



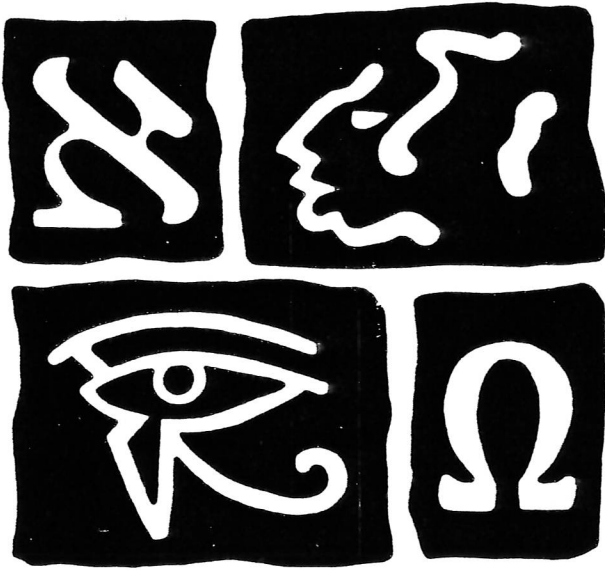
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**Handheld Weapons
in the
Book of Mormon**

William Hamblin

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**Preliminary
Report**

FOUNDATION FOR
ANCIENT RESEARCH AND
MORMON STUDIES

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HANDHELD WEAPONS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

by William Hamblin

1. Introduction¹

Man is perfectly capable of fighting and killing with his bare hands. However, for a number of reasons, he has found it useful to utilize specially designed tools for fighting known as "weapons." Weapons increase Man's capacity and efficiency in fighting in a number of ways. They increase the range at which injury can be done to an enemy and the degree of injury which can be inflicted also increased by the use of weapons. A soldier with a knife can damage vital internal organs which would remain relatively safe from his hands alone. Finally, using weapons helps protect the soldier from harm. Weapons can not only be often used to parry the attacks of an enemy, but by hitting an enemy with a club instead of one's hand, the hand is protected from injury.

With the introduction of advanced types of weapons, ancient warfare took on a new complexion. In a conflict between two unarmed men, victory tends to go to the strongest or fastest. When using weapons, however, victory often goes to the soldier who is better armed or trained. As many weapons were expensive or difficult to

1. This article is part of an ongoing study of warfare in the Book of Mormon. Forthcoming topics will include missile weapons, armor, fortifications, organization, strategy and tactics, military theory and practice. A Brent Merrill, "Swords and Cimeters in the Book of Mormon" (unpub. ms.) has independently come to many of the same conclusions presented here, and should be consulted. I would like to thank FARMS for their support in this project.

make, military systems relying on relatively sophisticated weapons (a sword instead of a club or a spear instead of a rock) began to bring about the increasing militarization of society. Some people began to specialize in making weapons, while others spent their time learning the special skills required to use those weapons effectively. Still other members of society were then required to provide extra food and other necessities for those who specialized in warfare. Societies thus tended to become increasingly militarized, specialized and complex².

There are a large number of factors which influenced the types of weapons and techniques of use which could be employed by an ancient army, and there are no clear criteria for determining the absolute superiority or inferiority of a specific type of weapon. Technology, available raw materials, climate, military theory and practice, the weapons of the enemy, cost, and martial skill all influenced the decision of which "weapons system" would be adopted by a civilization at a given time. For example, the crossbow was adopted by French and Italian infantry as their major missile weapon beginning in the twelfth century AD, and continued in widespread use until the rise of

2. I don't mean to imply here an evolutionary or mechanistic interpretation of society. There were clearly cycles of declining and increasing military specialization in ancient societies. Furthermore, there were dozens of significant non-military factors involved in the relative sophistication and specialization of an ancient society. As far as it goes, however, the above simplified model seems to hold true.

effective gunpowder weapons in the sixteenth century. The English utilized the longbow, while the Saracens adopted a recurved composite bow. Each weapon has its advantages and disadvantages -- the English longbow requires extensive training in archery, but has a long range. The crossbow requires little training to use effectively, but has a slow rate of fire. The composite bow is expensive and difficult to make, but is powerful and can be easily shot from horseback. Each army adopted a different weapon, and adapted their military system to that weapon's effectiveness and limitations³.

Many of these elements concerning the relationship between weapon technology, society and warfare can be seen clearly reflected in the Book of Mormon. The broader implications of some of these factors will be examined in later studies. Here only some of the technical aspects of weapons mentioned in the Book of Mormon will be dealt with. What weapons were used by the armies in the Book of Mormon? What was the nature and function of these weapons? How do they relate to known weapons of the Middle East and Mesoamerica⁴? For this study weapons will be broadly classified into two categories: melee weapons, which

3. On these weapons see R. Payne-Galloway, The Crossbow (London, 1903, rep. 1958); Robert Hardy, The Longbow (New York, Arco Pub., 1977); and J. D. Latham and W. F. Paterson, Saracen Archery, (London, 1970).

4. This study assumes that Mesoamerica is the "promised land" of the Book of Mormon following John Sorenson's An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985).

are held in one or two hands for face to face combat, and missile weapons which are thrown or propelled at an enemy from a distance. There are a large variety of different types of weapons in each of these two categories, and weapons of both types as found in the Book of Mormon will be discussed in detail.

2. Swords

The sword is a weapon consisting of a handle or hilt, generally four to ten inches long, and a blade which can measure from a foot to as much as five feet long. Sword blades can be single or double edged, and either straight or curved. The points of swords may be sharp for thrusting, or blunt, in which case the sword is used only for cutting with the edge of the blade. Some swords are designed only for cutting or thrusting alone, while others can be used with both techniques. Although in one sense "sword" is a common English word, there are in reality a vast variety of weapons with many different characteristics which can be categorized as swords⁵. Thus a weapon which is called a "sword" in one age or language, might be totally different in size, design, construction and use, from a sword of another age, although both might be called by the exactly the same

5. One need only examine Stone, Glossary, p. 594, fig. 762 (note: abbreviated references are sited in full in the bibliography) to see the many shapes, sizes and types of weapons which can be classified as swords. See figs 2.1-2 for some examples. (Figures for Section 2 begin on page 25.

term. An excellent example of this is the gladius. The original classical Latin gladius was a technical term for a short sword, only about 18-22 inches long, used by Roman infantrymen (it was an unsuitable cavalry weapon)⁶. By the Middle Ages, however, the gladius had become a generic term which could be used to designate any of the many types of swords used by European knights and soldiers, some of which — in contrast to the Roman gladius — could be as tall as a man.

In the Book of Mormon the sword is mentioned more than any other weapon, and its usage can be divided into two categories: literary-/metaphorical and military/technical⁷. There are four major types of sword metaphors used in the Book of Mormon: fighting or warfare in general; dying violently; military vigilance; and Divine power. Fighting in battle and violence are described metaphorically with eighteen different sword phrases: "take (raise or lift) up the sword⁸," "fall upon with the sword⁹," "smite with the sword¹⁰,"

6. L. Tarassuk and C. Blair, The Complete Encyclopedia of Arms and Weapons, p. 193b.

7. Sword/swords occurs 157 times in the Book of Mormon. I have classified 79 instances as metaphorical and 78 as technical. However, many occurrences are ambiguous and could fall in either or sometimes both categories.

8. Eight instances: 2 Nephi 12.4; Alma 27.29, 48.14, 60.16, 60.28, 61.11, 62.5; Hel. 15.9.

9. Two instances: Alma 58.18; Mormon 6.9.

10. Two instances: Alma 51.20, 60.30.

"pestilence and the sword"¹¹, "visit with the sword"¹², "contend with swords"¹³, "resist them with our swords" (Alma 61.14), "struggle with the sword" (Morm. 2.14), "fought with the sword" (Ether 15.29), "deliver ... out of bondage by the sword" (Mos. 22.2), "let fall the sword" (3 Nephi 3.8), "enforce it by the sword" (Alma 1.12), "preserved from swords" (Alma 44.9), "swords of their own hands fall upon their own heads" (Nephi 22.13), "run upon swords" (Alma 57.33), "pestilence of the sword" (Hel. 11.14), "beating swords into ploughshares" (2 Nephi 12.4 = Isaiah 2.4), and "famine and the sword" (2 Nephi 8.19).

Seven major sword metaphors are used to describe dying violently: "fall by the sword"¹⁴, "perish by the sword"¹⁵, "slain by the sword"¹⁶, "destroyed by the sword"¹⁷, "hewn down by the sword" (Alma 51.19), "murder with the sword" (Alma 60.17), and "slaughters with the sword" (Nephi 17.2). Military preparedness is metaphorically

11. Two instances: Alma 10.22,23.

12. Three instances: 2 Nephi 1.18; Hel. 1.39; 3 Nephi 3.6.

13. Two instances: Alma 44.17; Ether 15.24.

14. Eighteen instances: 2 Nephi 13.25 (= Isa. 3.25), 23.15 (= Isa. 13.15); Omni 1.17; Alma 24.24, 43.38, 44.18, 56.51, 58.39, 60.5,8,12,22; Mormon 6.15; Ether 14.4,24, 15.23,29; Moroni 9.2.

