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# Priscus at the Court of Atilla: Unveiling Hunnic Dynamics

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**Abstract**

This paper examines and reevaluates the lasting impacts of Priscus of Panium's eyewitness account of his ambassadorial trip to Atilla the Hun in 449 CE, dubbed *Priscus at the Court of Attila.* Through meticulous analysis, this paper attempts to contextualize the presence and military movements of Huns across Europe based on Priscus' original work. I clarify that Atilla's encampment was in Wallachia while detailing the location's significance and the significance of Hunnic military movements in Media. Moving forward, I use Priscus' work as a tool to observe the social norms of Byzantium and Scythia ranging from things like their female beauty standard to their court rituals. Additionally, Priscus' writings motivate an exploration of the economic motivations behind Hunnic actions, helping to explain an attempt at a possible shift in the Hun economy away from plundering to a focus on tribute. Furthermore, Priscus' observations of Hunnic diplomatic behavior offer crucial insights into the complexity of the Hunnic political vision. By utilizing Priscus' work and its impacts, the paper attempts to challenge the notion of the Huns as uncivilized and offers a nuanced understanding of their culture.

**Introduction**

Priscus of Pannium's work dubbed *Priscus at the Court of Attila* by later historians stands as an invaluable testament to a critical juncture in Byzantine history. It details Priscus' ambassadorial trip to visit Atilla the Hun in 449 CE[1] and was part of the larger work of an unknown name. However, Priscus' work is frequently referred to as *Byzantine History* by the *Suda,* a work heavily citing Priscus.[2] Most of Priscus' *History of Byzantium* has been lost over time, leaving only fragments of his work behind. Priscus' work recounting his time with Atilla during his ambassadorial trip survived and became one of the earliest histories about Atilla the Hun, an enigmatic figure in history who has had a lasting effect on its annals. Priscus' work has been heavily cited by various historians across several time periods, making it a foundational cornerstone to the building of the history of the Huns. **The major impact of Priscus' work is its use in contextualizing Hunnic migrations, and military patterns, elaborating on Byzantine and Hunnic cultural distinctions, and foreign relations, and being the origin point for the diffusion of stigma of the Huns.** Priscus, through his writing, has preserved an invaluable chapter of Byzantine diplomacy. His work shaped our understanding of an era where East met West, the civilized met the seemingly barbaric, leading to a volatile theater of international relations.

**Contextualizing Priscus and Byzantium**

To best understand Priscus' work it's vital to understand both the world in which Priscus wrote his work and Priscus himself. Priscus of Panium was born around 420 CE in Panium, a city in Thrace which was a Greek portion of the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantine Empire

(330-1453 CE).[3] Thrace was in close proximity to Constantinople, the capital city and beating heart of Byzantium. Priscus exemplifies the quintessential Byzantine citizen—educated, well-versed in law, philosophy, and rhetoric, and deeply rooted in the Hellenistic cultural ethos of the Eastern Roman Empire. Priscus originally wrote his *History of Byzantium* in Greek which shows how he bought into the Hellenic culture of Byzantium. Priscus also spoke Greek and honored its culture while still being a devout Christian, which places him squarely in the middle of the beliefs that characterized the Byzantine Empire.[4] Priscus was like a Rhetorician or Sophist as that is the job he is described to have had in the *Suda* and other important early works citing him. His success as a Sophist, however, is unclear. It is clear though that Priscus was skilled enough to draw the attention of Maximinus, who would invite Priscus to join the envoy to Atilla initially. Moreover, Priscus would even play a role in the writing of the Theodosian Code.[5] Priscus' interest in Roman law is evident in his studying of Roman law and defending it in his work. All in all, Priscus was a figure who fit nicely into the cultural landscape of Byzantium with his education, religious beliefs, and interest in Hellenistic culture.

