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An Everlasting Witness: Ancient Writings on Metal

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An Everlasting Witness: Ancient Writings on Metal

Abstract: *After reviewing and updating the best studies of writing on metals in the ancient world, the paper examines scholarly and scriptural texts that explain what writing on metal meant to ancient scribes. Finally, the paper turns to what writing on metal meant to the Nephites.*

Ancient Writing Materials and the Brass Plates

From its inception, Joseph Smith's talk of a record inscribed on metal plates caught the imagination of people on the American frontier and continued to provide fodder for scandal down to the present. Few realized he was really talking about multiple ancient metal records, including not only Mormon's gold plates, but also the Brass Plates that figure so prominently in the Book of Mormon, and also other metallic records created by or known to the Nephites. But in the twenty-first century it is generally acknowledged by academics studying the ancient world that a wide variety of materials, including metals, have been used for records as may have been determined by purposes and possibilities at different times in

different places.

Unfortunately for the preservation of these writings, the refined metals on which they were inscribed had far more present value for subsequent generations than did the inscriptions themselves. Recycling of the metals explains why so few have been preserved down to the present day. Nor were they safe from the fires that destroyed so many ancient cities. “More than three thousand tables of bronze or brass kept in the Roman Capitol perished by fire in the reign of Vespasian” containing “proclamations, laws and treaties of alliance.”¹ The vast majority of surviving metal artifacts with inscriptions were protected in tombs, building foundations, or stone boxes. The political or religious institutions that created the original metal documents were never permanent, and so the artifacts have been left to fend for themselves over time.

Scribal School Workshops. In another paper I have demonstrated why Lehi and Nephi should be seen as trained scribes belonging to a Manassite scribal school.² In general, these scribal school workshops produced their own basic writing materials. They were the only customers for such products. Lehi’s Jerusalem

¹ This ancient story is retold in David Diringer, *The Hand-Produced Book* (London: Hutchinson’s Scientific and Technical Publications, 1953), 48.

² See “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Scribes,” working paper, June 16, 2021.

scribal-school workshop needed someone with sufficient skill in metalwork to manufacture and engrave brass plates. Nephi and Lehi not only exhibited the reading and writing skills of trained scribes, they also had the ability to inscribe their compositions on metal plates of their own making. One Hebrew Bible scholar sees a tangible connection between “the crafts of scribe and metalworker” in the inscription of names on metal weapons in the early Iron Age.³ That raises the distinct possibility that Nephi and his father may well have been personally involved in the manufacture of the Brass Plates in their generation.⁴

Bronze Age Copper Production. Most non-specialists today would grossly underestimate the importance of copper and copper alloys in the Bronze Age. Documentation of its role in trade and in material culture throughout Europe and the Middle East is especially strong for those final centuries before the Iron Age (1200–800 BCE). For example the Mitterberg mine near Salzburg, Austria, was

³ Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 107.

⁴ Because the Brass Plates contained “many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah” (1 Nephi 5:13), they may have been manufactured or expanded not long before Lehi fled Jerusalem.

producing around 50 tons of copper per year in the twelfth century BCE.⁵

Copper for the manufacture of brass plates was readily available in the 8th–7th centuries in Jerusalem from the nearby and highly productive Edomite copper mines. Archaeologists today estimate that these mines produced thousands of tons of copper in the Feinan area before being abandoned in the late fifth century BCE.⁶ A very helpful update and summary of current studies of the production and trade routes for copper, iron, and silver in the relevant time frame has been assembled recently by Hebrew University professor Yahalom Mack.⁷

Papyrus Scrolls. We might ask ourselves in passing what the physical characteristics of scribal records in Israel might have been in the seventh century. Scholars have looked at this question, and Menahem Haran has brought these

⁵ Peter S. Wells, “Crisis Years? The 12th Century B.C. in Central and Southeastern Europe,” in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.: From the Danube to the Tigris*, edited by William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowsky (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), 35–37.

⁶ E. A. Knauf, “Edomite Copper Industry,” *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 3 (1987): 86. See also E. A. Knauf, “King Solomon’s Copper Supply,” in *Phoenicia and the Bible: Proceedings of the Conference Held at the University of Leuven on the 15th and 16th of March 1990*, edited by E. Lipinski, *Studia Phoenicia*, vol. 11. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, no. 44, (Leuven: Peeters and Orientalistiek Departement, 1991): 67–186.

