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Comanche Resistance against Colonialism

By Tyler Amoy

Abstract: Of all the indigenous tribes in North America, none stood stronger than the Comanche. This Great Plains tribe is considered to be one of the strongest and most warlike of the indigenous tribes and can even be compared to the Greek Spartans of old. This empire ruled for hundreds of years, overtaking and enveloping other tribes and nations in this area, however, this success would not last forever. In three steady waves, the invasions by Spain, Mexico, and the United States would crash upon this nation like a wave on the shoreline. Unlike many other native nations, the Comanche initially stood strong against these colonial powers through the adoption of their technologies and strategies, which they used against the invaders. This warlike society's ability to adopt their enemy's strategies, hit-and-run tactics, attempt at diplomacy, and all out warfare allowed the Comanche to stand stronger and longer than other indigenous tribes during this time. The Comanche tribe invoked a fierce bellicose nature that was second to none in eighteenth century North America, which allowed it to defend itself against the colonial powers of Spain, Mexico, and the United States with relative success.

Before the influence of the Spanish touched the Great Plains of America in the sixteenth century, the Comanche Indians survived as a small hunter-gatherer society.¹ During the Comanche's early days in contemporary Wyoming, this group illustrated traditional

¹ Pekka Hamalainen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1.

hunter-gather practices, where men of the tribe hunted the buffalo of the plains, while the women prepared the hides and meals and gathered whatever supplies were necessary for the daily functions of the tribe. As with many of the plains tribes, the buffalo was pivotal for survival. To the early Comanche, the buffalo provided food, shelter from the elements in the forms of furs and hides, bone for tools and weapons, and was incorporated into every aspect of daily life. It is due to the necessity of the buffalo in Comanche society that this tribe began its primary migratory patterns, which resulted in a nomadic lifestyle.² These teepee dwelling nomads followed the seasonal migratory patterns of the buffalo, which meant that they never resided in one area for long. This constant pursuit of the buffalo eventually led the Comanche to their first contact and conflict with the Spaniards who traveled north into the contemporary American Southwest. Their seasonal migration, which initially began in a search for food, led the Comanche further into the contemporary American Southwest.³ The Comanche thus dwelled most commonly within New Mexico and Texas, which eventually put them into direct contact with the Spanish.

While this migration south initially resulted out of the necessity of following the bison, it quickly evolved into a desire for horses. It was this adoption of horses into Comanche society that encouraged further southern migration in North America.⁴ Wherever there were horses to be tamed, the Comanche would follow. Horses, which were primarily introduced into North America by the Spanish in 1680, were adopted and widely used by the Comanche for waging war and producing meat.⁵ This initial interaction began the prosperous future of Comanche cavalry

² Gerald Betty, *Comanche Society: Before the Reservation* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005), 66.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵ R.E. Moore, "The Texas Comanches," *Texas Indians*, 2012, <http://www.texasindians.com/comanche.html>.

conquest. By observing how the Spaniards hunted buffalo on horseback, the Comanche adopted similar techniques and methods for their own.⁶ The establishment of light cavalry gave the Comanche a distinct advantage in hunting, as they were able to match the speed of the bison. In addition to hunting, horses gave the Comanche a superior advantage over neighboring tribes, who were seldom at peace with one another. As they migrated south, it was common for the Comanche to encounter other tribes that had already inhabited these areas, such as the Apache and Pueblo.⁷ The Comanche efficiently conquered or drove out every indigenous nation they encountered, including the Apache, who were known for their brutal close combat skirmishes and stealth tactics. This extensive mastery of the art of warfare placed the Comanche on equal footing against the Spanish in the conflicts to come, as they could match the speed and prowess of this previously superior force.

