

Helga Köhler, Hg.: *C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius. Die Briefe. Eingeleitet, übersetzt und erläutert von Helga Köhler*, Bibliothek der Mittellateinischen Literatur 11, Stuttgart (Hirseemann) 2014, XXXVII + 355 S., ISBN 978-3-7772-1414-6, € 224,-.

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Köhler provides us with a welcome first German translation of the 147 letters of Sidonius Apollinaris, Gallo-Roman aristocrat and Bishop of Clermont, who lived from ca. 431–480/490 C. E.).¹ The text translated is Mohr's Teubner *editio minor*,² not Lütjohann's MGH.³ Sidonius' correspondence is an essential source for 5th century Gaul, underpinning as it does, any account of the province in this period.⁴ Since the letters, even those of Books 6 and 7, all of which are addressed to bishops, have little truly theological or religious content, they have been used primarily as a source for daily life and for the secular sphere, above all for Roman interactions with the Visigoths. There is to date no Italian translation of the letters, but two English translations (including a far more than competent Loeb)⁵ and an annotated French Budé⁶ have long been available. Translations bear some relationship to the ability of undergraduate students to read various dead languages and the requirements of professors who may have to teach ancient texts to non-specialists. So the German-speaking world's hour of need must be upon it, for the price is steep!

1 Ralph Mathisen, "Dating the Letters of Sidonius," in *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris* (ed. Johannes A. van Waarden and Gavin Kelly; Late Antique History and Religion 7; Leuven: Peeters, 2013), (221–248) 239.

2 Paul Mohr, ed., *C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius* (BSGRT; Leipzig: Teubner, 1895). He used two new MSS in addition to those used by Christian Lütjohann.

3 Christian Lütjohann, ed., *Apollinaris Sidonii Epistulae et Carmina* (MGH AA 8; Berlin: Weidmann, 1887).

4 E. g. John B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* (2 vols.; New York: Dover, 1978); Samuel Dill, *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire* (2d rev. ed.; New York: Meridian Books, 1960); Courtenay E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris and His Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933). He figures as a dramatic character in Iain Pears, *The Dream of Scipio* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2002).

5 Ormonde M. Dalton, *The Letters of Sidonius* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1915); William B. Anderson, *Sidonius: Poems and Letters* 1 (2 vols.; The Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936–1965).

6 André Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire 2: Lettres livres 1–5* (Collection des Universités de France; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1970); André Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire 3: Lettres livres 6–9* (Collection des Universités de France; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1970).

Sidonius is now hot, his letters a self-fashioning and literary project. A fine web site keeps us updated on the latest developments in *Sidoniana*, and the “Saxxi” project is dedicated to producing new commentaries on all of his works.⁷

A recent piece in an edited volume dedicated to Sidonius explains the origins of Köhler’s dissertation, a commentary on Sidonius, *Epistulae* 1,⁸ in a seminar in Heidelberg in 1990.⁹ Here, Köhler explains her mode of translation, notably her reluctance to lower Sidonius’ *Sprachniveau* and her insistence on presenting him as he was.¹⁰

Sidonius’s style can at first seem complicated, with its pretentious and recherché vocabulary, but, provided one has experience with Late Latin art prose (and even Apuleius will do), he is not that hard to understand or to read. This is largely because his writing is not excessively abstract or circuitously periodic, and his recurrent (often annoying) antitheses underline his points. One usually knows what he is talking about—which is more than can be said of the coded discourse of Ennodius or Avitus! And, as is often the case with his soul mate Cassiodorus, Sidonius is striving for vividness, colour, *realia*, as Köhler (p. XVIII) rightly notes. He aims to please.¹¹

Köhler emphasizes the literary, reminds us of Sidonius’s verse and the poetic qualities of his prose with its aural effects that get lost in translation. In another contribution she had noted that the letters were gifts.¹² Her enthusiasm for Sidonius and his offerings is infectious: her readers will want to know him better. She is not above teasing her favorite bishop in an apostrophe (p. XX).

