

New light on the Nazca Lines

December 9 2012



Credit: Clive Ruggles

The first findings of the most detailed study yet by two British archaeologists into the Nazca Lines – enigmatic drawings created between 2,100 and 1,300 years ago in the Peruvian desert – have been published in the latest issue of the journal *Antiquity*.

As part of a five-year investigation, Dr Nicholas Saunders of the University of Bristol's Department of Archaeology and Anthropology and Professor Clive Ruggles of the University of Leicester walked 1,500 km of [desert](#) in [southern Peru](#), tracing the lines and geometric figures

created by the Nasca people between 100 BC and AD 700.

The confusing palimpsest of desert drawings has attracted a host of theories purporting to explain them ever since they were discovered during the 1920s – notably the bizarre ideas of Erich Von Daniken who supposed they were made by visiting extra-terrestrials.

Dr Saunders and Professor Ruggles combined the experience and knowledge gained by walking the lines, studying the layers of superimposed designs, photographing the associated pottery and using satellite digital mapping into the most detailed such study to date.

They discovered a new design of labyrinthine complexity 'hidden' in the landscape. Invisible in its entirety to the naked eye, the only way of knowing its existence is to walk its 4.4km length through disorienting direction changes which ended (or began) inside a spiral formation.

They studied the integrity of many lines and figures, and suggest that after 1,500 years, the often well-preserved contours of these features argue against crowds of people and their animals walking along them to the ancient pilgrimage centre of Cahuachi in the nearby Nazca Valley.

Dr Saunders said: "Meandering and well-worn trans-desert pathways served such functional purposes but they are quite different from the arrow-straight lines and geometric shapes which seem more likely to have had a spiritual and ritual purpose. It may be, we suggest, that the real importance of some of these desert drawings was in their creation rather than any subsequent physical use."

More information: "Desert labyrinth: lines, landscape and meaning at Nazca, Peru", by Clive Ruggles & Nicholas J. Saunders, *Antiquity* 86, 1126–1140. antiquity.ac.uk/ant/086/ant0861126.htm

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: New light on the Nazca Lines (2012, December 9) retrieved 4 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-12-nazca-lines.html>

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