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The Battle of the Catalaunian Plains

A brief historical overview*

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In this study, I examine the „Battle of the Catalaunian Plains”. In the first part, the causes of the campaign of 451 are discussed; the treachery of Honoria, the Frank succession, and the Ostrogothic immigrants in the Visigothic Court. Then I present the campaign, describing how the opposite forces manoeuvred, what their plans were, and how they arrived at the place of the battle. The battle plans and the fight of the forces, which continued through the night, are also analysed. Then the next couple of days, the sieges of the camps, and the reason, why the Romans left the battlefield are described. The paper is completed with the author’s conclusions, the examination of the performance of the military leaders, the losses of the opposing forces, and claiming the winner.

KEYWORDS: Attila, the Huns, Flavius Aetius, Honoria, Gaul, Battle of the “Catalaunian Plains”

A Catalaunumi csata – Rövid történelmi áttekintés

Ebben a munkában a „catalaunumi csata” vizsgálatával foglalkozom. Ennek első felében a 451-es galliai hadjárat okait tanulmányozom; Honoria árulását, a frank trónutódlási krízist, valamint azt az eseményt, amely során osztrogót uralkodói szökevények kerültek a vizigót királyi udvarba. Ezután a 451-es hadjárat eseményeit mutatom be, a haditerveket, a két hadsereg manővereit, valamint azt, milyen okok vezettek a csatához. Ezt követően elemzem a csatát, a két ellenséges hadsereg hadrendjét, a haditerveket és az összecsapást, amely a hunok javára dőlt el az éjszaka folyamán. Valamint ki fogok térni az utána következő néhány nap fontosabb momentumaira, a táborok ostromaira, és arra, hogy miért hagyták el a rómaiak a csatateret. A közleményt záró következtetések mellett, bemutatom a hadvezérek teljesítményét, értékelem a veszteségeket és bemutatom a győztest is.

KULCSSZAVAK: Attila, hunok, Flavius Aetius, Gallia, „Catalaunumi csata”

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In this essay, I would like to examine the battle of the “Catalaunian Plains”. This was the largest and most defining battle at the end of Late Antiquity. Jordanes writes about it in *Romana* “...*nec par, ut ferunt, audita est in nostris temporibus pugna a diebus Attilæ in illis locis.*” That is: „And they say that in our times no battle equal to this one has been heard of in these parts since the days of Attila”.¹ It was fought by a military superpower (the Huns of Attila), a declining superpower (the Western Roman Empire), and a rising middle power (the Visigothic Kingdom). The battle was considered by some historians a decisive Roman victory, which saved Western Europe from the barbarian terror. Others did not give it any significance. I have not found two similar descriptions of the battle, thanks to the different interpretations and the different authors emphasizing different elements. I intended to make a simple and unitary theory, which features the conclusions of the authors, and mine as well. First of all, I examined the chronicles of the time of Attila (Prosper Tiro², Priscus, Hydatius³, Merobaudes, and Sidonius Apollinaris). Then I continued my research with other chronicles (two books by Jordanes, Theophanes, and Procopios, and finally with works from the 21st century (by Peter Heather, Alexander Goldsworthy, Michael Kulikowski, et al.)⁴ I tried to broaden my research, to make a synthesis from the different works, and simplify my theory.

In the first part of my essay, I will examine the motives behind the campaign of Gaul in 451. In my opinion, there are three major ones. The most straightforward was the treachery of Honoria, which arose from the loss of her power in the Imperial Court. In Gaul, the Franks lost their king and his two sons. We could only guess their names. We only know about Childerich, and the Gregory of Tours mentioned, that his father was Merovech. It is likely, that Childerich was the firstborn, but this theory will be detailed in the next chapter. This story was maintained by Jordanes, and Priscus also. They searched for a patron, which was another motive for Attila to invade Gaul. However, it was the last one that proved really surprising. Jordanes in ‘*Getica*’ mentioned royal Ostrogothic immigrants, who fled to the Visigoths because they wanted to become their leader. This was an unsuccessful attempt although they received high status from Theoderich, and their settlement in a new territory could trigger a Hunnic invasion. In the next part, I will examine the course of the invasion, the motives and movements of the two armies, and the reason why the battle was fought.

In the last and longest part, I will examine the battle itself. I lean mostly on Jordanes’ most famous work, ‘*Getica*’. The battle orders and the battle plans were easy to deduce from ‘*Getica*’. However, the reconstruction of the events of the clash was really difficult, so I made many conclusions that could not be verified because of the confusing nature of the sources. I will end my study with my findings, and I will

1 Jordanes 1882, 52.

2 Prosper Tiro, *Chronik. Laterculus regum Vandalorum et Alanorum*. Ediert von Maria Becker und Jan-Markus Kötter. Einleitung und Text. Kleine und fragmentarische Historiker der Spätantike (KfHist) G5-6. Paderborn 2016.

3 Hydatius, *Chronica (Hydatii Limici Chronica subdita)*, 37–38.

4 Goldsworthy 2009.b; Kulikowski 2019.

try to name the winner, sum up the losses of the participants, examine the performance of the commanders, and the consequences of the battle. My examination will cover a period from 451 A.D. to 453 A.D., the death of Attila. The events of this study took place in this period. Jordanes used the battle of the Catalaunian Plains as a tool to criticize the campaign of Justinian I. in Italy. He wanted to show through the battle, how a great leader led his army. He had to use every chance to his advantage, just as Aetius did, and had to fight with an aggressor, who had a huge pride, like Attila. Moreover, he might also have created another Visigothic-Hunnic battle after the battle of the Catalaunian Plains, in order to craft a new Visigothic history.⁵ He mostly worked from the lost chronicle of Cassiodorus.

