

Decorative Iron in Early Israel

John W. Welch

Mosiah 11:8 “all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron”

At various times when iron was scarce, it was used as a precious decorative metal. So concludes a recent article, “King Og’s Iron Bed—Fact or Fancy?”¹ Here, Alan R. Millard documents archaeological evidence for the early use of iron to decorate beds (see Deuteronomy 3:11) and thrones, as well as bracelets and jewelry, weapons and royal swords. Such beds or jeweled boxes were not of solid iron, but they were plated, veneered, or studded with the metal.

The article features pictures illustrating how, in the second millennium B.C., iron was “highly prized,” like other precious metals and the semi-precious blue stone, lapis lazuli. “At a time when iron was hard to obtain, the product of a difficult technique, a bed or a throne decorated with it could be a treasure in a king’s palace.”²

With such a point in mind, we can reread the account of King Noah, who built many elegant buildings and “ornamented them with fine work of wood, and of all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron[!]” (Mosiah 11:8; emphasis added). Although a person today would not normally think of using iron as a precious decoration, we can now see that this was actually done in antiquity.

Thus, though iron was present in the city of Nephi in Noah’s time, it was apparently rare and precious then, just as it was in the early Iron Age in Palestine. This was probably always the case in Book of Mormon society, for all New World references to iron in the book mention it together with gold and silver and other precious things (see 2 Nephi 5:15; Jarom 1:8; Ether 10:23). Perhaps this metal was especially prized among the Nephites due to the great symbolic and spiritual value of the “rod of iron” in Lehi’s vision in 1 Nephi 8.

Based on research by John W. Welch, appearing in Insights, no. 2 (1990).

Footnotes

1. Alan R. Millard, “King Og’s Iron Bed-Fact or Fancy?” *Bible Review* 6 (April 1990): 16-20.

2. *Ibid.*, 20.