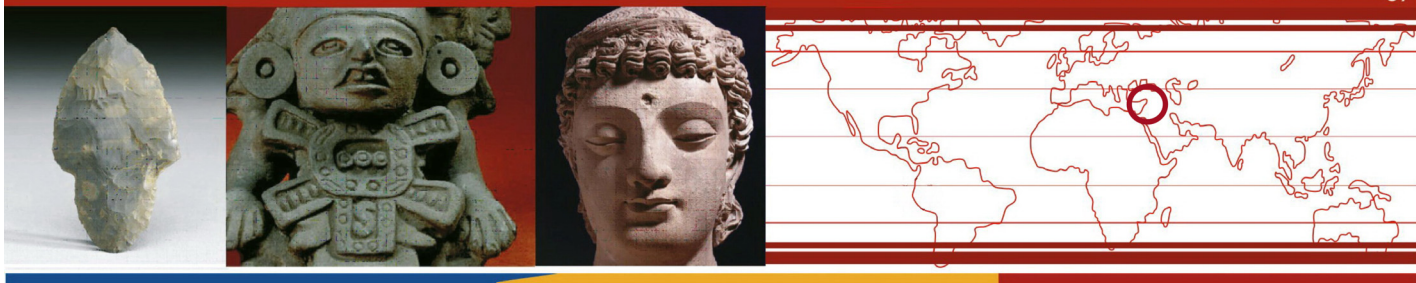


# Archæological Newsletter

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## No Garden in Eden: Hunting for Syria's First Urban Dwellers.

*Clemens Reichel, Associate Curator (Ancient Near East), Department of World Cultures, ROM, & Assistant Professor (Mesopotamian Archaeology), Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto.*

The Middle East is home to some of the world's oldest continuously occupied cities, like Aleppo and Damascus that are said to be thousands of years old. Not surprisingly, many scholars have traced the emergence of the world's first cities to the Ancient Near East. The "Cradle of Urbanism" traditionally has been located in Southern Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, the lands of ancient Sumer and Babylonia (Fig. 1). An alluvial landscape of sediment deposited by the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, this area is potentially capable of sustaining a large population using irrigation agriculture to produce large yields. Considerable efforts to maintain such a system, however, were required; canals had to be dug and kept up to bring water for irrigation, and dykes needed to be built to keep flood waters out of the fields in time for spring harvest. Irrigation agriculture therefore required a large labour input, resulting in the early development of a division of labour, social stratification, surplus production and the formation of elites—all of them signposts on the road to urbanism. As a result, cities indeed arose early in this area. By about 3200 BC, Uruk, the largest city of southern Sumer and home to the "Uruk Culture," extended over an area of ca. 250 hectares—one of the largest continuously occupied settlements on the planet. Uruk's face

