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War and the Military

Source: *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*

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Published by: Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998

Page(s): 124-133

War

Overview

More often than not, war was a matter of ritual more than of combat. Conflict was carried on so consistently that it, rather than peace, was viewed as the basic condition for society and about as inevitable as planting crops or engaging in sex. Each of the three activities was fraught with danger, but more threatening than fighting or planting or sex as such was the possibility of acting inappropriately in those processes. Doing any of the three improperly could upset the sacred balance in the universe. So war was approached as a delicate emergency in which the role of sacred powers must be carefully planned for and, if possible, controlled. That required ritual.

As among many other American Indian cultures, and in fact throughout ancient civilizations generally, most military engagements tended to boil down to individual contests. There were rudimentary general staffs and a bit of strategic planning, training exercises, and propaganda, but the army as a corporate entity was secondary. In the final analysis, war was not so much a series of battles between organized societies as it was a summation of the struggles of single men against other lone combatants. It was considered that if enough personal confrontations were won by one side, then they had won the battle. Still it was not mere individual strength, skill, and zeal that were decisive. Each two-person engagement was seen as a vehicle for the expression of divine will; if the gods wished to give victory to one man, and thus to one side, then so it would be. The combatants were working out the determination of the supernatural powers, one personal clash at a time.

It was crucial to learn the gods' intentions when planning war. Several modes of

contacting the supernatural could be tried. Astrological indicators were often consulted to set a date for an attack, a prophet or seer might have been consulted to learn where and how to deploy forces, holy images or icons were carried onto the battlefield, priests accompanied each expedition to implore sacred favor even during battle, and a battle leader or his honorific representative—a person chosen by deity to lead his favored people—was the head of government. Sacrificial thanks to divinity necessarily followed a victory; ritual sorrow and apology for whatever sins had been at fault sprang from defeat.

Obtaining slaves made little economic sense, but taking captives to humiliate, execute, or sacrifice them was routine.⁸⁵ It was not common for a conqueror to force his detailed religious system on a subject people; there may have been no religious wars in the medieval European sense, although the possibility remains.⁸⁶ Societies in mainstream Mesoamerican civilization did, however, have the cultural decency, if defeated, to add key gods of the conquerors to their local pantheon as a sign of their subservience. In the worst of circumstances, the conquerors slaughtered the people and burned and looted their property, but conquest's usual outcome was little more than the conquered people's promising not to rebel anew and to pay tribute assessments faithfully.

Part of the pattern is illustrated in the Old Testament. In 2 Chronicles 36:2–3, for instance, we read that “Jehoahaz was twenty and three years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem [and presumably made trouble]. And the king of Egypt put him down at Jerusalem, and condemned the land in [i.e., to payment of] an hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold [as punitive tribute].”

This pair of west Mexico figurines set in a combat posture epitomizes Mesoamerican warfare. Neither fancy formations of warriors nor efficient weapons were thought to determine the outcome of the conflict so much as the will of the gods. For that reason, the decorative emblems that a warrior donned were not just to show off, nor to inspire fear, nor simply for practical protection. They were a demonstration of, or appeal for, divine protection and strength.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Nearly everything the Book of Mormon tells us about warfare agrees with the picture just sketched. The sacred element in war is made especially clear. It was the Nephites' custom to appoint as military leaders those who "had the spirit of revelation and also prophecy" (3 Nephi 3:19); and prophets were asked for specific military guidance (see Alma 43:23–4; 48:16). Combatants credited their God for success in battle (see Alma 44:3–4; Alma 43:50; 46:16–21). Human sacrifice and even

cannibalism were associated with warfare (see Mormon 4:14 and Moroni 9:7–10). Personal combat, particularly between leaders, was crucial (see Ether 14:30; 15:27–32; Words of Mormon 1:13; Alma 2:16, 29–33). Meanwhile, strategy as a means to winning battles was looked down on or seldom employed (see Alma 43:30; 52:21). Battles were sometimes scheduled, probably based on calendrical or astrological considerations (see Alma 2:15–6; Mormon 6:2–5; compare Alma 52:1–2).⁸⁷

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War
 Overview

Military Organization

The vast majority of warriors in Mesoamerican units were militia-men. That is, they were common citizens who left their homes and regular activities to go off to war with their neighbors in hometown units. Among the militaristic Aztecs and others of the most war-like peoples near the time of the Spanish Conquest, certain special units were composed of essentially full-time professional soldiers, but that was not generally the case. However, some militia leaders no doubt spent much more time and energy in preparation for military campaigns than common soldiers did.

