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The Battle of the Catalaunian Plains

Abstract

In this study I would like to examine the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains. In the first part of my article I will talk about the causes of the campaign of 451; the treachery of Honoria, the Frank succession and the Ostrogothic immigrants in the Visigothic court. Then I will move forward to the campaign, and I will show how the opposing forces manoeuvred, what were their plans, and how they arrived to the place of the battle. Then I will examine the order of the battle, the battle plans, and fight of the forces, which has continued through the night. Then, I will talk about the next couple of days, the sieges of the camps, and the reason why the Romans left the battlefield. Finally, I will finish with my conclusions, the examination of the performance of the military leaders, the losses of the opposing forces, and I will claim the winner in the end of my study.

Keywords: Attila the Hun, Flavius Aetius, Honoria, Gaul, Battle of the Catalaunian Plains

1. The Battle of the Catalaunian Plains

1.1. 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 number one event, which led to the invasion of the Huns. Honoria was a princess, the sister of Valentinian III. We do not know much about her. She was mentioned first by Merobaudes, a Frank general and poet in the Western Roman military. She participated in the wedding of his brother in Constantinople, and she was described as a beautiful woman, who outshone her brother with her beauty.² Her treachery is told in two different stories. The first one was mentioned

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² Frank M. Clover – Flavius Merobaudes: A Translation and Historical Commentary. *Transactions of the American Philological Society*, 61, no. 1 (1971). 1–78.

by Priscus, and it said that she and her lover, Eugenius, also her economic assistant, wanted to overthrow Valentinian. However, this plot was discovered, and Eugenius was executed. She was forced to marry an insignificant senator, named Bassus Herculanus. So she turned to Attila and asked for help.³ However, the other story is much more interesting, it was written by Jordanes in 'Romana'. It said 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. He thought that this was a marriage proposal, and he invaded Gaul. But she could not keep her promise until Attila came to Italy in 452, so she had an affair with Eugenius.⁴ We do not know, which story is true, I think it is the second one. Probably Honoria did not have a problem to marry a common senator. She could give life to a child, and in that time, giving birth to a baby (preferably a son) was the basis 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 give birth to children, so she lost all of her power.

Thus, if the first story was true, and Priscus claimed that she was pregnant,⁵ and she would have given birth to a son, Valentinian had had to give her husband the title of August, which meant co-emperorship. However, Valentinian wanted to avoid this situation. He remembered what had happened, when his father, Constantinus married his mother, and was made co-emperor by Honorius. He did this under pressure, and after Constantinus's death, he forced Galla Placidia to leave the capital, Ravenna, with her family.⁶ So with this move, Valentinian aimed to avoid to name a co-emperor and give Honoria more power than the emperor's. He had two daughters, and was afraid that Honoria could take away all of his power. But Attila used this occasion to launch a campaign against Gaul.

The next reason was the succession crisis in the Frank territory. Priscus said that the king of the Franks was dead, and his sons wanted to become kings. So, the elder one went to Attila and asked for his help, which he got. The younger brother went to Aetius, and did the same. He was so young that according to Priscus he was seen in the imperial court with bumfluff.⁷ He could be in his late teens or early twenties. We do not have much information about this event, and about who the father was, or who his sons were. We have only 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.⁸ 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.⁹ This means that he could not be the younger boy, who was seen by Priscus in the imperial court, because he had to be thirty or forty in 450, so he was not as young as described by the prince.

³ Gyula Lindner: *Hunok és rómaiak. Priskos rhétór összes töredéke* [Huns and Romans. All Fragments of Priscus]. Budapest, Attraktor, 2017. 15.

⁴ Jordanes: *De Summa Temporum Vel Origine Actibusque Gentis Romanorum*. 328.

⁵ Lindner (2017): op. cit. 15.

⁶ Flavius Cassiodorus: *Chronicle*. London, Bouke Procee Publishing, 2014. 49.

⁷ Lindner (2017): op. cit. 41.

⁸ Ian Hughes: *Aetius: Attila's Nemesis*. Barnsley, Pen and Sword, 2012. 215.

⁹ *Fredegar et Allorum Chronica*. Hannover, Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1888. 95.

But who were the two princes? We can find the answer in the Chronicle of Gregory of Tours. He described the lineage of the Frank kings from Clodio to Clodveg. Merovech's son, Childeric gained the throne after Merovech. And 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.¹⁰ This means that Childeric was violent, because he was the conqueror, and he did not receive his position by the support of the Frank noblemen, or by the people, but by an external force, possibly Attila. Because the noblemen of the Franks supported the younger son, and after the battle of the Catalaunian Plains, Attila gave the throne to his favourite.

