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William J. Hamblin

Sacred Writings on Bronze Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean

Summary:

William Hamblin focuses on the use of bronze and other metal plates to preserve sacred writing in four interrelated pre-Christian cultures of the central and eastern Mediterranean—Hebrew, Phoenician, Greek, and Italic. He concludes that such use of plates was widespread in the eastern Mediterranean at the time of Lehi.

Preliminary Report
Book of Mormon, Answers to Criticisms

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Sacred Writing on Bronze Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean

William J. Hamblin

The alleged absurdity of the Book of Mormon having been written on golden plates and its claim of the existence of an early sixth century B.C. version of the Hebrew Bible written on bronze (brass) plates has long been a favorite target of critics of the book. Today, however, those critics almost universally admit that there are numerous examples of ancient writing on metal plates. Indeed, they have for the most part dropped the argument that the idea of ancient writing on metal plates is absurd; some ironically claim instead that knowledge of ancient writing on metal plates was readily available in Joseph Smith's day. Joseph is now interpreted as simply having absorbed from his environment an idea originally dismissed as absurd. In this regard Hugh Nibley's observation that

1 See below for my rationale for equating the Book of Mormon term brass with the current usage of the term bronze.


3 Most recently, see Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," Dialogue 26/3 (Fall 1993): 156–57. As I have noted elsewhere, Metcalfe
“it will not be long before men forget that in Joseph Smith’s day the prophet was mocked and derided for his description of the plates more than anything else” seems quite prescient.4

What were the “brass plates” of the Book of Mormon? Following standard early modern English usage,5 the term brass in the Book of Mormon most likely has reference to various forms of the copper and tin alloy that we currently call bronze, rather than the alloy of copper and zinc now known as brass.6 In this usage the Book of Mormon consistently follows the KJV Bible, which also never uses the word bronze. The biblical Hebrew word nechushah was used indiscriminately to describe metals we would now distinguish as native copper as well as alloys which contain mostly copper, such as bronze or modern brass. It is usually translated in the KJV as brass, but is rendered four times as steel.7 The adoption of the word bronze (from Italian bronzo) for the copper/tin alloy in distinction from the brass copper/zinc alloy only became current in English in

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6 The word bronze never appears in the Book of Mormon; the word brazen (from “brazen serpent” of Helaman 8:14) is the adjectival form of brass; J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 2:501c. Cf. KJV Numbers 21:6–9, where the antecedent serpent mentioned in Helaman 8:14 is clearly said to be of “brass.”
the late eighteenth century. Even thereafter, "in reference to ancient times, and especially to the nations of antiquity, 'brass' still meant the older [copper and tin] alloy." I will therefore use the modern terminology bronze plates in preference to the archaic brass plates, except in direct quotations from the Book of Mormon.

Previous studies have succeeded in demonstrating the widespread practice of writing on metal plates in antiquity. This paper will attempt to provide a fuller historical context by focusing specifically on the evidence for the use of bronze and other metal plates for the preservation of sacred writing in four interrelated pre-Christian cultures of the central and eastern Mediterranean—Hebrew, Phoenician, Greek, and Italic.

1. Hebrew Writing on Metal Plates.

In terms of their basic material culture, the Hebrews and their Canaanite, Phoenician, and Aramaic neighbors are quite often archaeologically

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8 Oxford English Dictionary, 2:581b, where Johnson's 1755 dictionary is cited as defining bronze as brass.
9 Oxford English Dictionary, 2:493a. Note, however, that Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language (New York: S. Converse, 1928), distinguishes brass as "an alloy of copper and zinc" from bronze, "a compound of copper and tin."
indistinguishable. Thus, it is probably methodologically unnecessary to attempt to distinguish Hebrew examples of writing on metal from those of their close neighbors. However, since the Lehites came from a specifically Hebrew cultural context, it is useful to treat Hebrew evidence as independent.