⁷ Naama Yahalom Mack, “Metal Production and Trade at the Turn of the First Millennium BCE: Some Answers, New Questions,” in *Rethinking Israel: Studies in the History and Archaeology of Ancient Israel in Honor of Israel Finkelstein*, edited by Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Matthew J. Adams, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 451–461.

studies together and shown that almost all “books” would have been written on papyrus scrolls in that century. The use of animal skins was not unknown, but only became common or required in later centuries.⁸ “Epigraphical and archaeological evidence confirms . . . that papyrus was known and available in Canaan.” It was imported to Byblos from Egypt as early as 1100 BCE and would have been available throughout Canaan and Israel in the biblical era.⁹ Papyrus plants did grow wild around Lake Huleh in the upper reaches of the Jordan river, and Nelson Glueck has speculated on the possibility that “from them was made some of the papyrus which served as paper in antiquity.”¹⁰

The Evidence for Inscriptions on Metals in the Ancient World

While the general public may not realize that writing on metal is an ancient practice with multiple applications, these have now been documented by a myriad of studies focused on a wide variety of times and places and extending back

⁸ Menahem Haran, “Book-Scrolls in Israel in Pre-Exilic Times,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982): 161–174.

⁹ Haran, 164.

¹⁰ Nelson Glueck, *The River Jordan, Being an Illustrated Account of Earth’s Most Storied River*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), 33.

almost 4500 years before the present. Because of long-standing criticisms against Joseph Smith's account of the Book of Mormon based on the modern assumption that claims about writings on metal were not believable, Latter-day Saint scholars have been more motivated than others to bring that scattered documentation together in defense of Joseph's claims about gold plates and brass plates.

H. Curtis Wright is one who worked on this for four decades. He began with a seven-page bibliography in 1970 listing widely recognized discoveries of ancient writings on metal. The extended version he published in 2006 filled 211 pages.¹¹ He included the more selective and geographically organized 1970 bibliography in a paper that explained why these studies from a wide variety of disciplinary origins were not easily recognizable in the academic literature as an identifiable group dealing with writing on metal.¹² He followed this up in 1982 with a further study in which he described an important subset of the twentieth-century discoveries of foundation deposits of inscribed copper, silver, gold, or lead plates buried in stone boxes in the foundations or other inaccessible recesses of temples and palaces built for ANE dynasties from the Neo-Assyrians in

¹¹ H. Curtis Wright, *Modern Presentism and Ancient Metallic Epigraphy*, (Salt Lake City: Wings of Fire, 2006), 135–346.

¹² H. Curtis Wright, "Metallic Documents of Antiquity," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1970): 457–477.

Mesopotamia to the Ptolemies in Egypt.¹³

Over time, these usually single-plate engravings articulating the claims to authority and the domains of rulers evolved into lengthy chronicles or histories of their accomplishments comparable to the other literary compositions of ancient scribes.¹⁴ One of the most important sources of information about the Hittite kingdom in the 12th century is a bronze tablet, found in 1986 buried under a stone floor, that contains an important treaty and details about the Hittite rulers and their family.¹⁵

The findings in these and numerous other studies were combined in a form that addresses the perspective of Book of Mormon readers by William J. Hamblin.¹⁶ The relevant conclusions that can be drawn from all these studies would include the recognition that writing on metals such as copper (brass), lead,

¹³ H. Curtis Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metallic Foundation Documents in Stone Boxes,” in *Occasional Papers, University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science* 157 (1982): 1–42. The paper was revised and updated for republication as “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes,” in *By Study and also by Faith*, vol. 2, edited by John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 273–334.

¹⁴ Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 302–304.

¹⁵ A brief and well-informed description of this tablet and its contents in English can be found in H. A. Hoffner, Jr., “The Last Days of Khattusha,” in *The Crisis Years*, 47–48.

¹⁶ William J. Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean,” *FARMS Review* 19, no.1 (2007): 37–54.

silver, and gold was part of the widely shared scribal practices in the ANE and Mediterranean world both before and after the times of Lehi for records that were intended to be permanent. In his short history of alphabetic writing in late Bronze Age Canaan, Seth Sanders identifies a non-standardized cuneiform alphabet that was competing with the famous cuneiform alphabetic writing of Ugarit as “the tool of multiple ethnicities and artisans at craft sites where metalworking and writing were practiced together . . . in the thirteenth century . . . with some awareness of the Ugaritic system.”¹⁷ One famous example demonstrating the quotidian use of inscribed copper skinning knives to cast lots in a legal dispute in eleventh or tenth-century Byblos is best known through the analysis of W. F. Albright.¹⁸

Writing on Metal in South Asia. Ancient Near Eastern cultures were not the only ones to turn to metal for the recording of special documents. The ancient Sanskrit Vedas were maintained through oral tradition for about seven centuries before the Indians developed their own script—inspired by the new Phoenician alphabet around 800 BCE—allowing them to transcribe them into permanent

¹⁷ Sanders, *Invention of Hebrew*, 100.

