

HAMOUKAR

McGuire Gibson

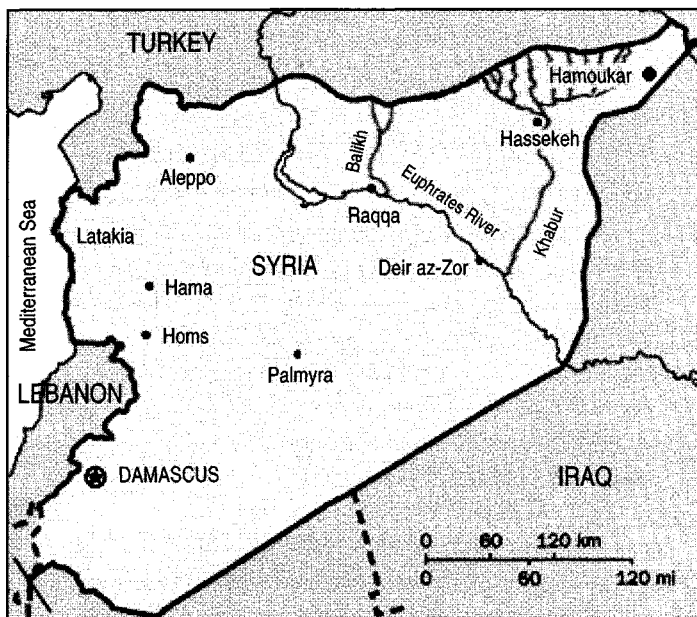
Would anyone believe that archaeologists sometimes want to find fewer things? Having decided to build a dig house at Hamoukar, the large early city site in northeastern Syria, we knew we would have less time during the second season than we had in 1999. In that first campaign, areas A and B produced hundreds of artifacts in contexts that we were able to relate to the beginnings of complex society. A large group of artifacts such as that would be very difficult to process with the reduced staff that I was taking to the field. Therefore, in the second season, in the autumn of 2000, the actual time of excavation was to be shorter and less intensive than the previous campaign. As it turned out, we still found dozens of objects in area C, where we concentrated the work, and they still had to be photographed, drawn, and prepared for submission to the museum. That is the kind of site Hamoukar is. You dig a hole and things pour out, sort of like Nippur.

My plan was to get to the site about a month before anyone else and get the house up before the rest of the staff arrived. If all had worked as it might have, the house could have been finished in a month, at least enough so that we could have occupied part of it.

In order to get the basic construction done in a month, however, we had to have all the mudbricks made and ready for use by the time I arrived. In the previous year, I had signed a contract with a local man to have 30,000 mudbricks made in the early summer. But about a week before I left Chicago, I received an e-mail from my new co-director, Dr. Amr al-Azm, saying that the contract for bricks had not been carried to completion and that we had only about 3,000 bricks on-site. That number would do no more than one room, and the house was to be a big one, with nineteen rooms.

