

# Tonina as Ammonihah

By Chris Scott, with contributions from Neil Steede, David B. Brown, Terry Scott and Mormon © 2012

One of the beautiful things about the Book of Mormon that the Hill Cumorah Expedition Team finds compelling is the level of description contained within the stories. The details concerning locations, culture, the lay of the land, the religion, the people involved and their positions in society found in every aspect of the stories are a few of the things that help us to compare and contrast the recorded event of the Book of Mormon to the locations in Central America where we feel that they occurred.

The Hill Cumorah Expedition Team has visited the site of Tonina twice in recent years. They found evidence of many historical events at the site that fit the story of Alma visiting the city of Ammonihah as told in the Book of Mormon. This article touches upon those evidences found at

Tonina and presents a comparison to the city of Ammonihah in the Book of Mormon with the Mayan site of Tonina.

Tonina is a beautifully preserved Mayan site located in the Chiapas highlands of southern Mexico. It has a large plaza area containing a sunken ball court with a terraced temple pyramid rising 71 meters above the plaza. As we visited the area we noticed a breathtaking view of the area surrounding the pyramids and plaza area. (see picture)

The Book of Mormon scripture from Alma 6:7 provides a description of where the city is located:

*“.....when he (Alma) had finished his work at Melek, he departed thence, and traveled three day’s journey on the north of the land of Melek; and he*



## Quest for the Lost Maya<sup>1</sup>

A review of the National Geographic Special by Terry Scott & Glenn A. Scott

Most archaeologists believe the Maya culture began in Guatemala around 600 BCE in the Mirador Basin. Recent discoveries in the Northern Yucatan may change this view. Up until now, it was thought that this area was sparsely settled. The discovery of the cities of *Kiuc* and *Xocnaceh* and many smaller towns in the area demonstrate the Northern Yucatan to be anything but empty. Recent road construction around the modern city of Merida has uncovered over 190 towns. According to archaeologist Anthony Andrews, Northern Yucatan was as densely populated as Los Angeles County.

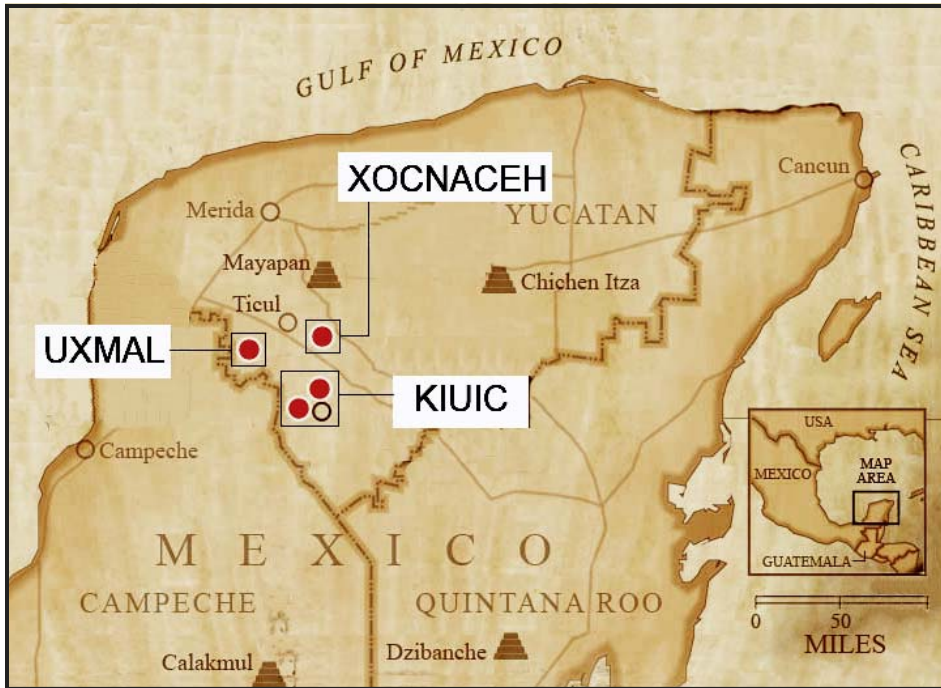
According to site archaeologist George Bey the city of Kiuc, 60 miles south from Merida and 20 miles southeast from Uxmal, was founded about 900 BCE.<sup>2</sup> While excavating one of the pyramids, he decided to sink a shaft looking for a tomb or burial chamber. Twenty three feet down he found a cap stone, the top of another building.

