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## News from a *mundus senescens*: Romans, Visigoths and Saxons in a Letter by Sidonius Apollinaris (8.6)

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The *ep.* 8.6 not only has the distinction of being, with its eighteen paragraphs, the longest of Sidonius Apollinaris' 146 letters, but, in its great detail, it also presents the peculiarity of offering a particular cross-section of the world of the 'other', outlining the most comprehensive 'portrait' that we have of the Saxons, depicted as having marked connotations of ferocity and barbarism, as opposed to the Roman values of a *mundus iam senescens* (world which is growing old<sup>1</sup>).

Before analysing these topics, it is first necessary to address some preliminary issues, starting with the complex structure of the letter, and then consider the identity of the addressee and the letter's debated dating.

### The content and structure of *ep.* 8.6

In order to understand the structure of the letter, it would first of all be appropriate to draw up, for the benefit of the reader, a schematic summary of the content:

§§ 1–9. Sidonius tells Namatius he feels honoured by the praise of Nicetius, as happened to Julius Caesar, exalted by Cicero for his military and oratorical arts. Sidonius reciprocates the praise: memories of Nicetius.

§§ 10–12. Back to Namatius: is he dealing with agriculture, architecture or both? Some funny scenes demonstrate his lack of skill in hunting.

§§ 13–15. News from a messenger: Namatius is in command of a fleet keeping the Saxons under surveillance. Description of the reckless boldness of the Saxons and the tortures they inflict on their prisoners.

§§ 16–17. Plea to Namatius to let Sidonius have positive news.

§18. Dispatch of the books requested by Namatius, the *Logistorici* of Varro and the *Chronicon* of Eusebius.

Although a clear division into two parts is recognizable in the structure of this letter, with the conspicuous insertion of paragraphs 13–17 between the initial block of paragraphs 1–12 and the concluding one, its overall organization tends to confuse the reader, at first sight not appearing very linear. One wonders in particular why the author has chosen to complicate everything by including the scene of the arrival of the messenger in order to update the reader on Namatius' situation. In fact, as Hanaghan noted, 'this seemingly disorganised arrangement reveals a clear structure when the arrival of the messenger is read as a narratological device.'<sup>2</sup> According to the scholar, the arrival of the messenger would create a *Ringkomposition*, linking the end of the letter to its premise about Caesar's military and oratorical glory. If the example of Nicetius in fact offers Namatius a model of oratorical art and commitment to the public service rather than to the military one, it is the news unexpectedly brought by the messenger about the patrolling against the Saxons now carried out by Namatius to recall how important Caesar's example is also from the other point of view. Namatius should draw inspiration from him, more than from Nicetius or Sidonius himself. Through this development, the author achieves the double result of connecting the two main threads of the discourse, Nicetius' oratorical ability and the danger of military action against the Saxons, and of emphasizing the importance of *paideia* for Namatius.

### The addressee

The *peregrinans amicus* (friend abroad: *ep.* 8.6.17) to whom the letter is addressed is Namatius and some of his few biographical data known to us can be obtained from these same Sidonian pages. Namatius owned land on the island of Oléron in the Gallic province of *Novempopulana*, where he lived with his father, while it is not clear whether he also had a house in the *Santones*, that is, around Santona, today Saintes,<sup>3</sup> where he had recently been put in charge of the fleet of the king of the Visigoths, Euricus, to defend the coast from attacks by Saxon pirates. From the letter one can also deduce that he had literary interests, given his request to Sidonius to send him the two books. According to Mathisen, Namatius could be the same person who appears among the correspondents of Ruricius of Limoges (*ep.* 2.1–5 and 2.62): if that were true, we would also know that he had a wife named Ceraunia and a daughter who had married one of the sons of Ruricius.<sup>4</sup> For Martindale, they are, instead, two different people.<sup>5</sup>

In the letter in question there is another figure known to us only through Sidonius, namely Flavius Nicetius. Also in this case, there is no agreement as to whether or not it is the same Nicetius whose inheritance is mentioned in *ep.* 3.1.3.<sup>6</sup> Assessor of the *praefectus praetorio Galliarum*, Nicetius was given the title of *vir spectabilis*. From among his memories, Sidonius recalls the panegyric that Nicetius had pronounced for the Consul Astyrius in Arles in 449, when Sidonius' father was prefect of the praetorium, and the *lex de praescriptione tricennii* which Nicetius had introduced in Gaul.

### The dating

The dating to 478 hypothesized by Stroheker<sup>7</sup> was considered unacceptable by Loyen.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of some references in the letter, and in particular the expression *aevo viridis* (in the prime of life: *ep.* 8.6.2) relating to Sidonius' age, the French scholar anticipates its dating to a period between the advent of Euricus (466) and the episcopate of Sidonius, proposing 469. Loyen also applies the expression *praesentis opusculi volumina* (the various books of the present little work: *ep.* 8.6.2) to the first book of the correspondence. However, Stroheker's lower dating has found confirmation in subsequent studies: Martindale considers the letter 'perhaps written shortly before *c.* 478, when Sidonius published Book VIII of the letters.'<sup>9</sup> Kaufmann places it 'etwa 477/478', after disputing Loyen's arguments also regarding the interpretation of *praesentis opusculi volumina*.<sup>10</sup> Piacente dates it to 478 in all probability, after having made a detailed reconstruction of the exegeses of Stroheker and Loyen, and reinforced the former's hypothesis with further arguments.<sup>11</sup> More recently, while Fascione<sup>12</sup> and Mascoli<sup>13</sup> are still aligned with Loyen's positions, considering the letter datable to 469 and seeing the reference to *praesentis opusculi volumina* as an allusion to the publication of the first book of letters rather than to the block constituted by the first seven, Kelly has reiterated that 'the plural *volumina* is sufficient here to show that this is not, as Loyen thought, a reference to Book 1, and in fact the letter clearly belongs to 477 or later, since Sidonius at its close affects just to have heard the news that Namatius has joined Euricus' navy. We are implicitly in a period after the end of Roman rule.'<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the most probable dating appears to be no earlier than 477/478. Sidonius is forced to recognize as the victors the people under which Namatius is fighting against the Saxons (*victoris populi signa comitaris*, you follow the standard of a victorious people: *ep.* 8.6.16). And the people who subdued the

Romans of that area of Gaul are undoubtedly the Visigoths,<sup>15</sup> to whom in 475 the imperial power had ceded Arvernia in exchange for Provence, and whose Romano-barbarian reign was being consolidated after the collapse of the sovereignty of Rome in 476.<sup>16</sup>

### The 'other' according to Sidonius: the Visigoths

Returning to the main issues addressed in this letter, one wonders, in the first place: after the important historical-political turning point that took place between 475 and 476, how did this aristocratic Gallo-Roman bishop define and describe the 'other'?

