



*The Meeting of Leo the Great and Attila, Raphael, 1514*

## Barbarians at the Gate

*When the king had received the embassy, he was so impressed by the presence of the high priest that he ordered his army to give up warfare.*

Prosper of Aquitaine, c. 455

† THE MOST MEMORABLE THING about the fabled meeting between Leo the Great and Attila the Hun in 452 is that it's just that: a *fable*, a authentic event in history which—like the conversion of Constantine at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 313—has over the years been greatly embellished to serve the purposes of the Church.

As the story goes, Attila the Hun was marching toward Rome with his mighty army in 452, on his way to collect his intended wife—Honorio, sister of Emperor Valentinian III—characteristically raping, looting, and burning cities along the way.

Lacking the manpower to hold off the formidable Hun army, Valentinian asked Pope Leo to lead a delegation to negotiate with Attila, hoping to persuade him to spare the city. Leo proceeded to meet with Attila, and when Attila encountered the emissaries, a miraculous vision of Saints Peter and Paul suddenly appeared above Leo's head, and an astonished, chastened Attila ordered his army to “give up warfare” and withdraw.

The only thing about this account that is historically accurate is that Leo and Attila actually did meet (although not at the gates of the city, as depicted in Raphael's fresco; it occurred in the north of Italy, near Mantua).

In reality, Leo's delegation was only one of three envoys sent by the emperor to negotiate with Attila, the others being led his consul, Gennadius Avienus, and Memmius Trygetius, the prefect of Rome.

Little is recorded about the negotiations (although Avienus was probably the more persuasive of the three), allowing Christian scribes to assign Leo all the credit for Attila's retreat. But it hardly seems credible that a notoriously fearless and ruthless leader like Attila would be persuaded by admonitions from a weak pope—or, for that matter, had he actually seen a saintly vision.

The reality was that after two decades of unimpeded empire building, Attila could no longer be assured of victory on the battlefield, having experienced an unprecedented defeat at the Battle of Chalons the previous summer, a bloody spectacle of hand-to-hand combat with thousands of casualties.

At this time, the Western Roman Empire was well into decline. (After Rome was sacked by Visigoths in 410, the capital was even moved to Milan, and later to Ravenna, from where Emperor Valentinian ruled the fragmented remnants of the empire.)

The once invincible Roman army was a mere shadow of its former self, and its foot soldiers were no match for 'the Scourge of God's' skilled equestrian archers. (The priest-historian Jerome described how the Huns "filled the whole earth with slaughter and panic alike as they flitted hither and thither on their swift horses.")

Even so, Attila's forces faced a capable army, hastily assembled by the skilled Roman general, Flavius Aetius. (This was Attila's second major assault on Rome, facing the same foe who had repelled him at Chalons.)

As he met with Leo's delegation, Attila's position was in fact much weaker than Leo or the Romans probably realized. Along with suffering serious losses at Chalons, the Huns were short on supplies, and a famine and plague had swept through their army as a result of a blight raging throughout Italy.

(Ironically, the famine was made worse as the Hun advance laid waste to the countryside, destroying farms and farmers alike.)

Aetius's forces had nonetheless slowed Attila's advance, and the Huns also faced an offensive from the eastern emperor, Marcian, whose threat Attila—lacking reliable communication—may have overestimated.

With winter coming on, Attila no doubt feared the prospect of a long and indecisive battle to subdue and then retain control of Rome, and decided to retreat and regroup.

However effective it may or may not have been, Leo's intercession failed to prevent the sack of the city by the Vandal King Genseric just three years later—although it may have spared Rome from being burnt to the ground rather than merely plundered.

Fortuitously for Leo and the Romans, Attila died early the following year while preparing for a third assault on Italy, and crippled by sibling rivalry, the Hun empire began to break up the following year.

The Roman staving off of Attila's attack helped the Roman Catholic Church become the dominant political and religious force in Europe. (Despite their brutality in battle, the Huns had allowed their conquered peoples to practice freedom of religion.)

Leo I died in 462, and came to be known as 'Leo the Great' and 'the Savior of Rome', although it had actually been nature—and Flavius Aetius—who defeated him.

As a tragic epilogue to the story, Aetius was rewarded by Valentinian giving his daughter's hand in marriage to Aetius's son, but rumors among the imperial court that Aetius planned to overthrow Valentinian and place his son on the throne prompted the emperor to murder him. Only six months later, Valentinian was himself assassinated by two of his guards still loyal to Aetius. ■