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INTRODUCTION
Traditional accounts of the eighteenth-century world in the American Southwest often make reference to “Spanish New Mexico.” Spaniards may have been wildly outnumbered by the surrounding indigenous communities, and their political control may have been patchy and tenuous. But this rarely prevents scholars from drawing a circle around the region and labeling it Spanish. A European colony, it is assumed, is still a European colony, even if it is a very small and powerless one.

Increasingly, however, this position is coming under fire. Some of the strongest critiques have emerged within Pueblo communities, many of which now openly reject the language of “Spanish conquest.” Europeans, they observe, may have invaded the Southwest at the end of the sixteenth century—and then again at the end of the seventeenth century following the Pueblo Revolt—but they never “conquered” the region in any meaningful sense of the term. With respect to the eighteenth century in particular, some Pueblo commentators are quick to point out that Spaniards were economically and militarily
dependent on indigenous communities, with little actual power to impose their will (see John G. Douglass and William M. Graves, chapter 1 in this volume). Certainly the metal-clad immigrants from the south rattled their sabers, made proclamations, and founded settlements (many of which, during the mid-eighteenth century, remained so weak as to be periodically abandoned), but asserting dominance is not the same thing as achieving dominance. An aspirational colonialism is merely that. From this perspective, we are still looking at a “Pueblo New Mexico” in which Europeans participated but as neither the sole nor even the primary authors. Pueblo critics, in other words, are challenging us to reimagine the eighteenth century as a time of indigenous history-making, the goal being to rewrite this early chapter of the “Historic period” as a veritable “Pueblo V period,” that much neglected extension of the Pecos Classification recently championed by Matthew Liebmann (2012a). Indeed, the new trend among the Rio Grande Pueblos to formally reinstate indigenous toponyms—to take down signs for “San Juan Pueblo,” for instance, and replace them with signs for “Ohkay Owingeh”—might be interpreted as contributions to this reimagining.

Historians, for their part, have also sought alternatives to Eurocentric accounts of the colonial Southwest. Since the 1970s, contributors to the so-called New Indian History have cast a spotlight on the perspectives and political agendas of native actors in the tug-and-pull of colonial power struggles, redressing a long-standing tendency to typecast American Indian societies as anachronistic obstacles to Euro-American progress whose primary discursive role was to stand in for a primordial wildness that had no choice but to succumb to the inexorable advance of civilization. Indeed, old myths of the vanishing Indian—however much they still circulate in popular White discourse—are themselves vanishing from much academic writing. And even if the narrative forms and framing categories within the New Indian History remain decidedly Euro-American in their overall orientation (see Mihesuah 1998), there can be little question that the attention to native protagonists offers an important rejoinder to earlier accounts.

Nowhere is this more spectacularly evident than in contemporary commentary on the political history of the Comanches, that most notoriously militant of Native American tribes. The Comanche past is extraordinary: at the start of the colonial era, their ancestors were Shoshonean hunter-gatherers living in small camps dispersed throughout northern Colorado and Wyoming; during the final decade of the seventeenth century, they acquired horses and quickly remade themselves into the most skilled equestrian warriors and long-distance traders in North America; by the mid-eighteenth century, they had ousted the Apache from the Southern Plains and emerged as a continental power; and into the mid-nineteenth century, they were key players in an expanding regional
economy of horses, slaves, hides, and guns that eventually extended from the Canadian Plains deep into northern Mexico (see John 1996; Kavanagh 1996). Unlike many other native groups, then, the Comanches have always been seen as agents of Southwestern history in the nonnative imagination. However, until quite recently their agency was inevitably written about as a wild barbarism bent on destruction. Most historical commentary, that is, has portrayed the tribe as possessing a negative agency that didn’t so much pursue goals as frustrate those of others—foiling the northern expansion of Spain in the eighteenth century, upending the lives of Apaches and other native occupants of the Southern Plains, and delaying the westward expansion of the United States well into the nineteenth century. As the title of one early work put it, historians studied “The Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement” (Richardson 1933).

The older specter of negative agency hasn’t gone away. On the contrary, the most widely read recent history of the tribe is S. C. Gwynne’s Empire of the Summer Moon, a New York Times best seller that recounts Comanche history with all the dark zeal for primitive violence that one finds in mid-twentieth century Westerns such as The Searchers (1956, directed by John Ford). In Gwynne’s pen, the Comanches transformed the Southwest into a veritable war zone, “an open and bleeding wound, a smoking ruin littered with corpses and charred chimneys, a place where anarchy and torture killings had replaced the rule of law, where Indians and especially Comanches raided at will” (Gwynne 2010:3). No doubt this remains the White public’s dominant image. But within contemporary academic scholarship, the look of Comanche history is changing rapidly, primarily due to the efforts of Pekka Hämäläinen, whose The Comanche Empire presents us with a bold new vision of the Southwest in which the dominant actors were neither Hispano nor Pueblo, but Comanche. “When Comanches subjected Texas and New Mexico to systematic raiding of horses, mules, and captives, draining wide sectors of those productive resources, they in effect turned the [European] colonies into [Native American] imperial possessions,” he suggests. “That Spanish Texas and New Mexico remained unconquered by Comanches is not a historical fact; it is a matter of perspective” (Hämäläinen 2008:5).

What are we to make of the fact that some historians now write of an eighteenth-century Comanche conquest of New Mexico—of a “Comanche New Mexico,” as it were, rather than a Spanish or Pueblo New Mexico? How, in particular, are we to understand Hämäläinen’s provocative notion of a reversed colonialism in which European colonists suddenly found themselves in the position of the colonized? And how, in the end, are we, as archaeologists, to respond to the new vision of a veritable Comanche empire in the Southwest? How indeed, when a century of research on the archaeology of colonial New Mexico still hasn’t produced a single published example of a “Comanche” site in the region? Could it be that we’ve simply missed the archaeological traces of an...
entire Native American empire that has been there all along, unacknowledged, just beneath our nose?