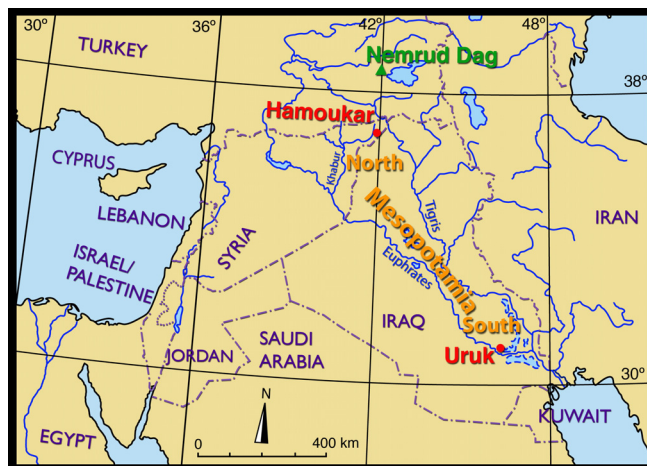


Fig. 1: map of Middle East, showing locations of Uruk and Hamoukar

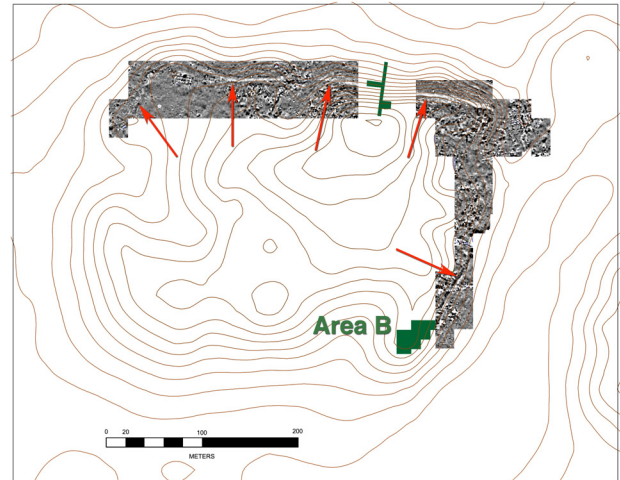
was shaped by elaborately decorated temples and public buildings. A highly sophisticated bureaucratic apparatus administered and controlled life in this sprawling ancient metropolis.

Comparatively little is known about early cities in other regions of the Middle East (a walled settlement at Jericho around 8500 BC remained a singular phenomenon and discussion as to whether it should be considered a city continues) such as Northern Syria. Rainfall in this area, often called the "Dry-Farming Belt"

was sufficient to sustain rain-fed agriculture, favouring the establishment of stable, self-sustained village economies but leaving few incentives for intense social-economic organization that would have led to urbanism. Not surprisingly, Northern Syria's urban experiments appeared to be few and short-lived. Between 3500–3000 BC, during an expansion of the Uruk Culture into Syria and Turkey in a quest to gain and retain access to vital raw materials such as stone, metal, and wood that are lacking in the south, several cities were founded, but they seemed to be little more than southern “colonies.”

In short, there was little evidence suggesting that city life truly was at home in Northern Syria when we started working at Hamoukar in 1999. To call Hamoukar's location “remote” would be an understatement. Situated in the northeastern corner of Syria, some 5 km from the Iraqi border, a trip from Damascus, to the site by car takes longer than a plane trip from Toronto to Syria (**Fig. 1**). A large, unassuming mound of ca. 100 hectares, covered in part by a modern village, it nowadays looks less like a cradle of civilization than a place where civilization has ended.

We originally had picked the site because it was strewn with sherds of the southern Mesopotamian “Uruk” culture, suggesting Hamoukar was another southern colony. As we started excavations, however, we realized that these Uruk pottery layers, which at times covered the site like an over-baked crust, belonged to later levels that largely had eroded away due to wind and rainfall, leaving the associated pottery in place. Below it we found remains of a settlement that was “urban” in its characteristics but which dated between 4000–3500 BC—centuries before the Uruk culture controlled this area. A geophysical survey undertaken in 2008 showed that this settlement was surrounded by a three-metre wide wall,



**Fig. 2:** Plan of Hamoukar's high mound, arrows point to city wall. Area B, seen in Fig. 3, is in green.

enclosing an area that roughly corresponds to the size of Hamoukar's present-day “high mound” (**Fig. 2**). Covering an area of ca. 16 hectares, this was a sizable settlement at a time when contemporary villages were between 1 and 2 hectares in size.



**Fig. 3:** Building complexes in Area B (aerial view).

On top of the mound, on a spur in the southeast, excavations revealed the remains of two large building complexes (**Fig. 3**). Though their level of preservation varied, it was clear that they followed the same plan. In their middles were square courtyards that were surrounded by rooms and abutted on the north by buildings of tripartite structure. A fire, dated to ca. 3500 BC by C<sup>14</sup> dates, had preserved the inventory of

these buildings. A plethora of storage vessels suggest the presence of a well-organized storage or redistribution facility, while several large bake-ovens clearly were meant to feed groups larger than an average family. Several dozen



Fig. 4: a) stamp seal, bone, of a lioness killing a calf; b) seal, black stone, of two kissing bears; c) seal design on bottom of b), showing vulture surrounded by body parts.

stamp seals (Fig. 4) and more than 2300 clay sealings—clay lumps that were used to close or “seal” doors or containers and impressed with a seal to prevent unauthorized removal (Fig. 5)—indicate the presence of a well-organized bureaucracy.

