## Battle of the Catalaunian Plains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Battle of Châlons</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part of the Hunnic invasion of Gaul</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Huns at the Battle of Chalons*  
by Alphonse de Neuville (1836–85)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>June 20, 451</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Approximately the region of Champagne-Ardenne in the northeastern part of present-day France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Tactically inconclusive; withdrawal of the Huns; Strategic Roman/Visigothic victory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Belligerents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Western Roman Empire (including many Germanic soldiers)[1][2]</th>
<th>Hunnic Empire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visigoths</td>
<td>Ostrogoths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franks</td>
<td>Rugians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burgundians</td>
<td>Sciri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saxons</td>
<td>Thuringians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alans</td>
<td>Bastarnae</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50,000-80,000</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Commanders and leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flavius Aetius</th>
<th>Theodoric†</th>
<th>Merovech[3]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gondioc</td>
<td>Sangiban</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Attila the Hun | Valamir | Ardaric |

### Casualties and losses

| Unknown, but heavy | Unknown |

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[1][2]: [Notes](#)

The Battle of the Catalaunian Plains (or Fields), also called the Battle of Châlons or the Battle of Maurica,[4] took place in AD 451 between a coalition led by the Roman general Flavius Aëtius and the Visigothic king Theodoric I against the Huns and their allies commanded by their leader Attila. It was one of the last major military operations of the Western Roman Empire though Visigothic soldiers also formed the core of the allied Roman army.[5] The battle was a strategic victory for the Romans, stopping the Huns' attempt to conquer Roman Gaul. The Huns were later destroyed by a coalition of Germanic peoples at the Battle of Nedao in 454.

Prelude

By 450 Roman control of Gaul had been restored in much of the province, although control over all of the provinces beyond Italy was continuing to diminish. Armorica was only nominally part of the empire, and Germanic tribes prowling around Roman territory had been forcibly settled and served as foederati under their own leaders. Northern Gaul between the Rhine north of Xanten and Marne rivers (Gallia Belgica) had unofficially been abandoned to the Franks. The line of effective Roman control ran from Cologne to Amiens and to the coast at Boulogne. The Visigoths in Gallia Aquitania were growing restive. The Burgundians in Sapaudia[6] were more submissive, but likewise awaiting openings for revolt. The parts still securely in Roman control were the Mediterranean coastline, a wide band of varying width running from Aurelianum (present-day Orléans) upstream along the Loire as far north as Amiens and one downstream along the Rhône River including the Auvergne, Provence and Languedoc.

The historian Jordanes states that Attila was enticed by the Vandals' king Gaiseric to wage war on the Visigoths. At the same time, Gaiseric would attempt to sow strife between the Visigoths and the Western Roman Empire (Getica 36.184–6).[7]

Other contemporary writers offer different motivations: Honoria, a troublesome sister of the emperor Valentinian III, had been married off to the loyal senator Herculanus a few years before. This kept her in respectable confinement. In 450, she sent a message to the Hunnic king asking for Attila's help in escaping her confinement. She offered her hand in marriage, and half of the empire as dowry. He demanded Honoria to be delivered along with the dowry. Valentinian rejected these demands, and Attila used it as an excuse to launch a destructive campaign through Gaul.[8]
Another possible explanation is that in 449, the King of the Franks, Chlodio, died. Aetius had adopted the younger son of the Franks to secure the Rhine Frontier, and the elder son had fled to the court of Attila.\[9\]

Attila crossed the Rhine early in 451 with his followers and a large number of allies, sacking Divodurum (Metz) on April 7. Other cities attacked can be determined by the hagiographic vitae written to commemorate their bishops: Nicasius was slaughtered before the altar of his church in Rheims; Servatus is alleged to have saved Tongeren with his prayers, as Genevieve is to have saved Paris.\[10\] Lupus, bishop of Troyes, is also credited with saving his city by meeting Attila in person.