The Byzantine Empire was a cosmopolitan society characterized by its focus on Greek culture and language, Roman political tradition, and Christian beliefs creating a distinctive amalgamation of old and new. This dynamic empire absorbed influences from the Eastern and Western realms, resulting in a unique cultural environment. The onset of Eastern influence unfolded notably, when Constantine I ushered Christianity into the empire, a transformative shift leading to Christianity gradually growing into the primary religion of the empire. As this empire evolved, so did its enemies with the presence of highly organized and powerful barbarian peoples challenging their rule. The reigns of 395-527 CE consisted of Visgoth invasions under Alaric I, Hun invasions under Atilla, and invasions from Slavs, Bulgars, Persians, and Avars.[6] The Huns of Scythia, however, instilled a particular dread in the Roman people. The Hunnic king Rugilia in 422 CE attacked Byzantium under Theodosius II's rule and compelled the empire to pay tribute. Tribute obligations to the Huns continued without a hitch for several years until two major events happened: Rugilia died leaving his empire to eventually fall into Atilla's hands in 447 CE and revolts across the Byzantine Empire forcing Theodosius II to stop tribute payments. Atilla had recently won several battles north of the Danube River, gaining more territory near Constantinople and becoming too powerful to ignore. Atilla's growing presence motivates

Theodosius II to resume tribute obligations which is the assumed purpose of the Eastern Romans during Priscus' envoy to Atilla.[7]

**Priscus' Embassy to Atilla**

While negotiation of a tribute obligation may have been the official purpose of Priscus' diplomatic mission, there was a far more nefarious plot brewing beneath the surface. In R.C. Blokey's translation, Priscus' account begins with Edeco, a Scythian ambassador bearing letters from Atilla for Theodosius II. Attila's letters explain the threat of war with Rome if they did not return his Hunnic fugitives, and if the Romans continued to farm the land close to the River Sava which had recently came under Atilla's rule after a treaty was crafted and signed by Aetius, a Western Roman general. Moreover, Atilla ordered that high-ranking Byzantine ambassadors come to him. Hearing Atilla's letters, Chrysaphius, a eunuch and advisor to Theodosius II suggested to Edeco that if Edeco killed Atilla he would be given a luxurious lifestyle in Rome and 50 pounds of gold. Edeco seemingly agreed and everyone present for the conversation was sworn to secrecy. Including Chrysaphius, Priscus, and Vigilias. Edeco would later be paid and they would meet with Maximinus, a Roman elite, and then journey to Serdica to meet Atilla's envoy.

They continued their travels, met Atilla's envoy, and had dinner with them, following dinner, the situation escalated quickly. Someone made a comment saying it was unfair to compare Theodosius II and Atilla because one is a man (Atilla) and the other is a God (Theodosius II). This angered the Scythians but Priscus and Maximinus found a way to de-escalate the situation by offering gifts. They reach Naissus where they meet Agintheus, the leader of the Illyrian armies, who permits them to continue to Atilla despite them not having all the deserters Atilla wanted. However, once they reach Atilla's camp, he sends a messenger telling them he won't meet them until they bring him all the deserters he wants. With the embassy feeling dejected, Priscus manipulates Scottas, a Hun noble and they meet with Atilla. After a short conversation with Atilla, Attila insults Vigilias "....calling him a shameless beast…"[8] and orders him to return to Rome and fetch his deserters.

This is notable because Attila is said to have been respectful to Vigilias in particular on previous ambassadorial trips. The meeting ends and Priscus talks to Viglias about Atilla's comment. Priscus thinks it's because someone leaked the assassination plot to Atilla. They conclude that Edeco leaked the plans because he either was afraid to follow through with it, or he

had intended to betray them from the beginning. Later, Edeco talks to Vigilias expressing that his gold payment should be given to those who help him in the attempt on Atilla. Edeco then returns the gold to Vigilias after informing him who he should pay. Edeco departs and the Scythians tell the ambassadors that they aren't allowed to spend money on anything but food. This essentially traps Vigilias because he now has no excuse to pay someone to help him kill Atilla as Edeco suggested. Then, Vigilias leaves on the pretext that he is going to get the deserters but it's likely he was trying to find Edeco. It's unclear whether Edeco betrayed the Romans or not but Priscus and Vigilias seemed to have thought so.

Later, they travel again with Atilla and reach a Scythian village where they meet the Western Roman ambassadors Romulus, Romanus, and Promotus. Priscus talks with the Western Roman ambassadors and they discuss the purpose of the Western Roman embassy. They were trying to get Atilla to stop threatening war over Silvanus' life. Silvanus had bought Atilla's golden plates from a Hun deserter and sold them to priests in Rome. Attila was threatening war if they didn't give up Silvanus or the plates. The Emperor of Western Rome didn't want to give up Silvanus who was under his protection and offered the plates value in gold to Atilla because they were now owned by priests meaning the Emperor couldn't take them.

