

## Geoglyphs in the UK

In an earlier paper discussing possible art work visible in and around the ground of the Band of Holes in Peru I observed that:

*"In the UK, it is possible that other ground surface art also just about survives in the giants and horses carved, typically, into a chalk landscape. The difficulty in the UK and often elsewhere is that climate, vegetation and other human interference make it difficult, even impossible to assess whether additional images surround or adjoin all that now remains as readily visible<sup>1</sup>."*

The observation, I now see, was inaccurate in two respects, firstly in implying that landscape art, along the lines, say, of the Nazca figures, was rare in the UK, and secondly in asserting that such art, if and where it rarely existed, was inevitably difficult to discern. The purpose of this paper is primarily to provide some very few examples to indicate that, on the contrary, such art work is relatively common in the UK, as in other countries, in some respects also readily visible, and in others difficult to perceive not only for the reasons in the above quotation, but because people such as myself commonly lack the necessary perceptual awareness to see it.

I will not detail the locations of the examples for two main reasons. It would be unfortunate for the sites concerned to attract visitors in vehicles or on foot. They may also still be active, in the sense that amendments or additions may still be being made by those who understand the tradition of which they form part. I do not think their activities should be compromised. On the other hand, I also think it wrong to leave behind patent inaccuracies, as I did in the earlier paper, and maybe right to encourage others at least to look at landscapes in a way that may just possibly bring a degree of novel insight.

I have outlined elsewhere my reluctance to "decode" further the form and content of the artistic and cultural tradition on which the geoglyphs appear to be based, one that I have called, for want of other ideas, Linear and cult art<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, I will not offer anything other than a few select, brief comments on each of the examples that follow.

However, it may be helpful to recapitulate that the art in question deals in selective suggestion. It is not a case of single, full-blown graphic images (a giant, say, or horse), the difficulty of seeing which has been occasioned only by time's attrition. There is, of course, some of that, but in general the art form, from the moment of conception and creation, only sets out to suggest, albeit often with exacting precision, some part or parts of the images it wishes, at any one time, to evoke, leaving the rest to outline sketch, conducive natural features, or the suggestibility of the human eye or mind. The difficulty of discerning its images is compounded by the fact that it also deals in multiple, compound motifs, and minimal interventions to suggest, say, a pig face may also be intended to suggest, say, a child's, the eye of a hare (reinforced by adjoining traces of the characteristic ears) the eye, also, of a corvid (suggested by a no less characteristic adjoining trace beak). And the difficulties are only increased still further by the fact that successive generations of artists working in the same tradition and on the same surface make their own additions or variants.

For all that, the imagery nonetheless carries its own distinctive coherence and credibility thanks to the persistence and pervasiveness of its techniques and motifs, the latter of which may owe their nature to correlated sound and image play originating in the context of fertility or mystery cult. Within such constraints, the art form is amazingly, even exhaustingly creative.

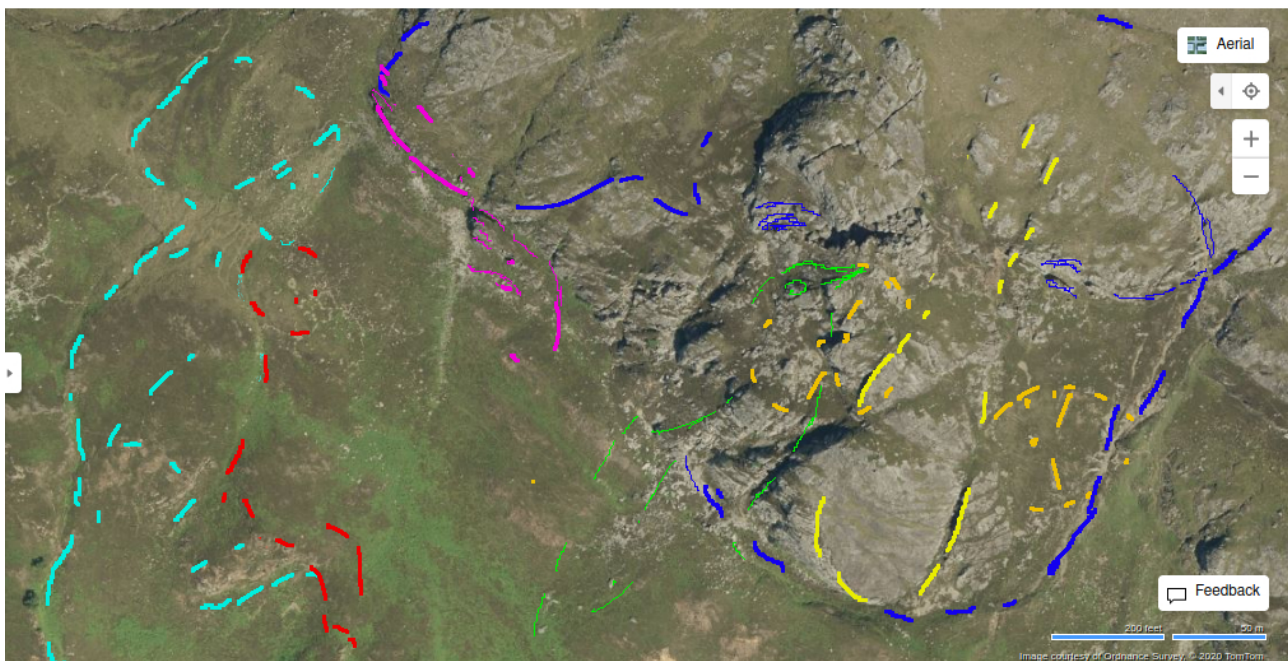
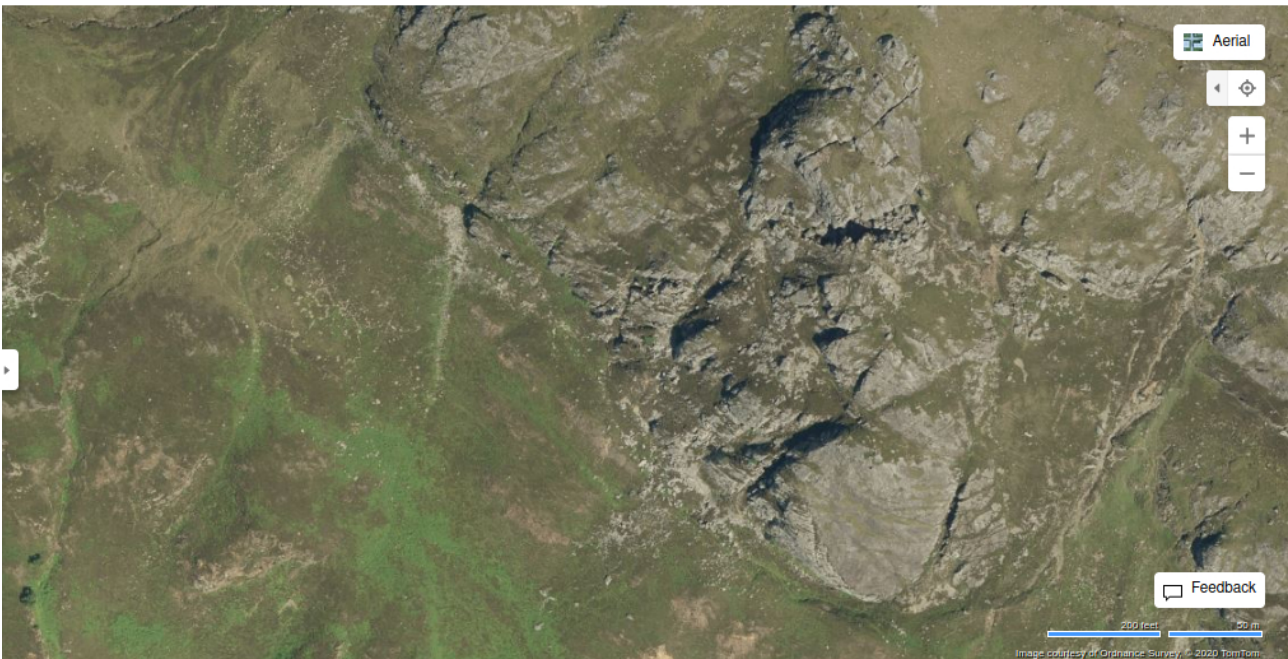
For the aerial views I have avoided too great an altitude as that would entail another set of difficult issues, and it is, besides, easier to assess the plausibility, or otherwise, of human intervention at a lower height. One disadvantage is that the geoglyphs proposed are arguably relatively small-scale, but I can only advise that they, or the interventions creating them, are often only component parts of far larger compositions, cognate or not.

