FARMS Preliminary Reports

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) was founded in 1979 as a clearinghouse to distribute scholarly articles focused on Latter-day Saint scripture. Within a few years, FARMS began collecting and distributing its own "Preliminary Reports." These were said to consist of "tentative papers reflecting substantial research [that was] not yet ready for final publication." FARMS made them available "to be critiqued and improved and to stimulate further research."

Having since absorbed FARMS into the Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, the Maxwell Institute offers the FARMS Preliminary Reports here in that same spirit. Although their quality is uneven, they represent the energy and zeal of those who sought to enrich our understanding of LDS scripture.

If you possess copies of Preliminary Reports that are not included on our website, please contact us at maxwell_institute@byu.edu to help us provide the most complete collection possible.
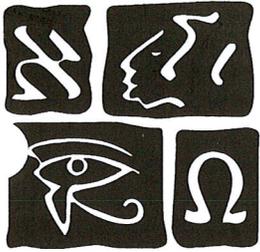
David Palmer

Warfare and the Development of Nephite Culture in America

Summary:

David Palmer discusses the persistent military conflict during Nephite times, exploring the economic, political, and religious causes of ancient warfare. He also examines the role of the war captain, battle tactics, and how archaeological remains in Mesoamerica support the existence of a military class and fortifications. Details from the Book of Mormon accounts appear to weave in very well with information archaeologists have found on the role of warfare in Mesoamerican society.

Preliminary Report
Book of Mormon, Warfare

$2.00
PAL-85

7 14861 04150 7

For a complete listing of FARMS publications,
call 1-800-FARMS-15 for a FARMS catalog.

WARFARE IN NEPHITE AMERICA

David A. Palmer

INTRODUCTION

It appeared to be the darkest hour of the Israelite people.
Philistines, called "peoples of the sea" by the Egyptians, had conquered
the Hittites and now threatened Egypt. Ramses III had beaten them back to
the southern coast of Palestine. There they had taken up residence in Gaza
and imposed Philistines' military might on the Canaanites. The
Philistines' superior iron weapons made them formidable opponents. Now
they challenged the tribes of Israel. In a great battle, the Israelites
were defeated, losing thirty-four thousand men. The Ark of the Covenant,
symbol of their belief in Jehovah, was captured (I Samuel 4).

Complete subjugation of the Israelites appeared inevitable. During
the few hundred years since they had moved back into the land of Palestine,
they had developed no significant physical culture of their own and were
badly fragmented politically. Now the federation of tribes was on the
verge of collapse.

Then almost miraculously, they survived as a people. What happened?
Their prophet Samuel anointed Saul as their king. He formed an effective
army, and met the Philistine challenge. David, who succeeded Saul,
continued military expansion as a state policy. The Jewish scholar Aharoni
has commented on the results of this militaristic turn:

> The material and spiritual revolution that unfolded in Israel during
> the reign of David and of Solomon, his successor, was remarkable; no
> praise could be too great. A nation of peasants that had lived until
> then in comparatively isolated and depressed regions became, almost
> overnight, lords of an empire that commanded the most valuable
> commercial communications in the Middle East.... As more and more
> money poured into the royal treasury, the Israelite's standard of
> living began to rise dramatically.... David and Solomon's great
> objective was to impose permanent organizational forms on this complex
> kingdom, and the forms had to be created virtually from scratch.(1)

In effect, the organizing of a state to carry on warfare led to
creation of the expansive empire of David and Solomon. This example, in
biblical history helps us to understand the forces at work in development
of Nephite prosperity in America.

The Book of Mormon paints a picture of persistent military conflict
during Nephite times, reaching a fever pitch in the first century B.C. The
location of these events is now generally believed (among Book of Mormon
geography experts) to have been in parts of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras,
and Belize, an area of advanced ancient cultures named "Mesoamerica."
Notwithstanding many similarities between the archaeological record and the
Book of Mormon account, archaeologists held the opinion for many years that
all was peaceful during early times, warfare being only a late phenomenon
(7). This opinion extended not only to the Mayas but also the cultures of
Monte Alban and Teotihuacan to the northwest. However, in the last three

decades, archaeological discoveries have caused a complete reappraisal of the role of warfare in very early times. In fact, the picture now painted is remarkably consistent with that of the Book of Mormon.