Later, Priscus and company travel with Atilla to a new village where Atilla is greeted by his attendants and women bearing meat and wine. Then, Priscus is said to meet a Greek prisoner of war from Viminacium who was now a follower of Onegesius. They immediately debate whether it's better to live under Scythians/Huns or Romans. After a short debate, the Greek trader is said to burst into tears to admit Priscus' victory.

After the debate, Onegesius, a Hun noble, meets with Priscus and Maximinus. Onegesius agrees to help the Byzantine Romans persuade Atilla to not attack Byzantium if they stay loyal to Atilla. The next day the embassy goes to Atilla's wooden palace and gives gifts to his wife. Then, Attila meets with the Western Romans. He tells them they either give up the plates or Silvanus or there will be war.

Priscus asks the Romans about their conversation with Atilla, but they eventually change the subject to Persia and the Huns. The ambassadors speak of the Hunnic invasion of Persian Media. The Huns plundered the land but were forced to retreat by the Persians. Priscus asserts that Attila would take all the Sassanid territories if he were to confront the Sasanians/Persians, and he prayed Attila would destroy the Sasanians. Later, Priscus included the opinion of his

companion, Constantiolus who said that if Attila destroyed the Sasanians, he would be more powerful than the Romans. Thus the Romans would have a larger problem on their hands.[9]

Blokey's translation ends with Priscus' comments on the Persians but a separate translation by J.B. Bury of *Fragmenta historicorum graecorum* further details Priscus trip. It details Priscus and the other ambassadors going to Atilla's banquet. Priscus describes the customs of the banquet and the social order represented by the seating arrangement and cup-bearing ceremony. They remain at the banquet for a while but leave after not wanting to drink too much.[10] It's unclear what happens next or before the start of this account due to Priscus' original work being lost, leaving us only with excerpts. We do know the goal of a tribute negotiation was successful. Theodosius II agreed to pay a tribute larger than the previous agreement but the exact number is unknown. Theodosius II also agreed to cede land ranging from 300 miles east of Singidunum to 100 miles south of the Danube.[11]

We also know that in Jordanes' *Getica,* Jordanes cites Priscus' work when describing the circumstances of Atilla's death. He says that Priscus said Atilla died in 453 AD after marrying Ildico. He is said to choke on his blood while drunk in bed. Priscus suggests he burst a blood vessel in his neck from excessive alcohol consumption, but the truth of his death is still unclear.[12]

**Impacts of Priscus' Work: Hunnic Placement**

Priscus' writing gives us the ability to map out where the Huns were located throughout their history. This allows historians to explain the Hun's military movements based on where they were located in their lands. Specifically, Atilla's location is particularly important. Atilla would provide military leadership to his army making it necessary for him to be close to any battle his people waged. This means that his location can provide insights into where his armies were currently fighting or planned to attack in the future.

Many historians believed that Atilla's encampment was somewhere in the Hungarian Plain but Priscus' work provides information to make us believe otherwise. One reason why Atilla was not present in the Hungarian Plain during Priscus' diplomatic mission, is that Priscus only mentions passing through Serdica and Naissus on his way to see Atilla. The issue with this is if Atilla was in the Hungarian plain, it makes it seem as though Priscus traveled from Serdica directly to Atilla's camp in the Hungarian plain without stopping or passing through any major towns, or he simply omitted passing through major cities. Both of these possibilities are equally unlikely based on physical restraints and Priscus' habits as a narrator. Furthermore, the place the

embassy is said to cross the Danube would line up better if they were traveling to Wallachia rather than the Hungarian plain. Moreover, the similarities of Priscus' depiction of Atilla's camp with the topography of Wallachia further support the argument that Atilla was stationed in that region. All of this information leads us to believe Atilla was stationed in Wallachia, not the Hungarian Plain at the time of the embassy.[13]

