

THE DEATH AND PUBLIC REHABILITATION OF APOLLINARIS THE ELDER: INTERTEXTUALITY WITH LUCAN IN SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS, *EPIST.* 3.12*

ABSTRACT

Sidonius Apollinaris' Epist. 3.12 tells how one day, while leaving Lyons, he caught a couple of gravediggers about to violate his grandfather Apollinaris' grave, which had become unrecognizable over time. He instructs the addressee, his nephew Secundus, to restore the tomb mound and provide it with a stone for which he attaches the text. Whereas this letter is usually interpreted as a piece of self-promotion by the author for his filial piety and expert storytelling, this article suggests that there is a significant subtext to be found in Lucan's Pharsalia which makes the letter first and foremost a rehabilitation of Apollinaris while strongly suggesting that the latter was executed. There follow some rather more tentative thoughts trying to grasp the precise critical moment in time for this rehabilitation. It is argued that this could be Sidonius' departure for Clermont, in 469/470 to take on the episcopate, after his term as City Prefect of Rome and a stay in Lyons with Bishop Patiens. The letter is aimed at bolstering family cohesion in the conflict of interests between Auvergne and Provence and at securing Sidonius' position as incumbent bishop.

Keywords: Sidonius Apollinaris; Apollinaris the Elder; usurpers; rehabilitation; family interests; intertextuality; Lucan

1. CONTEXT

Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 3.12 is addressed to Sidonius' nephew Secundus. The author describes how, as he leaves Lyons on horseback heading for Clermont, he approaches the town's old, overgrown graveyard, where the tomb of his grandfather is scarcely recognizable anymore. Some gravediggers think that they have hit upon a vacant spot and have begun digging a pit. Sidonius discovers the desecration and has them punished on the spot. Patiens, the town's bishop, accepts his apologies for letting his temper flare up. Sidonius asks his nephew to take care of the restoration of the burial mound and to provide for a gravestone at his expense. He also supplies the poem to be engraved upon it. Secundus must see to it that the engraver commit no errors. This belated tribute by the third and fourth generations has august precedents in history—the author claims.

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This letter is traditionally interpreted as an instance of the author's self-promotion for his filial piety and his expert storytelling.¹ It is variously dated to some point in the 460s.²

Sidonius' grandfather Apollinaris³ had been involved in the surge of Gallic usurpations against Emperor Honorius in 407–413, supporting the usurper Constantine III and acting as his *praefectus praetorio Galliarum* in 408–409, and, possibly, after that supporting Jovinus in another coup. The rebellions were crushed and it has often been conjectured that Apollinaris fell victim to the purges of 413 carried out by Honorius' generals and the then *praefectus praetorio Galliarum*, Claudius Postumus Dardanus.⁴ Gaul's relationship with the central government would remain precarious, and the tensions were subsequently heightened by the Visigoths and the Burgundians carving out kingdoms of their own. Political prudence as to this vulnerable strain in his family history remained Sidonius' policy, including his reticence about the exact cause (or perpetrator) of Apollinaris' death.⁵ As this article suggests, it took a long time and a specific occasion before he deemed fit publicly to flaunt

¹ See F. Giannotti, 'Levigata pagina. Riconsiderando l'epitaffio di Sidonio per il nonno Apollinare (Ep. III 12)', in F. Giannotti, Scrinia Arverna. *Studi su Sidonio Apollinare* (Pisa, 2021), 41–57, at 43. Apollinaris' epitaph contained in the letter is further studied in S. Condorelli, *Il poeta doctus nel V secolo D. C. Aspetti della poetica di Sidonio Apollinare* (Naples, 2008), 198–200 (incorporated in S. Condorelli, 'Gli epigrammi funerari di Sidonio Apollinare', in M.-F. Guipponi-Gineste and C. Urlacher-Becht [edd.], *La renaissance de l'épigramme dans la latinité tardive* [Paris, 2013], 261–82, at 268–70) and in C. Stein, 'Épigraphie et mise en scène de la domination sociale dans la Gaule méridionale tardive (IVe–VIe s.). À propos de la tombe du grand-père de Sidoine Apollinaire', in S. Agusta-Boularot and E. Rosso (edd.), *Signa et tituli. Monuments et espaces de représentation en Gaule Méridionale sous le regard croisé de la sculpture et de l'épigraphie* (Paris, 2015), 191–205, at 199–203. For the letter's artful storytelling, see R. Henke, 'Der Brief 3,12 des Sidonius Apollinaris an Secundus. Eine Novelle in einer Epistel?', *Hermes* 140 (2012), 121–5; M.P. Hanaghan, *Reading Sidonius' Epistles* (Cambridge, 2019), 69–72. A full commentary on Book 3 is provided by F. Giannotti, *Sperare meliora. Il terzo libro delle Epistulae di Sidonio Apollinare. Introduzione, traduzione e commento* (Pisa, 2016).

