

HAMOUKAR

McGuire Gibson

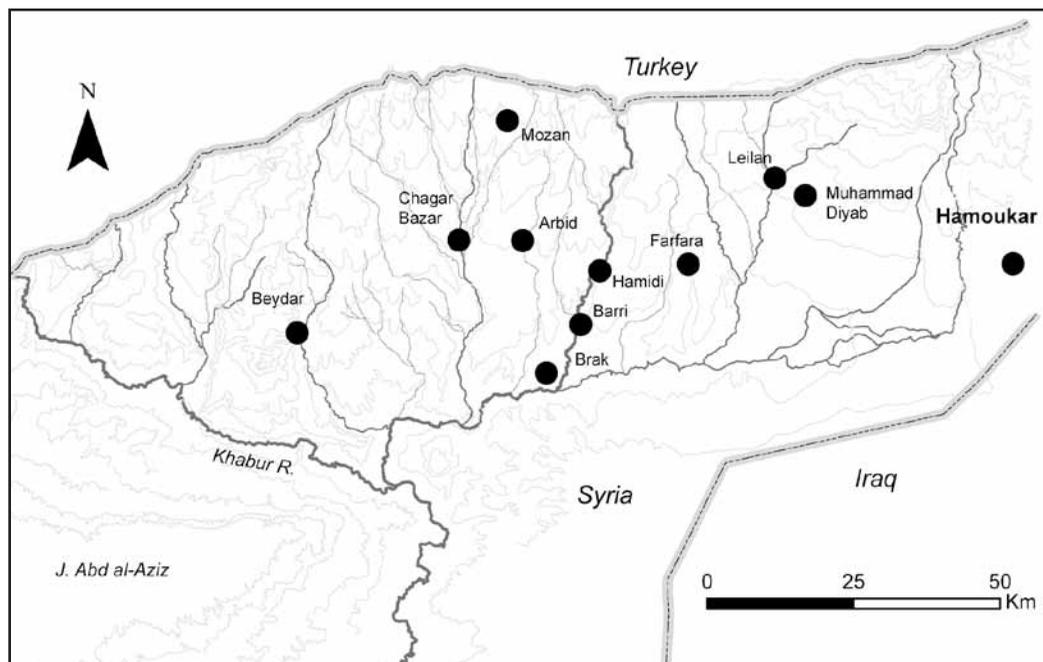
How could we be having such a great season in a time that was so hideous otherwise? The third campaign of excavation at Hamoukar had barely begun when 11 September struck. When the news came on the radio, it occurred to all of us that this might be the end of the season. But, as a few days passed and it became apparent that we were completely safe in Syria, we decided that we should treat this crisis as other Oriental Institute expeditions had done through the years — we would continue working. Chicago House at Luxor and other expeditions in Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq have all witnessed numerous challenges, such as wars, revolutions, and coups, and have carried on until told to leave by the host governments. Since 1948, when the Institute first began work at Nippur, the expedition worked through four Arab-Israeli Wars, the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War, and several coups or counter-coups. The Iran-Iraq War, when rockets were falling on Baghdad, was much more immediately dangerous than our situation at Hamoukar last year.

In the first season of work at Hamoukar, 1999, our joint Syrian-American Expedition had found evidence of early civilization at a time before 3500 BC, the traditional point at which we normally say that civilization first came about in the Late Uruk period of southern Iraq. We had exposed a possible city wall in Area A and, even more important, we had found large domed ovens of a type that were not used for normal family cooking but rather implied in-

stitutional feeding. We also discovered dozens of seals and seal impressions that were direct evidence of accounting, administration, and a hierarchy of responsibility. Above the buildings in which we found the ovens and seals there were huge pits that had been cut from a higher surface, now eroded away, and in these pits were abundant examples of pottery that we identify as southern Mesopotamian in origin. We suggested that we had evidence at Hamoukar of local rulers who had been creating their own state at the same time that civilization was being developed in southern Mesopotamia. And we also stated that the masses of southern artifacts lying above the earlier local remains should be interpreted as evidence of conquest of Hamoukar by southerners.

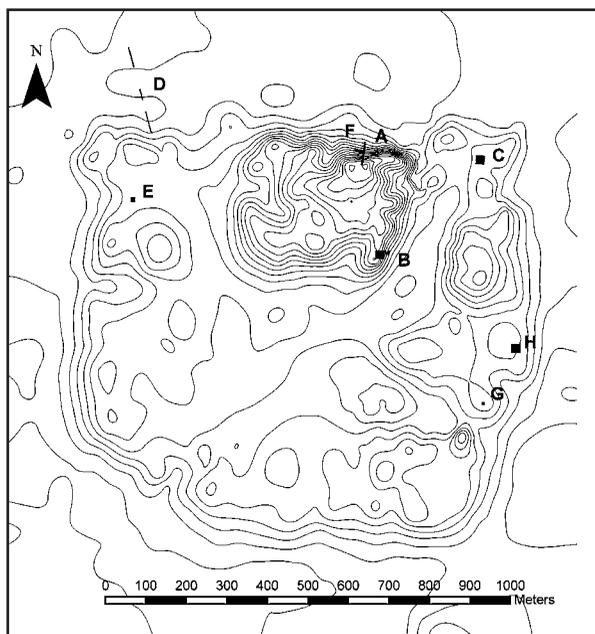
Our findings were featured in *The New York Times* and many other media outlets, and, of course, some of the publications went too far in saying that civilization had developed first in Syria. Papers do like firsts. What we were saying was that civilization was definitely starting in Syria earlier than previously thought, at the same time that it was developing in southern Mesopotamia. But we also tried to get across that the Uruk period was a long one, going back to about 4000 BC and that we really don't know very much about what was happening at southern sites like Uruk in the Early and Middle Uruk phases, before 3500 BC. In one publication at the time, I went on to write that we should look to the earlier Ubaid period, before 4000 BC, for the real origins of civilization, where I saw evidence in a few large buildings for the beginnings of complexity.