The knowledge of Atilla's location at this time is important because it grants us insight into their movements. Atilla's presence in Wallachia means he was closer to the eastern half of his empire and better suited to mount an attack on that border. He would no longer be cut off by the Carpathian mountain range like he would be if he were stationed in the Hungarian plain. The Carpathian mountain range would have also posed a navigational issue for his army of horseback warriors if they were to attack the eastern portion of his empire due to them having to traverse it before going to battle. Their placement even convinced Romulus, the envoy of the Western Romans whom Priscus met at the Hun court, that Attila was likely to attack Persia through the Caucasus shortly.[14] Albeit it's possible Romulus had a bias in the matter, hoping for Atilla to attack Persia to knock off one of Western Rome's major enemies. This desire for Persia's destruction would make him more likely to claim Atilla was about to attack. However, a small Hunnic force had recently invaded Media, a Persian territory, but the Persians repelled the Huns. Hunnic presence in Media was confirmed when Priscus recorded Romulus saying the Huns had just plundered Media.[15] This invasion does support a Hunnic interest in Persia. Even though both Romulus and Priscus could have been biased in their certainty that Atilla would attack Persia, the invasion of Media, their certainty, and Atilla's place in Wallachia supported this conclusion. Surprisingly, the Huns refrained from launching a subsequent invasion of Persia after their initial invasion of Media. The Huns and Atilla turned their focus back towards the West and in 451 CE invaded Gaul in the battle of Catalaunian Plains which spelled his eventual defeat.[16] Priscus' work gives us evidence to conclude that Atilla didn't attack because he wasn't positioned incorrectly but because of some other unknown reason that motivated him to return to the West and not attack Persia.

Priscus' work also can confirm Hunnic movements to Scandinavia which have long been debated.[17] This confirmation is via Romulus mentioning Atilla had supremacy in the "the (Northern) islands of the Ocean…".[18] This evidence along with Hunnic-style earrings and gold hordes being found in Denmark confirms Hunnic presence in Scandinavia, which also explains

the growth of shamanism and animal idols in Denmark during the 5th century CE. The Huns were shamanistic people so shamanism's growth in Scandinavia, one of their new territories, makes sense.

Additionally, there is a distinct focus on mounted warriors in 5th-century Scandinavia that is also likely a result of Hunnic influence. Priscus' work not only provides evidence to help confirm the Hunnic presence in Scandinavia and explains the development and growth of shamanism and mounted warfare. These developments were a major shift that led to the creation of a distinct Scandinavian identity that had parallels to the barbarians of their time.[19] Priscus' records played a vital role in helping historians trace the Hunnic people's movements across Eurasia, thereby offering contextual insights into various historical developments.

**Impacts of Priscus' Work: Social Outlining**

Priscus' writing also gives us information about Hunnic customs which can help us better understand who the Huns were as a civilization. Throughout Priscus' work, we see the focus on sexual favors as a gift or sign of respect in Hunnic society. This is first seen when Priscus and company enter a Scythian village and they mention "the women who ruled the village sent us food and attractive women for intercourse, which is a mark of honor amongst Scythians. We plied the women generously from the foods placed before us but refused intercourse with them".[20] This is noteworthy because the embassy's lack of interest in Scythian women shows the feeling of superiority they had over the Huns, who were seen as uncivilized.[21] It was not simple pride they had over the Huns either, denying a high honor from the Scythians could have been seen as incredibly disrespectful, which is a dangerous way to behave while in enemy territory. Additionally, it proves the theory that even though Byzantium was a cosmopolitan and seemingly racially tolerant society, it did value whiteness over all other races in its feminine beauty standard. Byzantium's diverse society valued darker skin depending on gender. For men, darker skin was a symbol of power and strength with emperors being praised for their dark skin in unison with their strength. Not just emperors but fabled heroes like Odysseus being said to have darker skin. However, for women, darker skin represented masculine traits and served to make them appear manly and therefore undesirable [22] The Hun women not being white is possibly another reason the embassy was not attracted to them, for they would appear too manly to the ambassadors. This is noteworthy for it gives a material example of Byzantium's feminine beauty standard being white-centric despite being a racially unique civilization.

The gifting of women does not just stop at unmarried women. It was noted in Priscus' writing that Onegesius, a high-ranking Hun noble, granted one of his wives to Atilla after his travels to sexually gratify him.[23] This carries significance because it reinforces the idea of the exchange of women as a sexual gift in Hunnic culture. To grant one's wife to another is a sign of immense respect in Hunnic society, so it would make sense for one to grant his wife to Atilla, their king. The embassy frequently finds these gifts of women notable enough to log them apart from other gifts explicitly. Women are the only gift that they distinctly mention the details of after first being explained. Every other gift, like silk or food or gems, is only directly named a singular or small number of times. The repeated mention of women as gifts shows the embassy's surprise at the practice. The Huns were likely comfortable with the exchange of women because they kept multiple wives at a time, so it was not abnormal or detrimental to their personal lives to give a wife to another to raise their social standing.[24] The gifting of women detailed in Priscus' writing shows a major rift between Hunnic/Scythian cultures and Roman culture which is likely part of what builds the stereotype around the Huns as uncivilized people.

