

BY MICHAEL COE

MORMONS @ ARCHEOLOGY: AN

"Mormonism" must surely be the only major religious movement whose founder was fascinated by archaeology and whose members are imbued with a mystique based upon archaeological findings.¹

Because of this element of faith, scientists who are not Mormons have found it exceedingly difficult to evaluate in a fair and objective manner the achievements and failures of Mormon archaeology and its practitioners. Members of the faith have often accused outside critics of ignorance, and often rightly so, on the grounds that almost none of them has ever read the Book of Mormon, and are unacquainted with Mormon history, values, and scholarship. While not myself a believer in the Mormon faith, I should warn readers that I have tried not to commit these sins of omission.

Most outside critics and many Mormons seem to be unaware that neither the Church in Salt Lake City nor the Reorganized Church in Independence takes an official stand on the identification of the places and events described in the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, the flyleaf of a Book of Mormon sent to me by a Reorganite friend has the following:

Have you ever wondered about the source of the prehistoric ruins now being discovered on the American continents? Have you ever been curious to know who some of the prehistoric forefathers of the American Indian were? In the Book of Mormon you'll find answers to these questions, and many others.

In hundreds of motels scattered across the western United States the Gentile archaeologist can find a paperback Book of Mormon lavishly illustrated with the paintings of Arnold Friberg depicting such scenes as Samuel the Lamanite prophesying on top of what looks like the Temple of the Tigers in Chichén Itzá, Yucatán. Any curious archaeologist can hear guides in L.D.S. visitor centers from Sharon, Vermont, to Los Angeles confidently lecturing that the Nephites built the Maya "cities" and expounding on other subjects that are usually the preserve of experts in these matters. Small wonder that the outside archaeologist often feels bewildered-

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ment if not downright hostility when confronted with things he is sure cannot be true.

How did this all come about? One must go back to Joseph Smith himself and the milieu in which he lived to find an answer. During the 1820s, in the "burned-over district" of western New York and probably generally throughout the eastern United States, there was a great interest in the mounds that had been left by the former Indian inhabitants. Among white Americans, the belief was widespread that they had been built by a fair and intelligent race that had been overwhelmed by the dark-skinned and savage Indians. Occasional and highly informal excavations in these mounds sometimes disclosed copper plates and other artifacts which seemed to confirm this view of the superiority of the "Mound-builders." There is some evidence that the young Smith might have participated in some of these treasure-hunting digs, and it is certain that he was fully acquainted with the speculative literature on the subject. The influence that such ideas and activities might have had upon the contents of the Book of Mormon can be judged in two different ways, depending on whether one accepts it as divine writ or not.

Joseph Smith's involvement with the pre-European past of the New World continued to be strong, long after 1830, when the Book of Mormon was published. In 1834, for instance, his volunteer army (known as Zion's Camp) encountered Indian remains in Spring Hill, Missouri, where some of his men excavated a large mound. In it, they found a skeleton of a man with an arrowpoint in his ribs. Smith enthusiastically declared this to be a "white Lamanite" named Zelph. The year 1835 saw the arrival of the famous Egyptian papyri in Ohio, and Smith's subsequent translation of part of them as a supposed "Book of Abraham." But probably the most significant year for Mormon archaeology was 1842, when the Prophet read *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* by the founder of Maya archaeology, John Lloyd Stephens. Smith immediately reprinted extracts in *Times and Seasons*, along with the editorial comment that in his opinion, the ancient cities described in the Book of Mormon lay in Guatemala (which then included Chiapas). He explicitly stated that Palenque was "among the mighty works of the Nephites." Thus, despite the present day reticence of the Church on this subject, its founder had no qualms about placing Book of Mormon geography in what we now know as Mesoamerica.

Finally, in 1843 (the year before his death) the Kinderhook Plates incident took place. Six brass, bell-shaped plates were brought to him with the claim that they had been dug up by one Robert Wiley in a mound near his house in Kinderhook, Illinois. Again, as in the case of the papyri, Smith made a translation of the "hieroglyphs" which were incised upon them, presumably with the expertise derived from his decipherment of the "Reformed Egyptian" plates shown to him by the angel Moroni. This time, the Prophet stated that the text dealt with the history of a descendant of Ham.

