



Type: Book Chapter

Death Ritual of the Buried Weapons

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Chapter 24

Death Ritual of the Buried Weapons

Burial of weapons occurs in the Book of Mormon's post-Jaredite narratives of Nephite-Lamanite warfare. But the ritual burial of weapons is first found among the Olmec. At the Olmec site of El Manatí, some of the first excavations unearthed a knife and a celt as part of a ritual offering, with 353 greenstone celts being eventually unearthed (Grove 2014, 120, 172) and some additional knives. A celt is a prehistoric stone or metal implement with a beveled cutting edge, probably used as a tool or weapon. The El Manatí site is dated from 1700 BC to 1200 BC.

Ritual burials of this sort are referred to as votive burials. At the Olmec site of La Venta, burial of celts (also known as "pseudo-axes") was extremely common in both burials and offerings. They were typically purposefully oriented in various ways, sometimes creating specific designs. It is unclear whether these artifacts were actually used in any practical way or if their meaning is ritualistic or symbolic. Most are smooth, but quite a few are decorated with what has been interpreted as representing religious symbolism. Such celts and other jade artifacts were offered to deities during ceremonies at La Venta and the belief in supernatural beings is evidenced in Olmec artifacts. However, it is difficult to tell which important figures remaining on the stone monuments and artifacts are gods and which are human leaders. In fact, there might have been little difference between the divine and the Olmec king in their ideology (Diehl 2004).

This practice is not only found in the Olmec heartland. At the site of Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico, also known as the city of Sidom under the Sorenson model, various votive offerings involving large numbers of axes similar to Olmec patterns have been excavated. Some axe offerings were found in tombs of what would be interpreted as royal (elite leaders) tombs (Bachand and Lowe 2012; Bachand and Lowe 2011; Bachand et al. 2008).

Some are very crudely formed "pseudo-axes" that were not finely crafted, but others were finely polished. The axes were carefully placed in axe clusters similar to other Middle Formative ritual axe clusters found at San Isidro, La Merced, El Manatí, and La Venta. Only 10 percent of the axes showed any damage or use.

The Book of Mormon recounts various episodes of enemies surrendering by laying down their weapons of war (Alma 44:6, 8, 14, 15; 52:25, 36–39; 55:23). With these peaceful occurrences, the record recounts associated covenants of peace related to the laying down of weapons of war (Alma 23:7, 13; 62:16; Helaman 5:51; Mormon 7:4).

The Book of Mormon ritual that directly relates to the documented Mesoamerican votive offerings of weapons occurs among a group of Lamanites called the Anti-Nephi-Lehites (later called the people of Ammon), who, together with their new king (who took the name of the people), "took their swords, and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man's blood, and they did bury them up deep in the earth" (Alma 24:15–17). An oath was made in conjunction with the ritual burial, stating "if our brethren seek to destroy us, behold, we will hide away our swords, yea, even we will bury them deep in the earth, that they may be kept bright, as a testimony that we have never used them, at the last day; and if our brethren destroy us, behold, we shall go to our God and shall be saved."

Brant Gardner (2015) has an excellent discussion regarding this votive offering and the corresponding oath and its setting in Mesoamerica (303–308). Extending Gardner's discussion, there are some additional items that that were left unaddressed.

