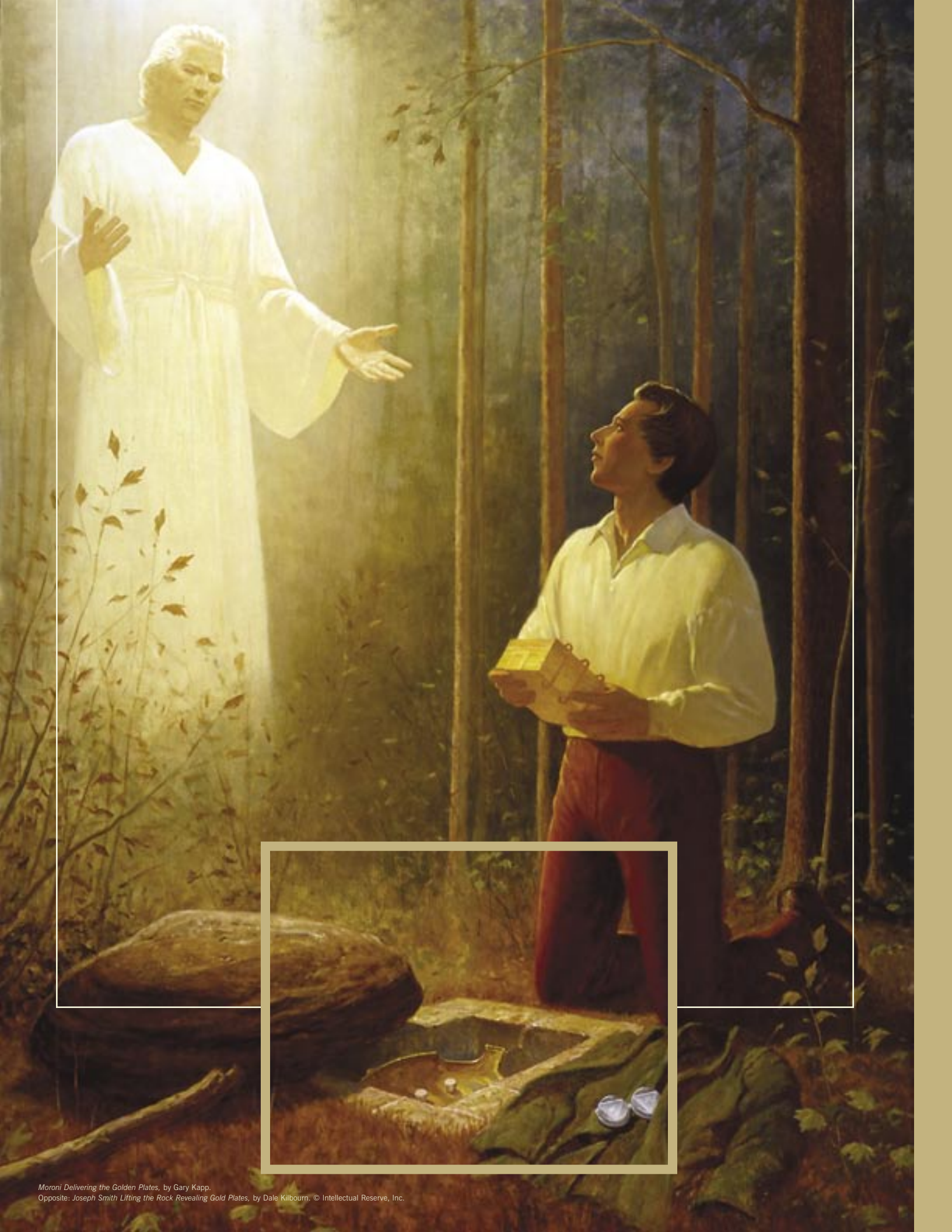




ARCHAEOLOGY
&
CUMORAH
QUESTIONS

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Moroni Delivering the Golden Plates, by Gary Kapp.
Opposite: Joseph Smith Lifting the Rock Revealing Gold Plates, by Dale Kilbourn. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