Attila's army had reached Aurelianum by June. This fortified city guarded an important crossing over the Loire. According to Jordanes, the Alan king Sangiban, whose foederati realm included Aurelianum, had promised to open the city gates,\[11\] this siege is confirmed by the account of the Vita S. Anianus and in the later account of Gregory of Tours,\[12\] although Sangiban's name does not appear in their accounts. However, the inhabitants of Aurelianum shut their gates against the advancing invaders. Attila began to besiege the city, while he waited for Sangiban to deliver on his promise.

**Battle**

Upon learning of the invasion, the *Magister militum* Flavius Aëtius moved quickly from Italy into Gaul. According to Sidonius Apollinaris, he was leading forth a force consisting of few and sparse auxiliaries without one regular soldier.\[13\] He immediately attempted to convince Theodoric I to join him. The Visigothic king learned how few troops Aëtius had with him and decided it was wiser to wait to oppose the Huns in his own lands. Aëtius turned then to the powerful local magnate Avitus for help, who was not only able to convince Theodoric to join with the Romans, but also a number of other wavering "barbarians" resident in Gaul.\[14\] The combined armies then marched for Aurelianum (Orléans), reaching that city about June 14.

According to the author of the *Vita S. Anianus*, they had reached the besieged Aurelianum literally at the last possible minute. Attila's men had made a breach in the city's walls and had positioned a party within the city. At this very moment, news of an advancing hostile army reached the Huns. They were virtually in control of the city, but to keep it meant to be besieged in it. Hence they broke camp and proceeded back homewards, doubtless looking for an advantageous spot to make a stand. Theodoric and Aëtius followed in close pursuit. The two forces at last met at the Catalaunian Fields on June 20, a date first proposed by J.B. Bury and since accepted by many, although some sources claim September 20.

The night before the main battle, one of the Frankish forces on the Roman side encountered a band of the Gepids loyal to Attila. Jordanes' recorded number of 15,000 dead on either side for this skirmish\[15\] is not verifiable.
In accordance to Hunnic customs, Attila had his diviners examine the entrails of a sacrifice the morning before battle. They foretold disaster would befall the Huns and one of the enemy leaders would be killed. At the risk of his own life and hoping for Aëtius to die, Attila at last gave the orders for combat, but delayed until the ninth hour so the impending sunset would help his troops to flee the battlefield in case of defeat.\[16\]

According to Jordanes, the Catalaunian plain rose on one side by a sharp slope to a ridge. This geographical feature dominated the battlefield and became the center of the battle. The Huns first seized the right side of the ridge, while the Romans seized the left, with the crest unoccupied between them. Jordanes explains that the Visigoths held the right side, the Romans the left, with Sangiban of uncertain loyalty and his Alans surrounded in the middle. The Hunnic forces attempted to take the ridge, but were outstripped by the Romans under Aetius and the Gothic Left flank under Thorismund. The Huns remained unable to take the ridge, but routed the Alans under Sangiban.\[17\]

Theodoric, while leading his own men after the disordered enemy, was killed in the assault without his men noticing. Jordanes states that Theodoric was thrown from his horse and trampled to death by his advancing men, but he also mentions another story that had Theodoric slain by the spear of the Ostrogoth Andag. Since Jordanes served as the notary of Andag's son Gunthigis, even if this latter story is not true, this version was certainly a proud family tradition.\[18\]

The Visigoths outstripped the speed of the Alans beside them and fell upon Attila's own Hunnic household unit. Attila was forced to seek refuge in his own camp, which he had fortified with wagons. The Romano-Gothic charge apparently swept past the Hunnic camp in pursuit; when night fell, Thorismund, son of king Theodoric, returning to friendly lines, mistakenly entered Attila's encampment. There he was wounded in the ensuing mêlée before his followers could rescue him. Darkness also separated Aëtius from his own men. As he feared that disaster had befallen them, he spent the rest of the night with his Gothic allies.\[19\]