There are many issues to deal with here, not least the notion of “empire” itself. A number of historians have written loosely about a Comanche empire in the Southwest, but Hämäläinen takes this idea seriously, and he does so for at least three reasons. First, to speak of a Comanche imperial project is to radicalize the question of native agency, pushing the agenda of the New Indian History to its furthest extent. It is not just that Native Americans were actors who pursued their own local goals in the face of European colonialism; now we are encouraged to imagine far bolder Native American actors with geopolitical aspirations and strategies that rivaled and sometimes eclipsed those of Europeans.

Second, the notion of a Comanche empire further challenges us to expand our understanding of “empire” as a cross-cultural analytical category. Clearly, the Comanches were not attempting to build a regional polity following Roman or Incan models. They were not, in other words, interested in conquering foreign territories so as to turn them into Comanche provinces ruled by Comanche governors. “Their aim,” proposes Hämäläinen (2008:4–5), “was not to conquer and colonize, but to coexist, control, and exploit. Whereas more traditional imperial powers ruled by making things rigid and predictable, Comanches ruled by keeping them fluid and malleable.” If the Comanches can be said to have ruled an empire, then it was more of an economic than a political empire. Thousands of mounted Comanche soldiers regularly maneuvered throughout the Plains, New Mexico, Texas, and northern Mexico to engage in a complicated and ever-shifting combination of diplomacy and warfare. But their goal was to extract resources and maintain access to markets, rather than to obtain political subjugation. In this sense, one might draw a parallel with the so-called Mongolian shadow empires of the Eurasian steppe (Barfield 2001), though Hämäläinen’s central point seems to be that we should seek to understand the alterity of Comanche political organization on its own terms, without reducing it to existing anthropological or historical models derived from other cultural traditions.

Third, and perhaps most important, the notion of a Comanche empire pushes back against the persistent tendency to portray American westward expansion during the nineteenth century as a civilizing process whereby order was introduced into an organizational void. Indeed, Hämäläinen argues that the regional might of the Comanches was actively forgotten precisely in order to legitimize the American takeover of the West. The result was an insidious form of national amnesia that began to set in on the heels of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and then, more deeply, after the Comanches finally surrendered to the US military at Fort Sill in 1875. “Comanches ruled the Southwest for well over a century,” concludes Hämäläinen, “but they left behind no marks of their dominance. There were no deserted fortresses or
decaying monuments to remind the [American] newcomers of the complex imperial history they were displacing. Envisioning a new kind of empire, one of cities, railroads, agricultural hinterlands, and real estate, Americans set out to tame, commodify, and carve up the land . . . With each new layer of American progress, the memory of the Comanches and their former power grew dimmer” (Hämäläinen 2008:342). Again, his suggestion is that this erasure of Comanche history has been an implicit part of America’s own imperialistic project (see also DeLay 2008). Thus, by rereading colonial archives to bring this indigenous empire to light, revisionist historians could be said to participate in a broader postcolonial critique.

**TOWARD AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF COMANCHE NEW MEXICO**

Our goal in this chapter is to explore how archaeology might contribute to this revisionist effort. Whether or not one is willing to take the notion of a Comanche empire seriously, there is no question that the tribe exerted a strong influence on both native and nonnative communities across an impressive swath of North America during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. And while historians’ reliance on written colonial archives may lead them to conclude that the Comanches “left behind no marks of their dominance,” we take this apparent invisibility as a beginning point for research—as an archaeological challenge to uncover whatever material traces may still exist.

We are particularly interested in the Comanche presence in New Mexico during the early eighteenth century, at a time when the tribe was still developing its equestrian adaptation and readying itself for a takeover of the Southern Plains, which would become its base of operations for more than a century beginning in the 1740s. During this formative period in the emergence of Comanche identity, the tribe’s relationship with the northern Rio Grande Pueblo communities was vital. The Taos region, in particular, could be said to stand at the heart of Comanche ethnogenesis. This was a region with extensive pasturage for large herds of Spanish horses, which the Comanches’ relatives, the Utes, were poised to acquire after the Pueblos drove the Spanish out in 1680. As the horse made its way north through native trade networks into Comanche hands, new economic and military potentials were unleashed. Within a generation, the distribution of power in the northern Rio Grande was profoundly transformed. Returning to the region at the end of the seventeenth century, the Spanish discovered that both they and the Pueblo communities now had to contend with the repeated invasions of a new kind of *indios bárbaros*: mounted nomads who could strike with great speed and military agility over long distances.

The first potential written references to the Comanche appear on French maps from the 1680s, during the period of Spanish exile. The French regularly reported the presence of a group known as the Padouca at the northeastern edge of New
Mexico, often in the vicinity of the headwaters of the Arkansas River, not far from Taos. In later mid-eighteenth century documents, Padouca was clearly used by the French as a term for Comanche—or perhaps for a particular Comanche band—but historians have long disagreed over whether the earliest mentions of “Padouca” might have instead referred to an Apache band or simply to those living in the Arkansas headwaters region, regardless of language and culture (see Secoy 1951). We consider this as an open question, complicated of course by two of the central facts of the colonial period: first, many indigenous identities were undergoing substantial transformation and, second, colonial authorities often knew almost nothing about indigenous groups, particularly about the highly nomadic groups whose home territories were far from colonial settlements.

