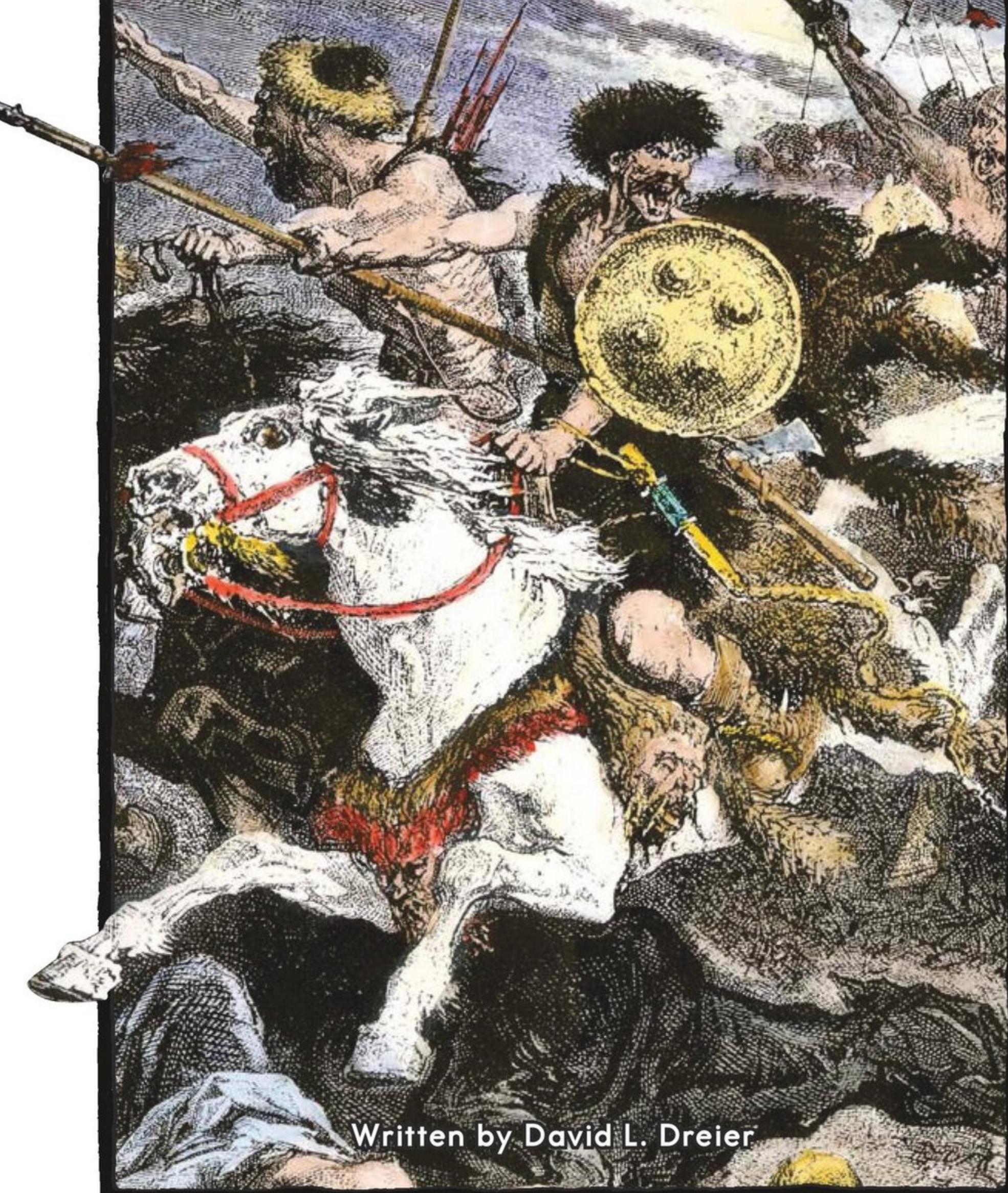


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THE ROMAN EMPIRE FACES ATTILA



Written by David L. Dreier

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Terror from Asia

No invaders in ancient Europe struck as much terror into people's hearts as the Huns. These ferocious horsemen from northcentral Asia thundered into the heart of Europe in the AD 370s. Wherever they went, they left death and destruction behind them. Historians of the time described the Huns as hideous **barbarians** who killed without mercy.



