

## HAMOUKAR

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The noise of the car brakes woke me up again. The car had slowed down significantly, turning off the road to the right. “Here, here it is — the turnoff,” Mahmoud said, as he descended from the relative safety of the paved road into the first of myriad rain-filled potholes that somehow marked the way to the site. Though the car had slowed down significantly, brown water splashed around the car to the left and to the right, occasionally gushing through the narrow slots in the windows where window glass and door frame no longer met. After ten minutes of slow, bone-shattering progress Mahmoud pulled the car to the side. “*Shuf, shufu* — can you see it?” pointing at a narrow straight line that had started to distinguish itself at the horizon against the gray sky. “The house — our house — look ... it’s safe,” he exclaimed with unmistakable pride in his face.

We were on the road to Hamoukar, having left Raqqa, Mahmoud’s home town, at 4 A.M. in the morning. It was mid-November — Eid, the feast that marks the end of Ramadan, was only days away — but as a devout Muslim, Mahmoud “Abu Turki” el-Kitab, our housekeeper, was fasting during daytime, refusing both food and drink. We drove up the valley of the Balikh, now filled with rainwater that recently had poured down in the Turkish mountains; by 8 A.M. we had passed Hassake, the provincial capital of Syria’s large northern province, and headed across the wide open Khabur plain. I was on my third trip from Chicago to Hamoukar in less than five months, yet the scenery along the road could not have changed more between each trip. In June we passed through golden fields that were ready to be or in process of being harvested. By September, the merciless sun had scorched the landscape, taking out any remnant of green and giving it the lifeless, dusty appearance of a desert planet. Now, less than two months later, the scenery once more could not be more different. The winter rain had started early in mid-October and turned the parched fields along the dam that carried the high road into waterlogged lagoons. What had appeared dead and desolate only a few weeks earlier now seemed to be sprouting new life — myriad green spots in the brown waters gave witness to the resilience of vegetation in this part of the world, and countless birds had started to populate these short-lived yet rich biotopes. The rain showers, which kept intercepting us on our trip in almost predictable intervals, had also cleared the air. To the north the Tur Abdin, the foothills that precede the Taurus mountains in Turkey, were clearly visible; as we were getting closer to Hamoukar the Jebel Sinjar started amassing across the border in Iraq in the east.

Despite the rain and mud it was a trip that gave me great relief, for I knew that we had just taken the first big hurdle on our way to working at Hamoukar — saving our dig house. Just five months earlier in June 2005, I had visited the site for the first time since our highly successful 2001 season. While I was pleased to see that the site itself has not been looted I was shocked to see the deterioration that our house had suffered. A large mudbrick compound built by McGuire Gibson in 2000 and 2001 it was a spacious, comfortable building, well designed to accommodate large teams. By the end of the 2001 season we had put the finishing touches on the house, and we were looking forward to a swift return to the site in spring of 2002. Sadly, the complications of the post-9/11 world and a lawsuit that followed the removal of abandoned houses on the site delayed our return to Hamoukar. By late 2002 our focus had turned towards Iraq and the impending war; following the 2003 war Gibson found himself busy dealing with the consequences of the looting of the Iraq Museum and the scale of site destruction in Iraq. In the wake

of the catastrophes that the archaeology of Iraq was facing, Hamoukar simply disappeared from our radar screen for a while.

But it wasn't forgotten. Already in 2003 Gibson had introduced the idea of transferring the directorship of Hamoukar to me. Although I was trained as a Mesopotamian archaeologist and always had hoped eventually to work in Iraq I realized that under the current condition such plans would not materialize very soon. I had also worked on sites in Syria since 1992, last as field director at Hamoukar, so Syria in many respects is my true archaeological "homeland." Though a large site like Hamoukar seemed like a tall order I happily accepted the challenge. For various reasons, however, I could not act on this new assignment before June 2004, when I took my first trip out to Syria to begin negotiations with Dr. Tammam Fakouche, then Director General of Antiquities and Museums, and to Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of Excavations, towards a reissue of the excavation permit. As I pointed out in last year's *Annual Report*, my request was generally well received and I inferred that a permit would be issued once all legal problems concerning the removal of abandoned houses on the site had been solved. My second trip to Syria, undertaken in September and October 2004, originally should have concentrated on the repair of the dig house which, as had become dramatically clear in June, had been damaged heavily by rain and during three years of neglect and clearly was not going to survive another season of winter rains. Unfortunately, once I arrived in Damascus, I learned that no repairs on the dig house could be undertaken before our outstanding legal issues had been resolved. Ultimately most of my time ended up being spent in Damascus solving these disputes and working out technicalities concerning the permit. I will readily admit that it was the least favorite of my Syria trips — spending time in government offices does not constitute fun anywhere in the world. To be fair, the Syrian antiquities administration had to address a number of legitimate concerns. Hamoukar is located only a few miles away from the border with Iraq — considering the events that happened in Iraq in the past two years, the idea of having an American archaeological mission so close to the border must have raised a few eyebrows. By October 12, 2004, finally all legal obstacles had been cleared away and permission was granted to repair the house. With Ramadan on the horizon and early winter rains the chances of saving the house before winter seemed dim. Within hours after getting the approval, however, Mahmoud packed his pickup truck and headed out to Hamoukar to start the repairs. I myself had to head back to Chicago for two weeks to attend other urgent business, but following a conference on Archaeology



