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**Title** A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5: A Step toward Improved Interpretation

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**Abstract** Aided by creative techniques, Ajáx Moreno carefully prepared more accurate, detailed renderings of the Izapa monuments, including Stela 5, with its complex scenes of gods and other supernatural creatures, royalty, animals invested with mythic and value symbolism, and mortals. The author raises relevant questions about reconciling Jakeman's view with the new drawing: Are there Old World connections? Can Izapa be viewed as a Book of Mormon city? Did the Nephites know of Lehi's dream? Are there name glyphs on the stela? The scene, if it does not depict Lehi's dream, fits clearly in Mesoamerican art in theme, style, technical execution, and meaning. The basic theme of Stela 5 may be the king as intercessor with the gods on behalf of his people.



# A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5

A Step toward  
Improved Interpretation

BY JOHN E. CLARK

For the past 46 years, the carved stone monument known as Izapa Stela 5 from southernmost Mexico has been discussed as a possible depiction of Lehi's dream reported in 1 Nephi 8. From this the stela has come to be known in some Latter-day Saint circles as the "Lehi stone." My purpose here is to present the latest drawing of this monument, to discuss how this drawing was made, and to suggest its implications for the Lehi hypothesis. This brief article is not meant to be the final word on the matter. In fact, I will avoid talking about most of the technical details and only highlight the most significant features of the scene on the stone in order to assess the implications of recent study.

The intriguing idea that a carved stone monument from the tropical forest of southern Mexico shows Lehi's dream was first proposed by M. Wells Jakeman of the BYU Department of Archaeology in the early 1950s (see the article in this issue by Stewart Brewer for a history of this proposal). Since then the stone has been the subject of intense study by numerous scholars, the most thorough and persuasive being that by V. Garth Norman. The bottom line of all the discussion over the years is that every scholar who has taken a serious look at this complicated scene has proposed a different interpretation based on a different drawing. There are many reasons for this variety, but one of the critical ones is that the stone is somewhat eroded and the carved details are difficult to see, even in the best lighting. Following this commendable tradition of seeking improved representations of the monument that might lead to a more reliable interpretation, the most recent drawing, which has just been completed by the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAf), supported, in part, by a grant from FARMS, necessitates a new explanation of what the ancient artist intended.

### Redrawing the Izapa Monuments

Over the past twenty years the progress of research on the carved monuments found throughout Mexico and Central America has increasingly underlined the need for more accurate reproductions of what they picture. From 1963 to 1973, V. Garth Norman made a major contribution to this effort by working under NWAf auspices to photograph the major Izapa sculptures and publish both an album of the reproductions and an extensive analysis of what they depict.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, as an increasing number of sculptures have been discovered throughout Mesoamerica in subsequent years, and as more students of ancient art have become involved in research on them, the need for further detailed reproductions has become apparent. As an exercise to see whether we could finesse more details from the old stones by using new lighting techniques, the Foundation launched a project two years ago to produce a fresh set of drawings of the Izapa pieces.

The project took advantage of the talent of artist Ayax Moreno, the NWAf staff illustrator. Not only had his experienced eye and able hand qualified him to draw outstanding likenesses of ancient objects, he was also able to harness technology in fresh ways to enhance his discernment of what the ancient artists had engraved. Of course he had to overcome problems resulting from the subtlety of some of the ancient carving as well as the dimming effect of erosion on some of the stone surfaces. The texture of the stone, natural cracks, fungi on the surface, and

modern damage (some thought to be from Mormon tourists attempting to highlight details on Stela 5) were other challenges to the eye that called for a closer look than photography had previously achieved.



Ayax Moreno is head illustrator for the New World Archaeological Foundation.

Moreno's first step was to drape each monument in clear plastic on which he traced the most visible details of the carved figure or scene with a grease pencil. This was done at night under light furnished by strong lamps powered with an automobile battery. The light was repeatedly played across the surface of the stone in a circular pattern to produce raking illumination from all sides and at every angle. The result was the detection of more carved features and a greater degree of delicacy than ever achieved before.

The original drawing on plastic was then reduced to manageable size in the NWAf studio by placing it over a large grid on a wall, and each detail on the plastic was transferred to the flat grid sheet. This version was in turn reduced, point by point, to a grid only one-fourth as large. That smaller rendering then was taken back to the field to verify the lines that had first been drawn and to add still finer details. At a later stage, Moreno returned to the site again and used a video camera to record what became visible when the moving light played over the surface of the carving. In the studio the videotape could be freeze-framed and details rechecked as many times as needed. Only confirmed details were inked onto the final drawing. As director of the project, I acted as critic, continually verifying or rejecting details by independently checking each drawing against previous photos and drawings, our videos, and the original stone. Consulting earlier representations forced us to check on the reality of details that others had reported seeing.