IF KNOWN TRUTH WERE ACCEPTED, JOSEPH SMITH'S RECOVERY OF THE GOLDEN PLATES FROM THE HILL CUMORAH WOULD RANK AS ONE OF THE GREATEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS OF ALL TIME; COUPLED WITH THE SUBSEQUENT TRANSLATION OF THIS GOLDEN RECORD INTO THE BOOK OF MORMON, THERE IS NOTHING COMPARABLE IN THE ANNALS OF HISTORY. THE STORY OF THE COMING FORTH OF THE BOOK OF MORMON REVEALS A CONSTANT TENSION BETWEEN THE MIRACULOUS AND THE MUNDANE—ANGELS AND INSCRIBED GOLDEN PLATES ON THE ONE HAND, AND ON THE OTHER THE WORK OF LIFTING AND CARRYING HEAVY OBJECTS, PERIODICALLY HIDING THE PLATES, AND TRANSLATING A PORTION OF THEM CHARACTER BY CHARACTER. SURELY THERE MUST HAVE BEEN EASIER WAYS. IF DIVINE INTERVENTION WERE NECESSARY, WHY NOT HAVE AN ANGEL JUST HAND YOUNG JOSEPH AN ENGLISH COPY OF THE SACRED TEXT AND BE DONE WITH IT? WHY THE DRUDGERIES OF EXHUMATION, TRANSLATION, AND TRANSCRIPTION, LINE FOR LINE? WAS IT NECESSARY THAT JOSEPH DEAL WITH ANCIENT ARTIFACTS AND SPEND MONTHS WITH PALPABLE RELICS DICTATING PARAGRAPHS TO SCRIBES? APPARENTLY SO.

We await answers for most questions evoked by this miracle of divinely supervised archaeological toil. What we do know is that Joseph Smith Jr. found the golden plates and other relics in a stone box in a hill near his home, a prominence now known as Cumorah. And as many believe, Cumorah was also the place of the final battles described in the Book of Mormon that destroyed the Nephites and, centuries earlier, the Jaredites. If any place merits archaeological attention, it is Cumorah. The very word elicits a series of empirical questions that can only be addressed through archaeology.

Things are rarely as simple as labels make them appear. For the past 50 years, some scholars have suggested that common Latter-day Saint usage of *Cumorah* confuses two different places and that the modest hill where Joseph Smith recovered the plates is not the eminence of the genocidal battles. Further, the Cumorah battlefield is seen by many scholars as the key for identifying the location of the ancient lands described in the book. Hence, much rests on its correct placement. All these observations lead to a paradox explored here: before archaeology can reveal Cumorah's secrets, it must first be

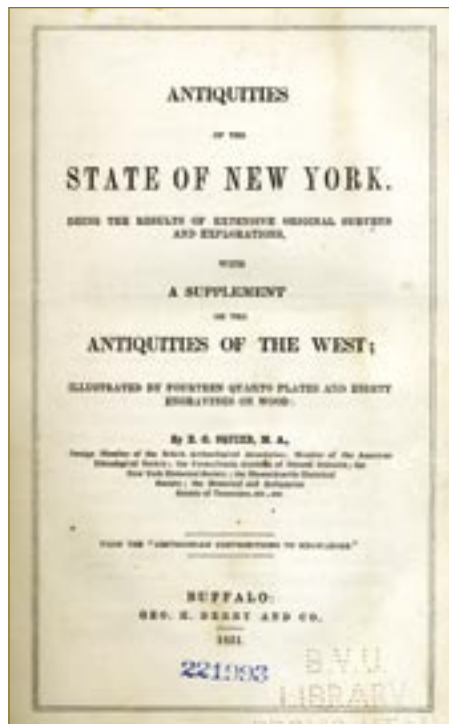
employed to identify its location. The hill the plates came from is not at issue; the question is whether this final resting place is the same hill where the ending battles occurred. Many serious scholars have attempted to prove that the Palmyra hill was the battle hill, but to little avail, largely because they do not understand archaeology as an inexact science. They argue that the Palmyra hill and its surrounding area once had tons of convincing evidence that has long since been destroyed or carted away.

Most proposals for the location of Mormon's final stand fall into one of two possibilities: either the Palmyra hill or one in Middle America 2,000 miles to the south. Here I consider reasons for questioning the case for a New York location. I am unaware of any archaeological investigation of the hill itself, but sufficient information is available for the surrounding regions to make a critical assessment. Mormon's hill and Moroni's hill are not one and the same.

