

# Zarahemla Ceibal

## Could This Be Zarahemla

In 1995, we found ourselves on the beautiful Pasion River, a river that runs through center of the Petén which is in northern Guatemala. We were headed to a remote location in the jungle that sounded so good and intriguing that we could not pass it up. Could this be Zarahemla or some other Book of Mormon ancient city?

We were told that it was first inhabited around six hundred BC and had a total collapse in 350 AD. He talked about how the river was situated and had a number of statues and steles that resembled European faces. This was more that we could stand so we decided to go.

The next morning bright and early we found ourselves in an old dilapidated Land Rover and during a two-hour journey over a dirt road full of ruts (its paved now) I asked him about a possible bandito encounter. He said we are totally safe in this jalopy; the thieves are only looking for the rich ones. The other thing that I was concerned about was our ability to even reach the destination. This old relict had been around the block a few times.

Shortly before we arrived at the site we noticed a high bluff rising just west of the river. This bluff runs along the river for about six miles by the ancient city of Ceibal. In addition to being six miles long it was also about two miles deep and to add to the size of these ruins, also there were suburbs close by. Therefore, from the standpoint of size, this ancient city would certainly qualify for the capital city of Zarahemla.



The climb to the top of the bluff was not much of a challenge for our missionary son but my wife and I and the other couple we had with us had quite an ordeal in getting to the top. When we got to the main plaza we were disappointed with the lack of large imposing structures like we saw at Tikal and other popular tourist attractions, but then we realized that the people of Zarahemla were probably not into the construction of large and spacious buildings

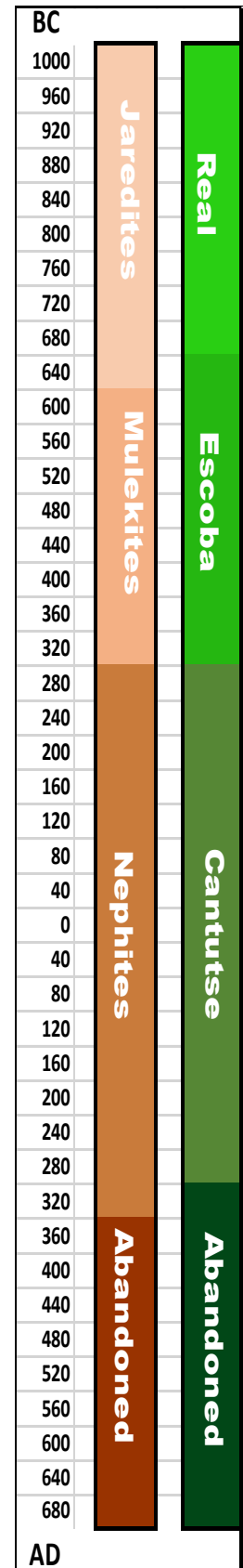
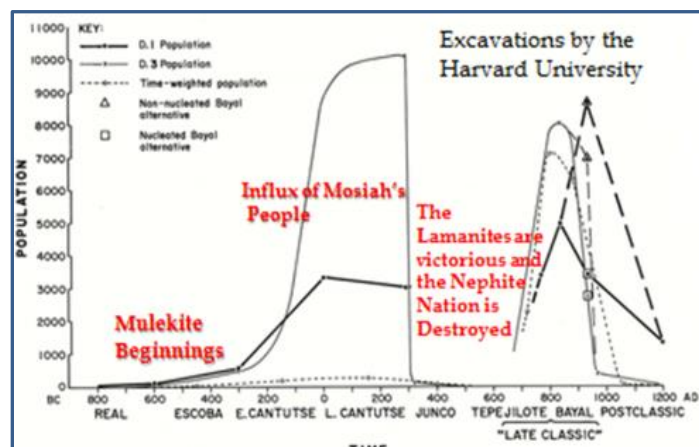
When I returned home I immediately went to the BYU library and found out that it was excavated and studied by Gordon Willy a prominent archaeologist from Harvard. I checked out the books that dealt with excavations of Seibal to see if our tour guide was correct and it validated everything he said. I then prepared a list of one hundred reasons why Ceibal should be considered as a candidate for the city of Zarahemla. I sent it out to the FARMS and nothing really happened and I felt like it was all that could do for the time being. At the time I felt like it was no big deal, after all, sometimes intellectual testimonies can get in the way of spiritual ones.

**Time Frames:** The most amazing scientific information that came out of this trip was the remarkable correlations that exists between the different societies that existed at Ceibal during Preclassic to the Early Classic periods and the

different societies of the Book of Mormon. This chart summarizes the field work completed in the 1960's by Gordon R. Willey, a Harvard archeologist. This chart has an amazing time line that mirrors the major activities that are associated with Zarahemla. It was this chart that convinced me to become more involved in the search for the lands of the Book of Mormon.