The Battle of the “Catalaunian Plains”

The motives behind the campaign of Gaul in 451

We can describe three major events as the motives behind this campaign: the treachery of Honoria, the Frank succession crisis, and the Ostrogothic immigrants in the Visigothic Court. First of all, I would like to examine the first one, because our sources describe it as the main event, which led to the invasion of the Huns. Honoria was a princess, the sister of Emperor Valentinian III.⁶ Her treachery is told in two different stories. The first one was mentioned by Priscos, and it stated, that she and her lover, Eugenius, also her economic assistant, wanted to overthrow Valentinian. However, this plot was discovered, and Eugenius was executed. Honoria was forced to marry a senator, named Bassus Herculanus. So, she begged Attila and asked for help.⁷ However, the other story written by Jordanes in ‘Romana’ is much more interesting. According to that, Honoria had to make a vow of virginity before the Imperial Court in Ravenna. She did not want to keep this promise, so she turned to Attila, and gave her ring to him. Attila he thought that this was a marriage proposal, and he invaded Gaul. She could not keep his promise until Attila came to Italy in 452, and she had an affair with Eugenius.⁸ It is not known which story is true; in my opinion it is the second one. Probably Honoria did not have a problem marrying a senator because she could carry a child, and at that time giving birth to a baby (preferably a son) was the base of power for an imperial woman. However, in the second story, Valentinian took away this power from her with the vow of virginity. This act meant that Honoria was not allowed to carry a child, consequently she lost all of her power.

The next reason was the succession crisis in the Frank territory. Priscos said that the king of the Franks was dead, and his sons wanted to become kings.⁹ Therefore,

5 Whately 2013.b, 65–78.; Kovács 2020, 165.

6 Clover – Merobaudes 1971.

7 Linder 2017, 15.

8 Jordanes Romana <https://www.harbornet.com/folks/theedrich/Goths/Romana.htm#X384>, (Accessed on 4 December 2021.) 328.

9 Linder 2017, 41

the elder one went to Attila and asked for his help, which he got. The younger brother went to Aetius and did the same. We do not have much information about this event, about who the father was, or who his sons were. We have only a little proof to identify the son who gained the kingship. There were multiple guesses about the younger son. Ian Hughes in his work stated that it was Merovech. However, Fredegar and his chronicle deny this claim. It was written that Merovech's mother became pregnant by a sea monster in the 410s or 420s.¹⁰ Thus, he could not be the younger boy, who was seen by Priscos in the Imperial Court because he had to be thirty or forty in 450, so he was too young at that time. Then who were the two princes? We can find the answer in the Chronicle of Gregory of Tours.¹¹ He described the lineage of the Frank kings from Clodio to Clodveg. Merovech's son, Childeric ascended the throne after Merovech. As a king, he was rude towards the daughters of the noblemen, who banished him and chose the Roman military commander of Gaul as their leader.¹² This means that Childeric was violent because he could be the older brother who was placed on the throne by Attila.

At last, there was another motive behind this campaign, described in 'Getica'. I wondered why Attila intended to attack the Visigoths in 451, as there had been little encounter between them previously. The answer is in that chronicle. According to this book, an Ostrogothic nobleman, a Hunnic vassal named Beremud, escaped from the Huns with his son Vidirich. They left because it was heard that the Visigothic king Vallia, had died. It was also known, that the Visigoths elected their king from their noblemen, and Beremud thought that he had a great advantage, because he was an Amal prince. The Amals were the royal house of the Ostrogoths. and Beremud knew that the Visigoths gave his house great significance. Hence Beremud left the Huns to become king of the Visigoths, but he arrived late at the court. Another nobleman, named Theodoric, had been chosen to be king by the Visigoths. Beremud, because he feared for his life, did not tell the Visigoths anything about his lineage.¹³

However, Theodoric liked him, and so he was chosen to become the king's chief advisor.¹⁴ Therefore, this could be a strong reason for the Huns to attack Gaul. This theory was supported by the Huns' actions in the Eastern Roman Empire. The Hunnic kings launched several campaigns against the eastern half of the empire, not just because of money. The Huns launched campaigns because the Eastern Roman Empire allowed the fugitives of the Huns to settle in their territory. Priscos wrote that Ruga demanded from the Romans that they sent back immigrant tribes, like the Amalzuri, Itimari, and the Boisks. Attila also demanded the Hunnic fugitives before he launched a campaign against the eastern territories.¹⁵ Therefore, this reason could

10 Fredegar 1888, 95.

11 Hughes 2012, 215.

12 Gregory of Tours 2013. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/gregory-hist.asp#book3>, (Accessed on 4 December 2021.) Book 2, text 12.

13 Mierow 1915, 100, 175.

14 Mierow 1915, 100, 175.

15 Linder 2017, 7, 11.

be highly possible. Priscos also claims that Attila wanted to launch his campaign against Gaul because he wanted to fight with the Franks and the Visigoths.¹⁶ This means that the Hunnic campaign had two main objectives. First, they wanted to secure the throne of the Franks for Childeric, and second, they wanted to punish the Visigoths for harbouring immigrants.