² See C.E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris and his Age* (Oxford, 1933), 170 ('461/7'); K.F. Stroheker, *Der senatorische Adel in spätantiken Gallien* (Reutlingen, 1948), 215 ('vor 470'); A. Løyn, *Sidoine Apollinaire. Lettres*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1970), 250 n. 12 ('469'), followed by Giannotti (n. 1 [2016]), 214–15; R.W. Mathisen, 'Dating the letters of Sidonius', in J.A. van Waarden and G. Kelly (edd.), *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Leuven, 2013), 221–48, at 239–40 ('465/9'); R.W. Mathisen, 'A prosopography of Sidonius', in G. Kelly and J. van Waarden (edd.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh, 2020), 76–154, at 120 (places Secundus in the 460s).

³ See J.R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1980), 113. 'Apollinaris 1'; P. Mascioli, *Gli Apollinari. Per la storia di una famiglia tardoantica* (Bari, 2010), 11–17.

⁴ Exceptionally, Mathisen (n. 2 [2020]), 80 sees a case for Apollinaris' being actively involved in, and surviving, the purges in Greg. Tur. *Hist.* 2.9. The text, however, rather seems to suggest the opposite; see Giannotti (n. 1 [2016]), 213 and Giannotti (n. 1 [2021]), 47 n. 26.

⁵ See, for the various aspects mentioned here, J.D. Harries, 'Sidonius Apollinaris, Rome and the barbarians: a climate of treason?', in J. Drinkwater and H. Elton (edd.), *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity* (Cambridge, 1992), 298–308, at 303–4; J. van Waarden, 'Sidonius' biography in photo negative', in G. Kelly and J. van Waarden (edd.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh, 2020), 13–28, at 19; M. Kulikowski, 'Sidonius' political world', in G. Kelly and J. van Waarden (edd.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh, 2020), 197–213, at 198–203. As to political prudence, in private correspondence Sidonius mentions his grandfather for his high office as early as the 450s (*Epist.* 1.3.1) and, in the 470s (*Epist.* 5.9; see also n. 11 below), offsets his presumed loyalty to the Theodosian dynasty against his loathing for the usurpers and Dardanus. However, public rehabilitation in the form of a conspicuous and representative tomb evidently was quite another matter.

There is more. In the epitaph, the lateness of the rehabilitation is thematized from the outset: *serum post patruos patremque carmen*,⁹ reinforced in section 6 of the letter where Sidonius reassures Secundus concerning the fact that the rehabilitation is only realized in the third and fourth generations: *tibi quoque non decet tardum uideri quod heres tertius quartusque dependimus*. The same motif of lateness occurs in Luc. 837–9 *si saecula prima | uictoris timuere minas, nunc excipe saltem | ossa tui Magni*. In both cases, the cause of this belatedness is dangerous repression at the deaths of both Pompey (initiated by the victorious Caesar) and, presumably, Apollinaris (under Emperor Honorius).

A central theme of the epitaph is Apollinaris' exemplary (and life-threatening) courage under high-handed tyrants: 11–12 *exemploque aliis periculoso | liber sub dominantibus tyrannis* ('an example for others at his own peril, a free man under high-handed tyrants').¹⁰ His life (and death?) played out among dangerous usurpers.¹¹ His patriotic collaboration,¹² first with the usurper Constantine (and the latter's son Constans—the situation being complicated by the *magister militum* Gerontius)¹³ from outside the Gallo-Roman circle, then with a full-blown Gallic aristocrat, Jovinus, cost him dear. The alternative, the loyalist stance towards the emperor, personified in the prefect Dardanus, turned out to be another snake pit. This chimes with Pompey falling victim to Caesar, dubbed *saeuo ... tyranno* in Lucan (835), in an equally inextricable conflict of loyalties, murdered by an overzealous henchman.¹⁴ Like another Pompey, it is implied, Apollinaris had fallen a tragic victim to the consequences of tyranny, but now his time has come, just as Pompey's time will come: *ueniet felicitas aetas* (869 in the passage cited above). The parallel with Pompey strongly suggests that

uiolassent capita persequendos. Section 3 suggests that capital punishment would have been in line with the *mos maiorum*, but the fact that the desecration was not fully perpetrated (section 1 *paene*) was no doubt a mitigating circumstance (for the episode, cf. R.W. Mathisen, 'Sidonius' people', in G. Kelly and J. van Waarden [edd.], *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* [Edinburgh, 2020], 29–75, at 65). Sidonius wants to keep the ambiguity, and with it the atmosphere of violence, which arguably has a parallel in the ambiguity about what had happened to Apollinaris.

