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Abstract Some critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have claimed that the church has funded several failed archaeological expeditions in an effort to prove the veracity of the Book of Mormon. As Daniel C. Peterson points out, however, such excursions have not been failures. On the contrary, they have produced significant evidence to support the Book of Mormon, and there is still more to be discovered.

ON THE NEW WORLD ARCHAEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Daniel C. Peterson

In their unfortunate book *Behind the Mask of Mormonism*, Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon¹ refer to “the Mormon New World Archaeological Foundation, which Brigham Young University supported with funds for several fruitless archaeological expeditions.”² The insinuation that the New World Archaeological Foundation failed abjectly in its supposed mission to prove the Book of Mormon true has become a staple theme with some critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “From 1948 to 1961,” write Jerald and Sandra Tanner,

the Department of Archaeology at Brigham Young University sent “five archaeological expeditions to Middle America,” but no evidence for the Nephites was discovered. After these expeditions had failed, the church leaders gave “large appropriations” to support Mr. Ferguson’s New World Archaeological

I wish to thank Jan E. Anderson for helping me to track down useful information, thus saving me considerable time.

1. For an investigation into the deeply mysterious nature and number of Ankerberg and Weldon’s doctoral degrees, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Constancy amid Change,” *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 89–98.

2. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Behind the Mask of Mormonism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 289; compare John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992), 289.

Foundation. This organization also failed to find evidence to prove the *Book of Mormon*.³

We are apparently intended to conclude that, since hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars have been spent over the past few decades on “several fruitless archaeological expeditions” designed to confirm the Book of Mormon, the book must be false and ought to be jettisoned. “The interested reader,” say Ankerberg and Weldon, “should purchase appropriate materials and prove to his own satisfaction that Mormon archaeological claims are without foundation and that therefore the *Book of Mormon* is not logically to be classified as a translation of ancient records.”⁴

The facts need to be set indisputably straight on this topic. First of all, some historical information: “There may have been five ‘expeditions’ in name,” reports John Sorenson, referring to the Tanners’ claim of a quintet of demoralizing archaeological failures between 1948 and 1961, “but several were only nominally ‘archaeological.’”⁵ In 1948, the work consisted of “‘test excavations’ that yielded a mere 801 potsherds.”⁶ Ten years later, in 1958, Dr. Ross T. Christensen and several Brigham Young University students returned to the area in order to continue the efforts that Professor M. Wells Jakeman had initiated in 1948 “to test the site for cultural materials and to determine its size and composition.”⁷ In 1961, with the financial backing of “the

3. Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism: “A Condensation and Revision of ‘Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?’*” rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 141, emphasis in original. It isn’t clear from their text whom or what the Tanners are quoting.

4. Ankerberg and Weldon, *Behind the Mask of Mormonism*, 290.

5. John L. Sorenson, e-mail to Daniel C. Peterson, 16 April 2004. The history of the work is recapped in Ray T. Matheny, “The Ceramics of Aguacatal, Campeche, Mexico,” *Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation* 27, ed. Susanna Ekholm-Miller (Provo, UT: NWA, 1970), v, 2. I am indebted to Professor Sorenson for the historical information in this paragraph and for the references. Quotations in the paragraph not otherwise attributed come from his e-mail.

6. Sorenson to Peterson, 16 April 2004. M. Wells Jakeman issued a report on this activity in “An Archaeological Reconnaissance of the Xicalango Area of Western Campeche, Mexico,” *Bulletin of the University Archaeological Society* 3 (1952).

7. Both the 1948 and 1958 efforts were jointly financed by “Brigham Young University and the University Archaeological Society.” See Matheny, “Ceramics of Aguacatal, Campeche, Mexico,” v.

BYU–New World Archaeological Foundation,”⁸ further fieldwork was conducted, yielding quantities of pottery. Subsequently, an analysis of that pottery was done by Ray T. Matheny, and the report was submitted as his doctoral dissertation to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oregon. “No documentation associated with any of this work,” says Professor Sorenson,

mentioned The Book of Mormon in relation to any objectives. The work was invariably done with advance approval of the objectives and under official permits issued by archaeological authorities of the Mexican government. . . . The stated objectives—“to test the site for cultural materials and to determine its size and composition”—were accomplished to a reasonable degree. It is only the [Tanners’] subjective interpretation that “these expeditions had failed.”⁹

