

*Gaio Sollio Modesto Apollinari Sidonio Marcus Maecilius Flavius Eparchius Avitus salutem, S.V.B.E.E.V.*

I, *Magister militum* Marcus Maecilius, by the grace of Our Lord in the consulate of Herculanius and Sporacius, write now this account concerning the meeting of myself and *Rex* Attila of the barbarian *Hunni*. I write now to thee, most excellent Sidonius, that there might be no shame upon my house for the humiliation suffered by Rome at the hands of the barbarians.

Ever since the death of Flavius Aëtius in the defeat at Campus Mauriacus a year past, management of the defense of our glorious state has fallen on myself. Pressed with the abandonment of our barbarian allies the *Vesi*, I found myself in the direst of circumstances. Attila razed Aquileia and continued on his march to the Po River. With difficulty I persuaded His Holiness the Pope to abandon his mad plan to have an audience with the barbarian king, and instead met him in battle. I must admit, son of Apollinaris, that the battle was a rout on our part, and before many weeks they came upon the city of Rome like a pack of wolves. It was even in such a state that I resolved to visit Attila, seeing it as the only possible way to save the city. In this the Emperor, our lord Flavius Placidius Valentinianus Augustus, was in full agreement.

I should not, perhaps, have been surprised at the graciousness with which my suggestion was received – I was the mouse, and Attila was the cat, and it is a well known fact that cats will play with their meal before devouring. So I rode out with only a few companions and came to Attila's camp by the light of the sun.

I had fought the *Hunni* before, but never ceased to be surprised at how diverse was their multitude. *Alani*, *Sarmatae*, *Gepidae*, *Scirii*, *Rugii*, *Gothi*, *Burgundes*, *Franci*, *Sacae*, and many others were part of the host. Attila himself came out to greet me.

He was not tall, as I remember, but he had a large head with a flat nose and broad chest. His beard was thin and graying, and his beady eyes glittered beneath swart brows. His garb was simple, and a sword was buckled at his side. Not what I had expected of the *Flagellum Dei*, but nonetheless a fearsome sight.

“Welcome to my camp, Roman,” he said in deeply accented Latin. “You have come to discuss terms for the removal of the siege?”

I bowed, and the King smiled.

“Come along, then. A banquet is prepared.”

I entered into the King's own tent, where there had been laid out tables and chairs. At the far end was a couch upon which Attila placed himself. I was given a chair on Attila's left. On Attila's right, in the seat of honor,

was Onegesius, one of the chieftains of the *Sacae*. To my right, between myself and Attila's couch, was seated a large fellow richly dressed, another of the *Sacae*. I noticed, too, a rather dull-looking fellow on the end of the king's couch with cast-down eyes. I had heard tales that the barbarian king only accepted brave warriors to his table, but this was not true. There were many old men there, and several women.

"Welcome, *Magister Avitus*," the *Saca* on my right said in near-perfect Latin. "I am Berichus."

"*Salve*, Berichus," I said. "Who is that on the king's couch?"

"His eldest son," replied Berichus. "But hold, here comes the King's cup-bearer."

A handsome youth entered, carrying in both hands a large wooden vessel filled with wine. Everyone rose to their feet. Attila took this and raised it, toasting first Onegesius, and then the entire company one by one. More cup-bearers entered the tent, one for each present, and all of us drank. After we were all seated, more slaves came bearing great silver platters of viands, an enormous meal comprised mostly of meat and bread, the former in great variation and abundance. Attila received the lion's share, but not a guest went hungry that day. Musicians and singers came and performed, sometimes with ballads of Attila's deeds, other times with comic compositions that sent everyone laughing and talking. Only Attila remained grave and unmoved. I heard many tongues spoken in that tent, but the only one I could definitely pick out was Latin. The rest seemed to be composed of various barbarian tongues from across the world.

At last, when everyone was finished eating, Attila motioned for silence. He looked straight at me.

"*Magister Avitus*, what are you willing to surrender for the salvation of your city?" It was said simply, almost business-like.

"The treasury of Rome is at your disposal," I replied. "What do you demand?"

Attila stroked his beard. "Three hundred minae of gold a year."

"Three hundred?" I fairly exploded. I can't say diplomacy was ever one of my strong points. "That comes out to more than thirty-eight thousand drachmae! We'll give you one hundred and fifty minae."

The King shrugged. "Six hundred this year and two hundred every year afterward, and that is the least I will accept."

I could not move him after that, O most excellent Sidonius. It would drain the treasury of Rome, but the only other option was to suffer another sack. I agreed to the offer, and departed at once to the city where I consulted

the consuls. The tribute was paid, as you know, and the *Hunni* once more crossed the Po and returned to their conquests in the north. I'll never forget that meeting, however.

The flame of my candle burns low. Rome has survived another onslaught, but how many more can it take, I wonder? The most noble Valentinianus Augustus believes that we shall survive long yet; that Rome will recover her strength. But I do not know if this is true. Aëtius is dead, and even our brothers in the City of Constantinus pay annual tribute to the barbarians. The people say that I will be made Emperor after Valentinianus is dead, for he has no son. I pray not! It would be a heavy burden indeed. Already I am blamed for the defeat. The *Vesi* have turned against us, and the *Vandali* have moved up the coasts closer and closer toward Rome. Attila has been pacified, but not eternally. Therefore, O Sidonius, I close this letter with deep sadness and fear for the future. I trust that you are in good health, and may you not be burdened as I am.

*Vale.*