Eventually, there was another motive behind this campaign, which was found in 'Getica'. I wondered why Attila intended to attack the Visigoths in 451, as there had been little encounter between them previously. The Huns fought against the Visigoths as a mercenary force with the Western Roman Empire under Aetius. They defeated many barbaric nations, such as the Burgundians and the Visigoths,¹¹ under Aetius's general, Litorius. He was a duke in Gaul, which means, he was a border guard commander.¹² He pushed back the Visigoths, who wanted to conquer Arles, with Hunnic mercenary forces. However, he was defeated and executed by the Visigoths. So, why did Attila want to attack them? I found the answer in 'Getica'. According to this book, an Ostrogothic nobleman, a Hunnic vassal named Beremud escaped from the Hunnic rule with his son Vidirich. They left, because it was heard that the Visigothic king Vallia was dead. It was also known, that the Visigoths chose their king from their noblemen, and Beremud thought that he had a great advantage, because he was an Amal prince.¹³ The Amals were the royal house of the Goths, such as the Árpáds to the Hungarians. So Beremud left the Huns to become king of the Visigoths, but they arrived late at the court. Another nobleman named Theodoric was chosen to be king by the Visigoths. Beremud, because he feared for his life, did not tell about his lineage to the Visigoths.

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. The reasons were mostly financial; however, the Huns conducted campaigns also because the eastern court accepted immigrants from the Huns. They could be used against the Hunnic kings as tools for a coup, and the Huns wanted to prevent this. Priscus wrote that Rugila 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 So this reason could be highly possible. Priscus also said that Attila wanted to launch his campaign against Gaul, because he

¹⁰ Gregory of Tours: *History of the Franks: Books I–X*. New York, Fordham University, 2013. Book II, text 12.

¹¹ Richard W. Burgess: *The Chronicle of Hydatius and Consularia Constantinopolitana. Two Contemporary Accounts of the Final Years of the Roman Empire*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993. 93, 95.

¹² Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 177.

¹³ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 174.

¹⁴ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 175.

¹⁵ Lindner (2017): op. cit. 7, 11.

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 hiding immigrants.

1.2. The campaign of Gaul in 451

We do not know exactly when Attila started the preparations for the campaign. He attacked in May 451, so he had had to make these in the second half of 450. Thus, the Huns stacked up provisions, gathered the forces of their vassals, and the chieftains determined the main tasks as well as the roads the military would use. Maybe in March 451, Attila and his forces started their march from the area of modern-day Hungary. They possibly moved up to Vienna and from there they marched to Strasbourg along the Alps. We do not know how many soldiers Attila really had. Ikka Syvanne stated that their numbers reached 400–500,000.¹⁷ However, this number was 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, because he claims 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. And 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's claim that Aetius foresaw the moves 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 realised Attila's plan in the last minute, possibly, because Attila's troops marched along the Alps, which was guarded by watchtowers and little strongholds. One of them could spot the huge Hunnic army and warned Aetius, who rushed to Gaul saving the province. Meanwhile Attila's army arrived at the Rhine River, where his forces crossed with huge boats, which had been created by trees of the Hercynian Forest.²¹

This feat was possibly completed by military engineers or labourers, who were taken from the Roman military manufactures, called *fabricae*. These "factories" were created by Emperor Diocletian in Roman cities, which were positioned next to important

¹⁶ Lindner (2017): op. cit. 31.

¹⁷ Ikka Syvanne: *Military History of Late Rome 425–457*. Barnsley, Pen and Sword Military, 2020. 99–100.

¹⁸ Attila Kiss P.: Germán népek részvétele a hunok hadjárataiban [The Participation of Germanic Peoples in the Campaigns of the Huns]. *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények*, 123, no. 1–2 (2010). 152.

¹⁹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 185.

²⁰ Sidonius Apollinaris: *Poems and Letters*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1963. 146–147.

²¹ Apollinaris (1963): op. cit. 146.

roads and the border areas. They made all kinds of Roman military equipment, mostly shields, swords, armour and siege engines.²² The labourers were considered military personnel, and they were judged by the 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 Divodurum.²⁴ Then, the Huns took Rheims, looted it, and its citizens were murdered along with Saint Nicasius. Then, Attila's forces occupied many other cities like Camaracum,²⁵ Nemetacum²⁶ and Turnacum.²⁷ But how could they take so many cities under such a short time (mostly under days or a week)? There are two answers. First of all, Attila probably divided his army into two. The first one was most likely led by Ardarich, one of his main chieftains. This force marched north from the position of Attila, and occupied the aforementioned cities. Attila led the southern forces, he took Metz and Rheims, then marched to Paris.²⁸ The other answer was given by the fragments of Priscus, because he described the Hunnic siege tactics when he wrote about the siege of Nassius (nowadays Nis).

