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Book of Mormon Swords in Mesoamerican Antiquity

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Swords are an important weapon in the Book of Mormon narrative. The prophet Ether reported that in the final battle of the Jaredites, King Coriantumr, with his sword, "smote off the head" of his relentless enemy Shiz (Ether 15:30). Swords were also used by the earliest Nephites (2 Nephi 5:14) and were among the deadly weapons with which that people were finally "hewn down" at Cumorah by their enemies (Mormon 6:9–10). While the text suggests that some Jaredites and early Nephites may have had metal weaponry (1 Nephi 4:9; 2 Nephi 5:14; Mosiah 8:10–11; Ether 7:9), references to metal weapons, including metal swords, are rare. The Bible describes the Philistine champion Goliath as having a helmet of *nochesheth,* or bronze ("brass" 1 Samuel 17:5 KJV). However, as an authority on ancient warfare observes, "the fact that on occasion the Biblical writer deems it necessary to add the word 'bronze' to the use of the term 'helmet' would suggest that the headgear was not normally made of metal."[1] Similarly, in the Book of Mormon most weapons may not have been made of metal. In recent years Latter-day Saint researchers have suggested that most Book of Mormon swords likely resembled the Mesoamerican weapon called a *macana* or *machuahuitl*, a long flat piece of hard wood into which was set a row of sharp obsidian blades on both sides.[2] Unlike war clubs the *machuahuitl* was a slashing weapon and was called a "sword" by the Spaniards who encountered its lethality firsthand.[3] Post-Columbian Mesoamerican art highlights its deadly nature. The Codex Fernandez Leal, for example, portrays a battle between Cuicatec armies of Central Mexico wielding *macanas* with which several warriors are shown decapitated.[4]

In his work on ancient Mesoamerican warfare, military historian Ross Hassig suggests that the *machuahuitl,* which he terms a "broadsword," was a late Mesoamerican innovation that appeared only after the 13th century.[5] Some critics have questioned whether such a weapon was present in Book of Mormon times, asserting that earlier versions of the weapon were simply barbed clubs.[6] While it is possible that some Mesoamerican weapons labeled *macanas* by scholars were clubs, there are valid reasons to question the claim that the sword

Mesoamerican swords were quite deadly, as evidenced by the decapitation of several warriors as depicted in the Codex Fernandez Leal. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

macanas were only a late Mesoamerican invention. The weapon, for example, held in the right hand of the warrior at Loltun Cave, which some label a war club, is similar to later representations of the Aztec broadsword and likely represents the same weapon.[7] (The Loltun representation probably dates around the time of Christ). Other evidence now available from Mesoamerican art confirms this view.

At the site of La Nueva, near the Pacific coast in southern Guatemala, archaeologists recently discovered a monument in the Cotzumalguapa style dating to the Middle to Late Classic period (AD 450–900). Stela 1 (Monument 11) portrays a ruler who stands, wielding in his right hand a long triangular object pointed downward; this appears to be a sword.[8] A Classic period figurine from Palenque, Mexico, shows a warrior bearing a *macuahuitl.*[9] Mesoamerican scholars working at the site of Teotihuacan in Zone 11 (known as El Gran Conjunto) believe they have identified several weapons on the damaged murals at that site. Mural 1 in Portico 3 shows two weapons with sharp saw–like edges of triangular blades, leading Ruben Cabrera to conclude that "these figures represent two macanas or military weapons."[10] Recently another specialist agreed that the objects represented "weapons that have cutting blades of wooden swords similar to the *machuahuitl,*" something that should not really be surprising since the Teotihuacanos were experts in the use of obsidian.[11] These examples obviously sug-

gest a much earlier use for the weapon than many have assumed. More significantly, however, archaeologist Ann Cyphers, an authority on the Olmec Preclassic site of San Lorenzo (1500–900 BC), has recently identified weapons on recovered monuments at that site, including several curved scimitar-like weapons similar to the Toltec "short sword." One of these, on Monument 78, which she identifies as a *macana*, has a handle with a straight base inset with triangular blades on both edges. Cyphers notes that while it differs from weapons shown in Middle Preclassic monuments, "its form is like that from later times particularly the Mexica [Aztec] culture."[12] This suggests that the Aztec *macuahuitl* sword, like the scimitar or short sword, in fact, goes back to Early Preclassic times among the Olmec. Since most contemporary researchers on the Book of Mormon associate the Jaredites with the Olmec tradition, the representation of swords in the earliest Olmec art at San Lorenzo, though contrary to the current views of some scholars, is consistent with Book of Mormon references to swords among the Jaredites.

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Notes

1. T. R. Hobbs, *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1989), 130.

2. 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), 338–47; Matthew Roper, "Swords and 'Cimeters' in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 34–43. Although the terms are frequently used interchangeably, those unfamiliar with the variety of Mesoamerican weaponry may not always distinguish between *macanas,* which are clubs and swords.

3. Matthew Roper, "Eyewitness Descriptions of Mesoamerican Swords," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 150–58.

4. Sebastián van Doesburg, ed., *Códices Cuicatecos: Porfirio Diáz y Fernández Leal* (Mexico: 2001), 203, lamina 16.

5. Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 138.

6. Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue* 26/3 (1993): 161 n. 27; Deanne G. Matheny, "Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology,* ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 294–96; James White, "Of Cities and Swords: The Impossible Task of Mormon Apologetics," *Christian Research Journal* (Summer 1996): 35.

7. Compare the Preclassic Maya weapon at Loltun Cave in Hamblin and Merrill, "Swords in the Book of Mormon," 339, with the sword held by the Aztec lord in Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 84 fig. 11.

8. Francisco Estrada Belli and Laura J. Kosakowsky, "Survey in Jutiapa, Southeastern Pacific Guatemala, 1997," *Mexicon* 20/3 (1998): 56 fig. 4.

9. Robert L. Rands and Barbara C. Rands, "Pottery Figurines of the Maya Lowlands," in *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 543–44, 548 fig. 33.

10. Ruben Cabrera, "Conjunto Plaza Oeste," in *La Pintura Mural Prehispanica en Mexico I: Teotihuacan: Tomo I Catalogo,* ed. Beatriz de la Fuente (México: Universidad Nacional Autónomo de México Instituto de Investigaciones Esteticas, 1995), 51, my translation.

11. Alfonso A. Garduno Arzave, "De las armas ofensivas en el arte y la arqueologia de Teotihuacan," *La Pintura Mural Prehispanica en Mexico* 12/24–25 (2006): 59–60.

12. Ann Cyphers, *Escultura Olmeca de San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, 2004), 145–46, my translation.

From Elder Neal A. Maxwell

The sophist, who is often a carrier of cleverness, is really an intellectual guerrilla, a forlorn man without a country who draws his delight and satisfaction from the process of verbal combat and encounter itself; he does not seek resolution, but disruption. He has no homeland and, therefore, seeks always to fight his battles on the home-front of the believer. The sophist has nothing to defend. He takes no real risks because he believes in nothing. Perhaps, in a strange and twisted way, he wants to create anomy and drift by using the sword of speciousness to cut other men away from the eternal things that anchor them. (*A Time to Choose* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972], 31, as quoted in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 323.)