These are the facts concerning Joseph Smith and the New World past. Mormon archaeologists over the years have almost unanimously accepted the Book of Mormon as an accurate, historical account of the New World peoples between about 2,000 B.C. and A.D. 421. They believe that Smith could translate hieroglyphs, whether "Reformed Egyptian" or ancient American, and that his translation of the Book of Abraham is authentic. Likewise, they accept the Kinderhook Plates as a bona fide archaeological discovery, and the reading of them as correct.

Let me now state uncategorically that as far as I know there is not one professionally trained archaeologist, who is *not* a Mormon, who sees any scientific justification for believing the foregoing to be true, and I would like to state that there are quite a few Mormon archaeologists who join this group. This is in spite of a host of well-intentioned books and articles by Mormon intellectuals (whom I shall later discuss) trying to justify these claims.

First of all, there is an inherent improbability in specific items that are mentioned in the Book of Mormon as having been brought to the New World by the Jaredites and/or Nephites. Among these are the horse (extinct in the New World since about 7,000 B.C.), the chariot, wheat, barley, and metallurgy (true metal-working based upon smelting and casting being no earlier in Mesoamerica than about 800 A.D.). The picture of this hemisphere between 2,000 B.C. and A.D. 421 presented in the book has little to do with the early Indian cultures as we know them, in spite of much wishful thinking.

There is also little doubt in the minds of non-Mormon scholars that Joseph Smith had no ability whatsoever to read "Reformed Egyptian" or any other kind of hieroglyphs. The papyri translated as the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price are, in the opinion of qualified Egyptologists, a series of fragments of the Egyptian "Book of the Dead," something which Smith could not have known since Champollion's decipherment of the Egyptian script had not yet been published. As for the Kinderhook Plates, W. P. Harris (one of the men involved in the supposed find), wrote in 1855 that they were a hoax perpetrated by Wiley, W. Fugate, and B. Whitten, and in 1879 Fugate revealed that the hieroglyphs had been etched with beeswax and nitric acid, rather than incised. When one of the plates was rediscovered recently in Chicago, a member of the University Archaeological Society at Brigham Young University attempted to discredit Harris' statement by securing the opinion that the object had not been etched.² But definitive tests have been carried out at Princeton University by Dr. George M. Lawrence on the one surviving plate (Number Five), which conclusively proved it to be a low zinc brass or a bronze. "The dimensions, tolerances, composition and workmanship are consistent with the facilities of an 1843 blacksmith shop and with the fraud stories of the original participants," states Dr. Lawrence, and he concludes that the inscriptions almost certainly *were* produced by a combination of the acid-wax etching technique and engraving.³

Following the great exodus to Utah under the leadership of Brigham Young, there seems to have been little interest in antiquarian studies for many decades on the part of Mormons. Perhaps this was because the Church and its people, now effectively isolated from their gentile enemies and greatly strengthened politically, felt little need to convince the outside world of the historical truth said to be contained in the Book.

The close of the nineteenth century saw the inauguration of the intellectual movement called "Book of Mormon geography." Probably the most careful scholar to work in this tradition was Louis E. Hills of the Reorganized Church in Independence, a man whose contributions to the subject have been systematically ignored by Salt Lake City circles. Prior to his work, it was generally assumed that the locale of most of the cities in the Book of Mormon was to the south of the Isthmus of Panama, in contradiction to the stated belief of Joseph Smith (among those subscribing to this view were James Talmage and the Reorganite "Ameri-

can Archaeology Committee"). In 1917, Hills published his *Geography of Mexico and Central America from 2234 B.C. to 421 A.D.* He went over many of the Mexican historical sources (admittedly at secondhand, since he based himself largely upon Bancroft) to arrive at his main conclusion: the narrow neck of land described in the Book of Mormon was the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, so that Zarahemla comprised the lands immediately to the east of it (Guatemala and British Honduras), and Bountiful the lands to the west. According to Hills, the Jaredites were to be equated with those earliest settlers who were said to have landed at Pánuco and proceeded south, according to several early sources. The 1917 study was followed in 1919 by *Historical Data from Ancient Records and Ruins of Mexico and Central America*.