Uniforms, particularly colorful headgear, distinguished each unit (or at least the leaders). Just as at home, some features of everyday costumes worn by soldiers probably distinguished the inhabitants of one community or region from those living elsewhere. Of course all the men in a given unit spoke the same dialect. Leaders may have been more resourceful linguistically in order to interact with unit leaders from other areas, but then at home they likely dealt with a wider range of people in the marketplace or politically already.

Given the mass public source of manpower, most units were essentially duplicates of each other in function, although there were some units specialized by

weaponry, such as slingers and bowmen. Amassing a larger army meant mainly bringing together more bodies, not wider expertise. Overall command was in the hands of officers appointed by the central, overall ruler. Their aims and viewpoint were not as localized as those of the militia leaders. Motivation and experience as political leaders, not practiced combat abilities or special skills, probably were what distinguished leaders from those they led.

When approaching a battle, no doubt a general strategy of action was laid out to govern battlefield eventualities, but in the heat of attack or defense, changes in plans probably could not be communicated very effectively from the overall commander to his units. Weakness in the technology of communications hindered any attempt to send signals to units in battle beyond flags or standards, shouting, and hand signals.

Supplies were obtained in two ways. Some necessities, such as extra weapons, were brought from the home base. A support camp moved along with the armed units. It consisted of less able warriors, servants, or slaves as bearers, plus the families of some of the soldiers. Their women prepared food in the field for the troops much as they would have done at home. Food carried along was supplemented by requiring local leaders of the unfortunate populace through whose area the troops moved to provide whatever was needed, as a kind of war tax on the locals.

Typically an Aztec expeditionary army numbered approximately eight thousand men. Special military orders were on permanent service and served as the shock troops; men qualified for them by the number of captives they had taken and the valor of their deeds. Each city had its own army, which marched under a common banner. Men from the same ward or sector in a city formed subunits in a municipal army. A squad was made up of four tactical units, each with four or five men in it.⁸⁸

AZTEC MILITARY ORGANIZATION	
UNIT	LEADER ROLE
Combined Aztec Army	King—Commander in Chief Commanding General
Army of City	?Chief Captain
Army of "Ward"	?Captain
Unit of 400	Veteran Warrior
Unit of 200	Veteran Warrior
Unit of 100	Veteran Warrior
Squad	Veteran Warrior
Tactical Unit	Veteran Warrior



Great Aztec leaders shown in this scene from the Codex Mendoza are dressed in their distinctive garb, which distinguished their hometown, ethnic affiliation, and individual honors won in battle.

VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon mentions features of military organization that sound Mesoamerican: (1) the strength and skill of individual warriors are the key to victory (see, for example, Alma 52:31) rather than overall numbers, organization, or strategy; (2) using the plural word *armies* as well as the singular *army* (for example, compare Alma 52:20 and 51:30) indicates in some cases the combining of regional groups, each constituting an army, to form a complex host of armies; (3) the lack of extensive training and the brittle nature of military leadership comes through in places in the text like Alma 48:5 and 49:25, where the slaying of leaders produced chaos in the ranks; (4) the camp accompanying an army is mentioned several times (for example, see Alma 49:12); (5) dependence

on supply columns from the home area is also indicated (see Alma 55:34; 57:8–10).

Of particular note regarding organization is Mormon's account of the final Nephite battle. He refers to twenty-three different units of ten thousand that were destroyed: "And Lamah had fallen with his ten thousand; and Gilgal had fallen with his ten thousand," and so on (Mormon 6:14). In later Mexico, similar language was used about leaders and their units of ten thousand.⁸⁹ Furthermore, among the Tlaxcalan forces at the time of Cortez, a commander often tied his "great standard" or identifying banner to his own back, so that his men could visually follow him. That custom recalls Captain Moroni's use of the title of liberty flag to rally his followers (see Alma 46:12, 19–21).⁹⁰



Glyphs on an observatory known as Mound J at Monte Alban, Oaxaca, (after 200 B.C.) show human heads upside down to denote towns conquered by the rulers of Monte Alban. Some scholars see those rulers as having originated in Chiapas.⁹⁰ Their expansion from south of the isthmus into the more northerly portion of Mesoamerica recalls the migration documented in Helaman 3:3–5, which occurred a little before the Christian era.

