

# Caral

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**Caral**, or Caral-Supe, was a large settlement in the Supe Valley, near Supe, Barranca province, Peru, some 200 km north of Lima. Caral is one of the most ancient cities of the Americas, and a well-studied site of the Caral or Norte Chico civilization.

## History

Caral was inhabited between roughly 2600 BCE and 2000 BCE, enclosing an area of more than 60 hectares. Caral was described by its excavators as the oldest urban center in the Americas, a claim that was later challenged as other ancient sites were found nearby. Accommodating more than 3,000 inhabitants, it is the best studied and one of the largest Norte Chico sites known.

## Archaeological findings



The Caral pyramids in the arid Supe Valley, some 20 km from the Pacific coast.



Paul Kosok discovered Caral in 1948, but it received little attention at the time because it appeared to lack many typical artifacts that were sought at archeological sites throughout the Andes at the time. Archaeologist Ruth Shady further explored the 4,000 to 4,600 year-old city of pyramids in the Peruvian desert, with its elaborate complex of temples, an amphitheater and ordinary houses. The urban complex is spread out over 150 acres (607,000 m<sup>2</sup>) and contains plazas and residential buildings. Caral was a thriving metropolis at roughly the same time that Egypt's great pyramids were being built.

Caral is the largest recorded site in the Andean region with dates older than 2000 BCE and appears to be the model for the urban design adopted by Andean civilizations that rose and fell over the span of four millennia. It is believed that Caral may answer questions about the origins of Andean civilizations and the development of the first cities.

Among the artifacts found at Caral are a knotted textile piece that the excavators have labeled a quipu. They argue that the artifact is evidence that the quipu record keeping system, a method involving knots tied in rope that was brought to perfection by the Inca, was older than any archaeologist had previously guessed. Evidence has emerged that the quipu may also have recorded logographic information in the same way writing does. Gary Urton has suggested that the quipus used a binary system which could record phonological or logographic data.

### Main pyramid

The main pyramid complex (Spanish: *Pirámide Mayor*) is 150 meters long, 110 meters wide and 28 meters high. The date of it's construction is unknown.

## **Lack of warfare**

No trace of warfare has been found at Caral: no battlements, no weapons, no mutilated bodies. Shady's findings suggest it was a gentle society, built on commerce and pleasure. In one of the pyramids, they uncovered 32 flutes made of condor and pelican bones and 37 cornetts of deer and llama bones. One find revealed the remains of a baby, wrapped and buried with a necklace made of stone beads.

## **Scope of site**

Caral spawns 19 other pyramid complexes scattered across the 35 square mile (80 km<sup>2</sup>) area of the Supe Valley. The find of the quipu indicates that the later Inca civilization preserved some cultural continuity from the Caral civilization. The date of 2627 BCE is based on carbon dating reed and woven carrying bags that were found in situ. These bags were used to carry the stones that were used for the construction of the pyramids. The material is an excellent candidate for dating, thus allowing for a high precision. The site may date even earlier as samples from the oldest parts of the excavation have yet to be dated. The town had a population of approximately 3000 people. But there are 19 other sites in the area (posted at Caral), allowing for a possible total population of 20,000 people for the Supe valley. All of these sites in the Supe valley share similarities with Caral. They had small platforms or stone circles. Shady (2001) believes that Caral was the focus of this civilization, which itself was part of an even vaster complex, trading with the coastal communities and the regions further inland – as far as the Amazon, if the depiction of monkeys is any indication.



Panorama of Caral Site



One of the pyramids of Caral

## **Geoglyph**

In 2000, Marco Machacuay (the chief of excavations at the time) and his colleague, Rocío Aramburú, discovered a large shape etched on the ground in circular stone lines near Caral. This image, known as a geoglyph, is located on the desert floor just west of the main site at Caral. When traced out, the lines form the design of a human face with long, streaming hair and a gaping mouth. This geoglyph is similar to the screaming, bleeding figures found etched onto the stone walls at a site called Sechín, in the Casma Valley 150 miles to the north. It is unclear what exactly this figure means, but it is believed to have been constructed around the same time as Caral and to have been associated with a nearby ceremonial site known as Chupacigarro.