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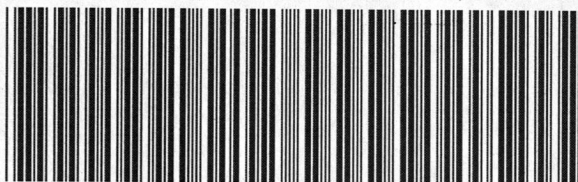
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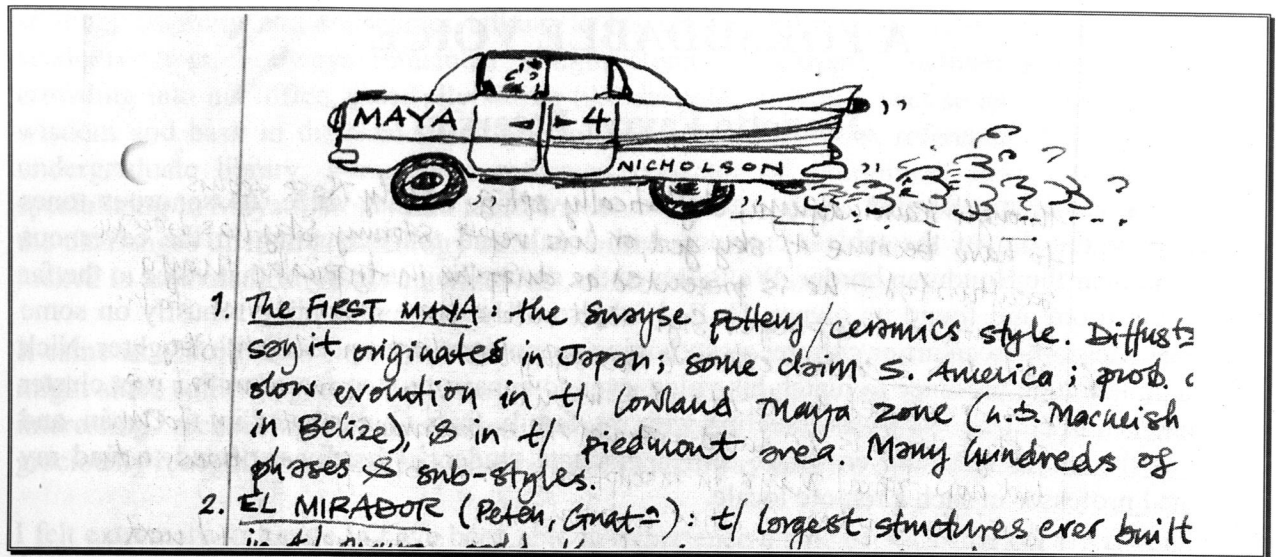
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From my class notes: "Nich" driving through Week 4 of his Maya class, without his glasses. The vehicle was a classic, and he drove it with purpose.

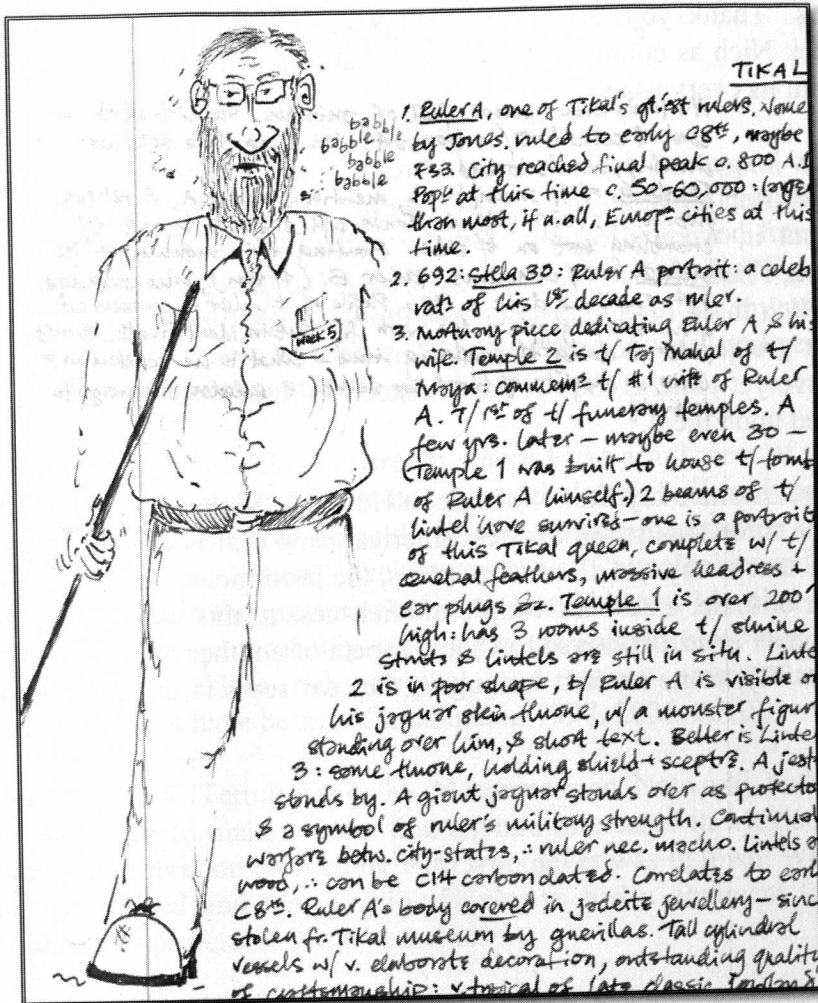
DISCIPLES OF "NICH-NESS"

