

Atilla the Hun

Atilla the Hun (circa 406-53), king of the Huns (circa 433-53) One of the most feared and notorious barbarians of all time, Attila is believed to be of distant Mongol stock, he ravaged much of the European continent during the 5th century AD. Apparently Attila was as great a menace to the Teutonic tribes people as he was to the Romans.

There is a story that he claimed to own the actual sword of Mars, and that other Barbarian chiefs could not look the King of the Huns directly in the eyes without flinching. Attila was a striking figure, and Edward Gibbon in The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire offered a famous description of the personality and appearance of the Hun, based on an ancient account:

His features, according to the observation of a Gothic historian, bore the stamp of his national origin . . . a large head, a swarthy complexion, small, deep-seated eyes, a flat nose, a few hairs in the place of a beard, broad shoulders, and a short square body, of a nervous strength, though of a disproportioned form. The haughty step and demeanor of the king of the Huns expressed the consciousness of his superiority above the rest of mankind; and he had a custom of fiercely rolling his eyes, as if he wished to enjoy the terror which he inspired....He delighted in war; but, after he had ascended the throne in a mature age, his head, rather than his hand, achieved the conquest of the North; and the fame of an adventurous soldier was usefully exchanged for that of a prudent and successful general.

In his own day he and his Huns were known as the "Scourge of God," and the devastation they caused in Gaul before the great Battle of Châlons in 451 AD became a part of medieval folklore and tradition.

The rumors of his cannibalistic practices are not unfounded; he is supposed to have eaten two of his sons. The circumstances of this act, however, may be more accurately depicted in the Edda poems where his revengeful wife serves him the meat of his sons under the guise that it was the meat of a young animal.

From the year 433 Attila shared the throne with his brother Bleda, but killed him in 445. At the outset of his reign, Attila demanded more money, and the Eastern Emperor, Theodosius II, obligingly doubled the annual subsidy. For various reasons, however, the new king began in the late 440's to look to the West as the main area of opportunity for the Huns. For the next decade and a half after his accession Attila was the most powerful foreign potentate in the affairs of the Western Roman Empire. His Huns had become a sedentary nation and were no longer the horse nomads of the earlier days. The Great Hungarian Plain did not offer as much room as the steppes of Asia for grazing horses, and the Huns were forced to develop an infantry to supplement their now much smaller cavalry. As one leading authority has recently said, "When the Huns first appeared on the steppe north of the Black Sea, they were nomads and most of them may have been mounted warriors. In Europe, however, they could graze only a fraction of their former horse power, and their chiefs soon fielded armies which resembled the sedentary forces of Rome." By the time of Attila the army of the Huns had become like that of most Barbarian nations in Europe. It was, however, very large, as we shall see, and capable of conducting siege operations, which most other Barbarian armies could not do effectively.

In any event the Hunnic invasion of Gaul was a huge undertaking. The Huns had a reputation for cruelty that was not undeserved. In the 440's one of Attila's attacks against the East in the Balkans aimed at a city in the Danubian provinces, Naissus (441-42). It was located about a hundred miles south of the Danube on the Nischava River. The Huns so devastated the place that when Roman ambassadors passed through to meet with Attila several years later, they had to camp outside the city on the river. The river banks were covered with human bones, and the stench of death was so great that no one could enter the city. Many cities of Gaul would soon suffer the same fate.

After securing a strong position on the Roman side of the Danube the Huns were checked by the famous Eastern Roman general, Aspar, as they raided Thrace (442).

By 447 he advanced through Illyria and devastated the whole region between the Black and the Mediterranean seas. Those of the conquered who were not destroyed were compelled to serve in his

armies. He defeated the Byzantine emperor Theodosius II; Constantinople was saved only because the Hunnish army, primarily a cavalry force, lacked the technique of besieging a great city. The Huns marched as far as Thermopylae and stopped only when the Eastern Emperor, Theodosius II, begged for terms.