The pyramid’s C-14 dating is around 800 AD but this lower building dates about 500 AD, 300 years earlier. The current theory is that Northern Yucatan was not occupied until 700 AD when mass migrations from Southern Yucatan began due to many wars and great famines. Kiuc was occupied long before these refugees arrived from the south.

Another stone found at Kiuc showed part of a human head wearing a mask. This was part of the facade of a royal palace. Further excavation revealed the palace consisted of a three part structure. On the left was a temple, on the right the royal residence and in the center was the throne room. Many sites have one temple or pyra-

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## Quest for the Lost Maya continued



mid built on top of another by a later ruler or a conqueror. The difference in dates seems to bear this out.

Within a mile of the Kiuc palace, was found a 200 foot stairway leading to a 9 or 10 room house on top of a hill overlooking the plantation below. Archaeologists have dubbed it the “stairway to heaven.” Such a large dwelling, not of the royal family, points to a very prosperous city. About half of the population had houses of stone, a rarity in Mesoamerica. This seems to indicate a large wealthy middle class, another sign of prosperity.

North of Kiuc, archaeologist Tomás Gallareta Negrón of INAH has been exploring another site called Xocnaceh. This site, C-14 dated at 500 BCE, was unknown until now because everything had been completely overgrown with jungle. Negrón has uncovered a huge stairway and plaza elevated 28 feet above the jungle floor, measuring 500 feet by 500 feet; an area as large as four football fields. This plaza could hold thousands of people for ceremonies and other activities. Among artifacts found here were basalt tools from Belize, conch shells from Vera Cruz, 700 miles away and jade from the Guatemalan highlands (Southern

Yucatan). This site appears to have been the trading hub of a huge empire.

Seventeen miles from Kiuc is a large cave. The only access to this cave is through a small opening. The cave floor is 230 feet down and can only be reached by rope. Maya priests had to lower themselves into the cave by ropes made of vines. Descending into the cave and threading through narrow tunnels one finally comes to a manmade wall marking

the entrance to a sacred area. The ancient Maya believed that caves were the home of underworld gods. The cave walls in this area are covered with a thick coat of soot from countless torches and ritual fires. The floor of the cave is littered with thousands of broken clay pots, each with one small piece missing. It is believed that those who conducted the sacrifice took that piece with them outside and buried it somewhere else. The walls contain some remarkable paintings of jaguars and parrots. The style is Maya but subtly different than any seen before. Their age is estimated around 100 BC, making them among the earliest paintings discovered in the Americas.

The civilization in Northern Yucatan appears to have ended because of a major drought. There had once been a very small lake close to Kiuc. Core samples taken from the lake bed revealed several bands of white gypsum which formed when the lake dried up, indicating a very long dry spell. C-14 dates of the gypsum are consistent with other indicators of when Northern Yucatan was abandoned.

### References:

1. “Quest for the Lost Maya” Produced by National Geographic Television for PBS ©2011
2. [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2010-08-25-maya-pompeii\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2010-08-25-maya-pompeii_N.htm)



## Tonina as Ammonihah continued

came to a city which was called Ammonihah.”

The Hill Cumorah Expedition Team has identified City of Melek as Bonampak which was probably originally a Mulekite city. So the fact that Alma began his mission at Gideon, then Melek and then Ammonihah tends to indicate that he was interested in strengthening the Land of Zarahemla by preaching the gospel in cities that had a Mulekite history—he was using the gospel to strengthen the bonds of society. When leaving Bonampak the best way to reach Tonina is to travel northwest through a very long upward sloping valley and then over a mountain range that takes you almost directly to the eastern entrance of Tonina.