The new information and its interpretation by the archaeologists help us to understand Mormon's account much better. For example, we can understand the battle strategies employed, the preeminent role of captain Moroni or the arch-villain Amalickiah, and the reason why prosperity followed immediately after wars. We can also see physically how a fortification conforming to Moroni's design was constructed.

WHAT CAUSED ANCIENT WARFARE?

Of the wars reported in the Book of Mormon, seven were economically motivated, six were politically motivated, and four were religiously motivated. This overview is admittedly subjective but it does identify a variety of factors at work. The wars based on economic factors revolved around either control of land or control of people for slave labor.

Economic Causes of Warfare

As prime agricultural land fills up, there is competition for it. Losers move away to fill up other good land. But there is a limit to such movement, and eventually the losers are forced to occupy more marginal land. Finally that too fills up, and the people at the bottom of the power scale have nowhere to go. An almost perpetual state of conflict can then develop.

Where lands with substantially different agricultural potential are in close proximity, conflict is likely. The Mayan lowlands, specifically the southern portion of the Yucatan Peninsula called the Peten, were the locale of the greatest development in the Early and Middle Classic periods of Mayan history. The Peten has wide variations in agricultural potential. "No more than 20% of the land surface of the Peten is easily adapted to primitive agriculture. Virtually all of the soils of this category are limited to the northeastern Peten" (2).

Webster envisions that in an environment of rapid population growth, part of the group will fission (break off) and move into other areas, particularly when there is an open frontier with available land. Quite often the new land will have less agricultural potential, but moving to it is often preferable to armed conflict. As the land available for effective fissioning decreases, the potential for armed violence increases (3).

Half a dozen conflicts in the Book of Mormon are recognizable instances of fissioning:

(1) In about 250 B.C., increasing conflict in the highlands of Nephi motivated king Mosiah to lead his people down to the land of Zarahemla (Omni 12-13).

(2) Alma's colony of 450 people departed for religious and perhaps economic reasons (Mosiah 18:33-35).

(3) In about 122 B.C. the people of Limhi, who had descended from people who recolonized the land of Nephi, fled because they had been enslaved (Mosiah 22).

(4) The people of Ammon fled the land of Nephi in a struggle related to religion and power (Alma 25:5-9).

(5) In 67 B.C. the people of Morianton tried unsuccessfully to escape to new territory after losing a dispute over land (Alma 50:25-36).

(6) In 55 B.C. there were large migrations of Nephites into the Land Northward. This may have reduced the population pressures, since after a few years the wars ceased and there was great prosperity. However, the dispersal of the Nephite population may have put the Nephites at a military disadvantage. In about 35 B.C. the Lamanites drove them out of Zarahemla and back to their fortified cities which guarded the passes through the isthmus (Helaman 4).

Through warfare, leaders can gain new land which can be distributed and thus increase their personal power. About 51 B.C. the Lamanites sent an army that tried to cut through the heart of Nephite territory and on into the "land northward" (Helaman 1:23). They had obviously received reports of the economic potential of that area, possibly from those who had migrated there four years before. Control of that area would have increased Lamanite power and strategic dominance of the region. Control over populations there would also give them a source of servile labor which can achieve a similar result. Three Book of Mormon examples illustrate this principle:

(1) Alma's colony in Helam was taken over by the Amulonites. They were forced to work as slaves (Mosiah 19).

(2) The people of Limhi were virtually enslaved (Mosiah 19).

(3) Elite Zoramites had subjugated part of their population, forcing them to build temples they could not worship in. When these humble people accepted the teachings of Alma, they were persecuted and fled to the land of the Ammonites. However, the Zoramites belatedly recognized that they had just lost their source of cheap labor and demanded that the Ammonites "cast out of their land all those who came over from them into their land" (Alma 35:8).