15. Four instances: 1 Nephi 1.13; Alma 24.23, 50.22; Ether 15.28.

16. Four instances: Alma 1.9, Hel. 10.18, Ether 13.18, 15.2.

17. Three instances: Alma 57.23, Hel. 11.4,5.

described by the phrases "sleep upon swords"¹⁸, "and "guard them, swords in hand" (Alma 57.15). The final use of sword metaphors is to describe Divine power — "sword of justice" is the main metaphor in this class, which occurs six times¹⁹. "Sword of vengeance" (Mormon 8.41), "sword of almighty wrath" (Alma 54.6), "sword of destruction" (3 Nephi 2.19), and "mouth sharp like a sword" (1 Nephi 21.2 = Isa. 49) also fall into this category.

Of course, some of these occurrences might represent technical statements that someone was actually killed by or was fighting with a sword rather than a metaphor that he was killed by violence or fought in battle. However, when such stock literary phrases are employed it is often impossible to determine whether the intended meaning was technical, metaphorical, or both²⁰.

Unlike most other weapons in the Book of Mormon, which are simply mentioned in passing but never described in detail, it is possible to get a relatively good idea of the technical nature of the Book of Mormon sword from the usage of the word in military situations. There

18. Four instances: Alma 57.9; Ether 15.20,22,24.

19. Alma 26.19, 60.29; Hel. 13.5; 3 Nephi 20.20, 29.4; Ether 8.23.

20. An excellent example of a sword metaphor being employed with a literal sense is Alma 1.9, where Nehor "was wroth with Gideon, and drew his sword and began to smite him. ... therefore he was slain by the sword." Here the sword metaphor "slain by the sword" is used, but describing the fact that Gideon was actually killed by a sword, rather than that he was killed by generic violence.

are several important incidents in which the use and nature of the Book of Mormon sword can be analyzed.

The first detailed description of the use of the sword in the Book of Mormon is the famous beheading of Laban (1 Nephi 4.7-19, c. 590 BC). Here Laban's sword fits nicely into the pattern of a high quality Middle Eastern weapon — a sheath, gold hilt, fine workmanship, and "blade ... of the most precious steel" (1 Nephi 4.9, see fig. 2.3). Nephi's method of beheading Laban by grasping his hair to pull up the head and expose the neck is a common technique (see figs 2.5 and 2.6.). Grasping the hair of the victim also insures that the head remains a stable target for the swordsman.

The second major incident involving swords is the story of Ammon and the brigands at the waters of Sebus (Alma 17.26-39, c. 90 BC). While defending the flocks of King Lamoni, Ammon is attacked by a band of brigands who had been marauding in the region. He kills a number of them at long range with his sling, after which "they came forth with clubs to slay him. But behold, every man that lifted his club to smite Ammon, he smote off their arms with his sword; for he did withstand their blows by smiting their arms with the edge of his sword..." (Alma 17.36b-37a). This incident is important in that it makes it clear that Nephite swords were edged weapons used for cutting. Thrusting or stabbing with swords is never mentioned in the Book of Mormon. The weapon is generally "raised" and is used to "smite," both of which imply a cutting action, as explicitly described

in this incident with Ammon²¹.

Ammon's sword technique deserves some attention. The text reads, "every man that lifted his club to smite Ammon, he smote off their arms with his sword ..." Actually severing an arm or hand of an enemy with a sword is a difficult task. What will generally occur is that the sword will cut into the flesh until it reaches the bone, which will also be partially severed or cracked. However, since the arm is free to rotate at the shoulder, rather than cutting deeper into the limb the sword will simply push the limb away in the direction of the blow. Thus in most situations one would expect a sword to make a deep gash, but not to actually sever the arm. In order to sever an arm the sword must be extremely sharp, swung swiftly, and must strike against a limb which is either somehow fixed, or moving toward the sword blade.

Thus Ammon's sword technique makes perfect military sense. He waits for the enemy to attack him with his club. As the club is raised and brought down swiftly towards Ammon, Ammon swings his sword

21. The only major implication of thrusting with Book of Mormon swords is an ambiguous passage in Alma 57.33 (63 BC), where the Lamanites "did in a body run upon our swords ..." Although this passage could be understood to imply that the Lamanites rushed against the points of the Nephite's extended swords, this is not necessarily the intent of the passage. It is probably another sword metaphor referring to weapons in general. 2 Nephi 24.19 reads, "those that are slain, thrust through with a sword," clearly describing thrusting as opposed to cutting with a sword, but this passage is a quotation from Isaiah 14.19. The significant incident of Zerahemnah's scalp being put on the point of a sword will be discussed below.

in a fast powerful blow aimed at the forearm. The combined momentum of his own swing and the oncoming force of his enemy's swing were sufficient to sever the the forearm. Thus according to the Book of Mormon, Ammon waits for precisely the right moment to initiate his arm severing sword technique for maximum effect against his enemy²².

The final major incident involving swords occurred at the surrender of Zerahemnah after the battle of the Sidon River (Alma 44.8-15, 74 BC). After having been defeated by Moroni, the Lamanite Chief Captain Zerahemnah "delivered up his sword and his cimeter, and his bow into the hands of Moroni" (Alma 44.8), in token of surrender. However, when Zerahemnah refused to take a peace oath Moroni did not accept his surrender, and Zerahemnah's weapons were ritually returned²³. Zerahemnah then attempted to kill Moroni, but was stopped by one of Moroni's personal guards. The guardsman "smote it (Zerahemnah's sword) even to the earth, and it broke by the hilt" (Alma 44.12).

22. The practice of severing enemy arms as battle tokens will be discussed in a future study.

23. This type of ritual disarming as part of surrender is a well known and universal military custom. From a modern perspective of total warfare, returning weapons to an enemy after he has surrendered is unthinkable. However, Moroni and Zerahemnah were enacting a ritual of surrender, and Moroni ritually returned the weapons to show the Nephite soldiers who were watching that the surrender and truce were not in effect, and they should be on guard for further conflict.

As I interpret this incident, Zerahemnah swung his sword at Moroni, but his blow was parried by the sword of a watchful guardsman. The force of the parry knocked the sword from Zerahemnah's hand, and broke it at the hilt. Swords are designed to be held by the hilt, which is generally the only part of a sword which is not sharp. Hilts are usually made of a separate material from the blade (wood, bone, leather, stone), and therefore structurally the weakest point of the sword is often the joint between hilt and blade²⁴. Thus if Zerahemnah's sword were to break, there would be a high probability that it would break at the hilt²⁵, just as described in the Book of Mormon. It is possible that Moroni's guardsman was attempting a sword parry similar to Ammon's described above, but perhaps missed the forearm, hitting the sword instead. Moroni's guardsman then aimed a blow at Zerahemnah's head, but succeeded only in scalping him²⁶. The unfortunate Zerahemnah's scalp was then "laid" on the point of the guardsman's sword, raised aloft and paraded before the Lamanites²⁷.

24. Of course, as there were many specific methods of attaching hilts to swords, the structural integrity and points of weakness of each type of sword differed.

25. On the question of the nature of the "hilt" of the Mesoamerican macuahuitl, see below.

26. A light glancing sword blow which managed to strike the head could scrape across the protection of the skull and succeed in slicing off a portion of the scalp.

27. The "point" of the Mesoamerican macuahuitl will be discussed below.

There are a number of other cases in the Book of Mormon where a sword is mentioned in a technical military context, but these incidents do not shed additional light on the nature or use of the sword²⁸. The important role of the sword of Laban in Nephite kingship will be discussed in a future study.

Does the sword of the Book of Mormon correspond with contemporary weapons known in the Old and New Worlds? The sword was a very common weapon in the Near East during Nephi's time. Figures 2.3 and 2.4 show examples of Near Eastern swords which are perhaps similar to Laban's sword which Nephi brought with him to the Americas²⁹.

From the Mesoamerican perspective, the most likely candidate for the Book of Mormon sword is the weapon known in Nahuatl (Aztec) as the macuahuitl or macana (see figs. 2.7 - 2.11). The macuahuitl was constructed from a long staff or large paddle-shaped piece of wood. Sharp obsidian flakes were fixed into the edges of the wooden blade, giving it a deadly cutting edge³⁰. There are numerous representations

28. Other than the incidents discussed above, swords are mentioned in Omni 1.2,10; Mosiah 19.4; Alma 1.9, 2.1,20,29,31, 3.2, 6.7, 18.16, 19.22,24, 20.14,16,22, 24.21, 31.5, 50:26, 60.35, Hel. 1.23, Ether 9.27, 14.1,2, 15.5,30. The Biblical image of Cherubim and the flaming sword (Gen. 3.24) is mentioned in Alma 12.21, 42.2,3, but is undoubtedly based on the account of the Garden of Eden on the Brass Plates of Laban (1 Nephi 5:11).

29. For brief discussions of swords in the Old Testament, see J. W. Wevers, "Sword," IDB 4:469-70, and his "Weapons and Implements of War" IDB 4:820 ff.

30. For an excellent discussion on the structure and manufacture of the macuahuitl, see Follett, pp. 385-7.

of the macuahuitl in Mesoamerican art, the earliest dating back to the pre-Classic era.

Due to the paucity of artistic remains in Mesoamerica, there are only a few representations of the use of the macuahuitl in pre-Classic. The earliest artistic example of which I am aware is shown in Fig. 2.7, which depicts a macuahuitl in the standard pattern of later Maya weapons, with multiple obsidian blades on both edges of the weapon. Another early example of a related, but slightly different style of edged weapon, dated to 366 AD, is shown in Fig. 2.8. Although early artistic evidence is sparse, these examples, combined with the clear evidence of the widespread obsidian blade industry, indicate that some type of the macuahuitl sword was known and used in Book of Mormon times. Mesoamerican art from the Classic and later periods provides many additional examples of the widespread use of the macuahuitl sword continuing on until the Spanish conquest³¹.

