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Notes on the Cimeter (Scimitar) in the Book of Mormon

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William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill

To what Mesoamerican weapon could the Book of Mormon authors have been referring with the word *cimeter*? Since evidence on this matter is sparse and ambiguous, the following discussion should be viewed as preliminary speculations.

All references except Enos 1:20 mention it in conjunction with the sword, although many passages mention the sword without mentioning the scimitar. Note also that the earliest reference (fifth century B.C., Enos 1:20) is the single case where the cimeter is listed without the sword. The cimeter is here described as a Lamanite weapon, which might indicate that the weapon was of Lamanite origin. If this is true, the Nephites adopted the cimeter some time after the fifth century B.C. The cimeter is not mentioned after 51 B.C., despite the fact that there are references in Mormon 6:9 to swords and bows, the other major weapons of the Book of Mormon. This could be an arbitrary omission, but it could also indicate that the cimeter fell out of use sometime after the first century B.C. There is no detailed indication from the text as to how the cimeter was used or what type of wounds it inflicted, except one instance where “their [the Nephite’s] swords and their cimeters . . . brought death almost at every stroke” (Alma 43:37, ca. 74 B.C.), which could imply that the Book of Mormon cimeter was a cutting weapon.

There are three characteristics that distinguish the scim-

itar from an ordinary sword: it is sharp only on one side, its blade is curved, and it is used only to cut. Some of the same characteristics that distinguish a scimitar from a sword distinguish several different types of Mesoamerican melee weapons. Indeed, the early Spanish conquistadores and colonists correlated some Mesoamerican weapons with the scimitar. Antonio de Solis y Rivadeneyra relates that the Aztecs "had likewise long Swords, which they used with both Hands, as we do our Scimitars."¹

One of the earliest Mesoamerican candidates for the Book of Mormon scimitar is found in a Late Pre-Classic sculpture that shows a warrior holding in one hand a *macuahuitl*² and in the other a strange curved weapon (see fig. 3, p. 339 in chapter 15). It is impossible to say for certain what this item is supposed to represent. However, a similar weapon is known in India—the *haladi*.³ Note that this warrior holds both a *macuahuitl* sword and a curved weapon just as Zerahemnah is described in the Book of Mormon as being armed with.

In our opinion, however, the Book of Mormon cimeter should probably be identified with a curved, axlike weapon held by many of the figures in the Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza. It appears to be a curved piece of wood in the end of which was inserted obsidian or flint blades (see fig. 1).⁴ Although in appearance it is somewhat like an ax, it is structurally different, in that an ax has a straight shaft of wood with a blade mounted on the shaft, while this weapon has a curved shaft of wood with a blade mounted at the tip of the wood.

A final possible interpretation, although somewhat far-fetched, comes from the etymology of *šamšir*. According to medieval Persian lexicographers,⁵ *sāmsīr* derives from *sām*, "claw," and *šir*, "lion," thus meaning, "lion's claw," perhaps so designated because the blade curves like a lion's claw. This Persian term is similar in meaning to the Egyp-



Figure 1. Sketch of a possible Mesoamerican scimitar. This figure clearly shows the structure of the weapon as being different from the standard ax.

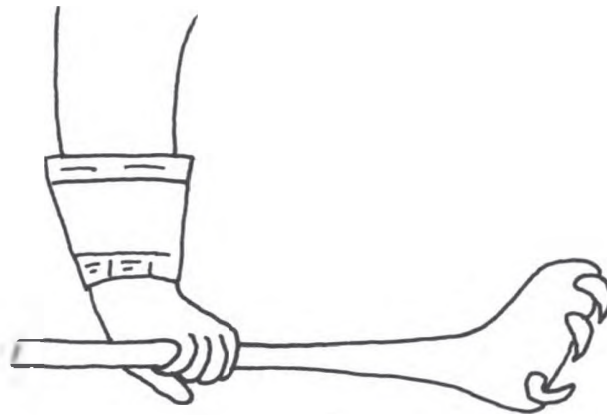


Figure 2. Jaguar claw mace, detail from Yaxchilan, lintel 6 (structure 1), ca. A.D. 750. In this figure, a jaguar claw has apparently been cut off and mounted on a piece of wood, or perhaps the entire forearm was severed and skinned, leaving the claw with the bone forearm as the haft of the weapon.