<sup>1</sup> Page 9 at <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:21803/>. My own material in this paper is freely available for any lawful public or private non-commercial use so long as the source, and its sources, is duly acknowledged, and such use exercises rights regarding its own use by others that are no more restrictive. Regard should also be had for the rights of those whose work I have used, which may be different. My use of their material in no way reflects their approval or otherwise of my statements or graphics (including extractions from and enlargements of photos). All mistakes are my own. I cannot guarantee that web pages are still live.

<sup>2</sup> Such as sections 6 and 10 of *The Problem with Linear B* <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:20833/> and pages 1-2 of *Linear and cult art: addenda, corrigenda, concludenda* <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:27115/>

Geoglyph 1<sup>3</sup>

The area extracted below is ground sharply sloping up from bottom to top.



A right-profiled apparently seated and partially hooded woman (turquoise) carries a child (red) seated on her lap, with a right-profiled hare's head (purple) further right. There are multiple variants and, particularly for the hare, scales of the related images. Similarly with the large frontal male face wearing a Tam o' Shanter (blue), but I have selected a version where the delineation of his right eye is particularly exact. The landscape abounds in multiple suggestions of perched and hovering birds, and again I have highlighted only one, right-profiled (green). The rock surface appears to have been exploited to suggest more than one wood or iron golf club (yellow), and probably golf balls, though the latter double up as a clock faces (brown).

<sup>3</sup> Extracted and enlarged from Bing Maps © 2020 Microsoft, image courtesy of Ordnance survey, © 2020 TomTom. Some of the geoglyphs are variously visible in other satellite or aerial imagery, such as Google Earth (generally 2d). The photo extracts are about 6.5 inches or 16.5 centimetres wide on my screen.



