Nephite History in CONTEXT
Artifacts, Inscriptions, and Texts Relevant to the Book of Mormon
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Vered Jericho Sword
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Background
Vered Jericho was a small ancient Israelite fortress first excavated in the winter of 1982 by archaeologist Avraham Eitan. It’s located roughly 3.7 miles (6 km) south of Jericho proper, on the northern side of Wadi es-Suweid. The walls still stand over 6 and half feet tall (2 m) and nearly 3 feet (0.9 m) wide, with two towers on each corner flanking the gate. Inside the fort is a courtyard and two dwelling structures. The fort may have also had cultic or ritual functions as a “high place” (beit bamah). It dates to the late seventh to early sixth century BC, and was destroyed by fire, quite likely in either the Babylonian siege of 597–598 or that of 588–586 BC.1

Among the ruins, excavators found a large iron sword, fully intact, next to the skeletal remains of a man. It is the largest Israelite sword found to date, and measures nearly 3 and half feet long (1.04 m) and a little over 2 inches wide (6 cm); it gets narrower (.75–1.5 in; 2–4 cm) at the handle, which was made of bronze and wood and widens into a crescent shape at the end.2 The blade is double-edged, and metallurgical analysis determined that the iron had been carburized into “mild steel.”3

Image

Book of Mormon Relevance
Since steel can be produced through accidental carburization during the ironworking process, it’s hard to say when Israelites first developed the technical expertise to intentionally create high-quality steel.4
The earliest evidence for the intentional creation of steel comes from twelfth century BC Cyprus, and may have spread to Palestine fairly early on. Metallurgical analysis of tenth century BC iron artifacts from Israelite sites reveals that many, even most, of these are technically steel, but there's uncertainty as to whether these were carburized deliberately or not.

Whenever the technology developed in Israel, the Vered Jericho sword is evidence the Israelites knew how to intentionally create steel by the late-seventh century BC. According to metallurgical analysis of the blade, “the iron was deliberately hardened into steel, attesting to the technical knowledge of the blacksmith.” Thus, it is the earliest steel sword found in an Israelite context, and the largest, fully intact steel sword found anywhere in the ancient Near East.

In 1 Nephi, a military commander named Laban, living in Jerusalem in the early sixth century BC, had a sword with a hilt “of pure gold” and a blade “of the most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9). The Vered Jericho sword, from the exact same time-period, compares favorably with this description—it had a long blade of deliberately-made, high-quality steel, as opposed to the lower quality steel often produced on accident, and was also bi-metallic, with a bronze and wood handle. Laban’s hilt of gold is comparable to that on King Tutankhamen’s dagger (ca. 1336–1327 BC), and in comparison with this contemporary Israelite sword it suggests that his was the weapon of a man with high social standing.

Notes

2 For dimensions of the sword, see Amihai Mazar and Shmuel Ahituv, “Tel Reḥov in the Assyrian Period: Squatters, Burials, and a Hebrew Seal,” in The Fire Signals of Lachish: Studies in the Archaeology and History of Israel in the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Persian Period in Honor of David Ussishkin, ed. Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na’aman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 273. Contra Mazar and Ahituv, who report that “the blade and hilt are made of iron as one unit,” Eitan says the “haft is of bronze with some wood remains.” See Shanks, “BAR Interviews,” 33.
Stech-Wheeler et al. analyzed 11 iron articles from Taanach, dated no later than ca. 925 BC, and determined that 5 were carburized into steel and that this was done deliberately. In contrast, Yahalom-Mack and Elyahu-Behar analyzed 60 iron artifacts dated to ca. tenth–ninth centuries BC, and determined that nearly all of them (57) are steel, but that none was likely carburized intentionally. While Yahalom-Mack and Elyahu-Behar is the more recent study, and uses newer methods, their results are significantly hampered by the poor preservation of their samples and the limitations of the available methods, and thus their conclusions are far from definitive. Nonetheless, their data does seem to suggest that at this early stage in Israelite history, “a range of steels existed during the Iron Age, indicating the lack of systematic, deliberate carburization” (p. 297), while all of the steel samples analyzed by Stech-Wheeler et al. could be explained as accidental carburization.


8 Eitan, “Rare Sword,” 62.


10 On King Tutankhamen’s dagger, see the forthcoming Nephite History in Context 4.