Evidence suggests that ancient Mesoamericans may have had horses. Excavations have produced horse bones that archaeologists believe date to before the Spanish Conquest.

The article also mentions an artifact found in Bolivia that may have characters in a Semitic script. Locals have asked for assistance in examining the piece, but it is not yet clear whether it is relevant to the Book of Mormon.
Were Ancient Americans Familiar with Real Horses?

The FARMS newsletter published an Update in June 1984 on the question of horses in pre-Columbian America during the period when human beings were here. That piece was republished in Reexploring the Book of Mormon under the title “Once More: The Horse.” Since then, previously unrecognized research has shed new light on the question.

The most striking information comes from excavations that confirm the possibility that a species of native American horse survived the Pleistocene (Ice Age) in Mesoamerica down to an age when humans were familiar with this animal.

Publications from the late 1950s reported results from excavations by scientists working on the Yucatán Peninsula. Excavations at the site of Mayapan, which dates to a few centuries before the Spaniards arrived, yielded horse bones in four spots. (Two of the lots were from the surface, however, and might represent Spanish horses.) From another site, the Cenote (water hole) Ch’en Mul, came other traces, this time from a firm archaeological context. In the bottom stratum in a sequence of levels of unconsolidated earth almost two meters in thickness, two horse teeth were found. They were partially mineralized, indicating that they were definitely ancient and could not have come from any Spanish animal. The interesting thing is that Maya pottery was also found in the stratified soil where the teeth were located.

Subsequent digging has expanded the evidence for an association of humans with horses. But the full story actually goes back to 1895, when American paleontologist Henry C. Mercer went to Yucatán hoping to find remains of Ice Age man. He visited 29 caves in the hill area—the Puuc—of the peninsula and tried stratigraphic excavation in 10 of them. But the results were confused, and he came away disillusioned. He did find horse bones in three caves (Actún Sayab, Actún Lara, and Chektalen). In terms of their visible characteristics, those bones should have been classified as from the Pleistocene American horse species, then called Equus occidentalis L. However, Mercer decided that since the remains were near the surface, they must actually be from the modern horse, Equus equus, that the Spaniards had brought with them to the New World, and so he reported them as such. In 1947 Robert T. Hatt repeated Mercer’s activities. He found within Actún Lara and one other cave more remains of the American horse (in his day it was called Equus conversidens), along with bones of other extinct animals. Hatt recommended that any future work concentrate on Loltún Cave, where abundant animal and cultural remains could be seen.

It took until 1977 before that recommendation bore fruit. Two Mexican archaeologists carried out a project that included a complete survey of the complex system of subterranean cavities (made by underground water that had dissolved the subsurface limestone). They also did stratigraphic excavation in areas in the Loltún complex not previously visited. The pits they excavated revealed a sequence of 16 layers, which they numbered from the surface downward. Bones of extinct animals (including mammoth) appear in the lowest layers. Pottery and other cultural materials were found in levels VII and above. But in some of those artifact-bearing strata there were horse bones, even in level II. A radiocarbon date for the beginning of VII turned out to be around 1800 B.C. The pottery fragments above that would place some portions in the range of at least 900–400 B.C. and possibly later. The report on this work
concludes with the observation that “something went on here that is still difficult to explain.” Some archaeologists have suggested that the horse bones were stirred upward from lower to higher levels by the action of tunneling rodents, but they admit that this explanation is not easy to accept. The statement has also been made that paleontologists will not be pleased at the idea that horses survived to such a late date as to be involved with civilized or near-civilized people whose remains are seen in the ceramic-using levels. Surprisingly, the Mexican researchers show no awareness of the horse teeth discovered in 1957 by Carnegie Institution scientists Pollock and Ray. (Some uncomfortable scientific facts seem to need rediscov- ering time and time again.)

Meanwhile, Dr. Steven E. Jones of the BYU physics department has for several years been tracking down horse bones in North America considered to predate the European conquest. Professor Jones’s purpose for this search is to submit the bones to tests by the radiocarbon method (some of that work has taken advantage of assistance from FARMS). So far, one or more finds appear to be possibly of pre–Spanish Conquest date, although definitive results will take more work. Further work is being done by Yuri Kuchinsky, a researcher in Canada who has been pursuing a variety of other evidence, based mainly on Native American lore, about possible pre-Conquest horses in North America.

Hebrew Writing in Bolivia?

In a private communication to John Sorenson, an archaeologist in the Midwest reports that a group of people in Bolivia who are interested in antiquities of the area have asked U.S. archaeologists for help in evaluating the authenticity of an artifact found in that South American country. The large ceramic basin is modeled to show stylized fauna on its sides. That much can be seen on an indistinct photograph submitted by e-mail, but there are also supposed to be “characters” on it, not perceptible in the photograph, that the people concerned feel might be in a Semitic script. A relevant expert (not LDS) will be traveling to Bolivia to examine the piece firsthand. Even if characters are apparent, it will still probably be impossible to learn the context from which the loose artifact was obtained and thus what it might signify.
building of temples to reveal the ordinances of the temple for both the living and the dead (see Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 224, 267–8, 323).

12. To get the full account implies having the power of the Lord. Joseph Smith was given "power" from on high by the men which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon" (D&C 20:8; see D&C 113:3–4). Since the 24 plates are in an unknown language, the translator must have the power of God to get the full account. Another implication, although un-stated, is that the translator will be led to find the plates. Mormon definitely led Joseph Smith to "find" the Book of Mormon plates (Joseph Smith—History 1:42–54). Limhi’s people found the gold plates of the Jaredites (see Ether 1:2; Mosiah 21:27, 28:11) that Ether had hidden in a manner that they might be found (see Ether 15:33). Wasn’t the question will remain unanswered upon just 24 plates is a question that is much debated. See Tigay, The Temple Scroll from Qumran, 90–91; and so forth.

13. While Joseph the Prophet was translating the Bible, the information on Enoch was revealed to him (November–December 1830). Several years later, he recorded more information about Adam’s blessing his posterity when all things in Christ will be gathered throughout the world for the building of temples to reveal the ordination of men to perform endless lives to the sons and daughters of Adam” (ibid., 322).


15. The Lord revealed to Oliver Cowdery that there were "engravings of old among the ‘wagon loads’ seen by the Prophet Joseph Smith, text of the Book of Mormon. The most complete study of the Nephi plates to date is John W. Welch, “The Translation of the Book of the Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).


18. For a recent review of biblical scholarship on Deuteronomy, see Tigay, The Temple Scroll from Qumran, 90–91; and so forth.


24. Ibid., 130; emphasis added.

25. Ibid., 130–32. This may help to explain the fact that the fewest temples in Egypt in Elephantine (destroyed in 410 B.C.E) and Leontopolis (shut down in A.D. 73) where sacrifice was offered. See Haran, Temples, 46–47. Shemesh cites Mishnah Menahot 13:10 and Babylonian Talmud Menahot 109a.

26. What’s in a Word? Cynthia L. Hallen


30. All Hebrew transcriptions are adapted from the WordCruncher scripture concordance program (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2003).

31. El Libro de Mormon (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993).


New Light

1. For example, see the April 2001 issue of Insights, the FARMS newsletter, for observations about the use of the term “radiocarbon dating” even at its best.

Out of the Dust