In verse sixteen Alma is reviled and thrown out of the city. He then began his journey to the city of Aaron. His heart was heavy with grief over the rejection and as he travelled he was visited by an angel of God. The angel commanded him that he should return to the city of Ammonihah and preach again to the people. He returns and in verse 6:24 it states:

*“And he entered the city by another way, yea, by the way which is on the south of the city of Ammonihah.”*

A discussion with one of the museum attendants who worked on much of the original excavations at Tonina revealed that the city only had two entrances; one on the east and the other on the south. He stated that the one on the south was the larger main entrance to the city.

As Alma enters the city he meets a man named Amulek who has also received a visit from an angel of the Lord telling him of Alma. Amulek receives Alma into his home for many days and his household is blessed. The spirit of the Lord once again called upon Alma and Amulek to commence their preaching to the people of the city of Ammonihah. Verse 6:39-41 states:

*“And they had power given unto them, insomuch that they could not be confined in dungeons; neither were it possible that any man could slay them; Nevertheless they did not exercise their power until they were bound in bands and cast into prison. Now this was done that the Lord might shew forth his power in them.”*

Alma and Amulek did have some success in preaching and we read in Alma

10:32:

*“After he had made an end of speaking to the people, many of them believed on his words and began to repent and to search the scriptures, but the greater part of them were desirous that they might destroy Alma and Amulek....”*

The rest of the story becomes very disturbing, Alma 10:44-46:

*“.....they cast spit upon and cast stones on all those who believed in the words of Alma and Amulek. (45) And they brought their wives and children together, and whoever believed or had been taught to believe in the word of God, they caused that they should be cast into the fire. (46) They also brought forth their records, which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also, that they might be burned and destroyed by fire.”*

Many remains of people that died violent deaths were found in the plaza of Tonina. There were three types of remains. Each of these types of remains fit some aspect of the story as found in the Book of Mormon. One type of remains show a group of people that were burned and died a gruesome death, as referred to in the above scripture. The other two types of deaths will be dealt with later in the article. The next part of the story continues to fit the violence that was present in the hearts of the people.

Alma and Amulek were then bound and cast into prison. Alma 10:61-81;

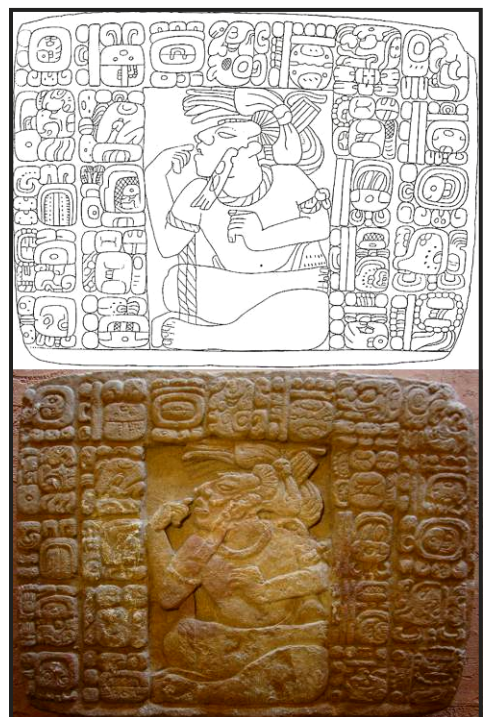
*“And when they had been cast into prison three days, there came many lawyers, and judges, and priests, and teachers, who were of the profession of Nehor; And they came in unto the prison to see them, and they questioned them about many words; but they answered them nothing.”..... “ And it came to pass that the judge stood before them, and said? If ye have such great power, why do ye not deliver yourselves? And many such things did they say unto them, gnashing their teeth upon them, and spitting upon them,”..... “ And they did withhold food from them, that they might hunger, and water, that they might thirst; And they also did take from them their clothes, that they*

*were naked; and thus they were bound with strong cords, and confined in prison.”.....*

There are several panels found at the site of Tonina that tell this story in stone. There are two prisoners bound. The panels are contemporaries of each other, fashioned at the same time. One is holding his hand to his mouth as if hungry. (see Figures 1 & 2) Also, in the first figure the bands around his upper arms are seen falling away as described in the next scripture.

