

PART I



THE ROMAN EMPIRE

I: REVERSALS OF FORTUNE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE AGE OF ATTILA

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ATTILA'S PAINTING

A story was told in antiquity that when Attila the Hun captured Milan in 452, he noticed a painting – perhaps decorating a public building – that showed the eastern and western Roman emperors on golden thrones with steppe nomads lying dead at their feet. The infuriated Hun king immediately summoned an artist to render a counterimage: in the new painting *he* would be the man on the throne while servile Roman emperors poured gold coins before him from leather money bags. In a triumphant mood, Attila was rejecting old stereotypes of nomad inferiority and boasting of the enormous treasure he had extorted from the Roman government.¹ Attila's painting, if it ever existed, would have been a scandalous outrage to a Roman viewer, and that is precisely what the Roman writer who described this episode wanted to convey.² He meant to shock his readers with an intimation of a world in which Roman claims of universal victory were successfully challenged and mocked by an uncivilized Hun.

Attila and the Huns left a deep stamp on European history. From 434 until his death in 453, the “Scourge of God” controlled a vast domain in central Europe and the western Eurasian steppe, from which the Huns had entered the European consciousness nearly a century

¹ The annual payment reached 2,100 pounds of gold per year. See Christopher Kelly, chapter 11 in this volume.

² *Suidae Lexicon*, ed. Ada Adler (1928, repr. Leipzig, 2001–2004); Suda On Line: <http://www.stoa.org/sol/>. The entry is κ 2123, for “kôrukos,” leather sack. The source of the entry is not named. It could be from Priscus of Panium.

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earlier. For a generation, his army of Huns and subject peoples assaulted the eastern Roman Empire, alternately coercing huge sums of cash and causing enormous destruction. During the last three years of his life, Attila campaigned in western Europe. When his momentum stopped after a great battle in Gaul in 451, he pulled back to Italy, where he fought with mixed results until his death. Attila's name came to resonate grandly in medieval legend,³ and today he and his Hunnic armies still stand for violence and aggression. They were, however, only part of a much bigger and even more colorful story.

This book uses Attila to represent a world that was changing far more profoundly than the author of the anecdote above could have imagined. The *Companion to the Age of Attila* introduces readers to a long period stretching from the latter half of the fourth century, when Huns first appeared in the west Eurasian steppe and the Roman Empire still stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Black Sea, to the beginning of the sixth century, by which time Attila was yesterday's news and the Roman state based at Constantinople had become a regional power in the eastern Mediterranean, though it was still the strongest kingdom in Europe. Attila gives his name to the age, not because he was its prime mover or even because of the terrifying legacy he left in the European imagination, but because of the deep-seated transformations that he represents and that this book explores.

To help visualize the scope of the complex story of the Age of Attila, it is helpful to think of four interlocking geopolitical zones, each a composite with its own long history of local traditions, economies, political communities, and varieties of religious expression. These zones were (1) the Eurasian Steppe, a corridor of grasslands and desert that stretched from the Hungarian Plain to the Gobi Desert,⁴ impeded only in part by the arc of the Carpathian Mountains;⁵ (2) Sasanian Persia, which controlled the Iranian plateau, shared the Near Eastern culture area with Rome and reached the fringes of the Eurasian steppe north of the Caucasus range; (3) the lands of northern Europe that had never been included in the Roman state, bounded roughly

³ Franz H. Bäuml and Marianna D. Birnbaum, eds., *Attila: The Man and His Image* (Budapest, 1993).

⁴ Mark Whittow, "Geographical Survey," in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys, with John Haldon and Robin Cormack (Oxford, 2008) 219–231; Étienne de la Vaissière, "Central Asia and the Silk Road," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford, 2012) 142–169, here 142–144.

⁵ Roger Batty, *Rome and the Nomads: The Pontic and Danubian Realm in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2007) 89–94.

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by the Atlantic Ocean, the Rhine and Danube Rivers, and the great forests beyond eastern Europe;⁶ and (4) the Roman Empire, based in the Mediterranean but controlling lands from Britain to the Red Sea. Rome receives the lion's share of attention in the chapters ahead. (map 1).