**Figure 1. CO-DIRECTORS' SHAKE-UP: New Hamoukar co-directors Clemens Reichel (Oriental Institute) and Salam al-Quntar (Department of Antiquities, Damascus / Cambridge University, U.K.) with Hamoukar landscape in background, following bone-shattering 300 km ride to Hamoukar in back of pick-up truck (April 2005)**

## RESEARCH



**Figure 2. AT LAST, A ROOF TO LAST:** Mahmoud “Abu Turki” el-Kitab, majordomo of Hamoukar expedition house, examines repairs of new roof over Hamoukar’s dig house, following five months of winter rain (April 2005)

and Computers in Vienna in the first week of November I headed back to Syria to check on the progress.

The car moved up the shallow slope of the mound. The long, narrow extend of the site, partially occupied by a village, had become a familiar view. In past visits the liveliness of the village had been in stark contrast to the abandoned, decrepit state of our house. With holes in its walls, emptied of all of our belongings, and with doors and windows missing, its appearance was ghostlike and shadowy — a painful view for everyone who had seen it during better times. This time, however, the scenery could not have been more different. Most villagers had sought refuge from the rain showers and the village at first seemed abandoned (though word of my arrival always seems to spread fairly quickly). Our house, by contrast, was engulfed in movement, and the noise of sawing and hammering became discernible as we drove up the last few yards up to its main entrance. Mahmoud had accomplished the impossible — in little more than three weeks he had fixed the walls (figs. 3–4) and replaced the whole roof, surrounded by rainstorms and fast-

ing during Ramadan (the poor guy indeed looked hollow-cheeked, having lost quite a few pounds). The original roof consisted of roof beams that were covered with a thick mud plaster. Such a roof type is common and perfectly acceptable in this part of the world, but it needs to be maintained every year as soon as the winter rain is over. We originally had hoped that our annual excavation seasons would be preceded by regular maintenance of the house in spring, but the three year hiatus following the 2001 season had taught us that we could not rely on such a schedule — the roof of the house had to be able to withstand the rain without our help. Originally we had planned on replacing the roof with a cement roof, but this would have been costly, heavy, and still would not have protected the walls against water damage from torrential rainfalls. Mahmoud came up with an alternative plan — he proposed to cover the whole refurbished roof with slanted metal sheeting that would lead the rainwater away from the walls. This is what we (or I should really say “he”) did in the end — it is actually a combined metal-mud roof with straw insulation (fig. 2). I am pleased to say that it seems to be working — the house survived the winter rain without any damage. Not without a certain amount of pride Mahmoud later on informed that this particular technique of roofing was invented in the U.S. — I later on learned that this is a preferred technique used to add roofs to stationary trailer homes. I admit that a metal roof looks less classy than a mud roof, but not being rained on while lying in bed also has its advantages. We will do other visual improvements over the next few years, but first we need to get the place up and running again.

Saving the house from collapse was a first important step in getting back to Hamoukar. Yet I still did not have an excavation permit and, to be frank, I was not sure what our chances were to

do fieldwork in the foreseeable future. In April 2005 I undertook another trip to Syria — my fourth in less than a year — to continue work on the house but also to negotiate the terms of a new excavation permit. Once more I was well received — I had the chance to present my case to several government officials, who without exception welcomed the idea of resuming at Hamoukar. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Mahmoud al-Sayyed, Syria's Minister of Culture, Dr. Abdel-Razaq Moaz, Vize Minister of Culture, and to Dr. Bassam Jamous, who had succeeded Dr. Fakouche as Director General of Antiquities and Museums in January 2005, for their help and support. I realized that, to some degree, I had mis-appreciated the situation — I had assumed that the political conflicts between the U.S. and Syria would work against me. I found quite the opposite to be true — the welcome I received was hearty and genuine. The fact the Oriental Institute was about to renew its commitment to working in Syria *despite* the current political misgivings was, in fact, appreciated. I had hoped that on this trip I would make some progress on getting a new permit some time in the future, but I certainly didn't expect to return with it. I was very surprised, therefore, to find upon my return to Chicago that the permit had already been mailed there. I am very well aware that a number of people in Damascus, including Syria's Supreme Council of Archaeologists, worked overtime to get this done in ultimately less than a week, and I am very grateful for their extra effort in this context particularly to His Excellency Dr. Imad Moustapha, Syria's Ambassador to the U.S. for his advocacy on our behalf. The person to whom I am most indebted, however, is Salam al-Quntar (fig. 1). An employee of the Department of Antiquities, Salam is a veteran of the 2000 and 2001 seasons at Hamoukar. For the past few years Salam has worked on numerous field projects in Syria, including Tell Brak, and without doubt is one of Syria's most experienced and talented young archaeologists. Salam's enthusiasm, persistence and passion for the project was vital in obtaining the permit. As in the first three seasons, the project will be run as a joint Syrian-American project with the Department of Antiquities. I am more than pleased to have learned that the Department of Antiquities has appointed Salam to be my Syrian co-director — I could not have asked for a better person in that position!