⁹ That is, it was not carried out by the second generation, Sidonius' father and uncles. Thus correctly É. Wolff, 'Sidoine Apollinaire et la poésie épigraphique', in A. Pistellato (ed.), *Memoria poetica e poesia della memoria* (Venice, 2014), 207–18, at 210 n. 7 (although I think that Sidonius conveys a sense of understanding rather than of embarrassment ['gêne'], as Wolff supposes), and Mathisen (n. 8), 58. Loyer (n. 2), 224 n. 38 takes it to mean that Sidonius' father and uncles, too, had dedicated a poem to Apollinaris, contrary to what *Epist.* 3.12 tells the reader. Giannotti (n. 1 [2021]), 51–2 would have *post patruos patremque* qualify *haud indignus* in the next line (Sidonius being worthy of Apollinaris just as his father and uncles had been). This seems to go linguistically contrary to the strong and natural bond between *post patruos patremque* and *serum* created by the hyperbaton *serum ... carmen*.

¹⁰ For the collocation, cf. Sen. *Ep.* 28.8 *in quantalibet turba dominantium liber*.

¹¹ For *tyrannus* as the usual late Latin term for usurper, see S.E. Bond, 'Usurpers', in O. Nicholson (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2018), 1543. Cf. the wording of this episode in Greg. *Tur. Hist.* 2.56, citing Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus. As J. Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome* (Oxford, 1994), 29 points out: 'For the main players in the drama of 407–13 [Sidonius] had nothing but contempt: Apollinaris [...] had hated "in Constantine his unreliability, in Jovinus his shiftiness, in Gerontius his treachery, [...] in Dardanus all combined together"' (*Epist.* 5.9.1 *in Constantino inconstantiam, in Iouino facultatem, in Gerontio perfidiam, ... omnia in Dardano crimina simul*).

¹² See C. Delaplace, *La fin de l'Empire romain d'Occident. Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531* (Rennes, 2015), 152: 'L'aristocratie auvergnate était au coeur de la rébellion.'

¹³ See Delaplace (n. 12), 135–8.

¹⁴ Caesar as such does not concern Sidonius here: he is introduced in the final section in connection with the theme of belatedness.

Apollinaris, too, was murdered, which adds a decisive argument to the existing assumption that this was the case (see page 310 above).

Finally, and significantly, both gravesites are decked with a stone: Pompey's with a simple piece of rock (*saxo*) provisionally marked with the text *hic situs est Magnus* in charcoal (*semusto stipite*, 789–93), Apollinaris'—anonymous at first—with a smooth slab of marble (section 2 *leuigata pagina*, 3 *in marmore*) meticulously inscribed (3 *ut uitium non faciat ... lapidicida*) with a full-blown epitaph intimating that *praefectus iacet hic Apollinaris* (poem line 6).

Lucan is one of Sidonius' most important intertextual anchors. His descriptions, in particular, of Caesar's march on Rome and the famine in Caesar's besieged camp at Dyrrhachium inspire Sidonius' evocations of crucial episodes from the Visigothic onslaught on Auvergne and the desperate defence of its inhabitants (*Epist.* 7.1 and 7.7). The proud definition of the Arvernians as 'brothers to Latium' (*Epist.* 7.7.2) also stems from Lucan.¹⁵ While thus defining Sidonius' one foothold in Clermont, the presence of Lucan in Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 3.12 now also appears to define the other in his native Lyons, linking his and his family's fate—as he is setting out for Clermont—to grandfather Apollinaris, a second Pompey, *liber sub dominantibus tyrannis*.

3. DATE AND OCCASION

3.1. *Epist.* 3.12 in 469/470

It is worth looking if a more specific date and occasion for this letter can be teased out, however tentatively. As late a date as possible, in 469/470, between Sidonius' return from Rome and his consecration as bishop of Clermont, is needed because: (1) Sidonius calls himself *haud indignus auo nepos* (poem line 2), which is meaningful if it indicates that he, like his grandfather, had been a prefect;¹⁶ (2) Sidonius is clearly not yet a bishop himself because of the way in which he speaks about Patiens, defining himself as one of his parishioners (section 3 *nostro ... sacerdoti*); (3) in this connection, the surprising appearance of Gaudentius may point to the circle of Patiens c.469, in which he may have taken part as a *conuersus*¹⁷ and in which Sidonius took his preparation for the episcopate, being ordained a deacon by Patiens;¹⁸ (4) Secundus, almost certainly a son of Sidonius' younger brother mentioned as having his virtue saved by Bishop Faustus in *Carm.* 16,¹⁹ has to be adult enough to take responsibility for the tomb.