*“ And it came to pass after they had thus suffered for many days, (and it was on the twelfth day, in the tenth month, in the tenth year of the reign of the Judges over the people of Nephi,) that the chief judge over the land of Ammonihah, and many of their teachers and their lawyers, went in unto the prison where Alma and Amulek were bound with cords. And their chief judge stood before them, and smote them again, and said unto them, If ye have the power of God, deliver yourselves from these bands, and then we will believe that the Lord will destroy this people according to your words. And it came to pass that they all went forth and smote them, saying the same words, even until the*

Figure 1



## Tonina as Ammonihah continued



Figure 2

last; And when the last had spoken unto them, the power of God was upon Alma and Amulek, and they arose and stood upon their feet; and Alma cried, saying, How long shall we suffer these great afflictions, O Lord? O Lord, give us strength according to our faith which is in Christ, even unto deliverance; and they brake the cords with which they were bound; and when the people

Figure 3



saw this, they began to flee, for the fear of destruction had come upon them. And it came to pass that so great was their fear, that they fell to the earth, and did not obtain the outer door of the prison; And the earth shook mightily, and the walls of the prison were rent in twain, so that they fell to the earth: And the chief judge, and the lawyers, and priests, and teachers, who smote upon Alma and Amulek, were slain by the fall thereof. And Alma and Amulek came forth out of the prison, and they were not hurt; for the Lord had granted unto them power, according to their faith which was in Christ.”

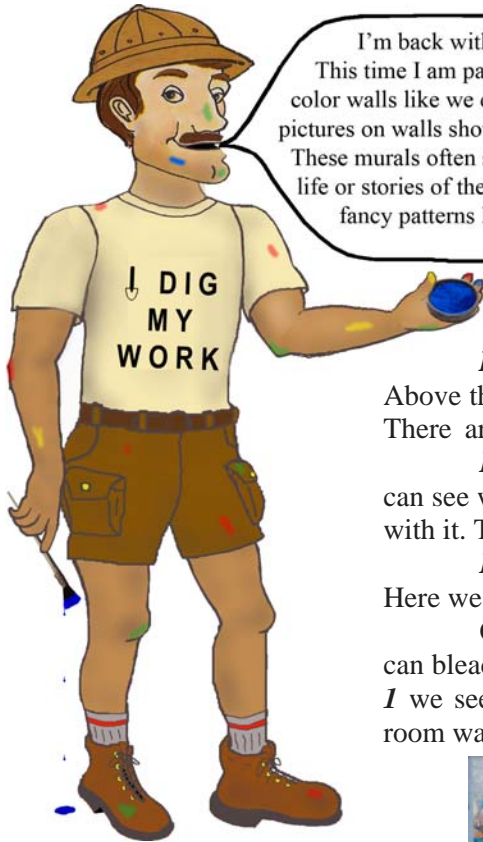
Another piece of evidence that is very famous at this site is “The frieze of the dream Lords”. This frieze was dated at a later period of time. It could possibly have been erected by the Palenque Historical Society. This frieze shows violent deaths, decapitated heads, a skeletal figure and individuals hunched over or laying down as if something has fallen in on them. Overlaying the scene are beams that appear to be covered by feathers. In the middle of the frieze where the beams cross are upside down heads. (See Figure 3) One interpretation of this frieze is the violence that was present in this community or it could represent a story or a conglomeration of stories. The feathers on the beams could represent the quetzal bird. In the religion of the time the quetzal represented good. Or in our interpretation the quetzal represented Christ. The

upside down head could represent the absence of Christ in the community and death is the result. The museum guide indicated that the frieze of the Dream Lords was tied to diadems that were found in the plaza area around the sunken ballcourt. Under the diadems were found remains of broken bones. (see Figure 4) These could possibly be the remains of the lawyers and judges that were killed in the fall of the prison walls. This is the second set of remains found in the plaza area.

