

The Western World was saved at the Battle of Chalons, 451 AD

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The Battle of Chalons, also called the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields or the Battle of the Catalun, is considered by many historians as one of the most significant battles in history. It occurred in 451 AD somewhere in the western part of present-day France. Edward Creasy in his book *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* states: "...the battle not only rescued for a time from destruction the old age of Rome, but preserved for centuries of power and glory the Germanic element in the civilization of modern Europe." The clash at Chalons was a monumental conflict. It pitted two of the towering figures of Late Antiquity, the fierce Attila the Hun, and the noble Roman Flavius Aetius against each other. If Flavius had not been successful in holding back the Hun invasion, the whole course of Western history might have been changed.

The Huns were fearsome nomadic horsemen from the steppes of Central Asia. They originated as tribes who routinely raided and pillaged their neighbors, and each other. The Huns were wanderers, who did not understand the concept of civilization or agriculture. In order to survive, they moved in small groups over large areas from grazing ground to grazing ground. They often blindly plundered and destroyed everything. The barbarians not only ruined countless cities and villages of Central Asia, they also stripped the steppe land itself. They uprooted trees and bushes for firewood, which promoted drift-sand. For undetermined generations their herds and flocks of cattle, horses, goats, and sheep were driven over the steppes of central and southern Siberia. Roaming at large among the mountains and woods, taught them from birth to endure cold, hunger, and thirst. Soon after birth, the cheeks of males were cut with a sword so they could learn to endure pain. Their short stature, broad shoulders, thick necks, and wild appearance helped inspire fear in those who came across them.

Before some small raids that followed the Battle of Adrianople in 378 AD, the Romans had little direct contact with the Huns. Ironically, Hunnic mercenaries had fought in the Roman armies that tried to resist the Gothic invasions of the Roman Empire. In his book *The Battle of Chalons*, J. F. Fuller writes about the first great incursion of the Huns in 395 AD, crossing the frozen Danube River and their hordes devastating *Dalmatia* (modern Croatia) and *Thrace* (southern Bulgaria). They passed through the area of the Caucasus, overran Armenia and devastated *Cappadocia* (modern Turkey), and parts of Syria. The Huns laid siege to *Antioch* (modern-day Antakya, Turkey) and many other cities on the Euphrates River. They killed everyone in their path, stripping everything of value, they could find. This caused terror along the people of the east. The Huns lived on their horses and took extra with them so they might have mare's milk and horse's blood for food and drink. Their operations took the form of whirlwind advances and retirements. Whole districts were laid waste and entire populations annihilated. They did this not only to establish terror in their opponents but also to leave their rear area clear for withdrawals. For the Romans, the hit-and-run tactics of the Hunnic armies, all of them mounted, was a shock. They seemed to appear everywhere at once thanks to their unparalleled speed of movement.

By 400 AD, the ranks of the Huns north of the Black Sea had swelled to such proportions that they began to overflow into the spacious plains of *Pannonia* (now Hungary) in a flood of violence and terror. The various Germanic tribes living there were swept aside. They were either absorbed into the Hunnic Empire as *vassals* (servants), as were the *Gepids*, or fell back against the imperial Roman borders. One group, the *Vandals* (Eastern Germanic Tribe), tried to invade Italy to escape the Huns, but after being barred by Roman armies they moved on to the west, sweeping through Iberia, they were finally able to cross the Strait of Gibraltar. The Hun's conquests were due to the high mobility of small bands of archers on horseback who could concentrate fire rapidly at a given point, quickly disperse, and re-concentrate at another. When on an extensive raids, the bands of mounted men moved on a wide front and were followed by their families and wagons. The wagons could be drawn up into an encampment formed by a circle of wagons. In 408 AD, a small raiding party of Huns swept through *Thrace* (southern Bulgaria, northeastern Greece and Turkey) on a pillaging expedition, and although they soon withdrew, the threat was all too apparent to the Romans. The walls of Constantinople were strengthened shortly after. At the same time, the Roman army was evolving into a very different form from the army that had been so severely mauled by the Germanic tribes (mainly *Visigoths* and *Ostrogoths*, assisted by some non-Germanic *Alans*) at Adrianople 30 years earlier. The foot soldier, as

the key military arm, was being increasingly supplemented by mounted troops to counter the new enemies of the fifth century.

