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Title This Idea: The “This Land” Series and the U.S.-Centric Reading of the Book of Mormon

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THIS IDEA: THE “THIS LAND” SERIES AND THE U.S.-CENTRIC READING OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

Brant A. Gardner

Review of Edwin G. Goble and Wayne N. May. *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*. Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology, 2002. ix+ 218 pp., with bibliography and maps. \$21.95.

Review of Wayne N. May. *This Land: Only One Cumorah!* Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology, 2004. ix + 225 pp., with bibliography and maps. \$21.95.

Review of Wayne N. May. *This Land: They Came from the East*. Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology, 2005. [xi] + 225 pp., with bibliography and maps. \$21.95.

The Book of Mormon was first published in Palmyra, New York. It was published in a young and growing country, only a scant generation removed from the violent throes of its birth and a nation struggling to define itself politically, geographically, and, in many ways, religiously. Those subcurrents carried the early readers of the Book of Mormon. For those who accepted it, it became a symbol of their personal redefinition as no longer Methodist, Baptist, or seekers. They were rather those who accepted that the God of old was present again and that the ancient blessing of a prophet had also become present again in the person of the man who translated the golden plates into the miraculous text of the Book of Mormon.

It didn't take long for those early believers to extrapolate their wonder in the Book of Mormon to their own position in a new nation and even newer community. The very understandable reading of the Book of Mormon was that it was about them. The Book of Mormon world

was their world, not only religiously, but geographically. Nevertheless, various opinions about where the Book of Mormon occurred developed relatively early. It is important to remember in our discussions of geography and the Book of Mormon that this has been left in the hands of the researchers and is not a matter of official church doctrine or definition. There were sufficient differences of opinion that George Q. Cannon felt it important to address the issue in 1890. Cannon knew Joseph Smith; in fact he was living with his uncle John Taylor during the terrible time when Taylor accompanied Joseph and Hyrum to Liberty jail.¹ He worked with his uncle at the *Times and Seasons* and was certainly in a position to know whether there was an established geography. Later, as a member of the First Presidency, he noted:

The First Presidency have often been asked to prepare some suggestive map illustrative of Nephite geography, but have never consented to do so. Nor are we acquainted with any of the Twelve Apostles who would undertake such a task. The reason is, that without further information they are not prepared to even to suggest. The word of the Lord or the translation of other ancient records is required to clear up many points now obscure. . . . Of course, there can be no harm result from the study of the geography of this continent at the time it was settled by the Nephites, drawing all the information possible from the record which has been translated for our benefit. But beyond this we do not think it necessary, at the present time, to go.²

The earliest associations between the Book of Mormon and a real-world setting were made between the land the early Saints knew and the land described in the new book. Because the plates had been retrieved from a hill in New York, that hill was called Cumorah, though

1. "George Q. Cannon," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Q._Cannon (accessed September 2008).

2. George Q. Cannon, *Juvenile Instructor* (1 January, 1890); reprinted in *The Instructor* 73/4 (April 1938): 159–60. Quotation copied from Matthew Roper, comment on "Examining the Secular Side," FAIR blog, comment posted 13 September 2008, <http://www.fairblog.org/2008/09/03/examining-the-secular-side/#comments>.

it appears to have required ten to twenty years for the Saints to settle on that name for the location.³ Once so named, however, it became even more important and merged in the minds of the Saints with the text of the Book of Mormon to become, in popular thought, the very hill at which the final battle between the Lamanites and Nephites took place. Oliver Cowdery himself described the hill in 1835 and noted specifically that it was the place where “once sunk to nought the pride and strength of two mighty nations.”⁴

The confluence of name, place, and familiarity virtually assured that early Saints would look to western New York as the scene of the last battle and use the archaeology of the area as a support. With such a tradition behind it, it might seem surprising that there would still be books published strenuously arguing for the New York hill to be *the* Cumorah. One might expect it to be an accepted fact. Nevertheless, the location of the Book of Mormon’s Cumorah has become a controversial issue following the publication and wide scholarly acceptance of the “Limited Geography Theory” of Book of Mormon lands, which places all of the events in Central America, including the destructions of the Nephites and Jaredites at Cumorah (which hill was called Ramah by the Jaredites).⁵ This newer geographic correlation is sometimes called

3. Martin H. Raish, “Encounters with Cumorah: A Selective, Personal Bibliography,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13/1–2 (2004): 39. Raish notes (p. 40, sidebar) that while a very late remembrance by David Whitmer claims that a mysterious stranger was “going to Cumorah” in 1829, there is no corroboration that this name was used that early. Neither Oliver Cowdery in his 1835 description of the hill nor Joseph Smith’s history of 1838 uses *Cumorah* as the name of the hill.

