

The Chaco Road

The ancient Pueblo peoples of the American Southwest left behind many structures. One that archaeologists like bickering about most is the Great North Road, also known as the Chaco Road. This road is actually a system of roads that radiates out from sites of cities, such as Pueblo Bonito and Una Vida. From there, the roads lead to smaller settlements and natural features inside and beyond Chaco Canyon.



The Chaco Road is 180 miles long and was created sometime between 1000 and 1125 C.E. When it was excavated in the 1970s, it was found to be a flat surface of bedrock. This means that to make the road, ancient Pueblos either chiseled the road out of rock or removed the plants and soil that covered it.

The purpose of the Chaco Road is ambiguous. No communities have been discovered along the route to offer clues to its purpose. An early theory was that the road was used to move armies quickly from place to place, but there has never been any evidence of a permanent Chacoan army. Therefore, that idea is considered preposterous by most.

With a lack of indisputable evidence about the road's purpose, archaeologists have narrowed down their theories to two. Of course, each side in the debate believes they are correct.

One group believes the road was used for trade, transporting local and exotic goods in and out of the canyon. This idea is supported by the presence of luxury goods at many sites in the canyon, including Pueblo Bonito, a large excavated town at one end of the road. Items such as turquoise, shells, and imported pottery prove that there was perpetual trade between Chacoans and other groups. It is also pertinent that wood was often used in the construction of Chaco buildings, even though wood is not widely available in the canyon. Some archaeologists think that the Chaco Road was also used to move wood from distant places to be used in Chaco buildings.



Another group of archaeologists think the Chaco Road was used for religious purposes, providing a path for religious journeys and ceremonial gatherings. This religious-purpose theory is supported by descendants of the Chaco people, who believe in a "Great North Road." This road is said to lead to their place of origin along which spirits of the dead travel. According to modern belief, the road represents a connection to the "shipapu." The shipapu is said to be a place where their ancestors entered the world and where religious leaders could predict the future.

There is additional evidence that supports this theory. Fragments of ceramic figures have been found along the road. Some think these figures were used in rituals. Secondly, isolated structures along the road are thought to be religious shrines. Also, some of the roads seem to go nowhere, so it is possible that the Chaco Road was used to study stars and agricultural cycles. Finally, long, linear grooves were cut into some of the roads in no specific direction. Some archaeologists believe that these lines showed the path for ritual ceremonies.

Archaeologists will continue to grapple with the possible purposes of the Chaco Road. Most do not preclude the possibility that the road's purpose may have changed over time. The road's significance lies in the possibility that we can one day understand the cultural expression of ancestral Pueblo societies.