A scene from the Cuicatec Codex Fernandez-Leal depicts different aspects of a minor battle. A fortified hill is being attacked as reinforcements arrive by back trails. They are probably militiamen reporting directly from their homes.



Battle and Conquest

As already indicated, Mesoamerican warfare generally was characterized by what appears to modern observers to be disorganized confusion. An enemy attack was often more what we might call a raid than planned, pitched combat. There was esteem to be gained by exhibiting individual acts of valor; to help win a battle was of secondary significance.

Heavy vegetation and broken terrain, at least in many parts of Mesoamerica, contributed to confusion on the battlefield. What was happening to units other than one's own probably couldn't be observed very well. In any case, a commander's place was at the front, in the middle of the action, literally leading his men. So without close coordination, once a battle began, the outcome was a summation of what happened in personal conflicts.

The strategic aim of battle was not to destroy the enemy force but to compel them to abandon the fight. Of course there may have been men involved who enjoyed

slaying for itself, but the cultural norm was to stop the destruction as soon as both sides recognized the victory of one over the other. At that point, victors as well as vanquished pulled back and tried to restore peace. The victorious army then took key prisoners or perhaps killed a few symbolic leaders, especially if they had a record of rebellion. They burned one or more temples as a means of demonstrating the superiority of the winners' gods and then retired from the field after ensuring that a hefty tribute would be delivered.

Despite this pattern of ritual combat and posturing that characterized most Mesoamerican fighting, systematic slaughter with heavy casualties was not unknown. Ixtlilxochitl, the Aztec chronicler, claimed that the Tultecas under Topiltzin lost 5,600,000 slain over a three-year period.⁹¹ Although small-scale tactics dominated battle action, large-scale strategy was significant in certain cases. The careful planning of defensive fortifications and cultivation of allies, for instance, allowed both the Tarascans and Tlaxcalans to avoid for generations falling to Aztec conquest.



From the Codex Mendoza we see the torching of temples, the culminating act of conquest in pre-Hispanic Mexico.



The throbbing confusion of hand-to-hand battle is shown dramatically in this mural at Bonampak near the border of Mexico and Guatemala. It dates to about A.D. 800.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

A majority of the military actions reported in the Book of Mormon involved little or no combat but rather threats and acting out.⁹² Very typical of Mesoamerica is the pattern reported in Mosiah 19:12–5. In the face of a raid in force by the Lamanites, the outnumbered Zeniffites put up little resistance. Some of their men fled but were finally forced to surrender and pay an extortionate tribute. Alma, 's people likewise had to take a pacifying stance when a Lamanite-Amulonite force stumbled upon their land of Helam (see Mosiah 23:25–6). The same phenomenon, on a much larger

scale, was evident when the Lamanites led by Coriantumr, caught the defenders of Zarahemla off balance and conquered them quickly (see Helaman 1:14–22). The Lamanite attacks on Ammonihah were of the same ilk (see Alma 16:2–3 and 49:1–25).

In contrast, Amalickiah's ambitious plan for conquest of the narrow neck of land and Moroni, 's thoughtful defensive scheme involved grand strategy, contrary to the general rule (see Alma 51:22–30). And, obviously, the final slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Nephites in the fourth century

was out of character, although not without parallel in the Mesoamerican tradition.

The political importance of towers in the Book of Mormon made them an obvious military target. The prototype for the Jaredites was the "great tower" in Mesopotamia (Ether 1:3, 33; compare Genesis 11:4). Not surprisingly, when Moroni, 's army smashed the forces of the king-men, the rebel leaders "were compelled to hoist the title of liberty upon their towers" (Alma 51:20; compare 46:36), perhaps after the sacred houses atop the towers were burned.

Weapons and Armor

Mesoamerican weaponry gives the appearance of being less efficient than that of, say, the Romans with their abundant metal armaments. But the appearance is deceptive, for death was as effectively dealt out in the one place as in the other. When it came to butchery, simple technology seems to have been sufficient if not efficient.

The most fearsome piece in the armory was the obsidian-edged sword. This device was used for over twenty-five hundred years. It consisted of a flat hardwood club with grooves in the edges into which razor-sharp fragments of obsidian or volcanic glass were inserted and glued. The Spaniards were horrified by its power. They learned to their dismay that a single blow with one of these weapons could sever the head of a horse or, of course, a man. Being both effective and quite cheap to make, this *macuabuiltl* (the Aztec name; the Spaniards called it simply "sword") was the instrument most often wielded in Mesoamerican fighting.