4. Raish, “Encounters,” 41. B. H. Roberts continued to hold this opinion of the hill as the final battle location described in the Book of Mormon: “Meantime I merely call attention to the fact which here concerns me, namely, that central and western New York constitute the great battle fields described in the Book of Mormon as being the place where two nations met practical annihilation, the Jaredites and Nephites; and of which the military fortifications and monuments described by Mr. Priest are the silent witnesses.” B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1951), 3:73–74; quotation from *GospelLink 2001 CD* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).

5. John Clark, “The Final Battle for Cumorah,” review of *Christ in North America*, by Delbert W. Curtis, *FARMS Review of Books* 6/2 (1994): 79, suggests: “Reacting to John L. Sorenson’s view of two Cumorahs printed in the *Ensign* in 1984, Curtis addresses the questions of (1) whether there are two Cumorahs or just one, and (2) where the final Nephite and Jaredite battles really occurred. He argues for a limited geography in the

the “two Cumorahs” theory in contrast with the “one Cumorah” of older and more traditional geographic interpretations.⁶

One Cumorah Theory

Wayne N. May, founder of *Ancient American* magazine, has published (under the impress of his Ancient American Archaeological Foundation) three books adamantly supporting a “one Cumorah” correlation, as well as a particular geographic and cultural connection to the Book of Mormon. He has published a series of three books bearing the phrase “This Land” as part of the title.⁷ Of the three, only the first deals with the arguments for a specific geography. The other two volumes concentrate on descriptions of artifacts that are used to support the basic geographic correlation found in the first volume.

The first volume, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, lists two authors, Edwin G. Goble and Wayne N. May. In this collaboration, Goble generally provided the geographic arguments and

area of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie and is convinced that there is only one Cumorah.” A similar reaction has Wayne May retitling his expansion of a book by E. Cecil McGavin and Willard Bean. Originally titled *The Geography of the Book of Mormon*, publication details are now Wayne N. May, *This Land: Only One Cumorah!* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2004).

6. William J. Hamblin, “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 177, describes the issue from the viewpoint of the scholarly consensus about the location of the Book of Mormon in Central America: “Actually, the Limited Geography Model does not insist that there were two Cumorahs. Rather, there was one Cumorah in Mesoamerica, which is always the hill referred to in the Book of Mormon. Thereafter, beginning with Oliver Cowdery (possibly based on a misreading of Mormon 6:6), early Mormons began to associate the Book of Mormon Cumorah with the hill in New York where Joseph Smith found the plates. The Book of Mormon itself is internally consistent on the issue. It seems to have been early nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint interpretation of the text of the Book of Mormon which has caused the confusion on this point. Thus, advocates of the Limited Geography Model are required only to show that their interpretations are consistent with the text of the Book of Mormon itself, not with any nineteenth-century interpretation of the Book of Mormon.”

7. Wayne N. May and Edwin G. Goble, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*; May, *This Land: Only One Cumorah* (an expansion of E. Cecil McGavin and Willard Bean’s *The Geography of the Book of Mormon*); and May, *This Land: They Came From the East*.

May the artifactual material.⁸ The geography described in this volume has the New York hill as the final Cumorah/Ramah of the Book of Mormon. Goble therefore locates most of the Book of Mormon lands along the Mississippi, which he considers to be the Book of Mormon Sidon.⁹ This allows the Nephite homeland to be heavily in Ohio and to be correlated with the Hopewell culture, the “mound builders” who occupied that land during Book of Mormon times. Because we know that these theories are the products of mortal speculation rather than divine revelation, we must use the tools of scholarship to examine them and determine whether or not a particular geographic and cultural correlation could possibly represent the place and culture behind the Book of Mormon.