Specific Hebrew examples of writing on metal plates are relatively limited in number, but clearly attest to the practice. There are five major examples:

1.1. The oldest example of Hebrew writing on metal is the engraved gold plate attached to the front of the turban of the high priest [at least 10C]. According to Exodus 28:36, Moses was ordered to “make a plate (tzitz) of pure gold, and engrave upon it as an engraved seal (khotem), ‘Holy to Yahweh.’”

1.2. Excavations in the late 1970s uncovered First Temple period tombs at Ketef Hinnom, near Jerusalem. Among the artifacts discovered in this dig were two small silver plates dating to the seventh century B.C., containing the priestly

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12 Throughout this paper I will use pointed brackets ( ) to indicate the date of a document under discussion. Most of these dates are archaeological approximations. All dates are B.C. unless otherwise indicated. C indicates “century”: thus [10C] means tenth century B.C., [6C] means sixth century B.C., etc.
13 The engraved stone Tablets of the Law (luchot ha-eben wa-ha-torah, Exodus 24:12) which were kept in the Ark of the Covenant are an example of formal legal codes engraved on stone, paralleling the archaic example of Hammurabi’s Law code (see David Noel Freedman, ed., The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:304 [hereafter ABD], for a list of biblical passages referring to the Tablets). Hammurabi’s law-code was also inscribed on a stone stele or tablet (see James B. Pritchard, The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958) 1:138–67, fig. 59). As will be described below, from the sixth and fifth centuries on, “modern” versions of such engraved law codes increasingly came to be written on bronze plates instead of stone tablets.
benedictions found in Numbers 6:24–26\textsuperscript{14} and representing “the earliest known fragments of the biblical text.”\textsuperscript{15}

1.3. In 161 B.C., Judas Maccabaeus concluded a treaty with the Romans which "the Romans engraved on bronze tablets and sent to Jerusalem for the Jews to keep there as a record" (1 Maccabees 8:22).\textsuperscript{16} Josephus' account states, however, that the Jews themselves engraved the document in bronze.\textsuperscript{17} In his analysis of this incident Jonathan Goldstein concludes that since there are no other known instances of Romans sending bronze treaties to their allies (as opposed to keeping copies of these treaties on bronze plates in Rome), Josephus' account is probably more accurate.\textsuperscript{18} Later, in 140 B.C., when Simon was proclaimed by the Jews as both high priest and prince, “they ordered that this text [of Simon's privileges and responsibilities] be drawn up on bronze tablets and set up in the precinct of the sanctuary [of the temple] in a conspicuous place and that copies of the tablets be placed in the treasury [of the temple] so as to be available for Simon and his


\textsuperscript{15} Barkay, Ketef Hinnom, 30. The silver plates were rolled into small scrolls designed to be worn around the neck as amulets (ibid).

\textsuperscript{16} Quotations from I Maccabees are taken from Jonathan A. Goldstein, I Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, vol. 41 of The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964). The Greek phrase for bronze plates in I Maccabees, deltoi chalkoi, will be discussed below.

\textsuperscript{17} Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 12.10.6 #416.

sons." These examples clearly indicate that, following the common practice of most other cultures of the eastern Mediterranean (discussed below), the Jews kept records of important historical documents on bronze plates in their temple.

1.4. The most well-known example of Hebrew writing on metal plates is the famous Copper Scroll (3Q15) from Qumran (1C A.D.), containing a list of hidden temple treasures. Although the origin and purpose of the Copper Scroll is widely debated, it is a clear example of an attempt to preserve an important sacred record by writing on copper/bronze (Heb. nechushah) plates and then hiding the document.

1.5. The Hebrew ritual magic and ascension text Sefer ha-Razim [late 3C A.D.] contains numerous references to writing on metal plates or amulets (Heb. tzitz).

