



Long-Distance Trade in the Americas

By Bennett Sherry

All societies in the Americas engaged in trade. Mesoamerica is a great place to start looking for evidence of extensive long-distance trade networks before 1500.

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In the middle of everything

When studying ancient trade routes, we often hear about the Silk Road. It was fascinating. It connected Europe with South and East Asia. But the ancient Americas had plenty of trade before 1500 A.D., too. Specifically, Mesoamerica (today's Mexico and Central America) did. It was also in the middle of everything. The prefix “meso-” means “middle.”



Map of Mesoamerica. The word “meso” is a Greek word that means “middle.”
So, “Mesoamerica” means “Middle America.” By Yavidaxiu, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Until recently, historians and archeologists assumed the Americas had limited long-distance trade. For example, many believed that the Maya economy was controlled by the ruling class. Such control would prevent large markets and a merchant class from developing. They also assumed that the Inca in South America had a centrally planned economy. That would mean very little commercial activity happened.

There were good reasons to think this way. Mesoamerican societies did not have sailboats. Most Mesoamerican societies developed inland, away from seaports. The Americas had few pack animals to carry goods. Few rivers were easy to navigate. Most merchants had to carry goods themselves, on their backs. Still, Hirth notes, Mesoamerica developed active long-distance exchange networks. Huge markets grew. All societies in the Americas traded. The big question: How far did these trade connections reach? One way to answer this is by comparing two major Mesoamerican cities: Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlán.

Teotihuacan

Around 400 and 500 CE, Teotihuacan was one of the largest cities in the world. As many as 200,000 people lived there. During the Classic Period of Mesoamerica (100 – 650 CE), this was the most powerful city in Mesoamerica. Teotihuacan was the center of regional trade networks extending through Mesoamerica and possibly beyond.



*The Avenue of the Dead in Teotihuacan was a large street that ran through the center of the city. It was named by the Aztecs 900 years after the collapse of the city, but this street was once full of life, with merchants from distant cities carrying goods to the city's market.
By Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0.*

Teotihuacan was a trading power for one reason: obsidian. This natural glass is formed when volcanic lava cools. Metal-working was rare in Mesoamerica. So, obsidian was the best option for weapons and sharp tools... if you could get it. Like iron and copper in Afro-Eurasia, Mesoamerican societies with access to obsidian had an advantage.

The Teotihuacan rulers completely controlled the region's obsidian sources. Their merchants traded obsidian across Mesoamerica and beyond. Its strongest trade, though, was with the Maya city-states. These were mostly in what is now Mexico. Teotihuacan and the Maya exchanged goods, ideas, and people.



Obsidian knife with turquoise handle. Public domain.

Traveling long distances, traders could only carry lighter, high-value luxury goods. But staples like salt, grains, cotton, and ceramics moved shorter distances along the same routes. Short-distance trade moved food between different climate zones. Such trade would protect societies from sudden natural disasters like drought. These shorter trade routes laid the foundations for truly long-distance networks during the Classic Period.

Still, we don't have many written sources from Mesoamerican societies. Some societies, like Teotihuacan, left us no records. The Maya, and other societies, had written records. Yet there were burned by Spanish colonizers centuries later. To make matters worse, merchants weren't part of the ruling class. The available sources only focus on the lives of the powerful. This is probably why scholars thought that the Maya and Inca never really had a complex commercial economy. Researchers mostly studied murals of market scenes. They also looked at archeological evidence to understand merchants' lives.



Archeological dig in front of the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan. By Jonathan Cardy, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Tenochtitlán

Just 25 miles south of Teotihuacan sits the capital of the Aztec Empire—Tenochtitlán. Well, you'll find the ruins of Tenochtitlán, at least. Today, it's Mexico City. It's a world trade hub. Almost 21 million people live there.



The extent of the Aztec Empire in 1519 (shown in green). By Gigette, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Teotihuacan fell around 550 CE. Soon other societies rebuilt regional trade networks. By the 1400s, the Aztec Empire controlled widespread trade routes across Mesoamerica. Three powerful city-states made an alliance to form it. The empire's capital city, Tenochtitlán, sat on a lake. It had huge markets, straight streets, and grand architecture. Over 200,000 people lived there. It was larger than London, Paris, or Madrid at the time. Thousands visited the nearby market of Tlatelolco every day.

Trade was central to Aztec life. Aztec merchants were called *pochteca*. They traveled all over Mesoamerica, carrying their goods on their backs. *Pochteca* also acted as spies for the empire. They would gather information about rivals.

We know more about the Aztec merchant class. We have more sources from the Aztecs and the Spanish colonizers. The *pochteca* formed their distinct social class. They developed a complex ranking system. Near the bottom were smaller merchants. They sold homemade goods at local markets. At the top were super-wealthy individuals. They employed dozens of minor merchants to carry luxury goods beyond the empire's borders.



A model of the Tlatelolco market. Tlatelolco was Tenochtitlán's sister city. By Joe Ravi, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Decorative quetzal feathers were a valuable trade good that was light and could easily be transported long distances. They were often used for ceremonial purposes and in clothing, *like this Aztec headdress*.
Left: By Harleybroker, CC BY-SA 4.0. Right: By Thomas Ledl, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Long-distance networks in the Americas

Other regions of the Americas also had long-distance trade. Vast road systems linked societies in the Andes Mountains, today's Southwestern U.S., and in the Maya lowlands. Llama caravans traveled the Inca highlands to the Pacific coast. In the Mississippi River valley, trade networks stretched from Wisconsin to the Gulf of Mexico. Caribbean societies traded with communities in South America.

The Puebloan peoples in today's Southwestern U.S. traded turquoise across a vast network. It stretched from California to Colorado to Northern Mexico. Puebloan turquoise has been found in Aztec sites. Aztec cacao and feathers have been found in the American Southwest. This is all evidence of long-distance trade. The two societies were separated by 1,200 miles. That's about the distance between Rome and Egypt.

Technologies moved along with goods. Methods for farming maize might have traveled to North and South America from Mesoamerica along trade routes. South American metal-working technology probably arrived in Mesoamerica along the same routes.

Still, we know little about trade in the Americas before 1500 CE. Our knowledge is based on incomplete evidence.

We know that trade within Mesoamerica was common and widespread. We know the same for the Andean highlands in South America, the Caribbean Islands, the Southwestern U.S., and the Mississippian societies. What scholars continue to debate is how interconnected these different regions were. Did Amazonian people get any trade goods from the Caribbean islands?

Maybe.

The lack of sources limits our knowledge, but not our curiosity. Researchers at sites across the Americas have only begun to study trade routes before 1500. The debates will continue as discoveries are made and new connections revealed.



[*Pochteca merchants*](#) carrying trade goods. Public domain.

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Bennett Sherry

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in History from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a Research Associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

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