¹⁸ W. F. Albright, “The Copper Spatula of Byblus and Proverbs 18:18,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 90 (April 1943): 35–37.

written form.¹⁹ In his global study of “hand-produced books,” David Diringer found that

“many thousands of Indian inscriptions, carved on stone, or *engraved on plates of copper, or on iron, gold, silver, brass, bronze, clay, earthenware, bricks, crystals, ivory, and other hard material* have come down to us. They are written in Sanskrit, Pālī, Sinhalese, Tamil, Bengālī, Oriya, Nepālī, Telugu, Malayalam, and other languages.”²⁰

For example, one inscription on copper plates anticipating a serious famine has been dated to the late fourth century BCE.²¹ Of particular interest for Book of Mormon readers was the discovery “of a manuscript of twenty gold leaves containing extracts of the Pālī canon” believed to come from the Pyu, a previously unknown Thai people.²² He also reports that in Burma “the king’s letters, for

¹⁹ Holger Pederson, *Discovery of Language: Linguistic Science in the 19th Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 14. It was around 800 BCE when scribes speaking the Hebrew, Aramaic, Ammonite, Phoenician, or Edomite languages devised their own versions of this landmark alphabet that became the inspiration for alphabetic writing in countries both to the west (Greek and Latin) and to the east (Sanskrit, etc).

²⁰ Diringer, *The Hand-Produced Book*, 358. Some of Diringer’s findings were reviewed by Wright in “Metallic Documents.”

²¹ John Keay, *India, A History: From the Earliest Civilisations to the Boom of the Twenty-First Century*, revised and updated (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 86.

²² Diringer, *The Hand-Produced Book*, 375. See Wright, “Metallic Documents,” 466–468, for a more developed account of this scriptural record inscribed on gold leaves.

instance, were engraved on sheets of gold when they were sent to princes.”²³

A Second Brass Plates Tradition from Manassite Israel? Although the ancient Jewish community in Cochin, India, was already in decline in the late seventeenth century, the report of English seaman Captain Alexander Hamilton, who had spent three decades working in that region, is especially intriguing. In his memoirs, he wrote that the Jews of Cochin claimed to be descended from the tribe of Manasseh that was deported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon’s easternmost province. From there, they had eventually emigrated south to this west coast of India, where they maintained their culture for over 2200 years. Hamilton was also told that they “kept their Records, engraven on Copper-plates in *Hebrew* Characters; and when any of the Characters decay, they are new cut, so that they can shew their own History from the Reign of *Nebuchadnezzar* to this present Time.”²⁴

While no one knows where those copper plates might be today, the similarities with Lehi’s Brass Plates story are uncanny—Manassite refugees from Jerusalem with records on copper plates driven out before or during the

²³ Ibid., 377.

²⁴ Captain Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 1 (London, 1744), 323-4. This book is now available as a photographic reprint and online. I used the GALE reprint edition.

Babylonian conquest. The current origin stories offered by the tiny group of survivors from the Kerala Jewish community include no memory of such a narrative but refer instead to the Spanish Inquisition or the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome as causes of Jewish flight to India or even to left-behind sailors from Solomon's reputed fleets of traders.²⁵ A leading scholarly history of India that emphasizes the early peoples in the continent cites Greek and Roman historical references to their own trade connections to southern India back to the fourth century BCE. It also includes the traditions about St. Thomas's successful Christian proselyting in Kerala, but contains no reference to earlier Jewish settlers in its discussion of the Kerala area.²⁶

Ancient Israel and Writing on Metals

²⁵ See Edna Fernandes, *The Last Jews of Kerala: The Two Thousand Year History of India's Forgotten Jewish Community* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2008), 9–10, 14–15, 21–38. Two centuries after Hamilton's sailings in these Indian waters, Sir Charles Allan Lawson also spent three decades in southeast India as a newspaper editor and publisher and left his observations about the Jewish population in British times in chapter 7, "Native Cochin," *British and Native Cochin*, reprinted and distributed in 2018 by Forgotten Books, pp.119–134 . While Lawson's account fills in important details about the decline of the Colchin Jews going back to early Portuguese times, the picture he paints foretells the final demise described by Fernandes. In her 1968 study of literacy in Kerala, Kathleen Gough reported a Jewish community of around two thousand, but offered no evidence of instruction in Hebrew at a time when the Christian communities were teaching both Syriac and Latin, and Muslims were teaching Arabic. See Kathleen Gough, "Literacy in Kērala," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, edited by Jack Goody, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 136–137.