The activity turned into a logistical nightmare, consuming a full year more than originally planned. It should be

emphasized that all the Izapa monuments, not just Stela 5, were treated in this way. This provided an advantage. A symbol or artistic feature that could be seen clearly on one monument might be much less visible on another. Thus Moreno followed a learning curve as the drawing process became interactive; he modified his drawings on the basis of what he could discern from other sculptures produced by, we may suppose, the same ancient artist or school of artists. However, in no case did we speculate by sheer extrapolation of details from one monument to another without a demonstrable basis.

The results have been gratifying. In general terms, of course, the new drawings are like earlier photographs and sketches. (Incidentally, aside from use of the video camera with its useful zoom feature, everything we did could have been done fifty years ago.) But the intensity and imaginative use of the lighting, plus the repeated back-checking of details, allowed us to recover a whole new level of detailed information from the carvings. We firmly believe that further examination of the Izapa sculptures will likely reveal no significant data beyond what our drawings now show.

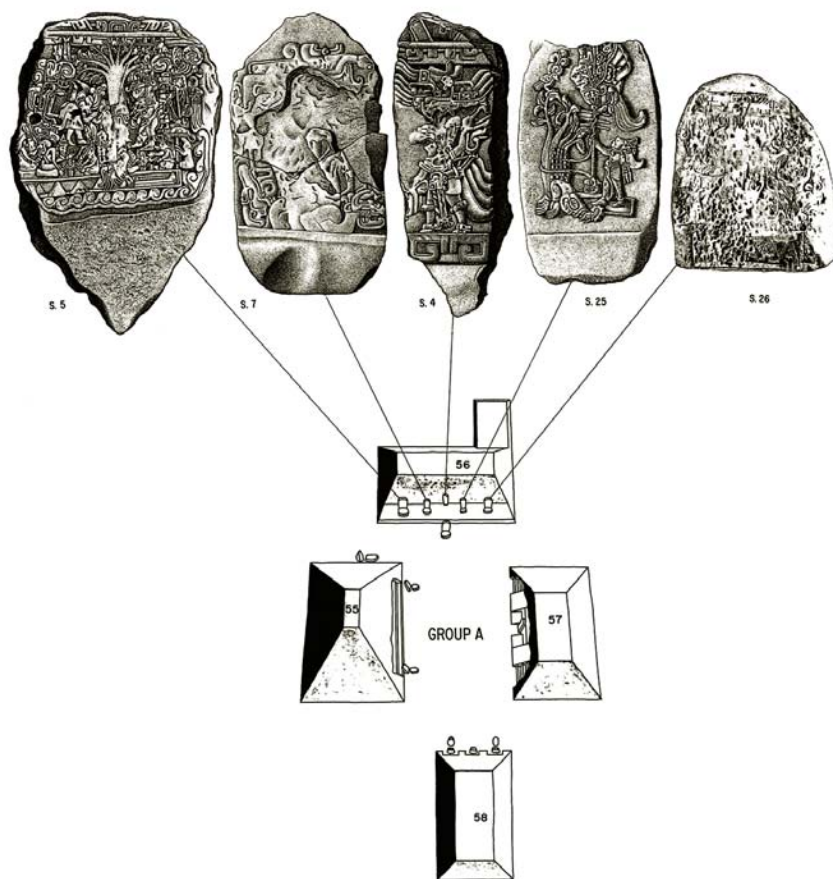
The NWAFF hopes in the future to extend this project in order to redraw early monuments at other early sites in Mesoamerica. That would permit for the first time reliable comparisons to be made not only from monument to monument at Izapa but to the work of artists in other regions. In the interim we intend to publish (tentatively planned through the FARMS Research Press) a volume of all the Izapa drawings for the use of scholars.

### The Place of Izapa in Mesoamerican Culture History

Izapa was the most important ancient religious center in the Soconusco area, the Pacific coastal portion of the Mexican state of Chiapas. Large pyramid structures were constructed around central plazas comprising a number of groups scattered across the site. The sculptured monuments were placed at key points in front of and centered on the pyramids.

What is particularly remarkable about the arrangement of these monuments, buildings, and plazas is that an intricate pattern of sight lines governed where they were placed. Those lines were sighted from, say, one monument, across two other monuments, to focus on a peak or notch on the horizon where the sun

rose on the day of autumnal equinox or some other notable celestial event. It appears that priest-planners laid out such sight lines at the point in time anciently when the ceremonial site was first conceived, saying, in effect, "At this spot we will place the center of structure X, which we intend to mean such-and-such, and over there in line with that mountain we will erect monument Y, signifying something else." Speculations about the religious meanings of the complicated arrangement at Izapa have included notions about the sequence of seasons, the months and the structure of the calendar, certain myths preserved among later inhabitants of Mesoamerica, and rituals and beliefs concerning birth, death, and afterlife. Of course no one knows for sure today just what ideas governed the minds of the builders, but those ideas must have been powerful and respected.



