



Type: Magazine Article

The Stone Box

Author(s): Paul R. Cheesman

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 69, No. 10 (October 1966)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 876–878, 900

Abstract: Prior to Joseph Smith's encounter with the stone box that contained the gold plates, no record existed that described the stone boxes of antiquity. The author includes descriptions of various stone boxes that have subsequently been found in Central and South America.

BY PAUL CHEESMAN

THE STONE BOX

● Prior to 1823, when Joseph Smith first gazed upon the stone box containing the golden plates, no record had been found that described any type of stone box from any ancient period. Only in recent years have archaeologists confirmed the idea that this method of storing valuable articles was common in ancient times.

What better way of preserving a precious record than to place it in a stone box? Joseph Smith's and Oliver Cowdery's descriptions of the stone box containing the golden plates have stood alone for over a century as the only incident involving ancient stone boxes. Today the validity of this description is strengthened considerably by numerous discoveries of similar description in a variety of shapes and sizes.

Joseph Smith's own account of the visitations of the Angel Moroni indicated that his first experience concerning the Book of Mormon occurred September 22, 1823. During the night previous to this date, Joseph was visited three times by this heavenly messenger. The following day he received a fourth visit from the Angel Moroni, with specific instructions to meet him on a nearby hill. Joseph wrote:

"I . . . went to the place where the messenger had told me the plates were deposited. . . . On the west side of this hill, not far from the top, under a stone of considerable size, lay the plates, deposited in a stone box. This stone was thick and rounding in the middle on the upper side, and thinner towards the edges, so that the middle part of it was visible above the ground, but the edge all around was covered with earth.

"Having removed the earth, I obtained a lever, which I got fixed under the edge of the stone, and with a little exertion raised it up. I looked in, and there indeed did I behold the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate, as stated by the messenger.

"The box in which they lay was formed by laying stones together in some kind of cement. In the bottom of the box were laid two stones crossways of the box, and on these stones lay the plates and the other things with them.

"I made an attempt to take them out, but was forbidden by the messenger. . . ." (Joseph Smith 2:50-53.) (Continued on page 878)

1. Discovered in ruins near Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico, this box was formed by inverting one carved-out stone over another.
2. Stone box was found at Lake Titicaca, Bolivia.
3. Sketch of large limestone trough found at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, shows symmetrical designs on vessel's outer surface.
4. From Tres Zapotes, Vera Cruz, Mexico, boxes carved from stone are representative of Olmec culture, contemporary with or predating the Maya.
5. Contents of box in this drawing were valuable and belonged to important people.
6. Man in upper illustration is bearded—perhaps a god. Feathers of sacred quetzal bird are seen.
7. Stone in foreground is the lid to stone box at center. Box contained masonry tools when found at Temple of Kulkulcan, Chichén Itzá, Yucatán.



1 2



3 4



5



6



7



Joseph then stated that he returned to this spot, as commanded, each year for four years. On the fourth year he was permitted to take the plates from the stone box and use them for the Lord's purposes. Joseph retained these plates, except for short intervals, until the messenger called for them. Joseph then delivered the plates to him and remarked, ". . . he has them in his charge until this day, being the second day of May, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight." (Joseph Smith 2:60.) We are not told of the exact date the plates were returned, only that it was sometime prior to May 2, 1838.

In a letter published in the *Messenger and Advocate* and with the approval of Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery described the stone box that contained the plates of the Book of Mormon:

"The manner in which the plates were deposited: First, a hole of sufficient depth (how deep I know not) was dug. At the bottom of this was laid a stone of suitable size, the upper surface being smooth. At each edge was placed a large quantity of cement and into this cement, at the four edges of this stone were placed, erect, four other, their bottom edges on the first stone. The four last named, when placed erect, formed a box; the corners, or where the edges of the four came in contact, were also cemented so firmly that the moisture from without was prevented from entering. It is to be observed, also, that the inner surface of the four erect, or side, stones was smooth. This box was sufficiently large to admit a breastplate, such as was used by the ancients to defend the chest, etc., from the arrows and weapons of their enemies. From the bottom of the box, or from the breastplate, arose three small pillars composed of the same description of cement used on the edges; and upon these three pillars was placed the record of the children of Joseph, and of the people who left the tower far, far before the days of Joseph or a sketch of each, which had it not been for this, and the never failing goodness of God, we might have perished in our sins, having been left to bow down before the altars of the gentiles and to have paid homage to the priests of Baal!

"I must not forget to say that this box, containing the record, was covered with another stone, and the bottom surface being flat and the upper, crowning; But these three pillars were not so lengthy as to cause the plates and crowning stone to come in contact. I have now given you, according to my promise, the manner in which this record was deposited; though when it was first visited by our brother, in 1823, a part of the crowning stone was visible above the surface while the edges were concealed by the soil and grass, from which circumstance you will see, that

however deep this box might have been placed by Moroni, at first, the time had been sufficient to wear the earth so that it was easily discovered, when once directed, and yet not enough to make a perceivable difference to the passer-by. So wonderful are the works of the Almighty, and so far from our finding out are His ways, that one trembles to take His holy name into his lips, is left to wonder at His exact providences, and the fulfillment of His purposes in the event of times and seasons."

