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

Sure, the Silk Road was fascinating. It connected Europe with South and East Asia and deserves attention from history classes. But plenty of trade was going on in the ancient Americas before 1500 A.D., too. Specifically, Mesoamerica (today's Mexico and Central America) had much trade activity. 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 that means "middle." So, "Mesoamerica" means "Middle America." By Yavidaxiu, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Until recently, historians and archeologists assumed there was limited long-distance trade in the Americas. 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 develop sailing technology. 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 and huge markets. 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 Mesoamerican cities, separated by 25 miles—and by 1,000 years: 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 because of 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 a distinct advantage.

Obsidian knife with turquoise handle. Public domain.

The Teotihuacan rulers completely controlled the region's obsidian sources. Merchants from Teotihuacan traded obsidian across Mesoamerica. Archeological evidence suggests that Teotihuacan's trade networks even reached from today's Southwestern U.S. to Panama. However, its strongest trade was with the Maya city-states, now Mexico. Maya merchants traveled the coast in huge canoes. They'd carry jade, honey, and feathers, among other luxury items.

Long-distance trade was limited to lighter, high-value luxury goods that were easy for merchants to carry. But staples like salt, grains, cotton, lime, 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 probably developed first and laid the foundations for truly long-distance networks during the Classic Period.

You might have noticed we said probably. We don't have many written sources from Mesoamerican societies. Some societies, like Teotihuacan, left us no records. Many written records from other societies, like the Maya, were burned by Spanish colonizers centuries later. To make matters worse, merchants weren't part of the ruling class. The available sources all focus on the lives of the powerful. So we don't know as much about merchants. This is probably why, for so long, scholars assumed that the Maya and Inca never really had a complex commercial economy. Scholars studying this region mostly studied murals of market scenes and 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, itself a global trade hub and home to almost 21 million people.

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

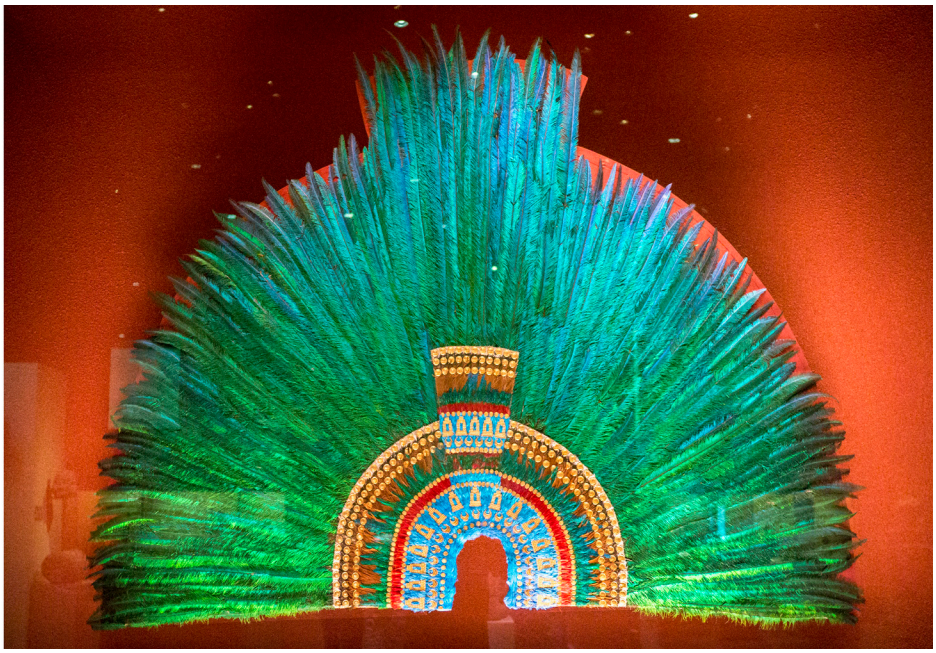
Teotihuacan collapsed around 550 CE. Soon other societies rebuilt regional trade networks. By the 1400s, the Aztec Empire controlled widespread trade routes across Mesoamerica. The Aztec Empire was formed by an alliance among three powerful city-states in the early 1400s. The empire's capital city, Tenochtitlán,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

Trade was central to Aztec life. Their pantheon—the group of gods they worshipped—had a god of commerce, named Yacatecuhtli. This god protected faithful merchants and travelers. Aztec merchants were called pochteca. They traveled all over Mesoamerica, carrying their goods on their backs. The pochteca walked through the empire and beyond. They also acted as spies for the empire, gathering 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 and developed a complex hierarchy, or ranking system. Near the bottom were minor merchants. They sold homemade goods at local markets. At the top were incredibly wealthy individuals. They employed

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

dozens of minor merchants to carry luxury goods beyond the empire's borders. Like merchants in Europe and China, many pochteca were forced to hide their wealth to avoid angering the nobles.



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—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.

Pochteca merchants carrying trade goods. Public domain.

Still, much of our historical knowledge about trade in the Americas before 1500 CE 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. Were Mississippian merchants connected to Aztec markets by way of Caribbean canoes? Did Amazonian people get any trade goods from the Caribbean islands?

Maybe.

The lack of sources limits our knowledge, but not our curiosity. Archeologists and anthropologists at sites across the Americas have only begun to trace the paths of exchange before 1500. The debates will continue as discoveries are made and new connections revealed.

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