



Trading Patterns, Ancient American

by Michael E. Smith

Trade was widely practiced in all parts of the ancient New World, among societies of all levels of social complexity, from the earliest hunter-gatherers to late prehistoric empires like the Aztec and Inca. But the high costs associated with overland human transport produced a volume of long-distance trade lower than that found in many other ancient societies.

The native peoples of the New World exhibited a great diversity of trading patterns before the European invasion. In most ancient American societies, trade and exchange were strongly embedded within social institutions and practices. The long-distance trade identified by archaeologists was typically only one component of wider processes of social interaction that included exchanges of ideas and information, warfare and diplomacy, marriage alliances, and migrations of peoples. Trade assumed an independent commercial status only among the late states of Mesoamerica (Mexico and northern Central America).

Earliest Inhabitants

The timing of the initial migrations to the New World is a topic of considerable debate. Regardless of their actual age, however, the earliest archaeological sites in North and South America provide evidence for a low level of long-distance trade. During this time, known as the Paleoindian period (c. 15,000 BCE–8000 BCE), small bands of hunters and gatherers traded projectile points and other tools made of high-quality chert (a variety of silica) and other varieties of stone over

moderate distances. The finely made and distinctive Clovis spear points were used over much of North America. These objects were made separately in many regions, and their similarities derive from a common technology that points to long-distance interaction throughout North America. Obsidian, a volcanic glass from which extremely sharp cutting tools were made, was first traded in the Paleoindian period. Obsidian occurs geologically in only a limited number of mountainous areas in western North America, Mesoamerica, and the Andes. Each source area has a distinctive chemical “fingerprint” in the occurrence and quantity of trace elements. When subjected to any of a number of analytical techniques for measuring trace elements, an obsidian artifact’s geological place of origin can be traced.

In most parts of the New World, the Paleoindian period was followed by the Archaic period (starting c. 8000 BCE and ending at different times in different areas). This was a time of growing populations, increased reliance upon plant foods, and growing technological sophistication. In Mesoamerica, the Andes, and the Amazon, plants and animals were domesticated at this time. The Archaic period furnishes evidence of increasing long-distance trade of stone tools. Although the evidence for trade is clear in the Paleoindian and Archaic periods, the overall volume of exchange was low and people obtained most goods in their local area. Trade was probably organized in what archaeologists call “down-the-line trade,” in which trade goods move through reciprocal exchange from group to group without merchants or long-distance exchange expeditions.

Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. • **Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)**



This Cayuse woman from Oregon wears shell disk earrings, a shell bead choker, and shell beads, items used since ancient times for trade and as burial goods. Photo by Edward Curtis circa 1910. Library of Congress.

North America

The roster of North American long-distance trade goods increased dramatically with the end of the Archaic period to include marine shell, ceramics, and objects made of copper, galena, obsidian, and other types of exotic stone. The frequencies of imported goods were typically much higher than in Paleoindian and Archaic times. Obsidian found at sites in eastern North America and marine shell ornaments at sites far inland show trade over long distances. Several later cultures are noteworthy for high quantities of imported goods. The Hopewell culture of the North American Midwest, for example, is best known for its elaborate public ceremonialism centered on earthen

mounds and open plazas. Some Hopewell burials and other offerings contained thousands of ornaments and other finely crafted objects, many of which were imported from great distances. Imported burial goods include at least ten types of native copper ornaments, finely-made stone bifacial tools, obsidian objects, mica mirrors, smoking pipes of clay and stone, ornaments of human bone and bear's teeth, tools of deer bone, quartz crystal, shell beads, and silver objects.

The emphasis on ornaments among the imported goods of the Hopewell and other North American cultures suggests that social factors were more important than strictly economic factors as stimuli for trade. Elaborate ornaments and exotic goods were most likely used in ceremonies and at other public gatherings (before being deposited in offerings) to communicate information about social identity and status. They probably served as sources of prestige for high-ranking individuals. This pattern continued in the most politically complex and spatially expansive North American culture, the Mississippian culture of southeastern and midwestern North America (c. 1000–1550).