What does archaeology reveal about the immediate environs of the New York hill? Is there evidence of habitation by the millions involved in the final battles? Did ancient fortifications ever stand on the Palmyra hill? Currently, few general works

on the archaeology of Pennsylvania or New York exist, so serious students must consult local histories, articles, and technical reports for details. These are particularly difficult to read and interpret. There is one old but excellent source for New York compiled by E. G. Squier in 1851.¹ Another, which is almost 40 years old, was written by William A. Ritchie and most recently revised in 1994.² Overall, the paucity of published sources and archaeological projects in western New York reflects a lack of interest in this region by the archaeological community. Perhaps one reason for the meager treatment and low interest is that the archaeology of this region for ancient time periods is relatively dull compared to that of adjacent regions to the south and west. This circumstance is rather telling and involves considerable irony because western New York was one of the first regions to receive archaeological attention in the early 1800s, the time of the Smiths' residence there.

Early settlers' accounts of upstate New York describe numerous trenched and walled fortifications, weapons, and mass graves of disorderly bones—the latter presumably casualties of war. However, not all is as it seemed. One of the interpretive challenges is that apparently much of the evidence either has been destroyed or would not have survived normal processes of decay to the present day. In addition, it is possible that much of the evidence for early fortifications, battlefields, weapons, and war dead was destroyed when the lands in



Above: Title page of E. G. Squier's 1851 archaeological survey of New York. Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

Below: Squier in Peru, circa 1863. Courtesy of the Latin American Library, Tulane University, Squier Collection.



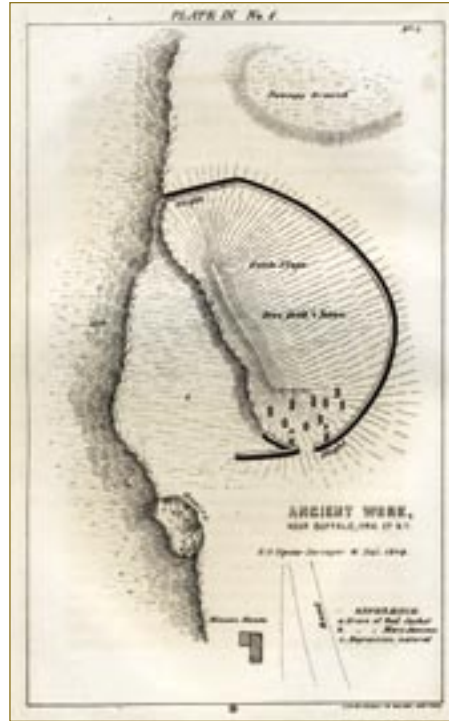
question were brought under cultivation. The plow destroys the sword in this case. Possibilities and probabilities of destroyed evidence have become an excuse for avoiding serious archaeological research altogether. But the early reports, which give glowing accounts of wonderful finds—and of the destruction of the sites from which they came—can only be considered as hearsay. William Ritchie's work is telling. He provides a complete archaeological sequence for New York, with nothing missing. He relies on acceptable techniques of dating materials through radiocarbon and through changes in artifact styles. For our interests, Ritchie's account shows that the Nephite-equivalent period in New York is one of relatively low population. Subsequent research in New York and adjacent regions is substantiating the historic patterns described by Ritchie.³ Sites dating to Nephite times are represented in Ritchie's work, but there are not that many of them, and they are unimpressive. His findings do not support expectations derived from the Book of Mormon.

What about site destruction? Can we account for the discrepancies in the number and size of sites reported for New York and our expectations from the Book of Mormon account by considering how many were plowed under? No. In practical terms, the only way buried sites can be found is when they are partially destroyed during normal urban or rural activities, such as a sewer line encountering burials in downtown Salt Lake City. Archaeologists are drawn to land disturbance like moths to a light because they have a chance to

