



## Tolar Petroglyph Site

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### Horses!

The Spanish introduction of domesticated horses to North America dramatically changed the lifeways of Plains Indians in the two centuries following AD 1600. Horses vastly improved hunting success on the open plains and they immediately became an extremely important exchangeable asset.

Hunters and gatherers in regions surrounding the High Plains quickly moved to where horses were accessible. Shoshone bands, for example, which lived in the mountains and basins of Wyoming, moved south in large numbers along the eastern

front of the Rocky Mountains. From there they could raid Spanish communities in New Mexico and capture their horses. By the early 1700s, as many as ten thousand Shoshone had left Wyoming.

### A new name.

At some point, the Spanish gave these Shoshone raiders a new name—the Comanche—and although its origin remains obscure, the reality of the Comanche armed entrepreneurial effort is well documented. By 1740, the Comanche had established themselves as middlemen in an extensive trade network that included transactions with French settlements along the Mississippi River and with the Spanish-Pueblo colonies along the upper Rio Grande. Comanche trading partners included Indian groups as diverse as the Pawnee, Wichita, Kiowa, Kansas, and Iowa, as well as their Shoshone relatives still in Wyoming.

At their most active, the Comanche were the main contributors to an interaction sphere that ranged from western Wyoming to northern Chihuahua, Mexico. Among the items purveyed were garden products, dried meat, bison hides, deerskins, and slaves. These were exchanged for horses, guns, ammunition, knives, kettles, iron arrow points, and a wide number of decorative than the horses they traded across their vast empire.

### Pictures of riders and horses.

Plains Indians drew pictures of riders and horses on rock formations, on hides, and, ultimately, on paper. The figure on the 2010 Wyoming Archaeology poster is a photograph of a petroglyph from the Tolar site located near Rock Springs, Wyoming, where the rock panels are dominated by proto-historic and historic figures. Plains Indians made such accurate images of Comanche and Cheyenne horses and riders that tribal identity could be determined by a rider's hairstyle, the type of shield, or the tack on the horse. Rock art archaeologists have used these distinguishing characteristics to develop a lexicon for identifying the tribal affiliation of the riders and horses in Wyoming petroglyphs and pictographs.

By applying this lexicon to the figures at the Tolar site, we can make a strong claim that the image on the Wyoming Archaeology poster represents a Comanche horse and rider. This identification is supported by the petroglyph figures adjacent to the Tolar horse and rider and by a strikingly similar image of a horse and rider in a

drawing on paper—titled a “Drawing made by a Comanche Indian”—that was collected by Dr. Edward Palmer in Oklahoma Territory in 1868 (Figure 1).

One shared feature of the Tolar petroglyph and the paper drawing is headdresses whose long, thin horns are oriented upward. A trailing feather extension is attached to the Palmer figure's horned bonnet, while the Tolar rider appears to have fringe or hair around the base of its bonnet, indicating a kind of buffalo horn headdress that was popular among Comanche warriors. Both figures carry circular shields with radiating feathers. The legs of the Tolar rider are short and apparently unfinished, although they could be hidden behind a cape or cloth armor. Long breechclouts with trailing ends are draped to the side of the rider depicted in the Comanche drawing done for Dr. Palmer.

The triangular feature of the Tolar rider's yoke is indicative of Comanche men's attire and distinguishes it from other tribal dress. Another uniquely Comanche design can be seen on both the shirt in the Palmer drawing and the shield pattern in a drawing by Yellow Wolf in Figure 3. These symbols always indicate a particular person within a tale and are the embodiment of the protective beliefs associated with Comanche armature.

The horses in Figure 1 also share several characteristics. Both have elongated bodies, well-proportioned heads, and relatively long necks extending forward from the shoulders. Neck extension in most Plains Indian drawings is upward, so in this respect these horses are atypical.



Figure 1. The Tolar petroglyph horse and rider, on the left, compared to a paper drawing by a Comanche artist for Dr. Edward Palmer in 1868. The similarity between the two figures is so striking that they seem to belong the same artistic tradition. (Palmer drawing: Smithsonian Institution, Photograph number 97-8352.)

