

HAMOUKAR

Clemens D. Reichel

[In 2004 McGuire Gibson turned over direction over the Hamoukar excavations to Clemens Reichel. The summary below is Reichel's account of an investigative trip to Hamoukar three years after the last season.]

The plane descended steeply on its way towards Damascus. From my window seat I watched the change in the landscape from desert sands to agricultural land. Villages and field boundaries were passing by quickly. From afar, the lights of Damascus were blinking. It all looked very familiar — nothing seemed to have changed. Yet anticipation about my return to Syria was mixed with a feeling of unease. It had been three years since our last season at Hamoukar. What was I going to find?

I flashed back to 2001 — our third, and inarguably most successful, season at Hamoukar. The 1999 and 2000 seasons had shown us how to approach the site. In 1999 a step trench in Area A cut across a city wall, indicating the presence of a city dating to the early fourth millennium B.C. Conventional wisdom argues for the earliest cities to have risen in the Mesopotamian floodplain, seeing them as an inevitable outcome of large-scale labor organization for irrigation projects and specialized production of goods. In Syro-Mesopotamia, an area dominated by rain-fed agriculture with little need for large-scale labor organization, the foundation of cities is usually seen as the result of contact with the Uruk culture. Famed for its construction of elaborate temples and



Figure 1. Tradition meets modernity — Umm Nasr, mother of the site guard at Hamoukar, talking on her cell phone

