



1-1-2015

War Banners: A Mesoamerican Context for the Title of Liberty

Kerry Hull

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hull, Kerry (2015) "War Banners: A Mesoamerican Context for the Title of Liberty," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol24/iss1/5>

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.

War Banners: A Mesoamerican Context for the Title of Liberty

Kerry Hull

THE MAKING OF THE TITLE OF LIBERTY in the Book of Mormon is one of the more passionate episodes in the text. Moroni, as chief commander of the Nephite forces, rallied his people to defend the most cherished aspects of Nephite culture: their families, religion, peace, and freedom. What is sometimes overlooked in this event is the heavily martial context in which the title of liberty appears and functions. More than simply an inspirational, tangible symbol of the rights that were in jeopardy, the title of liberty was profoundly linked to warfare. In this study I place the title of liberty within a Mesoamerican context to show numerous correspondences to what we know of battle standards in Mesoamerica. Through an analysis of battle standards in the iconography and epigraphy of ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, I argue that the title of liberty fits comfortably in both form and function in this well-established warfare tradition. Moreover, I present specific linguistic, literary, and cultural correlations between ancient and colonial Maya texts to the language and style of Alma 46 in describing the title of liberty, strongly suggestive of a common cultural origin.

Introduction

Research on the cultural background informing the title of liberty event in Alma 46 has primarily looked for Old World origins and parallels. Some researchers have pointed to the Persian hero Kawe, said by legend

to be the founder of the Magi, whose banner served as a symbol of independence for the Iranian people for generations.¹ What is discounted in locating the rite solely within Old World practices is that the Nephites had been in the New World for over five hundred years, a considerable space of time for cultural change and adaptation. It is not unreasonable to assume that local customs and traditions regarding the ceremonial use of banners would have taken root by that point.

In one respect, Old World patterns in the title of liberty ritual certainly are present. We know this to be the case since Moroni explicitly links the rending of the coat of Joseph who was sold into Egypt to Moroni's rending of his garment: "Moroni said unto them: Behold, we are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea, we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces; yea, and now behold, let us remember to keep the commandments of God, or our garments shall be rent by our brethren, and we be cast into prison, or be sold, or be slain" (Alma 46:23). Moroni then recites an unknown story in our day (but evidently well known in Moroni's) from the life of Jacob, Joseph's father, and ties it symbolically to the rending of his garment in the act of covenant making:

Yea, let us preserve our liberty as a remnant of Joseph; yea, let us remember the words of Jacob, before his death, for behold, he saw that a part of the remnant of the coat of Joseph was preserved and had not decayed. And he said—Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved by the hand of God, and be taken unto himself, while the remainder of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment. Now behold, this giveth my soul sorrow; nevertheless, my soul hath joy in my son, because of that part of his seed which shall be taken unto God. Now behold, this was the language of Jacob. (Alma 46:24–26)

1. Hugh Nibley drew a parallel between Moroni and his title of liberty and Kawe, a blacksmith in ancient times in Iran who fastened his leather apron onto a pole; the apron became a symbol for Iranian independence right through to the Arab conquest. *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 93.

Moroni is clearly basing his actions on Jacob's prophecy about the continued existence of his seed represented by the preserved remnant² of Joseph's coat. In so doing, the precedent for the ceremony is established, and yet Moroni vastly expands upon Jacob's experience, using it as a springboard for adaptation and innovation. Connecting his experience to that of Jacob's likely legitimized the act in the eyes of the people—precisely what Moroni needed to help convince many who were not at all eager to enter into a covenant to fight and defend. Linking the Jacob narrative to their current situation by means of a banner was an especially erudite choice by Moroni, for banners in ancient Mesoamerica were “highly charged objects that were seen as emblematic of the polity or political division of the group”³ and were therefore ideal for marshaling support.

Banners in Mesoamerica

Banners appear early in the Mesoamerican iconographic record. An especially good example dating to about 500 BC is found on Monument 13 at the Olmec site of La Venta (fig. 1). The scene depicts a man with

2. Hugh Nibley linked this notion of a remnant of Joseph's clothing to a tenth-century Islamic tradition recorded by Muhammad ibn-Ibrahim ath-Tha'labi in Persia. He cites the following passage as evidence: “According to ad-Dahak that garment was of the weave [pattern, design] of Paradise, and the breath [spirit, odor] of Paradise was in it, so *that it never decayed* or in any way deteriorated [and that was] a sign [omen].” Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 220. Brian Hauglid, however, has offered a more correct translation of this key phrase that altogether changes its tenor: “Al Dahak said that garment was from the weave of Paradise, and there was in it the odor of Paradise, which does not fall upon the afflicted nor upon the sick but [that] it heals and gives health.” Brian M. Hauglid, “Garment of Joseph: An Update,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 4 (2003): 23. As Hauglid argues, the participle *mubtalan*, taken by Nibley to be “decay,” more properly refers to being “afflicted” or “tired” in this grammatical construction and therefore is not evidence of Jacob's garment not decaying in Alma 46:20.

3. Kathryn Reese-Taylor and Rex Koontz, “The Cultural Poetics of Power and Space in Ancient Mesoamerica,” in *Landscape and Power in Ancient Mesoamerica*, ed. Rex Koontz, Kathryn Reese-Taylor, and Annabeth Headrick (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 18.



Figure 1. Monument 13 from La Venta (drawing by Asa Hull, after Philip Drucker, Robert F. Heizer, and Robert J. Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, 170. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, figure 61).

a turban on his head who is walking purposefully and is carrying a banner or flag near a series of hieroglyphs, one depicting a footprint, which usually represented the idea of travel in ancient Mesoamerica.⁴ Iconography throughout ancient Mesoamerica attests to the importance of various types of banners, both ritual and war-related. These battle standards had a considerable range of styles and sizes. The most commonly encountered were cloth banners on poles, while some were handheld as small bannerettes (figs. 2a–d; 3a–e). In ritual processions and battle scenes, fanlike banners and round parasol-like banners were held aloft, as richly demonstrated in the mural paintings at Bonampak (fig. 4).⁵ Warriors also carried decorated war banners (fig. 5). In the colonial period, Spanish authors made numerous references to banners

4. See Joel W. Palka, *Historical Dictionary of Ancient Mesoamerica* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2000), 158; Christopher Pool, *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 258; Prudence M. Rice, *Maya Calendar Origins: Monuments, Mythistory, and the Materialization of Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 96.

5. It is often difficult to distinguish between the use of parasols and war banners with these fanlike forms; cf. Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 219; and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec*, 5th ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012). While Miller believes some of these objects are “parasols” (p. 12), Andrew Finegold sees them instead as standards with a “clearly heraldic signification.” “Dramatic Renditions: Battle Murals and the Struggle for Elite Legitimacy in Epiclassic Mesoamerica” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), 29. David A. Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker argue that Bonampak tells us that the great parasol standards not only functioned in battle but also had an important role in rituals before and after the battle.” *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path* (New York: William Morrow, 1993), 304.

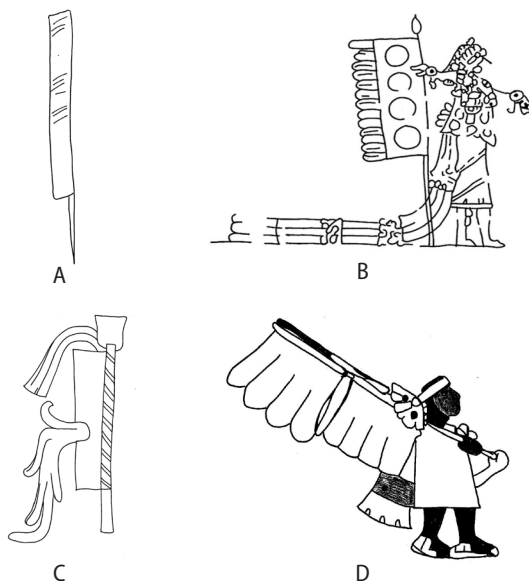


Figure 2. (A) Graffiti of banner or standard from Tikal (Structure 5-D 65) (drawing by Asa Hull, after Helen Webster); (B) Las Higueras (drawing by Asa Hull, after Rex Koontz); (C) Codex Nuttall, p. 28 (drawing by Asa Hull); (D) Codex Barbonicus, p. 23 (drawing by Asa Hull).

