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The Nazca Lines

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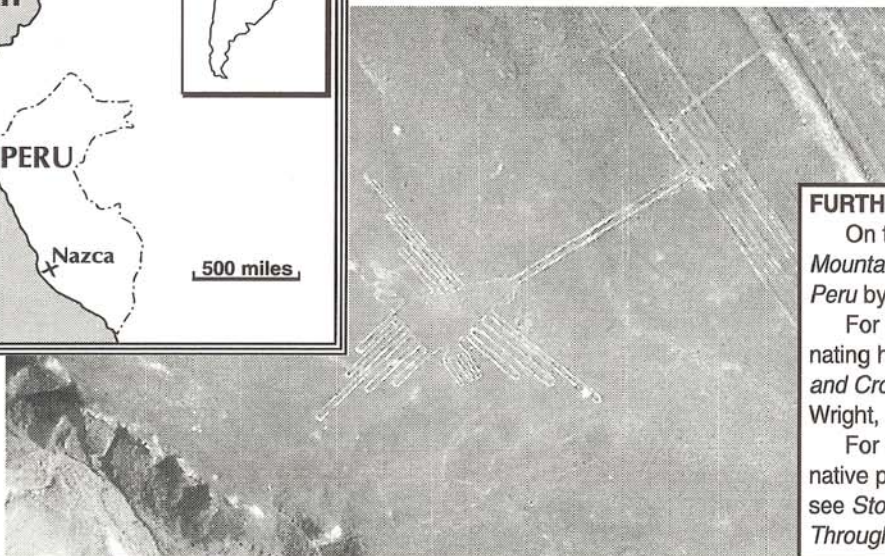
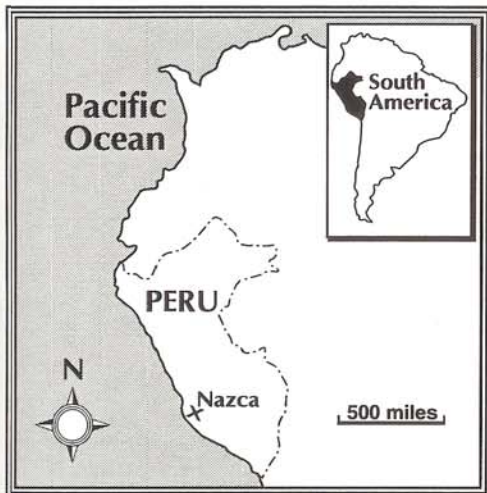
Thousands of years ago, the Nazca people lived along the desert coast of Peru, a narrow strip of relatively flat land between the deep Pacific Ocean and the high Andes Mountains. The Nazca once fished in the ocean and grew corn and cotton along the rivers that flow down from the mountains, through the desert, and into the ocean. The same people also left behind large, stylized figures of the animals with whom they shared the land and ocean. By scraping away the small stones that covered the desert's surface, the ancient Nazca drew condors, whales, monkeys, and other animals. The figures are hundreds of feet long. For example, the wingspan of the condor measures about 300 feet. Because the desert is so dry (less than one inch of rain falling in any decade) the figures have survived over the last 2,000 or so years. If the Nazca Lines were not in a desert, water would have washed them away, and plants would have covered the surface. A slightly different type of figure is the Trident of Paracas, scraped into the face of a sand dune along the coast and preserved by a crust of salt deposited on the sand from ocean spray.

Even though the animal figures survive, they are so large that you can't easily see them while standing on the ground. The best way to appreciate the skill of the ancient artists is to fly over the desert in a small airplane. The Nazca did not have airplanes, of course, and exactly how they viewed and thought about their own creations remains in the realm of speculation. Nonetheless, the work of many

researchers over several decades has demon-

strated that the figures in the desert were intimately intertwined with Nazca cosmology and ecology. Many of those same aspects of belief

and life persist among today's native peoples in Peru. Yet the exact role the lines played in ancient Nazca life still remains mysterious. **O**



GLOSSARY

Stylized: a simplified and standardized representation, like drawing a happy face to represent a smiling person.

Condor: A large bird related to vultures that soars among mountain peaks in South America and California. The California Condor is threatened by extinction.

Wingspan: The distance from the top of one wing to the tip of the other wing.

Trident: A three-pronged spear.

Ecology: The ways in which plants, animals, and humans relate to their environments and to each other.

Cosmology: The study of the origin and nature of the universe.

FURTHER READING

On the Nazca Lines, see *Lines to the Mountain Gods: Nazca and the Mysteries of Peru* by Evan Hadingham, 1987.

For a broader perspective on Peru's fascinating history and present, see *Cut Stones and Crossroads: A Journey in Peru* by Ronald Wright, 1984.

For an even broader perspective on native peoples in North and South America, see *Stolen Continents: The "New World" Through Indian Eyes* by Ronald Wright, 1992.