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Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Desert art

The mysterious desert drawings known as the Nasca lines have puzzled people since they first became widely known in the late 1920s. Before air travel in Peru began, it was impossible to get a clear view of the giant drawings of the spider, monkey and hummingbird. Yet the Nasca people who made these patterns 2,000 years ago couldn’t have seen them from above.

One of the first formal studies of the lines was by Maria Reiche. She spent half a century working for their conservation and was convinced that the lines must have been part of an astronomical calendar. Other people thought they might have been ancient Inca roads or irrigation systems. The weirdest idea was that they could have been landing strips for alien spacecraft!

This region of Peru is one of the driest places on Earth and yet successful societies, including the Nasca, lived here. Water must have had an incredible significance to these societies, so perhaps the lines were related to this. We know that the Nasca River, which comes down from the nearby mountains, runs underground for about fifteen kilometres before suddenly emerging on the surface again. This must have seemed an astonishing, even sacred, phenomenon to ancient societies. It has also become clear that there are many huge drawings in the area, not just the ones on the flat desert plain. Many are much older than the Nasca figures themselves, so the same group of people can’t have created them. It now seems that the Nasca lines may have been part of a long tradition of ceremonial activities connected to water and religious beliefs.

phenomenon (n) /fəˈnɒmɪnən/ an event or fact

ceremonial (adj) /ˌserəˈməʊniəl/ ritual and traditional