worth praising’).

¹⁴⁹ Sidon. *Ep.* 8.16.5 (to Constantius) *dictio mea, quod mihi sufficit, placet amicis*. On coded communication in his ‘ingroup’, see rightly Schwitter (2015) 192, n. 275, 217–27 and 301, although one may have doubts about his concept of *obscuritas*.

¹⁵⁰ On the Visigothic empire, see Delaplace (2015) 170, 238–55, 302–3; on Sidonius’ resilience Mratschek (2020).

¹⁵¹ E.g. the visualisation of Sigismer’s ‘wedding’ (*Ep.* 4.20) as a projection of the new era.

¹⁵² E.g. Sidonius’ Avitacum, or the meaningful wall painting of the Pontii Leontii.

¹⁵³ E.g. public appearances of paradigmatic figures such as Fl. Astyrius, Theoderic II, Ricimer, Sigismer, and Chilperic II. Cf. Hanaghan (2019) on temporality from a narratological point of view.

¹⁵⁴ Compare Gibson’s (2012) 43–5 and (2015) persuasive approach to reading and re-reading Pliny’s collection, which – as with a volume of poems – not only brings out symmetries, but also reveals contrasts and a process-generated semiotic tension between themes. Cf. also Gibson (2011, 2013a, 2013b) and in this volume, ch. 11, on Sidonius’ epistolography.

Common to both writers, as Chris Whitton suggests, is their ‘combination of artistry, wit and evasiveness’.¹⁵⁵ Dense allusivity is an important generator of meaning, and both have attracted the attentive reading required to decipher it.¹⁵⁶ ‘Imitation’ in this case, then, is much more than the typical practice of emulation both as ‘a goal in itself . . . and a way of adding colour to the narrative’,¹⁵⁷ as it goes beyond the conscious act of ‘playful concealment’¹⁵⁸ by providing the key to a deeper understanding and artistic appreciation of the work as a whole. By evoking hypotexts and images from literary tradition (*nobilium sermonum purpurae*), and opening up spaces of memory and counter-worlds that constitute meta-levels where the skills of pagan rhetoric blend with Christian identity discourses, Sidonius succeeds in transcending the conventions of the genre and showing his audience his personal vision of the world. Given the sustained tension in the letters between perception of the historical present and the ‘teleological design’ of the past, allusions to the classics and their imagery prove to be a means of elucidating both the world and his self in an age of political and social upheaval. In this analysis, Sidonius’ authorial achievement emerges in a new light.¹⁵⁹

Sidonius’ intention, like Pliny’s before him, is that his audience should visualise the ‘aesthetics of existence’ as lived by the Gallo-Roman elites with their codes of behaviour and their sophisticated literary taste – the way of living that he himself stands for, the ‘good Roman’ aristocrat and intellectual who has internalised the classical literary tradition and reworks it in a protean variety of ways. This concept was developed by Foucault, in connection with the question of status-appropriate patterns of behaviour, for the specific case of the lifestyle of Antiquity, and centres on the individual’s capacity for exemplary self-development.¹⁶⁰

What can be said about the aesthetic existence of the persona of an author who concealed himself in his writing behind such various and varying roles? Sidonius, the author of carefully elaborated poems and letters, informs his educated audience about the values by which he measures the social world of his epoch, and about how he defines his attitude to his model: he views that social world and its fragility with the eyes of Pliny the Younger. Where this emerges most clearly is in the visualisation of Sidonius’ summer residence, Avitacum. Not only do the architectural features of Pliny’s homes – his Tusci, his Laurentinum, and his Lake Como villas¹⁶¹ – reappear, but, as in Pliny’s model, the length of the letter coalesces with the reading, the villa with its description, the virtual tour of the villa with the real-life visit by Domitius, to form a unity. As a highlight and crowning *pointe*, and with ambivalent effect, Sidonius alludes to Pliny’s famous reflection on his lengthy ekphrasis of his Tuscan estate

¹⁵⁵ As with Pliny, the curriculum vitae offered is selective: there are gaps in Sidonius’ biography and political career, in his change of role to bishop, his conversion and baptism, and with regard to the religious landscape of Clermont. For a comparison see Whitton (2013) 36. See van Waarden on Sidonius’ biography in this volume, ch. 1.

