

HAMOUKAR

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The screeching of car tires was audible all the way to the photo room. I already knew who it was — the geophysicists had returned. Mixed in with the shuffling of equipment I heard Ann and Mike walk into the workroom. Normally I try not to get distracted by such routines of daily life while doing object photography, but that day I had reasons to drop what I was doing immediately. Ann had plunged down in a chair, her face still wrapped in her *kaffiyah* — all I saw were her eyes and short, blond hair — nursing an orange Crush, one of the sickeningly sweet soft drinks that abound in the Syrian Jazirah. She looked toasted — how else can you describe someone who had just spent several hours walking up and down the slope of a mound in brutal heat. It was early October — was it ever going to cool down? “How was it?” She didn’t reply. Not unusual — I know the feeling of total exhaustion all too well. Instead she plugged her magnetometer, a strange-looking contraption that all too often has inspired the fantasies of the villagers regarding the “true” purpose of her work, into her laptop computer. I knew that this was going to take a while — she was downloading the data recovered on-site during the morning. Little by little the hundreds of signals retrieved this morning would plot out on a map, gradually showing what secrets were still buried at Hamoukar. A few minutes later I heard her voice: “Come over here — I wanna show you something.” No telling in her voice if this was good or bad. I found her tinkering with a grainy image on her computer, changing contrasts and adding algorithms. “Is this what you wanted me to find?” she said triumphantly. I squinted, but the object of interest was unmistakable: a white band winding along the contour of Hamoukar’s high mound. My jaw dropped. I had been hopeful, but this was more than I expected. Hundreds of meters of what appeared to be dense brickwork. We had found Hamoukar’s city wall.

Back home, the recounts of our field adventures become clinical, suggesting a narrative and a path of action that was not apparent during the actual season. We can show the photographs, plans of buildings, and the artifacts found in them. What we can’t relate is the dust, the heat, the sweat, the exhaustion, the disappointment, but also the exhilaration that comes with a great discovery. People often ask what the “greatest” moment of a season was. The answer to such a question is more complex than most people think, since it is connected to the outset, the expectations that are being put into a season from its beginnings.

The 2008 season followed a tranquil study season in 2007. Since we undertook our first steps in magnetometry we ultimately have a field season, but without the noise and buzzing coming from trenches under excavation. We needed the time, however, to study and take in all the magnificent discoveries that we had made in 2005 and 2006. The 2008 campaign, however, was going to be different again — a full-blown field season. Preparations during summer were unusual and somewhat awkward for me, since this season coincided with my own departure from the Oriental Institute for the University of Toronto. Packing for a season is one thing; packing up one’s life at the same time is a totally different story....

We arrived in Syria in early September. The paperwork at the Department of Antiquities was done in record time. Within forty-eight hours after my arrival we were on the road to Hamoukar. This year’s team was the largest we ever had, filling the house to capacity — at times up to thirty people! Ann Donkin and Mike Robinson (University of Akron, Ohio), our geophysicists, helped to re-establish the site grid and trench corners so that field work could begin within a few days of our arrival.