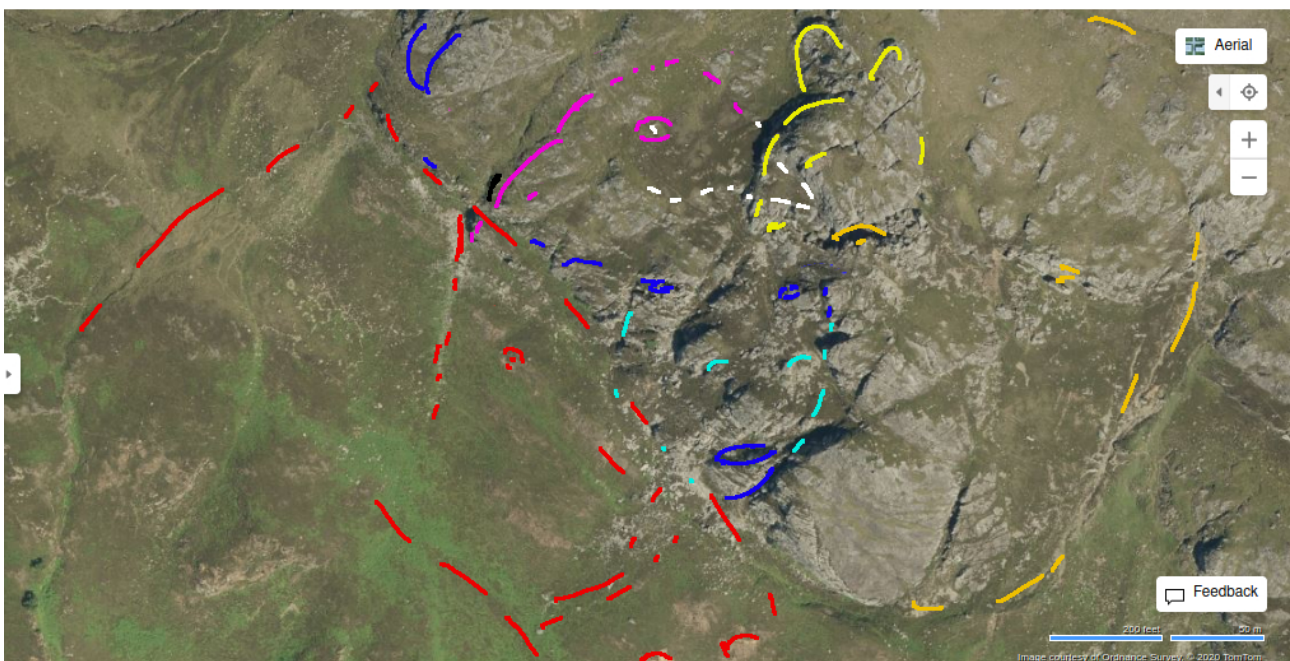
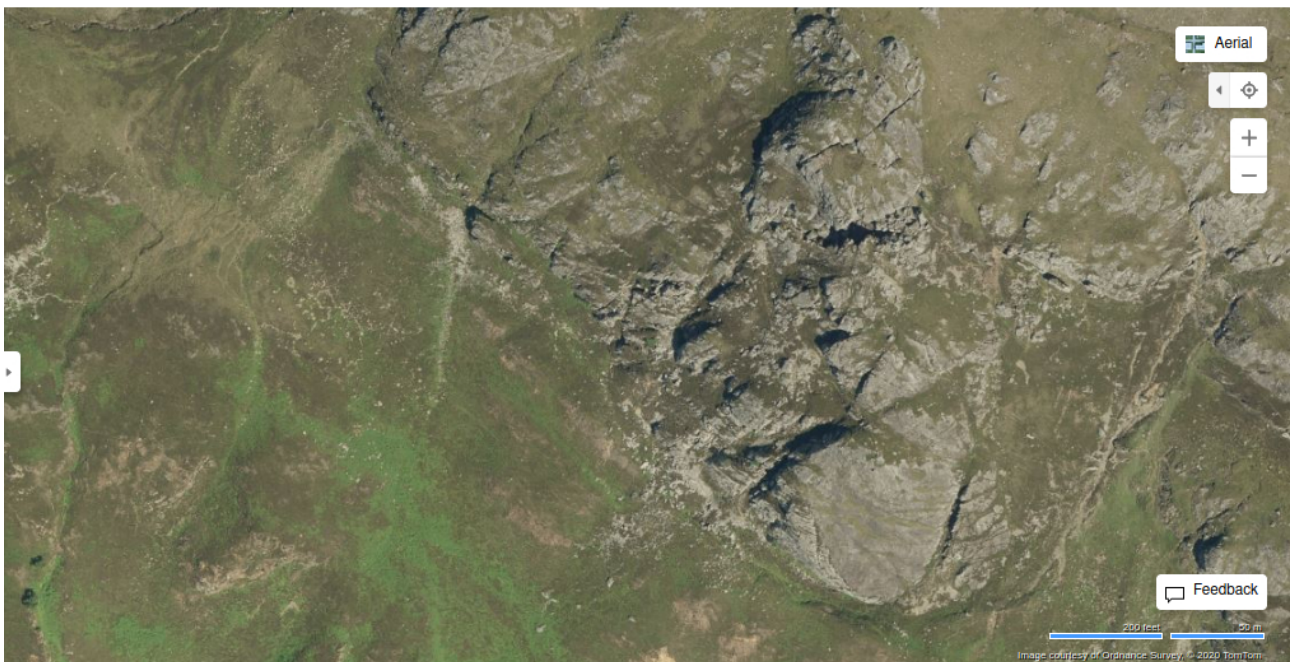
In the further highlighting below, a right-profiled horse (red), with careful suggestion of nostrils, muzzle, ears and tackle, though variants (including other animals, such as hares) are again suggested, particularly by the position of the eye. For the horse imagery, see note 5 under Geoglyph 2 below.

With a variant of the frontal male visage formerly highlighted in blue, here highlighted brown, the man may perhaps carry an also bonneted child whose largely frontal face is highlighted blue, with a smaller possibly becaped face below (turquoise).

Various perspectives of a bird's eye, beak and domed head are suggested by the interventions highlighted purple and white. But the images suggested are so multiple in this and other areas of the piece it can be difficult to discriminate any particular one.

More or most obvious, perhaps, is the largely frontal and seated hare or rabbit (yellow).

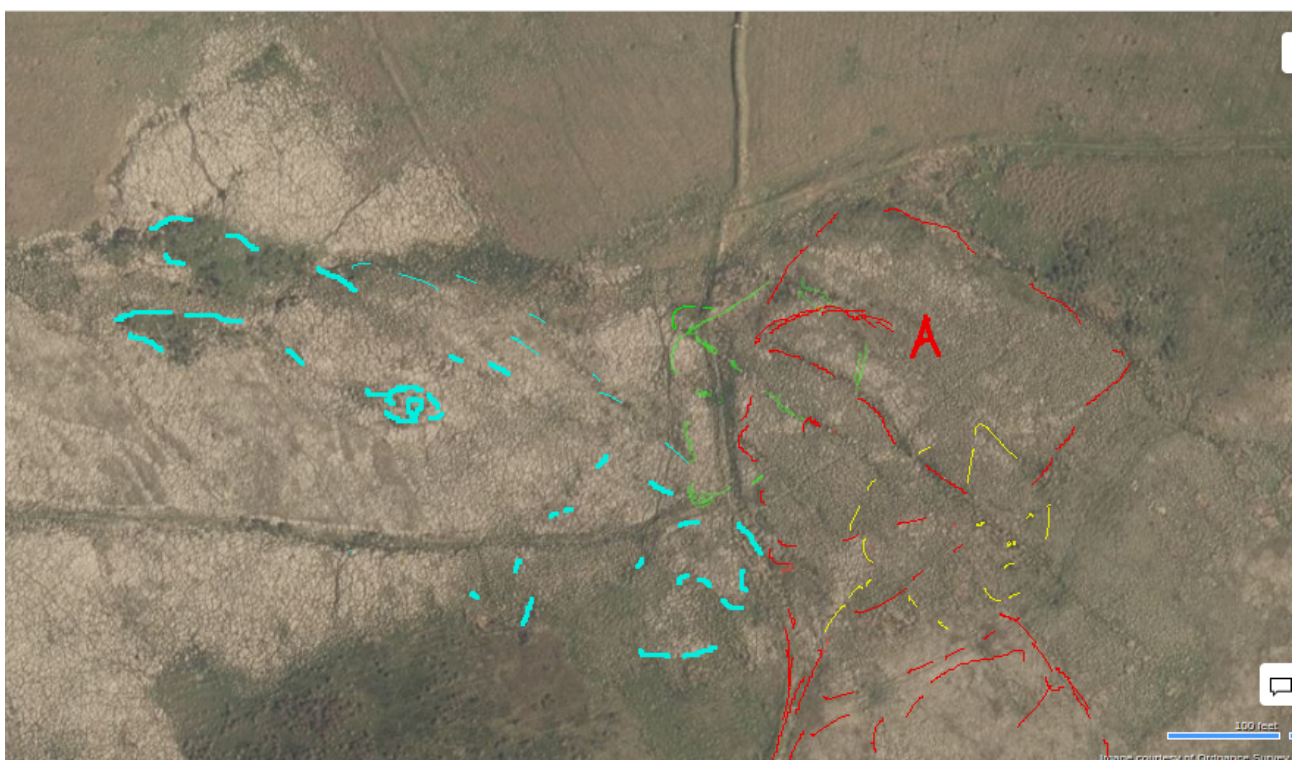
With one partial exception, also in Geoglyph 2 below, I do not intend highlighting the suggested and suggestive erotic imagery in this or other examples. It is profuse, an important component of the cult art, and perhaps not particularly hard to discern.





