

# Prehistoric Trade

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# Prehistoric Trade



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Source materials for maps on pages 6, 10, 15, and 20 obtained from The Atlas of World Archaeology, edited by Paul G. Bahn in 2000, and from the U.S. Geological Survey.

Front cover: Ancient traders discuss a trade of animal tusks for animal hides.

Back cover: Many trade networks in North America were well-established before Europeans ventured across the Atlantic Ocean during colonial times.

Title page: Ships use the St. Lawrence Seaway to move goods for trading.

Table of Contents: The fur trade became big business in North America.

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## Correlation

### LEVEL V

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## Introduction



People play in a Yu-Gi-Oh! tournament.

As soon as the bell rang, Robert stuffed that night's homework into his backpack. He ran for the front steps of the school. Every day, Robert and his friends sat and played a trading card game.

Robert, William, and Rudolfo liked to play, but sometimes they would just sit and trade cards.

William often got good cards from his cousin in California, and Rudolfo got cool cards from his family's shop downtown. Robert always liked to trade, but today was special. There was a new student in the class who had just moved from Japan, and Haruki liked to trade cards, too.

Haruki wanted to trade cards with William, and had cool cards from Japan that William had never seen! All of Haruki's cards were in Japanese, and no one at Robert's school had them. Haruki traded cards to William that William had never played with, and William gave Haruki some cool cards in return. Haruki shared these English language cards with his friends in Japan.

## Long-Distance Trade

**Trade** is an exchange of one thing for another. Trade can involve doing work in return for an object, or trading valuable items, just like William and Haruki traded game cards. If people didn't trade, every family would have to grow its own food, sew its own clothes, and build its own house. Trade is a basic human activity that makes it possible to enjoy products from all over the world.

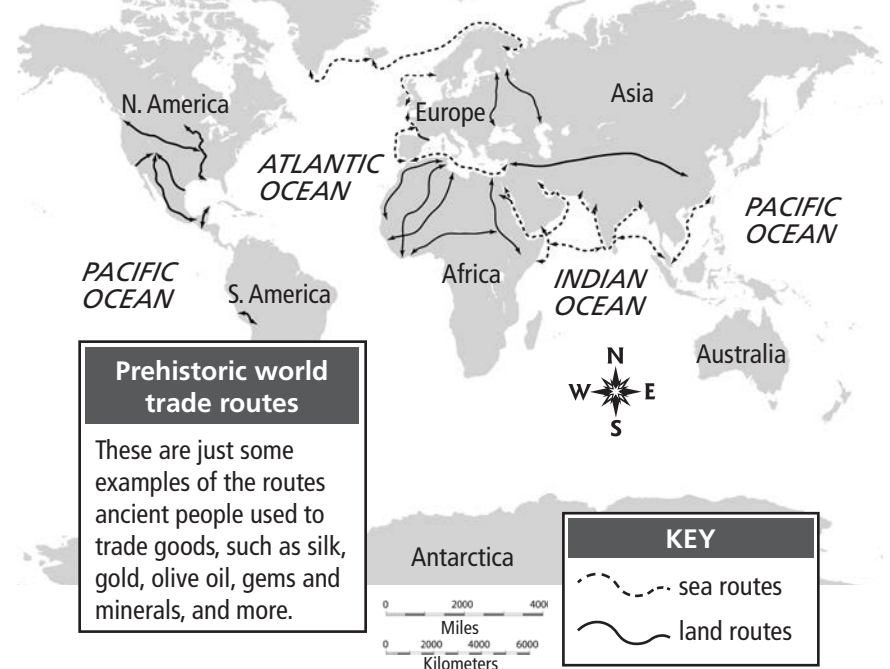
Now, everyday objects can come from anywhere in the world. Things in your backpack might have been made in your hometown. They also might come from Canada, Mexico, Australia, China, France, or even Brazil!

### Stop & Think

Where do the objects in your bedroom come from? Read the labels on your clothes or toys and look at a map. How far has your clothing traveled?