The leader of the Huns when they were at the height of their reign of terror was a man named Attila (AT-uh-luh or uh-TIL-uh). The people of Europe found Attila so horrifying that they called him “the **Scourge of God.**” Attila crushed nearly every army sent against him.

Attila the Hun



United We Stand

Beginning around 27 BC in Europe, the Roman armies fanned out and conquered much of the ancient world. The Roman **Empire** ruled as a united entity for close to five centuries. By the mid-300s, the empire was growing old and tired. The empire covered so much land that it took two emperors to govern it. One emperor ruled in the west from the city of Rome; the other—Valens—ruled in the east from Constantinople, a city in what is now the country of Turkey. By the year 400, the two halves of the empire would be permanently divided and would never enjoy the power they had once enjoyed as one united empire.

In AD 376, a messenger brought some very disturbing news to Roman Emperor Valens. The messenger said that large numbers of **Germanic** people called the *Visigoths* were swarming into the Roman Empire. They were seeking protection from a terrible new enemy from the east: the Huns. This was the first time that the Roman world had heard rumor of the Huns.

The Visigoth refugees were allowed to settle in the Eastern Roman Empire. But the Romans

treated them badly. The angry Visigoths rebelled. For two years, they **rampaged** through part of the Eastern Empire, causing great destruction similar to what they were fleeing. Valens led an army to stop the uprising, but the Visigoths destroyed his army and Valens was killed.



Alaric I, king of the Visigoths, led his people to rebel against those who had given them shelter from the Huns.



Nearly 100 years after the Visigoths sacked Rome, they and other Germanic tribes had taken over the land once governed by the Western Roman Empire.

Without the leadership of Valens, the Roman Empire became weaker. The Visigoths and other Germanic tribes began attacking the western part of the empire. Without a central leader, the Romans were powerless to stop the invaders. Nearly 40 years after the Visigoths first started fleeing the Huns, the Visigoths **sacked** the city of Rome in AD 410. Enemies had not destroyed the capital city in centuries. It was a devastating blow. The last thing the Romans needed at this point was even more trouble. But they were soon to get it, and it came from the Huns.

The Scourge of God

The Huns had settled into an area that is now part of the country of Hungary. They built towns. The leaders lived in houses made of wood, but most of the people lived in tents. The tents enabled them to easily leave the settlement on horseback, taking their homes with them. The Huns were not content with what they had. They wanted more.



Roman coin
circa AD 440



The Huns wanted money and nice things, so they attacked people who had those things. Beginning in the 420s, they demanded an annual payment of several hundred pounds of gold each year from the Romans. Desiring to keep the peace, the new Eastern Roman emperor, Theodosius II (thee-uh-DOH-shee-us) agreed to the demand. For more than 20 years, the Huns accepted the payments and caused the Romans

little trouble. That began to change in the AD 440s, after a man named Attila rose to become the sole ruler of the Huns and the Germanic people the Huns had conquered.

Attila was in his late thirties. A Germanic historian of the time described the new king: “[He has] small, deep-set eyes, a flat nose, a few hairs in the place of a beard, broad shoulders, and a short, square body.” Other people who met Attila said he had very simple tastes and ate and participated in feasts in moderation.

Attila might have been moderate when relaxing with friends, but he was ferocious when dealing with the Romans. He demanded more gold from them. In order to maintain peace, Theodosius agreed to double the annual payment, but then Attila wanted even more. With an army of about 100,000 men, Attila launched war against the eastern part of the Roman Empire. The Huns reduced one Roman city after another to ruins and killed many thousands of people.



