



9-1-2008

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Wright, H. C. and Sutton, Elisabeth R. "Evidence of Ancient Writing on Metal: An Interview with H. Curtis Wright." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 9, no. 3 (2008).  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol9/iss3/16>

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# Evidence of Ancient Writing on Metal: An Interview with H. Curtis Wright

*H. Curtis Wright and Elisabeth R. Sutton*

*H. Curtis Wright is a professor emeritus of ancient Greek studies and modern library education at BYU. Wright's book *Modern Presentism and Ancient Metallic Epigraphy*<sup>1</sup> contains the largest bibliography ever collected about metallic epigraphy, ancient writing on metal—nearly two thousand references.*

*Elisabeth R. Sutton (elisabeth.sutton@gmail.com) graduated from BYU with an English major and an Arab-Islamic studies minor.*

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*Sutton: What first sparked your interest in ancient epigraphy?*

**Wright:** Before my mission, I was studying at the University of Utah. I was headed on a track like mechanical engineering or something else mathematical. My mission among the Navajos put me in a situation where my companion and I; the local trader, who was Mormon; and his wife, who was Presbyterian, were the only ones who didn't know what was going on around us because we could not understand the language. There I learned that knowledge of foreign languages in certain circumstances is not a pretty nicety; it is a survival necessity. As long as you cannot understand what is going on around you, you tend to become paranoid and nervous. You will not be comfortable in the courts and the marketplace. That is what got me interested in languages, particularly Navajo. We were not supposed to learn the language in those days because we didn't have a Missionary Training Center. I ended up trying to learn it anyway.

When Matthew Cowley and Elder Spencer W. Kimball (before he was President of the Church) found out that I was trying to learn Navajo, I thought they would be angry. But they were not; they were interested in the fact that I tried to learn it. Some of the traders

down there had done business with the Navajos for forty years and still could not speak Navajo. They spoke what the Navajos called “Baking Powder” Navajo. I never could get any of the traders that I knew to function as an interpreter. They could not speak the language well enough. So when Elder Kimball and Elder Cowley, the General Authorities that I have known best, found out I was seriously interested in Navajo, Elder Kimball said, “Don’t go back to the U; go back to the Y and study under Hugh Nibley.”

That is how I got in contact with Hugh Nibley. I came to Brigham Young University on January 4, 1951, and I started studying with him. When I arrived, he was working on a series of articles called “Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites” for the *Improvement Era*.<sup>2</sup> In the first months that I knew him, he was talking about ancient metal documents. He had discovered what he called a worldwide pattern of ancient metal documents, so I got interested in that and began to think about it. All of a sudden I started to notice writing on metals in ancient cultures I was studying.

**Sutton:** *Where did you earn your PhD?*

**Wright:** From Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. This is what happened: I was a classics librarian at the University of Cincinnati, where there is a very important classics department in terms of Bronze Age archaeology. It was just a marvelous place to be. After a year I got a chance to apply for a United States Office of Education (USOE) grant in Cleveland, which is just up the state from Cincinnati. Case Western had a program that worked out just fine. Jesse Shera was convinced that librarianship was interdisciplinary—that there is nothing at a university that does not touch a library. He had created a bifurcated program, what he called the cognate-area PhD. Because Shera believed in the total interdisciplinarianism of librarianship, he believed that you could pick any PhD-granting program in the whole university and spend half your time in that program.

We in the bifurcated librarianship program used to call ourselves the Cleveland Seven because we were seven graduate students working on one or the other of these programs. I selected classics, so half of my doctoral study was British and American library education and the other half was ancient Greek language and literature. Now, if I had studied classics without librarianship, then the other half of my degree would have been Latin language and literature. That is why I call myself a half-trained classicist, though I can also read Latin when I put my mind to it.

I had to compete with honest-to-goodness classicists. I studied shoulder to shoulder with other students who went on to earn doctorates in classics, and I ended up with a 4.0 average in my classes. I took them seriously, but that does not mean anything because there is no correlation between education and actual talent. A PhD just shows that you have the tenacity to get it done. It doesn't say much about what you really know.

