

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, Deseret Book, 1976, 366–376

The Book of Mormon is so often taken to task by those calling themselves archaeologists that it is well to know just what an archaeologist is and does. Book of Mormon archaeologists have often been disappointed in the past because they have consistently looked for the wrong things. We should not be surprised at the lack of ruins in America in general. Actually the scarcity of identifiable remains in the Old World is even more impressive. In view of the nature of their civilization one should not be puzzled if the Nephites had left us no ruins at all. People underestimate the capacity of things to disappear, and do not realize that the ancients almost never built of stone. Many a great civilization which has left a notable mark in history and literature has left behind not a single recognizable trace of itself. We must stop looking for the wrong things.

Impressive and Misleading Names

Ever since the Book of Mormon first appeared its claims have been both challenged and defended in the name of “archaeology.” The writer frequently receives letters from people calling themselves archaeologists proposing to discredit the Book of Mormon, and other letters from those who have been upset by such claims, not daring to question the authority of “archaeology.” But what is an archaeologist? To quote from a recent study which is as near to an “official” statement as we can get, he is simply an “expert in the cultural history of a particular part of the world.”¹ He is strictly a specialist, not in “archaeology but in the ways of a particular society: “specialization in archaeology is necessarily by area, as in the humanities, rather than by subject matter, as in the natural sciences.” That is, there is no “subject matter” of archaeology as a single disciplines but only a lot of widely separated fields in which “the program of training for each area is different.”² As any archaeologist will tell you, “the actual techniques of archaeological excavation and recording can be learned only by field experiences” and not by reading books or taking courses. Anyone who wants to be an archaeologist must “choose an area of specialization early and stick to it,” receiving his degree not in “archaeology” but in that area. Proficiency in one area (usually Classical Languages, Near Eastern Languages, Far Eastern Languages, or American Anthropology)³ does not in any way qualify the student in any of the others; there is no “general archaeology.” If after centuries of diligent archaeological study and the outpouring of vast sums of money in archaeological projects the world’s great universities are still without archaeology departments it is not because the idea has never occurred to them but simply because archaeology cannot be studied as a single discipline.

Advice to Book of Mormon Archaeologists

“It cannot be too strongly emphasized,” a leading archaeologist writes “that archaeological finds in themselves mean nothing they have to be interpreted.”⁴ And for that as Braidwood says, “no tool may be ignored,” the most important tool by far being that which enables the archaeologist to examine the written records of the culture he is studying.⁵ The careful critical study of original texts is the principal activity of every competent archaeologist who “uses the evidence of written history and the material remains of human activities” together. For this he must “learn the historian’s techniques and ... acquire an intimate familiarity with the historical literature. ... This procedure involves learning the languages ... so that the archaeologist will not have to depend on other people’s interpretations of these materials in his work.”⁶ Today, we are told an archaeologist’s “training must be wider and more intensive than it has ever been. The day has long passed when it was sufficient for a student of the Near East to know Hebrew and have a nodding acquaintance with one or two of the cognate languages. One must have a working knowledge of all if he is to be really competent.”⁷ The archaeologist according to the director of the Oriental Institute of Chicago, “needs for example enough of the modern local languages to steer the physical work ... and to gain that traditional setting of his site which persists through long ages. He needs enough of the ancient local languages to exercise a judicial, topical control on the pronouncements of the professional linguists.”⁸ In other words, he must at least speak the modern languages of the area in which he works, and read the ancient ones. “To recreate the past we need ... a great deal more than a dog-Latin transcription of observed data,” said R. E. M. Wheeler in his presidential address to the Council for British Archaeology, “... it is not enough that we archaeologists shall be a variety of natural scientist man’s recorder ... must be a good deal more than a rather superior laboratory assistant; what is needed,” he concludes, is “something equivalent to a classical education,” with its rigorous training in language, “to save archaeology from the technicians.”⁹