Wars for Political Ascendancy

Wars based on desire for political power are historically perhaps the most common. It is not surprising that such wars would have a big part in Book of Mormon accounts. Examples are the Amlicite battles in 87 B.C. (Alma 2), the two series of battles for control over the people of Ammon in about 77 B.C. (Alma 28), attempts by the Zoramite Amalickiah to make himself king over the Nephites (Alma 46), and the attempts by "king-men" to overthrow the Nephite republic (Alma 51).

Religion Based Conflict

An often overlooked cause of war was religion, noted several times in the Book of Mormon. The noted Mesoamerican archaeologist Gordon Willey (4) notes that a handicap of archaeologists is lack of information on the ideology of the early cultures. He suggests that while ideology is often relegated to a secondary position in our analysis of cultural evolution. "It is difficult to look at the monuments and remains of this civilization without believing that this role must have been an important one." Indeed, the Book of Mormon can shed some light on this question.

Wars tentatively identified as having at least some religious motivation occurred approximately in:

(1) 585 B.C., when Laman and Lemuel threatened Nephi, who fled with his family and followers (2 Nephi 5:1-8),

(2) 140 B.C., when Alma's converts fled from the wicked king Noah and his priests (Mosiah 23),

(c) 80 B.C., when the Lamanites slew their own people (the anti-Nephi-Lehi's) who had accepted the Nephite belief in a Savior (Alma 25:5-9).

(4) The Nephite wars at time of Captain Moroni also had definite religious overtones (Alma 54).

ROLE OF THE WAR CAPTAIN

The various causes of warfare are illustrated in the person of the war captain. Lamanites chose their war captains in large measure with the intention of gaining economic, political, and religious ascendancy over the Nephites. The Nephites typically chose their war captains to defend their liberty, lands, and religion. In the first century B.C. the overriding Nephite concern reported by their historians was freedom of religion. David Webster (5) notes "a typically Mesoamerican emphasis on the religious aspects of warfare, with a corresponding overdevelopment of religious aspects in comparison with organizational or technological capabilities." He gives as an example the ceremonial importance of the war captain and the "religious significance placed on warfare."

The Nephites made a practice of choosing prophets to lead them into battle. King Benjamin (Words of Mormon 13-18) led his people into battle. Alma, the chief high priest, led the Nephites against the Amlicites and Lamanites (Mosiah 29:42; Alma 2:16). Helaman, Alma's son and spiritual successor, headed a band of 2000 young men sent to battle. The book of Alma also makes clear that the chief captain Moroni was a man of God. His son Moronihah was also a prophet who "did preach many things unto the people because of their iniquity" (Helaman 4:14). Concerning a later general, Gidgiddoni, we read, "Now it was the custom among the Nephites to appoint for their chief captains (save it were in their times of wickedness) someone that had the spirit of revelation and also prophecy; therefore, this Gidgiddoni was a great prophet among them, as also was the chief judge" (3 Nephi 3:19).

Of course the greatest of their generals was Mormon, after whom the Book of Mormon is named. Serving as his lieutenant was his son Moroni, who had a great role to play in the eventual coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Comparative anthropological data from Africa gives support to this Book of Mormon picture of leadership. Robert Netting, drawing from African data on political leadership, concluded that sacred or religious motivations could overcome basic deficiencies in organizational structure, and pull people together. "The new grouping must be united not by kinship or territory alone, but by belief, by the infinite extensibility of common symbols, shared cosmology, and the overarching unity of fears and hopes made visible in ritual. A leader who can mobilize these sentiments, who can lend concrete form to an amorphous community, is thereby freed from complete identification with his village or section or age group or lineage" (6).

This insightful model brings immediately to mind Captain Moroni, as he carried the "Title of Liberty" throughout the land, trying to overcome divisiveness and rebellion:

..when Moroni, who was the chief commander of the armies of the Nephites, had heard of these dissensions,... he rent his coat, and he took a piece thereof, and wrote upon it--In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children--and he fastened it upon the end of a pole....(and he called it the title of liberty)....he caused the title of liberty to be hoisted upon every tower which was in all the land, which was possessed by the Nephites (Alma 46:11-13,36).

