Nephite History in CONTEXT
Artifacts, Inscriptions, and Texts Relevant to the Book of Mormon
The Iron Dagger of King Tutankhamun
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Background
The discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922 was a worldwide sensation, and to this day is widely regarded as one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all-time due to the veritable treasure trove of artifacts found inside. The treasure was so great that to this day many of the items have yet to be studied. Likewise, Tutankhamun (ca. 1336–1327 BC) remains the best-known Pharaoh of Egypt in popular culture today, but details about his actual reign and accomplishments are still generally unknown among the public. Some are aware that he ascended to the throne as a mere child, about 8 years old, but few realize that he oversaw an important period of transition into the post-Amarna era in Egypt before dying in his late-teens about a decade later.¹

Among the treasures found in the tomb were two ornate daggers, each about a foot long, found directly on the body of Tutankhamun.² One, with a blade of hardened gold, was almost certainly ceremonial, but the other was “a more practical, iron-bladed weapon” with a decorative golden handle.³ Both the iron blade and the golden-haft are still in remarkably good condition. As Carter described it, “The haft of the dagger is of granulated gold, embellished at intervals with collars of cloisonné work of coloured stones, and is surmounted with a knob of turned rock crystal; but the astonishing and unique feature of this weapon is that the blade is of iron, still bright and resembling steel!”⁴

The dagger was most likely a gift from a Hittite ruler, based on the mention of a remarkably similar weapon in a list found at Amarna (EA 22) of offerings to Pharaoh Amenhotep III (ca. 1390–1352) from King Tušratta of Ḫatti:

[1] dagger, the blade of which is of i[r]on; its guard, of gold, with designs; its haft, of ebony with calf figurines; overlaid with gold; its [pomm]el is of … -stone; its […]…, overlaid with gold, with designs. 6 shekels of gold have been used on it.⁵

After decades of debate, recent scientific analysis has determined that the blade was forged from meteoric iron, which is naturally alloyed with nickel, making it a bright, silvery color.⁶ Egyptians
referred to it as the “iron of heaven,” indicating their awareness that it came from meteors falling from the sky. This metal, sometimes called “nickel steel,” was “of greatest rarity and value” in ancient Egypt and the Near East.

**Image**

![Dagger Image](https://example.com/dagger.jpg)

*Found in King Tutankhamun’s tomb, this 14th century BC dagger of Hittite origin measures 33.5 cm (34.2 cm) from end to end, with a blade “resembling steel,” 8.25 cm (21 cm) long and 1.75 cm (4.45 cm) wide, and an ornate gold handle. Photo credit: Daniela Comelli; © John Wiley & Sons*

**Book of Mormon Relevance**

Centuries after Tutankhamun, 1 Nephi reports that a military commander living in Jerusalem, named Laban, had a sword, with a “hilt ... of pure gold,” with “workmanship ... [that] was exceedingly fine,” and a “blade ... of the most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9). This description of Laban’s sword calls to mind Carter’s own description of Tutankhamun’s dagger, with its “granulated gold” haft, ornate embellishments, and bright silvery-blade “resembling steel.” While the blade of Tutankhamun’s dagger only *resembled* steel, Laban lived at a time (ca. 597–595 BC), when true steel blades were being made, as evidenced by the late-seventh century BC steel sword from Vered Jericho. Based on the golden handles, both Laban’s and Tutankhamun’s weapons were probably prestige items, and perhaps Laban’s steel blade was “most precious” because it, too, had been made from the silvery, highly rare and valuable, meteoric iron.

Furthermore, like the remarkably well-preserved dagger in Tutankhamun’s tomb, Laban’s sword was apparently still in useable condition centuries later. Benjamin, a second century BC Nephite king, used it in battle (Words of Mormon 1:13), and handed it down to his son Mosiah (Mosiah 1:16). The sword was passed on to Joseph Smith in the 1820s, and reports from those who saw it at that time suggest it was still in relatively good condition.
Notes


2 See Carter and Mace, Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen, 2335–136, 268 and pl. LXXVI; Reeves, Complete Tutankhamun, 177; Donadoni and Giorgi, Egyptian Museum Cairo, 130–131; Mey Zaki, The Legacy of Tutankhamun: Art and History (Giza: Farid Atiya Press, 2008), 116–117; Marjan H. Feldman, Diplomacy by Design: Luxury Arts and an “International Style” in the Ancient Near East (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 31–32. See also Carter no. 256k-1, The Griffith Institute, Oxford University, online at http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter/256k-c256k-1.html.

3 Darnell and Manassa, Tutankhamun’s Armies, 77.

4 Carter and Mace, Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen, 2135.


9 Reeves, Complete Tutankhamun, 177.

10 There are some cases where, even using scientific analysis, it’s been difficult for scholars to determine if an artifact is made from steel (carburized iron) or meteoritic iron, due to the natural carbon sometimes occurring in meteorites. See McNutt, Forging of Israel, 126–127.


12 See Nephite History in Context 3 (August 2018).

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See Brett L. Holbrook, “The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 39–72; Daniel N. Rolph, “Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and it’s Possible Pre-Laban Origin,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 73–79. For references to seeing the sword from David Whitmer, see Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:462. However, since Joseph Sr. never himself saw the sword, Lapham’s late recollection is at best third-hand, and should be considered with appropriate caution. Since those who saw it repeatedly described seeing a sword, and not just a hilt, it seems likely that the blade was still intact, and the weapon’s overall condition was good enough to be recognized by non-specialists as a sword. On the other hand, Francis Gladden Bishop claimed to also have seen the sword and published a detailed description of it in 1851 (see Holbrook, p. 79–71 n.103). Bishop’s description of the sword as “somewhat dagger shaped,” with precious stones in the golden hilt and guard, and with a “pearl” at the end is interesting in light of the dagger found in Tutankhamun’s tomb and those mentioned in the Amarna Letters (EA 22), with their colored stone embellishments and crystal knobs at the end. Some details (like the four-cross guard), however, would be out of place in the ancient world. Interestingly, Bishop also traced the origins of the sword back to Joseph in Egypt (Holbrook, p. 71; cf. Rolph, pp. 73–79), which would date the weapon to the mid-second millennium BC, making it essentially contemporary with the dagger of Tutankhamun and those mentioned in Amarna. As a high-ranking officer just below Pharaoh, Joseph realistically could have received a similar weapon as a diplomatic gift (though Joseph would be chronologically early for Egyptian-Hittite relations). Bishop’s claims to seeing the sword should be viewed with skepticism, however, since he was repudiated by Joseph Smith in 1842; and thus his description, like Lapham’s, should be considered with caution.