Alma and Amulek were then commanded to depart out of the city. The next part of the story explains the third set of remains that are found in the plaza area of the Tonina complex. These remains show evidence of battle wounds, such as cuts in the skeletal remains. In Alma 11:2-3, 15-18 we read:

“...the armies of the Lamanites had come in upon the wilderness side into the borders of the land, even into the city of Ammonihah, and had begun to slay the people and destroy the city. And before the Nephites could raise a sufficient army to drive them out of the land, they had destroyed the people who were in the city of Ammonihah, and also some around the borders of Noah...”

“Every living soul of the Ammonihahites had been destroyed, and also their great city, which they said God could not destroy because of its greatness. But, behold, in one day it was left desolate;... Nevertheless,



I'm back with my paint brush again. This time I am painting the walls. Not just solid color walls like we do today, but murals. Murals are pictures on walls showing people doing some activity. These murals often showed scenes of battle or daily life or stories of their past. Sometimes they painted fancy patterns like our own wallpaper.

The Maya loved to paint. They put plaster over the stone walls and then painted them with bright colors.

The outsides of the buildings were often painted with solid colors, like *Figure 1*. Many of the inside walls had pictures or murals painted on them.

*Figure 2* is a painted room at Bonam Pak as it appears today. Above the doorway you can see where some of the plaster has peeled off. There are two other rooms painted similar to this one at Bonam Pak.

*Figure 3* is a painting of a battle scene at Cacaxtla. Again you can see where the plaster has fallen off and taken some of the battle scene with it. The whole mural is very wide and covers two walls.

*Figure 4* is a mural from Teotihuacan, just north of Mexico City. Here we see how faded the paint has become over the years.

Over time, weather can cause these murals to disappear. The sun can bleach out the colors or the rain can wash the colors away. In *Figure 1* we see that most of the paintings are still in good shape because this room was sheltered from the sun and rain.