²⁶ John Keay, *India*, 118–123.

As Hamblin concluded from his review of the Northwest Semitic materials that have been found to date, specifically Hebrew writing on metals is rare:

These examples of early Semitic sacred writing on metal plates are sufficient to demonstrate that northwest Semitic languages were repeatedly and consistently written on metal plates from the twenty-fifth century BC until after the Greek conquests. The major types of metal used were copper/bronze and gold, precisely as described in the Book of Mormon. Thus, although surviving examples of specifically Hebrew writing on gold and bronze plates—as opposed to Phoenician or other Semitic languages—are relatively rare, the abundance of examples from the general cultural region shows that this type of writing was quite common.²⁷

The growing literature on scribal traditions in ancient Israel demonstrates an increasing scholarly awareness of scribal practices involving writing on metal.

For example, one Hebrew Bible scholar has pointed out that

for other purposes all sorts of surfaces were used for writing: a plate of gold (the section of the Sota [Num 5:11–13], silver (the blessing of the priests [Num 6:22–27], from the recent archeological findings in Jerusalem from

²⁷ Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates,” 45–46.

the sixth century B.C.E.), copper (the so-called *Copper Scroll* from Qumran). From the magic literature as well as from archeological findings, we know that not only the above-mentioned metals were used and that there were even more: iron, tin, lead, and bronze. It is reasonable to believe, therefore, that actually all the metals known at that time were in use for writing.²⁸

Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible. Because the vast majority of early Hebrew writing consisted of applying ink to papyrus, leather, or pottery with a reed brush, the biblical terms for scribal pens would usually refer to such instruments, as is explained in detail by Zhakevich in his recent study of ancient scribal tools and materials.²⁹ But, as some of the following scriptures illustrate, the scribal tool kit also included iron pens or chisels that could write on hard surfaces such as metals

²⁸ M. Bar-Ilan, “Scribes and Books in the Late Second Commonwealth and Rabbinic Period,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism*, Martin Ian Mulder editor, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 26. Though dated in some respects, Bar-Ilan’s article is still one of the best informed summary statements of the material and intellectual dimensions of the work of ancient scribes in the Jewish tradition. See pages 21–38. Cf. Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010), 3.

²⁹ Philip Zhakevich, *Scribal Tools in Ancient Israel: A Study of Biblical Hebrew Terms for Writing Materials and Implements* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 126–129.

or stone. Some Qumran writings use another term, “engraving tool,” which also shows up in Exodus 32:4 and Isaiah 8:1.³⁰ Zhakevich concludes that these writing implements were among the “specialized scribal tools employed for the specific purpose of writing by professional scribes in ancient Israel.”³¹

As the educated elite and preservers of their tribal traditions, Josephite scribes in late seventh-century Jerusalem could have been strongly motivated to resort to a metal-plates copy of their scriptures to preserve their unique tribal versions of Israel’s history and scriptures in a precarious world. Wealthy members of that group such as Lehi might well have been called upon to provide the resources necessary for such an expensive project. They possibly shared Jeremiah’s assessment of what the Judahite scribes were doing with the sacred texts:

How could you say, “We are wise,
and the Lord’s teaching is with us”?

Why, look, but a lie
has *the scribes’ lying pen* made it.

The wise shall be shamed,

³⁰ For a discussion of the Hebrew terminology and archaeological exemplars of items created by such tools, see *ibid.*, 124–126, 129–131, 134, and 145.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

they shall fear and be caught.

Look, the word of the Lord they rejected,
and what wisdom do they have?³²

The Scriptures as Permanent Witnesses. Isaac Rabinowitz has explained how the written word, especially when inscribed on hard surfaces, was thought by ancient Israelites to provide a permanent witness of truths, prophecies, histories, and genealogies for all future generations—and for which future generations would be fully responsible.

Closely allied to the postulation of the written words as inscribed variables of existent or future realities is the assumption that writing fixes, preserves, renders permanent what otherwise might be changeable, evanescent, impermanent.³³

He illustrates this insight by reference to Jeremiah's assertion that "the sin of

³² Jeremiah 8:8–9 as translated in Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2019), 887. See my working paper, "The Brass Plates in Context," for a detailed account of the various editing projects of seventh-century Jerusalem scribal schools that produced much of the Hebrew Bible we have today.

