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Archaeology and the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: The author reviews archaeological evidences of the Book of Mormon and other finds that clarify understanding of the Book of Mormon. The subjects reviewed include: ancestry of the American Indian, the calendar, iron, elephants, and horses.

Archaeology and the Book of Mormon

by Paul R. Cheesman*



Macchu Picchu, Peru (pre-Columbian)

Archaeology is a division of science which classifies the material remains of man's past. These material remains of human workmanship, and their uses in the societies to which they belonged, construct a picture through which the scientist has tried to recreate as accurately as possible the story of early man. The accuracy of the story depends upon the accuracy of scientific procedure in unearthing the facts of history.

Let us view such a study in relation to the Book of Mormon. In archaeological research we concern ourselves with the historical authentication of the Book of Mormon, not the theological. However, certain artifacts and findings have helped in understanding many ancient religious ordinances.

Before undertaking a study of archaeology and the Book of Mormon, there are some facts which need to be understood:

1. The science of archaeology was not in existence in 1830. It did not really get under way until the late 1800's. Even the development of the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was not promoted until 1850.

2. It was not until 1910 that the existence of advanced cultures in Mesoamerica before 400 A.D. (Book of Mormon times) was archaeologically established. (See *UAS Newsletter*, 6.2 and 22.01. University Archaeological Society: Provo, Utah.)

Ancestry of the American Indian

We do not know how many groups came to North and South America prior to Columbus. The Book of Mormon records only three groups: the Jaredites, Lehi's group, and the Mulekites. That other groups, some with Mongoloid characteristics, were here, is accepted by most archaeologists. (*UAS Newsletter* 70.1.) Recorded in the Book of Mormon are several scriptures which indicate that other groups were in evidence. (See 1 Nephi 17; 2 Nephi 1:5-12; Mosiah 21:25, 26; Alma 31:35; 46:22; Helaman 3:5.)

How the Groups Arrived

The Book of Mormon records that the Jaredite immigrants and Lehi's colonists came to the New World by way of marine navigation. It is not clear which route or even which ocean they traveled. Ideas of their routes of travel by Book of Mormon scholars must at this time be speculative. These speculations can only be substantiated through

(For Course 12, lessons of January 12 and 19, "A Leader Has Faith" and "A Leader Serves the Lord"; for Course 14, lessons of December 8, 15, and 29, and January 5, "Book of Mormon"; for Course 16, lesson of January 19, "Other Scriptures"; for Course 18, lessons of February 2 to 16, "The Book of Mormon," "Getting Acquainted with the Book of Mormon," and "Distinctive Characteristics of the Book of Mormon"; for Course 30, lesson of November 3, "Divinity of Book of Mormon"; and of general interest.)

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further, more definite archaeological findings or by further revelation from God.

Among the early immigrants, Lehi's colonists left us with the most complete record of their travels, suggesting that they came across the Pacific.

Welby W. Ricks has offered some research concerning the claim of the traditions recorded by the early Spanish priests that the area of Panuco, near Tampico on the Gulf Coast in northern Veracruz, was the landing place of some of the early inhabitants. Some think that this refers to the Mulekites; however, all this is speculative. (*UAS Newsletter* 36.1.)

Geography of the Book of Mormon

The geography of a country always helps us to understand its people better. Evidently it was not considered of prime importance to the writers of the Book of Mormon, however, since sufficient detailed information is not provided for us to determine with certainty the location of the areas or cities of the history. This should not discourage continuous study in this field, since future findings may help to establish the geography and thus clarify some aspects of the Book of Mormon.

There are those who believe that there are two Hill Cumorahs. Their theory is that the hill on which Mormon fought the last battle with the Lamanites is not the same hill in which Joseph Smith found the gold plates. Advocates of this theory establish their analysis primarily from the internal evidences of the Book of Mormon. Others conclude that there is only one Hill Cumorah, and that the place where Joseph Smith and Moroni met was the same place Mormon and Moroni visited in the fifth century. There is no official Church view.

Some say the "narrow neck of land" is Panama, and others the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico. The landing place of Lehi is still unknown. (*UAS Newsletter* 6.2, 22.00, 46.6, 80.1.)