## Geoglyph 2<sup>4</sup>

Moderately rising ground of a shallow west-east valley runs approximately around the right-profiled horse's head (turquoise), with perhaps the faint suggestion of a receding line of other heads behind it. A left-profiled standing jockey or similar (red) faces the horse, with cap or variant headdress at A. Other profiled faces are suggested, jockeys or spectators perhaps (for example highlighted green), maybe to match the facing line of receding horses.

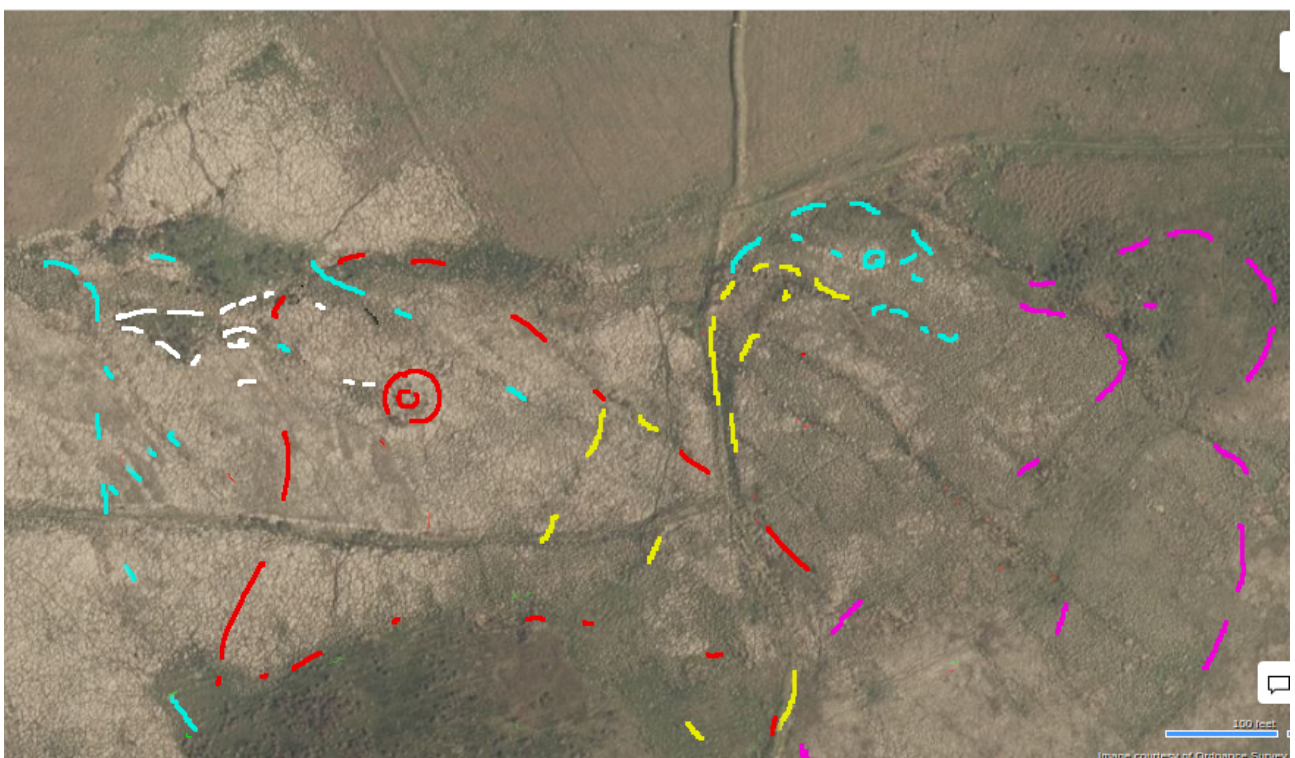


4 For the credits, see note 3.



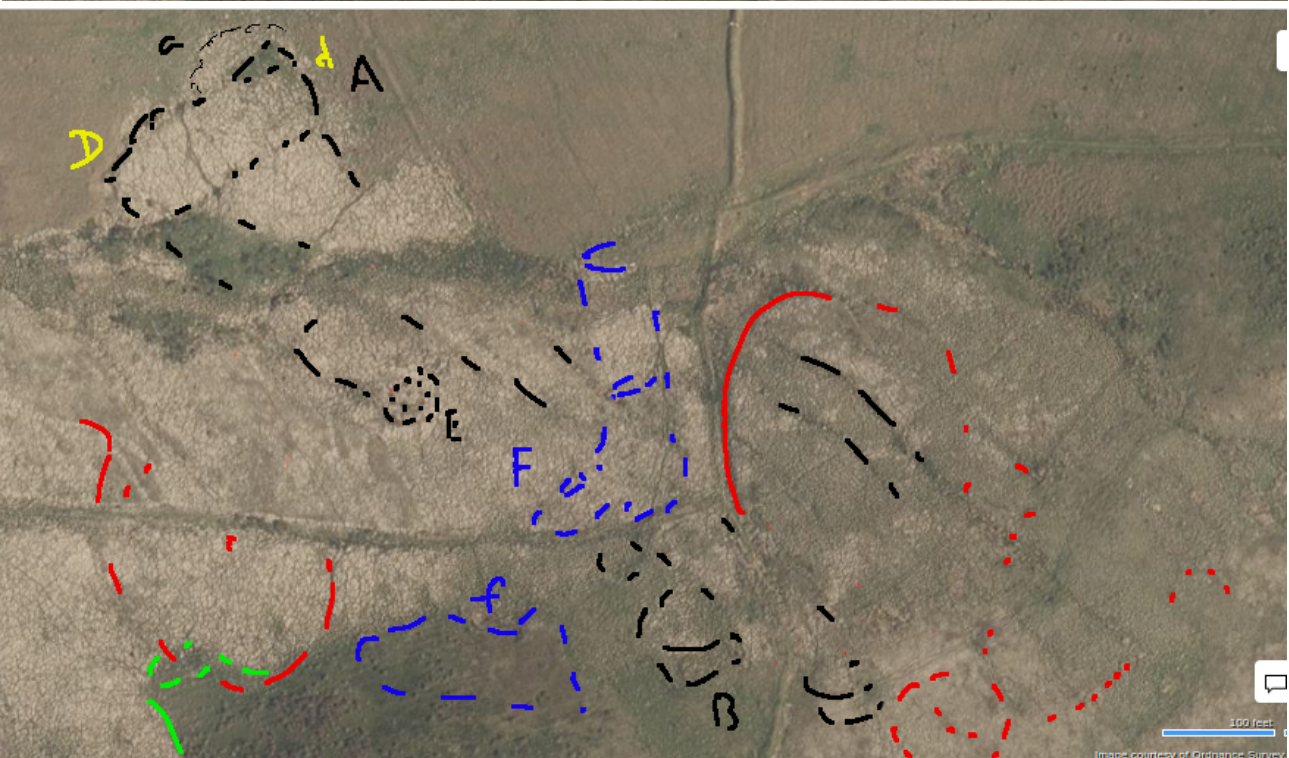
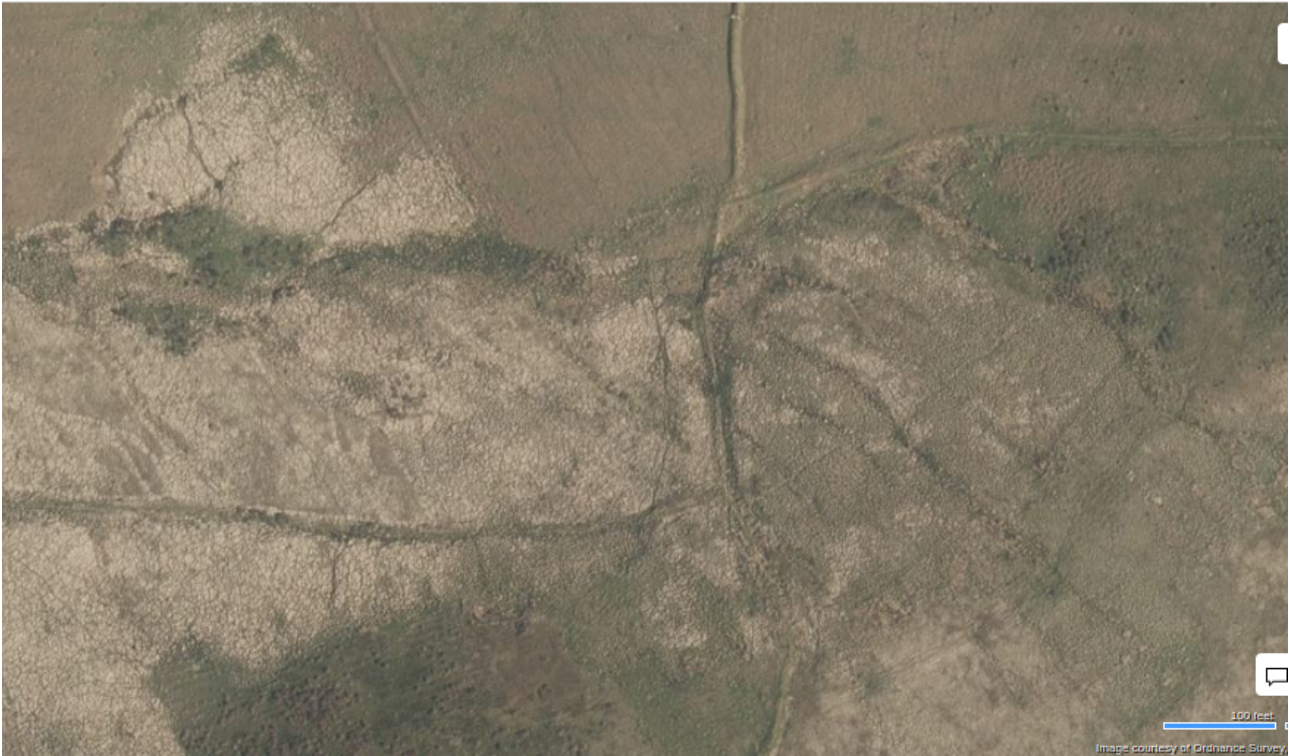
The horse's ears, eyes, nostrils or muzzle and tackle are suggested with precision, so too the profile and maybe riding coat of the jockey, as also, for example, the right-profiled, maybe seated and shawled figure (yellow). Some of the features correspond to water courses, but it is impossible to say whether their occurrence prompted the image or vice versa or both.

In the highlighting below, variously profiled and sized swimming water fowl (yellow, turquoise, purple), a larger and frontal, slightly left-profiled robin or similar (red), the suggestion of whose beak may coincide with the right eye of a slightly right-profiled pig face (white) whose snout coincides with the robin's (and former horse's) eye. Adjusting the size of the image, up or down, may assist identification.





Similar adjustment may clarify a left-profiled riding boot or similar (blue, F, below, with lacing) plus other shoe (f) further below. The large black area of which that latter forms part may be suggesting a left-profiled tea-pot (spout, green). Faint suggestions of horseshoes double up in some cases as clock or watch faces (red). At A, highlighted black, the posterior of, probably, a woman, also featuring a left swimming duck head and tail (yellow D d) extends into human legs, the former horse's eye now suggesting not so much the human foot as a horseshoe (black E, with nail holes), whilst the suggestion of horses' legs and hooves continues as an extension down to the right (B and others)<sup>5</sup>.

