

The Battle of Chalons



In confronting the Huns under Attila, the man known as “the last Roman” led the remnant forces of Western civilization against the rampaging barbarian horde.

by Charles Scaliger

The citizens of Orleans lay prostrate in the streets, praying for a miracle. Men, women, and children wept and begged the God of nations to deliver them from the greatest calamity young Christendom had yet witnessed. In the distance, the terrifying sounds of siege warfare — the incessant crash of stones and other missiles launched by catapults, the thump of rams testing the walls and gates of the city, and the howling of an enemy host that would show neither restraint nor clemency — warned of imminent catastrophe. Inside the walls of Orleans, thousands of peace-loving citizens prepared for the worst. Outside the walls, on the verge of forcing a major breach in the city’s meager defenses, were the Huns.

Lately led by the emperor Attila, the self-styled “Scourge of God,” the Huns were no strangers to the newly Christianized realms of the eastern and western Roman empire. Their arrival in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea from the fastnesses of Central Asia nearly a century earlier had set in motion a chain of events that devastated the aging Roman Empire.

The precise origin of the Huns is uncertain. They were most likely the same as the Hsiung-nu, a powerful Turkic people conquered and driven out of China during the Han Dynasty. Driving the Goths, Alans, and other Germanic peoples before them, they pushed into Europe in the fourth century, subduing numerous tribes with their superior composite bows and extraordinary battlefield mobility.

The Huns’ reputation for ferocity drove the Goths westward to the Danube, where they asked the Eastern Roman Emperor Valens for asylum within Roman territory. Valens reluctantly granted them leave to enter the empire, and the Goths poured over the Danube and settled on imperial soil.

The abrupt arrival of the Goths within Roman territory triggered an unprecedented immigration crisis for Rome. Conflict between the restless Goths and their Roman overlords led eventually to the monumental Battle of Hadrianople in 378 A.D., in which the Goths and their allies annihilated most of the Roman military, including the Eastern Emperor Valens.

After Hadrianople, the Goths became permanent and unwanted residents in Central and Western Eu-

Attila at banquet: “The attendant of Attila first entered with a dish full of meat, and behind him came the other attendants with bread and viands.... A luxurious meal, served on silver plate, had been made ready for us ... but Attila ate nothing but meat on a wooden trencher. In everything else, too, he showed himself temperate; his cup was of wood, while to the guests were given goblets of gold and silver.”

— *Priscus at the Court of Attila the Hun, 448 A.D.*

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rope. It was a Gothic host under the leadership of Alaric that thrice besieged the Eternal City, finally sacking Rome in 410 A.D.

Another tribe of Germanic barbarians driven westward, the Vandals, led by the formidable Gaiseric, wrested North Africa from the Romans, destroying a large portion of the Roman Mediterranean fleet in the process.

Through all these horrendous depredations, the Western Roman Empire somehow lived on, although greatly diminished. By the early fifth century Rome, increasingly isolated from the Eastern Empire and its capital Constantinople, controlled with certainty only the Italian peninsula, although she still enjoyed nominal sovereignty over portions of Gaul, Belgium, and the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea. The rest of formerly Roman western Europe was in the hands of various Germanic tribes, while most of north central and eastern Europe, extending far out beyond the Volga River, groaned under the overlordship of the Huns.

Rise of Attila

In 432 A.D., the Hunnic emperor Rugila died, leaving control of his vast dominions to Attila and Bleda, the sons of his brother Mundzuk. Under their united guidance, the Huns launched campaigns against Sassanid Persia, in which they were eventually repulsed, and into southeastern Europe against the Eastern Roman Empire, where they spread desolation across the Balkans and Thrace, penetrating Greece as far as Thermopylae before accepting tributary peace terms from the Eastern Emperor Theodosius II.

Sometime after 440, Attila appears to have murdered Bleda and assumed sole command of the Hunnic state. Under his rule, the Huns were unquestionably the supreme power in Europe, extorting heavy annual tribute from the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire and gathering under their control dozens of tribes from Central Europe to the Ural River.