RESEARCH

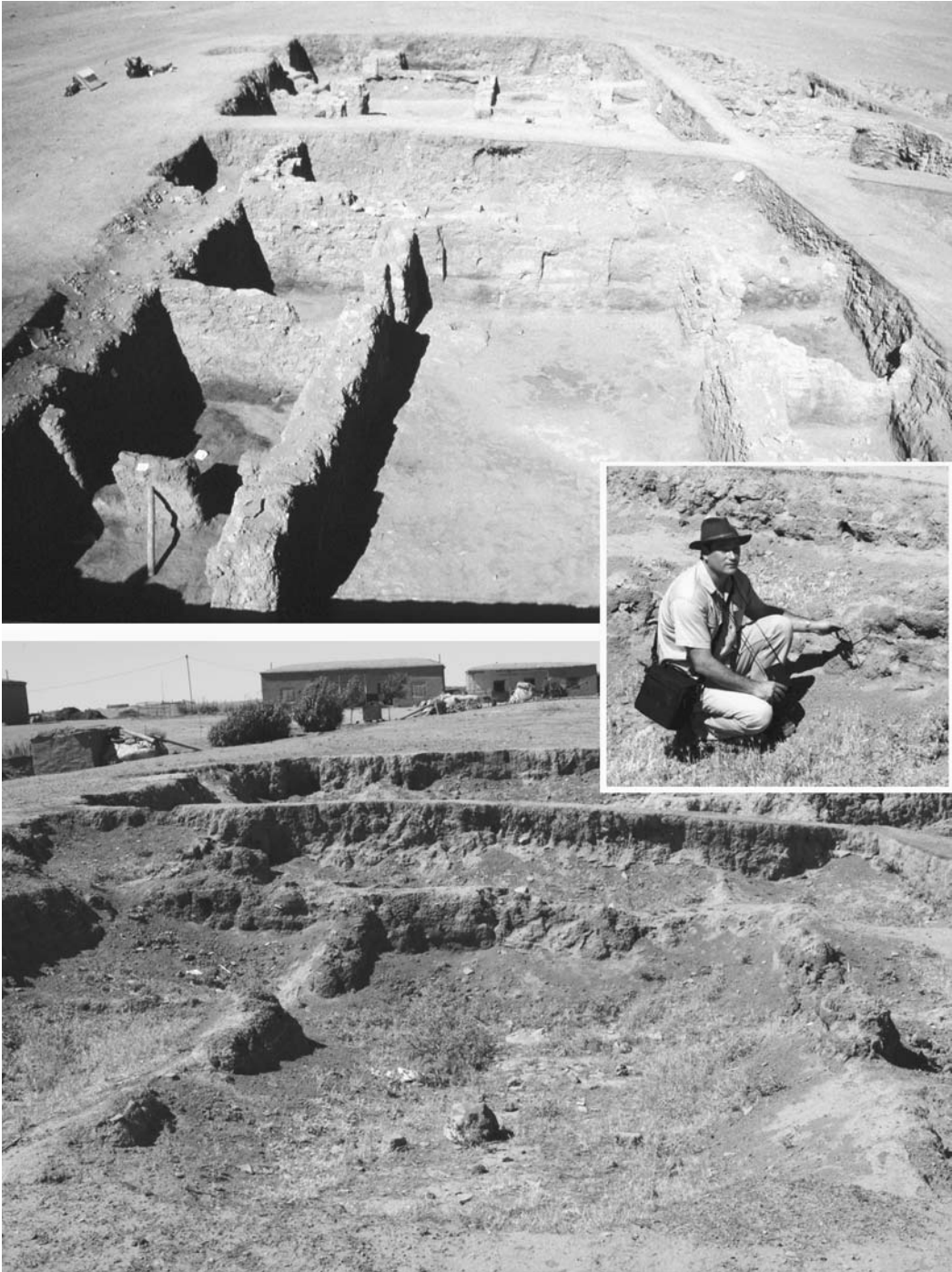


Figure 2. The tripartite building in Area B in 2001 (top) and 2004 (center and bottom). Though the walls have deteriorated, erosion has revealed previously invisible details such as the bricklaying pattern (inset)

administrative buildings and the invention of writing, this culture expanded into Syria, Anatolia, and western Iran during the mid-fourth millennium B.C., where numerous Uruk colonies of a large size, such as the 30 ha settlement of Habuba Kabira on the Euphrates River, emerged.

Settlements associated with the Uruk culture were found on numerous sites in northeastern Syria. Our discoveries at Hamoukar, however, which were widely reported in the press, challenged the prevalent theory of “secondary” city formation in Syria.

During the same season, several superimposed levels of industrial installations, including large ovens were found in Area B, a different part of the site, also dating to the fourth millennium B.C. A pit or grave found in this area right below the surface contained over 100 stamp seals and over 7,000 beads dating to the fourth millennium B.C. In a third area (Area C) of the main mound, a niched and plastered façade had been located in a sounding, suggesting the presence of an elaborately-built temple dating to the late third millennium B.C. Having tested the ground successfully we reevaluated our strategies and modified our approach in 2001. Area C was cleared in an area of 20 × 20 m to the third-millennium B.C. level. It turned out that the niched-and-buttressed façade found two years earlier actually was part of what appears to be a large administrative building. Hundreds of broken vessels strewn all over its open areas indicate that the building had been looted prior to its destruction. Large private houses dating to the same period and showing the same pattern of destruction and looting were excavated far off the main mound in Area H, part of the late third-millennium B.C. outer town. In the area of the step trench we followed the course of the wall discovered in 1999 for another 20 m, establishing beyond a doubt that it is indeed a city wall. Our focus then turned to Area B. The trenches dug in 1999 were at the slope of the mound; the pit containing the stamps seals and beads was close to the surface of the mound and its associated architectural layers had disappeared due to erosion, but they were preserved higher up on the mound. We started a series of new trenches on top of the mound, and our expectations were not disappointed. One of the trenches contained an administrative building that had burned down. During the destruction, the building’s roof collapsed, burying its artifact assemblage below it. Typologically the building was a tripartite building with a central rectangular room or court, flanked by a symmetrical arrangement of small rooms. This building type was a hallmark of the Uruk period, an association highlighted in our building by other Uruk traits such as symmetrically arranged multiply-recessed doorways and niched wall decoration. In addition to hundreds of completely restorable pots, the artifacts recovered from the ashes of this building included about 270 clay sealings with seal impressions, which allowed us to investigate the administrative and bureaucratic layout of this building. But these sealings also raised new questions. Surprisingly, almost all of the seals on these sealings were stamp seals with local, northern Mesopotamian designs, not the cylinder seals commonly used in Uruk administrative systems. It became clear to us that Hamoukar’s interaction with the Uruk world was more complex than we had thought. Hamoukar had proved to be a most exciting site, and we anticipated many more exciting seasons to come.