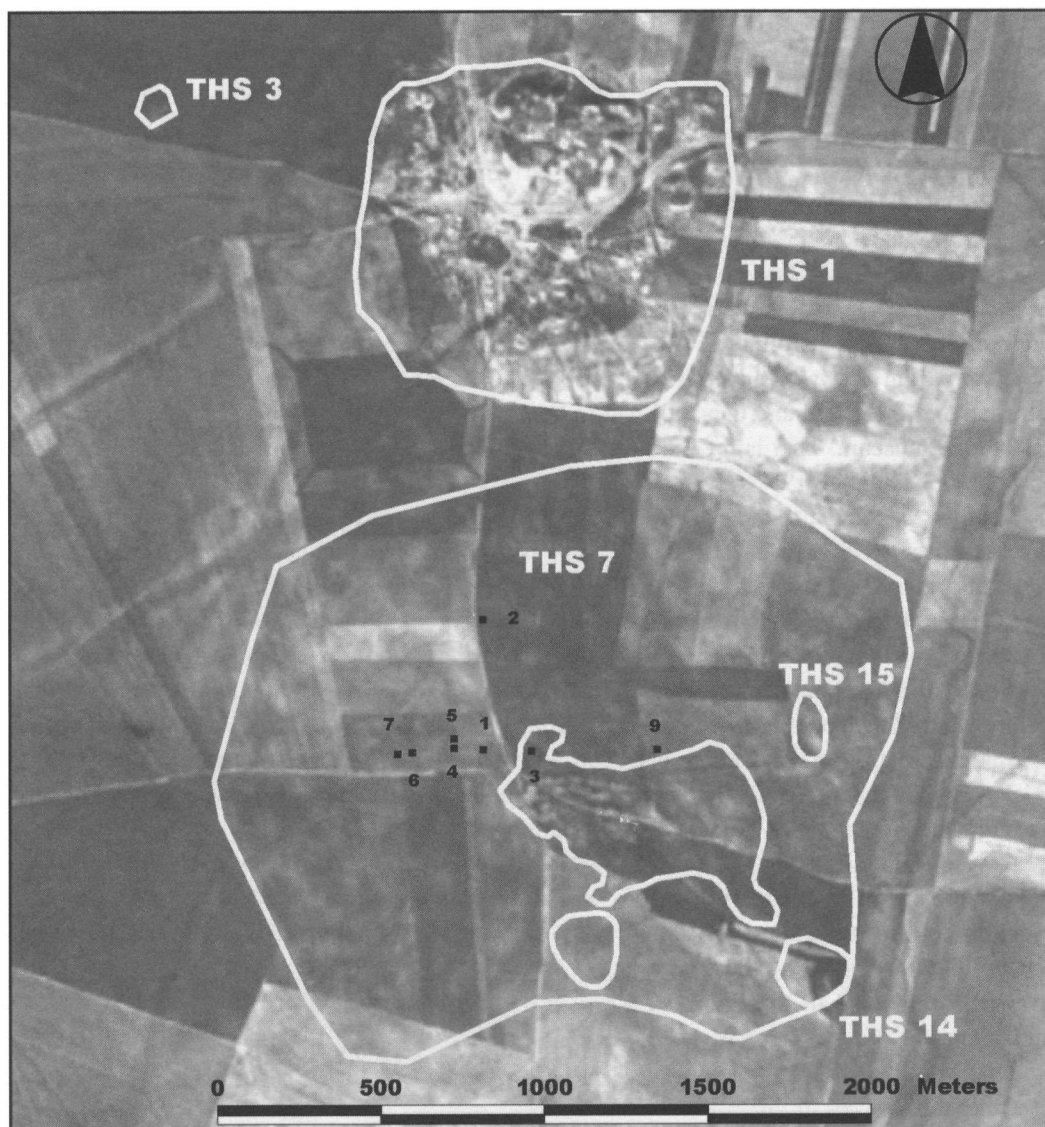
Having arrived in Damascus on 11 August 2000, I went to Hamoukar with Amr to check into the situation. The problem with the bricks had arisen mainly as a result of the shift from the previous co-director, Muhammad Maktash, to Dr. Amr. The brickmaker thought that the previous co-director had to be there to oversee the making of the bricks, and when he did not appear, he stopped working.

Amr and I stayed in the village for a couple of days, in the house of a man who works with us. Here, rather than the break from the rest of the world that used to come during a stay in a Middle Eastern village, we had unrelenting access to CNN, BBC, and dozens of other "news" outfits through the satellite dish that stood outside the door. You just can't escape anymore. How soon will our workmen be sort-of working while they talk into cell phones?



Map showing Hamoukar in northeast corner of Syria

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Satellite photograph showing Hamoukar, southern extension, and pits mentioned in text

For three days, we drove around the countryside seeking bricks. Eventually, we were directed to a village about 70 km south of Hamoukar, where the people do nothing but make mudbricks. Their houses sit on a peninsula in the middle of an ever-widening hole. After some drinking of tea and much negotiating, we settled on a price, and our project became a bonanza for that village for the next month. We bought up 10,000 bricks that were already made and had been curing in the sun for a week and arranged for them to be transported to Hamoukar so that the builder could begin work. From then on, as fast as the villagers could make bricks and let them dry a week, we would haul them away.

