

## Pope Leo and Attila the Hun

**Central Historical Question:**  
*What happened at the meeting between Pope Leo and Attila the Hun?*

### Materials:

- Raphael Painting Warm-up
- Background PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A & B
- Guiding Questions

### Plan of Instruction:

1. Warm-up: Pass out copies of the Raphael Painting warm-up or project the image.
  - a. The teacher may need to help students identify key people in the image, such as Pope Leo (identified by robe and hat), Attila the Hun (identified by non-Roman clothing and being held back from Pope Leo by a Roman soldier), and Saints Peter and Paul (men floating above Pope Leo).
  - b. Have students complete questions and then discuss as a class.
    - i. *Important to note:*
      1. *Many students will probably say this is a good or bad source based on the title of the painting or the quality of the painting.*
      2. *Students might mention that it is not realistic because Peter and Paul are shown floating in the sky.*
      3. *Most students will probably not mention the date of the painting at this point. If they don't, ask them, "How long after the event was the painting created? Was Raphael at the meeting? Why would that matter?"*
  - c. Tell students that historians never want to use just one source to figure out what happened at an event, especially if that source was created so many years after the event took place. Today, they will look at two short documents to help decide if Raphael's painting is a good source for determining what happened at this meeting.
2. Background PowerPoint: Use the PowerPoint Presentation to review or provide an overview of what was happening in Rome at the time of this meeting. (Note: This lesson is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of why Rome fell.)
  - a. Slide 3: Raphael's image for warm-up
  - b. Slide 4: Rome grows weaker. *Beginning in the 200s, Rome faced many challenges outside and inside of the empire, such as weak leaders, economic troubles, and invaders.*
  - c. Slide 5: Map of various Roman invasions. *In the late 300s, the Huns (from Central Asia) began creating a large empire in Eastern Europe. This caused the Germanic tribes to flee west and begin attacking Rome. Rome became the invaded instead of the invader.*

- d. Slide 6: Attila the Hun. *Attila was born in 406 and was the leader of the Huns from 434-453, when he died. He helped unite the Hun Kingdom and led attacks on the Eastern & Western Roman Empire.*
  - e. Slide 7: The Huns and Rome. *In the mid-400s, Attila the Hun led an attack on Gaul (modern-day France). The Roman Army and its German allies defeated him in 451. Attila then turned to attack the city of Rome. In 452, Attila peacefully left Rome after a meeting with Pope Leo. Why did this happen?*
  - f. Slide 8: Central Historical Question. *Today students will look at two written documents to try and determine what happened at this meeting and why Attila was willing to leave peacefully. They will also begin to consider what makes a good historical source.*
3. Hand out Document A.
- a. If this is one of the first times students are working with documents, it might be helpful to complete Questions 1-2 as a class. Question 1 is very straightforward, but the teacher should make the following points about the source date with Question 2.
    - i. *Although we don't have an exact date, it seems this document was written at least 300 years after the meeting took place.*
    - ii. *This might affect whether or not I believe this document because I know Paul the Deacon was not present at the meeting. Since no one at the meeting would still be alive, we don't know where Paul got his information. This doesn't mean he made it up, but it does bring up some questions. Also, there would be no one alive to contradict what he writes.*
    - iii. *Additionally, I know that Pope Leo is no longer the pope, so Paul wouldn't have to worry about insulting him. Still, Paul is a Christian writer, so he probably wants to make the pope sound good and powerful.*
  - b. Have students read the document and answer Questions 3-4 individually or in pairs.
    - i. *The content of this document is similar to the Raphael painting. Paul writes that Attila left in peace because Saints Peter and Paul appeared and threatened him with death.*
    - ii. *Based on the content, it seems like Paul might be writing this document to tell everyone what a great pope Leo the First was.*
  - c. We now have two sources that give very similar descriptions of this meeting. Does this mean this is what happened?
4. Hand-out Document B
- a. Explain that students will now read another written account of this meeting to see if we can learn more information about what happened. As they read this document, they should compare it to both the painting and the document they just read.

- b. Have students read Document B and complete the questions either individually or in pairs. Remind students that they should complete questions 1-2 before reading the document.
  - c. Review student answers to sourcing questions.
    - i. *This document was written in 455, which is 3 years after the meeting happened between Pope Leo and Attila the Hun. Based on the information we have, we don't know if Prosper was actually at the meeting or not.*
    - ii. *Three years is relatively close to the actual meeting. It is long enough to forget some details, but close enough to the meeting that people would probably remember the general events.*
    - iii. *Also, we know that Pope Leo was still alive in 455, and probably many other witnesses to the meeting were alive as well. This might affect what Prosper says. He would probably want to be truthful because other witnesses could contradict him if he says the wrong thing. He would probably also want to make Pope Leo look good, since he's still the pope at the time.*
  - d. Review the additional questions and general content of the document.
    - i. *After meeting with Pope Leo, Attila promises peace and goes home. Prosper never really explains why Attila decided this. He only mentions that Leo trusted in God.*
    - ii. *All three sources depict a meeting of Leo and Attila with other people present.*
    - iii. *Prosper mentions nothing about the "floating" images of Saints Peter and Paul that appear in the other two descriptions.*
    - iv. *We don't know exactly why Prosper wrote this, but it seems to be part of a general history, with a religious angle.*
5. Final Discussion
- a. Even after reading these documents, do we really know what happened at the meeting between Pope Leo and Attila?  
*Answer: Not really, but these documents do give us a better understanding of the meeting. These accounts do corroborate the argument that the Pope went with a group of officials and begged for peace. Some students may find this frustrating because we don't really know why Attila left in peace. Remind students that this is what a historian does. They use clues left behind (written sources, images, etc.) to piece together what might have happened in the past even though the puzzle is often somewhat incomplete.*
  - b. Which written document seems like a better source for deciding what happened at the meeting between Pope Leo and Attila?  
*Answer: Students will probably argue Document B because it was written closer to the event, and it makes more sense to them.*
  - c. What do we need to think about when assessing a source's reliability?  
*Answer: Date, possible motives for writing/creating it, what other sources say.*

*Note: The source written closest to the event will not always be the best source. Still, it's important for students to begin noticing the date and think about what it means for the document.*

6. Summary: Have students return to the warm-up question and write a revised answer. Based on what they have read today, is the painting *The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila* from 1514 a good source for deciding what happened at the meeting in 452? Why or why not?