From 420 AD a Hunnic dynasty had begun to emerge, led first by a chieftain known as Oktar, who began to fuse the different Hunnic tribes into a cohesive whole with a common purpose. His brother Rua succeeded him and by around 430AD, the Huns were no longer simple family groups. They were organized into a confederation under Rua's rule. When Rua died in 433 AD, his two nephews Attila and Bleda succeeded him. By this time, some of Rome's richest provinces in Africa were virtually independent, and the *Vandals'* chieftain, Gaiseric, had captured Carthage and set up a kingdom for himself. From there, he would launch raids against Mediterranean shipping, seizing Sicily in 440 AD. The Huns' first major raid under Attila was launched across the Danube in 440 AD against the Eastern Roman Empire. Whether by coincidence or design, it coincided with the *Vandals'* siege of Carthage. Roman troops that had been dispatched to forestall the Carthage threat had to be recalled by Roman Emperor Theodosius to defend the capital. As a result, Carthage and Africa were lost. 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. *Thrace* and Macedonia were ravaged, but in spite of an earthquake that leveled part of its mighty land walls, the Eastern capital Constantinople was left untouched.

The next incursion of importance came in 441 AD, immediately after Gaiseric's negotiations with Attila. Again, the Huns crossed the Danube and destroyed *Viminacium* (Serbia). This lightning campaign compelled Theodosius to recall his fleet from Sicily and to abandon his projected attack on Gaiseric. In 442 AD, a truce was agreed upon, but Theodosius refused to hand over to Attila the fugitives demanded by him. Attila renewed the war in the following year. For now, the Huns settled for returning to the Pannonian plains with thousands of captives and wagonloads of booty. Theodosius was forced to sue for peace on unfavorable terms, but they were not all fulfilled by the Romans, giving Attila an excuse to launch a second raid in 442 AD. Once again, cities were sacked and Roman armies defeated, and again Constantinople was only saved by its impenetrable walls. The victorious Huns withdrew once more, weighed down with plunder. Another truce followed in 443 AD. In 445 AD, Bleda was murdered by Attila. This allowed him to consolidate his rule over the Confederacy. Attila was then able to unite the tribes under his leadership.

In keeping with his policy of preserving his followers' loyalty through pillage, Attila launched a third raid in 447 AD, with the same results as the previous two. To make matters worse, a massive earthquake hit the entire region. Previously impregnable walls were leveled, and the cities they protected were sacked by Attila's hordes. Constantinople was only saved by the efforts of every able-bodied citizen to rebuild its damaged walls. To buy time for that operation to be completed, another Roman army marched north to face the seemingly invincible Huns along the Vid River. Although the Romans suffered another defeat, they had learned enough of Hunnic warfare by then to inflict massive losses on the men from the steppes. The battle broke the back of the Hunnic effort, and after looting as far south as Greece, the invasion lost its momentum. For the Eastern Roman Empire, this was a critical time. Constantinople's armies were gone, its treasury empty and its source of revenue dried up by the devastation of the Attila's raids.

In 449 AD, a delegation set out from Rome to sue for a lasting treaty with the Huns. Attila was surprisingly accommodating, and in return for a huge cash payment, he agreed to cease from further raids on the Eastern Empire. Attila realized that the East was now exhausted, with little prospect left for plunder in the near future. The peace would leave him with a secure rear for his next project, an invasion of the virtually untouched Western Roman Empire. In the West, the Roman General Flavius Aetius was trying to hold a crumbling empire together, with the child emperor Valentinian III serving mostly as a figurehead.

