

Scimitars, Cimeters! We Have Scimitars! Do We Need Another Cimeter?

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Cimeter is an early variant spelling for the word that has become standardized in twentieth-century English as *scimitar*,¹ meaning a highly curved, single-edged saber, which was usually associated with the Middle East and was used for slicing or hacking.² The word *cimeter* appears in the Book of Mormon eleven times, always in a context of weaponry (see Enos 1:20; Mosiah 9:16; 10:8; Alma 2:12; 27:29; 43:18, 20, 37; 60:2; Helaman 1:14). Because the preferred modern spelling is *scimitar*, I will use it throughout this discussion.

Some critics have termed the presence of scimitars in the text of the Book of Mormon anachronistic. They base their claim on the mistaken assumption that scimitars did not exist in the pre-Islamic Old World and therefore could not have appeared among Book of Mormon peoples who claim an Old World nexus with Iron Age II Palestine.³ This assumption is based no doubt on one or more of the following considerations: (1) the scimitar is not mentioned earlier than the sixteenth century in English texts;⁴ (2) the Persian word *samsir* probably provided the etymon for the English word;⁵ and (3) the mistaken assumption that the period from A.D. 1000 to 1200 saw the “perfection of the Moslem scimitar.”⁶ None of these observations asserts the presence or absence of scimitars in pre-Islamic times. Any arguments to the contrary based on these observations are simply arguments from silence and in this case would result in false conclusions.

There can be no question that scimitars, or sickle swords, were known in the ancient Near East during the Late Bronze Period, that is, about six hundred years prior to Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem. There have been several early attempts to demonstrate this,⁷ but more recently Brent Merrill has convincingly shown that scimitars existed in the Late Bronze Age.⁸ In addition to the sources Merrill cited, Othmar Keel, on the basis of artifactual and glyptic evidence, dated the use of the scimitar as a weapon in the ancient Near East from 2400 to 1150 B.C., just a little after the traditional 1200 B.C. closing date for the Late Bronze Age.⁹ Robert Macalister found a late Bronze Age sickle sword at Gezer in Palestine (together with a Mycenaean pot), which Maxwell Hyslop dated to the “14th century B.c.”¹⁰ Yigael Yadin discussed such swords in the context of warfare in the Near East, including the curved sword in use from Egypt to Assyria during the Late Bronze Age.¹¹

These Late Bronze Age scimitars were, of course, different from the later Moslem swords familiar to the Western world. Changes over time must be expected, especially after the end of the Late Bronze Age when technology developed for making iron swords that could be longer, thinner, and stronger than bronze blades. To suppose that the knowledge of scimitars was lost after the close of the Late Bronze Age and needed to be rediscovered in the Islamic period is highly unlikely. That scimitars continued to be used into the Iron Age and later is more probable. In fact, the glyptic and textual evidence for the curved sword in the Iron Age and the Hellenistic period in Palestine is positive and conclusive (see fig. 1), though to the best of my knowledge, an extant Iron Age scimitar has yet to be found (no doubt due to the capricious nature of archaeological discovery). Kurt Galling pointed out in 1966, building on the textual material cited hereafter and based on glyptic materials, that the scimitar is in evidence in the Iron Age from the tenth century B.C. to about 700 B.C.¹²

The textual material centers around the Hebrew word *kîdôn*,¹³ known prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls from only eight verses in the Old Testament (see Joshua 8:18, 26; 1 Samuel 17:6, 45; Jeremiah 6:23; 50:42; Job 39:23; 41:21). The context in all eight verses clearly called for a piece of personal martial equipment, but a narrower definition was not possible. The translators and lexicographers of the Hebrew Bible have, until now, only been able to guess the nature of the *kîdôn*, which has been rendered as *dart*, *javelin*, *shield*, *dagger*, and so on. Thus a consensus has been elusive.¹⁴

The denotation of *kîdôn* was again opened up for discussion when the Qumran text 1QM appeared.¹⁵ From the content of V:11, 12, and 14, Yigael Yadin wrote that the *kîdônim* of iron in these passages “should apparently be identified with a type of sword.”¹⁶ K. G. Kuhn and G. Molin proposed that the *kîdôn* was a specific type of sword, namely, the scimitar.¹⁷ Though some scholars have continued to opt for the more generic “sword,”¹⁸ others are certainly more correct in reading “scimitar.” Roland de Vaux stated, “More probably, however, the *kîdôn* was a scimitar, a *harpe*.¹⁹ Kyle McCarter called the *kîdôn* a “scimitar,” a specific term of which *hereb*, ‘sword,’ is the generic”; and Othmar Keel, with much evidence and discussion, translated the term without qualification as “sickle sword.”²⁰

