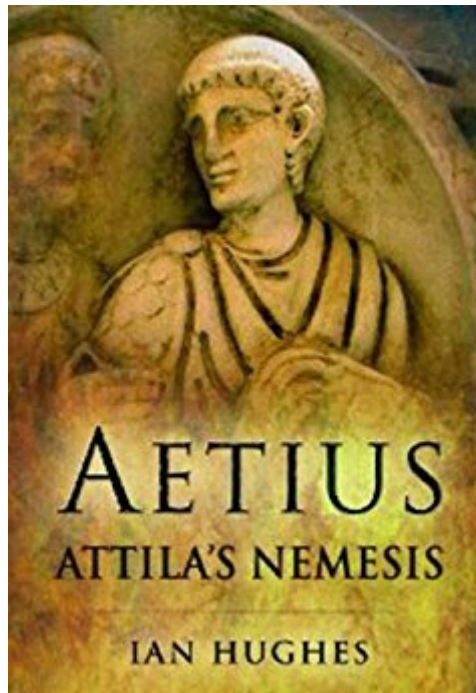




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Aetius: Attila's Nemesis



Synopsis

In AD 453 Attila, with a huge force composed of Huns, allies and vassals drawn from his already-vast empire, was rampaging westward across Gaul (essentially modern France), then still nominally part of the Western Roman Empire. Laying siege to Orleans, he was only a few days march from extending his empire from the Eurasian steppe to the Atlantic. He was brought to battle on the Cataluanian Plain and defeated by a coalition hastily assembled and led by Aetius. Who was this man that saved Western Europe from the Hunnic yoke? While Attila is a household name, his nemesis remains relatively obscure.

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Customer Reviews

When I originally started to read this book I had specifically two questions about Aetius. On the one hand, I was interested in the story of how the three most powerful persons of the Western Roman Empire could fall out and start to fight each other, and how this would play out. Would it be a little bit like in *Gladiator*, and the two less powerful figures would ally with each other against the more powerful one? As it turned out, this story is a lot less dramatic and ends actually extremely anticlimatic: First two of them fought it out, and the remainder then turned onto

the third one, until only one of them was left standing. The second question I had was, how could the West fall so quickly after Aetius' death? Here as well, this book gives extremely good answers. In what follows, I will put down, as I realize myself, more of a summary than a review of the book. The reason is actually that therewith, I make it easier for myself in the years to come to remember the main lessons of this book.

In 422, Castinus, the successor of Constantius III. as *magister militum*, on his campaign in Spain suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Hasding Vandals. He blamed Boniface for his defeat. Boniface had been sent with him on this mission, probably on the initiative of Galla Placidia, and they both started to quarrel with each other already on the way to Spain. Therefore, Boniface already before arriving in Spain, had fled to North Africa. Castinus thus accused now Boniface, Galla Placidia and the Goths, who have betrayed him in the battle, of a plot against him. It can nowadays not be evaluated anymore nowadays how much of these accusations were really true. However, Honorius after this defeat quickly fell out with his sister and she had to flee with her daughter and her son to Constantinople. A year later (423), Honorius died. Castinus, dreading that Galla Placidia would come to power as regent for her young son Valentinian, covertly backed the usurper John. Boniface on the other hand stayed loyal to Galla Placidia and revolted against John. Exuperantius and Gaudentius, Aetius' father, were sent to Gaul to take over control there from local troops. After an expedition to also take over North Africa is defeated, the Gallic troops rebelled as well and killed Exuperantius and Gaudentius, declaring their loyalty to the dynasty of Theodosius. John had thus only the Italian troops as his disposal. He was quickly defeated. Two days after his death, Aetius arrived with Hunnic reinforcements. After some skirmishes, an agreement was reached: Aetius was to be promoted to *magister militum per Gallias* and given control of the Gallic troops. Boniface kept control over North Africa. As *magister militum praesentalis*, Felix was chosen. He must have been a loyal man to Theodosius II. in the East and therefore have been seen as of no danger to Galla Placidia and Valentinian. Castinus, as having not directly been involved in the usurpation of John, was kept alive but sent into exile. And herewith the three powerful figures had entered the picture.