Some ancestral Comanches surely began to visit northern New Mexico during the late seventeenth century, most likely in the company of the Ute, whose long history of occupation immediately northwest of Taos would have given them both an intimate knowledge of the landscape and established access to Pueblo trade networks. The subsequent ethnic divisions between various Numic-speaking tribes (Ute, Paiute, Shoshone, Comanche, etc.) would have then just been emerging, as the return of the Spanish to the New Mexico and the spread of European technologies impacted native worlds throughout the region. Indeed, while some archaeologists have sought to naturalize Comanche military aggression—presenting it as a deeply precolonial pattern that was merely accentuated by the adoption of the horse (Sutton 1986)—Blackhawk (2007) makes a compelling argument that Comanche ethnogenesis must be understood as a complex response to a new landscape of colonial violence that rippled out from Spanish New Mexico, creating new possibilities and economic rationales for raiding and captive-taking.

Be that as it may, the greater Taos area was clearly a key locus of self-fashioning for the Comanches at the start of the eighteenth century. The tribe’s early horse herds were primarily obtained from this region. In fact, local Hispano oral traditions still include stories about how the initial Comanche herds were built up through raids on settlements a short distance south of the modern town of Taos. Insofar as the tribe’s historic identity is inseparable from an equestrian lifestyle, one might say that Taos was where the Comanches truly became “Comanche.”

Full-blown Comanche militarism also saw its beginnings in the Taos region. In 1706, en route to El Cuartelejo to retrieve the remnants of the Picuris Tribe, Juan de Ulibarri stopped at Taos Pueblo and learned from the local leaders that the threat of Ute and Comanche aggression was palpably felt. “They were very certain that the infidel enemies of the Ute and Comanche tribe were about to come to make an attack upon this pueblo,” Ulibarri wrote (Thomas 1935:61). Marching a short distance northeast of Taos, Ulibarri also learned that combined Ute and Comanche attacks had taken a heavy toll on Apache settlements.
Comanchería proper was more or less established during the 1740s. The confederated Comanche bands, greatly enlarged by the influx of captives and refugees, secured control of the Southern Plains’ vast grasslands, which became the ecological foundation for the two cornerstones of the Comanche economy: buffalos and horses (see Hämäläinen 2010). By mid-century, the Comanche had split with their former Ute allies and assumed a position of dominance across a large region from Wyoming down into northern Mexico. Taos continued to serve as a strategic center for Comanche economic and political ambitions, however, both as a major market—during the 1700s, the Taos trade fairs were rivaled only by those at Pecos Pueblo—and as a target for continued raids. “Whether they are at peace or at war,” wrote Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez (1956:112) in 1776, “the Comanches always carry off all they want, by purchase in peace and by theft in war.” The Comanches were so comfortable navigating the Taos landscape during this period that they sometimes brought over a thousand horses from their herd to feed on the lush grassy meadows near Taos Pueblo when the dry season limited pasturage on the Plains (Domínguez 1956:111). In contrast, the vecinos living in the region were notably constrained in their use of the landscape and its resources; throughout much of the mid-eighteenth century, few had horses at all and the threat of Comanche raiding forced most of the colonists to live within the walls of Taos Pueblo for protection (Jenkins 1966:98).

There is no question that the Comanches were regular visitors to the Taos region during the critical period when they were emerging as a militarized equestrian society with regional economic ambitions. Hämäläinen (2008:83) goes so far as to write of eighteenth-century Taos Pueblo as “a virtual Comanche satellite,” whose loyalties most frequently lay not with the Spanish officials but with the powerful and wealthy Comanches who dominated trade in slaves, horses, bison meat, and hides. If one is to talk of an emergent Comanche empire, then Taos, it seems, should be viewed as a kind of imperial outpost. And yet, prior to the research reported herein, no Comanche sites had been identified in the Taos region despite many decades of archaeological survey.

Compare this situation with the great many Jicarilla Apache sites that dot the Taos landscape (see Eiselt 2009, 2012, 2013; Girard 1986; Johnson et al. 2009; Woosley and Olinger 1990). The Jicarilla’s presence is indeed strong and archaeologically visible. On the one hand, the Jicarilla’s heightened visibility is itself linked to the influence of the Comanches, for it was only after the Comanches’ militarized thrust into the Southern Plains that the Jicarilla were forced to seek permanent refuge in the northern Rio Grande. On the other hand, the Jicarilla
displayed remarkable resilience. As Eiselt (2013) has carefully documented, they developed a distinctive enclave economy focused on exchange of micaceous pottery and upland resources, which served as important supplements to the agricultural products of lowland Hispano and Pueblo communities. Reduced mobility and the relatively liberal use of durable remains such as pottery, chipped stone, and metal, as well as a strategic willingness to accept Christianity and to appear in Catholic baptismal records—all of this enhances our archaeological perception of the Jicarilla presence.

The Comanches, in contrast, have traditionally been viewed as the destroyers rather than the creators of sites. In fact, beyond their regular appearance at Taos trade fairs, the most memorable Comanche incident in the region is surely the 1760 attack on Taos Pueblo and its surrounding ranches, including the Villalpando compound, the largest Hispano settlement near Taos. Shortly afterward, Bishop Tamarón offered a brief report, observing that nearly 3,000 Comanches had besieged Taos, killing many, taking fifty-six women and children as captives, and leaving smoldering structures in ruin (Adams 1954:58; Hämaläinen 2008:51–52). The large-scale attack was in response to a direct insult: some months earlier, Taos had flaunted Comanche scalps in front of a Comanche audience at one of the pueblo’s scalp dances (John 1996:330). Nevertheless, these sorts of incidents have left us with the impression that the archaeological signature of the Comanches in the Taos region—were one to go looking for such a thing—would primarily be found in the charred remains of destroyed Hispano, Pueblo, and Jicarilla Apache sites. As in other parts of New Mexico, “Comanche archaeology” continues to be understood primarily in negative terms.