Group A at Izapa consists of Structures 55, 56, 57, and 58. Twenty-five stone monuments were arranged near these structures. Five stelae, including Stela 5 (extreme left) and Stela 25 (second from right), were arranged in front of Structure 56. The entire site includes five additional groups. *Courtesy NWAFF.*

A great surge of creativity characterized life at Izapa from around 300 to 50 B.C. It was manifested especially in the unique style of art shown on the monuments. Most or perhaps all of those that have been discovered were carved and erected in that period.<sup>2</sup> During that brief time, Izapan art influenced a wide area—highland Guatemala (notably the great city whose ruin is now called Kaminaljuyu), the Yucatan Peninsula, central Chiapas, and as far away as the Tuxtla Mountains in southern Veracruz (the southernmost coast of the Gulf of Mexico), as well as Oaxaca (the ruin at Dainzú), well to the northwest of Izapa.

A major concern of archaeologists and art historians with Izapan art has been to figure out what role the region played as a bridge—in time and in space. In geographical terms the Izapa zone was near the southern extreme of the territory inhabited by speakers of Mixe-Zoquean languages, the family of tongues apparently used by the bearers of the Olmec tradition. Olmec territory centered in the southern portion of Veracruz state. But carriers of that culture's ideas, at some point between 1,300 and 900 B.C., moved southward from their homeland across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, then along the Pacific coastal lowlands perhaps all the way to El Salvador. Izapa occupied a zone where Olmec-connected people and their cultures interacted strongly with Mayan-speaking groups to the east. So Izapa might be viewed as either a frontier outpost or a bridge by which Olmec features were transmitted to speakers of the languages of the Maya family to the east. In terms of time, the Izapans can be seen as intermediaries through whom Olmec concepts (from the period generally between 1,300 B.C. and 400 B.C.) passed down through the centuries to reach the later Maya civilization that flourished from the first century B.C. to A.D. 900.

In the whole body of sculpted art at Izapa, Stela 5 presents us with the most complex scene. Indeed, it is one of the most complicated of all Mesoamerican sculptures. Norman calls the scene on Stela 5 a "supernarrative," for it seems to represent some complex event or story. It is apparent that anciently it bore special significance beyond most of the simpler sculptured stones at the site. The latter, Norman continues, "obviously are of a more limited nature—if we were to take up to ten other Izapa monuments and treat them as a unit, they would approximate the challenge of [interpreting] Stela 5." He counts on this stela at least 12 human figures, a dozen animals, over 25 botanical and inanimate objects, and 9 stylized deity masks. The exotic symbolism of those individual elements joins with the complex relationships among them all, when combined, to pose serious problems for anyone who wants to tell us what the scene was meant to show. Yet correct



*Above:* This god or god-impersonating human bears characteristics of Ehecatl, the wind-god of the later Aztecs. Apparently this representation of him at Izapa documents an ancestral form of the wind-god. Among the Aztecs, Ehecatl was considered a special aspect of the deity Quetzalcoatl.

*Below:* This striking image of Ehecatl was excavated from near Stela 5 by BYU-NWAF archaeologists. It dates to the second century B.C. and is considered one of Mexico's archaeological treasures.



interpretation of this “supernarrative” could provide a key to why and how Izapa was so pivotal in the history, art, and religion of the area over two millennia ago. However, as Norman noted, “inaccurate decipherment of eroded or confused detail has plagued previous treatments of Stela 5.”<sup>3</sup>

### The New Moreno-Clark Drawing

In its themes and symbols, Stela 5 is arguably the most complicated monument carved anywhere in the Americas in B.C. times. It is little wonder that it has stimulated keen interest and varied interpretations. Fortunately a number of the features it displays can be identified on other Mesoamerican sculptures. Scholars have worked out the meanings of these figures by laborious critical comparisons of how they are used in art throughout Mesoamerica. By comparing their contexts with native myths and traditions it has been possible to determine certain facts about what the ancient artists intended to communicate. Norman’s work, a quarter-century ago, led the way in this effort in relation to Izapa’s sculptures, but today much more is known about those matters.

The carved scene on Stela 5 is largely symmetrical; it shows paired groups of human figures or supernatural beings flanking a central fruit-bearing tree. In agreement with Mesoamerican art of the same period that has survived at other sites, series of carved bands and designs at the top of the monument identify that portion with the heavens, and another set of bands, straight lines, and triangles at the base of the monument represent the earth. The long roots of the tree appear to penetrate the ground. But when we look closely, we see that what look like roots are actually the elongated teeth of a crocodile or earth monster, while the tree trunk doubles as the crocodile’s body, a feature depicted on several other Izapa monuments. Waves of water are shown cascading down the right side of the picture which roil beneath the earth. In ancient Mesoamerican thought, the earth was considered to rest upon the back of a crocodile that floated on the primordial sea. The water and earth signs on Stela 5 evidently display this crocodile-water association.