tian word for scimitar—*khopeš*—meaning “foreleg.”⁶ This suggests the Nephite word for scimitar (written in Reformed Egyptian) and reflects the appropriate, modern English term for a type of sickle sword that originated in the Near East several thousand years ago.

There is artistic and literary evidence showing that the

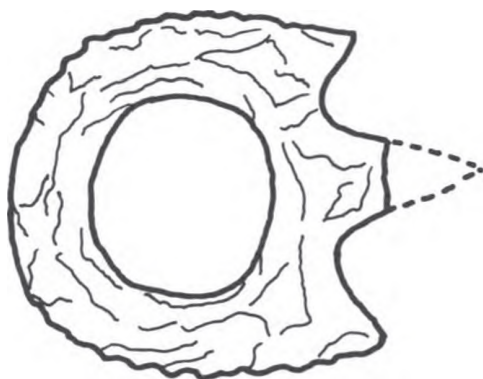


Figure 3. Flint "jaguar claw knife," Classic Period, Lel Palmar.

early Maya used severed jaguar claws mounted on sticks as weapons (see fig. 2) and fashioned imitation jaguar claws from stone and wood (see fig. 3).⁷ Similar weapons made in imitation of tiger claws, called *bagh nakh* (tiger claw) were also used in India.⁸ The jaguar claw weapon was in part ceremonial, perhaps being utilized by officers or by members of a jaguar martial society.⁹ There is a slight indication that the scimitar may have had a ritual or ceremonial function, for when Zerahemnah surrenders to Moroni, he gives him his sword, scimitar, and bow as token of his surrender (see Alma 44:8), although, of course, he may simply have been disarming himself. As mentioned above, although the scimitar is almost always paired with the sword in the Book of Mormon, there is no clear indication as to the type of wound it inflicted, so that a jaguar claw weapon cannot be precluded.

Notes

1. Cited in Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 15.

2. On this term, see William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, "Swords in the Book of Mormon," in this volume.

3. See George C. Stone, *A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration,*

and Use of Arms and Armor (New York: Jack Brussel, 1961; reprint of 1931 ed.), 275a, fig. 342.

4. For dozens of examples, see Earl H. Morris, Jean Charlot, and Ann A. Morris, *The Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza, Yucatan* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, pub. #406, 1931), vol. 2, pl. 77, 79, and so on.

5. As summarized by Francis J. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 760a.

6. For a discussion of the scimitar in the Near East, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Scimitars, Cimeters!" in this volume.

7. Compare discussion by Prescott H. F. Follett, "War and Weapons of the Maya," *Middle American Papers, Middle American Research Series*, Publication No. 4 (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1932), 388–89, and his figs. 29–33. Other examples can be seen in Merle Greene, Robert L. Rands, and John A. Graham, *Maya Sculpture* (Berkeley: Lederer, Street & Zeus, 1972), 68–69, pl. 28; 334–35, pl. 159; and Sylvanus G. Morley and George W. Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, rev. by Robert J. Sharer, 4th ed. (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1983), 293, fig. 11.20.

8. See Stone, *Glossary*, 86–87, fig. 109, #7.

9. On the use of the jaguar "claw knife" among the Maya in ceremonial situations, see Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 292, fig. 11.20 (Temple III, Tikal, ninth century A.D.) and 430, fig. 13.35 (Late Post-Classic ceramic). In Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), 205, and in Delia Goetz, tr., *The Annals of the Cakchiquels and Title of the Lords of Totonicapan* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 177 and 183, jaguar claws are mentioned as part of the royal equipment. On martial societies in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon, see John A. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), 300–309.