Does the Mesoamerican macuahuitl correspond with the descriptions of the nature and use of the sword in the Book of Mormon? The first question is whether the macuahuitl can be considered a "sword." This is really a question of semantics, and although some scholars prefer

31. See figs. 2.9 - 2.11. Artistic depictions of the macuahuitl are widespread, see Follett, figs. 15-20, Florentine Codex, Bk. 8, figs. 78-80, Bk. 12, figs. 77, 80, 89, 90, 93, 104, 108-110. Examples could be further multiplied.

to call it a war club, others call it a sword³². The real question is not what modern scholars choose to call it, but whether the weapon matches the description of swords in the Book of Mormon.

The story of Ammon's battle at the waters of Sebus demonstrates that the cutting edge of the Book of Mormon sword was capable of severing arms. The cutting power of the obsidian edge of the macuahuitl was renowned at the time of the Spanish Conquest³³. In a famous incident a Maya warrior cut off the head of a Spaniard's horse with one blow of a macuahuitl³⁴. Thus Ammon's feat of cutting off human arms would have been easily possible for a man armed with a macuahuitl sword.

The macuahuitl was clearly a cutting rather than a thrusting weapon, which causes some potential difficulty in the story of Moroni's guard raising Zerahemnah's scalp "upon the point of his

32. Follett consistently calls the macuahuitl a war club. Morley, Maya, p. 257, calls it a sword. Miguel Leon-Portilla, The Broken Spears (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), alternately calls it a club (p. xxvi) or a sword, (p. 165). It is called a sword in HMAI 3:671, 969, 976.

33. Nigel Davies, The Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico (New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 96. An obsidian cutting edge is sharper than surgical steel.

34. This event at the battle of Quetzaltenango in 1524 is recounted in George E. Stuart and G. S. Stuart, The Mysterious Maya, (National Geographic Society, 1977), pp. 132-33; cf. Robert M. Carnack's translation of the Quiche account Titulo C'oyoi (pp. 38-9) in his Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic and Archaeological Sources, (University of California Press, 1973) pp. 39, 283, 303, 341.

sword" (Alma 44.13). Although most later representations of macuahuitl swords do not show the weapon with a point, one of the earliest examples of the weapon, reproduced in figure 2.7 shows a triangular obsidian blade inserted in the top of the weapon, giving it a point which could be used for thrusting, and upon which Zerahemnah's scalp could easily have been laid.

Another possible problem in equating the macuahuitl with the Book of Mormon sword is the mention of the hilts of the swords³⁵.

Mesoamerican macuahuitls show no evidence of a hilt made of special material, but rather are constructed of a wooden shaft into which obsidian blades were embedded. However, structurally, the macuahuitl does have a hilt. The lower portion of the weapon lacks obsidian blades so it can be held, which thus functionally distinguishes the handle or hilt from the blade. It should be noted that Zerahemnah's sword breaks at the hilt (Alma 44.12). If a macuahuitl were to be broken when struck by another weapon, the expected place for such a breakage would be where the wood of the shaft was not protected by the obsidian blades and thus was directly exposed to the blades of the other sword. It is also possible that hilt in the Book of Mormon could refer to the wooden shaft of the macuahuitl as a whole, distinguishing it from the obsidian blades. Thus although there is a slight semantic difficulty in the association of "hilts" with the macuahuitl sword, on close examination it does not prove to be significant.

35. 1 Nephi 4.9, having reference to Laban's Near Eastern sword; Mosiah 8.11 which will be discussed below; Alma 44.12; Ether 14.2.

An interesting incident in the Book of Mormon involves the staining of swords with blood (Alma 24.12-15, c. 90 BC). The Lamanites who had been converted by Ammon refused to take up arms, giving the following argument, "Since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren³⁶." Two separate metaphors are used here: first, that the swords had been stained with blood, and second that they had been made bright again by God. Although today we speak of "stainless steel," in Joseph Smith's day, metals were not generally thought of as becoming stained. Staining was a term generally applied to wood, cloth, or other substances which could be discolored³⁷. Reference to staining swords with blood is not found in the Bible. Thus although not impossible, the metaphor of staining metal swords with blood is somewhat unusual. However, if the Nephite sword was the Mesoamerican macuahuitl with a wooden shaft, the wood of the sword would naturally become stained and discolored with blood when an enemy was wounded. Furthermore, if a metal weapon becomes bloody, the blade can be easily wiped clean. It is virtually

36. Alma 24.12. The same metaphor is used again in vs. 13 and 15.

37. See OED 10:774-6. Wood, cloth, glass, hands, stars, earth, water and reputations, and even stones are all stained in abundance in the examples given in this entry. However, Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language (New York, 1970 reprint of 1828 ed.) vol. 2, article "stain," (no pagination) does mention "armor stained with blood."

impossible to remove a bloodstain from wood since the blood is soaked into the fibers of the wood. Thus the metaphor of the great mercy of God in removing the bloodstains from the swords becomes much more powerful and understandable if it refers to wood stained with blood which only a miracle would remove, rather than metal stained with blood which could be cleaned with a piece of cloth. As to the second metaphor, making the swords bright again, brightness can refer to any object which shines, metal, stars or stone³⁸. Many types of obsidian have a fine luster and the stone edges of the macuahuitl could easily be described as bright. Thus although the "bloodstained-to-bright" sword metaphor could be applied to either metal or stone edged swords, it is actually a more powerful image if the sword referred to was a macuahuitl.

A possible difficulty with interpreting the macuahuitl as the Book of Mormon sword are references in the Book of Mormon to drawing a sword³⁹. The clearest instance occurs in 1 Nephi 4.9, where Nephi saw Laban's sword, "and ... drew it forth from the sheath thereof." The sword referred to here, however, is Laban's standard Near Eastern sword which generally was carried in a sheath. It is significant that in the other four cases of drawing a sword in the Book of Mormon, sheaths are not mentioned. In 145 BC Gideon "drew his sword and swore

38. OED 1:1103a mentions precious stones as being "bright."

39. There are five instances: 1 Nephi 4.9; Mosiah 19.4; Alma 1.9, 19.22, 20.16.

in his wrath that he would slay the king⁴⁰." Elsewhere, the sword seems to be "drawn" in preparation to strike someone⁴¹. It is thus possible that these references are meant to describe grasping or brandishing a sword before combat rather than actually "drawing" it from a sheath.

I am unaware of any example of a scabbard or sheath for the Mesoamerican macuahuitl. However, there is a case of several weapons being carried in a bag from which it would have to be drawn for combat (see fig. 2.12). Sheaths or scabbards served three major functions. Most importantly, they protected the soldier and his companions or mount from being accidentally cut or jabbed by an exposed blade or point. Second, it served to protect the blade of the weapon from corrosion or from being scratched or damaged. Finally, weapon sheaths were often decorated and ornamented to serve as symbols of the bearer's wealth and rank. All of these functions were important in early Mesoamerican society. In addition to carrying bags such as that mentioned above, it is not impossible that early Mesoamericans could have had some type of protective covering for valuable weapons from which the macuahuitl sword would need to be "drawn" in preparation for

40. Mosiah 19.4. Swearing by one's weapon will be discussed in a later article.

41. Alma 1.9 (91 BC), Nehor "drew his sword and began to smite him." Alma 19.22, where one of the brigands at the waters of Sebus "drew his sword and went forth that he might let it fall upon Ammon." In Alma 20.16 (90 BC) King Lamoni "drew his sword that he might smite him (Ammon)."

combat, as described in the Book of Mormon⁴².

The final and perhaps most significant difficulty with associating the Book of Mormon sword with the Mesoamerican macuahuitl is references to metal swords and to Nephi making swords patterned after Laban's. 2 Nephi 5.14 states that "Nephi did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords ..." The sword of Laban was undoubtedly a normal Near Eastern style sword, and according to 1 Nephi 4.9, the blade was made of steel.

If Nephi patterned the swords he made after Laban's sword, it would be expected that they too would have metal blades, which would contradict the macuahuitl theory. There are several aspects to this important question. First it should be pointed out that Nephi is not said to have instructed his people how to make swords, but rather made the swords himself. This may be an indication that the metallurgical technology of the Nephites, following the pattern of many ancient societies, was the monopoly of a specific family or clan⁴³. If such a small clan were to somehow die out from war, disease, famine or natural accidents, the metallurgical skills would also be lost.

42. There are examples of wrapping special royal insignia in cloth or skins, Popol Vuh, p. 205.

43. Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 2nd ed., discusses the origins and cultural significance of metallurgy in ancient societies. See also J. A. Tvedtnes, "Was Lehi a Caravaneer?" FARMS Preliminary Report TVE-84, and FARMS Update for March 1984, "Lodestone and the Liahona," for discussions of the possibility that Lehi's family may have been involved in metallurgy.

The instance mentioned above is the only reference to making swords after the pattern of Laban's. There are no later examples of metal weapons specifically mentioned among the Nephites or to their making swords patterned on Laban's. In view of the evidence of archeology, it seems possible that after the Nephites moved inland away from the Land of First Inheritance, they were unable to discover new and adequate sources of ore. If this was the case, their metallurgical technology could have been lost after a single generation had passed without access to the ore necessary to train the new generation in the metal making skills. The Nephites would have been forced to adopt or develop lithic technology. From that point on most, if not all of their weapons would have been made from stone rather than metal. As a hypothetical scenario, then, it can be posited that the swords made by Nephi in the early sixth century BC were originally metal weapons based directly on the pattern of Laban's sword, but that eventually the metallurgical technology was somehow lost, and macuahuitl-style swords replaced the original metal ones⁴⁴.