In all this excitement, however, world politics overran us. The attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, occurred less than a week after our season at Hamoukar began. It had no direct impact on our work — in fact, we completed our season as scheduled — but our thoughts had to be with friends and families at home and the realization that the world at home had changed forever. Soon after our return to Chicago the impending war on Iraq took most of our attention, inevitably shifting our focus away from our work at Hamoukar. Throughout 2002 and 2003, most of our efforts concentrated on Iraq and the preservation of its cultural heritage. Realizing that his commitment in Iraq was going to take too much time to run a field season in Syria in the foreseeable future, McGuire Gibson turned over the directorship of Hamoukar to me in early 2004. I decided to take a trip to Syria in June 2004, inspect the site, and

RESEARCH



Figure 3. Living quarters and main work room of the Hamoukar dig house, built in 2000 and 2001 by MacGuire Gibson. Photo shows damage to a doorway and the roof

also meet with the authorities in the Department of Antiquities to discuss future seasons and a renewal of the permit in my name.

The timing of my trip seemed most unfortunate. Since 2001, Syro-American political relationships had taken a turn for the worse. Syria had strongly opposed the war against Iraq. Relationships between Washington and Damascus remained icy in the aftermath of the war, and a set of economic embargoes, enforced with the Syria Accountability Act on May 4, 2004 — two weeks before my departure for Syria — by a presidential order promised to bring relationships to a new low point.

As it turned out, to my great relief, not much seemed to have changed. Having passed immigration and customs at Damascus International Airport without any problems, the familiar “Welcome to Syria” sounded as genuine as ever before. Like most people in the Near East, Syrians seem to be eminently capable of keeping politics apart from personalities. For the next three weeks, any reference to my being from Chicago was mostly met with the all-too-familiar 1920s gangster associations of our hometown (it has always amazed me how many Syrian children are familiar with the name of Al Capone) but never with any anti-American hostility. About the “worst” thing that I heard was puzzlement about a provision in the Syria Accountability Act that banned all direct commercial flights between Syria and the United States and all landings of Syrian-owned commercial aircraft in the United States. To the best of my knowledge, neither one ever happened or existed.

In Damascus I met with up with Salam Quntar, a two season veteran of Hamoukar (2000 and 2001). An employee of the Department of Antiquities, Salam has worked extensively on numerous other sites in Syria; when I met her she had just finished a season at the site of Tell Brak

with Geoff Emberling, the new museum director at the Oriental Institute. Salam recently obtained her M.A. degree in archaeology at the University of Liverpool and is about to start her Ph.D. program at Cambridge University. With her fluency in English and excellent relationships with the administrators of the Department of Antiquities in Damascus, Salam turns out to be one of the most useful people to know in Syria, but I admit that her kindness and friendship with the villagers at Hamoukar on this trip left the deepest impression upon me. Just like our own students, Syria's urban dwellers occasionally have a hard time adjusting to life in a remote village, but Salam clearly knows no such problems.

But I am getting ahead of myself. In Damascus I first met with Dr. Tammam Fakouche, Director of Museums and Antiquities, and Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of Excavations. All conversations were friendly and constructive, and I have to thank them for their help and support throughout my trip. Considering Hamoukar's proximity to the border with Iraq, some legitimate security concerns for a future excavation season had to be addressed, but all major issues could be resolved. When I asked for permission to take a trip out to Hamoukar, it was granted without hesitation. I was more than pleased that Salam was allowed to accompany me on this trip.

In past years we used to fly from Damascus to Qamishli at the Syro-Turkish border, the big town next to Hamoukar, a convenient arrangement that cut the daylong trip through all of Syria down to little more than an hour. In June, however, the airport in Qamishli was closed for repairs and upgrades, so Salam and I decided to fly to Deir ez-Zor and take a car from there to Hamoukar.

Our trip on Saturday, June 12, almost ended prematurely in disaster during the departure at Damascus Airport. Normally the plane to Deir ez-Zor leaves at 8:00 A.M. On Saturdays, however, the planes leave an hour earlier because they fly on to Kuwait from there, a fact that we had overlooked. When we arrived at the airport at 6:30 A.M. the baggage check-in was already closed so we ran to the gate with our bags, deciding to take them on board as carry-ons. I had already put my bag on the belt of the X-ray machine when a terrible thought struck me, but it was already too late. My bag was singled out and I found myself surrounded by security guards who made me open my bag. The trowels and scrapers in it passed inspection without suspicion, but a multipurpose tool with screwdrivers, saws, and, yes, blades definitely drew attention. It was confiscated, my passport was taken (as it turned out simply to help security spell my name), but then I was ushered on board. Upon disembarking in Deir ez-Zor I was once again stopped by security, where my tool was returned to me with a smile.

