



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 28 | Number 1

Article 5

January 2008

Full Issue

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Recommended Citation

(2008) "Full Issue," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 28: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol28/iss1/5>

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INSIGHTS

The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

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Number 1
2008

New Series Launched with Book on DNA Research

In the last few years, the topic of how DNA research fits in with the text of the Book of Mormon has become increasingly divisive. On the one hand, critics of the Church seize on recent DNA studies to claim that Native Americans are descended from Asian, not Middle Eastern, ancestors. On the other hand, faithful LDS scholars, including some of the most respected DNA researchers in the country, say the data from recent research is insufficient to deny or confirm the claims of the Book of Mormon.

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship has published several articles dealing with DNA and the Book of Mormon in its *FARMS Review* and *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. Now, for the first time, all of these articles will be available in one volume, entitled *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*.

Edited by Daniel C. Peterson, *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research* is the first volume in a new series, The Best of the Maxwell Institute. This series will publish collections of articles on persis-

tently important themes. *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research* will appear this summer and other volumes will follow periodically.

This new publication includes contributions by Book of Mormon scholars John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, who address the complex cultural, historical, and theological questions surrounding the Book of Mormon text. John M. Butler, the lead scientist in developing DNA tests used in identifying the victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, discusses the difficulties with conducting ancestry studies, especially on ancient populations.

Other contributors include Michael F. Whiting, a BYU professor of biology; David A. McClellan, a geneticist; D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, biologists; Brian Stubbs, who studies population dynamics; and David G. Stewart Jr., a medical doctor. The studies offer different perspectives on how to deal with the DNA questions surrounding the Book of Mormon. However, many of the authors also emphasize that the authenticity of the Book of Mormon lies in the realm of faith, not science. 

Institute Supports Graduates and Undergraduates

The Maxwell Institute continues to encourage and support the work of graduate and undergraduate students through two funds.

Nibley Fellowship Program

Each year at this time we remind graduate students about the Nibley Fellowship Program and its application deadline. Named in honor of the late eminent Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh Nibley, this program provides financial aid to students enrolled in accredited PhD programs in areas of study directly related to the work and mission of the Maxwell Institute, particularly work done under the auspices of one department of the Institute, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, such as studies of the Book of Mormon, the Book of

Abraham, the Old and New Testaments, early Christianity, ancient temples, and related subjects. Applicants cannot be employed at the Maxwell Institute or be related to an Institute employee.

Those interested in applying for the first time or who wish to renew their fellowships for the 2008–2009 academic year should know that the deadline for submitting a completed application form and all supporting documentation is **August 31, 2008**. Guidelines and an application form are available by downloading from maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/nibleyfellowships or by e-mailing nibleyfellowships@byu.edu.

The Maxwell Institute awarded Nibley Fellowships to the following graduate students for the 2007–2008 academic year:

Continuing Nibley Fellows are **Jared William Anderson**, history of the Bible, Department of

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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

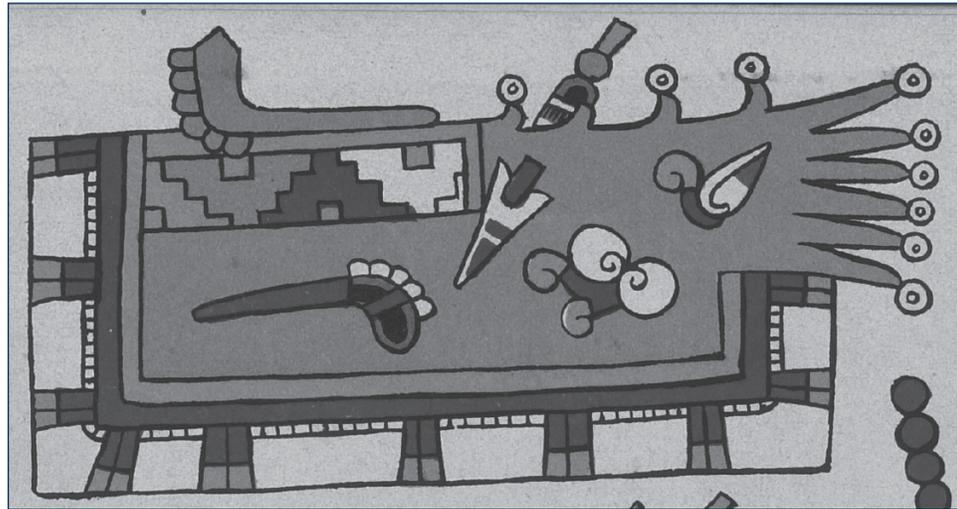
1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defines it, "a short sword with a convex edge."

