

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF BOOK
OF MORMON ARCHAEOLOGY:
EXCAVATING THE ROLE OF
"FOLK" PRACTITIONERS IN THE
EMERGENCE OF A FIELD

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Practitioners and historians of Book of Mormon archaeology have tended to narrate the emergence and history of the field as a story of conventional scholarly investigations by Latter-day Saint professionals, professors, and ecclesiastical leaders. These narratives foreground the efforts of educated, white, upper-middle-class professionals and Church-funded institutions based in Salt Lake City and Provo, near the centers of Mormon power. The historiography ignores charismatic figures from the social periphery who spurned formal training and excavated artifacts with the help of revelation and religious texts. In contrast to the "official" history of the formal field, their efforts are relegated to the informal domain of "folklore."

Historian Stan Larson titled his history of Book of Mormon archaeology *Quest for the Gold Plates*, but the academics he studied never searched for gold plates.¹ In fact, Brigham Young University anthropologist Ray Matheny once said that if he dug up gold plates, he would

1. Stan Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson's Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Freethinker Press, 1996).

put them back in the ground.² In contrast, charismatic figures like José Dávila, Jesus Padilla, and John Brewer not only searched for but actually claimed to discover ancient metal and stone records of Book of Mormon peoples. Archival documents and interviews with their associates help unearth the stories of their extraordinary archeological and religious claims.

Such figures are important to the history of Book of Mormon archaeology in part because they served as the foil against which the field defined itself. When the search for physical evidence of Book of Mormon historicity first got underway in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, no clear boundaries separated what folklorists call the “official culture” (which is created, filtered, and broadcasted by influential publications and institutions) and the “folk culture” (which arises and spreads more organically, person-to-person, with fewer quality controls). Academics with formal training worked alongside charismatics who claimed special spiritual knowledge of Book of Mormon geography and who presented artifacts of uncertain provenance. Even as the official field worked to define itself by pushing away the folk practitioners, the boundaries between folk and official often blurred. Folk practitioners used scientific techniques and presented their findings to experts and high-ranking LDS Church leaders, some of whom endorsed their work. Official culture (which here includes both the Church and the academy, in that both are elite institutions with cultural cache) completed the folk practitioners’ marginalization only as their establishment allies deceased.

The spiritual archaeologists’ vivid and colorful stories are also important in their own right—not just as an adjunct to the history of an academic field. Their experiences present a case study of religious

2. Jerry Ainsworth, “Response to Brant Gardner’s Article Regarding *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni*,” *The Reading Room: Book of Mormon Geography*, Aug. 2006, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071004165330/http://mormonsites.org/page4.html#padilla>.

revitalization and the sect-church process by which new religious movements spin off from older traditions. As the official Latter-day Saint culture pushed charismatic archaeologists—and their charismatic artifacts—to its margins, an array of Mormon revitalizers and splinter groups laid claim to them. Though repulsive to the gatekeepers of official culture, folk practitioners' stories appealed to some rank-and-file Latter-day Saints who longed for a more literal and charismatic faith.

A Short History of Book of Mormon Archaeology

Latter-day Saints have long hoped to prove the historicity of the Book of Mormon through the excavation and study of ancient American artifacts. Joseph Smith himself looked to unearthed bones, ruins, and metal records as evidence of the veracity of the narrative he had translated from the gold plates.³ Reflecting on the 1834 Zion's Camp expedition, he wrote fondly of “wandering over the plains of the Nephites, . . . picking up their skulls & their bones, as proof of its [the Book of Mormon's] divine authenticity.”⁴

After Smith's 1844 martyrdom, others also looked for physical relics of ancient Book of Mormon civilizations. Many followed spiritual cues, as when succession claimant James J. Strang in 1845 dug up a set of brass plates from a Wisconsin hill he had seen in vision, or when Bishop

3. Kenneth W. Godfrey, “What Is the Significance of Zelph in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 70–79; Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 243; Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “President Joseph Has Translated a Portion’: Joseph Smith and the Mistranslation of the Kinderhook Plates,” chapter 17 in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, edited by Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 452–523.

4. Joseph Smith, Letter to Emma Smith, June 4, 1834, in Letter Book 2, 56–59, Joseph Smith Collection, MS 155, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

John Koyle opened a “Dream Mine” near Salem, Utah, to dig for gold records that the angel Moroni had shown him in vision in 1894.⁵ Others scoured the secular scientific literature for clues, as when John E. Page in 1848 identified the Book of Mormon city of Zarahemla with the Maya ruins at Palenque, or when educator George M. Ottinger in 1879 compared the Book of Mormon to the sacred K’iche’ Maya manuscript known as the *Popol Vuh*.⁶ In the last year of the nineteenth century, Brigham Young Academy president Benjamin Cluff Jr. led an expedition to Colombia, where he hoped “to discover the ancient Nephite capital of Zarahemla” on the Magdalena River and “to establish the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.”⁷

In the twentieth century, other Mormon academics followed in Cluff’s footsteps. In 1909, Deseret Museum director James E. Talmage investigated clay, copper, and slate tablets discovered two decades earlier in Michigan. Perhaps reflecting a cultural shift toward a more secular scientific sensibility, Talmage debunked the artifacts as frauds despite

5. Roger Van Noord, *The King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 33–35, 102; Ian Barber, “Dream Mines and Religious Identity in Twentieth-Century Utah: Insights from the Norman C. Pierce Papers,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 70, no. 3 (2009): 433–69; Kevin Cantera, “A Currency of Faith: Taking Stock in Utah County’s Dream Mine,” in *Between Pulpit and Pew: The Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore*, edited by Paul W. Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 125–58.

6. John E. Page, “Collateral Testimony of the Book of Mormon,” *Gospel Herald* (Voree, Wisc.) 3, no. 26, Sept. 14, 1848, 123, available at <https://archive.org/details/GospelHerald18471850/page/n473>; G. M. Ottinger, “Votan, the Culture-Hero of the Mayas,” *Juvenile Instructor* 14, no. 5, Mar. 1, 1879, 57–58, available at <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/votan-culture-hero-mayas>.

7. Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 151, available at <https://archive.org/details/brighamyounguniv00wilk/page/150/mode/2up>.

their faith-promoting potential.⁸ And in contrast to traditional interpretations of the Book of Mormon that saw its narrative encompassing the whole of North and South America, many early twentieth-century writers proposed “limited geography” interpretations that set the narrative mostly within a small region of Central America.⁹

Building on these early efforts, Mormon researchers in the 1940s and 1950s developed Book of Mormon archaeology into a formal scientific subfield. In 1952, amateur anthropologist Thomas Stuart Ferguson founded the New World Archaeological Foundation, a nonprofit with a mandate to carry out archaeological excavations of Preclassic Maya sites in Central America with an eye to scientifically confirming the Book of Mormon. Milton R. Hunter, a president of the Seventy and amateur archaeologist, served as a vice president of the organization, and Max Wells Jakeman, Brigham Young University Department of Archaeology chair, served prominently on the foundation’s archaeological committee. In partnership with BYU anthropologists like Jakeman, Ross T. Christensen, and Bruce W. Warren, Ferguson led numerous Central American expeditions and excavations in the 1950s. These efforts caught the interest of Church authorities, who extended Church funding to the NWAFF in 1955 and folded it into BYU in 1961.¹⁰

The establishment of a formal academic subfield by no means marked the end of excavations by spiritual methods in the style of Strang and Koyle. The mid-century Book of Mormon archaeology boom inspired spiritual as well as scientific artifact-seeking, with considerable overlap between the two. In the 1950s, a Mexican Mormon tour guide named José Dávila guided NWAFF archaeologists on some of their expeditions to southern Mexico and Guatemala. Dávila seamlessly blended

8. Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Mormonism’s Encounter with the Michigan Relics,” *BYU Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001): 174–209.

9. Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon,” 260–65.

10. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 45–70.

scientific and spiritual methods, drawing on archaeological scholarship and personal revelation to find Book of Mormon sites. Presented with a set of inscribed gold plates, he translated them with the help of scholarly lexicons of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which he used in combination with a nineteenth-century Egyptian grammar book apparently dictated through revelation by Joseph Smith. Similarly, in the 1960s, an arrowhead hunter named Earl John Brewer excavated many inscribed stone tablets and metal plates from a cave near Manti, Utah, where he professed to have encountered the angel Ether. Both Dávila and Brewer understood themselves to be engaged in archaeology, and both received support from BYU anthropology professor Paul R. Cheesman and from Church authorities such as apostle Mark E. Petersen and Milton R. Hunter, a president of the Seventy.

