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## FARMS Book of Mormon Research Highlighted

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# Insights

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## FARMS Book of Mormon Research Highlighted

During a recent meeting of the FARMS Development Council, four principal investigators on Book of Mormon-related projects reviewed the status of their ongoing work. The reports clarified each project's goals, highlighted new findings, noted future directions, and expressed appreciation for the crucial support of generous donors, many of whom were in attendance. A summary of the presentations follows.

### Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

After opening remarks by FARMS director Noel B. Reynolds, Royal Skousen discussed the Book of Mormon critical text project. Begun in 1988, the project seeks to determine the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon as Joseph

Smith received and dictated it. Skousen, a BYU professor of linguistics and English language, said that textual evidence shows the original text to be more systematic than initially thought and that Joseph received the text word for word and letter by letter. Skousen illustrated what he termed the "astonishing consistency" of the original text with the following example from part 1 of volume 4 of the critical text. The current Book of Mormon text has 17 occurrences of the phrase *sins of the world*, but the only two that refer to John the Baptist's witness of Jesus (1 Nephi 10:10 and 2 Nephi 31:4) originally read in the singular (*sin of the world*), perfectly consistent with the reading of the biblical parallel in John 1:29. (For a full report on the recently published part 1 of volume 4, see the report "Restoring the Original Text of the Book of Mormon," *Insights* 24/4 [2004].)


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## The Michigan Relics Revisited

One of the most enduring archaeological hoaxes, the Michigan relics, a series of copper, slate, and clay forgeries, were "discovered" throughout counties in Michigan from the late 19th century until 1920. James Scotford and Daniel Soper apparently worked together to create and sell the forgeries. Scholars and archaeologists were skeptical from the outset, but interest in the objects persisted. In 1911 James E. Talmage studied the relics, recognizing the impact they could have on the perception of the Book of Mormon if they were genuine. In a detailed report, Talmage dismissed them as blatant forgeries.

However, interest revived in 1984 when a series of authors began writing about the relics, attributing their engravings to Zoroastrian, Christian, and other Old World influences (see *JBMS* 7/1 [1998]: 78). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had acquired almost 800 such objects through a

donation from the University of Notre Dame. Richard Stamps, Latter-day Saint professor of archaeology at Oakland University, examined the collection in 1977 and again in 1998 and 1999. He likewise declared the relics to be forgeries (see his article "Tools Leave Marks: Material Analysis of the Scotford-Soper-Savage Michigan Relics," *BYU Studies* 40/3 [2001]; also see Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Mormonism's Encounter with the Michigan Relics," in that same issue of *BYU Studies*).

While the items clearly are not evidence of an ancient civilization, they are artifacts of Michigan's history. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints recently donated the collection to the Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing, where pieces were on display through August 2004. The exhibit, "Digging Up Controversy," included commentary depicting the objects as fraudulent but nevertheless reflective of earlier Michigan citizens' fixation with archaeology and ancient civilizations. 

## FARMS Research cont. from page 1

### Research on Lehi's Trail

S. Kent Brown, a professor of ancient scripture and director of BYU's Ancient Studies program, discussed the history and status of FARMS research in the Arabian Peninsula. Of key interest are Lehi's route through Arabia and the fertile coastal locale known as Bountiful, where the company embarked on a voyage to the New World. In 1988 and 1998, BYU expeditions investigated the southern Omani coast (a surmised location of Bountiful) and concluded that further botanical, geographical, and archaeological studies were warranted. Brown noted that two documentary films are growing out of this project, both by award-winning LDS filmmaker Peter Johnson: one on Lehi's route to the New World, the other on the famed incense trail.

### Ancient Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon

John E. Clark, professor of anthropology and director of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation, reported on FARMS's Mesoamerican initiative. He proposed a 50-year research project on Mesoamerican history and chronology. The project's goal is to recover the history of Mesoamerica's early cities. This will be an enormous task best accomplished by organizing a community of scholars. Clark's current work in Chiapas aims to identify the earliest pre-urban people there (material remains suggest a date of 1200 BC so far). He concluded by listing many aspects of Mesoamerican civilization that comport with the Book of Mormon: ancient writing, fortifications, cotton armor, long dynasties, stone thrones, artistic motif of a tree growing from one's heart, 400-year prophecies, and cycles of civilization.

### Responding to Critics of Restoration Scripture

Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at BYU, reviewed FARMS's efforts to respond appropriately to critics who challenge the authenticity of Latter-day Saint scripture. This work should not be a fundamental purpose of FARMS, Peterson said, but a by-product of mainstream academic work, which enables those who respond to critics to speak from a position of strength. He pointed to Egyptologist John Gee's work on the Book

of Abraham as an example of how solid research accepted by the larger academic community is simultaneously strengthening Mormon apologetics. Other research, such as that of Keith E. Norman and Jordan Vадja on early Christian belief in deification, show that Latter-day Saint teachings, to the chagrin of critics, fit comfortably with the theology of the earliest Christians. Peterson shared several other examples of how faithful research on many fronts is defusing the claims of critics.

### There's More to Do

The final presentation of the symposium was given by John W. Welch, founder of FARMS. He first noted several major research projects that have been made possible only by the generosity of specific donors, including work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Masada exhibition brought to BYU in 1996, and the recent publication of *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*. He went on to describe several new discoveries, such as a recent examination of the Gubbio brass plates in Italy and three possible translations of the Isaianic expression "swallowed up in victory" that all happen to be present in the Book of Mormon; publication of new developments awaits the funding necessary to complete the research and writing. The importance of Book of Mormon research was emphasized by quoting Mormon 7:9, where Mormon states the purpose of his book, namely, "for the intent that ye may believe [the Bible]." For this reason, FARMS is eager to support the production of a multivolume New Testament commentary. Welch explained how the work of FARMS—to bring faithful scholarship to bear on all our ancient scriptures, both the Bible and the scriptures restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith—will continue to go forward in the future, as it has in the past, through the support of many people working cooperatively and generously with one another. 📖

### Correction

In the previous issue of *Insights* (vol. 24, no. 4), the article "Restoring the Original Text of the Book of Mormon" should have read "towards that great and spacious building" rather than "toward the tree of life" in two references to 1 Nephi 8:31.