In addition to the catalyst provided by horses, the Comanche were a tribe that exhibited an aggressive and violent nature. This nature was driven by two aspects of their society: an aggressive need to survive, and a religious experience of kinship. Life in the Great Plains of America was often tedious and difficult, as survival depended on the cooperation of nature and very limited resources. It was through this necessity that the Comanche formed its society around its warrior class, as they deemed it better to resort to violence against foreign peoples rather than face starvation.⁸ It was through this that they displayed the survival of the fittest mentality, as their warriors were prepared to take what they needed to survive. This mentality was honed long before any engagements with the Spanish, and revealed itself with vigor as it faced this great opponent. Even beyond survival, the aggressive nature of this tribe was a direct result of their kinship with one another. The warrior class of the Comanche experienced and savored many religious practices within their ranks, which in turn

⁶ Betty, *Comanche Society*, 83.

⁷ Moore, "Texas Comanches."

⁸ Betty, *Comanche Society*, 125.

formed a tight bond between the men.⁹ When a brother in arms was killed or dishonored by another tribe's warrior, it was common practice for the Comanche to rise up in arms to avenge their tribesman. The tight-knit nature of this nation served as a shield against the colonial powers to come. Instead of succumbing to loss and despair, the Comanche's resolve only strengthened in the face of the future confrontations.

It was through this military success that the Comanche built an empire of their own, as defeated tribes were either forced to bend a knee to the Comanche, or were permanently removed from the plains. This empire grew rapidly, but not in a manner similar to that of European conquest. The Comanche simply had the desire to "coexist, control, and exploit," and did not seek to expand their territory or claim new lands unlike the European colonizers.¹⁰ This fairly rapid rise in power occurred in the early 1700s, and was a result of the gradual adoption of Spanish culture, strategy, and technology including: horseback riding, cavalry, farming, steel weaponry, and gunpowder.¹¹ It was the combination of this adaptive flexibility, technological advancements, and military prowess that set the Comanche apart from the other indigenous nations in the resistance and rejection of foreign colonialism within the Americas.

As the Comanche Empire grew, its encounters with the Spanish became more frequent in the early eighteenth century. Initially, the interactions between the tribe's people and the Spaniards were peaceful. The Comanche and Spanish primarily built their relationship on trade, which the Comanche took great advantage of. Upon first encountering the Comanche tribe, the Spanish were very open to working with these indigenous people. The Spanish saw these tribesmen as educated in trade, well dressed, and even fluent in several languages, one of which

⁹ Ibid., 126.

¹⁰ Hamalainen, *Comanche Empire*, 4.

¹¹ John Tutino, "Globalizing the Comanche Empire," *History and Theory* 52, no. 1 (2013): 70.

included Spanish.¹² It was through these positive first experiences that the Spanish were fairly unprepared for the drastic change of relationship that would follow. The Comanche had closely studied these intruding European white men, as they not only adopted and perfected riding on horseback, but also acquired metal weapons and tools, firearms and ammunition, woven cloth, and farming techniques.¹³ The Comanche's study and development of Spanish tactics and culture helped grow this nation into a powerful empire in the Great Plains of America, which was paramount in the resistance against technologically superior invading nations. It was through this meticulous study of the Spanish and adoption of their strategies that gave the Comanche the upper hand when their peaceful relationship with the Spanish turned sour.

Throughout the mid-eighteenth century, the Spanish explorers and Comanche warriors alternated between periods of war and peace.¹⁴ The Spanish continued their quest for riches and silver, and the Comanche consistently invaded and attacked the Spanish in a series of small, quick raids. While the Spanish had the initial advantage, the Comanche came out on top as they studied the invaders and adopted their superior technologies and battle strategies. The one advantage that the Comanche could not overcome, however, was the disease the Spaniards brought from Europe.¹⁵ The most aggressive disease the Spaniards brought was smallpox, which ravaged the Comanche tribe and the other nations under its empire. While this disease decimated the entire population of the Great Plains, it struck an acute blow against the Comanche, as it affected their horses as well. Despite the major loss in population and livestock, smallpox was not enough to completely destroy the Comanche Empire.

As time went on, the Comanche transitioned into a fairly docile role within the Great Plains, as they patiently waited for the proper time to strike the Spanish Empire. While they waited for

¹² Moore, "Texas Comanches."

¹³ Tutino, "Globalizing the Comanche Empire," 73.

