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## Paleontology and the Book of Mormon

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**Abstract:** This article provides information regarding a number of recent paleontological discoveries that shed light on Book of Mormon statements regarding oxen, sheep, and other animals, and the smelting of iron.

# PALEONTOLOGY AND THE *Book of Mormon*

By RASMUS MICHELSEN

"And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the goat and the wild goat." I Nephi 18:25.

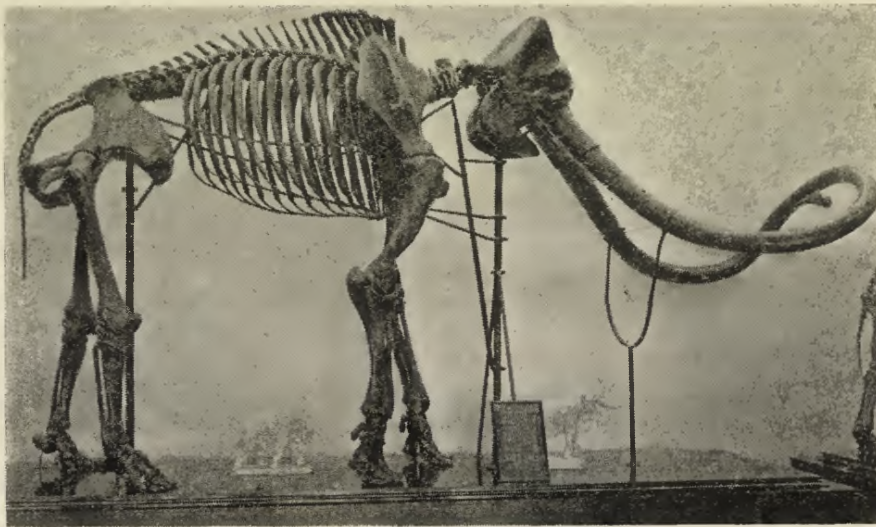
"And also all manner of cattle, of oxen, and cows, and of sheep, and of swine, and of goats, and also many other kinds of animals which were useful for the food of man.

"And they also had horses, and asses, and there were elephants and cureloms and cumoms; all of which were useful unto man, and more especially the elephants and the cureloms and cumoms." Ether 9:18-19.

his work, "The Discovery of America" (1892), like so many others, has to take a little fling at the Book of Mormon and in this wise:

"It is extremely difficult for an im-

Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art, and there to view a very splendid collection of mounted fossil skeletons, excavated under the direction of the Museum during the years 1913 to



*Skeleton of Imperial Elephant from Rancho La Brea.  
Courtesy Los Angeles Museum.*

**T**HERE was a time, not so very long ago, when the above quoted passages from the Book of Mormon were quite embarrassing to believers in, and defenders of, this sacred volume, for, as is well known, many of the animals here named, and the most prominent among them the horse, were not found on this continent at the time of its discovery by Columbus.

Indeed, our esteemed and staunch defender of the Book of Mormon, B. H. Roberts, in his very excellent work, "New Witness for God," Volume 2, published 1909, expresses himself thus pertaining to this point: "In the present state of our knowledge upon the subject, it has to be admitted that it constitutes one of our most embarrassing difficulties."

The noted philosopher, John Fiske, of Harvard University, in

poster to concoct a narrative without making blunders that can easily be detected by a critical scholar. For example, the Book of Mormon, in the passage referred to, in supremely blissful ignorance introduces oxen and sheep, as well as the knowledge of smelting iron, into pre-Columbian America."

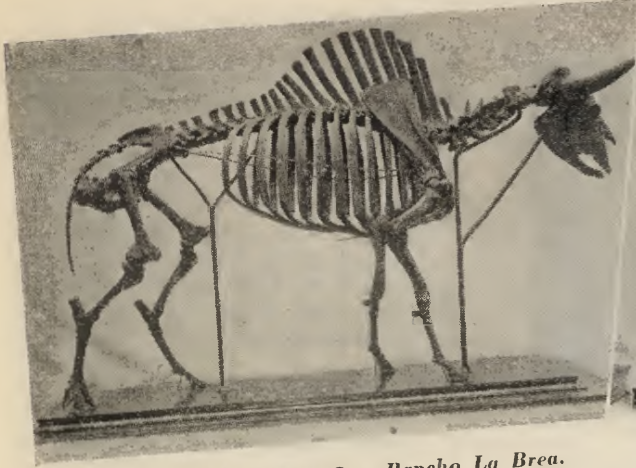
**B**UT, somehow he reckoned without his host when he essayed in this manner so easily to dispose of the Book of Mormon. It somehow will not stay dismissed. Time is a friend of truth, as well as a friend of innocence, and nobly has it again vindicated this claim, this time through the medium of paleontology, the branch of science which deals with animal and plant life as revealed through their fossil remains.

