

Shock and gore not to the fore

A hate figure of popular history reveals his more caring side to Tom Palaima in a vivid new treatment

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According to Amazon.co.uk, people who ordered Christopher Kelly's *Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire* also ordered the Coen brothers' film version of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. Both explore the dance between worn-out enforcers of the rules of an exhausted civilisation and a practitioner of violence speaking a new moral language that they cannot understand.

These buying habits reflect Kelly's ability to communicate to his readers something more than the irony of Constantine Cavafy's poem *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which Kelly uses as his epigraph. More, too, than the warnings of Edward Gibbon and moralising Victorian historian Thomas Hodgkin. In a stylish epilogue, Kelly criticises the later use of Attila as a bogeyman against high cultural "feeble(ness) and dissolution" (Gibbon) and "British or American despots ... (who) will guide mighty empires to ruin, amidst the acclamation of flatterers" (Hodgkin). Kelly also takes on the kinds of racist or politically ideological stereotypes of Attila promulgated by Kaiser Wilhelm sending German soldiers to help suppress the Boxer Rebellion and personified by screen villain Jack Palance in the Hollywood film *Sign of the Pagan* released during Senator Joseph McCarthy's Communist witch-hunt.

Attila is at the centre of the 80 years of Roman imperial history that Kelly covers (AD375-455). He lays out, almost fondly, Attila's skills in diplomatic exchanges with the imperial court in Constantinople. He praises Attila's bold strategising of major moves in his campaigns (for example, his thrust into Italy in 452) and his cautious risk-taking in battles. He admires the concern Attila shows for the good of his family and his people, and how he deftly inspires fear and loyalty in his closest companions in order to counteract the near-constant threats against his power and his life.

But Kelly also gives us chillingly intimate close-ups. Attila, Kelly makes us see, is no monster or sociopath. Yet he racks up a large body count while adhering to a code of behaviour that the emperors in Rome and Constantinople never stoop to fathom or aspire to emulate. Kelly drops the horrendous massacres perpetrated by Julius Caesar's troops in Gaul and early imperial legionaries in Britain into one side of the scales and into the other the devastation caused by Hunnish armies from modern Belgrade across to Metz and down to Pavia and Milan.

Kelly's account of the embassy to Attila undertaken by Maximinus in AD449, accompanied, fortunately for us, by the historian Priscus, is full of eerie scenes. We come upon riverbanks littered with human bones. We camp amidst the cheerless ruins of once-breached city walls. We gaze upon a "deserted landscape" with "the wreckage of farm buildings and villages". Kelly calls all this, understatedly, a "bitter reminder of past prosperity". It is really a Hunnish variant on Tacitus' Roman recipe for peace.

The centrepieces of Kelly's study are chapters 15 and 16, where he reconstructs from what survives of Priscus' account of the clever ways Attila uses Hunnish feasting mores to confuse the Roman emissaries, and to discomfit them with his own demands for the return of disloyal Hunnish refugees while scrupulously fulfilling his duties as a host. This embassy was part of a plot to assassinate Attila. It might well have succeeded, Kelly stresses, "if Attila had been the stupidly cruel barbarian that the eunuch (Chrysaphius behind the assassination plot) assumed him to be".

Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire

By Christopher Kelly

The Bodley Head

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