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## Review of *The Comanche Empire*. By Pekka Hamalainen

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Comanche Empire*. By Pekka Hämäläinen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. viii + 500 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.

*The Comanche Empire* is an important and well-researched book that traces the development of the Comanche nation in the eastern and western borders of the Greater Southwest from the early eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. Segmented into eight thematic chapters, this work explores the Comanches' sources of inward power and power over others, but privileges the Comanche perspective to place the author's conclusions within a historical context. Hämäläinen's treatment of the complex relationships between the Comanches and other European and Native American societies is unique, particularly as it clarifies the social and trade mechanisms the Comanches established and nurtured to maintain the primacy of their objectives on the Great Plains.

The author fleshes out the Comanches' chameleon strategies to adapt to the changing fortunes of the Spanish, the French, the Mexicans, and the Anglo-Americans as trade became the nexus of effective social interaction. Drawn into multiple Comanche interaction spheres through trade in goods and slaves, Europeans and many Native American groups often found they had been manipulated and upstaged. Such was the case of the Spanish in New Mexico and of the Wichita groups in Texas in the early 1800s. In these cases, as in others, the Comanches profited from geographic placement and propitious historical conjunctures, but they were adaptive at seizing the moment to enable their plans. Hämäläinen's research emphatically demonstrates the Comanches' flexibility to adapt while maintaining core values and traditions despite the autonomy of Comanche bands and decentralized authority.

Although the concept of a Comanche "empire" is problematic, Hämäläinen collates and narrates the events of the eastern and western frontiers through time in such an effective manner that the reader is swept in the flow of an almost seamless narrative. It is unquestionable that "Comanches desired the resources of the land, [while] Americans wanted legal titles to it." Nevertheless, asserting that the Comanches had an empire project, which they refashioned at each crucial temporal and political node at the expense of all other competing Native American nations, is to give far too much credit solely to the Comanches.

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