Priscus also outlines the food and how they ate in Hunnic territory in depth. First, he mentions that they were given millet and mead instead of corn and wine. Millet and mead seemed to be a new food and drink to the Romans and outlined a social difference between the two groups based on what they ate. Moving past their diets, Priscus also mentions how servants would offer food to Atilla. He said Atilla "..ate while sitting on his horse, the barbarians who were accompanying him having raised the platter aloft…". Attila eating without dismounting his horse showed the importance of horses and their normality in daily life.[25] The significance of horses in Hunnic culture is remarkable not in the sense that it was unclear before if horses were important but in the sense that we now have confirmation that it was even normal to eat on horseback, despite it being unnecessary to do so.

Additionally, Priscus describes a Hunnic banquet where he explains how the Huns would drink and sit in a specific order relative to Atilla to show respect and outline each person's social importance. The further you sat from Atilla, the less respect he had for you; typically, his children sat closest to him. During the banquet, each person was required to drink in a particular order depending on their distance from Atilla, and all must drink for Atilla's health. Throughout the banquet, they would bring in singers and entertainers for Atilla who would exalt his warrior virtues.[26] These courtship rituals surprised Priscus for they were remarkably similar to those of

Rome, with a focus on praising their leader and holding the banquet in a prescribed order. The banquet and Priscus' reaction to it express the similarities between the Hunnic and Byzantine social spheres, specifically in their courts, with both being highly methodical and focused on their ruler's greatness. This is one of the only similarities between the two peoples that Priscus suggests.[27]

The banquet itself though was not the only important part but also the location of it. Huns were said to have important structures resembling large timber lodgings called Halls or Yurts. The existence of these Yurts, in Priscus' work, proves the presence and use of permanent structures in Hunnic civilization. Hun society is characterized by its transportability due to its practices of living in tents and keeping everything you need on horseback. Yurts, however, would be an exception to their nomadic practices, which emphasize the meetings within Yurts. Yurt meetings could range from internal political or cultural affairs to external politics, like ambassadorial meetings. The meetings in Yurts were significant enough that Huns would stem away from their typical traditions and lifestyle, reflecting a sophisticated Hunnic respect for politics.[28] The Hun's respect for politics, shown by Yurts, breaks away from the stigma of Huns being thoughtless people focused only on negotiation through violence by exemplifying their knowledge and use of complex political practices. Priscus' work confirms not only the presence of Yurts but also their purpose in Hunnic society.

Priscus' writing does not only outline important Hun practices but also Byzantine ones. The most notable of the concepts Priscus' work confirms is the feeling of superiority the Eastern Romans had over the Huns. This feeling is shown in Priscus's conversation with an unnamed Greek merchant who had become a Scythian by being enslaved, and then gaining his freedom through service to Onegesius. The conversation begins with an intense debate about the fairness of the laws and class system of the Romans, versus that of the Scythians. The merchant asserts the Scythians had fairer laws and a more equal society. He makes these claims based on the idea that he believed rich Romans could pay their way to innocence in court even if they were guilty. He also states how poor Romans could not do this and often were assigned guilt when they were not guilty. He then spoke about how long court cases took and how the Scythian law was quick and easy. Priscus refutes the claims against the Romans detailing how everyone, no matter their wealth must obey laws, even the Emperor. Then, Priscus explains that the reason court cases take so long is that judges don't want to wrongly assign guilt, so they take their time. The merchant

concedes his points and physically bursts into tears with Priscus stating “My acquaintance wept and said the laws were fair and Roman polity was good, but it was the authorities that were ruining it…”.[29]

It's often debated if this conversation was real or not. The common belief by historians was that it is not real and there are several points to support this. The first of which is, Priscus never names the merchant while he names practically every other person he encounters on the trip. Another is how the conversation feels very unrealistic with a man just showing up and immediately debating Priscus on laws. Finally, the merchant bursting into tears is an extremely dramatic response to the conversation he was having with Priscus. It's likely this conversation is a product of Priscus wanting to explain the Byzantine superiority over the Huns, by making a Hun themself see the errors in their ways and repent. This conversation also specifically mentions how the Hun elites treated their slaves worse than the Romans did, often killing and mistreating them while the Romans did not.[30] The treatment of slaves by nobles could have been evidence that ancient authors used to base their claims of Huns being murderers and brutal, but this seems to be too insubstantial of evidence to make the all-encompassing statements the authors make about the Hun's society. To claim an entire society is murderous based on how its elites treat the slaves is unfair to the rest of its citizens who don't keep slaves.