We had hoped to meet Mahmoud al-Khattab at Deir ez-Zor to travel with us to

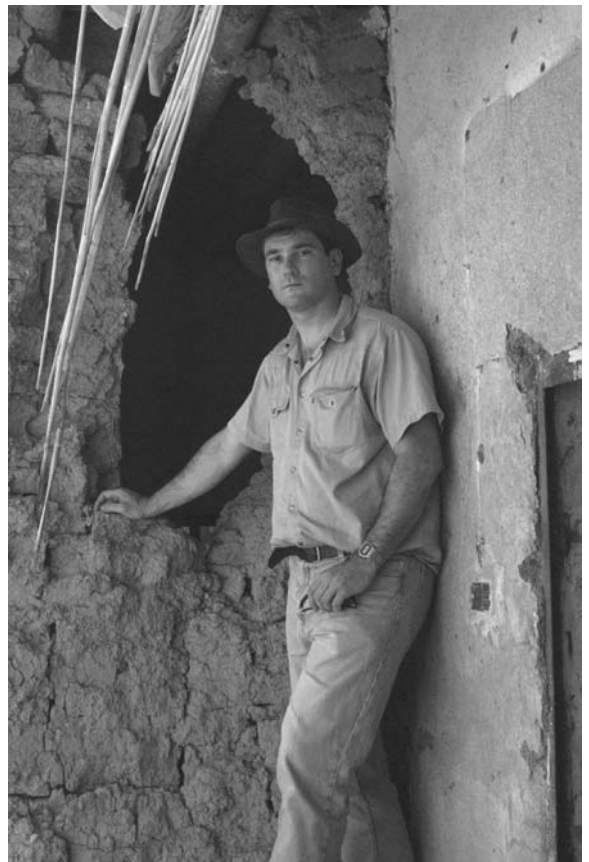


Figure 4. Assessing damage to the dig house

RESEARCH

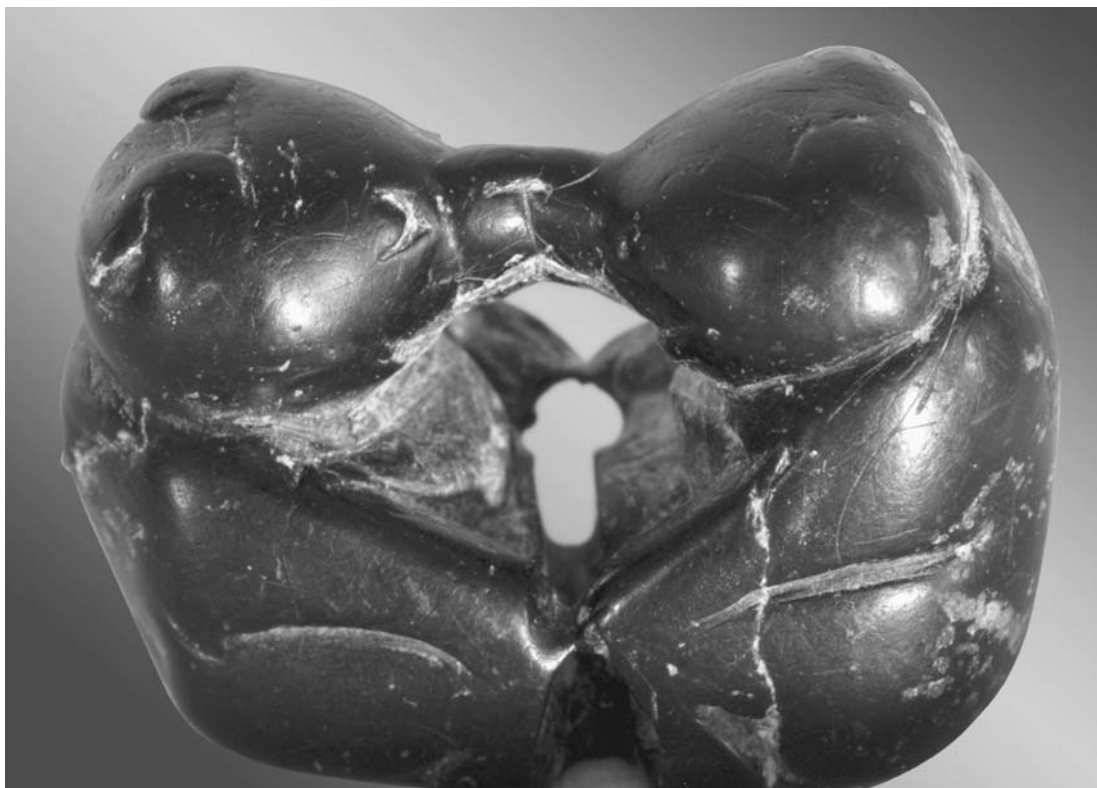


Figure 5. An intimate view of the kissing bears, a stamp seal found at Hamoukar in 2001, dated ca. 3500 B.C.