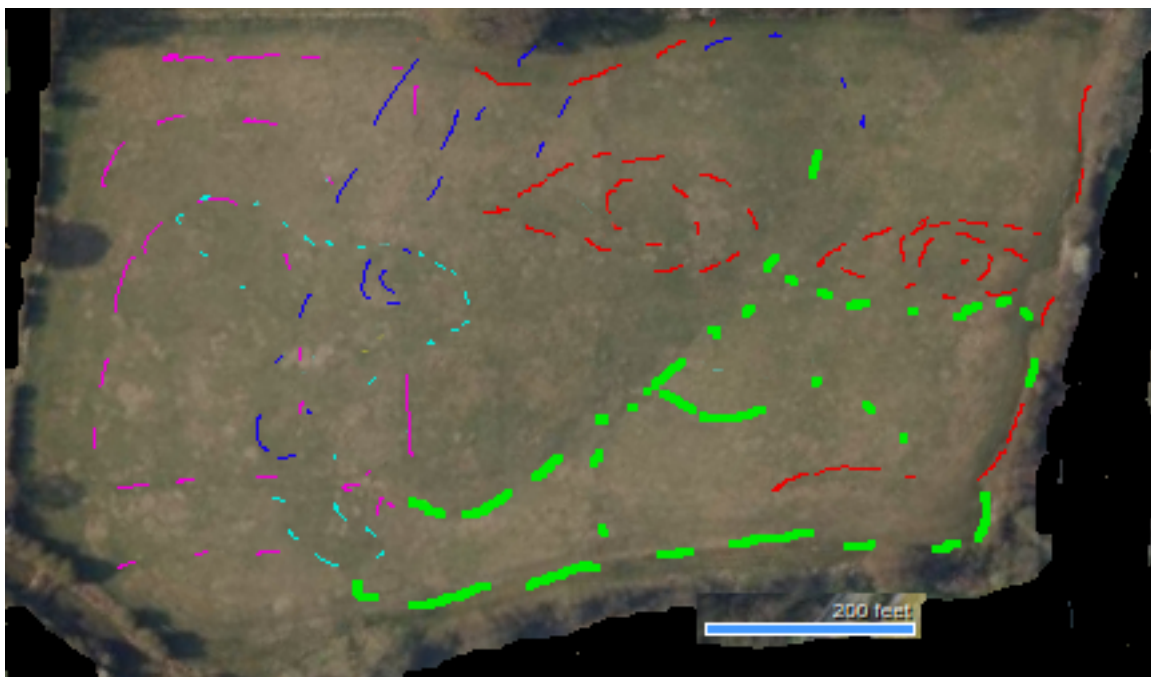


5 The sound or syllables of "Ceres" might suggest, in Greek, κελης, rider, (σ)κελη, legs, χηλη, horseshoe. For such maybe cult-inspired word and image play (including rhotacism and lambdacism), see note 2.

### Geoglyph 3

The art form, in terms of geoglyphs, does not seem to fare well in the face of intensive agriculture or urbanisation, but this final aerial UK example is from an urban conurbation. For the credits, see note 3. I have blacked out the surround, though the geoglyphs are likely to continue in some of it. The surface rises only little from bottom up. The suggested motifs seem to rely heavily on colour differentiation, howsoever achieved, and it takes a little while to begin to see them.

The surface is so full of eyes it can be hard to match pairs, but the suggestion of lips as well as the field boundary helps a little with the examples highlighted red. There are various suggestions of size and shape of the left-profiled shoe or boot (green, with lacing). A frontal, partly left-profiled and receding hare or rabbit (blue) probably shares an eye with one right-profiled (turquoise). Straight lines and, especially, diagnostic half ovals suggest the frontal view of a typical fireplace.

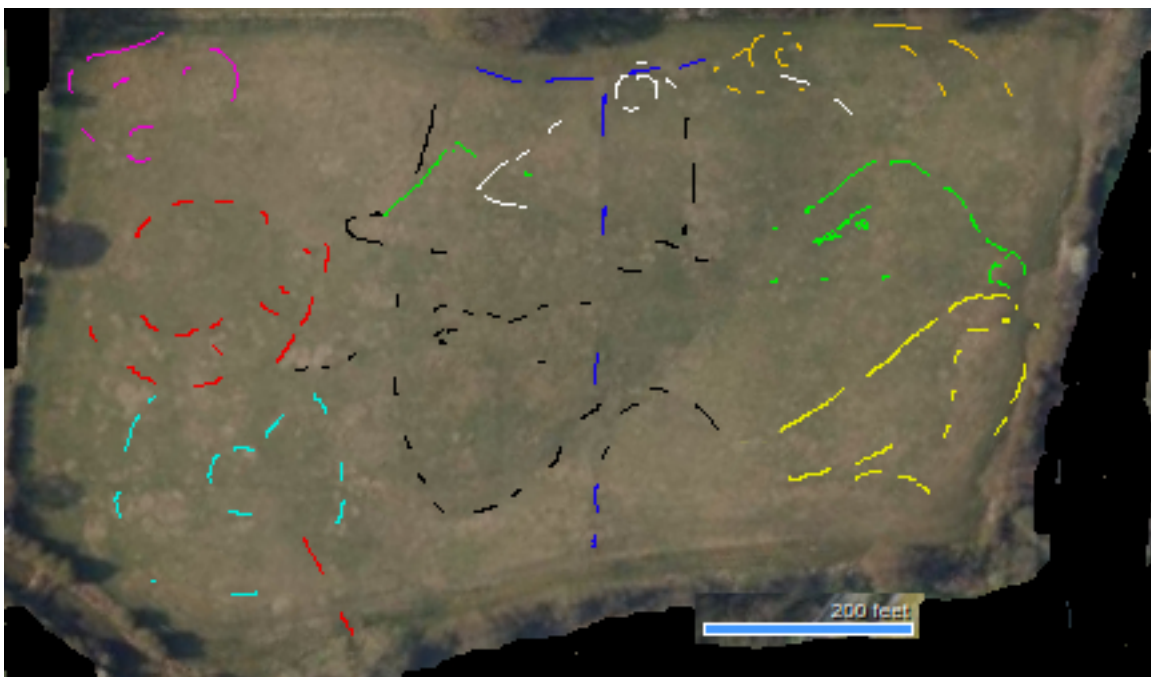




There is, again, more than one suggestion of a chimney sweep, but the one highlighted black is perhaps most obvious as he coincides with a darker area of the field. Suggestions of his brushes (red, turquoise) terminate in the fireplace proposed above, but another may be suggested by the straight vertical (blue), possibly remnant of a hedge or field boundary. The sweep is often associated in the art form with a chimney boy, and there are probably numerous such suggestions here too, but they are faint and merge with one another as well as with other, different motifs, and I have provided only a crude indication of the (fat) face of one such boy (purple, probably squatting), atop the fireplace, where the same interventions may also suggest a frontal owl's face.

Similarly it is possible to discern one or more horseshoes (their oval coinciding with the half-oval fire surround), held by the left arm of a blacksmith whose apron or torso occupies much of the central field, but I find this also too hard to highlight.

