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Near Eastern Weapon Parallels

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Parallels between sickle swords and two-bladed knives in ancient Mesoamerica and the Near East may strengthen the possibility of some historical link between the areas. Similarities in weapons terminology may also lead to fruitful research.
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Certain weapons in use in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica resemble those that were used in the ancient Near East. This Canaanite sickle sword (a) is so much like a scimitar-like weapon shown in the Mexican Codex Borgia (b) as to be very interesting.

The odd curved weapon pictured in the grasp of the sculptured warrior figure at Loltún Cave, Yucatan (see p. 34), has two blades projecting in opposite directions from a central handle. Whether the blades were of chipped obsidian or hardened wood, this device would have been fearsome to face in hand-to-hand combat. What seems to be another version of the same concept is pictured in the early art of highland Guatemala.

Hamblin noted that this weapon has a close parallel in ancient Syria and India. There it has been called a curved double-dagger or haladie. Each of its blades was approximately 8½ inches long and the two were connected by a small handgrip, probably of wood. The fact that the Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites of the Book of Mormon record had their origins in ancient Israel, adjacent to Syria, is interesting, to say the least. To all appearances the haladie, the Loltún Cave weapon, and the Kaminaljuyu weapon were constructed in response to one shared idea, and both must have functioned very similarly.

A second parallel between Mesoamerica and the Near East may support the position that the latter area could have been a cultural source for the former in some aspects of armament. The obsidian-edged sword that was called macuahuitl by the...
or carried. Hamblin and Merrill note that a mural from Chichen Itza (dated long after Book of Mormon times) shows a Toltec-era soldier carrying a bag or basket holding several macuahuitls on his back.27 Some Aztec warriors carried a kind of rack on their backs to which they could fasten their weapon when not in use.28 The Toltecs were reported to have borne “swords . . . fastened [on] with belts.”29 So while Nephite warriors might have had sheaths, they could also have “drawn” their swords from a bag, a basket, or a belt fastening.

The expression drawn might also have been a rhetorical device meaning something like “prepared to give battle.” Early Spanish chroniclers use the term in that metaphorical way when describing actions by native lords using macuahuitls that were not carried in a sheath: “And he flattered himself, that his sword being once drawn [i.e., the decision being made to go to war], he might have a chance to reach the crown.”30 “None of the caciques [native rulers] dared to draw a sword against them.”31

How sharp were their swords? Some Book of Mormon references to swords suggest that the blades of these weapons could be very sharp, as when Ammon severs the limbs of his enemies at the waters of Sebus, or when a Nephite soldier cuts off Zerahemnah’s scalp. Pohl observes, “The brutal nature of this weapon made combat bloody and dismemberment common.”32 Spaniards who faced native Mesoamerican swords in battle were deeply impressed by their deadly cutting power and razorlike sharpness. Here are a few of their statements:

- These swords cut naked men as if they were steel.33
- They slashed at his mare, cutting her head at the neck so that it only hung by the skin.
- They cut the mare with a single sword stroke.
- There were shields large and small, and a sort of broadsword, and two-handled swords set with flint blades that cut much better than our swords.34

If Ammon’s sword were a macuahuitl, he could easily have cut off the limbs of the live-stock “rustlers” that he fought. But even a sharpened sword of hardwood might have done the job as well.

Were their swords pointed? At Alma 44:12–13, Mormon describes the unsuccessful attempt by the leader of a Lamanite army, Zerahemnah, to kill the Nephite chief, Moroni. In the skirmish, a Nephite soldier wounded Zerahemnah by smiting off part of his scalp. The warrior then “laid” the scalp on the “point” of his sword, apparently without piercing it. As Hamblin and Merrill note, we cannot tell from this statement whether the “point” was dangerously sharp or not. Another passage implies that a group of Lamanite prisoners who were attempting to escape may have been impaled on pointed swords held by their guards: “And it came to pass that because of their rebellion we did cause that our swords should come upon them. And it came to pass that they did in a body run upon our swords,
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