

Part One

GREAT BARBARIANS OF HISTORY

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Chapter 1

Attila the Hun: The Scourge of God

Attila! One of the most notorious barbarians of the Dark Ages, his name struck fear into the heart of the Western world. A Roman historian called him “a man born to shake the races of the world, a terror to all lands.”¹ Saint Jerome called the Huns the “wolves from the North.”

His enemies called him the Scourge of God.

Attila was even rumored to have killed his own brother in a staged hunting accident. This Hunnic king’s brutal raids and constant plundering shook the foundations of the Roman Empire, and brought the great city of Constantinople to its knees—twice.

And each time, Attila left with hoards of cash and thousands of pounds of gold in tribute as Rome was forced to buy peace.

Attila was power-hungry and ruthless. He said, “For what fortress, what city, in the wide extent of the Roman Empire, can hope to exist, secure and impregnable, if it is our pleasure that it should be erased from the earth?”²

As Attila and his Huns marched on Constantinople, the historian Callinicus wrote:

The barbarian nation of the Huns, which was in Thrace, became so great that more than a hundred cities were captured and Constantinople almost came into danger and most men fled from it. . . . And there were so many murders and bloodlettings that the dead could not be numbered. Ay, for they took captive the churches and monasteries and slew the monks and maidens in great numbers.³

More favorable historians would tell you that Attila was not swayed by the riches his pillaging brought. Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus, a Roman historian, said Attila was “renowned for the arts of peace, without avarice and little swayed by desire.”⁴

But that doesn’t hold much water. Under Attila’s rule, Eastern Rome’s tribute to the Huns doubled in 435, and then tripled in 443.

Attila knew how to negotiate with an iron fist. He was a master at breaking the spirit of those he conquered. Paying Attila the ransom he demanded was easier than suffering more devastation and despair.

For example, the Eastern Empire had already been paying tribute to the Huns with an annual payment of 350 Roman pounds. In 435, Attila and his brother marched into Roman territory, threatening to take more land unless their demands were met.

The two brothers met with the Romans on horseback outside the city of Margus, intimidating the Romans enough to force a new treaty with even better terms: 700 Roman pounds in tribute, and eight solidi ransom for every Roman prisoner taken by the Huns. (There are 72 solidi to a pound.) The Huns were also awarded the right to trade on the banks of the Danube.⁵

Attila’s Retaliation

Edward Gibbons, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, wrote, “The kings of the Huns assumed the solid benefits, as well as the vain honors, of the negotiation. They dictated the conditions of peace, and each condition was an insult on the majesty of the empire.”⁶

But instead of keeping its promise, Eastern Rome reneged on the treaty.

Even more foolhardy, in 440, even as Attila was threatening invasion, the bishop of Margus allegedly went out and robbed the graves of some Hunnic royalty, taking the treasures back within the city walls of Margus. This gave Attila the excuse to attack a market across the Danube, raze the fortress at Constantia, and demand the bishop and the stolen treasure be turned over.

Rome did not turn the bishop over, or return the Hunnic grave treasures. If this pretense of stolen treasure was true—and Gibbons asserts that it was not, writing that the Huns' attack was unprovoked—this was probably the Eastern Empire's worst decision. The Huns came in force, Attila's sweeping invasion driving the Romans back out of the Balkans.

Richard Gordon, author of "Battle of Châlons: Attila the Hun Versus Flavius Aëtius," published in the magazine *Military History*, wrote, "Attila's warriors sacked Belgrade and numerous other centers . . . defeating Roman armies three times in succession and penetrating as far as the outskirts of Constantinople itself."⁷

The Huns' retaliation overwhelmed Eastern Rome's defenses. Crossing the Danube, thousands of Huns struck swiftly, sweeping in for 500 miles, pushing the Romans back as far as Constantinople.

The Huns now had thousands of captives who, at eight solidi apiece, were very valuable. Thrace and Macedonia were pillaged and stripped of all their riches. This was enough to cause the Eastern Emperor Theodosius to sue for peace.

And yet after this resounding defeat, Rome still did not honor its peace treaty. At dispute were captives on both sides. Rome would not pay for all the prisoners taken, nor would they turn over Attila's subjects who had fled.

Attila showed no mercy. He would be paid the money he demanded. In 442, he attacked again, laid waste the military city of Ratiaria, and besieged Naissus with battering rams and towers.

Priscus of Panium, a contemporary of Attila and author of *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, told of this siege, chronicling, "Then the enemy brought up scaling ladders. And so in some places the wall was toppled by

the rams and elsewhere men on the battlements were overpowered by the multitude of siege engines.”⁸

The city fell. Attila’s terms were paid willingly.