That some immigrants came by the Bering Strait is the most widely accepted theory among archaeologists regarding the early migrations. It could be true that some groups came across this Strait. The Book of Mormon does not say.

Perhaps the most interesting of all these comments is found in *Times and Seasons*. Joseph Smith, as editor of the paper, is responsible for this statement:

... *Central America, or Guatemala* [the whole of what we now call Central America was then known as Guatemala] *is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien [Panama] and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south. The city of Zarahemla, burnt at the crucifixion of the Savior, and rebuilt afterwards, stood upon this land*

*as will be seen from the following words in the book of Alma. . . .*¹

Commenting on this statement in an article published in *Progress in Archaeology*, Dr. Ross T. Christensen says:

"Here the prophet takes up the passage which speaks of 'a day and a half's journey for a Nephite.' (Alma 22:32.) Further on, he strongly speculates on the identity of the ruins of Zarahemla with those of Quiriguá, Guatemala, which had only recently been discovered.

"Now if the ruins of Zarahemla lie somewhere in what is now Central America, as the Prophet wrote, that fact automatically disqualifies the Panama theory, for the Nephite record makes it abundantly plain that that city was located in the land *southward*, whereas, in the Panama theory, Central America would be part of the land *northward*. If Joseph Smith was correct in these statements, then Zarahemla cannot have been in South America, nor can the Isthmus of Panama have been the 'small neck of land.'"²

American Indians in the Islands of the Pacific

The voyage of Thor Heyerdahl in *Kon Tiki* suggests that the ancient inhabitants of South and Central America were capable of building seagoing craft and crossing vast expanses of ocean. Heyerdahl theorizes:

1. Polynesia was first colonized about 500 A.D. by Caucasians from the area of South America.
2. Easter Island, the Marquesas, the Society Islands, and Tonga were originally white.
3. Early white colonizers went first to southern Mexico and Central America. Part then went to South America and thence to Polynesia. Blood groupings for Polynesians show they could have come from continental America. (*UAS Newsletter* 12, 70.4 and 53.60 tell about other raft journeys, substantiating the theory that the Polynesian Islands were originally inhabited by people from North and South America.)

Calendar

The ancestors of the American Indian established several advanced calendrical systems featuring a sacred almanac. In one system there were 18 months of 20 days each, plus a five-day holiday. They also took into account the leap year. One study indicates that the starting date of the sacred calendrical year was placed in April to commemorate the birthdate of Christ. (*UAS Newsletter* 31.0, 16.02, 44.01, 31.0.)

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¹*Times and Seasons*, Volume III, No. 23; October 1, 1842; page 927.
²*Progress in Archaeology*, compiled and edited by Ross T. Christensen; published at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1963; page 195.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

(Continued from preceding page.)

Religion

The monotheistic concept of God is found earliest in Mesoamerica. Tradition indicates that there was a great white spirit with a beard who once visited there. Many similarities point to the possibility of Quetzalcoatl of Mesoamerica and Virococha of Peru being Christ.

Reference is often also made to a god of war, pestilence, darkness, and the underworld. (Satan?)

Incense Burner

A horned type of incense burner quite common in the Near East about 1000 B.C., is very similar to the incense burners of highland Guatemala during its early periods. (UAS Newsletter 6.1, 44.00.)

Blood Groups

An excellent treatment of this subject has been given by Virgil Haws, who concludes that the blood types of the ancestor of the American Indian correspond not only to the Mongoloid, they seem to be related even more closely to blood types of the Mesopotamia area. We could draw the further conclusion that the American Indian of the time of Columbus and today is of multiple racial origin. (University Archaeological Society Miscellaneous Papers, No. 18, December 1956, by Virgil Haws, published at Brigham Young University.)

Iron

The Book of Mormon speaks of iron-working among its people. A book by Arlington H. Mallery, *Lost America, the Story of the Pre-Columbian Iron Age in America* (Washington, 1951), claims the discovery of prehistoric iron smelting furnaces in the Ohio Valley. There are also evidences of iron ore deposits in northern Peru. However, since iron oxidizes rapidly, there are only a few ancient evidences remaining; and thus the iron metallurgy mentioned in the Book of Mormon remains a major problem to Book of Mormon archaeologists.

