TRADE ROUTES IN THE AMERICAS BEFORE COLUMBUS

Compared with Eurasia, the development of trade routes in the pre-Columbian Americas was constrained by the fact that the largest states, such as the Aztec and Inca empires, were in inland settings, not along major rivers, and that the hemisphere lacked domesticated pack animals, except for llamas and related camels of the Andes. The Mississippi, Amazon and other major rivers served as important arteries for commerce and cultural exchange. Yet with no large early riverine civilizations stimulating maritime trade, as the Egyptians did in the Mediterranean and Red Sea, seafaring of the early Americas remained relatively small scale and confined to coasts. Given these limitations, pre-Columbian peoples developed ingenious means for connecting vast areas through trade networks, including the vertical economies that integrated mountainous and tropical lowlands in Andean South America and Mesoamerica, and the continental-scale exchange centred on Mississippian North America. This overview selectively highlights and compares a few of these networks, their organization and developmental trajectories.

ARTIFACTS, PATHWAYS AND CHRONICLERS

Our understanding of pre-Columbian trade routes derives more from archaeology than is the case with many of the other textually based societies found worldwide. Archaeologists reconstruct trade and exchange by documenting the distribution of raw materials and finished goods with respect to their sources of acquisition and production. This may be achieved by comparing artifact styles or by identifying mineralogical, organic, or other properties within archaeological materials in order to connect them to particular resource areas. When applicable, archaeologists also map ancient roads, such as the elaborate Inca network, which may be done from the ground or through the use of space or airborne remote-sensing techniques. Geographical Information Systems (GIS) facilitate the study of trade networks by identifying the relative transportation costs associated with particular routes – considerations that must then be compared with the actual distributions of sites or artifacts to be supported or rejected. A pre-Columbian written record exists only for some Mesoamerican societies, yet these texts are primarily focused on political and religious themes, and only include glimmers of economic information such as Aztec tribute rolls and Maya murals with possible named market vendors. The textual record proliferates with European contact in the late fifteenth century, and the best historical sources for the Caribbean, southern United States, Mesoamerica, Central America and Andean South America are found in the sixteenth-century letters, memoirs and accounts written by Spanish conquistadors and friars, often working with native scribes and translators.

ROAD SYSTEMS

Pre-Columbian road systems are found in diverse regions of the Americas, but how intensively they were used for trade is a topic of debate. Extremely straight roads that climb mountain ranges or traverse dense rainforest without meandering may have served more religious functions, such as pilgrimage, or symbolic – rather than practical – functions, such as linking communities. Examples include the desert roads associated with Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (A.D.850–1150), or Nasca, Peru (A.D.1–750). Elevated causeways through the jungle were built by both Amazonian peoples and the Maya. The latter constructed their sacbé (‘white roads’) out of limestone and...
Fine stones for feathers
Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1541, discussing people of northern Mexico who mediated the exchange of birds from tropical Mesoamerica for turquoise from the Puebloan region in the southwestern United States.

They also gave us many beads and some cloth that is found in the South Sea (Pacific Ocean) and many very fine feathers that they gave from toward the north. And among these things that they gave us, I asked them where they had obtained them. And they said that they had brought them from some very high mountains that are toward the north and they bought them in exchange for feathers and parrot feathers. And they say that there were villages of many people and very large houses there.


NORTH AMERICAN ROUTES
In North America, apart from the Chacoan sphere, formal roads are not a conspicuous feature of archaeological landscapes. Yet pre-Columbian trade routes of the North American Midwest and other temperate environments are more difficult to detect due to their having been ephemeral constructions, such as dirt paths, which are now covered in dense vegetation. Trade surely flowed along the large rivers of the midcontinent – the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, St. Lawrence and others – and the North-west, including the Columbia and Fraser, both on watercraft and over footpaths tethered to these permanent water sources. Through the plains and prairies, trade often followed the well-trodden paths of migrating buffalo: routes known as buffalo traces, which were also used by Anglo-American pioneers on their journeys west.

The central plaza at Cahokia (circa 1000–1550 AD) was at the heart of a city that stretched between rivers and crisscrossed by roads which by around 1250 may have had some 15,000 inhabitants. Situated at a strategic confluence of rivers, Cahokia was the hub of a network of North American long-distance trade routes.

A marketplace for all needs
Hernán Cortés, writing to Emperor Charles V in 1532 regarding Tlacuilco, a rival state to the Aztec Empire in Mexico.

‘There is in this city [Tlaxcalpa] a market where each and every day up to thirty thousand people come to buy and sell, without counting the other trade which goes on elsewhere in the city. In this market there is everything they might need or wish to trade, precious as well as utilitarian and fashionable. There is jewelry of gold and silver and precious stones and other ornaments of featherwork and all as well laid out as in any square or marketplace in the world.’