Thus, while the NWAF's founding was a triumph, historians should resist the temptation to narrate it as a story of progress from "folk" to "scientific" methods. Not only does this imply a one-sided moral judgment, but it's also somewhat anachronistic because folk and scientific efforts were not clearly distinguishable from each other in the early days of Book of Mormon archaeology. Arguably, academic archaeologists at BYU defined the folk in the process of defining their scientific discipline. They professionalized Book of Mormon archaeology partly through the gradual marginalization and exclusion of spiritual practitioners like Dávila and Brewer. While a few BYU scholars, like Cheesman, received Dávila's and Brewer's claims with sympathy, others dismissed them. In particular, Ray Matheny became BYU's go-to artifact authenticator (and debunker) and Dávila's and Brewer's principal antagonist. A former student of Matheny recalls that he used to "regale us with stories about the crazy things people would bring . . . for evaluation and potential authentication. He once told me he sometimes felt like a modern Charles Anthon."¹¹ (Charles Anthon was the nineteenth-century New

11. Chris Watkins, email to Christopher Smith, Nov. 2, 2020.

York linguist who had thumbed his nose at Martin Harris's transcript of characters from the Book of Mormon plates.)¹²

While Matheny and others succeeded in marginalizing spiritual approaches to Book of Mormon archaeology and relegating them to the domain of the "folk," they won no total victory. Certainly, the academic debunkers found good reasons to doubt the purity of Dávila's and Brewer's motives and the authenticity of artifacts they championed. In addition to saving souls, the purveyors of these artifacts stood to gain money, notoriety, and spiritual authority by offering proof of the Book of Mormon's historicity. But the folk archaeologists got in their own licks against the establishment scholars, whom they saw behaving more like critics than believers, in pursuit of secular academic respectability and advancement in secular careers. They organized themselves into a kind of alternative establishment—a network of nonprofits and fundamentalist sects—that still thrives today, doing cultural work worthy of study. What follows is a first attempt to tell the origin story of that alternative establishment and to understand the work its practitioners are doing.

José Dávila and the Padilla Gold Plates

In the first few years after the NWAFA's 1952 founding—as Book of Mormon archaeology struggled to find its scientific footing—BYU scholars went on several exploratory expeditions to Central America to find potential excavation sites. To help them navigate the unfamiliar landscape, they employed Mexican guides at a salary of \$225 per month.¹³

12. See Richard E. Bennett, "Read This I Pray Thee': Martin Harris and the Three Wise Men of the East," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 190–94.

13. John F. Forber & Company to Thomas S. Ferguson, Jan. 12, 1953, MSS 1549, Thomas S. Ferguson Papers, 1936–1975, box 9, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

One of those guides was José Octavio Dávila Morales, a Spanish-English bilingual *mestizo* (mixed-blood) Huastec-Maya Indian born in Tampico, Mexico in 1925.¹⁴ By his twenties, Dávila worked as a licensed Mexican federal tour guide for archaeological sites.¹⁵ He also served as a Latter-day Saint branch president in Puebla, Mexico, having married a widow from Bountiful, Utah, and converted to her Mormon faith in 1946.¹⁶ The semi-nomadic couple flitted back and forth between Mexico and Utah, where Dávila joined the University Archaeological Society (UAS) at BYU.¹⁷

By 1951, Dávila owned a small business, the Puebla Travel Service.¹⁸ Coiffed hair, a winning smile, and earnest intensity accounted for only part of Dávila's tour business success. He also read voraciously and possessed an uncanny power to retain what he read.¹⁹ Although he had

14. José O. Dávila to John A. Wilson, Oct. 15, 1965, in Veryl R. Todd Notebook, circa 1965–1975, MS 9263, LDS Church History Library.

15. "Archaeologist to Lecture in Pl. Grove," *The [Provo, Utah] Daily Herald* 91, no. 165 (Mar. 19, 1964): 13A.

16. "Personal History of Claudious Bowman, Jr. and His Wife Nelle," chap. 6, available at http://www.dublan.net/History/Personal/Bowman/Claudious_Jr_and_Nelle/Claudious_Chapter_6.html; "Mexico Guide Dated by Society at Y.," *Deseret News and Salt Lake [City, Utah] Telegram* 354, no. 158 (Dec. 31, 1960): A7; "Hazel Argyle Stocks," Family Search, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KWC6-FT1> (accessed March 5, 2020).

17. Max Wells Jakeman, "Recent Explorations in the Proposed, Region of Zarahemla," *UAS Newsletter* 22 (Aug. 23, 1954).

18. "Archaeologist to Lecture in Pl. Grove"; "Join December Tour of Book of Mormon Lands in Mexico" (advertisement), *The [Provo, Utah] Sunday Herald* 33, no. 23 (Nov. 6, 1955): 2B.

19. Jerry L. Ainsworth, *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni* (n.p.: Peace-Makers Publishing, 2000), 5, 15; Terry L. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates," June 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20220305181501/http://www.mysteryglyphs.com/pages/Articles/20090626_0003C.pdf; "Mexican Travel Guide Presents New Ideas on Book of Mormon Sites," *Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 84, no. 241 (September 10, 1955): 3.

no formal archaeological training, Maya history held him in the grip of a lifelong passion matched only by his newfound enthusiasm for the Book of Mormon, which he felt might unlock the ancient Maya's secrets.²⁰ (Maya script would not be fully deciphered until the late 1970s.)

At BYU, Dávila met Max Wells Jakeman and fully embraced his "limited geography" interpretation of the Book of Mormon. In 1953 and 1954, Dávila guided Jakeman and an NWAFF team on exploratory expeditions to southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. In Guatemala, they found ruins they identified with the Book of Mormon city Zarahemla. Dávila helped excavate the ruins in 1956.²¹

In 1954 and 1955, Dávila also guided NWAFF vice president Elder Milton R. Hunter of the Seventy on three "archaeological trips" to Mexico and Guatemala, during which the two men documented skin-color differences among Central American Indigenous populations and similarities between Hebrew and Indigenous cultures. Hunter published an extensive chronicle of his adventures with Dávila in search of Book of Mormon evidences.²²

Except for a lecture that Dávila delivered before the UAS in January 1961, Dávila's association with the NWAFF largely ended after 1956.²³ Perhaps the BYU archaeologists no longer wanted his services. Clark S. Knowlton, who was actively seeking a job in the BYU archaeology

20. "Book of Mormon Attracts Guide to LDS Religion," *Deseret News and Salt Lake [City, Utah] Telegram* 354, no. 104 (Oct. 29, 1960): 6.

21. "Mexican Travel Guide Presents New Ideas." The NWAFF's official papers and expedition reports omitted any mention of Dávila, but Max Wells Jakeman noted his participation in an article published in the newsletter of the UAS. Jakeman, "Recent Explorations."

22. Milton R. Hunter, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956).

23. "Mexico Guide Dated by Society at Y.," "Guide Lectures at BYU Society," *Deseret News and [Salt Lake City, Utah] Telegram* 355, no. 2 (Jan. 3, 1961): 2B/.

department, wrote to BYU professor Ross T. Christensen in 1955 that he was “ironically amused” by a newspaper account of Hunter’s expeditions with Dávila. Knowlton felt that Hunter was “the type that can and has done considerable harm to Book of Mormon archaeological studies,” and he even expressed a desire to “vote against him sometime in Church.”²⁴ This candid assessment of a General Authority illustrates how quickly academic Mormon archaeologists had soured on amateur involvement in their field.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the entrepreneurial Dávila struck out on his own. He crafted his own map correlating archaeological sites with Book of Mormon cities. He conducted his own not-entirely-legal excavations in search of Lehi’s ship, Nephi’s temple, and King Benjamin’s tower. And he presented his findings in lectures and tours directed to audiences of Utah Mormon laypeople. By 1960, he counted Church president David O. McKay and apostle Harold B. Lee among those who had taken his tours.²⁵ In these endeavors he drew on a combination of archaeological science and divine guidance in the form of visions and dreams.²⁶

24. Clark S. Knowlton to Ross T. Christensen, February 7, 1955, MSS 1716, Ross T. Christensen Collection, 1891–1992, box 5, folder 5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

25. “Mexican Guide to Tell Book of Mormon Theory,” *Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 84, no. 225 (Aug. 25, 1955): 16B; “Mexican Travel Guide Presents New Ideas”; Merle Shupe, “Guide Plans Map on Book of Mormon,” *The Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 89, no. 257 (Oct. 3, 1959): 3; “Mexico Guide Dated by Society at Y.”; José O. Dávila, “An Account of Our Book of Mormon Lands Tour, Jan. 27th to Feb. 16th, 1961,” Americana Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; José O. Dávila, “Physical Evidences of the Book of Mormon,” December 1965, MSS 2049, box 63, folder 2c, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; José O. Dávila, “The Geography of the Nephites,” December 1965, MSS 2049, box 63, folder 2c, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

26. Dávila, “An Account of Our Book of Mormon Lands Tour,” 36–37, 43.

Meanwhile, in February 1961, a Mexican physician named Jesus Padilla Orozco took the missionary discussions in Cuautla, Mexico. The missionaries gave Padilla a Spanish-language tract containing a facsimile of the first four (out of seven) lines of Book of Mormon “Characters” that Martin Harris had shown to Columbia College professor Charles Anthon in 1828.²⁷

Padilla carefully studied the tract and then told the missionaries that he owned a set of gold plates inscribed with similar characters. He had found them while working for the government on an aerial mineral survey in 1959. The surveyors’ plane had set down in Oaxaca, Mexico, and Padilla and several other men had hiked into the jungle. In the jungle they stumbled upon the ruins of an ancient city inhabited by naked, white-skinned Indians.²⁸ Inside the ruins they found a coffin that contained some gold plates. Padilla claimed to be the only survivor of the expedition, the other four having died of drowning, falling, accidental gunshot, and snakebite, respectively.²⁹

The missionaries doubted the story, having previously heard Padilla tell colorful stories that didn’t add up. They asked to see the plates, but Padilla said he had left them with a linguist in Mexico City.