¹⁴ Betty, *Comanche Society*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

their moment, they continued to trade with the Spaniards, and gained further resources and strategies. As Spain widened its reach on the Americas, a fracture began to emerge. As Napoleon and his massive French army wreaked havoc in Europe and Spain, resources and military power that were needed for the conquest of the New World were required elsewhere. While this released some of the pressure on the indigenous tribes, it also revealed an opportunity for the Mexican natives to gain independence. Spanish citizens who resided in Mexico often questioned the motives of the Crown, as they were forced to financially participate in a war that they believed held no influence over their lives. This led to strife and eventually a full revolution, which declared Mexico as an independent nation in 1821, one that was no longer under the control of the Spanish Empire. It was in this moment that the Comanche Empire struck.¹⁶ Whatever hold the Spanish Empire had on North America was weak and distant, as it faced conflict in both Mexico and its homeland in western Europe. The Comanche used this weakness as an opportunity to completely push the Spanish out of Texas, thus throwing off the shackles of influence this first colonizer placed upon them.¹⁷ The Spanish were shocked to see just how much the Comanche had developed since their first encounter with the nation, and this underestimation of the Comanche cost them their place within North America. As Spain's hold over the Americas weakened, a new power emerged under the control of the Mexican government. Mexico fought to declare itself as a sovereign nation, and Spain's presence in the Mexican Northwest receded. The Comanche saw this as an opportunity; they filled the newly formed void and placed their permanent foundation within Texas and New Mexico.¹⁸ In these areas, the Comanche thrived. These borderlands presented new opportunities for the Comanche that were previously denied to

¹⁶ Tutino, "Globalizing the Comanche Empire," 67.

¹⁷ Moore, "Texas Comanches."

¹⁸ Tutino, "Globalizing the Comanche Empire," 72.

them.¹⁹ These fugitive landscapes²⁰ allowed the Comanche to maintain their traditional activities: they hunted bison, migrated their communities, and gathered food from the land. However, they also developed new factors of trade and resources to raid that the developing nation of Mexico provided. The primary resource that Mexico offered to the Comanche was an abundance of horses. These horses, left when the Spanish Empire was thrown out of Mexico, were a necessary resource for the Comanche, and as illustrated through their migratory patterns, the Comanche would go wherever the horses would lead them. As Mexico grew in power and its presence in North America became noticed, the powerful Comanche Empire descended upon this nation like a predator upon infant prey.

Unlike the Spanish, the interactions between the Comanche and Mexico began in a somewhat violent nature. The Comanche viewed any Mexican efforts to migrate north as raiding opportunities. As a result, a new era of terror and hatred began, as the bellicose Comanche began a steady stream of raids upon these areas throughout the 1830s and 1840s.²¹ This period of strife halted Mexico's northern expansion, as the Comanche presented far greater resistance and military threat than was expected. The Comanche's ferocity and tactical expertise caught Mexico by surprise, as an empire this established was not foreseen to exist within this region. Despite the Mexican perception of the Comanche as barbarians and savages, the Mexican government sought to make peace, and presented an olive branch to this nomadic tribe.²² The Comanche, who saw this possible peace as an opportunity for trade, accepted the offer and treaties between these two nations were made. While the leaders of the Comanche upheld these treaties, the younger warriors continued to raid the Mexican

¹⁹ Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 87.

²⁰ Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 44.

²¹ DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

borderland cities. This created an “uneasy calm” between the two powers, and tensions once again began to rise.²³ Similar to their relationship with Spain, the peace between the Comanche and Mexico did not last for long.

When the majority of the Comanche refused to end the raids along the borderlands, the Mexican government broke the fractured treaty and retaliated against the tribe.²⁴ While these encounters did not manifest in the form of total war, constant conflict took place. Most of these instances involved small encounters, however large battles between the Mexican military and Comanche warriors sometimes occurred, like the confrontation between Bustamante and the Comanche in 1826.²⁵ This conflict was Mexico’s retaliation to the previous years of raiding and attacks from the Comanche upon Mexican border settlements. Bustamante gathered a large band of Mexican soldiers, and took the fight to the Comanche villages. This offensive attack was poised to show the Comanche what a raid upon their homes was like. After the primary battle was completed, both sides came to a tentative peace agreement as an armistice was signed by Comanche representatives. Despite the efforts of the Mexican government, the Comanche could never truly be the focus of their forces, as confrontations with the United States arose for the first time during the early nineteenth century. This two-front war was the undoing of the Mexican government, as the full force of its military was necessary to stem the tide of the Comanche.

