Topics for Consideration

A. Caravan trails are found in arid lands in the Old and New Worlds, and share characteristics of domesticated animals with specific physical physiognomies; the presence of foraging and pastoralist peoples in antiquity and historically; optimally efficient trail routes; oases that served as points of trade; representations (“art”) near and/or related to caravan trails and practices; and the disappearance of these functional cultural resources through modern development and destruction.

B. Conversely, there are aspects of caravan routes and remains that are unique to regions, which on a gross level can be separated by Old and New World factors. Regional geography, history, and natural resources dictate the political, economic, and social forces behind the origin and maintenance of caravan and desert trails and associated material culture.

Based upon these common and uncommon factors, we can consider:

1. Analogies: what can and do we know of the lifeways of modern/historic nomads, pastoralists, and caravaners & caravans, as compared with the archaeologies of nomads, pastoralists, and caravaners & caravans? What distinguishes a caravan stop from a nomadic camp in the absence of clear temporal controls? Are there demonstrated examples of reliable/unreliable oral narratives, and what kinds of factors can account for the contradictions?

2. Nomads: is there a natural progression between nomadic lifeways (e.g., paleo-indians and archaic hunter-gatherers) and the development of nomadism within the settled world?

3. How old is the evidence of caravan trails in the Old and New Worlds? What were the circumstances and characteristics of their origins?

4. Natural resources: are oases the only foci of desert trail routes? How are other natural resources like lithic materials and metals, as well as water, wood, and forage, incorporated into trails and routes?

5. Physiography: what is the impact of natural features like mountain passes, river fords, and waterless regions in the routes used and created?

6. Route archaeology: what kinds of imagery and material culture are associated with caravan routes? What, if anything, dictates their distribution? Are such objects found off-trail as well as on? What determinations can be made of evidence of en-route ritual behaviours? What kinds of evidence of non-campsite activities exist (sensu stricto)?
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7. Rest stops: what is the nature of rest stops/halts? Are they intensive or extensive? Are they re-used or of infrequent use?

8. Route use: in non-state societies, is the use of specific trails relegated to particular kin groups? Is the use purely economic?

9. Environment: what environmental (geophysical and climatic) factors affect caravan routes diachronically? How can desert/caravan routes be traced in temperate climates where evidence has been obliterated by subsequent natural erosion and accretion and modern development?

10. Social interregional interaction: how are caravans managed when passing through friendly and unfriendly territories?

11. Navigation: what kinds of navigation are employed? How is a memory of landscape expressed? Are the differences cultural, environmental, or both? What is the evidence of a featureless/featured landscape as a cultural perspective? Is there evidence of celestial navigation?

12. Markers: are there alternative considerations of the purpose(s) of cairns (apachetas [Andes], alamat [Arabic])?

13. Remote sensing and field survey: what is the return on 100% vs. sampling surveys in the field? What is the effectiveness of non-random and random field surveys? What is beyond Google Earth and low-altitude aerial photography? When is high resolution satellite survey viable economically?

14. Caravan route destruction: how prevalent is the destruction of caravan routes? What are efficient and effective ways of documenting caravan routes? Should we be lobbying for regional/national/global recognition?