Archaeological sites of the Mississippian culture are larger and more numerous than those of earlier cultures. The largest Mississippian site—Cahokia—was a true urban center with a substantial population, monumental architecture, powerful rulers, and various types of craft specialists. Many archaeologists classify Cahokia as an example of the chiefdom form of political organization. Cahokia was located in the American Bottoms (in Illinois, across from St. Louis), the largest expanse of rich alluvial floodplain along the Mississippi River. This region had numerous Mississippian settlements, all engaged in agricultural production and many with active craft industries. Exchange was extensive on both the regional level (linking the sites in the American Bottoms area) and the macroregional level, as evidenced by a variety of exotic imported goods found in excavations. Although some utilitarian goods were widely traded—particularly agricultural hoes produced from high-quality chert—most Mississippian trade goods were ornaments, ritual items, and the raw materials used to



Mayan burial site. Archaeologists have found evidence of imported luxury items by examining burial offerings and other excavations. Photo by Arturo Delfin.

produce such goods (including copper, marine shell, and a variety of precious stones). The organization of Mississippian trade probably included down-the-line trade, gifts among localized elites, and exactions of taxes or tribute from subject populations.

Mesoamerica

Mesoamerica is a cultural area whose numerous peoples and cultures shared a variety of traits and

practices. The commonalities that defined Mesoamerica were sustained by systems of long-distance interaction that included exchanges of both goods and ideas. Although long-distance trade goes back to the earliest inhabitants of Mexico and Guatemala, the distinctive exchange systems that created and defined Mesoamerica as a distinctive area developed after the start of the Formative period (c. 1600 BCE). In cultural terms, the Formative period saw the spread of a way of life based upon agriculture, sedentism (year-round villages), and

pottery. Chiefdoms soon developed in several parts of Mesoamerica, including the Pacific coast, the Valley of Oaxaca, central Mexico, and along the Gulf of Mexico (home of the Olmec culture). The rulers of these polities exchanged a number of goods, including jadeite, serpentine, and other precious stones; obsidian tools; ceramic vessels; iron ore mirrors; shell ornaments; and various animal products used in ritual, such as sting-ray spines and turtle shells. As in the case of Hopewell and Mississippian exchange in North America, most trade goods were luxury goods used in social display and ceremonial performance, and the production, exchange, and consumption of these goods was probably under the control of chiefs and elites.

The Classic period in Mesoamerica (c. 250–900) was marked by the rise of powerful states in most regions. In the jungle lowlands of Guatemala and Mexico, Mayan kings ruled city-states from urban centers with abundant monumental architecture. Imported luxury goods were essential elements in the elaborate public performances and lavish lifestyle of these rulers. Kings often adorned themselves with imported precious stones (such as jadeite and obsidian) and headdresses of tropical bird feathers. They sponsored exclusive elite feasts at which foodstuffs such as cacao and other delicacies were served from elaborate painted pottery vessels. Obsidian had to be imported from distant sources, and most Classic-period Maya obsidian objects functioned in the realm of social display and rituals.

The contemporary Teotihuacán state of central Mexico presents a cultural and economic contrast to the Maya polities. Less flamboyant than their Maya counterparts, the rulers of Teotihuacán concentrated more effort on trade and craft production. Located near several major geological sources of obsidian, Teotihuacán controlled the production and trade of obsidian tools and jewelry in northern Mesoamerica. Excavations have located numerous craft workshops, and Teotihuacán houses have yielded goods imported from all parts of Mesoamerica. Teotihuacán exports—found all over Mesoamerica—include ceramic vessels in addition to obsidian objects. Some kind of special economic and diplomatic relationship existed between Teotihuacán and the city of Monte

Albán in Oaxaca, and a colony of merchants from the latter area has been excavated at Teotihuacán.

The transition to the Postclassic period (900–1520) was marked by a significant increase in economic activity in most parts of Mesoamerica. For this period, written historical records supplement archaeological evidence, and it is clear that highly commercialized long-distance trade flourished.

Caribbean Islands

The initial inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, most likely immigrants from the Mexican mainland, traded with peoples of northeast South America for crystals and other ritual items. A major migration from South America began c. 2000 BCE, bringing new peoples into the Lesser Antilles and eventually to most of the Caribbean. These “Saladoid” peoples, ancestors of the Tainos, maintained contact with people in South America through trade in a variety of goods. From earliest times, the peoples of the Caribbean were expert mariners who used dugout canoes to undertake both local and long-distance voyages. Trade within islands and between adjacent islands was extensive in all periods, whereas the extent of long-distance trade varied across time and space.