The enfeebled Western Roman Empire watched Attila's ascendancy with growing alarm. The most powerful man in the West in those years was the general Flavius Aetius, sometime aspirant to the throne, who, under the patronage of the Roman queen-regent Galla Placidia, had



Barbarian warlord: Attila “sought to subdue the foremost nations of the world — the Romans and Visigoths. His army is said to have numbered 500,000 men. He was a man born into the world to shake the nations, the scourge of all lands.”

— Roman historian Jordanes, 551 A.D.

risen to the office of *magister militum*, or supreme commander of the military forces in the West. Nicknamed “the last Roman” by some authorities, Aetius was the last major figure (in the Western Empire, at least) to embody the military virtues of ancient Rome.

Having lived for many years among the Goths as a hostage, Aetius was thoroughly familiar with the military tactics of the barbarians. For years, it was his able leadership that somehow kept the forces at bay that dismembered the empire after his lifetime.

But Aetius was shrewd enough to recognize the limited resources at his disposal. The Roman state by this time existed in little more than name only; the noble culture that had helped to civilize much of the known world in former centuries had long since faded away under the relentless assault of foreign invaders, economic ruin, and moral decline. Many of Rome's remaining legions were largely populated by mercenaries, and the government was honeycombed with double-dealing and outright treason.

Under such circumstances, Aetius was forced to play potential foes — the Visigoths,

Vandals, and Huns — against one another, to prevent any of them from achieving complete hegemony, or forming an irresistible alliance against Rome.

For a time, the strategy appeared to work. In 450 A.D., however, the delicate balance of power began to erode. Attila announced his intention of attacking the Visigoths and secured the approval of both the Western Emperor Valentinian III and Aetius to do so.

But then trouble arose from a completely unexpected source. Honoria, the impulsive, strong-willed sister of the weak emperor, had conducted an illicit court affair the previous year, in consequence of which her brother, after executing her lover, had thrown her out of the palace and forced her into an unwanted engagement with a senator. Honoria bridled at such

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To the victor go the spoils: Attila and his Huns pillage a Roman manor during the Italian campaign.

treatment by her feeble-minded brother, whom she clearly deemed unfit to rule. In spring of 450, she sent a letter to Attila, importuning him to rescue her from her situation. Whether the letter was in fact a proposal of marriage to the lord of the Huns is not clear. But Attila interpreted it as such, since Honoria enclosed a ring with the letter.

What impulse could have moved Honoria to such an act is difficult to imagine. She must have known of the barbaric customs of the Huns, and that she would be merely one of many wives in Attila's seraglio. Moreover, Attila himself was renowned for his brutal disposition and fearsome appearance. According to Jordanes, the most important chronicler of Attila's life and times (although not a contemporary), the Hun leader was

short of stature, with a broad chest and a large head; his eyes were small, his beard thin and sprinkled with gray; and he had a flat nose and tanned skin, showing evidence of his origin.

Seeing an opportunity to expand his dominions westward by virtue of royal inheritance, the emperor of the Huns sent word to Valentinian accepting Honoria's proposal. He demanded that the emperor's sister be delivered to him, along with

a substantial dowry including half of the Western Empire. When an incensed Valentinian refused, Attila made plans to invade Gaul to seize his claimed dowry by force of arms.

Invasion

Aetius, alarmed at these developments, knew that his legions could not hope to defend Rome against the combined might of the Hunnic horde and the host of Germanic allies — the Gepids, Alans, Ostrogoths, and Burgundians among them — marching under Attila's standard. Aetius and Valentinian appealed to Theodoric, the king of the Visigoths, for help. "He [Attila] measures his ambition by his might," they wrote. "License satisfies his pride. Despising law and right, he shows himself an enemy to Nature herself. And thus he, who clearly is the common foe of each, deserves the hatred of all."

To this letter Theodoric responded favorably, conveniently setting aside recent quarrels with Rome. An alliance was hastily assembled to save Western civilization from the Huns, including, besides the Roman legions and Gothic host, a generous number of Franks and other nationalities.

