

Hun Personas

The Huns were a horse nomad empire that spread from Eastern Europe to Central Asia and were mostly noted for inspiring the Chinese to build the Great Wall to keep them out, and later for raiding the Roman Empire.

Names

The Hun Empire was a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual confederation of steppe tribes. Oghuric Turkic was the main language of the Hun elite, yet it is important to note that your Hun persona can take a name from any of the allied tribes or subject peoples that made up the empire as people intermarried quite a bit.

The original Hsiung-nu (also spelled “Xiongnu”) Empire was made up of Turkic, Mongolic, Iranian, Tungusic, and Yeniseian elements.

The later Hunnic Empire (that included eastern Europe) maintained many of the former elements but also included a large Sarmatian and Germanic population. The Ostrogoths had embraced steppe nomad life even before they were brought into the Hun Empire and the Gepids assimilated so completely with the Huns that some scholars have even referred to them as the Gepid-Huns.

Clothing

Sources from the time period state that the Huns were unkempt, animalistic, and barbaric in appearance. However, one must remember that the main source of information came from the Romans who were quite biased about the Huns.

Huns wore pants made out of skins. Depending on which translation you agree with, the skins were either goat hide or ibex hide. Tunics of poor Huns were made out of marmot skins sewn together. Rich Huns wore better quality furs. Leather and fur were stitched together with either leather thongs or hemp. Leather and fur coats were worn that came down close to the knees. These coats were not closed with buttons but cinched closed with a belt.

Huns also had access to linen cloth and nobles would stitch small gold plaques or pendants on to their garments. Hats were made out of hide and were pointed. Boots were made of sheepskin. (Primary sources state that the boots were made for riding and not walking and that when the Huns walked it was a clumsy gait due to their boots). Huns wore two fur coats in the winter. The inner coat was worn with the fur facing inward and the outer coat was worn with the fur facing outward.

All types of adornment were used by the Huns. As a nomad society, wealth had to be displayed in a way that was easily transported. Jewelry and saddle decorations were common. Gold was the favored metal and coins were melted down to make small plaques of animals and geometric designs to sew onto clothing. Beads were made from coral, carnelian, mother-of-pearl, quartz,

pyrite, lapis lazuli, Egyptian paste, amber, lignite, stone, clay, and glass. Beads were traded from all over. Hun women loved intricate embroidery that used beads to decorate their clothing. Tombs have been unearthed showing even the poorest of Hun women had beads adorning the sleeves and collars of their tunics as well as their boots and the lower part of their trousers. Women wore pants the same as the men did since this was a horse nomad society and women engaged in riding, warfare, and sport that would require trousers.

Accessories

When choosing a Hunnic persona, think about your main occupation before choosing garb, camp, and accessory items. For instance; if your persona was mainly a cattle herder, you would want cattle hides as rugs in your Altai yurt and cattle horn for utensils and cups. Think about where in the Hun Empire you live, what year it is, and your social class standing. This will affect what trade goods were more readily available to you.

One accessory item that was of importance to Huns was the belt. Belts were seen by many Central Asian peoples as symbols of power and authority. Weapons and personal items were hung from it and the belt itself would be decorated. Decorations depended on the status and wealth of the wearer. The preferred metal for adornment was gold. Gold decorations could be found on any personal item, clothes, or on horse tack. Brass and bronze can be used if gold is not an option since they look somewhat like gold. Avoid silver for jewelry or adornment. Stone beads are another option.

All Huns had bows and could shoot on foot or horseback. Learning archery is great for a Hun persona, or at the very least, have a recurve bow displayed in your tent.

Riding crops were used and carried by most everyone. Attaching one to your belt would be a good accessory for your persona. Another option is wearing a hawking glove since this was a favorite Hunnic pastime.

Since the SCA encourages the use of devices, you can design a device that has a Central Asian theme to it. More accurately, you can choose to use a *tamga* for your device. Tamgas were simple, geometric symbols that steppe nomads used much like an SCA badge or device. They were put on banners like a device but also used to show ownership (like a badge) and used for horse brands etc. Creating and registering a tamga can help make your persona more accurate and unique.

Homes

Homes depended on time period, location, and economics. Most Huns lived in a type of yurt that is often referred to as an "Altai yurt". The lattice work style yurt that the Turks (and later, Mongols) used had not been invented during the time of the Huns. Instead of lattice work walls, the walls were constructed by pounding vertical poles into the ground. Roof construction varied quite a bit. Yurts were covered with hide or felt depending on the region and economic factors.