As you know from last year's *Annual Report*, the second season, 2000, was a time of restraint, with no work done on the tantalizing questions that we had raised the year before. Instead, we concentrated on excavating in only one place, Area C, where seventh century BC houses lie above a temple or palace of the Akkadian period (ca. 2300 BC). We did carry on with the areal survey, locating more than fifty sites within a five kilometer radius of the site. But most of our funding and a good part of our attention were expended on building the expedition house.



Map showing Hamoukar on eastern edge of Khabur area, Syria

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Topographic map of showing areas excavated at Hamoukar, Syria

ums. Dr. Amr al-Azm was my co-director, and we had two assistant directors, Clemens Reichel and Salam Quntar. Clemens also served as the architect for this season and Salam was also in charge of Area F. Assisting Salam in Area F was George Muammar ibn Yakub. Area C was once more under the supervision of Carrie Hritz, assisted by Stephanie Reed, Saqr Muhammad, and Martin Mackinson. Area B was under the supervision of Lamyia Khalidi, Jonathan Tenney, and Bassim Muhammad. Area E, very close to the expedition house on the western edge of the site, was carried out by Carlo Colantoni, Bashar al-Dakhil Jasim, and Colleen Coyle, who was also registrar. Areas G and H were conducted by Jason Ur and Tariq Ahmad, with the later addition of Carlo Colantoni and Salam Quntar. This season we had the invaluable conservation skills of Ghassan Abdul Aziz, who worked on not only fragile clay sealings and bone artifacts, but also on the hundreds of reconstructible pots that we found. Thaer Fayad carried out the flotation of soil samples to recover ancient seeds under the direction of Dr. al-



Area F. Hamoukar, Syria

In the third season, 2001, we occupied the new expedition house and renewed or initiated excavation in a number of areas. Area B, the location with the fourth-millennium ovens and seals, was a major focus of activity, as was Area C. We also opened new operations in Areas E, G, and H. These last three areas are all located in the lower reaches of the mound where surface sherds indicated that, with a minimum amount of digging, we might expose buildings of the third millennium BC. We also ran a trench, Area F, perpendicular to our old Step Trench, Area A, to determine whether or not we really had a city wall.

In order to carry out the expanded program of excavation in the third season, we had a much larger staff than before, including a group of students from the University of Damascus and several specialists from the Department of Antiquities and Muse-

ums. Serving once again as driver, but also as solver of all problems, was Mahmoud Kattab. And I don't want to forget the contribution of Ivan Mahar, the cook who fell in love with apple pie and learned to make it from Peggy Sanders, who was with us to draw objects for the last month of the dig. Ivan also became a great fan of astronomy, having been shown the stars through the theodolite by Clemens. Tony J. Wilkinson joined us for about two weeks and carried out some landscape studies.