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Hamoukar

Area B

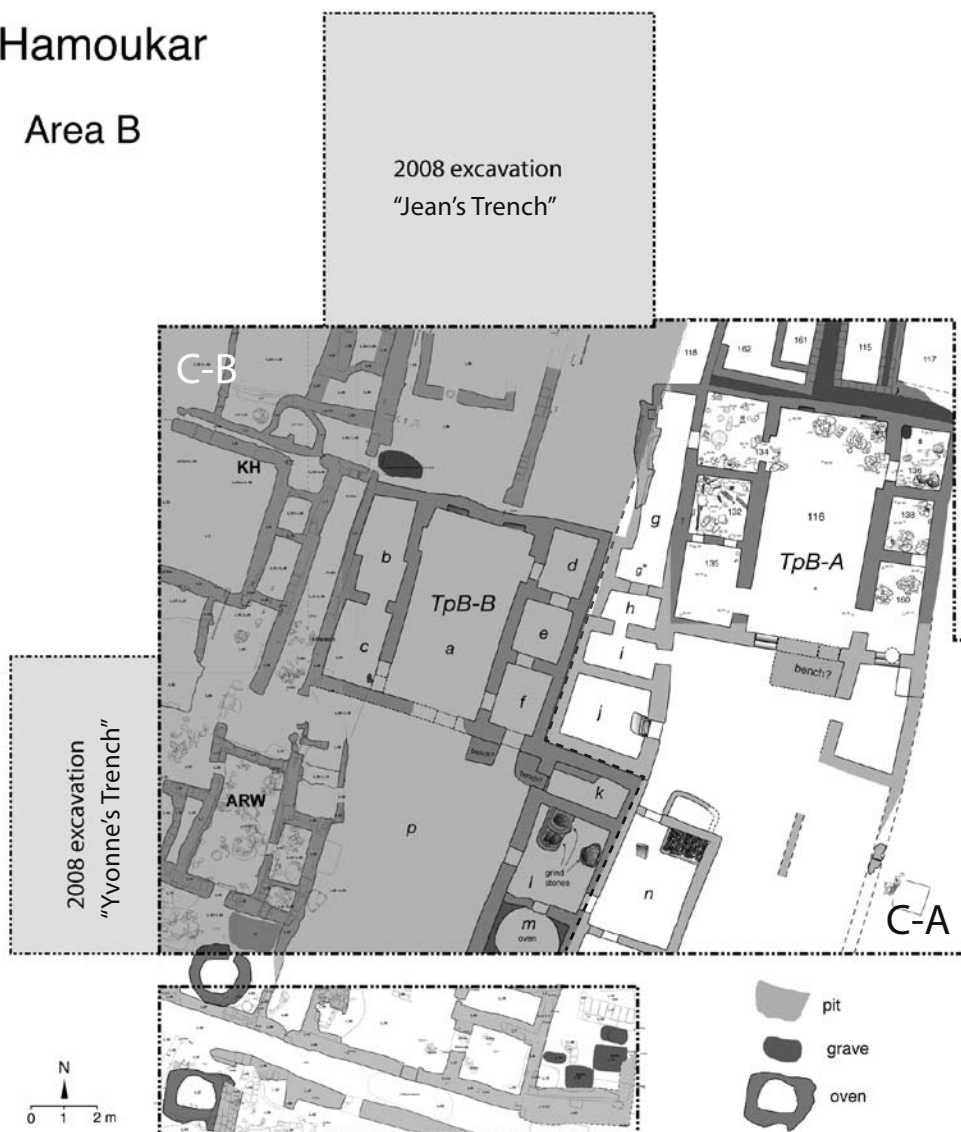


Figure 1. Plan of Area B at Hamoukar showing excavations up to 2006 and new excavation areas. The shaded portion of the central excavation area represents complex C-B, the unshaded portion represents complex C-A

This season we worked in five distinct areas which at the time spread our resources (transport logistics and tools) to the limit. With its size of over 1,000 acres, a walk across Hamoukar is no piece of cake.

In all previous reports the major focus has been on Area B, the location of the burnt buildings that had been destroyed by a violent conflagration around 3500 B.C. (fig. 1). The recovery of thousands of sling bullets pointed toward a hostile attack and this city's early demise. The story of Hamoukar's warfare often overshadows the fact that these buildings were the remnants of an early city with administrative buildings and storage units, in which we found thousands of clay

sealings and numerous elegantly carved stamp seals. As reported in previous years, the discovery of such an early city in a location far away from southern Mesopotamia — traditionally assumed to be the homeland of Near Eastern urbanism — and far away from any known watercourse runs afoul of most traditional theories on the formation of early cities, adding significantly to the excitement behind our discovery. By 2006 we had largely excavated two large complexes in Area B (C-A and C-B) that appear to have been of administrative nature. The main objectives of the 2008 campaign were the completion of the excavation of C-B, the western complex, and to see if we could follow the architecture as well as the destruction layer farther to the north. While we had determined the function of the two complexes as “administrative” in a wider sense, their exact function still eluded us. By excavating adjacent buildings we hoped to get a better idea of their placement and function within the ancient city. Regarding the first objective, it turned out that in 2006 we narrowly missed the western edge of the economic/administrative unit TpB-B. A 5 × 10 m trench excavated by Yvonne Helmholtz (University of Münster) located another room with a collapsed roof that was fronted by an open space to the west. In previous seasons we already noted sizable differences in floor elevations along the slope, so it seems pretty clear that the Area B ridge is an ancient feature that must have looked very similar some 5,500 years ago. Future seasons along the slope will aim at determining to what degree this settlement was terraced. Within the outer space, which contained several levels of sherd pavements, we found the remains of several burials (fig. 2). Similar to those found in 2006 they had been dug from a slightly higher surface dating to the post-destruction period, obviously representing the clean-up efforts after the fire.