Hills' pioneering work has had many successors. I suspect that Book of Mormon geography is still the primary interest of most of those Reorganite Church members who consider themselves archaeologists. Few, if any, of these "archaeologists" actually carry out excavations, but rather engage themselves in antiquarian speculations which are all too frequently slipshod. For instance, as far as I know, the Society for Archaeological Research, the membership of which is drawn from the Reorganized Church, has never set spade in an archaeological site, although it has conducted tours among the ancient ruins of the New World. Many Book of Mormon geography studies are interesting and well-written (such as the Reorganite scholar Paul Hanson's *Jesus Christ Among the Ancient Americans*), but they are unlikely to convince any nonbeliever who knows something of the subject.

Next, we come to "Book of Mormon archaeology," which I would define as an attempt by Mormons to establish the historicity of the Book of Mormon by means of "dirt" archaeology, or by analysis of archaeological findings made by non-Mormons; this has been dealt with in a scathing review by Dee F. Green.⁴ I think that it is still a viable field of study in spite of Green's assertion that "The first myth we need to eliminate is that Book of Mormon archaeology exists" (p. 77).

Before plunging into this fascinating but somewhat bewildering topic, we might first consider the useful distinction which has been made by Richard Poll between two intellectual schools within the Church. Using metaphors from the Book of Mormon, Poll calls one group "Iron Rods" and another "Liahonas."⁵ Iron Rod intellectuals, whether archaeologists, historians, or geographers, believe the Book of Mormon to be literally true, and use archaeology to "prove" it. Far less conservative are the "Liahonas," scholars who tend to view the Book of Mormon as a source of mores and guidance and for whom Book of Mormon archaeology would probably represent a waste of time and effort. What Liahonas exist would seem to be concentrated in the liberal wing of the Salt Lake City Church, since the members of the Reorganized Church appear to be solidly Iron Rod.

As far as Mormon archaeology is concerned, the Iron Rod bastion appears to be the Society for Early Historic Archaeology. This started out, under the leadership of M. Wells Jakeman and Ross T. Christensen of Brigham Young University, as the University Archaeological Society. It changed its name to the present one in 1965. The masthead of its *Newsletter and Proceedings* says that it is published for

the dissemination among its members of information on new discoveries in archaeology throwing light on the origins of civilization in the Old and New Worlds, on the earliest

X periods of recorded history in the two hemispheres, and on the important historical claims of the Hebrew-Christian and Latter-day Saint scriptures. . . .

An amazing amount of information on Mesoamerican archaeology is presented in its pages,⁶ along with highly orthodox articles and editorial matter interpreting this information as proof of the historical validity of the Book of Mormon. Practically every LDS archaeologist, whether Iron Rod, Liahona, or apostate, has authored an article in this publication.

One of the most curious pieces of scholarship in the Iron Rod tradition is by Jakeman, in his own right an outstanding authority on Mesoamerican ethnohistory. This appeared in two published versions, both in the year 1958, and both dealing with the very complex scene carved in relief upon Stela 5 at Izapa, a Late Formative to Proto-Classic site on the Pacific plain of Chiapas in Mexico. This monument shows seated and standing figures, richly garbed, arranged on both sides of a world tree, an iconographic element to be found elsewhere in Mesoamerican religious art (for instance, among the Classic Maya and in central Mexican ritual books). Version number one, issued as a number of Brigham Young University's series, *Publications in Archaeology and Early History*,⁷ is a sober and quite insightful analysis of this scene. While comparisons are made with Mesopotamia and an Old World origin is suggested, no mention is made of the Book of Mormon, and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions. Not so with version number two. This is sumptuously published by the University Archaeological Society with blue covers stamped in gold, and is obviously meant only for members of the Church.⁸ It sets out from the beginning to prove that Stela 5 is a record of the vision or dream of Lehi about the Tree of Life, an event that supposedly took place about 597 B.C. near the Red Sea, while Lehi and his followers were headed for the New World.