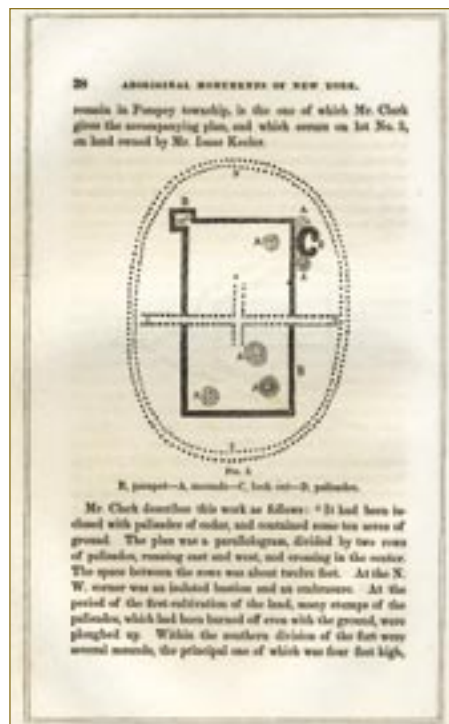
view what is beneath the surface without digging blindly. Opinions among archaeologists on the benefits of destruction, such as those voiced by Squier in the opening lines of his early study on fortifications in western New York, are not uncommon:

The Indian tribes found in possession of the country now embraced within the limits of New England and the Middle States have left few monuments to attest their former presence. The fragile structures which they erected for protection and defense have long ago crumbled to the earth; and the sites of their ancient towns and villages are indicated only by the ashes of their long-extinguished fires, and by the few rude relics which the plough of the invader exposes to his curious gaze. Their cemeteries, marked in very rare instances by enduring monuments, are now undistinguishable, except where the hand of modern improvement encroaches upon the sanctity of the grave.⁴

True, many features of these sites, such as posthole patterns and earth embankments, can eventually become too scrambled to detect. But evidence of the site will not vanish. The issue here is of visibility vis-à-vis site disturbance. Those who have collected arrowheads know that the best places to look are plowed fields, erosion channels, and other sites where surface vegetation is removed and where subsurface deposits are exposed or churned to the surface. The same principle applies to site visibility. Weekend collectors and pothunters tend to preserve



Excerpts from Squier's *Antiquities of the State of New York* highlighting ancient settlements.



and display in collections the artifacts they find. Such artifacts are removed from sites but not from sight—quite the opposite. In his study of New York, Ritchie makes frequent use of observations from private collections.

Naturally, one should not expect silk, linen, roast beef, perfume, honey, feathers, or lemonade—or the like—to survive long in the archaeological record under New York conditions. In turn, stone, bone, gold, copper, and shell survive under most conditions. Turning to the Book of Mormon, given the cultural features and events described in the record, what kinds of archaeological evidence would be preserved? What things were made of stone, shell, wood, gold, or cement? And where should we find them on the Book of Mormon landscape, and for what time periods? Perhaps significantly, the archaeological record of New York is full of evidence for wooden structures, so claiming that buildings were of wood and would leave no traces is a poor argument. Of course, most of the evidence consists only of floor plans as marked by postholes of ancient buildings rather than their superstructures.

It is always possible that many sites have not been discovered because they have not had the dubious fortune of being partially destroyed. No archaeological record is completely known, so there are always sites, or features at known sites, yet to be discovered. An important concern in dealing with an archaeological record is its representativeness. Do sites of the various periods have an equal chance of coming to the attention of the archaeological community or of being reported in print? Clearly not. Archaeological

reporting is biased to archaeological visibility. Large sites are easier to find than small ones, and most mound sites are easier to identify than non-mound sites. Sites with pottery and chipped stone are easier to find than those without such diagnostic artifacts. Sites with exotic artifacts and burials are reported more rapidly and frequently than those without. Sites in areas of frequent human activity are easier to find than those in remote places; thus, sites located in valleys, along river floodplains, on lake-shores, or on tilled land are easier to find because of increased human disturbance. Knowing these things, one can compensate for underrepresentation of some sites by assessing the ebb and flow of regional histories. Most places within the continental United States, however, have now had sufficient archaeological activity that the basic outlines of prehistory are known. Future efforts will be directed to filling in details and making minor adjustments. In short, what we see in the New York archaeological record is probably a representative sample of what once existed there.

I am not an expert on New York archaeology, nor am I likely to be, but I took a few hours to peruse some of the literature and learned that the general course of prehistory outlined for New York fits comfortably and logically with the histories of adjacent regions and that it makes good anthropological sense. The inferences made from archaeological observations appear reasonably supported by known facts. When we pay attention to time and to cultural context, it becomes clear that the events described in the Book of Mormon did not occur in New York.

