



OUT OF THE DUST

Ancient Steel Sword Unearthed

The November/December 2005 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* contains a summary of the final reports of excavation work at biblical Ekron (see Seymour Gitin, “Excavating Ekron: Major Philistine City Survived by Absorbing Other Cultures,” 40–56).

Ekron, located only some 22 miles southwest of Jerusalem, was last destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 604 BC. Thus it predates the Book of Mormon record. Of special interest is an ivory-handled “dagger” or short sword. By the size of the adult hand holding it (see the accompanying photo), the blade is 12 to 16 inches in length. This metal must technically be described as steel rather than iron. Smelting anciently relied upon charcoal, which infused substantial amounts of carbon into the iron as the ore was smelted and the bloom was worked, producing a carbon steel. (Compare 1 Nephi 4:9, although “most precious” here might well indicate meteoric iron/nickel. Forged steel was more common in the ancient Near East in general and in Israel by Lehi’s time than many have imagined.)

While at one time Israelites apparently were restricted from

or dependent upon the Philistines for iron tools (see 1 Samuel 13:19–22), attempts to maintain such a monopoly over technologies such as iron metallurgy inevitably gave way through the process of cultural diffusion. The article’s author acknowledges that such cultural processes existed between Philistine and Israelite communities:

There is no evidence that olive oil had been produced at Ekron prior to the seventh century B.C.E., indicating that the industrial know-how had to be imported. The most obvi-

ous source was Ekron’s neighbor Judah, where the technology for producing olive oil had been well known for centuries. As we have come to expect, Ekron Philistines absorbed their olive-oil production expertise from their neighbor but adapted it to their own methods, thereby developing a new economic culture. (pp. 53–54) ■

Reported by Gordon C. Thomasson



Philistine short sword from ancient Ekron. © 2006 Corbis