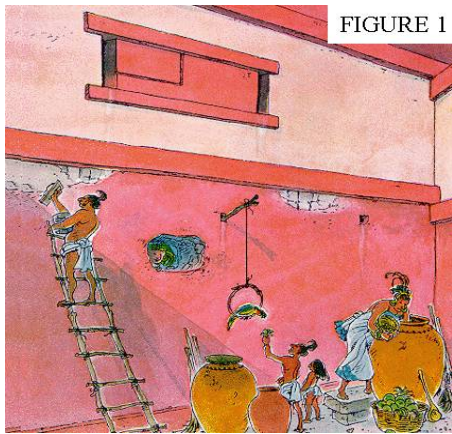


FIGURE 1



FIGURE 3

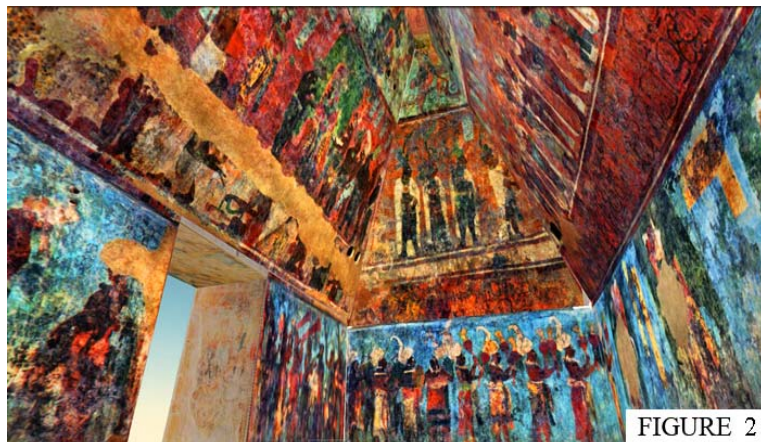


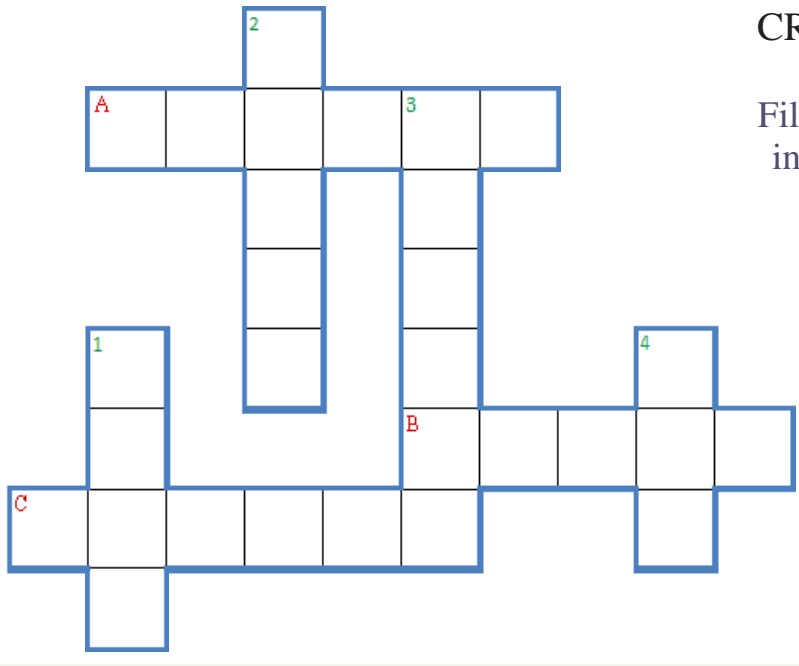
FIGURE 2



FIGURE 4

### CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Fill in the blanks by writing in the correct colors using the clues below.



- ACROSS**  
 A. Bright Sun  
 B. Leaf in Spring  
 C. Violet

- DOWN**  
 1. Clear Sky  
 2. Night with no Moon  
 3. Fruit Juice  
 4. Tomato

R	N	C	O	L	O	R	S	E	I	R	O	T	S	L
S	E	A	D	P	X	P	G	L	F	F	N	F	F	A
K	H	H	C	H	L	D	N	T	H	F	A	I	Y	K
G	V	Z	T	A	O	O	I	T	R	M	H	D	A	X
H	A	U	S	A	U	S	D	A	Y	A	M	P	E	R
K	J	T	A	G	E	H	L	B	I	G	M	R	H	D
W	E	H	B	N	L	W	I	S	F	A	H	C	V	Q
R	H	Q	O	C	G	M	U	T	N	B	A	P	I	M
G	V	C	Z	M	M	Z	B	O	O	E	B	A	F	Z
E	U	M	V	W	E	X	B	G	L	E	L	I	M	G
C	A	C	A	X	T	L	A	B	E	B	T	N	U	N
V	D	L	E	C	R	H	I	Y	J	C	L	T	R	I
Y	L	L	M	G	J	C	C	F	G	B	U	I	A	N
S	Q	S	M	J	Q	U	L	K	E	C	X	N	L	U
U	K	J	Q	H	B	D	L	V	W	S	Z	G	S	S

Find the hidden words in the Word Search Puzzle to the left.

- BATTLE
- BLEACH
- BONAM PAK
- BUILDINGS
- CACAXTLA
- COLORS
- FADED
- HOME LIFE
- MAYA
- MURAL
- PAINTING
- PLASTER
- RAIN
- STORIES
- SUN
- TEOTIHUACAN
- WALLS
- WEATHER

[http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/lesson\\_plans/science/archaeology/](http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/lesson_plans/science/archaeology/)  
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<http://www.precolumbianweapons.com/>  
 For questions e-mail me at [tscott75@sbcglobal.net](mailto:tscott75@sbcglobal.net)

