

# Codex Nicholson



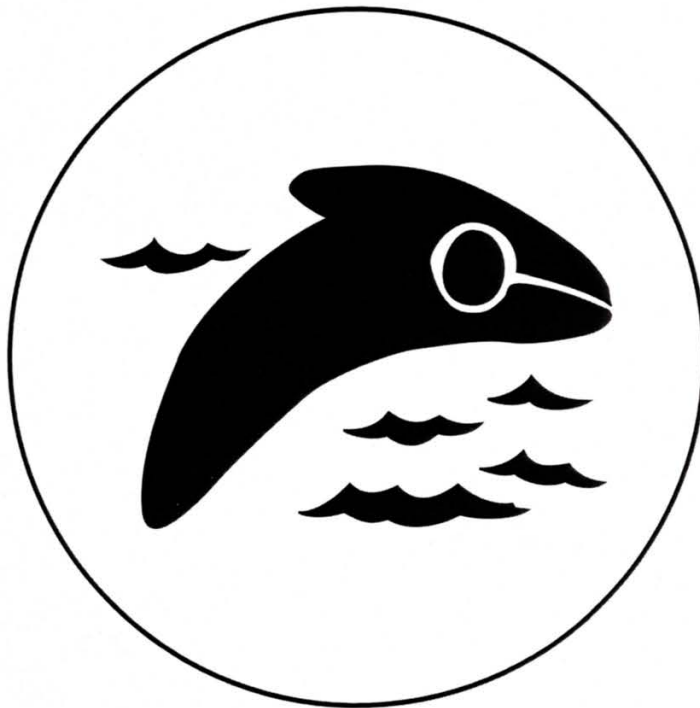
**Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Occasional Paper**

**Number 4**

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**Brian Dervin Dillon and Matthew A. Boxt, Editors**

## ***Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Occasional Paper***

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Cover: Quetzalcoatl from Codex Magliabecchiano, redrawn by Miguel Covarrubias (1947).



*Nick Nicholson  
at the Tenth Annual UCLA Maya Weekend, October 11-12, 2003.  
UCLA Institute of Archaeology photo.*



## FOND MEMORIES OF H. B. NICHOLSON

### Alfredo López Austin

I enjoyed two very different relationships with H. B. Nicholson. The first, that benefiting my own scientific research through consultation with the work of an academic colleague, is still ongoing. The second, that of personal friendship, has now, sadly, ended. Both relationships arose through our common, obsessive affinity for similar research topics. We were both committed to increase the awareness of an ancient people and the symbolism derived from their view of the cosmos. Nicholson and I both sought to understand, at least to some extent, the thoughts of ancient men who created gods, felt indebted to them, and gave them the most precious part of their being. Within our shared perception of that past reality, there were enough agreements and disagreements to stimulate debate and make such discourse attractive, agreeable, and frequently, revealing.

Several decades have passed since my introduction to H. B. Nicholson's writings, but my original admiration for this wise man has remained constant. Nicholson was 11 years my senior, an age that in the scientific world might amount to two generations. His advantage in cumulative experience led to my recognition of him as a master; his scientific honesty greatly increased my respect for him. From my first readings of his work, I was captivated by his erudition, the soundness of his ideas, and the lucidity of his global concepts. My critical reading of his work taught me much, sometimes supporting my own research conclusions, other times challenging them. There was an important original proposition in each of his publications, well supported by evidence. His perfectionism in all literary efforts, no matter how brief, may have unfortunately delayed for many years the publication of his final and outstanding tome *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: The Once and Future Lord of the Toltecs*.

Our friendship, born in the rarified world that we specialists construct, was subject to accidental encounters at professional meetings and conferences. Nick and I enjoyed each other's company whenever we could. There were never appointments. We met one another by accident all over the world at irregular intervals. We initiated conversations without any preconceived plan, aware that there would always be passionate discussion between us. We always knew that we would see one another again, often when least expected, at which time we could resume our dialogue. I must confess that I recall some of our exchanges more from their circumstances than from their content; some interaction from long ago springs back into focus when I look at some of my line drawings inspired by H. B. Nicholson.