HOPEWELL AND CAHOICKA
Two cultural spheres of the North American Midwest stand out for their extensive trade networks. The Hopewell sphere (c.1500–c.400 BC), centered primarily in southern Ohio and Illinois, involved trade over distances that cover much of the continental United States. Hopewellian acquired marine shell from the Gulf of Mexico, sheet mica from the Appalachian Mountains, copper from the Great Lakes, and obsidian and grizzly-bear teeth from the Rockies Mountains, located some 1,200 miles (1,930 kilometers) away.

Following the adoption of maize as a primary domesticate, a Mississippian trading system began to flourish within fertile alluvial lands known as the American Bottoms, headed by the site of Cahokia (c.1000–1550 AD). Like its historical counterpart St. Louis, the ‘gateway to the West’, Cahokia was located near the confluence of the Missouri, Illinois and Mississippi rivers, where prairie and woodland ecosystems met. From this vantage point Cahokians traded regularly with a network spanning from Wisconsin to the Gulf of Mexico north–south, and the Atlantic seaboard to Oklahoma east–west. This sphere of cultural and economic exchange is illustrated particularly nicely by the distribution of chunky stones, which were used for a sport that involved hurling a javelin at rolled discs of this name. Chunky stones were made from a quartzite local to the Cahokia region and are found throughout regions of the North American Midwest, Southeast and Plains that Cahokians traded with.

Mesoamerican merchants
Long-distance trade is well attested to in Mesoamerica. Multiple cultural traditions recognized a god of merchants and trade routes, who was called Yacatecutli in Nahualt, the language of the Aztecs. Among the Aztecs, the polvoca were professional merchants who undertook distant expeditions, usually carrying low-bulk, high-value goods. Jade, turquoise and other blue-green stones, precious metals, feathers from tropical birds and cacao are some of the goods that travelled great distances.

A particularly illuminating example comes from evidence of trade between Mesoamerican and Ancestral Puebloans of the United States Southwest, groups separated by 1.200 miles (1,930 kilometers) and a large desert. In return for turquoise, often used by Mesoamericans as mosaic inlays for masks and other adornments, Puebloan groups received tropical birds, which they depicted on pots and wall paintings, and cacao for making a chocolate beverage, the existence of which was discovered only recently through the detection of residual theobromine in cylindrical vessels from Chaco Canyon. Sixteenth-century Spanish chronicles report that some of this trade was mediated by peoples of the desert region of northwest Mexico, just as it had been roughly a century earlier involving the Casas Grandes culture (see map, page 170). In fact, this trade route was so efficient on its own that when the Aztecs conquered regions of southern Mexico with existing acquisition networks for turquoise they simply required tribute from those destination points rather than attempting to acquire the material for themselves from closer to the source.

INTERCONTINENTAL TRADE
Distant trade contacts may have also taken place between coastal peoples of the northern Andes, including parts of modern Ecuador and Columbia, and west Mexico, though these may have been even more sporadic than connections between Mesoamericans and Ancestral Puebloans. Most telling in this regard are the appearance of Andean metallurgical traditions in west
adaptations such as market and tributary systems did much to enable access to particular resources. Compared to the Andes, these trade networks consisted of a core area with meandering tentacles extending into peripheral areas. City-states—such as Cahokia, Tula, and a number of Maya states—were more analogous to wheel-hubs with spokes extending to the periphery of the empire. This was the source of tropical products such as cacao and exotic bird feathers.

A MAN IN SEARCH OF A SPONSOR

In 1484 Columbus managed to secure an audience with Portugal’s King Joao II and he presented his documents and elaborate arguments in favour of a state-sponsored voyage. Joao II and his specialists debated the proposal but ultimately turned down Columbus, not because they thought the world was flat, but because they knew the world was much larger than Columbus claimed and that maritime technology was insufficiently advanced for tiny sailing ships to cross such a distance safely. Perhaps more importantly, after decades of voyaging, Portuguese mariners were already on the verge of completing a sea route to India by rounding Africa and they had little interest in a rival route. Columbus then famously left Lisbon and moved to Spain, where in 1486 he presented his proposal to the Catholic Monarchs. King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile. Years passed while a committee of learned men and mariners studied and debated Columbus’s proposal, and while Spain waged war on the Moorish kingdoms of Granada. Columbus again offered his services to Portugal and to the kingdoms of England and France as well, but to no avail. However, in 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella finally agreed to support Columbus and by the summer he had assembled his famous trio of ships, the Santa Maria, the Pinta and the Nina, with a total crew of less than 100 and a year of supplies. The first departied Pales, in southwestern Spain, and headed towards the Canary Islands before having sailed and turning west into the unknown—beyond the coasts of Europe—Atlantic Ocean, with good winds, on 6 September.

LAND SIGHTED AND FAME GAINED

On 12 October, after weeks at sea, they spied land, the tiny island of San Salvador in the Bahamas, where they encountered the Arawak people. For the next several months, Columbus’s ships explored the coasts of Cuba and Hispaniola searching for evidence of the land of the Great Khan and the spices of the Orient. They departed for home in January, leaving about 40 men behind on Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Columbus was hailed as a hero when he returned and toured the towns of Spain, displaying several captive Arawak natives, colourful squawking parrots, screeching monkeys, exotic fruits and spices.