Examining the Nazca Lines. – Since May 10, 2018, the *Bundeskunsthalle* in Bonn, Germany, had been offering yet another excellent exhibition that overlaps with the profile of our journal, and as such it could also be of interest to our readership. The exposition was devoted to the Nazca culture that emerged on the arid coastland of southern Peru (where it had been influenced by the preceding Paracas culture), and subsequently expanded into the Rio Grande and the Ica valleys.

The Nazca flourished from circa 100 BC to about 800 AD and produced an array of crafts and technologies such as ceramics, textiles, as well as an impressive system of underground aqueducts (*puquios*) some of which are still in use today. What made this ancient American civilization world famous, however, is the system of geoglyphs, commonly known as the Nazca lines, one of the "wonders of culture" that was classified by UNESCO as a world heritage site in 1994. In modern times, their gigantic dimensions were first realized only in the 1930s, when the pilot of an airplane that overflew that desertic area saw from above what was otherwise not discernible on the ground – linear design of gargantuan proportions representing various animals, such as a hummingbird or an orca, and geometrical figures (Fig. 1). About forty years later, in 1968, Erich von Däniken, in his widely acclaimed book *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* (eng. *Chariots of the Gods?*) pointed to the Nazca lines as one of several proofs of extraterrestrial visits to our planet that supposedly took place in the remote past und laid foundations for human civilizations. Be that as it may, to use the desert as an enormous screen, or canvas, in order to produce visual art was certainly an original idea. Moreover, the Nazcans excelled also in other areas of art, such as pottery and textiles in which one also finds the motifs similar to those discovered in the geoglyphs (Figs. 2 and 3). Indeed, one can hardly find any other ancient American civilization whose sophistication of visual culture would equal that of the Nazcans.

Nonetheless, the Nazca lines were not destined to be gazed or marvel at, but rather to walk on; in fact they

Fig. 1: Geoglyph of an orca (Fot. Alfonso Casabone, 2017).

Fig. 2: Nazca pottery in the form of an orca, 50–300 AD (Museo Nacional de Arqueología) Antropología e Historia del Perú).

Fig. 3: Textile with the motif of a shaman in trance, 200 BC–50 AD (Museo de Arte de Lima).

Fig. 4: Spiral geoglyph (Fot. Alfonso Casabone, 2017).

Fig. 5: Ceramic art showing a procession, AD 450–650 (Museo Nacional de Arqueología) Antropología e Historia del Perú).

Fig. 6: Painted cup in the form of human head, AD 300–450 (Museo de Arte de Lima).

were, in some cases kilometers-long, procession routes. In order to produce such paths, one had to turn over or remove the reddish, oxidized pebbles that cover that area and thus to expose the light-gray surface below them. Nazcan communities were able to create in this arduous way the complex figures mentioned above (Fig. 4). The purpose of those designs still remains a puzzle for archeologists and Americanists. A number of scholars, including the late German archeologist Maria Reiche (1903–1998) – who researched the geoglyphs and advocated for their conservation – argued that the lines represent a calendar for agrarian rituals, while some others saw in them an imitation of river beds – water having been, obviously, an important issue in that arid environment; still other pundits associated the lines with the cult of nature or ancestor worship. The most convincing explanation, however, is the above-mentioned interpretation of the geoglyphs as procession routes. Countless pottery shards scattered along the lines, which one identifies as traces from ritual acts, seem to support this thesis. If this supposition is correct, the lines would delimit an impressive ritual area (or an "open-air temple") of about 500 square kilometers. Cecilia Pardo from the Museo de Arte de Lima in Peru and Peter Fux from the Rietberg Museum in Zürich support this view. They also argue, pointing to the excavated ceramic art, that one component of such ceremonies was the shamanistic-like trance induced by means of psychoactive substances, e.g. mescaline extracted from local cacti, while the entire group walked along a given set of lines, accompanied by flute music (Fig. 5).

Another impressive aspect of the Nazca culture is the richly decorated pottery with a plethora of motifs, including that of human head (Fig. 6). Several burials of Nazca individuals, for instance, are the so-called "partial burials," typically containing bundles of limbs, caches of severed heads, or with bodies with missing arms or legs. In some others graves, the missing head was replaced with what is most commonly referred to as a "head jar" – a ceramic vessel with a human head painted on it, along with trees and plants that are growing out of the head. Such burials are also attributed to the Paracas culture – the forerunner of the Nazca. It is still unclear, however, whether they were trophies of war or objects of ritual. Nazca representations of decapitations often depict the executioners with weapons and military dress, but such garments could

Fig. 7: Fragment of the Nazca exhibition in Bonn.

have been worn in ceremonial settings as well. Moreover, archeologists found out that all the heads had a hole in the forehead through which a rope could be affixed so that the head could be displayed or carried around. A similar feature had also been observed in certain indigenous cultures of Amazonia, which would support the thesis that these were indeed trophy heads. The number of burials with severed heads appeared to have increased dramatically during the Middle Nazca period (450–550 AD). In the Late Nazca period (550–750 AD), however, their number diminished, although the practice of decapitation continued. On the other hand, the Late Nazca iconography also suggests that the prestige of leaders was still enhanced by headhunting.

The exhibition aimed at presenting the Nazca culture, history, and society as complete as possible by means of about 200 items of high artistic value from the holdings of museums in Lima and Zürich (Fig. 7). Although the exhibited objects had been relatively well preserved in the dry environment of that region of South America, they still required painstaking work of art and craft restorers. As the Nazcans did not use any formal script, the richly ornamented and colored cult and everyday objects fulfilled the function of religious writings that are known from other culture circles. The visitors who made a conscious effort to understand that complex idiom – with its multiple motifs, vivid scenes, rich colors, and complexity of depicted rituals – were certainly amazed by this bygone but still fascinating world at display in the *Bundeskunsthalle* in Bonn. Curator: Susanne Kleine. The exhibition closed on September 16, 2018.

Darius J. Piwowarczyk