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In 451, Attila and his Huns fought with their reflex bows at the Battle of Chalons. This image, from a German-language text, depicts how such a battle may have appeared. The drawing is by Hermann Vogel (1854-1921). Online, via Wikimedia Commons.

With rested horses always in reserve, attacking Huns used surprise as a military tool. Messengers could not reach their towns to warn people faster than the Huns could descend *en masse*. Ammianus Marcellinus, writing in 395 A.D., says:

They are very quick in their operations, of exceeding speed, and fond of surprising their enemies. With a view to this, they suddenly disperse, then reunite, and again, after having inflicted vast loss upon the enemy, scatter themselves over the whole plain in irregular formations: always avoiding the fort or an entrenchment.

Using reflex bows which drew back twenty to thirty centimeters, the Huns had developed a powerfully effective weapon. (A specimen reflex bow can be seen at the Hungarian Military Museum in Budapest.) Their arrows could travel 300 meters (about 328 yards), killing a man at half that distance. Marcellinus describes the Hunnic warrior in action:

And in one respect you may pronounce them the most formidable of all warriors, for when at a distance they use missiles of various kinds, tipped with sharpened bones instead of the usual points of javelins, and these bones are admirably fastened into the shaft of the javelin or arrow; but when they are at close quarters they fight with the sword, without any regard for their own safety; and often while their antagonists are warding off their blows they entangle them with twisted cords, so that, their hands being fettered, they lose all power of either riding or walking.

Professor Sandor Bokonyi, the leading Hungarian authority on Hun animals, believes the Huns invented the stirrup. (Others credit the Sarmatians, who expected their young women to fight, with that invention.)

Even if they did not invent them, Huns used their stirrups to terrify enemies. Standing upright on a racing horse, they could fire their deadly arrows forward, backward and sideways. Unsuspecting townsfolk did not realize disaster was about to strike until they saw a cloud of dust, heard pounding hooves and experienced a rain of Hun arrows which turned the sky black.

So adept at horsemanship were the Huns that Marcellinus observes:

There is not a person in the whole nation who cannot remain on his horse day and night. On horseback they buy and sell, they take their meat and drink, and there they recline on the narrow neck of their steed, and yield to sleep...And when any deliberation is to take place on any weighty matter, they all hold their common council on horseback. They are not under the authority of a king, but are contented with the irregular government of their nobles, and under their lead they force their way through all obstacles.

Although they sustained setbacks in the third century A.D., the Huns soon resumed their conquering ways. They lived on plunder (from conquered towns and people) and tribute (garnered from those who preferred to pay instead of die). Historically a Nomadic people, Marcellinus describes their living arrangements:

They never shelter themselves under roofed houses, but avoid them, as people ordinarily avoid sepulchers as things not fitted for common use. Nor is there even to be found among them a cabin thatched with reed; but they wander about, roaming over the mountains and the woods, and accustom themselves to bear frost and hunger and thirst from their very cradles.

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Media Stream



Reflex Bows - Attila and the Huns

Image online, courtesy the [Deadliest Warrior](#) website.

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Hungarian Reflex Bow

Image online, courtesy Asian Traditional Archery Research Network.

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Sarmatians - Expert Horsemen

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Barbarian Migrations and Invasions. The early cross-border raids of neighboring peoples gave way to migrations of starving and overpopulated barbarian tribes looking for safety in the Empire. By the fifth century, large-scale raids by the Huns and Vandals reached throughout the western Empire, resulting in permanent settlements.

Map Depicting Hun Movements

Image online, courtesy the joneshistory.net website.

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