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References:

Kelly Christopher, *The End of Empire: Attila the Hun & the Fall of Rome*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 323.

Susan Elizabeth Ramirez, Peter Stearns, and Sam Wineburg, *World History: Human Legacy*, (Orlando: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 2008).

Painting

Raphael. *The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila*. 1514, Fresco, 200 in. x 300 in. Apostolic Palace, Vatican City,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Meeting\\_of\\_Leo\\_the\\_Great\\_and\\_Attila](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Meeting_of_Leo_the_Great_and_Attila).

Document A

Prosper. "Leo and Attila" in *Internet Medieval Source Book*. Fordham University.  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/attila2.asp>.

Document B

Paul the Deacon. "Leo and Attila" in *Internet Medieval Source Book*, Fordham University.  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/attila2.asp>

## Warm-up



Source: *The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila*, created by Raphael in 1514.

1. According to the painting *The Meeting Between Leo the Great and Attila*, what happened at the meeting between Pope Leo and Attila the Hun?

2. Is the painting *The Meeting Between Leo the Great and Attila* from 1514 a good source for understanding what happened at the meeting between Pope Leo and Attila the Hun in 452? Why or why not?

## Document A: Paul the Deacon (Excerpt)

*Paul the Deacon was a Christian monk and historian who lived in the Middle Ages, many years after the fall of Rome. In the following excerpt from his book Roman History, published in the late 700s, he describes the meeting between Pope Leo and Attila the Hun that took place in 452.*

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Attila, the leader of the Huns, who was called the **scourge** of God, came into Italy, inflamed with fury . . .

Then Leo . . . and a large part of the Roman senate went to meet Attila . . . He spoke to the monarch [Attila], saying "The senate and the people of Rome, once conquerors of the world, now conquered, come before thee as **suppliants**. We pray for mercy."

As Leo said these things Attila stood . . . silent, as if thinking deeply. And lo, suddenly there were seen the apostles Peter and Paul . . . standing by Leo, the one on the right hand, the other on the left. They held swords stretched out over his head, and threatened Attila with death if he did not obey the pope's command. Wherefore Attila was **appeased** . . . [and] promised a lasting peace and withdrew beyond the Danube.

### Vocabulary:

scourge: person who gives punishments suppliant: people who pray, beg or ask appease: calm
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Source: Excerpted from J.H. Robinson's translation of Paul the Deacon, *Roman History*, late 700s CE

## Document B: Prosper of Aquitaine (Modified)

*Prosper of Aquitaine was a Christian writer at the end of the Roman Empire. In the following excerpt from his book History of the World, published in 455, he describes the 452 meeting between Pope Leo and Attila the Hun. Historians don't know if Prosper was actually at the meeting.*

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Now Attila . . . took his way through Pannonia into Italy . . . To the emperor and the senate and Roman people, none of all the proposed plans to oppose the enemy seemed so practical as to send **legates** to the most savage king [Attila] and beg for peace. Our most blessed Pope Leo – trusting in the help of God, who never fails the righteous in their trials – undertook the task . . . When King Attila had received the **embassy**, he was so impressed by the presence of the high priest [Leo] that he ordered his army to give up warfare and, after he had promised peace, he departed beyond the Danube.

### Vocabulary:

legates: government officials

embassy: group of people on a mission for a government, ambassadors

Source: Prosper of Aquitaine, “Account 1” from *History of the World*, 455 CE.

## Guiding Questions

### Central Historical Question:

*What happened at the meeting between Pope Leo and Attila the Hun?*

### Document A: Paul the Deacon

1. (Sourcing) About how many years after the meeting between Leo and Attila was this document written?
2. (Sourcing) How might the date affect whether or not this document is a good source for understanding what happened at the meeting between Leo and Attila?
3. (Close Reading) How does Paul the Deacon's description of the meeting compare to Raphael's painting of the meeting?
4. (Sourcing) In your opinion, what was Paul the Deacon's goal in writing this document?



## Document B: Prosper of Aquitaine

1. (Sourcing) How many years after the meeting between Leo and Attila was this document written?
2. (Sourcing) How might the date affect whether or not this document is a good source for understanding what happened at the meeting between Leo and Attila?
3. (Corroboration) How is Prosper's description of the meeting between Leo and Attila different from Paul the Deacon's? How is it similar?
4. (Corroboration) How is Prosper's description of the meeting between Leo and Attila different from Raphael's painting? How is it similar?
5. (Sourcing) In your opinion, what was Prosper's goal in writing this document?

**Summary:** Based on what you have read today, is Raphael's painting *The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila*, made in 1514, a good source for deciding what happened at the meeting in 452? Why or why not?

Raphael's painting *The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila* **is/is not (circle one)** a good source for deciding what happened at the meeting in 452 because . . .

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2. \_\_\_\_\_  
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