Moroni made this ancient flag serve as a point of national and religious commitment. His god, country, family movement brought him tremendous loyalty and support. Moroni was given considerable authority by "the chief judges and the voice of the people, therefore he had power according to his will with the armies of the Nephites" (Alma 46:34). "And Moroni took all the command, and the government of their wars." (Alma 43:17). During the critical battles with Lamanites in about 62 B.C. , Moroni seemed to have more power and authority than the chief judge and governor of the land. In fact, he even threatened the governor when he believed him to be wilfully withholding materiel and food for the war effort (Alma 59-61).

Webster, writing on the role of warfare in Mayan civilization, has theorized that considerable power flows to successful war leaders. Some will be system-serving and others self-serving. Captain Moroni would be the prime example of a system-serving leader. His arch-rival Amalickiah, who was totally self-serving, used to his own purposes any system he could find. As Webster sees it, "Warfare itself may have been manipulated by perceptive leaders who saw their own fortunes linked to military success, and such conflict would ultimately have become self serving and destructive of the wider system" (7). That would be a masterpiece of understatement compared with the colorful but disastrous career of Amalickiah (Alma 51-62), who tried to overthrow the Nephite government and establish himself as king. When that attempt was foiled by Captain Moroni (Alma 46), Amalickiah fled to the land of the Lamanites. There, by the most devious and dastardly of connivances, he became king of the Lamanites and even

married the widow of the former king, whom he had murdered. He spent his life at the expense of the Lamanites, trying to subjugate the Nephites, a blatantly self-serving scheme.

BATTLE TACTICS

Sieges

Webster (5) is of the opinion that sieges were generally ineffective because of logistical problems in Mesoamerica. Indeed, Book of Mormon history suggests such to be the case. Sieges were a little used device. Robbers who tried the technique on a large concentration of Nephites in about A.D. 17, were at a terrible disadvantage. The Nephites were able to store sufficient provisions for years of siege, so those who starved were the robbers. The robbers were too vulnerable when they tried to farm, and there was insufficient game for food (III Nephi 3-4). In the end the robbers were forced into a frontal attack, losing the advantage of their guerrilla tactics. They were destroyed in the attempt.

Time for Battle Preparation

At the time of the last Jaredite battle in probably the sixth century B.C., there was a truce period of four years. The two armies used that time to gather in as many supporters as possible (Ether 15:14). A four-year period was also granted Mormon in A.D. 380 to assemble his people for the last battle at the Hill Cumorah (Mormon 5:6; 6:2,5). The Nephites were able to gather in a reasonably organized manner for that final battle. The place chosen was well watered, and it probably had significant agricultural potential, providing food resources necessary to build a big army (8).

The practice of allowing a truce period to precede very major battles appears to have persisted to the time of the Conquest. The Indian historian Ixtlilxochitl (9) records that in the eleventh century A.D. the Toltec king Topiltzin found his city of Tula on the verge of destruction by three challengers to the throne. Therefore, he took advantage of the native law that allowed him time to assemble his forces. He was granted ten years, and the place of battle was designated as Tutitlan. In the meantime, the people gathered provisions, made weapons, and assembled every able-bodied man and his wife into the two armies. The wives fought with their husbands in a battle that went on for three years. Most were killed, including women and children. Topiltzin managed to escape with a few followers. Ixtlilxochitl claimed that 5.6 million people died in the war--perhaps an exaggeration, but nevertheless an indication of the severity of native Mexican battles.

Part-time Warriors

During the first phases of cultural development wars are carried on seasonally, because warriors are also farmers. In Mesoamerica, "military operations of any great size were seasonal and limited by the demands of the milpa cycle" (5). This would place their wars primarily in the slack period at the end of the rainy season, when crops were ripening. Such a situation is verified by Book of Mormon descriptions of many of the wars. The beginning of the calendar year among the Nephites prior to the birth of Christ is unknown at present. However, it seems to figure prominently in the timing of the wars. The following examples are offered:

(1) The war with the Amlicites started at the beginning of the fifth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 2:1).

