Attila the Hun and his warriors rose from the plains of Scythia, modern-day southern Russia and Kazakhstan, and spread terror across Europe. The citizens of the weakened Roman Empire gazed in fear and disdain upon these uncouth barbarians with tattooed faces and top-knotted hair. The Christianized Romans could not understand how God could allow these pagans to destroy their once-mighty empire; they called Attila the "Scourge of God." Attila and his troops conquered vast swaths of Europe, from the straits of Constantinople to Paris, and from northern Italy to islands in the Baltic Sea.

Who were the Huns? Who was Attila?

**The Huns Before Attila:**

The Huns first enter the historical record far to the East of Rome. In fact, their ancestors probably were one of the nomadic peoples of the [Mongolian](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/mongolia/p/ProfileMongolia.htm) steppe, whom the Chinese called the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu launched such devastating raids into [China](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/china/p/ChinaProfile.htm) that they actually motivated the construction of first sections of the Great Wall of China. Around 85 A.D., the resurgent Han Chinese were able to inflict heavy defeats on the [Xiongnu](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossarytz/g/xiongnuglos.htm), prompting the nomadic raiders to scatter to the west. Some went as far as Scythia, where they were able to conquer a number of less fearsome tribes. Combined, these peoples became the Huns.

**Uncle Rua Rules the Huns:**

At the time of Attila's birth, c. 406, the Huns were a loosely organized coalition of nomadic herder clans, each with a separate king. In the late 420s, Attila's uncle Rua seized power over all of the Huns and killed the other kings. This political change resulted from the Huns' increasing reliance on tribute and mercenary payments from the Romans, and their decreased dependence on pastoralism. Rua's Huns fought for pay for Rome. He also got 350 lbs of gold in annual tribute from the Eastern Roman Empire based in Constantinople. In a gold-based economy, people did not need to follow the herds; power could be centralized.

**Attila and Bleda's Rise to Power:**

Rua died in 434 - history does not record the cause of death. He was succeeded by his nephews, Bleda and Attila. It's not clear why the older brother Bleda was unable to take sole power. Perhaps Attila was stronger or more popular. The brothers tried to extend their empire into Persia in the late 430s, but were defeated by the Sassanids. They sacked Eastern Roman cities at will, and Constantinople bought peace in exchange for an annual tribute of 700 lbs of gold in 435, rising to 1,400 lbs in 442. Meanwhile, the Huns fought as mercenaries in the Western Roman army against the Burgundians (in 436) and the Goths (in 439).

**The Death of Bleda:**

In 445, Bleda suddenly died. As with Rua, no cause of death is recorded, but Roman sources from that time and modern historians alike believe that Attila probably killed him (or had him killed). As the sole King of the Huns, Attila invaded the Eastern Roman Empire, seizing the Balkans, and threatening earthquake-ravaged Constantinople in 447. The Roman Emperor sued for peace, handing over 6,000 pounds of gold in back-tribute, agreeing to pay 2,100 pounds annually, and returning fugitive Huns who had fled to Constantinople. These Huns were probably the sons or nephews of the kings killed by Rua. Attila had them impaled.

**Romans Try to Assassinate Attila:**

In 449, Constantinople sent an imperial ambassador, Maximinus, supposedly to negotiate with Attila over the creation of a buffer zone between Hunnic and Roman lands, and the return of more refugee Huns. The months-long preparation and journey were recorded by Priscus, an historian who went along. When the gift-laden train of Romans reached Attila's lands, they were rudely rebuffed. The ambassador (and Priscus) did not realize that Vigilas, their interpretor, had really been sent to assassinate Attila, in collusion with Attila's counselor Edeco. Edeco revealed the whole plot, and Attila sent the Romans home in disgrace.

**Honoria's Proposal:**

A year after Attila's not-so-close brush with death, in 450, the Roman princess Honoria sent him a note and a ring. Honoria, the sister of Emperor Valentinian III, had been promised in marriage to a man she didn't like. She wrote and asked Attila to rescue her. Attila interpreted this as a marriage proposal, and happily accepted. Honoria's dowry included half of the provinces in the Western Roman Empire, a very nice prize. The Roman Emperor refused to accept this arrangement, of course, so Attila gathered his army and set out to claim his newest wife. The Huns quickly overran much of modern-day France and Germany.

**Battle of the Catalaunian Fields:**

The Huns' sweep through Gaul was halted at the Catalaunian Fieds, in northeastern France. There, Attila's army ran up against the forces of his former friend and ally, the Roman General Aetius, along with some Alans and Visigoths. Unsettled by ill omens, the Huns waited until almost dusk to attack, and got the worse of the fighting. However, the Romans and their allies withdrew the next day. The battle was not conclusive, but it has been painted as Attila's Waterloo. Some historians even have claimed that Christian Europe might have been extinguished forever if Attila had won that day! The Huns went home to regroup.

**Attila's Invasion of Italy - The Pope Intervenes (?):**

Although he was defeated in France, Attila remained dedicated to marrying Honoria and acquiring her dowry. In 452, the Huns invaded Italy, which was weakened by a two-year long famine and epidemics of disease. They quickly captured fortified cities including Padua and Milan. However, the Huns were dissuaded from attacking Rome itself by the lack of food provisions available, and by the rampant disease all around them. Pope Leo later claimed to have met Attila and persuaded him to turn back, but it's doubtful that this ever really happened. Nonetheless, the story added to the prestige of the early Catholic Church.

**Attila's Mysterious Death:**

After his return from Italy, Attila married a teenaged girl named Ildiko. The marriage took place in 453, and was celebrated with a grand feast and plenty of alcohol. After dinner, the new couple retired to the wedding chamber for the night. Attila did not show up the next morning, so his nervous servants opened the chamber door. The king was dead on the floor (some accounts say "covered with blood"), and his bride was huddled in a corner in a state of shock. Some historians theorize that Ildiko murdered her new husband, but that seems unlikely. He may have suffered a hemorrhage, or he could have died of alcohol poisoning from the wedding night revels.

**Attila's Empire Falls:**

After Attila's death, his three sons divided up the empire (reverting, in a way, to the pre-Uncle Rua political structure). The sons fought over which would be the high king. Eldest brother Ellac prevailed, but meanwhile the Huns' subject tribes broke free from the empire one by one. Only a year after Attila's death, the Goths defeated the Huns at the Battle of Nedao, driving them out of Pannonia (now western Hungary). Ellac was killed in battle, and Attila's second son Dengizich became the high king. Dengizich was determined to return the Hunnic Empire to the glory days. In 469, he sent a demand to Constantinople that the Eastern Roman Empire pay tribute to the Huns again. His younger brother Ernakh refused to get involved in this venture, and took his people out of Dengizich's alliance. The Romans refused Dengizich's demand. Dengizik attacked, and his army was crushed by Byzantine troops under General Anagestes. Dengizik was killed, along with the majority of his people. The remnants of Dengizik's clan joined Ernakh's people, and were absorbed by the Bulgars, ancestors of today's Bulgarians. Just 16 years after Attila's death, the Huns ceased to exist.

**The Legacy of Attila the Hun:**

Attila is often portrayed as a cruel, blood-thirsty and barbaric ruler, but it's important to remember that our accounts of him come from his enemies, the Eastern Romans. The historian Priscus, who went on the fateful embassy to Attila's court, also noted that Attila was wise, merciful, and humble. Priscus was amazed that the Hunnic king used simple wooden table implements, while his courtiers and guests ate and drank from silver and gold dishes. He did not kill the Romans who came to assassinate him, sending them home in disgrace instead. Attila the Hun was a much more complex person than his modern reputation reveals.