During the Age of Attila, the inhabitants of these zones came to interact differently with one another, while internally they experienced radical discontinuities as well as transmutations of far older cultural and political practices. This developmental aspect of the Age of Attila should be stressed. Despite all its violence and destruction, the period under discussion here, the “long” fifth century, should be seen as a time of unexpected growth, a threshold era that was as much witness to the emergence of the medieval world as it was to the end of so much of the classical age. This introductory chapter considers the four zones in turn, beginning with the Eurasian Steppe that produced the Huns.

ZONE 1: THE EURASIAN STEPPE

For Roman writers of the imperial period, the Eurasian steppe was synonymous with frostbite and savagery, but historians today understand the steppe quite differently. Its populations were more than able to generate their own quite sophisticated political and social formations without dependence on outlying empires, and they were not at all stuck in a rut of primitive life as was once believed. Although quite diverse culturally and linguistically, they shared certain traits of herding, trading, and fighting across the steppe's enormous expanse.⁷ The nomads often lived in peaceful, complex synergy with nearby agricultural and commercial communities,⁸ and they also benefited from long-distance trade.⁹ In addition to caring for their herds, raiding the settled lands to acquire loot and livestock became regular practice among them.¹⁰ Mounted warrior elites noted for their ferocity and high degree of mobility across the steppe directed affairs through elaborate networks of authority and dependence.

⁶ See Peter J. Heather, chapter 12 in this volume.

⁷ Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies* (Cambridge, 2002) 42–43; Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (Oxford, 2011) 9–20, for introductory survey.

⁸ Golden, *Central Asia*, 11.

⁹ Xinri Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford, 2010) 63; Golden, *Central Asia*, 16–17.

¹⁰ Golden, *Central Asia*, 16.

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The Age of Attila marked an important phase in the long history of the steppe and the great empires surrounding it.¹¹ Although peoples originating in the Eurasian Steppe had fought ferociously with Rome on the Danube frontier in earlier centuries, it was only with the arrival of the Huns that the steppe as the seat of nomad empires became a permanent presence in Roman political calculations, especially for the eastern Roman Empire that confronted steppe peoples on the Danube frontier.¹² The steppe would remain a point of departure for Avars, Turks, and many other implacable enemies in the centuries to come.

The canvas gets even larger. Rome's greatest rival, Sasanian Persia, endured profound internal readjustments in response to the kingdoms of the Hephthalite, Chionite, and Kidarite Huns (not connected to Attila's domain) on their northeastern frontier.¹³ Much farther afield, the Gupta empire in northern India became deeply preoccupied with the Hephthalites,¹⁴ while China, temporarily in a state of political disunion, fought with other groups from the steppe as well.¹⁵ This volume focuses on the kaleidoscopic alterations in the political, religious, and social landscape "only" from the Atlantic to the western steppe. Nevertheless, we can say that over an even greater area, the Age of Attila inaugurated a new order in world affairs.

The Arrival of the Huns

Bands of Huns reached the western Eurasian steppe in the second half of the fourth century, around 370, perhaps driven in part by climate

¹¹ The steppe has been inhabited by modern humans for nearly fifty thousand years, but pastoral nomadism only emerged after a long and piecemeal development about 1200 BCE; Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, 13–42, surveys theories.

¹² Dennis Sinor, "The Hun period," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Dennis Sinor (Cambridge, 1990) 177–205; Roger Batty, *Rome and the Nomads*, 347–456.

¹³ Frantz Grenet, "Regional Interaction in Central Asia and Northwest India in the Kidarite and Hephthalite periods," in *Indo-Iranian Languages and Peoples*, ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 116 (Oxford, 2002) 203–224; on divisions of the Huns, Mark Šćukin, Michel Kazanski, and Oleg Sharev, *Des les Goths aux Huns: Le nord de la Mer Noire au Bas-empire et à l'époque des grandes migrations*, British Archaeological Reports International Series 1535 (Oxford, 2006) 111.

¹⁴ Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia: From Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion* (Princeton, 1998) 177–178.

¹⁵ Mark E. Lewis, *China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009) 144–151.