In conclusion the evidence leaves no doubt that the Hebrews had a longstanding tradition dating at least to the First Temple Period (i.e. well before 587

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20 For a summary and references to the most important bibliography, see ABD 1:1133-34.
22 Text: Mordecai Margalioth, Sepher Ha-Razim (Jerusalem: Yediot Achronot, 1966); translation: Michael A. Morgan, Sepher ha-Razim: the Book of Mysteries (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983). The following are the major references:
  gold (1.136 = trans. 34; 2.125 = trans. 54; 5.20 = trans. 74; 6.30 = trans. 79);
  silver (2.56 = trans. 48; 2.100 = trans. 52; 2.127 = trans. 54; 2.126 = trans. 54; 2.139 = trans. 55; 3.38 = trans. 64)
  copper/bronze (1.203, 207 = trans. 40; 2.32 = trans. 45; 2.117 = trans. 53; 2.153 = trans. 56);
  iron (2.114 = trans. 53)
  lead (2.63 = trans. 49)
  tin (1.145 = trans. 35)

For some additional references to writing on metal in Rabbinic literature, see Marcus Jastrow, Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature (New York: Judaica Press, 1982), 1279b.
B.C.) of writing sacred texts on metal plates for amulets, inscriptions, and literary
documents.23

2. Semitic Sacred Writing on Metal Plates.24

2.1. There are numerous examples of Presargonic Sumerian writing on metal,
including knife blades, lance heads, pegs, vases, bowls, figurines, and plates,
dating from roughly 2700–2350 B.C.25 Most notable among these are three

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23 The mention of an “iron pen” in Jeremiah 17:1 may have reference to a tool for engraving
metal and/or stone.
24 I have not included examples of writing on metal bowls or statue inscriptions, which
would more than double the known examples of northwest Semitic writing on metal. For
examples, see John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*. vol. 2, *Aramaic Inscriptions*
Press, 1982), 141. One interesting example is the Bernardini bowl (7C) which was apparently
made by Phoenicians. Made in an Egyptianized style, it includes a lengthy pseudo-Egyptian
inscription and a short Phoenician inscription. It was found in a tomb in Italy, demonstrating the
remarkable mix of cultures, writing on metal, and script found in the eastern Mediterranean
during Lehi’s lifetime. See also Sabatino Moscati, ed., *The Phoenicians* (New York: Abbeville
bowls cataloged by Glenn Markoe have inscriptions (*Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls from
Cyprus and the Mediterranean* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 72); he briefly
mentions ten other metal bowls with inscriptions in Phoenician or Aramaic (74). Markoe also
discusses the Bernardini bowl (his E1) on pages 188–191, 274–77.
25 Jerrold S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions*, vol. 1, *Presargonic Inscriptions*
(New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1986), gives a complete list of all known inscriptions
from Presargonic times. Inscriptions on various forms of metal are found on pages 16, 20, 25, 47,
49, 58, 60, 62, 93, 97, and 99. Cheesman claims that there is a foundation plate in the temple of
Dagan dating to 3000 B.C. which is now in the Louvre (Cheesman, *Ancient Writing*, 77–78), but
provides no references; it is not mentioned in *Presargonic Inscriptions*. Likewise, Cheesman’s
unsubstantiated claim of the existence of a copper plate from the Indus Valley civilization dating
to 2800 B.C. cannot be confirmed (*Ancient Writing*, 49) and is not included in standard works on
the Indus Valley script.
foundation plates: the copper plate of E'iginimpa'e of Adab,26 the silver plate of Urluma of Umma (late 25C),27 and the gold plate of Gishakidu of Umma (early 24C).28 This evidence clearly indicates that writing on metal plates was well known in Mesopotamia in the time of the Jaredites.29

2.2. The earliest known surviving example of writing on “copper plates” from the Syria/Palestine region are the Byblos syllabic inscriptions [18C], from the city of Byblos on the Phoenician coast.30 The script is described as a "syllabary [which] is clearly inspired by the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, and in fact is the most important link known between the hieroglyphs and the Canaanite alphabet."31 Thus, it would not be unreasonable to describe the Byblos syllabic texts as eighteenth-century B.C. semitic “bronze plates” written in “reformed Egyptian characters.”32