The bitter sentiment that motivated Priscus to concoct this conversation with the Greek man, may come from the military power the Huns had over the Romans for years, forcing the Romans to pay tribute under the threat of invasion. This tribute obligation and the threat of war likely hurt the Roman people's pride for they could do nothing about the Hun's superiority. Priscus’ was likely trying to show the societal/legal superiority they had over the Huns as a way to cope with their military inferiority. On top of this, the conversations focus on laws that play to Priscus’ strengths. He was educated on the Roman legal system in Constantinople so he had a deep grasp of the Roman legal system's ins and outs and philosophy.[31] It would make sense Priscus’ would want to make a fake conversation that plays to his strengths to show his obvious superiority.

The Huns were not the only group of people that the Eastern Romans disliked at this time. They also had a fierce dislike for the Sasanians. The Sasanians were a Persian-speaking people who were seen as a second Persian Empire, and were a historical enemy of the Romans due to previous conflicts such as the Byzantine-Sassanid War (421-422).[32] Besides being a

historical enemy of Byzantium, they also adhered to a different religion, which built further tension between the groups. After the Council of Nicaea Byzantium was primarily Christian while Sasania was still majorly following Zoroastrian beliefs.[33] Religious tensions as well as bad blood from previous wars brewed hatred between the two powers and motivated Priscus' dislike of them.

The Sasanians were a power equal to that of Byzantium, which posed a serious threat to them militarily. They were a large enough threat for Priscus to know them in enough detail to refer to them as Persians or Parthians which reflects his understanding of the different Iranian tribes within their empire. Also, Priscus prayed that Atilla and the Huns would conquer the Sasanians to destroy one of their major enemies and thought the Huns could easily accomplish this.[34] However, his friend Constantiolus feared the strength the Huns would gain if this happened saying that "he (Atilla) would return as a master rather than as a friend".[35] Priscus' work illustrates the dislike for Sasanians by providing an example of Byzantine citizens of political influence, praying for the Sassanid Empire's outright destruction. His writing also contextualizes the complex political landscape of Byzantium, being surrounded by enemies to the north with the Huns and to the east with the Sasanians while expressing intense hatred towards both groups.

**Impacts of Priscus' Work: Stigma**

The Huns throughout history have been seen as a ruthless, barbaric, civilization. A large part of this stigma around the Huns is due to their victories in Italy and Gaul as well as other Roman territories.[36] Another source of these misconceptions could be their disfigured appearances. The Huns were severely deformed people. Constant horseback riding and elongated heads from birth practices, morphed their bone structures to be almost inhuman-looking. The skeletal remains of the Huns prove their deformity. The Hun's strange appearance likely terrified the Romans and made them think they weren't human. Hunnic victories also damaged Roman pride and the way they bandaged it was by claiming that the Huns were uncivilized and inhuman.[37] The Huns also didn't keep their own written history, leaving the Romans and other groups of people to keep their history for them. Naturally, these histories would not paint the Huns positively or truthfully whatsoever because they were the enemies of those who wrote about them; this is a unique example of a time when the victors didn't write history.[38] The skewed histories of the Huns led to exaggerations or lies about the Huns to make them seem lesser.

Priscus' work was among the first eyewitness accounts of the Huns, so it became the oasis of knowledge on them. However, its credibility in earlier centuries made it a target for untrustworthy authors to cite to support their audacious claims on the Huns, often citing Priscus in unreliable ways. Several ancient authors would cite Priscus heavily when detailing the Huns and would make their negative claims based on Priscus' work, even if it's unclear if Priscus said what they cited him for. It's hard to tell what Priscus actually said or not due to his original work being lost, but it's clear from what remains of his work that he didn't write nearly as negative an account of the Huns as those who cite him.