In close combat, knives whose blades were chipped from obsidian came into play. Some of those were almost big enough to qualify as swords. There were also axes of several shapes and a variety of clubs. Several types of spears—one also lined at the point with obsidian chips—or javelins were included in the repertoire of weapons.

The bow and arrow were in use too, although the Mesoamerican bow was not as sophisticated as the best ones in the Old World. For long-distance firepower, the *atlal*, or spear-thrower, was used. It functioned as an extension of the user's arm. The end of a long arrow or small spear was butted against a carved projection at the end of this stick, and the arrow was propelled as the device was swung forward. It achieved greater velocity and range because the thrower's arm was, in effect, eighteen inches or so longer than the man's arm alone. While the spear-thrower was known very anciently in both the Old and New Worlds as a hunting device, it was in Mesoamerica where it came to be used most widely in warfare.

There was some use of metal, mainly in axes, but it was not a frequently used and

certainly not a decisive material. One reason may be that the Mesoamericans' knowledge of metallurgy could not produce long-lasting cutting edges. Or the difficulty or cost of preparing metal weapons may have prevented their wide use.

Armor was also in widespread use. The most common type seems to have been a garment composed of two layers of cloth, quilted, between which salt, kapok, or some other buffering substance had been placed. Various other devices were also used—shields, breastplates, and headgear including helmets.⁹⁴ The Spaniards found a few native chiefs who possessed certain items of armor made with metal plates, but since that seemed to have been of gold (alloy?), perhaps it was for mainly ceremonial, not practical, purposes.

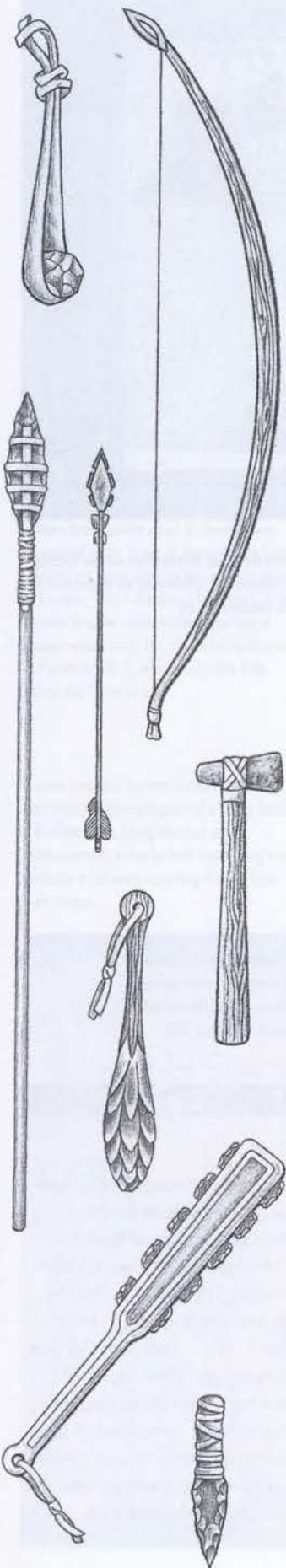


VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

All the weapons employed in native Mesoamerica may be referred to in the Book of Mormon. Often the connections are obvious (for example, "spears," Alma 17:7). Certain other names of weapons in that text (for example, "axe" and "sword") leave us unclear in both the Nephite record, as in Spanish descriptions of native weapons that speak, vaguely, about the appearance and function of the mentioned weapons. Yet enough plausible matchups are apparent that seeing Mesoamerican weapons gives us valuable clues to understand those of the Nephites.⁹⁵

Given the generally tropical climate of this land (see Alma 51:33), more often than not the warriors described in the Book of Mormon went on their campaigns with little clothing (note Alma 3:5 and 44:18). However, armor was donned when combat was imminent. Noteworthy in comparison with Mesoamerica are the "very thick garments" worn as armor by the Lamanites and Nephites (Alma 49:6; see 43:19–20).

An interesting statement is found in Alma 49:19 where the Nephites are said to have been "casting over . . . arrows" at the enemy on the other side of a fortification (see also Alma 49:4). The arrows used with bows would not have been "cast," but the verb would be correct if applied to the larger projectiles propelled by Mesoamerican spear-throwers.