The claim that the Nephites can be seen in the remains of the Hopewell culture and the Jaredites in the earlier Adena has problems, I believe, from the perspectives of both geography and archaeology. The problems in the geography on which Wayne May hangs his artifacts are numerous. Perhaps the most significant problem is that the Mississippi flows south but the Sidon must flow north. The city of Manti is south of Zarahemla and is close to “the head of the river Sidon” (Alma 22:27). That the phrase *head of the river* should be taken for the headwaters rather than some other definition that might allow for the river to flow south is confirmed when we find that when Alma inquired of the Lord concerning the flight of a Lamanite attack party, he tells Zoram that “the Lamanites will cross the river Sidon in the south wilderness, away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti” (Alma 16:6). The Book of Mormon uses the terms *up* and *down* in ways that are consistent with topography and may be used to envision the general lay of the land. John L. Sorenson uses this information

8. Edwin G. Goble, in an e-mail to me dated 23 September 2008, makes the following claim: “I was involved in writing *This Land* volume 1 only.” He is responsible for all of the geography in that particular book. According to Goble, “May is an advocate of artifacts that are questionable.”

9. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 11, attributes the correlation of the River Sidon as the Mississippi to Duane Erickson: “We have built on his pioneering.”

to describe the reasons why a north-flowing Sidon is most consistent with the Book of Mormon text:

We have more information about the surface features of the land than a casual reading of the scriptures might imply. The recordkeepers consistently wrote about going “up,” “down,” or “over.” (Some readers have maintained that these expressions reflect mere cultural conventions, like the Yankee expression “down South.” But in many cases, the scripture connects the words to clear, consistent topographic circumstances; I see no reason not to take the prepositions literally.) This information allows us to draw a neat picture of relative elevations.

A dominant feature is the major river, the Sidon, which flowed down out of the mountains that separated the lands of Nephi and Zarahemla. This river ran “by” the local land of Zarahemla, which lay mainly on the stream’s west (Alma 2:15). The only populated part of Nephite lands surely on the east of the river is the valley of Gideon (Alma 6:7). Since travelers had to go “up” to Gideon, and since there was a “hill Amnihu” just across the river from the city of Zarahemla extensive but gentle enough to accommodate a large battle, the Sidon basin must have slanted up more sharply on the east side than on the west. We also know that the river must have been fairly long. Its origin was deep in the wilderness above the highest Nephite city on the river, Manti (Alma 16:6). Zarahemla was downstream.¹⁰

A second difficulty for the authors’ argument arises in Helaman 3:3–7:

And it came to pass in the forty and sixth, yea, there was much contention and many dissensions; in the which there were an exceedingly great many who departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and went forth unto the land northward to

10. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 23.

inherit the land. And they did travel to an exceedingly great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers. Yea, and even they did spread forth into all parts of the land, into whatever parts it had not been rendered desolate and without timber, because of the many inhabitants who had before inherited the land. And now no part of the land was desolate, save it were for timber; but because of the greatness of the destruction of the people who had before inhabited the land it was called desolate. And there being but little timber upon the face of the land, nevertheless the people who went forth became exceedingly expert in the working of cement; therefore they did build houses of cement, in the which they did dwell.

These verses set up some very specific geographic requirements that intersect with archaeology. The location of this land must be “an exceedingly great distance” north of the Nephite lands. It must have “many waters” and have been “rendered desolate and without timber”¹¹ by its “many inhabitants,” who could no longer use timber to build and therefore “did build houses of cement.” If the Hopewell culture in Ohio is to represent the Nephites, then this important geographic feature must be farther north. There is simply nothing north of Ohio that fits any of these requirements save the “many waters.” The Great Lakes are clearly candidates for “many waters,” but during Book of Mormon times, there were no great cities, no deforestation, and certainly no houses of cement as dwelling places in that area.

The Michigan Artifacts

Other geographic problems might be brought up, but perhaps it is sufficient to note that Goble, author of the geographic correlation

11. There is also a time element attached, though that is somewhat unclear. The text requires that this be the description of the land just before the time of Christ. I have suggested that it represents Mormon’s present description of the land he knew about, imputed to the earlier time. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:17–18.

upon which these books are based, has concluded that the geography is incorrect and has revised his position. One of the strongest elements of the original argument, and one continued by May, is that the proposed Sidon-equals-Mississippi argument has the support of “prophetic statements.”¹² For example, a letter from Joseph Smith to Emma in 1834 during Zion’s March from Ohio to Missouri suggested that they were crossing “the lands of the Nephites, viewing mounds and lands of the once beloved people of the Lord.”¹³ Goble points out that if we are really to build a geography based on “prophetic statements,” this cannot be the land southward that the Mississippi correlation requires: “A North American geography is impossible because of Joseph Smith’s own clear statement in the Levi Hancock Journal about the Land of Desolation being in the very place that [May’s] claim (and formerly mine) that the Land of Zarahemla was.”¹⁴

Both for reasons of changing his opinion of geography and specifically to distance his ideas from some of the controversial artifacts

12. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 50, uses as a chapter heading “Prophetic Statements about Geography.”

13. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 63, as paraphrased in the caption to the map.

14. Goble, personal e-mail in my possession, dated 23 September 2008. Goble posed this issue to Rod Meldrum (who is also a proponent of a similar geography for similar reasons). Meldrum included the question with his response, <http://bookofmormonevidenceblog.wordpress.com/2008/09/04/initial-response-to-fairs-reviews-of-this-research/#comments>, post 40 (accessed 25 September 2008). Goble wrote: “Mr. Meldrum, if you put stock in Joseph Smith’s statements, then once again, I directly challenge you to address the Land of Desolation statement in the Levi Hancock journal and how you believe it does not devastate your geography. Or will you discount it entirely? Explain yourself clearly and how you intend to get around Joseph Smith’s own statement.” Meldrum replied: “Dear Brother Goble, The difference lies in first hand accounts (such as the Wentworth Letter) and second hand accounts that have been ‘filtered’ through others (Levi Hancock’s journal). First hand account are certainly better evidence than second hand accounts. Do you not agree with this?” This argument might be more impressive if only autographic statements were used in these geographies. However, the Zelp incident is often used as a key “prophetic statement,” and it is that incident to which Hancock refers. As with Hancock’s statement, other descriptions of that incident are similarly secondhand. Joseph Smith rarely wrote himself, dictating history to others who did the recording. Suggesting that the Wentworth Letter, which treats a different subject, is a contradiction to Hancock is simply playing fast and loose with the evidentiary materials, accepting only those that conform to the selected geography.

Wayne May promotes as evidence of the Book of Mormon, Goble has requested that I present his position, which I do without editing:

I would very much appreciate if you could include this retraction, including my current beliefs and my intent to divest myself further of anything else that turns out to be untrue. I only want to get to the truth of the matter:

Just for the record, I was involved in writing *This Land*, volume 1 only, and my association with May ended in 2002, after May got upset with me for my first retraction that I made of what I wrote about the Michigan Artifacts and Burrows Cave Artifacts that appeared in Brant Gardner's first review.¹⁵ May is responsible for the volume 2 and 3 of the *This Land* series entirely. And now it appears that Rod Meldrum is carrying on the torch with a similar geography,¹⁶ although I have never had association with Mr. Meldrum. Mr. May is an advocate of artifacts that are questionable. I don't believe they are real, so I am retracting everything I wrote about those artifacts. I am also retracting some of the theories presented in *This Land*, Volume One. I now believe that the Narrow Neck of Land and the Land of Zarahemla in Mesoamerica. However, at this time, I still disagree with Mesoamerican advocates that Cumorah is down in Mesoamerica. I have always been wanting to know the truth. And if something is not true, then obviously I want to know what the truth is, and let go of that which is not. I will be publishing an article taking the Cumorah controversy to a new level, tentatively named "Resurrecting Cumorah." It will go head on, rebutting David Palmer's Criteria for Cumorah in the book *In Search of Cumorah*, as well as the other writings on the subject of Cumorah, such as those done by John Clark in his reviews. I've been working on this article for some years. And so, I'm inviting all good scholars out there to have

15. Brant A. Gardner, "Too Good to Be True: Questionable Archaeology and the Book of Mormon," <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/QArch.pdf> (accessed September 2008).

16. Rod Meldrum, "DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography," <http://www.bookofmormonevidence.org/index.php> (accessed September 2008).

at it, and to either convert me to the Mesoamerican theory for Cumorah once and for all, or to admit my new argument real plausibility.¹⁷

The artifacts that Goble refers to are known collectively as the “Michigan artifacts.” They figure prominently in *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation* and are the subject of two chapters in *This Land: They Came from the East*. The history of the Michigan artifacts is somewhat difficult to trace, as the readily available literature comes from their apologists. A basic beginning point is noted by Fred Rydholm:

The “Michigan Tablets” tale begins around 1885, in Big Rapids, where James O. Scotford, one-time sleight-of-hand performer turned sign-painter, was displaying an almost clairvoyant ability to discover Indian artifacts in prehistoric mounds.

He sold Indian “relics” (some of them authentic), and was assisted by a Mr. Soper. No one was suspicious until 1890, when Soper was elected Michigan’s Secretary of State, not a very important job in those days. He got into trouble accepting kickbacks, and was promptly fired by Governor Edwin B. Winans, in 1891.