27. Ray T. Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Plates,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 33–40.

28. When paraphrasing primary sources, especially where they draw upon racial myths and stereotypes, I generally preserve their racial terminology (e.g., “Indian”) rather than substitute an alternative label.

29. Richard Averett, letter to Ross T. Christensen, May 7, 1961, quoted in Paul R. Cheesman, Ray Matheny, and Bruce Louthan, “A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico,” January 1973, 4–5, 8–9, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Gerald C. Kammerman, letter to Diane E. Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; “Padilla Follow-Up,” n.d. [ca. 1978], in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

He promised to bring them back and show them to the missionaries, but “week after week as we visited them [the Padillas] or stopped by, he claimed that he had forgott[e]n.” One day Padilla produced from a safe a handwritten copy of some characters from the plates. The missionaries remarked upon their similarity to the Book of Mormon characters on the pamphlet they had shown him, and Padilla agreed with their assessment. Finally, after about a two-month delay, Padilla presented three postage stamp-sized hinged gold plates, which he had strung onto a charm bracelet for his wife. He asked the missionaries “if anyone in the Church would be interested in buying” the three plates at an \$80,000 price. The missionaries met with their mission president and apostle Marion G. Romney to discuss the proposal. Fearing that the plates might be a hoax, Romney advised the missionaries to mail photographs of the plates to BYU for authentication. They did so, and BYU archaeologist Ross T. Christensen replied that the plates were probably fraudulent and not worth pursuing.³⁰

José Dávila did not share the BYU scholar’s skepticism. He heard about the plates and visited Padilla, who showed him five plates, including the three with hinges that he had previously shown the missionaries. Dávila “immediately recognized the writing as . . . Nephite reformed Egyptian” and offered to buy the plates. Padilla asked for too much money, so Dávila left without making a deal. But later that year, Padilla’s wife contacted Dávila and, pleading financial difficulty, offered to sell or lease the plates for \$2,000. (The parties later disagreed as to whether the

30. Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; Wayne Hamby, “Padilla Plates,” Apr. 29, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; “Padilla Follow-Up”; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 18; J. Golden Barton, “A Rebuttle Written by J. Golden Barton to ‘A Report on the Gold Plates in Mexico’ by Paul R. Cheesman, Ray Matheny and Bruce Louthan January, 1973,” 2, 9, 15, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

transaction was a lease or sale.) Dávila raised the money from a backer in Utah and exchanged it for the plates.³¹

Dávila tried to donate the plates to the LDS Church, but apostle Marion G. Romney declined the donation on the grounds that it would be illegal to take them out of Mexico. That didn't stop Dávila, who arranged for his wife to take the plates to Utah. Church authorities there again declined to take custody of the plates and referred the matter to the department of archaeology at BYU. BYU archaeologists Max Wells Jakeman and Ross T. Christensen examined the plates and in 1962 published an article in the UAS newsletter expressing their opinion that the plates were fake and that the Dávilas had committed a crime by bringing them to the United States.³²

This offended Dávila, who continued to insist on the plates' authenticity. The metallurgist hired by BYU had noted that the plates looked freshly polished and lacked the wear that comes with age. To Dávila, this evoked the Book of Mormon's promise in Alma 37:5 that plates containing sacred records "must retain their brightness." Thus, his scriptural literalism led him to different conclusions than the BYU academics drew from the same data point.³³

Dávila spent the next two years translating the Padilla plates. Donations from Utah Church members funded the work, and apostle Joseph Fielding Smith helped by providing Dávila a copy of an Egyptian grammar book supposed to have been composed by revelation by

31. Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 18–19; Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 8; José O. Dávila, "Moroni's Petroglyphs in Utah," Dec. 23, 1964, MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 63, folder 2c, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

32. Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 9–10; "Gold Plates from Mexico," *U.A.S. Newsletter* 78 (Jan. 17, 1962): 4, available at <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/uas-newsletter-no-78-january-17-1962>.

33. José O. Dávila, "Laboratory Analysis of the Amuzgus Front Plate," in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

the Church's founder, Joseph Smith.³⁴ Using a pair of early twentieth-century hieroglyphic dictionaries in combination with the methods outlined in Smith's grammar book, Dávila managed to place an interpretation upon the Padilla plates' script. The full translation portrayed Jesus Christ as a "Sky God" whose "celestial boat was wrecked upon the cross," neatly blending Mormon and Egyptian motifs.³⁵

In 1963, a farmer named Del Allgood heard rumors of Dávila's translation work and invited him to come examine some petroglyphs in Chalk Creek Canyon near Fillmore, Utah. Allgood and a business partner named Harold Huntsman believed that the petroglyphs marked the location of an old Spanish or Indian mine. The pair had filed several mining claims on the site in 1950 and had scoured the area for evidence of mineral wealth, but they had come up empty so far. They turned to Dávila in the hope that this half-Maya translator might be able to interpret the glyphs and reveal the location of the mine.³⁶

Using the same method he had employed with the Padilla plates, Dávila teased a message from the mysterious glyphs. Amazingly, they gave instructions for how to locate a "natural stone chamber"

34. Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 10; "Join Our December Tour to the Book of Mormon Lands in Mexico, December 10 to 30" (advertisement), *Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 34, no. 291 (Oct. 30, 1955): 6B.

35. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; José Dávila, "The Full Translation," n.d., in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

36. Memorandum of Jose Octavio Davila, in Harold Huntsman and Flora Huntsman v. Jose Octavio Davila, Mrs. Jose Octavio Davila, E. Del Allgood, and Mrs. E. Del Allgood, case no. 5634, District Court of the Fifth Judicial District in and for Millard County, Utah, Oct. 1966, Millard County Clerk's Office.

containing “metal tablets” or “garlanded everlasting mineral records.”³⁷ Still more stunning, one pair of esoteric glyphs—the Jewish *hamsa* and the Taoist *yin yang*—comprised the signature of the angel Moroni. Dávila hypothesized that after the Lamanites destroyed the Nephites in a final apocalyptic battle in Mexico, Moroni had fled north with the Nephite records and buried them in New York to be discovered by Joseph Smith. En route, Moroni had passed through Utah and buried a portion of the Nephite library in Chalk Creek Canyon. Dávila concluded that “it would not be far fetched to estimate we are considering here the resting place of the twenty[-]four plates of Ether” mentioned in the Book of Mormon.³⁸

In 1964 and 1965, Dávila gave a series of public lectures about this discovery. Through these lectures he recruited a hundred volunteers and a smattering of financial backers to excavate the site. Dávila explained to them that the excavation’s objective was to promote salvation and “to deliver these records to the LDS Church.” In the summer of 1965, the excavators spent over \$4,000 drilling six hundred feet of exploratory holes. Frustrated by his lack of success, Dávila revisited his

37. Recall that Jesus Padilla had “garlanded” his gold plates by stringing them together on a necklace for his wife. José O. Dávila, “The Translation of the Large Texts,” n.d., in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 63, folder 2c, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; José O. Dávila, “Translation of Fillmore Symbols,” n.d., https://web.archive.org/web/20220305181601/mysteryglyphs.com/pages/Articles/20090629_0005A.pdf; José O. Dávila, “The Chalk Creek Canyon Texts from Fillmore, Utah, Translated by J. O. Dávila,” Nov. 1965, MS 2105, LDS Church History Library.

38. José O. Dávila, “Moronai in Utah, or, Hidden Treasures in Your Backyard,” Dec. 24, 1965, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 63, folder 2c, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. See also Jerry L. Ainsworth, “Is There Evidence That Mormon and Moroni Visited the American West?” *Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum*, 2015, <http://bmaf.org/node/576>; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 201–03.

translation and discovered an error: “All the Summer and Fall of 1965 has been employed in work done over 100 f[ee]t off the true spot.”³⁹

Meanwhile, a breach opened between Dávila and Harold Huntsman, the majority owner of the mining claims on which Dávila was excavating. Dávila examined the paperwork for the Huntsman-Allgood claims and concluded that Huntsman and Allgood had failed to meet the legal requirements to maintain the claims. In February 1966, Dávila challenged the prior claims and filed his own mining claims on the site. Huntsman ordered Dávila off the claims and signed an agreement with filmmaker DeVon Stanfield to excavate the gold plates and make a documentary film about the excavation. Dávila, who felt the discovery was too sacred for television, came to blows with Stanfield when he found him on the property.

In October 1966, Huntsman sued Dávila. Dávila’s lawyer admitted in court that Dávila had made “open, notorious, hostile adverse use of the property” without Huntsman’s permission, but he argued that none of that mattered because Huntsman’s mining claims were invalid. The court ultimately disagreed and ruled against Dávila, barring him from the site and awarding Huntsman \$10,000 in damages.⁴⁰

The lawsuit precipitated a tragedy. On November 5, 1966, Harold Huntsman showed up at the property and informed two of Dávila’s volunteers that the court had ordered them to halt excavation. The two men refused to leave, so Huntsman left and told them he would be back

39. Dávila, “Moroni’s Petroglyphs in Utah”; Dávila, “Moronai in Utah”; Stephen B. Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients* (Springville, Utah: Plain Sight Publishing, 2013), 155; Dávila, “The Chalk Creek Canyon Texts”; Dávila to Wilson, Oct. 15, 1965.