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changes in their Central Asian homelands.¹⁶ Their arrival on the western side of the Volga River changed the political landscape of the western steppe in a dramatic fashion. Some scholars believe that to some extent they brought with them political and cultural attachments to the defunct Xiongnu empire (ca. 200 BCE to 100 CE) on the north-west Chinese frontier, credited as being the first nomad empire [LA VAISSIÈRE].¹⁷ As they crossed the steppe, their ranks were increased by defeated tribes and other groups that willingly joined them, as regularly happened on the steppe.¹⁸

Initially, Huns came in separate groups, with different names and leadership traditions, and they settled over a very wide area.¹⁹ Within a century, however, their elites controlled all of the steppe and its indigenous peoples between Hungary and the Urals, although they were never unified under one ruler (maps 1 and 2).²⁰ Kidarites, Chionites, and Hephthalites in turn established their kingdoms northeast of Iran, while “European” Huns moved further west, basing themselves first in the Pontic-Danubian region²¹ and then on the Hungarian Plain. Their arrival was a calamity for the western steppe’s other nomadic peoples as well as for its settled populations, most importantly Gothic kingdoms that had been established between the Danube Basin and the Black Sea for several generations.²² Much of the Gothic population fled west from the Huns and sought refuge across the Danube in the Roman Empire, instigating a cascade of events that led to the disastrous battle of Adrianople in 378 (see below) and the eventual settlement of Goths

¹⁶ La Vaissière, “Central Asia and the Silk Road,” 144–147.

¹⁷ Nicola Di Cosmo, “Ethnogenesis, Coevolution and Political Morphology of the Earliest Steppe Empire: The Xiongnu Question Revisited,” in *Xiongnu Archaeology: Multidisciplinary Perspectives of the First Steppe Empire in Inner Asia*, ed. Ursula Brosseder and Bryan K. Miller (Bonn, 2011) 35–48.

¹⁸ Golden, *Central Asia*, 15–17.

¹⁹ Étienne de la Vaissière, chapter 10 in this volume; Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 169–170.

²⁰ See Richard Payne, chapter 16 in this volume; Ščukin, Kazanski, and Sharev, *Des les Goths aux Huns*, 111.

²¹ Batty, *Rome and the Nomads*, 2, calls this region “a zone of interaction” rather than a place with strict territorial boundaries.

²² Peter J. Heather, “The Huns and the End of the Roman Empire in Western Europe,” *English Historical Review* 110 (1995) 4–41; Peter J. Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996); Marina G. Moshkova, “A Brief Review of the History of the Sauromatian and Sarmatian Tribes,” in *Nomads of the Eurasian Steppes in the Early Iron Age*, ed. Jeannine Davis-Kimball, Vladimir A. Bashilov, and Leonid T. Yablonsky (Berkeley, 1995) 87.

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within the empire.²³ Some Alans, who were a nomadic people in the region, also fled further west, but many of them, as well as Goths and others, remained under Hun dominance.²⁴

Huns based in the Pontic Steppe soon attacked the Middle East. In 395–396, war bands, perhaps driven by famine, crossed the Caucasus Mountains and raided in force into Armenia, Syria, Palestine, and northern Mesopotamia. They took slaves, cattle, and other movable goods back to the steppe.²⁵ At the same time, Huns in Europe hired out as armies in the service of Rome on various occasions, sometimes in considerable number.²⁶ In this way they played a significant role in Roman political affairs. An indication of scale (probably the high end) is given by the perhaps sixty thousand Huns employed as auxiliaries by the western general Aetius in 425 for service in a revolt against emperor Theodosius II.²⁷

By the early years of the fifth century, the western Huns coalesced into a more unified confederation under the leadership of Rua.²⁸ He invaded Thrace in 422 from his base on the Hungarian Plain (the westernmost extension of the Eurasian Steppe) and extorted from the Roman government an annual payment of 350 pounds of gold, setting a precedent for relations with Constantinople. After his death in 433, his nephews Bleda and Attila assumed leadership of the Huns of the west.²⁹ They began a more aggressive policy toward Rome, and in 435, they negotiated a new treaty which doubled their annual subsidy from Constantinople. This brought five years of peace, but in 441, Attila attacked again. Negotiation, extortion, and extreme levels of violence marked his interactions with Roman authorities as well as with his own subjects [KELLY]. He forbade any movement of people out of his empire and insisted that Romans return all fugitives to be punished [POHL].³⁰

²³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, ed. and trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Mass., 1935) book 31.