Soper dropped out of sight until 1907, when he reappeared in Detroit, living near Scotford. At that time, he was selling rare Indian artifacts to collectors in Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois and Canada. He offered hundreds of objects—copper weapons, ornaments and all kinds of copper implements as well as clay pipes and bowls which he claimed had been unearthed by Scotford in Isabella County, near Big Rapids, at sites within three miles of Lansing, even in back of Palmer Park.¹⁸

17. Edwin G. Goble, personal e-mail in my possession, dated 23 September 2008.

18. Fred Rydholm, “Trashing America’s ‘Politically Incorrect’ Prehistory,” *Ancient American* 32/229, <http://www.artbull.com/zion/Political.pdf> (accessed September 2008).

The version from *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation* provides the basics without the more interesting aspects of the backgrounds of the principal discoverers:

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 one bearing on it the grouping of cuneiform, the same as that on the slate shuttle. (pp. 21–22)

The most spectacular of the artifacts were those that included an apparently complex writing system and artistic representation of clearly late Christian themes. All of them also bore five markings that appear similar to the stylus used to impress cuneiform into clay (some appear on clay, but even on slate the markings are etched to resemble the result of the stylus), which to modern eyes might look like a two-dimensional picture of a thin golf tee. The five markings form three “letters.” The first is vertical, the next three form an “H” and the last is slanted (as the slash mark: /). They form a set that some have seen as, and transliterated as, “JHS” (IH/), a not unintentional (in my opinion) connection to Jesus Christ.

The “discovered” artifacts were disputed from the beginning: “When the University of Michigan was given an opportunity to buy two caskets, a prehistoric beer mug, a bowl, three goblets and some copper coins at \$1,000 and refused, the items were offered at \$100, and when the University declined, Soper left them in Ann Arbor.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, they did acquire some notoriety, and at least one scholar

19. Rydholm, “Trashing America’s ‘Politically Incorrect’ Prehistory,” 230.

provided a translation of one of the texts. John Campbell, a philologist, was sent photographs of some of the artifacts. He noted:

On a careful examination of the workable material before me, I saw that I had to deal with something that was only new in the matter of grouping, in other words, with the old Turanian syllabary. This syllabary I was led into acquaintance with through Hittite studies, and, having mastered its various forms and their phonetic equivalents, I have published many decipherments of inscriptions made in its protean characters.²⁰

The Association accepted my explanation, and Japanese and Basque scholars favour my translations, in the east of the Lat Indian and Siberian inscriptions, and in the west of the Etruscan, Celt-Iberian, and similar documents. Unfortunately, among philological ethnologists there are few Basque and Japanese scholars.²¹

It was perhaps fortunate for Campbell that there were so few Basque and Japanese philological ethnologists. When Alex Chamberlain, a linguist, examined one of Campbell's translations of a different language, with which he was familiar, he found that "careful study during some nine years of a greater mass of Kootenay linguistic material than is in the possession of any other philologist entitles him [the writer] to an opinion on the questions involved in Professor Campbell's comparisons, which, as presented in this paper, violate the known rules of the phonology, morphology and syntax of all the languages concerned."²²

20. John Campbell, "Recently Discovered Relics of the American Mound-Builders (Read 25th May 1898)." *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Section II, 1898*, 3, <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/10163/0002?id=7ba6ed34f17b2226> (accessed September 2008).

21. Campbell, "Recently Discovered Relics," 4.

22. Alex F. Chamberlain, untitled articles in *Review of Historical Publications Relating to Canada*, ed. George M. Wrong and H. H. Langton (Toronto: William Briggs, 1899), 4:197, http://books.google.com/books?id=YH0OAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA197&lpg=PA197&dq=%22monhegan+stone%22&source=web&ots=hYQ3lEweql&sig=pxAaJyMD042yFtWyzCzQtKIDp5M&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=8&ct=result#PPA191

Campbell's translation and Chamberlain's repudiation of his ability as a linguist perhaps become the microcosm of the continuing controversy over the entire set of artifacts. They still have their adherents who, like Campbell, come up with reasons to accept them. They still have scholars who, like the curators of the University of Michigan, find them to be fabrications. The issue has become one of fierce amateur advocacy against universal scholarly dismissal.