The campaign of Gaul in 451

Attila possibly planned the attack in the second half of 450. He attacked in May 451, so he had to make the preparations in the bulk of the previous year. Thus, the Huns stacked up provisions, gathered the forces of their vassals, and the leaders determined the main tasks as well as the roads the military would use. Around March 451, Attila and his forces started their march from the area of modern-day Hungary or from the Banate, where the centre of his empire laid. They possibly moved up to Vienna (Vindobona) and from there they marched to Strasbourg (Argentoratum) along the Alps. We do not know how many soldiers Attila had. Ikka Syvanne states that their numbers reached 400–500,000.¹⁷ However, this number is enormous, and one could not feed such a huge force in a province pillaged several times, such as Gaul. In my esteem, Attila Kiss P. may be right, claiming that Attila's forces could be 30–40,000 strong.¹⁸

Attila intended to divide the forces of the enemy before the campaign. Therefore, he sent two messages simultaneously. The first one was received by the Roman emperor, Valentinian III. In his message, Attila said that he was marching against the Visigoths. He sent another message to the Visigoths, in which he wrote that his forces would crush the Romans.¹⁹ Jordanes described the trick as a failure, because Aetius had foreseen this, and set up a huge coalition against Attila. However, if we read other sources, this trick could be considered otherwise. Sidonius Apollinaris, a Roman poet, and son-in-law of Avitus, a later Roman emperor, also described the campaign. He stated that Aetius was in the Alps before Attila's attack, and when he heard the news, he rushed to Gaul and tried quickly to recruit as many soldiers as possible.²⁰ This information denies Jordanes' claim that Aetius foresaw the advance of Attila and tried to stop him with a coalition. On the contrary, Attila's trick was a success, and the future allies did not know about his goals. The Western Roman military leader realized Attila's plan at the last minute, possibly, because Attila's troops marched along the Alps, which were guarded by watchtowers and little strongholds. One of them could spot the huge Hunnic army and warned Aetius, who rushed to Gaul to save the province. Meanwhile, Attila's army arrived at the Rhine River, where his forces crossed in huge boats, built from trees of the Hercynian Forrest.²¹

16 Mierow 1915, 100, 175.

17 Syvanne 2020, 99–100.

18 Kiss 2010, 152.

19 Mierow 1915, 185.

20 Apollinaris 1963, 146–147.

21 Apollinaris 1963, 146.

This was possibly completed by military engineers or labourers who were taken from the Roman military manufacturers, called *fabricae*. These „factories” were established by Emperor Diocletian in Roman cities, which were positioned next to important roads and the border areas. They made all of the Roman military equipment, mostly shields, swords, armour, and siege engines.²² The laborers were considered military personnel, and they were judged by military law.²³

Thus, it is possible that they made the boats to be used by Attila’s army, which crossed to Gaul, and attacked the cities of the Franks. The first city to be occupied was Divodorum (Metz). Then the Huns took Durocortorum (Rheims), looted it, and its citizens were murdered. Then Attila’s forces occupied many other cities like Camaracum (Cambrai), Nemetacum (Arras), and Turnacum (Tournai). But how could they take so many cities in such a short time (mostly within days or a week)? There are two answers. First, Attila probably divided his army into two. The first one was led most likely by Ardarich, one of his main chieftains, king of the Gepids. This force marched north from the position of Attila and occupied the aforementioned cities. Attila led the southern forces; he took Metz (Divodorum) and Rheims (Durocortorum), and then marched to Paris (Lutetia Parisiorum).²⁴ The other answer was given by the fragments of Priscos because he describes the Hunnic siege tactics when he writes about the siege of Naissus (today’s Niš).

He states that the Huns first surrounded the walls with towers covered with animal skins that prevented them from burning down by the defenders. The towers were not used to climb the walls, instead, archers were placed at the top of them, who shot rain of arrows at the defenders, and tried to drive them from the walls. Then the battering rams came to breach the walls. At the same time, the Huns tried to climb the walls with ladders.²⁵ These combined measures helped the Huns to occupy cities in no time. However, the enemies could help the Huns, also. They did not have any money to maintain and renovate the walls, which were in bad shape when the Huns came. Furthermore, they could demolish them, to frighten the citizens, just as the Vandals did in North Africa²⁶. Hence, the walls did not allow their new masters to defend themselves from the Huns. The army led by Attila and his other force joined near Paris. The city survived, possibly because it was unimportant strategically, and the Huns moved against Orléans.

Meanwhile, Aetius arrived in southern Gaul and tried to gather as many soldiers as possible. However, his army was formed mostly by *limitanei*²⁷ troops. Sidonius Apollinaris writes that Aetius’s troops were few and ill-equipped.²⁸ At the beginning

22 Whately 2013.a, 236.

23 Kulikowski 2019, 14–15.

24 Syvanne 2020. 99–100.

25 Linder 2017, 10.

26 Sarantis 2013, 13, 42.

27 The *limitanei* were border guards, their main tasks were to repel little barbarian incursions, defend the frontier castles, or doing police duties. They were composed of local civilians, they were allowed to live where they served, and maintained themselves in exchange for tax allowances. Lee, A.D., *War In Late Antiquity*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 11–13.

28 Apollinaris 1963, 146.

of the 5th century, the Roman state was not able to maintain a huge military force. The manpower of the army decreased expeditiously, because of the civil wars between pretenders, and the wars of the barbarian invasions.²⁹ However, the greatest blow was to come from Vandal king Geiserich, who seized Carthage in 439³⁰ as it was the centre of the Western Roman grain supply.