In the meantime, Attila had not been idle. His immense army moved west to the Rhine and began destroying the cities along its eastern bank. First Strasbourg and Worms, then Mainz and Cologne, fell

to the Huns. Imitating the first Caesar five centuries before, the Huns constructed a pontoon bridge across the Rhine, and poured unimpeded into Gaul and Belgium.

Few superlatives are adequate to describe the horrors that followed as the Huns and their allies swept across the rich countryside of northwestern Europe, burning and slaying. The utter desolation of Metz in April 451 is captured in historian Edward Gibbon's elliptical prose:

[The Huns] involved, in a promiscuous massacre, the priests who served at the altar, and the infants, who, in the hour of danger, had been providently baptized by the bishop; the flourishing city was delivered to the flames, and a solitary chapel of St. Stephen marked the place where it [i.e., the city of Metz] had stood.

Rheims, Amiens, Cambrai, and many other notable towns and cities in the region followed. Paris alone was spared, thanks, it is said, to the prayers and piety of St. Genevieve.

Sometime in the early summer of that dark year, the army of Attila arrived before the recently strengthened walls of Orleans and apparently laid siege to the terrified city (although some authorities believe the city was spared the rigors of a siege by the arrival of Aetius with his Gothic allies). On the authority of Gibbon and the bulk of received tradition, however, the city held out, under the leadership of their peerless bishop Anianus, a man of "primitive sanctity and consummate prudence," who, anticipating the approach of Aetius, exhorted his flock to pray for deliverance.

According to tradition, a distant cloud of dust betokened the approach of the Roman-Gothic army just as the Huns, who had already occupied the suburbs, forced a breach in the city wall. At the approach of the enemy, Attila withdrew from Orleans, leaving the city intact, and marched northwest, looking for a spot to confront Aetius and his allies.

At his heels marched the combined host

of Romans and Goths, led by Aetius and the aged Gothic King Theodoric in person, along with the latter's two sons. The flower of the militaries of Western Christendom had been called out for what no man doubted would be a monumental clash.

At a plain of indeterminate location somewhere between Orleans and Rheims, (but which the historian J.B. Bury placed closer to Troyes) whose name has come down to us as Chalons or the Catalaunian Fields, Attila decided to make his stand. As the two vast armies encamped and began probing each others' weaknesses, a "skirmish" occurred — between Attila's Gepids and Aetius' Franks — in which roughly 15,000 lives were lost, casting some perspective on the scale of the greater battle to come.

Some time before the battle, Attila had consulted his pagan soothsayers. They, after inspecting bones and entrails, reported that Attila would lose the battle but that the other side would lose its greatest chieftain. Believing from this that Aetius would die and thinking this outcome worth the risk to his own personal safety and the security of the Hunnish empire, Attila ignored the warnings and prepared his warriors for all-out combat.

Battle Is Joined

The following day, the battle — one of the most substantial the world had seen since Vercellae at the end of the Cimbrian War five and a half centuries earlier — centered on a knife-edged ridge, the capture of which would confer tactical advantage. The Huns first held, then lost the ridge to a determined Roman and Gothic onslaught. The battle lasted all day and into the night, and the Gothic King Theodoric was among the fallen.

The next day found the two remnant armies stalemated. Attila had withdrawn behind a formidable entrenchment of wagons, and had reportedly prepared his own funeral pyre out of saddles, prepared to immolate himself rather than fall into the hands of the foe.

The Romans and Goths, along with their allies, were horrified at the carnage, but Theodoric's sons, burning to avenge their father's death, argued to renew the battle.

At this juncture Aetius made a fateful decision, one that the West was to rue bit-

terly in the months that followed. Rather than follow up his initial gains with an all-out victory over Attila, Aetius decided to allow him to withdraw, with the still-formidable remains of his army. Aetius' reasoning, colored by the same fatal pragmatism that has afflicted decrepit imperial powers up to our own time, was that maintaining a balance of power among foes was preferable to creating a vacuum by completely vanquishing his enemy.

