

The Comanche Empire Book Review
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The Comanche Empire by historian Pekka Hamalainen documents the Comanche rise to become "lords of the plains" and their fall as United States settlers flooded the southwest.¹ Comancheria, the Comanche homeland, flourished between 1750 and 1850 in a region contested by the powerful European nations. The Comanche expansion was caused by their shift migration to the southwest and transition into mounted nomadic hunters. Through an analysis of the importance of bison hunting and raiding to the Comanche economy, Hamalainen brings a new perspective to the academic debate concerning empire by examining documents through a native rather than a Eurocentric lens. *The Comanche Empire* is a revisionist history that challenges traditional views of imperialism in the Americas.

In presenting his revisionist history, Hamalainen is at his best when analyzing the Comanche rise to power. The Comanches became a distinct tribe when splitting from Shoshone and migrating to the southern plains. Hamalainen speculates they made the move to gain access to Spanish horse herds, a claim backed by the documented account of Shoshones "who remembered that the Comanche left them and went south in search of game and ponies."² Hamalainen contends that the greatest contribution to Comanche expansion and dominance on the plains was the transformation to a mounted hunting society. His argument is convincingly supported by explaining why the Comanches were alone in making the shift in lifestyle. The Comancheria capital was located in the Big Timbers of Arkansas, a plains-prairie ecotone that provided "water, firewood, and shelter for Comanches and their herds."³ This is crucial to Hamalainen's argument because the Comanches settled in a geostrategic position vital to trade and provided resources needed for further expansion. The Comanches migrated to the Southern plains "as an extraordinarily adaptive people."⁴ In contrast, the Apaches were hundreds of years

into building an agricultural society and their traditions tied their settlements to the land. This information is critical to Hamalainen's argument because the Apaches' inability to adapt rapidly led to the Comanches supplanting them as "Lords of the Plains".

A probable motive for migrating to the southwest was Spanish horse herds in Texas and New Mexico. Hamalainen identifies the integration of horseback riding into hunting and raiding as integral to Comanche expansion. Comanches acquired horses largely through trade from their alliance network and raiding other native groups and Spanish pueblos. Comanche warriors were unique in using horses for guerilla-style warfare where they would shock villages into submission and ride miles away to safety before substantial resistance could be mounted.

By the 1830s the Comanches put all their people on horseback and "began to employ the mounted bison chase."⁵ Hamalainen does a superb job of depicting the essential role of the bison in Comanche culture. Bison was the Comanches' main food source, and by using all the animal parts, Comanches traded their surplus in bison to supplement their diets and obtain European manufactured goods. The abundant bison herds sustained Comanche expansion, but the decline in this essential resource also led to the collapse of the Comanche Empire. Hamalainen associates the increase of the Comanche population to overhunting of the bison. The evidence he provides is compelling, the Comanches "probably neared, and in some years exceeded, the sustainable yearly rate of killing," and as incompatible species, large horse herds and bison had similar diets and could not graze together without depleting foraging spots.⁶ Although Hamalainen's assessment of the decline in bison herds is convincing, he could have better explained why the Comanches weren't able to adapt in this instance.

Hamalainen conveyed the significance of the Comanche raiding and militaristic power well. Raiding provided a way for young native men to gain prestige and honor. In addition to this societal aspect, raiding was also practical. Comanches stole whatever resource they lacked, and these raids provided a steady supply of Mexican and native captive slave labor. A key concept in proving Comanche's imperial power is their booming slave economy. The Spanish officials fought many battles with the Comanches with the intent of forcing an end to the raids, but they were unable to curtail the trade. The Spanish desired an end to Comanche raiding but altered their expectations and accommodated the Comanche policy. The Comanches' ability to dictate politics and events on the ground in the southwest is why they are considered an empire. According to Hamalainen, Comanche militaristic domination through raiding and economic domination by trading catapulted their society into imperialism.

Comanche power in the southwest persisted through constantly evolving trade alliances. Controlling trade allowed the Comanches to grow into a southwestern economic powerhouse. Hamalainen explains that diplomacy aided the Comanches in dominating the region. When they first entered the plains, they established an alliance with the Utes and traded captives for horses, and European manufactured goods like guns and metal tools. When their Ute alliance was no longer mutually beneficial, the Comanches aligned with other natives and Europeans to acquire mainly the guns they needed. Comanches relied heavily on the same people they exploited and colonized. Hamalainen's argument that Comancheria operated as an empire is a sound argument, but their reliance on access to European trade goods provides doubt if this empire was ever sustainable.