The Cost of Peace—Attila’s Cash Cow

Peace was Attila’s cash cow. He was now exacting a tribute of 2,100 Roman pounds, plus a 6,000 pound fine. Roman hostages were now ransomed for 12 solidi. This single attack on Constantinople cost Rome the equivalent of \$107.6 million and a huge parcel of land in Thrace.⁹

This amount was devastating for the crippled empire. After fighting Africans at Carthage, the Visigoths in Gaul, and Attila at Constantinople, Rome was quickly running out of cash. The tripling of its annual tribute to the Huns forced Rome to levy a war tax.

Priscus wrote, “Those registered in the senate paid, as the war tax, sums of gold specified in proportion to their proper rank, and for many their good fortune brought a change in life. For they paid under torture what those assigned to do this by the emperor assessed them.”¹⁰

Roman senators auctioned off their wives’ jewels and the rich decorations of their houses, such as heavy silver tables and gold vases. What a humiliation for the Great Empire! Gold in hand, the Huns left Constantinople in shambles and continued their push west into the rich, ripe Balkans.

That was their game—attack and pillage, then demand tribute. Attila and the Huns believed that exacting tribute was the ultimate form of superiority.

In all, it’s estimated that between 443 and 450, Rome paid Attila 22,000 pounds of gold.¹¹ That’s \$387.2 million, or \$55.3 million a year—or a daily payoff of more than \$151,500. The Huns were very rich indeed.

This type of barbarism—smart military tactics with crafty negotiation—nearly bankrupted the Roman Empire.

What’s truly barbaric about all the loot and plunder Attila won—aside from the cruel and ghastly acts that decimated huge city centers—is that only Attila’s select cadre of commanders and generals reaped the benefits of the Huns’ barbarism.

Golden goblets and silver platters, gem-crusted armor and jeweled swords—these chieftains wore their wealth. Gibbons wrote, “The Huns were ambitious of displaying those riches which were the fruit and evidence of their victories: the trappings of their horses, their swords, and even their shoes, were studded with gold and precious stones; and their tables were profusely spread with plates, and goblets, and vases of gold and silver, which had been fashioned by the labor of Grecian artists.”¹²

Not only that, but when the Huns settled in Gaul and began a diverse economy based on trade and labor, Attila collected food and tribute from his own people.

Taxes and tribute . . . sound familiar?

Today’s barbarians do the same thing. They even have the swords.

Take Hank Paulson, for example, the former CEO of Goldman Sachs and the seventy-fourth Treasury secretary. He was also *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year 2008¹³ for his knee-jerk reaction to inject \$700 billion into the financial system.

Paulson told banks they would be forced to take the money, whether they wanted it or not. In a memo given to the banks, he wrote, “If a capital infusion is not appealing, you should be aware that your regulator will require it in any circumstance.”¹⁴

And what did Paulson and the government get in exchange? Stock in the companies, and a lot of interest on the bailout loans, as we saw when financial institutions released earnings for 2009. Citigroup had to pay \$8 billion in pretaxes for paying back its TARP loans early. That led to the company posting a loss of \$7.14 billion for the last quarter of the year.¹⁵

We’ll talk more about Hank “the Hun” Paulson in later chapters, but his barbaric tactics forced businesses to carve up their companies in tribute to the government’s economic plan. Not unlike Attila holding his sword to the throat of Constantinople, requiring a tripling of his annual tribute, is it?

Aëtius and Attila—A Double-Headed Coin

Much as modern-day barbarians share their tactics (and wealth) with a select circle of friends and partners, Attila discerned that befriending a powerful Roman soldier could help him expand his empire.

He found that partnership in Aëtius, a young political hostage of both the Goths and the Huns. Political hostages were a means of making sure both sides held up their ends of the deal. The lives of the hostages were at stake. One false move and the boy Aëtius would have been killed.

For three years, Aëtius was with the Goths under King Alaric I. Then the boy, who was the son of a Roman soldier and a wealthy Roman woman, was sent to the Huns, in the care of King Rua—none other than Attila’s uncle.¹⁶ There it is said he learned his ruthlessness, but also forged a great friendship and trust.

Aëtius even sent his son Carpilio to be educated in Attila’s camp.

Later, in 433, Aëtius sought out the safety of the Huns after marching against his Roman rival Bonifacius. Though Aëtius lost the battle, Bonifacius was killed, leaving Aëtius as the strongest Roman general in the Empire. This promotion wasn’t looked on favorably by Rome, and Aëtius was forced into a short exile for the death of Bonifacius.

The Huns welcomed him, remembering his time with them as a hostage and his trust in sending his son to learn from them.

Aëtius returned from exile backed by 60,000 Huns,¹⁷ and forced the Empress Placidia to grant him clemency. Placidia was half-sister to Honorius, Western Rome’s emperor until his death in 423. Honorius left no heir, which sparked a bit of a struggle for the throne.