Easier, if in many cases multiple, are birds and bird heads, such as a left-profiled goose or heron head (white, brown), right-profiled song bird (yellow), and right-profiled swimming duck head with tail (green).





Are such geoglyphs found elsewhere in the world? Indubitably so. Here is an example from Greece. Plainly, it is not a satellite or aerial image<sup>6</sup>. The scale can be roughly estimated from the trees and maybe central small building. The art work seems to embrace natural features, human constructs, and a perspective that, for the images suggested here, often involves interventions on variously distanced, receding ground.

A right-profiled hare is variously sized and eared, but its eye, nose, ears and mouth are precisely suggested (yellow). It is possibly followed by another right-profiled hare head (turquoise). A precisely suggested duck's eye, beak tip and head more generally swim towards us (red). The outline of a frontal human face, with additional indentation for eyes and mouth, is perhaps easier to see (blue) than the larger equivalent of a dog or bear (purple).

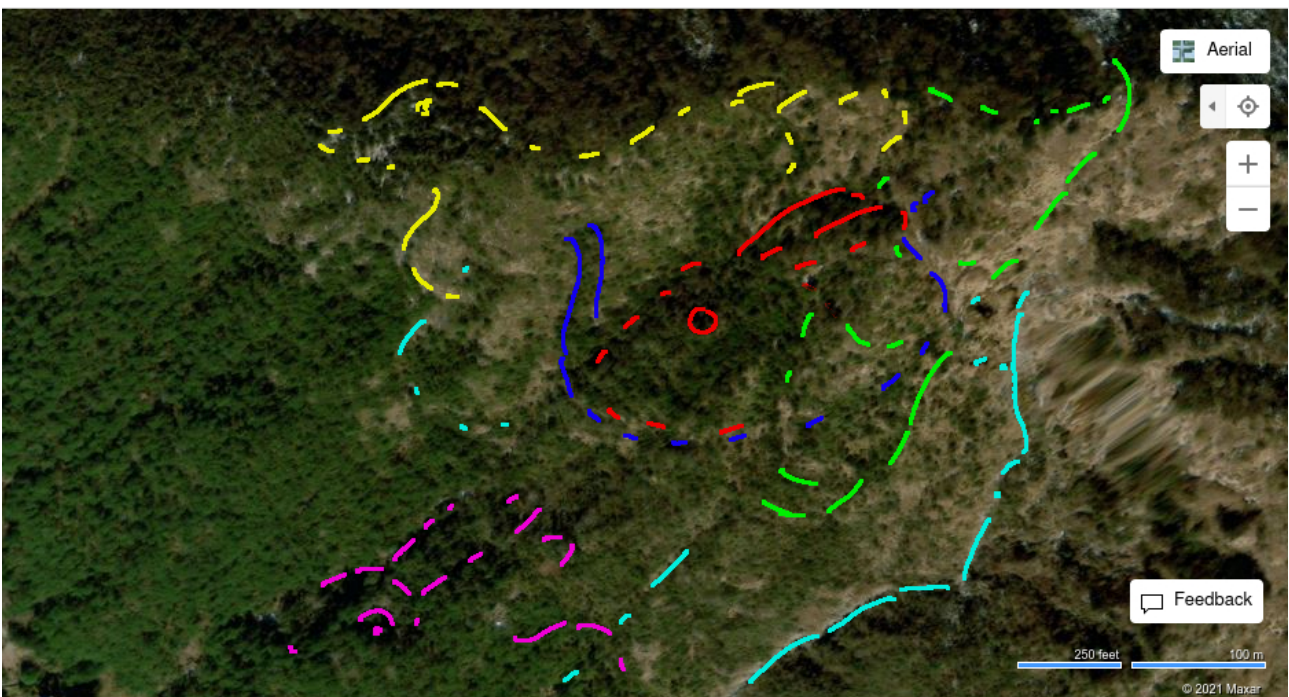
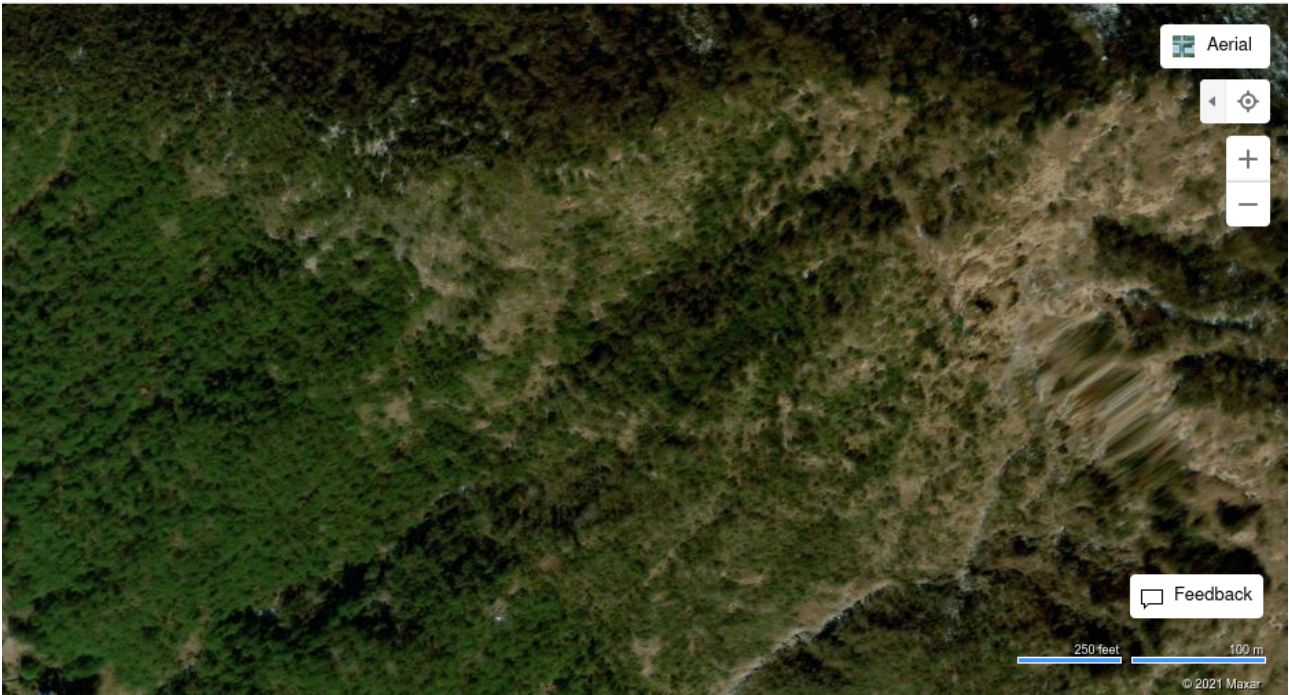
So the landscape may appear barren, but those with the time to look will be able to find a wealth of many more hidden images.



