

# Tiller the Hun? Farmers in Roman Empire converted to Hun lifestyle—and vice versa

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Example of a modified skull, a practice assumed to be Hunnic that may have been appropriated by local farmers within the bounds of the Western Roman Empire. Credit: Susanne Hakenbeck

Marauding hordes of barbarian Huns, under their ferocious leader Attila, are often credited with triggering the fall of one of history's greatest empires: Rome.

Historians believe Hunnic incursions into Roman provinces bordering the Danube during the 5th century AD opened the floodgates for nomadic tribes to encroach on the empire. This caused a destabilisation that contributed to collapse of Roman power in the West.

According to Roman accounts, the Huns brought only terror and destruction. However, research from the University of Cambridge on gravesite remains in the Roman frontier region of Pannonia (now Hungary) has revealed for the first time how ordinary people may have dealt with the arrival of the Huns.

Biochemical analyses of teeth and bone to test for diet and mobility suggest that, over the course of a lifetime, some farmers on the edge of empire left their homesteads to become Hun-like roaming herdsman, and consequently, perhaps, took up arms with the tribes.

Other remains from the same gravesites show a dietary shift indicating some Hun discovered a settled way of life and the joys of agriculture—leaving their wanderlust, and possibly their bloodlust, behind.

Lead researcher Dr Susanne Hakenbeck, from Cambridge's Department of Archaeology, says the Huns may have brought ways of life that appealed to some farmers in the area, as well learning from and settling among the locals. She says this could be evidence of the steady infiltration that shook an empire.

"We know from contemporary accounts that this was a time when treaties between tribes and Romans were forged and fractured, loyalties

sworn and broken. The lifestyle shifts we see in the skeletons may reflect that turmoil," says Hakenbeck.

"However, while written accounts of the last century of the Roman Empire focus on convulsions of violence, our new data appear to show some degree of cooperation and coexistence of people living in the frontier zone. Far from being a clash of cultures, alternating between lifestyles may have been an insurance policy in unstable political times."

For the study, published today in the journal *PLOS ONE*, Hakenbeck and colleagues tested skeletal remains at five 5th-century sites around Pannonia, including one in a former civic centre as well as rural homesteads.

The team analysed the isotope ratios of carbon, nitrogen, strontium and oxygen in bones and teeth. They compared this data to sites in central Germany, where typical farmers of the time lived, and locations in Siberia and Mongolia, home to nomadic herders up to the Mongol period and beyond.

The results allowed researchers to distinguish between settled agricultural populations and nomadic animal herders in the former Roman border area through isotopic traces of diet and mobility in the skeletons.

All the Pannonian gravesites not only held examples of both lifestyles, but also many individuals that shifted between lifestyles in both directions over the course of a lifetime. "The exchange of subsistence strategies is evidence for a way of life we don't see anywhere else in Europe at this time," says Hakenbeck.

She says there are no clear lifestyle patterns based on sex or accompanying grave goods, or even 'skull modification' - the binding of

the head as a baby to create a pointed skull - commonly associated with the Hun.

"Nomadic animal herding and skull modification may be practices imported by Hun tribes into the bounds of empire and adopted by some of the agriculturalist inhabitants."

The diet of farmers was relatively boring, says Hakenbeck, consisting primarily of plants such as wheat, vegetables and pulses, with a modicum of meat and almost no fish.



A modified skull from Gyr. The practice of modification originated in central Asia and has been associated with Huns and other nomadic populations. Credit: Erzsébet Fóthi, Hungarian Natural History Museum Budapest



The herders' diet on the other hand was high in animal protein and augmented with fish. They also ate large quantities of millet, which has a distinctive carbon isotope ratio that can be identified in human bones. Millet is a hardy plant that was hugely popular with nomadic populations of central Asia because it grows in a few short weeks.

Roman sources of the time were dismissive of this lifestyle. Ammianus Marcellinus, a Roman official, wrote of the Hun that they "care nothing for using the ploughshare, but they live upon flesh and an abundance of milk."

"While Roman authors considered them incomprehensibly uncivilised and barely human, it seems many of citizens at the edge of Rome's empire were drawn to the Hun lifestyle, just as some nomads took to a more settled way of life," says Hakenbeck.

However, there is one account that hints at the appeal of the Hun, that of Roman politician Priscus. While on a diplomatic mission to the court of Attila, he describes encountering a former merchant who had abandoned life in the Empire for that of the Hun enemy as, after war, they "live in inactivity, enjoying what they have got, and not at all, or very little, harassed."

**More information:** Hakenbeck SE, Evans J, Chapman H, Fóthi E (2017) Practising pastoralism in an agricultural environment: An isotopic analysis of the impact of the Hunnic incursions on Pannonian populations. *PLoS ONE* 12(3): e0173079, [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0173079](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0173079)

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