The New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAf) was incorporated on 20 October 1952, in the state of California, as a nonprofit, scientific, fact-finding body.¹⁰ It emerged out of discussions the previous year between Thomas Stuart Ferguson, Alfred V. Kidder of the Carnegie Institution, and Gordon Willey of Harvard University regarding “the status of archaeology in Mexico and Central America.” In a published reminiscence of those discussions, Ferguson wrote that

8. Ibid. The NWAf was initially a private foundation, incorporated by Ferguson in California in October 1952. He persuaded the church to finance it in 1954. In 1961 it was incorporated into Brigham Young University. By the early seventies the foundation was administered by the dean of the College of Social Science. In 1990 the Department of Anthropology assumed responsibilities for its administration. See John L. Sorenson, “Brief History of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation,” paper delivered at the opening of an exhibition at Brigham Young University displaying the work of the NWAf on the occasion of the BYU Centennial in April 1975, pp. 2, 6, typescript in possession of Daniel C. Peterson.

9. Sorenson to Peterson, 16 April 2004. The history of the work is recapped in Matheny, “Ceramics of Aguacatal, Campeche, Mexico,” v, 2.

10. For the history of the formative years of NWAf, I have drawn upon the fuller treatments in Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *The Messiah in Ancient America* (Provo, UT: Book of Mormon Research Foundation, 1987), 247–83, and Stan Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Freethinker Press, in association with Smith Research Associates, 1996), 41–84, but also upon conversations with John L. Sorenson, John E. Clark, and Fred W. Nelson.

it was agreed that it was unfortunate that so little work was being carried on in so important an area and that something should be done to increase explorations and excavations. . . .

Despite the amazing discoveries made between 1930 and 1950, work on the Pre-Classic was virtually at a standstill in 1951. The result of the discussion was that we agreed to set up a new organization to be devoted to the Pre-Classic civilizations of Mexico and Central America—the earliest known high cultures of the New World.¹¹

In the beginning NWAFF was financed by private donations, and it was Thomas Ferguson's responsibility to secure these funds. Devoted to his task, he traveled throughout California, Utah, and Idaho; wrote hundreds of letters; and spoke at firesides, Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis Clubs, and wherever else he could. After a tremendous amount of dedicated work, he was able to raise about twenty-two thousand dollars, which was enough for the first season of fieldwork in Mexico.

However, even before the Foundation was organized, Ferguson had attempted to persuade the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to support it. He sought an appointment with the First Presidency but did not succeed. He then asked his friend J. Willard Marriott for help, and the meeting was arranged. In April 1951, Ferguson and the non-Mormon archaeologist Alfred V. Kidder presented a plan to the First Presidency for archaeological work in Mesoamerica. The plan had been submitted through Elder John A. Widtsoe after it had been discussed with a number of the General Authorities. Ferguson and Kidder asked for \$150,000 to support the work for five years, but, after several months of repeated inquiries from Ferguson and answering silence from the First Presidency, the request was declined. On 12 January 1952, Ferguson again wrote to the First Presidency and, this time, asked permission to organize the Foundation without church funds or endorsement. "If asked by members of the Church,"

11. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, "Introduction concerning the New World Archaeological Foundation," Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation 1 (Orinda, CA: NWAFF, 1956), 3.

he said, “if we know of the attitude of the Church toward the work of the Foundation, we will state that the organization has no connection with the Church other than that some members of the Church have participated in its activities—that there is no official connection with the Church.”¹² On 18 January, the First Presidency responded, stating that they had no objection whatever to the organization of the non-profit corporation nor to the activities in which it would engage. And, they added, “[we] wish you well in your undertaking and will await with deep interest a report on the progress of your work and particularly on the result of your exploratory operations.”¹³

Almost immediately after its incorporation in October 1952, the Foundation’s first expedition did begin work on the Lower Grijalva, near the mouth of the river and close by Villahermosa in the state of Tabasco. Professor Pedro Armillas served as field director of the expedition. His assistants were William T. Sanders (a graduate student in archaeology from Harvard University who would subsequently teach at Pennsylvania State and complete major projects at Teotihuacán, Kaminaljuyú, and Copán, among other locations) and Román Piña Chan (who went on to earn a doctorate and thereafter, until his recent death, was widely accounted one of the top two or three Mexican archaeologists), both non-Mormons, and two Latter-day Saint graduate students in archaeology from Brigham Young University, John L. Sorenson and Gareth W. Lowe. The expedition labored from January until June 1953, exploring and test-pitting from Huimanguillo (west of Villahermosa) upstream to the south as well as in other nearby areas.¹⁴ The focus of NWAf’s subsequent work was significantly and helpfully narrowed by the exploratory efforts of this first season, since the team determined that there were no major Preclassic sites along the Lower Grijalva. Near the end of the 1953 field season, Thomas Stuart Ferguson himself

12. Warren and Ferguson, *Messiah in Ancient America*, 259.

13. *Ibid.*, 60.

