

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE: QUESTIONABLE ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

By Brant Gardner

In recent years, two very different books have appeared that discuss the place of the Book of Mormon in the real world. Although they differ widely in the locations where they place the Book of Mormon action, they are remarkably similar in one sadly coincidental detail. Both books use artifacts in support of the Book of Mormon that are known or regarded by experts to be forgeries. Even more coincidentally, both authors know of the controversies, and respond to the debunking of their favored artifacts in similar ways.

The first book is *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, and the second is *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni*. The first book places the Book of Mormon lands in North America, with Cumorah in New York and the Mississippi as the Sidon. The second places the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica. While the geographies are diverse, and the archaeological artifacts must necessarily differ, they both include major sections on artifacts that are tantalizingly representative of exactly what the Book of Mormon states happens. In the first case, there is a representation of early Christians in the Americas, and in the second, examples of the very script of the Anthon transcript! Both of the examples are so remarkable that they would appear to be conclusive proof of the Book of Mormon. They seem almost too good to be true. Unfortunately, they really are too good to be true.

THIS LAND: ZARAHEMLA AND THE NEPHITE NATION

The book *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation* is heavily illustrated with artifacts collectively known as the Michigan artifacts. As introduction to these pieces, *This Land* tells us:

Public awareness of the Michigan Mounds Artifacts began in 1874, in Crystal, Michigan, where a farmer, clearing some land,

uncovered the large replica of a shuttle ground black slate and highly polished. One surface displayed the incised drawing of a man's head wearing a helmet and the obverse showed two lines of writing; a group of cuneiform and a line of an unknown script. Over that 19th Century summer, more pieces were found in the surrounding countryside, including a copper dagger, a clay box, and some slate tablets, each item showing an unknown grouping of script but each on bearing on it the grouping of cuneiform, the same as that on the slate shuttle.¹

A representative slate tablet is shown in Figure 1. In the circle is the "cuneiform grouping" and in the rectangle the "unknown script." Figure 2 shows clay tablets from the Michigan collection, again highlighting the "cuneiform grouping" in the circles.

Even without a physical examination of the artifacts, there are features represented that are red flags to anyone with a background in art history. One of the first should be the presence of the "cuneiform grouping" on a slate tablet. Cuneiform writing was created for use with clay tablets. In the soft medium, a stylus was pressed into groupings that represented the language recorded. The shape of the stylus would leave the markings seen in these Michigan artifacts. Take a look at the clay tablets, and notice that the formation of the characters would be a very simple task. The stylus is simply pressed into the clay, which retains the shape and grouping of the marks. Now note the same markings on the slate. In order to gain the shape that is characteristic of cuneiform, the maker of the slate text has to *draw* the shape. The head of the marking has a triangular shape that must be drawn rather than punched. When compared with the rest of the "unknown script" the differences are obvious. The rest of the script can be created by an engraving motion. In the "cuneiform grouping," the text has to be created as



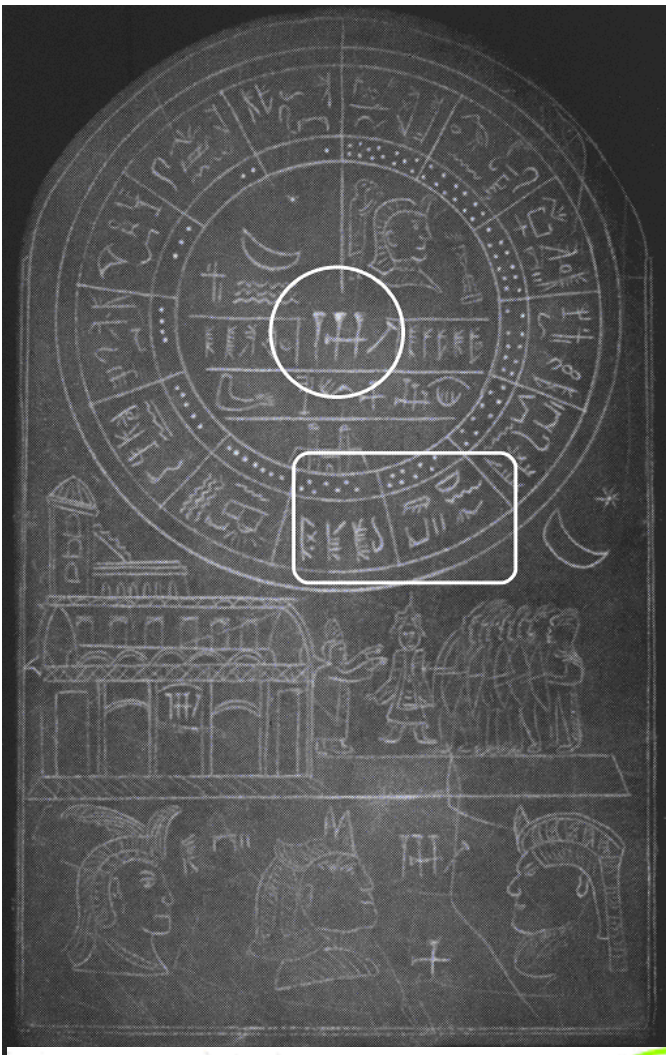


Figure 1: Michigan artifact on slate.