It was the writer's privilege, about two years ago, to visit the

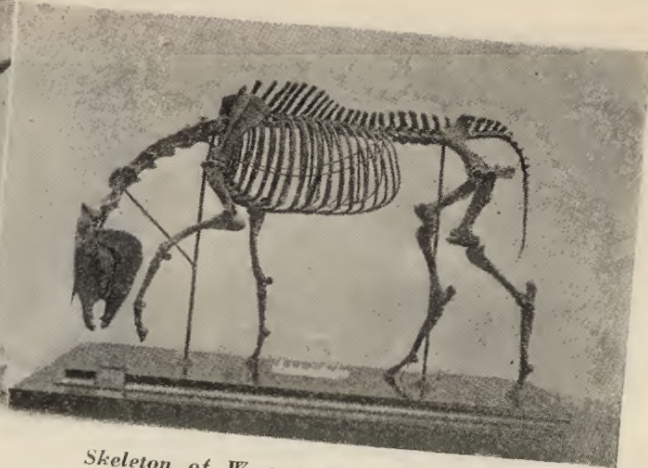
1915 from some tar pits located on what was then known as Rancho La Brea (the Tar Ranch). This ranch was a tract of land of about thirty - two acres containing a large number of these tar pits and in which many animals of pre-historic and later times had been en-

trapped and perished. This tract of land was eventually donated by its owner, a Mr. Hancock, to the city of Los Angeles, and is now known as Hancock Park, located on Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles. This collection of fossil remains is regarded as the richest of its kind in the world, and students of the Book of Mormon should not fail to visit it, when in Los Angeles. A census taken revealed that at least four thousand two hundred and sixty-four individual animals were entrapped in these tar pits.

**T**HE Los Angeles Museum has issued two publications dealing with this fossil collection. One is named "Notes on the Pleistocene Fossils from Rancho La Brea," 40 pages, and the other, "Paleontology No. 1," of 80 pages. I can do no better than to quote briefly from these.



Skeleton of Ancient Ox. Rancho La Brea.  
Courtesy Los Angeles Museum.



Skeleton of Western Horse from Rancho  
La Brea. Courtesy Los Angeles Museum.

"In the science department of the Museum are exhibited a considerable number of mounted skeletons and many skulls and bones of prehistoric animals, that were trapped in the asphalt pits of Rancho La Brea and their bones preserved in the oil to the present day. These were animals of the Pleistocene, or Glacial Epoch, the geological period immediately preceding the one in which we live, known as the Recent Epoch. They represent the type of great beasts that inhabited North America at that time and which became extinct possibly before the appearance of man and were replaced by modern types." Page 8.

"The Imperial Elephant was the largest of all land mammals, ranging in height from twelve to fifteen feet at the shoulders. Jumbo, the largest modern elephant on record, measured eleven and a half feet, while the average of the modern elephant is around nine feet. It is remarkable that practically all the elephant remains found in the asphalt beds were taken from a single deposit, known as Pit No. 9, or the 'Elephant Pit.' There, in an area fifteen by twenty-five feet, with an extreme depth of nearly thirty-five feet, were found bones representing many elephants, together with a number of Mastodons and a great quantity of bones of the Ancient Ox, Giant Sloth, Camel, Horse, Lion, Sabre-Tooth, Wolf and Cave Bear. \* \* \* The American Mastodon must have existed in great numbers, as its fossil remains are found nearly everywhere in the United States. In some cases these remains have been so associated with implements of human manufacture as to suggest the belief that it existed until after the appearance of man." Page 17.

"The camel, with the horse, enjoys the distinction of having originated in North America and becoming extinct here after species had spread to other countries and there perpetuated itself. \* \* \* Both llamas and true camels abounded in early and middle Pleistocene time on the Great Plains and in California." Page 30.