14. The work was eventually reported in Román Piña Chan and Carlos Navarrete, “Archeological Research in the Lower Grijalva River Region, Tabasco and Chiapas,” *Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation* 22, ed. J. Alden Mason (Provo, UT: NWAf, 1967).

joined the expedition, and he and Sorenson conducted a speedy reconnaissance, by jeep, of the west bank of the Grijalva, from Tuxtla Gutierrez southward toward Guatemala. Discovering numerous Preclassic sites along the way, including Chiapa de Corzo, they traveled as far as La Concordia (near Santa Rosa), which they reached just as the annual rains began. On the basis of potsherd and figurine collections that they procured, in less than two weeks they identified numerous sites of Preclassic (Book of Mormon period) age, visiting a total of twenty-three sites and obtaining information on an additional hundred.¹⁵

That first season of fieldwork, in 1953, was financed mostly by private donations Thomas Ferguson himself raised. On 9 April 1953, however, Ferguson made another presentation to the First Presidency. In this proposal, he asked for \$15,000 to finish out the current season and for \$30,000 annually for four additional years of fieldwork, or a total of \$135,000. Slightly more than a week later, he was granted the \$15,000 he had requested to complete ongoing work, but nothing more. And, a few months later, in September 1953, when he requested another \$29,000 from the First Presidency, his request was denied.

No fieldwork was conducted in 1954 for lack of funds. However, thanks to various private donors, NWAf commenced work again in 1955. In April and May of that year, Ferguson and others accompanied the non-Mormon Edwin Shook, formerly Kidder's associate in the Carnegie Institution's fieldwork in Guatemala, for an examination of sites in central Chiapas which confirmed that excavation there would be highly productive for NWAf's aims. Armed with Shook's authoritative endorsement, Ferguson's persistence was at long last rewarded when a generous grant to span four to five years was finally authorized by the church in 1954.¹⁶ A few years later, the non-Mormon J. Alden Mason, who was at the time the Foundation's editor and field

15. See John L. Sorenson, "An Archaeological Reconnaissance of West-Central Chiapas, Mexico," *New World Archaeological Foundation Publication 1* (Orinda, CA: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1956), 7–19. For Ferguson's late arrival on the expedition, see page 5 of the same publication.

16. Warren and Ferguson, *Messiah in Ancient America*, 264–65, and Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 50–51, 73 n. 49, 74 n. 53, disagree on the timing of the First Presidency's decision to make the grant, with Warren and Ferguson identifying Shook's support following his visit to Chiapas as a crucial factor in gaining the approval of church leaders,

advisor and an emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, commented regarding the 1954 grant that “The world is much indebted to this Church for its outstanding contribution to the advancement of archeological research and the increase of scientific knowledge.”¹⁷

Several relevant facts stand out from this bare-bones recital of the earliest history of the New World Archaeological Foundation. First, non-Latter-day Saint archaeologists were prominent—in fact, dominant—from the beginning, not only in choosing central Chiapas as the geographical focus of its excavations, but in making the pitch for support from the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and in directing and carrying out NWAf’s fieldwork. Second, far from betraying an eager zeal to back a hunt for Book of Mormon artifacts and “proofs,” the leadership of the church was manifestly reluctant to fund NWAf. Third, the participation of the eminent non-Mormon archaeologists Alfred V. Kidder and Edwin Shook in proposals for financial support from the First Presidency ensured that those proposals did not focus at all on NWAf’s potential usefulness in Book of Mormon apologetics. Fourth, church financial support first came in 1953 (and then on a much larger scale in 1955) and not, as the Tanners claim, only after a supposed string of failed BYU archaeological expeditions that ended in 1961.

As a matter of fact, the New World Archaeological Foundation has never worked directly on Book of Mormon questions, has always sought and received the collaboration of prominent non-Mormon researchers, and has by no stretch of the imagination been “fruitless” in its expeditions’ findings.

In his foreword to one of the earliest NWAf publications, issued in 1959, Mason very briefly summarized the overall historical plot of the Book of Mormon and then correctly observed that

while Stan Larson says that it was the church’s support, already promised, that encouraged Ferguson to invite Shook to Chiapas in the first place. Nothing significant hinges on this dispute, but, based on the personal recollections of John L. Sorenson, I have chosen to follow Warren’s chronology.

