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Abstract Ammon, a Nephite missionary who chose to serve a Lamanite king as his servant, gained fame by cutting off the arms of the king's enemies. The practice of smiting off arms of enemies as trophies fits a cultural pattern known among the later Aztecs and Maya in pre-Spanish Mesoamerica.





AMMON AND THE MESOAMERICAN CUSTOM OF SMITING OFF ARMS

BY BRUCE H. YERMAN

The Book of Mormon story about Ammon smiting off the arms of the Lamanite thieves who scattered King Lamoni's flocks fits a cultural pattern known from pre-Spanish Mesoamerica. Cutting off an enemy's arm in battle not only rendered him utterly helpless but also netted the victor a grisly trophy to carry from the scene of battle that would validate his prowess in hand-to-hand combat. Documents from Mexico and Guatemala reveal such a pre-Columbian custom.

In Mexico City's National Palace, famed artist Diego Rivera represented the life of the Aztecs and their predecessors in a series of colorful and accurate murals. The one in the first corridor of the palace depicts the marketplace at Tlatelolco, a quarter of the Aztec capital metropolis that was made famous through vivid descriptions provided by the Spanish conquerors.¹ This carefully researched Rivera mural shows a prostitute tempting men around her in the marketplace. They show off for her by flaunting tokens of wealth and power. One displays a precious jade necklace. Another admirer, a soldier, offers the woman "an arm of a

white man, whom he surely had just defeated in combat."² The artist's intimation is that the war trophy was considered comparable to the piece of fine jewelry. Bernal Díaz, the conquistador author, described the sad fate of several of his comrades who were captured in battle: After the captives had been sacrificed, Aztec warriors held aloft the severed arms of the victims as they taunted and threatened the Spanish and their native allies who were within earshot.³

Among the Aztecs, one of the few avenues open to a man for social advancement beyond the status of his parents was to demonstrate valor in combat. If he proved himself valiant, which included vanquishing his enemies by cutting off their arms, he could gain such privileges as the right to enjoy special foods and dress in fine clothing. It would make sense that in an earlier era among the Nephites and Lamanites, superior performance in the frequent wars would have enhanced social prestige in a similar way. One considers, for example, the high esteem in

which the warrior Teancum was held for an act of daring (see Alma 62:37). Moroni, another of the Nephite heroes, was also a man of extraordinary military prowess—“a strong and a mighty man” (Alma 48:11; compare 48:13, 14, 16; 51:18; 54:12; 60:30). Ammon, whose story is noted below, was deeply admired by the Lamanites “because of his expertness [in arms] and great strength” (Alma 18:3).

One sees further evidence for the Aztec practice of cutting off enemy arms in the Mexica room of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Near the entrance sit four carved figures of death, Las Cihuateteo—women who had achieved the status of “warriors.” A woman obtained that rank—which assured her a special glorified status after death—when she died in childbirth. Acquisition of rank was taken so seriously that, upon hearing of a woman who had just died giving birth, youthful soldiers whose return from the latest battle was not glorious would on occasion rush to the woman’s home, barge in, cut off an arm of the “warrior” woman, and bear it off as a trophy of their valor.⁴

Evidence for the arm-severing practice in earlier times is rare, yet one finds traces. Notable is a mythical event in the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiché Maya of highland Guatemala. There is evidence that at least some of the beliefs and customs recorded in that volume of native “virtual scripture” were current as far back as 2,000 years ago.⁵ (To Latter-day Saints, it may be significant that highland Guatemala might have been the territory where Ammon lived among the Lamanites centuries earlier.⁶) At one point the Popol Vuh reports a fight between hero twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, and the god Seven Macaw. Hidden in a tree, Hunahpu shoots Seven Macaw with his blowgun. As the twin seeks to escape, Seven Macaw twists and tears an arm off Hunahpu’s body. “And when Seven Macaw had taken the arm of Hunahpu, he went home . . . then he hung up the arm of Hunahpu,”⁷ most probably as a token of his victory.

According to the Book of Mormon, Ammon, one of the sons of the Nephite king Mosiah, chose to abandon his princely role to serve as a missionary among the Laman-



ites (see Alma 17). Such a decision by a Mesoamerican noble would be so untypical that it would be recounted among his people.

The Lamanite guards bind Ammon and take him before King Lamoni. Upon seeing and hearing this articulate, noble individual, the king frees him and offers to give him one of his daughters as a wife (see Alma 17:24). Ammon, however, chooses to be the king’s servant. Three days later he is out defending the king’s flocks and his fellow servants against a band of roughnecks who try to steal the animals. Ammon quickly kills a number of the rustlers with his sling. Armed with clubs, the remaining thieves rush at Ammon, who kills their leader. The Nephite prince skilfully uses his sword to disable more of his enemies, cutting off the

RIVERA DEPICTS A SOLDIER OFFERING A WOMAN “AN ARM OF A WHITE MAN, WHOM HE SURELY HAD JUST DEFEATED IN COMBAT.”

arms of a number and leaving them “astonished at his power” (see Alma 17:36). Later the servants of the king collect the severed limbs and take them to the royal residence “as a testimony of” their story about Ammon’s skill and bravery (see Alma 17:39; 18:1–3).

The king is emotionally and spiritually shaken when he hears of the visitor’s performance; he even supposes Ammon to be a deity (see Alma 18:10, 11). Even after Ammon corrects that mistaken notion, the impact of the Nephite prince’s actions earns him respect as a very powerful man in Lamanite society (see Alma 19:24–27).

It is more than interesting that a similar custom existed in the ancient Near East. For instance, an Assyrian work of art celebrating a military conquest shows soldiers cutting off the heads, feet, and hands of vanquished enemies, first for an accurate count of enemy dead and second as trophies of war. Egyptian art shows the taking of hand trophies.⁸

The cultural message delivered to the Lamanites by the fellow servants of prince Ammon who took trophy arms from his foes reminds us forcefully of the same practice among later Aztecs and Maya. □

I thank Randi Reinhart for contributing to this article and discussing elements of it with me.

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Bruce H. Yerman

1. For example, Bernal Díaz del Castillo reported, "Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before," Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico, 1517–1521*, tr. A. P. Maudslay (London: Broadway House, 1928), 302.
2. Antonio Rodríguez, *Diego Rivera Mural Painting* (Mexico: Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, 1991), 76.
3. Díaz, *Discovery and Conquest*, 570.
4. Discussed by Felipe Solís Olguín, archaeologist and curator of the Mexica Room at the National Museum in courses at the museum in October 1996 and May 1997.
5. See, for example, Michael D. Coe, "The Hero Twins: Myth and Image," in *The Maya Vase Book: A Corpus of Rollout Photographs of Maya Vases*, ed. Justin Kerr (New York: Justin Kerr, 1989), 1:161–84, esp. 163.
6. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 138–45.

7. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh, The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 92
8. "Ammon and Cutting off the Arms of Enemies," in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 180–82.