

Horses Were of Immense Cultural Importance in Southwestern Native Societies Following Their Introduction to the New World

By Jake Wenger

Depicted in various films such as *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957), Native Americans such as Tonto relied greatly on horses as a means of everyday travel, as well as for battle and other endeavors. While these films emphasize the importance of the horse, one begins to wonder how truly impactful the horse was on Native Americans, especially following their introduction to the new world shortly after the start of European colonization. It may be shocking to some as to how impactful the horse was not just on everyday native life, but also how it impacted and made its way into Native American society, culture, and folklore.

Rock carvings are one way we know that the horse was greatly valued by different native tribes, such as the Comanche. A specific rock engraving from Tolar, Wyoming depicts a Comanche horned warrior riding on the back of a horse.¹ These rock carvings can be found across the midwestern and southwestern United States, and their importance cannot be understated. While one would initially pass these carvings off as merely being Native American art, the Comanche would create rock carvings as a way of seeking spiritual help prior to battle.² By including horses in depictions of themselves, the Comanche visually expressed how important the horse was to their identity.

Besides rock engravings, horses also played a crucial role in Native American ceremonies. For example, when a baby boy was born, the Navajo would cut the umbilical cord and tie it to the end of a horse's tail to ensure that the boy would grow up to be a master at horseback riding.³ The Apache, similarly, would bury the umbilical cord underneath a horse's tracks following the birth of a boy to ensure the same.

¹ Richard Collier and Larry Loendorf. "Engraving of a Comanche warrior riding a horse." (118)

² Mitchell, Peter. *Horse Nations: The Worldwide Impact of the Horse on Indigenous Societies Post-1492*. (117)

³ Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (110)

Horses were also involved in other Native American ceremonies and ritual practices, as well as being depicted in Native American folklore. For instance, the Navajo would carry around fetishes such as shells and stones, believing these holy items would protect their horses as well as themselves.⁴ Meanwhile, Apache folklore tells of mythical water horses that were able to cure illnesses related to snakes, water, or lightning.⁵ Both the Navajo and Apache examples show that various native tribes associated the horse with the supernatural in some way or form because the Navajo and the Apache held the horse in high regard.

The Navajo and Apache were not alone in their supernatural perspective of the horse. In the 1540's, towards the start of European colonization, Pueblo communities would rub the sweat of horses onto themselves as a source of spiritual blessing, as well as a blessing to guarantee rain for their crops.⁶ Like the Navajo and the Apache, this practice demonstrates the Pueblo viewed the horse in a supernatural perspective.

Whether it be rock carvings, birth ceremonies, or spiritual practices and native folklore beliefs, there are multiple examples of how substantial the horse was to numerous native tribes in the southwestern United States. Additionally, some of these practices show more than just the horse's importance to Native Americans: the rock carvings paint a picture of how large Comanche hegemony was at one point in time, and the Acoma Pueblo reserving horse riding mainly for male members of their communities paints a picture of gender dynamics in these cultures.

⁴ Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (109)

⁵ Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (110)

⁶ Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (101)

Bibliography

1. Collier, Richard and Larry Loendorf. "Engraving of a Comanche warrior riding a horse." In *Horse Nations: The Worldwide Impact of the Horse on Indigenous Societies Post-1492*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 118.
2. Mitchell, Peter. *Horse Nations: The Worldwide Impact of the Horse on Indigenous Societies Post-1492*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.