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Eyewitness Descriptions of Mesoamerican Swords

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EYEWITNESS DESCRIPTIONS OF MESOAMERICAN SWORDS

*"And it came to pass that thousands . . .
did take up their swords in the defence of
their freedom, that they might not
come into bondage." (Alma 62:5)*

Recent scholarship on Book of Mormon warfare suggests that the Mesoamerican weapon, the *macuahuitl*, fits the criteria for the Book of Mormon "sword."¹ Recent critics of this position have argued that the comparison is faulty. The *macuahuitl*, they argue, was merely a club studded with obsidian. "Such flexible interpretations," insists one recent critic, "suggest a lack of methodological rigor on the part of those already certain of the Book of Mormon's ancient historicity."² It is noteworthy that early chroniclers of Mesoamerican culture such as Duran and Clavijero unashamedly describe this weapon as a sword. Modern Mesoamerican historians commonly use similar terminology.³ In order to shed additional light on the issue I have provided extracts from Spanish accounts of those who encountered this weapon in battle. As these examples clearly demonstrate, these witnesses almost universally describe the *macuahuitl* as a "sword," and in some cases these same witnesses distinguish between several kinds of swords.

Christopher Columbus

The Admiral thanked God for having shown him in a moment samples of all the goods of that country without exertion or exposing his men to any danger. He ordered such things to be taken as he judged most handsome and valuable, such as . . . *long wooden swords* with a groove on each side where the edge should be, in which cutting edges of flint were fixed with thread and bitumen (*these swords cut naked men as if they were of steel*).⁴

Bernal Diaz

Many bands of Indians came along the coast from the town of Champoton, as it is called, wearing cotton armour to the knees, and carrying bows and arrows, lances and shields, *swords which appeared to be two-handed*, slings and stones.

Then they attacked us hand to hand, some with lances and some shooting arrows, and others with their *two-handed cutting swords*.

They were carrying their usual weapons: bows, arrows, lances of various sizes, some of which were as large as ours; shields, *swords single and double handed*, and slings and stones.

Then they attacked us with their *two-handed cutting swords*.

When we met the enemy bands and companies, . . . they were armed with large bows and arrows, spears and shields, *swords like our two-handed swords*, and slings and stones.

They carried *two-handed swords*, shields, lances, and feather plumes. Their *swords*, which were as long as *broadwords*, were made of flint which cut worse than a knife, and the blades were so set that one could neither break them nor pull them out.

They put up so good a defence that they wounded some of our horses with their *swords* and lances.

These Indians put up a good fight with their arrows and fire-hardened darts, and did wonders with their *two-handed swords*.

But the passage was very difficult, for the Indians' shooting was extremely good, and they did us great damage with their spears and *broadwords*.

We did not dare break our formations, however, for any of our soldiers who was bold enough to break ranks and pursue their *swordmen* or captains was immediately wounded and in great danger.

While we were at grips with this great army and their *dreadful broadwords*, many of the most powerful among the enemy seem to have decided to capture a horse. They began with a furious attack, and laid hands on a good mare well trained both for sport and battle. Her rider, Pedro de Moron, was a fine horseman; and as he charged with three other horsemen into the enemy ranks—they had been instructed to charge together for mutual support—some of them seized his lance so that he could not use it, and others slashed at him with their *broadwords*, wounding him severely. Then they slashed at his mare, cutting her head at the neck so that it only hung by the skin. The mare fell dead, and if his mounted comrades had not come to Moron's rescue, he would probably have been killed also.

Their *swordsmen* and spearmen pressed us hard, and closed with us bravely, shouting and yelling as they came.

Their charging *swordsmen* were repelled by stout thrusts from our *swords*, and did not close in on us so often as in the previous battle.

Then their *swordsmen* made a sudden attack on the fourth side, in the positive certainty that they would be

able to carry off some of our men for sacrifice. But God provided otherwise.

Cortes gave them a mild answer. . . . "When I remember seeing us surrounded by so many companies of the enemy, and watching the play of their *broadswords* at such close quarters, even now I am terrified. When they killed the mare with a single *sword-stroke* we were defeated and lost, and at that same moment I was more aware of your matchless courage than ever before."

Montezuma had two houses stocked with every sort of weapon; many of them were richly adorned with gold and precious stones. There were shields large and small, and *a sort of broadsword, and two-handed swords set with flint blades that cut much better than our swords.*

Then they described the weapons which the Mexicans used: . . . *flint-edged two-handed swords.*

At a difficult pass they attacked us with their *broad-swords*, killing two of our soldiers and one horse, and wounding almost all the rest.

And the dogs fought back furiously, dealing us wounds and death with their lances and their *two-handed swords.*

The Tlascalans became like very lions. With their *swords, their two-handed blades, and other weapons* which they had just captured, they fought most valiantly and well.

Some of their captains carried scythe-like lances made from the swords they had captured from us during the slaughter on the causeway; others had long straight gleaming lances, which were also made from captured swords. Then there were archers and warriors with double-headed javelins, and with slings and stones, and their *two-handed swords.*

The soldier Olea had been badly wounded by three *sword-cuts* and was losing blood.