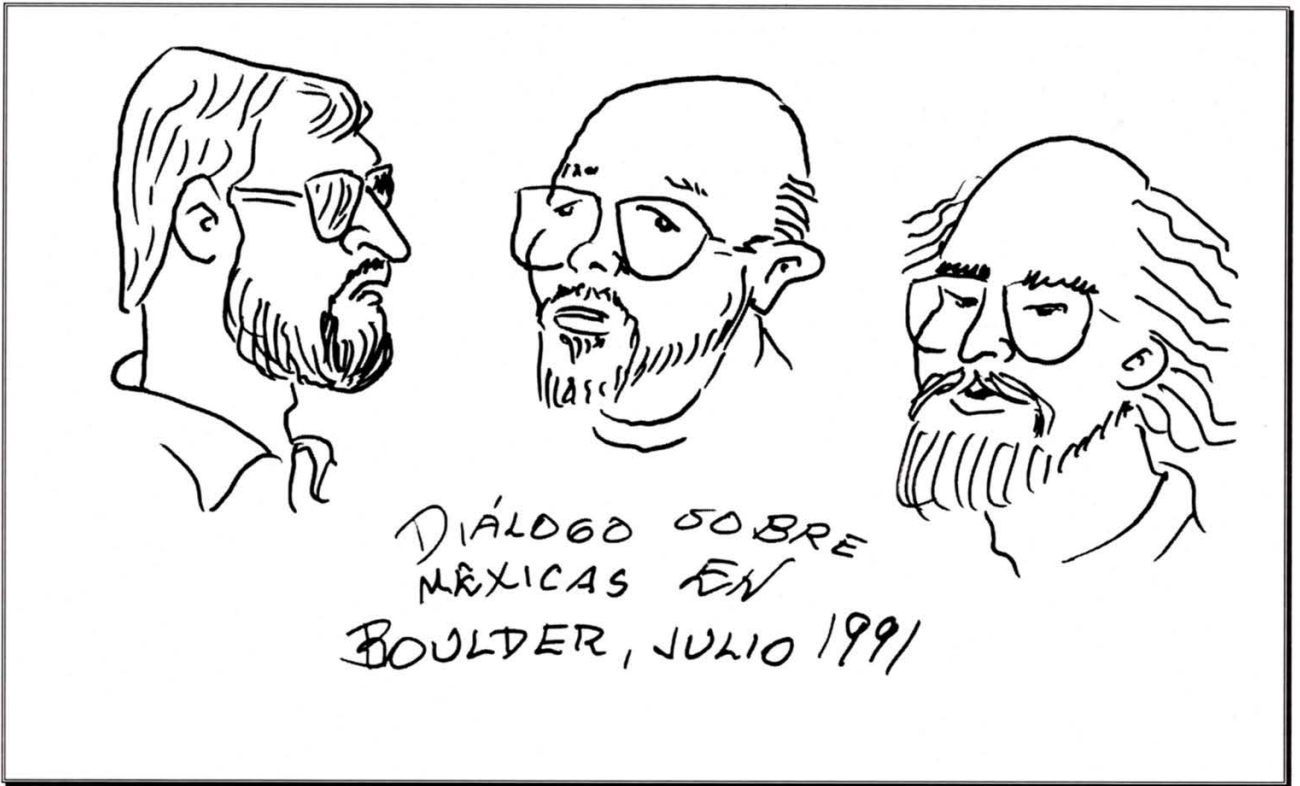
One such cartoon I drew in Cholula, in June 1972, while listening to Nicholson's presentation on the cult of Xipe Tótec in Mesoamerica. In the style of archaeologists, who represent the most ancient times in the lower stratigraphic depths of their excavations and more recent periods in the upper levels, I changed the face of Xipe as it moved stratigraphically upwards so as to evolve into that of Dr. Nicholson. At the time this seemed entirely appropriate for Nick, if not actually wearing a flayed skin, then he at least had assigned himself the role of the ancient gods' most impassioned spokesman. Another fond recollection is of a stroll through a park in Boulder, Colorado, with Nick and our mutual friend Bernardo R. Ortiz de Montellano. This took place in July of 1991, during a recess from academic meetings and the presentation of papers and formal discussions. We halted our ambulatory discussion with frequent rests on park benches. In the



*The evolution of Xipe Tótec into Henry B. Nicholson.  
Cartoon by Alfredo López Austin, Cholula, Mexico, 1972.*

park the boundaries between friendship and scientific discourse began to disappear, helped along by my own lack of discipline.

At this conference, Nicholson's brilliance, his academic rigor, and the incisiveness of his interpretive syntheses, as expressed from behind the podium, contrasted greatly with the actions of one irreverent colleague in the audience, me. Instead of taking notes on the central points of



*Los tres barbudos: from left, H. B. Nicholson, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, and David Carrasco.  
Cartoon by Alfredo López Austin, Boulder, Colorado, USA, 1991.*

Nick's lecture, I drew cartoons of him in a notebook. My doodling was both a kind of mnemonic aid and also a form of self-entertainment justified by that familiarity which can exist amongst a friendly group of specialists. Later, while reviewing my drawings, I remembered and joined together the words heard in the auditorium. My notebooks with their sketches fulfilled their original functions for a while, but then, as with so much of the evidence of our daily activities, they passed from the desk drawer to a cardboard box, to await accidental rediscovery through unplanned excavations.

This rediscovery indeed occurred. Some time ago I found my drawing of Xipe Tótec metamorphosing into Nicholson, and was very pleased to present a copy of it to Nick at one of our meetings. The second discovery was another drawing made 19 years after the first. In this more recent sketch, I sought to capture the moment when Nick conversed with Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and David Carrasco, in Boulder, Colorado, in July 1991.

These two drawings now fulfill a different function from their original one. At first, they were simply transitory mnemonic notes, but over time they came to document the evolution of scientific collegialism into warm personal friendship. Today my sketches reflect my admiration for and recognition of a brilliant colleague, Dr. H. B. Nicholson. Also, and more importantly, they document my affection for Nick, my friend.