The important topic of the cultural and mythic aspects of the use of an archetypal sword as a pattern for making other weapons in ancient societies must await discussion in a later article⁴⁵. Nephi

44. Sorenson, AAS p. 280-2 discusses this general scenario, providing several references to additional literature on this topic.

45. See Eliade, op. cit., pp. 97 ff., which gives a discussion of some of the mythic and ritual roles of the manufacture of swords and weapons in ancient societies.

may also be speaking here in a general sense; he made the Nephite's weapons on the general pattern of Laban's sword — a hand held weapon with a double-edged long blade — rather than exactly copying its structure and material in every detail.

The general question of the use of metals by Book of Mormon cultures is an important topic which deserves detailed attention⁴⁶. Here only the question of metal weapons will be analyzed. There are five explicit references to metal weapons and armor in the Book of Mormon⁴⁷. Two are references to Near East weapons: "the blade (of Laban's sword) was of most precious steel" (1 Nephi 4.9). and Nephi's bow "was made of fine steel" (1 Nephi 16.18). The existence of steel (i.e. carburized iron) weapons in the Near East in the early sixth century BC has been clearly demonstrated⁴⁸. The question of Nephi's

46. Some excellent work has been done in this regard by John Sorenson in AAS, pp. 277-88, and his "A Reconsideration of Early Metal in Mesoamerica," Katunob, 9.1 (March 1976) pp. 1-8, University of Northern Colorado Museum of Anthropology, Miscellaneous Series, #45, 1982, available as FARMS Reprint SOR 82b.

47. The existence of metal weapons may be implied in Jarom 8, where the Nephites are described as having "iron and copper and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war ..." This could be understood to mean that the tools and weapons were of the iron, copper and steel mentioned. However, it can be argued that the passage simply means that the Nephites had the metals mentioned, as well as tools and weapons constructed of unspecified materials.

48. See Robert Maddin, et.al., "How the Iron Age Began" Scientific American, vol. 237, Oct. 1977, pp. 122-31, where they state on p. 131, "To sum up, by the beginning of the seventh century BC at the latest, the blacksmiths of the eastern Mediterranean had mastered two of the processes that make iron a useful material for tools and weapons: carburizing and quenching." See also, Robert Fisher, The Epic of Steel, (New York, 1963) pp. 5-24, and Hugh Nibley, Since Cumorah, p. 254.

steel bow will be discussed in an article on missile weapons.

This leaves three cases of metal weapons, all of which, interestingly enough, are from Jaredite times. The Jaredites "did molten out of the hill, and made swords out of steel ..." (Ether 7.9). On returning from their expedition into the lands of the Jaredites in c. 121 BC, a band of Nephite explorers "brought breastplates, which are large, and they are of brass and of copper, and are perfectly sound. And ... swords, the hilts thereof have perished, and the blades thereof were cankered with rust;" (Mosiah 8.10-11). The possible significance of metal Jaredite armor will be discussed in a forthcoming article on armor. There are thus two remaining references to metal swords among the Jaredites. The steel sword episode occurred during the civil war between Shule and Corihor. Although Jaredite Chronology is very uncertain, John Sorenson has tentatively dated this period of Jaredite history to around 2800 BC⁴⁹, putting it well before the beginning of the Iron Age in the Middle East.

There are a number of ways in which this passage can be understood in light of contemporary conditions in Mesoamerica. Although the blades of most macuahuitls in Mesoamerica were made from obsidian, the Aztecs are known to have had war clubs studded with iron instead of the usual obsidian⁵⁰. There are even examples in

49. See Sorenson, AAS, pp. 107ff., especially pp. 116-9 and figure 1 on page 118; and his "The Years of the Jaredites", available from FARMS, Preliminary Report SOR-69.

50. H. H. Bancroft, The Native Races (of the Pacific States), vol. 2 (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft and Co., 1882), pp. 407-8, quoted in Sorenson, AAS, p. 284.

Mesoamerica of ceremonial macuahuitls with feathers replacing the obsidian blades (see fig. 2.13). Various types of material, including iron, were used to replace the usual obsidian of the macuahuitl and could thus be described as a sword with a metal "blade." Another possibility is to equate this Jaredite steel with the "steel" of the King James translation of the Old Testament which actually refers to the Hebrew word for "bronze"⁵¹.

Finally, it must be understood that Mosiah translated Ether's plates into social and linguistic concepts with which he was familiar. Mosiah, as king, possessed Laban's sword, a steel weapon which was passed down as one of the insignia of royalty. In translating Ether's record, Mosiah might thus have given the Jaredite kings steel swords, like the one he himself possessed, because in Mosiah's society a king was expected to have a steel sword as his royal weapon⁵².

In summary, although there are some difficulties and obscure points which need further attention, none of the Book of Mormon descriptions of swords would exclude the Mesoamerican macuahuitl from consideration. Although additional archeological evidence may eventually show that there were indeed Near Eastern style swords with

51. See IDB 1:467, "Bronze." The implications of the KJV biblical translation of bronze as "steel" will be discussed in a forthcoming article on missile weapons.

52. For an excellent discussion of the various factors involved in Mosiah's translation of the plates of Ether, see John W. Welch, "Preliminary Comments for Discussion on the Sources Behind the Book of Ether" unpublished MS.

metal blades in use among the Book of Mormon peoples, in our present state of knowledge it seems likely that the early Mesoamerican obsidian edged macuahuitl was generally the "sword" referred to in the Book of Mormon, with the possible rare use of metal in place of the usual obsidian for special weapons.

FIGURES FOR SECTION 2

Fig. 2.1, Assyrian sword from
reliefs from the Palace of Sargon
at Khorsabad (721-705 BC), in
Yadin, Art of Warfare, vol. 2, p.
422.



Fig. 2.2, A strange hooked sword
from Malabar, in Stone, Glossary,
p. 595, fig. 762, # 1.



Fig. 2.3, an iron dagger with gold handle and sheath, from Tutankamen's tomb, c. 1337 BC, from David P. Silverman, Masterpieces of Tutankhamun, (Abbeville: 1978), pp. 52-3. The blade is of nonmeteoric iron, and apparently a Hittite import.

Fig. 2.4, Near Eastern Assyrian sword, probably roughly similar to Laban's, from reliefs from the Palace of Sargon at Khorsabad (721-705 BC), in Yadin, Art of Warfare, vol. 2, p. 426.

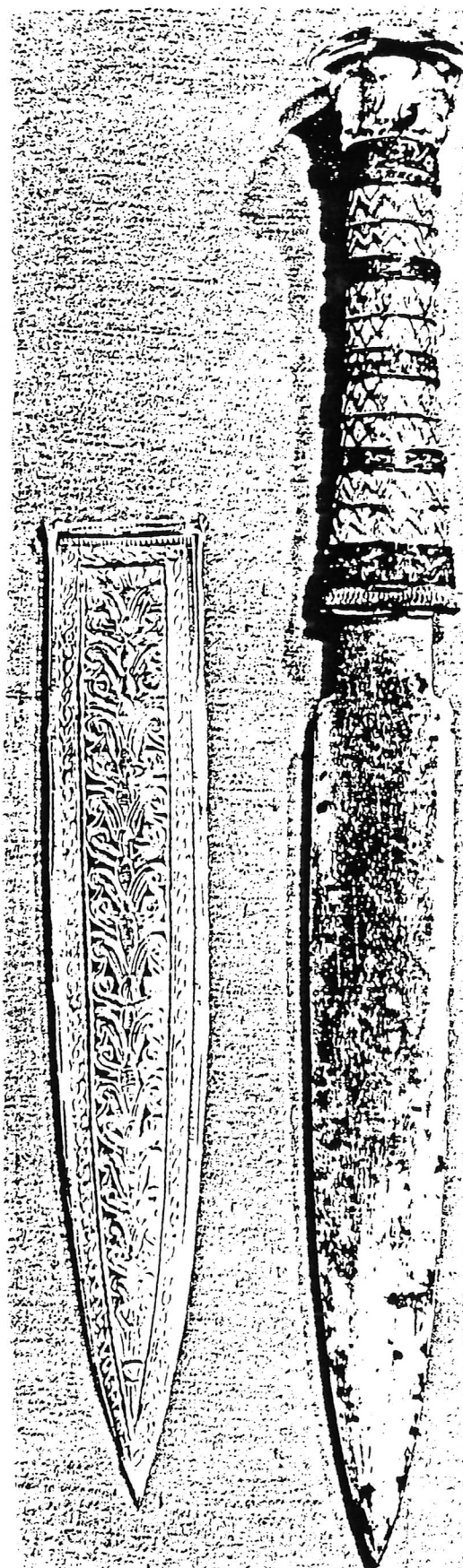


Fig. 2.5, Rameses III grasping the hair of his enemies as he beheads them, from a relief at Medinet Habu, XXth Dyn. (1192-1160 BC) in Yadin, Art of Warfare, vol. 2 p. 350. Note that Rameses is here holding a "cimeter," on which see section 3 below.