Wayne May is certainly aware of the controversy concerning the Michigan artifacts, though just as clearly dismisses contrary evidence. In *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, he notes (apparently using some caution Goble encouraged):

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 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 our own families, we have seen false accusations made, and it is certainly not out of the question.²³

Although the confession of the daughter-in-law might not be sufficient by itself, May's suggestion that she was fabricating the story doesn't seem to fit with a similar story from a different person (published in Wayne May's *Ancient American* magazine):

Perhaps it was Granny Mary Robson who really gave the "Dawn Race of Caucasians" [a tabloid name for the putative people behind the Michigan artifacts] their quietus. She told *The News* on September 6th that one winter she had a room at 313 ½ Michigan, next to the one occupied by Percy Scotford and his brother, Charles, age 21.

,M1 (accessed 10 November 2008). Earlier on this page, Chamberlain speaks specifically of Campbell's translation of the artifact but dismisses it with generalizations.

23. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 19.

She said “Hammering went on day and night.” She went to the boys’ room to borrow something and “they warned me out.” Then they relented and told her that she was in Detroit’s ancient relic factory.

Next day, Charles denied this and said that Percy had hypnotized Granny Robson using skills gained in a correspondence course. “Never hypnotized me in their lives,” said Granny firmly.²⁴

J. Golden Barton and Wayne May had this to say of the responses to the Michigan artifacts:

The so-called “men of letters” in America’s contemporary scientific community condemned Soper and Savage as conspirators of an archeological hoax. For every published report even mildly in favor of the two hapless investigators, some university-trained scholars would issue a charge of fraud. So unrelenting was the official campaign of academic hysteria that anyone even remotely associated with the Michigan artifacts distanced themselves from the bitter controversy. Eventually, any discussion of the artifacts’ possible genuineness was no longer considered. And over the decades, the Michigan Tablets fell into almost complete oblivion.

Today, however, they are being re-examined in the new light of unprejudiced investigation. Many collections private and public are being photographed and catalogued for the first time. Their illustrated texts have been preserved for present and future researchers into the lost history of North America.²⁵

The battle lines have thus been drawn between scholars and ardent amateurs, with the implication of some cabal on behalf of the schol-

24. Rydholm, “Trashing America’s ‘Politically Incorrect’ Prehistory,” 230–31.

25. J. Golden Barton and Wayne May, “The Michigan Tablets: An Archaeological Scandal,” in *Discovering the Mysteries of Ancient America: Lost History and Legends, Unearthed and Explored*, contributions by David Hatcher Childress, Zecharia Sitchin, Wayne May, Andrew Collins, and Frank Joseph (n. p.: New Page Books, 2006), 36.

ars that requires them to dismiss what the amateurs are finding to be more convincing. This is behind the plea in *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*: “We have shown things 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.”²⁶

Unfortunately for his association with May, Goble was unaware that such testing had already been done. Goble read a note in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* about the *BYU Studies* article, not the original. This means that he, and probably May, had not read the full article that indicated 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 preindustrial population.²⁷

More importantly, whoever entered the information about James Talmage (and I presume it would have been May) neglected to mention the next article in the very same issue of *BYU Studies*: precisely the modern scientific examination of the artifacts, just as May requested be done. The results were certainly nothing May wanted to reproduce.

Richard B. Stamps ran several types of examinations on multiple examples of the 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.”²⁸

26. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 12.

27. Ashurst-McGee, “Mormonism’s Encounter with the Michigan Relics,” *BYU Studies* 40/3 (2001): 193.

28. Richard B. Stamps. “Tools Leave Marks: Material Analysis of the Scotford-Soper-Savage Michigan Relics,” *BYU Studies* 40/3 (2001): 217.

Further evidence of the impossibility of the clay objects' antiquity is that they dissolve in water and thus could not have survived 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.²⁹

Stamps also examined some of the copper pieces, yielding the same microscopical conclusion as the report to Talmage. The pieces are modern smelted copper.³⁰ 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 forging 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 peaned (hammered to remove the straight edges), the sides are parallel, and the corners are right angles. The cross-section is rectangular, whereas most tradi-

29. Stamps, "Tools Leave Marks," 217–19.

30. Stamps, "Tools Leave Marks," 220.

tional 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.³¹

Stamps notes that criticism of the metal artifacts early on 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.”³² 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.”³³

Many of the artifacts are on slate. Talmage had earlier seen clear evidence of modern saw cuts on a slate artifact, an observation Stamps confirms.³⁴ 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.³⁵ On this point, May is clearly aware of the problem and provides the following “solution”:

The black slate which is very common in the collections comes in all sizes. Some items are thin; others are quite uniformly thick. The claim was made that ancient men could not have produced such uniformity of surface to leave their history upon. And secondly, the slate must have been cast-offs from the printing industry or slate roofers in the state who both get their slate from New York or the Carolinas. The slate does indeed come from Michigan. The ancient open-pit mine is

