

0. SCOURGE OF GOD - Story Preface

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In 1863, Ede Heinrich created this artist's interpretation of the "Feast of Attila." It depicts a meeting, which had occurred thousands of years previously, between Priscus, an emissary from the Eastern Empire, and Attila the Hun.

As Attila significantly enlarged the territory he inherited, he became known as the "Scourge of God." Some sources say he coined the phrase himself.

He was the first, and last, sole King of the Huns. He created a coalition of disparate people: Hunnic, Germanic, and Iranian tribes who remained coalesced while he lived. Frequently raiding the Roman Empire in the East, he also launched two significant invasions of the Empire in the West.

He remains a legendary figure of mythic proportions. Yet the one account by Priscus, a reliable historian who actually met him, shows a side of Attila the Hun seemingly inconsistent with a swaggering ruler who cuts down people and cities at will.

Priscus was a Greek-speaking Roman citizen who routinely referred to Huns, Germans, Goths and people of other tribes as "barbarians." He described Attila's personal features: a short, square body with a large head; deep-seated eyes; a swarthy complexion with little facial hair. He wore plain, not luxurious, clothing.

Since Attila had invited Priscus to have dinner with him, the historian was able to closely observe the ruler's interactions with others. He was courteous to ambassadors, although he viewed only other rulers as his equal. He seemed to be a loving father, at least to one of his sons, and allowed his first wife to have a position of dignity.

When Attila learned of a murder plot against him, allegedly involving the Eastern Emperor Theodosius II, he allowed the would-be assassin to live, with this proviso: That he travel to Constantinople, to the Emperor's palace, with a sack of one hundred pounds of gold hanging from his neck during the entire trip.

When Priscus paid his respects to Attila's wife, he found the following:

Within the enclosure were numerous buildings, some of carved boards beautifully fitted together, others of straight, fastened on round wooden blocks which rose to a moderate height from the ground. Attila's wife lived here, and, having been admitted by the barbarians at the door, I found her reclining on a soft couch. The floor of the room was covered with woollen mats for walking on.

At the same time, Attila was passing judgment on several legal matters. When the lawsuits were attended to, Attila joined Priscus for dinner:

When the hour [3:00 in the afternoon] arrived we went to the palace, along with the embassy from the western Romans, and stood on the threshold of the hall in the presence of Attila...Attila sat in the middle on a couch...A luxurious meal, served on silver plate, had been made ready for us and the barbarian guests, 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. His dress, too, was quite simple, affecting only to be clean. The sword he carried at his side, the latches of his Scythian shoes, the bridle of his horse were not adorned, like those of the other Scythians, with gold or gems or anything costly.

After-dinner entertainment included songs celebrating Attila's military conquests:

When evening fell torches were lit, and two barbarians coming forward in front of Attila sang songs they had composed, celebrating his victories and deeds of valour in war. And of the guests, as they looked at the singers, some were pleased with the verses, others reminded of wars were excited in their souls, while yet others, whose bodies were feeble with age and their spirits compelled to rest, shed tears.

Unmoved by even the most humorous stories, Attila was quiet. Only one person received his affection that evening - his youngest son:

Attila, however, remained immovable and of unchanging countenance nor by word or act did he betray anything approaching to a smile of merriment except at the entry of Ernas, his youngest son, whom he pulled by the cheek, and gazed on with a calm look of satisfaction. I was surprised that he made so much of this son, and neglected his other children but a barbarian who sat beside me and knew Latin, bidding me not reveal what he told, gave me to understand that prophets had forewarned Attila that his race would fall, but would be restored by this boy.

Attila, it seems, was a great believer in omens. But the prophecy about his son was not to be.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/SCOURGE-OF-GOD-Attila-the-Hun>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/SCOURGE-OF-GOD-Attila-the-Hun>

Media Stream



Feast of Attila by Ede Heinrich

In 1863, Ede Heinrich created this artist's interpretation of the "Feast of Attila." It depicts a meeting, which had occurred thousands of years previously, between Priscus, an emissary from the Eastern Empire, and Attila the Hun.

Priscus' account of that meeting survives. It is the source of first-hand information about the Hunnic leader including his appearance and treatment of people.

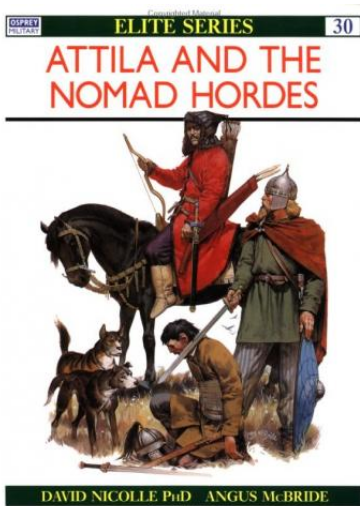
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Oil-on-canvas by Ede Heinrich, created 1863. Currently part of a private collection.

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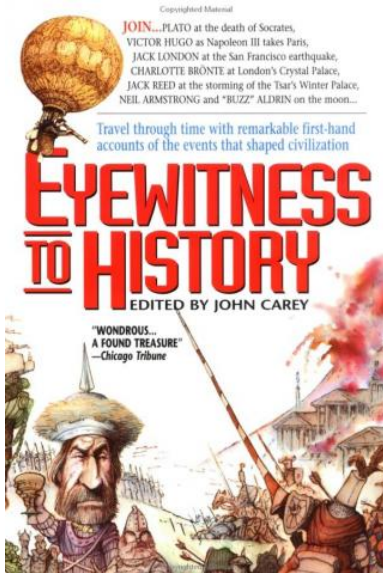


Attila and the Nomad Hordes

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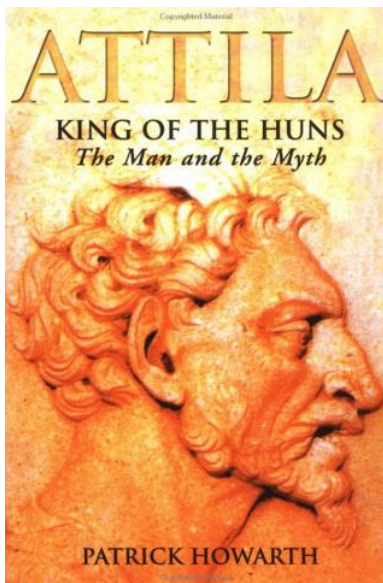


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Theodosius II

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Feast of Attila

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The quoted excerpt, from [Priscus' account](#), is from fr. 8 in *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* (translation by J.B. Bury). Online, courtesy "Internet Medieval Source Book," at Fordham University).

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