Both horses have hooked hooves and well-defined muscles of the upper legs. Only the legs of the Tolar example suggest movement, however. Both horses also have pinnate or feathered tails. The features shared by the Comanche figure drawn on paper and the Tolar horse-and-rider petroglyph strongly suggest that a Comanche artist made both images.

### Other horse-and-rider petroglyphs.

Additional attributes of a second horse and rider on the Tolar petroglyph panel, placed to the right of the figure appearing on the Wyoming Archaeology poster, suggest a Comanche artist placed in front of a horned human figure, whose upraised arms and hands are attached to a rectangular body. Other diagnostic features include the figure's large round head and tear-streaked eyes. The small bear placed close to the figure may be a power symbol or a glyph indicating that the rider's name was Standing Bear.

The same arrangement of a small horse and a rider with a rectangular body occurs at a site on the Purgatoire River in southeastern Colorado (Figure 2, right image). The human figure also has upraised arms and hands but does not wear a horned

Figure 2. Another Tolar petroglyph horse and rider is illustrated on the left. A similar horse and rider, on the right, occurs in a petroglyph panel from the Purgatoire River in southeastern Colorado. Note that both figures have rectangular bodies, upraised arms and hands, and round heads with tear-streaked eyes. Although the Tolar figure wears a horned headdress, the head of the Purgatoire figure is bare, perhaps indicating that prayers are being offered for the return of its headdress.







Figure 3. Drawing by the Comanche artist Yellow Wolf completed in the 1850s. Note the diminutive horse in front of the warrior on the right. (Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, New York, accession number 60.160.2.)

headdress. Nonetheless, the arrangement of both horse-and-rider pairs in Figure 2 is very much like the Comanche drawing on paper made by Yellow Wolf and illustrated in Figure 3.

All but one rider (the Purgatoire figure) of the five horse-and-rider pairs illustrated in this brochure wears a horned headdress. Since the Comanche considered feather loss to be an ominous event requiring extraordinary steps prior to feather retrieval, the Purgatoire rider might be responding to the “feather rule” by engaging in the ceremonies needed to retrieve his headgear.

### The Yellow Wolf drawing.

Between 1852 and 1859, the Comanche artist Yellow Wolf made the drawing on paper shown in Figure 3. The scene contains a diminutive horse with a rectangular body that is quite similar to the horses in the Tolar and Purgatoire petroglyphs (Figure 2). The stylized representation of Yellow Wolf wears a buffalo-horn headdress. The facial features of his somewhat oversize head include tear-streaked eyes like those of the second Tolar and Purgatoire petroglyph figures. Yellow Wolf appears to have thrust at his adversary a long, segmented lance with weights,

similar to the one depicted in the Tolar petroglyph image in Figure 1. Both figures are holding guns, an indication that the drawing was completed more recently than the Tolar petroglyphs.

The lances and shield held by the Tolar warrior depicted on the 2010 poster indicate that he is outfitted for war. The scene may be a narrative account of a battle or it may indicate that the warrior visited the petroglyph site during his preparations for combat. The practice of praying at rock art sites prior to warfare was widespread, occurring in the American Southwest as well as the Plains. Before departing on a raiding expedition, a warrior would often fast and pray for guidance and for the success of his war party. The lances—and particularly the spear points—held by both the Tolar warrior and the figure in Yellow Wolf’s drawing reflect one of the ways that Spanish technology was adapted to suit the requirements of Comanche warfare.

### The ongoing contribution of the Tolar site.

The importance of Tolar site cannot be overstated. As a traditional cultural property, it is valued by several Indian nations as a place where the ancestors prayed and left images on the rocks. It has historical significance, too. Although the data available to anthropologists and historians have allowed them to suggest a Wyoming presence for the Comanche, the Tolar site is important *physical evidence* of Comanche movements across a considerable distance. The information conveyed by the Tolar petroglyphs permits archaeologists and historians to identify exactly the extent of the Comanche empire in the 1700s. While archaeologists are fully aware of the difficulty of establishing the tribal affiliations of past peoples—and are often taught that arrowheads and pots are not good indicators of people and tribes—petroglyphs such as the horse-and-rider figure at the Tolar site are powerful temporal markers establishing the presence, activities, and even the cultural identities of ancestral tribal groups.

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