The building of the house was very instructive for someone who digs up very similar ancient constructions made of unbaked bricks. Watching the mason, Ali, work with his crew of seven men was a lesson in simplicity and sophistication. Although he has little formal schooling, Ali is a whiz at mathematics and geometry. Throughout the work, his basic tools were string, a long

tape, a hatchet, and a level. I had a plan, but all he needed to know was how we wanted the building to be oriented and where the ends of one outer wall were to be located. He then needed to know where the other two outer corners were to be and proceeded to lay out, with a string and a tape, a perfect rectangle. He then spent about three days laying down the bottommost course of bricks throughout the entire house, getting me to indicate where the partition walls were to be. Later, he asked me to show him where the doors were. All the doorways were indicated by removing bricks and piling them up at either jamb. By counting the number of bricks in the bottom course and multiplying that figure by the number of courses high, he could estimate the total number of bricks needed, which came to almost 50,000.

The walls of the house went up very fast, with a minimum of a thousand bricks laid each day by each mason and his team of four helpers. One man mixed the dirt, straw, and water for the mortar. Another carried the mortar to the mason. Two others carried bricks, which were placed very close to the wall that was being built. We had already hired a front-end loader for a day to dump huge piles of dirt inside the building site, and we brought water in hoses from a tanker wagon directly to the piles to make the mortar.

Ali worked with another mason and crew in order to get the work done faster, but we had no hope of finishing by the time the digging team arrived. In fact, we were still rushing to get the roof on by the end of the season, 30 October. Oddly enough, the roof was not the mason's responsibility. Once he had positioned the beams within the top course of the wall, another crew of men from the village was contracted to lay down the reed mats, straw, and clay that completed the roof. They also applied the mud plaster on the inner and outer walls.

With the house still not ready, we needed a place for the team to stay for the season. We did not want to make the long commute from the nearest town, as we had in the first season. So, after a lot of negotiation, we rented a house in the village on the mound. A village house is actually several buildings. Our house had a main building of four rooms, in which most of the team lived, ate, and worked. There was also another building with a kitchen and one bedroom, where



Expedition house being built. Hamoukar

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Neo-Assyrian level, one of several pavements. Area C, Hamoukar

the cook and his assistant lived. A separate, more elaborately appointed, one-room building had been the guest house. This entertainment room had green-painted walls and shocking pink drapes. It also had an air conditioner and a sink. Here, we decided to put the computers, because of the air conditioner, and also had two of the men sleep there. As it turned out, about as much of the computer work was done on the big table in the main building as was done in the House of Pink Drapes.

At the most crowded, seven women occupied one long room and three men occupied a small one. I took a room to myself, along with equipment, the photographic setup, and the registered objects. Early in the season, the crowding was not so extreme because most of the staff slept outdoors, the women on a platform that came with the house and the men on beds in various locations. But in mid-September, as the nights got colder, everyone shifted back into the house. Throughout the season, everyone suffered from excessive dog barking. Dozens of dogs would get into howling matches without reason, at any time of night. Our new house is positioned strategically as far away from other houses as we can get it, and I have no intention of having pets.

When I rented the house, there were only five working lights and two outlets in the entire set of buildings. We would need a lot more outlets to power the computers, battery chargers, lights, and other equipment. Before we could occupy the house, we put in a lot of plugs, lights, and ceiling fans. The fans we took over to the new house. As it turned out, the electricity coming to the house was very weak and we often blew fuses, especially when someone wanted to have a hot shower and had the electric water heater plugged in. The weakness of the electricity might have had something to do with the fact that wires led out of our house into two other houses. This was not wiring to any code. There was just a plastic-coated electric line running from a

junction, out a window, and onto the ground, where a shallow trench had been dug to take the wire and then filled in. Anyone digging in the wrong spot might have had a surprise.