I had never heard another teacher acknowledge the worldwide pattern of ancient metal documents before Nibley, so I started to collect a bibliography of articles on it. In the fall of 1969, just after I finished my PhD and returned to BYU, a man named Spencer Palmer happened to see me with a four-page bibliography, and he started bugging me about it. So I finally published "Metallic Documents of Antiquity" in the 1970 *BYU Studies* just to get him off my back.<sup>3</sup> It had seven pages of bibliography.

*Sutton: So that's the article that started it all?*

**Wright:** That is where I started. But all I did for a year or so was notice these things. I found out about five hundred curse tablets in a well discovered in Boeotia. After about a year, I thought I should be keeping track of these things, so I collected this stuff in files for fifty-four years. Then I put it together in this book: 211 pages of scholarly references to ancient metallic epigraphy.

*Sutton: What has been the response to your research?*

**Wright:** While I was preparing for my oral exams on the classics side of my PhD, I took this bibliography of seven pages and showed it to Dr. Charles H. Reeves. He was a very brilliant man, the head of classics in Cleveland. He and I went to a restaurant there, and he looked at the bibliography and said, "This is incredible. I've heard of a couple of the things here. I had no idea there was so much of this stuff." He was just plain startled by this. Now, he was a Bronze Age archaeologist, and the archaeologists are the ones who wrote about epigraphy, not the historians, because classics makes a clear distinction between archaeological monuments and historical documents.

Archaeologists tended to hide epigraphic things away and call them monuments, and everybody looking for epigraphic documents is cut off. I had to learn the conventions of classics when I became a classics librarian. That is just the way they think about these things, and the way they think about them determines how you handle them in the classics library. On the other side of the spectrum, Near Eastern studies does not make any distinction between soft and hard writing materials at all. They are interested only in the message itself. I think Latter-day

Saints should go back and reassess the whole corpus of ancient writings in Near Eastern studies because they bury the distinction that makes these things visible.

Anytime I have shown anybody this research in classics, not just in Mormonism, they have been flabbergasted by it. My graduate director was Russian, and his name was Rawski. He was also fluent in German, and he made the mistake of telling me, “Well, if you find anything in German, I’ll read it for you.” And then I started dumping bushels of journal articles on him.

He turned to me twenty years later and said, “I told you that I would translate your articles because I was sure you wouldn’t find anything.” I found examples of ancient writing on metal because I learned where to look for them. This has been the story with everyone who has seen my research. They are shocked. Not just people in Mormonism. Scholarly people everywhere are shocked to see so many of these epigraphic documents. So this turns out to be an unknown, or very obscure, footnote in the history of ancient writing. And people are always shocked by it.

*Sutton: What surprised you the most during your research?*

**Wright:** Well, number one, I am surprised just like everyone else with the sheer number of metallic epigraphs that are available. Also, it is hard to study the transition from no writing at all to protowriting, because you have nothing, no record at all to go by. The earliest technologies that go way, way back are the ancient technologies of woodworking, stonecutting, and metalsmithing, and my guess is that they are the oldest forms of writing because you do not have to smelt anything. You just have to chop trees down, for example, since they dry out, and then you build a boat or whatever you want. Writing drew on these technologies.

I have one article in the bibliography called “Sie schrieben auf Holz” (They wrote on wood).<sup>4</sup> However, wood is biodegradable, so wood documents do not survive, while stone lasts forever. Engraving stone seems to be the most cumbersome thing. What would you use to write with? Well, you have to have chisels, hammers, punches, scribes, everything—you have to have all the paraphernalia that a stonemason uses in order to write. They used to do that for public consumption.

*Sutton: What about clay tablets?*

**Wright:** Clay tablets are not epigraphical. They are probably the oldest. They are not epigraphical in the classical sense, but classics does not have a lot to do with clay. The all-time winner of the war for survival is the clay tablet largely because clay has no intrinsic value. Metal

is always getting melted down and sold on the black market. We have examples of that. But clay has no value, so it piles up. But I assume that you use clay tablets when they are wet or moist, and you impress them and then let them dry. That is not the same thing as using metal.