Among the barbarian populations, the Visigoths are, as is known, the most prevalent in the Sidonian correspondence.<sup>17</sup>

If, in *ep.* 1.2, there is a flattering portrait of King Theodoricus II,<sup>18</sup> which confirms the image of a devoted and friendly sovereign in *carm.* 7 to Avitus,<sup>19</sup> instead, several letters reveal, towards his killer and successor, Euricus, an attitude of hostility, or at least of contempt, attributable as much to his Arian creed as to his oppression of Arvernia. A particular case is that of the poem included in *ep.* 8.9 to Lampridius, apparently aimed at celebrating Euricus, but actually aimed at portraying him as a wicked tyrant and above all a crude barbarian.<sup>20</sup> This poem continually reaffirms the negative judgement already expressed in the long beginning of *ep.* 7.6, where the image of Euricus, accused of having broken the ancient *foedus* with the Romans, appears immediately after that of a wolf in the act of threatening sheep (an implicit reference to his anti-Catholic attitude).<sup>21</sup> And even in the accompanying verses to be engraved on a silver basin, written at the request of his friend Evodius for Euricus' wife, Queen Ragnahilda, Sidonius sarcastically comments: *in foro tali sive Athenaeo plus charta vestra quam nostra scriptura laudabitur* (in that sort of forum or Athenaeum your writing-material will get more praise than my writing: *ep.* 4.8.5). Even in the courtly dimension of the poetic homage, it is another sign of contempt for the ignorance of the Visigothic court, presented ironically and through antiphrasis as a sort of temple of culture.<sup>22</sup>

There should be a separate discussion regarding other passages in which Sidonius conveys his disgust for the Visigoths by means of particularly 'strong' lexical choices. The metaphorical fabric of an expression such as *Gothis credite, qui saepenumero etiam Septimaniam suam fastidiunt vel refundunt, modo invidiosi huius anguli etiam desolata proprietate potiantur* (you may learn even

from the Goths, for they often feel constrained to despise or renounce their own Septimania for the prospect of gaining possession of this coveted corner: *ep.* 3.1.4) seems to insist on the act of vomiting: the ‘migrating’ of the barbarians would therefore be aligned, through images, with the vomit of someone who has gorged himself on something *ad nauseam*.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the recollection of the suffering during the period of imprisonment spent within the *moenia Liviana* is linked to two *Getides*<sup>24</sup> *anus, quibus nil umquam litigiosius, bibacius, vomacius erit* (two old Gothic women, the most quarrelsome, drunken, vomiting creatures the world will ever see: *ep.* 8.3.2), and therefore once again to something nauseating. Instead, in the expression *siquidem quos humari nox succincta prohibuerat decervicatis liquere cadaveribus, tamquam minoris indicii foret quam villis agnosci crinitum dimisisse truncatum* (that is to say, they decapitated the bodies of all the men whose burial was prevented by the shortness of the night, and left them thus, imagining that less would be revealed if one abandoned a man in a headless state than if he were to be recognized by the tufts of hair on his head: *ep.* 3.3.7), the author employs the term *villus*, normally used to indicate the fur of some animals, to express his disgust for the outward appearance of the barbarians, in this case their ‘mane’.

The letter to Ecdicius from which this last expression is taken presents, among other things, one of the most significant examples of the cruelty and fanaticism attributed to the Visigoths by Sidonius. Probably for celebratory reasons, namely to underline further the exceptional importance of the military enterprise of Ecdicius, the hero of the Arvernia resistance against the Visigoths, the author seems here to argue that the Visigoths would have proceeded to this decapitation of the corpses in order to make it less obvious how great their losses had been.<sup>25</sup>

Instead, with the above-mentioned words from *ep.* 8.6.16, *victoris populi signa comitaris*, the author seems to accept as a matter of fact not only the victory of the Visigoths over the Gallo-Romans, but also the collaboration that some of his aristocratic fellow citizens like Namatius had begun with Euricus’ court, sometimes even managing to carve out for themselves successful careers.<sup>26</sup> This is the case, for example, of the Victorius mentioned in *ep.* 7.17.1, who had entered the Visigothic administration.<sup>27</sup> Or the two figures who, like Victorius himself, played a role when Euricus granted Sidonius his forgiveness. The first one is his friend Leo of Narbonne, who interceded with the Visigothic king and was at that time one of his advisors: *cotidie namque per potentissimi consilia regis totius sollicitus orbis pariter [eius] negotia et iura, foedera et bella, loca spatia merita cognoscis* (for every day in the councils of a most powerful king you meticulously gather information about the whole world’s affairs and rights, treaties and wars, localities,

distances, and merits alike: *ep.* 4.22.3); *sepone pauxillulum conclamatissimas declamationes, quas oris regii vice conficis* (put aside for an instant those much-acclaimed declamations which you compose as the royal spokesman: *ep.* 8.3.3).<sup>28</sup> The second, Lampridius, to whom Sidonius sent, for reading, the poem for the above-mentioned Euricus, was in turn an official who fully enjoyed the rights of Visigoth citizens: *tu munificentia regia satis abutens* (when you are in full enjoyment of the King's munificence: *ep.* 8.9.1); *ago adhuc exulem, agis ipse iam civem* (I still in exile, you are now a citizen: *ep.* 8.9.3).<sup>29</sup> And even Sidonius' son, Apollinaris the Younger, a few years later, in 507, would have fought for the Visigoths against the Franks in the battle of Vouillé.<sup>30</sup>

However, it is significant that, in the same book 8, there is another letter, which can be considered more or less contemporary with the one sent to Namatius, as it is dated at 478, in which Sidonius defines the Visigoths a victorious *gens*, but *aliena* (*ep.* 8.2.2).<sup>31</sup> It is a sign that Sidonius' attitude would always remain critical towards them and that, as will be seen better later, the fight against the militarily undefeated barbarians had by then been transferred to the cultural level, taking the form of a struggle to maintain a Roman identity.