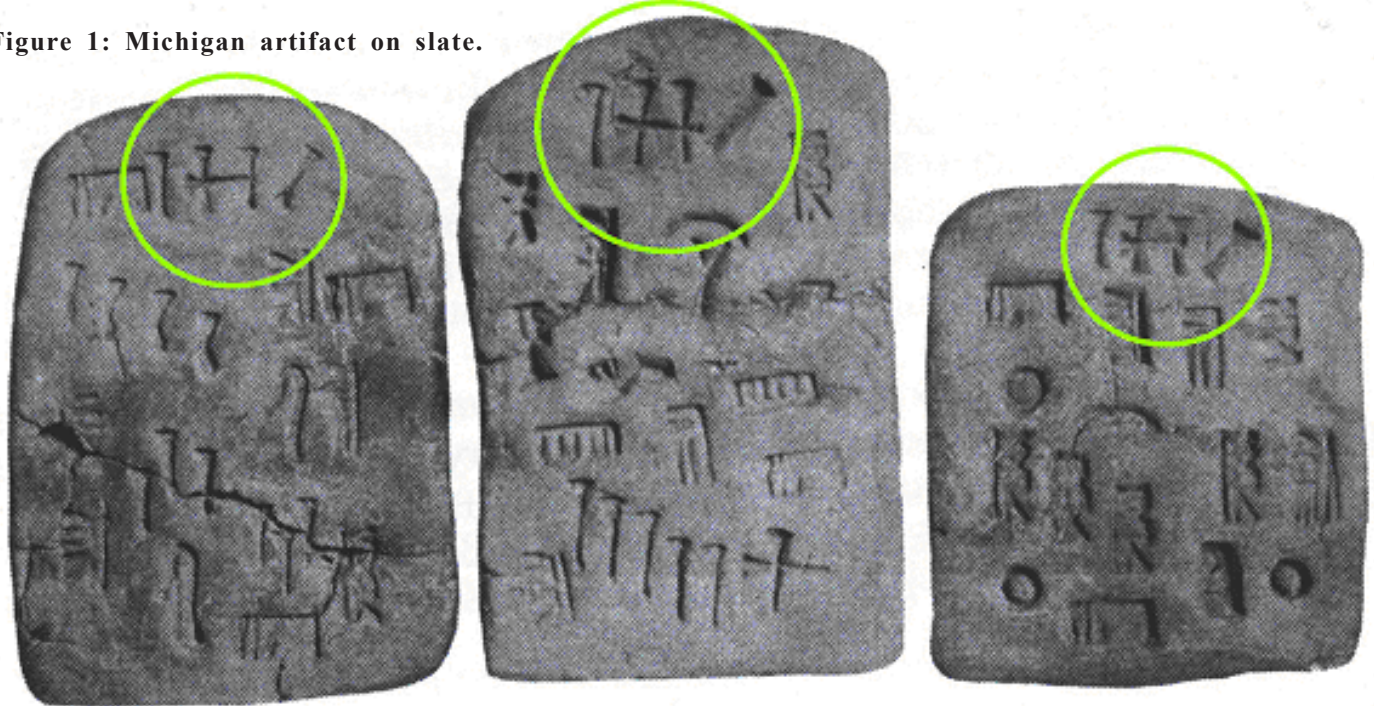


Figure 2: Clay tablets from the Michigan collection.

though it were a picture, not a letter. Thus we have two different types of script on a single artifact, and scripts that were designed to be created with two different types of tools, and on two different media. The difficulty of reproducing the “cuneiform grouping” on a non-clay surface is illustrated in Figure 3 where the author of the tablet simply gives up and uses a simpler “T” shape rather than the “correct” cuneiform style for the characters in the grouping. The omnipresence of this particular grouping led one proponent of the artifacts to label it the “Mystic Symbol,”²² though a critic of the artifacts labeled it the “sign-manual of the forger.”²³

For their part, the authors are quite clear that they understand that the artifacts are not only controversial, but have been proclaimed as forgeries from the beginning. From an LDS perspective, no less an LDS scientist that James E. Talmage examined the artifacts and declared them forgeries. Against such evidence, the authors reply:

We are quite careful in the way we treat controversial artifacts. The *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* makes mention from James E. Talmage’s journal the story about the step-daughter of Scotford (the discoverer of some of the Michigan relics), who stated that he had fraudulently manufactured many of the relics. They call this “critical evidence.” The fact is either the girl is fabricating the story, or she was telling the truth. It can go one way or the other, especially if she had something against him. In