Limitations of Archaeology

J. De Laet, a Belgian archaeologist of wide experience in Europe and the Near East, has just written a monograph on the limitations of archaeology. He begins by pointing out the great amount of jealousy and tension that always exists among archaeologists, and the conflicting definitions of archaeology that are still being put forward. Archaeology in its proper function of “auxiliary of history” is at present falling down, he claims, due to “the encroachment of techniques on ideas,” a trend which is dangerously far advanced in America.¹⁰ Because of faulty concepts and practices “we do not hesitate,” says De Laet, “to affirm that at least fifty percent of all archaeological material gathered in the course of the past century in almost every

country of the ancient world is actually of more than questionable value.”¹¹ As to the rest, “the archaeological documents of undoubted validity to which one can accord complete confidence ... are still insufficiently numerous to be used as a foundation for systematic historical and philological study.” “Historians and philologists,” he concludes, “have attempted much too soon to utilize the offerings of archaeology in the attempt to solve problems of a historical or philological order.”¹² Half the material is useless and the other half can’t be used! If such can be seriously described as the state of archaeology in the Old World, where the study is ancient and established, the documents numerous and detailed, and the workers many and zealous, what can we expect of archaeology in the New World, or how can we seriously attempt at this state of the game to apply archaeological evidence to prove the Book of Mormon?

The archaeologists are no more to blame for this state of things than is the nature of the material they work with. The eminent Orientalist Samuel Kramer, director of one of the greatest archaeological museums in the world, notes that material remains unaccompanied by written texts are necessarily in themselves “highly ambiguous material,” and always the object of “unavoidably subjective interpretation.” As a result, while one group of archaeologists reaches one conclusion, “another group of archaeologists, after analyzing practically identical archaeological data, arrives at an exactly opposite conclusion.”¹³ “The excavator,” writes Woolley, “is constantly subject to impressions too subjective and too intangible to be communicated, and out of these, by no exact logical process, there arise theories which he can state, can perhaps support, but cannot prove.”¹⁴ “To illuminate the distant past,” Henry Breuil has written recently, “nothing remains but anonymous debris, worked stones, sharpened bones, skeletons or scanty and scattered remains of ancient men lost in the floors of caves, the sands of beaches and dunes, or mixed with the alluvial wash of rivers,”—all quite anonymous and dateless.¹⁵ No wonder Kramer deems it “fortunate” that the evidence for understanding Sumerian early history “has nothing to do with the highly ambiguous material remains ... (but) is of a purely literary and historical character.”¹⁶ All these warnings and instructions the Book of Mormon student should take to heart when questions of archaeology are raised.

Proceed with Caution!

There is certainly no shortage of ruins on this continent, but until some one object has been definitely identified as either Nephite or Jaredite it is dangerous to start drawing any conclusions. There was no Hittite archaeology, for example, until some object was definitely proven to be Hittite, yet men were perfectly justified in searching for such objects long before they discovered them. The search must go on, but conclusions should wait. We are asking for trouble when we describe any object as Nephite or Jaredite, since, as Woolley says, “no record is ever

exhaustive,” and at any moment something might turn up (and often does!) to require a complete reversal of established views. Aside from the danger of building faith on the “highly ambiguous materials” of archaeology and the “unavoidable subjective” and personal interpretations of the same, we should remember that archaeology at its best is a game of surprises.

A Disappointing Picture

People often ask, if the Book of Mormon is true, why do we not find this continent littered with mighty ruins? In the popular view the normal legacy of any great civilization is at least some majestic piles in the moonlight. Where are your Jaredite and Nephite splendors of the past? A reading of previous lessons should answer that question. In the Nephites we have a small and mobile population dispersed over a great land area, living in quickly-built wooden cities, their most ambitious structures being fortifications of earth and timbers occasionally reinforced with stones. This small nation lasted less than a thousand years. Their far more numerous and enduring contemporaries, the Lamanites and their associates including Jaredite remnants (which we believe were quite extensive)¹⁷ had a type of culture that leaves little if anything behind it. Speaking of the “Heroic” cultures of Greece, Nilsson writes: “Some archaeologists have tried to find the ceramics of the invading Greeks. I greatly fear that even this hope is liable to be disappointed, for migrating and nomadic tribes do not use vessels of a material which is likely to be broken, as will be proved by a survey of the vessels used by modern nomadic tribes.”¹⁸ Neither do they build houses or cities of stone.

