

The Hidden Image of the Nazca Display

were part of an ancient Peruvian irrigation system.

Film maker, zoologist and writer Tony Morrison, firmly believes a ritual significance is attached to the Display. He calls the lines "Pathways to the Gods" (which is also the title of his excellent book on the subject). Perhaps 2000 years ago torch-light processions would trace out one of the continuous-line pictograms on the appropriate days of the year and then follow a line to the "Great Rectangle" where ceremonies would take place honouring a particular God of fertility, or the occult, the sun, or the moon?

Perhaps the Display is the "World's largest astronomy book"? A phrase actually coined by Dr Paul Kosok, the accepted discoverer in 1941 of the Nazca Display proper. Dr Kosok was making a study of ancient Peruvian irrigation systems along the coast of Peru and rapidly concluding that the lines he had been investigating were definitely not part of a canal network, when one day towards evening, he noticed by chance that the sun set exactly over the end of one of the long, single lines. The date was June 22nd, time of the winter solstice in the southern hemisphere. Further astronomical correlations, many of which have since been verified as possibilities, led Dr Kosok to believe that he had found a gigantic star map of the ancient heavens.

Maria Reiche, the German born Mathematician-Astronomer, who has spent the major part of her life surveying and charting the Nazca Display with the object of relating the lines and pictograms to astronomical occurrences, states that without a doubt the people of Nazca were deeply concerned with time-reckoning and astronomy for religious and ceremonial prediction. She believes that the coincidences of astronomical direction are too many to be dismissed as pure speculation. However both Maria Reiche and Dr Kosok wisely proposed that even if a number of lines are aligned with lunar or solar extrema, or perhaps some star constellations, they could never be more than part of the whole integrated complex.

The Nazca Display is named after and generally attributed to the Nazca Culture which flourished along the bordering Nazca Valley. Basic archaeological chronology puts the Nazca Culture in the period 200 B.C. to A.D. 600, well before the time of the Incas which did not culminate until A.D. 1200. The Nazca Culture developed out of the Paracas Culture and that of the Highland Chavin, c. 1000 B.C. the dominant theme of the Chavin was the Puma and the Jaguar and this forceful motif spread to the south coast of Peru initiating the Paracas Culture, which lasted until around 200 B.C. A state of limbo then prevailed until Proto-Nazca art styles began to appear incorporating less threatening deities like the Otter, the Ocelot and the Monkey.

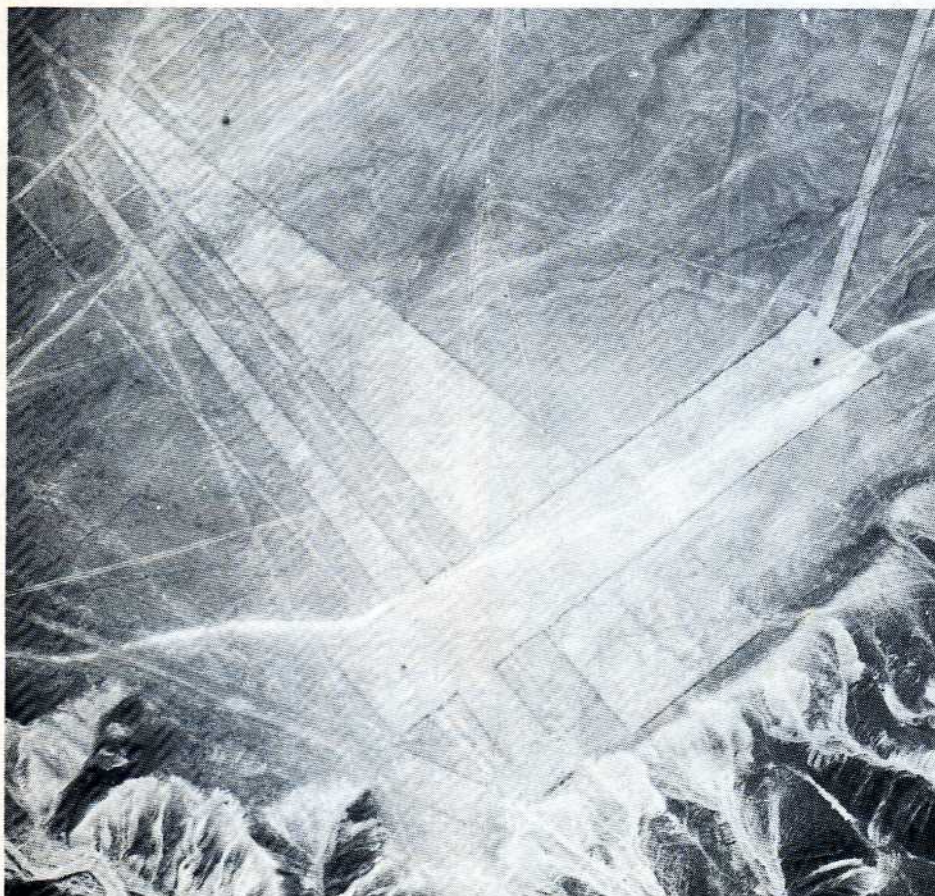
Culture chronology can give a tentative dating to the Nazca Display but a much