The very adjective *alienus* – of central importance in my opinion for the purposes of this discourse on how the 'other' is seen – occurs in two other letters of book 5 with this same meaning. In *ep.* 5.5, expressing to the noble Syagrius, descended from illustrious Roman ancestors, his amazement at the ease with which he had learned the language of the Burgundians (*sermo Germanicus*), Sidonius asks him: *velim dicas, unde subito hauserunt pectora tua euphoniamentis alienae* (I should like you to tell me how you have managed to absorb so swiftly into your inner being the exact sounds of an alien race: *ep.* 5.5.2). That *alienus* is used here with the meaning of foreigner also finds confirmation in the following words: *aestimari minime potest, quanto mihi ceterisque sit risui, quotiens audio, quod te praesente formidet linguae suae facere barbarus barbarismum* (you have no idea what amusement it gives me, and others too, when I hear that in your presence the barbarian is afraid to perpetrate a barbarism in his own language: *ep.* 5.5.3). The concept of linguistic and broadly cultural extraneousness, introduced by *alienus* and reaffirmed immediately afterwards by *barbarus* (with the play on *barbarismus*), could not be expressed more clearly.<sup>32</sup> In a completely different but equally interesting context, *alienus* returns twice: in the *ep.* 5.12 to Calminius, a friend of Sidonius who fell into the hands of the Visigoths, who forced him to fight against his fellow citizens of Clermont. The letter therefore presents itself as a historical testimony not only of the treatment that the Visigoths reserved for their prisoners and of the changes that their advance imposed on

Gallo-Roman territory, but also of their brutality (in *pendant*, according to Loyen, with what emerges in the macabre description, mentioned above, of the beheading carried out by the Visigoths on the corpses of their army).<sup>33</sup> Even the justification that Sidonius gives of the fact that Calminius rarely received his letters provides a significant insight into the difficulties of communication, aggravated in those times by the risk of letters being intercepted. This could be the reason for the double use of the adjective *alienus*, which would have allowed the sender to call into question the Visigoths without explicitly naming them: *quod rarius ad vos a nobis pagina meat, non nostra superbia sed aliena impotentia facit . . . ad arbitrium terroris alienis vos loricae, nos propugnacula tegunt* (if a line from me comes to you all too seldom, it is not superciliousness in me but the violence in others that is to blame . . . at the dictate of a menacing foreign power you have donned your armour and we are covered by our fortifications: *ep.* 5.12.1). Also noteworthy is the fact that in both cases the adjective in question accompanies a term with a negative meaning: *impotentia*, which is widely used also in the metaphorical sense of ‘*intemperantia, nimia licentia, animi efferatio*’, pertaining to the sphere of ethics,<sup>34</sup> and, in a syntactically inverted order, *terror*, which recalls how the climate imposed by the Visigoths conditioned the possibilities of contact between the prisoner and his former fellow citizens, the former protected by the armour of the attacker, the latter defended by the fortifications of the attacked.

The letter to Namatius, despite the brevity of the implicit and fleeting reference *victoris populi signa comitaris*, therefore constitutes an important stage in the evolution of Sidonius’ attitude towards the Visigoths: from the propagandistic positive presentation of Theodoricus II to the aversion towards Euricus after the breaking of the *foedus* and the consequent misobarbarism; then from the acceptance of their victory and the collaborationism of friends and fellow citizens to the persistence of the feeling of the Visigoths’ extraneousness, at least linguistic and cultural – a factor, destined, as will be seen later, to influence the perception and representation of the self.

But the importance of this letter in the Sidonian context (and beyond) is linked above all to the fact that it contains ‘the best original account of the Saxon pirates’.<sup>35</sup>

### The ‘other’ according to Sidonius: the Saxons

Before this letter, Sidonius had already had occasion to mention the Saxons in the panegyric to Avitus (*carm.* 7.88–92, 369–371, 388–390):



Victricia Caesar

signa Caledonios transvexit ad usque Britannos;  
fuderit et quamquam Scotum et cum Saxone Pictum,  
hostes quaesivit, quem iam natura vetabat  
quaerere plus homines . . . .

Quin et Aremoricus piratam Saxona tractus  
sperabat, cui pelle salum sulcare Britannum  
ludus et assuto glaucum mare findere lembo.<sup>36</sup> . . .

‘Ut primum ingesti pondus suscepit honoris,  
legas qui veniam poscant, Alamanne, furori,  
Saxonis incursus cessat.’ . . .

Caesar took his victorious legions over even to the Caledonian Britons, and although he routed the Scot, the Pict and the Saxon, he still looked for foes where nature forbade him to look any more for men. . . . The Aremoric region too expected the Saxon pirate, who deems it but sport to furrow the British waters with hides, cleaving the blue sea in a stitched boat. . . . ‘No sooner had he taken up the burden of the office thrust upon him than the Alaman sent envoys to crave pardon for their frenzy, the Saxon’s raiding abated.’ . . .

However, these references are believed to lack historical reliability. In the first case, relating to the predecessors of Avitus, because Caesar in his campaign in Britain had not actually had anything to do with the Saxons: the poet would therefore be projecting on to the first century BCE later ethnic data of the fifth century CE.<sup>37</sup> Later, the Saxons appear twice among the multitude of barbarians reduced to obedience by Avitus, but according to Kaufmann these statements are panegyristic *flosculi*, without any historical content:<sup>38</sup> it is not only the propagandistic tone which is striking here, but also Sidonius’ debt to the analogous treatment reserved for the Saxons, according to Claudian, by Theodosius, Honorius’ grandfather, and Stilicho, for how they are respectively praised in *Panegyricus de quarto consulatus Honorii Augusti* and *De consulatu Stilichonis*.<sup>39</sup> In common with Claudian there is also the fact that the Saxons were associated with the ideas of piracy and attacks from the sea.