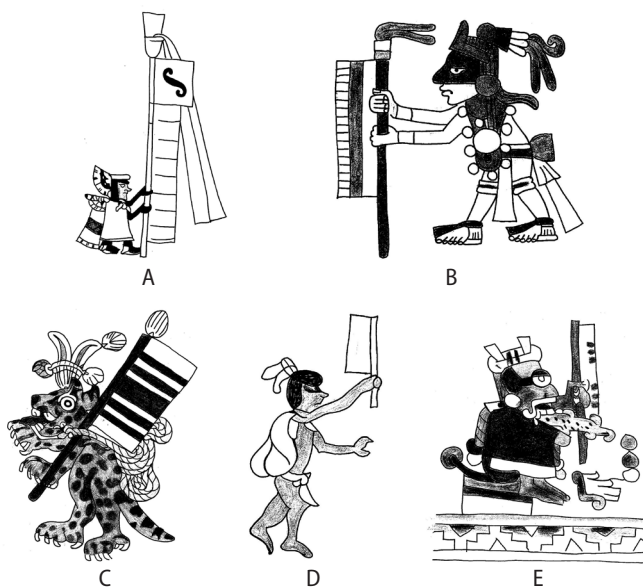


Figure 3. (A) Codex Barbonicus, p. 27 (drawing by Asa Hull); (B) Codex Laud, p. 8 (drawing by Asa Hull); (C) Codex Barbonicus, p. 9 (drawing by Asa Hull); (D) Codex Barbonicus, p. 31 (drawing by Asa Hull); (E) Codex Selden, p. 6 (drawing by Asa Hull).



Figure 4. Depiction of two individuals on a rollout Late Classic Maya vessel, the one on the left holding a fanlike banner and the one on the right a round feather banner (drawing by Asa Hull, after Linda Schele).



Figure 5. K8083 (photograph courtesy of Justin Kerr).

among the Maya as well as the Aztecs, many of which will be discussed below. Yet for all the banners encountered during the colonial period, a mere handful of standards have survived the harsh jungle conditions of the Maya area since they were made primarily from perishable materials.⁶ Though hundreds of examples of standards and other warfare items were sent back to Europe at the time of the Conquest, fewer than ten exemplars survive today.⁷

6. Rex Koontz, *Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents: The Public Sculpture of El Tajín* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 28.

7. Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (New York: Abrams, 1983), 278–80.

Aztecs and banners

In Aztec society banners figured prominently in both ritual and military affairs.⁸ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a sixteenth-century Franciscan friar who labored in colonial Mexico, reports that some banners were enormous in size, stretching over 33 meters in length and 1.67 meters in width.⁹ Other uses of banners related to warfare among the Aztecs and Mixtecs included the holding of a small white banner by individuals to indicate their status as a captive slated for sacrifice.¹⁰ Furthermore, each Aztec city had its own war banner under which its army marched (fig. 3c).¹¹ Individual warriors also had banners fastened tightly to their backs; this custom served a number of functions, such as aiding in locating one's commander, coordinating movement of forces, and identifying one's regiment.¹² The warrior in charge of the military unit usually donned a special standard.¹³ The loss (capture) of one of these principal

8. For examples of Aztec banners and flags, see John Pohl and Charles M. Robinson III, *Aztecs and Conquistadores: The Spanish Invasion and the Collapse of the Aztec Empire* (Great Britain: Osprey, 2005), 75.

9. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of Things of New Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, 13 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950–1982); René Teiggeler, “The Politics of Amate and Paper in Mexico,” in *IPH Congress Book 2006*, vol. 16 (Marburg: International Association of Paper Historians, forthcoming), 6.

10. See Elizabeth H. Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 55; Jill Leslie Furst, “The Life and Times of 8 Wind ‘Flinted Eagle,’” *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics* 4/1 (1978): 19; cf. Codex Zouche-Nuttall, pp. 3–4. For a Mixtec example, see the Codex Selden, p. 5, where Lord One Reed carries a flag signaling his status as a sacrificial victim.

11. Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica*, 143.

12. Patricia R. Anawalt, “What Price Aztec Pageantry?,” *Archaeology* 30/4 (1977): 232; and John Pohl, *Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521* (Great Britain: Osprey, 2001), 60.

13. See Francisco J. Clavigero, *Historia Antigua de México* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1964), 226. Pohl describes various types of Aztec banners: (1) the *quaxolotl*, which was umbrella-shaped and yellow, blue, and green in color, (2) the *tlecocomoctli*, said to represent a headdress on fire, (3) the *chimallaviztli*, meaning “shield insignia,” displaying a grinning demon’s face, (4) the *papalotl* insignia, representing a butterfly, and (5) the *caquatonatiuh*, the sun insignia colored black and yellow. *Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521*, 60. Aztec warriors were given different stages of warrior suits as they took more and more captives. Anawalt, “What Price Aztec Pageantry?,” 229.

war banners demoralized the unit, often causing them to abandon the fight.¹⁴ John Pohl, a specialist in ancient art and writing of Mexico, describes one particularly illustrative case of this strategy, involving Hernan Cortés, that occurred during the battle of Otumba.

Nowhere was the strategic significance of such banners more graphically illustrated than during the battle of Otumba. After they had succeeded in escaping a death trap in Tenochtitlan, Cortés led his troops north around Lake Xaltocan to Otumba located near the ancient ruins of Teotihuacan. Crossing a broad open plain, he was suddenly surrounded by an army of over 10,000 Aztecs. Exhausted and outnumbered, Cortés could do little but make a last stand. Soon he began to realize that the troops were being coordinated by a signal unit under the command of the Cihuacóatl or Snake Woman priest. Cortés boldly mounted his horse, charged through the oncoming Army and cut down the Cihuacóatl. The effect was devastating. Not only were the Aztec troops demoralised by this desperate gamble, but they appear to have been unable to any more effective movement than to withdraw in total confusion.¹⁵ Later the Tlaxcaltecas presented the principal signal banner called the xopilli or “claw” device to Cortés in honour of his heroism.¹⁶

The loss of the signal banner and its commander was sufficient to throw the Aztec warriors into disarray. As a prize from battle, the banner became a trophy for Cortés. While some banners were kept or even given to other Aztec lords,¹⁷ others were summarily destroyed. For example, when Cortés and his indigenous allies eventually overpowered the regional Aztec overlords, friars set the idols and the captured war banners

14. Rex Koontz, “Performing Coatepec: The Raising of the Banners Festival among the Mexica,” in *Space and Spatial Analysis in Archaeology*, ed. Elizabeth C. Robertson, Jeffrey D. Seibert, Deepika C. Fernandez, and Mark U. Zender (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006), 378.

15. As Mark Alan Wright (pers. comm., 2014) has pointed out to me, similar confusion followed the death of the leaders of the men of Antipus (Alma 56:51).

16. Pohl, *Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521*, 60.

17. Later, this net-bird claw signal banner, taken by Cortés during the battle of Otumba, was offered to Lord Maxixcatzin, according to the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Pohl, *Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521*, 46.

of the Tlaxcalteca ablaze, a scene vividly illustrated in a sixteenth-century manuscript held in the Glasgow University Library.¹⁸

Both war- and non-war-related banners were part of Aztec ritual practices. Aztec warriors would sometimes carry battle standards in their hands on certain ceremonial occasions.¹⁹ However, the principal rite involving banners took place at the midpoint in the war season from late November into early December when the Aztecs celebrated the annual Panquetzaliztl ritual,²⁰ or “raising of the banners,” in the ceremonial center at Tenochtitlan.²¹ The rite involved the setting up of the war banner in the central part of the courtyard.²² The purpose of the ceremony was primarily to memorialize the birth of the god Huitzilopochtli, as well as other deities such as Tezcatlipoca and Yacatecuhtli. Commoners throughout the city would set up small banners made of paper in their houses during this celebration. Its timing, in the middle of the warfare season, was no coincidence. Beyond being simply a celebration of Huitzilopochtli’s birth, there were definitive military overtones associated with the Panquetzaliztl rite.²³

18. See Pohl, *Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521*, 63. A copy of the manuscript, MS Hunter 242 fol. 242 (c. 1581–84), can be viewed at the Glasgow University Library, Scotland. An image of this page of the *lienzo* can be seen at http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/manuscripts/search/detail_i.cfm?ID=44.

19. Anawalt, “What Price Aztec Pageantry?,” 229.

20. The term *panquetzaliztl* in Nahuatl derives from *pāntli* (variants *pāmitl* and *pānitl*), meaning “banner, flag,” and *quetza:tla* signifies “stand something up, set something in place,” hence “raising of the banners.” John Bierhorst, *A Nahuatl-English Dictionary and Concordance to the Cantares Mexicanos: With an Analytic Transcription and Grammatical Notes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 259, 281. In addition, in Aztec hieroglyphic writing, the symbol of a banner had the phonetic reading of *pan*.

21. See Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 142; Inga Clendinnen, “Landscape and World View: The Survival of Yucatec Maya Culture under Spanish Conquest,” in *The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society: Essays on Mesoamerican Society and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 138n44; Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 558; and Miguel León-Portilla, *Mexico-Tenochtitlán, su espacio y tiempo sagrados* (Mexico, D.F.: Plaza y Valdes, 1987).