On the following day, finding the battlefields "were piled high with bodies and the Huns did not venture forth", the Goths and Romans met to decide their next move. Knowing that Attila was low on provisions and "was hindered from approaching by a shower of arrows placed within the confines of the Roman camp", they started to besiege his camp. In this desperate situation, Attila remained unbowed and "heaped up a funeral pyre of horse saddles, so that if the enemy should attack him, he was determined to cast himself into the flames, that none might have the joy of wounding him and that the lord of so many races might not fall into the hands of his foes".\[20\]

While Attila was trapped in his camp, the Visigoths searched for their missing king and his son Thorismund. After a long search, they found Theodoric's corpse beneath a mound of corpses and bore him away with heroic songs in sight of the enemy. Upon learning of his father's death, Thorismund wanted to assault Attila's camp, but Aëtius dissuaded him. According to Jordanes, Aëtius feared that if the Huns were completely destroyed, the Visigoths would break off their allegiance to the Roman Empire and become an even graver threat. So Aëtius convinced Thorismund to quickly return home and secure the throne for himself, before his brothers could. Otherwise, civil war would ensue among the Visigoths. Thorismund quickly returned to Tolosa (present-day Toulouse) and became king without any resistance. Gregory of Tours (Historia Francorum 2.7) claims Aëtius used the same stratagem to dismiss his Frankish allies, and collected the booty of the battlefield for himself.
Forces

Both armies consisted of combatants from many peoples. Besides the Roman troops, Jordanes lists Aëtius' allies as including (besides the Visigoths) both the Salian and Ripuarian Franks, Sarmatians, Armorican, Liticians, Burgundians, Saxons, librones (whom he describes as "once Roman soldiers and now the flower of the allied forces"), and other Celtic or German tribes.\(^{[21]}\)

Jordanes' list for Attila's allies includes the Gepids under their king Ardaric, as well as an Ostrogothic army led by the brothers Valamir, Theodemir (the father of the later Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great) and Widimer, scions of the Amali.\(^{[22]}\) Sidonius offers a more extensive list of allies: Rugians, Gepids, Gelonians, Burgundians, Sciri, Bellonotians, Neurians, Bastarnae, Thuringians, Bructeri, and Franks living along the Neckar River.\(^{[23]}\) E.A. Thompson expresses his suspicions that some of these names are drawn from literary traditions rather than from the event itself:

*The Bastarnae, Bructeri, Geloni and Neuri had disappeared hundreds of years before the time of the Huns, while the Bellonoti had never existed at all: presumably the learned poet was thinking of the Balloniti, a people invented by Valerius Flaccus nearly four centuries earlier.*\(^{[24]}\)

On the other hand, Thompson believes that the presence of Burgundians on the Hunnic side is credible, noting that a group is documented as remaining east of the Rhine; likewise, he believes that the other peoples Sidonius alone mentions—the Rugians, Scirans and Thuringians—were likely participants in this battle.

However, the number of participants for either side—or in total—is entirely speculative. Jordanes reports the number of dead from this battle as 165,000, excluding the casualties of the Franko-Gepid skirmish previous to the main battle. Hydatius, a historian who lived at the time of Attila's invasion, reports the number of 300,000 dead. No primary source offers an estimate for the number of participants.

The figures of both Jordanes and Hydatius are implausibly high. Thompson remarks in a footnote, "I doubt that Attila could have fed an army of even 30,000 men." As a reference, in the early 3rd century, the Roman Empire maintained thirty three legions with just under 5,200 actual men for each legion with the total of 171,600 soldiers; if we follow the general assumption that the number of auxiliaries matched the number of legionaries, then add the Praetorian Guard as 15,000 strong, and six Urban Cohorts which totalled 9,000, we find that the Empire at its height fielded a grand total of 395,000 soldiers across its territories. However in the early 3rd century the number of auxiliaries was larger than legionaries by 50,000, and the figures given by Thompson do not include men in the navy.

