Excavations of South American sites containing traces of ancient human activity have suggested that humans reached the southern region of the continent at least 14,500 years before present (BP)—remarkably quickly after first entering the Americas and only 500 years after the initial peopling of the continent. In a study published earlier this year, she and her colleagues found modern genetic traces of a population known as the ‘Tupi’ that dominated the Brazilian coast during the 15th century but had supposedly been driven extinct by European conquerors. Modern people known as the Tupiniquim, who live in cities and do not speak an indigenous language, have long identified themselves as descendants of the Tupi, and the researchers found that they do indeed have signals of indigenous ancestry, along with European and African heritage, in their genomes. Furthermore, their indigenous ancestry was distinct from that of any other modern groups who have been studied.

The team’s analysis points to a migration of Tupi people from central Amazonia northeast toward Brazil’s coast around 2,000–3,000 years ago, followed by a later migration of a separate Tupi group who traveled southeast but also ultimately expanded along the coast. They were not the first people to reach the Brazilian coast; archaeological sites with distinctive shell mounds known as sambaquis indicate that others had settled the coast 10,000–8,000 years ago, but they appear to have been completely replaced by the Tupi.

The current goal of her work, Hünemeier says, is “to figure out how [people in the second group] settled Amazonia and how they split,” as well as “which was the original group that came to Amazonia.”