Near Eastern Weapon Parallels

Parallels between sickle swords and two-bladed knives in ancient Mesoamerica and the Near East may strengthen the possibility of some historical link between the areas. Similarities in weapons terminology may also lead to fruitful research.
of centuries after Nephi's death; if he did know the process, it could well have died out in succeeding years. There is no evidence from Mesoamerican archaeology or traditions to indicate the use of any metal in the manufacture of swords, other than as occasional decoration, although we may not have the final word on that matter.24

But we do not need to interpret Nephi's statement “after the manner of” as meaning that the swords he produced were of the same material as Laban's sword, only that their general pattern was similar—a straight double-edged slashing implement, in contrast to a cimeter. The same phraseology is used by Nephi, in regard to building their temple in the new land. He did so “after the manner” (that is, according to the pattern) of the temple of Solomon, but it was not built of all the same materials (see 2 Nephi 5:1). When Nephi produced enough swords to arm his whole people, he could well have used some other metal, including perhaps obsidian, flint, or even fire-hardened wood, for the cutting portion.

Could a Macuahuitl Be “Stained”?

The Lamanite king named Anti-Nephi-Lehi admonished his fellow converts, “Since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren” (Alma 24:12). Many types of obsidian have a fine luster so the edges of a macuahuitl might well be described as bright.25 For example, Friar Juan de Torquemada in the sixteenth century described obsidian as “a stone which might be called precious, more beautiful and brilliant than alabaster or jasper.”26 But what might “stain our swords” have meant if a Lamanite or Nephite sword was in the form of a macuahuitl? Hamblin has noted that blood would deeply stain the wood in a weapon like the Aztec sword. The king’s metaphor for redemption that involved stained weapons and their cleansing might actually be more powerful if it referred to blood-soaked wood than to a metal or even an obsidian blade, which could easily be wiped clean.

Did native American swords have sheaths? Laban's sword is the only weapon mentioned in the Book of Mormon that is said to have been carried in a sheath. There are later references to men "drawing" their swords, but that expression need not imply a sheath. Weapons could be "drawn" from a bag or basket in which they were stored.
or carried. Hamblin and Merrill note that a mural from Chichen Itza (dated long after Book of Mormon times) shows a Toltec-era soldier carrying a bag or basket holding several macuahuitls on his back. Some Aztec warriors carried a kind of rack on their backs to which they could fasten their weapon when not in use. The Toltecs were reported to have borne “swords . . . fastened [on] with belts.” So while Nephite warriors might have had sheaths, they could also have “drawn” their swords from a bag, a basket, or a belt fastening.

The expression draw might also have been a rhetorical device meaning something like “prepared to give battle.” Early Spanish chroniclers use the term in that metaphorical way when describing actions by native lords using macuahuitls that were not carried in a sheath: “And he flattered himself, that his sword being once drawn [i.e., the decision being made to go to war], he might have a chance to reach the crown.” None of the caciques [native rulers] dared to draw a sword against them.

How sharp were their swords? Some Book of Mormon references to swords suggest that the blades of these weapons could be very sharp, as when Ammon severs the limbs of his enemies at the waters of Sebus, or when a Nephite soldier cuts off Zerahemnah’s scalp. Pohl observes, “The brutal nature of this weapon made combat bloody and dismemberment common.” Spaniards who faced native Mesoamerican swords in battle were deeply impressed by their deadly cutting power and razorlike sharpness. Here are a few of their statements:

- These swords cut naked men as if they were steel.
- They slashed at his mare, cutting her head at the neck so that it only hung by the skin.
- There were shields large and small, and a sort of broadsword, and two-handed swords set with flint blades that cut much better than our swords.

If Ammon’s sword were a macuahuitl, he could easily have cut off the limbs of the livestock “rustlers” that he fought. But even a sharpened sword of hardwood might have done the job as well.

Weren’t their swords pointed? At Alma 44:12–13, Mormon describes the unsuccessful attempt by the leader of a Lamanite army, Zerahemnah, to kill the Nephite chief, Moroni. In the skirmish, a Nephite soldier wounded Zerahemnah by smiting off part of his scalp. The warrior then “laid” the scalp on the “point” of his sword, apparently without piercing it. As Hamblin and Merrill note, we cannot tell from this statement whether the “point” was dangerously sharp or not. Another passage implies that a group of Lamanite prisoners who were attempting to escape may have been impaled on pointed swords held by their guards: “And it came to pass that because of their rebellion we did cause that our swords should come upon them. And it came to pass that they did in a body run upon our swords,

Aztecs was labeled hadzab among the Maya of Yucatan in Spanish colonial days. The Maya word signifies “that with which one strikes a blow.” In Hebrew יִב ish means “to hew,” as in chopping, although in certain passages in the Hebrew scripture the meaning is “to cut.” The phonetic similarity of these two terms seems interesting at least.

This is not the only parallel between Maya and Hebrew terminology. In fact many cultural complexes are shared by the Near East and Mesoamerica that lead to the possibility of some type of historical link between them.

Given these parallels, it seems appropriate to search carefully in the vocabulary related to arms and warfare of the two areas to look for other specific parallels that would shed further light on the nature of the relationship between them.
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