As this struggle ensued, the United States made its presence known across the entirety of North America. Through its justification of expansion in Manifest Destiny, the United States pushed west like never before. This expansion caused conflict with Mexico, as areas that were regarded as Mexican territories were invaded by United States forces. Similar to their response to the

²³ Brian DeLay, “The Wider World of the Handsome Man: Southern Plains Indians invade Mexico, 1830-1848,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁵ DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*, 19.

struggle between Spain and Mexico, the Comanche took advantage of this new conflict, and continued to raid the smaller, more vulnerable towns within Texas and New Mexico.²⁶ Mexico, which quickly realized the larger of the two threats resided within the United States, lessened its attempts to bring the Comanche to heel. This struggle ever increased within the favor of the Comanche, until finally the last strand of Mexico's attempt to fight this tribe collapsed when the Mexican Northwest, which included Texas, was taken by the United States in 1848.²⁷ Suddenly, the Comanche no longer posed the same threat to Mexico as it had previously, as the lands that were under attack by this nation were no longer under the control of the Mexican government. The thorn that was lodged in Mexico's side was now removed and placed within the side of the United States, and the United States responded as it knew best.

As the Civil War ended in 1865, the United States had an army of idle, eager soldiers and a desire to expand its borders. This inevitably led to the massive westward expansion illustrated by this young nation. In addition to the desire for expansion, discovery of gold in western America drew in many Americans who hoped to strike it rich. Initially, this expansion faced relatively little resistance, however, the Comanche in Texas were the first major roadblock for the United States' expansion of its Manifest Destiny. As with the initial relations with Spain, the relationship between the Comanche and the United States began peacefully in the form of trade.²⁸ This trade was very similar to that of Spain, as the Comanche were able to acquire the newest technologies presented by a foreign nation, especially weapons and ammunition. For a period of time, there was relative peace between these two nations, but if the two previous instances of foreign relations revealed anything, this was not to last.

As relations between these two nations continued, the initial wariness worn by the Comanche wore off, and they began to

²⁶ Tutino, "Globalizing the Comanche Empire," 73.

²⁷ DeLay, "Wider World," 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

resume their normal raiding rotations. Not wanting to engage in all-out war with this nation, it was common for local United States settlements to broker treaties with the Comanche chiefs in the area. One such instance took place in Austin, Texas on May 20th, 1840. The *Austin City Gazette Newspaper*—a Texas based newspaper—published an article overviewing a recent treaty between several of the Comanche chieftains and local government officials. This treaty sought to broker peace between the local Comanche population and the citizens of Austin, Texas. The officials in Austin viewed this as a ploy by the Comanche to scout the city and acquire more technology and goods through trade. As a result, they presented the sole condition to this agreement as an immediate release of any United States prisoners under Comanche control.²⁹ The Comanche reluctantly agreed to these terms, and a tentative peace treaty on this front was established.

The Comanche, who were very set in their traditions, refused to curb their raiding practices. Meanwhile the United States refused to let another nation stand in the way of its expansion of Manifest Destiny. The United States, however, tried a new approach to handling this indigenous tribe. As with many of the Native American tribes, the United States offered peace in the form of reservations to the Comanche people. Initially, the leaders of this Empire were furious, however, they reluctantly accepted this proposal. This acceptance came largely due to the parameters of the treaty, as the Comanche were forced from their previously occupied areas onto the reservation grounds, but in turn they were allowed to resume their traditional practices and activities.³⁰ This allowed the Comanche to have a seemingly secure region of their own, where they were left alone by the United States forces, and were still allowed to leave the reservation to hunt bison and perform their religious and traditional activities. Initially, this treaty seemed to hold, but it eventually collapsed as the Comanche realized they had received the short end of the stick and the United

²⁹ G.K. Teulon, “The Comanche Treaty,” *Austin City Gazette*, May 20, 1840, 2.