## Tonina as Ammonihah continued

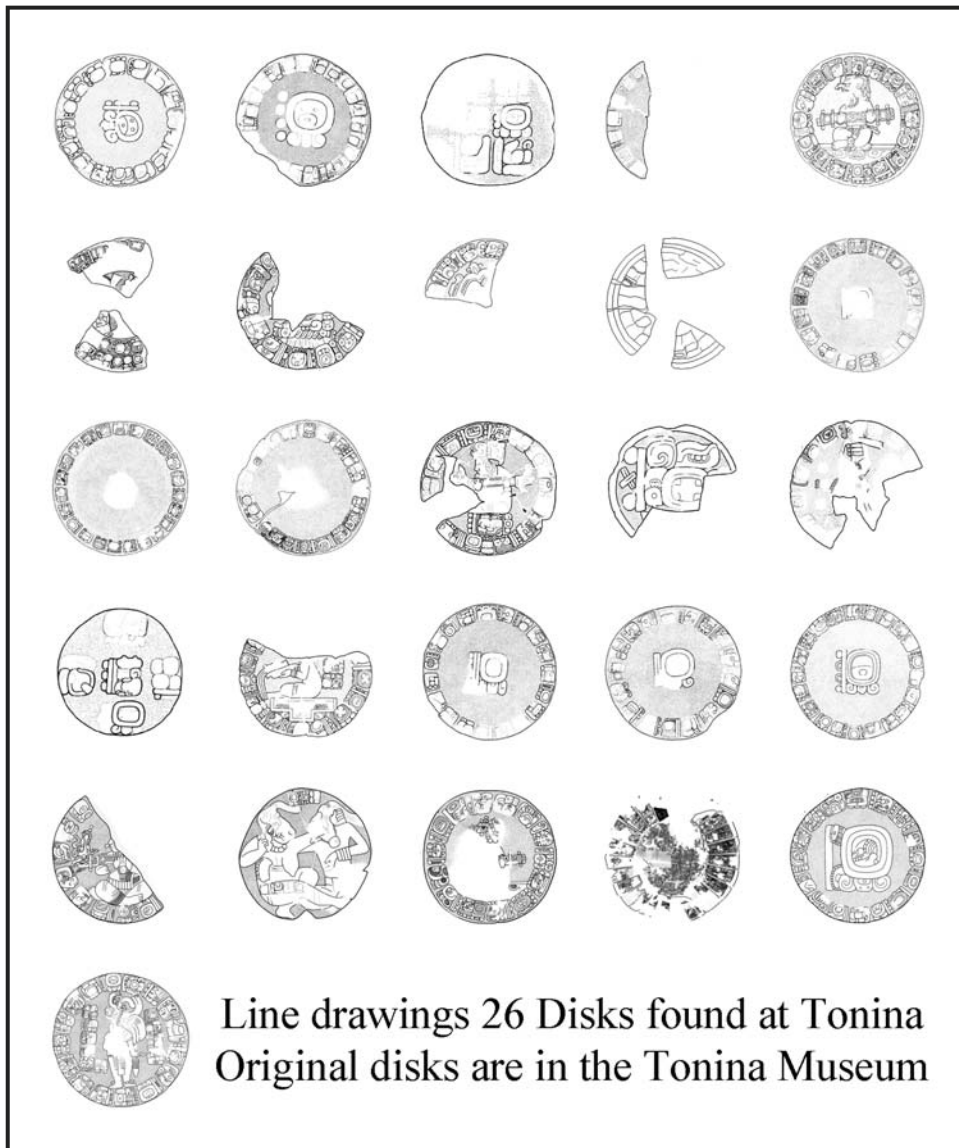


Figure 4

after many days, their dead bodies were heaped up upon the face of the earth... Now so great was the scent thereof that the people did not go in to possess the land of Ammonihah for many years.”

There is evidence in Tonina history that the city might have been uninhabited for a period of time. We read from an article written by Peter Matthews, “The Dates of Tonina and a Dark Horse in its History;”

“Nevertheless, there is one huge gap in the middle of this period at Tonina. Table 2 shows that during k’atun 17 only two dates are known from the extant monuments, and one of those is a birth date commemo-

rated long after the actual event. A closer look at the list of dates in Table 1 show an even more dramatic picture: apart from those two dates, there is an almost a two-k’atun gap in the Tonina record (between 9.15.5.2.7, Ad 736, and 9.17.4.12.5 AD 775).” This is approximately 40 years.

Another quote from this same article gives a possible reason for the gap.

“Therefore, a second possible explanation for the long gap in Tonina’s monument sequence comes to mind: perhaps Tonina was in a temporary decline at this time. Cer-

tainly we know much about Tonina’s stormy relationship with its neighbours during earlier times.”