26 Cooper, Presargonic Inscriptions, Ad 3.2 = p. 16, date unknown, from the twenty-fifth century or earlier.
27 Ibid., Um 4.1 = p. 93.
28 Ibid., Um 6 = p. 93.
29 Although Ether wrote his record on golden plates at the end of Jaredite history (Mosiah 8:9), it is not at all clear that this was a standard Jaredite cultural practice deriving from the Old World. There are no other references to Jaredite metal plates other than the Book of Ether.
30 For basic summary see ABD 4:178–80; the quotation is from 4:178a. For a detailed linguistic study and translation, see George E. Mendenhall, The Syllabic Inscriptions from Byblos (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1985). The original publication is M. Dunand, Byblia Grammata: Documents et recherches sur le developpement de l’ecriture en phenie (Beirut: Direction des Antiquites, 1945); photographs and transcriptions of all the documents can be found on pages 71–88. It is worth noting that Byblos is only about 170 miles north of Jerusalem, and that Lehi’s ancestors were from the northern tribe of Manasseh (Alma 10:3, 1 Nephi 5:14).
31 ABD 4:178b.
32 There are faint traces of Byblos syllabic writing on the Azarbaal plate (2.5 below). The original inscription is too faint to properly read. John C. L. Gibson, Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, 3:9–11, with additional bibliography. Hugh Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 105, noted the existence of these plates.
2.3. A large number of arrowheads [12C–10C] have been discovered bearing Phoenician inscriptions, which are frequently thought to have been used for divination rather than strictly military purposes.33

2.4. The Azarbaal plate is a triangular bronze plate from Byblos [mid 11C–10C] containing a short inscription. The precise interpretation and date of this plate is controversial, but several scholars see it as having either a magical, ritual, or divinatory purpose.34

2.5. Shalmaneser III [859–825] inscribed a golden plate (now in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago) describing his conquests and sacrifices.35

2.6. The Kilamuwa gold plates [830–825] contain a short prayer which was apparently attached to the handle of a staff of a courtier or priest.36 It is, incidentally, interesting to note that many scholars see this as an Aramaic

33 For general background, bibliography, and examples, see Gibson, Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, 3:1–8. The arrowheads are also discussed by Benjamin Sass, The Genesis of the Alphabet and its Development in the Second Millennium B.C. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988), 72–85. If they were not used for divination they do not represent sacred writing on metal plates. However, if these arrowheads were indeed used for bellomancy (arrow divination), they provide some of the earliest evidence of this practice. Note Nibley’s speculation on the relationship between bellomancy and the pointers of the Liahona in “The Liahona’s Cousin,” Improvement Era (February 1961): 87–89, 104, 106, 108–9.
35 For a translation see Daniel David Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926) 1:251–52 (#706–7). Shalmaneser also ordered the construction of the bronze gate of Balawat, which is inscribed with both illustrations and lengthy texts, but which is technically historical rather than religious. See L. W. King, Bronze Reliefs from the Gates of Shalmaneser (London: British Museum, 1915); Luckenbill provides a translation in 1:224–32 (# 612–25)
36 Gibson, Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, 3:39–41; the approximate date is provided on p. 31.
inscription written in Phoenician script, and it is thus another example of the interchange of script and language in the ancient Near East.

2.7. The Carthage Gold Pendant [8C] is a votive inscription discovered in a later Carthegninian tomb. 37

2.8. Among the many writings of Sargon II [714–705] are six metal plates (in copper, silver, and gold) from Khorsabad, containing a lengthy inscription on Sargon’s temple building activities. 38

2.9. An important example of early Phoenician writing on gold plates is the Pyrgi gold plate from Italy [500–475 B.C.]. 39 This plate is a dedication by the Etruscan king Thefarie Velianas to the Phoenician goddess Astarte (syncretized to the Etruscan Uni = Latin Juno). One plate is in Phoenician, the other two in Etruscan (see 4.2 below). This plate is thus a prime example of the spread of the Phoenician practice of writing sacred texts on golden plates from their original center in Phoenicia, via Carthage, to Italy, and is roughly contemporary with the Book of Mormon’s claim that sacred texts were written on metal plates by the Phoenicians’ closer neighbors, the Jews.