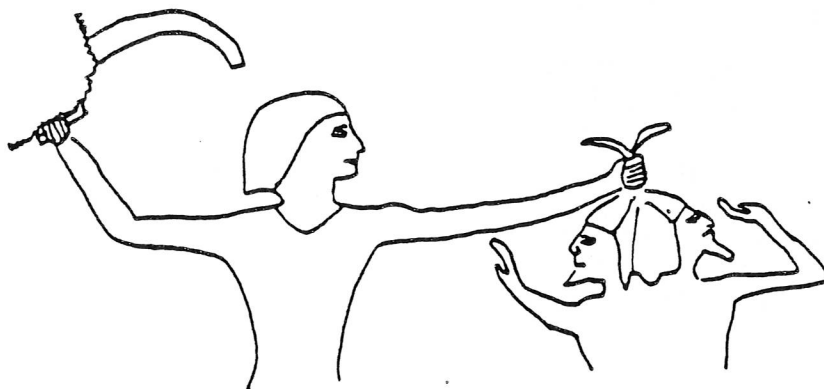


Fig. 2.6, Mesoamerican beheading scene, from Izapa Stela 21, Protoclassical (= c. 100-200 AD) in Greene, Maya Sculpture, p. 425, pl. 202. (Many details have been left out.) Although the motifs in this stela are not uncommon, the overall theme of the images bears an interesting general resemblance to the story of Nephi and Laban — a priestly or royal figure decapitates another while additional figures prepare for a journey in the background. Cf. V. Garth Norman, Izapa Sculpture, New World Archaeological Foundation, Paper 30 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1976).

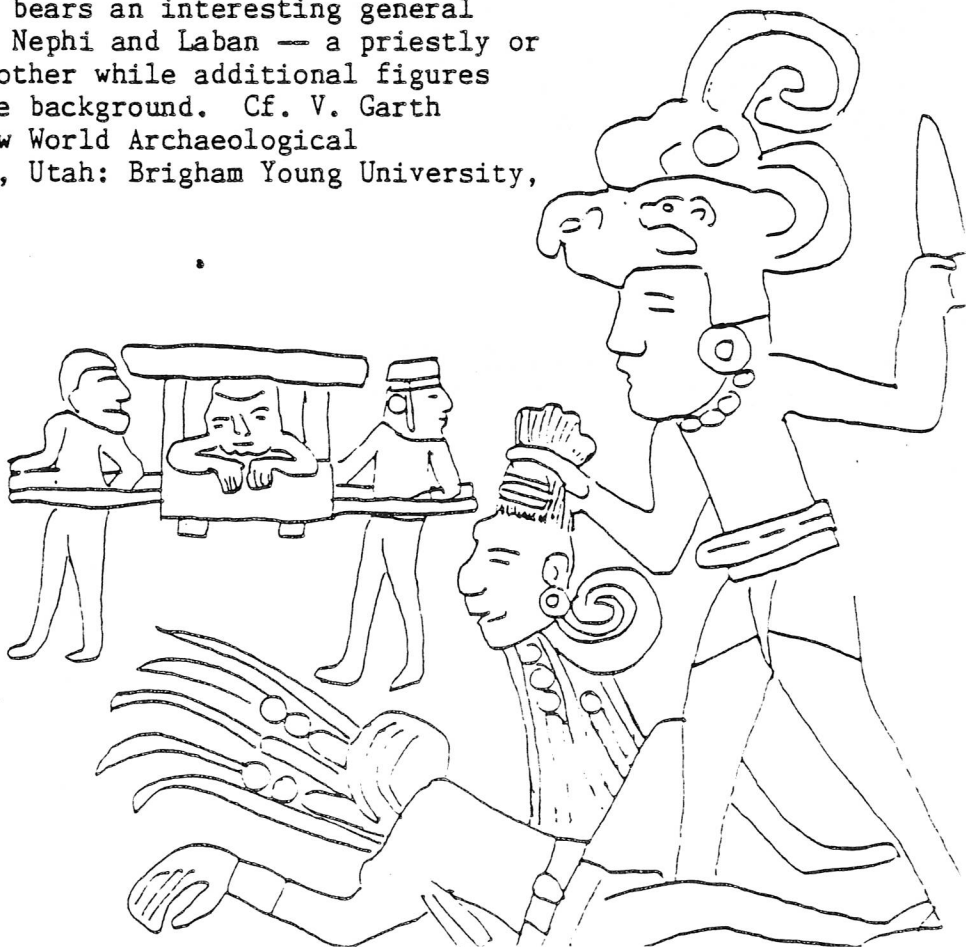


Fig. 2.7, Preclassic (before 200 AD) macuahuitl from sculpture in Cave of Lultun, Yucatan, Mexico, in Morley, Maya, p. 82, fig. 3.18. Note the obsidian blade on the top of the weapon which gives it a point and makes it useful for thrusting (cf. Alma 44.13 where a Nephite places the scalp of Zerahemnah on the point of his sword.)

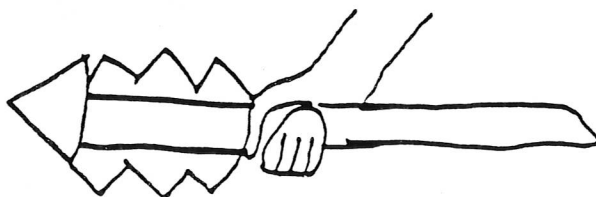


Fig. 2.8, Early form of macuahuitl dated to 366 AD (Maya 8.16.10.0.0) from Uaxactun, Stela 5, in Follett p. 394, fig. 39. See also Green, Maya Sculpture, pp. 308-9, pl. 146.

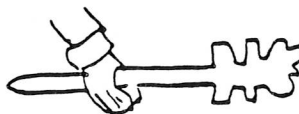


Fig. 2.9, Late Aztec macuahuitl, in Florentine Codex, bk. 12, fig. 80.



Fig. 2.10, Macuahuitl, in Follett, p. 386, fig. 15 (no date).



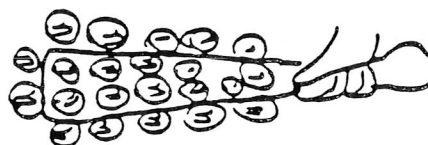
Fig. 2.11, ibid., fig. 16.



Fig. 2.12, figure from Chichen Itza Temple of the Tigers and Shields, Temple A, in Follett, p. 388, fig. 20, showing a warrior carrying macuahuitls in a bag on his back, from which the weapons would need to be drawn. (Some details have been left out.)



Fig. 2.13, A ceremonial macuahuitl with feathers instead of obsidian, from the Florentine Codex (sixteenth cent. AD), in Follett, p. 386-8 fig. 19.



3. Cimeters

Cimeter is an early variant spelling for the word that has been standardized in twentieth century English as "scimitar," meaning a highly curved single edged sabre, usually associated with the Middle East (see fig. 3.1)⁵³. The word entered English usage in the sixteenth century, being derived from the Romance languages where various forms of the word began to appear in the fifteenth century. These words had in turn been borrowed from Turkish or Persian⁵⁴. It has been claimed that the mention of the cimeter in the Book of Mormon represents a significant anachronism, since the scimitar is a technical term referring to a specific type of Persian sword originating only in the sixteenth century⁵⁵. It is therefore worth looking into the philology of the word in some detail.

The exact derivation is not certain, but it is generally thought that scimitar was derived from the Persian word shamsher (or shamshir), being simply a common word for a sword of any kind⁵⁶. It

53. For additional illustrations of scimitars, see Stone, Glossary, figs. 708 and 709. Figures for section 3 will be found beginning on page 36.

54. OED 9:223c.

55. George Smith, "'Is there Any Way to Escape These Difficulties?': The Book of Mormon Studies of B. H. Roberts," Dialogue 17.2 (Summer 1984) p.96.

56. F. Steinglass, Persian-English Dictionary, (London, 1963 reprint of 1892 ed.) p. 760a; cf. OED 9:223c.

was used extensively by the medieval Persian poet Ferdowsi in his epic Shahnameh (eleventh century)⁵⁷. The same word is also found in earlier pre-Islamic Pahlavi texts as well⁵⁸. I am not aware of any examples of the use of shamsher in Old Persian, but as the extant texts in that language are so sparse this should not be taken to mean that the word was unknown. Indeed, Josephus in the first century AD uses a Greek transliteration of shamsher, sampsera⁵⁹, indicating that it was perhaps also an early Persian term for sword which was current in the Middle East at least by the first century AD. Thus it is not impossible that the word could have been in use in the Middle East even in Nephi's day. However, even if the specific Persian word shamsher was unknown to Nephi, a similar type of sword — highly curved with a single edge — was in common use in the Middle East in Nephi's day (figs. 3.2 - 3.5).

Cimeter occurs eleven times in the Book of Mormon⁶⁰. In all

57. See F. Wolff, Glossar zu Firdosis, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965) pp. 573b-574a, where it lists dozens of references to the use of shamsher.

58. See J. M. Unvala, ed., The Pahlavi Text "King Husrav and his Boy", (Paris: Paul Genthner, 191-), p. 14. The text dates to the late fifth or early sixth century.

59. Josephus, Antiquities, 20.2.3. Suidas, a tenth century AD Byzantine lexicographer defines the term as "a barbarian sword." See OED 9:223c, and H. Liddel, et.al., A Greek-English Lexicon, (Oxford, 1978, 9th ed.) p. 1582b.

60. Enos 1.20; Mosiah 9.16, 10.8; Alma 2.12, 27.29, 43.18,20,37, 44.8, 60.2; Hel. 1.14.

references except Enos 1.20 it is mentioned in conjunction with the sword, although there are many cases where the sword is mentioned when the cimeter is not. It is also important to note that the earliest reference (fifth cent. BC, Enos 1.20) is the single case where the cimeter is listed without the sword. The cimeter is here described as a Lamanite weapon, which might indicate that the weapon was of Lamanite origin. If this is true the cimeter was adopted by the Nephites sometime after the fifth century BC. The cimeter is not mentioned after 51 BC, despite the fact that there are references in Mormon 6:9 to swords and bows, the other the major weapons of Book of Mormon. This is probably an arbitrary omission, but could indicate that the cimeter fell out of use sometime after the first century BC. There is no detailed indication from the text as to how the cimeter was used or what type of wounds it inflicted, except one instance where "their (the Nephite's) swords and their cimeters ... brought death almost at every stroke," (Alma 43:37, c. 74 BC) which implies that the Book of Mormon cimeter was a cutting weapon.