**TESTIMONY OF THE RIO GRANDE GORGE**

Recent surveys in the Rio Grande Gorge, just west of Taos, are beginning to change this impression, however, bringing to light a previously unknown diversity of Comanche sites. The Rio Grande Gorge (Figure 6.1) is a rugged rift valley filled with talus ridges, scree slopes, and cliffs that cut down sharply into the Taos plateau. As such, it has remained largely unsettled, posing a major barrier to movement in the region. But the gorge does have the advantage of being a hidden subterranean space with occasional sediment-filled basins that are today covered with weedy sagebrush but that prior to the ravages of late nineteenth-century sheepherding would have been filled with grasses suitable for equestrian camps. Indeed, anyone on horseback looking for a hideout while planning trading or raiding expeditions would have found a number of excellent options in the gorge.

This is particularly true in the vicinity of the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Rio Pueblo, where the gorge broadens somewhat and includes a great
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A series of secluded and easily defensible basins accessible via old trails that had likely been in use for many millennia. During the eighteenth century, the Rio Grande–Rio Pueblo confluence was also roughly equidistant from a number of key communities in northern New Mexico—Taos Pueblo, Picuris Pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, Embudo (present-day Dixon), Abiquiú—each of which could be reached within a half day’s horse ride. What had previously been a kind of interstitial no-man’s land between pueblo centers would have offered, during the colonial era, a strategic location for mounted traders and raiders. As discussed below, it is precisely in this location that the strongest evidence of a Comanche presence has been found.

The first mounted tribes to camp in the Rio Grande Gorge appear to have been the Jicarilla and Ute, both of whom were early converts to an equestrian lifestyle. Jicarilla sites dating from the seventeenth century through the mid-nineteenth century are relatively easily identified by the presence of thin
micaceous pottery and a light distribution of metal artifacts in association with small tipi rings (2–2.5 meters diameter). Jicarilla rock art remains poorly defined, but our research has suggested that it can be broadly characterized as lightly pecked with a frequent focus on shield-bearers, morning stars, Mountain Spirit headdresses, horses, and the like (Figure 6.2). In fact, the earliest images of equestrian battles in the Rio Grande Gorge were probably created by Athapaskan groups during the seventeenth century when the Apache and Navajo posed the most significant military threat to both native and nonnative communities. At the Lightning Arrow Site near the Rio Grande–Rio Pueblo confluence, for instance, we have documented numerous pecked battle scenes; most warriors are on foot, but there is at least one mounted warrior depicted astride a “boat form” horse (Figure 6.2A), which James Keyser (1987) argues is among the earliest horse forms in the Plains Biographic Tradition of rock art. Significantly, three Jicarilla micaceous pot drops and one probable tipi clearing were located in close association with the pecked rock art at the Lightning Arrow Site, strengthening the claim for Jicarilla affiliation. Indeed, this Apachean rock art tradition appears to have continued well into the nineteenth century, as evidenced by additional pecked battle scene images at another site in the gorge, just to the south, that was explicitly identified as having a Jicarilla affiliation by tribal consultants (Figure 6.2C).

The Ute occupation of the Rio Grande Gorge is more difficult to document, though this is surely due to a lack of research attention rather than the absence of Ute sites in the region (but see Montgomery 2015, in press). We know that at the onset of Spanish colonialism, the Ute already had deep historical roots in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, a fact that is still commented on at Taos Pueblo, where a long history of relations and intermarriage with the Ute is quickly acknowledged. The nearest Ancestral Ute sites that have been identified with confidence, however, are at the northern edge of the Taos region, near the Rio Grande–Rio Hondo confluence, where pecked and abraded rock art panels with distinctive iconography (e.g., oversized bears and elks, pluralities of small quadrupeds, and almost Fremont-like anthropomorphs) are found in direct association with brownware pottery (Figure 6.3).\(^1\)

These traces of a late pre-Hispanic Ute presence are significant insofar as it was the Ute’s familiarity with the Taos region that facilitated the Comanches’ entrance. Not only did the Comanches probably receive their first horses from their Ute cousins, whose proximity to liberated Spanish herds during the Pueblo Revolt era led them to be key middlemen in the early horse trade; the Ute are also known to have regularly enlisted Comanche muscle in their raids on northern New Mexico during the early eighteenth century. The Comanches’ perception of the New Mexican landscape, in this sense, would have been initially guided, quite literally, by the Ute.
FIGURE 6.2. Probable Jicarilla Apache rock art from the Rio Grande Gorge: A and B: lightly pecked rock art at the Lightning Arrow Site, near the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Rio Pueblo (probably late seventeenth century); C and D: pecked rock art at the Pilar Morada Site (LA 55948), near the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Arroyo Cieneguilla (probably late eighteenth or early nineteenth century).

FIGURE 6.3. Lightly abraded and pecked rock art at the Manby Trailhead Site (LA 102341). This panel and a cluster of others were found in association with brownware pottery, and are likely affiliated with the ancestral Ute occupation of the Taos region.
One gets a good sense of this at the most impressive of the eighteenth-century sites in the gorge: the Vista Verde Site (LA 75747) (Figures 6.1 and 6.4), located directly opposite of the Rio Grande–Rio Pueblo confluence, quite close to the Apachean material at the Lightning Arrow Site, discussed above. The Vista Verde Site has been a focus of sustained research since 2008; it is the largest site in the Rio Grande Gorge, with a striking density of rock art panels encircling a large flat basin bounded by rugged basalt talus ridges. Archaic and Ancestral Pueblo individuals visited the area for millennia, at least to a limited extent, as evidenced by rock art and isolated projectile points. Extensive use of the Vista Verde Site, however, appears to have only begun during the early colonial period. In the course of a magnetic gradiometer survey of the central basin in 2009, for instance, a large buried feature (roughly twenty by fifteen meters) resembling a horseshoe-shaped dance ground was located. The feature exhibits a clear opening to the southeast and three pronounced dipole anomalies along its northwestern edge that may represent bonfires, as well as evidence of at least one large tipi ring in direct association a few meters away (Goodmaster 2011). Subsequent conversations with consultants from the Ute Mountain nation have suggested that this buried archaeological complex may be an early Bear Dance ground, which the ancestral Ute are known to have constructed in the region during the early colonial period (Terry Knight, personal communication, 2010).