The vast majority of Book of Mormon people, almost all of them in fact, are eligible for the title of “migrating and nomadic” peoples. We have seen that the Lamanites were a slothful predatory lot on the whole, and that even the Nephites were always “wanderers in a strange land.” A great deal of Epic literature deals with mighty nations whose deeds are not only recorded in Heroic verses but in chronicles and annals as well— that they existed there is not the slightest doubt, yet some of the greatest have left not so much as a bead or a button than can be definitely identified! “Archaeological evidence is abundant,” writes Chadwick of the remains of Heroic Ages in Europe, “though not as a rule entirely satisfactory. Great numbers of raths or earthen fortresses, usually more or less circular, still exist”¹⁹ But such remains look so much alike that English archaeologists are always confusing Neolithic, British, Roman, Saxon and Norman ruins.²⁰ And this is the typical kind of ruins one would expect from Book of Mormon peoples.

Scarcity of Stone

The surprising thing in the Old World is that so little seems to have been built of stone, except in a few brief periods such as the late Middle Ages or the early

Roman Empire. Welsh heroic literature, for example, is full of great castles, yet long and careful searching failed to reveal a single stone ruin earlier than the time of the invader Edward I, who learned about stone castles while crusading in the Near East.²¹ An official list of Roman castles from the time of Justinian enumerates 500 imperial strongholds and gives their locations; yet while the stone temples and amphitheatres built at the same time and places still stand, not a scrap of any of those castles are to be found.²² Though a great civilization flourished in Britain before Caesar, generations of searching has failed to produce in all England a single stone from pre-Roman times “on which the marks of a chisel appear, nor any kind of masonry, by which we can determine with certainty, what sort of materials were used by them before the arrival of the Romans.”²³ Scandinavian bogs have brought forth objects of great refinement and sophistication in leather, metal, wool and wood. But where are the mighty buildings that should go with this obviously dense population and advanced civilization? They are not there.²⁴

Like the Nephites, the ancients in general built of wood whenever they could. Even in Egypt the chambers of the first kings at Nagadah when not actually built of boards, and beams were built in careful imitation of them in clay and stone.²⁵ The few surviving temples of the Greeks are of course of stone, yet they still carefully preserve in marble all the boards, logs, pegs, and joinings of the normal Greek temple.²⁶ In ranging afoot over the length of Greece, the writer was impressed by the strange lack of ruins in a country whose richest natural resource is its building stone. Except for a few famous landmarks, one might as well be wandering in Scotland or Wales. It is hard to believe as one travels about the upper reaches of the Rhine and Danube, as the author did for several years by foot, bicycle, and jeep, even if one visits the local museums and excavations conscientiously, that this can have been the mustering area of countless invading hordes. There are plain enough indications that somebody was there, but in what numbers? for how long? and who were they? Only the wildest guesses are possible. The history of the great migrations is a solid and imposing structure, “clearly perceptible to the linguist.” but until now completely evading the search of the archaeologist.²⁷

Vanished Worlds

In the center of every great Epic poem looms a mighty fortress and city, yet how few of these have ever been located! Schliemann thought he had found Troy, but, as every schoolboy knows, he was wrong. He thought he had found the tomb of Priam and the Treasury of Atreus—wrong again! What he did discover was a type of civilization that Homer talked about, but to this day Hissarlik is still referred to as “the presumed site of Troy.” We have no description of any Book of Mormon city to compare with Homer’s description of Troy. How shall we recognize a Nephite city when we find it? The most we can hope for are general indications of a Book of