To the north of TpB-B we opened another 10 × 10 m trench, supervised by Jean Evans, who recently joined the Oriental Institute as a research associate. In addition to bringing in her skills as an experienced excavator, Jean’s extensive background in art and art history made



Figure 2. Area B: burial in post-destruction context. Date: ca. 3500 B.C.

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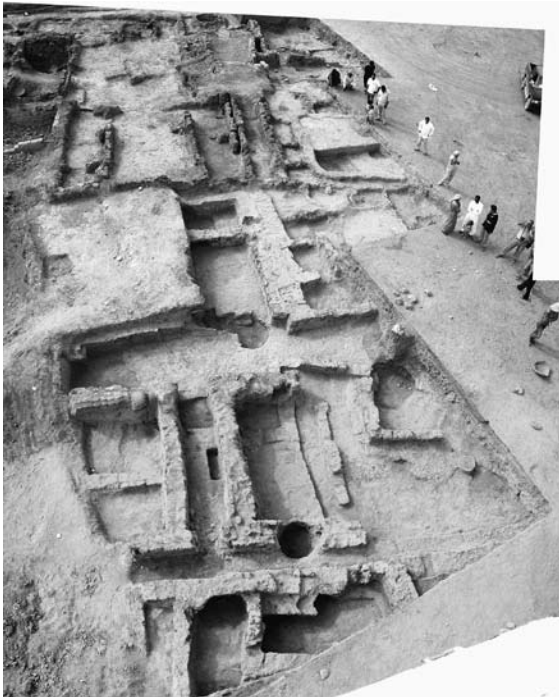


Figure 3. Area B: 2008 excavations at Jean's trench seen from north (composite picture). Burnt tripartite building TpB-B visible in background

her an ideal choice to excavate an area that in 2005 and 2006 has provided us with so many seal impressions. Here, however, things turned confusing. Instead of another complex with a tripartite building Jean found rooms and open spaces that do not seem to conform to any previously encountered building plan (fig. 3). In fact, we cannot even be sure if we are dealing with one or several buildings. Complicating the matter further was the fact that, instead of finding one level destroyed by fire Jean encountered numerous sub-phases, during which the layout of the area kept changing, though it seemed to reflect a gradual change over time. What was entirely missing was a clear destruction level. As the season was drawing to a close, selected areas of the trench were excavated deeper to see if this level could be reached at least in a sounding, but these attempts were unsuccessful even when penetrating below the levels of the burnt complexes. I began to wonder. Over three seasons we had cemented our warfare scenario — a violent destruction of the settlement, possibly caused by military force.

Several pits full of Uruk pottery that had been dug into the ruins from a higher, now eroded building level had allowed us to suggest that this destruction was associated with the expansion of the Uruk culture westward across the Khabur plain. This scenario was at first doubted by several colleagues as being “too early for organized warfare,” but gained general acceptance as we could cement our results with more data. Now it appeared as if our reconstruction was falling apart — had we been on the wrong track? A possible answer (and I shall not commit myself to more than that at this point) was found at the northern edge of the trench, where Jean literally caught the edge of yet another heavily burned building. The destruction of Late Chalcolithic Hamoukar therefore seems to have been patchy, which upon reflection makes much sense. If the attacking army (whether from Uruk or elsewhere) planned taking over the city then it would make little sense to destroy it entirely. Moreover, in the absence of incendiary missiles, fires were most likely not started during the siege, but set during a subsequent house-to-house combat. It seems unlikely and unwise for an “average” occupant of Hamoukar to have put up a stiff resistance to an invading, and obviously winning, army. Resistance more likely would have been encountered in buildings under the control of or affiliated with the city's key political and religious institutions. As administrative/economic units TpB-A and B fit this profile (also keeping in mind their strategic placement at the southwest edge of the city).

