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Raphael created a famous fresco, located in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, depicting the meeting between Pope Leo I and Attila the Hun. This image depicts a detail from that fresco.

In the 5th century, the power of the Pope was not what it was in later centuries. But as Attila and his Huns were vanquishing city after city, the people of Rome - and the pope - were worried.

Contemporary accounts tell us that Leo I, then Pope, traveled north to meet with Attila:

The old man of harmless simplicity, venerable in his gray hair and his majestic garb, ready of his own will to give himself entirely for the defense of his flock, went forth to meet the tyrant who was destroying all things.

He met Attila, it is said, in the neighborhood of the river Mincio, and he spoke to the grim monarch, saying "The senate and the people of Rome, once conquerors of the world, now indeed vanquished, come before thee as suppliants. We pray for mercy and deliverance. O Attila, thou king of kings, thou couldst have no greater glory than to see suppliant at thy feet this people before whom once all peoples and kings lay suppliant. Thou hast subdued, O Attila, the whole circle of the lands which it was granted to the Romans, victors over all peoples, to conquer. Now we pray that thou, who hast conquered others, shouldst conquer thyself. The people have felt thy scourge; now as suppliants they would feel thy mercy."

Raphael's magnificent fresco (which actually depicts Pope Leo X) and Algardi's stunning sculpture (located at the Vatican's St. Peter's Basilica), portray the historic meeting.

For whatever reason (there are several hypotheses including a famine, the prior year, which may have impeded the Huns' ability to obtain supplies), Attila turned away from Rome.

People believed that Leo was the reason Attila backed down. Thereafter referred to as Leo the Great, the pontiff had accomplished not just a victory for Rome but also for the Church. In future years, as Rome's secular power continued to fade, the power of the Roman Church, and that of the Pope, substantially increased.

The Huns returned home. Attila reportedly joked that he knew how to conquer men, but the Lion (Pope Leo) and the Wolf (Saint Lupus - from Troyes) were too strong for him.

Attila's next plan of conquest was the Eastern Roman Empire. He never had the chance to actualize that goal, however. Constantinople would remain unconquered for a thousand years, but Attila's life would soon be over.

Although he already had several wives, Attila took another after his return from Italy. Celebrating the event, sometime during the early months of 453, he drank heavily. He died on his wedding night. Most historians say he died of a nosebleed, perhaps from a burst artery.

His warriors were stunned by his unexpected death. According to Jordanes, they cut off their hair and slashed themselves with their swords so that

the greatest of all warriors should be mourned with no feminine lamentations and with no tears, but with the blood of men.

They buried him in a triple coffin - of gold, silver, and iron - along with spoils of his conquests. To insure no one learned of his final resting place, his warriors killed the funeral party.

Another very distinct possibility is that Attila, from historical accounts a heavy drinker, died of a condition called "esophageal varices." (It is the number one cause of death for chronic drinking today.) Victims of this condition usually drown in their own blood, unless they quickly get a blood transfusion. In Attila's day, of course,

transfusions were not an option.

Attila had ruled just eight years.

After his death, none of his squabbling sons could effectively stand in their father's shoes. The once-mighty Empire of the Huns fell apart, and the Hunnic warriors - all except Attila - faded into history.

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

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Media Stream



Pope Leo the Great and Attila

Image online, courtesy the Web Gallery of Art [website](#).

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Raphael's Fresco

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Algardi Sculpture - Attila and Pope Leo

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Pope Leo the Great

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Attila - Death of the Hunnic Ruler

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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Attila the Hun - Legends and Legacy

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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