2.10. The Lapethos inscription from Cyprus [c. 275 B.C.] is not itself a bronze plate, but contains an important reference to h-dlt h-nchst, or the “the bronze plate,” indicating that writing on bronze plates was known in Cyprus in the third century B.C. 40

38 For translation, see Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia, 2:56–59 (#106–15).
39 See Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 49 for further sources. Wright’s article also contains extensive bibliography on the famous silver and gold Persepolis plates of Darius.
40 H. Donner and W. Rollig, Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966–1969), 1:10 #43.12, commentary in 2:60. The word dalet for “writing tablet” is
These examples of early Semitic sacred writing on metal plates are sufficient to demonstrate that northwest Semitic languages were repeatedly and consistently written on metal plates from the twenty-fifth century B.C. until after the Greek conquests. The major types of metal used were copper/bronze and gold, precisely as described in the Book of Mormon. Thus, although surviving examples of specifically Hebrew writing on gold and bronze plates—as opposed to Phoenician or other Semitic languages—are relatively rare, the abundance of examples from the general cultural region shows that this type of writing was quite common.

3. Greek Writing on Metal Plates.

According to Walter Burkert, the practice of writing on metal plates was brought to the Greeks by Phoenicians in the seventh or sixth centuries B.C., at which time they also adopted the northwest Semitic term for "writing tablet" dlT, as Greek deltos. The social context of writing on metal plates is preserved not only by the archaeological remains, but also by the classical Greek lexicographer Pollux (late 2C A.D.), who defined deltos chalkos (bronze plate) as referring to "ancient sacred law." In other words, the Greeks adopted the technology and practice of writing sacred writings on metal plates from the Phoenicians at precisely the time the Book of Mormon attests to the same practice among the Phoenicians' closest neighbors, the Jews.


Classical Greek and Latin documents on gold and bronze are well known. This survey will only provide some basic examples which demonstrate the range of Greek sacred and historical writing on metal.

3.1 The Sybaris treaty from the temple at Olympia (6C B.C.) is one of the oldest examples of Greek writing on bronze plates. This plate is a treaty between the Etruscan city of Sybaris and the "Serdanioi" (Sardinians). It indicates that the custom of writing important historical documents on bronze plates to be preserved in temples as historical records dates back to at least the sixth century B.C.—precisely the time of Lehi.

3.2 The temple of Dodona is noted for its large archaeological collection of surviving prophetic bronze plates from the early centuries B.C. These include both votive inscriptions and prophetic materials from the oracle. They thus represent an example of the preservation of prophetic records on bronze plates.

3.3 According to a legend recorded by Pausanias, around the year 370 B.C. Epiteles the son of Aeschines had a dream in which he was told where to dig to rescue the Great Goddess who was "shut in her brazen chamber." Epiteles dug at the designated spot, discovering a bronze vessel in which was "some tin foil

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43 Wright, "Metallic Documents in Antiquity," surveys much of the evidence.


45 The Sybaris plate is thus an earlier example of a bronze treaty plate like that found among the Jews in the second century B.C. (see 1.3 above).

very thin, rolled like a book. On it were inscribed the mysteries of the Great Goddesses."^{47}

3.4. Plutarch describes a proto-archaeological expedition which excavated in what they called the "tomb of Alcmene." But whatever tomb was actually excavated, they discovered "a bronze tablet with a long inscription ... the characters had a peculiar and foreign conformation, greatly resembling that of Egyptian writing."^{48}

3.5. The well-known Orphic gold plates (6–5C B.C.) contain a collection of sacred texts related to the afterlife. Some interesting parallels to the Book of Mormon have been discussed by Wilfred Griggs.^{49}

3.6. Pausanius claims to have seen a copy of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, written on lead plates and preserved at Helicon.^{50}

3.7. A "golden book" (*chusoun biblion*), containing the poetry of Aristomache of Erythrae, was deposited in the Treasury of the Sicyonians at Delphi.^{51} This


49 Griggs, "The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book," provides the major bibliography. For text and translation of the Orphic plates, see Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 659–73. The date given is for the origin of the texts; some of the actual plates themselves were produced much later. There are thus two separate questions: what is the date of the ideas and texts, and what is the date of the practice of writing on gold plates?