Hamoukar. Mahmoud, who works at the museum in Raqqa, was our driver in 1999, but his responsibilities expanded greatly over the next two years (in fact, finding one title that will describe all of Mahmoud's functions adequately almost seems impossible; majordomo may come closest). In 2000 and 2001 he also oversaw most of the building of our dig house at Hamoukar.

In the end, unfortunately, his tight schedule during harvest time made it impossible for him to meet us, but he organized a comfortable air-conditioned van with a driver. The trip took us along the Khabur Valley, past Hassake, through the sun-parched agricultural lands of northeastern Syria, which were in the process of being harvested, and finally toward the Iraqi border. A few miles before Yaroubiyah, the Syrian border town, we left the main road and went onto the badly potholed road towards Hamoukar. Finally, there it was! From a distance, through the dusty air of the mid-afternoon sun, we could see the long shallow rise that characterizes its high mound. Even from afar the step trench along the north side of the high mound, which I had dug in 1999, was clearly visible. I *had* to get out of the car to take a picture. As I opened the door I was overwhelmed with a sensation of unbearable heat that seemed to burn my skin and made it almost impossible to breath. I have been at Hamoukar as early as late August, but I had not realized how hot it gets there in June at the height of the sun! I made a mental note to *never* have a June/July field season, took my picture, and plunged back into the comfort of the air-conditioned car.

About half of the high mound is occupied by the village of Hamoukar. We drove past the houses and finally arrived at the house of Muhammad Nasr, our site guard. Umm Nasr, his mother (fig. 1), recognized and welcomed us. Having lost her husband early in life, she was undoubtedly in charge of this large household which encompasses several sons, daughters, and daughters-in-law. Despite her advanced age, her great physical and mental strength give her an

impressive appearance, a woman who readily defies any Western stereotype of an oppressed Arab woman. With her facial tattoos and traditional Bedouin garments she epitomizes traditional life in this corner of Syria (a picture that got somewhat disturbed when she pulled a cell phone out of her sleeve to call her son). We were ushered into the reception room where we were served tea and caught up on the developments of the last three years.

Even someone who has spent a considerable amount of time in the Near East continues to be amazed by the hospitality found in the Arab world. We showed up totally unannounced, but there was no question so ever that we were to be their guests. For dinner a sheep was slaughtered and a festive meal was prepared consisting of *manzaf*, a delicious traditional Bedouin dish of cooked meat. For the night, Salam was accommodated with the other women, and I was given a bed within the courtyard of the compound. As the sun sets, the temperature becomes very pleasant even in June, especially at night. With its crystal-clear air devoid of any pollution, Hamoukar offers great potentials for hobby astronomers. During 2001 we surveyed the nightly sky looking for planets and star constellations with our optical theodolite. After several hot nights in Damascus, resting outside at Hamoukar in a gentle, cool breeze while gazing at the stars felt like Paradise.

After the terrible pictures from Iraq showing countless sites pitted with robber holes, seeing Hamoukar again was a great relief. Though I walked the site extensively I could not find the slightest evidence of clandestine digging. About the worse damage to the site I observed were a number of shallow pits far off the high mound where clay had been dug to make bricks, but the pits did not damage any visible archaeological layers and clearly were not associated with looting activities. I noticed a few new buildings on the site, but that was about it. Our guard was clearly doing his job.