Compared to the 2005 and 2006 seasons we recovered relatively few seals and sealings in our new excavations (figs. 4–5). With over 100 sealings, though, the term “relatively few” needs to be put into context. In 2006 we retrieved over 900 sealings. Quite clearly, Hamoukar's wealth of finds has begun to spoil us. One of the more curious finds from Jean's trench was a “spectacle idol,” which was found lying in the middle of an open space (fig. 6). We had found several



Figure 4. Stamp seal, bone, in shape of reclining goat or gazelle. Area B; date: ca. 3500 B.C.



Figure 5. Clay sealing with impression of kidney-shaped seal showing horned animal. Back shows impression of several strings, possibly closing a box in a leather bag. Area B; date: ca. 3500 B.C.



Figure 6. "Spectacle idol" from Area B; date: ca. 3500 B.C.

dozens of them in earlier Late Chalcolithic context (ca. 4500–4000 B.C.) in the workshop areas of the Southern Extension. In the past these items had been explained as utensils used in textile work (spinning or cord making). Their light weight and generally hollow bases, however, would make it hard to anchor them on the ground, and at least those from Hamoukar never show any sign of wear. I prefer to see them in a wider “cultic” context and would connect them to the eye idols known from Tell Brak and Hamoukar, with which they at least share a similarity in appearance. But this debate is certain to continue.

In addition to his own excavation in Area B (concentrating on the baulk left between the main excavation area and a 5 × 10 m trench to the south), Oliver Mack (University of Munich) began a comprehensive study of the sling bullets from Area B. For reasons given above, relatively few of them were found in 2008, but several thousands found in 2005 and 2006 in the burnt buildings were at Oliver’s disposal. Oliver noticed a number of things that previously had escaped our notice. The discovery of hundreds of “squashed” sling bullets, which had been distorted upon impact (mostly on walls), hence must have been malleable when launched, was reported in 2005 and 2006. My suggestion that these were bullets made to replenish dwindling



Figure 7. Two sling bullets showing impressions of braided material, presumably from the sling's pouch. Area B; date: ca. 3500 B.C.

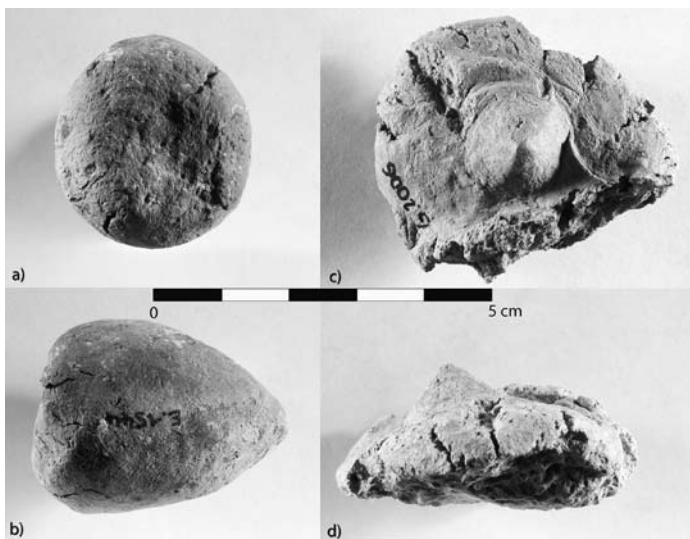


Figure 8. (a–b) Squashed sling bullet (bottom, side) from Area B showing minor deformation at thicker end; (c–d) squashed sling bullet (top, side) from Area B flattened upon impact. Area B; date: ca. 3500 B.C.

ammunition stashes as the battle dragged on, hence did not have a chance to dry out completely, had encountered some criticism, even ridicule, among colleagues — why would one pelt the enemy with wet clay? Oliver's analysis, however, seems to substantiate this theory: he noted that many of the bullets that we had categorized as “complete” actually had impressions of fibrous material, which very likely were impressed by the sling's pouch during the bullets' launch (fig. 7). This greatly increases the number of bullets that appear to have been launched while they were less than completely dry. The range of deformation encountered among the squashed bullets varies greatly, with some being merely

dimply at one side, while others were completely flattened by the impact (fig. 8). By comparison, completely dry bullets that had hit a wall had a much smaller chance of being noticed in the archaeological record, since they often broke apart. Oliver, however, was able to recognize several instances of a bullet that had been “bruised” by its target.