51 Plutarch, *Moralia*: "Quaestiones Convivales," 5.2, 675B (= Loeb 8:387). The term *biblion* is also translated as "tablet," but its more general meaning is a written document; it is the most common term in Greek for "book." If "tablet" is intended, it is usually rendered *biblion deltos*. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 315a. Plutarch [c. 50–120 A.D.] is citing a lost geographical work of Polemon of
Aristomache is not easily identifiable but is often thought to be a prophetic Sibyl. If so, this is an example of keeping a book of prophetic oracles on golden plates in a temple.

4. Italic Writing on Metal Plates.

Nearly all surviving documents from Italy before the third century B.C., when Rome began its conquest of the peninsula, are in Etruscan. The vast majority of these inscriptions are simply names on tombstones. The Bonfantes list only eight Etruscan documents of any length, half of which are written on metal. These four metal plates are also the oldest of the eight major surviving Etruscan documents; all of them are sacred texts.

4.1. The lead plate of Santa Marinella (500 B.C.), was a religious text written on both sides.

4.2. The Pyrgi plates (early 5C B.C.) have been discussed above (2.9). They represent not only one of the earliest lengthy Etruscan documents, but also sacred writing on gold plates in both Phoenician and Etruscan. Although not quite a “Rosetta Stone,” these plates were important in the deciphering of Etruscan.

Illium (fl. 190 B.C.); see OCD 850. Thus, the golden biblion (book, or “bible,” which derives from biblion) of Delphi dates to at least the third century B.C., and probably much earlier.


53 Giuliano Bonfante and Larissa Bonfante, *The Etruscan Language: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 48, mention 13,000 inscriptions in Etruscan, with only a few hundred in all other Italic languages including Latin.


55 Ibid., 49.
4.3. The lead tablet of Magliano [475–450 B.C.] (inscribed on both sides) is a religious text discussing rituals and sacrifices.\textsuperscript{56} Since both the Santa Marinella (4.1) and the Magliano lead plates were inscribed on both sides, it clearly indicates that they were not intended as dedicatory inscriptions to be mounted on walls, but were to be handled while read.

4.4. The famous bronze \textit{haruspicina} (liver divination) model Settima [3–1 C B.C.] is not precisely a metal plate, but is nonetheless an example of sacred prophetic writing on bronze.

That the three oldest Etruscan texts of any length (4.1, 4.2, 4.3) are all sacred writing on metal is certainly indicative that the practice was widespread in pre-Roman Italy. The dual Phoenician/Etruscan inscription from Pyrgi (4.2, 2.9) indicates that the practice was most likely adopted from Phoenicia, where examples of writing sacred texts on metal plates date much earlier.

The fact that gold, bronze, and lead metal plates are durable in part accounts for the unique survival of these documents, but metal plates, being quite valuable, would have been collected by scavengers and melted for reuse, whereas stone inscriptions would generally be ignored. Thus, it is quite significant that the three oldest Etruscan documents of any length are all sacred writings on metal plates, showing a close connection with an antecedent Phoenician practice.\textsuperscript{57} The Book of Mormon describes sacred writing on bronze and gold plates in the early sixth century B.C. at precisely the time when we find

\textsuperscript{56} Fred Woudhuizen, \textit{The Language of the Sea Peoples} (Amsterdam: Najade Press, 1992), 195–228, provides references to earlier bibliography. An Etruscan lead tablet of Minerva (from Punta della Vipera in Santa Marinella) is also inscribed on both sides; see Luisa Banti, \textit{Etruscan Cities and Their Culture} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 196.