Jordanes, a 6th-century Byzantine bureaucrat of Gothic ancestry writes *Getica* to tell the history of the Goths. *Getica* heavily cites Priscus and calls the Huns barbaric killing machines. Jordanes cites Priscus while claiming that the Hun's objective was Rome itself but again there isn't any record of Priscus saying this. Jordanes could likely be embellishing this. Another ancient work that claims to cite Priscus is *Chronicon Paschale* which claims to include an extract from Priscus, saying that Atilla wanted to unseat the Roman Emperors. Again, it's unclear if this is part of Priscus' lost work or just embellishments, the Chronicon is also traditionally seen as unreliable by historians. A third author who makes negative claims against the Huns based on Priscus' work is Prosper of Aquitaine, a fifth-century Galic author. Prosper cites Priscus to support his views of Huns as blood-thirsty barbarians. This is another example of citations that could be lies or just Priscus' lost work. Ancient authors could have exploited Priscus' narrative to support claims that the Huns harbored territorial ambitions. However, the accuracy of such assertions remains uncertain, and it's entirely possible they used Priscus' name simply to forward their negative agendas against the Huns. All of these authors' works were highly influential to the world when they were written and contributed to the stigma around Huns being barbaric. The three aforementioned authors are just a few sources that cite Priscus when talking about the Huns negatively.[39] Most of the histories of the ancient Huns, including those three, share a commonality of citing Priscus, and saying the Huns were bloodthirsty, barbaric, and focused on obtaining territory; however, from what remains of Priscus' work there isn't much to base that claim on.

The theory of Atilla wanting to gain territory may stem from Romulus speculating that "He (Atilla) was aiming at more than his present achievements, and in order to expand his empire further, he wanted to attack the Persians".[40] Romulus, not having any direct contact or

personal experience with Attila's court, probably lacked knowledge about Attila's true intentions or motivations. Thus, asserting that Attila's main objective was territorial expansion, solely relying on Romulus' biased and uninformed opinion, is an inadequately supported argument. It appears that the primary focus of Atilla and the Huns was not territorial expansion, but gold. Gold was the glue that held Scythia and the Huns together, it was the root of all of Atilla's policies and motivated his subjects. Gold hordes have been found across Atilla's old territories including territories as far away as Denmark. Historians have agreed that Atilla's primary goal was to extort money and resources from other civilizations, rather than butcher their enemies like ancient historians suggest. Atilla was likely trying to shift his nation's livelihood away from the heavy focus on plundering villages.[41] This attempt to shift the Huns from a war-based economy to a trading culture based in gold reflects Atilla's true ambitions with his nation. This is further supported by the nature of Atilla's diplomatic meetings.

Most of Atilla's diplomatic meetings involved the negotiation of tribute including the meeting with Priscus and the ambassadorial trips to his father Rugilia.[42] Attila might have been aware that if he kept his enemies alive longer, without going to war with them, he could enforce lucrative tribute deals with conquered nations. This is supported when Priscus theorized that Atilla likely knew the ambassadors were planning to assassinate him but he chose not to kill them.[43] Instead, he kept them alive and continued to negotiate a tribute obligation. Atilla's decision to shrug off an attempt on his life reflects his shrewdness as a politician and the importance of tribute obligations to him. The weightiness of tribute to Atilla may have stemmed from his knowledge of how transformative gold was for the Hun society. Atilla often used Tribute money to buy wheat to feed his people. Tributes on the low end of what the Romans offered, were enough to buy wheat to support 32,700 adult Huns.[44] The use of tribute to buy wheat supports the idea that Atilla was trying to shift his nation away from raiding and find a more stable source of resources and income. The focus on gold, instead of territory and blood, contrasts with the common stereotype around the Huns saying they were focused on death and territory, a stereotype that is rooted in works citing Priscus. Without Priscus' writing, it's harder to find a primary source used to claim the Huns were as evil and bloodthirsty as ancient authors claimed. In reality, it's more likely that Atilla was focused on obtaining gold to support his nation and find a more stable footing in the world.