This gap in Tonina’s history fits very well with the Book of Mormon story and remains that were found strewn about the plaza area of the ballcourt. This is the third set of remains found in the plaza. Each of the three types of remains found in the plaza area is distinctive and fit the story of the Book of Mormon. Here is a summation of the three types of remains found in the plaza area. The three types of remains found were charred bones, crushed bones, and cut bones. They were found in different locations in the plaza area with the charred bones in clusters close to the stepped façade, the crushed bones in the area around the ball court where the diadems were found, and finally the cut bones were found scattered throughout the plaza area.

Our story continues In Alma 21:149-152;

“And now it came to pass, in the eleventh month of the nineteenth year, on the tenth day of the month, the armies of the Lamanites were seen approaching towards the land of Ammonihah. And behold, the city had been rebuilt, and Moroni had stationed an army by the borders of the city, and they had cast up dirt round about, to shield them from the arrows and the stones of the Lamanites: for behold, they fought with stones, and with arrows. Behold, I said that the city of Ammonihah had been rebuilt. I say unto you, yea, that it was in part rebuilt, and because the Lamanites had destroyed it once because of the iniquity of the people, they supposed that it would again become an easy prey for them. But behold, how great was their disappointment; for behold, the Nephites had dug up a ridge of earth round about them, which was so high that the Lamanites could not cast their stones and arrows at them, that they might take effect, neither could they come upon them, save it was by their place of entrance.”

When the expedition team visited the museum at Tonina, most of the explanations were written in Spanish. The guide at the museum indicated that the city had been rebuilt after it was abandoned and

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Photographs provided by:  
Terry Scott

## Tonina as Ammonihah continued

part of the renovation included a mote built around the city. Then a mound of dirt was built up in front of the mote (see figure 5). This coincides with the scripture from Alma 21:152;

*“But behold, how great was their disappointment; for behold, the Nephites had dug up a ridge of earth round about them, which was so high that the Lamanites could not cast their stones and arrows at them, that they might take effect, neither could they come upon them, save it was by their place of entrance.”*

The city of Tonina became the most dominant city in the west and was one of the last surviving Mayan civilizations. We read from Alma 21: 162-163:

*“And behold, his chief captains durst not attack the Nephites at the city of Ammonihah, for Moroni had altered the management of affairs among the Nephites, insomuch that the Lamanites were disappointed in their places of retreat, and they*

*could not come upon them; Therefore they retreated into the wilderness, and took their camp, and marched towards the land of Noah, supposing that to be the next best place for them to come against the Nephites;”*

There are many evidences at the site of Tonina that suggest that it was the city of Ammonihah in the Book of Mormon. Any of these evidences might not stand on its own, but in combination with one another weaves a very strong cord of parallel histories between the two cities.

The story in the Book of Mormon, though disturbing at times, is miraculous in the Lord working with Alma and Amulek.

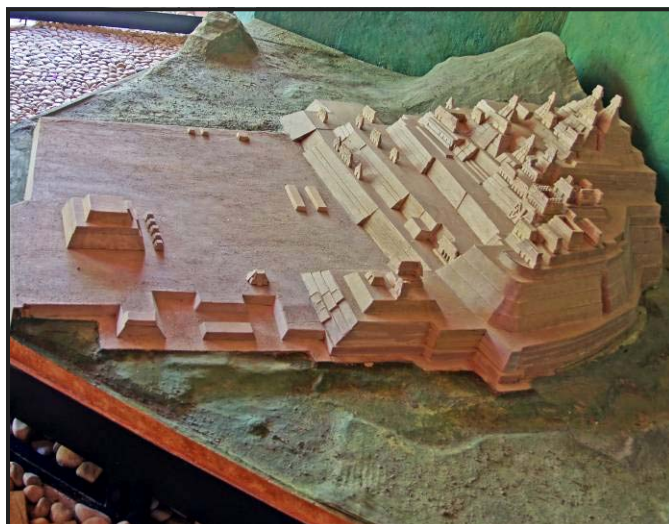


Figure 5; A model of Tonina depicting its final construction phase with the mote.

Also it is very miraculous in the fact that we have access to it and can compare it to the evidences being found in Central America at the present time.