Takeshi Inomata has followed up on Willies work at Ceibal and has essentially verified Willies work. Mr. Inomata has used high-precision radiocarbon dating and aerial LiDAR to further refine the research at Ceibal. He has come up with some amazing findings that reinforce the proposition that ancient city Ceibal is an excellent candidate for the city of Zarahemla. *See chart on following page.*

The ancient history of Ceibal begins around 1000 BC with the Maya (Jaredite) with some Olmec influences. The previous" Jaredites a Great Nation" chapter



clearly establishes the Maya-Jaredite tie. In the tenth chapter of Ether it refers to an area south of the narrow neck that was preserved for hunting which would place Ceibal in their hunting zone. This was during Lib's reign which would coincide with the 1000 BC timeframe. Ether 10:20 tells about Lib's great city just north of the narrow neck of land or on the northern edge of the land southward where they went to hunt. Uaxactun is a near perfect match for this city which further validates the land use policies of that year. The archeological evidences at Ceibal during this are very sparse and it was probably easy for the Mulikes to conquer or assimilate in this area around 600 BC. The scientists have designated this 400-year period between 1000 BC and 600 BC as the Real Phase.

The next scientific period is called the Escoba Phase and essentially covers the Mulekites time period of 600 BC to 300 BC or up until the time when Mosiah discovered the city of Zarahemla. Anciently the Petén, the area of the land of Zarahemla, has been considered no-man's land. This is because it was a dense tropical jungle full of poisonous snakes (serpents), and wild animals. It is also very humid and probably full aggravating insects.

The Mulekites likely followed the Northern Equatorial Current on their trip to the Americas. This current would have taken them to the eastern side of the Yucatan and their arrival would coincide with a Jaredite time period where there were millions scattered throughout the Yucatan. In their search for a place where could call their own, it appears that they traveled around the Yucatan peninsula and up then the Usumacinta River until they came to Ceibal, a place with very few inhabitants.

The next scientific period is called the Cantutse Phase which matches the time when Mosiah came out of the land of Nephi and discovered the Mulekites and after 300 years they "experienced a drastic decline around 300 AD". (Inomata 2017). This phase coincides with the Nephite period at Zarahemla which starts around 250 BC. In 326 AD., after much conflict with the Lamanite's there was an all-out war near the borders of Zarahemla and it appears that the Nephites were driven northward out of the land of Zarahemla. It is also interesting to note that in the year 75 BC, fortifications were constructed in Ceibal. This happens to correspond to time frame when Moroni instructed the Nephites to commence building fortification to fend off the Lamanites.

**Two Models:** Over the years there has been a number of Book of Mormon scientists that have concluded that the Book of Mormon lands must be in the shape of an hour glass. Because of the number of these scientists it would be easy to conclude that there was a consensus reached on this matter.



The BYU religious department has recently developed a hypothetical model that also conforms to the hour glass model. It is also very similar to the proposed Pasion River



model.

Following is a list of their similarities:

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Seas on the east and the west    | Wilderness to the east, west and south |
| The land of Nephi and Zarahemla  | The Sidon River running north          |
| The Narrow Neck of Land          | The hill Cumorah                       |
| The Land of Zarahemla and Nephi  | The Land of Bountiful and Desolation   |
| The Land Northward and Southward | Costal cities                          |

**In the Heart of the Land**

According to the following scriptures, Zarahemla should be in the center and heart of the land. This requirement is very evident in both models.

*Helaman 1:27 But behold, the Lamanites...come into the **center of the land**, and had taken the capital city which was the city of Zarahemla.*

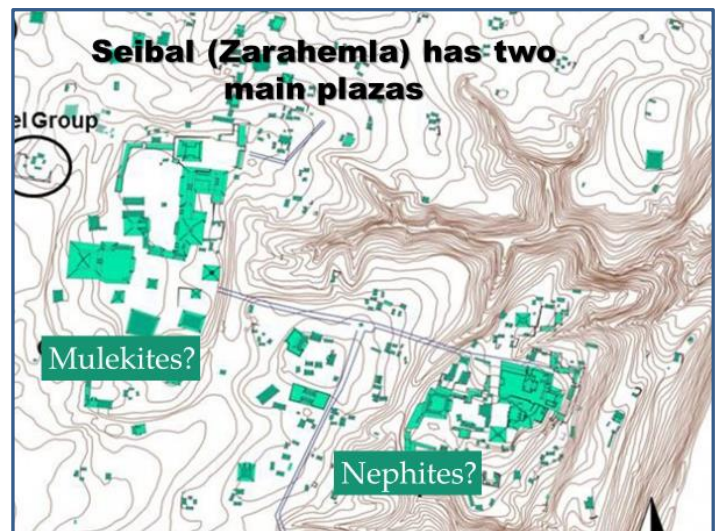
*Helaman 1:18 ...the Laminates durst no come into the **heart of their lands** to attack that great city of Zarahemla.*