Accordingly, Attila retired, bloodied but unbowed, to seek new horizons of conquest elsewhere.

The battle dead at Chalons numbered 177,000, according to Jordanes, although later chroniclers inflated

the figure to more than 300,000. Whatever the final toll, the slaughter was on a scale that Christendom would not again witness for centuries, and it was said that streams in the area were actually swollen by the in-

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Chalons: "Now show your cunning, Huns, now your deeds of arms!... I shall hurl the first spear at the foe. If any can stand at rest while Attila fights, he is a dead man." Inflamed by these words, they all dashed into battle."

— Attila's speech to his army at Chalons according to Jordanes, 551 A.D.



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flux of blood. For the first time in recorded history, a battle was joined between two vast multinational coalitions rather than between individual powers or small alliances. On the Catalaunian Fields nearly all the powers of Western and Central Europe, great and small, were represented, prefiguring the far-reaching coalitions that have characterized modern international warfare since the Thirty Years' War.

While the Battle of Chalons arguably spared the Christian West from annihilation, and demonstrated for the first time that Attila was not invincible, it did not put an end to the Hunnic emperor's depredations. The following year, a furious Attila,

still bent on collecting Honoria and his dowry, invaded Italy. The first object of his wrath was Aquileia, the great commercial city on the Adriatic that was among the largest urban centers of the Roman dominions. In an act of barbarity that made even the storming of Metz pale into insignificance, Attila slaughtered the inhabitants of Aquileia and destroyed the city root and

branch. So great was the devastation that Aquileia, like Nineveh and Persepolis before it, never rose again. Padua, Verona, Vicenza, and many other cities were also reduced with varying degrees of severity, but Rome, somewhat inexplicably, was spared.

Perhaps it was superstitious fear inspired by the example of the Gothic prince Alaric, who died mysteriously shortly after sacking Rome. Or perhaps it was the persuasive offices of Pope Leo I, afterwards surnamed "the Great," who pleaded with Attila in person to spare the city, allegedly accompanied by the miraculous personages of St. Peter and St. Paul. Whatever the cause,

the Scourge of God ultimately made peace with Rome, satisfied with a huge indemnity and promises to eventually deliver Honoria. If she were not surrendered within the time stipulated by the treaty, Attila warned the cringing Romans, he would return and inflict even greater horrors.

Fortunately for Honoria, Rome, and the entire civilized world, Attila did not long outlive his latest threat. In 453 he died suddenly, from an aneurysm supposedly suffered during his latest wedding night. Bereft of Attila's sure guidance, the empire of the Huns swiftly disintegrated. A coalition of vassal tribes arose and overthrew his successors, restoring to the Germanic race uncontested dominion over northern Europe. In the power vacuum that Aetius had so desperately sought to forestall, the Germanic tribes quickly completed the overthrow of the Roman state; three decades after the death of Attila, the Western Empire had ceased to exist.

Aetius, the other major player in Rome's last great drama, also met an untimely end, at the treacherous hands of the emperor Valentinian. Jealous of Aetius' success and popularity, Valentinian is said to have personally murdered "the last Roman" in the presence of his counselors.

The passing of both Aetius and Attila betokened the passing of an age. The awful destruction of much of what remained of Roman Italy cleared the way for the resettlement of the peninsula by Germanic tribes, who brought with them ways alien to those of imperial Rome. The forced abdication of the last Roman emperor in 476 A.D. was little more than a long-overdue formality. The heroism of the Battle of Chalons may be regarded as Rome's last convulsion, in which she gave the flower of her final generation to ensure the survival of the new Christian civilization that was to succeed her. ■



Leo and Attila: "Our most blessed Pope Leo undertook the task.... And the outcome was what his faith had foreseen; for when [Attila] had received the embassy, he was so impressed by the presence of the high priest that he ordered his army to give up warfare and ... he departed beyond the Danube."

— *The chronicler Prosper, 455 A.D.*