In 426, Aetius relieved Arles that was currently besieged by Goths. One year later, he fought the Franks along the Rhine. Once finished, he traveled back to Ravenna to report. There, Boniface had fallen out of grace. It seems, there had been rumors that he wanted to set up his own empire in North Africa. When he was consequently summoned back to Ravenna to explain himself, he refused to come: He had heard that the whole thing was a setup to trap him. Consequently, troops were sent from Felix to reconquer North Africa. In later sources, it was reported that Aetius had released the rumors about Boniface. However, Aetius was too weak at this point in time to really have profited from a downfall of Boniface. A more

temporary source says that it was Felix who had put the rumor into circulation and this would then also be the most logical explanation. The troops that were sent to North Africa were not successful, however. Boniface stayed in control of North Africa. After meditations with Boniface revealed the true nature of his rejection to return to Ravenna, the truth about his "rebellion" emerged. He is rehabilitated, Galla Placidia started to mistrust Felix instead. She could not do anything directly against Felix, however. So she set up a counterpoint to Felix, someone who could control him. But if she would have promoted Boniface directly, that would have meant certain civil war. Therefore, she promoted Aetius to *magister militum praesentalis*, on the same level as Felix. A year later (430), after Aetius had lead another successful campaign against the Goths, Aetius returned to Ravenna. There, he accused Felix of a plot against him, where upon the troops killed Felix. Boniface, after losing two battles against the Vandals in North Africa, is recalled to Italy and promoted to *magister militum praesentalis* as well, himself being now a counterpoint against Aetius. Aetius directly attacked Boniface and the two met in the Battle of Rimini (432). Aetius lost and retired to his estate in Italy. Boniface, however, had gotten severely injured in the battle and died within a short time, his son-in-law Sebastianus taking over his position. Aetius, who was left alone until then, fled to the Huns and returned with an army. Sebastianus himself now fled himself and therewith Aetius was the undisputed ruler of the west. Meanwhile, the Vandals had arrived in North Africa, whereupon they started to make their way towards its richest province Africa Proconsularis and its capital Carthage. In contrast to what emerges sometimes from short summaries, they were however not unopposed on their way towards the bread chamber of Rome. As already mentioned, in 430, Boniface confronted them with an army outside of Hippo Regius. The Vandals were victorious, however. Boniface retreated to Hippo Regius, where upon the Vandals besieged the city. In the third month of that siege, Augustinus died. However, expect maybe having an effect on moral, this did not influence the siege much. The Vandals, without steady supply lines suffered as much as the besieged. After fourteen months, the siege was raised. Shortly afterwards, the Eastern *magister militum* Aspar arrived with reinforcements from the East. Consequently, Boniface and Aspar confronted the Vandals a second time in early 432. The Vandals were again victorious. This time Boniface, in avoiding to be besieged in Hippo Regius again, fled eastwards. As a consequence, Hippo Regius was left unprotected, conquered by the Vandals and sacked viciously. Boniface was soon thereafter recalled to Italy. Aspar however continued his efforts to stop the Vandals. He contained them by not allowing them further access to food and other resources. This campaign proved successful as in 435, the Vandals were ready to accept a peace treaty. The Vandals, like the Goths before in Aquitaine, received land where they could settle upon. Where exactly this land lay in

unknown, as it is not recorded in the sources. Most probably, it was somewhere west of Africa Proconsularis, perhaps along the coast. The Vandals were hence officially made *foederati*, probably with the duty to supply troops. How and where they in practice supplied troops is unknown, as they were far away from any theater of war. Another contrast to the Goths in Aquitaine was also that their king Geiseric seems to have received an official post in the Roman army. He is recorded in the sources as *dux*. Consequently, as a Roman army, it seems that the Vandals received access to official Roman resources, such as weapons. The settlement of the Vandals would in hindsight prove fatal, as nobody was there in between them and Africa Proconsularis to protect the province. In a future crisis in Ravenna, where everybody would be busy taking care of other affairs, nobody would stop the Vandals taking possession of whole North Africa, including Africa Proconsularis. For the time being, however, everybody was happy, as the Vandals were pacified without the need for further troops or other precious expenditures. One fact that becomes clear from this book is why most provinces were lost after Aetius' death in 454 and specially after Valentinian's III. death in 455. In other books, I had previously read that at this time, treaties were not closed between two political entities such as a Germanic tribe and the Roman Empire anymore, but between two persons. Thus, all treaties at this time had Valentinian III. as counterparty, and once he had died, all Germanic kings did not see any reason why they should follow another Roman emperor. Hence, after Valentinian III., all Germanic kind in Gaul acted independently of Rome and the Roman Empire had lost at this time most of Gaul except the Provence. But I was always wondering how this could have happened after just one death. I hadn't heard that this had happened before. Now, Ian Hughes makes a good case that this had actually already happened after the death of Honorius. Britain, as well as Armorica had *de facto* become independent, and even though the Romans still considered themselves as rulers over these areas, and in the case of Armorica even managed after the campaign of Litorius in 436 to get this area again under their control, their grasp over these regions never grew strong again. In the case of Britain, no Roman general ever set his foot on this island again. But also the Visigoths strove for more independence after Honorius' death. Aetius' first campaign, after he had been promoted to *magister militum per Gallias*, was then indeed to relieve Arles from a Visigothic siege in 426. At this time, he most probably also concluded a new treaty with the Visigoths, this time with Valentinian III. as the person with whom the treaty was officially made. About ten years later, Aetius led a campaign against the Burgundians who had settled left of the Rhine after the Rhine frontier had been overrun in 406. They might or might not have been made officially *foederati* after this time with the order to protect the Rhine frontier around Worms. In 435, Aetius led thus a campaign against the Burgundians that was concluded with a peace treaty. A year

