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Was Iron Known in Ancient America?

Author(s): John A. Widtsoe

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Abstract: The view of scholars in the field of American archaeology holds that the pre-Columbian inhabitants of America did not know of or use iron. However, this article, citing the *Science Newsletter* of November 12, 1949, recommends that this view may have to be reevaluated on the basis of new findings of iron in ancient America.

Was IRON Known In ANCIENT AMERICA?

CXLIII

By John A. Widtsoe OF THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

THE Book of Mormon speaks repeatedly of the use of iron by the peoples of ancient America. The Jaredites apparently carried on extensive operations with the useful metals, including iron.¹ Nephi, writing soon after the arrival in America of Lehi and his company (about 570 B. C.) says:

"I did teach my people to build buildings and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron. . . ."

Later Book of Mormon writers likewise mention the possession and use of iron among the Nephites.²

Unbelievers have used these statements to prove the Book of Mormon false. They have said and written that iron has not been found among the artifacts of America's lost civilizations. Gold, silver, copper, and other valuable metals have been found, but not iron. Therefore, they have reasoned, the early inhabitants of the American continent did not know iron.

The Latter-day Saints, believers in the divine coming forth of the Book of Mormon, have answered that in time proof of the correctness of the Book of Mormon claims would be forthcoming. They have usually added that people who could smelt gold, silver, and copper from their ores could certainly smelt iron from the vast American iron deposits.

In scientific America a similar controversy has been carried on. Many magnificent buildings remaining from pre-Columbian days show exquisite workmanship. Granitic stone, for example, has been shaped with such accuracy that, in the words of several observers, a penknife could not be inserted between such stones in a wall. Likewise, hard stone materials have been fashioned for embellishing buildings into a great variety of forms.

To accomplish this, tools harder than stone, granite, for example, must have been used. Numerous conjectures have been made as to the tools used. Hardened copper, made by some lost process, has been suggested. Many have believed that iron and steel tools were used but have been lost by rusting throughout the years.

It is a commonly well-known fact that iron

¹Ether. 10:23

²1 Nephi 5:15

³Jarom 1:8; Mosiah 11:3, 8

oxidizes or rusts easily and quickly under favorable conditions of heat and moisture. The question whether iron was used in early American days is still being discussed by expert students in the field of American archaeology.

Meanwhile, the progress of science seems to confirm the Book of Mormon statement that iron was in the possession of the early inhabitants of America. The *Science News Letter* of November 12, 1949,⁴ has made an interesting summary of the question, which shows that iron was probably known in America in ancient times:

"Did pre-Columbian 'First Families' of Virginia and Ohio know how to smelt iron and make nails, horseshoes and tools of iron? . . ."

"Captain [A. H.] Mallery, who has skippered ships in northern waters, has collected specimens of ancient iron from Greenland, Labrador, Newfoundland, as well as from Virginia and from the Ohio mounds.

"Samples of this material have been sent by Captain Mallery to the National Bureau of Standards and to Battelle Memorial Institute, Columbus, Ohio, for metallurgical study. Experts at both the National Bureau of Standards and at Battelle have found that the specimens are definitely not modern, although it is difficult to assign a precise date to them because no articles of comparable antiquity of known date are available for comparison. . . ."

"The Virginia site was found when archaeologists of the River Basin Surveys of the Smithsonian Institution combed over the area in southern Virginia and northern North Carolina to salvage any possible archaeological remains before the area should be flooded by the Buggs Island Reservoir and dam.

"Stone points were found there that were made by a Folsom culture people. These points were like those found in the western part of the United States and believed to be 10,000 years old.

"In the same area there were found scattered over considerable land, bits of iron, nails, horseshoes, hinge fragments and occasional tools. One specimen from this find was submitted by the Smithsonian to Dr. Ellinger for evaluation. De-

(Concluded on page 231)

⁴*Science News Letter*, "An American 'Iron Age'" p. 309



EVIDENCES AND
RECONCILIATIONS

Was Iron Known In Ancient America?

(Concluded from page 175)

tailed study revealed that it was not made within the last 200 years.

"Early history of the region does not reveal any mention of a colonial iron furnace or smelter there, the report states. . . .

"Captain Mallery has compared the nails found on the Virginia Folsom site with iron nails dug up at the old Jamestown colonial settlement. They differ markedly in shape, he reports. On the other hand he finds them markedly like the rivets used by Vikings for holding together the oak planks forming the hulls of their boats. They are of a soft iron that could be hammered cold because hot iron would set fire to the wood and make the rivet loose. Similar nails, he says, were recovered from the so-called Oseberg ship which is dated at 600 A. D.

"The finding of this ancient iron opens up the whole question of whether America did have an 'Iron Age' before the Spanish and English colonists brought iron tools and weapons with them to the New World. Archaeologists have long believed that iron was unknown on this continent in pre-Columbian days."

So men of science are still divided, but the evidence is moving toward confirmation of the Book of Mormon statements.

ACCOUNTING

By Marie Henderson Wood

OUR angry words have scourged a loving heart
To leave it sorrowing beyond repair.
Our careless words have left a field of doubt
For idle minds to till and harvest bear.

Too often we have walked our wilful way
Oblivious of thine outstretched guiding hand,
Forgetful that we needed but to pray
To have revealed the powers at our command.

Again we've failed thee, Lord; and yet we know
That we are loved. We are thy children still;
Bewildered, groping, but receiving, as we go
Thy pardoning grace with all of thy good will.

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from basket
to box
score
in time
for
breakfast

How will your favorite team fare tonight? It's satisfying to know that tomorrow morning's Salt Lake Tribune will tell you the whole story. All the drama and color of the game are expertly related, and often an analysis is made of the background and effects of the outcome on future engagements. The actions of each player are faithfully recorded in the box score. Even games that may end as late as midnight are yours to review at breakfast time next morning. This service to you is the result of teamwork by scores of Salt Lake Tribune sports correspondents throughout the Intermountain states and the basketball specialists of The Salt Lake Tribune sports staff which includes



JOHN MOONEY, Associate Sports Editor, has seen and reported on 408 basketball games in his 16 years of newspaper work. His popular column, "The Sports Mirror," reflects the "news behind the news" of athletics.



BILL CLEGG, who covers the Intermountain college games, is a basketball letter-man (University of Illinois), finds reporting even more fascinating than playing. Readers of The Salt Lake Tribune's sports pages enjoy his impartial, factual style of writing.



DON PLATH loves high school basketball. His enthusiasm is reflected in his highly entertaining reports of games and his widely-read "Prep Talks" column. In his 2 years on the sports staff of The Salt Lake Tribune he has seen and reported on 63 high school hoop encounters.

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