The major long-distance trade goods found at archaeological sites in the Caribbean are chert (for flaked stone tools), pottery and volcanic pottery temper, beads made from a variety of exotic stones (e.g., quartz crystals, amethyst, and diorite), and ornamental carved stone objects (including distinctive stone pestles). The trade connections with South America were still going strong with Columbus arrived in the Caribbean. He noted ornaments of a gold-copper alloy worn by Taino chiefs. The Taino worked locally-occurring gold but did not cast metal, and these ornaments must have been obtained through trade with the South American mainland.

South America

As in North America and Mesoamerica, long-distance exchange in South America started with the



earliest hunter-gatherers of the Paleoindian period. Exchange throughout the Amazon Basin was probably extensive in most periods, but since the bulk of the material culture consisted of perishable goods this trade is difficult to document archaeologically. Early explorers and travelers reported active riverine exchange systems that some scholars treat as models for earlier periods. For a variety of reasons, trade is easier to study archaeologically in the Andean region. After the development of chiefdoms and states in the Andes, several goods of limited occurrence were widely traded over great distances. Of these goods, obsidian and marine shell stand out. There are fewer geological sources of obsidian in the Andes than in Mesoamerica, but Andean peoples made active use of the superior cutting edges of this stone in all periods. Marine shell was another important trade good in the Andes. Particularly valued was the colorful shell of the spiny oyster (genus *Spondylus*), used to make ornaments and ritual goods. These shells occur naturally only along the Pacific coast of Ecuador and Central America, and their presence at sites in the Andes was due to long-distance exchanges with northern groups. Metallurgy developed early in the Andes (c.1800 BCE), and objects of gold, silver, and bronze were widely traded.

The entire Andean zone was linked into a single cultural and economic system during three periods, called “horizons” by archaeologists. The Early Horizon (800–200 BCE) was dominated by the Chavín culture. The central settlement, Chavín de Huántar (in present-day western central Peru), has yielded archaeological evidence of exchange with both the Amazonian lowlands and the Pacific coast. Mechanisms of long-distance interaction included both the exchange of goods and the spread of the Chavín art style, which was probably the material expression of a common religious system that linked numerous localized small polities. The Middle Horizon (600–1000) witnessed the spread of two major art styles centered on the cities of Huari and Tihuanaco (in the central and southern Andes, respectively). Huari was the capital of a territorial empire in which both trade and the imperial art style contributed to political integration and domination. During the Late Horizon (1400–1530), the Inca

Empire expanded rapidly to control nearly the entire area of the Andes and the Pacific coast.

The peoples of the Andes made use of a number of distinctive trading patterns quite different from those of Mesoamerica and North America. Most important was a strong desire for self-sufficiency on the part of villages and polities. The varied environments of the Andes, caused primarily by differences in elevation, are often in close juxtaposition. Rather than having villages in each zone specialize in local products and trade with one another (as happened in Mesoamerica), villages and polities sent out temporary settlements to exploit different zones so that each social unit could be self-sufficient by controlling the products and resources of many zones. This pattern was first described by the anthropologist and historian John Murra, who called it “verticality.” The Inca rulers adapted self-sufficiency and verticality to their empire, with the result being a bureaucratic, state-run economy. Taxes were paid in labor as well as in goods. Managers organized labor parties and tracked the storage and movement of raw materials, flocks of llamas and alpacas, foods, and craft products. Money, markets, and independent merchants did not exist in the Inca Empire, although these institutions did occur among some Andean groups outside the reach of the empire.

Ancient American Trading Patterns

Native inhabitants of North America, the Caribbean, and early Mesoamerica traded mostly ceremonial and luxury goods, at low quantities in the first two areas and at higher quantities in Mesoamerica. Late Mesoamerican peoples adopted commercial exchange institutions that raised the volume of trade and extended the diversity of goods exchanged. In the Andes, a drive for self-sufficiency led to distinctive state-run trade systems. Overall, the high costs associated with overland human transport produced a volume of long-distance trade lower than that found in many other ancient societies.

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See also Andean States; Art—Pre-Columbian Central and South America; Aztec Empire; Inca Empire; Mesoamerican Societies; Mississippian Culture; Trading Patterns, Mesoamerican

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