Attila during a feast with his warriors



Walls like these were built around the Eastern Roman Empire's capital, Constantinople, to keep invaders like Attila from taking over the city.

To stop the destruction and killing, Theodosius agreed to once again double the annual payment of gold. The Huns would now get about 950 kilograms (2,100 lbs) of gold each year. But when Theodosius died in AD 450, the new Eastern Roman emperor, Marcian (MAR-shun), refused to make any further payments. That put Attila into a rage, and he took his fury out on the Western Roman Empire.

A Lady in Distress

Historians theorize that Attila may have had several reasons for turning his attention to the western part of the empire. He may have decided that Marcian was someone he didn't want to anger. Attila had also already drained the eastern part of the empire of much of its wealth. Both of these reasons made the Western Roman Empire an inviting target.

Attila had never needed an excuse for attacking. He just did it and took what he wanted. But this time, he pretended that he had an excuse. Honoria (ah-NOR-ee-uh), sister of the Western emperor, Valentinian III, had written to him. Honoria had been discovered having a secret romance with a servant. The servant was executed, and Honoria was locked away. Desperate to be free, she sent a letter to Attila begging him for help. She enclosed her ring as proof that she wrote the letter.

Attila announced that he considered Honoria's letter and ring a proposal of marriage. He said he wanted to marry the young princess. As a **dowry**, he demanded half of the Western Roman Empire. Needless to say, Honoria's brother Valentinian III refused this demand. Attila then declared that he would take what was rightfully his by force.

Attila really didn't care about Honoria. It was the Roman lands and riches he wanted. He was determined to get them. He assembled an army of about 100,000 men, including both Huns and Germanic **allies**. In early 451, Attila and his army crossed the Rhine River into Gaul—modern-day France. For several months, the attackers sacked and burned every city they conquered. They killed men, women, and children without mercy. They took people's riches and all their food. Attila believed that nothing could stop him. He was about to get a big surprise.



Attila crossing the Danube, a river that helped define the northern borders of the Roman Empire

The Last of the Romans

The Roman Empire was fortunate that it still had one great general. His name was Flavius Aetius (AY-tee-uhs), and he served in the court of Valentinian III. He is usually just called *Aetius*. As the Western Empire crumbled, Aetius did all he could to hold the empire together. For his efforts, he has been remembered as “the Last of the Romans.”

With the advance of Attila through Gaul, Aetius was facing the greatest test of his life. He scrambled to raise an army. Arguing that Attila was the enemy of humanity, Aetius convinced some of the Germanic tribes living in Gaul to join forces with him. These new allies included a large force of Visigoths under the command of their king, Theodoric. Aetius’s army was now about as large as Attila’s. In the late spring of 451, the Roman general led his forces to fight Attila and the Huns.

Thinking Critically

Aetius needed a larger army to fight the Huns, so he convinced men from Gaul to join the Roman army. Which is more important when fighting an enemy?

**Number
of men
— or —
talent?**



The Visigoth king Theodoric was slain in battle with Attila and the Huns, but Aetius and the Roman and Visigoth armies went on to beat the Huns.

The Battle of Chalons

Aetius and his army caught up with Attila in late June outside the city of Orleans, in modern-day France. The Hun army had been conducting a **siege** of the city. Seeing the approaching Roman forces, Attila retreated toward an open plain near the town of Chalons-sur-Marne. There, the two huge armies met in one of the greatest battles in history.

The Battle of Chalons began in the afternoon. After firing arrows at each other, the two sides fought up close with swords, spears, and axes. By evening, when the fighting stopped, tens of thousands of men from both sides lay dead on the field. Among them was Theodoric. But there was no question about who had won. Aetius's army had defeated Attila.

The next day, Aetius allowed Attila to retreat with the remainder of his army. The Roman general was criticized for this. But Aetius probably made a wise decision. His strategy was to keep the Germanic forces as allies of Rome. The best way to do this was if the Goths and the Romans had the Huns as a common enemy.

