

A giant cat picture was just discovered among the Nazca Lines

Enlarge / The cat is drawn from the side, with its head turned toward the viewer.

Johny Isla via AP

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Workers at the Nazca Lines site recently found the faded, partially eroded outline of a cat stretching across a desert hillside.

The cat joins the ever-growing list of about 900 shapes and images that ancient people etched into the Nazca Desert soil. At 37 meters (121 feet) long, the cat is among the smaller geoglyphs in the desert; some of the largest shapes, down on the flat valley floor, span more than 500 meters (1,600 feet). Like other geoglyphs in the Nazca Desert, the cat's ancient designers etched it into the ground by clearing away the dark surface sediment to form pale lines.

Geoglyph finds usually take months of trekking through the desert or poring over aerial photos, but the latest one was a happy accident. Workers were making improvements to a path leading up to a hilltop vantage point when they noticed the cat.

Looking at the photos released to the world over the weekend,

it's hard to see how anyone could have missed the image. The lines that form the cat are about 30 to 40 centimeters (12 to 16 inches) wide, after all. But the clear outline in the photos is the product of about a week of cleaning and restoration work.

According to Peru's ministry of culture, before the work, "the figure was scarcely visible and was about to disappear because it's situated on quite a steep slope that's prone to the effects of natural erosion." Erosion threatens many of the over 900 figures scattered across the dry coastal plain; most of the lines are etched just 10 to 30 centimeters (4 to 12 inches) deep and vulnerable to flash floods, strong winds, or human vandalism.

People created the giant cat figure between 2,500 and 1,800 years ago, according to the chief archaeologists for the Nazca Lines site, Johny Isla. He told Spanish news agency Efe that the cat looks very similar to cat motifs on textiles from the Paracas culture, which flourished in the area between 500 BCE and 200 CE—centuries before the Nazca culture, which usually gets credit for most of the valley's geoglyphs.

Cats can have a little archaeology, as a treat

The figure almost certainly doesn't depict a modern domestic cat. Archaeologists aren't yet sure what species the Paracas artists were trying to represent, but the answer might tell us something about the figure's purpose and the Paracas' view of the world.

For example, in 2019 a group of zooarchaeologists led by Masaki Eda studied several of the birds among the Nazca Lines. They wanted to identify the exact species in the images because they hoped that would yield some clues about the purpose of the huge drawings. It turned out that most of the

identifiable species actually lived far from the Nazca homeland. For some reason, these ancient artists were more interested in depicting exotic birds than local ones. Time, and a lot more analysis, may tell whether that holds true for the cat.

To identify bird species among the drawings, Eda and his colleagues used subtle clues like the shape of birds' tails, the number of toes, and the proportion of different body parts. If researchers wanted to try a similar study of the newfound cat, they might look at things like its large eyes, the size of its ears compared to its head, the row of dots on its tail, the shape of its back, or the two big patches or spots on its side.

Location might also offer some hints about the cat's purpose. Archaeologist Masato Sakai of Yamagata University has previously pointed out that relatively small geoglyphs like the cat tend to depict animals and people, and they tend to turn up on hillsides or along paths where people walking past could clearly see them. The larger geoglyphs tended to be abstract geometric shapes sprawling across hundreds of meters of desert floor, visible only from higher ground—and archaeologists found potsherds littering the ground inside several of them.

Sakai and his colleagues suggested that the smaller geoglyphs may have served as signposts or markers, while the larger ones may have been ceremonial gathering sites. To test the idea, his team plans to use a machine-learning algorithm to look for patterns in the distribution of different types of geoglyphs.

Another possibility is that the cat and other small (relatively speaking) hillside figures were made by an earlier culture, like the Paracas, while the larger glyphs on the desert floor belonged to the later Nazca culture. Isla pointed out that many of the other small figures on hillsides also mirror Paracas textile patterns, which include drawings of

people and birds.

For the moment, the cat's message is that we still have a lot more to understand about the Nazca Lines and the people who created them. "It's quite striking that we're still finding new figures, but we also know that there are more to be found," said Isla.

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