¹⁵⁶ On Pliny, see Whitton (2010) esp. 134–5.

¹⁵⁷ Visser (2014) 42.

¹⁵⁸ See the extremely thought-provoking book by Schwitter (2015) 206, along with Gualandri (1979) 94 and van Waarden (2010) 52. Schwitter’s appealing definition (203, 302–3) of *ars* as ‘technical virtuosity’ and ‘game’ that deliberately aimed for obscurity (*obscuritas*) does not go far enough; but see Schwitter (2020) on the literary contest of Sidonius’ friends. On the ‘obscuring effect’ of Sidonius’ high-wrought style, cf. Watson (1998) 181 and 197.

¹⁵⁹ As acutely recognised by Harries (1994). On the preponderantly negative critical assessment of Sidonius, see Mratschek (2008) 363, and, in closer detail, Schmitzer (2015) 74–6; for a new evaluation of the late antique language of art, see Formisano (2008), Hernández Lobato (2012a), and Schwitter (2015) 18–20 with reference to Roberts (1989). In his meticulous analysis of reception history, Wolff (2014c) 260 diagnoses a ‘Sidonian revival’.

¹⁶⁰ Foucault (2005) 904, no. 357, (1986) 84.

¹⁶¹ Mratschek (2018a) 221–9; see above, sect. 5.

(*Ep.* 2.2.20; cf. *Plin. Ep.* 5.6.44): *quapropter bonus arbiter et artifex lector non paginam, quae spatia describit, sed villam, quae spatiosa describitur, grandem pronuntiabunt*, ‘thus the arbiter of taste and the artful reader will declare, not the letter describing the spaces, but the villa described as spacious in it, to be great’.¹⁶²

Exactly who is meant here is subtly left unsaid: it could be Domitius, Sidonius’ (and Pliny’s) addressee; or it could be Sidonius himself as a reader of Pliny. The key can be found in Pliny’s letter (*Ep.* 5.6.35) itself: conceived as a work of art, in which letter and architecture, visualisation and villa, fuse into one, it is signed with the initials of both the *dominus* and the *artifex*, of both the owner and the artist, Pliny himself.¹⁶³ In dialogue with his model Pliny, Sidonius stylises himself so as to assume both roles – that of *artifex lector* and that of *bonus arbiter*, the artful reader of his letters, and the arbiter of good taste for his own epoch. Sidonius’ contemporaries endorsed his self-perception when they cast him in the role of the late fifth-century *arbiter elegantiae*, who was cautious when silent, and carried weight when he spoke.¹⁶⁴ His final judgement on Pliny’s art *and* his own is that it is *grandis* – that is, both great and grand. In the multi-dimensional expansive space of art, all kinds of movement and rebirth – social, political, creative – seem possible.

8 Further Reading

Sidonius’ letters have hitherto been used almost exclusively as a valuable source for the social and intellectual life of late antique Gaul.¹⁶⁵ Aiming to break down the apparently static structures of culture and society in what was in fact an age of transition, and to capture the voice of an author who employed various strategies for persuading and manipulating his audience, based on the evocative power of intertextuality and memory,¹⁶⁶ I chose to focus first (chapter 5) on the previously neglected dynamics of transformation, and second (this chapter) on a fresh reading of the social functions and the coded aesthetic of Sidonius’ epistolography. Through the poetics of allusion, the author’s project of self-construction reaches new heights as, in his reflections on his own writing, he reveals himself to his audience as an artful reader (*artifex lector*) of Pliny, and as he defines himself as an arbiter of taste (*arbiter elegantiae*) for the age in which he lived. Through recourse to classical tradition, and to literary exchanges with like-minded correspondents, he also plays his part in shaping a programme of revival for a new age and creating a world of his own, into which the Visigoths cannot penetrate.

