

The Choro Trail

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL HIKING GUIDE



ANCIENT HIGHWAYS OF BOLIVIA SERIES

Lindsay R. Hasluck



1ST EDITION

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Choro Trail Pre-Columbian Archaeological Hiking Guide

Welcome to the first edition in a series of archaeological walking guides printed by Heritage Aid Foundation. These guides are designed to help you appreciate the joys of the ancient past, the environment and culture, and their personal discovery. The information contained within has been kept at a level that will allow the interested traveller to hike through fascinating parts of Bolivia without the need of a hired personal guide, giving you the freedom of self motivation, privacy and solitude without the disorientation of being in the wilderness amongst different and sometimes strange cultures.

Here also you will be privy to information and tips that even the local tourist and mountain guides are unaware of, gained through the field experience and studies of the Director of Heritage Aid Foundation, Anthropologist, Archaeologist and Historian, Lindsay Robert Hasluck, who has spent over a decade wandering and working throughout the Andes.

For easy reference **archaeological information in this book has been highlighted in bold type** while general hiking information is printed in regular type. That way you can quickly find the type of information you need.

It is difficult in the Bolivian Andes to go walking anywhere in the wilderness without encountering many things of archaeological interest. However, most of these have never been seriously studied, many never even recorded and often are being slowly lost to science and humanity through the destructive processes of erosion, development and treasure

hunting. The aim of these guides is to show you some of what is out there, much of which can be spotted only with archaeological training, and where clear conclusions are unknown to use educated speculation to help the hiker understand the possibilities about the past.

A secondary aim is that these guides may raise general interest in Bolivian archaeology, cultures and environment, while at the same time the sales of these books will go towards further archaeological, anthropological and historical research and reconstruction, and help with Heritage Aid Foundation's dedication to increasing the education standards and work possibilities for Bolivia's new generation of scientists, that they will have a future to study the past and present from. For this we trust that our readers will not distribute photocopies of the guides but send interested fellow hikers to our office and local bookshops, to buy them directly from the Foundation, at the minimal cost we have kept them so that they may be available to foreigners and Bolivians alike. Also, please don't buy pirate copies from street vendors.

The guide books are also designed to let you understand a little of the native cultures and their unique environments while supplying you with the basic information of distances, accommodation, water, food and fuel supplies, and giving you the option to move at your own pace. Tourist agency guides are notorious for pushing people along at too fast a rate for comfort or enjoyment. After all, you're out there to enjoy yourselves!

While the guide book will let you know what is coming ahead on the track, we have only included the main points of interest, letting you discover and experience for your self the wealth of finer details and forcing you to keep yourself alert to your surroundings and its inhabitants.

This is a guide, not a text book or bible, and your own instincts and needs will have to be taken into consideration, your experience will be very much shaped by the personalities of the hikers and the people they meet and the places they choose to stop along the way. Heritage Aid Foundation and the author sincerely hope that you enjoy the guide books as much as we have writing them for you.

Please feel free to send suggestions or further needs to me directly or to the foundation office heritageaid@hotmail.com . Orders and advertising questions should be sent directly to the office e-mail.

Enjoy your stroll through Bolivia!

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Ancient History

Like most of Bolivia very little real study has been done of the Choro trail and its ruins, and that which has been done has been site location recording and descriptive in nature. However, knowing the ancient history of the region allows us to be able to draw some likely conclusions. So first a small trip back in time to understand the geo-political situation during the epoch that the trail was first formed.

Close by to La Paz, an hour across the Alti Plano and 10 km beside Lake Titicaca stands what is arguably the most important ancient city site in the Americas. It is so important not because it was the first city, nor the biggest. However it was the first of the large American urban civilizations and one of the longest lasting capital cities in the pre-hispanic Americas. Its iconographic influence was felt as far as Central and North America, where its famous "American Line" or staircase line design is still used in traditional indigenous decoration, as it also is throughout the Andes. The distinct Tiwanaku calendar system, based on the planets as well as the sun and moon, can later be seen in operation by the Mayas. The Tiwanaku trading influence went from the Pacific coast to the Amazon, and joined them all in a system of inter-regional trading of a size and sophistication previously unknown.

Tiahuanacu, as a city, is currently accepted as having begun around 1700 BC (contemporary with Troy to put it in perspective), but more recent finds of city levels existing below, may push the dates back even further (the earliest cities in the Americas are in the Supe Valley on the Central Coast of Peru and date back to around 3000 BC).

Tiwanaku, which had been influenced by the pre-urban, but first pan-Andean empire, the Chavín, continued much of its economic, religious and political reforms; such as irrigation farming, the growth of maize (and potato), the strengthening of social and political stratification, work specialization and religious cults, such as that of the icons of the Puma and anthropomorphic and geometrical figures (so typical of Tiwanaku designs). It was some of these crucial reforms that aided the wide spread of urbanization throughout the Andes in the period after the demise of the Chavín Empire in the mid last millennium B.C.