²⁴ Roger Batty, *Rome and the Nomads*, 368–374; Moshkova, “Brief Review,” 88–89; on Alans: Agustí Alemany, *Sources on the Alans: A Critical Compilation* (Leiden, 2000), and Bernard S. Bachrach, *A History of the Alans in the West: From Their First Appearance in the Sources of Classical Antiquity through the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 1973).

²⁵ Dennis Sinor, “The Hun Period,” in Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 177–205, here 182–184.

²⁶ Hyun Jin Kim, *The Huns, Rome, and the Birth of Europe* (Cambridge, 2013).

²⁷ Aetius changed sides at the last minute and sent the Huns home after paying them.

²⁸ Heather, “Huns and the End of the Roman Empire,” 14–17.

²⁹ Attila ruled with his brother Bleda from 434 to 445, and alone from 445 to 453.

³⁰ Andreas Schwarcz, “Relations between Ostrogoths and Visigoths in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries and the Question of Visigothic Settlement in Aquitaine and Spain,”

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At its greatest extent, Attila's realm stretched from the Volga to central Gaul. Hun influence may have reached as far north as the Baltic Sea as well.³¹ This was the first steppe-based empire of such a size to have an impact on European events.

Attila's rule and his influence on the Roman Empire and neighboring lands are evaluated in detail in various chapters within this book. Some paradoxes may be pointed out here. On the one hand, Attila never established a state on Roman territory or even won a major battle against Roman forces [KELLY, HEATHER]. On the other hand, the indirect effects of the Huns on the Roman Empire were quite significant. As the following chapters describe, the destabilizing presence of the Huns contributed to imperial economic weakness and inability to retake lost western territories for financial and strategic reasons. Huns played a role, although scholars debate the extent, in pushing various barbarian groups into the empire [KELLY, HEATHER]. They had considerable influence on other zones as well. In northern Europe, they helped create an environment that contributed to the rise of the Slavs [HEATHER]. Further to the east, Iran's Hunnic neighbors forced changes in Sasanian political ideology and cosmology [PAYNE].

How did the steppe itself change during the Age of Attila? Several points may be made. First of all, Huns brought new ethnic elements with them when they crossed the Volga and entered European history.³² The doors to populations from further east would remain open, most immediately for Avars and Turks who would dominate the western steppe from the late sixth century.³³ Through their conflicts with Rome and Persia, and the accompanying financial extortion and diplomatic interaction, these peoples of the steppe gained experience – and heightened expectations – of dealing with the rich settled empires. Perhaps most significant were the consequences for trade and economy.

in *Integration and Authority in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Walter Pohl and Max Diesenberger (Vienna, 2002) 217–226, here, 223.

³¹ Priscus, fr. 8, ed. Roger C. Blockley, in *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1981–1983); Priscus Panita, *Excerpta et Fragmenta*, ed. Pia Carolla (Berlin, 2008) 51. Some influences were seen in Sweden: Ščukin, Kazanski, and Sharev, *Des les Goths aux Huns*, 116 on extent of the empire, and 111 for Roman sources.

³² Peter B. Golden, “The Peoples of the South Russian Steppes,” in Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 256–284, here 256–258.

³³ Samuel Szádeczky-Kardoss, “The Avars,” in Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 206–228, here 206–207, Walter Pohl, *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa* (Munich, 1988) 567–822.