¹⁶² *Plin. Ep.* 5.6.44 *similiter nos, ut parva magnis, cum totam villam oculis tuis subicere conamur, si nihil inductum et quasi devium loquimur, non epistula, quae describit, sed villa, quae describitur, magna est*. Cf. Ammianus (16.7.9) on the potential *scrupulosus lector*, the painstaking reader of the classics, in his audience: see Kelly (2008) 181.

¹⁶³ *Plin. Ep.* 5.6.35 (referring to the box tree) *litteras interdum, quae modo nomen domini dicunt, modo artificis*. For an interpretation, see Mratschek (2018a), with reference to Squire (2013) 370.

¹⁶⁴ Claud. Mam. *Anim.* praef. (in his dedication to Sidonius): *Editionem libellorum mihi quos de animae statu condidi reticendi cautus et loquendi pensus arbiter imperasti*, ‘You, a cautious arbiter when silent and carrying weight when you speak, commissioned me to put out the book I have written *On the Nature of the Soul*.’ Ennodius was a distant relative of Sidonius – hence his Sidonian ideal of an *elocutio artifex*, an elaborate style (*Opusc.* 6.11: *MGH AA* 7.313). *Artifex*, which appears eighteen times in his work, seems to be a favourite word of Ennodius; cf. similar expressions such as *artifex sermo*, *artifex facundia*, *artifex subtilitas*, and *artifex ingenium*, Index 5 of Vogel (*MGH AA* 7.369). On their relationship, see Mathisen (1981a) 104 = (1991a) 22; on Ennodius’ quotation of Sidonius, see Schwitzer (2015) 140 with reference to Gioanni (2006) cviii–cix, 154, and 303.

¹⁶⁵ E.g. Zelzer (1997) 348, and Fuhrmann (1994) 274–81: ‘The letter as mirror of contemporary history: Sidonius Apollinaris’.

¹⁶⁶ Hardie (2019) *passim* and Mratschek (2013, 2016, 2020). Misinterpretations often result from failure to contextualise, or from a literal reading of the text (Dill (1898, 2nd rev. edn 1899), Stevens (1933), Stroheker (1948), Kaufmann (1995), Liebs (1998)).

For an understanding of the history and social relations of the aristocratic elites who transmitted culture, the standard works by Harries, Mathisen, Gualandri, Eigler, and Roberts are indispensable – the first two for the historical perspective, the others for their literary and philological contribution.¹⁶⁷ All five have researched Sidonius' circle and oeuvre minutely, and in conjunction with Gibson's comparative studies on epistolographical literature and new approaches to the aesthetics of Late Antiquity,¹⁶⁸ they form a bridge connecting history, prosopography, and manuscript tradition to the soft skills that help to decode the rhetorical and visual culture of the educated elites in the late Roman Empire.

¹⁶⁷ Besides Harries' essential Sidonius biography, see further important works by Mathisen (2003a), Mathisen and Shanzer (2001, 2011), and Delaplace (2015); also Gualandri (1979), Eigler (2003), and Roberts (1989). Cf. the commentaries by Köhler on Book 1 of the letters (1995), Amherdt on Book 4 (2001), and van Waarden on Book 7 (2010, 2016a).

¹⁶⁸ On epistolography see Gibson in this volume, ch. 11, also Gibson (2013a), Gibson and Morrison (2007), Gibson and Morello (2012), and van Waarden and Kelly (2013). For an aesthetic approach, see Formisano (2008), Charlet (2008), Webb (2009), Elsner (2014), Schwitter (2015), Squire (2016), Elsner and Hernández Lobato (2017), Hardie (2019), Mratschek (2017, 2020).