

## **HAMOUKAR**

**McGuire Gibson**

The first season of excavation at Hamoukar was an unqualified success. The areas excavated have already shown that this mound contains abundant evidence to address two of the most im-

portant questions in Near Eastern archaeology: the origins of civilization and the development of the Akkadian state, which is normally considered the world's earliest empire.

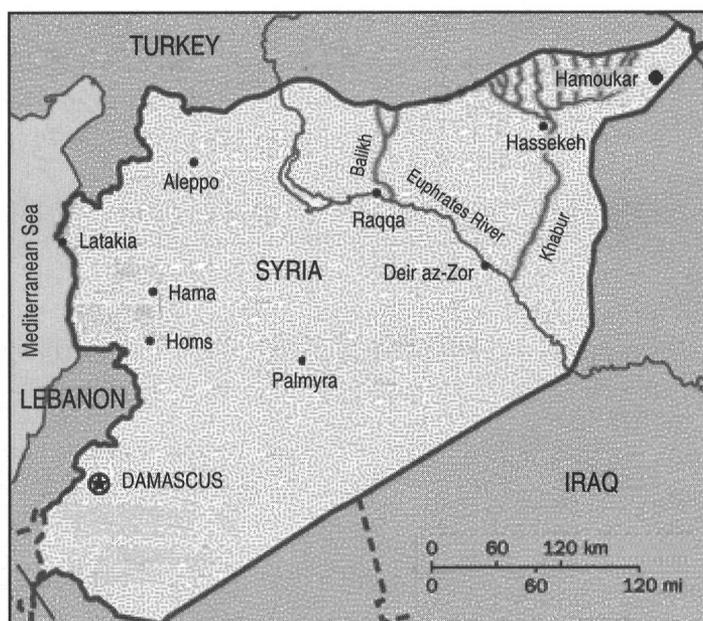
The expedition is a joint effort of the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and the Oriental Institute. Muhammad Maktash is my co-director, and in the first season he was joined by Abdulillah Salama, an architect, and Mahmoud Fawaz. Amr al-Azm of the University of Damascus joined the expedition as environmental specialist, especially dealing with botanical remains. The Chicago part of the staff included Judith Franke, who worked several seasons at Nippur and now directs the Dickson Mounds Museum in Illinois; Tony Wilkinson, landscape archaeologist; John C. Sanders, architect and computer expert; Peggy Sanders, drafts person; Clemens Reichel, graduate student and archaeologist; Jason Ur, graduate student and archaeologist, specializing in surface survey during this season; Carrie Hritz, archaeologist; and Brigitte Watkins, archaeologist and photographer.

Hamoukar, in northeastern Syria, is only eight kilometers from the border with Iraq and is situated on a major east-west route. Just as today's highway links Mosul with Aleppo, in ancient times a similar route joined Nineveh with Aleppo, passing through major sites like Tell Leilan, Tell Beydar, and on an alternate branch, through Tell Brak.

Intensive archaeological investigation over the past twenty years in northern Iraq, northern Syria, and southern Turkey has made it clear that there is a large zone of shared culture that is summed up in terms such as Late Chalcolithic (fourth millennium BC) or Ninevite 5 (third millennium). In these early periods, this cultural zone is distinct in much of its material culture from southern Mesopotamia, but there is evidence of linkages with the south and even colonization in specific periods.

The environmental situation in the northern area is starkly contrasted with that in southern Mesopotamia. Lying in the arc of the great Taurus/Zagros mountain chain, the northern zone receives sufficient rainfall to allow farming without irrigation, and in some periods the area has produced tremendous crops of wheat, barley, etc., using a fraction of the human energy and expense required of the irrigated agriculture in southern Mesopotamia. But the area has also been subject to fluctuations in rainfall, and for long periods in history, the Khabur and Balikh river drainages have not been cultivated, but have been the province of herders. Tony Wilkinson, who is a member of the Hamoukar team, has been at the forefront of researchers laying out the patterns of settlement and abandonment through surface reconnaissance in southern Turkey, northern Syria, and northern Iraq.