Many of the figures depicted on the monument will be unfamiliar to most readers because they are special symbols exclusively known among the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica. The two largest figures on each side of the monument represent hybrid jaguar-serpent monsters; the bodies and heads are serpentine, but the teeth are those of a jaguar. The two largest—the “floating” figures nearer the tree—I consider to be gods, or men dressed up as gods. The one on the left wears a bird mask and a large sea shell at the back of his head, while the one on the right is shown with a

jaguar mask and a very tall headdress. His face and mask were intentionally defaced in ancient times, but enough remains visible to identify him as a jaguar impersonator. This deity pair represent the two most powerful gods in Mesoamerica, known many centuries later among the Aztecs of central Mexico as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. They represent opposite forces, much like Thor and Loki in the Norse tradition. (However, this conceptual comparison does not imply any historical connection between Izapa or the Aztecs on the one hand and Scandinavia on the other.) Quetzalcoatl was a Mesoamerican god of rain and abundance; his name—if not his special roles—is no doubt already familiar to some readers. Tezcatlipoca was the most powerful god of the Aztecs, with his jaguar features connecting him to the most potent earthly beast known in the New World. Like Quetzalcoatl he was known from ancient times in Mexico under one name or another.

Each god is attended by nearby smaller figures, but it is impossible to see for sure what each attendant is doing. The ones on the right may be dressing the jaguar impersonator in his god costume in some sort of investiture ceremony.

Below the standing figures are six seated individuals, three on each side of the tree. The seated figure on the extreme left is a stooped old man with a pointed cap. He is sitting on a skull throne. His bones show prominently, signifying an old, emaciated body. He may represent death,

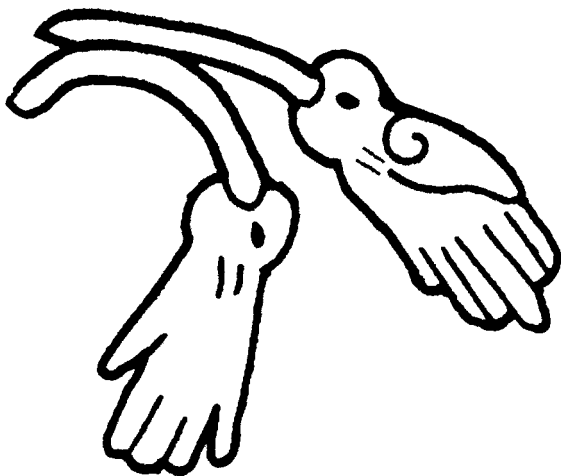


Figures like this, representing an old man or god, are quite common in Mesoamerican art. What looks like a pointing finger is probably the end of a rope which is seen encircling the seat; a rope often signifies kinship.



or a priest or aged king in a mask representing death. On a cushion behind him sits an old woman. In front of him is another person. Billows of smoke rise from an incense burner situated between the two. Burning incense was a common rite of prayer and supplication in ancient Mesoamerica. A similar incense burner is pictured on the matching scene on the right side of the tree. The principal figure here is shown seated cross-legged on the ground, and a person sits behind him holding a parasol. The young man at the center of the right-hand grouping sports an elaborate headdress that displays symbols of kingship and the maize god in conventional Mesoamerican iconography (the repertoire of meaningful symbols).

Working out further details of our new drawing of Stela 5 and what they mean will occupy scholars for many years to come. So final resolution of the scene's significance is still in the distance. Some of the meaning of the carving, however, is already obvious in the light of what we know so far about other Mesoamerican representations. In the case of Stela 5 we see gods and other supernatural creatures, royalty, animals invested with mythic and value symbolism, and mortals. Some of these figures are dressed to the hilt; others are depicted in pious acts and ceremonies. The smoking incense certainly signals ritual activity, prayer, and piety. Most of the people are shown holding objects in their hands. The woman, for example, holds a serrated spine from a stingray which she is using to jab a hole in her tongue to extract blood for an offering to the gods—an act of worship



The precise meaning of these hummingbirds is not known, but they are referred to in the lore of the Zoque Indians, longtime inhabitants of the Izapa area.

that agrees with the offering of incense. The young maize king holds a similarly pointed object, perhaps intended to serve the same purpose. Autosacrifice or self-bloodletting was a frequent and significant practice for millennia in Mesoamerica, especially for priests and high royalty. It appears that this ritual is being depicted on Stela 5.

