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Mesoamerican "Cimeters" in Book of Mormon Times

The Book of Mormon first mentions a weapon called a *cimeter* during the time of Enos (some time between about 544 and 421 BC). Speaking of his people's Lamanite enemies, Enos says, "their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax" (Enos 1:20). Later, in the first and second centuries BC, the weapon was part of the armory of both Nephites and Lamanites in addition to swords and other weapons (Mosiah 9:16; 10:8; Alma 2:12; 43:18, 20, 37; 60:2; Helaman 1:14).

The term *cimeter* (spelling standardized in more recent English as *scimitar*) was, as Webster's

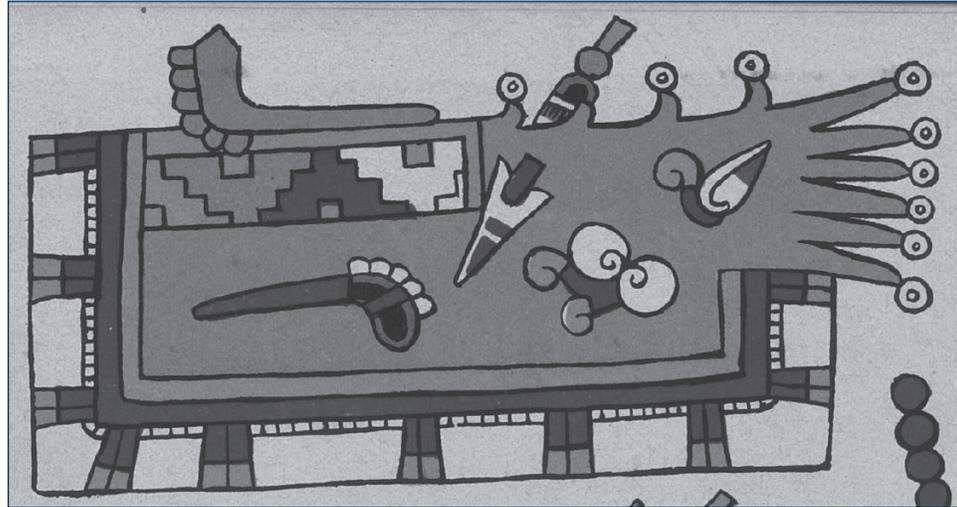
1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defines it, "a short sword with a convex edge."

Although once considered an anachronism in the Book of Mormon,¹ recent research and discoveries show that scimitars are now known to have been a significant weapon in pre-Columbian warfare.²

Military historian Ross Hassig has identified a curved weapon known from postclassic Mesoamerican art which he calls a "short sword." Approximately 50-centimeters (20 inches) long, this weapon was a "curved [wooden] sword with obsidian blades along each edge."³ Like the *macana* or *macuahuitl* sword used by the Aztecs, it had a deadly cutting edge. In contrast to crushing weapons like clubs, it "carried more cutting surface, and each blade was backed by the wooden base that provided direct support; it was an excellent slasher and yet the forward curve of the sword retained some aspects of a crusher when used curved end forward."⁴

Hassig suggests that the weapon was a postclassic Toltec innovation. However, additional examples of such curved dagger and sword blades are also known at classic sites such as Comitan (before AD 1000) and at Teotihuacan (circa AD 450). A monument from Tonina, Mexico, which dates to AD 613, shows a noble posing with a curved "scimitar-like

flint blade."⁵ A figurine found today in the Museo Regional de Campeche, which is probably from this period, portrays a warrior wearing a death mask who grasps an unhappy captive in his right hand and a curved weapon in his raised left hand with which he is about to decapitate his victim. The weapon in the figure's left hand has been called



This drawing from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall shows two curved weapons with triangular blades set into the sides. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

an ax by some scholars, but given its form it could appropriately be called a scimitar.⁶ Curved swords of varied forms are also found on preclassic monuments at Loltun, Izapa and La Venta, Mexico, and at Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala.⁷