"The most sensational discovery of the asphalt beds was that of a human skull, nearly perfect, and various fragmentary bones, unquestionably belonging to the same individual. \* \* \* Dr. J. S. Merriam, who has studied the occurrence, says in his preliminary report: 'The evidence as a whole indicates that the human skeleton

from Pit No. 10 is of a period much later than the typical Rancho La Brea fauna; the time being either within the Recent period, or not later than the very latest portion of Pleistocene time. The age of this specimen may perhaps be measured in thousands of years, but probably not in tens of thousands.'" Page 34.

From Paleontology No. 1, I quote as follows:

"A. S. Romer has recently described from a cave deposit near Fillmore, Utah, a remarkably preserved skull of a camel, belonging undoubtedly to the species represented at Rancho La Brea. The preservation of the specimen and the facts concerning its occurrence have led Romer to conclude that camels of this species were living at no very remote date on the North American continent. Additional evidence of this character may tend also to give a more youthful aspect to the Rancho La Brea assemblage." Page 20.

"Strikingly foreign as the camels appear to the North American mammalian life of today, this group of animals during the Age of Mammals was well represented over the northern continental area of the New World. Apparently only in late geological time have they disappeared entirely from this region. \* \* \* The camels of Rancho La Brea all belong to a single

species (*Camelop hesternus*). \* \* \* The mounted specimen has a height of more than seven feet." Page 48.

"The presence of bands of horses in the vicinity of the asphalt deposits during the period of accumulation is clearly testified by the numerous remains of these mammals found at Rancho La Brea. While many individuals are recorded in the collection, all of them belong to a single species. In stage of evolution and in general body structure this type resembles the modern horse, although differing from the latter in a number of specific details. Standing approximately fifteen hands (5 feet) at the withers (shoulders), this animal compared favorably in height with an average sized modern horse. In the fossil form the skull is somewhat domed in the region of the forehead and the sutures separating the individual bones of the skull in this area give a slightly different pattern from that seen in living specimens. In these two characters the Rancho La Brea species exhibits some resemblance to the asses. \* \* \* The abundance and widespread distribution of horses in North America make the apparent disappearance of the group in the region prior to the advent of the white man an added and an unusual feature of their long and eventful career." Pages 53-54.

From a recent *Tribune* news article (1931), I quote:

"Ten thousand years ago a slice of Ground Sloth meat was a mighty choice dish in the really best circles of Nevada, M. R. Harrington, Curator of the Southwest (Los Angeles) Museum, said in a statement here. Harrington, who just returned from Gypsum Cave, near Las Vegas, Nevada, had a lot of interesting gossip about the folks who chummed around with sloths as big as Grizzly Bears, and associated with horses and camels that were less than five feet high. \* \* \* Apparently man associated with extinct Ground Sloths, horses and camels in the last phase of the Pleistocene or Ice Age of North America. From evidence in the cave this was 10,000 years ago or more."

ANOTHER news article from the *Salt Lake Tribune* of July 12, 1931, has this to say regarding a find of Mastodon remains near Cromwell, Indiana:

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*The author of this article is not a paleontologist, but he is a careful student of the Book of Mormon and a keen observer. We feel that some of the documentary evidence he offers here will be of interest to our readers, although as he says, the best evidence of the Book of Mormon, or the Bible either for that matter, is the book itself.*

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"The finding of the arrowhead in connection with charcoal and a buried tree stump uncovered in the same stratum makes it probable Indians were here when the Mastodon died and even possible they killed the animal for food. Indians are known to have inhabited this country from 4000 to 5000 years ago. Dr. John T. Sanford, curator of geology and paleontology at the Buffalo Museum, said that the finding of fresh water shells and plant remains similar to, if not identical with, modern species in the clay surroundings and below the mastodon also intimates the animals lived at a much later date than first believed. It is probable the beasts lived as recently as one thousand years ago, according to Sanford."