In the outset of this report I refer to the geophysical work undertaken on the high mound, which succeeded in following the line of the Late Chalcolithic city wall over several hundred meters (fig. 9). Modern occupation of the site does not allow us to follow its remainder along the southern and western edge of the mound, but the general size of the Late Chalcolithic settlement, which in large extent corresponds to the high mound, becomes clear. Until 2008 our main information regarding its size came from an intensive site survey carried out by Jason

Ur (now at Harvard University), which gave us an approximation but not a firm line. Now we know exactly what areas — at least in the north, northwest, and east — were inside and outside the city, and we can begin to think about its internal organization and the placement of future excavation areas to complement the data from Area B.

A story that unfolded on a low mound to the north of the high mound (now called “Area I”) bears direct impact on the results from Area B. The site survey of 1999/2000 had picked up a scatter of southern Mesopotamian Uruk pottery in this area, suggesting the presence of an Uruk colony. Such off-site colonies are not unusual; they are known from other Late Chalcolithic centers such as Tell Hammam et-Turkman and Tell Brak and are probably to be understood as trading outposts, similar to the later Assyrian “karums” in Anatolia. Carrie Hritz (Pennsylvania State University), who worked at Hamoukar between 1999 and 2001 and who rejoined the Hamoukar team last season, excavated four 10 × 10 m trenches in this area parallel to a magnetometric survey. Unfortunately, the architecture had been plowed out extensively over the past few decades, and very little remained that could still be articulated. The pottery retrieved from a pit, which extended over 2.5 m, confirmed our date to Middle Uruk — contemporary with the architecture in Area B. What surprised us is

that we found evidence for a violent act here as well: remains of two bodies were found in what appeared to be unburied context, and several dozen sling bullets were retrieved. Even if the context of these discoveries cannot be established firmly, it appears as if this colony had been dragged into a conflict as well. Was it the same attack that destroyed the Late Chalcolithic city? Our chronological resolution is too low to ascertain this, but it is not inconceivable. If this is the case, how did this colony figure into the conflict? The Uruk expansion westward was not a singular, monolithic event. Contacts with local polities began long before the control of this area. It is in this context that the trade colonies should be seen. While economically driven, the initial expansion of the Uruk culture across the Khabur plain, therefore, appeared to be trade based, hence beneficial to both Uruk and the local polities. Our work in Hamoukar’s Southern Extension already identified obsidian tools as a major export item, probably replaced by copper after 4000 B.C. By 3500 B.C. the picture changed, when a massive, seemingly military, expansion of the Uruk system took over pre-existing local settlements (such as Brak and Hamoukar) across the Khabur plains and founded new settlements along the western Euphrates in northern Syria and southeastern Turkey. With their trading partners removed, such an act almost single-handedly