In addition to important individuals engaged in rites, we see mythic concepts, gods, and supernatural entities on this monument. The spatial arrangement of the figures is undoubtedly significant, but much of its meaning remains to be determined. Norman argued for a depiction of a ritual cycle of some kind, and this seems to be a good possibility, although the precise nature of the cycle remains unclear.

The style of the figures shown on Stela 5—their clothing, for example—is the culmination of a long tradition of stone carving in southern Mexico that goes back to at least 1,300 B.C., and no doubt the stone-working techniques have an equal pedigree. Carving the Izapa monument required artisans to use measuring cords to grid off the stone in traditional patterns according to standard measurements and layouts. The proposed scene was then drawn or scratched on the surface. Pointed stone tools were used to peck and grind away the background until the figures stood out appropriately in bas-relief. Metal tools or chisels were not used. Some of the rough texture of the carved surface resulted from the use of stone hammers to sculpt the scene.

#### The Drawing in Relation to LDS Interests in Stela 5

Stewart Brewer discusses in this issue the fascinating history of M. Wells Jakeman's claim that the scene on Stela 5 represents the prophet Lehi's dream or vision of the tree of life. Over the past 45 years many LDS people have accepted Jakeman's assertion that "This Tree of Life carving at Izapa is nothing less than an ancient portrayal in stone of the very episode of the Tree of Life found recorded in the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 8."<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that a more accurate drawing of Stela 5 should interest Latter-day Saints who accept the Jakeman interpretation. Equally, those who may be unaware of his view or who have hesitated to accept it will want to arrive at the most truthful resolution of the issues it raises by seeing the latest representation.

The NWAf project to draw the Izapa monuments has produced results relevant to an evaluation of Jakeman's views, but such an evaluation was not one of the objectives of the project. Our aim, as explained above, was to produce the most accurate rendering possible. Any connection between the production of the new drawing and any interpretation, LDS or non-LDS, of what the monument

shows is purely incidental. Nevertheless, as a service to those who feel the need to evaluate Jakeman's theory, I raise below what appear to me to be relevant questions about reconciling his view with the new drawing.

### Old World Connections?

There is not much to say here. No obvious thematic or stylistic connections to any Old World art are evident to me. The question that ought to be asked is why anyone would expect there to be any. A rather important question is embedded here about analysis and default assumptions. Whatever the field of study, scholars have learned that safety in interpreting the evidence lies in following rules based on experience; "do men gather . . . figs of thistles?" (Matthew 7:16). In the study of Mesoamerican art, it is a wise presumption that any monument found in America was made in America. If so, it would have been made by local artists, according to local canons or artistic rules, and would

of life in Mesoamerica and in the Near East.<sup>5</sup> But she never demonstrated any significant connection at the level of art style between western Asia and Mesoamerica, nor has anyone else done so.

### Izapa as a Book of Mormon City?

The internal evidence from the Book of Mormon seems to be definitive that the Nephites had nothing to do with Izapa, and it is doubtful that the Lamanites did either. The obvious arguments are as follows:

*Area of settlement.* The Nephite account has Nephi<sub>1</sub> and his followers fleeing their coastal land of first inheritance to go inland "up" to the land of Nephi. What little information is provided about their settlements over the next few centuries makes it appear that they remained in one rather small highland region. They multiplied and covered all of the immediate land of Nephi; they had kings, priests, and mighty men; they

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involve local ideas. To conclude otherwise would be justified only by very unusual and strong evidence. Furthermore, the presence of scores of carved stones at Izapa, all done in essentially the same style, argues that this creative activity was a regular phenomenon at this one site that produced a whole corpus of related art; with Stela 5 we are not talking about a lone piece that uniquely connects to a distant part of the world.

In the case of Izapa, moreover, I find no reason to believe there was ever sufficient cause to overturn the default assumption that the monuments are local works. All the themes in Izapan art are Mesoamerican, and the style is clearly derived from earlier styles in the same geographical area. The only reason for anyone to have looked to the Near East for parallels for the Stela 5 scene was Irene Briggs's 1950 study that showed a few (actually five) general thematic parallels between representations of the tree

were at nearly constant war with the Lamanites. Finally, around 200 B.C., the main group fled to the land of Zarahemla, another inland area northward. There is no hint of any coastal activity or concern in this early geography, yet Izapa is near the coast.

*Demographics.* There is considerable ambiguity in the statement that the early Nephites "covered" the face of the land. This looks like standard rhetoric. The Nephites appear always to have been under one king at a time rather than having multiple kingdoms. So we can presume that a single capital city, Nephi, was involved; only one city is mentioned at that time. About 400 B.C., they claimed to have increased substantially in numbers, yet by about 320 B.C. the greater part of the wicked Nephites appear to have been destroyed by the Lamanites. The surviving Nephites were apparently almost back to square one in terms of total population. When they later migrated to Zarahemla, they

were a small enough group that they could be incorporated into a single city, Zarahemla, with their host population, the Mulekites. All this suggests a modest population level and argues against their being able at that time to colonize distant territories, especially as far away as Izapa was from any plausible location for either Nephi or Zarahemla.