The Book of Mormon makes hundreds of clear cultural and chronological claims. Here it will suffice to touch on just a few principal ones. The dates inserted at the bottom of each page of the modern publication of the Book of Mormon provide the needed chronological frame. As to cultural practices, the Book of Mormon describes for all its peoples, even the Lamanites, a sedentary lifestyle based on cereal agriculture, with cities and substantial buildings. Thus, we should be looking for evidence of city dwellers, permanent populations, kings, farmers, and grains, among other things. These should start in the third millennium before Christ and persist at least until the fourth century after his death. There should be some climax and nadir moments in developments and demography, and these should occur in specific places on the land-

scape. New York lacked cities and cereal agriculture until after AD 1000 and is thus not the place where the events described in the Book of Mormon took place. We are not missing archaeological evidence of indigenous peoples, their settlement patterns, or subsistence practices for the time periods under consideration. These are reasonably well known for each period from a variety of evidence, and they simply do not fit the requirements specified in the Book of Mormon.⁵

The largest Nephite cities and towns of the Book of Mormon narrative were located in valley settings, necessarily in areas with good agricultural land. Some areas were occupied for centuries and experienced periodic building and rebuilding. Some had temples and other religious structures, walls, gates, and dwellings. In archaeological terms, these sites should be spatially extensive and thick, with significant stratigraphy. These are the types of archaeological sites with the highest potential for visibility and the greatest probability of being located and consistently reported. We would not expect evidence of their size or date to be annihilated, even with several centuries of plowing. Rather, such activity would make them easier to find—more visible. They should have been part of the early settlers' descriptions. New York and Pennsylvania lack sites that fit this description. Finding a 2,000- to 4,000-year-old city in New York State would be so novel that it would be reported quickly in all scientific outlets. It has never happened, and it will not happen. The most likely locations for such cities are already archaeologically well known because they are also the prime locations for modern occupation.

The archaeology of the midcontinental and northeastern United States covers a long time period. The Book of Mormon time period corresponds to the archaeological phases of the Late Archaic (Jaredite), Adena (Jaredite and Nephite), and Hopewell (Nephite) periods. But evidence of prehistoric occupation at the right time is not the same as evidence of occupation by Book of Mormon peoples and their civilizations. *Civilization* is a technical term with a special meaning in archaeology, usually meaning societies complex enough to have lived in cities and to have been ruled by kings—a basic requirement that matches the Book of Mormon.

The term *civilization* is an appropriate interpretation of the text but not for northeastern U.S. archaeology. For this area, the Adena and Hopewell

cultures are particularly attractive candidates for Book of Mormon peoples because they represented the most sophisticated cultures on their time horizon in the United States. They were the first cultures in this area to build burial mounds and mound enclosures, they engaged in long-distance trade, and they fabricated artistic items that they buried with select individuals. According to reports, some individuals were buried with thousands of pearls. Adena and Hopewell peoples lived in Pennsylvania and western New York, but this region represented the impoverished fringe of their culture.

What is the basic cultural sequence for this region? I take the following succinct summary statements of cultural periods and their typical cultural practices from a masterwork on Pennsylvania archaeology:⁶

- Archaic period (7000–1000 BC): “Bands of hunters and gatherers, following patterns of restricted seasonal wandering.”
- Transitional period (1800–800 BC): “Far ranging bands of hunters and gatherers, occupying temporary hamlets; heavy dependence on riverine resources.”
- Early Woodland (1000–300 BC): “Bands of family units living in scattered households; persistence of hunting and gathering, with a possible shift in some areas to semi-sedentary settlement due to a more stable economic base.”
- Middle Woodland (500 BC–AD 1000): “Incipient tribal village life in western Pa. [Pennsylvania], supported by horticulture, hunting and gathering; bands in eastern Pa. living in scattered hamlets, practicing hunting and gathering.”
- Late Woodland (AD 1000–1550): “Seasonally sedentary tribes; villages and hamlets (some stockaded villages); horticulture, hunting and gathering.”⁷

For the nearby Genesee Valley in New York, Neal L. Trubowitz gives detailed information from an intensive survey carried out in conjunction with the construction of a recent highway.⁸ For the wide strip of land involved, there is 100 percent coverage, so the information for relative changes in occupation is unusually good, as such things go in archaeology. Trubowitz’s information is more recent than Ritchie’s summary.