Attila accepted payment of all tribute in arrears and a new annual tribute of 2,100 pounds of gold. The Huns were also given considerable territory south of the Danube. One source says of this campaign, "There was so much killing and bloodletting that no one could number the dead. The Huns pillaged the churches and monasteries, and slew the monks and virgins . . . They so devastated Thrace that it will never rise again and be as it was before." This strong victory in the East left Attila free to plan the attack on the West that culminated in the invasion of Gaul.

Theodosius, however, was compelled to cede a portion of territory south of the Danube River and to pay a tribute and annual subsidy. Two other considerations proved especially important. One was the death of the Eastern Emperor Theodosius II, who fell from his horse and died in 450. His successor, Marcian (450-7), took a hard line on Barbarian encroachment in the Balkans and refused to pay Attila the usual subsidy. The fury of the Hun was monstrous, but he decided to take out his wrath on the West, because it was weaker than the East, and because one of history's most peculiar scandals gave Attila a justification for war with the Western Emperor. Honoria, Emperor Valentinian's sister, had been discovered in 449 in an affair with her steward. The unfortunate lover was executed, and Honoria, who was probably pregnant, was kept in seclusion. In a rage she smuggled a ring and a message to the King of the Huns and asked Attila to become her champion. He treated this as a marriage proposal and asked for half of the Western Empire as her dowry. So when he crossed the Rhine, he could claim that he merely sought by force what was his by right of betrothal to Honoria.

After massive preparations Attila invaded the Rhine with a large army of Huns and allied Barbarian tribes. In his force was a sizable body of Ostrogoths and other Germanic warriors, including Burgundians and Alans

who lived on the Barbarian side of the frontier. The Franks were split between pro- and anti-Roman factions.

As early as April Attila took Metz and fear swept through Gaul. Ancient accounts give figures that range between 300,000 and 700,000 for the army of the Huns.

Whatever the size, it was clearly enormous for the fifth century AD. Some of the greatest cities of Europe were sacked and put to the torch: Rheims, Mainz, Strasbourg, Cologne, Worms and Trier. Paris fortunately had the advantage of having a saint in the city and was spared because of the ministrations of St. Genieveve.

Attila died an appropriately barbarian death. He took a new, young, beautiful bride, a damsel named Ildico, though he already had a coterie of wives. The wedding day was spent in heavy drinking and partying, and the King of the Huns took his new bride to bed that night in drunken lust. The next morning it was discovered that he had died--drowned in his drunkenness in his own nosebleed. The new bride was found quivering in fear in the great man's bed quarters. The empire of the Huns dissipated nearly as quickly as its most famous leader. In 454 the Ostrogoths and other Germanic tribes revolted against the Huns, and the sons of Attila, who had quarreled among themselves, could not deal with the crisis.

Selected Thoughts of Atilla the Hun

Written reports have purpose only if read by the king.

A wise chieftain never kills the Hun bearing bad news. Rather, the wise chieftain kills the Hun who fails to deliver bad news.

Great chieftains never take themselves too seriously.

A Hun can achieve anything for which he is willing to pay the price.

Every decision involves some risk.

A wise chieftain gives tough assignments to Huns who can rise to the challenge.

When in a political war, a Hun must always keep an eye to the rear.

Huns only make enemies on purpose.

Critical to a Hun's success is a clear understanding of what the King wants.

Never appoint acting chieftains.

Appoint the most capable Hun, give her both responsibility and authority, then hold her accountable.

A Hun's perception is reality for him.

Huns who appear to be busy are not always working.

Every Hun has value -- even if only to serve as a bad example.

It is best for your friends and foes to speak well of you; however, it is better for them to speak poorly of you than not at all.

When nothing can be said of a Hun, she has probably accomplished nothing very well.

Contrary to what most chieftains think, you are not remembered by what you did in the past, but by what most Huns think you did.

Every Hun is responsible for shaping his life circumstances and experiences into success -- no other Hun, and certainly no Roman, can do for a Hun what he neglects to do for himself.

Some Huns have solutions for which there are no problems.

Suffer long for mediocre but loyal Huns. Suffer not for competent but disloyal Huns.