Actually there is not even an allusion in the Book of Mormon that can be construed as evidence for a Nephite population in a coastal-plain location like Izapa by the time Stela 5 was produced. Lamanite inhabitation of the Izapa area may be a different matter, however. That ethnic, cultural, or political category in the Nephite record is so vague that one could claim that Lamanites *might* have been at Izapa. But for that to be true they—those “Lamanites” who warred against the Nephites—would have had to increase their population quite miraculously. If there is room in the Book of Mormon world for “other peoples,” the inhabitants of Izapa and the ones who produced the

in the borders by the west seashore (see Alma 56:31), but there are no facts to lead one to think that this was Izapa, let alone to explain who occupied it and what was going on there. In short, a person has to strain to make any connection between the Nephite historical record and the presence of a Nephite or Lamanite city located at Izapa at any period.

*Did the Nephites know of Lehi’s dream?* Nobody has previously asked serious questions about this subject. Who knew about the dream? What did they know? When did they know it? I had always considered the tree of life narrative in the Book of Mormon to be masterful, linking themes that subsequently appeared in Nephite preaching about Christ and the atonement. I now think this is wrong. To Latter-day Saints, that may seem plausible because the Lehi story appears in the front of the book we now have. Yet we recall that the record (the small plates of Nephi) was not a public document. Most of the later

The period when the Izapa monuments were sculpted, 300 to 50 B.C., is a dark time in terms of Nephite history and geography. Little is said in the Nephite record that can be connected to Izapa even by inference.

art there would get my vote.

*Book of Mormon city?* This question arises and appears interesting only if we are already committed to Stela 5 as depicting Lehi’s dream. If a person makes that assumption, he or she needs to explain how such a Book of Mormon artifact came to be there; hence this question arises. If we do not assume that the monument shows a Book of Mormon scene, there is nothing to explain; the question of “was this a Nephite or Lamanite city?” is forced.

In any case, the period when the Izapa monuments were sculpted, 300 to 50 B.C., is a dark time in terms of Nephite history and geography. Little is said in the Nephite record that can be connected to Izapa even by inference. In the early part of the first century B.C. the west wilderness along the (presumably Pacific) coast was occupied by Lamanites dwelling in tents (see Alma 22:28); it may be implied that the Nephites had not occupied that area previously. Only a single city is ever mentioned in that west sector. About 65 B.C., mention is made of an unnamed city

prophets give no hint of being informed of its content, while most of the kings may have been no better informed because they relied on their royal record.

Is there any evidence that any of the later prophets preached about, or even referred to, Lehi’s dream? No. Even Nephi spoke of it only as the catalyst for obtaining his own vision of the prophetic future (see 1 Nephi 11:1–9). The older siblings in Lehi’s family might have remembered most or much of the dream since they heard it directly from Lehi’s lips (see 1 Nephi 8:2, “he spake unto us”). Yet centuries later Alma’s teaching about the tree of life goes down a different road; he talks about the tree in the Garden of Eden rather than the one seen by Lehi (see Alma 12:22–23; 42:2–5).

The key to understanding this situation is in the small plates, the source for our present books from 1 Nephi through Omni, covering the first four centuries of Nephite history. Those who kept that record make clear that their prime concern in writing was to speak hope and

repentance to the future descendants of their Lamanite contemporaries (see, for example, Jarom 1:2). But to their own people, the stiff-necked, wicked, warring Nephites, they were characteristically blunt about very basic behavioral and spiritual needs: repentance from sexual sins, no longer lusting after material wealth, abhorrence of social injustice, obedience to the law of Moses, and looking forward to the coming of Christ in the flesh (see Jacob 2; Enos 1:22–23; Jarom 1:3–4, 10–11). There is no hint that they preached about the great visions experienced by the founding fathers. Nor is there evidence that copies were made or circulated from which Lehi’s dream might have been studied. For instance, Enos recalled “the words which I had often heard my father speak” (Enos 1:3). But even this nephew of Nephi<sub>1</sub> does not suggest that he is familiar with Lehi’s and Nephi’s climactic spiritual experiences. Perhaps those accounts were considered too sacred for common reference by religious teachers, just as modern apostles typically refrain from talking directly about per-

*Right:* The back of this crocodilian dragon/monster, who was considered to dwell in the underworld sea, forms the surface of the earth in Mesoamerican mythic thought. Thus trees and other vegetation logically spring from his body. In the Near East, a sea-dwelling monster known as a Leviathan played a similar role. (The dotted lines are conjectural.)

