



## THE NASCA LABYRINTH

By Jodi Lorimer

In the most recent issue of National Geographic (March 2010) I came across a fascinating parallel use of a labyrinth from the ancient Nasca culture of Peru. The people of this culture created the famous Nasca Lines, as they are known; enormous patterns and images scraped into the high desert plains of an area east of the Andes mountains known as the Pampa de Jumana, one of the most arid regions on earth. There is a hummingbird, spider, monkey, condor, lizard, fish and other images as well as geometric shapes. Some are as large as 660 feet across and all are best seen from the air. They were created between 200 BCE and 700 CE. Since their discovery in the 1920's wild speculation imagined they were Incan

roads, irrigation plans, and even landing strips for alien spaceships! But since 1997 a German-Peruvian research team has conducted a thorough, cross-disciplinary investigation of the ancient cultures of this area and suggests a new theory: water worship.

Always arid, for the last 5000 years the climate here has swung back and forth from desperate drought to adequate water supply as rainfall in the Andes fluctuated. Even under these trying conditions, the Nasca people planted crops, made unique pottery, played music and created these massive line drawings on the desert pampas for eight centuries. Most of these images are each a single line, or rather pathway, with no line crossing another, a significant cultural and artistic choice, as it was discovered. They were made by determining the design then removing the top layer of rocks and soil, which had become darkened by exposure over the eons, revealing the lighter sand underneath. The dark stones were lined up along the edges as an outline.

What does this have to do with water and the labyrinth? Nearby the pampas is the town of Cahuachi. Here the Nasca River, which flows underground for nine miles, suddenly emerges as a bubbling spring, certainly a magical occurrence in the desert. This was a sacred site that drew pilgrims from many miles who held ceremonies and made sacrificial offerings. These offerings included pottery, flowers, food and, most interestingly, severed heads “with a braided rope strung through a hole drilled in the forehead, perhaps to allow the skull to be worn around the waist.” Ceremonies included the building of stone circles in which rituals were held in praise of mountain deities who were believed to be responsible for the blessing of rainfall. The Nasca lines were related to the worship of these gods. Mounds of stone and debris inside the great figures were found to contain the remains of offerings; potsherds, crayfish shells and particularly *Spondylus* shells, a mollusk with a creamy-coral shell that only appears on coastal Peru during El Nino years and so is associated with rainfall and fertility. *Spondylus* was an integral part of Andean ritual prayers for water.

There is, among the gigantic images carved into the high desert, a spiral with another spiral inside of it that is highly reminiscent of a modern labyrinth. The research teams have determined that the pathways forming these sacred images were designed to be walked during ceremonies connected to the return of the rains. Offerings were brought, music was played and people meditatively walked these sacred paths, in communion with their gods. In later years, as water became increasingly scarce, the people dug descending spirals into the ground to tap deep aquifers.



The author of the National Geographic article, Steven Hall, was told that, although most people come to see the Nasca lines from the air, only by walking the sacred landscape could one truly feel the power. He describes walking around the spiral path and finding himself surrounded in the four cardinal directions by the sacred mountains that fed the delicate rivers of the Nasca civilization. As Hall put it, “If I had stepped into the vortex of this curving itinerary in ancient times, I would also have been compelled to face my fellow worshippers walking the same path. Such a Nasca prayer walk... would have reinforced both sacred and social relationships... When your feet inhabit their sacred space... you *can* feel it.”

The ancient archetype of the labyrinth is once again born out here on the desolate flanks of the Andes Mountains. The ritual walking of these sacred pathways, including a spiral reinforced the relationship of the people with their ancestral lands, their sacred mountains, and their forbidding environment. At bottom, consistent with the most modern of ceremonies, walking the labyrinthine pathways of these gigantic forms was a worshipful supplication for water, for health, and for life's continuance.

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About the author:

Jodi Lorimer lives in Portland and is a relatively new member of both The Labyrinth Society and Labyrinth Network Northwest. Last October she was a presenter at the 2010 Gathering at Edgefield in Portland, speaking about her new book, "Dancing at the Edge of Death; the Origins of the Labyrinth in the Paleolithic." A life long fascination with mythology and ancient history led Jodi to pursue the origin of this ancient symbol, far beyond the familiar Greek story of Theseus and the Minotaur. A background in Anthropology has encouraged her continued study of ancient cultures and their spiritual pursuits. She finds it continually amazing that people are attracted to this ancient symbol for so many different reasons and from so many directions, yet the archetypal veracity of its power remains consistent; a healing encounter with spirit. Everyone has something new to teach us if we are open.

To see an animated model of the creation of the spiral go to:  
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/03/nasca/nasca-animation>

Read the article in National Geographic, March 2010. "Spirits in the Sand; the Ancient Nasca Lines of Peru Shed Their Secrets" by Stephen S. Hall

