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**Published on** H-LatAm (April, 2024)

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In their study of roads and road building in Peru’s Madre de Dios region, Stephen G. Perz and Jorge Luis Castillo Hurtado provide a deeply researched history of social and political change over several centuries in South America. They show how empires and nations valued mobility for diverse reasons, ranging from conquest and colonization to improved regional commercial activity and access to global markets. *The Road to the Land of the Mother of God* is an ambitious work that deftly spans academic subfields and scholarly periodization.

The book begins with a raid as five men from Madre de Dios decide to drive motorcycles from the distant region to Lima to show it can be done and urge the national government to provide medical aid to local communities. Despite being a difficult task, they accomplished the journey, which spurred calls for paving the road. Perz and Castillo draw on this dramatic anecdote to reiterate the importance that many different people placed on road building. Although some viewed new roads as signs of dangerous encroachment from outside forces, most people saw them as the means to improve living conditions and foster regional development. The authors follow with a wide-ranging chapter that considers roads and road building since Incan times and continues to 1890. They note that the Spanish conquistadors who arrived in the sixteenth century were not only greatly impressed by the quality and extent of road infrastructure the Inca had built, but they also utilized it in their rapid conquest of the empire. Later, Perz and Castillo explore how colonial officials and nineteenth-century nation builders supported road construction to extend governmental reach and integrate peripheral regions and populations into the metropole. Other important actors early in the book are the foreign explorers and merchants who arrived in the 1800s to build new infrastructure and exploit local natural resources.
The following chapters dig into the minutiae of developmental policymaking. The authors consider how rubber exploitation to incentivize road building also provoked declines in governmental support when the global price for the commodity dropped. Perz and Castillo describe a shift in policy perspectives; for many decades, the goal for politicians and officials was to fortify the national economy. In the case of Peru, which follows what scholars of road building have found in other national contexts, the authors note a cyclical development pattern underway in the twentieth century. Some political leaders used road building to burnish their reputations while in office, spending freely on new infrastructure. When budgets fell on hard times due to economic recession, successor governments allowed projects to flounder. A major turning point comes with a change in imagination. By the latter decades of the twentieth century, Perz and Castillo show, a new generation of political and business leaders had pivoted from nationally oriented development to a regional/transcontinental model. This change in perspective brought renewed efforts to develop roads in places like Madre de Dios, which served as link between the Amazonian lowlands and the Andean highlands. Peruvian and Brazilian leaders opened talks about developing a cooperative framework to build a transcontinental road to bring Brazil’s agricultural production to Peru’s deep-water ports to improve trade with nations in the Pacific region, especially China. Perz and Castillo note that several different routes were proposed, which reflected competing power blocs in the region. They also show how influential construction conglomerates, like the notoriously corrupt Odebrecht, played crucial roles in the planning process; managers and executives also spread bribes to gain officials’ support for their proposals.

*The Road of the Land of the Mother of God* is an excellent addition to the scholarly literature on road building. While the work is rooted in Peruvian archives and sources, the authors employ a regional perspective that incorporates Brazilian, Chilean, Argentine, and Indigenous actors into the historical narrative. Scholars of the Americas, as well as other world regions, will find it a useful text to compare the trajectory of road building and infrastructure development. The book’s rich case studies and anecdotes provide a lot that can be contrasted with other historical works. Moreover, the wide range of time periods means the work should also appeal to scholars of the colonial period and modern era. While the authors tell a rich story, the prose is often heavy, making for dense reading across each chapter and limiting its appeal to nonspecialists. Despite this detail, Perz and Castillo have produced a work that is necessary reading for scholars and graduate students of road building and regional economic development.
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**Citation:** Michael K. Bess. Review of Perz, Stephen George; Castillo Hurtado, Jorge Luis, *The Road to the Land of the Mother of God: A History of the Interoceanic Highway in Peru*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 2024.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59825

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