The Comanche Empire is a revisionist work because it breaks from viewing natives in a traditional Eurocentric perspective. Traditional Eurocentric sources would typically dismiss native attacks as barbarous actions from savages; however, Hamalainen does an excellent job analyzing native motivations. Comanches at the zenith of their empire raided neighbors largely for coveted resources, like horses and slaves, but they also ingeniously create artificial demand in local markets where Comanches could exchange their stolen goods. As the bison herds disappeared and Comanche society was in decline slave raids tended "to keep up the numbers of the tribe."⁷ This is an example of a revisionist history because the focus is shifted from reactions of settlers to an analysis of the indigenous rationale. Also, in preserving the voice of the natives, Hamalainen portrays the southwest as a "dynamic world of vibrant societies" instead of an "imperial backwater."⁸ The pressure caused by Comanches in the region caused Spain to give up their imperial ambitions in the area.

Hamalainen's integration of primary source material underscores his skillful methodology. Obstacles identified when embarking on this research included the availability of sources and filtering the Eurocentric biases that prevailed in the period being investigated. The author concedes "the available sources" are "invariably infected with bias, accidental misreadings and intentional misconstructions."⁹ Essentially, Hamalainen's methodology needed to address how to uncover the localized native viewpoint from a collection of primary sources largely comprised of European colonial documents. Hamalainen identifies Euro-American colonial records as the "documentary spine" of the book.¹⁰ In his methodological approach, Hamalainen verified documentary observations by cross-referencing sources against one another, therefore allowing a better interpretation analyzing native perspectives. For example, traditional analysis

of Comanche nomadic lifestyles may conclude Comanches lived non-sedentary lives because they lacked the means and sophistication to make such a shift, although the Apaches and other pueblo Indians were examples of sedentary agriculturalist societies. Hamalainen was able to glean new perspectives by analyzing multiple sources and interpreting the data with consideration of native intentions. Hamalainen concluded Comanches continued to reside in small nomadic bands because of the tactical benefit it gave to warriors. Comanches could attack other enemy tribes and Spanish pueblos using hit and run guerilla tactics. Then, they could retreat to their mobile villages, pack up the camp and disappear before a retaliatory response could be mounted. The effectiveness of these raids was documented in the numerous colonial records and personal accounts of settlers. Moreover, the effectiveness of Comanche raids was evident in the economic devastation of the southwestern settlements. European bias embedded in the sources commonly dismisses the Comanche people as uncivilized savages. Hamalainen's expert interpretations illustrated a clearer more in-depth reasoning that explained Comanche behavior and revealed a certain sophistication and strategic prowess that was previously obscure.

Hamalainen's work reveals that Europeans faced formidable challenges in trying to subdue the continent. Europeans had previously exerted imperial power over natives in early America; however, Hamalainen successfully documents the Comanches' influence over European culture. The Comanches forced Europeans to accept native cultural practices. For example, the Spanish had to participate in the slave economy and pay ransoms for captured loved ones. Furthermore, the Spanish by law were not allowed to trade guns with natives but the Comanches raided until Spanish reversed their decision to bring prosperity back to the region. Hamalainen's work also reveals that although the native political structure wasn't centralized it

was still highly effective. Their fluid political structure based on mobile bands facilitated relationships and trade between their alliance network.

In *The Comanche Empire*, Pekka Hamalainen convincingly shows that Comanches were able to initiate expansion as they incorporated mounted nomadism into their culture. They used raiding and sophisticated diplomacy to maintain dominance in the region. Hamalainen's work reveals that the Comanches resisted European imperialism and forced European, Americans and native peoples alike into marginalization. As a revisionist work, *The Comanche Empire* shifts the power balance enter world at that time to focus on events outside of European capitals and into the southwest.

¹ Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, Lamar Series in Western History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

² Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 23.

³ Ibid, 37.

⁴ Ibid, 67.

⁵ Ibid, 38.

⁶ Ibid, 295.

⁷ Ibid, 302.

⁸ Ibid, 11.

⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

Bibliography

Hämäläinen, Pekka. *The Comanche Empire*. Lamar Series in Western History. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.