40. Complaint, Harold Huntsman and Flora Huntsman v. Jose Octavio Davila, Mrs. Jose Octavio Davila, E. Del Allgood, and Mrs. E. Del Allgood, case no. 5634, District Court of the Fifth Judicial District in and for Millard County, Utah, Oct. 1966; photocopies provided by Millard County Clerk’s Office; Memorandum of Davila, Oct. 1966; Carter, “Jose Davila & the Gold Plates”; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 155.

with the sheriff. Realizing their time was short, the volunteers made one last big push to find the plates. They stuffed the bottom of a twenty-foot shaft with ninety-one sticks of dynamite and detonated the lot. They waited two hours for the carbon monoxide gas to clear and then went down the shaft. They hadn't waited long enough, and both men died of carbon monoxide poisoning. If only they hadn't worked on the Sabbath, lamented their friends.⁴¹

Adding tragedy upon tragedy, Huntsman had the thirty-six-year-old documentary filmmaker DeVon Stanfield continue the excavation where Dávila left off. Stanfield took more care than his predecessors, but on August 10, 1967, he too succumbed to carbon monoxide gas.⁴²

A bankrupted Dávila returned to Mexico by 1970.⁴³ Meanwhile, in 1970, Jesus Padilla wrote to the anthropology department at BYU claiming to be in possession of seven more gold plates from the same tomb as the five that he had leased or sold to Dávila. In 1971, Dr. Paul Cheesman visited Padilla to examine the additional plates.

Several discrepancies quickly emerged in Padilla's story. In speaking years earlier with the missionaries who first contacted him, he had claimed to have found the plates during a survey trip to Oaxaca in 1959. Now he said he had found them while camping with some friends in Guerrero in 1955. The new plates didn't have hinges like three of the originals had, which seemed to embarrass Padilla. He claimed that José

41. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 154–55; "2 S.L. Men Killed in Mine," *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, Utah) 366, no. 111 (Nov. 7, 1966): 1B, available at <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=cMIOAAAIBAJ&sjid=aUkDAAAIBAJ&pg=2260%2C1602095>; "Carbon Monoxide Cause of Shaft Deaths," *Deseret News*, Nov. 8, 1966, B1; "Search to Continue for Metal Tablet Cache Despite Deaths," *Idaho State Journal* (Pocatello, Idaho) 65, no. 203 (Nov. 8, 1966): 1; "Gas Is Fatal for Pair in Mine Shaft," *The [Twin Falls, Idaho] Times-News* 63, no. 206 (Nov. 8, 1966): 9.

42. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; "Blast Gas Fatal to Miner in Hunt for Silver," *The Salt Lake [City, Utah] Tribune* 195, no. 119 (Aug. 11, 1967): 1B.

43. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates."

Dávila had added the hinges to the originals, but photographs taken prior to Dávila's acquisition of the plates proved that the hinges had been present all along.⁴⁴

José Dávila heard a rumor that BYU might buy the seven plates from Padilla for \$35,000. Fearing that this would make the seven new plates inaccessible to him, he contacted Mexican authorities and alerted them of a pending illegal artifact sale. Then he called Padilla, told him what he had done, and warned him to hide the plates. This enraged Padilla, but he took Dávila's advice. By the time police raided Padilla's home a few days later, he had hidden his collection of artifacts. Before the police let him go, Padilla suggested to them "that Mr. Davila might well bear investigation on similar charges."⁴⁵

Dávila was arrested on July 6, 1971 and charged with crimes related to looting and illegal artifact smuggling. Most charges were eventually dropped for lack of evidence, but Dávila spent a few years in prison for driving unregistered vehicles.⁴⁶ During the investigation, Utah collector J. Golden Barton visited Dávila in jail, coaxed him to tell where he had hidden his five Padilla plates, sneaked the plates out of Dávila's

44. Paul R. Cheesman, Report, n.d. [1971–1972], in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 11; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; Matheny, "An Analysis of the Padilla Plates," 21n4; Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, "A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico," 9; Kammerman to Wirth, November 20, 1978; "Padilla Follow-Up"; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 18; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 2, 9, 15.

45. Barton, "A Rebuttle," 12–13.

46. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; Dale Van Atta, "The Angel, the Gold—and Jose Davila M.," *Deseret News* 383, no. 283 (Nov. 26, 1975): B10, available at <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=mTMpAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=7n0DAAAAIIBAJ&pg=5490%2C6117962>; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, "A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico," 9; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 13–14; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 116.

home under the noses of watching police officers, and then smuggled the plates out of Mexico under his toupee.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, Padilla provided his seven new plates to BYU professor Paul R. Cheesman for study and authentication. He refused to tell exactly where in the Mexican state of Guerrero he had found them, “but if there were some way to obtain a subsidy,” he promised to arrange for scientific dating of the site.⁴⁸ Cheesman showed the plates to various experts. Anthropologists Frederick Dockstader and Gordon Ekholm pronounced them fakes engraved with a modern steel tool. Diffusionist epigrapher Cyrus Gordon and BYU Egyptologist Hugh Nibley thought the plates might be genuine. Cheesman agreed with Gordon and Nibley.⁴⁹

Cheesman's BYU colleague Ray Matheny made a comprehensive study of the plates and pronounced them fraudulent. He noted pictographs on the plates apparently copied from famous Maya and Aztec artifacts, and he argued that the plates' perfectly square corners and “very straight edges” suggested they had been cut with modern tools. Matheny also found that the plates contained a majority of the symbols from the first four lines of the Book of Mormon “Caractors”

47. In telling this story, Stephen Shaffer refers to Barton only as “Jake.” I infer Barton's identity from other sources that allude to this escapade. According to Barton's obituary, “Jake” was his nickname. Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 116–19; “J. Golden (Jake) Barton,” <https://www.russonmortuary.com/obituaries/j-golden-jake-barton> (accessed April 5, 2020); Linda Karen Petty, comp., *Linda Karen Petty's Personal History*, vol. 4 (New Harmony, Utah: Petty Family Records Center, 2016), available at <https://www.familysearch.org/service/records/storage/das-mem/patron/v2/TH-904-67010-319-35/dist.txt?ctx=ArtCtxPublic>; Christopher C. Smith, interview with Gail Porritt, St. George, Utah, Jan. 19, 2013.

48. Jesús Padilla Orozco, letter to Paul R. Cheesman, June 26, 1971, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, “A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico.”

49. Cheesman, Report, n.d. [1971–1972].

document that Martin Harris had shown to Charles Anthon, whereas they contained almost no characters from the bottom three lines of that document. Recall that the missionaries who had first contacted Padilla had shown him a missionary tract that reproduced the first four lines of the “Caractors” document but not the bottom three. Matheny concluded that Padilla had borrowed from the missionary pamphlet to fabricate the plates.⁵⁰

J. Golden Barton—a private collector and friend of Paul Cheesman—read an early draft of Matheny’s report and penned a rebuttal. Matheny had drawn these conclusions from incomplete information, Barton protested. Matheny had had access to the seven new Padilla plates but not to the five originals. Barton’s “naked eye” examination of Dávila’s five plates revealed rounded corners cut at oblique angles. Moreover, apparent contradictions in Padilla’s narratives of discovering the plates could be harmonized. Oaxaca and Guerrero were adjacent states, and the camping trip that Padilla had described to Paul Cheesman might have occurred during the survey mission that he had described to the missionaries.⁵¹

Barton provided Dávila’s five plates to Cheesman in the hope that this additional evidence might help prove the plates’ authenticity. Matheny only grew more confident in his conclusions after examining them, however. The hinges attached to the plates had “been made with modern tubing dies” and attached with modern solder, and the edges of the plates bore marks from a jeweler’s saw and metal file. He pronounced the case against the plates’ authenticity “closed once and for all.”⁵²

The Church-owned *Deseret News* newspaper piled on with an editorial about Dávila in 1975. The article recounted a story from two

50. Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, “A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico,” 8–18; Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Plates,” 21–40.

51. Barton, “A Rebuttle,” 4–7.

52. Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Plates,” 22–30, 40.