Green has commented extensively upon the accuracy of Jakeman's reconstruction.⁹ Regardless of inside and outside criticism, Stela 5, at least its miniature polyurethane replica, has by now taken on the function of a kind of cult object in the living rooms of Latter-day Saints around the world. I fear that nothing would convince the faithful that non-Mormon archaeologists are more likely to view Jakeman's twenty so-called "correspondences in main features" and eighty-two "detailed agreements or similarities" as a matter of mere chance based upon only superficial similarities.

X Unlike the Book of Mormon geographers, the Book of Mormon archaeologists of the UAS and its successor, the SEHA, have undertaken real field work in south-eastern Mexico. By so doing, some of its members have changed themselves from Book of Mormon archaeologists into archaeologists who happen to be Mormons. But more of this later. At the same time, several ambitious books in the Iron Rod tradition appeared, the most noteworthy being Thomas Stuart Ferguson's *One Fold and One Shepherd* (1958) and *Great Civilizations and the Book of Mormon* (1970) by Milton R. Hunter. Both of these well-illustrated studies have tried to show that the latest archaeological research in Mesoamerica has completely demonstrated the accuracy of the Book translated by the Prophet from the "Reformed Egyptian." Ferguson, a lawyer by profession, went so far as to present his case as a series of legal exhibits that only the most prejudiced and ignorant judge and jury could fail to find convincing. Suffice it to say that non-Mormon archaeologists have remained totally skeptical of such claims.

Field excavations by Mormon archaeologists, sponsored in one way or another by the Church or Brigham Young University, got under way in the 1940s and 1950s, with two groups represented whose approaches to the subject were in total opposition. The first of these was the Iron Rod approach of the University Archaeological Society and its leader, Jakeman. Setting out with an expedition to confirm his belief that the Xicalango region of southern Campeche was "Bountiful," and the middle Usumacinta drainage as "Zarahemla" (without ever mentioning the Louis Hills geography of 1917), Jakeman and students made excavations and explorations that represented a small but significant contribution to Mesoamerican archaeology.¹⁰

Of far greater import were the events that culminated in the program of the New World Archaeological Foundation. While the guiding light of this endeavor, Ferguson, was also an Iron Rod, from the beginning everything was put on what non-Mormons would consider a scholarly underpinning. Based on Book of Mormon geography studies made by himself and others, Ferguson and Hunter conceived the idea "that a great Pre-Classic center should have existed in very early times adjacent to the Grijalva River." He obviously hoped that such a center would be one of the cities mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Unlike Jakeman, however, with his rival Zarahemla on the Usumacinta, Ferguson set up his program as an undertaking in modern anthropological archaeology, and created a committee that included not only Mormons like Milton Hunter and himself, but also non-Mormon experts in New World archaeology, such as A. V. Kidder, Gordon R. Willey, and Gordon F. Ekholm. The first field directors of the New World Archaeological Foundation were non-Mormons. By 1952, funds were made available by the Church, and the largest and most ambitious archaeological project ever funded by a religious institution (including the Vatican) got under way.

Some outsiders may wonder why the NWAFA, and Jakeman, have been exclusively concerned with the Pre-Classic or Formative period. The answer can be found in modern editions of the Book of Mormon itself. The Book describes three migrations to the New World by groups from Palestine, and all the events that transpired after their arrival in this hemisphere. Early editions of the Book of Mormon fix no dates to these happenings, but the precedent of the King James Bible, with its detailed chronology added as footnotes by the seventeenth century Archbishop Ussher, led Mormon scholars such as James E. Talmage to attempt the same thing. Accordingly, the time span for the first migrants, the Jaredites, runs from the Tower of Babel incident, around 3000 (or 2000) B.C., to their self-destruction between 600 and 200 B.C.; scholars like Hunter thus identify them with the archaeological Olmec, even though research by myself and others into Olmec remains has failed to reveal any basis for this assertion. The Nephite story, the main subject matter of the Book, includes Lehi and his followers and the Mulekites, and extends from about 600 B.C. to their final annihilation in 385 A.D. This chronology means that a Book of Mormon archaeologist would necessarily have to concentrate on the Formative period in Mesoamerica. But how is one to reconcile this dating with the flat statement of Joseph Smith himself that Palenque was a Nephite city? This Maya center was built *after* 600 A.D., according to all modern scholarship, some 215 years after the Nephites had been wiped from the surface of the earth. I can only sympathize with the Mormon scholar who has to work that one out!