If you choose to make an Altai yurt for your persona, you would need to set it up at an event that will allow digging in order to set the poles. If your event site does not allow this, you can have your vertical poles held in place with ropes and stakes like a round pavilion. (In fact, most Altai yurts look much like a round pavilion with a smoke-hole).

In the western part of the Hunnic Empire, (among the Attilanic Huns); some of the population lived in wooden homes. Attila and his second in command both had wooden homes with wooden palisades surrounding them. It was observed and documented by Priscus (a 5th-century Roman diplomat and Greek historian) that the homes were skillfully constructed and that the wood must have been imported from a distant region. If you wish your persona to have a wooden house, this can be done by either modifying a trailer or vardo to look like a house, or by making a tent look like it was constructed with wood. The shapes and styles of these houses were not clearly documented so you will need to exercise the “creative” part of your anachronism.

Wagons were of great importance to the Huns and were used as homes during migration or travel. When camped in a semi-permanent place, they were used as storage or sometimes family members would live in them. Hunnic covered wagons did not have sides that bow out like a gypsy *vardo* and had walls that went straight up. Wagons were covered in either hide or felt.

If you do not like any of the above options for your camp, one last option is a conical tent somewhat like a tipi. Some scholars believe that this was the type of tent that was used during the time of the early Hsiung-nu empire.

More nomad tent information can be found below in the resources section.

Furnishings

Not much is known about Hunnic furniture. Priscus mentioned that wooden chairs were set up in left and right rows for guests at the feast; and that Attila himself sat on a couch. Seating arrangements were always organized by the four sacred directions and the ranking of each person. Tray tables were brought out right before the meal was served for guests at the feast. Torches were made of bundles of long reeds as there was little wood in the area. Rugs were mainly felt or hide.

Food

Writing at the end of the fourth century, the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus described the Huns as the most barbarous of Rome's enemies:

“They are certainly in the shape of men, however uncouth, but are so hardy that they neither require fire nor well-flavored food, but live on the roots of such herbs as they get in the fields, or on the half-raw flesh of any animal, which they merely warm rapidly by placing in between their own thighs and the back of their horses.”

-Ammianus Marcellinus, History of Rome from Constantine to Valens, C. D. Yonge, tr. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1885)

The Huns were definitely not as primitive as Ammianus writes and certainly could not have survived on the freezing steppe or conquered such a vast empire if they didn't even know how to use fire. Like most central Asian horse nomads, the Huns ate primarily meat (horses, cattle, sheep, goats, wild game). Fermented horse milk was also an important part of their traditional diet.

Priscus writes that during his time among the western Huns as an envoy; he had been fed beef, millet, and once given "river fish". He was offered mead and barley beer to drink. At Attila's court feast he was offered delicacies such as wine, Indian pepper, and dates.

For your Hun persona, recreating Hunnic food is simple. You can serve beef and mutton either roasted or in stews. Wild game such as venison and game birds is also a good choice to serve and really easy to obtain. Fermented horse milk is more difficult to get in the United States, but you can offer your guests milk tea. If you make beer, make barley beer and you can also serve mead to guests. Food and drinks were always served in order according to a person's rank.

Weapons & Warfare

Horses:

Among the Huns, nothing was more important than horses. Horses were not just used in warfare but were part of everyday life. Primary sources note the Huns conducted business, met with envoys, ate, drank, and sometimes even slept in the saddle. Hun children knew how to ride before they learned to walk. By the time a Hun reached adulthood, riding was as natural as breathing. The Huns were superior horsemen such to the extent that they were compared to centaurs. Warfare on horseback made the Huns faster and more maneuverable than their enemies.

Weapons:

No weapon was more important than the bow. The bow was paramount to the Hun warrior and a Hun could shoot at full gallop and even shoot in retreat. The bow used by the Huns was a reflexed composite bow. Bone plaques were used to stiffen the ears and handle of the bow. Hun bows were asymmetrical. One theory for the use of asymmetric shape was that it allowed the bow to be increased in size without restricting its use from the saddle of a horse. These bows could shoot arrows at much greater distances than any Roman or European bow. The advantages of distance and maneuverability gave the Huns a great advantage in battle. Bows were the symbol of ruling power to the Huns just as swords were to their European counterparts. Great leaders would be buried with golden bows as a symbol of might and supremacy.

Huns were also known to use other weapons in addition to the bow including swords, Scythian axes, javelins, and lariats.