31. Stamps, “Tools Leave Marks,” 220–22.

32. Stamps, “Tools Leave Marks,” 224.

33. Stamps, “Tools Leave Marks,” 225.

34. Stamps, “Tools Leave Marks,” 226.

35. Stamps, “Tools Leave Marks,” 228.

located at Baraga, Michigan. I have been there and by reaching in with little effort, broken off pieces of black slate that were uniformly even and smooth as glass. The shaping of the tablet would have to be cut by some means. The saw marks that show up on the tablets are claimed to be modern cuts, yet we find hardened copper saws all over the ancient world and here in the Michigan collection too.³⁶

Of course, May neglects to mention that the slate originates from the Upper Peninsula, not close to where the slate was found in southern Michigan. The task of importing the slate from the Upper Peninsula to southern Michigan would be just as arduous as importing it from states farther east. It is interesting, of course, to note that May's defense of the saw marks refers to other places in the world. The only place we find the "saws" is in the Michigan artifact collection itself, and Stamps tells us that the tools that were "discovered" right after their incongruity was noted, have never done any work, nor could they. Using a forged collection to prove that it is not a forgery is a fascinating piece of logic.

Nevertheless, in May's argument, it is still the scholars who dismiss the artifacts without sufficient consideration: "They 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."³⁷

May has since learned that the evidence for forgery is so strong that even he cannot deny it. The newer approach is slightly different:

Did the Scotford brothers make some fake artifacts? Somebody did. All the men I have visited who have seen the collection in Salt Lake City or now in Lansing, Michigan, agree there are fakes in the collection. The Scotfords may or may not have

36. Wayne N. May, *This Land: They Came from the East* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2005), 150–51.

37. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 47.

been forgers, but someone surely was. However, just as courts of law require two or more witnesses to convict or identify the accused, so we have witnesses who have testified on behalf of some of the Michigan relics. Thanks to Rudolf Etzenhouser, we have signed testimonials by several witnesses as to the discovery and disclosure of such artifacts.³⁸

It is really not surprising that there were witnesses to the “discovery.” This was nothing new. When James E. Talmage went to see Soper and Father Savage, he was taken to a site where an artifact was successfully found. Thus Talmage himself could witness that the discovery had been found, just as the testimonials May cites indicate. Nevertheless, the test isn’t in the discovery (though modern archaeologists would consider it the highest of luck to be able to dig and find on demand precisely what they were looking for), but in the artifacts themselves. It is on that point that May appears to be deliberately blind. The scientific studies have been done. Stamps’s examination is devastating. Every artifact examined bore marks of modern manufacture. May might call for further scientific study, but he is apparently prepared to find a way around it, were it to be presented. We are left with the question of why May would continue to believe that some artifacts might be authentic when *every* expert he has consulted calls them forgeries and *every* piece that has undergone testing is clearly a forgery. If every expert and all scientific analysis show them to be forgeries, which specific pieces are so different that they might be the only authentically ancient ones?

Perhaps even more telling is the story of the artifacts that May does not relate. As part of his conclusions on the artifacts, Stamps provides the following information about the discovery of these artifacts:

The finds appeared only when Scotford or Soper were on the scene. Gillman, who worked extensively in southeastern Michigan, reports that none were found before 1890. From 1890 to 1920, they were found only by Scotford, Soper, or family and associates. The Michigan Relic phenomenon follows

38. May, *This Land: They Came from the East*, 148.

Scotford in time and space. After Scotford's death and Soper's retirement to Chattanooga, Tennessee, no new examples were dug up. Al Spooner, long-time member of the Michigan Archaeological society who as a youth dug with Soper; John O'Shay of the Anthropology Museum at the University of Michigan; and John Halsey, state archaeologist of Michigan, all concur that no new finds have been reported since the 1920s. Halsey's office has documented some ten thousand prehistoric sites in Michigan. None of them have produced Michigan Relics.³⁹

The insistence on using the Michigan Relics as evidence for Book of Mormon peoples in Michigan (though, of course, not Ohio, where his geography indicates they should have been) is indicative of the difference between the way May handles artifactual evidence and the way scholars do. It is not a question of whether there are "gee-whiz" appearances, but whether an actual case can be made to associate the artifact with the argument.

