

Medieval Sourcebook: Priscus on Attila the Hun 448

Priscus describes the court of Attila king of the Huns (448)

The Greek writer Priscus actually visited the Huns and conversed with Attila. He received a very different impression of the people from the fearsome pictures given earlier by Ammianus Marcellinus. We may however infer that the Huns had been a good deal changed by their contact with the European peoples. Priscus and a companion, Maxim, were sent by the Roman government with messages to Attila in 448. Priscus first tells of their long journey from Constantinople to Scythia, the territory then occupied by the Huns north of the lower Danube. After some difficulty the messengers obtained a first interview with Attila. Then, as the king of the Huns was about to move northward, he and his companion determined to follow him. After describing the incidents of their journey and their arrival at a large village, Priscus continues:

Attila's residence, which was situated here, was said to be more splendid than his houses in other places. It was made of polished boards, and surrounded with wooden enclosures, designed not so much for protection as for appearance' sake. The house of the chieftain Onegesius was second only to the king's in splendor and was also encircled with a wooden enclosure, but it was not adorned with towers like that of the king. Not far from the inclosure was a large bath built by Onegesius, who was the second in power among the Scythians. The stones for this bath had been brought from Pannonia, for the barbarians in this district had no stones or trees, but used imported material....

The next day I entered the enclosure of Attila's palace, bearing gifts to his wife, whose name was Kreka. She had three sons, of whom the eldest governed the Acatiri and the other nations who dwell in Pontic Scythia. Within the inclosures were numerous buildings, some of carved boards beautifully fitted together, others of straight planed beams, without carving, fastened on round wooden blocks which rose to a moderate height from the ground. Attila's wife lived here; and, having been admitted by the barbarians at the door, I found her reclining on a soft couch. The floor of the room was covered with woolen mats for walking on. A number of servants stood round her, and maids sitting on the floor in front of her embroidered with colors linen cloths intended to be placed over the Scythian dress for ornament. Having approached, saluted her, and presented-the gifts, I went out and walked to the other houses, where Attila was, and waited for Onegesius, who, as I knew, was with Attila. . . .

I saw a number of people advancing, and a great commotion and noise, Attila's egress being expected. And he came forth from the house with a dignified strut, looking round on this side and on that. He was accompanied by Onegesius, and stood in front of the house; and many persons who had lawsuits with one another came up and received his judgment. Then he returned into the house and received ambassadors of barbarous peoples. . . .

[We were invited to a banquet with Attila at three o'clock] When the hour arrived we went to the palace, along with the embassy from the western Romans, and stood on the threshold of the hall in the presence of Attila.

The cupbearers gave us a cup, according to the national custom, that we might pray before we sat down. Having tasted the cup, we proceeded to take our seats, all the chairs being ranged along the walls of the room on either side. Attila sat in the middle on a couch ; a second couch was set behind him, and from it steps led up to his bed, which was covered with linen sheets and wrought coverlets for ornament, such as Greeks and Romans used to deck bridal beds. The places on the right of Attila were held chief in honor - those on the left, where we sat, were only second. . . .

[First the king and his guests pledged one another with the wine.] When this ceremony was over the cupbearers retired, and tables, large enough for three or four, or even more, to sit at, were placed next the table of Attila, so that each could take of the food on the dishes without leaving his seat. The attendant of Attila first entered with a dish of meat, and behind him came the other attendants with bread and viands, which they laid on the tables. A luxurious meal, served on silver plate, had been made ready for us and the barbarian guests, but Attila ate nothing but meat on a wooden trencher. In everything else, too, he showed himself temperate - his cup was of wood, while to the guests were given goblets of gold and silver. His dress, too, was quite simple, affecting only to be clean. The sword he carried at his side, the ratchets of his Scythian shoes, the bridle of his horse were not adorned, like those of the other Scythians, with gold or gems or anything costly.

When the viands of the first course had been consumed, we all stood up, and did not resume our seats until each one, in the order before observed, drank to the health of Attila in the goblet of wine presented to him. We then sat down, and a second dish was placed on each table with eatables of another kind. After this course the same ceremony was observed as after the first, When evening fell torches were lit, and two barbarians coming forward in front of Attila sang sons they had composed, celebrating his victories and deeds of valor in war.

From the account left by Priscus, translated in J. H. Robinson, *Readings in European History*, (Boston: Ginn, 1905), pp. 46-49

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