Religion

The Huns were never converted to Christianity by their Roman contemporaries. In fact, the Huns remained Pagan throughout the entire time that they were mentioned in the historical chronicles. Through archaeological and literary evidence, it is believed that the Huns practiced a form of shamanism, (often called *Tengerism*) that was common among steppe nomads for centuries. Tengerism is an animistic belief system in which all things have spirits. This includes everything from animals and plants, to rocks and rivers. Animals can have spiritual significance. Among the Huns, bears symbolized peace while wolverines symbolized war. Birds of prey such as eagles and hawks were often the symbols of Hun royalty. Horse skulls were placed in front of people's yurts to keep evil spirits away.

When the spirits needed to be consulted, the Huns would turn to a spiritual specialist called a kam (shaman). Chroniclers of the time state that the Huns would never go to battle without consulting a shaman first. Shamanist rituals were involved in all aspects of the political and military realms including the ratifying of treaties and any diplomatic endeavors. Shamans were held in very high regard and wore special ceremonial regalia including headdresses with eagle decorations on the front.

The Huns spiritual world view saw the world divided into four sacred directions. The four sacred directions each had a color associated with it. Black was north, red was south, blue was east and white was west. Hun nations were each associated with one of these colors and directions. Black and blue were considered superior to red and white. When speaking about Black Huns, White Huns etc. it is important to note that this refers more to banner color than racial meanings (the Hunnic Empire was a confederation of multi-ethnic tribes). Also, as nations migrated their designated direction may not correspond with their associated color. (For example, the White Huns (western affiliated) actually ended up east of the Black Huns.

Past times

Huns were expected to be skillful in riding, hunting, and archery. Falconry was noted as one of the favorite pastimes of the nobles but it is not mentioned if the lower classes did this as well. The Huns also enjoyed humor. Khan Bleda had a dwarf at his court who was a very popular comedian and would entertain his guests at feasts.

Music

At feasts, it was important for bards to sing songs in honor of battle, acts of courage and valor, and victories won.

It was noted that when Attila returned to his camp after having been away, he was greeted by women who sang "Scythian songs".

Jordanes wrote down Attila's dirge (of which there are several inaccurate translations out there which make the exact words used unclear.) The gist of the dirge was praise of his military accomplishments and power. The fact that he did not die from an enemy's hand made the people feel that no vengeance was needed.

List of Occupations

As a horse nomad society; hunting and herding were the foundation of the economy. Some Huns raised cattle and others raised sheep and goats. All Huns raised horses. Camels were not used by the Huns in Europe, but the Huns in the Eastern part of the Empire (in the Volga region) kept small herds of Bactrian camels. Hunting was important because it not only supplemented the Huns food supply, but helped train their young for war. Hunting also brought in hides that could be used for clothing as well as sold or traded. Huns in the Black Sea region were known for being fur traders. Large amounts of furs were brought into the Roman Empire from this region.

Any Hun could be a warrior since they learned the skills for this growing up. Huns had a variety of shamans and healers as well as craftsmen and women.

Women

Women among the Huns enjoyed a great deal of freedom and high status. Women were not secluded from public or prohibited from serving office like some of their foreign counterparts were. Hun women could be warriors, shamans, chieftains, and governors. Priscus mentions a woman governor who assisted his embassy when they had their belongings destroyed by a storm.

Under the Hunnic ruler, Shi Hu; the entire royal guard consisted of 10,000 of the bravest women warriors. They were experts in archery and horsemanship and wore purple headdresses to show their rank.

Different Hunnic tribes had different marrying practices. Some Huns practiced monogamy and others polygamy. The White Huns (referring to the color of Banner and not race) practiced polyandry (one woman with many husbands). It was recorded that these women wore headdresses that showed off how many husbands they had.

Other Huns practiced polygyny (one husband with several wives). When this occurred, there was always the first wife who reigned over the others. Attila was noted to have a great number of wives, but Kreka was the only wife with the title and duties of the Queen.

“It is to be noted, however, that only one of these wives ranked as the Queen Consort. This lady not only outranked all of their rivals but seems to have exercised a considerable influence upon the affairs of state.” Pg 387 Early Empires of Central Asia. Queen Kreka received important foreign envoys and held court in her own royal enclave.

Recommended Books

The Huns, Rome, and the Birth of Europe by Hyun Jin Kim

A “must-read” for anyone trying to understand who the Huns were and their significant impact on Europe and the bringing about of the Middle Ages. Dr. Kim discusses Central Asian history from an eastern viewpoint for the first time instead of focusing only on the documents written by the enemies of the Huns.

The Huns by Hyun Jin Kim

A solid introduction to the history and culture of the Huns and their impact on world history and contributions to civilization and statecraft. Not as thorough as his first book on the Huns.

World of the Huns by Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen

This is an older book but has great information.