22. This white-and-blue striped banner that was raised on Coatepec during the Panquetzaliztl rites is visible on p. 32 of the Codex Barbonicus.

23. According to Koontz, just such banners, appropriated by conquering groups, would have been paraded into the center of the Aztec capital and “raised, echoing

El Tajín and banners

At El Tajín in Veracruz, Mexico, standards or banners served a number of ritual functions, both in terms of pageantry and warfare. The iconography and archaeological remains at the site of El Tajín preserve key details that allow a reconstruction of the ritual use of banners in this society. The focal ritual action “associated with these devices seems to be raising or erecting,” according to Rex Koontz, art historian and specialist of ancient Gulf Coast art.²⁴ Two clear examples from painted murals at the neighboring site of Las Higueras show several processes involving standards (see fig. 2b). As Koontz notes, “Most Higueras standards consist of a multicolored flag at the top of the staff.”²⁵ Ritual processions bearing such standards often culminated in the standards being hoisted or erected at a ceremonial center. At the bottom of the famed Pyramid of the Niches at El Tajín are fifteen square stone bases with holes perfectly suited for receiving standards or banners. Based on the iconography of the north and west sides of the Central Plaza at El Tajín, Koontz states that this would have been the spot where the standard would have been ritually raised.²⁶ The Maya site of Bonampak also has stones bored as receptacles for standards at the bottom of Structure 1, causing Koontz²⁷ to posit a possible equivalency between this ritual raising of perishable banners to the erection of stone stelae at the base of pyramids,²⁸ which were also explicitly labeled as “banner stones” (see discussion below).

Huitzilopochtli's banner raising during the war on Coatepec.” Koontz, “Performing Coatepec,” 378. The manipulation of this banner was, as Koontz notes, “central to the performance of the Coatepec narrative” since it was none other than Huitzilopochtli's war banner that was used to commemorate his birth and the first place of war at the mountain known as Coatepec (here represented by the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan). Koontz has also argued that Panquetzaliztli rite caused the war banner to “be seen as a physical manifestation of the military alliances that undergirded Mexica governance.” Koontz, “Performing Coatepec,” 378.

24. Koontz, *Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents*, 28.

25. Koontz, *Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents*, 28.

26. Koontz, *Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents*, 29–30.

27. Koontz, *Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents*, 30.

28. Archaeological examples of banner stands are found at other Maya sites such as Tonina (see photos at <http://www.famsi.org>, Schele Number 104084 and 104083).

In some cases, standards were also inserted into monumental sculpture that had a hole drilled in the center. Structure 4 Panel at El Tajín has a centered hole that would be ideal for a standard.²⁹ This closely parallels an example in the Maya area where a hole drilled in the center of the Early Classic (AD 300–600) monument Hombre de Tikal from the site of Tikal in Petén, Guatemala, “would be suitable for insertion of the wooden staff of a battle standard,” as David Freidel, Barbara MacLeod, and Charles Suhler note.³⁰

Banners and warfare

While different types of banners had various uses in ancient Mesoamerica, one dominant theme among them is warfare, as much of the above discussion makes clear. Additionally, war banners could function as weapons themselves. For example, at the Zapotec site of Cerro de la Campana in Suchilquitongo, Mexico, dating to 400 BC, murals from the back wall of the East room of Tomb 5 show a procession of four warriors. The leader of the four carries a banner with painted horizontal stripes. The banner itself, however, is a sharpened lance and is thus likely a weapon.³¹ Likewise, a careful examination of banners shown in war contexts on Late Classic period (AD 600–900) Maya ceramics reveal that many are depicted with sharpened tips that could easily serve as spears in battle (e.g., Kerr³² vessels K4625, K8083; see fig.5).

29. Koontz, *Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents*, 28.

30. Cf. Mark L. Van Stone, “Aj-Ts’ib Aj-Uxul Itz’aat & Aj-K’uhu’n: Classic Maya Schools of Carvers and Calligraphers in Palenque after the Reign of Kan-Bahlam” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2005), 396. See also David A. Freidel, Barbara MacLeod, and Charles K. Suhler, “Early Classic Maya Conquest in Words and Deeds,” in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, ed. Kathryn M. Brown and Travis W. Stanton (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2003), 195.

31. Javier Urcid, *The Zapotec Scribal Tradition: Knowledge, Memory, and Society in Ancient Oaxaca* (Coral Gables, FL: Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, 2005), 90, accessed September 29, 2014, <http://www.famsi.org/zapotecwriting/>.

32. Kerr (abbreviated K) notations refer to the Maya Vase Database by Justin Kerr, available online at <http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya.html>.

Similar sharpened banners also appear in the murals of Las Higueras in Veracruz, Mexico, a Late Classic site occupied by the Totonacs (fig. 2b).³³

That war banners could also function as spears is further attested among the K'iche' Maya. In an early K'iche' manuscript called the *Título de C'oyoi*,³⁴ dating to approximately AD 1550–1570, anthropologists Robert Carmack and James Mondloch note that the verb *tsoc* “picar con un instrumento agudo” (poke with a sharp instrument) appears “en asociación con la bandera (*lakam*) y otros instrumentos de guerra. Posiblemente, era una bandera que también servía de picote” (in association with the flag [*lakam*] and other instruments of war. Possibly it was a flag that also served as a stabber).³⁵ War banners were therefore not solely symbolic and heraldic but could at times be used as weapons of war.

Significantly, the term used for these war banner weapons in sixteenth-century K'iche' was *lakam*, a word (as I will discuss in detail below) that meant both “stela” and “banner stone” for the Classic period Maya. Furthermore, the term *lakam* still retained strong connections to warfare at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards in the New World.

Banners in the Maya world

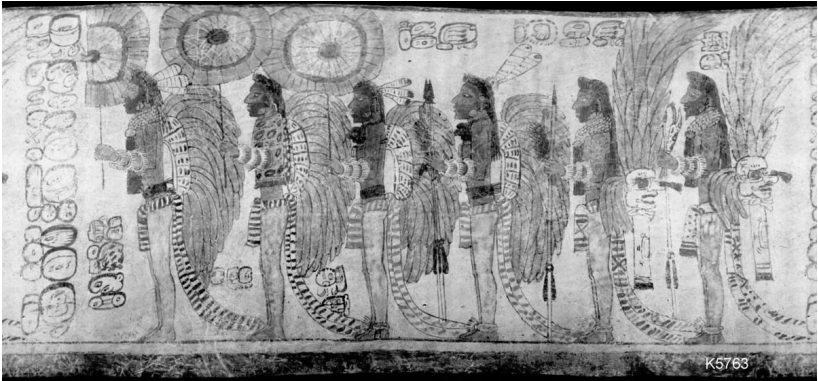
As Maya specialist David Stuart has noted, “Graffiti and ethnohistorical sources show that standards or banners were widely used among the Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples as temple and plaza decorations, in processions, and on the battlefield.”³⁶ Early ethnographic accounts in

33. See Rubén B. Morante López, *La pintura mural de Las Higueras, Veracruz* (Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 2005). Koontz similarly observes that the standards appearing in Las Higueras murals “were both ritual objects as well as more pragmatic military devices.” Koontz, *Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents*, 110. See examples of clothlike, decorated banners with a pointed or sharpened apex in Morante López, *La pintura mural de Las Higueras*, 116.

34. See Robert Carmack, *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

35. Robert M. Carmack and James L. Mondloch, *El título de Totonicapán: Texto, traducción y comentario*, transcribed and translated from K'iche' to Spanish, with notes (Mexico, D.F.: UNAM, 1983), 228n165.

36. David S. Stuart, “A Study of Maya Inscriptions” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1995), 106.



A



B



C

Figure 6. (A) K5763, (B) K695, (C) K6990 (all photographs courtesy of Justin Kerr).

the Yucatán in Mexico detail the use of large standards in war. Diego de Landa, a Spanish bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of the Yucatán in the sixteenth century, noted: “Guided by tall banners they went out in great silence from the towns and thus they marched to attack their enemies, with loud cries and with great cruelties, when they fell upon them unprepared.”³⁷ Mesoamerican anthropologist Ross Hassig similarly states that the K’iche’ Maya in colonial times could “reportedly raise an army of 8,000 to 16,000 men, organized into military units marching under their own banners.”³⁸ Late Classic Maya polychrome vessels contain numerous scenes of warriors, rulers, and attendants at the royal court holding banners (see fig. 6a–c). Standards were also ceremonially erected at sacred locations within restricted spaces. For instance, a stone effigy standard discovered at the site of Tikal in Guatemala contains epigraphic evidence that such standards would be erected and raised on the tops of ceremonial platforms (fig. 7).³⁹

The ritual association with banners also extended to the ancient Maya ballgame in the Classic period.⁴⁰ S. W. Miles also notes that colonial Poqom Maya played a ballgame, or “sacred sport, [that] was played

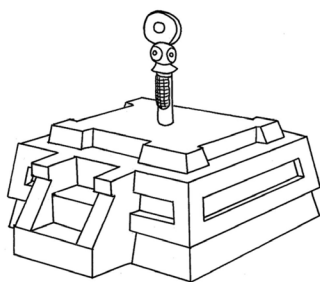


Figure 7. Drawing of Altar 49-sub in the North Plaza of Tikal with the “Marcador” standard in its likely original position (drawing by Asa Hull, after Linda Schele).