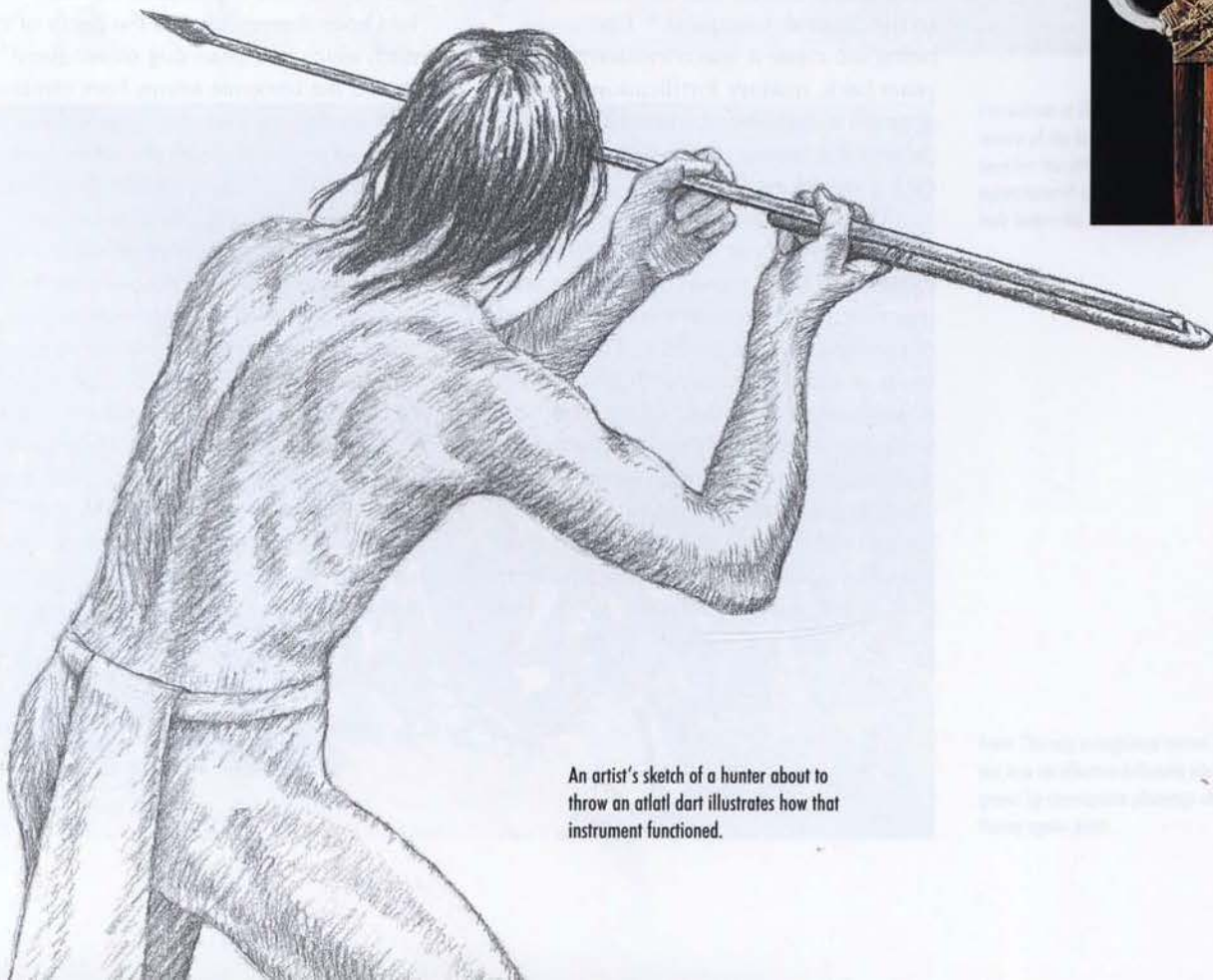




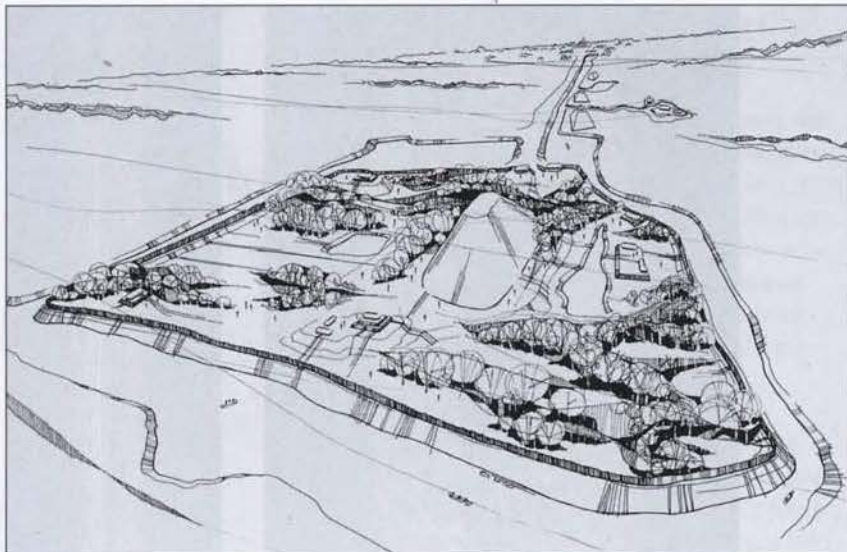
A figurine of Late Pre-Classical age (the late centuries B.C. to A.D. 300) from west Mexico pictures a man preparing to use his sling to cast a stone. Of course the sling was spun in a circle over the warrior's head before one side of the leather holder was released to allow the projectile to sail toward its mark.



A beautiful museum specimen of an Aztec warrior's spear-thrower is seen in one photograph, and the other shows the intricate detail of the hook against which the butt of the arrow or spear rested. Most atlatls would have looked much more workaday, of course.



An artist's sketch of a hunter about to throw an atlatl dart illustrates how that instrument functioned.



An artist's perspective drawing displays how a drainage system was turned into a moat that enclosed a fortress at the site of Edzna in the state of Campeche. It dates to about the time of the final Nephite wars, although surely not a Nephite construction.

Fortifications

Not many years ago archaeologists were confident that very rarely were sites in pre-Spanish Mesoamerica fortified. The last twenty-five years have seen a huge body of data come to light to the contrary. We now know of over three hundred places that were fortified or sited in relation to protective terrain, and they date from no later than 1000 B.C. up to the Spanish Conquest.⁹⁶ Instead of being the rarity it was considered a few years back, military fortification now appears to have been a normal cultural pattern for Mesoamerica with many interesting variations.

The most basic form was begun by digging a dry moat. The earth from the excavation was thrown up to form an inner embankment. Atop that a palisade of tree trunks was erected. The combined moat and bank provided defenders a downward sloping field of fire for their weapons that gave them substantial advantage over attackers. When Cortez crossed southern Mexico on his way to conquer Honduras, he discovered constructions just like this on the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico. In the 1970s, work