The artifacts recovered showed a high level of artistry that rivaled those recovered at southern cities such as Uruk. First and foremost among those were the stamp seals. One showed a lioness killing a calf or goat. Its design reminds one of artwork from the Graeco-Roman period over 3000 years later (Fig. 4a). Another seal, made of black stone, showed two symmetrically arranged bears, apparently “kissing” each other (Fig. 4b). The carved seal design on the bottom (Fig. 4c) does not help explain what went on in



Fig. 5: left: clay sealing with impression of kidney-shaped seal; right: reverse side, showing impressions of string.

the artist’s head when designing this seal, for it depicts a vulture surrounded by dismembered animal body parts.

But what prompted the development of a city in an area far away from Sumer, from any river, so apparently lacking all the necessary ingredients of city in the south? The answer seems to be found south of the main site in an area dominated by a vast, only lightly mounded area that covers an area of about 280 hectares.



Fig. 6: Obsidian core, multiple views.

Though not immediately recognizable as such, it is an ancient site, covered in sherds as well as fragments of obsidian, both tools as well as lithic debris (Fig. 6). Between 2005 and 2008 we opened several areas of excavation that showed occupation levels dating back as early as 5000 BC. By 4500 BC a flourishing tool industry had been established here in several workshops. Obsidian is readily available from several sources, some 100 – 150 km to the north of Hamoukar, in Turkey. Chemical analysis of obsidian tools found in southern Mesopotamia indicates that their raw material came from the Nemrud Dag

volcano in eastern Turkey. It is notable that Hamoukar is on a direct line between this source and Uruk to the south.

Was Hamoukar an ancient Pittsburgh, therefore, home to a specialized industry that exported large quantities of tools to resource-deprived Southern Mesopotamia? Was “making the big buck” an incentive for some farmers to abandon their subsistence-based life and move into the confines of this proto-urban settlement? The evidence seems to point toward that direction.

The avid reader, however, may have noticed a chronological discrepancy in this account. The apex of the obsidian workshops appears to have been reached in the mid-to-late 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. The city on Hamoukar’s main mound, however, was destroyed a good thousand years later. What happened in the intervening thousand years? The answer may be two-fold. First, the layer of the destroyed city is only the latest in a long sequence of layers. It is quite possible that its predecessors date as early as the late 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. A second reason can be found in technological innovations: by about 4000 BC the technology of copper smelting and working had started to spread. Many tools that previously had been made of stone now were made of this new, revolutionary, malleable material. A number of finds (blow pipes, crucibles) associated with metal technology from Hamoukar suggested the city had adjusted to the new taste of the time, now also shipping copper or copper items to Southern Mesopotamia.



Fig. 7: Sling bullets found in burnt layers.

Hamoukar’s early success with urbanism, however, was cut short by a violent conflagration. As we started clearing open areas the nature of the fire became all too obvious, for we found thousands of sling stones made of clay (Fig. 7). The city appears to have fallen victim to a hostile attack. Though no written records exist as to who did it (writing was invented several hundred years later) we can make a reasonable guess. Dug into the buildings’ remains were numerous pits from a higher, now eroded level. The pottery retrieved from them almost entirely consisted of Southern Mesopotamian “Uruk” types. Could Hamoukar’s economic success also have been its undoing? Access to raw materials, whether obsidian, flint, or metal was vital for the survival of Southern Mesopotamian cities. Any attempt at controlling or blocking this supply might well have been met with Uruk’s deadly, overpowering force.

Hamoukar remains a work in progress. Every season we learn more. As a senior colleague of mine once said, “The more you dig, the more you know.” We still have a lot of digging to do.

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**Editor: Dr. Chen Shen**  
**Asst. Editor: Christine Caroppo**  
**E-mail queries: [anlATrom.on.ca](mailto:anlATrom.on.ca)**

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