## Trade routes from 6300 BC — AD 1200



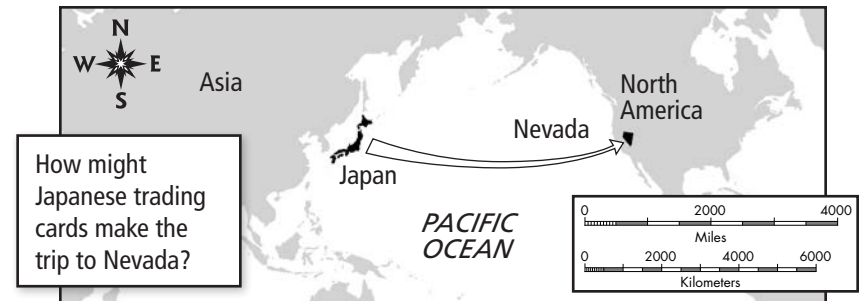
Ancient people, who lived thousands of years before us, also traded objects over long distances. In Europe, men would spend months crossing oceans and traveling up rivers to trade swords or hairpins. In North and South America, people lived and traded for thousands of years before meeting Europeans.

**Prehistoric** North American trade is a perfect example of how people moved valuable objects thousands of miles to trade them for other special objects. (Prehistoric means it happened before those people made written records, such as books.)

How can we learn about prehistoric trade? One way is through **oral tradition**. Oral tradition is the set of stories that one **generation** tells to the next. Because many people like to add things to stories to make them more exciting or easier to understand, stories that are part of oral tradition change over the years.

Another way to learn about prehistoric trade is through **archaeology**. Archaeology is the study of people through the things they leave behind. By looking at the remains of buildings, graves, and especially the trash people leave behind, we can learn about what people did.

How can archaeology help figure out how prehistoric North American people traded? If an archaeologist finds a broken seashell in the trash of an ancient village in Colorado, she knows those people in Colorado traded with people who lived near an ocean.



Think about William and his trading cards. If William's family moved houses, and someone found a Japanese card in his old room, that person would know that, somehow, William was trading with Japan!

If the person who found the card didn't know about Haruki, she might think lots of different people traded the card, bringing it from Japan to William. But since it's impossible to buy Japanese cards anywhere near William's hometown, it must have come from Japan.

People often travel farther for a rare and valuable **commodity**. A commodity is something that is traded, such as gold, seashells, or a trading card. Commodities that were traded in prehistoric North America include **copper**, shells, and animals. In prehistoric North America, people traveled long distances on foot or by boat. Because of this, trade commodities were usually light, valuable objects that would not spoil.



## Copper

Objects made from the reddish metal called copper are found in many North American **archaeological sites**. An archaeological site is a place where people have left behind evidence of their lives, such as trash or parts of buildings. Objects found on these sites are called **artifacts**. An artifact is an object that has been shaped or changed by people.