To what Mesoamerican weapon could Joseph Smith have been referring with the word cimeter? There are three characteristics which distinguish the scimitar from an ordinary sword: it is sharp only on one side, its blade is curved, and it is used only for cutting⁶¹. There were several different types of Mesoamerican melee

61. Stone, Glossary, pp. 550-553, entry "Shamshir," where he states, "The Persian sabre is purely a cutting weapon, the point being practically useless owing to the extreme curvature." (p. 550a).

weapons which were distinguished from one another by some of the same characteristics by which a scimitar is distinguished from a sword.

One of the earliest Mesoamerican candidates for the Book of Mormon cimeter is found in a late pre-Classic sculpture. Which shows a warrior holding in one hand a macuahuitl, and in the other a strange curved weapon⁶². It is interesting to note that this warrior holds both a macuahuitl sword and a curved weapon just as Zerahemnah is described in the Book of Mormon as being armed with both weapons (Alma 44.8).

In my opinion, however, the Book of Mormon cimeter should probably be identified with a curved ax-like weapon held by many of the figures in the Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza. It appears to be a curved piece of wood in the end of which was inserted obsidian or flint blades (see figs. 3.8 - 3.10)⁶³. Although in appearance it is somewhat like an axe, it is structurally different, in that an axe has a straight shaft of wood with a blade mounted on the shaft, while this weapon has a curved shaft of wood with a blade mounted at the tip of the wood⁶⁴.

62. See fig. 3.6. It is impossible to say for certain what this item is supposed to represent. However, a similar weapon is known in the India, the haladi, see fig. 3.7.

63. I give only two of the dozens of examples which can be found in Earl Morris, et.al., The Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza, Yucatan, (Washington DC: Carnegie Institution, pub. #406, 1931) vol. 2.

64. For examples of the Mesoamerican axe, see section 5 below.

A final possible interpretation, although somewhat far-fetched, comes from the entymology of shamsher. According to medieval Persian lexicographers⁶⁵, shamsher is derived from sham, "claw," and sher "lion," thus meaning, "lion's claw." There is artistic and literary evidence which shows that the early Maya used severed jaguar claws mounted on sticks as weapons (figs. 3.11 - 3.12) and fashioned imitation jaguar claws from stone and wood (figs. 3.13 - 3.15)⁶⁶. The jaguar claw weapon was in part ceremonial, perhaps being utilized by officers or by members of a jaguar martial society⁶⁷. There is a slight indication that the cimeter may have had a ritual or ceremonial function, for when Zerahemnah surrenders to Moroni he gives him his sword, cimeter, and bow as token of his surrender (Al 44.8, 74 BC) (although, of course, he may simply be disarming himself). As mentioned above, although the cimeter is almost always paired with the sword in the Book of Mormon, there is no clear indication as to the

65. As summarized by Steinglass, Glossary , p. 760a.

66. See discussion by Follett, pp. 388-9, and his figs. 29-33. Similar weapons made in imitation of tiger claws, called bagh nakh (tiger claw) were also used in India. See my fig. 3.16.

67. On the use of the jaguar "claw knife" among the Maya in ceremonial situations see Morley, Maya, p. 292 fig. 11.20 (Temple III, Tikal, ninth cent. AD) and p. 430, fig 12.2.25, late post-Classic ceramic. In Popol Vuh p. 205, and in The Annals of the Cakchiquels and Title of the Lords of Totonicapan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), pp. 177 and 183, jaguar claws are mentioned as part of the royal equipment. On martial societies in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon see Sorenson, AAS, pp. 300-309. This important topic will also be discussed in a forthcoming article.

type of wound it inflicted, so that a jaguar claw weapon can not precluded.

FIGURES FOR SECTION 3

Fig. 3.1, Persian shamsher, from Stone, Glossary, p. 550, fig. 708 #2.

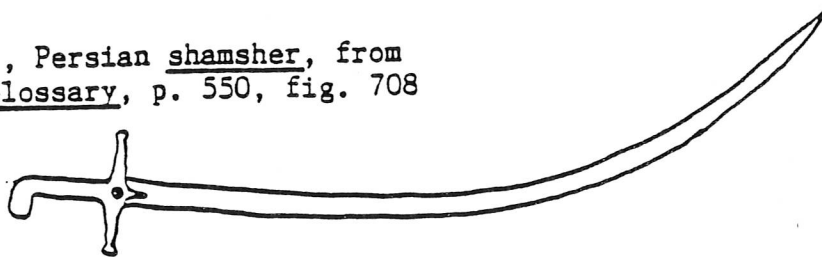


Fig. 3.2, Egyptian soldier armed with curved single edged khopesh or "scimitar" from the relief at Medinet Habu, XXth Dynasty, Rameses III (1192-1160 BC), from Yadin, Art of Warfare, vol. 2, p. 253.



Fig. 3.3, Detail from same reliefs as Fig. 3.2, Yadin Art of Warfare, vol. 2, p. 349.



Fig. 3.4, "Curved pointed Hittite sword" from relief on Lions' Gate at Malatya (eleventh to tenth cent. BC), Yadin, Art of Warfare, vol. 2, p. 359.



Fig. 3.5, Assyrian sapara, curved single edged "scimitar," (no date) from Stone, Glossary, p. 539-40, fig. 694. (There may be some philological relationship between Assyrian sapara, the Greek sampsera, and the Persian shamsher.)



Fig. 3.6, Possible early Mesoamerican cimeter from Cave of Loltun, Yucatan (Late pre-Classic), in Morley, Maya, p. 82, fig. 3.18.

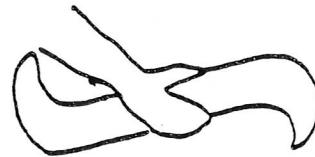


Fig. 3.7, a Haladi, double blade dagger from India, similar in form and possibly use to the Maya weapon shown in fig. 3.6. See Stone, Glossary, p. 275a, fig. 342.



Fig. 3.8, Possible Mesoamerican cimeter, from Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza, NW Colonade, column 9 N, in Morris Temple of the Warriors, pl. 77.

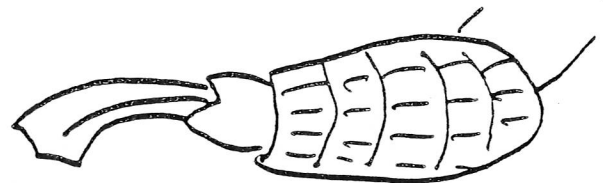


Fig. 3.9, ibid., column 11 N, pl. 79. Cf. Izapa Stelae 3 and 4.



Fig. 3.10, Possible Mesoamerican cimeter, from Victor W. Von Hagen, World of the Maya, (New York: New American Library, 1960) p. 130, fig. 33, #5. This figure clearly shows the structure of the weapon as being different from the standard axe.



Fig. 3.11, Jaguar claw mace, detail from Yaxchilan, lintel 6 (structure 1) c. 750 AD, see Greene, Maya Sculpture, pp. 68-9, pl. 28, left figure. In both this and fig. 3.12, it seems that a jaguar claw has been cut off and mounted on a piece of wood, or perhaps the entire forearm of a jaguar was severed and skinned, leaving the claw with the bone forearm as the haft of the weapon.

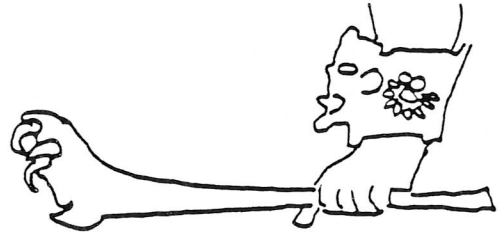


Fig. 3.12, ibid., right figure.



Fig. 3.13, Imitation claw knife, probably of stone or wood (see fig. 3.15), detail from Naranjo stela 33, 780 AD (Maya 9.17.10.0.0), see Greene, Maya Sculpture, pp. 334-5, pl. 159.



Fig. 3.14, Same, from Tikal, Temple III (810-869 AD), carved wooden lintel, see Morley, Maya, p. 293, fig. 11.20. Each of the three figures on this lintel holds a similar weapon.

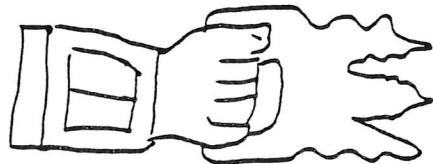


Fig. 3.15, Flint "jaguar claw knife" from Classic period discovered at El Palmar (middle claw is broken off). See Morley, Maya, p. 448, fig. 13.56.

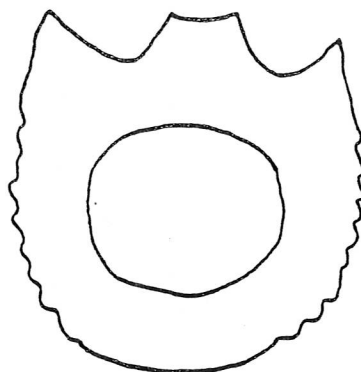


Fig. 3.16, a bagh nakh, or "tiger claw" from India, from Stone, Glossary, p.86-7, fig. 109 #7. As with the Maya claw knives in Figs. 3.13-5, it is made in imitation of a tiger's claw, and is used to slash or maul an enemy.