Mormon missionaries who had gone “on a one-day expedition with Dávila while on their Mexican mission. Dávila led them to a mountain where he claimed to have found a cave filled with gold, lowered himself over a ledge by rope, and disappeared into an opening in the cliff face. A few minutes later, the two heard a shot and pulled Dávila up. One foot was bleeding. He said an angel had shot him for trying to touch the sacred gold.”⁵³ In an acid letter to the editor, Barton complained that the editorial sounded like “the Palmyra ‘Reflector’ [of] New York state, [in] the year 1831, in which Obadiah Dogberry was describing the character of Joseph Smith in his Book of Mormon find.”⁵⁴

After Dávila’s release from prison, he returned to work giving tours of Mexican archaeological sites. In 1978, he befriended Connecticut Mormon public health professor Jerry L. Ainsworth, who became a sort of Dávila disciple. Ainsworth once accompanied Dávila on an expedition to Cerro del Bernal—which Dávila identified as the Hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon—in search of a “Nephite library” of metal plates. Uncanny storms and snakes drove them off the hill, which Ainsworth concluded “remains taboo [i.e., supernaturally protected] at this time.” Ainsworth also befriended Jesus Padilla, who supplied him with a steady stream of new artifacts from the same tomb as the Padilla plates.⁵⁵

Eventually Ainsworth wrote a book and a series of online posts to popularize Dávila’s ideas. In one post, Ainsworth described a conversation he had once had with BYU skeptic Ray Matheny. Ainsworth had asked what Matheny would do if he discovered authentic gold plates inscribed with reformed Egyptian characters. Matheny had replied that he would put them back in the ground and never tell anyone because

53. Van Atta, “The Angel, the Gold—and Jose Davila M.”

54. J. Golden Barton, “Archaeological Fraud?” n.d. [ca. 1975], in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

55. Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*.

such a discovery would end his career.⁵⁶ This anecdote illustrates the gap that had opened between the official and the folk, with neither able to countenance the other's perspective on gold plates.

John Brewer and the Manti Plates

José Dávila never met Earl John Brewer, as far as I know, but the two men ran in similar circles and had similar experiences. Like Dávila, Brewer offered metal records to confirm the Book of Mormon. Like Dávila, he combined amateur archaeology with the supernatural. And like Dávila, he found himself pushed to the edges of official Mormon culture and into the arms of the Mormon folk.

Born in Moroni, Utah, on February 11, 1933, Brewer worked as a turkey farmer and sanitation worker at different times in his life. Although he had a testimony of Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he stayed home Sundays and smoked, cursed, and drank coffee.⁵⁷ He was a loving father and husband and loved by his kids.⁵⁸

In 1963, Brewer and his friend Carl Paulsen brought some limestone tablets to a collector named Leona Wintch. She contacted her nephew, Utah State Archaeological Society president George Tripp, and he contacted Dr. Jesse Jennings of the University of Utah Department of Anthropology. Jennings examined the stones and pronounced them a hoax, noting that they appeared stained with fresh topsoil and

56. Ainsworth, "Response to Brant Gardner's Article."

57. "Earl John Brewer," Family Search, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KWZS-VX7> (accessed Feb. 8, 2020); Christopher C. Smith, Interview with John Heinerman, April 15, 2017; [J. Golden Barton], "Manti Enigma," 1974–1990, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, Box 7, fd. 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

58. Jed Brewer to Christopher Smith, April 4, 2021.

freshly engraved.⁵⁹ According to an affidavit made out by Carl Paulsen, he grew suspicious after hearing Jennings's findings and ransacked Brewer's room. Beneath the mattress he found several pieces of partially inscribed stone. He confronted Brewer and accused him of forging the stones. "He, John Earl Brewer, had no comment and shrugged off the accusation."⁶⁰

It's unclear what story Brewer told Wintch and Jennings about the discovery of these tablets, but his later narrations fitted the incident into a grand narrative of Jaredite treasure caves. A "diary" in Brewer's voice misdates the Wintch incident to 1960 rather than 1963 and turns the stone tablets into metal plates. According to Brewer's one-time friend John Heinerman, Brewer wrote the diary years after the fact to make sure he had his story straight. The diary represents an evolved version of a story that by then Brewer had told many times.⁶¹

Tellings of Brewer's story differ in their details but agree in their shape. The story begins with Brewer arrowhead hunting for an art display for the Sanpete County Fair about 1955. His friend George Keller, an African American ranch hand who claimed to know secret Indian places, agreed to tell Brewer where to find arrowheads in exchange for some wine. Brewer supplied the wine, and Keller took him to an

59. George Tripp, "Manti Mystery," *Utah Archaeology* 9, no. 4, (Dec. 1963): 1; Jesse Jennings to Mrs. J. Wallace Wintch, Nov. 27, 1963, Anthropology Departmental Records, University of Utah Archives; Jesse Jennings to Lambrose D. Callinagos, Jan. 28, 1969, Anthropology Departmental Records, University of Utah Archives. Special thanks to archivist Kirk Baddley for finding and providing the Jesse Jennings correspondence.

60. Carl and Louise A. Paulsen affidavit, Apr. 13, 1973, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

61. John Brewer journal typescript, June 17, 1960, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

overhang on the hill behind the Manti Temple and told him to dig beneath.

Brewer dug, and his shovel unearthed a stairwell that led down into a large chamber. The chamber contained two ten-foot-long stone coffins, each containing an eight-foot-tall mummy in full metal armor. One mummy had red hair, and the other had blonde. In addition to the coffins, the chamber also contained stone boxes wrapped in juniper bark and pitch. Brewer broke some of them open and found inscribed metal plates.

In some versions of the story, Brewer also encountered a glowing angel who identified himself as the Jaredite prophet Ether and warned him not to sell anything from the cave for gain. He also found stone tablets, which he assembled like a jigsaw puzzle to reveal a map to the locations of additional caves. Like Joseph Smith before him, he carefully guarded the secret of his cave's location and struggled prayerfully through feelings of personal unworthiness and greed.

Indeed, in Brewer's journal he explicitly wondered "if maybe this was anything like [Joseph Smith] went through." He thought perhaps not, because Smith "was a better man than I am. But the thought wouldn't leave me all day," so he followed Smith's example by asking God for help to understand the artifacts he'd found. No answers came right away. He felt that the Lord would guide him in the search for other caves but that God also wanted him to work to find answers on his own. "I know that he is [guiding me,] for I am not a very smart person and some of these things that come to me are not mine," he wrote.⁶²

62. Jared G. Barton, "Secret Chambers in the Rockies," *The Ancient American* 4, no. 28 (June/July 1998): 3–4, 6; "John Brewer Has a Cave, but He's Not Giving Tours," *Deseret News*, Nov. 26, 1975, B10; Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017; [Barton], "Manti Enigma"; John Heinerman, *Hidden Treasures of Ancient American Cultures* (Springville, Utah: Bonneville Books, 2001), 147–48; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 31–32; John Brewer journal typescript.

Word of Brewer's discovery reached BYU by 1965, when University of Utah anthropologist Melvin Aikens showed the limestone tablets to BYU's Ray Matheny. Matheny wrote to Aikens, "As you may know, many of these kinds of finds have been made in the past to exploit Mormons and we, at B. Y. U., would like to carefully record each of these, in order to expose the people involved for what they are."⁶³

Paul R. Cheesman shared Matheny's enthusiasm for investigating Brewer's find, though not to expose it as a fraud. Cheesman put one of Brewer's tablets on display in BYU's Joseph Smith Building, and in 1971 he convinced Church president Spencer W. Kimball and apostle Mark E. Petersen to supply \$1,000 to fund research into Brewer's find.⁶⁴ Several BYU anthropologists visited Brewer in Sanpete County on the Church's dime. Cheesman came away a believer, while his colleagues Ray Matheny, William J. Adams Jr., and Hugh Nibley came away convinced that Brewer's artifacts were fake.⁶⁵

Like Jennings, Matheny found the inscriptions and the pitch that coated them too fresh to be ancient, and he also found evidence that Brewer's metal plates had been cut with scissors and inscribed with a modern chisel. Adams, a linguist, examined the inscriptions and found fewer clusterings of symbols than you'd expect from a meaningful script. Later, he ate at an area restaurant and found a napkin decorated with local cattle brands that closely resembled the symbols from the plates. In 1972, Matheny and Adams coauthored a report debunking the

63. Ray T. Matheny to Melvin Aikens, Mar. 17, 1965, Anthropology Departmental Records, University of Utah Archives. Special thanks to archivist Kirk Baddley for finding and providing this document.

64. Letter from Paul R. Cheesman to Gary B. Doxey, May 3, 1971, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 1, folder 5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

65. Barton, "Secret Chambers in the Rockies," 6.

plates.⁶⁶ As for Nibley, “Brewer’s wife told somebody he [Nibley] knew that Brewer had made the plates himself.”⁶⁷

Undeterred, Cheesman organized another trip to Sanpete County with apostle Mark E. Petersen on March 5, 1974. Cheesman’s wife Millie, his student aide Wayne Hamby, and his friend J. Golden Barton accompanied him on the trip. The group met with Brewer at his bishop’s home in Moroni, Utah. Brewer told the visitors the tale of his discovery and withdrew from a briefcase about sixty inscribed plates made from various metals, including some gold plates he had framed under glass. “He told us he generally kept these plates in a safe deposit box at the local bank,” Barton wrote. “He also told us he had used the plates a[s] security for a loan with a private party.” Brewer also presented a sealed set of copper plates that he had never shown anyone before and which he proposed to open in Elder Petersen’s presence. The apostle demurred, saying the seal should only be broken in the presence of archaeological experts.

The visitors pressed Brewer to reveal the location of his cave for scientific study. Brewer “seemed reluctant to commit himself to an immediate excursion,” but he promised that once the snow had cleared, he would enlarge the cave entrance and show the cave first to Cheesman, and then to a team of archaeologists from BYU.