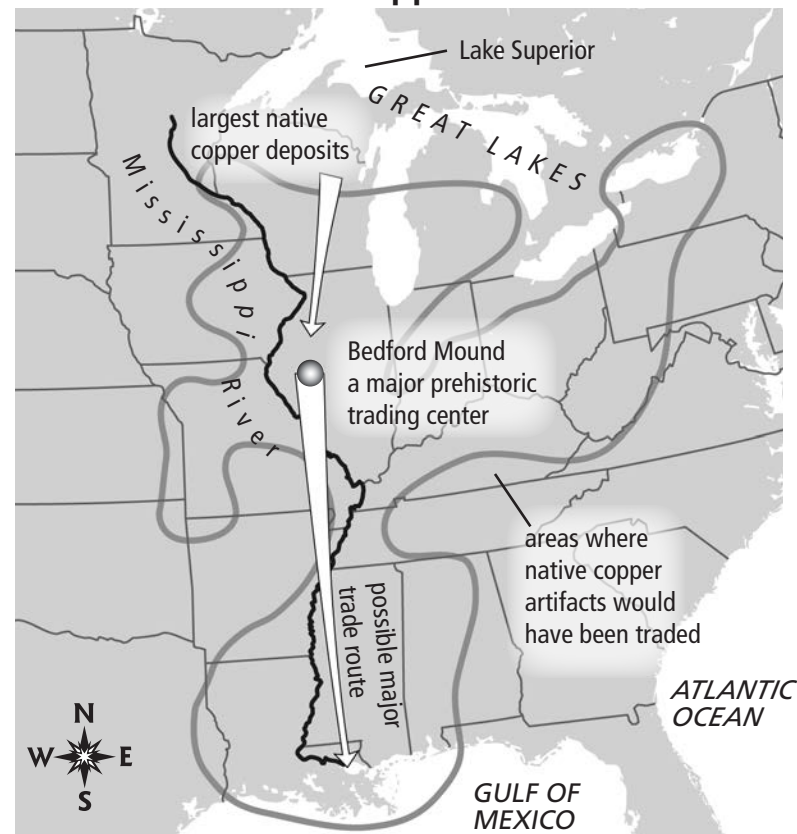


Gold and copper artifact from Peru, South America

Whole copper artifacts have been found in graves in archaeological sites, and broken objects have been found in old garbage. Copper artifacts found in North America include fishhooks, knives, jewelry, and bells.

Some of the copper used to make those artifacts was mined in the area around the Great Lakes, particularly around Lake Superior. In most of North America, it was hard for prehistoric people to make metal because metal is often mixed up in rock and that rock is only found in certain areas. Rock with metal in it is called **ore**. To get the metal out of the ore, people have to get it really hot. This is called **smelting** metal.

## Native Copper Trade



Near Lake Superior, there were very large deposits of native copper. Native copper is special because it is very pure copper that can be found in large chunks or as sheets in cracks of rocks. Native copper also does not need smelting. Hundreds of thousands of tons of native copper were mined in this area. Artifacts made from native copper have been found in areas on either side of the Mississippi River and far downstream.

We can tell that this copper was traded great distances in several ways. Many sites where archaeologists find copper artifacts have no natural copper nearby, so we know the copper must have come from far away. Also, by examining copper through a microscope, or examining small amounts of chemicals in the copper, we can tell native copper from smelted copper.

Copper ore needs to be smelted before the metal in the rock can be used.



Native copper does not need to be smelted before the metal can be used.



This ancient copper bell was made in Mexico.

A different example of long-distance copper trade involves copper bells. Copper bells found at sites in Arizona and New Mexico were made from smelted copper. Ancient people living in Mexico and Central America made copper bells. We know this because we have found tools used to smelt copper and make bells like these in Mexico and Central America, but not in Arizona or New Mexico. This is evidence that these copper bells were traded.

Copper artifacts found in North America came from different places. What if William (from the beginning of this book) had trading cards in both Spanish and Japanese? The fact that they aren't in English doesn't mean they all came from Japan.

### Stop & Think

Designs on archaeological artifacts help us figure out where those artifacts come from. Do you have a T-shirt or sweatshirt with words or designs that tell people where you've been?

Spanish cards might come from Mexico or Europe, while the Japanese cards would come from Japan. William has quite the collection!





## Obsidian

**Obsidian** is a glassy volcanic rock. Many tools in prehistoric North America



were made by chipping flakes off rock to make sharp edges. Obsidian is much better for making sharp edges than regular rock because it has been through a heating process. It can make sharper and harder blades than ordinary glass.

Obsidian is found in places that had volcanic activity, and obsidian from different areas has different, tiny amounts of chemicals. We can guess where it came from by examining the chemicals in obsidian, just as we can with the chemicals in copper.



Obsidian sculpture



Obsidian rock from Panum Crater in northeastern California

People can learn about many objects, not just copper or obsidian, based on trace chemicals. For example, the type of paper used in William's trading cards, or the kind of ink used to print his cards might reveal where a card comes from.