He said that the Huns first surrounded the walls with towers, which were covered with animal skin that prevented the defenders to burn them down. The towers were not used to climb the walls, instead archers were placed at the top of them, who shot rains of arrows on 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.²⁹ 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 Africa.³⁰ So the walls did not allow their new masters to defend themselves from the Huns. Attila and his other force were united below Paris. The city survived, possibly because it was strategically not important, and he 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*³¹ troops. Sidonius Apollinaris wrote that Aetius's troops were few and ill-equipped.³² At that moment,

²² Conor Whately: *Organisation and Life in the Late Roman Military. A Bibliographic Essay*. In Alexander Sarantis – Christie Neil (eds.): *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity. Current Perspectives*. Boston, Brill Academic Publishers, 2013. 236.

²³ Michael Kulikowski: *Imperial Tragedy. From Constantine's Empire to the Destruction of Roman Italy AD 363–568*. London, Profile Books Ltd., 2019. 14–15.

²⁴ Nowadays it is Metz.

²⁵ Cambrai.

²⁶ Arras.

²⁷ Thomas Hodgkin: *Italy and Her Invaders*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972. 166–118. Nowadays it is Tournai.

²⁸ Syvanne (2020): *op. cit.* 99–100.

²⁹ Lindner (2017): *op. cit.* 10.

³⁰ Alexander Sarantis: *Waging War in Late Antiquity*. In Alexander Sarantis – Christie Neil (eds.): *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity. Current Perspectives*. Boston, Brill Academic Publishers, 2013. 13, 42.

³¹ 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. A. D. Lee: *War in Late Antiquity*. Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 11–13.

³² Apollinaris (1963): *op. cit.* 146.

at the beginning of the 5th century the Roman state was not able to maintain such a huge force. The manpower of the army was fallen expeditiously because of the civil wars between pretenders and the wars of the barbarian invasions.³³ However, the greatest blow was to come from the Vandal king Geiserich, who seized Carthage in 439³⁴ as it was the centre of the Western Roman grain supply.

The Roman state and army 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 the food was growing enormously, so the silver coinage deteriorated.³⁵ 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 trade system. However, when Geiserich captured Carthage, he stopped this system, and the state could not pay the soldiers anymore.³⁶ So the army's manpower shrunk to a minimum level, and 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 for help from king Theodoric. Avitus joined him at the border, because he had raised an army, and waited Attila to attack. However, Avitus could persuade Theodoric to join forces with Aetius.³⁷ How he did this we do not know. Possibly Theodoric realised 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 was 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.³⁸ Nevertheless, Jordanes tells a different story. According to his version, Sangiban, the Alan leader of the city, tried to surrender Orléans to Attila. In spite of this, Aetius realised Sangiban's move, and 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.³⁹ And the allies followed him. In my point of view the second one 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.⁴⁰ Thus, Attila found out that he could not get away, and had to start a battle with the allies. So, he decided that the following day, he would fight on a hilly plain, which nowadays is called Montgueux.

³³ Adrian Goldsworthy: *The Complete Roman Army*. London, Thames and Hudson, 2003. 285.

³⁴ Cassiodorus. *Chronicle*. 51.

³⁵ Kyle Harper: *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2017. 160–199.

³⁶ Kulikowski (2019): op. cit. 204.

³⁷ Apollinaris (1963): op. cit. 147.

³⁸ Hodgkin (1972): op. cit. 119–121.

³⁹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 194.

⁴⁰ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 217.

1.3. 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 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 fall. Attila thought that would be Aetius, so he tried to kill him in the battle.⁴¹ The text later said that it was Theodoric, who died in the battle, and fulfilled the prophecy.⁴² However, the story of the soothsayers could possibly be an invention by Jordanes. Because, in fact, the commander of the Visigothic side was not Theodoric, it was Thorismund. When Jordanes speaks about the Visigothic manoeuvres, he mentions only Thorismund, not Theodoric. Accordingly, when the 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.⁴³ 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, which made sacrifices, because they wanted to know the outcome of the battles ahead.⁴⁴ But why did Thorismund become the general of the Visigoths? Possibly, because Theodoric was old, and probably ill,⁴⁵ so he could not participate in a battle all along.