*Below:* This monument was in Group A near Stela 5. It obviously shows the same monster as its neighbor, though more plainly. This scene illustrates an event related in the Popol Vuh, sacred book of the neighboring Quiché Maya Indians of Guatemala. For details see the article in this issue by Bruce H. Yerman.



sonal experiences with the Lord. So it seems quite possible that the Nephites generally, let alone the Lamanites, did not know enough about Lehi’s vision to have responded to it even if it had been represented for them on a stone.

*Are there name glyphs on the stela?* A few monuments at Izapa do exhibit a glyph here and there but none are on Stela 5. Could the unique headdresses on the figures somehow signify names or identities of the figures shown, as Jakeman claimed? Yes, it is possible. However this procedure of looking for meanings shows inconsistency. Jakeman considered the headdresses on two figures to label Sariah and Nephi<sub>1</sub>. But in the case of Lehi, Jakeman looked to a symbol “floating” nearby as identifier while ignoring the

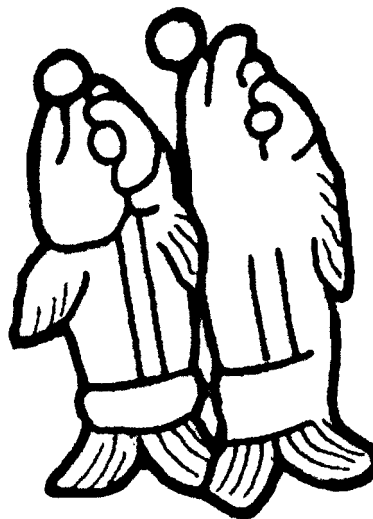


distinctive headdress on the old man figure. In all three cases the names that Jakeman claims to be present are not hieroglyphs as such, with defined phonetic elements that spell out a name by means of sounds (as we might expect from Mormon 9:32), but only icons or visual symbols for the individuals. (Incidentally, if one accepts Jakeman's argument for an Old World connection in art styles, Mesoamerican art adds support to one of his claims. His interpretation of the headdress of the figure he says represents Nephi<sub>1</sub> derives the head garb from an Egyptian "grain god," while in Maya art a similar-looking headdress signals the Maya jester god and also signifies that the wearer is "maize king.")<sup>6</sup>

### Evaluation of Jakeman's Argument

In the 48 years since Jakeman first concluded that Stela 5 represents Lehi's dream of the tree of life, major advancements have come about in the study of Mesoamerican art. Hundreds more monuments have been discovered and many of them have been analyzed in a detail that was impossible in the 1950s. It should not be surprising that these later studies would require changes in his interpretation as well as the interpretations of other scholars treating the material. His argument depended on interpreting the iconography of Stela 5. But this was seriously hampered by lack of a good pictorial representation of the scene on the stone. Major details were omitted or misdrawn in the rendering Jakeman used. A poor drawing is the equivalent of bad data. There is no way to arrive at a "correct" analysis using bad data. Unfortunately, because of the poor drawing, Jakeman saw things on the stone that are not there and missed many other features that are. In this he had company, for the same thing can be said of every interpretation of Stela 5 thus far.

Without belaboring the point, it is clear that many of Jakeman's identifications of the monument's features were forced to fit what he wanted to find. This applies to parallels he claimed between features on the stone and both Near Eastern art and references to the Book of Mormon text. In regard to the scriptural parallels, most of the several dozen elements that he thought linked the stela and Lehi's dream are only hypothetical. For example, the account in 1 Nephi tells us nothing of the circumstances when Lehi recounted the event to his family; all that is said is "he spake unto us" (1 Nephi 8:2). We are not told who was present and who was not, nor whether incense was burned or not. Again, most of the purported parallels to Old World art are based on Jakeman's speculations. Actually, only two elements mentioned in the text, a fruit tree and water, can be recognized on the stone without



A pair of fish carved from jadeite and forming part of a necklace was excavated together with the ceramic head of Ehecatl shown above. Whatever they mean exactly, obviously they are tied with the wind-god. Notice this pair appears just in front of the Ehecatl figure on Stela 5, possibly representing jadeite images hanging from a necklace.

resorting to guesswork. All the rest—the spacious field, the iron rod, an angel, and so on—were revealed as such by dint of Jakeman's own imaginative eye. This sort of subjective matching is not an acceptable procedure in scholarship or science.