As early as the fifth millennium BC, southern Mesopotamian artifacts that we term Ubaid, especially pottery but also architecture, were transferred to the northern zone. Ubaid pottery, or local derivations from it, can be found on



Map showing Hamoukar in northeast corner of Syria

## ARCHAEOLOGY



1 HM 90. Stamp seal from area B. Hamoukar, 1999. Photograph by Brigitte Watkins

Tabqa Dam Salvage operations on the Euphrates above Raqqa that the extent of that transfer could be estimated. At Habuba Kabira South, almost an entire city, complete with a city wall and southern-style temples and artifacts, was exposed. A few kilometers to the north was the smaller site of Jebel Aruda, located on a strategic and easily defensible mountain slope, and composed of what I interpret as a large administrative complex (published as “houses”), a sacred area with two temples enclosed by a wall, and a group of houses, in effect a microcosm of a southern Mesopotamian city. Both these sites seemed safely assigned to the late Uruk period, but a small mound across the Euphrates, Shaykh Hassan, also had earlier pottery that could be classed as middle Uruk.

Farther up the Euphrates, in Turkey, were other sites with Uruk materials mixed with local artifacts. These sites look more like trading posts established by southerners or places in which a few artifacts were acquired by local people.

To my mind, sites such as Habuba Kabira, Jebel Aruda, Shaykh Hassan, and Tell Brak are not just the result of trade, but are administrative and commercial centers, signs of conquest of territory. In fact, we may come to see the late Uruk occupation of the northern zone as the world’s earliest empire. This term is normally applied to the Akkadian period (ca. 2300 BC), when Sargon of Akkad and his grandson Naram Sin laid claim to all the territory between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean.

Hamoukar allows us not only to investigate the Uruk presence in northeastern Syria, but also gives us a chance to look at that second incursion of southern Mesopotamia into the northern zone. From surface collections, made by Jason Ur, we estimate that Hamoukar was at least 13 hectares (ca. 30 acres) in the fourth millennium. But it reached its greatest extent, more than 103 hectares (300 + acres), in the third millennium, just before, during, and after the coming of the Akkadians.

The surface collections show that the site was perhaps occupied for the first time in the Halaf period, some time around 5000 BC. There are also a few sherds of late Ubaid pottery (ca. 4300 BC). We cannot estimate the size of the site in these periods.

During the late Chalcolithic (fourth millennium), however, we can make estimates of settlement. In fact, for the earliest part of this millennium, we have something of a puzzle. The fields to the south of the main mound have in them hundreds of sherds of pottery that can be dated on sites in Turkey, Syria, and northern Iraq to the earliest part of the fourth millennium. In some

sites across northern Iraq and northern Syria. That contact is normally accounted for under the term “trade,” with varying reconstructions of the amount of human movement that may have accompanied the pottery.

More striking is the evidence of a large scale transfer of southern artifacts in the late Uruk period (ca. 3500–3000 BC). Although it has been known for decades that temples and numerous kinds of southern items reached northern Iraq and eastern Syria (especially at the site of Tell Brak) during this time, it was only with the excavation during the 1970s of a group of sites in the

scholars' terminology, this is the Early Gawran; others prefer to call it Early Northern Uruk, although there is little evidence of southern Mesopotamian material in the assemblage. The spread of the sherds over the fields amounts to something like 279 hectares, well over 500 acres. This is too huge a site for such an early period, and it is unlikely to have been occupied all at the same time. We think it may prove to be a village or a couple of villages that shifted location through a couple of hundred years. And that village (or villages) may be similar to modern cases in which nomads settle, but each household take up lots of space. We will be excavating this area in the next season and hope to have some answers.

