

Ammon and Cutting Off the Arms of Enemies

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Alma 17:39 "Bearing the arms which had been smitten off . . . of those who sought to slay him; and they were carried in unto the king for a testimony of the things which they had done."

The practice of cutting off the arms or other body parts of enemies, specifically as a testimony of the conquest of victims, is attested in the ancient Near East.¹ On the extreme left of band 4 on the decorated Gates of Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.), Assyrian troops are shown cutting off the heads, feet, and hands of vanquished enemies. "In other reliefs, the artists of the Assyrian kings depict the military scribes recording the number of enemy dead in accordance with the number of severed heads, hands and feet which Assyrian soldiers hold up before them."² This practice seems related to that of the astounded servants of King Lamoni, who took the arms that had been cut off by Ammon into the king as "a testimony" of what Ammon had done.

There may be several reasons behind this widespread phenomenon in the ancient world, ranging throughout the Near East and Egypt:

First, there was a need to obtain an accurate count of the dead. Military officers tended to exaggerate their conquests for self-aggrandizement and political gain; thus, a precise statistic was necessary to avoid misrepresentation. Similarly, Ammon (or his companions) was scrupulous to present precise evidence, so that no one could be accused of overstating his feat.

Second, there was a need for mercenary soldiers to be paid, and they were often rewarded based on the number of victims they had killed. Ammon, of course, had no interest in receiving compensation for his loyal service to King Lamoni, but the fact that the evidence was presented to the king, which could have entitled him to payment, heightens all the more the fact that Ammon sought no recognition or reward.

Other reasons for the practice may have included the need to identify the dead; thus, body parts were usually selected that were somehow unique to the victims. Taking an arm may also have had symbolic significance in punishing thieves who had misappropriated property by hand. Such became a common punishment for thieves in the Moslem world, although Jewish jurisprudence came to avoid any bodily mutilation.

Finally, an often-heard threat in the Near East today is that of vowing to cut down any arms raised against a person. Similarly, "as many of their arms as were lifted against" Ammon were smitten off (Alma 17:28).

Based on research by John M. Lundquist and John W. Welch, from the F.A.R.M.S. newsletters, October 1983 and Fall 1986.

Footnotes

1. Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), 2:399.

