Dedication

The staff of the History Journal dedicates this issue to Dr. Amy Livingstone, whose dedication to Wittenberg's history students and passion for education has inspired us to push our limits of though, research, and scholarship. Through her tireless work and caring advising, she encourages students to meet their fullest potential.

Never Mind the Romans, Here's Attila: The Brief and Bloody Reign of the Great Hunnic Leader

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Despite his reputation for being a merciless killer and the credit many give him for truly starting the demise of the Roman Empire, it can be hard to take Attila seriously. One can scarcely imagine him as anything other than a screaming barbarian wreaking havoc on a scale of Hollywood proportions. His tenure as sole ruler of the Huns, which involved his famous, devastating attack into Italy that may have garnered approval from Michael Bay or Mel Gibson, was predicated on political maneuvering that was in fact more deft than brutish. Like many good stories, the tale of this invasion starts with a death.

According to Roman historians such as Marcellinus, who had spent time in Attila's court, Attila assassinated his elder brother and co-ruler Bleda on or around 445 CE.[1] The Huns had for many years enjoyed success against a variety of sedentary empires under their combined leadership. Nevertheless, Attila appears to have desired for more power and autonomy over the Hunnic empire and the removal of his brother would have been a straightforward method of accomplishing this. The intrigue involved with an assassination is a far cry from the mounted invasions for which Attila is famous; one might expect pitched combat for control of the forces rather than a quiet death about which little is known. Without firsthand accounts of Bleda's death there has been some debate over its exact nature, but it is certain that after he gained control over the entirety of the Hunnic forces his focus was on Rome.

Attila's invasion of the Eastern Roman Empire in 447 took advantage of the lack of cohesion among the Romans. At this point in its history the Roman empire was not wholly united but instead had relatively autonomous emperors ruling from Constantinople in the east and Ravenna in the west. This arrangement would have worked better in the mid to late fifth century if not for a variety of nomadic groups, notably the Huns at this point, occupying the space between the two. When Attila invaded he was able to defeat the Roman forces in the east and march as far as Thermopylae.[2] He eventually withdrew and engaged in peace negotiations with Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II, but Theodosius died before they were completed. Rather than take advantage of that death or retaliate when Theodosius's son, Marcian, ceased paying tribute to the Huns, Attila decided to engage with the western Romans after this campaign.[3]

The events that sparked Attila's eventual invasion of the Western Roman Empire defy the commonly held view of him as the mindless, bloodthirsty destroyer of civilization. After his return from the invasion in the east Attila received an envoy from the Honoria, the sister of Western Roman Emperor Valentinian III. Valentinian had arranged her engagement with a man but she was against the marriage so she asked Attila for assistance in the matter. She had sent with the envoy treasure and promises of more and, most importantly, a ring.[4] Attila took this as an invitation to marriage and responded that he would help Honoria if she would become his wife.[5] This was a savvy political move, as it gave Attila a position to bargain with the Romans and justification for war. He did just that, and demanded Valentinian give to him Honoria and half of the Western Roman Empire.[6] With neither of these forthcoming, Attila launched an attack.

Attila first attacked into Gaul, rather than Italy, and was met there by Roman general Aetius. Aetius had been a captor of the Huns earlier in his life and was familiar with their tactics, and so when they met in battle on June 20, 451, at the Catalaunian Fields, both sides received heavy losses and Attila was forced to withdraw.[7] In 452 Attila finally began the invasion that made him the most famous and crossed the Alps into Italy. In northern Italy he sacked cities such as Aquileia, Pavia, and Milan.[8] When he finally reached Rome, however, he was famously persuaded to spare the city and cease his offensive by Pope Leo. Whether because of

fear of divine retribution, lack of supplies stemming from a drought in Italy, or a plague that had ravaged his soldiers, or any combination thereof, Attila was persuaded and withdrew from Italy.[9] Just a year later, in 253, eight years after he assumed total control of the Huns, Attila died of a blood hemorrhage on his wedding night with a new bride.

Attila is infamous in western history as the man that brought about the end of the Roman Empire through a bloody invasion of Italy. In some ways, this is exactly what he did: in a few short years he attacked several parts of the Roman Empire, destabilizing an already declining civilization. However, this was only possible because of successful statecraft both internally and externally, in addition to his military success. Attila may have been an uncommon leader, but the conditions that lead to Rome's downfall were already in place when Attila decided to take Honoria as his wife and threaten the heart of the Roman Empire. Rather than a crazed lunatic who plunged Europe into the Dark Ages, Attila is perhaps better remembered as a savvy leader who dominated his neighbors through negotiation as well as military force.

Endnotes

[1] Christopher Kelly, *The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 129.

[2] Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 97.

[3] Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, 97.

[4] E. A. Thompson, *The Huns* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 145.

[5] Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 225-26.

[6] Ibid., 236.

[7] Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, 98.

[8] Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 259.

[9] Ibid., 262.

Bibliography

Kelly, Christopher. *The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Beckwith, Christopher. *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

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Section I. Religion and The Other

Vézelay Abbey, northern Burgundy, France.