The encomiastic dimension with regard to an honoured person also dominates in the subsequent mention of the Saxons present in the eulogy of Euricus included in *ep.* 8.9.5 (= *carm.* 34.21–27):

istic Saxona caerulum videmus  
assuetum ante salo solum timere;  
cuius verticis extimas per oras

non contenta suos tenere morsus  
 alta lammina marginem comarum,  
 et sic crinibus ad cutem recisis  
 decrescit caput additurque vultus.

Here in Bordeaux we see the blue-eyed Saxon afraid of the land, accustomed as he is to the sea; along the extreme edges of his pate the razor, refusing to restrain its bite, pushes back the frontier of his hair and, with the growth thus clipped to the skin, his head is reduced and his face enlarged.

The *caerulus Saxo* opens the catalogue of the peoples who parade in an act of submission to Euricus.<sup>40</sup> With respect to the mention in *carm.* 7 here there is no reference to piracy, but the detail of the Saxons' familiarity with the dangers of the sea is repeated, to which Sidonius adds two physical details, namely the blue eyes and the cut of their hair, of which he had probably had direct experience at the court of Euricus in Bordeaux.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, not a mere mention but an accurate description is what takes up three paragraphs in *ep.* 8.6 and which seems to be built on a sort of crescendo. In fact, the first comment presents the Saxons as *archipiratae* (pirate-captain)<sup>42</sup> who, aboard their *pandi myoparones* (curving sloops),<sup>43</sup> are all capable at the same time of commanding and obeying, of teaching and learning robbery (*ep.* 8.6.13). A little further on, the author goes so far as to define these people *hostis [...] omni hoste truculentior* (that enemy surpasses all other enemies in brutality: *ep.* 8.6.14), adding an explanation of the ruthlessness with which they face not only enemies but also storms and shipwrecks. The passage culminates with the description of the *superstitiosus ritus* (rite due to superstition: *ep.* 8.6.15) with which, when they are about to leave for their lands, the Saxons usually inflict drowning or crucifixion on one prisoner out of ten.<sup>44</sup>

A first question posed by this passage is whether it can be considered reliable or not. Although some details are reflected in other more or less contemporary sources,<sup>45</sup> it is probable, as Kaufmann believes, that Sidonius had mixed news he had learned about while in Bordeaux with other rumours.<sup>46</sup> It would not seem to be first-person knowledge like perhaps that of the physical traits of the Saxon group that the author must have had the opportunity of seeing at Euricus' court, but rather 'second-hand' knowledge, a hypothesis that could in some way undermine the veracity of its reconstruction.<sup>47</sup> The question is probably destined not to have a definitive answer, but, as Flierman himself points out, 'this description is the first of its kind to survive in the late antique record'.<sup>48</sup>

Another question is related to this, as to why Sidonius describes the Saxons in such detail to Namatius, who, as the commander of the fleet, should have been

better informed than anyone about the enemies and the treatment they reserved for their prisoners. But since the author himself later confesses that he feels reassured, among other things, by his friend's wisdom (*in sapientes viros, quos inter iure censeris, minus annuo licere fortuitis*, with provident men, among whom you are rightly classed, there is less opportunity for accidents to happen: *ep.* 8.6.16:); it seems more probable that Sidonius might well have just seized the opportunity to present an educated fellow Roman with some interesting bits of hearsay on the coarse superstitions of an uncivilized people, duly wrapped up in stylized prose.<sup>49</sup> And even if there were news of which the author had come to know personally from others and which he had felt duty-bound to transmit to Namatius,<sup>50</sup> the literary aspect – deducible among other things from the lexical references to Cicero's *Verrinae* – may have superceded reality, acting as a filter on contemporary facts.<sup>51</sup>

Actually, the description of the Saxons, together with the praise of Nicetius (*ep.* 8.6.6–7), presents the letter's greatest stylistic development, judging by the high concentration of rhetorical devices in paragraphs 14–15:

– *hostis est omni hoste truculentior* (that enemy surpasses all other enemies in brutality)

– *inprovisus aggreditur, praevisus elabitur; spernit obiectos, sternit incautos; si sequatur, intercipit, si fugiat, evadit* (he attacks unforeseen, and when foreseen he slips away; he despises those who bar his way, and he destroys those whom he catches unawares; if he pursues, he intercepts; if he flees, he escapes);

– *ad hoc exercent illos naufragia, non terrent. Est eis quaedam cum discriminibus pelagi non notitia solum, sed familiaritas* (moreover, shipwreck, far from terrifying them, is their training. With the perils of the sea they are not merely acquainted – they are familiarly acquainted);

– *ipsa si qua tempestas est huc securos efficit occupandos, huc prospici vetat occupaturos* (a storm whenever it occurs lulls into security the object of their attack and prevents the coming attack from being observed by victims);

– *mortis iniquitatem, sortis aequitate* (the iniquity of death by the equity of the lot);

– *talibus se ligant votis, victimis solvunt; et per huiusmodi non tam sacrificia purgati, quam sacrilegia polluti . . .* (such are the obligations of their vows, and such the victims with which they pay their obligations. Polluting themselves by such sacrilege rather than purifying themselves by such sacrifices . . .).

Such a formalized prose could be a way to emphasize, through rethorical expressions, all the brutality the Saxons showed in the exercise of piracy and of their religious practices.

## Sidonius' representation of the self and self-perception

A second question posed by the letter to Namatius is how did his Gallo-Roman 'othering' impact Sidonius' representation of the self and self-perception?