Attila: The Barbarian King Who Challenged Rome by John Man

Written in 2005, this is one of the more recent looks at the Huns. Entertaining and insightful book even though there are some inaccuracies

Early Empires of Central Asia by William Mc Govern

Very thorough account of the Hsiung-nu (early Hunnic Empire) and some information on the Huns who expanded into Europe.

Riding Windhorses by Sarangerel Odigon

An introduction to Tenggerism (steppe nomad spiritual worldview)

Books on Hunnic Yurts

The best source of information about any type of steppe nomad tent is ***Felt Tents and Pavilions: The Nomadic Tradition and its Interaction with Princely Tentage*** by Dr. Peter Alford Andrews. This book discusses the variety and design of tents and carts that were used throughout steppe nomad history. The book also discusses how the camps were set up, organized and even some of the titles of camp officers and their duties.

Dr. Andrews has spent several decades traveling throughout Central Asia to study nomad tents. Here is a link to Dr. Andrew’s web site where you can find his publications and his curriculum vitae (qualifications, education, field work experience, research positions, etc.)

<http://www.andrewspeter.info/index.html>

Below is a link to a review of his book.

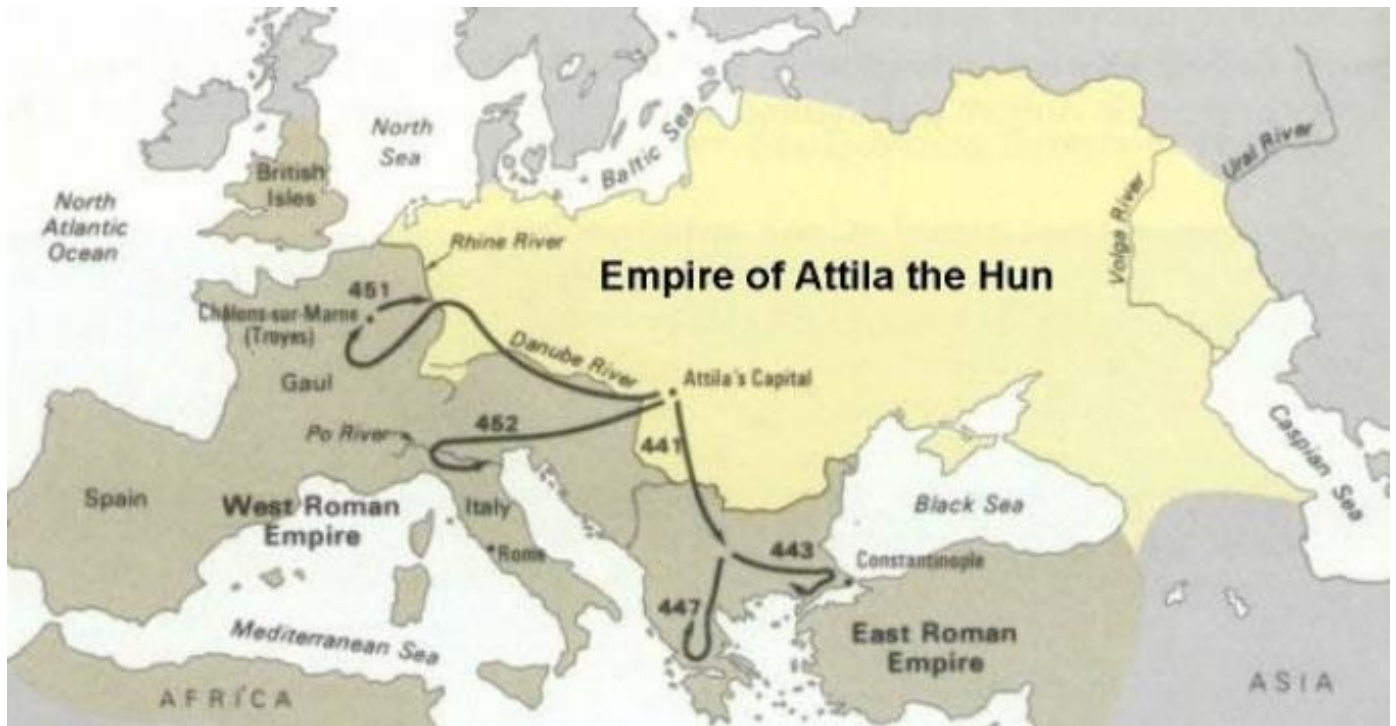
<http://www.andrewspeter.info/files/Allsen.pdf>

Maps

Below: The early Hunnic Empire (Xiong-Nu) under Modun Shanyu. All of present day Mongolia and surrounding regions.



Below: The Empire of Attila



Below: The empire of the Hephthalites (The White Hun Banner)