If the Vista Verde Site was indeed an established gathering place in the Rio Grande Gorge for the Ute, it makes sense that it would have been selected as a base camp for combined forces of Ute and Comanche raiders during the early eighteenth century. Surface mapping within the central basin immediately north of the buried dance ground revealed the presence of a large encampment composed of two dozen or more tipi rings. The absence of micaceous pottery in association with the tipi rings makes a Jicarilla affiliation unlikely, despite the Jicarilla’s strong archaeological presence in neighboring portions of the gorge. In fact, essentially no cultural artifacts—beyond the tipi rings themselves—seem to have been left on the surface of the site; not even hearths were constructed within the tipis, suggesting that this was a “cold camp,” similar to those created by Plains warriors in advance of a raid.

Unlike the relatively ambiguous architectural and artifactual evidence at the site, the hundreds of rock art panels that surround the tipi compound offer a world of interpretive possibilities, insofar as those who camped there seem to have been compelled to document their presence, often in extraordinary detail. The rock art is unusual and diverges in both its technology and iconographic content from prior traditions in the region. Almost all other local rock art is pecked, for instance, the artists having used stone and, later, metal tools to break through the dark patina of basalt boulders to expose the light interior. Indeed, pecking characterizes all known Archaic, Pueblo, Jicarilla Apache, Ute, and
FIGURE 6.4. Map of the central tipi encampment (Area 6) at the Vista Verde Site. The highlighted area presents the magnetic gradiometer detail highlighting the possible dance ground and tipi complex at the southern edge of the encampment.
Hispano petroglyph traditions in this part of the Southwest (e.g., see Schaafsma 1992; Slifer 1998). The dominant rock art of the Vista Verde Site, in contrast, was produced by lightly scratching and abrading with metal tools, leaving behind glyphs that barely (if at all) break through the patina of the rock. The overall result has little visual impact and is often impossible to see in direct sunlight, a fact that has led the imagery to be overlooked by past researchers.

The relative inscrutability of the scratched rock art, however, provides an important clue. Clearly, this is a technological tradition that did not develop locally; it is very poorly adapted to hard basalt of the Rio Grande Gorge. The most plausible interpretation is that it evolved in an area with softer rock, such as the extensive sandstones of northern Colorado and Wyoming in the ancestral Comanche territory, where the same artistic gesture using the same tools results in a deeper and much more visible glyph: an “incised” rather than merely a “scratched” icon, in other words.

The iconographic content of the images supports this interpretation nicely. As should be evident in Figures 6.5–6.11, the rock art at the Vista Verde Site depicts a wide range of Plains-style imagery including tipis, mounted horses, battle scenes, horse raids, warriors, shields, parfleches, and more. Many of the glyphs find parallels in Keyser’s (1987, 2004; see also Loendorf 2008) Plains Biographic Tradition, which originated in the ancestral Comanche region and was dominated by incised imagery on sandstone cliff faces. By the end of the eighteenth century the Plains Biographic Tradition had spread across much of central North America, from northern Mexico to southern Alberta—effectively characterizing the area of regular Comanche incursions following their conquest of the Southern Plains in the 1740s.

Part of what makes the rock art of the Vista Verde Site so intriguing, however, is that it appears to have been produced very early on in the development of the Biographic Tradition by mounted warriors who were just beginning their expansionist push into New Mexico. Rock art is notoriously difficult to position temporally, but in this case we are assisted by two key details. First, the imagery includes abundant evidence of indigenous equestrianism, indicating that it dates to a time after the Pueblo Revolt (1680–92), when Spanish horses first made their way into native hands in significant numbers. Second, the Vista Verde Site rock art also exhibits a near absence of gun icons, which is notable insofar as later Biographic Tradition imagery typically displays guns prominently. During the 1740s, French guns began to be widely traded among Plains tribes, and colonial correspondence discussing the situation at Taos reported that visiting Comanches were well supplied during this period (Twitchell 1911:440). Had guns been present at the Vista Verde Site, we assume they would have been regularly depicted, as was indeed the case in most subsequent Biographic Tradition imagery. This, then, provides us with a reasonable terminus ante quem.
FIGURE 6.5. Scratched and abraded rock art from the Vista Verde Site (detail of Panel 2014-009A).

FIGURE 6.6. Scratched and abraded rock art from the Vista Verde Site (Panel 2008-353).
This conclusion is broadly supported by details from the panels that the Comanche did create. Figure 6.5, for instance, is a detail from one panel at the Vista Verde Site depicting a classic Plains scene: a group of mounted and pedestrian warriors are pursing three bison, just outside the detail in the lower right of the panel. Seven of the warriors ride horses, their status being signified by long flowing war bonnets. One of the mounted warriors is depicted with a shield and buffalo horn headdress, a signature element of Comanche regalia. Below them are five additional pedestrian warriors; each has his shield, one holds a club, and three seem to wield lances. The combination of mounted and pedestrian warriors might itself point to an early eighteenth-century date, but so too does the most notable detail in this panel, namely, the body covering that shields a number of the horses. Depictions of horse body armor have been previously found in rock art at a handful of sites to the north of Taos in the ancestral
Comanche territory of Colorado and Wyoming (Mitchell 2004), and this imagery speaks both to a Comanche affiliation (the Comanche were one of the few tribes to armor their horses) and to the chronology of the Vista Verde Site generally. The Comanche produced and used thick sheets of bison hide as armor only during the first half of the eighteenth century, mimicking the Spanish use of metal horse armor. The last archival reference to this practice was in 1751 (Secoy 1951:532), after which the widespread availability of guns rendered the cumbersome hide armor an ineffective strategy of defense.