**Sutton:** *I guess working with clay would be a little bit easier than carrying a chisel around, but you would still require wet clay.*

**Wright:** Just imagine what the scribe's kit is; you need everything suited to work with moist tablets. And that means you have a different kit than if you are working with marble tablets or with wood or with metal. I believe that when writing first appears, it makes use of extant technology. So woodworking and stonecutting and engraving are already up and running when writing appears. All you need to create writing is contrast, a stable contrast between figure and ground that makes writing visible. They first do it epigraphically. That is, they violate the surface with something like a scorer, a punch, or a chisel. Once they have figured that out, they also figure out easier ways to write.

**Sutton:** *In your book, you pointed out that many Indo-European and Semitic words for "to write" come from words for "to cut" and "to scrape."<sup>25</sup> I think you make a very good argument for protowriting being epigraphic with those etymologies: if people started out writing on paper with ink, then they would not call the process cutting.*

**Wright:** Tree products are popular during the formative age of writing, and I think stonecutting is also. An ancient technique of gem carving goes way back, and gem cutting is only a refined kind of stonemasonry. I think gem carving was also involved in the first writing techniques. Metalworking is also very antique. Tubal-cain of the Bible was head of a great family of metalworkers: Tubal-cain means Cain the Metalworker. All these things predate writing and make writing possible.

**Sutton:** *What should Latter-day Saints know about writing on metal?*

**Wright:** First, it is very ancient. I would guess that the first writing is done on wood. Then they progress to using metals and stone. Also, I deplore the blurring of the classical distinction between hard and soft writing surfaces in Near Eastern studies. They make fun of the distinction; they think the distinction is silly. But the distinction between hard and soft writing surfaces is a key player. That is where classical philology begins, and philology is a concern for the literary tradition, not for the scientific tradition. I could not have made sense of the classics library in Cincinnati if I had not understood this distinction. Near

Eastern scholars are so interested in what the document says that they could not care less what it was made of.

**Sutton:** *So if someone were looking at a transcription of something written on metal, and they did not know that it was originally on metal, then they would assume it was written on a soft material?*

**Wright:** Yes, that is right. I will tell you an example of this—I studied a treaty associated with the Thirty Years’ War, one of the wars in Greece, for a long time without the vaguest hint that it was a metal document. I found out after I had a PhD that it was a metal document. It is ridiculous how this happens. This is what makes me think that Latter-day Saint scholars should reexamine all Near Eastern texts. If they did that, they would find metal documents.

Also this book suggests that nothing obviates the possibility—nothing rules out the possibility—that both scrolls in the Masoretic Text of Jeremiah 36 are actually metal.<sup>6</sup>

**Sutton:** *You also wrote that writing “with ink” (Jeremiah 36:18) may have just been added later.*

**Wright:** It is added later because the Masoretes think that was the only way to write. Both scrolls in the Masoretic Jeremiah 36 and in the Septuagint Jeremiah 42 may have been metallic epigraphs.

**Sutton:** *In the book, you wrote that the Septuagint was probably more accurate than the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, which was used for the King James Version of the Bible.*

**Wright:** That all depends on how you construe that. You know, the Book of Mormon is the first book in modern times that draws a very sharp distinction between the Jews at Jerusalem—the rabbinical Jews—and the Jews everywhere else—the Diaspora Jews. When the Jews came back from Babylon, they came back in two groups, because when they went to Babylon they were in two groups. There were supporters of the dead kings, the nationalist party. Then there were supporters of the prophets, the prophetic party, to which Jeremiah and Lehi belonged.