This 60,000-strong show of solidarity wasn’t the only example of how Aëtius and the Huns got on. The Roman general even engaged the Huns to help defeat the Burgundians in Gaul in 437. More than 20,000 died at the hands of the Huns, and Aëtius rose to great acclaim in Rome.¹⁸ In 449, Aëtius signed an agreement with the Huns, allowing some of them to settle in Pannonia, or modern-day western Hungary, and parts of eastern Austria, down into Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia.

One can make an interesting comparison between the relationship of Attila and Aëtius and the relationship between Hank “the Hun” Paulson and China. During his time as CEO of Goldman Sachs, Paulson traveled to China 70 times,¹⁹ creating extremely close ties that some might suspect constituted a conflict of interest during his time as Treasury secretary.

Paulson spearheaded U.S.-China relations and led the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue. At the Shanghai Futures Exchange, he told people, “An open, competitive, and liberalized financial market can



Figure 1.1 Hunnic Empire in the region of Atrilia

SOURCE: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, from William R. Shepherd, *Historical Atlas* (1911; 8th ed. Barnes & Noble, 1956), taken from www.emersonkent.com/map_archive/atrilia_empire_450.htm.

effectively allocate scarce resources in a manner that promotes stability and prosperity far better than governmental intervention.”²⁰

Like a double-headed coin—a sort of “Heads, I win; tails, you lose” scenario.

Meaning, don’t interfere. And that’s what got both Attila and Paulson in trouble in the end. It was Attila’s biggest—some say only—flub as king of the Huns, and how his terrifying horde of barbarians faded away into nothing more than a fantastic history for spirited Hungarians.

The Battle of Châlons—Attila’s Fate is Sealed

It wasn’t just for Attila’s honor that the Huns marched against Western Rome, though the temptation of Rome’s riches would’ve been enough.

A succession battle in the Frankish kingdom widened the rift between Rome and Attila. After Clodion, king of the Franks, died with 20 years of what could be called peaceful reign under his belt, his two sons fell to fighting over the kingdom. Fatefully, the younger son, Meroveus, sought the help of Aëtius and Rome, while the older son courted Attila.

This was a key alliance for the king of the Huns, as it provided a safe passage across the Rhine—and, as Gibbons puts it, an honorable pre-emptive for the invasion of Gaul.²¹

With a sure foothold across the Rhine, Attila would be able to sweep down on the Western Empire, or west into Visigoth territory. Either way, Attila’s position would open the floodgate for plunder and pillaging aplenty for his Huns.

As Attila raised the call, tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of eager tribes lined up for what looked to be an easy rout of the Old Empire—and a huge payday. They took Cologne, Mainz, and Worms on the banks of the Rhine. “Advancing in three columns through modern-day Belgium, the Huns spread terror and destruction,” wrote Richard Gordon in *Military History*. “Town after town was destroyed, including Metz, Cambrai, Strasbourg, Rheims, Amiens and Worms. Paris was saved only because the Huns considered it too small to be worth the trouble of a siege.”²²

It was a masterful first strike, and Attila and his Huns were weighed down with plunder. However, it was at this point that things started turning against the barbarian king.

During this first sweeping invasion that Gibbons describes as a “promiscuous massacre,”²³ Aëtius was beseeching the Visigoths under the rule of King Theodoric to join him against Attila. Theodoric had refused—until the Scourge of God reached Orléans, a scant 100 miles away from Visigoth lands in western France.

Theodoric thought it better to forget the past injustices between his people and Rome in favor of preservation. With Attila, there would be slaughter.

As the Huns marched on Orléans, Aëtius and Theodoric rushed to the city. Orléans was held by King Sangiban, and Aëtius doubted the king’s loyalty. This was the land where Rome had settled the Alans, whose distant homelands between the Caspian and Black Seas were now under Attila’s rule.

Aëtius was right to fear, for just as he and the Visigoths arrived at Orléans, King Sangiban was opening the city to Attila and the Huns.

In a quick attack, Aëtius and Theodoric diverted the Huns, who prudently retreated to the open fields of Châlons, just east of Paris. This is where Attila could have chosen to quit the field, having gained an enormous amount of wealth, and hightail it back across the Rhine.

But Attila turned, and sealed his fate.

Pride over Prejudice—Attila’s Only Defeat

The two sides aligned for battle on the flat plains, with only a small hill on Attila’s left flank as a point of advantage. Rome and her allies arranged themselves with the Alans in the middle, where they could be watched, with Theodoric and his sons to the right and Aëtius and the Romans to the left.

