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## Out of the Dust

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**Abstract** It is highly unlikely that an object found in Lake Michigan could be a Jaredite barge.

Lee Siegel reports about an archaeological dig at Piedras Negras, Guatemala, conceived and run by Brigham Young University's Dr. Stephen Houston.

A bronze sword discovered in Texas may be an Old World artifact.

A linguist documents convincingly that the Ket language in western Siberia shares cognates with the Na-Dene language family of North America, thus showing possible transcontinental linguistic links.

to come, including 11 other essays by leading scholars and an appendix that includes the complete text of the king's address with notes and comments. (This feature will ensure that careful readers of King Benjamin's sermon will never want for one more insight.)

Finally, I would recommend a book that reminds me how limited my understanding of the Book of Mormon really is each time I even look at the cover (let alone dip into its pages)—*Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998). Beginning with my first exposure to Isaiah in the Book of Mormon as a freshman at BYU, I have long taken the road of least resistance when I come upon the many chapters of Isaiah that have found their way into the Nephite record. This book, though, is changing that, as Andrew C. Skinner illuminates the reasons why Nephi inserted Isaiah 48 and 49 into 1 Nephi, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland shares his apostolic insights on Isaiah's prophecies concerning Christ's ministry, and as Dana M. Pike examines the "How beautiful upon the mountains" imagery found in Isaiah 52:7–10 (which was one of a handful of passages in Isaiah that I felt I understood but that I now see in a whole new light).

As one who likely will spend the remainder of his days on the receiving end of the voluminous scholarship that is being produced—and published, which is a rather recent occurrence that we ought not take for granted—I must acknowledge my gratitude for those who are providing me with insights that add to my meager attempts to teach, that enliven conversations I have with family and friends, and that, above all else, help the scriptures work upon me all the more efficaciously. □



## OUT OF THE DUST

### A Jaredite Barge in Lake Michigan?

A flurry of press dispatches and Internet messages earlier this year reported that an "enigmatic" object had been found in the waters at the mouth of the Chicago River near its entry into Lake Michigan. Described in terms like "a huge wooden cylinder" and "something like a submarine," it is still not clear exactly what has been found, but the notice taken by the press may have raised questions in the mind of some *JBMS* readers.

At least one inquiry to FARMS concerns whether this might be one of the Jaredite "barges" mentioned in Ether 2:15–25. Not enough clear information has been published yet to establish whether the find could qualify as a barge or any other type of vessel, but there are compelling reasons practically to rule out any possibility that the object could have a connection to the Book of Mormon.

The entire waterway area where the wooden object was found is a much-modified and dredged zone. The chance of any object more than a century old existing intact in such a busy commercial spot is virtually zero. In fact, the possibility of a wooden object that would be more than 4,000 years old even being preserved for that length of time in relatively intact form—as the reports indicate—seems most unlikely. Furthermore, the Jaredite barges obviously arrived on an ocean shore, on either the Pacific or Atlantic coast of America; no logi-

cal analysis of their landing point would place their barges in Lake Michigan.

What we can learn from this case, and similar finds reported in the press, is that information of this sort is much too skimpy to justify any rush of adrenaline in LDS or any other readers. We are always at the mercy of two parties in such situations, reporters and advocates. Reporters rarely know enough about archaeology to provide an accurate and informative article about a find. Even if they talk at some length (that would mean, for a reporter, a few hours) to well-informed experts, they are not likely to learn more than a few basic facts about the find. Given the press's interest in the sensational, almost invariably what is reported in the early stage of a research project will exaggerate or misunderstand at least some of what is and is not known. Deservedly little credence is given such hasty reporting. Archaeologists themselves frequently find themselves misquoted or misunderstood by deadline-sensitive journalists.

Increasingly we also should realize that parties who want their cause to be put in a good light in relation to a discovery intervene to shape press reports. In the case of the Chicago "submarine" find, it appears that some underwater archaeologists (whether amateur or professional) wanted to gain time and funding to conduct better studies of the "mysterious object." To protect their interest

against public apathy, they strove to raise the stakes. If they could whip up press attention with words like “mysterious,” they might hold off commercial forces that probably would want to get the find cleared out of a busy area as quickly and economically as possible.