There can be no question that the New World Archaeological Foundation's program has been an unqualified success. Its twenty years of excavations and exploration in Chiapas have put that state on the archaeological map and have established one of the longest and best archaeological sequences for any part of the New World. Credit for this goes to the foresight of Ferguson and the original directors, but especially to the first-class archaeologists who have carried out the program. First and foremost among them, I would name Gareth W. Lowe, who has been field director for a number of years and who has established himself as the outstanding expert in the field of Formative Mesoamerica. And full praise must be given to the generosity and wisdom of the Church leadership in providing financial backing for the Foundation. "Mormon archaeology" is no longer something that brings chuckles in Gentile circles.

Green has termed the Church's current approach to Mormon archaeology as a "back door" one, and he is right. There is here a close parallel to the Vatican, which, while encouraging and even financing excavations in its own foundations, has carefully avoided making official statements on the remains, while the faithful have assumed that the archaeologists have actually found St. Peter's church, tomb, and bones. No matter whether Zarahemla has been found or not, or whether Nephite cattle and metals actually turn up in excavations, or fail to do so, the Church, by remaining neutral, is always right. In this, the LDS leadership has shown itself to be far wiser than that of the SEHA.

The bare facts of the matter are that nothing, absolutely nothing, has ever shown up in any New World excavation which would suggest to a dispassionate observer that the Book of Mormon, as claimed by Joseph Smith, is a historical document relating to the history of early migrants to our hemisphere. The archaeological data would strongly suggest that the Liahonas are right about the Book of Mormon. To me, as a sympathetic and interested outsider, the efforts of Iron Rod archaeologists to go beyond the moral and ethical content of the Book of Mormon arouse feelings not of superiority but of compassion: the same kind of compassion that one feels for persons who are engaged on quests that have been, are now, and always will be unproductive.

What has gone wrong, therefore, with Mormon archaeology? Even the Soviets, wedded as they are to a nineteenth century doctrine of social and economic evolution, have not remained so far removed from the main stream of archaeological and anthropological thought as the Iron Rod archaeologists. Mormon intellectuals, it seems to me, have taken three ways to extract themselves from the dilemma. The more traditionalist, such as my friend John Sorenson, have tried to steer their stern elders away from Book of Mormon archaeology on the grounds that not even the best and most advanced research has ever been able to establish on purely archaeological grounds the historical details of the Bible, for instance the very existence of Jesus Christ. According to Sorenson, all one can hope to do is to "paint in the background," which in his case has meant building up a convincing picture of trans-Atlantic diffusion by presenting New World-Old World parallels.¹¹ This is of interest to non-Mormon archaeologists, and Sorenson has done much to work out the methodology of such comparisons, but few non-believers have been swayed when faced with the indigestible cattle, horses, wheat, and so forth.

The second escape is to take a Liahona approach to the problem. This is ob-

viously Green's way, as it is that of several other Mormon archaeologists of my acquaintance. But then what does one do with the Book of Mormon itself? Even the most casual student will know that the LDS ethic is only slightly based upon the Book of Mormon, which has very little in it of either ethics or morals; rather, its ethic is heavily dependent upon such post-Book of Mormon documents as the Doctrine and Covenants.¹² And what does one do with Joseph Smith, great man though he was, with his outrageous claims to be able to translate "Reformed Egyptian" documents, with the ridiculous Kinderhook Plates incident, with the "Book of Abraham," with Zelph the "white Lamanite," and with all the other nonsense generated by a nineteenth century, American subculture intellectually grounded in white supremacy and proexpansionist tendencies?

The third way out of the dilemma is apostasy. I will not dwell further on this painful subject, but merely point out that many unusually gifted scholars whom I count as friends have taken exactly this route.