The most difficult aspect of these models is the Narrow Neck of Land. There is a general consensus among professional researchers that the Book of Mormon lands are located in Mesoamerica. Even Joseph Smith implied that Zarahemla is in Guatemala. Therefore, the Narrow Neck of Land has to be in Mesoamerica. This requirement appears to be a major stumbling block in the search for Book of Mormon lands because there doesn't seem to be an area that meets this prerequisite. Consequently, the solutions to this dilemma will require creative thinking and research in order to come up with a solution. If the Narrow Neck of Land can be located through triangulation the general location of the Narrow Neck, it should be able to identified. This process was used in establishing the Pasion river model and has placed the Narrow Neck ten miles north of Tikal, Guatemala and after extensive research there appears to be an acceptable version of the Narrow Neck in that location. A complete explanation of the Narrow Neck will be outlined in the chapter, the Narrow Neck Complex.

**Mulekite and Nephite Centers:** Did the Nephites set up a separate section in the city of Zarahemla when they arrived? It seems like a plausible thing to do.

*Mosiah 25:4 And now all the people of Nephi were assembled together, and also all the people of Zarahemla, and they were gathered together in **two bodies**.*

This scripture suggest that at least east intially the Naphites and Mulekites coexisted in different places, however, over time it is likely that they became one.



### **Could There Have Been Horses?**

Our tour guide indicated that he was also a supervisor of various archeological digs in the area and told us that they had run into the skeleton of a horse that was in the Book of Mormon period. He was told not to say anything about it from his supervisors. I took that with a grain of salt at the time, but when I returned back to Utah I notified FARMS of his statement They seemed interested, but I'm not sure what they did with it.



### 13 Possible Religious Centers:

The interesting aspect of their building pattern was the location of nine modest temples that were scattered out evenly over the entire twelve square miles. Could they be religious edifices that would serve the various neighborhoods? Actually, the new LiDAR photos show many more religious or civic centers



**The Land of Nephi:** In 2007, I took my search for Zarahemla off the back burner. I grew more convinced that it was important that establishing the lands of the Book of Mormon was very important

I had an opportunity to help Richard Hauck out at Salama for parts of two years and because of his excellent work, I felt like he had established a strong case that he had established a credible site for the land of Nephi. (see chapter on the Land of Nephi)



My job was that of public relations. Dr Hauck and his associates were having a difficult time getting permission to excavate important ancient sites so we organized programs that would enhance our relationships with the locals. I organized tours that participated in numerous service activities and made some real friends with the native Guatemalans. We put in efficient wood burning stoves, water purifiers, provided computers for their schools, planted trees, took portraits of their families etc. This effort was successful in many instances but not all. There was a site near the proposed site of the city of Nephi that appeared to have the dimensions of a temple, however we could never convince the owner to let us excavate.



While at Salama, I became convinced that ancient sites near the city of Salama was an excellent candidate for the city of Nephi as well as other sites like Shemlom, Ammon's hill, Shilom, the forest of Mormon and the Waters of Mormon. This realization added a spark of optimism that Ceibal might in fact be a worthy candidate for Zarahemla. Ceibal had the right distance and direction and Pasion River fit right into land of Nephi. These new evidences of the Book of Mormon geography compelled me to start taking this seriously so I started to study this new-found theory in earnest.

With Zarahemla to the north and the city of Nephi to the south the hour glass configuration started to take shape. The seven wildernesses (wilderness, mountains and forests) all become a near perfect fit. In addition, the reference to the seas to the north, south, east, and west further strengthen the model. And the Pasion River correlated with every requirement of the Book of Mormon text. The picture below is the proposed site of the land of Nephi:

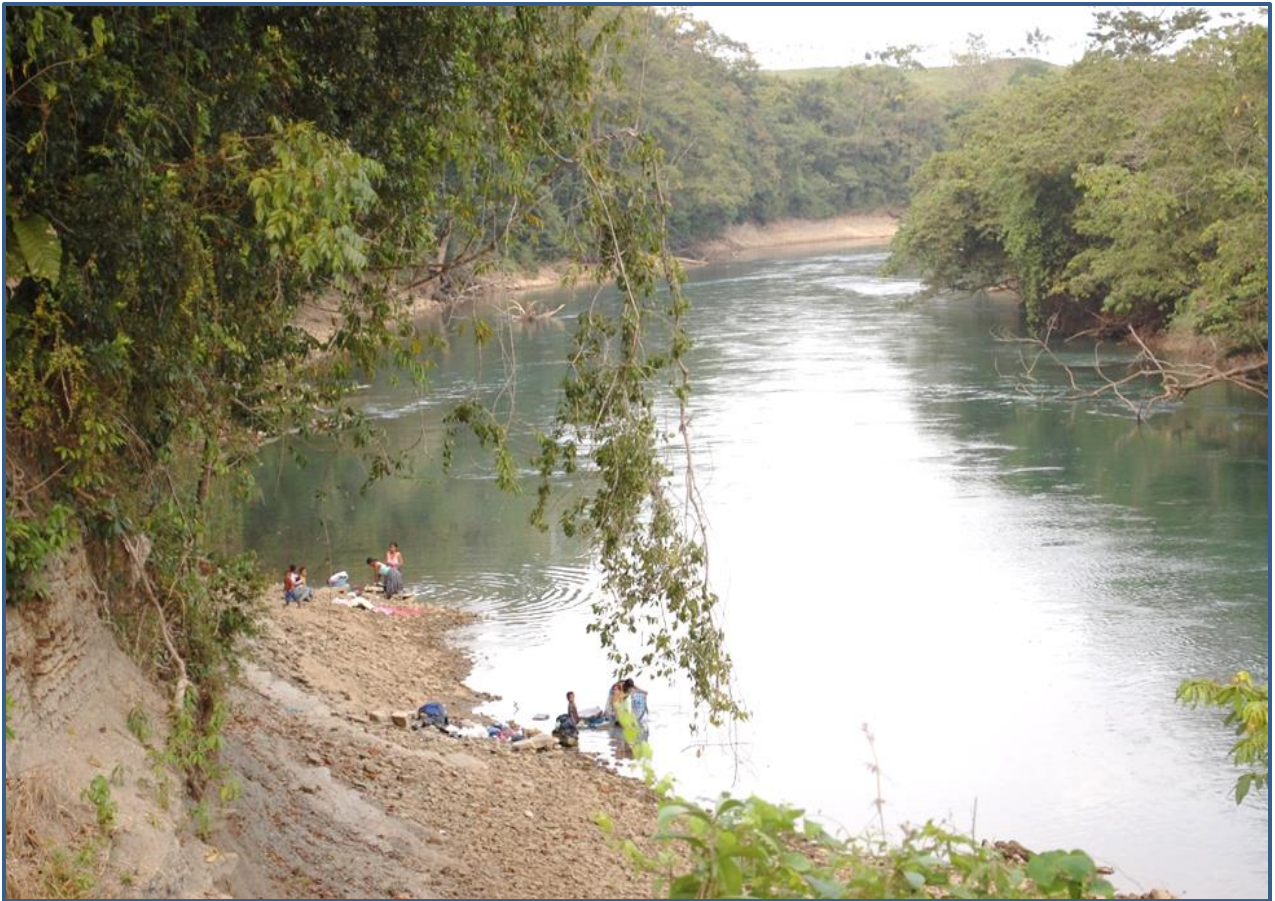


**Religious Evidences:** There are a number of indications that suggest that the city of Ceibal was utilizing religious practices that mirror those of the LDS Church. These include:

- Triatic architecture that is similar to the three spires that are utilized on some temples. (Hansen 1998)
- “And it came to pass” glyphs are nearby. (Norman 2010)
- The thirteen neighborhood temples in Ceibal suggest a decentralized religious set up. [9]
- The nearby Lacandon Indians have a number of beliefs that are similar to the LDS Church. (Foote 2010)
- Temple configurations that are similar to Solomon's temple. [8]
- Decline in the use of incense burners during Early Classic period. (Rice 1999)



**The Sidon River:** The Sidon River run through the center of the land (Helaman 1:27) of Zarahemla and is the connecting link to many of the Book of Mormon cities in that part of the land. It also was a central part of the travel and military actions that were prevalent during the Nephite phase of the Book of Mormon. Like the Sidon River, the Pasion river also runs through the center of the Petén and is also the connecting link with numerous ancient cities. Therefore, the Pasion Rivers is considered as a strong candidate for Sidon River.