Although there was a shower room in the main building, complete with water heater, the turn-off valves were broken. In the kitchen, there was no sink and no source of water. So we put in the necessary plumbing. The toilet was typical for the village, being a tiny building at the edge of the yard. There was a concrete floor and an *à la Turque* kind of fixture, for which we hooked up a supply of water. Some of the staff found this facility to be crude, but compared to most toilets on digs, this was actually pretty posh. I even put opaque glass in the windows of the metal door.

Mahmoud Kattab, the Antiquities driver who had been with us in the previous year, proved to be absolutely superb at coming up with ingenious repairs and adaptations on the rented house. He also took on the detailed oversight of the building of the new house, as a natural adjunct of his role in bringing in truckloads of materials. Because he was watching over the house building, I could give attention to the excavations.

During the season, the digging was concentrated mainly on area C, at the northeastern corner of the site. Here, in the first season, we had found a Neo-Assyrian level above a building that we thought might be a temple of about 2300 BC. During the previous season, in a small pit, Carrie Hritz had exposed a corner with a niched buttress in it. Niched buttresses are normally associated with temples, and we assumed that we had found the corner of a courtyard, and that a doorway to the left might lead into a sanctuary. We intended to find out what this building was during the six weeks we had to dig.

We laid out six squares over the area, and Carrie and Salam Kuntur, from the Directorate of Antiquity, began the excavation with about thirty workmen. The Neo-Assyrian level turned out to be more substantial than we had thought. We exposed parts of several houses and found, in each of them, evidence of care in construction. There were numerous horizontal drains of baked brick in courtyards, laid down within pavements of two or more courses of mudbricks. Wells, lined partially with mudbricks, were also in the courts. Erosion has removed much of the living debris above the pavements, but in places we recovered hundreds of potsherds that allowed a dating to the seventh century BC. Making the excavation somewhat difficult were more than ten bell-shaped pits that had been cut from the top of the mound down into and below the Assyrian level. These pits are clearly recent, judging from Syrian and Iraqi coins of the 1970s found in them. The villagers remembered that these pits had been dug for the tempo-



Neo Assyrian burial. Hamoukar

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Post-Akkadian pot. Area C, Hamoukar

rary storage of grain. There were also a few Neo-Assyrian pits of similar shape, probably for the same purpose. We encountered several Neo-Assyrian graves, the most important of which had two skeletons. One skeleton was lying on its back and was adorned with jewelry, even a toe ring. The other skeleton was laid on its right side, with its head on the first skeleton's shoulder. Thoughts that these were a man and wife were dispelled by the inclusion of weapons with both skeletons. The complete disintegration of both pelvises prevented us from determining the sex of the skeletons, but we assume that they were both male.

Because the Neo-Assyrian level proved to be more substantial than we anticipated, we had less time to investigate the third millennium building that we had found in the previous year. But Carrie Hritz was able to expose completely the space that we had thought was a courtyard. This turned out to be a small room that led into another small room. The feature that we had thought was a niched buttress in the corner of the room must now be understood to have been an altar. But rather than being a temple, the building now seems

more likely to have been a palace. That sounds paradoxical, but in fact makes sense. Palaces often have one-room shrines in them, usually with an altar in a corner. Such an arrangement of an altar in a corner is unusual in a temple, where altars are most often found centered on one wall of a sanctuary. On the evidence of the pottery found on the floors of the building, we would date this level to the Akkadian period, around 2300 BC.

There is a level between the Akkadian building and the Neo-Assyrian houses. Due to the dryness of the soil, the buildings of this level are difficult to define, but there are easily recognized small pits dug down from them into the Akkadian building. In the pits we found numerous whole and broken pottery vessels that we date to the time just after the Akkadian period, i.e., to about 2100 BC. This material, and numerous related sherds found scattered on the surface of Hamoukar, are important because they prove that the site was still being occupied for quite some time after the fall of the Akkadian Empire. This evidence contradicts a recent theory that as a result of a volcanic eruption somewhere in the Near East, or a meteorite strike, or a shift in weather patterns, northern Syria was completely abandoned at the end of the Akkadian period. Clearly our site was not, nor were a number of others.