Our only visitors for the season were Michèle and Gene Gragg, who kept to their

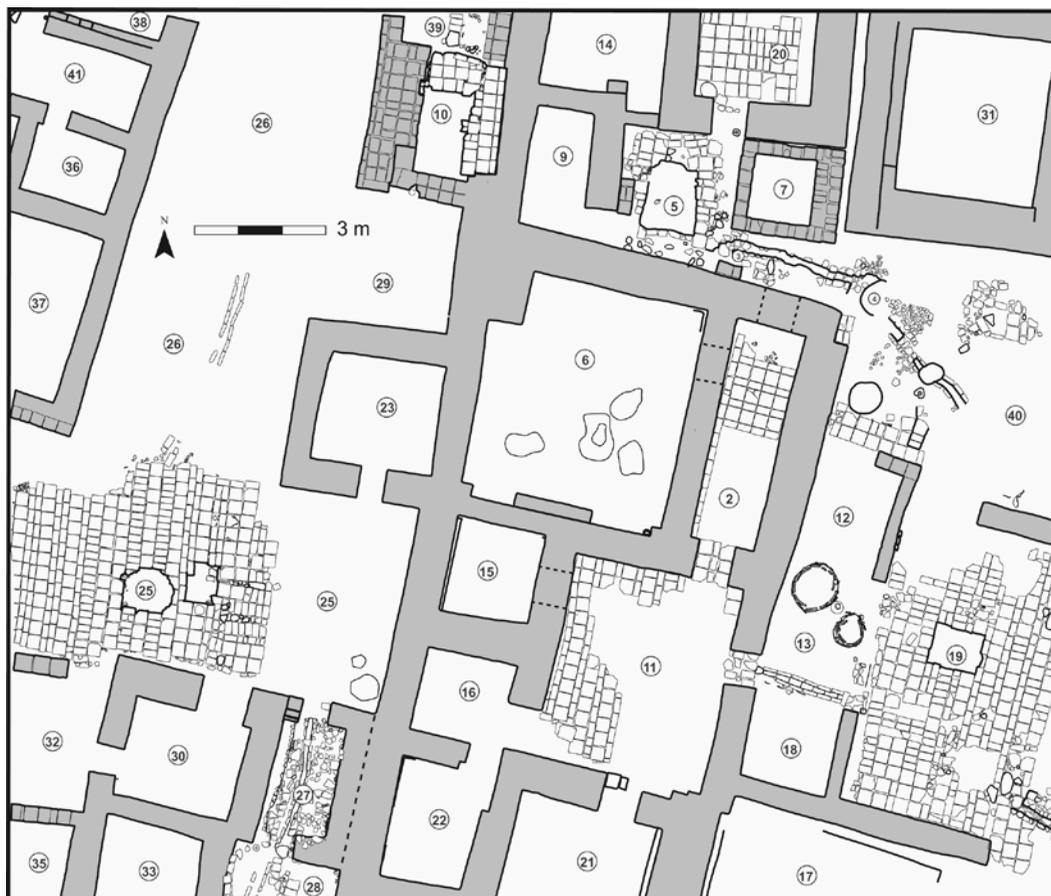
schedule and flew from Paris to Damascus in the week after 11 September. Their stay was all too brief, but I think that they got a very good idea of the potential of the site, the richness of Syria in terms of antiquities, and the flavor of the country, especially old Damascus.

The new house turned out to be very comfortable, but we found that even its large workrooms and storerooms could be filled up easily with the flood of pots and other objects that Hamoukar produces. We have one storage room that is more than thirty feet long by twelve feet wide by twelve feet high. After putting in shelves



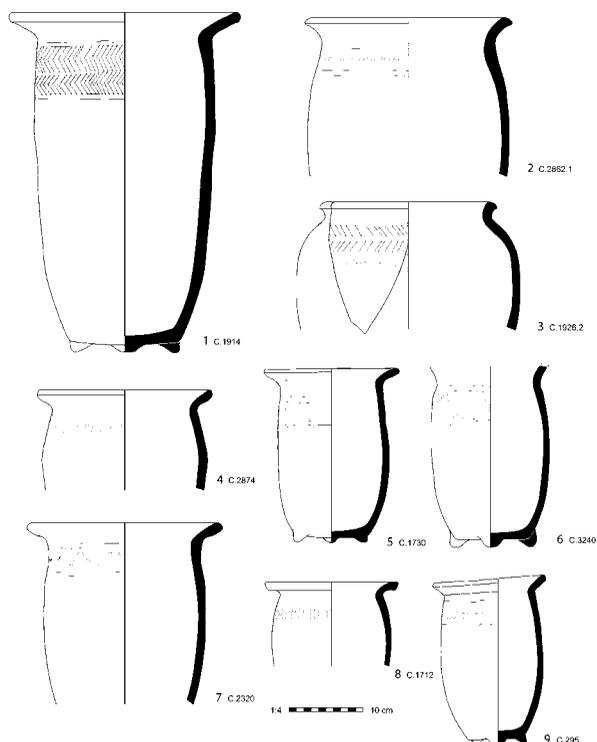
Area H. Hamoukar, Syria

from floor to ceiling around the room, we started to bring in boxes of sherds from the first two seasons as well as very large whole and reconstructed pots. If the flood of pottery continues, we will soon have to put shelves down the middle of the room and will have to think about building another storeroom.



Plan of Area H. Hamoukar, Syria

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Late third-millennium pottery. Hamoukar, Syria

Every one of the excavations this year, with the exception of Area F along the city wall and Area G, which we gave up on after only one day, produced dozens of jars, bowls, plates, huge vats, and other kinds of pottery that had been left in place.

Turning first to the third-millennium areas, out on the lower mound, I can give an example of how assumptions that we have often turn out to be proven wrong.

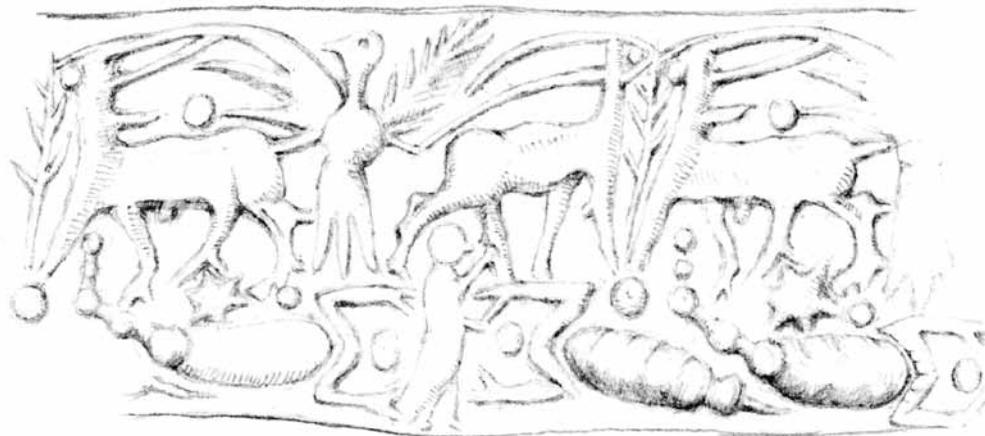
As I said above, the “temple” that we thought we might have in Area C turned out to be more probably a palace with a small altar in one small room. But this year’s digging was extensive enough to show that this room is part of a large building with thick walls and lots of repairs. Carrie Hritz, who has been excavating here all three seasons, also showed that there are other buildings next door. To the south of the big building is a street, and across the street is a building that we have seen only in two small rooms. But in the entry room there is a conical bread oven, of the type you would find in