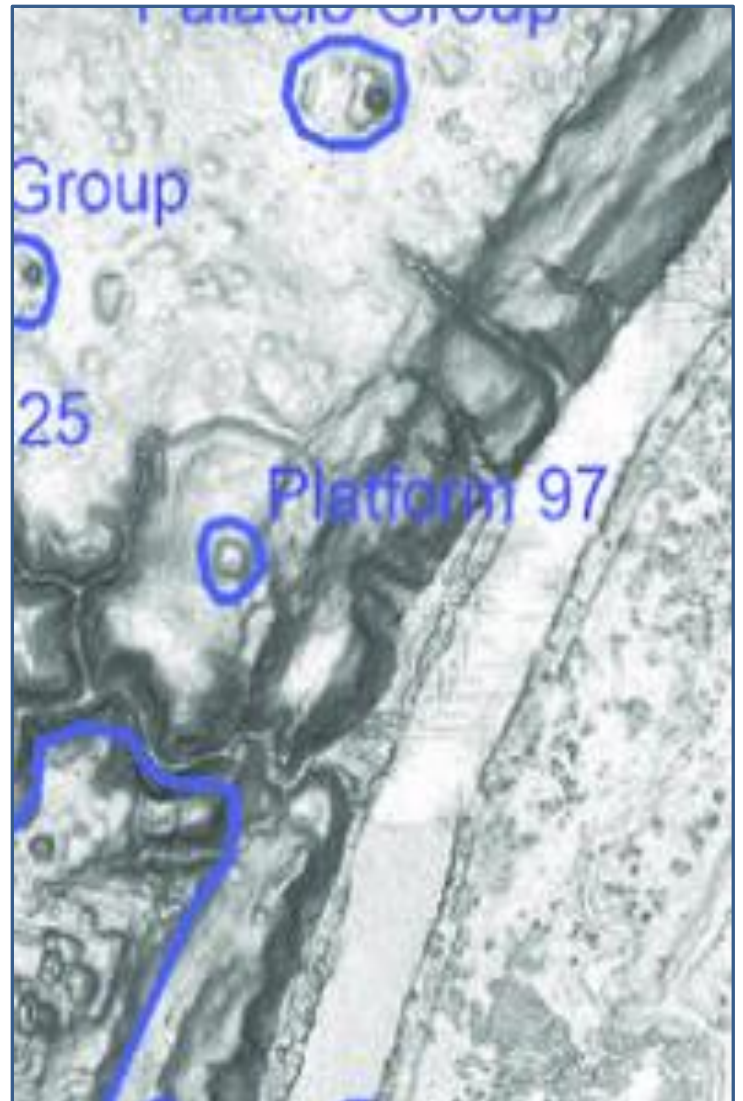
In addition to its strong regional ties, it also contributes to the validation that Ceibal is strong candidate for Zarahemla. Some of the obvious aspects of the Pasion River is that it meets the requirement of the river running north and that the city of Zarahemla is located on the west side of the river. The river must also be small to moderate in size. This allows the armies to cross multiple times at will with no prior preparation. As the river proceeds out of the south wilderness it is relatively small and accommodates the battles that are associated with war at hill Riplah. As the river moves to the north is picks up several tributaries that increase the size but not enough to preclude army crossings.



The steep banks along the Pasion river on the east side of Ceibal provide an excellent military advantage. Any army approaching Ceibal from the river or from the regions to east would find these steep banks very daunting. It appears that this natural defensive system played a part in the Gideon-Hermounts war when the Lamanites, who greatly outnumbered the Nephites, chased them toward Zarahemla. However, after they reached Zarahemla the Nephites were very successful in fending off the Lamanites likely because the steep cliffs that afforded them a military advantage. As the Lamanite casualties mounted it became apparent to the Lamanites that they were losing in a very horrific way. It was so terrible that the bodies along the river bank piled up to the point that the Nephites had to throw them into the so they would have room to cross.

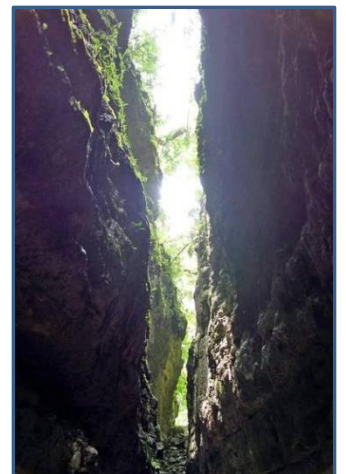
*“the bodies of the Lamanites who had been slain into the waters of Sidon, that thereby his people might have room to cross” Alma 2.*

The aerial photo to right illustrates the steep banks.