We have here what approaches actual confirmation for the Book of Mormon, and this on a point which until very recently was probably our most embarrassing difficulty and the hardest to meet. True, the scientists, who have investigated the find, estimate the entrapment to have occurred near the close of the Glacial Period, variously estimated to have terminated at from 15,000 to 25,000 years ago by gradually merging into the Recent Period, or period in which we now live. But it is also plain, from statements quoted above, that they are not very sure about this and freely admit that other discoveries tend to give the assemblage a "more youthful aspect." But even if they are approximately right as to time of entrapment, this is no evidence that these animals became extinct near that time; quite to the contrary we find a number there still extant, such as the Mountain Lion, Coyote, California Gray Fox, Timber Wolf, Deer, Antelope, etc., all of which are also found in the assemblage.

As to sheep and goats named in the Book of Mormon, it should only be necessary to point out that we still have the Rocky Mountain sheep and Rocky Mountain goats, both native of North America.

THE animals given by their Nephite names, Cureloms and Cumoms, it may not be possible to definitely identify at the present time. The similarity in names would seemingly indicate they were closely related to each other, and some Book of Mormon students have advanced the very plausible theory that they were what we now know as Alpacas and Llamas, native to the mountainous regions of South America. These are semi-domesticated, closely related animals allied to the camel family, but without humps. They are about three feet high, valued



**RASMUS MICHELSEN** was born in 1862 on a farm near the city of Aarhus, Denmark. He came to Utah in 1880. In 1924 he went on a mission to his native land. "Since my return from my mission," he says, "I have given the Book of Mormon more thought and study than at any previous time and my love and reverence for it has increased correspondingly. Now I feel free to say it is indeed a book of priceless value, grandly eloquent, notwithstanding the severe simplicity of its language."

alike for their hairy wool, their flesh and also as beasts of burden. At the time of the conquest of America by the Spaniards, the Llamas were the only beasts of burden known in South America. They are still used as such, and are able to carry a load of about 150 pounds.

Our good friend, John Fiske, was equally unfortunate in his little quip about the smelting of iron as mentioned in the Book of Mormon, for very recent discoveries have clearly established that this was also known to the early inhabitants of this land.

I quote the following from an article in "Worlds Work" for January, 1928, by the noted archaeologist, A. Hyatt Verrill:

"I am thoroughly convinced that these people [the inhabitants of the recently discovered ancient city on the Isthmus of Panama] possessed iron or steel tools, and I do not know of a single argument or fact to disprove it. The fact that no iron or steel tools have ever been found proves nothing. Iron is the most perishable of elements. \* \* \* Moreover, at a depth of five and one-half feet below the surface, at the temple site, among broken pottery and imbedded in charcoal, I found a steel or hardened iron implement."

ONE hundred years have now passed since this remarkable volume, the Book of Mormon, first appeared in print (1830). At that time the enemies of the work essayed to strangle it by refusing to buy it and made a concerted

effort in that direction. How well or poorly they succeeded is perhaps best shown by the fact that today it has an annual sale of about fifty thousand copies. Countless "shafts of falsehood and derision" have been hurled against it; theory after theory advanced by its enemies and skeptics with a view of discrediting it; such as the Solomon Spaulding theory, the Riley theory and many others, but all have fallen flat and vanished like dew before the rising sun.

The Book of Mormon is just what it claims to be, a divinely inspired record of the dealings of God with the ancient inhabitants of the Western Continent and who in times past had mighty prophets and inspired leaders to guide them.

To persons who place fine phraseology above divine truth, it may not appeal strongly, but what a treasure house of eternal riches it is to those who, with prayerful hearts, and minds receptive to real spiritual values will closely scan its pages—reading it in the light of the prophetic promise made in the very last chapter of the book.

MUCH as we value the many external evidences in favor of the Book of Mormon, as derived from archaeology, paleontology and kindred sources, the fact remains, nevertheless, that the strongest proof of its divine authenticity is the book itself. The spirit that accompanies it; its plain and clear presentation of the fundamental principles and ordinances of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; its beautiful account of the Savior's visit to the people of this Western Continent after his resurrection from the dead; its wholesome admonitions; its pleading call to repentance; its stirring appeal for the application of the golden rule in everyday life; its prophetic warnings and promises; its message of hope to souls heavy laden with the burdens of life; its deep and soul-satisfying answer to the eternal WHY of this earth-life; all unite in acclaiming it a work of inestimable value—a mighty witness that "Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting Himself unto all nations."

Difficult it surely will be for any sincere lover of truth to read this book with care and escape the conviction so aptly expressed by one earnest investigator: "A wicked man could not have written it; a good man would not, if not true."