37. Alfred M. Tozzer, *Landa's Relación de las cosas de Yucatán: A Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1941), 123.

38. Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica*, 162.

39. The verb at position A7 on the monument is *tzahpaj*, “it was planted,” referring to the setting up of the stone war banner. Cf. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 299, 470.

40. See K1209 for large, round banners at a Maya ballcourt.

exclusively by lords and principals.”⁴¹ The lords had “royal standards, or banners,” which he gives as *bacam ajual*—evidently a miswriting or variation of *lakam ajual*.⁴²

Even standard-bearers held a high status in Maya society. Known as *ajlaqam*⁴³ (lit. “he of the banner”), the standard-bearer in war in colonial K’iche’ Maya society was a position reserved only for high-ranking individuals.⁴⁴

The title of liberty

In the Book of Mormon, books preceding the book of Alma contain nine references to “standards,” several in citations from Isaiah (cf. 1 Nephi 21:22; 22:6; 2 Nephi 6:6; 20:18; 29:2). The standards that concern us here are those contained in the historical account of Moroni and the title of liberty.

About 73 BC, after Alma had been “taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses” (Alma 45:19), Helaman continued preaching his father’s message and set about establishing the church throughout all regions under Nephite control. Some prideful dissenters among them openly rebelled against Helaman and his brethren and contrived a plan to kill them. They were led by a man of large stature named Amalickiah who had strong pretensions to the throne.

41. S. W. Miles, “The Sixteenth-Century Pokom-Maya: A Documentary Analysis of Social Structure and Archaeological Setting,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 47/4 (1957): 767.

42. Similar spellings of *lakam* as *bacam* also appear in various colonial Yucatecan sources (e.g., *bacam*, meaning “*vela de navío*” [sail of a ship]). See Alfredo Barrera Vásquez et al., *Diccionario maya Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya* (Mérida: Ediciones Cordemex, 1980), 27. The word appears written as *cakam* in early Kaqchikel and K’iche’ sources; see José Mucía Batz, *Chajchaay, pelota de cadera* (Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala: Serviprensa, 2004).

43. The orthographic variation here of spelling *laqam* with *q* instead of *k* is common in colonial sources.

44. Robert M. Carmack and James L. Mondloch, “Título K’oyoi,” in *Crónicas Mesoamericanas: Tomo II*, ed. Horacio Cabezas Carcache (Guatemala: Universidad Mesoamericana, 2009), 33, 106n36; See also Adrián Recinos, *Crónicas indígenas de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1957), 86.

Amalickiah enjoyed considerable support from among the ranks of the lower judges, they having been promised positions of power if he succeeded in becoming ruler over the land. With Amalickiah's supporters growing in numbers, Mormon decried this "exceedingly precarious and dangerous" state of the affairs among the Nephite people (Alma 46:7) and further lamented: "Yea, we see that Amalickiah, because he was a man of cunning device and a man of many flattering words, that he led away the hearts of many people to do wickedly; yea, and to seek to destroy the church of God, and to destroy the foundation of liberty which God had granted unto them, or which blessing God had sent upon the face of the land for the righteous' sake" (Alma 46:10). Not only did Amalickiah's philosophies cause numerous people to "do wickedly," but his vision of rulership (read dictatorship) also included the abolition of the people's God-given liberty.

Faced with this burgeoning threat to the very existence of the church and the health of the state, Moroni, the chief military commander of the Nephite armies, fashioned a unifying symbol, the title of liberty, out of his torn coat to galvanize the people into supporting his aims (see Alma 46:11–12).

And it came to pass that he rent his coat; and he took a piece thereof, and wrote upon it—In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children—and he fastened it upon the end of a pole. (Alma 46:12)

What did Moroni write on the banner? A concise, poignant call to arms, elegantly presented in three semantic couplets: God—religion, freedom—peace, and wives—children. This type of parallel discourse has deep Hebraic roots⁴⁵ and may be reflective of the enduring influence of Hebrew and Hebraic structures in the Book of Mormon. However, by this

45. Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (Sheffield, England: Black, 1994); Barry Banstra, *Reading the Old Testament: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Stamford, CT: Wadsworth, 2008), 378; Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

time the Nephites had been in the New World for over five hundred years, and it is more than likely that the local poetic traditions specific to the area were also influencing their language. In ancient Mesoamerica, poetic language is dominated by *parallelismus membrorum* (parallelism of members), principally in the form of paired or couplet lines.⁴⁶ Within the wide range of couplet types (synonymous, antithetical, grammatical, phonetic, etc.), the most commonly used form in moments of emotive impact is synonymous parallelism,⁴⁷ “the repetition of elements that are similar in meaning or significance.”⁴⁸ Synonymy creates narrative emphasis and tension through the pairing of associated terms in separate lines, as it causes the audience to contemplate the relationship between the two. The successive use of this type of parallelism pervades ritual discourse among modern Mesoamerican groups and has clear antecedents back into the Early Classic period of ancient Mesoamerica.⁴⁹ Indeed, many ritual texts are completely composed in parallel lines. In others a narrative climax or a highly emotive moment obliges its use for aesthetic reasons. It is of no small import then that Moroni employs precisely this type of poetic structuring on the title of liberty:

In memory of our God,
 our religion,
 and freedom,
 and our peace,
 our wives,
 and our children. (Alma 46:12)

46. See Victoria R. Bricker, “The Ethnographic Context of Some Traditional Mayan Speech Genres,” in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 368–88; and Kerry Hull, “Verbal Art and Performance in Ch’orti’ and Maya Hieroglyphic Writing” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2003).

47. In James L. Kugel’s view, line-B should be viewed as an elaboration of the line-A rather than as its semantic parallel. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

48. Allen J. Christenson, trans. and ed., *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 1:44.

49. Hull, “Verbal Art and Performance,” 378–499.

In every respect this impassioned rallying call coincides perfectly with what we know of ancient Mesoamerican poetic discourse in terms of structuring, post-line-initial use of ellipsis, and noun-type pairing schemes.⁵⁰ Moroni shows himself to be adept at using local poetic forms as a means of generating the greatest emotional impact on his audience.

The title of liberty as a war banner

One of the key aspects of the title of liberty in the Book of Mormon is its function as a war banner. Indeed, the other term used by Moroni for his banner was *standard* (Alma 46:36; 62:4–5), which in 1830 meant “an ensign of war; a staff with a flag or colors,”⁵¹ as it still does today. While sometimes assumed to be only a powerful, uniting symbol for the people to protect themselves and their rights, the title of liberty was in fact far more symbolic in that it represented—to a Mesoamerican

50. For additional reading related to Mesoamerican poetic styles, see Jill Brody, “Repetition as a Rhetorical and Conversational Device in Tojolabal (Mayan),” *International Journal of American Linguistics* 52/3 (1986): 255–74; Allen F. Burns, “Yucatec Mayan Ethnopoetics: The Translation of a Narrative,” *Journal of Mayan Linguistics* 2/1 (1980): 3–12; Gary H. Gossen, “To Speak with a Heated Heart: Chamula Canons of Style and Good Performance,” in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, 398–416; Kerry Hull, “Poetic Discourse in Maya Oral Tradition and in the Hieroglyphic Script” (master’s thesis, Georgetown University, 1993); Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco, eds., *Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Maya Literature* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012); Kathryn J. Josserand, “The Discourse Structure of Maya Hieroglyphs,” in *Chol (Mayan) Dictionary Database Part I: Description and Appendices*, ed. J. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas A. Hopkins (Chicago: printed by author, 1988), 1–14. Final Performance Report, NEH Grant RT-20643–83; Kathryn J. Josserand, “The Narrative Structure of Hieroglyphic Texts at Palenque,” in *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, ed. Merle G. Robertson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 1–61; John Monaghan, “Performance and the Structure of the Mixtec Codices,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 1/1 (1990): 133–40; Dennis Tedlock, “Toward an Oral Poetics,” *New Literary History* 8 (1977): 507–19; Dennis Tedlock, “Hearing a Voice in an Ancient Text: Quiché Maya Poetics in Performance,” in *Native American Discourse: Poetics and Rhetoric*, ed. Joel Sherzer and Anthony C. Woodbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 140–75.