The chronological outlines we are left with—roughly AD 1700–50—effectively bracket the early period of combined Comanche and Ute raiding in the northern Rio Grande valley. And as we have suggested, the influence of both tribes might be read into the site: the location, perhaps, was selected by the Ute, while the imagery bears strong Comanche influence. This, we think, is a reasonable interpretation that is consistent with colonial records and local oral histories, as well as with many details within the rock art itself.

Regarding the latter, it is worth highlighting one rock art panel (Figure 6.6) at the Vista Verde Site in which certain noteworthy details lend additional support to
**FIGURE 6.9.** Scratched and abraded rock art from the Vista Verde Site (Panel 2008-298).

**FIGURE 6.10.** Scratched and abraded rock art from the Vista Verde Site (Panel 2008-059, overlying graffiti removed).
a specifically Comanche affiliation. The panel illustrates a tipi encampment under attack. One can clearly identify a cluster of sixteen tipis as well the many mounted warriors of the camp, all facing left. The aggressors are facing right, and among them is a dominant warrior, leaping over a tipi at the top of the panel, his long war bonnet flowing behind him. While we cannot identify the cultural affiliation of the right-facing warriors, there are good grounds for identifying the aggressed camp as Comanche. This is evident in certain subtle details, such as the way the poles extended off the top of the tipi in two clusters—a distinctively Comanche architectural pattern (Jimmy Arterberry, personal communication, 2011)—as well as the inclusion of a snake glyph in the lower center of the panel. Within the Plains Sign Language system, the Comanches were known as the “Snakes” (Wallace and Hoebel [1952] 1986:5), and here it seems the rock artist was making an explicit effort to assert that the settlement under attack was specifically a Comanche camp. The snake glyph, in this sense, served as a kind of signature.

**THE ONSET OF COMANCHE IMPERIALISM IN NEW MEXICO**

Accepting the interpretation of the Vista Verde Site as one of perhaps many sites left behind by the Comanche during their period of early eighteenth-century raiding, we stand in a strong position to explore the deeper logics behind the emergence of Comanche “imperialism” in New Mexico, as proposed by

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Hämäläinen. The archaeological evidence on the ground may be paltry indeed; this is to be expected insofar as the Comanche traveled light and purposefully left behind few traces of their camps, in part to elude potential pursuers. But for a brief period in the Taos region—early on in the tribe’s experiments with equestrianism, militarism, and regional economic involvement—rock art appears to have served as a key cultural space where new identities were being worked out.

At a basic level, the rock art of the Vista Verde Site reflects a desire to archive and assert the local visits of Comanche bands. Many hundreds of tipi glyphs were scratched onto the rocks surrounding the central camp. In some cases, the glyphs are simple triangles; a tipi with its smoke flap open might be all that was represented, as if the artist was simply acknowledging his or her participation in an expedition to the northern Rio Grande Valley and nothing more. In other cases, whole tipi encampments were depicted, giving us a potential sense of the scale and organization of the expedition. One panel, for instance, depicts twenty-five tipis (perhaps 150–200 people) organized into a broadly circular arrangement with mounted horses in the center (Figure 6.7). Interestingly, this panel is positioned on the edge of the central basin of the Vista Verde Site, where we have found evidence of a circular compound with roughly the same number of tipi rings.

The tipi depictions reveal much more than simply the scale of encampments. Many of the tipi glyphs are accompanied by images of tripods supporting shields and feathered lances (Figure 6.8), signaling that an important warrior occupied the tipi and was preparing for an impending battle. Within Comanche society, shields were regularly hung outside warriors’ doorways to absorb the sun’s powerful medicine, thereby making them more effective on the battlefield (Wallace and Hoebel [1952] 1986:251). The lance displayed its potency by the number of feathers or scalps hanging from it, which served as a tally of the military accomplishments of its owner. Honorable Comanche warriors were obligated to fight with a lance rather than a bow and arrow or a gun, for the lance necessitated intimate contact with one’s opponent and, hence, greater bravery (Kavanagh 2008:267). Similar displays took place once the battle or raid was over. “A warrior returning from a successful raiding party,” recalled Comanche informants in the 1930s, “set his lance upright before the door of his lodge with the scalps of his victims dangling from it. No one except the owner could remove the trophies. As in the case of the shield, tradition records that some lances had power, and the lance carried by the leaders was a characteristic sign of office” (Wallace and Hoebel [1952] 1986:111). We might go so far as to imagine that the depictions of shields and lances in Comanche rock art followed a sympathetic logic: beyond their role as signs of office for those residing in the tipis pitched nearby, the images plausibly also functioned as iconographic extensions of the warrior’s weaponry. Scratched onto the south-facing surfaces of dark black
basalt boulders, the images of shields and lances would have absorbed the sun’s potency on behalf of their prototypes all day long.

Militarism and the desire for public acknowledgment of bravery clearly preoccupied those camping at the Vista Verde Site. Tallies, seemingly archiving particular warriors’ accomplishments, were added to the sides of both human figures and their tipis; panels depicting horse raids offered records of the number of stolen horses; parfleche glyphs appear to have served as a means both of identifying participants in a military expedition and of acknowledging the power of the medicine bundles stored within them; and mounted warriors were illustrated with long flowing war bonnets, headwear adorning only those Comanche men “whose military achievements entitled them to wear it” (Wallace and Hoebel [1952] 1986:213) (see Figures 6.8–6.11).

