

GLYPH

Notes

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Sherds: Unlocking History and Cultures*

By Lyle L. Smith

During a casual conversation with a friend he asked, "Barring a catastrophic destruction like fire, what would be left two thousand years from now of our house and furnishings that would give archaeologists clues about how we lived?"

"Plates, bowls, and pitchers," I promptly replied. "Pottery and other ceramic items would still be here because pottery is baked earth. Wood products, cement, clothing, and most metal products would deteriorate. A few metals, like gold, and anything made of stone should also survive."

Because ceramics last indefinitely, archaeological digs are full of pottery, and archaeologists spend an enormous amount of effort analyzing ceramics (Fagan 1985:324).

Because pottery provides clues to archaeologists about the people who made and used it, the study of pottery became a major vehicle used to identify groups of people, their migrations, and their societal changes. Also, it's one of the three main methods for dating or establishing a culture's chronological timeline. In fact, before the 1950s and '60s when radiocarbon dating came on the scene and became the "golden boy" of dating cultures, broken pieces of pottery, or sherds,

found at every site had been used since the beginning of the science to date various archaeological strata and to establish cultural sequence and chronology.

A recent article by Hershel Shanks reminds me again of the importance

Pottery sherds from El Mirador fit the same sequence as those found at Nakbe, only ten kilometers away. An ancient sacbe (causeway) links the two ancient cities. Sherds shown 1/2 actual size.



Donald Forsyth

The scroll wing motif, for many years recognized as a symbol for Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan, decorates this bowl found at Tikal.



Don Beebe

Pottery sherds can provide clues about the people who made and used them as well as bring into focus correlations with The Book of Mormon.

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*Portions of this article appeared previously in *The Witness* (Fall 1993) and *glyph notes* (March/April 2001), but I felt these important observations cannot be shared too many times.

Sherds (Cont. from Page 1)

that pottery or ceramics plays in the dating of archaeological sites. Shanks reports on a new publication, *Cyber-Archaeology in the Holy Land*, written by archaeologist Tom Levy, of the University of California-San Diego, and his team. They postulate that relying on traditional pottery methods for dating will change.

Instead of relying on the traditional archaeological assumptions that are used to date pottery to a chronological period based on style, we decided to use a large number of high-precision radiocarbon dates anchored into the stratigraphy of the site with the best contextual/cultural data that cyber-archaeology can offer (Shanks 2013:6).

On the other hand, Shanks tells of another well-respected archaeologist, Manfred Bietak of the University of Vienna, who questions the precision of radiocarbon dating. Bietak says there is a present deadlock between dating by pottery sherds and dating by carbon-14. “[He] has determined a chronology based on what he calls historical data (mainly pottery seriation), which significantly differs from the chronology produced by carbon-14 tests. The difference in dates Bietak refers to amounts to about 80 years” (Shanks 2013:6).

Bietak bases this on his work with ancient cultures (circa 1000 B.C.) in the Middle East. Keep in mind that there are not hundreds of years difference between the dating of the two systems. The reason I say this is that dating by both carbon-14 dating and pottery have proven valid because they closely match The Book of Mormon narrative. (See “Comparative Timeline” in *glyph notes*, July/August 2011, page 8 and May/June 2012, page 5.)

Shanks concludes, “In short, radiocarbon does not offer a quick fix. We can’t stop dating pottery sherds ‘historically’” (Shanks 2013:69). This is borne out by the report in a prior issue of *glyph notes* about Takeshi Inomata’s presentation at a conference last September. Inomata employed a combination of high quality calibrated radiocarbon methods, Bayesian statistics[†], and pottery because he believed this combination provided the best way to arrive at dates for Ceibal (Smith 2012:4).

Reading Shanks’ article reminded me of an

[†]Bayesian statistics “is a statistical adjustment that allows the inclusion of archaeological evidence such as stratigraphic layers, other dating evidence from coins, volcanic ash, artifacts and the like, along with the calibrated radiocarbon ages. The modeling of these combined sets of data results in probability age estimates for specific archaeological events that are more robust and usually much more precise than those produced with single calibrated date ranges” (Shanks 2013:69).