The Roman state and military had received the grain from Carthage freely, but its occupation devastated the supply chain of the army. Moreover, it crippled the Western Roman monetary system. The Romans used silver coins to maintain the economy in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. However, there were several droughts in the empire, and the price of food grew enormously, so the silver coinage deteriorated.³¹ Emperor Constantine introduced the golden coinage to pay his soldiers. The coins were much fewer than the silver ones, so the merchants had to make it flow through the trading system. However, when Geiserich captured Carthage, he stopped this system, and the state could not pay the soldiers anymore.³² Consequently, the army's manpower shrank to a minimum level, and only the *limitanei* were conserved because they could maintain themselves without the state. Hence, Aetius had a little *limitanei* force with some little tribal armies, like the Franks. He needed help, so he sent Avitus, a Gallic nobleman to the Visigothic Kingdom and asked King Theodoric for help. Avitus joined him at the border, because he had raised an army, and waited for Attila to attack. However, Avitus could persuade Theodorich to join forces with Aetius.³³ How he did this, we do not know. Possibly Theodoric realized, that he could not defeat Attila alone, so he joined forces with Aetius. In the meantime, Attila and his army arrived at Orléans. There are two different stories about this siege. The first is depicted in the legend of Saint Anianus. He tried to defend the city, however, Attila breached the gates, and moved in, when the allies arrived and saved the day.³⁴

Nevertheless, Jordanes tells a different story. According to his version, Sangiban, the Alan leader of the city, tried to surrender Orléans to Attila. However, Aetius had realized Sangiban's move, arrived earlier than Attila's army, and captured him. The two armies built new walls, and when Attila arrived, he discovered that he could not take the city by force, so he started a full retreat.³⁵ The allies followed him. In my point of view, the second version is true, because it explains why Attila decided to make a retreat. He arrived at Troyes when his rear guard (Gepids) had a little clash with the allies' vanguard (Franks). 15,000 troops joined the fight, and possibly the Gepids managed to drive the Franks away because Jordanes did not mention any reinforcements sent by Attila.³⁶ Thus, Attila found out that he could not get away, and had to start a battle with the allies. He decided therefore that the following day, he would fight on a hilly plain, which is possibly called Montgueux nowadays.

29 Goldsworthy, 2003. 285.

30 Cassiodorus 2014, 51.

31 Harper 2017, 160–199.

32 Kulikowski 2020, 204.

33 Apollinaris 1963, 147.

34 Hodkin 1972, 119–121.

35 Mierow 1915, 194.

36 Mierow 1915, 217.

The site was claimed as the site of the battle because the continuator of Prosper writes, that the battle was fought eight kilometres from Troyes. Furthermore, as Girard, a famous local historian described, the northern part of the ridge of Montgueux is called Maurettes, which can be the field of Mauricium.³⁷ However, this finding could be debated. Macdowell also determined the location of Attila's camp in Saint-Lye, which lies next to the Seine. If he was correct, then Attila had to march seven kilometres to reach the northern slope of Montgueux. In addition, Macdowell states that Attila's main plan was to make Aetius' forces draw down from the slope and fight on the plain.³⁸ However, as Jordanes describes it, Attila and Aetius fought on the hill. He also mentions that the ridge was steep and it ruled the nearby countryside.³⁹ This means that Aetius and Attila could not avoid the conquest of the ridge in order to claim the battlefield. In the case of Montgueux, Attila did not have to ride up with his armies, because the ridge was isolated, and Attila could avoid it. However, I have a better candidate for the battlefield. The ridge of Bergères Les Vetus, or the Mont Aime. The ridge of Bergères Les Vetus is near Chalons and Champagne (Durocatalaunum) and also stretches into the road, which goes into the village. Thus, the two armies could not avoid it. The Mont Aime also ruled the centre of the battlefield, hence the opposition forces had to climb it to claim the battlefield. These theories could not be verified either, these depend on the road which was chosen by Attila. If he chose to withdraw along the same road from where he had come, the battle was fought on the ridge of Bergères Les Vetus, or the Mont Aime. If he went for Troyes, then in Montgueux.

The battle

The following day the armies lined up for a battle. However, they waited until three in the afternoon to start the fight. But why? Ian Hughes gives the perfect answer to that. He thinks that they did not want to risk an attack against each other's camps, because it could have ended up in a disaster. So, the two armies decided to form a battle order, rather than fight. Before the battle, Attila asked the soothsayers about the outcome of the clash. They stated that the Huns would be defeated, but the general of the enemy would be fallen. Attila thought that would be Aetius, so he tried to kill him in the battle.⁴⁰ The text later said that it was Theodoric, who died in the battle, and fulfilled the prophecy.⁴¹ However, the story of the soothsayers could be an invention by Jordanes. Because, in fact, it was not Theodorich who was commander of the Visigothic side, it was Thorismund. When Jordanes writes about the Visigothic manoeuvres, he mentions only Thorismund, not Theodoric. Accordingly, when the

37 Schulteis 2019, 68–69.

38 MacDowall 2015, 53, 57, 59–60.

39 „Erat autem positio loci declivi tumore in editum collis excrescens. Quem uterque cupiens exercitus obtinere, quia loci opportunitas non parvum beneficium confert, dextram partem Hunni cum suis, sinistram Romani et Wisigothæ cum auxiliariis occuparunt ; relictoque jugo de cacumine ejus certamen ineunt.” Mierow 1915, 197.