Harl in Coinage in the Roman Economy gives the estimates on page 231 as 481,000. There are many estimates of the size of the armed forced under Diocletian that range between 389,000 to 645,000 (Agathias). The point is that the regular Roman army in 450 A.D. in the West was run down to half its size 50 years previously.\(^{[25]}\)

A better sense of the size of the forces may be found in the study of the *Notitia Dignitatum* by A.H.M. Jones. This document is a list of officials and military units that was last updated in the first decades of the 5th century. *Notitia Dignitatum* lists 58 various regular units, and 33 *limitanei* serving either in the Gallic provinces or on the frontiers nearby; the total of these units, based on Jones analysis, is 34,000 for the regular units and 11,500 for the *limitanei*, or just under 46,000 all told. However, this figure is the estimate for the year 425 A.D. The regular Roman field army present at the battle may have numbered around 22,500 men if one accounts for paper strength, attrition, and other factors. The federates would have been far greater in number, possibly between 20,000 and 50,000 men. While the Roman forces in Gaul had become much smaller by this time, if we accept this number as the total of all of the forces fighting with Theodoric and Aëtius, one should not be too far off. Assuming that the Hunnic forces were roughly the same size as the Romano-Gothic, the number involved in battle is around 100,000 combatants in total. This excludes the inevitable servants and camp followers who usually escape mention.
Site of the Catalaunian Fields

The actual location of the Catalaunian Fields is unclear: Historian Thomas Hodgkin located the site near Méry-sur-Seine,[26] but current consensus[citation needed] places the battlefield at Châlons-en-Champagne.

In 1842, a labourer uncovered a burial at Pouan-les-Vallées (Aube), a village on the south bank of the Aube River, that consisted of a skeleton with a number of jewels and gold ornaments and buried with two swords; by the nature of its grave goods, it was determined that this elite burial was that of a princely Germanic warrior who had lived in the 5th century. The Treasure of Pouan is conserved in the Musée Saint-Loup (Musée d'Art d'Archéologie et de Sciences Naturelles), Troyes.

The archaeologist who described this find, Achille Peigné-Delacourt (1797–1881), claimed that these were the remains of Theodoric, but twentieth-century historiansWikipedia:Avoid weasel words generally have expressed their scepticism over this identification[citation needed].

Historical importance

Traditional view: The battle was of macro-historical importance

This battle, especially since Edward Gibbon addressed it in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and Sir Edward Creasy wrote his The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World, has been considered by many historians to be one of the most important battles of Late Antiquity, at least in the Latin-speaking world.

Creasy quoted Herbert's Attila[27] concerning this battle:

*The discomfiture of the mighty attempt of Attila to found a new anti-Christian dynasty upon the wreck of the temporal power of Rome, at the end of the term of twelve hundred years, to which its duration had been limited by the forebodings of the heathen.*

Creasy also stated:

*Attila's attacks on the Western empire were soon renewed, but never with such peril to the civilized world as had menaced it before his defeat at Châlons; and on his death, two years after that battle, the vast empire which his genius had founded was soon dissevered by the successful revolts of the subject nations. The name of the Huns ceased for some centuries to inspire terror in Western Europe, and their ascendancy passed away with the life of the great king by whom it had been so fearfully augmented.*

John Julius Norwich, the historian known for his works on Venice and on Byzantium, said of the battle of Chalons:

*It should never be forgotten that in the summer of 451 and again in 452, the whole fate of western civilization hung in the balance. Had the Hunnish army not been halted in these two successive campaigns, had its leader toppled Valentinian from his throne and set up his own capital at Ravenna or Rome, there is little doubt that both Gaul and Italy would have been reduced to spiritual and cultural deserts.*

He goes on to say that though the battle in 451 was "indecisive insofar as both sides sustained immense losses and neither was left master of the field, it had the effect of halting the Huns' advance."[28]