Two and a half months later, as I am typing this report (late as always), I am once more half-packed — I will take off for Syria in less than two weeks, this time for the first field season at Hamoukar in four years. Ironically, in the end it almost happened too fast — but now the door to Hamoukar is wide open, and we are excited at the prospect of continuing our work there. A major part of the tripartite building, which some six thousand years ago had collapsed following a conflagration with all artifacts inside, which we found in 2001, remains to be excavated. The size, exact date, and extent of Hamoukar's massive fourth millennium B.C. city wall in Area A has to be established. A large third millennium B.C. public



**Figure 3. A HOLE IN THE WALL OVERHAULED:** Damage to the dig house following winter rain and vandalism: (above) collapsed doorway and window in northwest corner of inner courtyard, the residential quarter of the dig house (October 2004); (below) doorway following repair of walls and roof (April 2005)



## RESEARCH



**Figure 4. REFURBISH AND RESTORE:** Passageway between inner and outer courtyard of the dig house, bathrooms on the right side, entrance to dining room area visible in passage way; (above) water damage to roof and partial wall collapse (October 2004), (below) same area following basic repair to walls and roof, before replastering of alcove (April 2005)



**Figure 5. ANIMAL-SHAPED STAMP SEAL:** Stamp seal, bone, in shape of reclining leopard (dots of leopard's fur indicated by dowels inserted into drill holes); found in Area B pit or grave during 1999 season; date ca. 3500 B.C.

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building with its niched façade in Area C remains to be fully excavated. And those are only the areas that are currently under investigation. We know that there is a large, well-built third millennium B.C. public building on the high mound, possibly the city palace. Several large well-built private houses in the Outer Town, dating to the late third millennium B.C. were investigated in 2001 in Area H, but a comprehensive view over the layout and organization of Hamoukar's residential quarter at the height of its greatest expansion will be retrieved best with a large-scale magnetometric survey of the Outer Town in the next few years. One of the most amazing aspects of Hamoukar is easy surface access to almost every time period — whether one is interested in fourth millennium B.C. Uruk/Late Chalcolithic material, third millennium B.C. Bronze Age, first millennium Iron Age, Seleucid, and even early Islamic — it is all right under the surface somewhere on the site. The fact that “...stuff just keeps on pouring out of that site” (to use a very non-scientific metaphor) has been shown during the first three seasons. Readers may be reminded of the dozens of animal-shaped stamp seals (fig. 5), eye idols, pendants, and thousands of beads found in 1999; more stamp seals, together with the hundreds of Late Chalcolithic clay sealings were found in 2001 (fig. 6), and we expect to find more of both as we will continue to excavate in the same area this year.

I cannot close this report without thanking those individuals who have supported Hamoukar in the past and who have, on short notice, helped again. Putting a major excavation season together within very short time is a challenge, and working out the finances is clearly the toughest part. Here I would like to thank first and foremost Oriental Institute Di-



**Figure 6. ANIMAL-SHAPED STAMP SEAL:** Stamp seal, bone, in shape of lioness killing animal (probably gazelle); reverse (not shown) has seal design composed of horned animals and lions; found in Area B during 2001 season; date ca. 3500 B.C.

rector Gil Stein, who recognized the importance of Hamoukar and helped me “seize the day” by supporting the project above call. But I would not have been able to announce a field season so soon after getting the permit without the support of several private individuals. Among those I would like to single out Ms. Cynthia Bates, who in early July 2005 held a fundraiser for this year’s Hamoukar season at her home in Evanston, and Mr. Howard Hallengren for his most generous contribution. Thanks also to the “Friends of Hamoukar” who have helped us in the past and present and who will continue to receive “letters from the field” as instituted by McGuire Gibson in previous seasons. Next year’s *Annual Report* will finally contain a report on a field season — considering the importance of Hamoukar I am confident that it will be the first of many more to come.

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