51. 1828 *Webster’s Dictionary*, s.v. “standard.”

culture—a call to arms, an object around which to rally, a banner of warfare.⁵² The details regarding its function, appearance, and display provide a unique glimpse into cultural warfare practices, all of which match to a remarkable extent the use of war banners in ancient and colonial Mesoamerica.

As noted earlier, such standards were commonly carried by ancient Maya armies into battle. A Late Classic polychrome ceramic vase dating roughly between AD 600 and 800 shows a procession of elaborately dressed warriors carrying circular fanlike banners (K5763; fig. 6a). On another Late Classic polychrome vessel, a group of returning warriors presents themselves before a noble Maya lord (K7716).⁵³ The foremost standing warrior holds a fanlike banner bearing the symbol of a shield with a flayed face cover—part of the insignia of warfare for the Late Classic Maya. On another Maya polychrome vessel (K695), four warriors are shown holding atlatl spear throwers in one hand and battle standards in the other (fig. 6b). Similarly, on K6990 a warrior brandishes an atlatl while carrying a decorated battle standard under his other arm (fig. 6c).

Clothlike banners are also common in ancient Maya iconography. Graffiti at the site of Tikal shows six long cloth or paper banners painted within Structure 5-D 65 that may be ceremonial or war-related banners (fig. 2a). On one Late Classic Maya ceramic vessel (K5024), three priests carry clothlike banners boasting various color schemes.⁵⁴ At the site of Palenque, the Panels of the Orator and the Scribe (fig. 8a) both contain elegant examples of clothlike banners in a context related to warfare. In these scenes, two individuals kneel on the ground while holding banners, both in the act of speaking or supplicating.

52. John L. Sorenson also refers to the title of liberty as “a flag or virtual battle standard” in “Summary of Mormon’s Codex: A Preview” at http://www.johnlsorenson.com/docs/mcodex_preview.pdf.

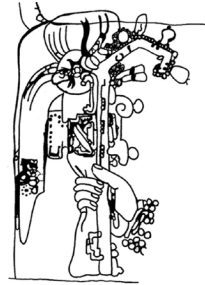
53. An image of this K7716 can be found at http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=7716.

54. An image of this K5024 can be found at http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=5024.



A

Figure 8. (A) Kneeling individual holding a flap-staff on the Panel of the Scribe from Palenque (photo by Kerry Hull), (B) Flap-staff held by Lady K'abel on El Perú Stela 34 (drawing by Asa Hull, after John Montgomery).



B

Other clothlike banners have been dubbed “flap-staffs” by Maya specialist Linda Schele. Maya art historian Matthew Looper describes a flap-staff as “a ritual object consisting of a staff with a perforated device attached, possibly a tube made of fabric.”⁵⁵ At sites such as Yaxchilán, flap-staff banners are displayed and danced with in ceremony.⁵⁶ Stuart has noted the clear connection between Maya flap-staffs and Aztec banners (*pāmitl*).⁵⁷ Maya scholar Justin Kerr has identified the banner held in the warrior’s hand on vessel K6990 mentioned above as a possible

55. Matthew Looper, *To Be Like Gods: Dance in Ancient Maya Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 16.

56. Nikolai Grube, “Die Entwicklung der Maya-Schrift,” in *Acta Mesoamericana*, 3 (Berlin: Von Flemming, 1990). One of the most common flap-staffs was known as the *jasaw chan* and was even labeled as such at times. These banners were held during ceremonial dances. A typical inscription mentioning the *jasaw chan* can be seen on a monument likely from the area of Retalteco in the Petén, Guatemala. It reads: *ahk’taj ti jasaw chan chan-winikhaab ajaw yaxuun bahlam*, “Yaxuun Bahlam, a four-score lord, danced with the *jasaw chan*.”

57. David Stuart, “The Lakam Sign” (unpublished manuscript, 1992).

flap-staff (fig. 6c).⁵⁸ Furthermore, warriors carrying poles with decorated clothlike banners attached can also be seen on other Late Classic Maya ceramics (see K8083). Flap-staff dance scenes in the iconography at the site of Yaxchilán also show rulers with warriors holding a flap-staff in the act of dance, which Mesoamerican specialist Susan Milbrath has suggested is related to events of capture and warfare.⁵⁹Looper also notes that the king depicted on Copán Stela H, Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil, who ruled Copán from AD 695 to 738, “wears ‘flapstaff’ war banners in his headdress during the conduct of ancestral rites,” further linking flap-staffs to warfare.⁶⁰

Of the scant number of flap-staffs that appear in the iconographic record (principally at three sites), none has writing on it, except Stela 34 of El Perú, which dates to AD 692. Here a scribal notation appears on a signature on the cloth of a flap-staff held by Lady K'abel, a woman from Calakmul who married into the El Perú dynasty (fig. 8b).⁶¹ Stuart, however, believes that banners among the ancient Maya once carried written texts, just as stone stelae, or banner stones, did: “Conceivably, the Maya may have hung cloth banners inscribed with glyphic passages in their plazas, as well, as a less permanent medium for textual display. All that survives, of course, are the stone banners that adorn architectural spaces throughout the lowlands.”⁶² If Stuart is correct, such banners would be very much like-in-kind for Moroni’s title of liberty. Indeed, flap-staffs may have other important connections to the title of liberty, as I discuss below.

After fastening the cloth onto the pole and painting the battle slogan upon it, Moroni confirmed the status of the title of liberty as a war

58. See http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=6990.

59. Susan Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya: Astronomy in Art, Folklore, and Calendars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 64. See also Nikolai Grube, “Maya Dance: Evidence from Hieroglyphs and Iconography,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 3 (1992): 201–18.

60. Matthew G. Looper, *Lightning Warrior: Maya Art and Kingship at Quirigua* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 46.

61. The flapstaff that Lady K'abel holds, according to Phil Wanyerka, is a symbol of “divine kingship and war and identifies it as a battle standard.” “A Fresh Look at a Maya Masterpiece,” *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 1 (1996): 80.

62. Stuart, “A Study of Maya Inscriptions,” 106.

banner by immediately donning “his head-plate, and his breastplate, and his shields,” and he “girded on his armor about his loins” (Alma 46:13). Bowing to the earth, Moroni then “prayed mightily unto his God for the blessings of liberty to rest upon his brethren, so long as there should a band of Christians remain to possess the land” (v. 13). All those who were willing to maintain the title of liberty in their land (i.e., to support the principles for which it stood) were urged to step forward and enter into a covenant to preserve their rights and liberties not just in word but in action on the battlefield. Note also that those who accepted Moroni’s challenge to join their effort “came running together *with their armor girded about their loins*” (v. 21) and entered into a covenant before God—in full military garb—that they would fight for Moroni’s cause, which was, in fact, their own.

The title⁶³ of liberty banner was the focal point of this dramatic ritual display by Moroni in part as a means of inspiring the people to join forces in preserving their rights—a classic use of a military banner in Mesoamerica. Freidel and others have argued that war banners in the Classic period for the Maya were not only “the representation of the state, but . . . [were also] an embodiment of a potent spiritual being whose presence, performance, were critical to success.”⁶⁴ Their mere presence signified divine protection and direction. Thus, while war banners in Mesoamerica, according to pre-historian Kent Reilly and archaeologist James Garber, were “physical objects and ideological symbols,”⁶⁵ they could also function at a metaphysical level as conduits for divine assistance in battle.⁶⁶ Similarly, Moroni’s banner likely signified they could expect God’s favor in the forthcoming wars.

63. The appellation *title* for Moroni’s banner is also revealing in this context. In the 1828 Webster’s dictionary, one of the meanings of *title* was “the instrument which is evidence of a right”—a very apt description of the purpose of the title of liberty as a physical symbol of their rights.

64. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 294.

65. F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber, “The Symbolic Representation of Warfare in Formative Period Mesoamerica,” in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, 128.

66. Geneviève Le Fort has cautioned against attempts to overemphasize the “sacred power” of associated battle standards. “Gods at War: Of War Protectors, Effigy

Captain Moroni emboldened his people and his troops by displaying his war banner. Aztec war banners had precisely the same purpose, as noted by Patricia Anawalt, the founding director of the Center for the Study of Regional Dress located at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History: “They were used as rallying points in times of adversity, thus sustaining the morale of the warriors.”⁶⁷ In conjunction with the poetic and stirring message written on the banner, the ritual context (i.e., covenant making) of the presentation of the title of liberty would certainly have strengthened the resolve of many that God’s protection would accompany all who fought under this banner.