**Destruction:** The huge crack in the picture to the left is located a few miles from Ceibal in the ancient city of Aquateca,

*3 Nephi 8 6 And there was also a great and terrible tempest; and there was terrible thunder, insomuch that it did shake the whole earth as if it was about to **divide asunder**. 17 And thus the face of the whole earth became deformed, because of the tempests, and the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the **quaking of the earth**. .18 And behold, the rocks were rent in twain; they were broken up upon the face of the whole earth, insomuch that they were found in broken fragments, and in **seams and in cracks**, upon all the face of the land.*



**Triangulation and Comparative Tests:** In order for this to be a legitimate candidate, there must be a multitude of other comparative tests completed before it can be declared a genuine contender for the prominent and famous Book of Mormon city. In addition, to finding a fit within the Land of Zarahemla, there must be affiliations built with other locations such as:

- The Land of Nephi sometimes referred to the Land of Lehi or the Land of Nephi/Lehi.
- The Land of First Inheritance
- The Land of Zarahemla, which includes the Land of Manti and the coastal cities. In addition, the Land of Zarahemla will cover the city of Zarahemla and the Mulekite association.
- The Jaredite nation and its demise as well the movement of the Nephites northward to resettle the abandoned Jaredite communities.
- The Land of Cumorah.
- The Land of Bountiful and the Narrow Neck of Land.

As these relationships are being established the geographical features such as rivers, seas, wilderness, hills, valleys etc. must fit with a high degree of accuracy. And the flow of the Nephites, Mulekites and Jaredites into their different lands must fit the different scenarios. Other essential requirements in the selection Book of Mormon cities is identifying those sites that match the Book of Mormon timeline, the size and the characteristic of the structures and cultural tie ins. One thing that is for sure, if the Book of Mormon people lived at a site for any length of time, there would be physical evidence of it. In addition, name associations, ancient writings and other artifacts and symbols will be used to further solidify the above-mentioned areas to Book of Mormon Lands. One last important requirement, each city must triangulate well and relate in direction and distance to the other cities. Over the last twenty years essentially all of these requirements have been met with essentially all the important cities, which sets the stage





for the final requirement, establishing the location for the Narrow Neck.

**Drought:** According to Elbert (2017), there was a major drought in the central Petén during the Late Preclassic. Zarahemla is located in the central Petén and the drought mentioned by Elbert closely corresponds with the drought mentioned in the Book of Helaman.

*Helaman 11:4 O Lord, do not suffer that this people shall be destroyed by the sword; but O Lord, rather let there be a famine in the land... Helaman 11:5 And so it was done, according to the words of Nephi. And there was a great famine upon the land, among all the people of Nephi.*

**Warfare:** In addition to the drought, Inomata maintain that war commenced in the land. Possibly the war was the result of the drought. These wars could be the result of people struggling for food. According to Inomata, there is scientific evidence that fortification was built during that time period. Social instability started with the intensification of warfare around 75 BC. (Inomata 2017)

*Alma 35:13 And the people of Ammon departed out of the land of Jershon, and came over into the land of Melek, and gave place in the land of Jershon for the armies of the Nephites, that they might contend with the armies of the Lamanites and the armies of the Zoramites; and thus, commenced a war betwixt the Lamanites and the Nephites*

### **Population Decline through Warfare, Famine & Migration:**

With the combination of drought and warfare, the researchers at Ceibal determined that there was a decline in population. This decline was also documented well the Book of Mormon. (see the following excerpts from Alma 63) Another likely reason was the continued military threat from the Lamanites. [Note 1]

*Alma 63:4... , there was a large company of men, even to the amount of five thousand and four hundred men, with their wives and their children, departed out of the land of Zarahemla into the land which was northward.*

*Alma 63:10 ...Corianton had gone forth to the land northward in a ship, to carry forth provisions unto the people who had gone forth into that land.*

In Mormon 10 it tells about the year, (324) that the Nephites abandoned Zarahemla and this date correlates the carbon dating abandonment date of 310 AD

*Mormon1:10 And it came to pass that the war began to be among them in the borders of Zarahemla, by the waters of Sidon.*

**Fortifications:** Remarkable correlations exist of references of fortifications built at Ceibal around 75 BC and the references found in Alma 43 through 49. [4]

*Alma 49:13 For they knew not that Moroni had fortified, or had built forts of security, for every city in all the land round about...*



It is truly remarkable that scientific research at Ceibal has established meaningful correlations that ties Ceibal to the city of Zarahemla. These actions all took place during the first century BC:

1. Wars were rampant throughout the land
2. There was a significant decline in population which likely meant that there were migrations out of the land of Zarahemla.
3. There was extensive drought throughout the land.
4. There were numerous fortifications built throughout the land.