The ensigns waved their banners and standards, and all carried bows and arrows, *two-handed swords*, javelins, and spear-throwers. Some also had *double-edged swords* and long or short lances.

The Mexicans had erected many barricades and ramparts, so that it was impossible to cross except by swimming. Whenever an attempt was made hosts of warriors were waiting for our men with arrows and slings and their *various kinds of swords* and lances.

Many Indians were attacking us, with swords captured when Cortes was defeated or with flint-edged *broad-swords*, trying to prevent us from rescuing the launch.⁵

Antonio de Solis y Rivadeneyra

They had likewise long *Swords*, which they used with both Hands, as we do our Scimitars or Falchions, made of Wood, in which they fixed sharp Flints.⁶

Andres de Tapia

As the Spaniards tried to capture one of them to find out where they were from, the Indians with two blows of their *swords* killed two horses, and also wounded two Spaniards, and so defended themselves that not one of them was taken alive.

The marqués ordered all the arms taken out of the arsenal we have mentioned, which were bows and arrows, spears and slings, and *wooden swords* with flint blades. There were about five hundred cartloads, and he had them burned.⁷

Juan Diaz

This Indian gave us signs of a place with many islands where there were caravels and men like ourselves, except they had large ears, and he said they had *swords* and shields, and that there were many other provinces there.⁸

Hernan Cortes

Two horsemen who had gone on in front of me perceived several Indians wearing the feathers which they are accustomed to wear in time of war, together with *swords* and shields.⁹

They had neither arrows, darts nor stones with which to resist us, and they were fighting against our allies armed with *swords* and shields.¹⁰

Francisco de Auguilar

They used . . . cudgels and *swords* and a great many bows and arrows. . . . One Indian at a single stroke cut open the whole neck of Cristóbal de Olid's horse, killing the horse. The Indian on the other side slashed at the second horseman and the blow cut through the horse's pastern, whereupon this horse also fell dead.

As soon as this sentry gave the alarm, they all ran out with their weapons to cut us off, following us with great fury, shooting arrows, spears and stones, and wounding us with their *swords*. Here many Spaniards fell, some dead and some wounded, and others without any injury who fainted away from fright.¹¹

The Anonymous Conquistador

They have *swords* that are like *broadswords*, but their hilts are not quite so long and are three fingers wide; they are made of wood with grooves into which they fit hard stone blades which cut like a Tolosa blade. One day an Indian I saw in combat with a mounted horseman struck the horse in the chest, cutting through to the inside and killing the horse on the spot. On the same day I saw another Indian give a horse a *sword* thrust in the neck that laid the horse dead at his feet.

In another part they cut the stones for knives and *swords*, which is something very interesting to see, and they also make *swords* and shields.¹²

Research by Matthew Roper, originally published in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 150–58; for more information on Mesoamerican swords, see his “Swords and ‘Cimeters’ in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 34–43.

NOTES

1. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 262–63; William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, “Swords in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 329–51; John L. Sorenson, “Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!” review of “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” by Deanne G. Matheny, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 324–31; William J. Hamblin, “An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe’s Assumptions and Methodologies,” review of “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity,” by Brent L. Metcalfe, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 481–83; and most recently Matthew Roper, “Swords and ‘Cimeters’ in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 35–43.

2. Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity,” *Dialogue* 26/3 (1993): 161 n. 27.

3. See Hubert H. Bancroft, *The Native Races of the Pacific States* (San Francisco: Bancroft, 1883), 2:409–10; Philip Drucker, *La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, no. 153 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952), 202; Maurice Collis, *Cortés and Montezuma* (New York: Avon Books, 1954), 41, 91, 94, 97, 202; Jon M. White, *Cortés and the Downfall of the Aztec Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1971), 115; Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 33, 45, 50, 75, 80–86, 90, 92, 96, 101–2, 111, 116, 121, 143, 172, 290 n. 67; Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 7, 112–14, 122–23, 126–27, 137–39, 150–51, 153, 160, 162, 172–73,

177; Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 237.

4. Samuel E. Morison, trans. and ed., *Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (New York: Heritage, 1963), 327; italics added.

5. Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Folio Society, 1974), 22, 29, 72, 75, 125–26, 127, 130, 133, 138, 180, 197, 260–61, 262, 292–94, 304, 321, 328.

6. Antonio de Solís y Rivadeneyra, cited in Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 15.

7. Andrés de Tapia, untitled account, in *The Conquistadors: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. and trans. Patricia de Fuentes (New York: Orion, 1963), 29, 42.

8. Juan Díaz, untitled account, in *The Conquistadors*, 9.

9. Hernando Cortés, Second Letter, 30 October 1520, in *Hernando Cortés: Five Letters, 1519–1526*, trans. J. Bayard Morris (1928; reprint, New York: Norton, 1991), 41.

10. Hernando Cortés, Third Letter, 15 May 1522, in *Hernando Cortés*, 224.

11. Francisco de Auguilar, untitled account, in *The Conquistadors*, 139–40, 155.

12. The Anonymous Conquistador, untitled account, in *ibid.*, 169, 179.