To answer this question, it would be appropriate to start from the observation that what is most striking in this letter is perhaps its being permeated with a staggering sense of the end of time: *per aetatem mundi iam senescentis* (in an era when the world is growing old: *ep.* 8.6.3).<sup>52</sup>

At least two distinct literary traditions converge in this evocative expression. On one hand, the words *per aetatem mundi* refer to Florus' *Epitome*, with the division of Roman history into four ages, like those of human life, according to a biological conception of history for which Florus is in turn indebted to Seneca the Elder.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the idea of the *mundus senescens* fits into the well-codified *topos* of *Roma senescens*, as opposed to that of *Roma aeterna*.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, here, Sidonius seems to have mixed Christian and pagan traditions. In fact, the expression appears close to a couple of passages from Cyprian's *Ad Demetrianum*: *illud in primo loco scire debes, senuisse iam saeculum* and *mun-do senescente* (you must in the first place know this, that the world has now grown old),<sup>55</sup> and very close to a page from Prudentius' *Hamartigenia*: *mundum [...] iam senescentem* (*Praef.* 17–18). In addition to this quotation from Prudentius, Mratschek points out a passage from Pliny, where Titinius Capito is praised as *litterarum iam senescentium reductor ac reformator* (the restorer and reformer of literature in its decline: *ep.* 8.2.1)<sup>56</sup> and which was certainly familiar to Sidonius.<sup>57</sup>

In effect, put back into its context – from which it has been briefly extrapolated by this short analysis of the literary background – the expression *per aetatem mundi iam senescentis* confirms that Sidonius' reflection on the decadence of the world around him is strictly cultural in nature: since his land is now definitively under the political dominion of the Visigoths, his attention turns to the situation in which the arts find themselves (*ep.* 8.6.3): *namque virtutes artium istarum saeculis potius priscis saeculorum rector ingenuit, quae per aetatem mundi iam senescentis lassatis veluti seminibus emedullatae parum aliquid hoc tempore in quibuscumque, atque id in paucis, mirandum ac memorabile ostentant* (for it was in the men of bygone ages that the Ruler of all the ages preferred to implant the talents for such arts; but now, in an era when the world is growing old, these arts have lost the power of germinating, they are exhausted, they produce little that is remarkable or memorable in anyone, and even that only in a few).

This is one of the culminating moments of the Sidonian reflection on the topic of cultural decadence that runs through his entire correspondence:<sup>58</sup> there

are few men still able to excel in the arts with which the *saeculorum rector* endowed past generations; an equally small number of men are still able to create something admirable and memorable. Among these, the author undoubtedly includes himself, as evidenced by the fact that the foregoing and the following in the letter report the words of praise that Nicetius had for Sidonius' works. Moreover, even when it is Sidonius who praises the cultural work of others, he tends to bring out the awareness of his being at the forefront of a similar battle, with that sort of false modesty that is often found in his epistles.<sup>59</sup>

The *ep.* 8.6, although permeated with a sense of the end of time, is significantly involved in this struggle, with the perception and representation of Sidonius himself as the one who, with his literary and cultural activity, tries to prevent the Roman identity from being overwhelmed and erased.

### Manifestations of Roman identity

This last point is the best introduction to a further question posed by this letter: what were the manifestations of Roman identity in this area of the Roman Empire? On the basis of the advice that Sidonius gives directly or indirectly to Namatius, it is evident that at least two other aspects of Roman identity must be added to the literary and cultural one that has already been partially mentioned: the first pertains to the linguistic sphere and the other is of a material nature and more broadly related to lifestyles.

Starting with the latter, a question that the author poses to the addressee at a certain point cannot go unnoticed: *venaris, aedificas, rusticarisne?* (do you hunt? do you build? do you live the life of a countryman?: *ep.* 8.6.10). Also from a stylistic point of view, the care with which the question has been constructed is evident – with three increasing *cola* of three, four, and five syllables respectively – perhaps precisely to emphasize that this is a crucial question, which marks, among other things, one of the hubs in the structure of the letter, with the end of Nicetius' praise. Hunting, building, and farming were three typical activities of a Roman citizen, in particular the third – in opposition, as is known, to the nomadism of the barbarians.

Curiously, Sidonius chooses to focus his attention on hunting, which was one of the favourite pastimes of the late antique aristocracy.<sup>60</sup> Curiously, because two entire paragraphs make fun of Namatius' poor success in this sport, with some particularly humorous passages, about the inefficiency of Namatius' dogs, and his consequent inability to catch wild boars and reach *lepusculi Olarionenses* (the

hares of Oléron),<sup>61</sup> vainly solicited, except to be kept in training waiting for Sidonius' son to visit Namatius and his father and show them how to work best (*ep.* 8.6.11–12).

According to Harland, 'we have . . . an illustration of Roman identity in crisis. Hunting was a traditional Roman aristocratic pastime: why would a Roman be bad at it?'<sup>62</sup> Personally, I do not believe that Sidonius here wanted to allude to a crisis of Roman identity, by stigmatizing that of hunting as a sort of crisis of one of its symbols. Otherwise, he might not have concluded the passage by envisaging the arrival of Apollinaris, almost certainly his son,<sup>63</sup> in aid of Namatius and his father: *dum tibi ac patri noster Apollinaris intervenit* (when our friend Apollinaris drops in on you and your father). I would therefore be inclined to believe that with these two paragraphs the author wants to counter the sustained tone of the letter, turning to a comic element, between the committed praise of Nicetius first and the later description of the brutality of the Saxons. The two sentences that open and close the account of his friend's clumsy hunts would seem to confirm this intention, respectively with the play on words, with an evidently ironic tone, *ut tibi de venatoris officio quam minimum blandiaris, maxume iniungo* (as regards the hunter's business I do most strongly urge you not to flatter yourself unduly: *ep.* 8.6.11) and with the explicit reference, once the digression is closed, to the fact that so far he has been joking: *exceptis iocis fac sciam tandem, quid te, quid domum circa* (joking apart, let me know at last the news of yourself and family: *ep.* 8.6.13).