Wheels

The Book of Mormon implies the use of wheels when it mentions chariots. No large utilitarian wheels have been found to date in pre-Columbian America. However, many wheeled toys have been found; and usually toys are made to resemble the real thing. These wheeled toys of Ancient America are remarkably similar to the wheeled toys of Mesopotamia. Many archaeologists acknowledge the apparent existence of the wheel principle, but they await future artifacts, larger and more practical, before speculating further.



Wheeled toy found in Mexico shows understanding of the wheel principle and is similar to the toys of Mesopotamia.

Theology

Many aspects of the religious service and theology of the American Indian are similar to the religion taught on eastern continents. Sacrifice, belief in final judgment, life after death, baptism, circumcision, fasting—all of these plus many other religious beliefs and practices have parallels in the life of the pre-Columbian Indian. (UAS Newsletter 57.70.)

Elephants

The Book of Mormon records that there were elephants in the Jaredite Period. (See Ether 9:19.) Archaeologists make little comment regarding these animals, except to recognize that mastodons and mammoths are known to have lived in North America prior to the Spaniard and the Indian. Skeletal remains of these animals were first thought to have come from around 8,000 B.C. Later studies brought them down to 4,000 B.C., and some have even brought them into Book of Mormon times. Although this is still a very speculative area, some substantial evidence has been found for their existence this late. The profile of two elephant heads on a stela in Copan, Honduras, and a bone clothes pin found in Peru carved with an animal resembling a baby elephant, have been some of the clues so far.

Horses

Facts upon which archaeologists agree concerning the horse are:

1. Horses were not here at the coming of the Europeans.
2. Remains of horses have been found at numerous ancient sites, such as La Brea in California, Tierra del Fuego in South America, Lagoa Santa in Brazil, and parts of Idaho. There has been no evidence to indicate that horses were used by man to ride upon.

3. It is commonly accepted that horses were here prior to the Indian.

The horse is mentioned in the Book of Mormon in several places, in both the Nephite and Jaredite records. It is interesting to note that nowhere does it mention that men ride the horses. In the war records, no reference to cavalry is found. Also there is no mention of horses after 3 Nephi. Could this be when the extinction started to take place?

Other Correlations

Following are a few miscellaneous traits of Mesoamerican culture (possibly the central Book of Mormon area) which correspond to the ancient Near East (before and after Lehi's day):

1. Highly developed cereal agriculture, including irrigation and fertilization; and possession of cotton and the gourd.

2. A highly organized, graded priesthood which was frequently the controlling force in a theocratic government.

3. Symbolism, including the Tree of Life, the serpent as a sign of wisdom, and the cat as a frequent artistic and religious motif.

4. Historical and genealogical records, often on paper.

5. Precious stones as a common form of wealth.

6. The umbrella as a symbol of divinity or rank.

7. Manufacture and use of purple dye from shellfish and scarlet dye from the cochineal insect.

8. Turbans in great variety.

Ancient Temple of Kukulcan, Chichen Itza, Mexico. Similar stepped pyramids are found in Mesopotamia and Egypt.



9. Advanced chronological and mathematical reckoning.

10. The use of the true arch. An example of this is found in La Muñeca, Mexico. The ancient American civilizations rarely employed the true arch; we do not know why, but we do know it was not because of ignorance.

The following list compares racial and cultural traits of Book of Mormon civilizations with archaeological findings about Mesoamerican civilizations:

1. The Jaredites are described in the Book of Mormon as "large and mighty men." Among the first civilized inhabitants of this continent were people whom the chroniclers galled "giants." (*UAS Newsletter*, Bul. No. 4.)

2. Jaredites had a knowledge of farming, pottery, and textiles; there is evidence that the first civilized Mesoamericans knew farming and the use of pottery and textiles.

3. Part of the Book of Mormon people were white. Evidences of bearded men with Hebrew noses have been found, suggesting characteristics of white Semitic man.

4. Temple buildings are in the form of pyramid structures or ziggurats, terminating in a flat area on top where there was built a place of worship. Examples of these stepped pyramids are in evidence in the Mesopotamia area. The use of the pyramid in Egypt to bury the honored dead is also duplicated in the structures of the American continents. Sun-baked bricks were basic building materials in both areas.