later, the Visigoths and the Burgundians seem to have rebelled simultaneously in a conspirative collaboration. As Aetius' resources were spread thin, Litorius was with the main army in the North of Gaul to pacify Armorica, all Aetius could do at this time was to stall and reach out for allies. Only a year later, with Litorius returning, could they relive Narbonne that was currently being besieged by the Visigoths. Aetius' Hunnic allies in the meanwhile crushed and annihilated the Burgundians on the Rhine. Their remaining residues were relocated in 443 to Sapaudia (modern Savoy?), to guard as foederati the passes over the Alps from Gaul into Italy. The Visigoths, however, were far from conceding defeat, and even a defeat in the battle of Mons Colubrarius ('snake mountain') a year later would not stop them. Only after another year of fighting and after Toulouse was besieged could they finally be subdued in 439. Hunnic mercenaries would also here from 437 to 439 fight on Aetius' side. And also probably in 437, the Franks would lead a campaign in Gaul, which enabled them to conquer the two cities of Cologne and Trier. Those could only be recaptured in 445 after another campaign against the Franks. Moreover, in 439, the Sueves began to take over places in Spain again and by 441, they already controlled most parts of Spain. In 446, Vitus tried to reconquer Carthaginiensis and Baetica, but the Suevic king Rechila managed to beat him back and the attempt to take back parts of Spain had thus failed. Aetius thus during his whole time as magister militum had all his hands full to coerce the different Germanic foederati to follow his and therewith the Roman emperor's will and lead wars against other groups. As he never had enough Roman troops at his disposal, only this sort of political maneuvering and the playing out of different groups against each other enabled Aetius to just barely hold on to all the provinces. Had he not been as successful as he was, the Romans might have lost large parts of Gaul already earlier. That Gaul was only lost after his death is thus witness to his military skills. His and the thereby caused death of Valentinian III. led to another power vacuum that was filled too late. Until then, nobody could force all Germanic foederati to follow the Roman emperor anymore. Gaul had thus mostly been lost. The Vandals during this time had not stayed idle. Noticing that the Western armies were all being employed elsewhere, they went about fulfilling their ambitions and conquering all of Roman North Africa. The Vandals had not even to use a lot of force. As Geiseric was an official Roman officer, he could just walk into Carthage and open the doors for his troops in 439. The Romans had no resources to stop them. As the Eastern court was about to send troops to help the West in its reconquest efforts, the Huns attacked the Eastern provinces south of the Danube in 441. The Eastern troops were thus recalled once they had reached Sicily. The West by itself was too weak to reconquer North Africa. So in 442, Theodosius concluded a peace treaty with Geiseric that the West could only accept. The Vandals were to keep Carthage and Africa Proconsularis but to return