This is an art translation that sets itself a high standard, not a trot. Köhler had touchingly to think through decisions like what form of “you” to use (answer: *Du* and *Ihr*), a tricky distinction because it involves making a decision about the relationship of the correspondents that is not marked (at least that way) in the Latin. She says yes to German’s ability to deploy, and love for, nested clauses, and successfully translates embedded verse as verse. Annotation of sources is

7 Joop van Waarden, “Sidonius Apollinaris,” online: <http://www.sidoniusapollinaris.nl>.

8 Helga Köhler, ed., *C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius: Briefe Buch 1: Einleitung – Text – Übersetzung – Kommentar* (Bibliothek der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften, N. F. 96; Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1995).

9 Helga Köhler, “Sidonius in German-speaking countries,” in *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris* (see note 1), (37–46) 37.

10 Helga Köhler, “Sidonius in German-speaking countries” (see note 1), (37–46) 37, 44–45; also Köhler, *C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius* (see note 8), 33.

11 C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius, *Epistula* 7,4,3 (BSGRT, 145,20–21 Mohr) (of himself): *qui etiam longe positorum incitare in se affectat affectum*.

12 Köhler, “Sidonius in German-speaking countries” (see note 9), 42.

limited to explicit citations.¹³ The translation proper is preceded by introductory matter on the author, the art of epistolography, Sidonius's reception, the translation itself, and metrics.

Much of this front matter needs reinforcement. Köhler often fails to document the general statements of her introduction with specifics. Time after time, one wants more information and says to oneself, "Such as?" only to find no documentation. For example what specifically does Köhler have in mind when she speaks of Sidonius' literary influence on the following generation (p. XXI)? We must wait for p. XXVI, where a list of names appears—without any clarification. This volume seems to envisage a less scholarly audience, so why, rather than citing Sidonius' amusing satirical letters in a footnote, send the reader to Jürgen Blänsdorf?¹⁴ The scholarship can feel skin-deep, e. g. when on p. XVII we are told that nautical allusions framing letter-collections are pretty rare, but can immediately remember that a programmatic sea-journey features prominently in Jerome, *Epistula* 1,2 (CSEL 54, 1–2 Hilberg).

There are weaknesses in the historical research. On p. IX "mit den Aviti ver wandt war" could be made more precise by reference to *Epistula* 3,1,1 (52,5–12 M.). Köhler on p. XVI seems unaware of sources for PLRE 2 "Apollinaris 3,"¹⁵ including the letters of Avitus of Vienne. And there are mystifying moments such as p. XV, where it sounds as if Köhler thinks that Gregory of Tours might have known material from Sidonius' letter collection about Sidonius' death (!). Or p. XXV where, after a paragraph on the absences of Christian epistolary sources in Sidonius' letters, we are told that he read Christian authors and valued them as exegetes. How do we know? Here Köhler's annotation is not necessarily reliable. At *Epistula* 1,7,3 (14,18 M.) *elementa famularentur* (p. 20) Köhler sees Sidonius using Rufinus' translation of Origen on Exodus and an allusion to Moses crossing the Red Sea. The expression is, however, quite common in patristic Latin, first occurring in Tertullian's *Apologeticum* 21,¹⁶ where it describes the thaumaturgic powers of Christ, including taming tempests and walking on water. The New Testament associations seem the more relevant here: not waters parting, but waters calmed. It's a small point, but, if one of many, could affect the cumulative source-criticism.

¹³ A pity, since intertextualities, such as C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius, *Epistula* 7,7,1 (BSGRT, 150,14 M.): *Ecce iterum Amantius*, echoing Juvenal 4,1: *Ecce iterum Crispinus* (ed. René Marache, *Juvénal: Saturae III, IV, V* [Érasme 14; Paris: Presses Univ. de France, 1965], 90), are important generic cues and determinants of tone.

¹⁴ P. XIX: Jürgen Blänsdorf, "Apollinaris Sidonius und die Verwandlung der römischen Satire in der Spätantike," *Philologia* 137 (1993): 122–131.

¹⁵ Arnold H. M. Jones, John R. Martindale, and John Morris, *PLRE 2: AD 394-527* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980): 114 (s. v. Apollinaris 3).

¹⁶ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 21,17 (CChr.SL 1, 125,89 Dekkers).