Hunting and gathering as a way of life continued into the Early Woodland Period [1000–300 BC], with land use still centered on the valley slope above the Genesee-Canaseraga junction as in the previous period. Very few data have

been found on flood plain or lake plain sites during this time period. There are a number of camps recorded for the upland, though the site density there is still the lowest. The population probably remained stable. . . . The basic stability in lifestyle continued despite the adoption of new technology (including ceramic pots and smoking pipes) and ideology (as seen in the elaboration of mortuary ceremonialism of the Middlesex and Meadowood phases in line with influences reaching the Genesee Valley from the Adena Tradition heartland in Ohio).

This pattern continued and intensified during the following Middle Woodland Period [500 BC–AD 1000]. Subsistence of the Point Peninsula Tradition was still based on hunting and gathering, and mortuary ceremonialism reached its fullest expression in exotic grave goods left in burial mounds of the Squawkie Hill phase, patterned after those found in Ohio (Hopewell Tradition). Verified mound sites are all on the valley slope overlooking the flood plain, as is often the case for contemporary mounds found in the Illinois and Ohio Valleys. Although only one site was found on the lake plain in the highway sample, others did exist in the lower Genesee River basin. . . . Point Peninsula site density was greatest on the flood plain as opposed to the valley slope. This could show a shift in subsistence focus, but small sample size may be a controlling factor here. However, the number of known sites and total site density drops from the Early Woodland Meadowood and Middlesex phases to the Point Peninsula Tradition and Squawkie Hill phase. This implies that a population decline took place during the Middle Woodland Period.⁹

These findings support Ritchie’s earlier reports for New York. The population of the Genesee Valley was always small and dispersed in small bands. The food quest involved hunting and gathering of wild plants, fruits, nuts, and berries. During the key time period (ca. AD 100–400), the Genesee Valley suffered a decline in an already sparse population. No large sites are found here for any time period. Corn agriculture did not become a significant factor here or elsewhere in the midcontinental or the southeastern United States until after AD 1000.¹⁰ With the commitment to corn agriculture, population and

village sizes increased, and so did tensions. All the known fortified sites and villages in New York date to the latest time period, the Late Woodland (AD 1000–1550). Clearly there were many settlements, and reports of them go back to the beginning of colonization, with the best report being Squier’s 1851 study, complete with maps. It bears emphasizing that these fortified knolls and spurs were all quite small and would have accommodated only about 100 to 400 people each. They really do not fit large populations, even if they were of the right period. Fortifications are found associated with mass graves and large storage pits, some of which still have evidence of stored maize. These are all known features of late occupation. The archaeology of western New York forms a long record of small bands of hunters and gatherers (berry eaters) who lived there for millennia. The record is clear, and I accept it as it stands.

In summary, the archaeology of New York is persuasive evidence that Book of Mormon peoples did not live in that region. By implication, the Cumorah of the golden plates is not the Cumorah of the final battles. These conclusions follow from a few basic points and assumptions. First, I presume that the archaeology of New York State, as currently published (2004), is a fair representation and adequate sample of what is there, and particularly that the evidence for some periods has not been

systematically destroyed. Second, I presume that the evidence published for the various regions and time periods is accurate—that is, that the majority of archaeologists working in this region are competent and academically honest in terms of their archaeology. Third, I assume that additional research and discoveries will not significantly alter current understandings of the times or places of prehistoric occupation nor of the cultural practices involved; rather, such data will lead to minor adjustments to some of the details of prehistory. Fourth, the archaeological record lacks evidence for cities, sedentism, corn agriculture, fortifications, and dense populations during Archaic, Early Woodland, and Middle Woodland times. In accord with these general observations about New York and Pennsylvania, we come to our principal object—the Hill Cumorah. Archaeologically speaking, it is a clean hill. No artifacts, no walls, no trenches, no arrowheads. The area immediately surrounding the hill is similarly clean. Pre-Columbian people did not settle or build here. This is not the place of Mormon’s last stand. We must look elsewhere for that hill.¹¹ The Palmyra hill is still a sacred place and was the repository of the golden plates and other relics placed there by Moroni. How Moroni made his way to this place and constructed his time capsule of artifacts is a historic adventure for another time. ■