How does all this have any relevance for the Choro Trail?

The Tiwanacoans were the first to create a large organised inter-Andean trading network, that around 500 AD during their expansionist stage (that was probably a religious/trading based imperial movement, stretched from northern Argentina & Chile, up to Northern Peru) where it influenced the decline of the Moche coastal civilization, and the growth of the thereafter Chimu civilization in the same area, its capital being the famous Chan Chan (now Trujillo).

To maintain its empire over such vast distances it built a second capital at Huari (near Ayacucho) in the central highlands of Peru and a network of roads along which llama caravans transported raw goods and gifts to the capital and religious centre Tiwanaku. Tiwanaku became the most important religious and trade centre, finally so wealthy through trade and religious politics that its pyramids were covered with sheets of gold.

Tiwanaku imported raw goods and exported vast quantities of fine ceramics, textiles, religious paraphernalia in gold, silver and bronze

(a mix a seven metals that stopped corrosion) and a hallucinogenic powder possibly made from the San Pedro cactus. The use of which was the base of their shamanic religion. To maintain their trading empire until its collapse (probably due to El Niño climate changes and political upheaval, around 1100 AD, making Tiwanaku city at least 2800 years old) a sophisticated network of roads was developed. The Choro Trail being an important connection with the Yungas and Amazon.

When the later offspring of the Tiwanaku civilization flourished in Cuzco and became the Tawantinsuyu (Inca), this road network, some of which had fallen into disrepair, was strengthened and expanded. The Choro Trail, which in places still shows signs of the cruder Tiwanaku construction, was most probably created by the Tiwanaku for trade with the Yungas and Amazon. After the Tiwanaku collapse it was probably still used, even if not maintained by the Molla who flourished in the period between the two great empires. Then under the Tawantinsuyu (Inca) it was refurbished, strengthened and improved and became a major highway between the Alto Plano, Yungas and Amazon. The Yungas, of course, was very important as a Coca leaf producing area from ancient times, the leaf of which was an important narcotic stimulant and sacred for the Inca elite and sacerdotas for religious ceremonies (as it remains important today).

The Tambos (resting houses) along the trail may stretch back to Tiwanaku times, but the main settlements seem certainly to be from the Tawantinsuyu (Incan)¹ period (about 1250 AD – 1450 AD), unless of course they were built over pre-existing settlements,

¹Tawantinsuyu is the correct term for the Incan Empire. It means the division of the empire into its four quarters. Inca actually means King and can only properly be applied to the Emperor himself or to members of the ruling family.

few sites outside of Tiwanaku city itself have had the necessary attention paid to them (something HAF is trying to rectify).

The route through the Cordillera was probably used in even pre-Tiwanaku times, as there are few easily accessible routes through the Cordillera to the Yungas and the Amazon, and these would have been exploited even during the thousands of years before civilization flourished. A simple walking track would have been its design at the time, used for access and simple trade between different ecological zones, a system known by archaeologists as “verticle reciprocity”, meaning the sharing by different groups of resources from various ecological zones that are formed by differences in elevation. So that for a single group to survive they needed to maintain reciprocal contact with other groups both above and below them in the geography. A system used from the most ancient of times throughout the Andes. Hence the need to keep open easy access to simple pathways. This ancient knowledge of the passes and pathways through the Cordillera would have been the base upon which future well constructed paths were formed.

It is more than likely than under the Tiwanaku the valley and stone trail were used for transport and remained little inhabited, and that only under the final Incan era the area became densely populated leaving the various scattered housing, tambos and few large settlements, which stretch out along the road in a typical Tawantinsuyu (Inca) style of working with the topography. However by the size of the settlements, which all remain to be further investigated, the Choro path/road was obviously of great economic importance, and Choro its self was the meeting point of three roads. Cities of substantial size, most of which remain to be discovered, were dotted throughout the Yungas and connected by side roads. Some of these roads are the alternative routes still to be investigated.

Substantial labour would have been needed to keep the road and bridges in repair. Labour that was extracted from the then existing villagers in the form of a "mitae" service tax to the Inca, in which local groups devoted part of their working time as a form of tax. The local villages were also expected to keep the Tambos² supplied with food for the passing llama trains, chaski message runners and travelling officials. Normally about a third of their community land was given over to supporting state needs. By this system the vast infrastructure of the Empire was maintained.

Later, under the Colonial period the local people were rounded up and sent to work in the mines in Potosi, and haciendas throughout the Yungas, from which they did not return. Re-settlement of the valley began again in earnest after the agricultural revolution and redistribution of lands amongst the campesinos (peasants) in 1952. Over the last twenty years there has been an influx of new immigration of Aymaras from the Alti Plano seeking better lands and a growth in the population that has led to the existence of such a sizeable village as Chukura, which now has a school.

²In Tawantinsuyu times a tambo was a small roadside refuge where travellers could stop to sleep and eat along the path. These were usually spaced at about a half day or full days walk apart, depending on how heavily the route was used.