One rock art image highlights this pattern with special clarity. Figure 6.11A depicts a military engagement between two warriors, each probably serving as a representative of a military group. On the left, a diminutive warrior in Pueblo attire is perched with a simple D-shaped bow. A far more impressive Comanche warrior with a headdress, recurved bow, and large body shield occupies the center of the panel. In the lower right, another warrior (possibly two) seems to be covering the central warrior’s back. This much can be readily identified. When viewed from within the Comanche iconographic tradition, however, a number of additional details become significant (Jimmy Arterberry, personal communication, 2011). The herringbone pattern between the two warriors, for instance, emerges as another tally, quite likely of the number of successful arrows each side shot in the altercation. Twenty-five arrows of the dominant warrior’s group seem to have hit and killed an opponent; only seven such arrows are tallied for his adversary—little question, then, which side was victorious. Indeed, the Comanche’s success was further indexed by the tangle of scratched lines falling away from the dominant warrior’s bow, which can be read as signifiers of the many bows that were broken by the Comanche in the course of the battle. Moreover, in the faintly scratched lines at the upper right of the panel, we can now squint and see the image of a bear—that most powerful of species—lending its spiritual assistance to the central warrior. The vague and sketchy rendering of the bear was probably an intentional iconographic strategy of depicting the bear’s spiritual status (again, Arterberry, personal communication, 2011), but later rock art gives us a sense of what was intended. Two probable Comanche panels at the Tolar Site in Wyoming, for example, offer more detailed renderings of individuals with similarly positioned bear glyphs (Figure 6.11B) (Loendorf and Olsen 2003). The bear glyph in the Vista Verde panel may be largely illegible by comparison, but there is no ambiguity regarding its link to the central warrior, for the artist has scratched a line connecting the warrior’s shoulder and the bear’s head. Indeed, five lines in the panel were included
to establish biographic connections in this way: each warrior is connected to his arrow tally, and the central warrior—in addition to being connected with his spirit bear—has lines linking him to his allied shield-bearer as well as to his tally of broken bows (see Figure 6.11A).

Other rock art panels depict the fray of battle much more vividly as a swirl of gestural lines. Figure 6.12 is the tracing of a panel a short distance north of the Vista Verde Site. Here we encounter a chaotic tangle of traces, within which as many as seven stylized horses can be identified. The riders of some are missing or indistinct, but others clearly include riders bearing shields and wielding lances or clubs. Lines extend out from each warrior to touch or strike combatants. In the case of the warrior just above the center of the image, two lines extend down to touch a combatant in the lower right of the panel, and additional lines extend out from his lance or club to strike the figure in the upper right, the latter of whom almost seems to have exploded from the blow. The image, in this sense, anticipates the well-known Plains tradition of counting coup, in which one of the most prestigious acts of bravery involved confronting and touching an opponent on the battlefield (Lowie [1954] 1982; Mishkin 1940). Such acts were the raw material out of which leaders were made within historic Comanche society. Indeed, the Comanches typically counted coup before going into war (Wallace and Hoebel 1986:252), which may explain why so many rock art panels were created at the Vista Verde Site. Gestural images likely provided important complements to the oral narration of acts of military bravery (Fowles and Arterberry 2013).

What is perhaps most remarkable about the images at the Vista Verde Site, then, is that they collectively point to the presence of a highly developed military culture at an early date. Again, the images were probably created during the first half of the eighteenth century, only a generation or two after the Comanches had acquired the horse. And yet, the tribe was already committed to the new world of indigenous imperialism that would characterize Comanche life on the Plains for over a century beginning in the mid-eighteenth century.

There is a sense in which the encampment at the Vista Verde Site even anticipated the spatial strategies the Comanches would so effectively deploy at the height of their regional ambitions. As many have observed, the special genius of Comanche geopolitics stemmed from the tribe’s ability to transform a former periphery—the Southern Plains—into an interregional center place, shifting the political and economic gravity toward the intersection of various European and Native American polities. In doing so, the Comanches benefited immensely from the colonial rivalries between the Spanish and French, just as they profited from their ability to extract the resources of Texas and northern Mexico for trade in the markets of New Mexico and the Northern Plains. The Comanches were, in this sense, self-fashioned arbiters of in-between places.
At the Vista Verde Site, a similar spatial logic prevailed. Tucked away within the Rio Grande Gorge, the site occupies a rugged landscape that was peripheral to Pueblo and Hispano centers in the region. In fact, our surveys have suggested that the site was situated in a transitional area where shifts in late pre-Columbian rock art and a local concentration of Pueblo shield-bearers mark the presence of an ethnic boundary—a “no man’s land” of sorts—between the traditional territories of Taos Pueblo to the northeast and the Tewa pueblos to the southwest. The Comanche appear to have inserted themselves precisely into this interstitial space during the early eighteenth century. From there, they were well poised to engage multiple local communities: trading with some, simultaneously raiding others, and all the while remaining hidden away in a subterranean canyon. The occupants of the Vista Verde Site, then, were playing out in microcosm what would become a truly continental strategy following the Comanches’ takeover of the southern Plains.
CONCLUSION

The study of Comanche archaeology—in New Mexico but also throughout the American West—remains in its infancy with its most exciting days still to come; of this, we are quite convinced. Intellectually, we find ourselves in a moment when historians have recently awakened to the remarkable scope and savvy of Comanche politics, offering bold new visions of the tribe’s regional influence that archaeologists have not yet even attempted to trace on the ground as a material phenomenon. How are we to respond? What are we to do when historians write of an entire indigenous empire in the middle of North America that has completely escaped archaeological detection?