Translating is like the fable of the man, the boy, and the donkey. One cannot please everyone. Translations are also hard for non-native speakers of the target language to hear properly and to evaluate in a rigorous and subtle manner. Gross errors and omissions one catches, but matters of connotation and *elegantia* (“le mot juste”) are much trickier when one does not master the palette available to the translator. This reviewer, for example, is not sure whether at *Epistula* 8,12,5 (195,28–30 M.) “Dir zu Ehren . . . taktfestes Seemannslied” has the right connotations for *modificato celeumate*, which refers to a rowers’ song that keeps time to the coxswain’s rhythm, sung in chorus by both in praise of Trygetius (*tuas laudes . . . canent*). For that reason, reviewing a translation becomes a series of questions. Luckily they can often be productive ones that bring one back to the meaning of the Latin and with luck to a better understanding of it. One must follow the multilingual paper trail.

And one finds that new translations can also create *Verschlimmbesserungen* (“disimprovements”). Here’s one case where Anderson had something better, while both Loyen and Köhler produced worse versions. By comparing the three, however, one can learn something. At *Epistula* 1,7,10 (17,3.5 M.) Sidonius is describing the self-destructive behavior of Arvandus during his trial, first with *se transfodit* (“pierced himself”) and then, at the end of the passage, with *iugulabatur* (“was having his throat pierced”). Anderson¹⁷ used “dealt himself his death-blow” and “were at his throat” (which though it rightly features the throat has distracting connotations of attack by wild beasts), Loyen¹⁸ uses “fut ainsî frappé à la mort” (which completely misses Arvandus’ agency), and “ce forfait”; Köhler (p. 24) neutralizes to “selbst den Untergang bereitet hat” and “vollends um den Kopf,” a neutral allusion to capital punishment. I would in all these instances have translated more literally. Arvandus, if condemned, would in this period have faced beheading, but, if one wants to express an idea of committing judicio-legal *suicide*, beheading just won’t work!—hence Sidonius’ recourse to the image of *iugulatio*. He insists on it twice, so must want readers to have Arvandus’ suicidal behavior firmly before their eyes. This is high pathetic writing and shouldn’t be bureaucratized or flattened.

Translators also temporize and waffle. Let’s look at the pathetic show put on by Arvandus’ accusers, the Gallic delegation who are described at *Epistula* 1,7,9 (16,12–13 M.) as *semipullati atque concreti*. Anderson¹⁹ rendered this as

¹⁷ Anderson, *Sidonius* (see note 5), 377.

¹⁸ Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire* (see note 6), 25.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Sidonius* (see note 5), 375.

“half-mourning and unkempt,”²⁰ Loyen²¹ follows him with “en demi-deuil et la chevelure negligée.” In her translation Köhler (p. 23) has “fast ganz in Schwarz und stoppelbärtig,” even though in her commentary she annotated, “Halb in Trauerkleidung” and “mit wuchernden Haaren und Bärten.”²² This is all very confusing and even self-contradictory. What is to be visualized? *Semipullatus* is Sidonius’ hapax, which ought to refer to an attempt at mourning (not “fast ganz”), but must *concreti* refer to hair? And, if so, head hair or beards? And does it mean “allowed to grow too long”? Hardly. With reference to hair the word *concretus* means “stuck together” (e. g. with blood or dust), but *concretus* can also be used of people, usually, with a word like *squalore* to mean “dirty” (English “caked”).²³

Questions of connotation are sometimes judgment calls. At *Epistula* 1,5,1 (p. 12) *Romae positus* (8,6 M.) (which means no more than “when I was at Rome”) turns into the slightly heavier “weilend,” but then Anderson had previously over-translated with “settled down.” In *Epistula* 1,8,1 (18,5 M.) *morari me Romae congratularis*, however, *morari*, translated with a bit more oomph by Anderson as “being still [italics mine] in Rome,” becomes for Köhler (p. 25) the flatter “zu meinem Aufenthalt in Rom.” Is *morari* merely the preferred Christian Latin for “stay,” or does it still have the residual connotations of “linger”? The electronic databases in this case can help decide: there is no sign that Sidonius uses *moror* in its Christian Latin sense; instead it is probably used *sensu proprio* with connotations of “still hanging out.” One might well ask whether it is Sidonius’ word or whether he is focalizing a teasing or belittling term of his correspondent’s. Let’s pursue that line of inquiry a step further. Loyen dates the letter to the end of 467²⁴ and translates *morari* as “prolonger mon séjour.”²⁵ This “point” right at the head of the letter suggests to me that Candidianus was teasing Sidonius about having contrived to “hang on” in Rome—in office, this time as City Prefect (*Praefectus Vrbi*)!²⁶ I might even push it a step further and read Sidonius’s “seeing the sun” (*gaudere te quod aliquando . . . videam solem*) as *oratio figurata* for *Kaisernähe*, contact with the Emperor Anthemius, whose panegyric earned him his office.²⁷ One might compare Sidonius *Carmen* 2 (*Panegyricus ad Anthemium*) *Sol hic quoque venit ab ortu* (BSGRT, 239,12 Mohr): “this [second] sun [viz. Anthemius] also came