At three o'clock, the armies started a fight. Jordanes also described 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 himself and his troops. 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's 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 in order to eliminate the Visigothic threat. We know from Jordanes that he placed his elite troops in the centre.⁴⁶ They were not Hunnic nomads, as other sources suggest.⁴⁷ Jordanes described them as Attila's most trusted men, and his elite troops.

⁴¹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 196.

⁴² Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 209.

⁴³ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 201.

⁴⁴ Christopher Kelly: *The End of Empire. Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome*. New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2009. 198.

⁴⁵ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 209.

⁴⁶ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 197.

⁴⁷ For example Simon MacDowell: *Catalaunian Fields AD 451. Rome's Last Great Battle*. New York, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2015. 40; Evan Michael Schultheis: *The Battle of the Catalaunian Fields AD 451. Flavius Aetius, Attila the Hun and the Transformation of Gaul*. South Yorkshire, Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 2019. 72–73.

So, Attila took the centre with his elite troops, possibly with his bodyguard heavy cavalry, and with his most trusted followers, with Edecon⁴⁸ and Laudericus.⁴⁹ 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, 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. He was famed by 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." Which means: "Attila might well trust them to fight against the Visigoths, their kinsmen."⁵⁰ So they were placed on the left flank. (According to many other historical books about this battle, Ardarich was positioned on the right flank.⁵¹) 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.⁵² And what was his plan about the battle? In order to answer this, we have to examine another clash, the battle of Leuctra in 371BC.

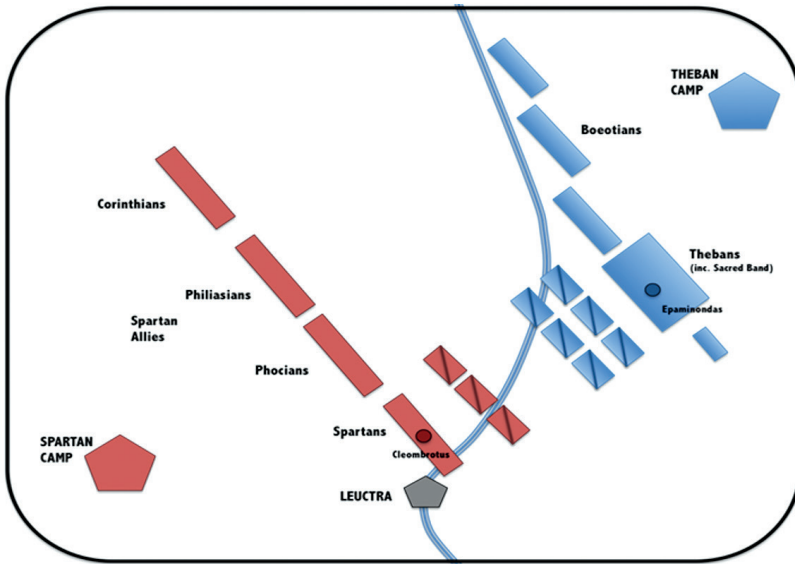


Figure 1: The Battle of Leuctra
 Source: www.vislardica.com/vb-sc-leuctra

⁴⁸ Edecon possibly received this post because he had helped Attila to uncover an assassination attempt that was planned by the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II and Chrysapius, his eunuch (Lindner [2017]: op. cit. 15–36).

⁴⁹ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: *The Gallic Chronicle of 511: Translation and Commentary*. 04 October 2019.

⁵⁰ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 199–200.

⁵¹ For example Hughes (2012): op. cit. 223; Schultheis (2019): op. cit. 72–73; MacDowell (2015): op. cit. 40.

⁵² Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 200.

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 wing 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 by the Ostrogoths, and the Gepids had to keep down the Visigoths from front-wise, and did not let them attack both flanks. Attila's allied troops on the right had to engage the Romans, and did not let them help the Visigoths. So he did not make a plan from fear of Aetius, that was made up by Jordanes and Procopius.⁵⁴

Thus, the battle orders were created. Between them there was a hill, and both armies wanted to seize it first. Attila sent his men to take it, but Aetius and Thorismund made a forced march, and arrived there first.⁵⁵ They drove back Attila's men with rains of arrows and darts, which were taken by the Romans.⁵⁶ Mostly Germanic tribes fought in the battle. They had lots of archers, and they were transported to the battle by horse. 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 wrote that the Goths could be simultaneously archers and infantrymen. As usual, the archers received support from the infantry 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 it. 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, or dismount from their horses, and fight on foot.⁵⁷

