

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Fragmentary History of Priscus Attila, the Huns and the Roman Empire, AD 430-476.* By JOHN GIVEN. Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing 2014. Pp. xlviii + 194. Paper, \$22.95. ISBN 978-1-935228-14-1.

Often Classicists know very little about the fifth century CE. For standard survey teaching many politely offer summative commentaries—more often than not—their own personal impressions of one of the most tumultuous centuries. Desire to learn more has consistently been thwarted by paucity of resources compounded by contradictory and irreconcilable ancient sources.

Some recall the enthralling comments offered by the fourth century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus about the Huns whom he describes as “...abnormally savage. From the moment of birth they make deep gashes in their children’s cheeks, so that when in due course hair appears its growth is checked by the wrinkled scars; as they grow older this gives them an unlovely appearance of beardless eunuchs. They have squat bodies, strong limbs, and thick necks, and are so prodigiously ugly and bent that they might be two-legged animals, or the figures crudely carved from stumps which are seen on the parapets of bridges.” (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.1, trans. Hamilton). Perhaps others may remember Raphael’s fresco in the Room of Heliodorus in the Vatican Museum showing Attila conferring with Pope Leo after which he mysteriously did not direct his forces against Rome. Raphael depicts Attila to be of enormous height as he must bend down from a standing position to speak with a representative of Pope Leo who, poised on horseback, faces the huge Attila. Rome is featured in the background. The scene is much more programmatic than historically accurate.

Regardless of what suppositions we may bring to the subject, the text of Priscus is lost. No manuscript contains any or all of the eight books that comprised his original history. We are left with citations, quotations, varied excerpts and allusions. Given’s scholarly work assembles these, and charts a navigable course through many situations which have often defied clarification. Eighty-three fragments from eleven sources are arranged to make chronological sense. Each has been admirably translated; each purports to be either a direct excerpt, or

a prose reference to the author indicating that his words have informed what is being reported.

The introduction discusses each source, pinpoints its origin, and assesses its validity. Eleven essential chapters of various lengths constitute the book. Their titles are self-descriptive: Ancient Testimonia (3–4), The Arrival of the Huns (5–18), Two Young Emperors (19–34), Negotiating with Attila (35–93), Attila in the West (93–110), The Death of Attila (111–116), Diplomacy in the East (117–124), Turmoil in the West (125–140), Huns, Persians, Goths, and Vandals (141–168), The End of the West (169–172), and Miscellaneous Fragments (173–176).

Each chapter features a head note or description printed in italics. These signify that they are the comments of the author. The translated fragments appear in non-italic print; footnotes—really endnotes—are posted at the close of each chapter. Separate bibliographies appear after the introduction and at the end of the book. A full index follows. The most interesting sections are the fifty-eight pages dealing with negotiations conducted with Attila. Resting on the largest collation of sources, these invite the reader into the complex and ruthless methods relentlessly employed by Attila, and confirm the impression of turmoil as a constant companion to life in the fifth century CE. The discussion surrounding the meeting between Attila and Pope Leo as well as accounts of Attila's death are also as instructive as they are engaging.

A glossary of the many names encountered throughout the text would be a welcome addition as well as a chronology chart which would significantly facilitate comprehension of the book. For a historian, this book has appeal; for the average reader just interested in a biopsy of the fifth century CE this excellent book will be ideal—well researched, well written and accessible.

HENRY V. BENDER

*St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, hbender@sju.edu*