Another spate of publicity recently stemmed from a modest discovery in Miami, Florida. Smack in the path of a proposed luxury condominium development, local archaeologists found what they trumpeted to journalists as a “temple.” Actually the find was a ruin of very modest size that consisted of a ring of postholes. The structure it represented was somewhat distinctive for the area. The excavators speculated this might have been a religious structure of the Tequesta Indians, a small group who occupied the Miami area when the Spanish explorers first arrived there less than five centuries ago. An adroit public relations game was played by the researchers. By whipping up international interest on the Internet, they apparently hoped to force the land developer not to ignore the archaeological ruin. Use of the pretentious term *temple* was combined with vague reference to supposed “Maya influence” from Yucatan (based on a single rough stone artifact) to make the little site sound important. While one can admire the way the proponents played their hand, nothing in the ancient remains is of more than local concern.

In other cases some famous but ambitious archaeologist considers it in his or her interest to plump up the importance of a find to advance a career. Some of these researchers have a reputation among their colleagues for “archaeology by press conference,” where the name of the game is to maximize the number of press clippings obtainable while having in hand minimal information.

In the competition among these diverse interests, the public is rarely going to get reliable data with any haste.

#### Piedras Negras: Lords of the Forest

Not all journalists produce superficial articles about archaeology. A positive example is the article by Lee Siegel in the weekend *Salt Lake Tribune* for 31 January 1999 entitled “Lords of the Forest: A Brigham Young University Researcher Explores the Mysteries of an Ancient Maya City in Guatemala and Its Inhabitants” (pp. J-1 and J-5). Despite one’s anticipation of light reading after the title has used the mandatory words “mysteries” and “ancient,” Siegel succeeds in conveying considerable—and reliable—information.

Readers are given a substantial picture of both the romance of a remote jungle dig and the background, process, and prospects of a major five-year project conceived and run by BYU’s Dr. Stephen Houston, one of the leading scholars on deciphering Mayan inscriptions. He and other BYU personnel are working with colleagues from Harvard, Yale, Pennsylvania, Arizona, and other major universities at the ruin named Piedras Negras. The first excavations of this site on the Guatemala side of the Usumacinta River were undertaken by the University of Pennsylvania over 50 years ago. That earlier effort was never properly completed nor reported. Since this ruin is one of the few where little modern looting has occurred, Houston hopes to recover many stone monuments that will document its history. It flourished, along with other Classic Maya sites, from approximately A.D. 250 to 850.

Incidentally, Siegel also penned a small article entitled “Piedras Negras

Dig Unrelated to Book of Mormon.” Houston, not a Latter-day Saint, is quoted as saying that BYU is now “one of the strongest centers in the world for the study of ancient Mesoamerica.” He formerly taught at Vanderbilt University, after becoming one of the half dozen leaders in the study of Maya hieroglyphs and civilization. “Much to the credit of the university [BYU],” he went on, “they’ve never compelled me to adopt a particular perspective on . . . interpretation.”

Clearly the quality of journalistic reports of studies of past cultures differs as much as the studies themselves. Readers need to cultivate a critical sense about what they read on these matters in the press, but at its best, popularized writing can provide helpful information. Where *JBMS* readers may wish to receive guidance on the quality of such reports, requests may be directed to FARMS or to this journal. To the extent that our resources permit we may be able to furnish helpful answers.

#### A Bronze Sword from America

Early in 1999 a corroded metal sword (approximately 25 cm long) was brought to FARMS in Provo and offered for whatever tests seemed appropriate and possible. Dr. Steven Jones of the BYU Physics faculty happened to be offering a graduate course during the semester on “archaeometry,” the use of advanced physics instrumentation in aid of archaeology. Since then archaeology student Aaron Jordan has been investigating the sword under Jones’s guidance and recently reported on his findings to a symposium held at BYU featuring student research projects in physics.

The sword was found in Texas on private land at a depth of six feet by an arrowhead collector. Being unin-



terested in this artifact, the finder gave it away. When it was brought to FARMS for examination, Jones and BYU archaeologists John E. Clark and David J. Johnson saw the weapon. They judged that it gave every indication of being ancient and was of a form completely unknown in the Americas. It is hoped that field investigation of the site where the sword was found will soon be possible. Meanwhile Jordan has been studying the object under Jones's direction. A test on a scaled-off fragment of the metal using a particle-induced X-ray emission (PIXE) instrument developed by student Scott Perry in the BYU Physics Department (under Drs. Rees, Jones, and Mangelson) revealed a copper-tin alloy—bronze. Chemical composition of bits of soil found on the weapon confirmed that the soil and metal had been in contact for some time.