any ancient house, or even in the court of any of the present-day Hamoukar village houses. But in the debris around and above that oven, we found about a dozen bits of unbaked clay. Each of them was about an inch wide in the middle but tapered toward both ends and were not very thick. Across one face of each of these bits of clay, a cylinder seal had been rolled, leaving an impression. Things like this have been found elsewhere, and they have sometimes been called “trial pieces.” That is, the clay was used to see how a cylinder seal was coming along as it was being made. I have never believed this to be the true function of these items. I think, rather, that such items were used as a kind of message device, perhaps in cases in which a sender did not want to write a note but was entrusting the information to the bearer of the bit of clay. This solution is like the sending of a signet ring with an oral message, well known in such perilous times as the rule of Henry VIII or Elizabeth I in England. Or, they could be accounting devices, a kind of token, sealed by someone who took something away from or left something with an official. Perhaps the token was to be broken or returned when the transaction was finished. The seals used on these items are of the same type, but there are at least four different seals. Each of them shows a variation on the theme of the eagle or the lion-headed eagle dominating animals. In one of them, a man battles two huge scorpions in a scene that is below the eagle and animals. Further digging may make it possible to determine the nature of these objects. Area C is clearly an important one, and the pottery and other artifacts coming from it number in the hundreds, so far.

In another example of assumptions that sometimes are not borne out, let me turn now to related third-millennium material. Jason Ur, when he did his systematic collection of all parts of the mound in the past seasons, noted that on the eastern edges of the mound, out beyond the present-day village in what are now fields, there are numerous fragments of baked brick

along with sherds that date to somewhere in the range of 2400–2100 BC. Since baked bricks imply greater expenditure to make than unbaked bricks, we assumed that there might be a public building such as a temple or palace in this area. By contrast, although there was pottery of the same age all over the surface of the mound near the expedition house, there were no baked brick fragments. Carlo Colantoni, a student at Cambridge, England, is doing a doctorate on housing in the third millennium, and he asked for permission to join us and open a broad area to examine private houses. He chose the spot near the house and began digging. After about a week, it became clear that he did not reach intact house remains until he got down about fifty or sixty centimeters. And when he got there, he found baked brick pavements in the courtyards and in bathrooms. These are clearly private houses, and not even exceptionally large and important ones, but they have baked brick pavements.

