

Did ALIENS make these massive pictures in the SAND?

You're flying over the desert near Nazca, Peru, when you spy huge drawings in the sand below. Gigantic animal images – a whale that's as long as a real blue whale and a hummingbird with a wingspan the size of a 747 jumbo jet's – seem to have gathered together in a bizarre zoo!

These 2,000-year-old geoglyphs – figures drawn into the ground and fully visible only from the sky – have been a mystery since they were first discovered about 90 years ago. At one point some thought that aliens had created them as landing strips. Others believed the drawings were a strange type of calendar. The truth? An ancient people called the Nazca created more than 1,500 of these incredible geoglyphs – everything from monkeys and condors, to a figure that looks like a spaceman!

Scientists have been puzzled as to why the Nazca created the lines. However, recent discoveries about the land, climate and culture are helping decode the *real* message behind these geoglyphs. And it wasn't about art. It was all about survival...

LINES IN THE SAND

The Nazca's territory was a barren desert. Even so, rivers flowed nearby, and complex canal systems tapped into underground sources to provide water to fields and villages. But around A.D. 500, a number of droughts devastated the land, causing rivers and wells to dry up, and villages



Pleasing the gods sometimes meant more than creating huge animal drawings in the sand. Archaeologists have unearthed more than 100 'trophy heads' – human heads that were strung on rope. The victims were sacrificed as an offering to the gods to bring water. Yikes!

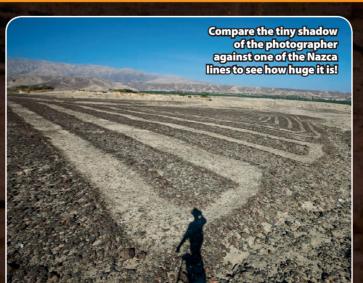
CONDOR SOUTH AMERICA

may have battled over water. Some archaeologists believe that this was when the Nazca created many of the geoglyphs. Since they probably thought that mountain and water gods controlled the rain, this would have been their way of asking the gods to

send water. The Nazca drew huge creatures associated with these gods, such as hummingbirds and orcas. And they created them so that only gods could see them – from the sky.

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"They were writing on the ground,
asking the gods for help," explains
archaeologist Johan Reinhard, a
National Geographic explorer-inresidence. "It's amazing that they did this
on such a large scale, because they could
rarely see a whole drawing."



BUILDING A Nazca LINE

Scientists are still interpreting the meaning behind the Nazca lines But they're pretty sure they've solved the mystery of how the lines were created.

continuous line. So working from small models, teams of 15 to 20 Nazca people would spread out from a single starting point with stakes (sticks with a sharp point), maybe connected with string. They would line up the stakes, and each person would turn over the dark desert rocks in their section to reveal the lighter sand underneath They would repeat this process until a drawing was complete.

The dry, windless terrain ensure the lines would last for thousands of years. Clever!

WALKING THE LINE

The lines weren't just images for the gods above – they were also worship centres for people on the ground. Researchers have found pots and seashells near the lines – signs that the Nazca walked along them to make offerings and hold rituals. "The lines were sacred places," archaeologist Christina Conlee says. "Instead of going to a church, the Nazca would go to the lines."

In the end, though, the water didn't come, and the civilisation ended around A.D. 650. They left no written communication, but researchers continue to read between the Nazca lines to learn more about these people. "For the Nazca, the landscape was alive," Johan says. "It could get angry and jealous. It might send droughts to destroy the crops if someone didn't make the right offerings."

We may find it strange that the Nazca believed they had to make sacrifices and offer up drawings to the land – but what's *really* incredible is that their pictures can still be seen in the desert sands all these centuries later!

Background, skull, shadow: Robert Clark. Condor: Aflo Foto Agency / Photolibrary. Whale TB Photo / Photolibrary. Monkey: Yoshino Tomi Photo Studio / Photolibrary. Map: Martin Walz