A logical problem also undercuts Jakeman's work. None of his critical identifications of Book of Mormon characters and elements work unless one assumes his conclusion beforehand. The supposed glyphs for Lehi, Sariah, and Nephi, for example, are impressive only if one *assumes* that Old World concepts were translated into New World iconography to signify names that were simultaneously meaningful in Palestine and Mesoamerica. Thus Jakeman supposed that the "Lehi" figure, the old man, can be identified by a monster skull floating behind his head, and he assumed that this feature represented a crocodile-like mythic creature known to the Aztecs (2,000 years later) by the name Cipactli. From that tenuous linkage, the analyst leaped to the notion that the skull signified "jawbone," despite the fact that the skull is noticeably jawless. Another step takes Jakeman to the name Lehi, which may have been pronounced like the Hebrew word for "jawbone." This argument is forced at several points. None of the links proposed is warranted, let alone demanded, by the data.

Two general issues here are basically problematic. One is the hypothetical relationship of Lehi's dream to the scene on Stela 5. At this point in time it is much too speculative

and is based on too many weak points of logic to be accepted. The new drawing may not allow a final conclusion about the viability of Jakeman's argument but it does appear to rob it of most of what had once seemed like impressive support.

The claim that significant parallels to Old World art are shown on Stela 5 is the second, independent question. It deserves study in its own right. If a connection is sustained by such an art historical investigation, that relationship need not have resulted from any connection with the Book of Mormon. The new drawing will at least facilitate anyone's research on that matter.

#### **An Afterthought on Stela 5**

Given the nature of LDS interest in Stela 5, most of my discussion has been forced to focus on what the scene is not. If it does not show Lehi's dream, what does it show?

The monument is clearly Mesoamerican in theme, style, technical execution, and quite surely meaning. It derives

the basic symmetry, balance, and concern for geometry and numerology that one also expects in Mesoamerican art. Of course, some elements for the moment do not make sense, such as pairs of fish; comparison with other monument scenes will probably clarify their meanings.

None of these elements fits one's expectations about Lehi's dream. Instead, the scene appears to concern royalty, their subjects, and their relationships to deities and the cosmos. I suspect that the basic theme of Stela 5 is the king as intercessor with the gods on behalf of his people. This was a concern of the ancient Mesoamerican rulers who commissioned the carving of monuments for the sake of their own glory, and this all accords with the ancient tradition of art and culture within which Stela 5 fits comfortably.

Some Latter-day Saints may still feel the need to seek a relationship between Stela 5 and Book of Mormon history. The Lehi connection that Jakeman espoused goes nowhere, in my opinion. But, long shot though it may be,

Long shot though it may be, a Jaredite link to Izapa cannot be completely ruled out. After all, Izapan art had its roots in the Olmec tradition, and that cultural line paralleled in time a major part of the history of the Jaredite lineage.

from a long tradition of stone carving which predates the people of Lehi by at least 700 years. The scene shown has cosmic significance; the heavens, the earth, and the underworld are conventional framing features for earlier art in this area. So is the tree—the world tree that is considered in Mesoamerican thought to grow at the center of the earth, from whose surface it reaches up to heaven and down to the underworld. Supernatural monsters appear in the scene. So do other figures, either gods or mortals (both male and female) who are dressed as though they were gods (they were probably royalty), and their attendants. Ceremony, pomp, and ritual are clearly represented with individuals depicted in elaborate dress, masks, and jewelry positioned before smoking incense burners. Some individuals hold piercing implements used to draw their own blood as an offering to deities. Overall the carving shows

a Jaredite link to Izapa cannot be completely ruled out. After all, Izapan art had its roots in the Olmec tradition, and that cultural line paralleled in time a major part of the history of the Jaredite lineage as reported in the book of Ether. The last Jaredite king, Coriantumr, carefully prepared a record on stone of his royal descent and status (see Omni 1:20–22). That is clearly a Mesoamerican-like thing for him to have done. While Stela 5 clearly cannot be his record (the geography and dating rule that out), it could fit within the general tradition of art and rulership that ended officially with Coriantumr's demise, but which might have persisted among the later Mulekites in the form of myths, art elements, and other cultural patterns all the way down to Izapa's heyday and beyond. □

## ENDNOTES

**A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5:  
A Step toward Improved Interpretation**  
John E. Clark

1. Published as, V. Garth Norman, "Izapa Sculpture, Part 1: Album," *Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation* 30 (1973), and "Izapa Sculpture, Part 2: Text," *Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation* 30 (1976).
2. The primary general source is Gareth W. Lowe, Thomas A. Lee Jr., and Eduardo Martínez Espinosa, "Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments," *Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation* 31 (1982).
3. Norman, "Izapa Sculpture, Part 2," 166.
4. Jakeman, "Izapa Stela 5 and the Book of Mormon," *Book of Mormon Institute*, Div. of Continuing Education, BYU, 1959 (1964 edition), 51.
5. Irene M. Briggs, *The Tree of Life Symbol: Its Significance in Ancient American Religion* (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1950).
6. Linda Schele and David A. Friedel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 115, fig. 3:14 (Cerros headband).