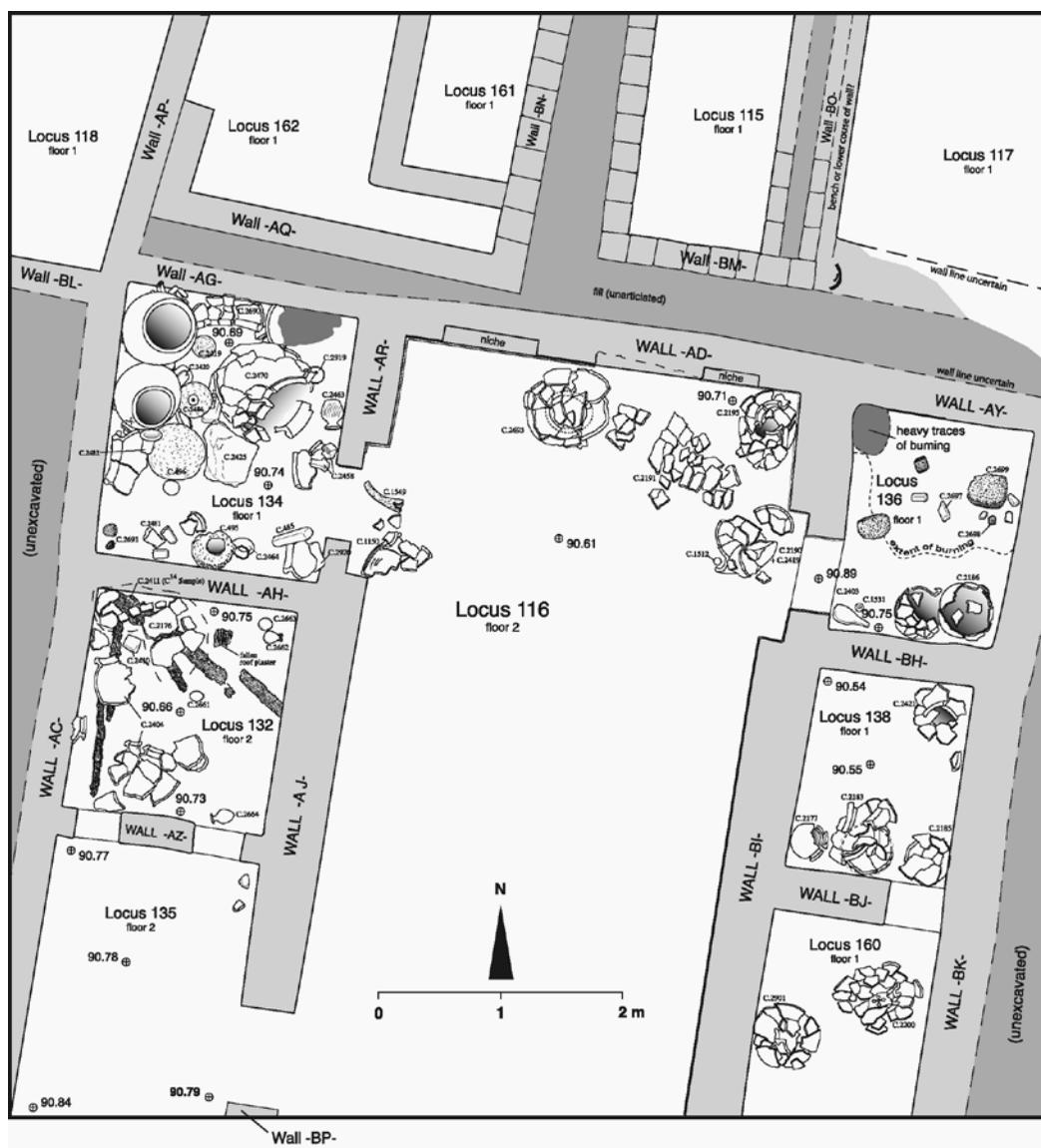
Where Jason was working, at Area H on the opposite side of the mound, the stumps of walls were immediately apparent just below the surface and they were preserved usually less than twenty centimeters high. Here, too, baked bricks were found paving courtyards, bathrooms, and drains, but these were also not public buildings, only houses. Clearly, baked bricks were much less exclusive than we had thought, or perhaps wealth was more generally spread than we had anticipated. The difference in the depth at which walls were encountered in the two operations was explained by the fact that over by the expedition house no one has been cultivating, while in Area H there has been plowing since at least the early 1970s. The plows, by loosening the soil, have caused increased wind and water erosion of the mound in Area H. The plows also brought up the occasional baked brick, which would be fragmented further by harrowing. Seeing how easy it was to get down to houses in Area G, Carlo shifted his attention from Area E, and he and Jason, along with Tariq, opened a much larger exposure. The digging here was difficult because the walls were usually so thoroughly destroyed that there might be only a course or two still left. Initially, some bits of wall were cut away accidentally,



3HM 188, 196, 199

Seal. Hamoukar, Syria

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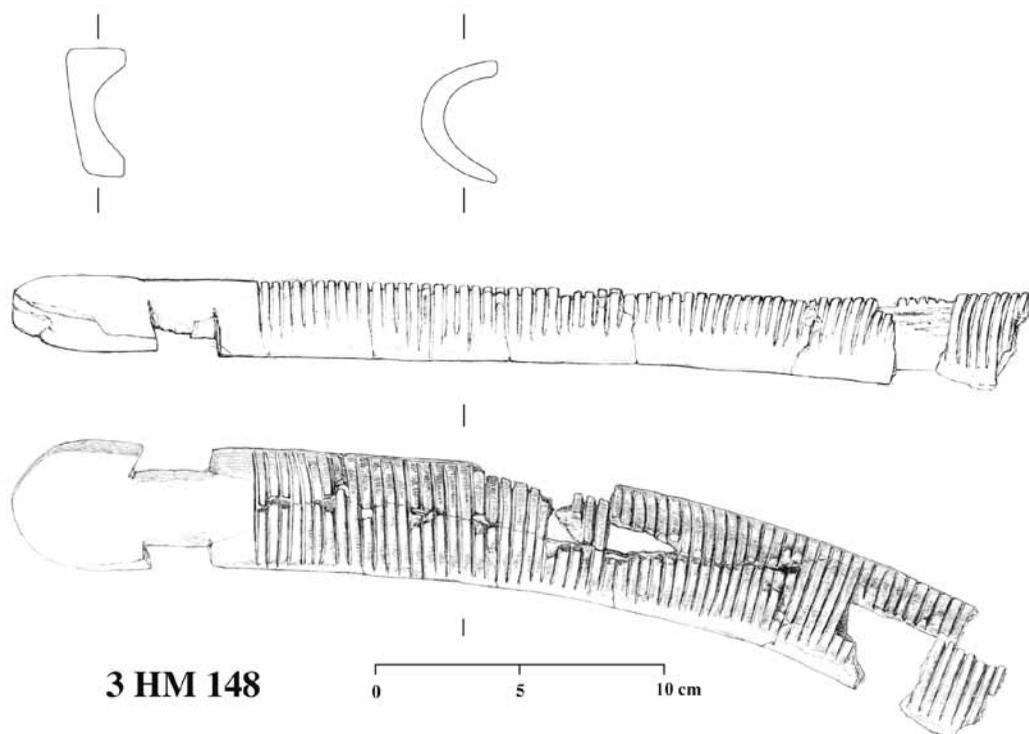