³³ Isaac Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel's Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible*, edited by Ross Brann and David I. Owen, (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1993), 40.

Judah is written with iron pen” (Jeremiah 17:1) and to the more expansive wishing of Job 19:23–24 (NIV):

Oh, that my words were recorded,
that they were written on a scroll,
That they were *inscribed with an iron tool on lead*
or engraved in rock forever!

Job’s words link writing on metal with an iron engraving tool—or on stone—to the art of making one’s words permanent. The same future intent informs Isaiah’s ancient command:

Go now, *write it on a tablet* for them,
inscribe it on a scroll,
that for the days to come
it may be *an everlasting witness*. (Isaiah 30:8, NIV)

We find the same sentiment in a first-century Mandaean text. In the opening sentences of the *Apocalypse of Enosh* we read:

The Pre-Eminent Almighty One has sent me to you so that I may reveal to you the secret (things) which you contemplated, since indeed you have chosen truth. Write down all these hidden things upon *bronze tablets* and

deposit (them) in the wilderness.³⁴

Nephite Perspectives on Metallic Scriptures

Five centuries after Nephi had carried the Brass Plates out of Jerusalem, the prophet Alma could look back and describe to his son Helaman the powerful effect that record had produced in the spiritual life of the Nephite people:

And now it hath hitherto been wisdom in God that these things should be preserved. For behold, they have enlarged the memory of this people, yea, and convinced many of the error of their ways and brought them to the knowledge of their God, unto the salvation of their souls. (Alma 37:8)

But Alma also had in mind a glorious and long-term future for the Brass Plates—as had been prophesied by his predecessors:

It hath been prophesied by our fathers that they [the plates of brass] should be kept and handed down from one generation to another, and be kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord until they should go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, that they shall know of the mysteries

³⁴ John C. Reeves, *The Heralds of That Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions*, Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies XLI (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 142.

contained thereon. And now behold, if they are kept, they must retain their brightness. Yea, and they will retain their brightness. (Alma 37:4–5)

The Plates of Mormon. Finally, we come back to the Plates of Mormon, the golden plates that caused such a scandal in Joseph Smith’s earliest days as a prophet. The Nephite prophets had been given a unique understanding of God’s ancient covenant given to Abraham—that his seed would be “a blessing to all peoples.” They were taught that their record, these very golden plates, would eventually become the primary means through which their own descendants, the Gentiles, and the house of Israel would receive the restored knowledge of Jesus Christ and his true gospel, enabling them to be gathered in to him and receive his salvation.³⁵

In a final blessing to his own youngest son Joseph, Lehi referred to an ancient prophecy given by Joseph and recorded in the Brass Plates. This prophecy is associated with Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible (Ezekiel 37:15–17) and explains this future role for the Nephite record:

³⁵ See Noel B. Reynolds, “All Kindreds shall be Blessed: Nephite, Jewish, and Christian Interpretations of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies of the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in Honor of Stephen D. Ricks*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Gaye Strathearn, and Shon D. Hopkin (Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 115–140, and “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant Through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018), 39–74.

Wherefore the fruit of thy loins shall write, and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write. And that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins and bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord. (2 Nephi 3:12)

Nephi had previously received his own version of this prophecy, which focuses on the essentials:

And the words of the Lamb shall be made known in the records of thy seed as well as in the records of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Wherefore they both shall be established in one, for there is one God and one Shepherd over all the earth. 1 Nephi (13:41)

Conclusions

This essay begins with the recognition that documents written on papyrus, metal, or other materials were produced in the workshops of seventh-century Jerusalem scribal schools. It continues with a review and an update of the most important

studies produced over the last half century that document the extensive practice of engraving important documents on different forms of metal in the ancient world. With that perspective we can see that contrary to the expectations of Joseph Smith's contemporaries, Nephi's Brass Plates and his own two records, referred to as Small Plates and Large Plates, all reflect a common practice of the ancient Near East, the Mediterranean world, and even parts of South Asia in Lehi's day. The essay also explains and documents the Israelite belief that written records, and especially those written on metal or stone, provided permanent witness of recorded truths and prophecies, making all subsequent generations responsible for their content. In that context, it was a simple matter for the Nephite prophets to understand that the records they had been commanded by the Lord to keep on metal plates would play a major role in God's final work of gathering and saving his people in the last days. It was that vision that motivated them to endure all kinds of hardship and danger as they made their respective contributions to the creation, transmission, and maintenance of those records.