



1-31-1999

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Journal of Book of Mormon Studies

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Studies, Journal of Book of Mormon (1999) "Book of Mormon Archaeology,: A Rich Source for LDS Folklore," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol8/iss1/5>

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FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

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Title “Book of Mormon Archaeology,” A Rich Source for LDS Folklore

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Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 19.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Excerpts from a letter written in 1962 reveal how Jakeman’s interpretation of Stela 5 quickly stimulated a body of folklore among some Latter-day Saints.

“Book of Mormon Archaeology,” A Rich Source for LDS Folklore

The following excerpt from a letter written in 1962 illustrates how news about Jakeman’s interpretation of Stela 5 quickly stimulated a body of folklore in some Latter-day Saint circles:

The fellows all got to talking about the strange things that had been going on in the area that week-end. It all began by one of them mentioning that big stone, Stella Izapa, found back in 1939 in Mexico and hidden away since then by the Catholic Fathers because it was another proof of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. . . . On the stone it pictured a very old man speaking to a small group of people, (as they sat in a circle,) concerning a large tree, which was depicted along with the stream of water and was certainly a carving showing Lehi telling his family about his vision of the “Tree of Life.” Not only that, the only three names legible above the heads of the people were those of Lehi [above the old man], Sariah [above the woman], and Nephi [above the largest man]. If you have read the article, you know how exciting it was to find out about it; if not, you ought to get the issue.

*When the men told us about that, then they told us about the excitement that had been going on in _____. It evidently started a couple of years ago when one of the Sisters from the _____ Ward went down to Mexico on a tour of the ancient ruins and when she found out that the guide was also L.D.S. they became good friends and have been corresponding ever since. It seems that this guide was conducting a trip for a very rich man and his friends, and as night came and they started to make camp, the ground which they were digging suddenly began to cave in. They decided to dig on in and see what they could find and it turned out to be a tomb. There was a mummy at each end of the room and in the center—a skeleton holding an urn, in which were Gold Plates. Yes, they were gold plates but they were very small; about 2½ by 3 inches and were held together by a very, very small nail. [Ray T. Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Gold Plates,” *BYU Studies* 19/1*

(1978): 21–40, reports on and analyzes these small plates, establishing that they were modern frauds.] *The rich man put an acid on one of the plates—an acid that easily eroded a gold ring, but the acid ran off like water off of an oily piece of paper. They were all, of course, very excited; especially the guide from his knowledge of the burial rites of the people he thought that it might be the dead man’s patriarchal blessing. He offered the rich man all that he had in his savings account—\$2,000—but the man had no need for money and said that he was going to make his wife a charm bracelet out of the plates. This happened around the first of last August and since then, the rich man has been losing everything. First it was his car, then his property, and then his stocks. Finally last Dec. when his business was threatening to fold up, he wrote to the guide and agreed to sell him the plates. The guide was on his way to Salt Lake to give them to the General Authorities and stopped in _____ to visit the sister there, the day before Christmas Eve, so she immediately called the Bishops of the two wards and their counselors, along with the county _____ (her neighbor) and they all inspected the plates and made photostatic copies. This was on Sat. and the next day the Elders Quorum was told about it, so by then everyone knew. _____’s Aunt and Uncle are stake missionaries and were able to get their hands on the pictures and I got to see them. I had shivers just looking at them. There were some of the same symbols—the eye, the dots and the “crows feet”—that are in the Pearl of Great Price. I have never felt the urge to do missionary work as much as I did then. I just wanted to go out and tell everyone about it. We are very anxious to find out what the Church thinks about it. Whether we ever know or not, it is more evident to me that each day, more is being revealed concerning the Gospel. I’m thoroughly content in knowing that we do have the truth—now if I can just live worthy of it. □*