Quibbling over definitions of what an empire is—and whether the Comanches should be considered one—would be a narrow and unproductive response, we suggest. Indeed, the traditional understanding of Comanche history has been hamstrung precisely by the tendency to impose preconceived notions of what an expansionist polity “should” look like, as well as by our heavy reliance on colonial documents authored by the Comanches’ European or Euro-American opponents. As recent work by Hämäläinen and others has so ably demonstrated, much can still be accomplished through revisionist study of the existing historical archives, but archaeologists have a great deal to contribute as well, particularly insofar as they offer the possibility of building new archives composed of evidence authored by the ancestral Comanches themselves. Alternative archives of this sort have always been a core commitment of historical archaeology, and our research at the Vista Verde Site follows closely in this tradition. The scratched images of Comanche militarism in the Rio Grande Gorge offer a rare glimpse of what the early eighteenth-century social and political landscape looked like from an indigenous perspective. They provide us an opportunity to imagine a Comanche New Mexico, counterbalancing dominant accounts of Spanish colonial New Mexico. We hope it goes without saying that this in no way denies the necessity of continuing to imagine yet other New Mexicos: Pueblo, Apache, Navajo, Ute, Genizaro, Mestizo, and so forth. The goal is to proliferate such perspectives, rather than limit them.

Regarding Comanche history in particular, three principal conclusions have emerged from our study. First, the rock art imagery clearly reveals that the reorganization of Comanche society around equestrianism and the new logics of tallying military honors occurred with remarkable speed. Within a generation of acquiring the horse, the Comanches had developed elaborate new cultural norms for building social prestige—which is to say that the Comanches were unquestionably a “hot” society, fully aware that they were making history. As the Comanche cultural critic Paul Chaat Smith has put it, “Contrary to what most people (Indian and non-Indian alike) now believe, our true history is one of constant change, technological innovation, and intense curiosity about the world.
How else do you explain our instantaneous adaptation to horses, rifles, flour, and knives?” (Smith 2009:4). We expect other archaeological sites to emerge that demonstrate an even older stage of development, but to our knowledge, the imagery at the Vista Verde site currently provides some of the earliest archaeological evidence of counting coup (broadly conceived) in North America, most other documented examples having been dated to the period after AD 1750 (e.g., Keyser 1979; Parsons 1987).

Second, new systems of prestige appear to have gone hand in hand with new strategies regarding how to maneuver at a regional level. We know a good deal about Comanche movements during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries following the tribe’s conquest of the Southern Plains, based upon both oral history and written colonial documents. Again, the Comanches were infamous arbiters of intermediary zones, playing various nations off one another to great economic and political effect. Our evidence from the Vista Verde Site suggests that such tactics did not emerge out of the blue, however. On the contrary, the Comanches were already developing their basic geopolitical strategies in the northern Rio Grande during the early eighteenth century.

Finally, we take it as quite significant that despite having documented hundreds of scratched rock art panels at the Vista Verde site, including dozens of images of military conflicts, only one panel thus far includes an image of a European. When battle scenes were depicted, they inevitably featured altercations between opposed Native American warriors instead. Bearing this in mind, one might speculate that the main occupation of the site was actually somewhat earlier than we have proposed—perhaps during the Pueblo Revolt period itself, when the Spanish were in exile—rather than shortly after the reconquest. We interpret the absence of nonnative subjects in the Vista Verde rock art differently, however. It provides, we suggest, a useful reminder that while our written histories privilege interactions between Europeans and Native Americans, the truly consequential political relations for most communities in the colonial Southwest were between indigenous nations. And it is in this sense that we might look to a time and place like the northern Rio Grande during the eighteenth century and begin to imagine a very different sort of colonial setting, one in which the Comanches stood in the position of the expansionistic polity and in which local residents—native and nonnative alike—were forced to adapt to the politics of these powerful interlopers.

NOTES
1. For other archaeological efforts to foreground native agency in accounts of the eighteenth century, see Sunday Eiselt’s (2012) study of the Jicarilla Apache settlement of the northern Rio Grande Valley, as well as Michael Wilcox’s (2009) and Matthew Liebmann’s (2012b) studies of Pueblo reinvention during the Spanish colonial period.

3. The published literature on Comanche archaeology is minimal. No monograph-length studies exist, and only a few articles (notably, Mitchell 2004 and Newton 2011) explicitly address Comanche sites.

4. “Komántcia” as an ethnonym appears to have originated as a Ute term, referring to “anyone who wants to fight me all the time” (Opler 1943:156). While the Ute often collaborated with the Comanches during the early eighteenth century, the relationship was clearly fraught and broke down entirely in the 1740s. Spanish use of the term “Comanche” to describe the Eastern Shoshone groups who had migrated onto the Southern Plains was probably inherited from the Ute.

5. Dennis Slifer (1998) notes that ancestral Ute rock art in southern Colorado, immediately to the north, was frequently executed in red pigment, but no such pictographs have been located during our survey of the Rio Grande Gorge.

6. It also precludes the possibility that other Plains groups—notably the Kiowa and Pawnee—were the authors the Vista Verde rock art. The Kiowa and Pawnee both have a long historical presence in the Rio Grande Valley. A Pawnee individual was baptized in New Mexico as early as 1702; an elderly Kiowa woman was buried at Isleta in 1727; and after 1730, dozens of individuals from both tribes came to be baptized by Spanish missionaries in New Mexico. These, however, were all individuals who entered New Mexican society as captives, victims of the eighteenth-century wars in which the Comanche played a defining role. In contrast, the first church burial records documenting deaths at the hands of either Kiowa or Pawnee raiders in the Spanish colony itself do not appear until the start of the nineteenth century (Brugge 1965), well after the Vista Verde rock art was produced.

7. The Comanche were one of a number of Shoshonean groups referred to as the “Snakes”; however of those groups, only the Comanches were known to have been regular visitors to the Taos region during the early eighteenth century.

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