by David Webster for Tulane University showed examples of precisely the same setup in the interior Yucatan Peninsula that were built between A.D. 250 and 450. Other, still earlier, examples have since shown that this is both an old and presumably an effective mode of site defense.

A number of other types of fortification also existed. Vertical stone-faced walls sometimes exceeded the height of a man. A defensive garrison or whole settlement might be placed atop a steep hill, on a dry spot in a swamp, or on a site partially protected by the steep bank of a stream. Walls of thorny brush or cactus plants could also be employed.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon describes some of the same forms of fortifications. In the simplest type, the Nephites "cast up dirt around about to shield them" (Alma 49:2; see 49:4). "The highness of the bank which had been thrown up, and the depth of the ditch which had been dug round about" prevented the Lamanite enemy from climbing over or digging away the ridge without being exposed to deadly fire from above (Alma 49:18; 49:22). A refined form had "works of timbers built up to the height of a man" (Alma 50:2) atop the earthen ridge. Protected towers were erected overlooking those palisades from which defenders could gain even more height to rain down weapons against attackers (see Alma 50:3–5). The original city of Nephi had a stone wall around it, apparently modeled upon the wall at Jerusalem in Israel (Nephi, the city's founder, had firsthand knowledge of Jerusalem) (see Mosiah 22:6), and the Nephite armies also constructed small stone-walled redoubts to protect garrisons (see Alma 48:8).



Excavations at Becán, a Maya site in the middle of the Yucatan peninsula, provides the basis for this artist's reconstruction of the appearance of a dry maat and wall that dates back before the end of the Nephite era.

From Tlaxcala in highland central Mexico we see how an effective defensive barrier could be grown by appropriate plantings of the very thorny agave plant.