By 450 AD, Roman control of Gaul, as with all of the provinces outside of Italy, had grown weak. The *Visigoths* (Western Goths), who had been forcibly settled in *Aquitaine*, an area roughly corresponding to the southwestern third of France between the Pyrenees Mountains and the Garonne River, a generation before, was growing increasingly uneasy. The *Burgundians* (Eastern Germanic Tribe), forcibly settled near the Alps were more submissive, but were also looking for openings for revolt. Northern Gaul had been all but abandoned by the Romans to the *Franks* (Western Germanic Federation). This area included the Rhine and Marne Rivers in the east, and *Armorica*, which included

the Brittany peninsula and the territory between the Seine and Loire Rivers. The only parts still securely in Roman control were the Mediterranean coastline and a band of varying width that ran from *Aureliani* (present-day Orleans) upstream along the Loire, across and downstream along the Rhone River.

Jordanes, in *The Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, states that Attila was enticed by Gaiseric, king of the Vandals, to wage war on the Visigoths, while at the same time Gaiseric attempted to sow strife between the *Visigoths* and the Western Roman Empire. However, other contemporary writers offer other motivations. Fuller described how Honoria, a troublesome sister of the Roman Emperor Valentinian III sent a message to Attila. She had been married off to a loyal senator, Herculanius, to keep her in a respectable confinement, and asked for Attila's help in escaping this marriage. Attila interpreted this as a proposal of marriage, and demanded that Honoria be delivered to him and half of Valentinian's domain as her dowry. Valentinian rejected these demands and Attila used them as his excuse to launch a destructive campaign through Gaul.

Recent wars between Rome and the *Visigoths* gave Attila confidence that the Western Roman Empire's strength would be drained and unable to resist his assault. In addition, he was sure that rather than unite with Aetius, Theodoric, king of the *Visigoths*, would use the opportunity of Attila's invasion to assert his own independence. Therefore, the Huns confidently crossed the Rhine into Gaul in early 451 AD with a horde consisting of not only Huns but also numerous German subjects. Advancing in three columns through modern-day Belgium, the Huns spread terror and destruction. 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. All the while, Aetius was marching to intercept Attila. In spite of Aetius' offers, Theodoric at first refused to commit himself to an alliance against the Huns, just as Attila predicted. Eventually, however, he decided that the threat of Hunnic devastation was more serious than that of Roman domination, and summoning his warriors, he set out north to join Aetius.

Attila met no significant resistance until he reached *Aureliani*, present-day Orleans. Sangiban, king of the *Alans*, whose realm included *Aureliani*, had promised to open the gates of this city to Attila, but the Romans learned of this ahead of time and were able to not only occupy *Aureliani* in force, but force Sangiban's troops into joining the allied army. Upon meeting the Roman-led forces, Attila at first began to retreat back to his own lands, but finally decided to make a stand where the battle took place. Both armies consisted of combatants from many peoples. Jordanes lists Aetius' allies as including (besides the *Visigoths*) both the Salic and *Riparian Franks*, *Sarmatians*, *Armoricans*, *Liticians*, *Burgundians*, *Saxons*, and other *Celtic* or German tribes. Attila had with him the *Gepids* under their king Ardaric, as well as an *Ostrogothic* army led by the brothers Valamir, Theodemir, the father of the later *Ostrogothic* king Theodoric the Great, and Vidimer of the Amali. The night before the main battle, one of the *Frankish* forces on the Roman side encountered a band of the *Gepids* loyal to Attila. Jordanes records that this skirmish left 15,000 dead on both sides.

The Catalaunian plain rose on one side by a sharp slope to a ridge, which dominated the battlefield, and became the center of the battle. The Huns first seized the right side of this ridge while the Romans seized the left, with the crest unoccupied in the between them. When the Hunnish forces attempted to seize this decisive position, they were prevented by the Roman alliance, whose troops had arrived first, and repulsed Attila's advance. The Hunnic warriors fled in disarray back into their own forces, thereby disrupting the rest of Attila's army. Attila attempted to rally his forces, struggling to hold his position. Meanwhile king Theodorid, while encouraging his own men in their advance, was killed in the assault without his men noticing. Theodorid was thrown from his horse and trampled to death by his advancing men. The advancing *Visigoths* came upon Attila's own Hunnish household unit, forcing Attila to seek refuge in his own camp, which he had fortified with wagons. The Allied assault apparently swept past the Hunnish camp in pursuit of the fleeing enemy troops. When night fell and Thorismund, son of king Theodorid, was retiring to friendly lines, mistakenly entered Attila's encampment, where he was wounded in the ensuing struggle before his followers could rescue him. Darkness also separated Aetius from his own men, and fearing that disaster had befallen them, he searched for his Gothic allies. After finally finding them, he spent the rest of the night in their camp. On the following day, finding the battle fields were piled high with bodies and the Huns not making any moves to attack, the Goths and Romans held a meeting on how to proceed. Knowing that Attila was low on provisions, and was hindered from approaching by a shower of arrows placed within the

