



1-31-1999

Near Eastern Weapon Parallels

Journal of Book of Mormon Studies

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Studies, Journal of Book of Mormon (1999) "Near Eastern Weapon Parallels," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol8/iss1/8>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Near Eastern Weapon Parallels

Author(s)

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 39-40, 78.

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

Abstract 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.

OF IT DID MAKE MANY SWORDS, LEST
COME UPON US AND DESTROY US.

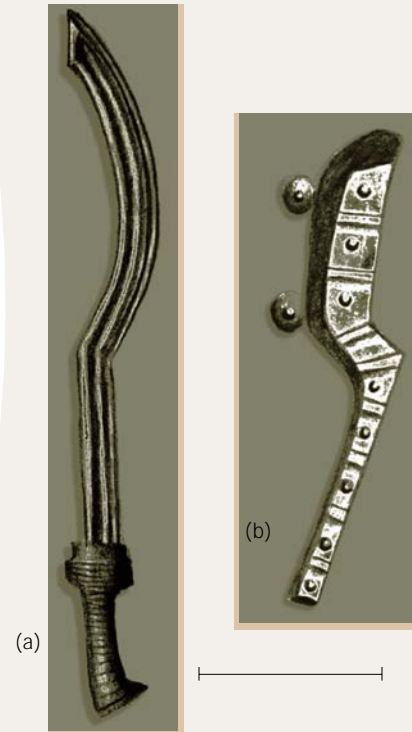
Could a Macuahuitl Be "Stained"?

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

Hamblin noted that this weapon has a close parallel in ancient Syria and India. There it has been called a curved double-dagger or *haladie*. Each of its blades was approximately 8½ inches long and the two were connected by a small handgrip, probably of wood.¹ The fact that the Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites of the Book of Mormon record had their origins in ancient Israel, adjacent to Syria, is interesting, to say the least. To all appearances the *haladie*, the Loltún Cave weapon, and the Kaminaljuyu weapon were constructed in response to one shared idea, and both must have functioned very similarly.

A second parallel between Mesoamerica and the Near East may support the position that the latter area could have been a cultural source for the former in some aspects of armament. The obsidian-edged sword that was called *macuahuitl* by the



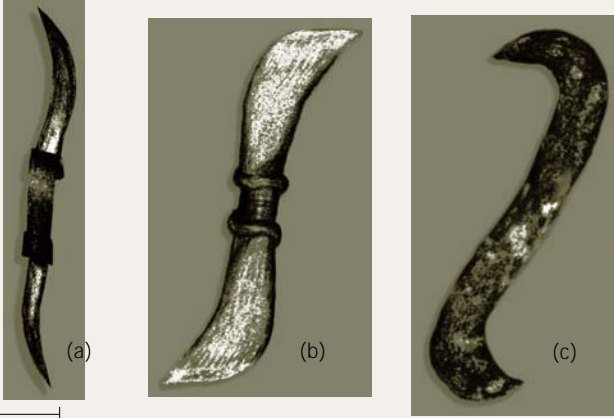
Near Eastern Weapon Parallels

Certain weapons in use in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica resemble those that were used in the ancient Near East. This Canaanite sickle sword (a) is so much like a scimitar-like weapon shown in the Mexican Codex Borgia (b) as to be very interesting.

The odd curved weapon pictured in the grasp of the sculptured warrior figure at Loltún Cave, Yucatan (see p. 34), has two blades projecting in opposite directions from a central handle. Whether the blades were of chipped obsidian or hardened wood, this device would have been fearsome to face in hand-to-hand combat. What seems to be another version of the same concept is pictured in the early art of highland Guatemala.

Hamblin noted that this weapon has a close parallel in ancient Syria and India. There it has been called a curved double-dagger or *haladie*. Each of its blades was approximately 8½ inches long and the two were connected by a small handgrip, probably of wood.¹ The fact that the Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites of the Book of Mormon record had their origins in ancient Israel, adjacent to Syria, is interesting, to say the least. To all appearances the *haladie*, the Loltún Cave weapon, and the Kaminaljuyu weapon were constructed in response to one shared idea, and both must have functioned very similarly.

A second parallel between Mesoamerica and the Near East may support the position that the latter area could have been a cultural source for the former in some aspects of armament. The obsidian-edged sword that was called *macuahuitl* by the



Versions of the scimitar-like double-dagger: (a) Syria, the haladie (each blade is 8 or 9 inches long); (b) from Stela 11 at Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, dated to the first century B.C.; (c) Loltún Cave, second century B.C.

Aztecs was labeled *hadzab* among the Maya of Yucatan in Spanish colonial days. The Maya word signifies “that with which one strikes a blow.”² In Hebrew *hšb* means “to hew,” as in chopping, although in certain passages in the Hebrew scripture the meaning is “to cut.”³ The phonetic similarity of these two terms seems interesting at least.

This is not the only parallel between Maya and Hebrew terminology.⁴ 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.⁵

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. □

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.

Were 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,

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.²⁷ Some Aztec warriors carried a kind of rack on their backs to which they could fasten their weapon when not in use.²⁸ The Toltecs were reported to have borne “swords . . . fastened [on] with belts.”²⁹ 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 *drawn* 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.”³⁰ “None of the caciques [native rulers] dared to draw a sword against them.”³¹

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.”³² 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.³³
- They slashed at his mare, cutting her head at the neck so that it only hung by the skin.
- They killed the mare with a single sword stroke.
- 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.³⁴

THESE SWORDS CUT NAKED MEN AS IF THEY WERE STEEL.

Near Eastern Weapon Parallels

1. George C. Stone, *Glossary of the Construction, Decoration and Use of Arms and Armor in All Countries and in All Times* (New York: Brussels, 1961), 275.
2. Ralph L. Roys, *The Indian Background of Colonial Yucatan* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 66.
3. Francis Brown, S. L. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 345.
4. David H. Kelley, "Calendar Animals and Deities," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 16 (1960): 325–29; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 79.
5. John L. Sorenson, "The Significance of an Apparent Relationship between the Ancient Near East and Mesoamerica," in *Man across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts*, ed. Carroll L. Riley et al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 219–41.