

# Nazca Culture

**N**azca flourished in the Ica and Rio Grande de Nazca river valleys of southern Peru, in an extremely arid coastal zone just west of the Andes. Nazca chronology is generally broken into four main periods:

- 1) Proto-Nazca or Nazca 1, from the decline of Paracas culture in the second century BCE until about 0 CE;
- 2) Early Nazca (or Nazca 2–4), from ca. 0 CE to 450 CE;
- 3) A transitional Nazca 5 from 450–550 CE; and
- 4) Late Nazca (phases 6–7), from about 550–750 CE.

Nazca 5 witnesses the beginning of environmental changes thought to be associated with the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), cycles of warm and cold water that interrupt the cold, low-salinity Humboldt Current that flows along the Peruvian coast. A 2009 study in *Latin American Antiquity* suggests that the Nazca may have contributed to this environmental collapse by clearing the land of *huarango* trees (*Prosopis pallida*, a kind of mesquite) which played a crucial role in preventing erosion.

While best known for their pottery and the Nazca lines (geoglyphs created in the surrounding desert), perhaps their greatest achievement was the construction of extensive *puquios*, or underground aqueducts channeling water from aquifers, similar in purpose and construction to the *qanats* of the ancient Middle East. Through the use of *puquios* the ancient Nazca made parts of the desert bloom; many Nazca *puquios* remain in use today. Some scholars long doubted that the *puquios* were made by the Nazca, but in 1995 chronometric dates using accelerator mass spectrometry confirmed dates in the sixth century CE and earlier.

Nazca is a prime example of an archaeological culture defined primarily on the basis of pottery. At least in the earlier periods Nazca is largely the same as the preceding Paracas Culture (ca. 900 BCE–200 BCE)—the same economy, religion, and material culture—but instead of thick and brittle decorations painted onto pottery after firing, ceramicists began adding powdered pigments to these slips or slurries, which were then fired into the surface. This slip-painting technique permitted richer, finer, and far more durable decorations and allowed a wider color palette. With time many of the elaborate textile designs of Paracas migrated to Nazca pottery, although whether this was an intentional change or simply reflected the greater adaptability of slip-painting is unclear.



### **Stirrup-Spouted Vessel**

Chavín, 12<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE

Pottery

Anonymous gift (86.101)

Chavín was an earlier (ca. 900–200 BCE) and more widespread highlands culture that predated both Moche and Nazca.

Even at this early date the distinctive forms characteristic of Peruvian pottery—such as stirrup-spouted vessels—are fully developed. So too are central zoomorphic elements. Here a raptorial bird, possibly a falcon, is depicted in reserve on front and back, surrounded by fields of vertical incised lines on an irregular surface, perhaps representing feathers. Beneath each side of the stirrup is a quadruped standing on end, with another bird depicted on either side of the stirrup.

Chavín vessels often lacked the thin walls and delicacy of later Moche and Nazca vessels. Because colored slips and slip-painting were not employed, the mechanics of joins between the spout and stirrup are more evident.



### **Plate with Painted Design of a Whale**

Nazca, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Dr. Daniel Rifkin (84.71)

Arid Peruvian deserts overlook an incredibly rich coastal zone, as the cold, low-salinity Humboldt current brings an abundance of sea life to areas immediately offshore. Many Nazca vessels depict sea creatures—here a killer whale. The killer whale was revered as a swift and powerful predator, much like the jaguar or raptorial bird. Killer whales are frequently depicted in Nazca art with hands instead of fins, carrying one or more human heads, and are believed to have been a principal deity.

In 2013 researchers from the Instituto Andino de Estudios Arqueológicos and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut identified a 200 foot long geoglyph—one of the famed “Nazca Lines”—depicting the same creature.



### **Double-Spouted Water Jar**

Nazca, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Renato Almansi (61.54.7)

Opinions differ regarding the animal referent for the stylized creature depicted here: feline, otter, monkey, and "masked monkey" have all been suggested. The projections from the face may be interpreted as whiskers, and designs similar in form show a figure reminiscent of this one holding human heads and with stylized heads linked to various costume elements. Archaeologists and art historians in the middle of the last century sometimes called this figure the "cat demon," although neither its iconographic referent nor its status as demon or divinity is clear.

Nazca pottery is characterized by a richer, darker palette of reds and deep browns than Moche pottery and more extensive use of colored framing lines. Nazca potters mastered the art of polychrome slip-painting using fine clay particles, mineral pigments, and water mixed in a slurry, or colloidal suspension. Pigments were applied in layers using fine brushes and swabs prior to firing.



**Double-Spouted Vessel Decorated with Bird Motifs**

Nazca, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Anonymous Gift (85.219)

Unlike the stirrup-spouted vessels of the Moche, Nazca potters favored a double-spout and bridge form. The bridge is solid rather than hollow and provides structural support for the tapered spouts, recapitulating the top curve of the vessel body.

Nazca pottery was made for hundreds of years, and styles changed markedly over time. More naturalistic designs, such as the insects and birds depicted here, are generally held to date from the earlier, so-called "monumental" periods, or Nazca 1-4; Nazca 5 is transitional, and the more stylized and complex "proliferous" styles are characteristic of Nazca 6-7.



**Double-Spouted Vessel with Bridge**

Nazca, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Anonymous gift (86.121)

Bird motifs were common on Nazca vessels and depicted among the geoglyph lines the Nazca inscribed on their landscape. Some birds depicted on pottery also lent their brightly-colored feathers to Nazca textiles; the Museum of Art and Archaeology holds many examples of colorful ancient Peruvian featherwork, rarely shown because of their fragility and sensitivity to light.

“Hummingbirds” feed from flowers at the base of each spout on this early Nazca jar. Recent research suggests that some Nazca depictions of “hummingbirds” may actually depict a subgroup—“hermits”—characterized by longer central tail feathers tipped in white, buff, or ochre.

[Scientists Identify Exotic Birds Depicted in Peru’s Mysterious Nazca Lines](#)



**Polychrome Double-Spouted Vessel  
with Bridge and Sea Otter Motif**

Nazca, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of William A. Scott (2009.202)

Bold and vibrant colors against highly contrastive backgrounds, made possible by application of successive slips and slip-painting prior to firing, set Nazca ceramics apart from the immediately-preceding Paracas culture. Paracas pottery was made using post-firing, resin-based pigments and negative resist decoration.

While the creature depicted is often called a “sea otter,” this is a misnomer. Sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*) were found in the north Pacific, ranging as far south as Mexico, but were not found in Peruvian waters. The quasi-feline character and geographic range suggest it is instead the marine otter (*Lontra felina*) that’s actually intended. In Spanish its common name is *gato marino* or “sea cat.” Among other differences, the two taxa have different dentitions; sea otters have more rounded teeth used for crushing, marine otters have sharper teeth used for slicing.



**Polychrome Beaker**

Nazca, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Pottery

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Renato Almansi (61.54.2)

Many Nazca vessels depict bands of fantastic beings, sometimes called "cactus spine" figures because of the distinctive headdresses they wear. Often these headdresses show alternating rays and snakes.

Polychrome beakers such as this one reflect many of the shapes also depicted by the famous "Nazca lines." These were huge figural shapes created on the ancient landscape near the latter-day towns of Nazca and Palpa, Peru, and were made by removing darker colored stones from the desert surface to reveal the lighter sand beneath. The more crowded and geometric forms, sometimes called "proliferous," are felt to represent later periods of Nazca iconography, replacing more naturalistic designs from earlier periods.