Mormon type of civilization— anything more specific than that we have no right to expect. From reliable Egyptian lists we know of scores of cities in Palestine whose very existence the archaeologist would never suspect.²⁸ Northern Germany was rich in megalithic monuments at the beginning of the 19th century, but now they have vanished. In every civilized country societies were founded in the 19th century to stem the tide of destruction that swept away monuments of the past with the increase of population, the opening of new lands to cultivation by new methods, the ceaseless depredations of treasure and souvenir hunters. But the antiquities went right on disappearing.²⁹

The same thing happened in America. We too easily forget what a wealth of imposing ruins of the Heroic type once dotted the eastern parts of the country. “Not content with having almost entirely exterminated the natives of this continent,” an observer wrote at the beginning of this century, “unsatisfied with the tremendous fact that we have violated covenant engagements and treaty pledges with the Indians a hundred times over, we seem to be intent on erasing the last vestige of aboriginal occupation of our land.”³⁰ This was written in an appeal to save some of the great mounds of Ohio: “There are numbers of structures of earth and stone scattered throughout our state. ... All such earthworks are, of course, placed on the summits of high hills, or on plateaus overlooking river valleys. At Fort Miami it seems as if blockhouses or bastions had been burned down when once protecting the gateway.”³¹ This is not only an excellent description of Book of Mormon strong places, but it also suits exactly the picture of the standard fortified places of the Old World. Hundreds of such hill forts have been located all over Europe and the British Isles, where they seem to represent the normal life of the people over long periods of time.

Standard Structures

These hill forts are now held to represent “the setting up of a fortified centre of tribal life by every little autonomous group at some capital point of its block of usually upland territory. Politically, the hill fort ... was the Celtic version of the earlier Greek polis.”³² That is, we find this type of structure and society standard throughout the ancient world, where it persists in many places right down to the Middle Ages.³³ It is certainly typically “Book of Mormon,” and throughout ancient times was also at home throughout Palestine and the Near East.³⁴ In Europe these communal strong-points “appear at intervals in large numbers, from which we can readily trace their erection to political causes,” while “the sparsity of cultural remains would tend to show that they were not permanently occupied.”³⁵ It is a strange picture presented to us here, of great fortified communal structures built in large numbers at one time only to be soon deserted in a land that reverts to nomadism, devoid of cultural remains. And it is valid throughout the whole ancient world. The best illustration, in

fact, of this peculiar but universal type of civilization and building, is to be found in modern times among the Maoris:

The average Maori pa was a place of permanent occupation. ... It is as the home of the people, the center of their social and economic life, no less than their defensive stronghold and focus of their military activity that the Maori pa has its peculiar interest for the archaeologist, and anthropologist and the prehistorian.³⁶

This is the typical old Greek, Celtic, Hittite and Maori Community, and it is typically Nephite as well—but it will give you no spectacular ruins.

This peculiar order of society is usually explained as the normal result of a sparse population occupying large areas of land. The dense world-population of our own day is a unique—and an alarming—phenomenon. On the other hand, populations can be too small: “The Roman Empire had an exceedingly small population.” writes Collingwood. “... the fall of the Western Empire ... depended on the fact that it neither possessed enough men to cultivate its own soil, nor invented methods of cultivating its soil so ... as to stimulate an increase of population.” And so it broke up, exactly as Nephite society did, “into a congeries of barbarian states,” living in a semi-nomadic manner.³⁷

Looking for the Wrong Things

Blinded by the gold of the Pharaohs and the mighty ruins of Babylon, Book of Mormon students have declared themselves “not interested” in the drab and commonplace remains of our lowly Indians. But in all the Book of Mormon we look in vain for anything that promises majestic ruins. They come only with the empires of another and a later day, and its great restraint and conservatism in this matter is a strong proof that the Book of Mormon was not composed by any imaginative fakir, who could easily have fallen into the vices of our archaeologists and treasure-hunters. Always there is a ruinous temptation to judge things in the light of one’s own reading and experience— and indeed, how else can one judge? Two hundred years ago an English archaeologist wisely observed:

... our ideas are apt to be contracted (“conditioned”, we would say today) by the constant contemplation of the manners of the age in which we ourselves live, and we are apt to consider them as the standard whereby to judge of, and to explain the history of past times; than which there can be no more delusive error; nor indeed is there any more effective method to prevent our understanding the truth of things.³⁸

Yet we still persist in judging the ability of the ancients to cross the Pacific or move across the continent without automobiles in the light of our own inability to do such things. We as gravely underestimate the Book of Mormon people on one side as we overestimate them on the other. If they did not build cities like ours, neither were they as helpless in their bodies as we are. More than anything else, as Paul Herrmann has recently shown, modern man underestimates the ability of the ancients to get around: "Manifestly," he writes, "the world has been since early times as great and wide as in our own day. And clearly nothing hindered early man from setting sail from his European or Asiatic homeland to regions as remote as America and Australia."³⁹

Above all, we must be on guard against taking the argument of silence too seriously. The fact that we don't find a thing in a place need not be taken to prove that it was not there. "Since the record is never complete," Woolley reminds us, "the archaeologist ... never has the last word." "The Islamic people," for example, "made no use of the wheel and the cart," but that does not prove that wheels and carts were unknown to them, for they were in constant contact with people who used them.⁴⁰

But what of the mighty ruins of Central America? It is for those who know them to speak of them, not for us. It is our conviction that proof of the Book of Mormon does lie in Central America, but until the people who study that area can come to some agreement among themselves as to what they have found, the rest of us cannot very well start drawing conclusions. The Old World approach used in these lessons has certain advantages. The Near Eastern specialists are agreed on many important points that concern the Book of Mormon, and the written records of that area are very ancient, voluminous, and in languages that can be read. It is our belief that the decisive evidence for the Book of Mormon will in the end come from the New World; the documents may be already reposing unread in our libraries and archives, awaiting the student with sufficient industry to learn how to use them.

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1. John H. Rowe, "Archaeology as a Career," *Archaeology* 7 (Winter 1954): 234.
 2. *Ibid.* The areas are so specialized that "the M.A. degree, which primarily qualifies the holder to teach at the secondary school level, is of no direct value in archaeology." *Ibid.*, 231, 234, 236.
 3. These are the conventional approaches to archaeology, which is never taught as an independent major: "Because it is important for archaeologists to have a solid grounding in the ancient languages of the areas where they intend to work, it is convenient to have the archaeology of those areas taught in direct association with the language." *Ibid.*, 230, 234.

4. Theophile J. Meek, "The Challenge of Oriental Studies to American Scholarship," *JAOS* 63 (1943): 83.
5. Robert J. Braidwood, *The Near East and the Foundations for Civilization*, Condon Lectures (Eugene: Oregon System of Higher Education, 1952), 6–7, defining archaeology as "the discipline which reclaims and interprets the material remains of man's past." That pretty well covers everything, since there are no immaterial remains: the immaterial part is purely a matter of modern reactions to ancient materials, including written documents.
6. Rowe, "Archaeology as a Career," 229.
7. Meek, "The Challenge of Oriental Studies to American Scholarship," 86.
8. John W. Wilson, "Archaeology as a Tool in Humanistic and Social Studies," *JNES* 1 (1942): 6.
9. Robert E. M. Wheeler, "What Matters in Archaeology?" *Antiquity* 24 (1950): 128–29.
10. Siegfried J. de Laet, *L'archéologie et ses problèmes* (Berchem-Brussels: Latomus, 1954), 7–9, 93. For an English translation, see Siegfried J. de Laet, *Archaeology and its Problems*, tr. Ruth Daniel (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 13–15, 82.
11. *Ibid.*, 88, p. 78 in English.
12. *Ibid.*, 89–92, pages 78–81 in English.
13. Samuel N. Kramer, "New Light on the Early History of the Ancient Near East," *American Journal of Archaeology* 52 (1948): 156–57.
14. C. Leonard Woolley, *Digging Up the Past* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 119.
15. Henri Breuil, "La conquête de la notion de la très haute antiquité de l'homme," *Anthropos* 37–40 (1942–45): 687. He is speaking of course of prehistoric archaeology, but his study bears out what Woolley says about archaeology in general.
16. Kramer, "New Light on the Early History of the Ancient Near East," 157.
17. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 238–54; reprinted in *CWHN* 5:237–52.
18. Martin P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion* (Lund: Gleerup, 1950), 6–7.
19. Hector M. Chadwick & Nora K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1932–40), 1:173, 296, 404, 424.
20. Osbert G. S. Crawford, "Barrows," *Antiquity* 1 (1927): 419; and Eliot C. Curwen, "Neolithic Camps," *Antiquity* 4 (1930): 22, for typical confusion of types.
21. Daines Barrington, "Observations on the Welch Castles," *Archaeologia* 1 (1770): 281–82, 286–87.