(2) On the fifth day of the second month of the eleventh year of the judges, Ammonihah was suddenly destroyed by the Lamanites (Alma 16:1).

(3) On the tenth day of the eleventh month of the 19th year of the judges, the Lamanites began attacking cities near the west sea (Alma 49:1).

(4) The flight of Morianton and his people from the east sea area to the land northward, and the subsequent battle, were in the "commencement of the twenty and fourth year of the reign of the judges" (Alma 50:25).

(5) Attacks by Amalickiah at the east sea preceded by a few days the first day of the first month of the year (Alma 52:1).

(6) In the commencement of the 28th year, Moroni and Teancum began offensive operations to reclaim cities on the east sea coast (Alma 52:19).

WARFARE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS IN MESOAMERICA

Ignacio Bernal, a very prominent Mexican archaeologist, is convinced that there was a significant warrior class at Teotihuacan (10). Defensive walls have now been located at Monte Alban (11), which is now believed to have been a military capital during Book of Mormon times. A temple discovered at Bonampak, Chiapas, contains murals depicting a war carried out with considerable brutality. The temple dates into the "Classic" period, probably after the Nephite destruction. It is interesting to note in the murals both the presence of people of different colored skin, and the role of a priest who apparently headed their society.

Many fortified sites are known in Mesoamerica. At Tikal there are representations of downtrodden enemies or armed warriors, as well as a moat and a wall, 9.5 kilometers long, built during the Classic period. The New World Archaeological Foundation has encountered fortifications of unknown antiquity along the lower reaches of the Grijalva River, and on hilltops parallel to the Guatemalan border in southwestern Chiapas. Near Tonala, overlooking a pass along the Pacific coast, is the fortified mountain settlement of Horcones. It is roughly contemporaneous with Teotihuacan. Armillas(12) has documented fortified sites from a number of later time periods. Good examples are at Yagul in Oaxaca, and at Xochicalco in Central Mexico. Five parallel ditches surrounded the fortress of Cacaxtla in southwestern Tlaxcala.

In fact, many sites had either concentric walls or boasted a ditch backed up by a wall. Often, a palisade sat on top of the wall. At Quetzaltepec stone stairways on the inner side of the wall gave access to the parapet. In Veracruz and in the Mayan area the town walls were often made of timber. Cortez said that in his approach to Cehache his men encountered pitfalls with pointed stakes in the bottom. A lagoon surrounded one side of the town and a small river protected the other. A wet moat and a timber wall over ten feet high also protected Cehache. Towers at intervals were about twenty feet high.

Recently, a discovery was reported of fortifications dating to the Protoclassic period, or about A.D. 50-300 (13). Known as the Muralla (wall) of Leon, it is located northeast of Lake Macanche in the Peten. The wall was of such a size that 200 men would have needed a year to complete it.

A much excavated site on the south-central end of the Yucatan peninsula, called Becan, has assumed considerable importance. The discovery of massive walls overlooking a deep ditch surrounding Becan was the motivation behind the work of Webster on the role of warfare in Mesoamerican cultural development. Becan was first settled by farmers about 550 B.C. Growth of Becan up to the Christian era was gradual and slow. At the time of Christ, growth accelerated and the population increased to about the carrying capacity of their slash and burn agricultural system. There appears to have been a period of peace with no real social distinctions from A.D. 50 for about two hundred years.

Sometime between A.D. 200 and 300 (Ball accepts a Late Preclassic date for this dry ditch, which could move its date back to perhaps the time of Captain Moroni), the period of peace was apparently disturbed, because an enormous ditch was built around the 46-acre site of Becan. During construction the excavated fill was piled as a parapet on the inner bank. The seven small causeways that crossed the ditch could have been easily defended. Webster believes that the ditch was probably topped by a wooden palisade. The average vertical height presented to attackers would have been about 37 feet, making defense easy and attack extremely difficult. Webster estimates (5) that ten thousand men could have completed the ditch in forty days. There is evidence that Becan was attacked, but no evidence that it was ever conquered.