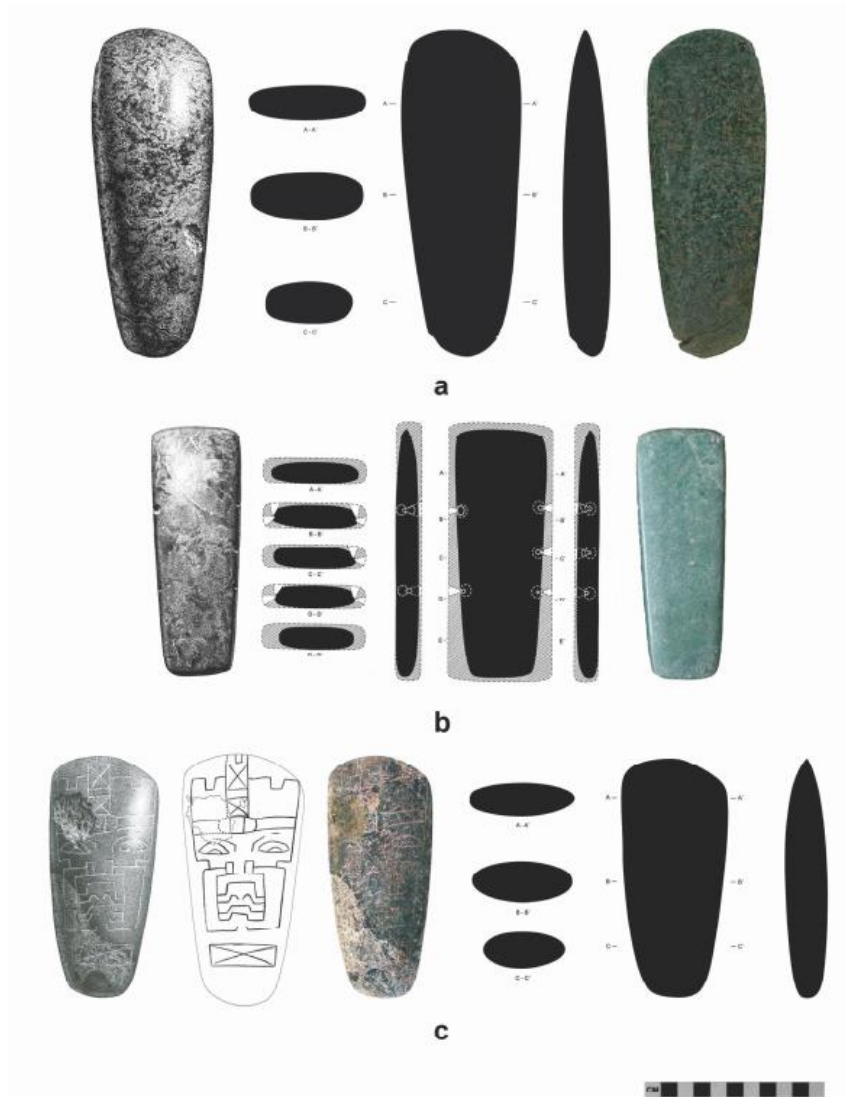


Figure 105.- Jade and serpentine axes from the Mound 11 axe pit excavations:
 a) Axe 1, b) Axe 8, and c) Axe 7 (drawings by Áyax Moreno).

Based on later discussions in the Book of Mormon of the children who did not take the oath, Gardner noted that all of the members of the group made the oath, except the very young, which would be those that were too young to voice an oath. An item unaddressed is whether the very young, or others who did not typically possess weapons, could have participated in the votive offering itself. Noting the relative simplicity of many of the pseudo-axe offerings at Chiapa de Corzo (some were just river rock and pebbles) and noting that only 10 percent appeared to be weapons that were actually used, these votive offerings seem to be community-type offerings in which all persons would have been able to participate, not just the warrior class who possessed actual weapons. The participation of all members of the Anti-Nephi-Lehites is consistent with the weapon offerings tendered in Chiapa de Corzo.