20 Anderson was of a generation that would have known the etymology of “unkempt” (viz. “uncombed”).

21 Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire* (see note 6), 24.

22 Köhler, C. *Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius* (see note 8), 247–248.

23 *ThLL* 4 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909), 96,40–43, s. v. *conresco*.

24 Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire* (see note 6), 245.

25 Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire* (see note 6), 27.

26 Pace Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire* (see note 6) who saw no reference to the Urban Prefecture.

27 C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius, *Epistula* 1,8,1 (18,6–7 M.).

from the East.” So the letter should be dated to some time after Sidonius’s office was announced (so late 367 or 368²⁸ when he was in office).²⁹ Much work lies hidden in even the smallest details of a translation and much can ride on one word.

These few examples serve to illustrate difficulties with connotation and with precise denotation (accuracy). But readers who are not following along in the Latin text will be unaware of problems at the back end, which is a good thing—for translators are capable of printing gibberish! Köhler does not, and her translation is usually accurate and lively: Like Anderson, she is committed to translating Sidonius’ often rather infantile puns. She aims to avoid flattening, so much so that at *Epistula* 1,8,2 (18,18 M.) we surprisingly find (p. 26) “der Stuhlgang fließt,” where Mohr reads *turres fluunt*. To understand what is going on, one would have to look at Köhler’s own commentary on *Epistles* 1.³⁰ She was reading *ventres fluunt*!

The bibliography is selective, which is a pity, because it seems half-baked and inadequate. It raises constant questions, not just the omission of Dalton³¹ and Jill Harries³² (the latter corrected with an *erratum* slip), but also of other items, e. g. Roy Gibson on the order of the collection and on its relationship to Pliny.³³ Why are “weitere Publikationen in Auswahl” added on as an afterthought on p. 336? Were (some) omissions noted only after page-proof? There is an index of names and an analytical index of the content.

Many of the problems in this book could have been eliminated by careful reading for consistency and continuity and spot-checking by a series editor. In addition, it would have been helpful for readers to have a concise contextualization of each letter for the many readers who will dive in rather than reading the whole book. If one analyses a letter, a first step is a reconstruction of the transactional context, which can often be puzzling.³⁴ It would have been helpful to have a positive description of Sidonius’ style³⁵ as well as a few linear examples to illustrate the challenges involved. In these days historians would like the prosopographical reassurance of PLRE references rather than naked names, many of which have many possible owners. The letters are under-annotated, which is a

²⁸ Jill Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome, AD 407–485* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 13.

²⁹ Thus I cannot agree with Köhler, *C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius* (see note 8), 257, who thinks it of little interest which stay of Sidonius at Rome is alluded to.

³⁰ Köhler, *C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius* (see note 8), 261 and 30 for the provenance of the variant.

³¹ Dalton, *Letters of Sidonius* (see note 5).

³² Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris* (see note 28).

³³ Roy Gibson, “Reading the Letters of Sidonius by the Book,” in *New Approaches* (see note 1), needed on pp. XX–XXIII.

³⁴ E. g. C. Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius, *Epistulae* 6,1 (126–128 M.); 6,4 (130–131 M.).

³⁵ An ideal model would be Michael Winterbottom, “Aldhelm’s Prose Style and Its Origins,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 6 (1977): 39–76.

pity, for Sidonius's writing is learned and allusive, and readers need help, both historical and literary.

The book is not entirely reliable or helpful as a piece of scholarship, so it is unlikely to become a "go-to" resource for German-speaking researchers. The latter will continue to have to work from the 19th and 20th century editions and translations, as well as the more recent commentaries. This is, however, a readable and accurate German translation with nice touches such as the use of verse to render verse.