Area B, Square Y, Hamoukar, Syria

until Jason noticed something that was the key to the digging. In places where he had directed the workmen to clear away only the top few centimeters of loose debris, he could see lines of potsherds. Using a trowel and a lot of brushing, he determined that these sherds were lying alongside the walls of rooms or courtyards. Sometimes, whole pots would be in the same position. Having found a line of sherds, they would set the workmen to brushing diligently on the tops of the wall stubs, thus revealing what was mudbrick and what was not. They then cleared down to the floors out away from the sherds, working back toward them and the wall faces. Thus, the plans of several houses were made apparent, and the dozens of pots and other objects found in them could be pinpointed exactly. Using a combination of exact points mapped in with a theodolite by Clemens Reichel and careful taped measurements, they were able to create drawings on a computer, sometimes using digital photographs taken as an additional aid. At the end of the season we were sent a “cherry picker” crane by the local office of the

Syrian Oil Company, from which overhead photographs and digital images were taken. These vertical shots proved to be invaluable in assembling a very detailed overall plan of Area H.

It is important to note that not only were many artifacts left in the houses of Area H, but that there were also two human skeletons. Both of these skeletons had not been buried but only lay in the houses. The fact that the bones were scattered somewhat probably means that animals disturbed them. The general impression one has of the houses is that they were abandoned quickly, and that normal procedures for dealing with the dead were not carried out. Lacking, thus far, seals and/or cuneiform tablets in Area H, we must rely on the pottery for a dating of the abandonment of the houses here and in Area E. We must also relate these houses to the buildings in Area C, which share the same pottery. The latest pottery in all these areas includes a type of tall jar with a flaring rim and an incised decoration, either wavy or straight, made by a comb. At Hamoukar, this type of pottery has three knobby feet, which seem not to be a feature of similarly decorated jars at other sites in eastern Syria and western Iraq. But the general shape and the decoration must be tied to pottery that Joan Oates at Tell Brak, an important site fifty kilometers south of Hamoukar, dates to the period after the Akkadian period, that is sometime after 2000 BC by the currently accepted chronology. There is a debate in Syrian archaeology about the end of the Akkadian period. Harvey Weiss of Yale University and his colleagues at nearby Tell Leilan, using information from glacial coring in Greenland that implies drastic climatic shift at 2200 BC, originally proposed that a volcanic eruption caused such environmental changes that the entire northern part of Syria was abandoned at that date. Well, what happened to the folks? He thinks that they, who would have been Amorites, went down to Iraq to live. It is true that Amorites showed up in southern Iraq some time at the end of the Akkadian period, and within a couple of hundred years were rulers of kingdoms in Sumer and Akkad. Weiss and his colleagues later proposed that it wasn't a



3 HM 148

Bone dagger. Hamoukar, Syria

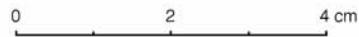
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3 HM 109a



Drawing based on 3 HM 96a-c, 109a-g, 115a

**Sealing. Hamoukar, Syria**

volcano but a meteorite that caused the problem, with the same result. Lately, he has proposed that it was major changes in global weather patterns that led to the abandonment. Given the evidence of the glacial cores, we have to admit that something happened about 2200 BC. But some scholars, digging in northern Syria, have evidence that not all sites were abandoned at that time, and our Hamoukar data may give another case for continuity. There is, however, another problem in assuming that this date and the end of the Akkadian period coincide. Within the past few years, there has been a new chronological scheme proposed, based in part on our work at Nippur and co-authored by members of the Nippur expedition. In this chronology, we have to cut out about a hundred years from our chronologies in the second millennium, and this would mean that all earlier periods would have to be cut accordingly. So instead of the year 2200 BC marking the end of the Akkadian period, as it does in the old chronology, it would really be marking some time at the beginning of that period. This means that the dramatic climate shift, implied in the Greenland ice, would be happening in one of the most important expansions of power in ancient Mesopotamia, when the Akkadians spread their rule from the Gulf to Northern Syria, and claimed territory all the way to the Mediterranean.

Getting a tighter control of our pottery sequence, by finding in place some inscriptions and seals, is obviously important in this ongoing discussion. We have submitted a group of carbon samples to a C-14 lab and hope that those determinations will aid in our research on the question.