The Israeli scholar M. Heltzer also recently argued from 1QM V:11, 12, and 14, and from 1 Samuel 17:45, that *kîdôn* cannot be the normal straight sword and, therefore, must be a scimitar.²¹ To buttress this argument, Heltzer proposed that *kîdôn* in Hebrew is a loan word from Hurrian, possibly through Akkadian *katinnu*.²² Heltzer proposed that the textual evidence for *katinnu* suggests a weapon – the curved sword or sickle sword. He went on to suggest that because the Hurrians at one time politically dominated the areas where the texts containing *katinnu* were found and continued to exert cultural influence over these same areas until the end of the Late Bronze Age, they most likely introduced the *katinnu* to the Near East. (Note here that it is precisely in these areas of Hurrian dominance, in addition to Amarna Egypt, that the artifactual evidence appears.) This hypothesis would link the scimitars from Late Bronze Age Palestine, Ras Shamra, Mesopotamia, and Egypt with the Assyrian vocable attested in the Late Bronze Age.

The passage 1 Samuel 17:45 is especially telling, not only because it demonstrates that the *kîdôn* is not a normal straight sword, or *hereb*, but also because a Book of Mormon passage parallels it. In Alma 44:8, Zerahemnah, a Lamanite military leader, surrendered his sword and scimitar to the Nephite leader. This parallels the armament of Goliath and also confirms that people carried both weapons into war, not that some troops carried a sword and others a scimitar, an interpretation that Helaman 1:14 could allow.

With extant Late Bronze Age scimitars (including two from Palestine), with Iron Age glyptic evidence from the ancient Near East, and with an Iron Age and Hellenistic period lexeme for scimitar, there is no room for doubt that Lehi could have known the scimitar. Indeed, Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi, placed the *kîdôn* in the hands of the people who would spoil Jerusalem. The scimitar is no more anachronistic in the Book of Mormon than it is in the Bible.

Notes

1. The spellings *cimeter* or *scimitar* depend on when and from which language the word was borrowed. See “scimitar” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter abbreviated *OED*), 9:223c.

2. See John Quick, *Dictionary of Weapons and Military Terms* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 380, 387. For illustrations of scimitars, see George C. Stone, *A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration, and Use of Arms and Armor* (New York: Jack Brussel, 1961; reprint of 1931 ed.), 550-51 figs. 708-9.

3. See the objections a Mr. Couch raised in an enclosure in a letter from W. E. Riter to James E. Talmage, as quoted in Brigham D. Madsen, ed., *B. H. Roberts, Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985), 36, see also 42-43. George D. Smith mentioned this objection in "Is There Any Way to Escape These Difficulties?: The Book of Mormon Studies of B. H. Roberts," *Dialogue* 17 (1984): 96, citing the as-yet-unpublished material.

4. *OED*, s.v. "scimitar."

5. *Ibid.*, but the etymological origin from Persian *samsir* "agrees in sense but is unsatisfactory as to form." *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1st ed.) derives the word from Persian *samsir* without comment.

6. R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 279. However, none of the works I consulted gave a date or country of origin for this weapon of the Middle Ages, not even Leonid Tarassuk and Claude Blair, eds., *The Complete Encyclopedia of Arms and Weapons* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1986), 416, 419-20, s.v. "shamshir" (with a reference under "scimitar" to shamshir). If the scimitar is not an invention of the Middle Ages, as I argue in this paper, then the origin of the scimitar must be sought in Mesopotamia. See Othmar Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen im Alten Testament*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 5 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1974), 27, n. 2, for the literature.

7. See Madsen, *B. H. Roberts*, 42-43, citing Ralph V. Chamberlain in an enclosure with a letter to Richard R. Lyman; see also the rather poor case made against the anachronism in another letter enclosure on p. 36.

8. I thank John W. Welch for calling my attention to this unpublished and undated paper on file with F.A.R.M.S.

9. Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen*, 28, 34-76.

10. Robert A. S. Macalister, *The Excavation of Gezer*, 3 vols. (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1912), vol. 3, pl. 75, no. 16 (the find site, tomb 30, is described in 1:312-13); and R. Maxwell Hyslop, "Daggers and Swords in Western Asia: A Study from Prehistoric Times to 600 B.C.," *Iraq* 8 (1946): 43 (Hyslop discusses the scimitar, his "Type 34," on pp. 41-44, with a line drawing on pl. IV; the entire article comprises pages 1-66 and six plates). Recently an additional Bronze Age scimitar was found in Palestine (see M. Tadmor, "Hepesh Sword and Straight Sword: New Acquisitions at the Israel Museum," *Qadmonioth* 3 [1970]: 63-64).