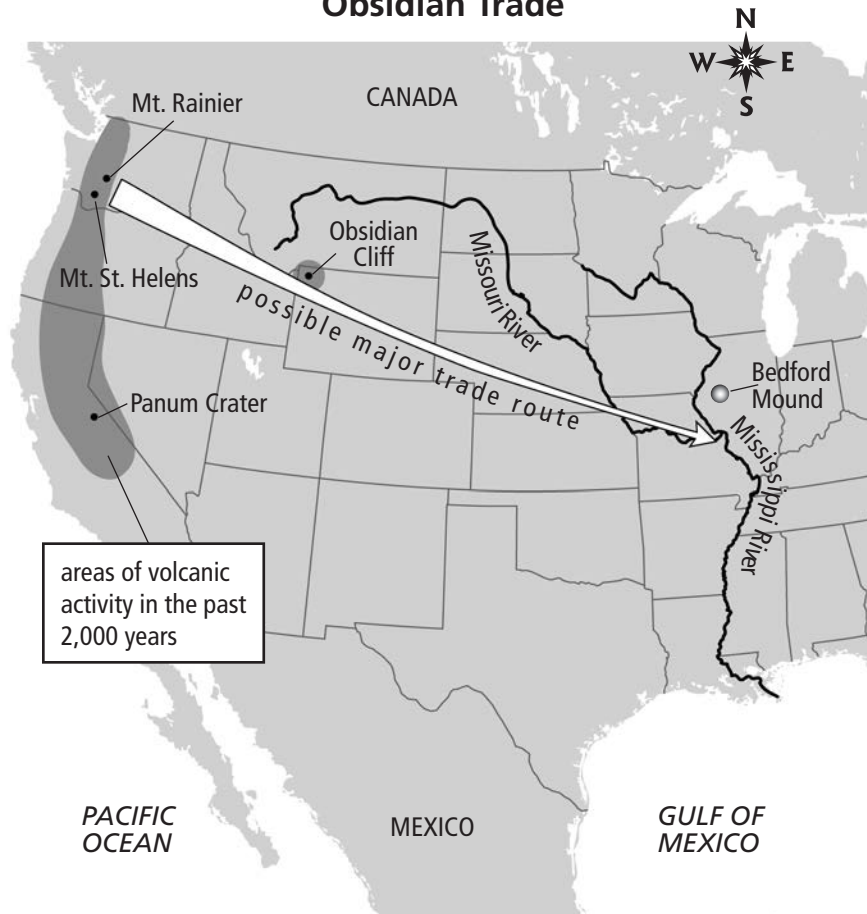
Prehistoric North American people living in the Northwest could easily find obsidian. Obsidian came from areas such as Washington, Oregon, Northern California, and western Canada. Obsidian deposits are often in areas that have volcanoes. Many of the tallest mountains in the Northwest are volcanoes, such as Mt. Rainier near Seattle, Washington, and Mt. Saint Helens. When a volcano erupts and the conditions are right, lava that cools rapidly can form obsidian.

Mount St. Helens before its 1980 eruption





## Obsidian Trade



Obsidian was traded all the way across North America, including the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Obsidian artifacts have been found in the United States throughout the Mississippi River Valley. The appearance and trace chemicals in these obsidian artifacts tell us that the obsidian came from northwestern North America.

## Shells

Shells from the ocean are beautiful and can be used for many purposes. Humans have used shells for jewelry, as small plates, and even as musical instruments.

At archaeological sites near the ocean, huge piles of shells can be found in trash heaps. Often these piles are the garbage left over after eating the meat in the middle of shellfish. We know that seashells found in the Arizona desert or the upper Mississippi River Valley are not from food, because it would have taken too long to carry shellfish that far inland before it would have become rotten and dangerous to eat.



An archaeologist examines seashells found in an ancient trash heap.



These prehistoric shell earrings were found in northern Arizona.

How do we know that some shells found on archaeological sites were used for jewelry? Many of the shells have small holes, usually in the same place. By placing the shells on a string, they could have been made into a necklace.