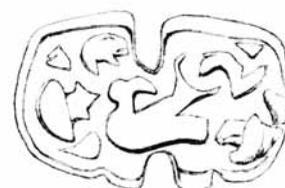
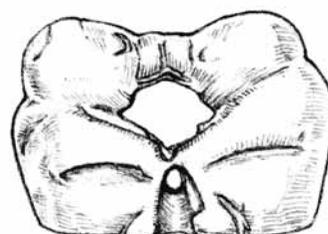
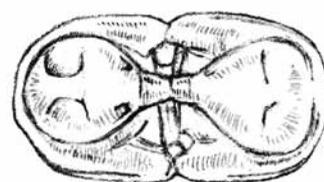
Turning now to the fourth millennium, I want to make special mention of the great work of Salam Quntar in “chasing” the city wall. In all other operations, artifacts were being found every day. Here, masses of dirt were being moved to expose the outer and inner faces of the massive wall, but few artifacts were being found. Work like that can be pretty depressing, but she kept to the job and followed the wall for twenty meters. As a result, we have determined that it is, in fact, a defensive wall, not just a revetment or platform, and that it was constructed over earlier buildings. Pottery at the base of the wall was consistent with what we had found in the first season, being of local manufacture and datable to the Middle Northern Uruk (ca. 3700–3500 BC), the same time as the houses with ovens found in Area B.

Arguably the most important finds of the season were in Area B, where Lamyia Khalidi, Jonathan Tenney, Toby Hartnell, and Bassim Muhammad expanded the fourth-millennium exposure by more than double the size. Down the slope, to the east, Judith Franke had found

the ovens and seals in the first season, as mentioned above. She had the idea that if we went up the hill to the west, and especially to the southwest, we might discover a more formal, well-constructed building that would have been the administrative unit for the food production implied in the ovens. She had gotten that notion because, at the end of her work, she could see just the corner of a substantial building in the southwestern corner of her excavation. She knew that to expose the building, we would have to dig to the southwest.

Within days of expanding in those directions, Lamya began to see evidence of a better-built structure, but it was at a higher and later level than the corner that Judi had seen. Lamya's building had been burned in antiquity. Digging in the ashy debris of the building was unpleasant, and Lamya always looked as if she had just climbed out of a chimney. Inside the rooms, high up in the debris, she found collapsed clumps of clay, about five centimeters thick, marked on the underside with impressions of roof beams and twigs or reeds. Here we had evidence of the clay roof of the building. She began to sieve every basket of dirt since burned buildings often have all their contents left in place. Under the roof debris, she and her workmen began to find whole and broken pots as well as numerous lumps of clay that had been sealed with stamp seals. If you turn such sealed lumps over and look at the back sides, you can often see impressions of what the clay had been sealing — baskets, bags of cloth or leather, boxes, jars, and even doors. Whenever a sealing was noticed in the dirt, it would be kept in place until Clemens Reichel could locate it precisely with the theodolite. Then it would be removed carefully and taken to the house for conservation work, study, drawing, and photographing. Farther down in the debris of the rooms, Lamya came upon another layer of clay and roof beams, burned to charcoal. And under that layer were hundreds of objects, especially clay sealings, still in place on the original floor. We have here, then, evidence of a second story on at least part of the building. Archaeologists often reconstruct second stories, but there is usually little evidence for them. Here we have the ground floor with lots of objects on it, and above them the collapsed clay ceiling and its beams, then more pots and sealings, and above them, the roof. Clemens, in working through his notes on locations of sealings, has been able to show that on the second floor the sealings had come mainly from baskets, while on the ground floor there was a greater mixture of sealings, including those that secured doors.

The artifacts on the ground floor of the building are in very good condition, but some are so unusual that we cannot explain their functions. For instance, there are four big clay hemispheres, in increasingly smaller sizes, with holes punched into them. Two of them seem to be made to hold upright something like a standard. But the other two have holes punched into their sides, so they couldn't have held anything upright. The hemispheres may have had a completely utilitarian use, but they may also have had a function in ceremony or ritual. There was found in the same room a remarkable bone artifact shaped like a dagger in a scabbard which,

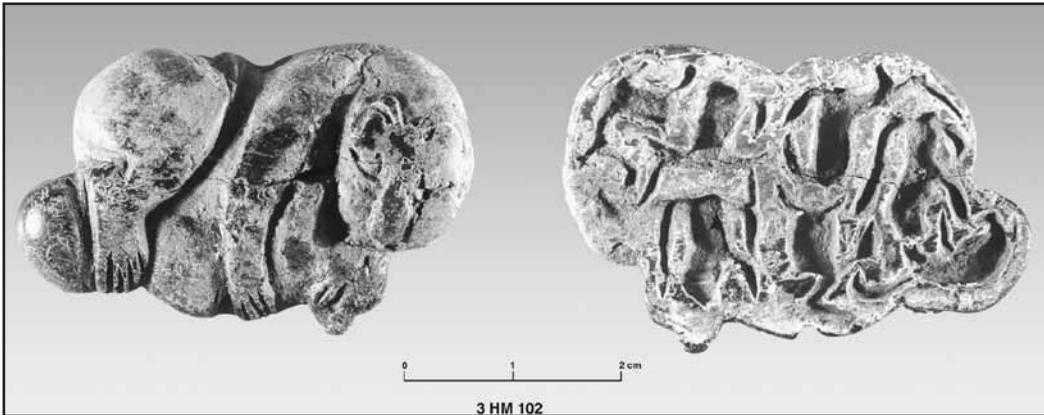


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Kissing bear seal. Hamoukar, Syria

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*Lion seal. Hamoukar, Syria*

although broken, could be restored to almost its entire length. A remarkable stamp seal of black stone in the form of two bears, seated and kissing, was found in one of the rooms. On the bottom stamping surface is a scene showing a vulture surrounded by body parts.