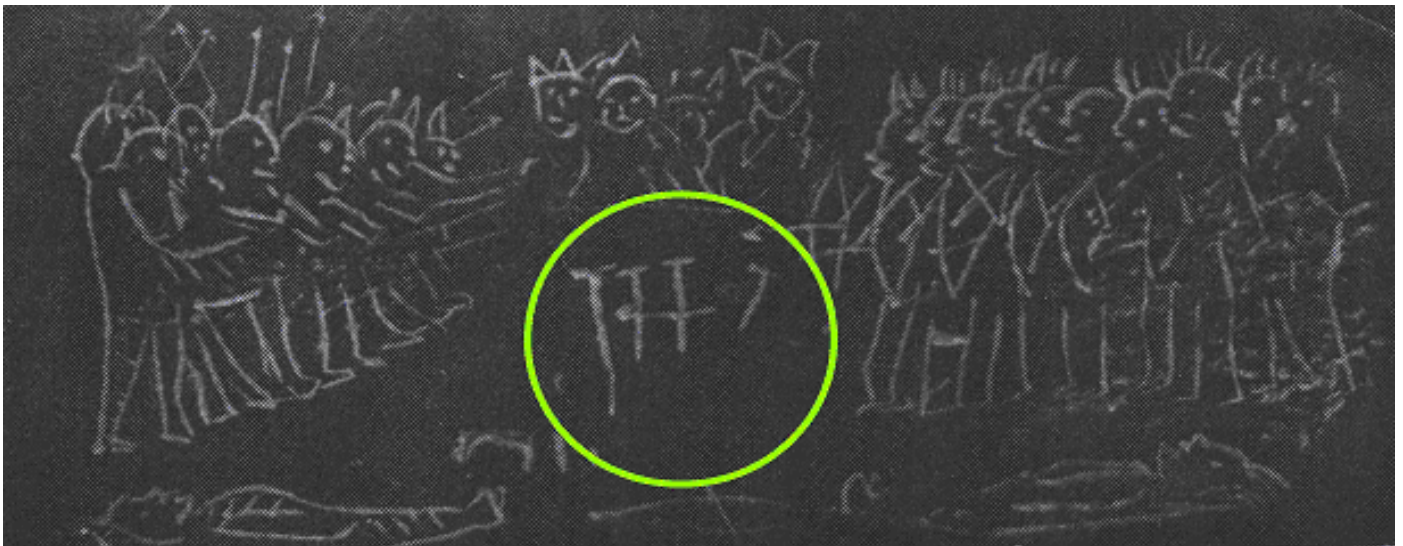


Figure 3: An “incorrect” representation of the cuneiform

our own families, we have seen false accusations made, and it is certainly not out of the question.⁴

In other words, Goble and May state that the declaration of a daughter of one of the forgers is insufficient proof, as is any of the reasoning by any of the experts. At one point, the authors decry Talmage for going with the *intent* to repudiate the artifacts because such a preconception would flavor his response.⁵ Nevertheless, they approve of a proponent who was “believing from the outset that the Michigan artifacts were genuine.”⁶

The impassioned plea of the authors is simply:

We have shown things that are controversial and have not been redeemed by science yet. We recognize that these cannot be regarded as “evidence” yet.

In spite of that, these artifacts still demand further research and cannot be dismissed out of hand, as they have a high probability of being real. Just test them is all we ask.⁷

Somehow in their rather self-serving dismissal of Talmage’s probe, they missed the fact that Talmage had sent samples of one of the artifacts that he participated in retrieving for scientific analysis, and the results were that it was factory-smelted copper, hardly the type of material that could have been used by an ancient pre-industrial population.⁸

Unfortunately for the publication of the text, the authors were apparently also unaware that exactly this type of scientific testing for which they plead has al-

ready been done, the year before they published their book. Richard B. Stamps wrote a devastating article in *BYU Studies*.⁹ Stamps ran several types of close examinations on various types of Michigan artifacts. When examining the clay artifacts he found that the type of clay and temper was not representative of that found in Michigan. In addition, several of the clay pieces have the “IH” symbol on one side, and marks of saw-cut wood on the other. As Stamps notes:

Because modern tools leave modern marks, it is logical, with these additional examples, to agree with Kelsey and Spooner that the clay artifacts having the “IH” symbol on one side and historic period woodprints on the other date to the historic period.¹⁰

Further evidence of the impossibility of the clay objects’ antiquity is that they dissolve in water, and thus could not survive in Michigan ground,

with its rainy springs, humid summers, and cold, snowy winters. The winter frost action, combined with the day thaw-night freeze sequence in early spring destroys low-fired prehistoric ceramics from the Woodland period. Water penetrates the porous pottery and, when the temperature drops low enough, it freezes, forming crystals that split the pottery. Many of the unfired Michigan Relic clay pieces have survived for more than one hundred years only because they have been stored in museums or collectors’ cabinets, protected from the harsh Michigan weather. If placed in the ground, they would not survive ten let alone hundreds of years.¹¹

Stamps also examined some of the copper pieces, yielding the same microscopical conclusion as the report to Dr. Talmage. The pieces are modern smelted copper.¹² In addition:

In cross-section, I observed that the temperature difference on the surface differs slightly from the temperature at the center. This difference is another evidence that the piece was made from smelted ingots that had been hot-rolled. Additionally, the piece I studied was too flat to have been built up by the cold-hammer, folding, laminating process that we see in Native American artifacts. This piece clearly has no folds or forgin laps. It is also extremely regular in thickness, with a range of .187 to .192 inches. A measurement of .1875 equals 3/16 of an inch – a Standard English unit of measurement and common thickness for commercially produced rolled stock. Even the edges have been peened (hammered to remove the straight edges), the sides are parallel, and the corners are right angles. The cross-section is rectangular, whereas most traditional pieces are diamond shaped with a strong ridge running down the center of the blade or point. The blank piece of copper from which this artifact was made appears to have been cut from a larger piece with a guillotine-style table shear or bench shear.¹³

Stamps notes that early criticism of the metal artifacts centered on the need for files and chisels to produce the artifacts, tools not in evidence in prehistoric North America. After the criticisms were leveled, exactly such artifacts were produced. Stamps examined a “file” and some “chisels.” He notes that the “file” is “something that looks like a file but has no cutting capability.”¹⁴ Similarly, the “chisels” have the mushroomed-out end that one expects of a chisel that has been hit with a hammer, but the chisel end itself could not cut, and shows no sign of the wear that would have caused the mushrooming of the blunt end of the “chisel.”¹⁵

Many of the artifacts are on slate, such as those in figures 1 and 2. Talmage saw clear evidence of modern saw cuts on a slate artifact, an observation Stamps confirms.¹⁶ Michigan does not have slate quarries, but there was a large business importing slate roofing tiles during the appearance of the Michigan relics. Many of the “relics” clearly demonstrate the markings of commercially cut and milled slate.¹⁷

Finally, Stamps notes the problematic nature of the images on the artifacts themselves:

Byzantine domes, pyramids, buildings, doors with windows on the sides, and double-hung, framed windows suggest Masonic Hall architecture. The use of perspective in drawings is a concept that did not appear in Europe until the fifteenth century—much too late to have come to Michigan with the lost ten tribes or even the fifth-century Coptic Christians—two of the theories concerning the artifacts’ origins.¹⁸