It is at this point that the discipline of the scholars must come into play again. In order for any geography to elucidate the Book of Mormon, it must meet a complex set of rigorous conditions. If we have the correct geographic correlation, the cultural data will also fit. If we have an otherwise plausible geography but the cultural data do not correspond to what we find in the text, then we likely have the wrong geography. On this level, as well as that of the geography, the Cumorah/Mississippi correlation cannot be the correct real-world setting behind the Book of Mormon.

Just as the Mississippi flows in the wrong direction for May's geography to work, the cultural information about population movements doesn't fit textual descriptions. The most important textual data that contradicts the Mississippian correlation to the Book of Mormon comes from the relationship of the Nephites to the Jaredites. The Nephites are never in direct contact with the living Jaredites. The people of Zarahemla were in contact with Coriantumr in approximately

39. Stamps, "Tools Leave Marks," 231.

200 BC, but that was before the Nephites had arrived in the land of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:18–21). The text requires that the Jaredites live north of the narrow neck of land and not have any inheritance in the lands south of the narrow neck (see all references to the land of Desolation, or the land of the Nephites).⁴⁰

The Hopewell tradition along the Mississippi that May equates with the Nephites is certainly in the area in approximately the right time, though the beginning date is usually given around 200 BC rather than 600 BC.⁴¹ The real problem is the correlation May makes of the earlier culture, the Adena, with the Jaredites.⁴² Most problematic is that the Adena lived in the same area as the Hopewell tradition.⁴³ Not only are they not north of the narrow neck, but they are also not physically separated in space (nor perhaps in time) from the later Hopewell tradition. Those facts completely disqualify the Adena as possible Jaredites. When combined with the requirements of finding large cities north of the narrow neck, and particularly the land northward where the lack of trees created the need to build with cement, both the geography and the archaeological information of the Mississippi correlation fail to fit the Book of Mormon requirements.

The lack of an official answer to where the Book of Mormon took place requires that we must use our best understanding of the text in

40. Alma 22:29–30 notes that the land of Desolation is north of Bountiful. Verse 32 places it in the land northward. The Nephites do not enter this land until after approximately AD 200. Alma 46:17 has Captain Moroni declaring the land south of Desolation the “land of liberty,” which was the same as the Nephite holdings at that time. Alma 50:34 places the land of Desolation north of the narrow pass leading into the land northward.

41. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 99, equates the Nephites with the Hopewell tradition but gives the dates as 600 BC to AD 400, which are the Book of Mormon dates, not those from archaeology. For more accepted dating of the Hopewell culture (200 BC to AD 500), see “Hopewell Tradition,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hopewell_culture (accessed September 2008), and “Hopewell Culture,” National Historic Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/hocu/> (accessed September 2008).

42. Goble and May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation*, 99. May again provides dates for the Adena from the Book of Mormon rather than from archaeology. He gives 2200 BC to 600 BC, where the accepted cultural range is 1000 BC to 200 BC; see “Adena Culture,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adena_culture (accessed September 2008).

43. “Adena Culture.” “The Adena lived in a variety of locations, including: Ohio, Indiana, West Virginia, Kentucky, and parts of Pennsylvania and New York.”

our search for an answer. Multiple answers have been given, some better than others. How should we judge any given geography? We must use the text as a guide. Any theory that violates what the text tells us also disagrees with those who really did know where the Book of Mormon took place—those who wrote the text.

In the case of the proposals Wayne May argues in his trilogy of books, the correlations fail significantly to pass important tests. The geography cannot fit with the text's descriptions, particularly for the direction of flow of the Sidon and the description of the land northward. The archaeological information fails because it requires that the Adena/Jaredites occupy the same lands south of the narrow neck as do the Hopewell/Nephites, something directly contradicted by consistent textual descriptions. Finally, May's interesting insistence on attempting to bolster his case with discredited forged artifacts cannot provide any support at all. Interestingly, May says of these discredited artifacts: "We feel that a proper scientific frame of mind would require that we presume them potentially feasible until we are constrained to reject the hypothesis due to the evidence to the contrary."⁴⁴ This comes in spite of the fact that all of those who have the training to deal with either the physical or cultural aspects of the artifacts have uniformly declared them fakes. All rigorous scientific tests have declared them forgeries. The testimony of witnesses to the forgeries and the absence of any artifacts since the time of the forgers, coupled with the absence of artifacts from known sites, all tell us that a "proper scientific frame of mind" requires that we declare them forgeries and look for our support of the Book of Mormon in firmer ground, geographically, culturally, and archaeologically.

44. Wayne N. May, *This Land: They Came From the East*, 187.