Also, some people wore jewelry when they were buried. Many people were buried with their valuable possessions. When an archaeological site includes ancient graves, archaeologists sometimes find objects in them that were traded great distances. In undisturbed graves, shells have been found in the pattern of a necklace. The string may be gone, but the shells are in the same place they would have been if there had been a string.

Shells can be helpful in identifying trade connections. Some types of shellfish only live in certain areas. For example, if a type of shell from a shellfish that lived in the Gulf of Mexico is found in Colorado, we know that the people in Colorado traded with someone from near the Gulf of Mexico.

fishing boat

fish sorted on docks

**Stop & Think**  
Many grocery stores have a counter where seafood is sold. Where does the fish you eat come from? Read the labels or ask someone at the seafood counter where the store's fish comes from.

fish sold at market





The bones of a dog uncovered in an ancient Israeli cemetery

### Birds and Animals

All over the world, animals are a common trade item. When Europeans first came to North America, they brought horses. Horses can be used for transportation or to pull and carry things. After European contact, many animals became part of **transatlantic trade**. Valuable animals were transported across the Atlantic Ocean.

Sometimes we find the bones of birds and other animals in archaeological sites. The bones of animals that live in the area, particularly those that are used as food, are common. For example, in eastern North America, deer bones are often found at sites where ancient people lived.



Sometimes we find the bones of exotic animals in an archaeological site. Exotic animals are those that come from a different place. An elephant is an exotic animal in North America, but normal in parts of Africa. Exotic animals are evidence of trade. For an elephant to come to a zoo in North America, it needs to be traded from a faraway place.

Archaeological sites in the Southwest, such as Arizona, sometimes have bones from parrots. Parrots are exotic animals because they ordinarily only live in Central or South America. Archaeologists think these birds were valued for their colorful feathers. The remains of birds, such as parrots, being found thousands of miles north of where they usually live is evidence of long-distance trade.

## Conclusion

In prehistoric North America, some people traveled thousands of miles to trade. Many times, traders used boats to travel along rivers or on the coast. For example, the Mississippi River was an important trade route that connected much of North America.

Other times, people had to walk. Crossing mountain ranges, such as the Rocky or Appalachian Mountains, could take weeks of difficult walking.

Today, it is easier to transport heavy trade goods long distances. Ships, trucks, trains, and planes are all used to carry trade goods among the countries of the world.



Containers full of trade goods travel by barge.

Trade doesn't require a truck full of valuable objects such as televisions. Trade can occur when one person gives another person something in exchange for something else. Remember how William got his Japanese trading cards?

Next time you take a trip, think about all the things you take with you. Afterward, think about the things you left behind. Did you exchange gifts with someone? Did you buy something you couldn't get at home? That's just what the prehistoric people of the world did.



Germany

Peru



Holland



Mexico



## Glossary

<b>archaeological sites</b>	places where people find evidence of past human activity, such as trash or parts of buildings (p. 9)
<b>archaeology</b>	the study of people through the things they leave behind (p. 7)
<b>artifacts</b>	objects that have been shaped or changed by people (p. 9)
<b>commodity</b>	something that is traded, such as gold or seashells (p. 8)



<b>copper</b>	a soft, reddish brown metal (p. 8)
<b>exotic</b>	out of the ordinary, usually from a faraway place (p. 20)
<b>generation</b>	the people in a family born around the same time or from parents of the same age (p. 7)
<b>obsidian</b>	glassy, volcanic rock (p. 13)
<b>oral tradition</b>	the set of stories that one generation tells to the next (p. 7)
<b>ore</b>	rock that contains metals (p. 9)
<b>prehistoric</b>	period of time before people made written records, like books (p. 6)
<b>smelting</b>	the use of extreme heat to separate metal from the ore containing that metal (p. 9)
<b>trade</b>	the exchange of one thing for another (p. 5)
<b>transatlantic trade</b>	trade between groups of people living on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean (p. 19)