66. “John Brewer Has a Cave, but He’s Not Giving Tours”; Ray T. Matheny and William James Adams, Jr., “An Archaeological and Linguistic Analysis of the Manti Tablets,” typescript of a paper presented at the Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures, Provo, Utah, Oct. 28, 1972, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. The napkin is preserved in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

67. Post by bobhenstra, Apr. 3, 2011, in “We’re surely in it now: Hel/3 Nephi, Revelation D&C 29, 45,” LDS Freedom Forum, <http://www.ldsfreedomforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=6041&start=540>; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

During the drive home, each member of the party that had come to meet with Brewer shared their opinion on the meeting. Elder Petersen chimed in first with his view that Brewer “was telling the truth and most likely did not have the capacity to perpetuate such an elaborate hoax.” The rest of the group agreed.

After dropping Cheesman off in Provo, Barton accompanied Elder Petersen back to Salt Lake City. During the drive, Barton showed Petersen José Dávila’s Padilla plates and shared his opinion that Dávila was sincere and “worthy of Church confidence.” Barton then “talked about some of the difficulties Dr. Cheesman and also myself had experienced when seeking help from the New World Archaeological Foundation in regards to both the Mexican plates and Cheesman’s work with Brewer.” The apostle “appeared somewhat distressed with the attitude of the Foundation toward archaeology of the scriptures.” According to Barton,

He clearly stated that he did not believe we had any reason to hide our views from intellectual circles in regards to these matters. He strongly advocated that L.D.S. students do their homework and not be hindered or harassed in the presentation of Book of Mormon archaeology. He further stated that in his opinion the Church had no reason to be embarrassed by the discovery or recovery of Gold Plates. After all the very foundation of the Joseph Smith story was based on such knowledge. He said that angels and gold plates were a very real part of Mormon history and that the Church witnessed the same to all the world.⁶⁸

The two men also favorably discussed a cache of Ecuadorian gold plates described in a book by ufologist Erich von Däniken, who in 1968 had famously proposed that aliens had built the Great Pyramid of Giza.⁶⁹

In the months following this meeting, Petersen eagerly pressed Cheesman for news. “We are very interested in this, as you know,” he

68. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

69. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

wrote. “President Kimball has inquired of Brother [Milton R.] Hunter [of the First Council of the Seventy] and myself on two different occasions as to what the status of the matter is.”⁷⁰ He also mentioned that “Our brethren here are very interested and it will not surprise me at all if they should authorize purchase of the land involved so that we may get full control.”⁷¹ Barton, hearing a rumor of the Church’s intent to buy the land on which Brewer’s cave was located, visited the Sanpete County recorder’s office and learned “that the Corporation of the L.D.S. Church had in fact been deeded a parcel of ground directly east of the [Temple].”⁷²

Unfortunately, Brewer did not make good on his promises. “Spring came and went in the Manti valley and John Brewer [m]ade no effort to contact Dr. Cheesman and fulfill the agreement that he had made in early March,” Barton wrote. “We received information that Brewer was experiencing some marital difficulties and so we chose not to pressure this man as he sought to solve his personal problems.”⁷³ In a letter to Petersen that summer, Cheesman reported that “John Brewer’s wife left him with all the children to care for, therefore a delay in our plans,” and “Brewer lost his job and is in the midst of changing to another job—further delay.”⁷⁴

70. Mark E. Petersen to Paul R. Cheesman, June 27, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 1, folder 6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

71. Mark E. Petersen to Paul R. Cheesman, Apr. 10, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 5j, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

72. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

73. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

74. Paul R. Cheesman to Mark E. Petersen, June 24, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 1, folder 6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

Alongside its scathing 1975 exposé of José Dávila, the Church-owned *Deseret News* published an exposé of Brewer.⁷⁵ Brewer frankly told the *Deseret News* reporter that “Whenever I don’t understand anything, I stall.” He told the reporter that concerns about privacy, credit for the discovery, and his children’s inheritance had caused him to keep the secret close.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Brewer’s bishop reported back to Cheesman that Brewer had discovered a second treasure cave containing additional boxes of plates.⁷⁷

Even as he stalled his friends in high places, Brewer made a smattering of folksier friends. In 1974, an anonymous “Canadian Indian” translated some of the plates, revealing that a group of Jaredites led by a man named Piron had settled in the American Southwest in 2500 BCE. The group had buried more than five million inscribed gold plates throughout the Americas, the translation said, and had known the secret of making electric batteries.⁷⁸

Around the same time, Brewer met Gail Porritt, a kindly eccentric who considered himself to be the “one mighty and strong” prophesied in Doctrine and Covenants section 85. Porritt heard rumors of Brewer’s discovery and visited him to learn more. “He showed me some round lead plates with inscriptions on them with a hole in the middle,” Porritt remembers. Porritt befriended Brewer, and Brewer gave him some artifacts and showed him a hill where “the largest and most important repository of records” was buried, according to the map he had found

75. “John Brewer Has a Cave, but He’s Not Giving Tours.”

76. “John Brewer Has a Cave, but He’s Not Giving Tours.”

77. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

78. Gail Porritt, “Report and Interpretation by a Canadian Man on Very Ancient Inhabitants of Utah,” n.d., in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; miscellaneous translations, June–December 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

in his cave. “They’re up there; good luck to you if you can find them,” Brewer invited.⁷⁹

A man named Dave Tomlinson also befriended Brewer. Brewer took Tomlinson on mountain hikes to search for sites marked on his Jaredite map. According to Brewer, the map marked Jaredite burials spanning from Colorado to Idaho, “with little footprints going from one to the other.” The “main” site on the map, however, seemed to be west of Manti, Utah. Brewer and Tomlinson searched the mountains for a “trail marker” depicted on the map, but they couldn’t find it.⁸⁰

In the 1970s, Brewer fell in with a man named John Heinerman. Like Porritt, Heinerman heard rumors of Brewer’s discovery and sought him out. Heinerman claims that Brewer showed him his cave, a claim that Brewer denied. The wonders Heinerman witnessed in the cave included a Jaredite battery and a unicorn head. He and Brewer also tried their hand at translating the plates.

Brewer and Heinerman somehow became entangled with a group of polygamist fundamentalists led by Ervil LeBaron. At minimum, Ervil’s nephew Ross LeBaron Jr. stole some photographs of Brewer’s artifacts from a photographer’s office.⁸¹ To hear Heinerman tell the story, the LeBarons also demanded to know the location of Brewer’s cave and tortured and killed Brewer’s son. Police concluded that Johnnie Brewer Jr. died

79. Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013. Diarist Linda Petty’s notes on Porritt’s stories from the 1990s add evocative details. To get to the cave whose general location Brewer had pointed out to Porritt, “there is a 200 foot drop. At the 30 foot level it [is] necessary to swing onto a ledge and take steps down from there.” Petty, *Linda Karen Petty’s Personal History*.

80. Carter and Tomlinson, “Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb”; David L. Tomlinson to Paul R. Cheesman and Millie Cheesman, Nov. 25, 1987, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 30, folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

81. Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013. Terry Carter identifies the photographer as Lucian Bound. Carter and Tomlinson, “Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb.”

of an accidental drug overdose, but Heinerman believes it was staged.⁸² Another source implies that Heinerman and Brewer conspired with the LeBarons to sell fraudulent artifacts to wealthy Latter-day Saints.⁸³

By 1990, Brewer and Heinerman had a spectacular falling-out. Their dispute concerned a Canadian woman named Louise to whom Heinerman had been engaged. Louise complained to Brewer that Heinerman had deceived her and defrauded her out of \$34,000. Brewer helped her move out of Heinerman's home, and he also testified against Heinerman before a Church court. According to a thirdhand account of Brewer's testimony, he confessed at the hearing that he and Heinerman had conspired to sell fake copper plates to members of the Church.⁸⁴ Heinerman retaliated with a priesthood curse consigning Brewer and his progeny to hell.⁸⁵

In 2001, Heinerman published a book to popularize Brewer's story.⁸⁶ Brewer complained about the book in an interview with Gail Porritt. According to Brewer, many claims in the book were fabricated, and the book's publication had complicated the resolution of a lawsuit over ownership of the land where the cave was located. "I've tried to let it cool off, more or less. Tried to say, well, no, you know, forget it, it's not true, whatever. Tried to cool it down. And I thought it was until he brought that dang book out."⁸⁷

82. Heinerman, *Hidden Treasures*, 203–08; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

83. [Barton], "Manti Enigma."