more definitive date can be obtained from the huge quantity of ceramics that are wide-spread across the Pampa. Just why there should be such a vast quantity of broken vessels is still a puzzle. Suggestions vary from the idea that they were left behind by the work force that constructed the Display; were left by desert travellers, formed ritualistic offerings at ceremonial practices; or, as I believe that they were part of the Display design itself.

There is no doubt that the ceramics are of the Nazca Period. The distinctly beautiful pottery is as easily recognisable as Wedgewood or Willow Pattern. Analysis places the ceramics in the Early Intermediate Nazca Period, with Nazca 3 and Nazca 4 Periods dominating the count, i.e. the period 100 B.C. to A.D. 100. Nazca pottery is rarely in effigy form but concentrates on exquisitely painted polychrome style. Motifs are mythological birds; the Pelican, Condor or Hummingbird for example; animals like the Dog, Monkey and Llama, and the Killer Whale. All these creatures are known to have been in existence at the time the Display was laid down. However, it must be pointed out that whilst the designs on Nazca pottery may appear to be representative of the sand paintings, truly as yet, only the Monkey and the Whale bear any close comparison.

Therefore by analysis of complex ceramic chronologies a reasonably acceptable archaeological dating can be derived for the Display. In fact, as Nick Saunders states in his book *Archaeology of the New World* (shortly to be published by Costello). "As with many of Peru's prehistoric cultures it is the ceramics - their style, distribution and chronology that forms the bulk of archaeological knowledge". But when it comes to the Nazca Display, there is no way of demonstrating whether the potsherds are related in any way.

Two final points on the dating of the Display. The relatively new technique of Radio Carbon dating has been used to date the preserved stub end of a wooden post found buried below the surface of a feature. A figure of A.D. 525 \pm 80 was obtained, i.e. A.D. 445 to A.D. 605, just towards the end of the Early Intermediate Period. Whether the post is part of the Display, or is first, second or even third replacement, is open to question. Current thinking suggests that it is possible to obtain archaeological dating by means of astronomically orientated lines of sight against possible lunar or solar extrema. But this method is so fraught with variable data that it is at best unlikely to be archaeologically acceptable for a long time. I hope that *Popular Archaeology's* readers will forget the "archaeological curiosity" tag attached to the Display and feel that it has a proper and very important place in the prehistory of ancient Peru. A whole book would be required to convey all the possible interpretations of the various display components, however, it is now fairly well agreed between scholars of Pre-Columbian history that the Display does have social, political, economic and religious implications. W.H. Ishbell sums up the situation when he says: "The ground drawings were primarily



An immense geometric figure on the Pampa Colorada, what it actually represents no one knows. Could it have been one of the ceremonial sites? The main rectangle is over 1300 feet long and 250 feet wide, whilst the extended triangle is over 2000 feet long.