It would be supremely arrogant for any outsider to recommend any of these escapes from the dilemma of Mormon archaeology. But for those practitioners of archaeology who happen to be Latter-day Saints, and perhaps for those Church leaders for whom the discovery of the past is an urgent task, I would like to be the advocate for a kind of research that has only begun: the archaeology of the Mormons themselves. In all parts of the western world, and in Latin America, scholars are discovering that there is no more important research than the study of how we ourselves came to be what we are. There is a tremendous amount of information about our Euro-American background which just does not appear in history books or in the documents on which they are based. In the Pilgrim settlements of Plymouth, in frontier forts of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, in industrial sites of the early nineteenth century, archaeologists are not only throwing light on the material culture of our forebears, but are adding new theoretical dimensions enabling us to interpret the social, political, and economic aspects of *all* ancient societies.

There can hardly be any part of American history more exciting and inspiring than the story of the Latter-day Saints, from their humble beginnings in New York State, through the turbulent years in the Middle West, to the triumphs of Utah. The excavations of Nauvoo are illuminating an important facet of what was once the largest city in Illinois. But think of all the Mormon remains which simply cry out for excavation! I would begin with early nineteenth century cellar holes in the hill country of Vermont, in the villages of Sharon and Whitingham which nurtured the young Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. How much do we really know of Palmyra and the "burned-over district" in which the Book of Mormon was born? What about Kirtland, its Temple, and its way of life? The great city of Nauvoo itself is only partly known from excavation, recent findings there represent only a fraction of what could be learned from this site.

And how many excavations have ever been carried out in the homesteads of those unsung heroes, the Mormon pioneers? We have the numberless quilts, chests of drawers, family portraits, and so forth in room after room of the fascinating pioneer Museums of Salt Lake City, but what about the day-to-day life, spatial arrangements, division of labor, and family structure that resulted in such products? Only the spade and trowel of scientific archaeology could answer such questions.

In conclusion, an outside observer like myself would make these suggestions. Forget the so-far fruitless quest for the Jaredites, Nephites, Mulekites, and the lands of Zarahemla and Bountiful: there is no more chance of finding them than of discovering the ruins of the bottomless pit described in the book of Revelations. It has been Hugh Nibley himself, the Mormon philosopher and historian, who has pointed out the futility of such endeavors.¹³ Continue the praiseworthy excavations in Mexico, remembering that little or nothing pertaining to the Book of Mormon will ever result from them. And start digging into the archaeological remains of the Saints themselves.

NOTES

¹I wish to acknowledge my deep indebtedness to Randolf W. Linehan, whose Yale Senior Thesis, "Of Mormons and Indians: The Development of a Mormon Empire in the Western United States," and anthropology 33b term paper, "The Mormon Church and Archaeology," brought important background material to my attention. I also thank Alfred Bush and Dee F. Green for help in the preparation of this article. Neither of them is responsible for errors of fact and opinion which might appear in it.

²Welby W. Ricks, "The Kinderhook Plates," *Improvement Era*, 65 (1962), 636-660.

³"Report of a Physical Study of the Kinderhook Plate Number 5," Princeton University, May, 1966. Unpublished MSS. Original in Princeton University Library.

⁴"Book of Mormon Archeology: the Myths and the Alternatives," *Dialogue*, 4 (Summer 1969), 71-80.

⁵"What the Church Means to People Like Me," *Dialogue*, 2 (Winter 1967), 107-117.

⁶See Ross T. Christensen, ed., *Progress on Archeology: An Anthology* (Provo: Special publication of the University Archeology Society, 1963).

⁷"The Complex 'Tree-of-Life' Carving on Izapa Stela 5," *Publication in Archeology and Early History, Mesoamerican Series*, No. 4 (1958).

⁸"Stela 5, Izapa, Chipas, Mexico," *The University Archeological Society* (Special Publication), No. 2 (1958).

⁹Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-76.

¹⁰See, for example, Ray T. Mathney, "The Ceramics of Aguacatal, Campeche, Mexico," *Papers of the New World Archeological Foundation*, No. 27 (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1970).

¹¹John L. Sorenson, "Ancient America and the Book of Mormon Revisited," *Dialogue*, 4 (Summer 1969), 80-94.

¹²See Thomas F. O'Dea's *The Mormons* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 119-154.

¹³*An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957).