Because the metal itself and the form of the weapon pointed to an Old World source, Jordan and Johnson sought parallels in the comparative literature on Bronze Age Europe and Asia. While some similarities were found to Celtic bronze swords of northwestern Europe, eventually a very close parallel was found elsewhere. The wreck of a Mycenaean vessel on the coast of Turkey had yielded swords of both Mycenaean (in Greece) and Canaanite styles dating between 1,500 and 1,200 B.C., and a Canaanite example compares in specific details with the Texas specimen. Permission is being sought to run physical tests on Mediterranean weapons for comparison.

Of course no satisfactory explanation can be advanced at this time as to how an Old World artifact could have reached Texas. Reports of finds on the coast of Texas suggest the possibility of one or more European shipwrecks there in pre-Columbian times. What-

ever we might surmise about its origin, further studies of the sword and its context are planned.

#### Asiatic Origin of Na-Dene Languages (Navajo and Relatives)

Linguist Merritt Ruhlen of Stanford University recently published an important article on "The Origin of the Na-Dene" in the prestigious *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*.<sup>1</sup> Some linguists have long sought, and claimed, evidence for a connection between Asiatic languages and the Na-Dene family of North America. (Three of its branches are found on islands along the coast of British Columbia and southern Alaska. The fourth, and largest, branch, Athabaskan, includes Navajo and Apache plus dozens of others in northwest Canada.)

Most experts have considered the evidence inadequate to establish any language connection between the two continents. Now Ruhlen documents convincingly that a particular people in *western* Siberia use a language closely related to Na-Dene. Their language, Ket, is spoken today by about 550 people only, the sole survivors of what once was a much larger Yeniseian family of languages. Ruhlen notes that "no one has ever directly compared the Yeniseian and Na-Dene families," meaning that nobody before has gone to the trouble to see if hard evidence existed that might challenge the dogma of a supposed ocean "barrier" to migration. He now presents 36 cognate (shared) terms between Ket and Na-Dene languages—such everyday words as *children, dry, hunger, name, night, summer, elbow, foot, birch bark, snow, deer, and rope*. The nature of the parallels strongly argues that they are due to the two language groups having had a common

origin; no other explanation for the similarities makes sense. The linguist's analysis points to the strong likelihood that the ancestors of the Na-Dene speakers once dwelt in Eurasia with or near the Yeniseians. He is unable to specify a date for the migration of the Na-Dene to northwestern America beyond the vague statement "between . . . 11,000 years ago and . . . 3,000 years ago."

This newly established link supports, and is supported by, a previous unorthodox proposal for an intercontinental relationship between other tongues. Otto Sadowszky, a linguist at California State University at Fullerton, had earlier established the existence of strong ties between Uralic languages of western Siberia and the Penutian family of central California.<sup>2</sup> The Uralic family was located only a few hundred miles from where Ruhlen's Ket-speakers live. Internal evidence in Uralic tongues allowed Sadowszky to set a date of around 500 B.C. for that movement. He hypothesized that migrants had moved north downriver from their homeland to the Arctic Ocean, then east along the coast to Alaska. They would then have followed the possibilities for salmon fishing southward as far as the San Francisco Bay area (where salmon end) before moving inland.

An important compilation of Sadowszky's research papers is: *The Discovery of California: A Cal-Ugtian Comparative Study* (Los Angeles: International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, 1996).

Professor Ruhlen agrees that evidence for Sadowszky's Uralic-Penutian link and his interpretation of a Yeniseian-Na-Dene connection strengthen each other. Furthermore, he believes that the Na-Dene speakers traveled by boat from Siberia to the islands off the coast of British Columbia (where some of their descendants became the

Haida, Tlingit, and Eyak Indians, and others moved inland to form populations of Athabaskan speakers such as the Navajo).<sup>3</sup>

At least two lessons may be drawn from this information from "out of the [linguistic] dust," (1) scholars are increasingly recognizing that peoples could and did cross the ocean "barrier" long ago by boat, and (2) general statements by linguists to the effect that "there were no language connections between the Old World and the New" are worthless pronouncements so long as the necessary detailed studies have never been done that could prove or disprove such a state of affairs. When they are done, the stereotyped generalizations may prove worthless. □

#### **Out of the Dust**

1. Merritt Ruhlen, "The Origin of the Na-Dene," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 95 (Nov. 1998): 13994–96.
2. See John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America* (Provo: Research Press, 1998), 222 and references there.
3. E-mail message from Ruhlen to John L. Sorenson dated 14 March 1999, on Sorenson's drawing his attention to the Sadoszky material.