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An ancient corbeled arch in Labna ruins, Yucatan, Mexico. Ancient people knew about but seldom used the true arch.



ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

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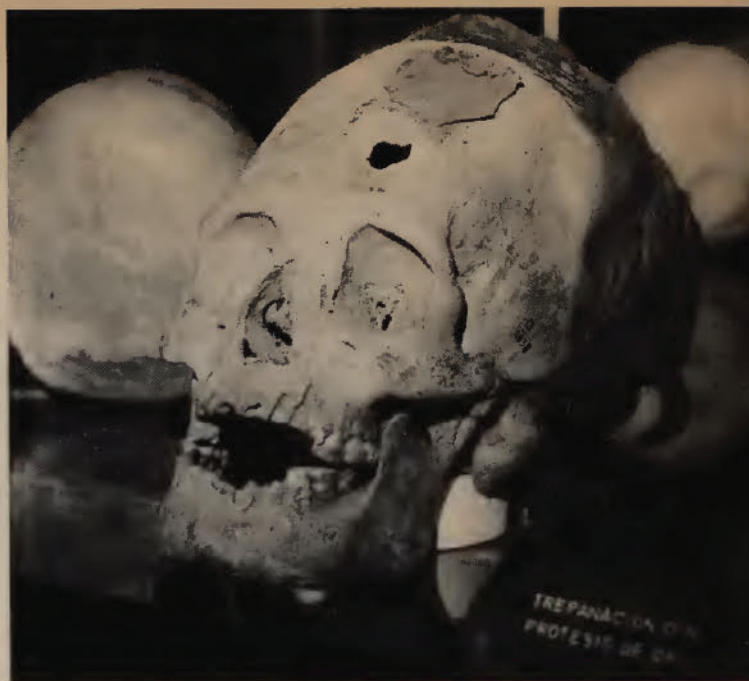
5. The Book of Mormon contains the dreams of Lehi and Nephi concerning the tree of life. The tree-of-life motif occurs in the ancient arts of the Old World. Tree-of-life symbols have been found in Central America as well as South America. Stela 5, Izapa, found in Chiapas, Mexico,³ seems to bear similarities to the story in the Book of Mormon and to Mesopotamian tree-of-life representations. Dr. Ross T. Christensen, Professor of Archaeology at Brigham Young University, has this to say regarding the Stela 5, Izapa, discovery:

"... The most direct and striking evidence in support of the Book of Mormon which has yet come forth from the science of archaeology. I do not know who carved this sculpture—whether the artist was a Nephite, a Lamanite, or of some other lineage—but whoever did it was beyond any doubt familiar with the story of Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life as recounted in 1 Nephi, chapter 8."⁴

³See "The Lehi Stone, Stela 5," by Richard O. Cowan, *The Instructor*, March, 1968, page 132.

⁴Quoted by permission of Dr. Christensen.

Sacrificial altar and inscribed stone slab are of the pre-Columbian period and were found in Tikal, Guatemala.



Advanced medical procedures are indicated by trephination of skull, with metal plate over wound. Found in Peru.

6. The cement used was of a very high quality. It is similar to the lime cement of today's civilization.

7. There has been considerable research done in the field of archaeology regarding the following points of interest:

1. hair composition,
2. skull measurements,
3. aqueducts,
4. burial methods,
5. tattoos,
6. walls around cities,
7. use of gold and silver,
8. building tools,
9. writing.

However, the results indicate that much more needs to be done before intelligent comparisons are to be made.

Summary and Conclusion

The findings of the scholars in this research field have been time-consuming and expensive. Study to date has only scratched the surface of this new science, and all theories may be altered when new writings and artifacts are uncovered.

The ancestor of the American Indian was not the uncivilized savage that Columbus found. Some aspects of early American civilization reached our level. Magnificent buildings, architecture, and art have been uncovered. Religious precepts and ordinances such as circumcision, sacrifice, and baptism, that could have only come from a revealed source, are evident.

Visual Aids

1. Catalogues are available listing the aids most valuable in supplementing lessons on this subject. They can be obtained by writing to: Book Clerk, Dept. of A. V. Communication, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Library File Reference: BOOK OF MORMON—ANTIQUITIES.