borders of the Roman camp, they decided to besiege his camp. In this desperate situation, Attila remained defiant and heaped up a funeral pyre of horse saddles, so that if the enemy should attack him, he was determined to cast himself into the flames so that no one would have the joy of wounding him.

During the siege of Attila's camp, the *Visigoths* went looking for their missing king, and Thorismund, the son of their king. After a long search, they found Theodoric's body beneath a mound of corpses, and carried him away with heroic songs in the sight of the enemy. Thorismund upon learning of his father's death, wanted to assault Attila's camp, but when he first conferred with Aetius, he was given different advice. According to Jordanes, Aetius feared that if the Visigoths destroyed the Huns, they might break off their allegiance to the Roman Empire and become an even graver threat. So Aetius advised Thorismund to quickly return home and secure the throne for himself, before his brothers could. Thorismund quickly returned to *Tolosa*, present-day Toulouse, and became king without any resistance. On the *Visigoth's* withdrawal, Attila at first believed it to be a trick to draw his beat-up forces out into the open to be annihilated, and so remained within his defenses for some time before he risked leaving and returning to his homelands. The *Visigoths* withdrew from the Chalons battlefield, and Attila was allowed to return back over the Rhine, defeated and humiliated, but with his power still intact. Jordanes' figure for the number of dead in this battle is 165,000, excluding the casualties of the *Franko-Gepid* skirmish before the main battle.

No sooner had Attila returned to his palace he claimed Honoria as his bride, and in the spring of 452 AD, he set out to invade Italy. When he entered Italy, the Romans sent an army over the Danube River and routed the Huns left behind by Attila to protect his base. This bold counter-stroke coupled with the lack of supplies, famine in Italy and the heavy losses at Chalons compelled Attila to come to terms. Within a year, Attila died of a nasal hemorrhage. His empire began to fall apart soon after his death. As his sons quarreled over the spoils, their German subjects rose up in revolt against their divided, weakened former masters and defeated them over the next several years. Driven from the Pannonian plains, the Huns receded into the vast spaces of Central Asia from which they had emerged and never again threatened Europe.

His devastating attacks on the Christian peoples of Europe earned Attila the nickname "The Scourge of God." Unlike most other Barbarians of the age, the Huns were not Christians, and their respect for the Graeco-Roman Christian civilization of the Late Empire was much more limited even than that of *Visigoth* and the *Vandal*. With the defeat of the Huns, the church organizations in the *Frankish* territories remained unbroken, with the result that the church became the chief international authority during the Middle Ages. The victory that Aetius, with his Gothic allies, had gained over the Huns was the last victory of Imperial Rome. Edward Creasy describes the value of Rome: "The mission of Imperial Rome was, in truth, already accomplished. She had received and transmitted through her once ample domination the civilization of Greece. She had broken up the barriers of narrow nationalities among the various states and tribes that dwelt around the coasts of the Mediterranean. She had fused these and many other races into one organized empire, bound together by a community of laws, of government, and institutions."

The Christian *Visigoths* of King Theodoric and the forces of Flavius Aetius fought together at Chalons preserving for centuries the power and glory of the Germanic element. Through the church and through the civilization that remained and developed, the conditions for the creation of modern Europe were set. Perhaps Rome's last great service to the West was to serve as a buffer between the Asiatic Huns and the Germanic Barbarians whose destiny was to lay the medieval foundations of the modern, western nations.

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