Clearly the authors did not know of this information, or else willingly ignored it. The statement in the text about the scientific study of the artifacts is limited to a response to the FARMS article, which they claim:

[FARMS] dogmatically reject the Michigan Relics based on an extremely flawed methodology. A careful examination of that article reveals that FARMS scholars continue to dismiss the Michigan Relics based not on any evidence, but on the claims, allegations and hearsay of the people that dismissed the tablets in the first place almost 100 years ago.¹⁹

It should be noted that at least one of the authors was truly unaware of the conflicting evidence. Ed Goble became aware of the scientific evidence after the publication of the book. To his great credit, he accepts the scientific evidence, but notes the inability of others to do so:

Speaking as one who has thoroughly embarrassed myself publicly by ever having been connected to the Michigan Tablets, I can now say that a bad taste has been left in my mouth. I can say with complete certainty on my part that they are frauds. I had a gut feeling that they were from the beginning, but I ignored it, because I wanted my book published so bad. It wasn’t until after the book had already hit Deseret Book that [the information on] ...these facts from BYU studies [was posted] on the Internet. So, I am personally very sorry I ever had anything to do with those artifacts. A symposium was held in Logan, UT at USU on Tuesday. I spoke at it. Others spoke as well. One thing became clear to me on Tuesday that they believe in them so much, and they have so much invested in them that they will never let go of them, even when facts are presented so convincing that there is no denying the facts. They still will not let go, and still try to find ways around it to argue that they are genuine. Even though I put a disclaimer in my book calling for the testing of the artifacts, and saying that they are

not yet authenticated, at this point, I am just plain embarrassed, and admit I made a big error. But that error is now in print, and cannot be changed.

The fraud continues to this day from the so-called “Burrows Cave” in Illinois. Artifacts are found on demand with the “Mystic Symbol” on them. Oh how convenient. This is not an accusation against the integrity of those who sincerely believe in these things. For example, I know Wayne May of *Ancient American Magazine* quite well, who is the co-author of my book. He sincerely believes in them. I am one of the authors of *THIS LAND: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, a book that is now available. Other parts of the book are still quite worthwhile, but I can’t say much for the parts dealing with the Michigan Tablets and Burrows Cave artifacts. Now someone is claiming to have found a cuneiform tablet in Utah, of all places. And now the “Mystic Symbol” is showing up in Utah. Will it never end?

Anyway, I am going to do the best I can do to undo my error of associating myself with these things.²⁰

The other author of *This Land* is Wayne N. May, publisher of *Ancient American* magazine and a long-time proponent of the Michigan artifacts. It would appear that even after the results of the scientific study providing just the proof of forgery that was called for, Mr. May will continue to promote them as authentic.

THE LIVES AND TRAVELS OF MORMON & MORONI

The second of these oddly parallel books is Jerry L. Ainsworth’s *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni*. Ainsworth’s controversial artifacts have nothing to do with the Michigan Relics, but rather a set of gold plates purportedly from Mesoamerica. The plates have become known as the Padilla plates, named for Dr. Jesus Padilla Orozco, the man who “found” them. An example of the Padilla plates is shown in Figure 4.

Just as with the Michigan relics examined earlier, this author also realizes that they are both controversial and the subject of a negative report concerning their authenticity. Ainsworth notes:

While this report didn’t rule out the authenticity of the gold plates, it nevertheless discredited those who believed the plates were valu-



Figure 4: Some of the Padilla Plates

able as evidence for the Book of Mormon. In fact, no clear-cut, convincing argument for or against the plates appeared in the report.²¹

It is absolutely remarkable that this statement should be so eerily parallel to the statement in *This Land*. There the critics proclaimed that the rejection of the Michigan artifacts was “based not on any evidence.”²² Now we have Ainsworth claiming that different professionals similarly cannot present “clear-cut, convincing” evidence. Both authors similarly find a way to completely dismiss the work of the professionals, rendering all of the scientific reasoning into a simple dismissal that it doesn’t constitute *real evidence*.

The similar refusal to accept the opinion of professionals is paralleled by a fascinatingly parallel refusal to believe the *same kind of contradicting evidence*. Remembering that one of the “problems” of the Michigan copper artifacts was that they were rolled rather than hammered, we find the fascinating comment in Ainsworth:

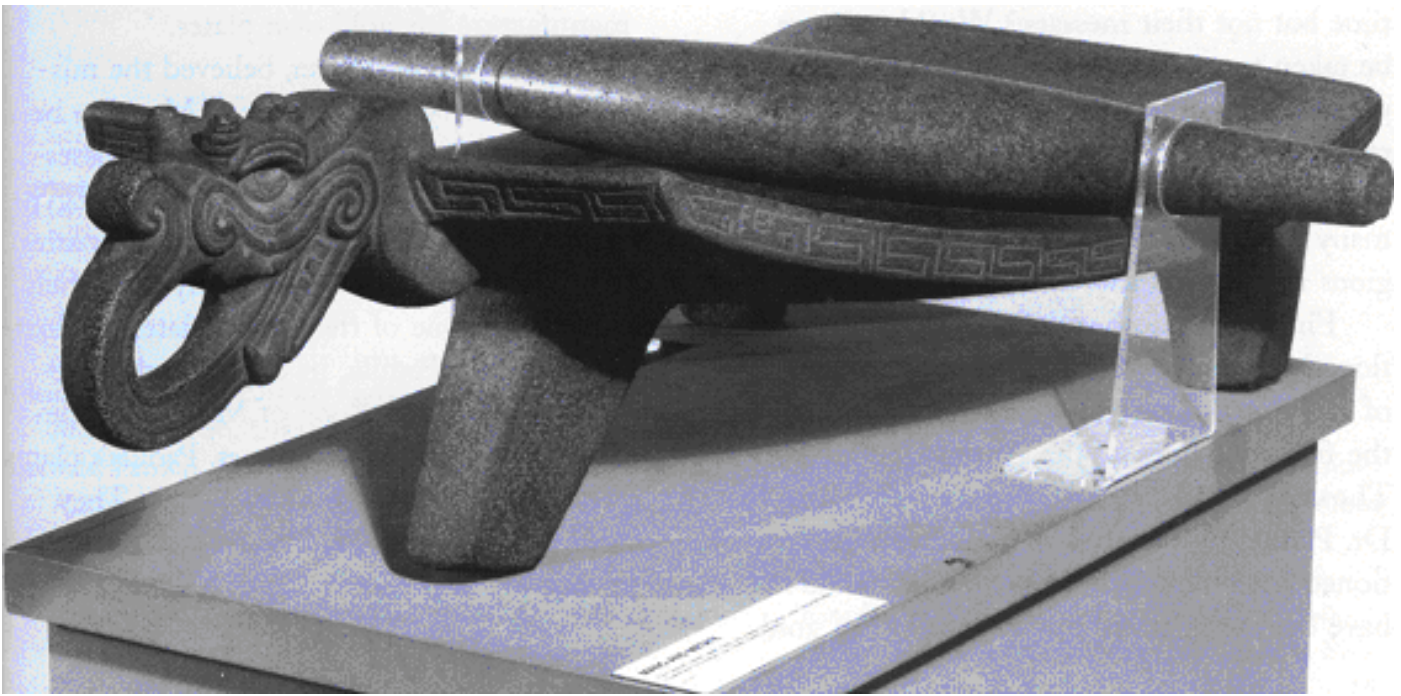


Figure 5: Ainsworth's "gold roller."

Objections that authors of the BYU report had toward the Padilla plates included the probability that several were made of rolled, not hammered, gold. No one in archaeological circles believed that pre-Columbian peoples possessed the technology to roll gold, though admittedly they had technologies in which they were as advanced as ourselves. Unbeknownst to the authors of the report, however, there are on display today a number of heavy, smooth stone rollers taken from excavations of Mayan ruins. One appears in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Another appears in the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia (illustrated).²³

It is indeed fortunate that Ainsworth gives us the illustration of this ancient gold roller. That illustration is reproduced in Figure 5 (from his book on page 269), and is the "roller" he cites from the University of Pennsylvania:

There is a very good reason why this marvelous "gold roller" was "unbeknownst" to the professional archaeologists from BYU. It is guaranteed that they knew this artifact (and the many just like it), but that they knew it as a *metate*, or a utensil for grinding corn. *Metates* are quite common, and very well known. They consist of the *metate*, or the base on which the corn is placed, and the *mano*, which is held in the hands and rolled on top of the corn against the *metate*. They are *not* known

to have been used to roll gold, and it is highly doubtful that they would produce anything like the Padilla plates. Notice that the *metate* is curved front to back, and the *mano* (the handpiece) is curved side to side. Remember that the Padilla plates are quite flat. They were produced with modern machinery, not ancient manual techniques.

The parallels of dogged assertion continue. Obviously unaware of the scientific examination of the Michigan copper artifacts, Ainsworth notes:

Another objection the authors of the report expressed about the Padilla plates was their rectangular shape and square corners. They felt that this feature of the plates constituted evidence of modern origin and could be a powerful argument against the plates' authenticity. On the other hand, we know that the gold plates of the Book of Mormon were rectangular with square corners.²⁴

Ainsworth is persistently ignoring the professionals who are making the same arguments as in the scientific and microscopic examination of the Michigan relics. His rebuttal argument is an attempt to use the plates of the Book of Mormon as refutation. While they certainly have a general form of a page, there is absolutely no way to know that they had the similarly perfect cuts as do the Padilla plates. The fact that artistic representations make them appear to have perfectly aligned pages does

not make it true. Since we cannot compare the Gold Plates to the Padilla plates, it becomes a convenient argument of expectations, but not of evidence.

Also similar to the Michigan artifacts is the presence of artistic errors on the Padilla plates. The errors on the Michigan Relics are fairly simple to see if one knows the history of the development of Western art. Thus the professionals could tell immediately that the use of perspective was an indicator of modernity, rather than antiquity. Similarly, the Padilla plates have significant and telling artistic errors that require the experience of the professional to see clearly. Nevertheless, once explained, the errors are just as out of place, and just as evident.

The author of the Padilla plates made some mistakes in iconography that are clearly undetectable to the uninitiated in Maya iconography, but which would never have been made by a native. Let's take a closer look at one of the plates, in Figure 6. The area in the yellow rectangle is the point of interest. It is a Mesoamerican world tree, shown enlarged at the right.

This basic iconographic symbol is very well known from multiple Mesoamerican sources. There are three important elements of the tree figure in authentic Mesoamerican art. The first is the tree itself, represented here as a cross-like drawing. The other two important elements are a bird at the top of the tree, and the earth monster at the bottom. In the Padilla plate, the bird and the monster are missing. Thus two-thirds of the meaning of the symbol is left off. In their place is some squiggling that attempts to represent the design, but lacking the meaning. It is as though someone attempted to draw a Moroni on a temple, and included a trombone instead of the trumpet. It is an error that would be impossible for a native artist, but quite understandable for a forger who did not truly understand the baroque forms of Mayan art.