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The once-rich kingdom of Bactria suffered terribly in the wars between the Hunnic nomads and the forces of Sasanian Persia, remaining largely depopulated until the sixth century. As a result, trade routes – collectively known as the Silk Road – shifted north into Sogdia, which prospered greatly. Nomadic elites made Sogdian towns centers of wealth in Central Asia that would dominate trade across Central Asia until the rise of the Muslim Caliphate in the mid-eighth century.³⁴ [LA VAISSIÈRE]. It was along these trading networks that Christian missionaries traveled east from the late fifth century, bringing their Nestorian beliefs to Central Asia and China. At the same time Buddhists journeyed west from China but did not reach Europe.³⁵

ZONE 2: SASANIAN PERSIA

The Sasanian dynasty, which rose to power in Iran in 224 and created an empire that lasted until the Arab conquest in 651, had many borders to defend during the Age of Attila (map 3). On its western flank it confronted Rome's eastern provinces across the Mesopotamian Plain, and it struggled with Rome for the Caucasus region, particularly for Armenia.³⁶ On its southwest border lay northern Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and a portion of the Indian Ocean. Control of these regions enabled seaborne trade with India. To the east lay the Gupta Empire, with which Sasanian Iran maintained diplomatic relations and conducted extensive trade.

The most perilous frontier for Persia, however, was the one shared with the steppe. Passes through the Caucasus Mountains provided an avenue for nomad raiders. More significant was the border north and east of the Caspian Sea, where Iran abutted Central Asia and the disputed lands of Transoxiana. In the late fourth century, Sasanian monarchs fought wars on this frontier with Chionite Huns and in the first half of the fifth century with Kidarite Huns. The rise of the Hephthalite kingdom and its seizure of the rich trading kingdom of Sogdia after the middle of the century put Sasanian monarchs on the defensive. Caught in a Hephthalite trap while campaigning on the steppe, the Persian monarch Peroz died in battle in 484. Subsequently, Hephthalite rulers

³⁴ La Vaissière, "Central Asia and the Silk Road," 146–148; Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, trans. James Ward (Leiden, 2005) 95–107.

³⁵ Joel Walker, "From Nisibis to Xi'an: The Church of the East in Late Antique Eurasia," in Johnson, *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, 994–1052.

³⁶ This disputed region rebelled against Persia in 451 and 482.

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interfered in royal Sasanian dynastic politics, and they helped Kavad, who had married into the Hephthalite royal family, regain the Persian throne in 498.³⁷

Interacting with these Hunnic kingdoms profoundly affected the Sasanian political system. In the face of defeat, humiliation, and loss of territory, the Sasanian regime reinvented itself, creating a new ideology of empire based on historical legends and Zoroastrian teachings. (The emergence of this new conceptual system roughly parallels the transformation of Rome into a Christian-Roman polity.) The Sasanian monarch held paramount authority, but his power depended on finding consensus among the great aristocratic clans of Iran. Aristocratic involvement in the new imperial ideology proved critical for its success [PAYNE].

Rome and Persia enjoyed peaceful relations through most of the Age of Attila, but they fought a cold war in North Arabia and southern Iraq through their Arab proxies. The Ghassanid federation led by the Jafnid clan fought for Rome, while the Lakhmid tribes led by the Nasrids took the Persian side. At stake in this competition was control of the highly lucrative trade coming from farther east.³⁸

ZONE 3: NORTHERN EUROPE (BARBARICUM)

Romans designated all of the lands in northern Europe that they had not conquered as “Barbaricum.” This derogatory term suggested a clear distinction between their own civilized realm and the lands beyond. Reality offered no such obvious absolute differences. Roman defensive fortifications and system of alliances and accommodations with client kings on the other side were intended to protect the Roman provinces by keeping out invaders, but the border had never been impermeable. Traders, slavers, and artisans went back and forth quite often, as did settlers who had imperial permission to enter Roman territory. For centuries, recruits from the north had joined Roman armies in different capacities, and when their enlistment ended, many returned to their homes across the highly militarized frontier.

³⁷ Michael Maas, “The Equality of Empires: Procopius on Adoption and Guardianship across Imperial Borders,” in *Motions of Late Antiquity: Religion, Politics and Society from Constantine to Charlemagne. Essays in Honour of Peter Brown*, ed. Jamie Kreiner and Helmut Reimitz (Turnhout, 2015); Frye, *Heritage of Central Asia*, 177–179.

³⁸ Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1989) esp. 22–24.