The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture by Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen

15 Centuries Of Undeserved Fame

My Personal Review:
In contrast to other reviewers, I found Otto Maenchen-Helfen's compendium on the Huns to be fun to read. It is always amusing to see a magisterial scholar speak frankly about lesser mortals. Maenchen-Helfen certainly considered E.A. Thompson, the best known of the few English historians of the Huns, to be a slipshod scholar and -- unkindest cut of all in Oxford -- a poor Latinist.

Well, all these scholars are long gone. But the myths than Maenchen-Helfen worked so hard to explode live on. One in particular is standard fare in recent books: that the Huns in eastern (and briefly western) Europe were the same as the Hsiung-nu on the borders of China. This error creates a gigantic transcontinental Hunnic empire in the 4th or 5th centuries that never existed.

Maenchen-Helfen also explodes the story still taught, at least in Catholic school histories, that the bold and holy Leo III confronted Attila and saved Rome. This, too, never happened.

It turns out that despite their well-earned fearsome reputation, the Huns were a passing fad in history and not much of a military force. Masters of the compound bow and mounted, they were hideous raiders. But they won few big battles against the Romans (more properly, Germans in Roman pay) and were often slaughtered. From the time they showed up around 370 to their disappearance was hardly more than 70 years.

Maenchen-Helfen is suitably agnostic about most details, including their language, which may have been a kind of Turkish, their religion, their political organization etc. One of the few things certain is that they boiled mutton in poorly manufactured copper kettles.

Maenchen-Helfen himself is an attractive character. As a young scholar, he spent some months with the last of the "wild" Turkic tribes in Mongolia. That was in 1929. A few years later, he evacuated Germany. His friends who assembled this volume from his papers after his death do not say he was rejecting Hitlerism, but that is the implication. Few enough among
German scholars, especially in such a racially charged field as Hunnic studies, showed such humanity.

In exile in California for the rest of his life, he seems to have maintained intellectual integrity in a field where ax-grinding, by German, Soviet, Slav and sometimes Turkish students was rife.

It is odd enough that practically every educated American "knows" a bit about the Huns, though few have even heard of the Sarmatians, who were their more important predecessors. This is thanks to the effect, still lingering after nearly 1,500 years, of outrageously dishonest Christian propaganda. Odder that everything we were taught was wrong. Those who dislike being abused by bad teachers will want to know this book, even if they care little about what the Huns did or who they were.

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