Matthew Restall

The first class I ever took as a graduate student at UCLA was "Aztecs," we colloquially called H. B. Nicholson's "Ancient Civilizations of Western Middle America." It was offered most fall quarters and was typically followed in the winter quarter by "Ancient Civilizations of Eastern Middle America (Maya Sphere)" (or "Mayas," as we cleverly dubbed it). I also took "Mayas" that first year. Both classes were 100-level undergraduate courses, but there were usually half a dozen or so graduate students taking it for graduate credit. We tended to hang out in the back to mark our "advanced" status and also to be on hand to help operate or unjam the slide projector when asked to do so by Nick (or "Nich," as I styled him in my notes).

We were certainly eager to be helpful—did we even vie for his approval?—and we took the courses seriously enough, in terms of our commitment to the subject and to producing written work of which Nich would approve (with, on my part, mixed success). But there was also a fair amount of note passing and whispered joking, and amidst my notes I scribbled cartoons. Most of these are too ribald or puerile to be reproduced here. Among the more innocuous scribbles, was a depiction of Nich driving "Week 4" of the "Maya" class without his glasses on, and therefore it can be shared with a larger audience. Nicholson gave the impression of being sight challenged, even when bespectacled, by squinting towards the back of the class and calling us by the wrong names. Is Kevin [Terraciano] there? he'd ask, looking straight at him.

Many of these cartoons were inspired by Nich himself, who was an immensely entertaining lecturer. His slides of Mesoamerican sites were full of pictures of himself as a younger man, often standing beside a colleague—with Nich always wearing the larger hat. He claimed that some of the pictures were recent, yet others appeared so old they may have been snapped not long after the ancient buildings themselves were constructed. To our amusement, Nich always seemed to look more or less the same in every frame.



Nich popping out from behind my class notes, striding directly from the jungle into the classroom, wielding his staff of office, deadly tropical insects still attempting to penetrate his impenetrable beard. His words were a "babble" to some (the word was an in-joke reference to a question asked by a student earlier in the quarter), but to others an inspiration for a lifetime studying Mesoamerica's wonders.

Any slide with him in it prompted diversionary tales of adventures among the pyramids, both his own and those of others. Such stories lent Nich the air of a Clark Kent version of Indiana Jones. He seemed physically frail, harmlessly jovial, and somewhat bumbling in his professorial manifestation, but that was just a convenient disguise; once in Mexico, he turned into a daring discoverer, a fearless man of action. Another drawing shows Nich himself emerging from behind my notes, with the "Week 5" header taped to his shirt like a name tag, dressed ambiguously (for the classroom or the field?), wielding a cane (to steady himself before the slide screen, or to fend off hostile wildlife amidst the ruins?); one could never be sure if the real Nich was Kent or Jones.

As the weeks passed, and the fall quarter gave way to the winter quarter, my notes became longer and denser and included a mounting list of Nich catch phrases. These were always uttered in response to student questions which Nich viewed as falling into particular (and predictable) categories. One was, "What's the relevance, man?" At the start of the quarter, he'd tell a story of a student in the 1960s who had asked that very question, but towards the quarter's end he'd simply repeat the phrase when a student's question seemed to inspire it. "Will this be on the final?" Nich's response, with a wry smile was, "What's the relevance, man?" Another of Nich's

catch phrases was "Thank you, Karl Marx!" It was delivered in response to a comment or question that struck Nich as coming from the left, but in a superficial or stereotypical way. We were delighted with its every usage.

My notes also grew longer and denser because Nich's bottomless fascination with Mesoamerican civilization, his enduring passion for its study, and his amazement that it was possible to make a living talking about it, were infectious. By the end of the second quarter, in an elaborate, sophomoric cartoon, I had divided the graduate students in the class into two groups: those of us who appreciated Nich in all his dimensions and those who had not yet perceived his many rich layers. The former group I labeled "The Disciples of Nich-ness." Since not all the members of the latter group have yet gone to their reward, discretion forbears me to provide the reader with the label I bestowed upon them.

It has been many years since my first exposure to Henry B. Nicholson, and, sadly, he is now no longer with us. The infectious strain of Mesoamericanismo that Nick, or, "Nich," was a carrier for has proven resistant to any and all modern cures, the proof being that I as well as many others remain to a greater or lesser extent a Disciple of Nich-ness to this very day. It is no coincidence that two decades later I'm still immersed in some aspect or another of Nich's "Middle America." And now, just possibly, some student lurking in the rear rows is drawing cartoons of me. So, thanks, Nich!