Attila arranged his troops with his fearsome Huns front and center, with the Gepids on his right and the Ostrogoths on his left, facing the singular hill. It was this hill that would be the first fight of the battle. Theodoric’s son Thorismund, armed with heavy cavalry, advanced on the hill, warding off the Ostrogoths and the Huns, though both sides took heavy casualties.²⁴

Next, Attila—at the center of his host of warriors, standing on the front line—charged the Alans at the center of Aëtius’s and Theodoric’s armies, and quickly turned on the Visigoths, separating Theodoric from Aëtius. Thorismund was quick to respond from his hilltop vantage and charged into the flanks of the Ostrogoths who had partially surrounded his father’s army. The charge broke the lines, and the Ostrogoths wheeled around to retreat, with the Huns barely escaping to the safety of the wagons.

From here, it was pure mayhem. Historical sources give conflicting versions of the rest of the battle. One says that Attila successfully cut off Theodoric from the Roman army, and that the Visigoth king was killed in battle, poetically and tragically speared by Andages, an Ostrogoth noble, and trampled by his own horses.²⁵

Another says that Theodoric and his son Thorismund thwarted Attila’s attack, forcing him to retreat to his wagons by nightfall. The Visigoth king was accidentally thrown from his horse, and his death was not noticed until later that evening.

Though Attila was forced back to his wagons, he would not back down. Even the Visigoths’ historians likened Attila to a lion encompassed in his den, and after several attempts to avenge his father’s death were thwarted by showers of arrows, Thorismund was talked into leaving the field of battle. Aëtius allowed Attila to retreat after it was clear that the Huns would never back down. Rather than risk his Roman army, Aëtius let Attila slink back to Hunnic territory.

This allowed the Roman general to have all the spoils of victory for himself, and also headed off any Gothic pride at victory on the battlefield. Aëtius knew that if Attila remained a threat, the Visigoth threat would always remain checked.

The scene at Châlons was one of pure carnage. Gibbons wrote:

The number of the slain amounted to one hundred and sixty-two thousand, or, according to another account, three hundred thousand persons; and these incredible exaggerations suppose a real and effective loss sufficient to justify the historian’s remark, that whole generations may be swept away by the madness of kings, in the space of a single hour.²⁶

These kinds of numbers don't matter to a barbarian like Attila. The number of coins in his treasury matters, or the number of wives at his camp. But ruthlessness overpowers prudence in Hunnic culture, which is why, only one year after the Battle of Châlons, Attila invaded Rome again—and this time, the barbarian Visigoths did not come to Aëtius's aid.

The only card Rome had to play was negotiating for peace, and an embassy was quickly dispatched to Attila. In this embassy was none other than the future Pope Leo I, then a bishop, who successfully bribed Attila with enough gold and the promise of the deliverance of his bride Honoria to make him go away.²⁷

The Death of Attila

In early 453, as he took a young bride named Idilco to his bed, Attila suffered a nasal hemorrhage and drowned in his own blood at the age of 49.²⁸

Priscus reports:

Worn out by excessive merriment at his wedding and sodden with sleep and wine he lay on his back. In this position a hemorrhage which ordinarily would have flowed from his nose, since it was hindered from its accustomed channels, poured down his throat in deadly passage and killed him. So drunkenness put a shameful end to a king famed in war.²⁹

This is a stunning end to one of the most notorious barbarians of all time.

Of course, controversy surrounds his death: Was he poisoned? Did his new bride kill him?

A full 80 years after Attila's death, Count Marcellinus, a Roman chronicler, wrote, "Attila, King of the Huns and ravager of the provinces of Europe, was pierced by the hand and blade of his wife."³⁰ And more recently, Michael Babcock asserted that the Emperor Marcian was behind Attila's death, in his 2005 book *The Night Attila Died: Solving the Murder of Attila the Hun*.³¹

After his death, the Huns fell into disarray as Attila's sons squabbled over the riches the Hunnic Empire had gained under their father's rule. Within a year, the ferocious Huns were defeated and scattered across the Pannonian plains. They would not bother Rome again.

Whether from natural causes, overindulgence, a young bride's fear, or political will, Attila's death highlights the transient nature of the barbarian's rise to wealth and power. His smash-and-grab tactics allowed for only momentary gain that simply vanished in the wind in the absence of real prosperity.

And indeed, his barbarism sucked the prosperity out of every land his Hunnic feet touched.

Today's barbarians of wealth have learned a lot from Attila. Have we not seen the Hank "the Hun" Paulson smash and grab \$700 billion to allegedly rescue the financial system from imminent collapse? Have we not seen the nationalistic President Hugo Chavez force international companies to give up their stakes in lucrative oil fields off the coast of Venezuela?

We've seen AIG throw a lavish retreat for its employees as the financial world collapsed around them. We've seen Attila-like investment banks heap multimillion-dollar bonuses on their CEOs while raking in taxpayer-funded bailouts.

Yes, barbarism was never the same after Attila, though the world would soon come to know barbarians of a different ilk—ones with silk tongues and righteous causes, ones with the might of empires behind them.

Ones like Charlemagne—Charles the Great, the Father of Europe.