In the Book of Mormon, you can read about the same split when you study the king-men and the freemen. The king-men were supporters of the kings, and the freemen were supporters of the gospel (see Alma 51; 60–62). The Jews have the same problem. Two stories developed among the Jews about what happened when Moses went up to Mount Sinai. One is that he went up there as a king, and when he came down he had all the commandments, and he gave those commandments as a king. The other theory was that when Moses went up and came down the mountain, he was a prophet.

**Sutton:** *So did the first group justify wanting a king because they said Moses was a king?*

**Wright:** Well, the repercussions of this split come out in the book of Deuteronomy. In the Jerusalem of Lehi's day, there is a very definite party of king-men. And then opposed to them you have Jeremiah, Lehi, and others, who are the prophetic people. So they were divided. Jerusalem was a divided city. When they come back from exile, the Jewish nationalists, the king-men, were the ones who built up and restored Jerusalem. The Jews in Jerusalem are often called "Temple Jews" because they rebuilt the temple, and they built a wall around Jerusalem and did a marvelously successful job of keeping almost everything Greek outside the walls. Now, the Jews in Jerusalem did not determine policy for the Jews in the Diaspora, and the Temple Jews did not like losing control over the Diaspora Jews.

So the Judaism outside Jerusalem was not under the control of the rabbis. The rabbis prefer the Masoretic Text, or the Hebrew text, but the Diaspora Jews and their creation of the Septuagint went back a lot earlier than the Masoretic Text. When the intellectual center of Greece moved from Athens to Alexandria, the cultural desire to have the biggest libraries almost precipitated a war between the northern and southern colonies, and it was a prestige thing. Jewish scholars got together in Alexandria to publish the Septuagint, and it is in Greek because the Diaspora Jews spoke Greek. That is how the Bible became known; a tiny local scripture became the worldwide scriptures right there in Alexandria.

I have not run into anybody at BYU who seriously studies the Septuagint except for John F. Hall; he wrote the introduction to my book. He said writing about the Septuagint is important. He has never heard of anybody at BYU except Hugh Nibley and me who consider the Septuagint this way. After all, the Christian church is modeled on the synagogue, not the temple.

**Sutton:** *This book is the first volume in a series. What is the second volume going to be about?*

**Wright:** The second one is about Nibley's writings on the *sophic* and the *mantic*, which I call the antigospel and the gospel. I had to understand this because when you study Greek you have to learn the difference between thinking and sensing in the Greek mentality.

**Sutton:** *What do *sophic* and *mantic* mean in Greek?*

**Wright:** *Sophic* and *mantic* explain thinking and sensing. They determine the sensory-noetic disjunction implicit in Greek thinking, and if you do not understand that, then you do not understand the



Greeks. Our preference for thinking about sensory things is scientific, but we think about literary things and ideas in a different way. I understand that very well, and I have run into quite a few people at BYU who also understand it. But Nibley lifts it up to a power of ten. He shows that the sophic-mantic dichotomy exists all over the world, in all cultures. I think it is the most important thing he ever did.

My assemblage of Nibley's ideas on sophic and mantic sat in my office for twenty-two years until I finally gave it to FARMS. And now I have sifted through all of this stuff and intend to make a full-blown book out of it.

*Sutton: Your research has come a long way.*

**Wright:** In 1970, I had seven pages in my bibliography of published information about ancient epigraphy. It has since gone from 7 pages to 211 pages because my office was right next to the ancient studies library. Every year a huge bibliography of classical studies comes out, and I learned how to find the epigraphical information in it. **RE**

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## Notes

1. H. Curtis Wright, *Modern Presentism and Ancient Metallic Epigraphy* (Salt Lake City: Wings of Fire, 2006).

2. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988).

3. H. Curtis Wright, "Metallic Documents of Antiquity," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1970): 457-77.

4. Helmuth T. Bossert, "Sie schrieben auf Holz," in *Minoica; Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Johannes Sundwall*, ed. Ernst Grumach (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), 75-79.

5. Wright, *Modern Presentism and Ancient Metallic Epigraphy*, 10-16.

6. Wright, *Modern Presentism and Ancient Metallic Epigraphy*, 41-57, 89-102.