**Summary:** A lot has transpired since 1995 when we had our first look at Ceibal. The most significant was putting all the major pieces of the Book of Mormon Lands puzzle together. By filling in the unknowns, it gave us great deal of confidence in furthering our belief that Ceibal was an excellent candidate for the city of Zarahemla. Establishing confidence, that the land of Nephi was near Salama was reassuring by identifying the proposed location of hill Cumorah was a major step forward. We established over fifty criteria from the Book of Mormon text for the land of Cumorah and we essentially had a perfect match. This led to the point where we should have a good idea where the Narrow Neck of Land should be. We had some suspicions as to where it was but we were having a hard time justifying some of our theories. Having realized that hill Cumorah and Zarahemla appear to be solid we realized there had to be a reasonable answer for the Narrow Neck location. If we could not find one it would cast a shadow over our previous findings. To make a long story short, we were able to establish a reasonable scenario for the Narrow Neck which essentially made it certain that we were on the right track. The issues associated with the Narrow Neck will be covered in another chapter.

The next major breakthrough was the amazing work done by Takeshi Inomata. He picked up where Gordon Willy (a prominent archeologist from Harvard) left off and was able to essentially confirm his findings. In addition, he was able through the use of High Precision Radiocarbon Dating and the use Aerial LiDAR, establish a more precise dating outcome and identify cultural characteristic of the different cultures and their time frames. All of this new information strengthened the possibility that Ceibal was Zarahemla. The fact that his work did not distract from the Book of Mormon theory is truly amazing. This fact is very significant. Evidently, Ceibal has more radio carbon dating than any other Mesoamerican site.

## Notes:

[1] An extended drought at the end of the Late Preclassic is likely contributed to the decline of some major polities in the central Petén, but smaller sites located in productive environments were more resilient and persisted in to the Classic period. This research provides a framework for understanding the complex social and environmental factors that influenced localized adaptations to climate change and the episodic growth and decline of early complex societies in prehistory. Ebert (2017)

[2] The trajectory of the Preclassic collapse at Ceibal exhibits a notable resemblance with that of the Classic collapse, with multiple waves of decline followed by short episodes of limited recovery. In both cases, the first signs of social problems appear to have been related to the intensification of warfare. Probable fortifications dating to the Late or Terminal Preclassic Period are found at other Maya sites, including El Mirador, Becan, Edzna, Cerros, Murralla de León, Cival, Chaak Akmal, and multiple hilltop sites along the Upper Usumacinta Rive. (Inomata 2017)

[3] The first signs of social problems leading to the Preclassic collapse at Ceibal emerged at the beginning of the Xate phase, around 75 BC. Our study confirmed the observation by the HP researchers that the population of Ceibal declined significantly from the Cantutse phase to the Xate phase (Sabloff originally called them the Early and Late Cantutse phases, respectively). (Inomata 2017)

[4] One date stands out. When Inomata finally got enough radiocarbon dates from a single site to determine events with temporal precision, he found that ca. 75 BC was the time when fortifications first appeared at Ceibal in response to intensified warfare. What was going on in the Nephite world ca. 75 BC? Captain Moroni became commander of Nephite forces, he fortified every city in the land, and fought continual wars from ca. 74 BC to ca. 61 BC. (Magleby 2017)

[5] Social instability started with the intensification of warfare around 75 BC..., followed by the fall of multiple centers across the Maya lowlands around 150 AD.. The population of Ceibal persisted for some time...but the center eventually experienced major decline around AD 300 Inomata (2017)

[6] This was an amazing experience; however, we had a little scare returning up the river. When we returned to the boat it became apparent that our guide and the boatman were in a serious discussion about something. I suggested to my missionary son, Neal, a Spanish speaking Elder, to take a casual walk near these men and figure out what they were agitated over. As he walked by they moved so they couldn't hear them.



This only heightened to my concerns. After a lengthy delay they finally decided to get into the boat and head back to the airport where we schedule to fly out in a few hours. On our way to the ruin our guide was full of laughs and was a real delight. However, going back down the river was a whole different matter. He would stand at the front of the boat looking nervously down the river for something. Could it be banditos? Needless to say, I was very uneasy. We had not seen another motorized boat all day so we knew we were pretty much on our own. All of sudden another boat came around the bend and he began waving to them. He then turned around and looked at with a smile and then opened the gas tank lid and showed me an empty tank. He knew that I had was very anxious about what was going on. The boat operator had forgotten to fill up with gas. The motor was probably running on the fuel that was in the gas lines and would have run out any second. After syphoning gas from their tanks, we were able to reach our destination in time. I have had visions of being stranded on the river through the night.