³⁰ Hamalainen, *Comanche Empire*, 323.

States broke its agreements. The United States began to place further restrictions on the Comanche, some of which no longer allowed them to leave the reservation to gather food or hunt.³¹ It became common for the United States government to treat the Comanche—and other indigenous nations' members—as United States citizens should they leave their established reservations. It was decreed in a Dallas newspaper articles that “Indians would have no voice in Congress but accept the law as enacted and the interpretation thereof by the proper officials.”³² The Comanche, facing starvation and betrayal, resumed their traditional methods of hunting and raiding. This caused the United States to declare war against this tribal empire, and the war between “tradition and capitalist expansion” ensued.³³

The betrayal by the United States and the war that followed ignited systematic hate and prejudice between the Comanche and the United States citizens. To the United States, this tribe was simply another roadblock on the road to westward expansion. The United States featured a military power that was unparalleled in these lands, and it used this knowledge to its advantage. This military run, industrial capitalist machine refused to stop for tradition or already existing claims to land. Instead, it viewed all of the new world as a ripe prize to be taken. This arrogant attitude greatly clashed with the bold nature of the Comanche, which valued war and brotherhood above all else. While the United States boasted a superior military, the Comanche had the home field advantage and the experience of conflict with the colonial powers of Spain and Mexico. The Comanche and United States military traded atrocious war practices, such as the scalping and torturing of prisoners, and viewed each other as little more than vermin. This resentment of the Americans even entered the Comanche's religious practices, as they practiced a new, specific form of burial for their warriors. This practice included the fallen warrior being

³¹ Ibid., 325.

³² W.T. Sherman, “The Indian Question,” *Daily Dallas Herald* 1, no. 67, April 29, 1873, 1.

³³ Ibid., 333.

buried with his weapons and even his horses, with his head facing towards the west. The Texas Ranger Nelson Lee—who was taken prisoner by the Comanches—wrote about this practice in his book that documented his experiences with these people: “They are buried to with their heads to the west, because they believe at the resurrection, they will arise and march eastward, again to take possession of all the country from which the accursed white man has driven them and their fathers”.³⁴ This example shows how the Comanche spirit was presented, which greatly explains their unwillingness to end their resistance against a far superior foe. The tenacity of the Comanche was a frustrating hinderance for the United States, as the threat of superiority and terror tactics proved to be unsuccessful against this indigenous nation.

As the war continued, the Comanche did all that was within their power to resist the forces of the United States. When they realized they were at a disadvantage, the Comanche even reached out to previously hostile tribes and created a “Great Peace” as they aligned themselves with the Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho indigenous tribes.³⁵ The United States—who had the far superior force—were surprised by the vigor with which this empire resisted its military might. The United States saw the Comanche and their allies as a great military threat and were forced to expand their battle strategies beyond pure violence on the battlefield. The United States understood the tribes of the plains better than the Comanche understood its invader, and this advantage quickly came to light throughout the war. The United States sought to kill two birds with one stone, and it began a slaughter of the buffalo within central and southern America.³⁶ Through near extinction of the buffalo, the United States bolstered its small goods market while it systematically destroyed the foundation of the Comanche lifestyle. Without the buffalo, the Comanche lost its source of food, shelter, trade, and basis of society. Without the foundation of the plains

³⁴ Nelson Lee, *Three Years Among the Comanches: The Narrative of Nelson Lee, the Texas Ranger* (Santa Barbara: Narrative Press, 2001), 124.

³⁵ DeLay, “Wide World,” 106.

³⁶ Hamalainen, *Comanche Empire*, 336.

lifestyle, the Comanche faced a bleak reality. Even the exemplar horsemanship, warrior class, and modern technology and weaponry of this empire could not impede its downfall. Eventually, the Comanche were forced to return to their reservations, defeated and starving, never to leave again.³⁷ This permanently ended the Comanche military resistance against the colonial powers of the United States. Had the buffalo herds not been eradicated, the Comanche would have forced the war with the United States to continue for many more years, and may have even resulted in victory.