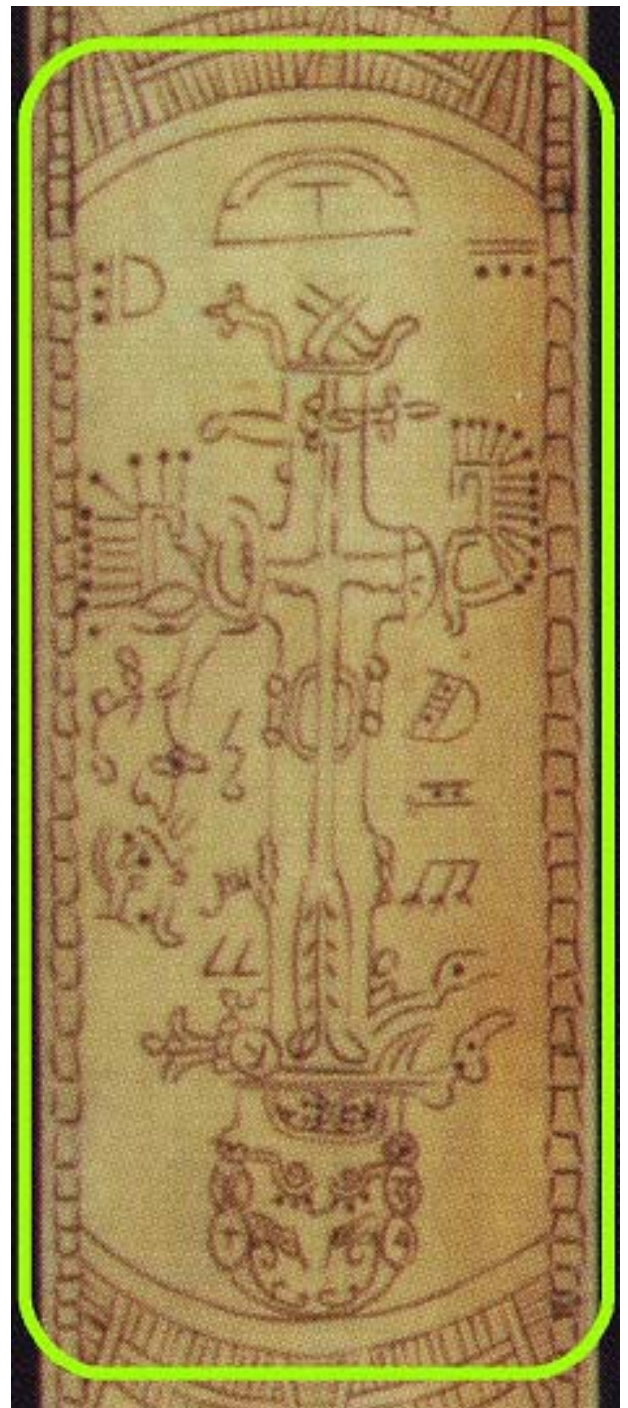


Figure 6: Examining iconography on the Padilla plates.

In the case of this particular engraving, it is quite probable that we know the piece that served as the model for the forgery—a panel from Palenque. Figure 7 shows the whole panel that the forger likely copied onto the plate. The plate is long and skinny, so the forger had to remove the two figures at either side. However, he doesn't remove them entirely. He takes the figure at the right and moves the head to the top of the tree panel, and then takes the head of the figure on the left and places it below his "tree."