[7] Probably the most stunning aspect of these sites was the European faces that were sketched upon a number stela. They had beards and European clothing and were much different than some of the other stela that were clearly Mayan.

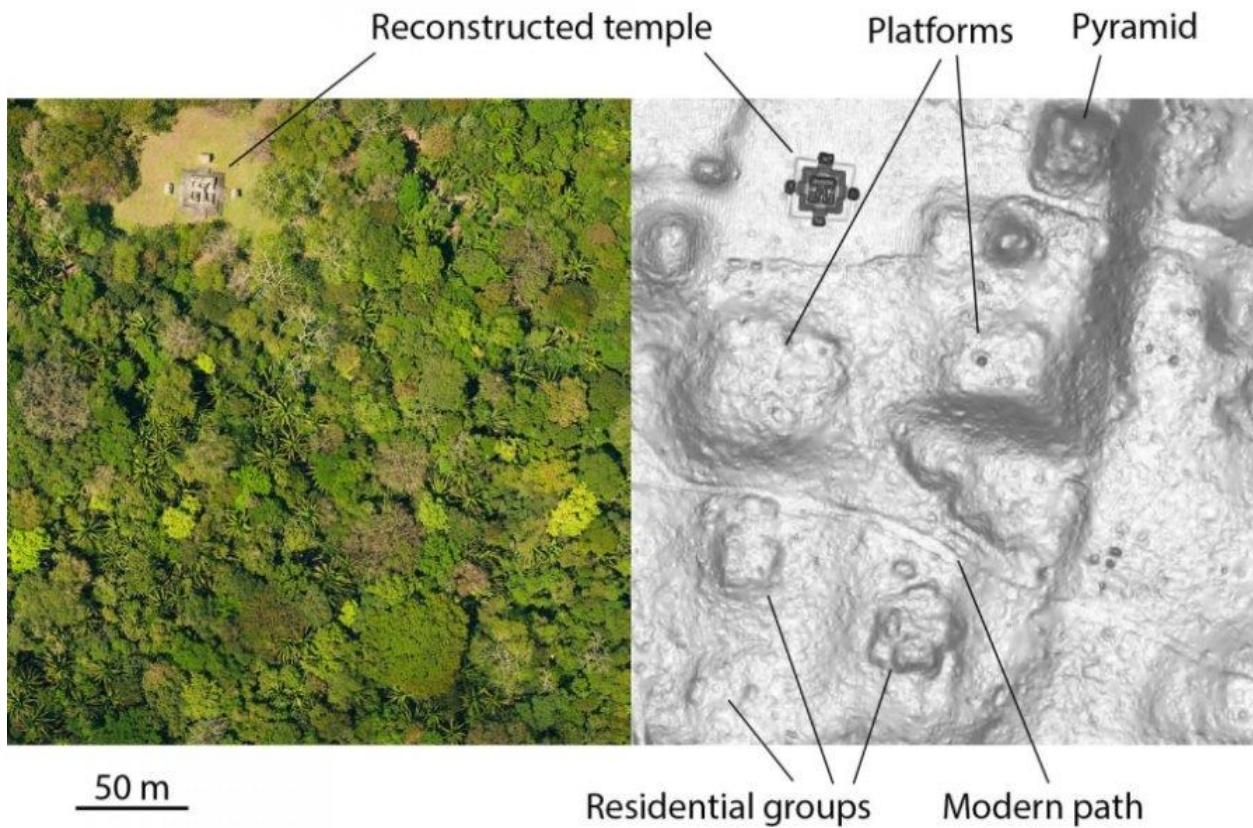


There was one statue (not a stela) that stood out from the rest and was considered to be a king by the experts, however, our guide said that the scientists could not understand why a king was carrying farming tools in his hands. There was no other stature or stela that compared to it and they could not carbon date it and it appeared to very old. Could this be King Benjamin?



It's hard to know if these stelas had any connection to the Book of Mormon and this is primarily due to carbon dating issues. Some feel they are later than Book of Mormon times. Still, it is interesting that a European face would suddenly show up at a prominent Book of Mormon city.

[8] There are numerous Temples. Platforms or Pyramids with Ceibal's ten square miles. The aerial photos below are sampling of the possibilities. Inomata (2018)



The ancient city of Talzacom (near the Guatemala City of Salama) is located in the center of the picture below. Richard Hauck feels that this is the city of Nephi. In addition, near the city center is an unexcavated mound that has the dimensions of a Solomon temple. The owners of the land would not allow the Hauck's team to excavate.