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

resident scholar, Maxwell Institute

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.

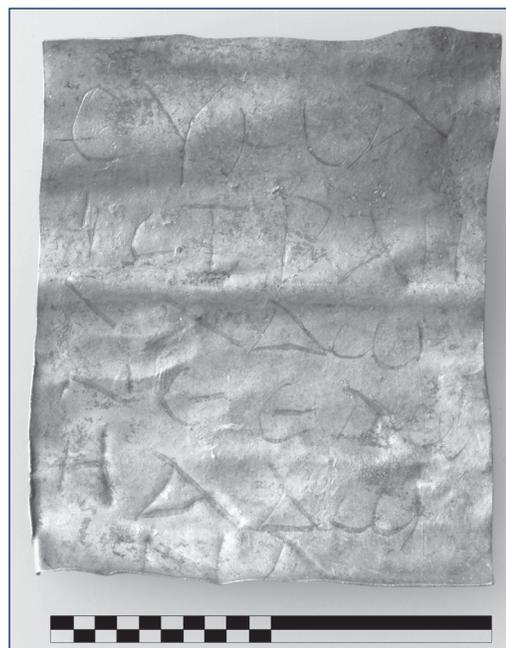
Inscribed Gold Plate Fits Book of Mormon Pattern

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—



Copyright University of Vienna, Institute of Prehistory and Early History.

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

by John A. Tvedtnes

retired senior resident scholar, Maxwell Institute

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.

Institute Supports Students

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Religious Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; **Lincoln H. Blumell**, early Christianity, Department and Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; **Matthew Bowen**, biblical studies, Department of Theological and Religious Studies, Catholic University of America; **Matthew J. Grey**, ancient Mediterranean religions, Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; **Paul Derek Miller**, theology, ethics and culture, School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University; **Brent James Schmidt**, Greek, New Testament, early Christianity, Department of Classics, University of Colorado, Boulder; **Shirley (Shirl) Irene Wood**, biblical interpretation, Iliff School of Theology, University of Denver; **Mark Alan Wright**, Mesoamerican archaeology, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside; **John D. Young**, religious and cultural history, medieval studies, University of Notre Dame.

First-time Nibley Fellows are **Ron R. Rainey**, New Testament, Department of Religion, Duke University; **Jacob Rennaker**, comparative religion, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington; **Daniel B. Sharp**, New Testament, Claremont Graduate University.

Russel B. Swensen Endowed Mentorship Fund

The Russel B. Swensen Endowed Mentorship Fund was created as a result of a generous gift from Robert (Bob) Gay in honor of his father William (Bill) Gay. Named in recognition of a beloved BYU professor, this fund was created to provide grants to selected undergraduate students each year who are pursuing degrees in fields of study related to the Maxwell Institute's broad areas of interest and who have secured an agreement to conduct research under the supervision of a BYU faculty member.

The Maxwell Institute awarded Swensen mentorships to two Brigham Young University undergraduate students for 2007–2008. **David Nielsen** is conducting research on "Canonical vs. Apocryphal Scribal Habits." His faculty mentor is Professor Thomas Wayment of the Department of Ancient Scripture. **Jonathan Harmon** is focusing on "Hebrews and Luke," with Professor Eric D. Huntsman of the Department of Ancient Scripture as his mentor.

Swensen Mentorship grants are administered by BYU's Office of Research and Creative Activities (ORCA). For information about student mentoring grants in general, please contact Nancy Davis in the ORCA office, A-285 ASB, 801-422-1461. For information about the Swensen Mentorship Fund or the Nibley Fellowship Program, contact M. Gerald Bradford at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 200 WAIH, Provo, UT 84602 (telephone: 801-812-1329; e-mail: bradfordmg@aol.com). 

Correction

In volume 27, issue 6 of *Insights* in the article about the *Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library*, we indicated that by special arrangement the Maxwell Institute distributes copies of the database on campus at little or no cost. This applies exclusively to those resident on the BYU campuses. All others should apply directly to Brill Academic Press. We apologize for the error.

INSIGHTS

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A Publication of
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The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