As I mentioned in the former section, the Huns were driven back from the hill. They were so disorganised that, according to Jordanes, Attila had to make a speech.⁵⁸ This speech was fabricated, and Jordanes took it possibly from Priscus.⁵⁹ We are not sure about Attila really making this speech. However, I had another clue, which can show what really happened. In his work, Guy Halsall describes one of the battles between Narses, the Byzantine general, and Totila, the Ostrogothic king. Before it started, Totila showed himself before his troops, and made a parade. He tried to

⁵³ István Kertész: *A görög–római harcművészet fejlődése* [The Development of the Greek and Roman Warfare]. Budapest, Zrínyi Kiadó, 2017. 90–91.

⁵⁴ Procopius: *Wars. The Vandal Wars. Book I*. Cambridge, Loeb Classical Library, 1916. Text 4; Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 196.

⁵⁵ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 201.

⁵⁶ Adrian Goldsworthy: *The Fall of the West*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009. 209.

⁵⁷ Guy Halsall: *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West 450–900*. London, Routledge, 2003. 86–198.

⁵⁸ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 202–206.

⁵⁹ Hyun Jin Kim: 'Herodotean' Allusions in Late Antiquity: Priscus, Jordanes, and the Huns. *Byzantion*, 85 (2015). 134–137.

encourage his troops to fight better against the Byzantines.⁶⁰ 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.

Jordanes then continued his text with the description of the battlefield. He wrote 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.⁶¹ 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 continue the fight. At this time, Attila's plan grew ripe. Jordanes goes on saying 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 would 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.⁶² However, Jordanes also wrote that Theodoric 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 because they did not know where he was. They later found him on the hill, under many dead troops, who could be Visigoths, who trampled him, or the soldiers of the enemy.⁶³ So how did Theodoric really die? Possibly in an accident. In my esteem, Theodoric got a stroke during the battle and he fell from his horse. The 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. And 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.

However, at that time the battle reached its turning point. As Jordanes described: "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 plaustris 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."⁶⁴ In other words, against the overwhelming attacks of Attila's men the Visigoths had to form new lines, not to let the Huns destroy their formation. Therefore, the formation stiffened, but this let Attila encircle the Visigoths, and cut

⁶⁰ Halsall (2003): op. cit. 192–193.

⁶¹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 201.

⁶² Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 209.

⁶³ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 214.

⁶⁴ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 210.

them off from the Alans. Thus, Thorismund realised that he could not move with his troops, retreat, or reunite with the Romans. So, he made the best choice he could. He had to kill Attila, because without him his army would have been 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 was mentioned in the Gallic Chronicle of 511.⁶⁵

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 in the right moment made a counter-charge. Jordanes said his companions, which means his bodyguards (only the centre) were pushed back with him.

Hence the Gepids and the Ostrogoths could possibly fight after all, and followed Attila later to his camp. The right flank might also have joined with Attila later. Therefore, the Visigoths, and the Romans launched attacks against Attila's camp. However, they were pushed back, their troops overpowered with arrows. And at the right moment, which came at night⁶⁶ when the allies got confused, the Huns made their counter-charge, and the enemy was scattered. We do not know this exactly, we only had clues about it. Jordanes claimed that both Thorismund and Aetius had been separated from their men.⁶⁷ Thorismund managed to get into the Hunnic camp unwittingly, and he would have been slain, if his bodyguards had not helped him.⁶⁸ 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 own camp. But he was wrong, and almost got killed by the Huns. Aetius was also pushed back from Attila's camp, and he possibly wondered through the enemy's lines.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰

And here comes the interesting part. Jordanes mentioned "socia castrae", which means "allied camp".⁷¹ So there could be a Roman camp in the field. But what happened with 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 camp was because the Roman camp was not secure at all during the night. Thus, he spent a night there, defended by shields.⁷² This means that the Gothic camp also saw a siege through, 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.⁷³

⁶⁵ Jawad Al-Tamimi (2019): op. cit.

⁶⁶ Burgess (1993): op. cit. 179.

⁶⁷ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

⁶⁸ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 211.

