

Anthropological Quark

By Margaret Evans (© 2005)

Archaeologist Joseph Magee finished his lecture about the Maya culture and sought out Dr. Amy Parrish, the guest anthropologist he had wanted to meet.

“Did I cover all the gods I needed to?” Magee asked her after shaking her hand. He was thrilled she had come to his seminar, afraid he had not impressed her.

Parrish was the prevailing world expert on Maya. She spent part of every year in the Yucatan. People came from all over the world to visit her. Yet here she was in Northern California, attending his seminar.

“Well,” she began haltingly, “most of the important ones. The difficulties lie in the comparison of the whole glyphs with the partial glyphs and cross-referencing these, when we’re able to get a match, with the memories we obtain from the present-day Maya in the context of the legends we’ve deciphered in the written stories we have. Hence, the confusion over one god with several variant regional spellings of his or her name but only one function and several gods with exactly the same name but differing functions. But I think you covered it pretty well, Dr. Magee,” she finished, smiling brightly.

Magee stared at her.

“I believe you have a similar challenge with the Olmec,” she went on, referring to Magee’s particular Mesoamerican favorites.

Magee’s expression turned pleasant.

“I flipped a coin,” he said.

“Most of us do,” Amy agreed, grinning. “But your presentation this weekend was sterling, and I couldn’t have told as much as you did about the Maya in only two days without losing their spirit. I’m just glad you didn’t mention the prophecies; I might have had to get involved in that.”

He shifted feet and really looked at her. So young, so pretty. Fired up. He was reminded of his own dynamic youth so long ago.

“Is that why you were quiet during the talk? No prophecies involved...or were you bored?” Magee ventured. Parrish had a standing reputation for lively debates.

“I was *not* bored. Lack of prophecy challenge was part of it. The rest was my curiosity about where you were taking the Maya.”

Magee was thinking that here was a woman who could be curious and remain silent. What a find.

“Not as far as you wanted me to take them, I believe,” he responded.

Magee referred, of course, to her theories about the fate of the glorious Maya culture that had all but vanished in the ninth century, long before the Spaniards arrived. Her controversial doctoral thesis was well known in anthropological circles.

“I promise I wouldn’t have told anybody that you agreed with my theories,” she said, conspiratorially.

Magee almost gasped at the thought of his ruined conservative reputation.

“They didn’t make it up here,” he insisted. “I don’t know how you could make that theory work. It borders on science fiction.”

She smiled, used to the skepticism.

“Let’s look at the evidence,” she suggested.

“A handful of pottery is hardly evidence,” he pointed out.

“The magnetic poles are already reversing,” she countered.

“Desert to jungle is understandable; but the reverse makes no sense,” he argued, ignoring mention of the natural, cyclic occurrence. “There wasn’t much water in California at the time, and there’s no reason for them to have come back north.”

She was silent a moment before responding.

“Maybe their gods told them the Spanish were coming and they had to leave,” she offered finally. “At any rate, I’m convinced California is exactly where they went. I’ve listened to too many Maya elders in recent years tell me tales that have been handed down orally over the centuries. These people were too smart to hang around and let stronger soldiers conquer them. They knew something was going to happen. They did something about it.”

“How did they do it? Where are they now?”

Parrish considered that she had just met Magee, his reputation notwithstanding, and here they were, arguing like old friends. But there were details from the elders she could not reveal to outsiders.

“They’re getting ready for the next age. It’s coming up pretty soon.” It was all she could say.

“Yes, but they’re performing their healing, cleansing and rededication ceremonies in specific cities in Central America, not in California.”

She turned her focus to the Central American artifacts under the glass case. Magee had an incredible display, skulls, pottery, tools and lots of pieces of carved stone with hieroglyphics on them. She wondered where he had gotten this many. Last time she checked, the Mexican and Guatemalan authorities really didn’t like it when you took away little pieces of their country. These had to be black market or maybe just secret pilfering. Magee had to know that; perhaps he hadn’t questioned the source.

“It’s really time for me to go, Dr. Magee. I’m glad I heard your lecture.”

She offered her hand again to him.

Magee stood watching her car drive away and wondered, not about the arguments they had, but about the statements he had made that she had not discounted.

Maya healing centers and holy places were only in Central America. Yes, they were.

The more he said it, the less certain he felt. He guessed when you read a theory in black and white, it was more likely to sound illogical. When you met the author in person, someone as dynamic as Amy Parrish, all of a sudden, you had doubts about your own traditional beliefs.

The tall shadows of her gentle words remained with him. He had discounted what he thought was her evidence, but in thinking back, he had not even given her a chance to offer it. Was there more she wasn’t telling?

He shivered and looked at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand with her e-mail address on it, then glanced down the road again. Her car was long gone, but he knew it was not the last time he would see her.

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