That the title of liberty was seen as a physical embodiment of principles of the divinely sanctioned movement is abundantly clear in Alma 51:20. When some of the remaining dissenters were faced with death or joining the cause to defend their country from Amalickiah and his forces, the text tells us they “yielded to the standard of liberty.” It was not to Moroni or his forces but to the standard that they covenanted their allegiance.

After Moroni first hoisted the banner and placed the initial group under covenant, he then “caused the title of liberty to be hoisted upon every tower” in the lands of the Nephites (Alma 46:36). A tower in ancient Mesoamerican architectural complexes could represent one of several possibilities. At the Late Classic site of Palenque in Mexico, a four-story tower stands atop House E. Known epigraphically as the *sak nuk naah*, “white-skinned building” (a unique feature since almost all structures at Palenque were painted red), this building served as the palace for King K’inich Janaab Pakal I. However, the type of tower found in House E at Palenque is unique among Maya sites, and there are currently no known examples of similar contemporary structures in Moroni’s day.

A more likely interpretation of a tower is a high ground designated as a place for banner display. In colonial Yucatec Mayan,⁶⁸ one term for *tower* was *hulbil na*. The root *hul* means “pasar una cosa delgada o puntiaguda

Idols, and Battle Banners among the Classic Maya,” *Mayab* 11 (1998): 11, 16; cf. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 317.

67. Anawalt, “What Price Aztec Pageantry?,” 232.

68. I use the term *Mayan* when referring to a Mayan language and *Maya* in all other cases.

a través de otra u otras” (to pass a thin or sharp thing through another or others).⁶⁹ The term *hulbil na* literally translates as “speared-through building.” If related, this term would be an apt description of a highly visible location where a banner would be “speared,” or planted, into the ground. In this episode in the book of Alma, the Book of Mormon uses the term *tower* as a place where banners were planted into the ground and displayed. In Yucatec the term *hulbil na* (translated as in Spanish *torre* [tower]), is etymologically transparent as a “speared-through building,” which only makes sense as a place where banners were placed. Another term for *tower* given as a synonym for *hulbil na* in Yucatec Mayan is *witsil na* (lit. “hill building” or “hill house”),⁷⁰ emphasizing its raised and easily observable location.

An ideal comparison for the tower in Moroni’s narrative is an altar platform that held a stone war banner, known as the Marcador, in the North Plaza of Group 6C-XVI at the site of Tikal. Fialko’s reconstruction of the platform shows the likely position of the banner stone planted in the center of the raised structure Altar 49-sub in the North Plaza (fig. 7). Such a platform corresponds well to the Yucatec *witsil na* (tower) cited above as well as *hulbil na* (a place where banners were “speared,” i.e., erected). The inscription on the monument discusses events from AD 374, which is contemporaneous with late Nephite society, though the text was dedicated in AD 416. The text on the Marcador describes the setting up of the banner stone itself with the verb *tz’ahpaj*, “it was planted/erected.” Significantly, the text further describes the *entrada*, or the entering of a powerful individual named Siyaj K’ahk’ from the site of Teotihuacan into the Maya area by AD 378.⁷¹ Thus, the context of the monument is

69. Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 242.

70. Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 925. Cf. K’iche’ *ch’ucuch’ik ja*, lit. “mass or swelling house” for *tower*. Alec Christensen, “Narrative of Some Things of New Spain and of the Great City of Temestitan, México,” FAMSI, n.d., accessed on September 21, 2014, http://www.famsi.org/research/christensen/anon_con/section04.htm. Likewise, in Poqomchi’ Mayan, “torre” (tower) is *najt naah paat* (lit. “elevated house”) or *mama’ paat* (lit. “big house”). Marcel Dobbels, *Diccionario Poqomchi’-castellano* (Guatemala: MINEDUC, 2003), 399, 499.

71. David Stuart, “‘The Arrival of Strangers’: Teotihuacan and Tollan in Classic Maya History,” in *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, ed.

one of war, expressed in the text as *och-ch'een*, “he entered the town”—a metaphor in ancient Maya for warfare. It is easy to envision the title of liberty, a war banner itself, being hoisted on similar raised altar platforms designated as towers in the Book of Mormon translation.

Banners and banner stones among the ancient Maya

In 1998, epigraphic detective work finally led to the decipherment of the term for stela among the ancient Maya, simultaneously yielding valuable insights into the ancient Maya equation of stelae with banners. As I will next show, this decipherment also has important implications for properly contextualizing the title of liberty within an ancient Mesoamerican warfare tradition.

The ancient Maya used the term *lakam* to describe their carved stelae. David Stuart, one of the foremost Maya epigraphers, offered the decipherment based on phonetic substitutions and corroborating linguistic evidence.⁷² The phonetic version of the glyph for stela is written **la-ka-ma-TUUN-ni**, or *lakam-tuun* (fig. 9a–b). Stuart provided evidence from both Yucatec Mayan and Tzotzil Mayan for the reading, which has enjoyed wide acceptance among all epigraphers. The principal evidence for the decipherment came from Yucatec, where the word *lakam* has the following meanings and contexts:⁷³

lakam: *cosa grande y gruesa* (large and heavy thing)

lakam tun: *piedra grande* (large stone)

lakam tun: *piedra enorme* (enormous stone)

David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 465–514.

72. David Stuart, “Kings of Stone: A Consideration of Stelae in Ancient Maya Ritual and Representation,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 29/30 (1996): 153–54. See also David Stuart, “‘The Fire Enters His House’: Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya Texts,” in *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, ed. Stephen D. Houston (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), 375.

73. Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 434.



Figure 9. (A) Phonetic spelling of **la-ka-ma-TUUN-ni**, or *lakam-tuun*, “banner stone” (drawing by Asa Hull, after David Stuart); (B) logograph of the **LAKAM** (“banner”) sign followed by **TUUN-ni** (“stone”) (drawing by Asa Hull).

Thus, the Classic period term for stela, *lakam-tuun*, meant “large stone.” While this name seems “deceptively simple,”⁷⁴ as Stuart himself has acknowledged, he realized it was a perfect description of stelae in the Maya area in more ways than one. Significantly, Stuart also noted that *lakam* had other meanings in Yucatec Mayan: “los pendónes o estandartes o banderas” (banners or standards or flags).⁷⁵ Not only does *lakam* refer to a stone stela, but it likewise includes flags, standards, and banners in Yucatec (and many other Mayan languages, as I show below). Stuart then made the following key insight: “The possibility remains that the stela glyph literally reads “banner stone.” That is, stelae were conceived as standards made of stone. We can easily imagine large flags and banners decorating plazas and architecture (as graffiti at Tikal and elsewhere explicitly shows). Stelae may have been originally thought of as a permanent, inscribed version of the same.”⁷⁶ Stelae, therefore, were conceived of as decorated banners, fully akin to decorated quotidian and ritual flags and banners made of perishable materials.

74. David Stuart, “Shining Stones: Observations on the Ritual Meaning of Early Maya Stelae,” in *The Place of Stone Monuments: Context, Use, and Meaning in Mesoamerica’s Preclassic Transition*, ed. Julia Guernsey, John E. Clark, and Barbara Arroyo (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2010), 283.

75. Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 434.

76. Stuart, “Lakam Sign.”

Thus flags, banners (counting war banners), and standards were designated by the single term *lakam* (variously recorded as *lakam*, *lacam*, *laqam*, *laq'am*, and others in linguistic sources). That the term *lakam* derives from a cloth or paper banner is clear from the cognate forms of the word. In Yucatec, by analogy to the loose, flopping action of a cloth or paper banner, *lakam* also is used for the jowl of various animals, such as the loose skin under the neck of a rooster, or the loose, hanging skin on the neck of cattle.⁷⁷ The term *lakam* likely derives from the root *lak-*, which has the general meaning of “flap,” or “thing that flaps in movement.”⁷⁸ This is precisely why it is consistently applied to dangling jowls that flop side to side in movement. Thus in Chontal Mayan, *lacac* means the “parte de abajo de la garganta de animales o de gente, papada” (part below the throat of animals or of people, jowl).⁷⁹ Similarly in Tzotzil Mayan, *lakaket* means “flexible,” and the notion of moving from side to side is reflected in *lákotelákte*, which means “chapaleando por aquí y por allá (la persona empapada)” (splashing around here and there; a wet person).⁸⁰ Similarly in K'iche' Mayan *laqam* means both “flag” as

77. Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 434.