Despite the ultimate collapse of the Comanche empire, this great nation showed a resistance to superior power that was second to none. Other than the Comanche, it was rare for the Native American tribes to resist with even a fraction of the force and tenacity of the Comanche. Many tribes, like the Tohono O’odham, often sought to accommodate the United States as much as possible, primarily in the form of assimilation.³⁸ The Comanche hardly showed this appeasing nature, instead they chose to rise up against their adversaries, and they agreed to treaties only when it was beneficial for them. Several other indigenous nations, such as the Kickapoo and the Yaquis, simply “watched their rights to migrate steadily erode.”³⁹ These two nations decided it would be in their best interest to peacefully submit to the power of the United States and life on the reservations, instead of engaging in violent confrontation. Unlike these two tribes, the Comanche did not sit idly by as their rights and traditions were stripped from them. Instead, this nation fought vigorously until the day it was defeated.

The Comanche upheld their bellicose resistance against the hungry conquests of Spain, Mexico, and the United States until their eventual downfall as the nineteenth century ended. As a

³⁷ Ibid., 341.

³⁸ Jeffrey M. Schulze, *Are We Not Foreigners Here? Indigenous Nationalism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 135.

³⁹ Ibid., 110.

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young, nomadic tribe, the warrior society of the Comanche adapted to their surroundings and grew into an empire that conquered much of the American Southwest and Midwest. When initially faced by the Spanish Empire, the Comanche resisted with such resolve that they outlived the Spanish presence in the Americas, and in turn grew into the greatest warrior class of the indigenous nations. In the wake of Spanish defeat, Mexico rose up and sought to spread its influence further north into the American Southwest. This expansion came to a halt as it crashed upon the Comanche Empire. During this conflict, the superior military power of the United States pushed ever westward, seeking to claim the lands of both Mexico and the Comanche. Despite showing tremendous strength and resistance, the Comanche eventually fell beneath the treads of the military capitalist power of the United States, thus they faced an existence within the bars of the reservation life. Despite the Comanche being far more successful in their resistance of these colonial powers than any bordering tribes, they eventually fell like every other indigenous nation. This cursed the Comanche to not only lose their land, but also their traditions, as they were scattered and detained in lands they could no longer claim as their own. In the late nineteenth century, Comanche chief Ten Bears said, “I was born upon the prairie, where the wind blew free, and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I was born where there were no enclosures, and where everything drew a free breath...I know every stream and every wood between the Rio Grande and the Arkansas. I have hunted over that country. I lived like my fathers before me, and like them, I lived happily.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Kathy Weiser, “Great Words from Great Americans,” *Legends of America*. 2018. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-quotes/2/>.

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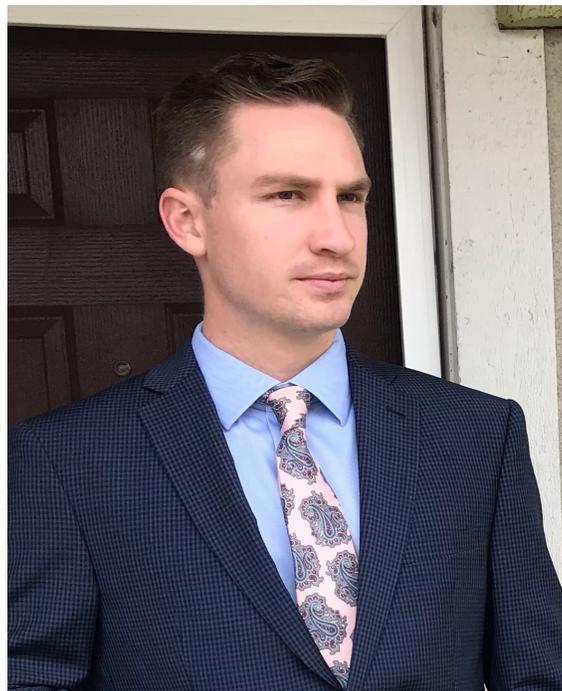
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