17. J. Alden Mason, foreword of *Research in Chiapas, Mexico*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation 1–4, ed. J. Alden Mason (Orinda, CA: NWAf, 1959), iii.

No statement respecting the landing places of these groups or the identification of any of the lands settled and cities established by them has ever been officially made by the Church. Nevertheless, some individual Mormons have made speculative deductions attempting to identify ethnic groups, archeological ruins, and geographical features of the New World with those described in the Book of Mormon. None of these interpretations to date has received either ecclesiastical or scientific approval.¹⁸

Mason recognized, of course, that Latter-day Saint commitment to the Book of Mormon was a principal motivation for the founding of the New World Archaeological Foundation. “As advocates of advanced education,” he wrote,

Mormons always pride themselves for maintaining the doctrine that ignorance should be replaced by knowledge gained through intelligent research and study. Observing the lack of unanimity in professional opinions respecting the development of the early high civilizations in America as well as the dearth of scientific data, many Mormons hope that archeological research may be effective in filling this void in our knowledge. Support of the present New World Archaeological Foundation investigations is a demonstration of that attitude.

Nevertheless, he unequivocally declared:

The stated purpose of this Foundation is *not* to seek corroboration of the Book of Mormon account, but to help resolve the problem of whether civilization in Middle America developed autochthonously or as a result of diffused or migrated influence from some area of the Old World, and to shed light on the culture and way of life of the ancients during the formative period.

There should be no underestimation of the difficulty of this assignment to reconstruct through archeology the lost

18. Ibid.

history of the once great early Mesoamerican civilizations. The task is tremendous.¹⁹

In a brief unpublished history of NWAf dating to April 1975, Sorenson emphasized the religious neutrality that characterized the Foundation from its beginning:

From the beginning the NWAf had held to a policy of objectivity. While an underlying Mormon hope for illuminating results in relation to the Book of Mormon was clear enough, the operational rule was always, impeccably down-the-line archaeology. Consequently a large majority of the staff were well-trained non-Mormon archaeologists from the beginning. Both because there were few competent LDS archaeologists and because of the overall policy of objectivity, the staff has continued to be weighted on the non-LDS side.²⁰

The response generally was that the work was admirable, but that some discomfort was felt in the profession about the possibility that objective results would be compromised by attempts to “prove” the Book of Mormon. Among the recommendations of this committee [formed to “consider future Church support of archaeological work”], therefore, was a strong one to the effect that strict objectivity ought to be maintained in any Church-supported work. That policy reiterated previous NWAf policy. That stance has characterized all Foundation work since.²¹

Stan Larson, Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s biographer, who himself makes every effort to portray Ferguson’s apparent eventual loss of faith as a failure for “LDS archaeology,”²² agrees, saying that, despite Ferguson’s own personal Book of Mormon enthusiasms, the policy set

19. Ibid., emphasis in original.

20. Sorenson, “Brief History,” 3–4.

21. Ibid., 5.

22. See Daniel C. Peterson and Matthew Roper, “*Ein Heldenleben?* On Thomas Stuart Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 175–219.

out by the professional archaeologists who actually ran the Foundation was quite different:

From its inception NWAFF had a firm policy of objectivity. . . . [T]hat was the official position of NWAFF. . . . [A]ll field directors and working archaeologists were explicitly instructed to do their work in a professional manner and make no reference to the Book of Mormon.²³

In a 21 July 1952 letter to Arquitecto don Ignacio Marquina of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City, Alfred V. Kidder clearly sought to allay any potential concern in the mind of his Mexican colleague that NWAFF might pursue a theological agenda. He wrote:

In discussing the Foundation with Mr. Ferguson, to whose interest and energy its organization has been due, he made it clear to me that he, and those of his friends who have contributed financial support, are primarily concerned with discovery of the truth and that the results of such fieldwork as may be done are to be published as purely factual reports.²⁴

Likewise, Dee F. Green, in a thirty-five-year-old *Dialogue* article on archaeology and the Book of Mormon that remains a perennial favorite with critics of the Church of Jesus Christ—they typically cite it as representing the current state of research on the antiquity of the Book of Mormon—describes the leadership of the church as having instructed participants in NWAFF research

that interpretation should be an individual matter, that is, that any archaeology officially sponsored by the Church (*i.e.*, the monies for which are provided by tithing) should concern itself only with the culture history interpretations normally within the scope of archaeology, and any attempt at correlation or interpretation involving the Book of Mormon should

23. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 46.