4. Clubs

The club is the simplest and oldest type of melee weapon. In its most basic form, it consists simply of a heavy stick which is used to beat an enemy (fig. 4.1 and 4.2). It requires little or no work to prepare the weapon for use. A large stone or metal warhead attached to the end of a wooden club will increase the weight and strength of the the weapon and the potential injury it will inflict on an enemy (fig. 4.3)⁶⁸. Due to its relative cost-effectiveness, clubs were often employed as weapons by the poorer warriors who couldn't afford more effective but much more expensive weapons.

Clubs are mentioned only four times in the Book of Mormon. In Mosiah 9.16 the club is included in a traditional weapons list which gives no indication of its use. The three other examples, however, are quite enlightening. The battle between Ammon and the brigands at the water of Sebus (c. 90 BC) has already been discussed in detail⁶⁹. Notice should be taken of the weapons of the brigands in this struggle. During the fight, they are armed only with clubs and stones (Alma 17.36-7), while Ammon has a sword (Alma 17.37). As mentioned above, due to the inexpensiveness and ease of manufacture, the club is an appropriate weapon for a band of outlaws living in the wilderness

68. Clubs with blunt stone or metal heads attached are often called maces, although the word club is frequently used to describe a wooden hafted weapon with or without an added head.

69. See pages 8-10 above.

without ready access to the lithic craftsmen necessary to make the more sophisticated obsidian and flint edged weapons. The final reference to clubs in warfare again shows that it was not a primary weapon of the Nephites or Lamanites. A large number of Lamanites were captured at the fall of the city of Cumeni (Alma 57.12-3, 63 BC). Later the prisoners rioted and are described as fighting "with stones, and with clubs, or whatsoever thing they could get into their hands, ..." (Alma 57.14). These sparse examples tend to indicate that clubs were used mainly by those without access to the more sophisticated weapons of the time.

This situation is confirmed by the Mesoamerican artistic sources, which show very few instances of warriors armed with the true club (see figs. 4.4 and 4.5 for examples). The vast majority of Mesoamerican melee weapons had some type of obsidian or flint blade.

Figures of Section 4

Fig. 4.1, Simple wooden staff club
from Fiji, Stone Glossary, p. 184,
fig. 232 no. 1.



Fig. 4.2, Wooden club with large
carved head from Marquesas Islands,
ibid, no. 6.



Fig. 4.3, German mace, sixteenth
century, ibid, p. 421, fig. 532,
no. 4.



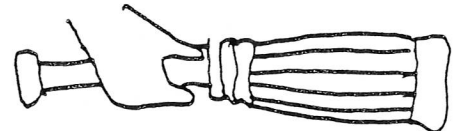
Fig. 4.4 Maya Club, c. 800 AD from Bonampak, structure 1 ("Building of Murals"), room 2, in Ruppert, Bonampak, fig. 28.



Fig. 4.5 Maya Club, ibid., the haft of this weapon is brown, but the round ball at the top of the club is red. It is probably carved and painted wood.



Fig. 4.6, Maya bladed ax or club, Late Classic (c. 550-800 AD) from a Lintel near Yaxchilan, in Greene, Maya Sculpture, p. 144 pl. 66. The grooves in the body of this weapon could represent either carved wood, or perhaps embedded obsidian blades, in which case it should perhaps be classed as a mace.



5. Axes

Although there are many different types of axes varying in size, form, material of construction, etc., in general an ax designates a weapon with wooden shaft in which a metal or stone blade is inserted (see fig. 5.1). It differs from the sword in that for an ax the haft of wood is generally longer than the blade, whereas on a sword the blade is longer than the hilt⁷⁰. An ax differs from a mace in that the blade of the ax is sharp and designed for cutting whereas the mace head is generally a weight designed for smashing⁷¹. Like a sword, an ax may be single or double bladed. Unlike most weapons, many axes are often designed primarily to be used as tools for wood cutting rather than weapons.

In the Book of Mormon the ax is mentioned four times, twice as a metaphor, and twice in a technical military sense. The first metaphorical use is in 2 Nephi 20.15 (= Isa. 10.15), "Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith?" The other metaphor is found in Alma 5.52, "the ax is laid at the root of the tree." Both of these are clearly referring to the ax as the tool of the

70. This basic definition also holds true for the Mesoamerican macuahuitl, in which the area of the wooden haft has multiple blades and is longer than the handle. On the other hand, the Mesoamerican ax has only one blade, with the haft longer than the bladed area of the weapon.

71. However, many types of mace heads also had sharpened blades or spikes, see fig. 5.3 for a European example, and 5.6 for a structurally similar Maya weapon.

woodcutter, with God as the woodcutter and Man as either the ax in 2 Nephi, or as the tree being cut in Alma. In technical usage, the word ax is found twice in military weapon lists: Enos 1.20 (c. 420 BC) and Mormon 6.9 (385 AD). Neither example gives any indication of the use or nature of the Book of Mormon ax, although it is worth noting that in both cases the ax is a weapon of the Lamanites rather than the Nephite. This could be seen as indicating that the ax was primarily a Lamanite weapon, but it also may simply be an arbitrary choice of which weapons were included.

Various types of axes were in common use in both the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica⁷², the main difference being in the respective use of bronze and iron vs. obsidian and flint as material for the ax head⁷³. Figure 5.1 shows a common Near Eastern ax. There were several types of Maya axes, some of which were apparently ceremonial rather than practical weapons (figs. 5.2 - 5.4).

72. For discussion of Mesoamerican axes see Follett, p. 387-9, figs. 21-4.

73. However, stone ax heads continued to be used in the Near East, especially as tools, even after the advent of the Iron Age. No metal axes are mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Figures of Section 5

Fig. 5.1, Typical Near Eastern axe head, tenth century BC, from Hazor Museum, Israel, in Yadin, Art of Warfare, vol. 2, p. 352. The blade would have been mounted on a piece of wood, shown by dotted lines.

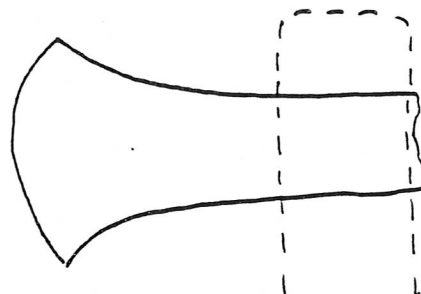


Fig. 5.2, Maya ax, from Aguas Calientes Stela 1, 790 AD (Maya 9.18.0.0.0) in Greene, Maya Sculpture, p. 183, pl. 84. The blade seems to have been embedded in bone rather than wood.

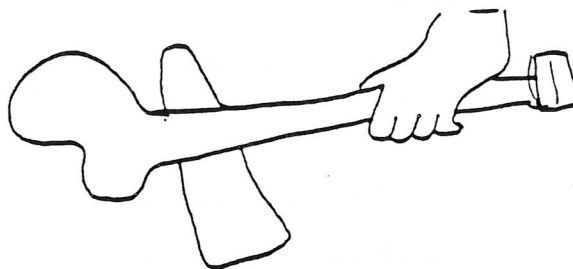
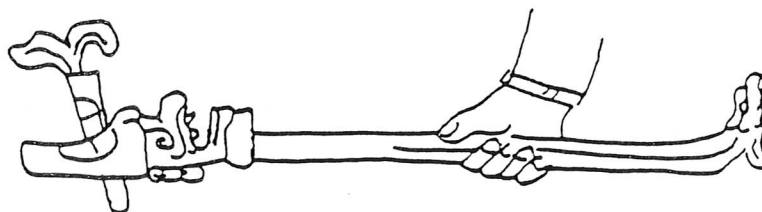


Fig. 5.3, Maya ax being used for beheading, in Michael Coe, The Maya Scribe and His World, (New York, 1973), p. 92.



Fig. 5.4, Ceremonial ax with narrow blade near head figure, in M. G. Robertson, The Sculpture of Palenque (Princeton, 1983) vol. 1 p. 287, stucco fig. 6.



6. Spears

Like the sword, the word spear in English is used to designate a wide variety of weapons. The fundamental characteristics of a spear are a long shaft topped with a sharp warhead (see fig. 6.1). The spear is essentially designed for thrusting⁷⁴, with the long shaft serving to extend the reach of the warrior, while allowing the user to parry enemy blows. Spears are divided into sub-categories mainly according to the length of the shaft and the size and form of the warhead, of which there are innumerable variations. Although primarily designed for thrusting, many lighter spears can be thrown as well. Short light spears designed primarily for throwing are known as javelins.

Spears are mentioned only twice in the Book of Mormon. The first instance is from a quotation of Isaiah (2 Nephi 12.4 = Isa. 2.4), where it is used as a literary motif, beating "their spears into pruning-hooks ..." The second comes from a literary weapons list (Alma 17.7, c. 80 BC), which shows that the spear was available for use in warfare, but tells us nothing of its specific function⁷⁵. The

74. However, there have been several varieties of spears which include a long sharpened blade for cutting as well. The European halberd is the best known example, which was a combination of spear and axe on a long shaft. Other examples include the Japanese naginata, and many types of polearms and sword staffs.

75. In this incident the sons of Mosiah are providing themselves with weapons not for warfare, but "that they might provide food for themselves while in the wilderness." (Alma 17.9) It could thus be argued that the spear was primarily a hunting weapon among the Nephites. However, the other weapons mentioned in this list — sword, spear, bow arrow and sling are all clearly used in warfare, and it is likely that the Nephites, along with most ancient peoples, used the same weapons for both hunting and warfare, and that hunting was in

spear was a common weapon in the ancient Near East.

