



0. DEADLY BATTLE - AETIUS and ATTILA at CHALONS -
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Theodoric, King of the Visigoths, was among those forces who gathered and died at the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields. Illustration by Angus McBride, copyright Angus McBride, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

In the summer of 451 A.D., Aetius (credited by historians for helping to break the Huns' siege of Orleans) had assembled a military force to combat Attila's further advance. Since the Roman army of the 5th century was not what it had once been, Aetius needed outside help.

Edward Gibbon describes a successful effort to recruit Theodoric, King of the Visigoths (a former Roman enemy), who had an independent kingdom in Aquitaine (with his capital located in the southern French town of Toulouse):

Theodoric yielded to the evidence of truth, adopted the measure at once the most prudent and the most honorable, and declared that as the faithful ally of Aetius and the Romans he was ready to expose his life and kingdom for the common safety of Gaul.

The actual site of the fighting (referred to as both the Battle of Châlons and the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields) is still unknown, although most scholars believe it was in the vicinity of Châlons-sur-Marne or Troyes in modern France.

Jordanes, writing of the event (believed to have taken place on or about June 20) a century later, tells how Attila challenged his men:

Here you stand after conquering mighty nations and subduing the world...It is a right of nature to glut the soul with vengeance. Let us then attack the foe eagerly, for they are ever the bolder who make the attack.

Both leaders were fighting with international forces. (Edward Gibbon notes that "nations from the Volga to the Atlantic were assembled on the plain of Châlons.")

Among others, Aetius commanded Alans, Burgundians, Franks, and Saxons. In light of the makeup of his own army, Attila's comments about the enemy, as reported by Jordanes, seem out of place:

Despise this union of discordant races. To defend oneself by alliance is proof of cowardice...Attack the Alans, smite the Visigoths. Seek swift victory in that spot where the battle rages, for when the sinews are cut the limbs soon relax, nor can a body stand when you have taken away the bones. Let your courage rise and your own fury burst forth.

Fury, it is said, did indeed burst forth.

Jordanes describes the "monstrous" nature of the hand-to-hand combat:

Hand to hand they clashed in battle, and the fight grew fierce, confused, monstrous, unrelenting--- a fight whose like no ancient time has ever recorded...For if we may believe our elders a brook flowing between low banks through the plain was greatly increased by blood from the wounds of the slain. Those whose wounds drove them to slake their parching thirst drank water mingled with gore. In their wretched plight they were forced to drink what they thought was the blood they had poured out from their own wounds.

Theodoric was killed on the battlefield. Attila, surrounded and concerned he might be captured, ordered that his own funeral pyre be prepared. According to Jordanes:

He was determined to cast himself into the flames, that none might have the joy of wounding him and that the lord of so many races might not fall into the hands of his foes.

But Attila, under siege, walked away from defeat when Aetius decided not to take advantage of his upper-hand position.

Perhaps wishing to maintain the balance of power within the remnants of the western empire, Aetius convinced Theodoric's son (Torismond) that he should attend to matters at home. When Torismond and his Visigoths withdrew, the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains was effectively over.

Attila was still alive, unlike so many others.

It is believed the battle lasted most of the day. Historians think Jordanes' estimates of casualties are high. If he was correct, however, hundreds of thousands died:

[O]wing to dissensions between the Romans and Goths he [Attila] was allowed to escape to his home land, and in this most famous war of the bravest tribes, 160,000 men are said to have been slain on both sides.

It wasn't long before Attila and the Huns returned - this time to Northern Italy. His actions there would shape the future of Europe.

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Media Stream

Death of Theodoric at the Battle of Catalaunian Fields

In the summer of 451 AD, the Roman general Aetius assembled a military force to resist the advances of Attila the Hun.

Theodoric, King of the Visigoths, was among those forces gathered at the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields. He, and his men, were part of the forces allied against the Huns.

Jordanes, the ancient historian, describes the “monstrous” nature of the hand-to-hand combat: *Hand to hand they clashed in battle, and the fight grew fierce, confused, monstrous, unrelenting—a fight whose like no ancient time has ever recorded...For if we may believe our elders a brook flowing between low banks through the plain was greatly increased by blood from the wounds of the slain.*

Theodoric was among those who had died.

In this image, Angus McBride—the highly prolific and respected artist who (until his death in 2007) specialized in historical and military subjects—imagines how that scene may have appeared so many thousands of years ago.



Attila, meanwhile, believed he would also die. Aetius and his men had him surrounded. Then ... for whatever reason ... Aetius decided he would end the battle, convincing Theodoric's son (Torismond) that he should attend to matters at home.

When Torismond and his Visigoths withdrew, the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains was effectively over.

Attila, to his own surprise, was still alive.

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Kingdom of the Visigoths

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Germanic Kingdoms and Eastern Roman Empire

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Toulouse - Map Locator

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Toulouse: City View

Image online, courtesy the larocheusa.org website.

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Chalons - Map Locator

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Franks

Image online, courtesy the Italian website, Storia Digitale.

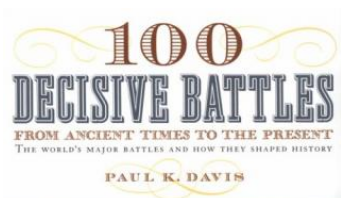
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Hand-To-Hand Combat

Image online, courtesy Barry C. Jacobsen at [The Deadliest Blogger](#) web page.

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100 Decisive Battles from Ancient Times to Now

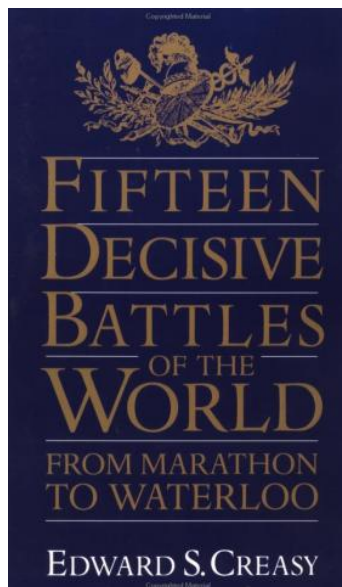
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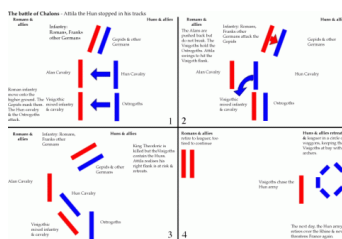


Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World

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Battle of Chalons

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Attila the Hun - Battle of the Catalaunian Plains

Clip from Attila: Scourge of God (1987). Written by Jesse Sublett; narrated by Monte Markham; aired on A&E's "Biography" series. Clip online, courtesy Uralic's Channel on YouTube.

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