24. Kidder's letter is quoted in full in Ferguson, "Introduction," 4–5.

be eschewed. This enlightened policy, much to the gratification of the true professional archaeologist both in and outside the Church, has been scrupulously followed. It was made quite plain to me in 1963 when I was first employed by the BYU–NWAf that my opinions with regard to Book of Mormon archaeology were to be kept to myself, and my field report was to be kept entirely from any such references.²⁵

Brant Gardner’s experience was much the same. “I was actually in the employ of the NWAf for about three months in 1977,” he recalls,

doing work on the linguistic history of southern Chiapas. I was hired because of my anthropology connections, not my connections to the church. Other graduate assistants were not LDS.

I can tell you from firsthand experience that there was absolutely nothing about the research that was done that was even remotely related to the Book of Mormon.²⁶

Had the mission of the New World Archaeological Foundation been Book of Mormon apologetics, it is inconceivable that Mason and Shook, both non-Mormons, would have lent their names and efforts to the cause.²⁷ Nor would the early officers of NWAf have been a virtual who’s-who of then-current Mesoamerican archaeology. The Foundation’s five-member advisory committee, for instance, included only one Latter-day Saint, Professor M. Wells Jakeman, who had earned a degree in ancient history from the University of California at Berkeley with a dissertation on the pre-Columbian Yucatán. Also among its members were the prominent Mexican archaeologist Pedro Armillas, who would later become a professor of archaeology in Illinois; Gordon F. Eckholm, curator of American archaeology at the American Museum of Natural

25. Dee F. Green, “Book of Mormon Archaeology: The Myths and the Alternatives,” *Dialogue* 4/2 (1969): 76.

26. Brant Gardner, e-mail to Daniel C. Peterson, 17 April 2004.

27. Professor Mason wrote one of the standard books of his generation on pre-Columbian America, *The Ancient Civilizations of Peru*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1968). The biographical sketch inside the cover cites his affiliation with NWAf.

History and a professor at New York City's Columbia University; and Gordon R. Willey, a professor at Harvard University and one of the most widely respected of all Americanist archaeologists. Alfred V. Kidder was the fifth member of the advisory committee, serving also as the Foundation's first vice president. As former director of archaeology for the Carnegie Institution in Washington, DC, which was, for ten years or more, the major research group devoted to Mesoamerica, Dr. Kidder worked for decades in Guatemala and established himself as the preeminent Americanist archaeologist of his era. (Even today, the most prestigious honor bestowed on archaeologists by the American Anthropological Association is the A. V. Kidder Award.)

It is also very doubtful that any of the professional archaeologists involved with the New World Archaeological Foundation from its beginning would agree with Ankerberg and Weldon's judgment that the NWAFF—which continues its work in Chiapas still today—produced nothing but “several fruitless archaeological expeditions.” Nor should they. For many years, the New World Archaeological Foundation has been the major player in work on the Mesoamerican Preclassic, and it still is. NWAFF has sponsored five decades of valuable and highly praised archaeological research in Central America—averaging at least one major dig annually, including the well-known excavations at El Mirador in northern Guatemala²⁸—and has been centrally involved in roughly seventy major field projects, very often in cooperation with other universities. NWAFF publications are routinely cited in standard treatments of Mesoamerican subjects.²⁹ In fact, the Foundation's current director, Professor John E. Clark, estimates that NWAFF has, to the time of this writing, generated roughly sixty-five scholarly monographs, several hundred academic articles, and scholarly presentations numbering perhaps in the thousands.³⁰ How much of this

28. See Ray T. Matheny, “El Mirador: An Early Maya Metropolis Uncovered,” *National Geographic* 172/3 (1987): 316–39.

29. See, for example, the bibliographies in Michael D. Coe, *Mexico* (New York: Praeger, 1962); Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984).

30. A catalog of NWAFF's own publications is available online, at fhss.byu.edu/anthro/NWAFF/publication_list.htm (accessed 28 April 2004).

material did Ankerberg and Weldon evaluate before they brought in their verdict of “fruitlessness”?

“Just how much the foundation is doing to advance the cause of Book of Mormon archaeology,” reflected Green in 1969,

depends on one’s point of view about Book of Mormon archaeology. There have been no spectacular finds . . ., no Zarahemlas discovered, no gold plates brought to light, no horses uncovered, and King Benjamin’s tomb remains unexcavated. But the rewards to the Church of the foundation’s work, while a little elusive to the layman and the “seekers after a sign,” will prove to be considerable in the perspective of history.³¹

And that was thirty-five years ago.

31. Green, “Book of Mormon Archaeology,” 77.