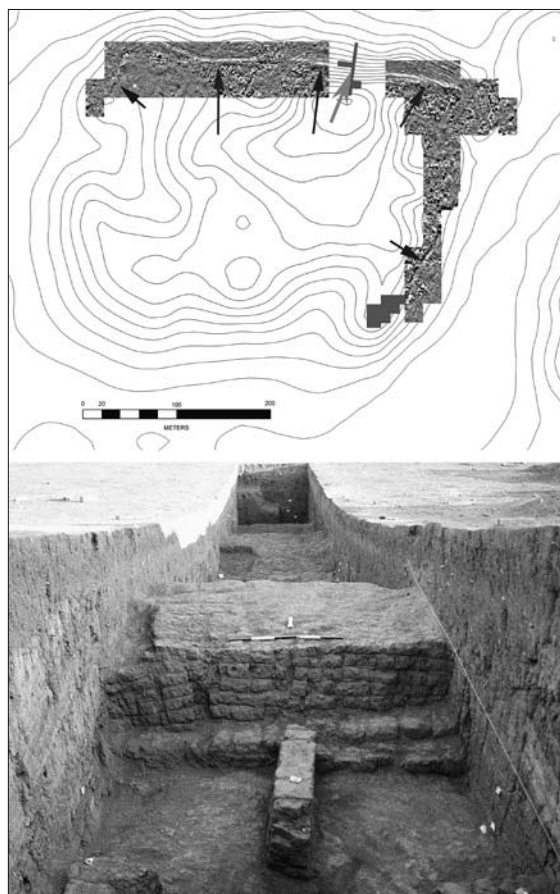


Figure 9. Top: geophysical map showing course of Hamoukar’s Late Chalcolithic city wall (marked with black arrows); bottom: city wall excavated in 1999 along north slope of high mound (location marked in map with gray arrow)

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would have put the Uruk outposts out of business. We do not know what authorities were behind the trade colonies, but it is quite possible that they should be seen as private enterprises of larger families, not as government endeavors. We really don't know enough about the internal organization of the Uruk system, but we have to allow for the possibility of competing interests in it. Whoever was behind the Uruk colony at Hamoukar may not have been identical to the one that ordered the attack on Hamoukar. The colony only stood to lose from this takeover, so it is conceivable that they sided with Hamoukar in this conflict and, as a result, might have been wiped out by their own people (even if not their own interest group) following the destruction of Hamoukar's city. I admit that this is not the only conceivable scenario, but it fits well with the overall evidence (flimsy as it is) at present.

Work in the Southern Extension, the area of the obsidian workshops, continued at a large scale by taking two 10×10 m trenches down some three meters. Excavated by Khaled Jayyab with the help of Ahmed Sleivi (both of Damascus University) and Susanne Hackenbeck (Cambridge University), for the first time the architecture encountered there has started to show a recognizable pattern, even if we are as yet unable to fully understand the layouts (fig. 10). Four phases can be distinguished so far, of which Phases 2 and 3 belong to the Late Chalcolithic 2, the earlier part of the Late Chalcolithic period (ca. 4500 B.C.). A deep sounding extending over 8 m failed to reach virgin soil; the lowest level reached represents the early Late Chalcolithic period (ca. 5000 B.C.). The depth of cultural deposition in this area far away from the main mound truly is astounding, but it confirms our initial notion that tool production from obsidian was practiced here for a long time, possibly extending over a millennium. More seals and sealings showed up this year, confirming the presence of at least some level of administrative complexity at Hamoukar