After a period of three years, our trenches had naturally deteriorated. Mudbrick walls had started to melt down, and vegetation had started to overgrow the excavation areas. To anyone unfamiliar with Near Eastern archaeology such changes may come as a shock, especially when looking at photographs taken during excavation, but such decay is a familiar phenomenon in mudbrick architecture. In a way, these deteriorations even have their good sides. All architecture had been mapped and photographed, but we can only document what is visible on its exterior. While the walls of tripartite building in Area B have deteriorated, for example, three years of winter rain had exposed and articulated a brick pattern that was not visible when we excavated them three years ago (fig. 2). Most importantly, the area where we expected to find the unexcavated remainder of this building has not been damaged at all, which should allow us to reconstruct the appearance and artifact assemblage of this building once we resume excavations in this area. A trench dug in 1999 just to the east of this building already cut the corner of what looks like a monumental forerunner of the latter construction. If this building had a similar function as the tripartite building it may tell us much more about the development of complex administration on this site during the fourth millennium B.C., possibly even before the Uruk period. In short, we seem to have lost little if any information in this area. The same observation holds true for the other areas. The walls in both Areas A and C have eroded due to winter rains, but no other trace of illegal digging was visible in either location. Once we start digging again we should pretty much be able to continue from where we left off.

I saved the bitter pill in this trip for the end of my account. Before the trip we had already received word of damage to our dig house. It had remained uninhabited for two years, and two successive seasons of winter rains had damaged the roof and walls, so I was prepared for the worst. While damage was indeed serious it was not quite as bad as I had feared (figs. 3, 4). I saw widespread water damage and partial collapse of the roof, but everything can be fixed, provided

RESEARCH

the repairs are started immediately. Fortunately, all our furniture and equipment had been shipped to the museum in Deir ez-Zor and was safe.

After visiting Hamoukar I spent a week at the museum in Deir ez-Zor, which is now the home for all of our Hamoukar artifacts. The heat and the high levels of humidity due to its proximity to the Euphrates River do not make this city a preferred vacation spot in June. The museum officials, however, notably Dr. Khalil, Director of the Museum, and its Deputy Director Moain Ali, went out of their way to make it possible for me to study and rephotograph the Hamoukar objects. Naturally, we had photographed all objects throughout the seasons, but the great amount of material found often put us under great time pressure, so some images turned out to be unsatisfactory after the films were developed in Chicago. A new digital SLR camera, which I had recently bought for the Diyala Project (see separate report), came in handy — being the head of several projects does have its advantages. Time did not permit me to rephotograph all objects, but I managed to take about 2,000 high-resolution color photographs of several hundred items (fig. 5). Having taken on the publication of the sealings from Hamoukar, I was particularly interested in obtaining close-up shots of seal impressions, which will be of significant help in a detailed analysis of the bureaucratic mechanisms during the fourth millennium B.C. at Hamoukar.

So where does my trip leave us with respect to future seasons? As I indicated above, the most important immediate action to be taken is the repair of our dig house, and steps are already being taken as I type this report (notoriously late as always). Less than two months after my return to Chicago, my suitcase is packed again. In a few days I will once again take off for Syria, this time to stabilize and repair the house before this year's winter rains start in October/November. Once the furniture is brought back from Deir ez-Zor, the house should be inhabitable again by spring 2005, when I hope to have a small field season. At present I am looking for financial sources to fund a big season in fall of 2005.

Our work continues here in Chicago. We are currently talking about a comprehensive publication of the first three seasons. I also plan to develop a comprehensive Web site for Hamoukar that will become a vital tool for data publication. Paper publications are good for narrative accounts, but extensive illustrations are expensive especially when used for color photographs. This is where Web-publications come in handy. In addition, archaeological data contains many spatial components that are better shown in interactive presentations than on paper. Archaeological plans, for example, can be marked up with hyperlinks: arrows inserted into plans can open photographs taken from that particular angle; object findspots can be indicated in a plan and linked to object descriptions and photographs; queries can highlight the findspots of sealings with the same seal impressed on it. With such tools available, a comprehensive functional approach to architectural units, whether of administrative, cultic, industrial, or domestic nature, becomes much easier. An online dissemination would also reach a much wider audience, including scholars in related fields such as Anthropology or Behavioral Studies.

In conclusion, I would like to express a heartfelt word of thanks to all of those who have supported Hamoukar financially in the past, in particular to the "Friends of Hamoukar." Considering that we had only three field seasons, thus far the results have been astounding. Yet we have barely scratched the surface of this astonishing site, and I anticipate decades of fruitful work to come. Following McGuire Gibson as director of a project is a challenge, but I will do my best to be a worthy successor. By next year our dig house will have been restored to its former glory, so that once more we can receive visitors in style who want to examine our results firsthand, and at night join us in watching the magnificent display of stars, which I hope will continue to shine benevolently on our work at Hamoukar.