These fortifications appear to be a near replica of the fortification plan developed three centuries earlier by General Moroni. In 73 B.C. he began defending his cities and building forts, building banks of earth and walls of stone around the strategic places (Alma 48:8): "The Lamanites could not get into their forts of security by any other way save by the entrance, because of the highness of the bank which had been thrown up, and the depth of the ditch which had been dug round about, save it were by the entrance."

After having success in a series of wars in 72 B.C., Moroni modified his design slightly. Apparently finding that earthen banks worked better than the stone walls, or perhaps because of the availability of materials, he emphasized and modified the earthen bank approach. This was done for many of the Nephite cities (Alma 50:1-6).

And upon the top of these ridges of earth he caused that there should be timbers, yea, works of timbers built up to the height of a man, round about the cities. And he caused that upon those works of timbers there should be a frame of pickets built upon the timbers round about; and they were strong and high. And he caused towers to be erected that overlooked those works of pickets, and he caused places of security to be built upon those towers, that the stones and the arrows of the Lamanites could not hurt them. And they were prepared that they could cast stones from the top thereof. (Alma 50:2-5)

About eight years later the design was modified further, the timbers being built "upon the inner bank of the ditch; and they cast up dirt out of the ditch against the breastwork of timbers... and this city [Bountiful] became an exceeding stronghold ever after" (Alma 53:4-5). This modification may have been employed to defeat long battering rams or other attempts to overturn the palisade.

The similarities between the fortifications used by Moroni and the ruined fortifications at Becan are striking. They coincide in nearly every detail with what is known about those ruins.

CONCLUSION

Details from the Book of Mormon accounts appear to weave in very well with a tapestry of information developed by archaeologists on the role of warfare in Mesoamerican society. There is a consistency and accuracy in the Book of Mormon record which cannot be explained as mere happenstance. Who could have predicted in 1830 that the exact form of fortifications described by Mormon would be discovered over a century later, and in an area not far from the probable location of Bountiful? In the context of the theories developed we also gain a better appreciation for some of the forces at work in Nephite times that helped to shape their society, for better or for worse.

REFERENCES

1. Aharoni, Yohanan, "The Jews in Their Land", David Ben-Gurion, ed. Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y.,(1974), p. 52.

2. Sanders, William T., Environmental Heterogeneity and the Evolution of Lowland Maya Civilization, "The Origins of Maya Civilization", R.E.W. Adams ed., Univ. of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque N.M.,(1977), p. 287.

3. Webster, David, Warfare and the Evolution of the State: A Reconsideration, "Antiquity", 40, (1975), p. 464.

4. Willey, Gordon R., The Rise of Maya Civilization: A Summary View, "The Origins of Maya Civilization", op. cit., p. 416.

5. Webster, David L., Defensive Earthworks at Becan, Campeche, Mexico, "Middle American Research Institute Publications", 41, Tulane University, New Orleans (1976), p. 92.

6. Netting, Robert McC., Sacred Power and Centralization: Aspects of Political Adaptation in Africa, "Population Growth: Anthropological Implications", B. Spooner, ed., M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1972), p. 233.

7. Webster, David L., Warfare and the Evolution of Maya Civilization, "The Origins of Maya Civilization", op. cit., p. 356.

8. Palmer, David A., "In Search of Cumorah--New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico", Horizon, Bountiful, Utah (1981).

9. Ixtlilxochitl, Don Fernando de Alva, "Obras Historicas", Alfredo Chavero, editor, Editora Nacional, Mexico (1952), p. 52, Vol. I.

10. Bernal, Ignacio, Teotihuacan, "Historia de Mexico", Salvat, Mexico, 1(12),(1974), p. 221.

11. Blanton, Richard E., "Monte Alban, Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital", Academic Press, N.Y. (1978).

12. Armillas, Pedro, Mesoamerican Fortifications, "Antiquity", 98,(1951), p. 25.

13. Rice, Don S. and Prudence M. Rice, Murralla de Leon: A Lowland Maya Fortification, "Journal of Field Archaeology", 8, (1981), p. 271.