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4. The Nasca-Palpa Project

The purpose of SLSA's Nasca-Palpa Project was to carry out a broad study of the Nasca culture including the geoglyphs of Palpa. The Palpa area is one of the most agriculturally fertile zones of the Nasca drainage (frontispiece). The first phase of the project (1997–2002) comprised three main activities³¹:

- A regional settlement pattern survey with more than 700 prehispanic sites located, recorded, and classified (Reindel et al. 1999, 2003a)
- Extensive excavations at Los Molinos and La Muña – two large sites along Río Grande with public architecture from Early and Middle Nasca times, respectively (Reindel/Isla 2001; Reindel et al. 2002)
- A complete recording and analysis of the geoglyphs that cover the slopes, ridges and plateaus of the Palpa region³².

The Palpa area was in many respects a good place for this study. The geoglyphs on the slopes and hills along the valley margins (figs. 6, 7; maps 1–13) are easily comparable to the geoglyphs on the Nasca *pampa*, but have so far received very little attention.

That such little research has been carried out in the Palpa area is somewhat surprising since in the early years of Nasca geoglyph research the Palpa area played a prominent role. As mentioned previously, Paul Kosok was standing on a hill near Llipata, to the south of Palpa, when he was struck by the idea that the geoglyphs constitute “[...] the largest astronomy book in the world”³³. In the following years Maria Reiche also worked in the Palpa area. This is evidenced by various pictures, sketch maps, and other references in her publications (Reiche 1976, 1993). However, she left no detailed account of her activities in Palpa. At about the same time, Hans Horkheimer studied the Palpa geoglyphs and took photos and sketches of several of them including the famous *reloj solar* or sun dial north of Palpa (Horkheimer 1947: figs. 7–9) and also the combination of lines on which Kosok had had his inspiration some years before, near Llipata (Horkheimer 1947: figs. 5, 11).

Thereafter for many years, however, the focus of Nasca geoglyph research shifted almost completely to the Nasca *pampa*. Strong passed through the Palpa area and Mejía conducted excavations there, but neither of them worked on geoglyph sites (Strong 1957; Mejía 1972, 1976). The Palpa geoglyphs were mentioned again by Rossel (Rossel 1977: chapter X) and Browne (Browne/Baraybar 1988; Browne 1992), but were never studied in detail. It was only known that

“[...] the valleys north of the *pampa* are also full of ground markings which were constructed in the same manner, and have forms identical to those on the *pampa*.” (Silverman/Browne 1991: 208)

Thus, a systematic investigation seemed a promising strategy. Other factors favored a study of the Palpa geoglyphs as well. They are situated close to densely settled zones along the valley floors. There are various sites where geoglyphs occur together with contemporaneous public and habitational architecture as part of the same site which is not the case on the Nasca *pampa*. Another decisive point for choosing the Palpa area was that in this area the geoglyphs are not protected. Since they are located in openly accessible terrain close to modern settlements, many of them have already been damaged or destroyed without having been recorded or studied. Hence, the work was considered a first step towards an effective protection and preservation of the Palpa geoglyphs.

The study of the Palpa geoglyphs started along with the regional settlement pattern study in 1997 when the first flight was conducted in order to obtain aerial images suitable for photogrammetric analysis. A second flight was carried

³¹ See also the project websites available at www.dainst.org, www.photogrammetry.ethz.ch, and www.slsa.ch (accessed August 22, 2005).

³² Reindel et al. 2003b; Grün/Lambers 2003; Sauerbier/Lambers 2003.

³³ Kosok 1965: 49; Kosok/Reiche 1947: 202; Kosok in Reiche 1993: 137.

out in 1998. The processing and analysis of the resulting images allowed the start of archaeological fieldwork on geoglyph sites in 2000. It was continued in three field seasons until 2001. Analysis of the data was largely conducted from 2002 to 2004 and resulted in the present study.

Following the structure of section 3 in which previous research was reviewed, the documentation of the Palpa geoglyphs and the analysis and interpretation of the resulting data are described separately in the following sections 5 and 6.



Fig. 6. Aerial view of Cresta de Sacramento (left: Río Viscas and Río Palpa, right: Río Grande).

Fig. 7. Aerial view of Cerro Carapo (right: Río Viscas).