Attila's army withdrew from Gaul, moving back across the Rhine River to a settlement. The Western Roman Empire was safe for the time being. But Attila still had plenty of men, and he hadn't given up on conquering the Western Empire. The Romans hadn't seen the last of Attila and the Huns.



Attila and his armies were known for the great violence they committed.

Attila and the Pope

In June of the following year, Attila led his army across the mountains into Italy. He was still pretending that he wanted to marry Honoria.



The Huns so thoroughly destroyed the city of Aquileia on their rampage through Italy that the city never recovered.

This time, Aetius was unable to raise an army large enough to fight the Huns. The Germanic people who had helped to save Gaul were less interested in saving Italy. Attila's army roamed at will in northern Italy, demolishing villages and killing their inhabitants. The army moved closer and closer toward Rome.

Aetius and Emperor Valentinian III decided to try **diplomacy** instead of battle. They asked Pope Leo I, the head of the Catholic Church, for his help. They wanted the pope to meet with Attila and ask him to leave Italy.

Pope Leo I met with Attila at the Huns' camp. What the two men said to each other was not recorded. But Attila agreed to stop his attacks.

This victory greatly increased the **prestige** of the pope. However, some historians believe that Attila was in a weaker position than many people realized. They believe his army had not fully recovered from the Battle of Chalons, and many of his men were dying of a plague. In addition, he was running short of food and other supplies. Whatever Attila's reasons were, he left Italy, never to return.



Pope Leo I kept Attila from furthering his attacks in Italy.



Divided They Fall

Attila stopped pretending to need Honoria as a bride. In fact, he already had a number of wives. In AD 453 he took a new bride, a beautiful young woman named Ildico. After a day of feasting, Attila and Ildico went to bed.

The next morning, Attila failed to emerge from his bedroom. Worried servants entered his room and found Ildico trembling with fear. On the bed lay Attila. He was dead. During the night, the king had suffered a burst blood vessel in his nose or throat. He drowned to death on his own blood.

After the death of Attila, the Huns' empire did not last. His numerous sons split the empire among themselves. Under Attila, the Huns had been united, but now they became divided. Their lack of unity caused them to grow weak.

Germanic tribes that had been ruled by Attila saw that the Huns were weakening. In 454, they revolted. Within a few years, they had overthrown the Huns. With their empire shattered, the Huns fled. In the words of one historian, they were "scattered to the winds." Once the terror of humanity, the Huns made no more lasting marks on history.



Though many believe that Hungary was named for the Huns, it was not. Scholars believe, however, that Budapest, the capital city, was named for Attila's brother Bleda, also known as Buda.

Glossary

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| allies (<i>n.</i>) | people or groups that join with others in a common cause (p. 12) |
| barbarians (<i>n.</i>) | outsiders who are considered brutal or uncivilized (p. 4) |
| diplomacy (<i>n.</i>) | the practice of negotiating between leaders of different countries (p. 16) |
| dowry (<i>n.</i>) | an amount of property or money given by a bride's family to the family into which she marries (p. 11) |
| empire (<i>n.</i>) | a collection of nations or people ruled by one person who has total authority (p. 5) |
| Germanic (<i>adj.</i>) | describing a people who spoke a group of languages with similar characteristics spoken across northwestern Europe (p. 6) |
| humanity (<i>n.</i>) | all human beings as one species (p. 13) |
| prestige (<i>n.</i>) | a level of high standing or respect (p. 17) |
| rampaged (<i>v.</i>) | proceeded in an angry or violent way (p. 6) |
| sacked (<i>v.</i>) | destroyed a city and stole all its wealth after capturing it from an enemy (p. 7) |
| scourge (<i>n.</i>) | a person or thing that is seen as an agent of punishment, suffering, or vengeance (p. 4) |
| siege (<i>n.</i>) | surrounding and often attacking an enemy for a long time while preventing them from getting food and other supplies (p. 14) |

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