On the main mound, we concentrated most of our digging on two areas, A and B, but also put an exploratory trench into area C. Area A was a step trench, designed to get an idea of what is in the mound from top to bottom. Clemens Reichel supervised this area, which measures 60 × 3 m, and was taken down to a depth of four or more meters in a number of the steps. In short, he moved a lot of dirt in two months. At the bottom of the trench, we encountered house levels that we date to the Middle Gawran (or Middle Northern Uruk, ca. 3700 BC). Above the level of these houses was a huge mudbrick wall. The wall, about four meters thick and more than three meters high, was built of large rectangular bricks. We assume that this was a city wall but cannot say that for certain until we expose more of it. Above the level of the monumental wall we encountered three building levels of late Uruk date, with southern Uruk pottery in abundance. In a layer that ran above the latest of the late Uruk houses, we had pottery that is called Ninevite 5, incised and excised, datable to about 2400 BC. On the Ninevite 5 layer was the earliest of three buildings that we date to the Akkadian period and later. These three buildings, especially the uppermost one, have baked brick pavements and multiple layers of plaster on the walls. We think we have here buildings that are more than just private houses, probably being administrative buildings. We will investigate these levels in a later season.

The latest occupation in area A is a building of the early Islamic period, with one small room that yielded slabs of unbaked clay, perhaps evidence of tile making or pottery making.

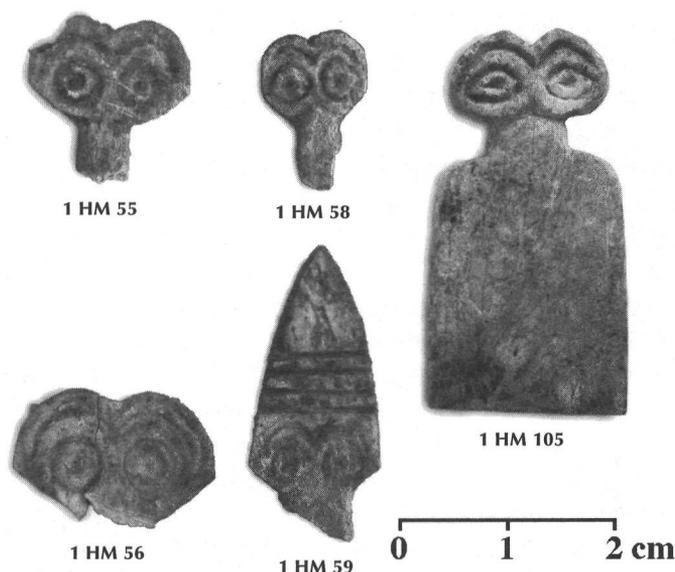
Area C, down on the lower part of the main mound at the northeastern corner, was a 2 × 2 m pit that was sunk to determine what might be here. We had thought that we would build an expedition house here and needed to know what we would be making inaccessible if we did build there. As it turned out, Carrie Hritz, the supervisor, found a building level of the first millennium BC near the surface, and at about two meters she encountered the corner of a building with a buttress and two niches. The walls were covered in mud plaster with an outer coat of white lime plaster. Niches and buttresses normally indicate public buildings, and we think we are dealing with a temple that belongs in the time just before or during the Akkadian period. We have decided to locate our house elsewhere, and we will be opening this area in a major way during the coming season.

Area B was the responsibility of Judith Franke and Abdulilla Salama. The spot was selected because surface sherds included large numbers of southern late Uruk pottery. Digging proved that the late Uruk level had been eroded away except for a set of large pits filled with ash and trash, including pottery. These pits cut down into a group of houses datable by the pottery to the Middle Gawran (= Middle Northern Uruk) with not very impressive mudbrick walls. The houses were full of ash, pottery, animal bones, seeds,



1 HM 3. Ancient seal impression. On left, animal with head turned back and long tail; on right, a tree. Hamoukar, 1999. Photograph by Clemens Reichel

## ARCHAEOLOGY



*Eye idols. Hamoukar, 1999. Photograph by Clemens Reichel*

Supporting the idea that the ovens were institutional, not only in scale but in purpose, was the finding in the house debris of eighteen bits of clay or bitumen that had been used to seal bottles, jars, and other containers. These bits of clay and bitumen had on them impressions of stamp seals, showing animals, perhaps human beings, and vegetation. Such sealings have been found at other fourth millennium sites from Turkey to northern Iraq. The style is a local one, having nothing to do with southern Mesopotamia. The use of seals is one of the signs of the beginnings of early states, being indications that some persons are administering and regulating the going in and out of goods or safeguarding stored items. In area B, we had other evidence for some kind of administrative hierarchy. In a pit, which was perhaps a grave since it also contained a few human bones, we discovered more than 5,000 beads, at least 89 stamp seals, and other items. The beads were predominantly made of bone, with shells and stone forming a minor percentage. There were some beads made of faience, a kind of glass product. Although the fourth millennium may be thought to be very early for production of faience, there are very similar beads found in similar Middle Northern Uruk contexts at Tell Brak. Included among the beads were five fragments of bone figurines that have been termed “eye idols.” These figurines, consisting usually of a large pair of eyes on a thin neck and a stylized body, such as the whole one that we found in a baby grave in area B, can also have a variation in which the head is conical. Both types have been found previously at Tell Brak. We also found broken examples of stone “eye idols” in the debris on floors within the houses in area B.