In the coming season, we will excavate further in area C, recording and removing the Neo-Assyrian level in preparation for greater exposure of the third-millennium buildings.

We also carried out another set of excavations during the season, initially under the guidance of Tony J. Wilkinson, Colleen Coyle, and Mark Altaweel. A set of seven pits were dug in the area that we call the southern extension. This area is a huge, low expanse with sherds scattered over more than 250 hectares. The pottery indicates an early fourth-millennium date, and if the entire extension had been occupied at that time, it would have been the earliest city in existence. As remarkable as Hamoukar was later in the fourth millennium, when the high mound was an early city of about 15 hectares, we had to assume that the scatter of sherds over the huge southern extension could not be evidence of an even earlier city. Such a development would be just too early to contemplate. We sank the pits to test the nature of the occupation there. In a few of

the pits, we did find a wall or two of mudbricks, but usually there was only ashy debris. Our preliminary conclusion is that the extension was the site of annual camps of semi-nomadic peoples who were in the area for part of the year but went up into the Turkish mountains for the warmer months. We need to expand operations in this area to explore these notions in a later season.

While the digging continued, we also carried on the surface reconnaissance around the site. Jason Ur, Lamy Khalidi, and Carlo Colantoni located more than fifty sites, usually of very small size, within a 5 km radius from the edges of Hamoukar. There are only seven or eight mounds visible in that area; the rest of the sites are low and show up on satellite images as white spots in fields. The survey team would go to the places that appeared that way and would almost invariably find sherds that marked a site. What is interesting is that in periods when Hamoukar was not occupied, these neighboring sites came into existence. We have an assortment of surrounding sites, from the prehistoric Hassuna, Halaf, and Ubaid periods through the Islamic. Often, sites are located along depressed lines that sometimes can be seen on the ground but are extremely obvious on the satellite images. These are “hollow ways” or ancient roads that were made by centuries of human and animal feet plus wheeled vehicles passing along them. Hamoukar is clearly the center of a number of radiating roads, some of which are segments of long-distance routes.

Another set of studies was being carried out during the season. Dr. Amr al-Azm continued to investigate the ecology of the site and area, mainly through recovering ancient burned seeds from debris from the excavations. He was assisted in this work by Affamia Kassab. Dr. Amr also continued the ethnographic analysis of the village, having another Directorate General member, Imad Mousa, map all the houses, animal pens, and enclosures.

While studies were being conducted on the site, there was also very valuable work being done inside the house. Wurud Ibrahim, from the Department of Antiquities, spent most of the season conserving artifacts and teaching our pot-washer Ahmed to mend pottery. Betsy Kremers photographed all the small objects from the previous season as well as all the objects from the current campaign.

For two weeks, we had a film crew on the site. Bryan Boyer Associates, represented by Kathy Anderson, with a cameraman and a sound man, came to videotape our work and the archaeological contexts in which we had found the important information on early complex societies. They also took background footage in Damascus, Palmyra, Aleppo, and at sites related to Hamoukar. In order to have them do the work, we had to remove the backfill dirt that we had put in areas A and B at the end of the previous season. We found the areas to be in great shape, with our tags still marking floors in the baulks. We had to clean up some details so they would show up well in the video. After a couple of days of shooting, we then filled it all back in again. We will be reopening the areas in the coming season. Unfortunately, for visitors who come to see what we have done, there is not a lot to view — just piles of dirt in what were clearly squares.

I wish to acknowledge the financial support of numerous members of the Oriental Institute, who have become Friends of Hamoukar. Two of them, Neil and Diana King, came for a visit, having driven across Turkey and down into Aleppo, then across the northern stretch of Syria. After we occupy our new house in the fall of 2001, we will be ready to give a real welcome to anyone who makes it to our part of Syria. We should be able to squeeze in a fair number of guests for the night, and we hope that we can offer the cuisine of one of those great cooks who make eating in homes and some restaurants in Qamishli and other nearby towns a pleasure.