84. [Barton], "Manti Enigma"; Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013; Carter and Tomlinson, "Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb." I did not ask John Heinerman about Brewer's confession, but he volunteered an anecdote in which Brewer's brother-in-law Jerry Mower enticed Brewer to manufacture and sell fake plates, and "they had to go and repay." Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

85. Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

86. Heinerman, *Hidden Treasures*.

87. Porritt, interview with Brewer, n.d. [ca. 2001].

When Porritt asked how soon Brewer expected to go public with the location of the cave, Brewer said it would be sometime within the next two years. In addition to needing to resolve the lawsuit over ownership of the land, he also expected the Lord to bring forth a couple of archaeologists to assist with the work. Porritt then asked if Brewer would mind recording his story on video for posterity. Brewer replied, “Well . . . I’m not too . . . not ready for that. I don’t want to be like John Heinerman. Okay?”⁸⁸ Brewer did *not* reveal his secrets sometime within the next two years. Instead, he kept them until 2007, when he took them to his grave.⁸⁹

According to Brewer’s friend Terry Carter, near the end of his life Brewer “blew the entrance to the cave up” and vowed never to reveal its location while he was alive. Carter wrote in 2006 that Brewer “has become a recluse, is starting to go senile and denies that his cave ever existed and will not talk to anyone about it. His wife is much more abrasive and will threaten to shoot anyone who tries to talk to John, or steps foot on their property.” Carter, a believer in the cave, explained away Brewer’s denial. Brewer “was given an ultimatum by his wife to deny that his cave, mummies and artifacts ever existed in order to re-store harmony to the family.”⁹⁰ Senile or no, Brewer had decided that being a father and husband made him happier than being a finder of plates.⁹¹

88. Porritt, interview with Brewer, n.d. [ca. 2001].

89. “Earl John Brewer.”

90. Post by Terry L. Carter, Oct. 5, 2006, in “9’ tall mummies . . . cool!” on the Ancient Lost Treasures Message Board, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100329140143/http://ancientlosttreasures.yuku.com/topic/4744>.

91. According to John Brewer’s son Jed Brewer, his father “paid my rent for 2 years so I could get my college degree.” Jed sent his father checks to repay the money, but when he visited, he found the uncashed checks in a stack. John “was always positive to what I was doing. He was never manipulative with any of my family,” says Jed. Brewer, instant message to author, Apr. 4, 2021.

Dávila's and Brewer's Legacies

Rejected by the Mormon establishment, Dávila's and Brewer's projects have been taken up by an array of fundamentalist prophets and non-profit organizations. One of the first to make use of Brewer's story was Gerald Peterson Sr., who in 1978 founded a polygamous sect called the Righteous Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Peterson claimed that Brewer had taken him inside his cave in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Peterson also borrowed some of the plates, which he translated. His followers are forbidden to read the translation until the appointed time. For four decades they have kept the translation under a sacred seal.⁹²

In 1990, Manti, Utah resident Jim Harmston led a group of locals to search the hills near the Manti Temple for Brewer's cave. They found esoteric petroglyphs much like those in Fillmore that José Dávila had identified as the angel Moroni's signature glyphs. In short order "there was an excavation going on the West side of the Manti valley," and rumors circulated that someone had found Brewer's treasure cave. Harmston's bishop in Manti objected to the illegal dig and worried that his ward members might embarrass the Church. Four years later, Harmston founded his own polygamous sect.⁹³

Another Manti polygamist, Jerry Mower, married John Brewer's sister and claims to have learned the secret of Brewer's cave. In 2001, Mower showed historians H. Michael Marquardt and Gerald Kloss "many artifacts he claims he found in the valley of Manti," including stone boxes and gold plates. Mower told the historians that he had "found many caves in the Valley of Manti and mummies, including he claims, the mummies of Adam and Eve—since he believes this was the

92. Christopher C. Smith, interview with Michael Peterson, Nov. 5, 2018. Brewer told Gail Porritt that no one had ever been inside the cave save himself and his son. Porritt, interview with Brewer, n.d. [ca. 2001].

93. [Barton], "Manti Enigma."

Garden of Eden site and the site where Noah built the Ark. He feels the second coming will take place in The Valley of Manti. He also showed us [a] translation of the gold plates with symbols for God the Father, Jesus the son, and The Holy Spirit, who is Joseph Smith.”⁹⁴

Mower added colorful science-fiction flourishes to Brewer’s stories. Among his artifacts is a disc-shaped rock that he says is an ancient CD. He also claims to know of a hidden temple in the mountains with three altars—terestrial, terrestrial, and celestial. The celestial altar is booby-trapped, and to reach it requires taking a literal “leap of faith” by walking off a cliff onto an invisible ledge. The ancient Nephite general Moroni, Mower says, teleported between Mexico, Utah, and New York with the help of a network of portals.⁹⁵

Fundamentalist prophet Ross LeBaron Jr. owes more to José Dávila than to Brewer. LeBaron has provided his own translation of Dávila’s Fillmore petroglyphs, declaring that the yin-yang symbol represents the location in southern Utah where the ark of the covenant was deposited by the priests of David and Solomon. The ark was buried there and then guarded by the direct descendants of David until the last of the guardians died out a hundred years ago. The last guardian carved the petroglyphs so that the hiding place would not be lost. From the Jewish *hamsa* symbol, LeBaron learned that Adam, Jacob, and other important biblical figures are buried in Zion National Park.⁹⁶

94. Gerald John Kloss, “My Visit to Utah: A Personal Reflection,” in *Latter Day Saint History* 13 (2001): 18–19; additional details provided by H. Michael Marquardt on Aug. 8, 2011. See also May, “Utah’s City in the Clouds,” *Ancient American* 27 (April/May 1999): 3–4, 37–39. For more on the history of this idea, see Cristina Rosetti, “Praise to the Man: The Development of Joseph Smith Deification in Woolleyite Mormonism, 1929–1977,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 54, no. 3 (2021): 41–65.

95. Smith, interview with Rodgers, Mar. 14, 2017.

96. Gail Porritt, “Ross LeBaron’s Interpretation of Characters,” 1–4, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

Like Dávila, LeBaron treated the petroglyph symbols as composites of multiple sub-symbols. Unlike Dávila, however, he did not use either Joseph Smith's "Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar" or scholarly Egyptian lexicons. Instead, he combined direct revelation with bits of lore derived from ostensibly ancient texts such as the *Forgotten Books of Eden*. LeBaron claimed that virtually every important event in gospel history took place in Utah. After being kicked out of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in a Utah "treasure cave." After the Flood, Noah landed on a mountain in present-day Utah. Utah was the location not only of the Tower of Babel, but also the original lands of Israel and Egypt. "Anyone who believes in that copy-cat area over there [in the Middle East] is part of the Babylonian confusion. It's all right here in Southern Utah."⁹⁷

In contrast to the fundamentalists, the Ancient Historical Research Foundation (AHRF) investigates Brewer's and Dávila's stories from an orthodox Latter-day Saint perspective. Terry Carter cofounded the organization in the 1990s to study "mystery glyphs" such as those translated by José Dávila. Dávila's friend J. Golden Barton and Brewer's friend David Tomlinson served as trustees for the organization until their deaths. Other trustees include marginal or controversial Latter-day Saint scholars such as Rodney Meldrum, Wayne May, and Steven E. Jones.⁹⁸

97. Gail Porritt, report on an interview with Ross LeBaron, n.d., 3–4, 11, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

98. Terry Carter and Shawn Davies, "Mysterious Petroglyphs in the Western US," <https://web.archive.org/web/20200111002346/http://www.mysteryglyphs.com/pages/Articles/20061029-002A.pdf>; Terry Carter, "About my youtube channel, Treasure Hunting, Nephilim Giants, out of place archaeology, etc.," YouTube, Dec. 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaLTleZHCWs>; "AHRF Bios," available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130221045836/http://www.ancienthistoricalresearchfoundation.com/Pages/Bios/BioMain.htm>.

In 2005, the AHRF carbon-dated a piece of bark from Brewer's cave and found it to be approximately 2,161 years old.⁹⁹ AHRF founder Terry Carter allows that aspects of the Brewer story are fishy, but he insists that the carbon-dated tree bark "couldn't have been forged." Members of the AHRF continue the search for Brewer's cave, although they feel that guardian spirits and booby traps may prevent it from being found until God's appointed time.¹⁰⁰ They also continue the quest for the Fillmore, Utah metal records sought by José Dávila. In the 1980s, David Tomlinson went so far as to purchase "the placer [i.e., mining] claims" to Dávila's Chalk Creek Canyon mine.¹⁰¹

Members of the AHRF see Mormon academics as their rivals. They accuse professional academics like Ray Matheny of bullying amateur explorers and stealing or covering up their finds. To these faithful Mormon folk, the establishment's rejection of Dávila's and Brewer's charismatic artifacts is a symptom at least of incompetence, if not of apostasy or malign intent.¹⁰²

99. Steven E. Jones, "Radiocarbon Dating of Bark Sample from Brewer's Cave, Manti Area," *Ancient American* 15, no. 90 (Mar. 2011): 8.

100. Terry Carter, "Nephilim Giants found in Utah, Brewers Cave the untold story," YouTube, Jan. 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ab2jZYFeGY>; Carter and Tomlinson, "Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb."

101. Paul R. Cheesman and David L. Tomlinson, "Egyptian and Hmong Clues to a Western American Petroglyph Group," *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications* 18 (1989): 303–10; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 161–63.

102. Post by DrJones, Feb. 26, 2011, in "We're surely in it now: Hel/3 Nephi, Revelation D&C 29, 45," LDS Freedom Forum, <http://www.ldsfreedomforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=6041&start=540>; Robert Shrewsbury, "An Open Letter to the President of the United States," *Terra Firma Assayers*, Oct. 23, 2004, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120729023110/http://www.terrafirmaassayers.com/bush.htm>.