\textsuperscript{57} Examples of sacred writing on metal plates tend to be in lead, bronze, and gold. The widespread use of lead was due to the fact that it was easier to work with than bronze but was far less valuable than gold and therefore would more likely survive plundering.
the earliest evidence of the spread of this practice from Phoenicia to Carthage, Italy, and Greece.

Although Etruscan inscriptions predominate in pre-third-century Italy, there are also non-Etruscan examples of sacred writing on metal plates.

4.5. The Twelve Tables of the Law (*lex duodicim tabularum*) were a set of twelve bronze plates set up in the forum of Rome as early as 449 B.C.\(^{58}\) Some of the legal ideas, and presumably the custom of engraving the text of the laws on bronze plates (Livy 3.57.10; Diod. 12.26; Dion. 10.57.7), were said to have been adopted from the Greeks (Livy 3.31.8, 33.5). The sacred law (*sacra lex*, Livy 3.32.7) inscribed on these bronze plates could not be changed; writing them on metal was thus a means to preserve a pristine copy.\(^{59}\) The law code was originally engraved on ten tablets or plates (*decem tabularum leges*) to which two additional tablets were later added (Livy 3.34.6–7). The original tablets were destroyed in the sack of Rome by the Gauls in 391 B.C. but were apparently reinscribed shortly thereafter.\(^{60}\)

4.6. Bronze inscriptions of laws were fundamental in early Italy. Indeed, “any knowledge of the municipal system evolved in Italy after the Social War must turn . . . upon the four [Latin] bronze inscriptions [of laws].”\(^{61}\) Frederikson adds that “from the earliest times until the age of Augustus bronze was the usual form of publication in Italy. Unlike Greece, Italy had few kinds of stone suited to the inscription of long texts until the heavy Augustan exploitation of Luna

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58 The basic narrative sources for the Twelve Tables of the Law are Livy 3.31–37, 57; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 10.55–60, and Diodorus Siculus 12.26.

59 The Twelve Tables contained both sacred and secular laws; the latter could be changed by the will of the people.

60 Livy 5.40; based on the standard interpretation of Livy 6.1.10.

quarries; she had, however, again unlike Greece, good supplies of bronze—a fact which more than any other explains the relative epigraphic paucity of Greek and Republican Italy."62 This is because, unlike stone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions tended to be collected, melted, and reused. "Important inscriptions were probably inscribed on bronze tablets, and were destroyed in antiquity. Bronze was a useful metal so the tablets were melted down."63

4.7. One of the most interesting Italic examples of sacred writing on metal plates is the Iguvium plates [3C B.C.], written in the Umbrian dialect of the Italic language family.64 Of the seven plates, five have writing on both sides, containing a total of around 4000 words. These texts contain the rituals and sacrifices to be performed by a clan of Umbrian priests, and, thus, are sociologically the equivalent of parts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which the Book of Mormon claims were on the Hebrew bronze plates.

The Iguvium plates are substantially larger than the golden plates of the Book of Mormon. They range from 33x22 to 16x12 inches, while the golden plates seem to have been about 8x6 inches, thus about half the size of the smaller Iguvium plates. Although the Iguvium collection as a whole contains 4000 words in Umbrian, the English translation tends to include about twice as many words, or an approximately 8000-word English equivalent. However, the large

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62 Ibid., 186.
63 Banti, *Etruscan Cities and Their Culture*, 197. The extraordinary paucity of Hebrew royal or religious inscriptions from the First Temple period (for a brief discussion see William J. Hamblin, review of Tanner and Tanner, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon*, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 [1993]: 261–63. For all Hebrew inscriptions see G. I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)) could be explained if we were to assume that the Hebrews, like the Romans, wrote their royal inscriptions in bronze, which were later plundered and destroyed, precisely as happened to most early Roman examples.
Iguvium plates have large letters (54 lines in 33 inches, or over half an inch high characters) and include characters for vowels, which were undoubtedly absent from the Book of Mormon text. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon was written in reformed Egyptian, which seems to have been a special script designed to reduce the space for characters.

