

Evidence for Tents

“And it came to pass that when Alma could pursue the Amlicites no longer he caused that his people should pitch their tents in the valley of Gideon.” (Alma 2:20)

One of the minor points made in recent criticisms of the Book of Mormon is the claim that there is no evidence of tent-making or tent-using tradition in Mesoamerica and no available material for making the tents that the Book of Mormon mentions. Actually, Mesoamericanist literature makes it clear that tents were in regular use by Aztec armies at the time of the Spanish conquest, and there is good reason to suppose that they were used by other peoples and in earlier times (including Nephite times) in Mesoamerica.

When the Spaniards saw the Aztec tents, they immediately labelled them *tiendas*, “tents.” Ross Hassig, the authority on Aztec warfare, notes, “The [Aztec military] camp itself was constructed of tents and huts [*xahcalli*] made of woven grass mats.”¹ Durán, whose *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España* is a fundamental source on Aztec war customs, also reports tents. Durán arrived in New Spain in 1542, only twenty-one years after the Conquest. He reports, for example, that the combined armies of the Mexicans prepared for an expedition against the city of Tepeaca by getting their encampment set up, “pitching their tents and huts [*armando sus tiendas y jacales*]—that is what they call their war tents—very nicely ordered and arranged.”²

“And one day’s journey before they arrived [at their destination], they sent ahead those charged with logistics to the place where they were going to set up the camp, and they pitched the tents [*tiendas*] and erected the huts [*chozas*].”³

In preparation for war, Montezuma ordered surrounding cities to furnish stores of food and “sleeping mats [*petates*] to make tents [*tiendas*] . . . in which they would dwell [while] in the field.”⁴

Bernal Diaz mentions that the Aztec soldiers “erect[ed] their huts” in the field,⁵ and John Sorenson distinguishes at least five types of field military shelters from the literature, several of them labelled *tiendas*, “tents,” by the Spaniards.⁶

Durán’s *Historia* describes tents in detail. He mentions at least six kinds of field military shelters:

- *casas pajizas*, houses of straw;
- *chozas*, huts of unspecified material but suitable for leaders to occupy;
- *jacales* (from Nahuátl *xahcalli*), huts; some were collapsible and movable; it is unclear how these differ from *chozas*; perhaps the latter were made from materials such as brush scrounged in the field, while the *jacales* may have been formed from mats;
- *tiendas*, tents; made of mats, or sometimes perhaps of cloth, given the normal Spanish sense of the term *tiendas*; some were good enough to house leaders;
- *casas de petates*, literally “houses of mats”; the cheap, light, portable mats could be combined with a framework of, say, spears, to make a simple tent;
- *cuarteles*, quarters, barracks; perhaps commandeered housing, or perhaps collapsible multiperson shelters.

Such military housing should not surprise us. After all, every army in the world has had to find culturally and ecologically effective ways to cope with the problem of shelter in the field. As long as there are armies, there must be cross-cultural equivalents of “tents.” The only questions in relation to a specific culture have to do with form, materials, and terminology.

For an added witness, we can look in the Motul dictionary, a classic sixteenth-century work that scholars automatically turn to for supplementary light on pre-Spanish Yucatec Maya language and culture. The definition for the Maya word *pazel* is “*choza o tienda en el campo, o casilla pequeña de paja*” (hut or tent for use in the field, or small straw booth).⁷

Mesoamerican farmers have long and widely used a similar type of hut. For example, the Zoques of Santa Maria Chimalapa in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec still construct “very small chozas of palm fronds and grass, almost level with the ground, where they sleep during the days when they work in the fields” away from home.⁸

There is no archaeological evidence for tents among the Aztecs—just accounts in historical documents. What archaeological evidence one could expect that would establish the presence of overnight *tiendas*, *chozas*, or *jacales* even among the Aztecs less than five centuries ago, is not at all clear. Then what hope has an archaeologist of finding the still slimmer traces of a temporary encampment dated two thousand years before that, the time of the Nephites? Until archaeologists come up with an operational solution to this dilemma, it seems sensible to accept the Book of Mormon as documentary evidence of the use of tents in the first century B.C. on a par with Durán’s testimony for the sixteenth century A.D.

Research by John L. Sorenson, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (May 1994): 2.

Notes

1. Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 73.

2. Fray Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme* Tomo II, Biblioteca Porrúa 37 (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1967), 2:157. The translations are Sorenson’s; pages refer to the Porrúa edition.

3. *Ibid.*, 2:180.

4. *Ibid.*, 2:156.

5. Cited in Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 161.

6. See John L. Sorenson, “Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe,” review of “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” by Deanne G. Matheny, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 33:34.

7. *Diccionario de Motul. Maya, Español, atribuido a Fray Antonio de Ciudad Real . . . Parte 2*, ed. Juan Martínez Hernández (Mérida: Tipográfica Yucateca, 1929), 732.

8. Carlos Muñoz M., *Crónica de Santa Maria Chimalapa: en las selvas del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (San Luis Potosí: Molina, 1977), 14.