Living under Stars: Preface to “The Bricker Almanac”

The Saturday in 2003 when we first met to plan this Festschrift was one of those excessively hot and sunny but no longer humid October days that New Orleans holds in store for early fall visitors. And today we were visitors. A conference on the Northern Maya Lowlands had brought the three of us together at Tulane University. We had established contact through e-mails in the weeks before; the preliminary exchange of ideas brimmed with an enthusiasm that would carry this project through two years and Hurricane Katrina. But we didn’t know at the time how other colleagues and friends would respond, or whether we would be able to effectively follow through with the project. Better, we thought, to keep it secret.

A small conference room near the gym housed the seminar participants. The Brickers and quite a few of the contributors to this Festschrift presented their latest research during that weekend. The intimate setting—all presenters sitting in a half-circle with the audience only an arms’ length away—did not make it easy to slip out under Harvey and Vicki’s keen eyes. Armed with lunch boxes, we sought a shady place at the picnic area outside. Over sandwiches, fruit juice, and cookies, we moved from throwing around ideas to serious planning.

Our project has, of course, antecedents. Since the foundation of the Department of Anthropology at Tulane University two generations ago, graduate students have regularly published the journal Human Mosaic. It has become a tradition to honor retiring faculty with a special issue. Robert Wauchope, the former director of the Middle American Research Institute, received the Brickers and quite a few of the Department of Anthropology, was honored in the special issue 28 of Human Mosaic in 1995. (Incidentally, copies of both Festschriften are still available.)

One of our initial concerns—who would be available to contribute to the Bricker Festschrift—soon became obsolete. We received enthusiastic responses to our initial inquiries and were quickly able to put a list of contributors together.

Biographical Sketches

The Brickers involved themselves as scholars in an astonishing array of fields and produced over the last thirty years a long list of books and articles (see their CVs on pages vii-xiv). A look at their list of publications shows that they simultaneously work and publish in several disciplines. A book on the excavations at Abri Pataud in France (H. Bricker 1995) appeared at the same time as a discussion of an astronomical text at Chichen Itza in Mexico (V. Bricker and H. Bricker 1995) and an overview of advances in Maya epigraphy (V. Bricker 1995). In the discussion that follows, we attempt to disentangle the different strands of their scholarly lives.

Harvey Bricker began his career as an archaeologist of Palaeolithic (not Paleolithic, as he reminded us in his lectures) France. As Hallam Movius’ student at Harvard University, he worked with the Harvard Dordogne Project, particularly at the Abri Pataud. His dissertation, as well as several book publications and articles, resulted from this work (e.g., Movius et al. 1968; H. Bricker 1975, 1985, 1995; H. Bricker and David 1984). Harvey never lost his interest in Old World archaeology, and recurring topics in his archaeological publications include chronology and dating. This may partially explain his fascination with Maya archaeoastronomy and the correlation question, which have become his primary areas of study since the 1980s.

Together with Vicki, Harvey approached the Maya codices from a novel perspective. The Brickers questioned Sir J. Eric S. Thompson’s view that codices were timeless tools for priestly rituals. Instead, they posited—and have since very successfully demonstrated—that the codices must be understood from a historical perspective (see, e.g., V. Bricker and H. Bricker 1992; H. Bricker, V. Bricker, and Wulfing 1997). The Venus table in the Dresden Codex has long been recognized as an accurate instrument to predict Venus’ movements over the course of hundreds of years. The Brickers called attention to similar tables that trace the movement of Mars or that allow the prediction of eclipses (H. Bricker and V. Bricker 1985; V. Bricker and H. Bricker 1986; H. Bricker, Aveni, and V. Bricker 2001) and further demonstrated that even “almanacs” based on the 260-day ritual calendar could frequently be shown to contain datable astronomical and seasonal events.

The Brickers’ study of the astronomical content of the Maya codices fostered their interest in applying the same methodology to Classic inscriptions and iconography from the cities of Copan, Palenque, Chichen Itza, and Uxmal (V. Bricker and H. Bricker 1995, 2002; H. Bricker and V. Bricker 1996, 1999). Examples such as the Skyband Bench at Copan straddle the boundary between glyphic text and iconographic symbol. The Brickers’ groundbreaking studies of particular Classic texts have elucidated meaning where epigraphers and art historians alike had previously often hesitated.

Vicki Bricker began her career as a cultural anthropologist, participating in Evon Vogt’s Zincacantan project through Harvard University. Her dissertation on