40 Mierow 1915, 196.

41 Macdowell, 2015, 65.

battle began, and the allies made a forced march to occupy the hill before Attila, the two armies were led by Aetius and Thorismund, not Theodoric.⁴² Thorismund participated in the greatest military manoeuvres against the Huns, after Theodoric's death, which means that he was the commander of the Visigothic army, which did not fall apart after the king's death. So, the story must be a fabrication that the author possibly made after Litorius and his Hunnic army, made sacrifices, because they wanted to know the outcome of the battles ahead.⁴³ But why did Thorismund become the general of the Visigoths? Possibly, because Theodorich was old and probably ill,⁴⁴ so he could not participate in a battle all along.

At three o'clock, the armies started a fight. Jordanes described also their battle order. The allies divided their armies into three parts. Aetius occupied the left flank with his tribal allies, such as the Franks. His allies were not so numerous, so he might have made three lines. The first one comprised his allies, and the other two his troops with himself. They served as reinforcements and strengthened the first line in case it could not stand against the enemy. In the centre, Aetius placed the Alans, because he did not trust them, and feared that they would escape from the battle. On the right stood the Visigoths, Aetius' largest contingent. Aetius intended to fight in defence against Attila and would have made a counter-charge with the Visigoths to create a one-sided encirclement and cut off the Huns from their camp. Attila followed Aetius's battle order, and he created his own to eliminate the Visigothic threat. We know from Jordanes that he placed his elite troops in the centre.⁴⁵

They were not Hunnic nomads, as other sources suggest.⁴⁶ Jordanes described them as Attila's most trusted men and his elite troops. So, Attila took the centre with his elite troops, possibly with his bodyguard heavy cavalry, and with his most trusted followers, Edecon (Edika)⁴⁷ and Laudericus.⁴⁸ And we know for certain which troops Attila placed at his left side. Jordanes wrote about Attila's two most trusted military leaders, Valamer and Ardarich. Valamer was an Ostrogothic viceroy and an Amal leader, like Beremud and Vidirich. Valamer was a great orator, he was dependable and skilled in wiles, which means, he was an expert in waging war. Valamer was likewise a viceroy, he was the leader of the numerous armies of the Gepids. Ardarich was famed for his counsel and loyalty. And a crucial phrase tells us their place in the battle order; „*Quibus non immerito contra parentes Wisigothas debuit credere pugnaturis.*” This means: “*Attila might well trust them to fight against the Visigoths, their kinsmen.*”⁴⁹ So they were placed on

42 Mierow, 1915, 201.

43 Kelly 2009, 198.

44 Mierow, 1915, 209.

45 Goldsworthy 2009.b, 326.

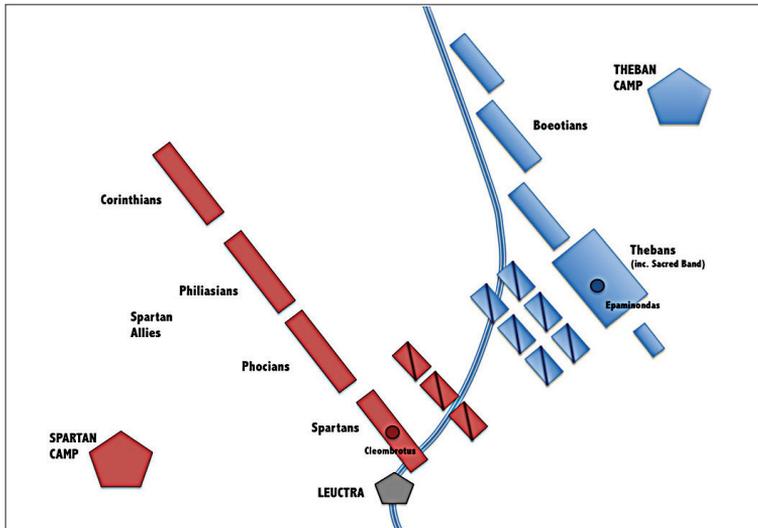
46 For example: *MacDowell 2015, 40.*; *Schultheis 2019, 72–73.*, They possibly fought against Marcian Eastern Roman Forces in the Balkan in order to hold them there. in Péter Kovács: A Chalcedoni zsinat levezése, mint a hun történelem forrása, *Studia Epigraphica Pannonica*, XIII/2022., 135–138.

47 Edecon possibly received this post because he had helped Attila to uncover an assassination attempt, which was planned by the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II., and Chrysapius, his eunuch. Linder 2017, 15–36.

48 The Gallic Chronicle

49 Mierow 1915, 199–200.

the left flank. (According to many other historical books about this battle Ardarich was positioned on the right flank.⁵⁰) Who was placed to the right flank against Aetius, then? The answer was to be found in 'Getica'. It said that there were many viceroys in Attila's camp, who paid attention to Attila's every move and order. And so he placed them on the right flank.⁵¹ And what was his plan for the battle? To answer this, we have to examine another clash, the battle of Leuctra in 371BC.



*The Battle of Leuctra*⁵²

In the battle of Leuctra, Epameinondas made a huge, fifty-deep column against the eighteen-deep Spartan right flank. He strengthened it with his cavalry and sent them against the Spartans. His centre and right wing were formed by skirmishers and cavalry units, and their main task was to hold against the Spartan attacks. His left flank attacked and defeated the strong Spartan right flank, and encircled the Spartan centre and left flank.⁵³ We can see the same tactic in Attila's plan. He tried to crush the Visigothic right flank of the allied forces, with stronger detachments. The right flank of this encirclement was implemented by his cavalry in the centre, which had to crush the Alans and cut off the Visigoths from the Romans. The left flank was made up of the Ostrogoths, and the Gepids had to keep down the Visigoths from front-wise and not let them attack both flanks. Attila's allied troops on the right had to engage the Romans and not let them help the Visigoths. That is, he did not make a plan for fear of Aetius, which was made up by Jordanes and Procopius.⁵⁴ In the

50 For example: Hughes 2012, 223; Schultheis 2019, 72–73; MacDowell 2015, 40.

51 Mierow 1915, 200.

52 Source: <https://www.vislardica.com/vb-sc-leuctra>, Accessed on 9 November 2021.

53 Kertész 2017, 90–91.

54 Procopius 1916. Jordanes, Getica 196.

battle of Metaurus, Claudius Nero redeployed his men of the rear lines on the left side, in order to eliminate Hasdrubal's right.⁵⁵ Julius Caesar also used his infantry behind the right flank, which consisted of his cavalry units. When Pompey tried to break through it with his numerous cavalry, Caesar's men attacked the enemy, routed them, and after this manoeuvre, they could surround Pompey's army.⁵⁶

Thus, the battle orders were created and the battle plan of Attila was proved with the analysis of further tactics, which were used long before Attila. Between them, there was a hill, and both armies wanted to seize it first. Macdowell mentions that Attila tried to force Aetius to leave the security of the hill. However, he did not give us any clue about it, he only follows Jordanes's narrative.⁵⁷ Attila sent his men to take the hill, but Aetius and Thorismund made a forced march and arrived there first.⁵⁸ They drove back Attila's men with rains of arrows and darts.⁵⁹ Mostly Germanic tribes fought in the battle. They had lots of archers, and were transported to the battle on horseback. In both armies, there were huge contingents of archers, because their role was important during the engagements. They shot arrows at the beginning, and supported the fight of the infantry. However, Guy Halsall writes that the Goths could be simultaneously archers and infantrymen. As usual, the archers received support from the infantry equipped with lances, but they also had swords and shields, so they could defend themselves.

The infantry fought mostly in three-line deep formations, which were deep enough not to let the enemy breach them. The lines were formed by people from the same region, so they knew each other and fought bravely. Their main task was breaching the enemy's lines and routing them. The Germanic armies used cavalry as well, they could attack the enemy's lines from the rear, dismount from their horses, and fight on foot.⁶⁰

As I mentioned in the above section, the Huns were driven back from the hill. They were so disorganized that, according to Jordanes, Attila had to make a speech.⁶¹ This speech was fabricated, and Jordanes took it possibly from Priscos.⁶² We are not sure about Attila making this speech. However, I had another clue, which can show what happened. In his work, Guy Halsall describes one of the battles between Narses, the Byzantine general, and Totila the Ostrogothic king. Before the battle started, Totila showed himself before his troops and made a parade. He tried to encourage his troops to fight better against the Byzantines.⁶³ Maybe Attila did the same in the time of need and showed himself to his troops. It must have worked because the troops charged back to the hill.

55 Livy, Book 27., Harvard University Press, 65-75.

56 Plutarch 2020, 163-167.

57 Macdowell 2015, 64-67.

58 Mierow 1915, 201.

59 Goldsworthy 2009, 209.

60 Halsall 2003, 86-198.

61 Mierow 1915, 202-206.

62 Kim 2015, 134-137.

63 Halsall 2003, 192-193.

Jordanes then continues his text with a description of the battlefield. He writes that both sides lost many warriors, and their troops made great deeds. The dead were so many that the nearby creek was filled with blood, and the warriors had to drink from it in the middle of the battle, to appease their thirst.⁶⁴ This highlights that the battle did not flow continuously, and the soldiers had time to drink and recover a bit before they re-joined the fight. In the meantime, Attila started to gain the upper hand. We knew that in the first phase of the battle, Aetius managed to push back the Huns from the hill, and Attila had to show himself to get the soldiers to continue the fight. At this time, Attila's plan grew ripe. Jordanes goes on to say that Theodoric had to gallop beside the lines of the Visigothic troops and encourage them. This means that the Ostrogoths and the Huns initiated their encirclement against the Visigoths, and Theodoric had to show himself to prevent the flight of his troops. However, it did not go as planned, because he fell from his horse, and his soldiers trampled and killed him.⁶⁵ However, Jordanes also writes that Theodorich was slain by the weapon of Andag, possibly an Ostrogothic prince or nobleman himself. However, this information could be wrong, or a part of an Ostrogothic tradition, because the Visigoths did not see how their king died. Jordanes added that after the battle the troops searched for their king at Thorismund because they did not know where he was.

They later found Theodorich on the hill, under many dead troops, who could either be Visigoths, who trampled him or the soldiers of the enemy.⁶⁶ So how did Theodorich really die? Possibly in an accident. In my esteem, Theodorich had a stroke during the battle and fell from his horse. A stroke has preliminary signs, such as sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body, and, of course, trouble in speaking, walking, or seeing. These signs were possibly discovered by Thorismund before the battle, so he made a change with his father, and became the general of the Visigoths. Theodoric made a bold choice when he tried to encourage his men because if he had not done that, his bodyguards could have possibly saved him.⁶⁷

However, at that time the battle reached its turning point. As Jordanes describes it: „*Tunc Wisigothæ, dividentes se ab Alanis, invadunt Hunnorum catervam et pæne Attilam trucidarent, nisi providus prius fugisset et se suosque ilico intra sæpta castrorum, quæ plaustri vallata habebat, reclusisset.*” That is: „Then the Visigoths, separating themselves from the Alans, fell upon the horde of the Huns and, indeed, would have slain Attila, had he not first prudently taken flight and immediately shut himself and his companions within the barriers of the camp, which he had palisaded with wagons.”⁶⁸ In other words,

64 Mierow 1915, 201.

65 Syvanne 2020, 144.

66 Mierow 1915, 214.

67 At the beginning I suspected, that Theodoric had a heart attack. To prove this I have made an interview with professor Merkely Béla. He said, that the heart attack hasn't got any preliminary signs, and it came suddenly, thus this explains why Theodoric's death was so abrupt. However after I have examined the battle order of the allies, I have realized, that Thorismund was the commander of the Visigoths. But why didn't Theodoric lead his man? In accordance with my theory, he produced some of the preliminary signs of the stroke, and this is why Thorismund replaced him.

68 Mierow 1915,10.

against the overwhelming attacks of Attila's men, the Visigoths had to form new lines, not let the Huns destroy their formation. Therefore, the formation stiffened, but this let Attila encircle the Visigoths, and cut them off from the Alans. Thus, Thorismund realized that he could not move with his troops, retreat, or reunite with the Romans. Therefore, he made the best choice he could. He had to kill Attila because without him his army would have crumbled. He charged the Huns with his troops and tried to slay Attila, who had fought in the first line. It is possible, that at this moment Laudericus was killed, which is mentioned in the Gallic chronicle of 511.⁶⁹ Attila figured out, that his life was in great danger, and moved his troops to his wagon camp and let the Visigoths come after him. He tried to stop them before his camp, and at the right moment made a counter-charge. Jordanes claims that his companions, which means his bodyguards (only the centre) were pushed back with him. Macdowell⁷⁰ and Hughes speak about Thorismund, as he had a separate army, which attacked Attila from the side. Schultheis mentions, that Attila retreated before the Alans were broken, but his theory could not be verified by Jordanes.

Hence the Gepids and the Ostrogoths could fight after all and followed Attila later to his camp. The right flank might also have joined Attila later. Therefore, the Visigoths and the Romans launched attacks against Attila's camp. However, they were pushed back, and their troops were overpowered with arrows. Then, at the right moment, which came at night⁷¹, when the allies got confused, the Huns made their counter-charge, and the enemy was scattered. We do not know this exactly, we only have clues about it.

Jordanes claims that both Thorismund and Aetius were separated from their men.⁷² Thorismund managed to get into the Hunnic camp unwittingly, and he would have been slain if his bodyguards had not helped him.⁷³ But how could he end up in the enemy's camp? In my judgment, he was chased by some of Attila's men, who could not catch him. However, he lost his spatial awareness and thought that he had found his camp. But he was wrong, and almost got killed by the Huns. Aetius was also pushed back from Attila's camp, and he possibly wandered through the enemy's lines.⁷⁴ This means that he moved with the Hunnic counterattack, and tried to avoid Attila's men. He feared that a huge catastrophe had happened and searched for the Visigoths in their camp.⁷⁵

Here comes the interesting part. Jordanes mentions "socia castrae", or "allied camp".⁷⁶ So there could be a Roman camp in the field. But what happened to it? When Attila's counter-attack developed, some fugitives escaped there and tried to defend the Roman camp. The possible reason why Aetius went to the Visigothic

69 The Gallic Chronicle of 511, 5th-6th century

70 Macdowell 2015, 77–83., Hughes 2012, 229., Schultheis 2019, 79.

71 Burgess 1993, 179.

72 Mierow 1915, 110.

73 Kim 2015, 101.

74 Mierow 1915, 110.

75 Kelly 2009, 249–250.

76 Mierow 1915, 110.

camp was that the Roman camp was not secure at all during the night. Thus, he spent a night there, defended by shields.⁷⁷ This means that the Gothic camp was also sieged, and the Roman military leader was under protection against arrows and darts. After the day of the battle, the allies looked out from their camps and saw the dead bodies all over the field. They did not see that the Huns came forth from their camp, and they reckoned that the victory was theirs. However, they knew, that Attila would not escape, only if he suffered a huge disaster.⁷⁸

About this Jordanes suggests that Attila possibly had enough man to continue the battle, and his position was not growing weaker either. We do not know how the allies received this information. Maybe they examined the Huns' position, or they took a prisoner, who talked about Attila and his plan. Attila did not feel defeated either. Jordanes claims that he made a clash of arms, sounded the trumpets, and threatened an attack.⁷⁹

The explanation for this was that Attila tried to use psychological means to frighten the allies, and show them that he was strong. So, they did not come forth and tried to defend the camp from another Hunnic assault. On the following days, the allies tried to invent a plan. They decided to make an "obsidione fatigari", which means an "exhausting blockade". In other words, they tried to blockade Attila's camp, as Jordanes mentions the Huns were hindered from approaching their camp by bowmen.⁸⁰ Thus, they tried to wear the Huns out and prevent them from receiving supplies from outside. This means that the allied camps laid next to some important roads, which the Huns had to use if they tried to get supplies.⁸¹

Consequently, the allied camps laid next to some important roads, which the Huns had to use if they tried to get supplies.⁸² However, with these psychological operations, Attila not only frightened his enemies but also made them seek shelter in their camps. Thus he could send some scouts, who brought back supplies. At this time, according to Jordanes, Attila was so desperate that he made a stake, and he would have burnt himself alive if his camp had been captured.⁸³ Despite this, we do not know whether this is true. Because the allied troops could not penetrate the Hunnic camp, they could observe it only from a distance. Therefore, it is possible they saw a defensive plank, which had been made by Hunnic saddles. And Jordanes said before, that Attila would have escape only if having suffered a catastrophe.⁸⁴ After a couple of days, the Visigoths went out looking for Theodorich, because they had not found him in the camp. They inquired Thorismund, but he did not know anything about him. So, they were searching for him in the battle area and found

77 Kim 2013, 76.

78 Kelly 2009, 252.

79 Mierow 1915, 212

80 Schultheis 2019, 87.

81 Mierow 1915, 111.

82 Macdowell 2015, 86.

83 Mierow 1915,110.

84 Hughes 2012, 238.

him under lots of corpses.⁸⁵ They buried him on the battlefield, and Jordanes mentions, that the Huns had seen this.⁸⁶

After the funeral, Thorismund was furious, and he wanted to avenge his father's death. Nevertheless, Aetius convinced him to go home, and take his father's place. In the version by Jordanes, Aetius did this because he feared that without the Huns, the Visigoths would be so powerful that they could destroy Rome. Consequently, he wanted to save the Huns, reconcile with them, and made them his ally again.⁸⁷ However, this was not the case. When Theodoric started this campaign, he came with two of his sons, Thorismund and Theodoric the younger.⁸⁸ Thorismund was the elder of the brothers, and he led the men in the battle, but the younger son possibly was not even there. We cannot find him in the description of the battle, and Aetius only spoke with Thorismund afterwards.

Where was he all along? The answer is simple. He was left in Orleáns to keep the traitor Alans under control, and keep the supply route of the allies secure. Thus, after the battle, Aetius realized that the two sons would compete for the throne. If Jordanes is right, Aetius should have kept Thorismund in the camp and destroyed the Huns.

Until then Theodorich would have secured his position as a king, and Thorismund would have had to wage a civil war with his brother. However, Aetius convinced Thorismund to go home, and take the throne before Theodoric. He needed a united Visigothic Kingdom against the Huns, who defeated them. He wanted to make his candidate become king, because he trusted in Thorismund, and believed that for his counsel the young man would ally with him. Thanks to this advice, Thorismund and Aetius went home on the following day. It was reported to Attila, who feared that the allies wanted to lure him out of his camp and attack his forces from behind. So, he stayed another couple of days.⁸⁹ After that, he became certain that the enemy had moved away, and he felt victorious, so he departed soon.⁹⁰ He could make Childeric king of the Franks on the road because the younger son possibly died on the battlefield. After that, he went straight home. Thorismund, too, was quick to arrive home before his younger brother, and he was elected king without opposition.

Conclusion

In the battle, all of the participants suffered severe losses. I have mentioned the Alans and the Romans, who lost the ability to defend their homelands. Attila suffered huge losses too, but he had many sub-nations, which could easily fill in the army, so the Hunnic war machine was in a perfect condition to continue the campaigns. The Visigoths also managed to resupply their army, because they were allied with the Sueves, so they could share the casualties with them.⁹¹ Thus, the main forces could

85 Mierow 1915, 111.

86 Kelly 2009, 252.

87 Mierow 1915, 111.

88 Hughes 2012, 238.

89 Mierow 1915, 111.

90 same 219

91 Halsall 2003, 247.

resupply their armies and start new campaigns. The Visigoths could beat the Alans, and conquer the area guarded by them, and the Huns conducted other campaigns in 452 and 453.

I would like to follow my conclusion with the evaluation of the military leaders. Let us begin with Attila. He is described by Jordanes as a terrified military leader, who only wanted to escape the entire time of the battle. He created his battle order to facilitate his flight. However, if we read 'Getica' carefully, we can find a different picture. It states that Attila assessed the enemy's battle order and formed his own in a particular way to gain the upper hand. He also made an adequate plan, which exploited the weaknesses of the enemy, and helped him to defeat Aetius. During the battle, he could easily change the plan and took advantage of the advance of the enemy. As for Aetius, we have to admit that he had limited resources. However, he could make the most of it. He won the Visigoths to his cause, and with them, he seized the hill before Attila and kept it in spite of heavy pressure. Nevertheless, he could not take Attila's camp, and after the counterattack of the Huns, he had to fight in defence. After the battle, he tried to blockade Attila's camp, but this proved to be unsuccessful.

Finally, I would like to speak about who won the battle. In my point of view, it was Attila, however, his victory was pyrrhic, because he had severe casualties. Despite this, he could recover quickly, and in 452, he conducted a triumphant campaign against Italy. His greatest success was that his army had not been destroyed, and he could return home unharmed after the battle. Although after the siege of Orléans (Aurelianum) the allies could pursue and catch up with Attila's army, they could not beat it, and they returned home with high casualties. Aetius tried to make a new alliance with the Visigoths, however, this collapsed shortly.

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