<sup>6</sup> It is extracted from the deep background of a photograph currently available on the web. I regret that, for the reasons given at the start of this paper, and some others, I have not felt able to consult or credit the photographer.



Finally, here is an example from Nepal<sup>7</sup>. The ground slopes severely from bottom left to top right, featuring a partially left-profiled frontal hare or rabbit's head (red) with another, maybe earlier or older below it (purple). Above, a left-profiled swimming duck (yellow), though probably conflated with the suggestion of a running hare (not highlighted). There are multiple suggestions of horseshoes, but I have outlined only one of the larger (blue). They can be seen as held by a frontal figure whose legs (indeed several variant such) recede towards the bottom. The right-profiled face or head (turquoise) appears to be configured so that it can be viewed with slightly different perspectives, and on different scales, depending on the viewer's perception of other interventions or features in the landscape.



7 Extracted from Bing Maps © 2021 Microsoft, © 2021 Maxar.



## Conclusions

Similar geoglyphs might be identified in many other places, generally undeveloped or marginal land, all around the UK, as also in many other countries<sup>8</sup>. In some cases, as in some of the UK's, the art relies not only on rock or surface soils but vegetative growth. The phenomenon raises many interesting and challenging questions as to age, manufacture and so forth. I have tried to address some of those in the earlier paper on the Band of Holes, and although its proposals might be enhanced or improved I still believe they are broadly along plausible lines. Here I want to consider just a very few matters arising.

Are the geoglyphs visible only from the air? The Greek example suggests not, and the Nepal and two of the UK examples are on sloping ground. It is not a case of only perpendicular visibility from on high. So, yes, in principle images should be viewable "from the ground". But, as such, they are likely to look different, to a greater or lesser extent, from aerial shots, and also vary (as also do aerial photos) according to the point of view, some too small to see except at close quarters, others too large except from a distance, and some only from certain angles or perspectives, a facet of the art that becomes perceptible if some of the examples I have offered are rotated (or the reader tilts his or her head), when different images may be discerned. The same surface feature, whether naturally occurring or man-made can, if it is suitable, provide a basis or starting point for multiple diverse and diversely-oriented motifs.

Are the images visible in real life and real time, if you are standing at some suitable point, without the aid of a camera snapshot? In the UK, at least, I think that is more difficult to answer positively. In principle, again, the answer should be yes, but the climate and vegetation are so variable, the visual distractions so numerous, the visualisation may take considerable practice. In some, even many cases, images may have been "simply" transferred from a 2d map onto the physical ground, as it is not always clear that immediate visibility is or was the intended aim. It helps, considerably, if you "know" what you are looking for in terms of typical motifs and typical "natural" features amenable to their projection. It helps even more, of course, if you have been involved in the creation of the art work in the first place, and possibly, in some cases, if the related work is only recent or at some suitable point in the annual cycle.

All of which leads to a reasonable question as to whether - since the substrate, in this case, is the earth's surface rather than a human artefact, like a wall or pot - the identification of the geoglyphs can be attributed to pareidolia<sup>9</sup>? In general I think not, partly because of the points I made about the art form in the introduction, partly because of the proximity of other human interventions. The land surface in many areas of our planet is rarely "natural" or pristine. So the question has a deeper and more serious problematic.

If I perceive that a - let us say for now random or natural or pristine - rock formation looks like a pair of trousers, it is unlikely, on the whole, that it really is a pair of trousers, but the perception of likeness may, nonetheless, be true, and others may agree that it is true, if I disclose the observation to them. I can also improve the likeness by various interventions so that it looks a bit more convincingly like a pair of trousers. I can even enhance or add to the likeness with the suggestion of creases, say, or turn-ups or a belt or even, to become yet more daring and if the surface or other available features allow, a top or torso or other limbs. But if I go too far in my ambitions, then any originally hidden or revelatory nature of the image in question is lost; for it becomes as overt as any piece of humanly manufactured, free-standing art, naturalistic or otherwise, a likeness, yes, but not quite the same kind or context.

In short, the polarity between "X is - or even just looks like - a pair of trousers" and "X is only a naturally occurring phenomenon" is false. For it ignores the possibility that our ancestors, say, also thought it looked like a pair of trousers and made whatever interventions accordingly. Basically, it ignores artistic likeness, any history thereof, and all that such things entail. A notable omission.

<sup>8</sup> The difficulty, even impossibility, of sustaining geoglyphic art in tropical jungle or sand-blown desert might perhaps help explain the creation of artificial pyramids, if their walls could one day be shown to be populated by the art form.

<sup>9</sup> Described in, for example, Wikipedia as "the tendency for perception to impose a meaningful interpretation on a nebulous stimulus, usually visual, so that one sees an object, pattern, or meaning *where there is none*" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareidolia> at 17 November 2021). The italics are mine.

But there are also mitigating and countervailing factors. The art form or tradition that I have outlined in this and earlier papers appears to use other human interventions, such as other art or script or its own earlier productions, both to convey and to conceal its own contribution. In the case of geoglyphs it appears to exploit, in the same way, not only possibly utilitarian human interventions in the form, for example, of congenially shaped paths, ditches, boundaries and, even, earlier or different geoglyphs, but also probably natural and random features as well, again both to conceal and to convey its hidden artistry. It is well aware, indeed often immensely skilled in the exploitation of conducive surfaces, whether random or generated by such previous activity, to play upon suggestibility.

Finally, though, what to do about its artefacts, in particular its geoglyphs? Here I am thinking mainly of the UK, as other countries or populations have their own cultures, traditions, circumstances. It is, I think, and for its own good reasons, a secretive but also in many ways forgiving art form or tradition, as well as highly adaptive and resilient. It is also fundamentally and almost literally vital, so preservation of its artefacts in a kind of aspic might be properly viewed as incongruous. Even so, in some cases where it faces obliteration from development, some individuals and groups, so far as I can see, have made and are continuing to make ingenious interventions to perpetuate its spirit in other ways. But I wish that, without breaking, if anything whilst also reinforcing any taboo, awareness of its existence was more widespread, so that at least we were aware of what else we are losing.