The stamp seals, almost all of bone, are pierced for suspension and are of two general classes: a) a flat rectangle with grooves on the upper surface and incised hatching or cross-hatching on the stamping surface, and b) animal-shapes. The animal-shaped seals include lions, pairs of lions, lion heads joined at the backs, a dog, hares, bears, gazelles, fish, and birds. Among the birds is a duck or goose with its head turned back over its body. This is an important set occurring in three sizes, small, medium, and large. The small seal has cross-hatching on the stamping surface. The medium-sized seal has a scene of one animal attacking another. The largest seal has a motif that is not yet identified but may be coiled snakes. We know from the impressions on clay found in the buildings that stamp seals with figurative scenes were used for sealing purposes, so we assume that the two larger types were definitely meant to be used as seals. The fact that we also

and other debris. The ash was derived from a group of large, ovoid ovens that we found in two of the squares. In one square, there were at least five ovens. They were not all used at the same time, but as one would go out of use, another would be built to take its place. In another square, the oven was relatively well preserved, showing its dome shape. Such ovens are beyond the size needed for household cooking. In that circumstance, bread would have been made in a small conical oven, very similar to those used in the Near East today. And usually other household cooking, such as roasting or boiling, would have been done over a hearth.

have a small one with hatching implies that it too must have been a seal, not just an amulet or bead. And if this type was a seal, so were all the other animal-shaped and rectangular stamps.

The largest of all the bone stamp seals are especially well made. One is in the form of a deer (with its horns broken off). On the stamping surface is a scene of three horned animals in a line. The other is a remarkably sensitive rendering of a leopard, lying down with its front paws extended. The leopard's spots were made by drilling small holes into the body in thirteen places, then inserting tiny dowels. Unfortunately, this object was badly damaged in several places. The stamping surface, however, is intact and also shows three animals in a line.

We conclude that because we have bits of clay and bitumen that had been sealed with stamp seals having figurative scenes, that all of the larger seals with figurative scenes served a more important function than the smaller ones with only hatching. We assume that the different types were used by functionaries in different levels of a hierarchy.

Putting together the evidence of the possible city wall, the food preparation on an institutional scale, and evidence of sealing and an implicit differentiation in levels of a hierarchy, we conclude that in the time before 3500 BC when there was a late Uruk occupation of Hamoukar, there was already a state level of complexity in this area. In other words, the usual picture of civilization developing in southern Mesopotamia in the late Uruk period and then moving north to stimulate civilizational development in Syria has to be revised. In Syria, and presumably in other areas such as southern Turkey and western Iran, complex forms of society and governance were being developed at an earlier period, independent of what was happening in southern Mesopotamia. Joan Oates, digging at Tell Brak, has been moving toward such a conclusion for some time now.

Because much work is now being done in Syria and Turkey, the tendency is for scholars to start seeing the northern zone as more important than the south. But they must deal with the fact that when we find evidence of contact, it is southern Mesopotamian material found in the northern zone, not vice versa. At this point, it seems that there was more independent development in the northern zone, but we cannot rule out the role played by the earlier contact from the south in the Ubaid period. Long-range trading contacts at that time may have stimulated both areas to develop more complex economic and social entities, so that when the late Uruk people came to occupy areas of Syria at about 3500 BC, they found kingdoms, not just tribally organized farmers and herders.

In August 2000 we will be returning to Hamoukar to build an expedition house and resume digging. The site deserves long-term attention and will be a focus of Oriental Institute research for some time to come.

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