We took many bags of dirt from the Burned Building and turned them over to Thaer Fayad, who put them through a flotation process. He recovered several liters of seeds, which are now in Damascus being identified by Dr. al-Azm.

To the north of the Burned Building, Jonathan Tenney excavated a set of rooms around a courtyard. The buildings here are not as well planned or constructed as the Burned Building, and are in fact much more like the buildings that Judith Franke found downslope. Although later than Judi's buildings, Jonathan's played the same role because he also discovered large oval ovens and much evidence of food preparation. We are assuming that this food preparation area was related to and administered by the Burned Building, just as Judi's houses and ovens were presumably related to a more formal building that probably lies under the Burned Building. In a pit in Jonathan's area, he found another remarkable stamp seal. This one, in bone, is about the largest we have found, although even larger ones are indicated by impressions on clay. The seal is in the form of a lion grasping a horned animal, which is upside down. The turning of the lion's head gives a vitality and action to the piece that makes this a superb example of the seal-cutter's art. On the reverse, the stamp surface shows lions stalking a horned animal.

On the hundreds of clay impressions that we have recovered from the Burned Building, thus far, the scene of lions stalking or attacking horned animals is the most common motif. There are also files of animals and animals standing under trees. There are a few impressions showing a man with his arms lifted. We can find very similar seal impressions at other fourth-millennium sites in Syria, Turkey, and northern Iraq. We also, however, have evidence of cylinder seals, which are in a southern Mesopotamian style, including motifs of files of lions and "the pigtailed lady," one alongside a harp. The lady and harp seal is best known from southwestern Iran.

The Burned Building is not quite finished. We have to excavate the southern end in a later season. But there is enough of the building to identify it as a "middle room house." This is a type of construction that is common in the Uruk period of Iraq and is well known at sites in eastern Syria that some scholars have thought were trading colonies. The hundreds of pots found in the building, so far, are all of local Syrian types, not the kinds of southern pottery that we have encountered above the level of the Burned Building in big pits. The few impres-

sions of southern style cylinder seals usually occur on clay sealings that also have one or more impressions of local stamp seals. It is important to note that at least one of the cylinder seal impressions is on a lump of clay that sealed a door. Some might see this fact as an indication that a southerner was already here, building his type of house, and sealing with a southern kind of seal. But the lack of any southern pottery in the building thus far makes us wonder if we do not have a case in which a local ruler or important person has taken on southern artifacts and a building style to express his importance. I am convinced that there were local rulers at Hamoukar well before the construction of the Burned Building. The ovens, local-style stamp seals, clay impressions implying different degrees of authority, and the presence of a city wall all datable from the time before the Burned Building and the appearance at the site of southern style artifacts have led us to conclude that there was a kingdom centered at Hamoukar, as there were in other parts of Syria, southern Anatolia, and northern Iraq. I assume that these locally-based kingdoms were contemporary with kingdoms developing in parallel fashion in southern Iraq and southwestern Iran, before the Late Uruk period (3500–3200 BC). The fact that above the local material there are strata filled with southern artifacts, especially pottery, says to me that there was a southern conquest of this area, not just trade and trading colonies. The early development of civilization in Mesopotamia and neighboring areas is clearly more multi-faceted and multi-centered and earlier than we had thought. And some of the criteria by which we have judged the onset of civilization (such as writing) are clearly hallmarks of a secondary stage of development rather than primary.

Searching for origins is a slippery pursuit. In the case of the earliest civilization, or complex society, or the earliest state, we face the same kind of difficulty that we do in the pursuit of the earliest domesticated plants or animals. By the time that the seeds or horn cores show physical changes that you recognize as domesticated, you are several generations beyond the earliest domesticates. Similarly, societal change can occur much earlier than the archaeological record will reflect, and an earlier generation of archaeologists probably already dug up remains of much earlier kingdoms than we are dealing with. I suspect that the world's first civilization did in fact start in southern Mesopotamia, but earlier than the Uruk period. I see evidence of complexity reflected not just in buildings but in their contents at Ubaid sites (5000–4000 BC) that have already been excavated at Tell Abada, Tell Uqair, and Tell el-Oueili in Iraq. I predict that some of the most intriguing excavations that will be done in the next twenty years will be on Ubaid sites, mainly in Iraq, but also in Syria.

Aspects of the Hamoukar findings are making their way to publication soon. A long article on the first season will appear this year in the journal *Iraq* with a companion article on the areal survey by Jason Ur. At about the same time, or even earlier, an issue of the journal *Akkadica* will feature Hamoukar. In this issue will be a general overview of the first three seasons, along with an article by Clemens Reichel on the seals from Area B, another article by Tony J. Wilkinson on the wider regional setting, and a final one by Jason Ur on the settlement pattern around the site.

I close by thanking the Friends of Hamoukar for their financial support during the past season. I want to mention, especially, Betty Baum, Carlotta and David Maher, and Howard Hallengren. And this year I can acknowledge the long-term, continuous support of Betty Tiekens, who always preferred to be Anonymous.

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