There are a couple of reasons why this combat has kept its epic importance down the centuries. One is that —ignoring the Battle of Qarqar (Karkar), which was forgotten at this time— this was the first significant conflict that involved large alliances on both sides. No single nation dominated either side; rather, two alliances met and fought in surprising coordination for the time. Arthur Ferrill, addressing this issue, goes on to say:

*After he secured the Rhine, Attila moved into central Gaul and put Orleans under siege. Had he gained his objective, he would have been in a strong position to subdue the Visigoths in Aquitaine, but Aëtius had put together a formidable coalition against the Hun. Working frenetically, the Roman leader had built a powerful alliance of Visigoths, Alans and Burgundians, uniting them with their traditional*
enemy, the Romans, for the defense of Gaul. Even though all parties to the protection of the Western Roman Empire had a common hatred of the Huns, it was still a remarkable achievement on Aëtius' part to have drawn them into an effective military relationship.

Addressing Attila's fearsome reputation, and the importance of this battle, Gibbon noted that it was from his enemies we hear of his terrible deeds, not from friendly chroniclers, emphasizing that the former had no reason to elevate Attila's reign of terror, and the importance of the Battle of Chalons in proving Attila to be defeatable.

**Opposing view: The battle was not of macro-historical importance**

However, J.B. Bury expresses a quite different judgement:

> The battle of Maurica was a battle of nations, but its significance has been enormously exaggerated in conventional history. It cannot in any reasonable sense be designated as one of the critical battles of the world. The Gallic campaign had really been decided by the strategic success of the allies in cutting off Attila from Orleans. The battle was fought when he was in full retreat, and its value lay in damaging his prestige as an invincible conqueror, in weakening his forces, and in hindering him from extending the range of his ravages.\[29\]

The number of combatants, while not as small as many conflicts over the following centuries, is not large compared to the entire forces of the Roman empire. And it did not halt Attila's campaign against the Roman Empire: the following year a weakened Attila invaded Italy, and caused much destruction, only ending his campaign after Pope Leo I met with him at a ford of the river Mincio. It was only after Attila's sudden death in 453, and after the divided and competing Hunnic forces fell upon each other at the Battle of Nedao in the following year, that the Huns vanished as a threat to Europe.

Further, following this victory the Roman Empire did not emerge with renewed military might, but instead was likewise weakened, though more slowly than the Huns: despite the assassinations of first Aëtius, then Emperor Valentinian III, then the Sack of Rome by Geiseric in 455, a generation later there were still sufficient useful remains of the Western Roman Empire for the warlords to fight over. As Bury further observes:

> If Attila had been victorious, if he had defeated the Romans and the Goths at Orleans, if he had held Gaul at his mercy and had translated — and we have no evidence that this was his design — the seat of his government and the abode of his people from the Theiss to the Seine or the Loire, there is no reason to suppose that the course of history would have been seriously altered. For the rule of the Huns in Gaul could only have been a matter of a year or two; it could not have survived here, any more than it survived in Hungary, the death of the great king, on whose brains and personal character it depended. Without depreciating the achievement of Aëtius and Theoderic we must recognise that at worst the danger they averted was of a totally different order from the issues which were at stake on the fields of Plataea and the Metaurus. If Attila had succeeded in his campaign, he would probably have been able to compel the surrender of Honoria, and if a son had been born of their marriage and proclaimed Augustus in Gaul, the Hun might have been able to exercise considerable influence on the fortunes of that country; but that influence would probably not have been anti-Roman.\[30\]

It is highly notable that Bury, who does not believe the Battle of Chalons to be of macrohistorical importance, characterizes Aëtius' rule thus: "From the end of the regency to his own death, Aëtius was master of the Empire in the west, and it must be imputed to his policy and arms that Imperial rule did not break down in all the provinces by the middle of the fifth century." Bury goes on to say, after noting that the emperor had cut off his right hand with his left by murdering the only man who held the dying empire together, "Who was now to save Italy from the Vandals?" Bury made clear that there was no one capable of taking Aëtius' place.