Don Beebe

Robert E. Smith’s analysis of Uaxactun pottery in the early 1950s and published in 1955 became a benchmark for subsequent pottery studies at other sites. Uaxactun ceramics fit the same sequence as those from Nakbe and other nearby sites. The small Uaxactun museum displays some of the pottery discovered there.



Don Beebe

earlier article written by Donald Forsyth, professor of archaeology at Brigham Young University and now director of the New World Archaeological Foundation. It was a report on his analysis of the ceramics at Nakbe, Guatemala, and a good example of how pottery can assist in dating a culture.

To me, Forsyth’s article and ceramic



Locations described in this article, El Mirador, Nakbe, Barton Ramie, Tikal, and Uaxactun, are found in close proximity to one another in northern Guatemala and western Belize.

chronological chart reveal close parallels between the Maya and the people of The Book of Mormon. Dates found in The Book of Mormon compare closely with the ceramic histories for the geographical area. While Forsyth's article speaks for itself, the conclusions made here are mine.

Nakbe, although having earlier beginnings, emerged as a fully developed city in what is now northern Guatemala between 600 and 400 B.C. Excavations began in February 1989 under the direction of Richard D. Hansen, who at the time was with the University of California at Los Angeles. The findings created quite a stir, and newspapers around the United States carried stories about the work being done at Nakbe. The widely-held belief that Maya advanced civilization began at A.D. 300 had to be revised.

The discovery, described by scholars as surprising and exciting, puts the emergence of an elaborate Mayan civilization with large cities back to at least 600 B.C. It was previously thought that the Mayans . . . did not rise above simple village life before 200 B.C. (Wilford 1989:C15)

The results of Forsyth's research on the ceramic evidence from Nakbe support this conclusion. The prevailing view had been that people during the period called the Middle Preclassic (900-350 B.C.) lived a small-scale village life, lacking monumental architecture and political organization. Forsyth says, "[This] seems questionable, at least at Nakbe.... The ceramics are very well made and show considerable sophistication in both manufacture and decoration" (Forsyth 1993:40). The earliest ceramic complex at Nakbe, called Ox, belongs to the Mamom horizon. The Mamom culture in the lowlands spans approximately 800 to about 350 B.C.

These observations by Forsyth add credence to what David Freidel wrote about the emergence of Maya civilization. "Maya civilization banged into existence in its own way and time.... It is unsettling. For it violates the tacit rules of diffusion and, even worse, the tacit rules of gradual evolution espoused by modern archaeology" (Friedel 1986:x).

This certainly calls to mind correlations with The Book of Mormon history—specifically the Mulekites, emigrants of an advanced civilization from the Middle East. They did not evolve gradually, but rather "banged on the scene" in the Land of Promise with a full-blown culture.

The high quality of ceramics in the Ox phase is perplexing to followers of the evolutionary model which dictates that earlier pottery should be simpler in style and composition than later pottery. Yet, if these ceramics represent the first three to four hundred years of the Mulekite civilization, then more than simple ceramics should be expected.

Not a lot is known about the people of Mulek. The Book of Mormon says they did not bring records with them, but they were, in part, servants of a king. They most probably knew good quality ceramics and the process of manufacturing. In addition, the Mulekite perception of government would include court rule, a system far removed from simple village life. Court rule would include governmental organization.

Nakbe's ceramic sequence fits the same sequences found at other early sites in the Peten area of Guatemala, such as El Mirador, Tikal, and Uaxactun, as well as those of Belize. Although sites in Belize like Barton Ramie, Cuello, Cerros, and Colha "share many types and modes with the central Peten, [they] also demonstrate important differences" (Forsyth 1993:42).

Around 350-250 B.C., the ceramics at Nakbe exhibit a major transition, moving from the Mamom

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to the Chicanel culture. “[This move] corresponds closely to that of El Mirador and other complexes of the Chicanel horizon, especially Uaxactun and Tikal” (Forsyth 1993:31). Coupled with the change in pottery styles in the Kan phase of the Chicanel was the disappearance of the small ceramic figurines so prevalent in Mamom (Weaver 1972:86; Coe 2011:80). Although the Kan ceramic period carries through until A.D. 150, little pottery was found after A.D.1, signifying a major reduction of population at Nakbe in the first century A.D.