11. See Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands, in Light of Archaeological Study*, tr. M. Perlman, 2 vols. paginated sequentially (Jerusalem: International, 1963), 10-11, 206-7, for a short discussion of the curved sword in the Late Bronze Age, together with pictures of similar curved swords from Egypt to Assyria; for other depictions of curved swords (sometimes with discussion), see 134, 136-37, 17273, 195, 204-5, 223, 228, 233, 348-50, 359; see also Claude F.-A. Schaeffer, "Les Fouilles de Ras Shamra-Ugarit, septième campagne," *Syria* 17 (1936): pl. xvii, 2 (plate immediately preceding p. 139) for a photograph of the bronze sword found at Late Bronze Age Ras Shamra. For examples of curved swords and daggers from various times and provenances, see W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Tools and Weapons* (British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1917; reprint War-minister: Aris & Phillips, 1974), pls. XXVI-XXVII, for what he calls "recurved" and "crook-backed" weapons.

12. Kurt Galling, "Goliath und seine Rüstung," *Vetus Testamentum, Supplement* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 15:166-67, citing examples from North Syria and Assyria.
13. There is another word in Hebrew that may refer to a curved or sickle sword: "Curved sickle swords, which represented a development from the battle ax and were used for cutting with the edge rather than stabbing, were of importance from the Sumerian period through the early part of the biblical period. There is probably no biblical reference to a sickle sword, except possibly in the otherwise unknown Hebrew term *mdkera*" (Allen C. Myers et al., eds., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987], 974).
14. For a summary, see Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen*, 22. For examples, see F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 475: dart, javelin; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 433: *Wurfspeer*, dart; King James Version: shield; New English Bible: dagger; Luther Bible (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1972): *Spieß*; Zwingli Bible (Zurich: Zwingli-Bible, 1952): *Wurfspieß*.
15. Yigael Yadin published the first full treatment, *Megillat Milhemet bne Or bi-vne Hoshekh mim-megillot Midbar Yehudah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Byaliok, 1955), and again in the English edition *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*, tr. Batya and Chaim Rabin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Earlier publications contained parts of 1QM. The abbreviation commonly stands for the full name of the scroll, which is identical with the title of Yadin's book.
16. Yigael Yadin, "Goliath's Javelin and the *mnwr 'orgym*," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 86 (1955): 58.
17. K. G. Kuhn, "Der gegenwärtige Stand der Erforschung der in Palästina gefundenen hebräischen Handschriften," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 1 (1956): 30, stated: "Bei dem *kidon* handelt es sich der Beschreibung nach um ein Sichelschwert, wie es aus Funden bereits bekannt ist." G. Molin, "What Is a *Kidon*?" *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956): 334-37, came out strongly on p. 336 for a scimitar.
18. Thus Yadin, *The Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*, 126; J. van der Ploeg, "La Règle de la Guerre," *Vetus Testamentum* 5 (1955): 403: "Dans la Règle c'est clairement l'épée que portent les soldats"; Johann Maier, *Die Texte vom Toten Meer*, 2 vols. (München: Reinhardt, 1960), 2:12-121; Philip R. Davies, *1QM, the War Scroll from Qumran, Its Structure and History*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 32 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1977), 37.
19. *Ancient Israel*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 1:242.
20. P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980), 292, 294; Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen*, 21-76, passim; see also Galling, "Goliath und seine Rüstung," 16569, who, with more caution, opts for *scimitar*.
21. Professor Michael Heltzer, University of Haifa, Israel, made the suggestions concerning the philological evidence for the sickle sword in the ancient Near East at the XXXV^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Philadelphia, July 1988.
22. In cuneiform texts of the Late Bronze Age, the object *katinnu* appears in tablets from the peripheral areas of Mesopotamia, i.e., Nuzi in the east, Alalakh in the northwest, and Ugarit on the Mediterranean coast. The English-language Assyrian dictionary translates *katinnu* simply as "an object or decoration of metal with stone inlay" (*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, 21 vols. [Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1971],

8:307), while the German-language Assyrian dictionary translates the term with even more caution as “ein Gegenstand” of unknown etymological derivation (Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 3 vols. [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965], 1:466). See also Hyslop, “Daggers and Swords in Western Asia,” 9.