In asking Namatius that question about his current occupation, Sidonius adds an interesting compliment: *sed de Vitruvio sive Columella, seu alterutrum ambosve sectere, decentissime facis* (as regards Vitruvius or Columella, whether you are a devotee of one of them, or of both together, you are acting splendidly: *ep.* 8.6.10). After mentioning Caesar and Cicero, at the beginning of the letter, there is a further reference to Latin literary production, which anticipates what in the last paragraph will present itself as the second of the manifestations of Roman identity, namely the insistence on classical studies. The final purpose of this letter is in fact to accompany the dispatch to Namatius of the two literary works he had requested from Sidonius: *Varronem logistoricum, sicut poposceras, et Eusebium chronographum misi* (I send you Varro logistoricus and Eusebius the chronographer, as you requested: *ep.* 8.6.18). In the first case, it was the entire Varronian collection and not just a single book of the *Logistorici*.<sup>64</sup> In the case of Eusebius, it is assumed that it is the second book of the *Chronicon* translated by Jerome.<sup>65</sup> A pagan writer and a Christian one, therefore, to allow Namatius to cover the two different spheres of knowledge, or rather 'to help him refine both

his philosophical and Christian lifestyle.<sup>66</sup> According to Overwien, Varro should be interpreted 'als Symbol für ein starkes Römisches Reich, Eusebios als Symbol für das katholische Christentum bzw. die Gefahr des Arianismus' (as a symbol of a stronger Roman Empire, Eusebius as a symbol of the Catholic Christianity or of the danger of Arianism).<sup>67</sup> What is surprising, in this passage, is not only Namatius' request for a work lost to us like the *Logistorici*, but also Sidonius' ability to fulfil it without difficulty. This reveals another aspect that, together with the defence of classical culture, was a sign of distinction for the Gallo-Roman senatorial aristocracy, namely the possession of rich libraries – in this case the library of Sidonius, which even included a Varronian text, whose total loss had already occurred, about the second half of the second century, in those cultural areas, such as Italy and Greece, where Gellius used to move while editing his notes.<sup>68</sup>

Sidonius' recommendation to his friend is to devote himself to Varro and Eusebius *inter excubiales curas* (amid the duties of the watch), and the reason for this is not insignificant, but opens up a new *pointe*: just as he will apply himself to cleaning his weapons, so Namatius will also be able to remove from his mouth the *loquendi robigo* (linguistic rust) thanks to their *lima* (refining tool), to be understood above all as the beneficial formative action in the field of expressive education and adequate linguistic expression (*ep.* 8.6.18).<sup>69</sup> Latin as a language of culture, pure, proper, elegant, and refined in its polished smoothness, or rather in its absence of 'rust', thus constitutes the third and last of the manifestations of the Roman identity. At the same time, the *loquendi robigo*, in its metaphorical allusion to the disfigured, if not exactly repellent aspect, which a Latin, stained by the negligence of the Romans and/or by interference or at least contacts with different languages and perceived as barbaric, must have had for a purist like Sidonius, also presents itself as a metaphor of the perception that the author must have had of the 'other', this time from the linguistic point of view. A confirmation of this type of perception by Sidonius emerges from the comparison with a passage in which the term *robigo* also occurs, namely the letter to Hesperius, a rhetorician of his circle, as well as the teacher of one of Ruricius' sons, and particularly esteemed for his battle in defence of Latinity: *tantum increbruit multitudo desidiosorum ut, nisi vel paucissimi quique meram linguae Latiaris proprietatem de trivialium barbarismorum robigine vindicaveretis, eam brevi abolitam defleamus interemptamque* (the mob of the sluggards has so grown in numbers 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 in a short time be lamenting its extinction and annihilation: *ep.* 2.10.1).

The passage is doubly interesting: here the noun *robigo* is in fact unequivocally accompanied by the specification *barbarismorum* and is in contrast with *mera linguae Latinaris proprietates*.<sup>70</sup>

As has recently been stressed by Wolff, for Sidonius 'the survival of ancient culture is conditional upon the preservation of proper Latin usage. It should be noted that Sidonius' opposition to the barbarians had far more to do with cultural issues than with problems of ethnicity, and he associated the empire's loss of influence with the precarious state of culture.'<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the usual extremely elaborate style of this and in general of all Sidonius' other letters aims to provide, indirectly, a shining example of Latin eloquence, devoid of any possible residual linguistic barbarism, rust or scaliness. And it can therefore be considered another way in which Roman 'othering' impacts the self-perception, in this case the linguistic self-perception.

## Conclusion

The letter to Namatius is thus a significant literary page on the theme of the 'other' in a precise historical and geographical context, that of the Gallic area of the Roman Empire in the fifth century CE. Its numerous points of reflection concern both the Visigoths and, above all, the Saxons, and their being negatively perceived by a member of the cultured senatorial aristocracy such as Sidonius Apollinaris. At the same time, the opposite tendency of the author emerges: to perceive and present, albeit indirectly, himself as one of the last defenders of the Latin language and literature, in contrast to the rampant barbarism. In making affectionate and at times even humorous suggestions to his friend, Sidonius also ends up wanting to prevent a sort of barbarizing process in Namatius, insisting on some of the main manifestations of the material, cultural, and even linguistic identity of the Gallo-Romans, such as agriculture, hunting (in which his friend still has to make progress), *paideia* and the survival of Latin as a language of culture in a *mundus iam senescens*.

## Notes

- 1 All the English translations of Sidonius are by Anderson 1936 and 1965.
- 2 Hanaghan 2019: 84.
- 3 Martindale 1980: 771, *Namatius 1* and Kaufmann 1995: 325–6, n. 70 *Namatius*.