From his studies at Barton Ramie in Belize (not far from Nakbe and Uaxactun), James Gifford postulated that the pottery changes around 300 B.C. from the Mamom to the Chicanel indicate a move of the Maya from smaller independent communities to a monolithic society with more common values (Sharer and Ashmore 1987:274).

Major change in ceramic styles occurred at Nakbe and her surrounding cities between 350-250 B.C. What caused the change in styles that included the standardization of design, the absence of figurines, and the establishment of a society with more common values? The Book of Mormon sheds light on this question. Mormon, the abridger of the records, relates that Mosiah and a group of Nephites emigrated down from the southern highlands into the northern lowlands, bringing with them written records and a specific religious belief. Undoubtedly, they also had their own style of pottery.

That such an influence came at the same time into this area (the Peten, which includes Nakbe) from the southern Guatemalan highlands has been documented in archaeology. David Freidel and Linda Schele theorize that cities in this area “borrowed certain Highland religious concepts, along with iconographic elements and the idea of hieroglyphic writing” (Willey and Mathews 1985:4; Willey 1985:175, 182; Willey 1977:69).

Besides the dramatic change in pottery style, the figurines that are believed to have had religious significance ended with the beginning of the Chicanel phase (Weaver 1972:86; Coe 2011:80). Wouldn't the arrival of the Law of Moses with King Mosiah have ended graven image production?

Nakbe ceramics from A.D. 1-600 are exceedingly rare, reappearing only again in Late Classic times (A.D. 600-900). A drastic reduction in population seems to have taken place in the first century A.D. This fits The Book of Mormon account of many cities being destroyed in A.D. 34. Linda Schele notes that “For reasons not yet understood, many of these

cities [those in the lowlands or northern regions of Guatemala] failed during the second half of the first century A.D.” (Schele 1991:6). In a more recent publication, Estrada-Belli concludes, “Around A.D. 100 . . . many areas in the central Lowlands appear to have experienced devastating population losses” (Estrada-Belli 2011:64-65). Another archaeologist wrote, “For unknown reasons several of these early cities were abandoned in the I [first] Century AD while others continued to flourish” (Delvendahl 2008:16).

From Forsyth's article on the ceramic sequence at Nakbe, much can be gleaned that lends support to The Book of Mormon record.

- 1) The considerable sophistication of the ceramics during the Ox phase in the Mamom horizon brings evidence that the people were more advanced than a simple village culture. The arrival of the Mulekites during this time with a full-blown culture would explain this sophistication.
- 2) The influx of a new religion, writing, and different style of pottery from the highlands to the lowlands lends credence to the account of the coming of the Nephites into Mulekite lands between 350-250 B.C.
- 3) The Book of Mormon account gives significant reasons for the great decline in pottery/ceramics and cities in Maya lowlands that took place in the first century A.D.

Pottery sherds are small things, but “By small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 17:35). And simple items, like pottery sherds, can provide important clues about the people who made and used them as well as to bring into focus correlations with The Book of Mormon. These finds do not prove the book true. Rather, they strengthen our faith and help convert our minds that The Book of Mormon is an authentic record of people identified in the Land of Promise.

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GLYPH *Quotes*

By Kevin Anderson


Simple and inspiring is the story of the Brother of Jared as he led his family and friends and crossed the sea in barges. The great antagonist of this journey is captured in the waves of the sea that encompassed the barges and buried them in the deep, from time to time, as well as the “great and terrible tempests” caused by the fierceness of the wind. The testimony of this story, however, is the strength of faith and trust exhibited by these families as they sought to follow God’s direction.

Many times and in different ways we face the waves and tempests. These come in many forms but always with the same purpose—to try us and to test our patience and endurance. *What we learn from the Jaredite story, however, is that the faith and trust of these families were “tight like unto a dish” just as the very vessels they had boarded.* The Brother of Jared and his family had been directed by the Lord in all of their travels, culminating in His Word which directed them to build barges as they had hitherto done and to board them for their journey across the sea. Their obedience required a tight, solid faith and foundation that should inspire us today.

tight like unto a dish....

