Letters of Sidonius Apollinaris


[Halsall Introduction]

(Caius) Sollius Apollinaris (Modestus) SIDONIUS, c.431-c.489, was a Roman Aristocrat living in Gaul at the time of its transformation from a province of the Roman Empire to the property of Frankish Kings. His letters are among the prime documents of the period. The two letters here illustrate aspects of that experience. The first is an account of the possibility of an idyllic country life for the Gallo-Roman aristocracy of the fifth century: the Roman Empire ended, but not, immediately, the lifestyle. The second is a description of a Germanic King, in this case Theodoric II, King of the Visigoths 453-66 [note: not the same as the Ostrogothic Theodoric!]. We see here the ways in which the Gallo-Roman aristocracy began to accommodate itself to the new military powers.

Book II: Letter IX

To His friend Donidius AD 461-7

To your question why, having got as far as Nimes, I still leave your hospitality expectant, I reply by giving the reason for my delayed return. I will even dilate upon the causes of my dilatoriness, for I know that what I enjoy is your enjoyment too. The fact is, I have passed the most delightful time in the most beautiful country in the company of Tonantius Ferreolus and Apollinaris, the most charming hosts in the world. Their estates march together; their houses are not far apart; and the extent of intervening ground is just too far for a walk and just too short to make the ride worthwhile. The hills above the houses are under vines and olives; they might be Nysa and Aracynthus, famed in song. The view from one villa is over a wide flat country, that from the other over woodland; yet different though their situations are, the eye derives equal pleasure from both. But enough of sites; I have now to unfold the order of my entertainment. Sharp scouts were posted to look out for our return; and not only were the roads patrolled by men from each estate, but even winding short-cuts and sheep-tracks were under observation, to make it quite impossible for us to elude the friendly ambush. Into this of course we fell, no unwilling prisoners; and our captors instantly made us swear to dismiss every idea of continuing our journey until a whole week had elapsed. And so every morning began with a flattering rivalry between the two hosts, as to which of their kitchens should first smoke for the refreshment of their guest; nor, though I am personally related to one, and connected through my relatives with the other, could I manage by alternation to give them quite equal measure since age and the dignity of prefectorian rank gave Ferreolus a prior right of invitation over and above his other claims. From the first moment we were hurried from one pleasure to another. Hardly had we entered the vestibule of either house when we saw two opposed pairs of partners in the ball-game repeating each other's movements as they turned in wheeling circles; in another place one heard the rattle of
dice boxes and the shouts of the contending players in yet another, were books in abundance ready to your hand; you might have imagined yourself among the shelves of some grammanarian, or the tiers of the Athenaeum, or a bookseller's towering cases. They were so arranged that the devotional works were near the ladies' seats where the master sat were those ennobled by the great style of Roman eloquence. The arrangement had this defect, that it separated certain books by certain authors in manner as near to each other as in matter they are far apart. Thus Augustine writes like Varro, and Horace like Prudentius; but you had to consult them on different sides of the room. Turranius Rufinus' interpretation of Adamantius Origenl was eagerly examined by the readers of theology among us; according to our several points of view, we had different reasons to give for the censure of this Father by certain of the clergy as too trenchant a controversialist and best avoided by the prudent; but the translation is so literal and yet renders the spirit of the work so well, that neither Apuleius' version of Plato's Phaedo, nor Cicero's of the Ctesiphon of Demosthenes is more admirably adapted to the use and rule of our Latin tongue. While we were engaged in these discussions as fancy prompted each, appears an envoy from the cook to warn us that the moment of bodily refreshment is at hand. And in fact the fifth hour had just elapsed, proving that the man was punctual, had properly marked the advance of the hours upon the water-clock. The dinner was short, but abundant, served in the fashion affected in senatorial houses where inveterate usage prescribes numerous courses on very few dishes, though to afford variety, roast alternated with stew. Amusing and instructive anecdotes accompanied our potations; wit went with the one sort, and learning with the other. To be brief, we were entertained with decorum, refinement, and good cheer. After dinner, if we were at Vorocingus (the name of one estate) we walked over to our quarters and our own belongings. If at Prusianum, as the other is called, [the young] Tonantius and his brothers turned out of their beds for us because we could not be always dragging our gear about: they are surely the elect among the nobles of our own age. The siesta over, we took a short ride to sharpen our jaded appetites for supper. Both of our hosts had baths in their houses, but in neither did they happen to be available; so I set my own servants to work in the rare sober interludes which the convivial bowl, too often filled, allowed their sodden brains. I made them dig a pit at their best speed either near a spring or by the river; into this a heap of red-hot stones was thrown, and the glowing cavity then covered over with an arched roof of wattled hazel. This still left interstices, and to exclude the light and keep in the steam given off when water was thrown on the hot stones, we laid coverings of Cilician goats' hair over all. In these vapour-baths we passed whole hours with lively talk and repartee; all the time the cloud of hissing steam enveloping us induced the healthiest perspiration. When we had perspired enough, we were bathed in hot water; the treatment removed the feeling of repletion, but left us languid; we therefore finished off with a bracing douche from fountain, well or river. For the river Gardon runs between the two properties except in time of flood, when the stream is swollen and clouded with melted snow, it looks red through its tawny gravels, and flows still and pellucid over its pebbly bed, if teeming none the less with the most delicate fish. I could tell you of suppers fit for a king; it is not my sense of shame, but simply want of space which sets a limit to my revelations. You would have a great story if I turned the page and continued on the other side; but I am always ashamed to disfigure the back of a letter with an inky pen. Besides, I am on the
point of leaving here, and hope, by Christ's grace, that we shall meet very shortly; the story of our friends' banquets will be better told at my own table or yours—provided only that a good week's interval first elapses to restore me the healthy appetite I long for. There is nothing like thin living to give tone to a system disordered by excess. Farewell.