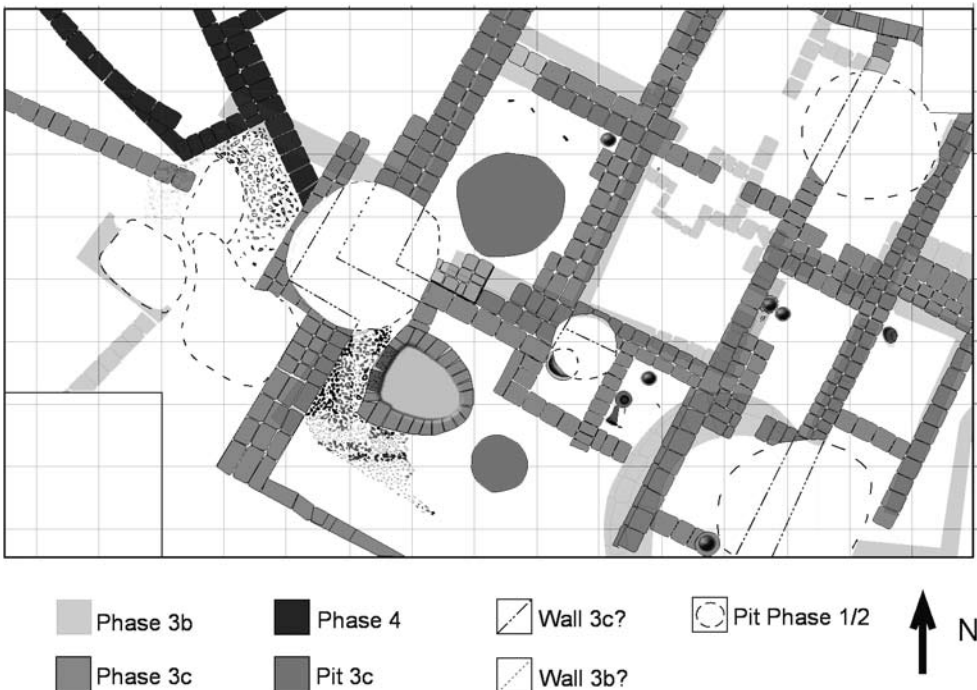


Figure 10. Area Z: Composite plan of architecture (Phases 3b, 3c, and 4)

during the fifth millennium B.C. (figs. 11–12).

During the late third millennium B.C. the Upper Khabur region saw an “urban explosion,” during which the size of sites increased fivefold and large lower towns formed around the traditional settlement sites. Our focus on the Late Chalcolithic period at Hamoukar often overshadows the importance of Hamoukar as an Early Bronze Age center, but quite unjustly. With an expansion of over 100 hectares (260 acres), it became

one of the largest of these urban centers. Excavations in 2001 and magnetometry in 2007 (see *2007–2008 Annual Report*) have shown the presence of large, well-planned houses in the southern part of the lower town. It was a low rise in the northeastern corner of the lower town that caught our attention in 1999, during the very first season. That season a 2 × 2 m sounding revealed a niched facade covered in gypsum plaster. We originally interpreted this facade as part of a temple, but subsequent excavations in 2000, 2001, and 2006 showed it to be a monumental



Figure 11. Clay sealing with multiple impressions of small circular seals showing rosette motive. Area Z; date: ca. 4300 B.C.



Figure 12. Button-shaped stamp seal, black stone, perforated, with geometric motive. Area Z; date: ca. 4300 B.C.

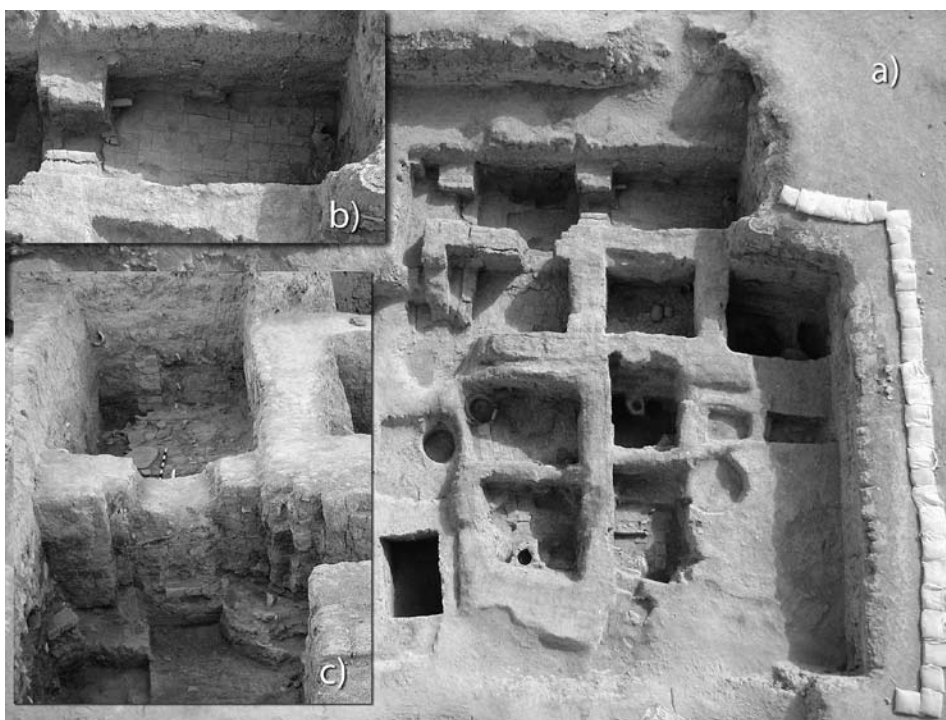


Figure 13. Area C: (a) aerial view of public building (from west); (b) close-up of room with double-recessed entrance way and podium (shrine?); (c) view of double-recessed entrance way during excavation (from north) with doorway unexcavated

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Figure 14. Clay slab (partial view) with seal impression showing “master of animals” holding horned animals (goats?) by their hind legs. Area C; date: ca. 2300 B.C.



