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## Deer as “Goat” and Pre-Columbian Domesticated

Sometime after the death of his father Jacob, Enos wrote that the Nephites raised “flocks of herds, and flocks of all manner of cattle of every kind, and goats, and wild goats” (Enos 1:21). While contemporary archaeology thus far has not yielded evidence of pre-Columbian goats, anthropologist John L. Sorenson has suggested that Book of Mormon peoples, like the Spanish writers of a later time, may have considered some species of pre-Columbian deer to be a kind of goat.<sup>1</sup>

Although surprising to us today, evidence suggests that some species of Amerindian deer may have been raised and shepherded as “flocks” in pre-Columbian times.

When the early Spanish explorers first visited what is now the southeastern United States, they encountered native Americans who raised semi-domesticated deer. Men from De Soto’s expedition reported that in Ocale, an Indian town in northern Florida, “there is to be found . . . fowls, a multitude of turkeys, kept in pens, and *herds of tame deer that are tended*.”<sup>2</sup> According to the 16th-century Spanish historian Gómara, in Apalachicola (what is now the state of Florida), “there are very many deer that they raise in the house and they go with *shepherds* into the pasture, and they return to the corral at night.”<sup>3</sup> Another early

historian of Spain, Peter Martyr d’Anghiera, recorded:

In all these regions they visited, the Spaniards noticed herds of deer similar to our herds of cattle. These deer bring forth and nourish their young in the houses of the natives. During the daytime they wander freely through the woods in search of their food, and in the evening they come back to their little ones, who have been cared for, allowing themselves to be shut up in the courtyards and even to be milked, when they have suckled their fawns. The only milk the natives know is that of the does, from which they make cheese.<sup>4</sup>

Additional evidence suggests that deer may have been tamed or semi-domesticated in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica as well. According to Diego de Landa, Maya women “let the deer suck their breasts, by which means they raise them and make them so tame that they never will go into the woods, although they take them and carry them through the woods and raise them there.”<sup>5</sup> When the Spaniards passed through the region of Guatemala and Honduras, they likewise encountered and easily killed fallow deer that were not afraid of them.<sup>6</sup> Some Mesoamerican scholars “are convinced that small herds of tamed or semi-domesticated deer ranged through Maya sites, with a result


not dissimilar in some respects to the ‘deer parks’ of European royalty.”<sup>7</sup> When they entered the region of what is modern El Salvador, the Spaniards encountered a native people known as *mazahuas*, who took their name from the practice of possessing and shepherding herds of “white deer,” which disappeared shortly after the Conquest.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnohistorical sources also mention the Mesoamerican custom of caring for deer. Anthropologist Mary Pohl notes that the term *ah may* in the Motul dictionary refers to “venadillo pequeño criado en casa,” that is, “a little deer raised in a house.”<sup>9</sup> Also related is the Maya term *Mazatenango* (from *Mazatl-tenen-co*), which means “en la cerca o muralla del ciervo,” that is, “inside the fence or wall of the deer.” Another researcher suggests, “Perhaps the name originated in the custom of fencing or corraling deer to care for them.”<sup>10</sup> Deer were an important animal in many pre-Columbian rituals and were often sacrificed.<sup>11</sup> In the Guatemala highlands today, some Indians believe that deer are intermediaries between men and the gods and that they speak with the gods in order to cleanse the sins of men.<sup>12</sup>

In light of the evidence for deer shepherding in pre-Columbian times, it is interesting that early Spanish colonists in

Mesoamerica associated native Mesoamerican brocket deer with the goat. Friar Diego de Landa noted, “There are *wild goats* which the Indians call *yuc*. They have only two horns like goats and are not as large as deer.” He likewise described the small brocket deer as “a certain kind of little *wild goats* [sic], small and very active and of darkish color.”<sup>13</sup> In the late 16th century, another Spanish friar reported that in Yucatán “there are in that province . . . great numbers of deer, and small *goats*”—the latter again apparently referring to the red brocket deer native to southern Mesoamerica.<sup>14</sup>

In post-Columbian times the Maya, recognizing a similarity between the European goat and the New World brocket deer, gave the European animal the name *temazate* from the Nahuatl word for brocket deer (*tamazatl*).<sup>15</sup> Since some Mesoamerican deer could fulfill many of the same purposes as goats, Mesoamerican

deer may have acquired a similar designation among peoples in the Book of Mormon. 

### By Matthew Roper

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#### Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (1985), 299.
2. Hernando De Soto, in *Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto* (1922), 162; emphasis added.
3. Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia General de las Indias* (1966), 70 (my translation).
4. Pietro Martire d’Anghiera, *De Orbe Novo: The Eight Decades of Peter Martyr d’Anghera* (1912), 2:259.
5. Diego de Landa, *Landa’s Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (1941), 127.
6. See Hernando Cortés, *Five Letters of Cortés to the Emperor* (1991), 314.
7. Brian D. Dillon, “Meatless Maya? Ethnoarchaeological Implications for Ancient Subsistence,” *Journal of New World Archaeology* 7/2–3 (June 1988): 60.
8. See Jorge Larde, “Los Mazahuas de El Salvador,” *Anales, Museo Nacional* 5/17–18 (1954): 86.
9. Mary D. Pohl and Lawrence H. Feldman, “The Traditional Role of Women and Animals in Lowland Maya Economy,” in *Maya Subsistence: Studies in Memory of Dennis E. Puleston* (1982), 305.
10. Jorge Luis Arriola, *El Libro de Las Geonimias de Guatemala: Diccionario Etimológico* (1973), 342 (my translation).
11. See Diego Garcia de Palacio, *Letter to the King of Spain* (1985), 41.
12. See María Montoliú, “Algunos Aspectos del Venado en La Religión de Los Mayas de Yucatán,” *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 10 (1976–1977): 165.
13. De Landa, *Landa’s Relación*, 204n1134 and 203–4; emphases added.
14. See Noyes, *Fray Alonso Ponce* (1932), 307 and n. 17.
15. See Rafael Martín del Campo, “Contribución a la Etnozoología Maya de Chiapas,” in *Los Mayas del Sur y Sus Relaciones con Sus Nahuas Meridionales* (1961), 33.

## New Web Site Debuts

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship unveiled its new Web site on 1 November 2006. The new site, found at [maxwellinstitute.byu.edu](http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu), features all the material that resided on the FARMS Web site as well as additional content and links from all departments that make up the Institute.

Over the last several years, the FARMS Web site saw a large jump in Internet traffic as readers were drawn to the immense archive of previous issues of the *Insights* newsletter, the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, and the *FARMS Review*, as well as the more recently added library of book chapters culled from Institute publications. The new site is built on that strong foundation but now better represents the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative (METI) and the Center for the Preservation of Ancient

Religious Texts (CPART) with added material and information, and the site now links to BYU Studies, which recently came under the umbrella of the Institute. The new site also features a biography of Elder Neal A. Maxwell and a bibliography of his writings.

In addition to its expanded focus, the Institute’s Web site has been reorganized to make information more readily available. Users can now search by keyword or by author or simply browse through thousands of articles organized by topic or by publication. The menus on the front page of the site will also feature several randomly selected articles to draw users in to the present research and the Institute’s vast archives. In coming months, additional features will be added to the site, such as a calendar of events and video clips.

To access the Maxwell Institute Web site, visit [maxwellinstitute.byu.edu](http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu). 