—Ether 3:8

Blind faith such as this is a mountainous wave that God’s people face continually. We, however, sometimes have the luxury of jumping ship when the swells become too fierce. This was a luxury the Jaredites simply did not have. There was nowhere for the families to turn—except to God. This is the purpose of every trial: to try us, as the Apostle Peter tells us in 1Peter 4:12, and hopefully to push us in *His* direction. The question is how well is our ship built to begin with? Is our ship built upon the foundation of the Word of God? Do we know, because of our prior faithfulness, that our ship is “tight like unto a dish” and capable of weathering the storm?

Man is continually faced with the temptation of turning and running from his trials. At some point it becomes necessary to pick ourselves up and *get aboard the barge*, as the Jaredites were commanded to do. If our faith is sufficient and our preparation sound, we can be assured that the foundation we have built through His Word is solid, even to the salvation of our lives and our souls. Are our faith and our foundation “tight like unto a dish?” 

GLYPH*Clips*

By Sherrie Kline Smith

New Radiocarbon Test of a Tikal Lintel Lends Credence to the GMT Calendar Correlation

Scientific Reports, April 11, 2013

Correlating the Maya calendar with the European calendar provides a basis for understanding archaeological data. Many solutions to the correlation problem have been proposed that have employed a variety of historical and astronomical data. The results span a difference of 1000 years. The most widely-accepted correlation has been the GMT (based on studies by Goodman, Martinez, and Thompson), but it lacked certainty. To help confirm the GMT correlation, a group of environmental archaeologists at Penn State conducted a new high-resolution radiocarbon test of one of the wooden lintels from Tikal (Lintel 3,

Temple 1) that had previously been tested in the 1950s and which had been largely responsible for the acceptance of the GMT. The new test took four samples from the same lintel. “The combination of high-resolution AMS ¹⁴C dating and calibration using tree growth rates provides a more definitive test of the GMT correlation.” The Bayesian statistical modeling of the calibrated data gave results that “strongly support the GMT correlation and there is no overlap with other correlation constants so that we can rule these out definitively.” (For an explanation of Bayesian statistics, see †Bayesian statistics at the bottom of page 2.) The report was published online at nature.com. <http://tinyurl.com/chpr5u>

This study also confirms that so many of the events documented by archaeology that correlate with the calendar in The Book of Mormon matches. For a good overview of these see *glyph notes*, July/August 2011, page 8 and May/June 2012, page 5.

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Don Beebe


Temple 1 at Tikal is the funerary structure for Tikal’s King Jasaw Chan K’awiil. The lintel from Temple 1 used in the test depicts the king and has a long hieroglyphic text that relates Jasaw Chan K’awiil’s defeat of a Calakmul king in A.D. 695. The recent tests provide greater certainty that this correlation of the Maya date with the GMT is correct.

— APOLOGY —

In the March/April 2013 issue of *glyph notes* it may have appeared that we were taking you on a Maya mystery tour that required your page-finding detective skills. Alas however, that was *not* our intention. We do apologize for the way you received the last issue of *glyph notes*! Thank you for taking the time to figure out the reading order. We so appreciate your support.

Sherrie Kline Smith
Editor

PS: Our foreign and first-class mail readers received corrected ones. 



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Glyph Clips (Cont. from Page 7)

Scripture on Gold Leaf

Biblical Archaeology Review, May/June 2013
(pp. 58-63, 69)

In a village about 60 miles east of Vienna, Austria, lies an ancient Jewish estate dating from the late second century until the middle of the fifth century. The estate had its own cemetery of about 300 graves. In 1986 two undisturbed graves were found, one of an infant about 18 months old from the third century (A.D. 100-200). In the grave was a silver amulet capsule enclosing a small gold leaf rolled into a scroll. Some years later the gold leaf was unrolled, and the scripture from Deuteronomy 6:4 was discovered engraved in Greek letters but in the Hebrew language. "Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord." Although the amulet is almost 800 years after the time of Lehi, it is another example of scripture being written on metal. 

The tiny gold amulet (at right) measures less than an inch on either side. Photo size is larger than original.