Figure 15. Double-mouthed jar. Area C; date: 3500 B.C.

building of a more secular function. Excavations and mapping in 2006 were cut short by flash floods, but in 2008 Tate Paulette, helped by Mike Fisher (both of University of Chicago), was able to continue where he had left off two years earlier. The substantial walls and baked brick floors portray the relative wealth of this era. One of the most interesting discoveries of this season was a room with a double-recessed entrance door facing a feature that appears to be a podium — a shrine or temple within this building (fig. 13). Quite clearly the building is palatial in nature, but more excavations are needed to ascertain its precise function. Sealings and pottery of exquisite quality (figs. 14–15) showing up in floor context point toward a public building. Could it have been one of the palaces, founded during the expansion of the city into the lower town?

The past season also helped us to address some questions concerning the origins of the city’s expansion during the third millennium B.C. While most of the lower town architecture excavated so far dates to the late third millennium, the initial site survey showed the presence of Ninevite V pottery across the lower town, dating from the early to mid-third millennium. Yet we could not tell for sure if these sherds — easily recognizable by their incised and later excised decoration — reflect mere sherd movements associated with later building endeavors or if they indeed represent the extent of a Ninevite V occupation. In 2008 Kathryn Grossman (University of Chicago), who is undertaking her dissertation research on this still-enigmatic time period, dropped several soundings across the lower town to examine the size of the Ninevite V city. Penetrating the levels of the later Early Bronze Age settlement, she indeed located Ninevite V levels in two soundings,

one in the southwestern edge of the mound (Area H), the other on the western edge of the mound. At the southern edge, Area K, where a site visit in 2007 had located large quantities of Ninevite V pottery in a lower area, she opened a 10 × 10 m trench. Recent plowing activities unfortunately had destroyed most architectural Ninevite V remains in this area, but the feasibility of excavating Ninevite V in surrounding higher areas seems virtually assured. A clay sealing from this trench seems to fit in the northern (“Piedmont”) style of early third-millennium seals (fig. 16).

Kate’s results, though preliminary, suggest that Hamoukar’s urban expansion happened centuries earlier than assumed so far, probably as early as 2600 B.C. This is significant since excavating these levels might help us to understand what Ninevite V actually represents. In terms of material culture it is represented by the easily recognizable pottery, but we don’t really know what the associated architecture looks like. Did this pottery represent a particular population group of the Middle East or was it a social marker? In other words, who were the people behind the pots? We hope to be able to address these questions during the next seasons.

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Readers may be aware that in late 2008 I left the Oriental Institute for a faculty position in Mesopotamian archaeology at the University of Toronto and the Royal Ontario Museum. The fate of the Hamoukar expedition following my departure has raised questions and speculations, so I take this opportunity to spill it out in writing: as before, Hamoukar will continue as a joint Syrian-American expedition under my co-directorship. The University of Toronto and the Royal Ontario Museum have agreed to assist with logistical and financial support, and future seasons will see the inclusion of team members from both institutions.



Figure 16. Clay sealing with impression of "Piedmont"-style seal. Area K (southern edge of the lower town); date: 2900–2700 B.C.

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The success of the Hamoukar 2008 season would not have been possible without the generous support of several institutions and individuals. To the Syrian Department of Antiquities, notably Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi (Director of Excavations), I am very grateful for a speedy issue of the excavation permit and logistical support during the season. Several donors have contributed most generously to the success of our season. Here I am particularly grateful to Toni Smith, Alan Brodie, Carlotta Maher (Chicago), Howard Hallengren (New York), and Rita and Kitty Picken (Chicago). To the Oriental Institute I am most grateful for logistical and financial support. Last but by no means least I want to thank my team for their hard work and enthusiasm.

Work at Hamoukar literally could continue for centuries. As the political climate between Syria and the United States has warmed up, I feel more confident than ever that our cooperation, which survived and even thrived during recent times of political stalemate, will continue for a very long time.
