WHO WERE THE HUNS?

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This image depicts an engraving of the Huns engaged in battle with the Alans. Created in the 1870s, the engraving is based on a drawing by Johann Nepomuk Geiger (1805-1880). Online, via Wikimedia Commons. PD

The Huns were a nomadic people who left the steppes of Central Asia, traveled to Europe and threatened what was left of Rome's empire. Chinese documents, from the Han Dynasty, refer to a warlike tribe called the "Hsiung-nu" who may have been the Huns' earliest ancestors. The first emperor of China began to build the Great Wall to keep out such marauders.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Huns moved west, traveling in different groups. It is likely they fled from an exceptionally dry period in the eastern steppes.

Searching for fodder, they conquered as they went. By 216 A.D. (when their territory was split into five successor states), the Huns had extended their area of control north to Siberia, south to Tibet, east to the Pacific Ocean and west to the Caspian Sea.

People were afraid of the Huns. Literary texts indicate that every boy had his face slashed as an infant. That led to fearsome looks, but the point of the mutilation was to teach children to endure pain. Archaeological evidence confirms deformation of Hunnic children and Ammianus Marcellinus, writing about fifty years before Attila's reign, describes a barbaric practice:

> *At the very moment of their birth the cheeks of their infant children are deeply marked by an iron...*

Jordanes, an historian writing about one hundred years after Attila's death, elaborates (see chapter XXIV):

> *For by the terror of their features they inspired great fear in those whom perhaps they did not really surpass in war. They made their foes flee in horror because their swarthy aspect was fearful...Their hardihood is evident in their wild appearance, and they are beings who are cruel to their children on the very day they are born. For they cut the cheeks of the males with a sword, so that before they receive the nourishment of milk they must learn to endure wounds.*

Expert horsemen, whose children learned to ride as soon as they could walk, the Huns were masters of the bow and arrow. Jordanes continues with his description of Hunnic warriors:

> *...their young men are without comeliness, because a face furrowed by the sword spoils by its scars the natural beauty of a beard. They are short in stature, quick in bodily movement, alert horsemen, broad shouldered, ready in the use of bow and arrow, and have firm-set necks which are ever erect in pride. Though they live in the form of men, they have the cruelty of wild beasts.*

It was their cruelty, and their military prowess, which made the Huns a conquering people even before Attila became their king. As Ammianus Marcellinus observes, at the beginning of his history:

> *The people called Huns, slightly mentioned in the ancient records, live beyond the Sea of Azov, on the border of the Frozen Ocean, and are a race savage beyond all parallel.*

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
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See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WHO-WERE-THE-HUNS-Attila-the-Hun

Media Stream

Great Wall of China

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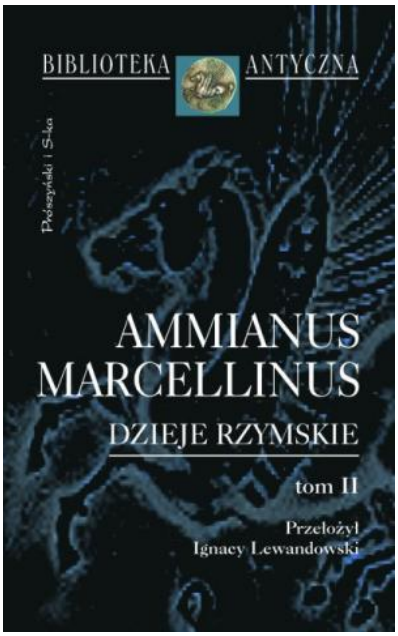

Ammianus Marcellinus

Image online, courtesy Amazon.
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Hunnic Empire - Area of Control

Map image online, courtesy Karahun.hu (Hungarian-language website)
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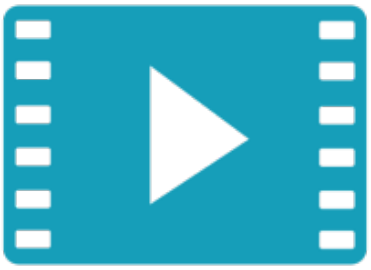

Attila the Hun - Scourge of God

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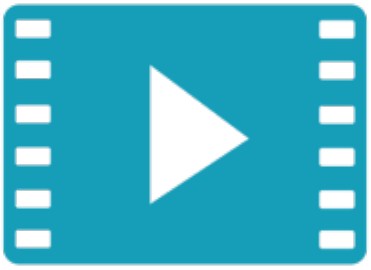

Attila - Expert Horseman, Roman Hostage

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