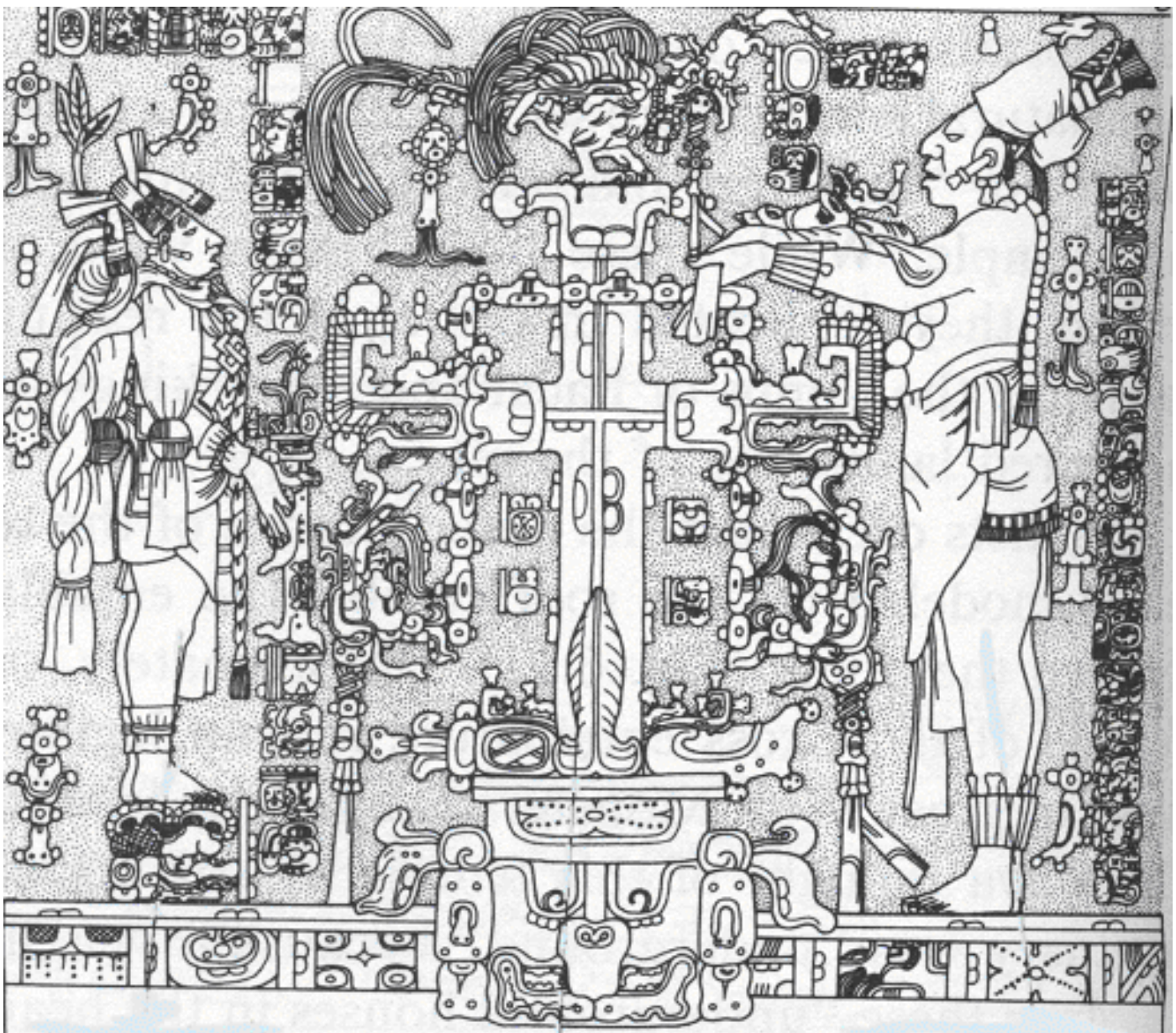


Figure 7: A panel from Palenque.

Figure 8 shows the authentic original, from Palenque, placed side by side with the forged copy, from the Padilla plates. It should be rather obvious that the drawing on the right is taken from that on the left. Note however, that at the top of the tree the U-shape is retained, but the authentic piece continues to place the stylized bird at the top of the tree. The forger stops drawing at that position, perhaps having run out of space through poor planning. Nevertheless, there is an “X” that appears to be the remnant of the legs of the bird. Note that the bird’s right leg is in the fore, and the left leg behind. The crossing of the X makes that same arrangement of elements, but without the essential part of the bird.

The next problem is at the bottom of the tree. For the native Mayan artist, this is the “world monster.” Although the art form is complex, knowing that there are two eyes, a nose, and a bone jaw along the mouth, makes it clear to even a non-specialist that a face is being represented. Compare the obvious earth monster from Palenque to the undistinguishable sketching of the forger. In Figure 9 you can see how the copyist attempted to represent elements of the drawing at the left in the forgery on the right. The lines that form the outline of the bottom of the eyes are still present, and even the curve that forms the pupil is present in both drawings. On the forger’s piece, however, the meaning never comes

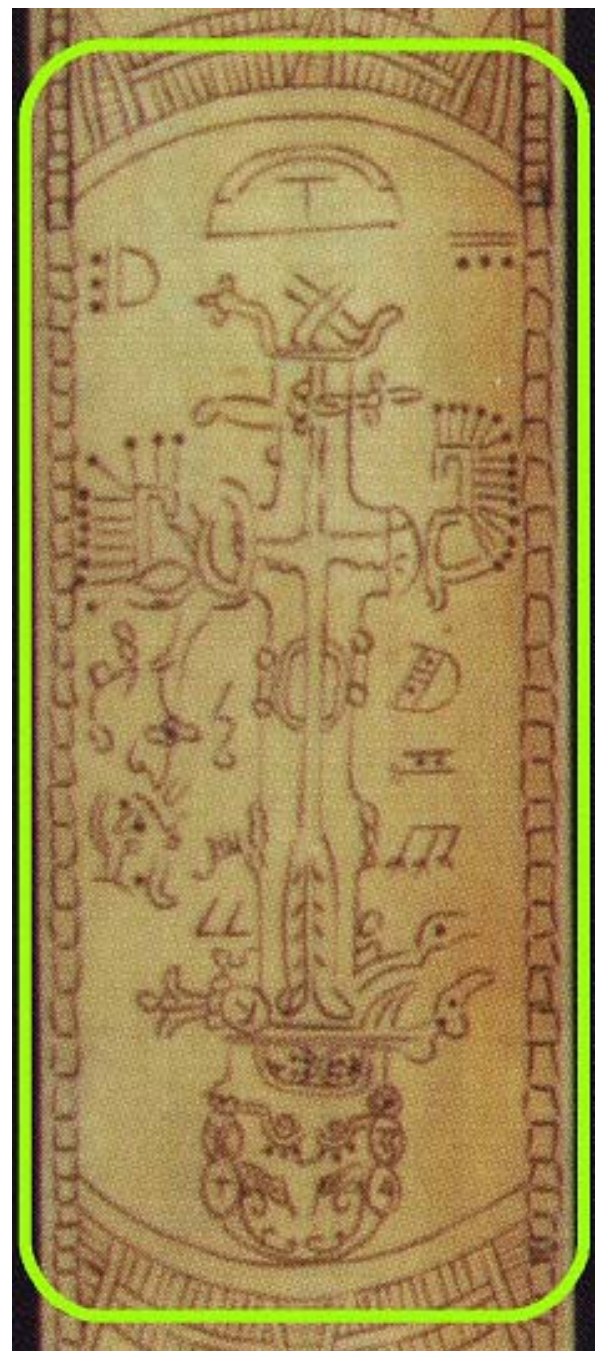
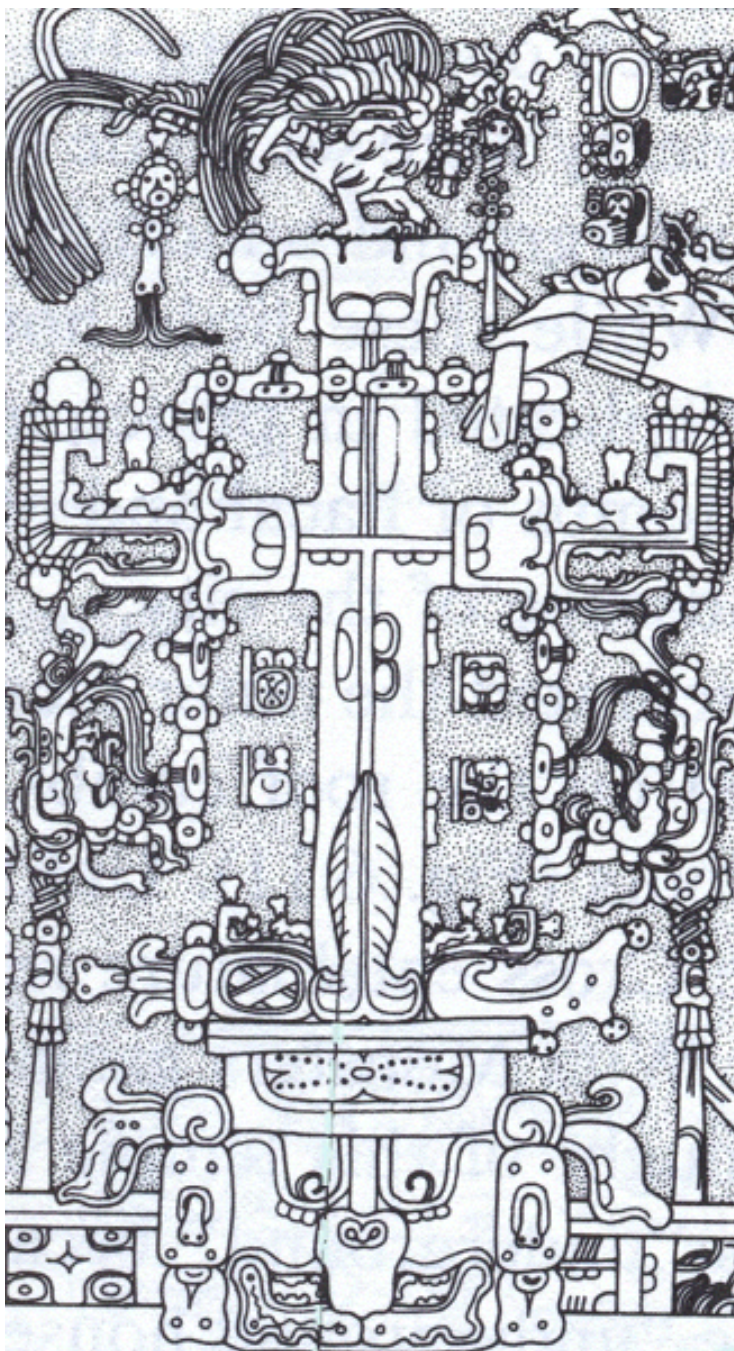