BOOK I, Letter II

To [his brother-in-law] Agricola AD 454 (?)

You have often begged a description of Theodoric the Gothic king, whose gentle breeding fame commends to every nation; you want him in his quantity and quality, in his person, and the manner of his existence. I gladly accede, as far as the limits of my page allow, and highly approve so fine and ingenuous a curiosity.

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

Now for the routine of his public life. Before daybreak he goes with a very small suite to attend the service of his priests. He prays with assiduity, but, if I may speak in confidence, one may suspect more of habit than conviction in this piety. Administrative duties of the kingdom take up the rest of the morning. Armed nobles stand about the royal seat; the mass of guards in their garb of skins are admitted that they may be within call, but kept at the threshold for quiet's sake; only a murmur of them comes in from their post at the doors, between the curtain and the outer barrier. And now the foreign envoys are introduced. The king hears them out, and says little; if a thing needs more discussion he puts it off, but accelerates matters ripe for dispatch. The second hour arrives; he rises from the throne to inspect his treasure-chamber or stable. If the chase is the order of the
day, he joins it, but never carries his bow at his side, considering this derogatory to royal state. When a bird or beast is marked for him, or happens to cross his path, he puts his hand behind his back and takes the bow from a page with the string all hanging loose; for as he deems it a boy's trick to bear it in a quiver, so he holds it effeminate to receive the weapon ready strung. When it is given him, he sometimes holds it in both hands and bends the extremities towards each other; at others he sets it, knot-end downward, against his lifted heel, and runs his finger up the slack and wavering string. After that, he takes his arrows, adjusts, and lets fly. He will ask you beforehand what you would like him to transfix; you choose, and he hits. If there is a miss through either's error, your vision will mostly be at fault, and not the archer's skill. On ordinary days, his table resembles that of a private person. The board does not groan beneath a mass of dull and unpolished silver set on by panting servitors; the weight lies rather in the conversation than in the plate; there is either sensible talk or none. The hangings and draperies used on these occasions are sometimes of purple silk, sometimes only of linen; art, not costliness, commends the fare, as spotlessness rather than bulk the silver. Toasts are few, and you will oftener see a thirsty guest impatient, than a full one refusing cup or bowl. In short, you will find elegance of Greece, good cheer of Gaul, Italian nimbleness, the state of public banquets with the attentive service of a private table, and everywhere the discipline of a king's house. What need for me to describe the pomp of his feast days? No man is so unknown as not to know of them. But to my theme again. The siesta after dinner is always slight, and sometimes intermitted. When inclined for the board-game, he is quick to gather up the dice, examines them with care, shakes the box with expert hand, throws rapidly, humorously apostrophizes them, and patiently waits the issue. Silent at a good throw, he makes merry over a bad, annoyed by neither fortune, and always the philosopher. He is too proud to ask or to refuse a revenge; he disdains to avail himself of one if offered; and if it is opposed will quietly go on playing. You effect recovery of your men without obstruction on his side; he recovers his without collusion upon yours. You see the strategist when he moves the pieces; his one thought is victory. Yet at play he puts off a little of his kingly rigour, inciting all to good fellowship and the freedom of the game: I think he is afraid of being feared. Vexation in the man whom he beats delights him; he will never believe that his opponents have not let him win unless their annoyance proves him really victor. You would be surprised how often the pleasure born of these little happenings may favour the march of great affairs. Petitions that some wrecked influence had left derelict come unexpectedly to port; I myself am gladly beaten by him when I have a favour to ask, since the loss of my game may mean the gaining of my cause. About the ninth hour, the burden of government begins again. Back come the importunates, back the ushers to remove them; on all sides buzz the voices of petitioners, a sound which lasts till evening, and does not diminish till interrupted by the royal repast; even then they only disperse to attend their various patrons among the courtiers, and are astir till bedtime. Sometimes, though this is rare, supper is enlivened by sallies of mimes, but no guest is ever exposed to the wound of a biting tongue. Withal there is no noise of hydraulic organ, or choir with its conductor intoning a set piece; you will hear no players of lyre or flute, no master of the music, no girls with cithara or tabor; the king cares for no strains but those which no less charm the mind with virtue than the ear with melody. When he rises to withdraw, the treasury watch begins its vigil; armed sentries stand on guard during the first hours of slumber. But I am wandering from my subject. I never
promised a whole chapter on the kingdom, but a few words about the king. I must stay my pen; you asked for nothing more than one or two facts about the person and the tastes of Theodoric; and my own aim was to write a letter, not a history. Farewell.