22. Ibid., 290.
23. James Essex, "Remarks on the Antiquity and the Different Modes of Brick and Stone in England," *Archaeologia* 4 (1777): 74; Cyril Fox & C. A. Raleigh Radford, "V.-Kidwelly Castle, Carmarthenshire," *Archaeologia* 83 (1933): 107, placing the Pre-stone period of castle-building in England between 1106 and 1275 A.D.
24. Typical is the tremendous Viking border fort of Iborsk, which flourished first from 860 to 900 A.D., yet did not receive its rim of stone reinforcement until 1330 A.D., L. Tudeer, "Isborsk—A Viking Stronghold," *Antiquity* 8 (1934): 310—14.
25. Jacques de Morgan, *La préhistoire orientale*, 3 vols. (Paris: Geuthner, 1926—27), 2:163—211.
26. Leonard Whibley, *A Companion to Greek Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 261.
27. Werner Vycichl, "Notes sur la préhistoire de la langue égyptienne," *Orientalia* 23 (1954): 218.
28. Martin Noth, "Die Wege der Pharaonenheene in Palästina und Syrien," *ZDPV* 60 (1937): 196.
29. Old prints show enormous Megalithic ruins such as those of Stonehenge and Avebury standing almost intact as late as the eighteenth and even mid-nineteenth centuries. Their disappearance in the last hundred years is an astonishing phenomenon. Carl Schuchardt, *Alteuropa* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1935), has much to say on this theme.
30. Warren K. Moorhead, *Fort Ancient* (Cincinnati: Clark, 1890), 107.
31. Ibid., 102—3.
32. Christopher Hawkes, "Hill Forts," *Antiquity* 5 (1931): 93.
33. Ibid., 95: "The Dark Ages were in many ways the Early Iron Age restored," with the people moving back again into the old fortifications and reconditioning them for use, exactly as in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 6:7—8).
34. Arie A. Kampman, "De historisch beteekenis der Hethietische vestingsbouwkunde," in *Kernmomenten* (Leiden: Brill, 1947), 142.
35. Friedrich Wagner, "Pre-historic Fortifications in Bavaria," *Antiquity* 2 (1928): 43, 55.
36. Raymond Firth, "Maori Hill-Forts," *Antiquity* 1 (1927): 66.
37. Robin G. Collingwood, "Town and Country in Roman Britain," *Antiquity* 3 (1929): 274.
38. Edward King, "Observations on Ancient Castles," *Archaeologia* 4 (1777): 365.
39. Paul Herrmann, *Conquest by Man*, tr. Michael Bullock (New York: Harper, 1954), 15.
40. C. Leonard Woolley, *Digging Up the Past*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 132—37; Herrmann, *Conquest by Man*, 179.