Figure 8: Comparing the Palenque panel and the Padilla plates.

across. This is particularly telling in the loss of the bone jaw (though the curves are represented) near the bottom. The authentic earth monster wears ear flares in the ears on either side of the head. The forger didn't know what they were, and so could not reproduce them. The iconography on the left can be read, but on the right there is simply an attempt at reproduction, but without understanding.

CONCLUSION

It is absolutely fascinating that these two faithful attempts to bolster our understanding of the Book of Mormon should look to so different a geography to make their case, but end up relying upon similarly controversial forgeries as part of that process. In both cases, the forgeries certainly looked like they might give evidence of the Book of Mormon. The Michigan Relics give the “right” storyline, and some characters that look a lot



Figure 9: Comparing the world monster in the Palenque panel and the Padilla plates.

like the Anthon transcript. The Padilla plates have even more text that appears very similar to the Anthon transcript. They all really do look like evidence for the Book of Mormon. The problem is that they only look like evidence for the Book of Mormon when one does not look too closely, or if one refuses to accept the verdict of those who are trained in the fields that can tell us whether or not such artifacts are legitimate. These are not.

The Book of Mormon itself is true. These forgeries are *too good to be true*. There is so much that legitimately can be said to help us understand the real world context of the Book of Mormon. There are excellent books that do not stoop to misrepresenting evidence for the text. The Book of Mormon does not need, and certainly does not want the kind of “help” that comes from continuing to perpetuate old frauds. Authors who rely upon such obvious forgeries to make their case will ultimately make it more difficult for the legitimate information to rise to the top of the heap. Sadder still is that there will be many faithful members of the Church who will grasp at these straws rather than found their understanding on more solid ground.

FURTHER READING

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NOTES

1. Edwin G. Goble and Wayne N. May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, (Colfax, Wisconsin: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2002), 21–22.
2. *Ibid.*, 22.
3. *Ibid.*, 25.
4. *Ibid.*, 19.
5. *Ibid.*, 25.
6. *Ibid.*, 35.
7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Mormonism’s Encounter with the Michigan Relics,” *BYU Studies* 40:3 (2001), 193.
9. Richard B. Stamps, “Tools Leave Marks: Material Analysis of the Scotford-Soper-Savage Michigan Relics,” *BYU Studies* 40:3 (2001), 210–238.
10. *Ibid.*, 217.
11. *Ibid.*, 217–218.
12. *Ibid.*, 220.
13. *Ibid.*, 221–222.
14. *Ibid.*, 224.
15. *Ibid.*, 225.
16. *Ibid.*, 226–227.
17. *Ibid.*, 228.
18. *Ibid.*, 231.

19. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 47.
20. Posted to bom-geography@yahoogroups.com listserv, May 24, 2002.
21. Jerry L. Ainsworth, *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni* (City Unknown: Peacemakers Publishing, 2000), 267.
22. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 47.
23. Ainsworth, *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni*, 268.
24. Ibid.



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