

CHAPTER
6
Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE **Dinner with Attila the Hun**
from Historici Graeci Minores
by Priscus

In about A.D. 450, representatives from the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire met with Attila, the king of the Huns, on a special diplomatic mission. Priscus, a representative of the eastern Roman Empire, wrote an account of having dinner with Attila. What do you learn about Attila from this account?

Attila invited both parties of us to dine with him about three o'clock that afternoon. We waited for the time of the invitation, and then all of us, the envoys from the Western Romans as well, presented ourselves in the doorway facing Attila. In accordance with the national custom the cupbearers gave us a cup for us to make our libations before we took our seats. When that had been done and we had sipped the wine, we went to the chairs where we would sit to have dinner. All the seats were ranged down either side of the room, up against the walls. In the middle Attila was sitting on a couch with a second couch behind him. Behind that a few steps led up to his bed, which for decorative purposes was covered in ornate drapes made of fine linen, like those which Greeks and Romans prepare for marriage ceremonies. I think that the more distinguished guests were on Attila's right, and the second rank on his left, where we were with Berichos, a man of some renown among the Scythians, who was sitting in front of us. Onegesios was to the right of Attila's couch, and opposite him were two of the king's sons on chairs. The eldest son was sitting on Attila's own couch, right on the very edge, with his eyes fixed on the ground in fear of his father. . . . After everyone had been toasted, the cupbearers left, and a table was put in front of Attila and other tables for groups of three or four men each. This enabled each guest to help himself to the things put on the table without leaving his proper seat. Attila's servant entered first with plates full of meat, and those waiting on all the others put bread and cooked food on the tables. A lavish meal, served on silver trenchers, was prepared for us and the other barbarians, but Attila just had some meat on a wooden platter, for this was one aspect of his self-discipline. For instance, gold or silver cups were presented to the other diners, but his own goblet was made of wood. His clothes, too, were simple,

and no trouble was taken except to have them clean. The sword that hung by his side, the clasps of his barbarian shoes and the bridle of his horse were all free from gold, precious stones or other valuable decorations affected by the other Scythians. When the food in the first plates was finished we all got up, and no one, once on his feet, returned to his seat until he had, in the same order as before, drunk the full cup of wine that he was handed, with a toast for Attila's health. After this honour had been paid him, we sat down again and second plates were put on each table with other food on them. This also finished, everyone rose once more, drank another toast and resumed his seat.

As twilight came on torches were lit, and two barbarians entered before Attila to sing some songs they had composed, telling of his victories and his valour in war. The guests paid close attention to them, and some were delighted with the songs, others excited at being reminded of the wars, but others broke down and wept if their bodies were weakened by age and their warrior spirits forced to remain inactive.

from B. K. Workman, trans., They Saw It Happen in Classical Times (Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1964). Reprinted in John Carey, ed., Eyewitness to History (New York: Avon Books, 1987), 23–24.

Activity Options

1. **Summarizing** With your classmates, plan and then present a re-creation of Priscus's dinner with Attila. Portray Attila, his servants, his sons, other Huns, the singers, and representatives of the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Draw on details in the passage to bring this re-enactment to life.
2. **Comparing and Contrasting** Make a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting Attila with the other diners.