Folk and Official Culture and the Routinization of Charisma

Academic folklorists define “folk culture” as culture that is “shared person to person” and that varies or changes each time it’s transmitted. This contrasts with “official culture,” which is broadcast in a single version by an authority or intellectual property owner.¹⁰³ While this definition foregrounds the process of transmission, it also references the social position of the message’s purveyors. Most Mormon folklore scholarship has emphasized the transmission process, perhaps to the neglect of social position.¹⁰⁴ To quote folklore studies professor Stephen Olbrys Gencarella’s summary of the critical theories of Antonio Gramsci, “the official exists in no small measure because it defines folklore,” and “folklore exists . . . in part because it officiates as the Other for the official.”¹⁰⁵

This dynamic is well illustrated in the history of Book of Mormon archaeology. Charismatic or spiritual practitioners have favored person-to-person storytelling, whether orally at firesides and “pow-wows” or on the internet in message boards and YouTube channels. Characteristically for folklore, their stories have transformed and taken on new proportions with repeated retelling. However, they tend to favor

103. Lynne S. McNeill, *Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013), 1–13.

104. See, for instance, W. Paul Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen, “Between Pulpit and Pew: When History and Lore Intersect,” in *Between Pulpit and Pew: The Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore*, edited by W. Paul Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 4; and Tom Mould and Eric A. Eliason, “Introduction: The Three Nephites and the History of Mormon Folklore Studies,” in *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, edited by Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013).

105. Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, “Folk Criticism and the Art of Critical Folklore Studies,” *Journal of American Folklore* 124, no. 494 (Fall 2011): 259.

this mode of transmission not because they lack the ambition to broadcast their message through authoritative channels but because they are denied access to those channels. They are denied access because of their social position—their poverty and lack of Church or academic credentials—and because they have made useful foils for official Church and academic culture. BYU archaeologists like Ray Matheny established their scientific bona fides in part by distancing themselves from archaeological claims they viewed as fraudulent or fantastical. As a result, “folk” and “scientific” Book of Mormon archaeologies arose together symbiotically.

Folklorists emphasize that “folk culture is no more or less important than official culture. It doesn’t exist above or beneath the official culture but right next to it.”¹⁰⁶ That, however, is not the attitude of most guardians and gatekeepers of official culture. Official culture actively *enforces* its single version, drawing and maintaining strict boundaries between itself and the folk, and it tends to look down on anything that doesn’t meet its standards for inclusion within its scope. So when a recent edited volume on Mormon folklore began its discussion of folklore by invoking Carl Sagan’s contrast between the folkloric “superstitious mind” and the scientific “critical mind,” it perhaps uncritically adopted the stance and language of official culture rather than the stance and language of folkloristics.¹⁰⁷ Academics engaged in the study of folklore may personally agree with academic critiques of folk culture, but as scholars we must also recognize that we occupy a privileged social position and have a vested interest in the struggle to distinguish folk from official, so we are not disinterested observers. Also noteworthy is that while folklore studies have historically focused on non-elite “folk,” the discipline increasingly recognizes that “elites will have, inasmuch as

106. McNeill, *Folklore Rules*, 66.

107. Reeve and Van Wagenen, “Between Pulpit and Pew,” 1–2.

they adhere in groups, a lore as well.”¹⁰⁸ We find good examples in the stories that Ray Matheny told his students about the “crazy” artifacts that people brought to him for authentication and in the story that William J. Adams Jr. told about his discovery of symbols from Brewer’s plates on a restaurant napkin.

Moving to a different disciplinary frame borrowed from the sociology of religion may help elucidate what cultural work the folk and official archaeologists were doing in their contests over Dávila’s and Brewer’s discoveries. According to the German sociologists Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, something like the tension between folk and official culture plays out in every religion and intensifies as the religion gets older. They called this the “sect-church cycle” or “routinization of charisma.” According to this theory, a religious sect begins with a “charismatic” event—a breaking-in to history of something thrilling but uncontrollable, like miraculous divine power or invisible gold plates. But as the sect matures into a full-fledged church, it builds systems, institutions, and routines around its founding charisma to contain the charisma and make it safe. It returns its gold plates to their stone box to prevent them from endangering the stability or quality of faith.¹⁰⁹

Charisma is thrilling, but routine is not. Inevitably, some adherents seek to “revitalize” their faith by liberating charisma from its

108. Roger D. Abrahams, “Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore: Performing Services,” *Western Folklore* 37, no. 3 (July 1978): 161.

109. The concept of “routinization of charisma” was pioneered by German sociologist Max Weber, whose fullest treatment of the subject has been translated into English as *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*, translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 358–92. German theologian Ernst Troeltsch elaborated Weber’s theory into the idea of the sect-church cycle in Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1931). The concept has been treated in a Mormon context by Armand L. Mauss and Philip L. Barlow, “Church, Sect, and Scripture: The Protestant Bible and Mormon Sectarian Retrenchment,” *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 397–414.

containment—by removing the plates from their box. Religion’s official gatekeepers may tolerate these folk revitalization movements if they find them nonthreatening enough. Or they may sanction and exclude them, at which point the revitalization movements fizzle out, go independent, or go underground. Many failed revitalization movements give rise to new religious movements, beginning the sect-church cycle all over again.¹¹⁰

Thomas Ferguson’s NWAFF began with an ambition to revitalize the LDS faith by finding concrete evidence of the Book of Mormon and its glittering gold plates.¹¹¹ But from the beginning, conservative forces in Mormonism’s official culture resisted Ferguson’s quest. Apostles Joseph Fielding Smith and Marion G. Romney worried that Book of Mormon archaeologists promoted heterodox interpretations of the Book of Mormon that limited its geographical scope in direct contradiction to statements made by the Church’s founder Joseph Smith.¹¹² Other General Authorities and Mormon academics felt “considerable embarrassment over the various unscholarly postures assumed” by Book of Mormon archaeologists and feared that their work would damage the academic reputation of BYU. This, in no small part, is why the Church folded NWAFF into BYU in 1961 and placed its administration and finances under the control of the Church Archaeological Committee. By 1963, the committee decreed that the foundation should do its archaeological work in a secular way and that “any attempt at

110. Anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace popularized the phrase “revitalization movement” in “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (Apr. 1956): 264–81.

111. See, for instance, Thomas S. Ferguson to David O. McKay, Jan. 25, 1954, MSS 1549, Thomas S. Ferguson Papers, 1936–1975, box 2, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

112. See, for example, Milton R. Hunter to Thomas S. Ferguson, Aug. 12, 1954, MSS 1549, Thomas S. Ferguson Papers, 1936–1975, box 2, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

correlation or interpretation involving the Book of Mormon should be eschewed.”¹¹³

In an illustrative exchange, apostle Marion G. Romney accosted BYU archaeologists in Mexico City. According to Max Wells Jakeman,

[Apostle Romney] immediately asked me, <in an important manner,> if I was expecting to find ‘Lehi’s Tomb’ on this expedition. I assured him that I was leaving this up to the missionaries. Yesterday he called Carl, Ray, Harvey, and Larry into a room by themselves, and there—according [to] the report they gave me—he gave them ‘serious instructions’; namely, that they must send back only sound scientific reports of their findings, and must leave all conclusion, with respect to the Book of M., to others—i.e. the ‘committee?’—back home. They said they were interested only in doing scientific work at Aguacatal, as the Department had done in the past, but he didn’t have <the> time to hear them out.¹¹⁴

While the archaeologists resented this interference in their work, they also took the lesson to heart. Despite the title of Stan Larson’s history of the NWAf, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, theirs was a quest for conventional archaeological evidence, not for sensational artifacts like gold plates. They increasingly functioned as an arm of official culture, helping keep the lid on the stone box. By 1969, BYU archaeology grad Dee F. Green—who had personally participated in NWAf excavations—could write that “the first myth we need to eliminate is that Book of Mormon archaeology exists.”¹¹⁵

113. Dee F. Green, “Book of Mormon Archaeology: The Myths and the Alternatives,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 76.

114. Max Wells Jakeman to Ross T. Christensen, Feb. 28, 1961, MSS 1716, Ross T. Christensen Collection, 1891–1992, box 13, folder 6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. Angle brackets indicate a supralinear insertion.

115. Green, “Book of Mormon Archaeology,” 76. For Green’s participation in BYU-NWAf expeditions, see Ross T. Christensen, Expedition Journal, 1962, MSS 1716, Ross T. Christensen Collection, 1891–1992, box 13, folder 7, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

The official culture did not speak with one voice on this subject. BYU academics like John Sorenson continued to work and publish on Book of Mormon archaeology, though more quietly and informally than before. And BYU archaeologist Paul R. Cheesman and General Authorities Mark E. Petersen and Milton R. Hunter each kept up a sympathetic correspondence and relationship with amateur archaeologists like José Dávila and John Brewer who continued the search for ancient Nephite and Jaredite artifacts and records. The charismatic quest for sensational artifacts like gold plates was pushed to the folk periphery of Mormon culture, but Cheesman, Petersen, and Hunter prevented it from being pushed out of Mormon culture altogether while they were alive.

After their deaths, gold plates became chiefly the domain of Mormon-inspired new religious movements and breakaway fundamentalist sects. And so the sect-church process began anew, with new charisma spilling forth from unearthed metal plates, luminous and uncontainable.

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