78. Another less likely possibility, however, is that the term *lakam* derives from a verbal root meaning something akin to “hold or grasp a pole.” Evidence comes from the root *lac* in Ch'ol Mayan, which means “agarrado (un objeto largo),” “grabbed (a long object).” H. Wilbur Aulie and Evelyn W. de Aulie, comps., *Diccionario Ch'ol de Tumbalá, Chiapas, con variaciones dialectales de Tila y Sabanilla* (Coyoacán, D.F.: Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, 1978), 71. Also in Q'anjob'al Mayan, *lakajoq* signifies “levantar con las manos.” Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, *Jit'il q'anej yet q'anjob'al = Vocabulario q'anjob'al* (Guatemala City: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2003), 95. The term *lakam* in only Yucatec means both “large” and “banner.” I suggest the etymological origins of the term lie first in the perishable object (*lakam* as “banner”), based on the action of “carrying” or on the motion of “flapping,” and the later association with stelae in the term *lakam tuun*, lit. “large stone,” influenced the unique semantic extension to the idea of “large”—that is, spread out widely like a cloth. Cf. note 92 below.

79. Kathryn C. Keller and Plácido G. Luciano, *Diccionario Chontal de Tabasco (Mayense)* (Tucson: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1997), 146.

80. Robert M. Laughlin, *Mol cholobil k'op ta sotz 'leb: El gran diccionario tzotzil de San Lorenzo Zinacantán* (Mexico, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social-Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes 2007), 109.

well as “*flecos*,” or “bangs” of the hair, since they move in the wind with a movement similar to a flag.⁸¹

Beyond the evidence offered by Stuart in his original decipherment, there are many other linguistic data that shed light on the origins of the term *lakam*. The following entries indicate that *lakam* originally referred to a clothlike banner or a similar object that flaps side to side. In the 1571 Tzeldal Mayan language of Chiapas, Mexico, the term *lacam* is given as “*vela de nave*” (ship’s sail), “*estandarse*” (sp.) (standard), and “*bandera*” (flag).⁸² In Tzeldal Mayan *lacam* also shows the semantic extension to “*papada, como de puerco, etc.*” (jowl, like of a pig, etc.).⁸³ In K’iche’ Mayan the term can appear with a glottalized medial consonant as *laq’am* or *lak’am*, “*bandera*” (flag),⁸⁴ at times as *lakan* for “*bandera*” (flag),⁸⁵ though more commonly as *laqam*.⁸⁶ In the sixteenth century Thomás de Coto⁸⁷ also recorded the term *lakam* for “*bandera, estandarte o pendón*” (flag, standard, or banner) in Kaqchikel Mayan, a form likewise attested in modern Kaqchikel sources for “*bandera*” (flag).⁸⁸ Also in Poqomchi’ Mayan, the cognate form *alaqan* means “*bandera*” (flag).⁸⁹ However, one

81. Mucía Batz, *Chajchaay, pelota de cadera*, 41.

82. Fray Domingo de Ara, *Vocabulario de lengua tzeldal según el orden de Copanabastla*, ed. M. H. Ruz (Mexico, D.F.: UNAM, 1986), 315.

83. De Ara, *Vocabulario de lengua tzeldal*, 316.

84. Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, *K’iche’ Choltzij, Vocabulario K’iche’: K’iche’-Kaxla’n Tzij, Kaxla’n Tzij-K’iche’* (Guatemala City: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2004), 69.

85. Cecilio Tuyuc Sucuc and Miguel Ventura, *K’ak’ taq tzij re k’iche’ tzij = actualización lexical idioma maya k’iche’* (Guatemala City: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2003).

86. Mucía Batz, *Chajchaay, pelota de cadera*, 41.

87. Thomás de Coto, *Thesaurus Verborum: Vocabulario de la lengua Cakchiquel u Guatemalteca, nuevamente hecho y recopilado con summo estudio, trabajo y erudición*, ed. René Acuña (ca. 1650; repr. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1983), 62.

88. Comunidad Lingüística Kaqchikel, *Kaqchikel Cholchi’* (Guatemala City: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2011), 81.

89. Marcel Dobbels, *Diccionario Poqomchi’-castellano* (Guatemala: MINEDUC, 2003), 106.

of the best early colonial⁹⁰ descriptions of the meaning of *lacam* comes from colonial Poqom sources.⁹¹

Lacam: bandera. estandarte. pendón. Y en símbolo suyo las velas del navío. tambien el pabellón de la cama. Las tiendas del campo . . . ah lacam. alférez. (Lacam: flag. banner. banner. And in symbol of the ship sails. Also a bed canopy. The tents of the camp . . . ah lacam. ensign.)

Notable are the related meanings of flag or banner with tents, a ship's sail, and a bed canopy, all clothlike materials that flap in the wind. We can therefore confidently posit an origin for the term *lakam* as a flexible, clothlike flap,⁹² most commonly described as a flag or banner.

I have already mentioned flap-staff banners, which are made of cloth and are used ceremonially, such as in dances among the ancient Maya. Remarkably, Stuart notes that the *lakam* sign actually appears at times on flap-staff banners, such as Stela 11 at the site of Yaxchilán. He writes: "It is possible that the **LAKAM** sign originally depicted a flag or staff with hanging cloth, although this iconic origin may have eventually been forgotten by Late Classic times when it came to be reanalyzed as a vegetation motif."⁹³ The early examples of the **LAKAM** sign, in fact, show no plantlike motifs whatsoever."⁹⁴ Thus, the sign for *lakam* can appear on flap-staff banners themselves, confirming their link to the larger *lakam* complex. Additionally, the clear similarity in form of flap-staffs

90. Indeed, as Carmack and Mondloch note that the term *laqam*, meaning "bandera" (flag) or "insignia" (insignia), is best known in K'iche' from older dictionaries. "Título K'oyoi," 33n89.

91. Lawrence Feldman, "Pokom Maya and Their Colonial Dictionaries" (FAMSI, 2000), 226, accessed on September 21, 2014, <http://www.famsi.org/reports/97022/index.html>.

92. The meaning of *lakam* in Yucatec Mayan as "grande" (large) likely grew out of the notion of a widely spread-out cloth; cf. Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 434.

93. See figure 8b for a clear depiction of the plantlike aspects of the logograph for **LAKAM**.

94. Stuart, "Kings of Stone," 154n6.

and the title of liberty further strengthens the argument that both are related to the *lakam*.

What is more, the notion of a *lakam* was also closely tied to warfare. For all intents and purposes, based on a preponderance of linguistic evidence, a *lakam* was a war banner par excellence. The military overtones pervade linguistic and ethnographic sources relating to *lakam*. Sixteenth-century Pokom Mayan sources specify *lacam* as “el estandarte de la guerras. La bandera de la *miliaria* [*sic*]” (the standard of wars. The flag of the military).⁹⁵ Colonial Yucatecan Mayan dictionaries refer to *u lakamil k'atun*,⁹⁶ “el pendón de la guerra o del guerrero” (the standard of war or the warrior).⁹⁷ In the Xajil Chronicle, a colonial Kaqchikel Maya manuscript, when the Kaqchikel descended from the top of a hill with shouts and battle cries to engage the K'iche' Maya, the text records: “Kani na wi pe x'paè' ru-laqam,” “Immediately the flag (*laqam*) was raised” to lead the charge,⁹⁸ affirming *laqam*'s identity as a battle standard.

Classic period texts and iconography also provide further contexts to understand the relationship between *lakam* and warfare. We know from numerous hieroglyphic inscriptions that the term *lakam* was used in the Late Classic period as a title for Maya warriors. Alfonso Lacadena, a Maya scholar who has written a study specifically on this term as a military title, summarized his findings as follows: “Propongo que los *lakam* del periodo Clásico . . . estaban encargados de la gestión de las unidades administrativas a su cargo, con funciones específicas de tributación y leva militar” (I propose that the *lakam* from the Classic period . . . were managers of administrative units charged with specific functions of taxation and military levy).⁹⁹ Examples of the *lakam* title with warriors can be seen on a Late Classic polychrome vase (K5763; see fig. 6a).

95. Feldman, “Pokom Maya,” 226.

96. The term *k'atun* in colonial Yucatec Mayan meant “soldado, batallón, ejército” (soldier, battalion, army) as well as “batalla, guerra, pelea, combate” (battle, war, fight, combat). Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 386.

97. Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 434.

98. Judith M. Maxwell and Robert M. Hill, *Kaqchikel Chronicles: The Definitive Edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 211.

99. Alfonso Lacadena, “El título *lakam*: Evidencia epigráfica sobre la organización tributaria y militar interna de los reinos mayas del Clásico,” *Mayab* 20 (2008): 33.

In colonial times the title *lakam* was still in active use. The sixteenth-century Poqom Maya employed “ensign bearers” known as *ah lacam* to carry banners into war.¹⁰⁰ In short, the military connections to the term *lakam* are everywhere present in ancient and modern sources. There are many obvious parallels between a *lakam* and the title of liberty in their function as war banners, yet even closer links can be posited based on the poetic structuring of the title of liberty’s message.