- 4 Mathisen 2020: 109, *Namatius* and Neri 2009: 247 and 413.
- 5 Martindale 1980: 772, *Namatius 2*.
- 6 Stroheker 1948: 194–5, Nr. 257 *Nicetius* and Nr. 258 *Flavius Nicetius*; Martindale 1980: 782, *Nicetius 1* and *Fl. Nicetius 2*; Mathisen 2020: 109, *Nicetius* and *Fl. Nicetius*. In the wake of Anderson 1965: 6, n. 1, Loyen 1970, vol. 2: 221–2, n. 4, identifies the person referred to here, who died in 471, as Flavius Nicetius whom Sidonius eulogizes in 8.6.2.
- 7 Stroheker 1948: 194, Nr. 253 *Namatius*.
- 8 Loyen 1970, vol. 3: 216
- 9 Martindale 1980: 771 *Namatius 1*.
- 10 Kaufmann 1995: 165–6, n. 459 and 325–6, Nr. 70 *Namatius*.
- 11 Piacente 1998: 191–4.
- 12 Fascione 2019: 29, n.126.
- 13 Mascoli 2021: 279–80, n. 15 and n. 18.
- 14 Kelly 2020: 187. Cf. Piacente 1998: 192.
- 15 Mascoli 2021: 284, n. 25.
- 16 For a detailed summary of these events, see Harries 1994: 54–81, 125–40, 222–42; also Kulikowski 2020: 206–13.
- 17 For the Visigoths in general, see Heather 1996. For the Visigoths in Gaul, see Luiselli 1992: 566–78; in Sidonius, see Kaufmann 1995: 106–39.
- 18 For this letter, see Köhler 1995, 1998, and 2014: 5–9.
- 19 For an analysis of these Sidonian pages, of the chronological relationship between *ep.* 1.2 and *carm.* 7, and the attempt, at this stage, to present Theodoricus' people in a positive light to make the alliance with the Visigoths acceptable to the Romans, see Gualandri 2000: 112–14. See also Consolino 2011 and Fascione 2019: 53–62.
- 20 See Fo 1999 (expanded in Fo 2002) and Overwien 2009.
- 21 For this letter, see van Waarden 2010. See also Fo 2002: 158–63; Fascione 2019: 38; 62–72.
- 22 Becht-Jördens 2017, in particular, insists on this aspect. For this letter, see Giannotti 2021, with further bibliography.
- 23 Giannotti 2016: 119. Also elsewhere, after all, Sidonius takes pleasure in describing coarse scenes not dissimilar about the barbarians' crudities: cf. *carm.* 12, 13 ff. about the Burgundians: *felicemque libet vocare nasum, / cui non allia sordidumque cepe / ructant mane novo decem apparatus* (I am fain to call . . . happy too your nose, for you don't have a reek of garlic and foul onions discharged upon you at early morn from ten breakfasts); and *carm.* 5, 339 ff. regarding the Vandal sovereign Gaiseric: *ipsi autem color exsanguis, quem crapula vexat / et pallens pinguedo tenet, ganeaue perenni / pressus acescentem stomachus non explicat auram* (his cheeks are bloodless; a drunkard's heaviness afflicts him, pallid flabbiness possesses him, and his stomach, loaded with continual gluttony, cannot rid itself of the sour wind). For the use of the verb *ructare* in connection with the world of barbarism, see Fascione 2019: 23.

- 24 Cf. Harland 2019: 47.
- 25 Ecdicius' undertaking referred to here is that he managed to force the Visigoths' blockade and reach his besieged fellow citizens in Clermont-Ferrand: the letter referring to it (3.3) is of an uncertain date, oscillating between 472 and 474; for this passage and the following one, see Giannotti 2000–2 and 2016: 133 and 151–5.
- 26 For the Gallo-Romans in barbarian service, see Luiselli 1992: 576–8 and Mathisen 1993: 125–9. According to Overwien 2009: 104–5, Sidonius shows concern for Namatius' fighting against the Saxon pirates, but behind this concern lies a reproach for the fact that his friend is in the service of the Visigoths. The same reference to Caesar at the beginning of the letter would demonstrate Namatius' distance from an ideal model of the coexistence of the military and literary. For Caesar and Cicero as biographical and political parallels, see Meurer 2019, esp. 215–32.
- 27 On Victorius like *comes civitatis Arvernensis* and *dux septem civitatum*, cf. van Waarden 2016: 205–9 and Mathisen 2020: 126–7. On the possible role played by Victorius in Sidonius' release, see Loyen 1970, vol. 2: 134, n. 38.
- 28 Cf. Mathisen 2020: 104, *Leo*.
- 29 Cf. Mathisen 2020: 104.
- 30 Greg. Tur., *Hist.* 2.37. Cf. Mathisen 2020: 81.
- 31 Regarding this letter and its dating, see Giannotti 2020b. On *alienus*, see also Giannotti 2022: 74.
- 32 Regarding this letter and in particular the terms *euphonia* and *barbarismus*, see Condorelli 2001: 105–7. See also below, n. 70. For the word *barbarus* and its complexity in Sidonius, see Egetenmeyr 2021.
- 33 Loyen 1970, vol. 2: XLI–XLII.
- 34 *ThLL* t. VII 1, coll. 672–673, s.v. *impotentia*.
- 35 Gibbon 1776–1788, II.xxv.995, n. 105. For the Saxons in the Roman Empire between c. 150 and 500, see Flierman 2017: 23–51; in late antique Gaul, see Harland 2019. For the Saxons in Sidonius, see Kaufmann 1995: 163–8.
- 36 In underlining the detail that the fifth-century Saxons would have used skin boats, Wooding points out how Sidonius may have had in mind a passage from the *De ora maritima* by Rufus Festus Avienus (ll. 106–107: *navigia iunctis semper aptant pellibus/ corioque vastum saepe percurrunt salum*, they always fashion vessels from skins joined together and often run through the vast salt sea on hides, trans. Roller 2021), with which there is in common the use of the terms *pellis* and *salum* (Wooding 1988: 34–5).
- 37 See Flierman 2017: 44. Cf. also Fascione 2019: 31–2, according to which Sidonius would, here, be mistaking the Saxons for Britons.
- 38 'Eine Floskel aus dem Munde des Panegyrikers, die wohl des historischen Gehalts entbehrt' (a catchphrase from the mouth of the panegyricist, which probably lacks historical content: Kaufmann 1995: 164, n. 454).

- 39 *IV Cons.* 24–40 (esp. 31–32; cf. also *Nupt.* 219); *Stil.* II 246–255.
- 40 On the use of the adjective *caerulus* and on the topical image of blue-eyed barbarians (also in connection with the privileged link between the Saxons and the sea), see Fascione 2019: 28, 33–4.
- 41 See Kaufmann 1995: 165 and Flierman 2017: 45, who also discuss the possibility that this particular Saxon hairstyle is to be considered a sign of ethnic distinction. The discussion was taken up again by Harland 2019: 48.
- 42 The words *archipirata*, like, soon afterwards, *myoparon*, recur several times in the section *de suppliciis* of Cicero's *Verrinae* (5.64–136) about a group of pirates whose ship (*myoparo*: §§ 73, 89, 97, 100) Verres captured, sparing the leader (*archipirata*) and appropriating both the booty and the best pirates, whom he replaced with Roman citizens then killed in their stead. As has been pointed out by Wolff 2020: 400, 'there is an analogy between the two situations described; in both cases, we have pirates and gratuitous cruelty'. Wolff (*ibid.*) has observed that also another rare word in this letter, *lepusculus* (here: *ep.* 8.6.12), recurs in *Verrinae* (4.47): see below, n. 61.
- 43 According to Wooding 1988: 33, the *myoparones*, regarding which also see the preceding note, were 'skin boats (presumably of the *curragh* type: i.e. a skin-covered vessel, of boat rather than *coracle* form)'. The scholar also indicates that, although '*myoparones* is selected for its romantic piratical associations, rather than use a more prosaic description of a Saxon ship', the word 'is consistent with the definition of a skin boat . . . , though there might be some debate as to whether a skin boat would be described as "curving" (*pandos*)' (Wooding 1988: 34). *Pandus* is in fact an adjective 'di colore nettamente poetico e di tradizione antica' (Gualandri 1979: 92, n. 58, who lists other matching passages from Sidonius). Regarding the *myoparones*, also see Fascione 2019: 30–1.
- 44 On the concept of *superstitio* which emerges in this letter, Squillante 2016 shows how, despite his Christian beliefs, Sidonius here resorts to a rational vision of religion of Lucretian structure as a possible instrument of power in the hands of the wicked who impose punishments at will, making the excuse that it is to appease the gods.
- 45 This is the case, for example, of the Saxons' ability to surprise their enemies (*inprovisus aggredditur*, he attacks unforeseen: *ep.* 8.6.14), which finds confirmation in Ammian. Marc. 28.2.12 and 30.7.8, or their practice of having human sacrifices (*ep.* 8.6.15), also documented in Ennodius with regard to the Franks, the Heruli, and the Saxons (*Vita Antoni* 13 = 240 Vogel 1885: 187).
- 46 Kaufmann 1995: 168.
- 47 Both Flierman 2017: 46 ('its author appears to have drawn on first- and second-hand experience with Saxons. This is, of course, no guarantee for truthfulness'), and, more categorically, Harland 2019: 46 ('not reliable ethnographic description. Namatius' Saxons existed, but Sidonius' observations on them need not be taken as fact').
- 48 Flierman 2017: 46.

- 49 Flierman 2017: 48. A different view is expressed by Wooding 1988: 34: 'It would not have been out of the ordinary for a literary man, such as Sidonius, to have offered advice (in the manner of Shakespeare's Polonius) about a practical concern, such as defence against the Saxons. Nonetheless, Sidonius was undoubtedly a well-travelled man and there is every reason to believe that he had both travelled to regions which had been directly affected by Saxon raiding and was, further, in regular receipt of information regarding their raids – just as the arrival of a messenger from Saintes was the occasion of his writing to Namatius. He provides substantial detail regarding their method of attack; noting that they often will attack under cover of a storm and brave the dangers of rocks and surf to achieve surprise (sailing practices for which a skin boat might be argued to be most appropriate . . .). Certainly these might simply be embellishments to heighten the 'slippery' image of the Saxons; there is however a quantity of detail in his comments which argues against an excessively fictionalised picture.'
- 50 See Kaufmann 1995: 168.
- 51 Cf. Gualandri 1979: 43.
- 52 On the theme of the end of the world in Sidonius' panegyrics and their *praefationes*, see Stoehr-Monjou 2009.
- 53 Condorelli 2020: 361, with reference to Ficca 2018.
- 54 Schwitter 2015: 230–1, with additional bibliography in n. 437.
- 55 Respectively § 3 (where *saeculum* is the reading of S – the most ancient manuscript, dating back to the sixth–seventh century, while other manuscripts present *mundum*: see the critical apparatus of von Hartel's edition for 'Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum', 3.1, Vindobonae 1868: 2, 352) and § 4; see also, at § 20, the sentence *inter ipsas saeculi labentis ruinas* (among these very ruins of a decaying world, trans. Wallis 1996). Cf. Gualandri 1979: 20–1, n. 71 and van Waarden 2018: 196, n. 39.
- 56 Translated by Mratschek 2020: 257.
- 57 Cf. Sidon. *ep.* 8.2.1, *aboleri tu litteras distulisti, quarum quodammodo iam sepultarum suscitator, fautor, assertor concelebraris* (if I delayed the tribute of praise due to you for delaying the extinction of literary culture, for you are acclaimed as its reviver, promoter, and champion). See Giannotti 2020b.
- 58 See Schwitter 2015: 229, who, in addition to 8.6.3, recalls in this regard *ep.* 2.10.1, 4.17.2, 5.10.4, 8.2.1, 9.7.2, 9.9.16. Cf. also the bibliography he cited in n. 431.
- 59 To limit to book 8, see Giannotti 2020b on *ep.* 8.2 and Giannotti 2020a on *ep.* 8.5.
- 60 See, for example, Aymard 1964.
- 61 See above, n. 42.
- 62 Harland 2019: 47.
- 63 See above, n. 30.
- 64 Piacente 1998: 197, with a reference to Zucchelli 1981.

- 65 Mratschek 2020: 243, n. 43. Cf. also Piacente 1998: 194 regarding Jerome's translation.
- 66 Mratschek 2020: 243.
- 67 Overwien 2009: 105.
- 68 Piacente 1998: 198, with reference to the fact that Gellius mentions the *Logistorici* in *Noctes Atticae* 20.11.
- 69 According to Gualandri 1979: 128, n. 75, in this case it is clear – and the parallel with the weapons proves it – that the term *lima* ('file') is not confined to generically evoking the idea of adding finishing touches, but vividly maintains the reference to the manual instrument.
- 70 For other examples of the metaphorical use of *robigo* in Sidonius and other authors, see Gualandri 1979: 129, n. 78. Regarding *barbarismus*, see Condorelli 2001 (cited above in n. 32) and Squillante 2018. For a different metaphor, the *sermonis Celtici squama* (ep. 3.3.2), see Giannotti 2016: 138–41, with bibliographic discussion.
- 71 Wolff 2020: 395–6. For literary studies as a unifying element for the Roman aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul, see Mathisen 1993: 105–18.

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