In Mesoamerica the spear was one of the major weapons, both of the common warrior and the nobility, with many variations found in artistic sources⁷⁶. The simplest type of spear is a long wooden shaft with a sharpened and perhaps fire hardened wooden point. Some of the weapons shown in the Bonampak murals seem to be of this type⁷⁷.

The fact that the spear appears in Mesoamerican art as a major weapon, if not the major weapon of most Maya soldiers is somewhat at odds with the Book of Mormon in which the sword seems to be the primary weapon, with the spear being mentioned in a military setting only once. This problem has a number of different ramifications. First, it must be emphasized that the Nephite and later Mesoamerican cultures from which most early artistic remains derive, were two separate civilizations. The technology, military theory, martial traditions and weapons usage could certainly have changed over the centuries, with Nephite warriors being skilled in the use of the sword and later Maya warriors preferring the spear, much as the English preferred the longbow, the Italians the crossbow and the Saracens the

many ways practice for war.

76. Three common types of Maya spears are shown in figs. 6.3 - 6.5.

77. See fig. 6.2. J. Eric Thompson writes, "in many cases (the points of spears depicted at Bonampak) are probably of wood, for they are painted reddish-brown and do not appear to be lashed to the foreshaft." Ruppert, Bonampak, p. 61b.

composite recurved bow, as mentioned above. Furthermore, it is clear that Book of Mormon authors, continuing the Hebraic Biblical tradition, use the sword as the major literary motif for violence and warfare⁷⁸. The sword, specifically the sword of Laban, was also a royal and perhaps ceremonial weapon among the Nephites. It is therefore not impossible that the upper class Book of Mormon authors might have emphasized the sword in their descriptions of warfare to the exclusion of the spear, even though the spear was used by many, even a majority of Nephite warriors. On the other hand, the spear served as a major ceremonial weapon and symbol of power in Maya society, and might therefore have been given a dominant position in Maya art at the expense of the macuahuitl.

78. See above, section 2, for discussion of swords used metaphorically.

Figures of Section 2.2.5

Fig. 6.1, Typical ancient Near East spear, showing technique of use; orthostat from the King's Gate at Carchemish (ninth century BC) at the Hittite Museum, Ankara, in Yadin, Art of Warfare, vol. 2, p. 368.



Fig. 6.2, Maya spear, apparently of sharpened wood without warhead, from Bonampak structure 1, room 2, in Ruppert, Bonampak, fig. 28. The spear seems to have a bundle of feathers mounted about two thirds of the way down, which were either decorative, or may have been used to protect the hand of the spear bearer. The point of the spear seems to be the same color as the rest, without a wider head, indicating it probably lacks a stone warhead.

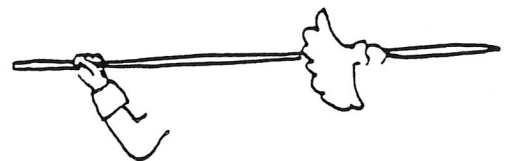


Fig. 6.3, Maya spear, close up of head, from Yaxchilan, lintel 41 (structure 42) (c. 720-800 AD), in Greene, Maya Sculpture, p. 89, pl. 38.

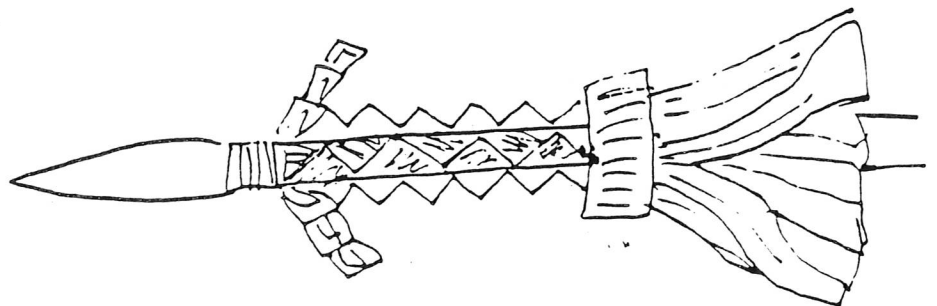
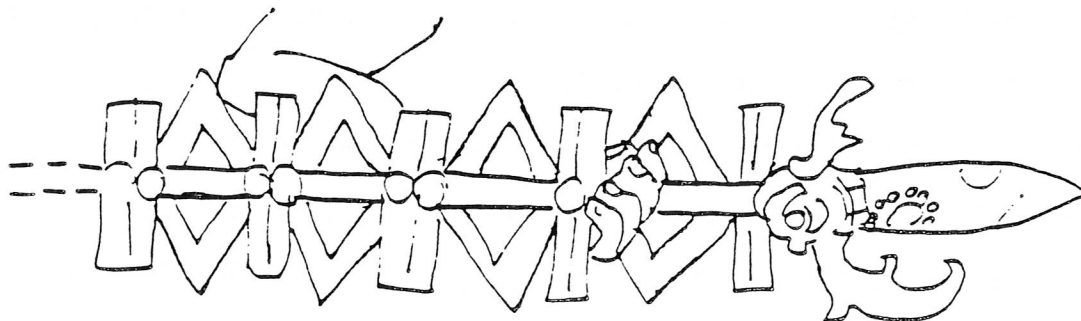


Fig. 6.4, Close up of large finely carved Maya spear head from Yaxchilan, lintel 45 (structure 44) (c. 750 AD), in Greene, Maya Sculpture, p. 93, pl. 40.



Fig. 6.5, Maya Ceremonial Spear, from Bonampak region, Late Classic, in Greene, Maya Sculpture, p. 163, pl. 75.



7. Daggers

In the Middle Eastern and European traditions, daggers (or knives) and swords were structurally the same, being distinguished only by length. Like a sword, a dagger consisted of a blade and a hilt, but the blade was generally much shorter than a sword. However, it is impossible to distinguish at what length a weapon called a long dagger ends and a short sword begins.

In the Book of Mormon the word dagger occurs only once (Jacob 2.9), where it is used metaphorically, "instead of feasting upon the pleasing word of God (they) have daggers placed to pierce their souls and wound their delicate minds." Daggers are not mentioned in any military sense.

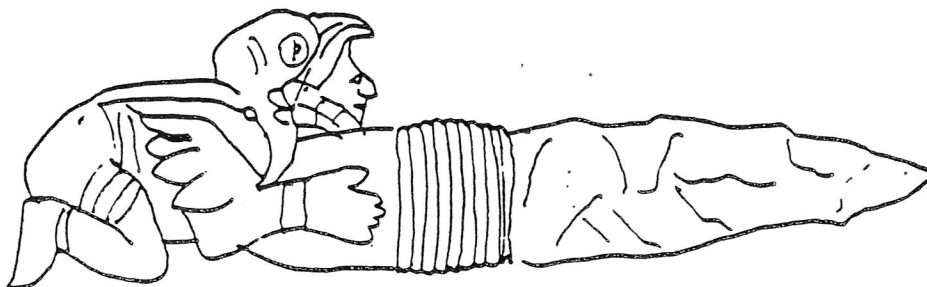
The standard Mesoamerican dagger was a carved piece of flint or obsidian, shaped into a blade of basically the same proportions as a Mid-East dagger⁷⁹. The obsidian blades of Mesoamerican daggers were often attached to a hilt (see fig. 7.1). It is interesting to note that it seems that daggers were used mainly as ceremonial weapons for sacrifices⁸⁰, being rarely employed in battle, which could correspond culturally to the use of the word dagger in the Book of Mormon only in a religious metaphorical sense.

79. See Follett, pp. 387-9, figs. 26-8, 34-6, for discussion.

80. I found no example of daggers in a military context in Mesoamerican art, although this does not necessarily mean it was never used in battle.

Figure for Section 7

Fig. 7.1, Ceremonial Mesoamerican dagger with carved hilt, in Follett, p. 392, fig. 35. (some detail left out).



ABBREVIATIONS

Sources referred to more than once are given the following abbreviations. Full bibliographic information for other citations are given in the footnotes.

Florentine Codex = Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, The Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, ed. and trans. by Charles E. Dibble, and Arthur J. Anderson, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1957-1959)

Follett = Prescott H. F. Follett, "War and Weapons of the Maya," Middle American Research Series, Publication No. 4, (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1932), pp. 373-410.

Green, Maya Sculpture = Merle Greene, et. al., Maya Sculpture, (Berkeley: Lederer, Street & Zeux, 1972)

HMAI = Robert Wauchope, ed., Handbook of Middle American Indians, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964-73) 16 vols.

IDB = George Arthur Buttrick, ed., The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962) 4 vols. plus Supplementary Volume, 1977.

Morley, Maya = Sylvanus G. Morley, The Ancient Maya, (Stanford University Press), 4th ed. revised by George W. Brainerd.

OED = The Oxford English Dictionary

Popol Vuh = Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, Popol Vuh: the Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950)

Ruppert, Bonampak = Karl Ruppert, et.al. Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico, (Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publ. 602), (Washington, 1955)

Sorenson, AAS = John L. Sorenson, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985)

Stone, Glossary = George Cameron Stone, A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration and Use of Arms and Armor, (New York: Jack Brussel, 1961 reprint of 1931 ed.)

Yadin, Art of Warfare = Yigael Yadin, The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Study, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963) 2 vols.

Merrill, A. Erent, "Swords and Cimeters in the Book of Mormon: A Military History," unpublished paper, 1985. FARMS Collection.