provinces they had previously traversed and devastated. This in terms of taxes that these provinces were to send to Ravenna again, this was a bad deal for the West. Moreover, Geiseric was to send some tribute to Ravenna and maybe even to give some land back to its former senatorial holders. The flows to Ravenna were however never going to be that large again as they had been before the Vandal takeover. Therewith, Aetius resources and possibilities to keep the West together became even more restricted. Finally, a law in 444 declared the West officially as bankrupt. The battle of the Catalaunian Plains in 451 is also described vividly by Ian Hughes, elegantly interpreting Jordanes' description in his *Getica*, which is the only source remaining that gives some details about the battle. Ian Hughes can point out convincingly that the only reason that this battle has been attributed so much importance up to our days is that it was about the only pitched battle in the fifth century. There was no decisive outcome and therewith no clearcut repercussions; Attila had had to retreat behind his wagon laager but was unbeaten. The next day, Aetius decided to send his Germanic allies home to secure their positions there. Contrary to what was also written in the sources, Aetius did not want Attila to escape in order to keep an external enemy with which to unite internal allies. Ian Hughes maintains that the threat that his Gothic and Frankish allied leaders otherwise might have come home to find themselves ousted from power was indeed very real. The next year, Attila invaded Italy unopposed. Ian Hughes can show again that it was not inactivity on the side of Aetius that enabled him to do so. Rather, Aetius acted in two ways: On the one hand, he had reinforced the garrison of Aquileia, which cost Attila several months to besiege and finally to take, which he had to do did he not want to see his retreat jeopardized. On the other hand, he waited with the assembled troops of the West in Bononia (Bologna), ready to attack should Attila make his way towards Rome or Ravenna. The interference of the East in the Hunnic homeland forced Attila then to retreat. Once Attila had died the following year (453), Aetius appeared to be replaceable. Consequently, factions at court could conspire to have Aetius removed. That he was not replaceable would soon appear after Aetius had been assassinated in 454. Valentinian III. himself was killed half a year later by Roman troops who had stayed more loyal to Aetius than to Valentinian III. And thereafter, all hell broke loose, with the Goths, the Franks, the Sueves and the Vandals all grabbing what they could and the Vandals eventually sacking Rome again. Nobody ever managed to control the Barbarian kingdoms anymore as Aetius has done, and barely twenty years later, there was no emperor in the West anymore. Ian Hughes as in his earlier books thereby manages extremely well to analyze the sources and to point out the most probable ways of how events happened. As such, he can draw an excellent picture of the last of this Roman general and of the events that occurred in his lifetime in the first half of the fifth century. On the other hand, this book can also be used well as a reference

book for this period. Consequently, and to nevertheless end with a sort of review, this book cannot highly enough be recommended to all people who want to know more about this epoch. Maybe not as a first book about this subject, maybe it is better to start with Peter Heather. But for anybody with a base of knowledge in this period, the lecture of this book will be connected with tremendous enjoyment and gain of knowledge.

The thing I like best about Hughes' books is that they hone in on one historical figure. Most historians would shy away from that, at least at that time in history. I had read other books about the era, which would mention Aetius, but they always focussed on the broader subject and didn't really give a chronology of some of the major players. For this reason, I also recommend his book "Stilicho," who is another person that comes up frequently but not enough to get a sense of who he was. The only fault to the book is that it involves a lot of speculation - which is not the author's fault, but the fault of the sources. He also takes care to point out when it is only speculation. This is only troublesome when, later in the book, he makes further speculation based on the first ones - it makes logical sense, but the whole thing ultimately goes back to a guess. But again, I'm sure that's the nature of the fragmentary source material. The best thing Hughes does is to list all of the primary sources, as well as how far removed they are from the time and what biases they may have had. And, reading the footnotes, he bases quite a lot of his book on these sources. There are some secondary/modern works he cites as well, but it appears whenever possible he cites from a contemporary source. One final note - he is a good writer. Aetius had an eventful life, and lived in momentous times, and Hughes does it justice.

The late Roman Empire is hard to write about. Not many sources, and the few are unreliable. But Ian Hughes does a wonderful job in bringing back the times of Aetius and Attila. I was most pleasantly surprised to find historically plausible hypothesis about very important events that are viewed, even today, with an aura of mysticism. The encounter of Pope Leo with Attila that saved Rome, for instance, is told and explained in a most sober and down-to-earth way. After Reading this book, one is left with thirst for knowing more about outstanding people like Galla Placidia, Emperor Marcian, Attila the Hun, Gaiseric the Vandal and many others.

Hughes on Aetius - the known facts are scanty, but author does a fine and interesting job filling them in with reasonable deduction and conjecture. By this time in the very late Empire, Aetius was unusual in being an actual Roman with a barbarian power base (which others had, but they were

barbarians themselves). The title is not an over-dramatization: Aetius was intimately familiar with Attila's father's generation of Huns, so he was, in a sense, their revenge on Attila's internal coup. Readable and recommended.

I've really enjoyed this author's series of Roman strong men. Another good book to add to the collection.

As Military History is my favorite hobby, I have always had a passion for the Romans and especially their downfall. This book was great as most of the books describe the Huns Invasion from Attila's point of view and not the Roman one. The life of Aetius was very pleasant to read as he might have been the last hope of a Roman Empire whose citizens were too busy fighting for internal power or keeping their privileges when the Empire was about to collapse due to foreign invasions. I give it a 5 stars for the amount of things I learnt from it.

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