In recent years other stone boxes answering a similar description have been discovered in Central and South America. Some contained tools, clothing, and jewelry; others, it seems, were used for burial purposes. In each case, however, it was evident that these stone boxes were used to preserve valuable items.

E. Wyllys Andrews of Tulane University states that stone boxes were used anciently as hiding places for food and supplies. He has found stone boxes in Mexico that contained a variety of raw materials used in making jewelry. Some of these boxes were constructed by inverting one metate (concave stone) over another to form the box. He also said that they were occasionally sealed with plaster.

Another interesting stone box was found in Bolivia on the island of Titicaca. This box, which is in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, contains a fine tapestry poncho shirt, but there is no positive means of dating the box. The approximate dimensions of this box are 1½' x 1' inside and 2½' x 1½' x 2¼' outside.

A few stone boxes 7" to 9" long have been found in Peru that belonged to the Mochica culture, dating near the time of Christ. These were constructed of stone slabs laced together with metal rings.

Many of the stone boxes found in Mexico are carved on the outside surface with many intricate and delicate designs. An interesting book written in German offers a series of explanations and illustrations of other stone boxes that have been found in Mexico. One very ornately sculptured box is 1' x 34" Interpretations of the sculptured figures represented are varied, except for the idea that the contents were valuable and belonged to people of importance. One theory is that the carved man represents a god. Others declare that there is some evidence of sacrifice, involving the spilling of blood.

On another box, a bearded man is depicted and is believed by some to be a god. Evidence of sacrifice is also indicated on this box, plus the use of quetzal feathers, a sacred bird of the ancient people. This box measures approximately 1½' x 1'.

Several other boxes (Continued on page 900)



From our complete selection
of L.D.S. Church books and supplies,

TAKE HEED TO YOURSELVES!

Gospel Discourses of
JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH

\$4.95

President Smith speaks on vital, timely subjects to give Latter-Day Saints better understanding of their responsibilities as members of the Church.

FOURTH FLOOR BOOKS

Mail orders filled, write to Auerbach's, Box 1465, Salt Lake City, Utah 84110. Add 15¢ postage for first book, 5¢ each additional, plus 3½% sales tax in Utah.

Phone for delivery in our wide delivery area: dial 328-1188 in Salt Lake City area, 825-1607 in Ogden area, 374-2780 in Provo area, Zenith 737 outlying areas. Delivery north to Tremonton and Richmond, south to Payson and Provo, east to Heber and Midway, west to Grantsville and Tooele, all points in between. Allow 4 days for delivery, there is a 50¢ charge on any C.O.D. delivery.

Auerbach's

STATE AND BROADWAY • SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH 84110

Preserve the Inspiration of

The Improvement Era

In Beautifully Bound Volumes



The Mountain West's finest bindery and printing house is prepared to bind your collected Improvement Era's into fine hard cover volumes. Mail or bring the editions you wish bound to the Deseret News Press.

12 issues in hard cover \$3.90. Advance payment must accompany all orders—Please include postage if volumes are to be returned by mail.

POSTAGE RATE FROM SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

Zone	5	1.07
1 & 2	.68	6 1.28
3	.75	7 1.50
4	.88	8 1.73



1600 Empire Road
Salt Lake City, Utah

The Stone Box

(Continued from page 878)

have been reported, one as large as 2' x 1' x ¾' inscribed with hieroglyphs and a smaller one made of lava stone. Some experts believe that cremation may have been practiced and that these boxes were used not only to hold the remains of the dead but also to preserve some of their valuable worldly possessions.

While the writer was in Merida, visiting the ruins of Chichen Itza, he photographed a stone box, the base of which is carved out of one piece of stone and the lid another. It has approximately a 2½' x 2' x 2' exterior and a 2' x 1½' x 1½' interior. The lid is rounded on the top, identical to the description of the stone box that Oliver Cowdery described as the vessel for the golden plates of the Book of Mormon.

Another stone box was found inside the Temple of Kukulcan on the site of Chichen Itza, Mexico. The attendant at this tourist attraction stated that when this box was uncovered, numerous masonry tools were found inside. Some experts believe that these tools were used in the construction of this famed pyramid.

Thus, the account of Joseph Smith concerning the plates in a stone box is only one of many external evidences supporting the story of the Book of Mormon. It is interesting to note that during the past few years more evidence of this type has been uncovered than during the previous fifty years. Each new discovery only adds to the growing archaeological evidences that parallel the story as told by the Book of Mormon.

THE VICTORY

BY GLADYS HESSER BURNHAM

*A roast well-done,
A steaming pie
With crust all flaky thin,
A cake so high,
Or cookies rich,
Reposing in the bin,
Can hold a spouse
Or truant teen
When nothing else will win.*