Priscus' writing is also used to support the idea that the Huns were barbaric and uncivilized people. However, this claim seems to be as shaky as the previous one. The diplomatic vision and discipline of the Huns are difficult to explain without an efficient and sophisticated authority present.[45] Their diplomatic civility is best shown through Priscus' direct views of their leader, Attila. During Priscus' first meeting with Atilla, Atilla insults Vigilias and calls him a shameless beast. This may lead a reader to believe that Atilla was an arrogant tyrant who would insult an ambassador of an enemy nation without batting an eye. This rudeness would support the notion of Atilla and the Huns being uncivilized, however, Priscus' work also provides evidence to say the opposite. When reflecting on the meeting in which Atilla insults Vigilias, Priscus states it was surprising for Atilla to act like that because he was " …calm and mild to him at the previous embassy…".[46] This directly contradicts the notion of Atilla being a bloodthirsty savage by showing Atilla being a respectful representative of the Huns and their society with him being stated to be mild and calm when speaking with ambassadors. An uncivilized, barbaric king would not behave calmly as consistently as Atilla did with diplomats. Furthermore, Atilla's anger towards Vigilias is also justified if it is based on his knowledge of Vigilias' involvement in an assassination plot against him; what king would not be angered by an attempt on his life?

Despite the wealth of evidence challenging the notion that the Huns were bloodthirsty and uncivilized, dispelling a stigma ingrained over millennia remains an unending battle. This is exemplified by the modern author George R.R. Martins' in his hit book series and TV show, *Game of Thrones*. In Martin's work, there is a civilization of nomadic horse warriors, called the Dothraki. Martin stated the Dothraki were based on a variety of steppe and grassland peoples, but a key and primary influence on them was the Huns. The Dothraki were brutal horse lords which was a common opinion of the Huns. They were highly skilled in mounted archery like the Huns, and cut their hair after losing battles the same way the Huns did in ritual after their king died. The Dothraki also participated in exchanging women as gifts, just like the Huns.[47] These correlations between the Huns in Dothraki, which Martin confirms, are examples of Priscus' work influencing the modern world through the stigmas born from his work appearing in a mainstream book and TV series.

The historical portrayal of the Huns as merciless barbarians has been significantly shaped by Roman biases and subsequent authors adapting Priscus' work. However, a more nuanced

examination reveals that the Huns, led by Attila, were primarily motivated by economic interests, seeking tribute rather than unrestrained conquest. Priscus' observations challenge the notion of Huns as uncivilized, highlighting Attila's typically mild-mannered demeanor in diplomatic interactions. However, it is undeniable that Priscus' work is what gave ancient historians the fuel to formulate their negative opinions of the Huns. While historians likely would have found a way to demean and disparage the Huns without him, his work made it significantly easier by providing a reputable eyewitness account they could potentially embellish and misinterpret. The stereotypes surrounding the Huns persist in popular culture, exemplified by George R.R. Martin's Dothraki in "Game of Thrones," underscoring the lasting impact of historical narratives on contemporary perceptions.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Priscus' work has left an indelible influence on our understanding of the Huns. It serves as a cornerstone for contextualizing their movements and shedding light on their society's various practices and norms. By challenging previously held beliefs about Attila's location, Priscus provides a unique perspective on the Huns' strategic positioning, offering insights that prompt further examination of their military decisions. Moreover, Priscus' writing also helps confirm the presence of Huns as far up as Scandinavia. Additionally, Priscus' detailed observations on social practices, banquets, and the exchange of women among the Huns contribute to a richer understanding of their culture. While some practices may seem grotesque and unrefined from a Roman standpoint, Priscus' work encourages a greater understanding of Hun culture by contrasting it with that of the Romans.

The most enduring impact of Priscus' work is the perpetuation of stigmas about the Huns. As later authors heavily relied on his accounts, a perspective was born depicting the Huns as uncivilized violent savages. This characterization has reached across space and time to shape historical narratives and impact popular culture. This negative image exemplifies how biases within primary sources can influence broader opinions. Priscus' work influenced the masses by making claims loaded with personal opinions like "...we expressed amazement at the unreasonableness of the Huns…".[48] Claims like these, perpetuate the historical stereotype of the Huns being uncivilized, barbarous people based on predisposed conceptions of what the Huns were like. The effect of these statements is seen in various Historian's works, referencing the Huns as "...uncivilized soldiers...".[49] All in all, Priscus' work, while invaluable, is a reminder of

the complications inherent in historical interpretation and the need for a critical evaluation of source material to create a comprehensive understanding of history.

Notes

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