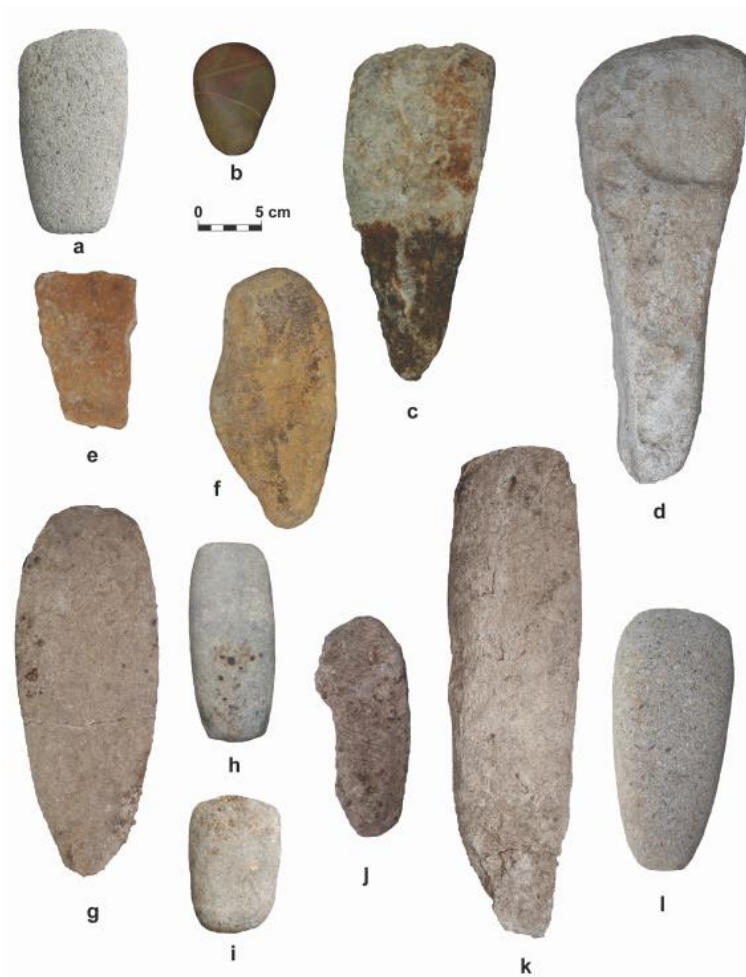


Figure 106.- Range of axe forms within the Mound 11 axe pit: a) Axe 2 – andesite, b) Axe 29 – river pebble, c) Axe 92 – limestone, d) Axe 23 – quartzite, e) Axe 69 – tabular sandstone, f) Axe 22 – sandstone, g) Axe 81 – limestone, h) Axe 97 – quartzite, i) Axe 89 – quartzite, j) Axe 46 – limestone (cave stone?), k) Axe 50 – limestone, l) Axe 11 – polished andesite.

Figure 102. Range of axe forms from Chiapa de Corzo Mound 11 votive offering. (Bachand et al. 2008)

Further, the Anti-Nephi-Lehi votive weapons offering is described that “they buried their weapons of peace, or they buried the weapons of war, for peace” (Alma 24:19). Smith (2017) argues that this phrase is an example of an improvisational error in the Book of Mormon, meaning that a mistake was engraved into the plates, and the correct verbiage is then restated and engraved by the author (72). Smith’s argument here is in error. With a removal of a comma (remembering there was no original punctuation in the Book of Mormon), the phrase reads “they buried their weapons of peace or they buried the weapons of war, for peace.” Given the fact that in the Chiapa de Corzo example there were two types of weapons buried, pseudo weapons (weapons of peace) and also actual weapons (weapons of war), this phrase makes perfect sense in a Mesoamerican votive offering context and is not an improvisational error.

Countering those asserting that the Anti-Nephi-Lehi offering was the cultural source of all Mesoamerican offerings, Gardner accurately argues that this type of votive offering predates and is more widespread. Extending Gardner’s argument further, this sort of offering is never noted among the Nephites. The practice is, however, noted again

among the Lamanites some 70 or so years later (Helaman 15:9). This is further evidence that it was a practice derived from local traditions incorporated by the Lamanites.

At Chiapa de Corzo some of the votive weapons offerings were done in conjunction with burials of important persons. Gardner indicates that this burial practice occurred at other places in Mesoamerica. While the Book of Mormon doesn't explicitly state this, it does state that the old Lamanite king (king Lamoni's father), who was the one who precipitated the conversion and change in heart of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi's, conferred the kingdom to his son and died in that same year, which was also the year that the Lamanites were preparing for war (Alma 24:3-4). Immediately afterward in the text is the pronouncement of the new king and the taking of the oath and votive weapons offering. The Book of Mormon votive weapons offering event looks to be entirely consistent with Mesoamerican practice because the votive weapons offering was made in conjunction with the burial of the old king.

Finally, the understanding of the Anti-Nephi-Lehites that the burial of their weapons would keep them "bright" indicates that weapons in the Book of Mormon were not made of metal, since metal is subject to corrosion upon burial.