⁶⁹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

⁷⁰ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

⁷¹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

⁷² Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

⁷³ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

About this Jordanes suggested that Attila possibly had enough man to continue the battle, and his position was not growing weaker either. We did not know how the allies received this information. Maybe they examined their position, or they caught a prisoner, who talked about Attila and his plan. And Attila also did not feel himself defeated. Jordanes said that he made clash of arms, sounded the trumpets and threatened an attack.⁷⁴ 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. In 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, after Jordanes mentioned that the Huns were hindered from approaching their camp by bowmen.⁷⁵ Thus, they tried to wear him out, and prevent the Huns 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.⁷⁶ However, with these psychological operations Attila not only frightened his enemies, but also made them seek shelter in their camps. Thus, meanwhile 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.⁷⁷ In spite of this, we did not know whether this was true. Because the allied troops could not penetrate the Hunnic camp, they could observe it only from a distance. So it is possible they saw a defensive plank, which had been made by Hunnic saddles. And Jordanes said before, that Attila did not escape without suffering a catastrophe.⁷⁸ After a couple of days, the Visigoths went out looking for Theodoric, because they had not found him in the camp. They asked Thorismund, but he did not know anything about him. So, they were searching for him in the battle area, and found him under lots of corpses.⁷⁹ They buried him on the battlefield, and Jordanes mentioned, that the Huns had seen this.⁸⁰

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, to reconcile with them and made them his ally again.⁸¹ However, this was not the case. When Theodoric started this campaign, he came with two of his sons, Thorismund and Theodoric the younger.⁸² Thorismund was the eldest 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 afterward.

⁷⁴ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

⁷⁵ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 213.

⁷⁶ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 214.

⁷⁷ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 213.

⁷⁸ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 212.

⁷⁹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 214.

⁸⁰ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 215.

⁸¹ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 215–216.

⁸² Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 190.

Where was he all along? The answer is simple. He was left in Orleáns in order to control the traitor Alans, and keep the supply route of the allies safe. Thus, after the battle Aetius realised that the two sons would compete for the throne. If Jordanes was right, Aetius should have kept Thorismund in the camp, and destroy the Huns. Until then Theodoric 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 own 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.⁸³ After that he became certain that the enemy had moved away, and he felt himself victorious, so he departed soon.⁸⁴ He would 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.

2. Conclusion

After the battle, Attila resupplied his army and attacked the Italian Peninsula. Jordanes claims that Attila decided to launch this campaign because he realised that the alliance between Aetius and the Visigoths had broken up.⁸⁵ So he marched his army to Italy and occupied its northern part. The Roman army lost so many men in the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains that they could not defend their homeland. Attila set his course to the south, but Pope Leo stopped him, asked the king to go home, and so he did. Attila made this decision because his army and his horses were struck by malaria, which was bred in the cities of Italy.⁸⁶ In the following year he planned a new campaign. According to Jordanes, he first wanted to attack Marcian and the Eastern Roman Empire, because they did not pay him tribute. However, Jordanes added that he wanted to go also to Gaul, where he was called by the Alans. Besides, the Alans suffered such heavy casualties in the battle that they could not withstand the attack of the Visigoths. Thus, they wanted to find an ally against them, and called Attila in. Jordanes claimed that Attila attacked Gaul, but was defeated again by Thorismund.⁸⁷ This was not true. In my point of view, Attila did not invade Gaul, but he sent them reinforcements, which were beaten by Thorismund. Possibly Attila went there, after his marriage with Ildico. We did not know much about her, apart from that she was a beauty,⁸⁸ although her name could give us a clue about her identity: it means "hildiz",

⁸³ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 218.

⁸⁴ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 219.

⁸⁵ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 219.

⁸⁶ Harper (2017): op. cit. 196.

⁸⁷ Jordanes: *De Origine Actibusque Gothorum*. 225–226; Gregory of Tours: *History of the Franks: Book II*, text 7.

⁸⁸ Lindner (2017): op. cit. 42.

"yildiz", which means "war". At the time of the marriage, there was another war going, the conflict between the Alans and the Visigoths. Thus, she was an Alan princess, who was sent to Attila to pledge the alliance between the Huns and the Alans.

All participants suffered severe losses in the battle. 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, who 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.⁸⁹ Thus, the main forces could resupply their armies and start new campaigns. The Visigoths could beat the Alans, and conquer the area, which had been 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 was described as a terrified military leader, who only wanted to escape in 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 says 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 under 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, a few words about who won the battle. In my point of view, it was Attila, however, his victory was pyrrhic, because he had severe casualties. In spite of 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, the allies could pursue and catch up with Attila's army, they could not beat it, and they went home with high casualties. Aetius tried to make a new alliance with the Visigoths, however, this collapsed shortly.

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⁸⁹ Halsall (2003): op. cit. 247.

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