Several other respected historians\[31\] have similar views.
Aftermath and reputation of the battle

"Cadavera vero innumera," the Romans said afterwards: "Truly countless bodies!"

Gibbon succinctly states:

Attila's retreat across the Rhine confessed the last victory which was achieved in the name of the Western Roman Empire.\[32\]

The following year, Attila renewed his claims to Honoria and territory in the Western Roman Empire. Leading his troops across the Alps and into Northern Italy, he conquered the cities of Aquileia, Vicetia, Verona, Brixia, Bergomum and Milan. Finally, at the very gates of Rome, he turned his army back only after negotiating with the pope.

Another reason the ferocity of this campaign left a deep impression upon its contemporaries is that not only did Attila savage much of Europe in a manner unrepeated for centuries, but the battle acquired a reputation for carnage almost immediately. Considering the extravagant totals for casualties, Gibbon remarked that they "suppose a real and effective loss, sufficient to justify the historian's remark that whole generations may be swept away by the madness of kings in a single hour".\[33\]

Two contemporary descriptions survive showing that this battle had an unparalleled reputation for its carnage. The first is from Jordanes:

For, if we may believe our elders, a brook flowing between low banks through the plain was greatly increased by blood of the slain. It was not flooded by showers, as brooks usually rise, but was swollen by a strange stream and turned into a torrent by the increase of blood. Those whose wounds drove them to slake their parching thirst drank water mingled in gore. In their wretched plight they were forced to drink what they thought was the blood they had poured from their own wounds.\[34\]

The second comes from the philosopher Damascius, who not many years afterwards heard that the fighting was so severe "that no one survived except only the leaders on either side and a few followers: but the ghosts of those who fell continued the struggle for three whole days and nights as violently as if they had been alive; the clash of their arms was clearly audible."\[35\]

A further reason for the reputation of this battle is that it was the first major battle since the death of Constantine I where a predominantly Christian force faced a predominantly pagan opponent. This factor was very much apparent to the contemporaries, who often mention prayer playing a factor in this battle (e.g., Gregory of Tours' story of the prayers of Aëtius' wife saving the Roman's life in Historia Francorum 2.7).

Notes


[7] The Getica (or 'Gothic History'), our principal source for this battle, is the work of Jordanes, who acknowledges that his work is based on Cassiodorus' own Gothic History, written between 526 and 533. However, the philologist Theodor Mommsen argued that Jordanes' detailed description of the battle was copied from lost writings of the Greek historian Priscus. It is available in an English translation by Charles Christopher Mierow, The Gothic History of Jordanes (Cambridge: Speculum Historiale, 1966, a reprint of the 1915 second edition); all quotations of Jordanes are taken from this edition, which is in the public domain.
A modern narrative based these sources can be found in E.A. Thompson, *The Huns* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 144–48. This is a posthumous revision by Peter Heather of Thompson's *A History of Attila and the Huns*, originally published in 1948.

Ian Hughes, *Aetius: Attila's Nemesis* pg. 151

The *vitae* are summarized in.

Getica 36.194f.

*Historia Francorum* 2.7.


Getica 41.217

Getica 37.196

Getica 38.

Getica 40.209.

Getica 40.209–12.

Getica 40.213.

Getica 36.191.

Getica 38.199f


E.A. Thompson, *The Huns*, p. 149.

This figure is based on a similar calculation in.


Bury, *The Later Roman Empire*, pp. 294f.


Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library), volume II, p. 1089.

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, volume II, p.285

Getica 40.208.

Quoted in Thompson, *The Huns*, p.155

**Further reading**


**External links**

- History of the Later Roman Empire (1923) (http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/home.html) at LacusCurtius
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