¹⁵ For Sidonius' intertextuality with Lucan, see I. Gualandri, 'Sidonius' intertextuality', in G. Kelly and J. van Waarden (edd.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh, 2020), 279–316, at 309–10. In section 1 of the present letter, the phrase *sidentibus aceruis* (of the original burial mounds being flattened over time) could be another trace of Lucan (7.791 *sidentes ... aceruos*; Giannotti [n. 1 (2016)], 216), thus unobtrusively introducing the main allusion.

¹⁶ See Loyen (n. 2), 250 n. 12.

¹⁷ In Sidonius' idiom, the adjective *uenerabilis* (section 4 *uenerabili Gaudentio*) is usually connected with someone being a Christian (cf. e.g. 3.2.3 *religione uenerabilis*). It could here point to a *conuersio*, the switch to a more spiritual lifestyle after a secular career (see Martindale [n. 3], 495).

¹⁸ The data are elusive. This reconstruction follows Loyen (n. 2), xxviii–xxix and Harries (n. 11), 176.


¹⁹ See Mathisen (n. 2 [2020]), 138, 'Anonymus 35'.

Why was Apollinaris' public rehabilitation postponed to this particular moment and rather forced by the circumstances than fully premeditated? The following hypothesis would create a coherent picture. From a position of relative strength (his favour with Emperor Anthemius and the honour of having held the City Prefecture, also acquiring the title of *patricius*), but weakened by the unpalatable Arvandus affair which went at the heart of loyalties in Gaul and temporarily split the family,²⁰ Sidonius moves on to the insecurity of leadership in Clermont, leaving the Burgundian dominated orbit for a world where Visigothic pressure looms large. *Epist.* 3.12 must immediately precede his episcopate and constitutes a strategic statement aimed to realign his family in the face of other competing factions and political stakeholders. Restoring grandfather Apollinaris to the public view means adding full weight to an undivided glorious family line. It takes no wonder, given Sidonius' new walk of life, that the decisive accolade for Apollinaris is his being the first in the family to be baptized: *haec sed maxima dignitas probatur, | quod frontem cruce, membra fonte purgans | primus de numero patrum suorum | sacris sacrilegis renuntiauit* (poem lines 13–16). Thus, the public rehabilitation of his grandfather is proof not only of the author's self-confidence as a responsible heir but also as an incumbent religious and political player. The voyage from Lyons to Clermont is not just any trip but a watershed, and *Epist.* 3.12 could be the pivotal letter in Sidonius' career switch.

3.2. *Epist.* 3.12 in 474/478

As a corollary, in the economy of Book 3 as published some five years later,²¹ this letter is also a very personal one. Sidonius leaves the care for the grave and all it stands for in the hands of his nephew Secundus rather than in the hands of his own son, another Apollinaris. The next letter, *Epist.* 3.13 to this Apollinaris, suggests why, going beyond the obvious supposition that, whereas Secundus lived in Lyons, Apollinaris stayed in Clermont. *Epist.* 3.13 is about the infamous typical rascal 'Gnatho', in every respect the opposite of what Sidonius stands for. Sidonius feels compelled to warn his son (of all people) to avoid such bad company.²² 'Secundus' would seem to be the 'next' generation Sidonius can rely on rather than the younger Apollinaris.²³

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²⁰ For this affair, see Harries (n. 11), 159–66; Delaplace (n. 12), 241–6.

²¹ See Mathisen (n. 2 [2013]), 239–40 and G. Kelly, 'Dating the works of Sidonius', in G. Kelly and J. van Waarden (edd.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Edinburgh, 2020), 166–94, at 185–6. While my argument in section 3.1 suggests that the letter circulated widely at an initial stage, a subsequent separate circulation of Book 3 as a whole perhaps also gains plausibility.

²² *Epist.* 3.13.11 *igitur ex uoto meo feceris si talium sodalitati ne congressu quidem primore sociere*. For an alternative positive appraisal of Apollinaris, see F. Prévot, 'Faut-il réhabiliter le fils de Sidoine Apollinaire? Shall we clear the name of Sidonius Apollinaris' son?', in C. Balmelle, P. Chevalier, G. Ripoll (edd.), *Mélanges d'Antiquité tardive*. Studiola in honorem Noël Duval (Turnhout, 2004), 251–60; see also Mascoli (n. 3), 23–33.

²³ The importance attached by Sidonius to the next generation ultimately is a counterpoint to his own struggle in the present. This theme comes to dominate the correspondence's closure in *Epist.* 9.16, where the 'winter' of his discontent is only resolved by the 'spring' of his youthful correspondents (see my analysis in *Sidonius Apollinaris: Selected Letters* [Cambridge, expected 2025]).