Using the Iguvium plates as a test case, it is possible to make a broad comparison between them and the number of words said to have been found on the twenty-four plates of Ether. The plates of Ether contained the equivalent of about 17,000 English words. This includes several hundred words of commentary by Mormon, but excludes an early version of the primeval history (Genesis 1–10, which amounts to about an additional 6500 words in English.) Thus, the total English word equivalent on the 24 plates is roughly 24,000 English words (17,000 in Ether plus 6500 from Genesis 1–10), which equates to about 1000 English words per plate (500 words per side). This compares favorably with 8000 English words on 6 Iguvium plates (five double sided and two single sided), or 1350 English words per plate (675 per side). Allowing for a slightly smaller character size in the Book of Mormon text, and a writing system without vowels to offset the larger size of the Iguvium plates, this analogy with the Iguvium plates demonstrates that it is quite reasonable for the 24 plates of Ether to have contained both the Book of Ether and Genesis 1–10.

4.8. Although these archaeologically surviving examples are relatively few in number, there is literary evidence confirming that a vast number of bronze plates were produced in antiquity. For example, in the great fire in Rome in A.D. 80, 3000 bronze tablets are said to have been destroyed.65

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Summary.

Based on these examples of Hebrew, Phoenician, Greek, and Italic practices, we can conclude that writing and preserving sacred bronze and gold plates was a widespread phenomenon in the eastern Mediterranean world at the time of Lehi. These bronze plates were frequently associated with four genres:

1. Ritual: recording and performing the sacred rites of priestly clans (1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1, 2.6, 2.7, 2.9, 3.3, 3.5, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.7).

2. Laws: preserving a permanent record of the community’s laws (1.3, 4.5, 4.6).

3. Prophecies and divination: performing divination or preserving important prophecies or oracles (1.5, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.7, 4.4).

4. History: preserving inscriptions of important treaties and other historical developments (1.3, 2.5, 2.8, 3.1, 3.6).

These genres broadly match the described contents of the bronze plates in the Book of Mormon. “And he [Lehi] beheld that they [the bronze plates] did contain [1] the five books of Moses ... [2] a record of the Jews from the beginning ... [3] and also the prophecies of the holy prophets” (1 Nephi 5:11–13). In other words, in traditional Jewish designation, the bronze plates contained the Law (*torah*), the Prophets (*nevi’im*), and the Writings (*ketuvim*), all of which genres are found recorded on sacred metal plates in the pre-Christian Mediterranean.

The examples provided in this essay demonstrate that sacred writing on metal plates was a widespread phenomenon in the Semitic Near East and the eastern Mediterranean world in the centuries just before and after Lehi. This conclusion has also recently been arrived at by Walter Burkert. In his recent study of the cultural dependency of Greek civilization on the Near East, Burkert
presents a short analysis of the spread of the alphabet and writing styles and materials from the Near East to Greece. In his discussion he states that “the reference to ‘bronze deltoi [plates or tablets]’ as a term [among the Greeks] for ancient sacral laws would point back to the seventh or sixth century [B.C.]” as the period in which the term deltos and the practice of writing on bronze plates was transmitted from the Near East to Greece. 66 For students of the Book of Mormon it is not at all surprising that in the seventh or sixth century B.C., the practice of writing on bronze plates was adopted by the Greeks from the Phoenicians, along with the term bronze plates (deltos, from Phoenician/Hebrew dlt) to describe “ancient sacred laws.” 67 This is, of course, precisely the time and place in which the Book of Mormon claims that there existed a set of bronze plates which contained the “ancient sacred laws” of the Hebrews.

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66 Burkert, The Orientalizing Revolution, 30.
67 Ibid.; cf. page 11, note 42 above.