Most recently, examples of such curved scimitar swords have been discovered on several monuments at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo in southern Veracruz (dated 1500–900 BC). Monument 112 at this site portrays a figure who carries in his belt a curved dagger.⁸ Archaeologist Anne Cyphers, currently the leading archaeologist at the site, notes that Monument 78 shows a "macana" that "has a curved body with eleven triangular elements encrusted in the sides."⁹ San Lorenzo Monument 91 also displays "an object in the form of a curved *macana* with 14 triangular points" including one on the tip.¹⁰ By its design, clearly this is the same form of curved weapon found in later postclassic art. These examples suggest that curved-bladed weapons or scimitars were not a late innovation in Mesoamerican arms, but were known from preclassic times just as the text of the Book of Mormon suggests. ■

by Matthew Roper

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Notes

1. “Cimeters were curved swords used by the Persians, Arabs, and Turks, half a world away from America and appearing a thousand years too late in history to enter the picture.” Gordon H. Fraser, *Joseph Smith and the Gold Plates: A Close Look at the Book of Mormon* (Eugene, OR: Industrial Litho, 1978), 58. On the early use of scimitars in the ancient Near East see William J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East to 1600 BC: Holy Warriors at the Dawn of History* (London: Routledge, 2006), 66–71; Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Scimitars, Cimeters! We Have Scimitars! Do We Need Another Cimeter?” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 352–59.

2. Matthew Roper, “Swords and ‘Cimeters’ in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 41–43; see also William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, “Notes on the Cimeter (Scimitar) in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 360–64.

3. Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 23.

4. Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 113.

5. Mary Miller and Simon Martin, *Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 188, pl. 106.

6. Linda Schele, *Hidden Faces of the Maya* ([Poway, CA]: ALTI, 1997), 100–101.

7. Roper, “Swords and ‘Cimeters’ in the Book of Mormon,” 34–43.

8. Ann Cyphers, *Escultura Olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004), 190, fig. 126.

9. Cyphers, *Escultura Olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, 145.

10. Cyphers, *Escultura Olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán*, 159.

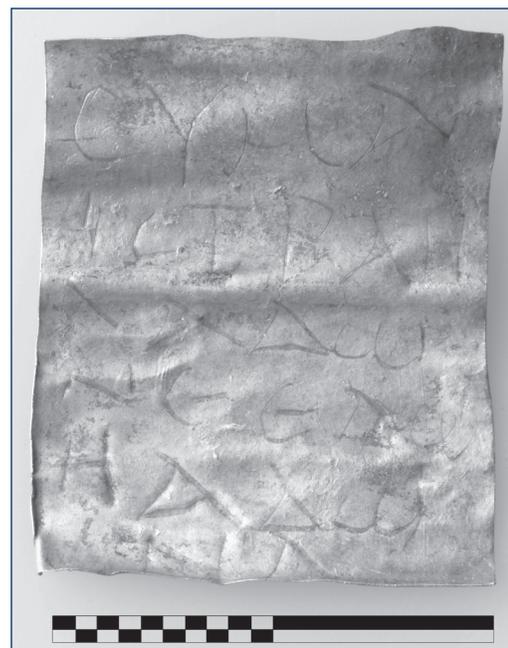
Inscribed Gold Plate Fits Book of Mormon Pattern

An inscribed gold plate 2.2 centimeters in length has been uncovered in a third-century AD Jewish burial. The burial, that of a young child, is located in a Roman cemetery in Halbtturn, Austria. The news was released by archaeologists at the University of Vienna’s Institute of Prehistory and Early History.

One gold and three silver-plated amulets inscribed with pagan magical texts were found in a stone sarcophagus in the cemetery. The gold-plated Jewish amulet differs in that, rather than bearing a magical text, it is inscribed with the Jewish prayer known as the *Shema* (“hear”), found in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.” Like the text inscribed on the gold plates of the Book of Mormon, it is scriptural in nature. The inscription shares another feature with the Nephite record: though the text is Hebrew, it is written using a non-Hebrew alphabet, in this case Greek. The Book of Mormon also employed Egyptian characters in its composition.¹

Comparing 1 Nephi 1:2 with Mormon 9:32–33, one has the impression that the Nephites employed the “reformed Egyptian” script for transcribing their Hebrew language for just over a thousand years (ca. 600 BC to ca. AD 400). The new find from Austria suggests that the Jews followed a similar system for about the same period of time.

The gold-plated artifact from Halbtturn will be on display as part of the “The Amber Road—



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Evolution of a Trade Route” exhibition in the Burgenland State Museum in Eisenstadt. 

by John A. Tvedtnes

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Notes

1. For an in-depth discussion, see John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, “Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 158–63. See also John Gee and John A. Tvedtnes, “Ancient Manuscripts Fit Book of Mormon Pattern,” *Insights* 19 (February 1999): 3–4.