Paralleled speech: Hoisting and planting

Moroni traveled throughout the Nephite land, setting up the title of liberty in each town or city. The physical presence of the title of liberty in each location in which it was temporarily erected would have served to further inspire people to their cause as well as to serve as an overt symbol of the covenant they were being asked to enter into: “And it came to pass also, that he caused the title of liberty to be hoisted upon every tower which was in all the land, which was possessed by the Nephites; and thus Moroni planted the standard of liberty among the Nephites” (Alma 46:36). Within the seemingly benign historical narrative of this verse one of the more remarkable links to ancient Mesoamerican societies in the context of the title of liberty is found. The core underlying structure of the verse is parallelistic, forming a synonymous couplet:

he caused the title of liberty to be *hoisted* upon every tower which was
in all the land . . .

and thus Moroni *planted* the standard of liberty among the Nephites.

The paired terms that compose the focal action described in the verse are the synonyms *hoisted* and *planted*. Several points here are noteworthy. First, the verb *to plant* in reference to a banner finds immediate confirmation in ancient Maya texts. As noted before, the word for stela is *lakam-tuun*, which translates either as “large stone” or “banner stone.”

100. Miles, “Sixteenth-Century Pokom-Maya,” 776.

One of the more commonly encountered verbal phrases in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions is “u-tz’apaw u-lakam-tuun” (he planted his banner stone/large stone).¹⁰¹ The verb *tz’ap*, first deciphered by Nikolai Grube in 1990, means “to sow (corn), to plant,” “to erect,” or “to hoist,” stemming from the agricultural action of spearing the ground with a planting stick (fig. 10a).¹⁰² Moroni’s use of *planted* with the title/standard¹⁰³ of liberty banner then is another remarkable correspondence with the setting up of banners and stelae in ancient Mesoamerican practice.¹⁰⁴

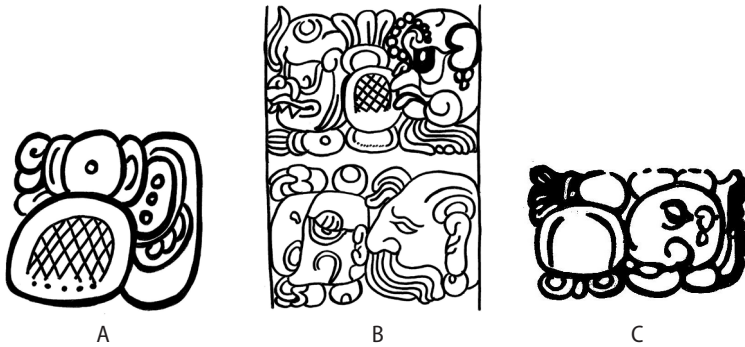


Figure 10. (A) **tz'a-pa-ja**, *tz'ahpaj*, “it was planted” (drawing by Asa Hull); (B) *uhti tz'ap-tu-un wa'wan*, “It came to pass the stone [stela] planting, it was raised,” found on Stela A at Copán (drawing by Asa Hull, after Linda Schele); (C) *tz'apiiy wa'wan*, “planting, it was raised,” a couplet from Stela H at Copán (drawing by Asa Hull, after Linda Schele).

101. Cf. Stuart, “Fire Enters His House,” 375. Today scholars regularly translate this phrase as “the planting of the banner stone”; Erik Boot, “Maya Writing: Synonyms and Homonyms, Polyvalency and Polysemy,” in *The Idea of Writing: Play and Complexity*, ed. Alexander J. de Voogt and Irving L. Finkel (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 272; and Palka, *Historical Dictionary of Ancient Mesoamerica*, 43. “This is routinely used to refer to the dedications of stelae, as in the oft-repeated phrase *ts'ap-ah u-lakamtun*, ‘his banner stone (stela) is planted,’” Stuart, “Fire Enters His House,” 375.

102. Grube, “Die Entwicklung der Maya-Schrift”; and Boot, “Maya Writing,” 4n5.

103. Note the second synonymous pairing that Moroni infuses this couplet with. In the first line he uses “title of liberty,” but in the second line, in perfect step with Mesoamerican poetic tradition, the head noun is substituted with a synonym, “the standard of liberty” (Alma 46:36).

104. Mark Alan Wright first brilliantly noted the significance of this couplet to me in Antigua, Guatemala. I had just lectured to a group on some of the inscriptions at the site of Copán and had mentioned a similar couplet twice found in those texts when

What is even more significant, however, is that the exact synonymous couplet used by Moroni is also documented in several Maya hieroglyphic texts, both cases in reference to the erection of stelae or “banner stones.” On Stela A at the site of Copán in Honduras, the initial verbal phrase after the calendrical notations is written as:

uhti tz'ap-tuun

wa'wan

it came to pass the stone [stela] planting,

it was raised. (fig. 10b)

The root of the second verb in the couplet is *wa'*, a positional verb meaning “standing upright,” “stood up,” or “raised” in numerous Mayan languages. The very same couplet also appears on Stela H at Copán, also referring to an action related to the stela itself: “tz'apiiy wa'wan” (planting, it was raised) (fig. 10c). The presence in the Book of Mormon of the precise terminology¹⁰⁵ and couplet structure¹⁰⁶ associated with the erection of banner stones in Late Classic Maya society is extraordinary.

There are yet further direct linguistic links between *lakam* and the text of the Book of Mormon. After the people of Zarahemla and the people of Mosiah were united, a curious carved stone was presented to Mosiah: “And it came to pass in the days of Mosiah, there was a large stone brought unto him with engravings on it; and he did interpret the engravings by the gift and power of God” (Omni 1:20). The seemingly uninspiring description of the monument as simply a “large stone” may actually be significant. As noted above, for the ancient Maya the word for “stela” was *lakam-tuun*, literally translated as “large stone.” While

Mark approached me and showed me Alma 46:36 and linked it to the glyphic couplets I had just been discussing—a remarkable insight.

105. The verb in modern Mayan language is *wa'*, meaning “stand up.” The form of the verb in Alma 46:36 is the transitive “hoisted.” The *wa'* root is also readily transitivized, such as *u-wa-b'u* “he hoisted it” in Ch'orti' Mayan.

106. The reverse order of the constituents in Book of Mormon (“hoist—plant”) and Mayan texts (“plant—hoist”) is standard practice in Mayan poetics where there is almost never a fixed order in the couplet terms.

possibly merely coincidental, that the precise designation of “large stone” for a carved monument with writing on it would be given in the Book of Mormon as well as in myriads of ancient Maya texts is further indication of a shared cultural and linguistic origin.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Moroni pulled out all the stops with the title of liberty. He provided legitimization for the covenant-entering ceremony by hearkening back to an apocryphal story of Jacob with a remnant of his son Joseph’s coat. Since Lehi was a descendant of Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14), the archaic nature of the rite by their lineage ancestor would have garnered Moroni additional support. The innovative use of a standard to display the rent garment shows Moroni adapting to the circumstances and culture in which he lived. A banner, well-known as a symbol of warfare, motivation, and leadership in battle in societies around the world, was an eminently appropriate way to rally others to his cause.

As I have shown, many aspects of the title of liberty ceremony are illuminated when placed in a Mesoamerican context. The use of such banners in ritual and warfare settings—often in fact the same thing in ancient Mesoamerica—is remarkably consistent with nearly all the details in the title of liberty story. The ritual context for the raising of the title of liberty is reminiscent of the later Aztec Panquetzaliztl (lit. “raising of the banner”) ceremony that has an underlying military theme. What is more, the close association and parallels with the Maya concept of a *lakam* to the title of liberty cannot be easily overlooked. The title of liberty was for all intents and purposes a *lakam*, a battle standard meant to inspire and lead Moroni’s army into victory.

Expressing himself in highly poetic forms, Moroni shows his complete familiarity with several of the key rhetorical devices common to all

107. Mark Alan Wright, in 2006, was the first to note the connection between *lakam-tuun* and the “large stone” in Omni. Mark Alan Wright, “Gleaning the Glyphs: Textual Tidbits and the Book of Mormon” (presentation, 4th Annual Conference of the Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 13–14, 2006).

Mesoamerican ritual discourse. Furthermore, the precise correspondence between the couplet *hoist—plant* in the Book of Mormon with the title of liberty banner finds a near exact linguistic parallel in Classic period Maya hieroglyphic texts also referring to a banner or banner stone.

Convergence to this degree of linguistic and cultural data is a striking endorsement for the validity of the text as an ancient document and provides evidence of a Mesoamerican cultural background for the Book of Mormon.

Kerry Hull is a professor in the Department of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. His academic interests include Mayan linguistics and anthropology, Polynesian linguistics, historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and Mesoamerican epigraphic studies. He has an MS in applied linguistics from Georgetown University and a PhD in linguistic anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin.