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Christopher Kelly, *The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009. Pp. x, 350. ISBN 978-0-939-06196-3.

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The End of Empire tells the story of the arrival of the Huns in Europe in the late fourth century AD and their interactions with the Roman Empire over the next century, with a focus on the exploits of Attila. Christopher Kelly (Cambridge), a professional historian of the Roman Empire,¹ wears his scholarship lightly here. The prose style is fluid and footnotes are replaced by invaluable bibliographic chapter notes (293–326). The book is unusual in rewarding professional scholars while remaining accessible to students and the general readers.

Part I, “Before Attila” (five chapters), covers the Huns’ arrival in Europe, with a careful discussion of the scant literary sources, particularly the work of the soldier-turned-historian Ammianus Marcellinus (ca. 325–ca. 395), and an introduction to the relevant archaeology. Part II, “Huns and Romans” (six chapters), deals with Roman imperial politics in the early to mid-fifth century and Roman interactions with the Huns up to 449. Part III, delightfully named “Dinner with Attila” (six chapters), gives a detailed analysis of an embassy to Attila that occurred simultaneously with a Roman attempt to assassinate him. The fourth and last part, “The Failure of Empire” (six chapters), covers the Hun invasions of Gaul in 451 and Italy in 452, Attila’s death, and the dissolution of his empire. The chapter headings are chosen with flair: for example, “Barbarians at the Gates,” “Shock and Awe,” “Mission Impossible.”

Typical of Kelly’s narrative style and his honest assessment of the difficulties posed by the source material is the following, on Attila’s murder of his brother Bleda:

Of Attila’s steady strengthening of his own authority, Roman writers—focused on the wreckage that followed the Huns’ attacks—have almost nothing to say. At some point in the three years after the campaign, Attila decided to challenge Bleda. This may have been a long and bitter struggle.... On the other hand, Bleda could have been unaware that Attila had any intention of ruling alone. Perhaps Bleda—boorish, violent, vulgar—never noticed a thing. Or perhaps Bleda—hearty, hospitable, open-handed—laughingly dismissed the idea that his kid brother was capable of such treachery.... Regrettably, these rivalries cannot be reconstructed.... The detailed stories are lost: the particular circumstances and precise chain of events open to endless speculation. Only one thing is sure: in the brief words of the most reliable Roman account [Count Marcellinus], in 445, three years after Hun troops had returned home from their Danube offensive, “Bleda, king of the Huns, was assassinated as a result of the plots of his brother Attila.” (128–29)

Just why the western Roman Empire fell in the fifth century is a question that has fascinated historians at least since Edward Gibbon published his masterpiece on the subject (1776–88). Every attempt to find the elusive answer to that question teaches us more. In terms of what we know about the Huns, little has changed in the past half century, but, as Kelly shows with this book, our understanding of the world of the late Roman Empire has improved enormously.

Kelly is well aware of what archaeology has taught us in the last fifty years. Finding and dating material from the Hunnic period is easy enough, but determining whether the artifacts were made by Romans or Huns, Goths or Gepids, is a very different matter. Kelly makes good use of the limited evidence, skirting with aplomb the common problem of exaggerating just what the archaeological record tells us. For example, like Otto Maenchen-Helfen,² he categorically (and correctly) rejects any links between the Huns and the Chinese Hsiung-Nu (44).

1. Author of *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2004) and the masterfully succinct *The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2006).

2. See *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*, ed. Max Knight (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1973).

The author particularly excels in sifting the Greek and Latin sources to tell a most compelling story. He astutely capitalizes on the lengthy firsthand account of Priscus of Panium, who accompanied the Roman ambassador Maximinus to Attila's camp on the Great Hungarian Plain in 449 and provides eyewitness testimony of Attila at dinner. Though he was a voluminous writer, Priscus comes to us mostly via an epitome used by the author of the *Suda*, a tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia. Other primary evidence is both scarce and not very good, but Kelly adeptly uses it to sustain a crisp narrative flow in his main text, while offering specialists careful discussions of historical cruxes in his chapter notes.³

Among the book's other distinctions are a careful discrimination of the Huns of the late fourth century from those of the mid-fifth and a perceptive treatment of the reasons for the Huns' initial successes—effective use of the horse and short bow and reliance on terrifyingly unexpected raids and swift retreats. This combination of resources and tactics, not any marked technical superiority in their weapons, was the key to the Huns' victories (39).

Kelly's Attila is an astute observer of the late Roman political scene who ultimately failed to take advantage of that knowledge. Kelly has done the best that can be done with the deficient primary sources to recreate the thinking of Attila and members of the Roman imperial court, as opposed to their recorded public actions. He might, however, have stressed more emphatically the ephemeral nature of Attila's empire, though he makes clear the Hun king's concern for getting all refugees back under his control.⁴

The End of Empire is smoothly written and well proofread. Serviceable maps at the front and adequate halftone images enhance the narrative. Other well-conceived ancillaries include a section, "Ancient Texts" (327–30), detailing primary source editions and a concise "Chronology, AD 375–455" (331–33). The frequent use of medieval illustrations, however, points up one of the problems in writing about the fifth century: far too often, we simply do not have enough evidence to work with. Despite that considerable obstacle, Christopher Kelly has written a superb account of the world of Attila and the Huns, one that now stands first among the standard English-language monographs.⁵

3. Notable is his repeated use of the revisionist chronology (an "elegant solution") presented in Constantin Zuckermann, "L'Empire Orient et les Huns: Notes sur Priscus," *Travaux et Mémoires Byzantines* 12 (1994) 159–82.

4. A lesser flaw is the consistent replacement of "Gaul" with the anachronistic "France."

5. Superseding E.A. Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns* [1948], rev. ed. *The Huns*, ed. Peter Heather (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996) and Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns* (note 2 above).