

HAMOUKAR

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The current situation in Syria has not allowed us to undertake field seasons at Hamoukar for the past two years. Our focus during the past year, therefore, has been on the processing and publication of data excavated since 2005.

In addition to the human tragedies that continue to unfold, Syria's archaeological heritage also has been put into danger; in some cases it has already suffered badly. On May 16, 2012, a report called "Damage to the Soul: Syria's Cultural Heritage in Conflict" (<http://globalheritagenetwork.ning.com/profiles/blogs/new-report-on-damage-to-syria-s-cultural-heritage>), compiled by Emma Cunliffe (Durham University) in cooperation with the Global Heritage Fund, was published, which details not only numerous instances of illegal digging and looting, but also a direct impact of military actions on archaeological sites. The most disturbing images were recorded between January and March 2012 on several videos (also linked to on the Global Heritage Fund website), which show the citadel mound of Qala'at al-Mudiq, the citadel mound of Apamea, being subjected to prolonged shelling and suffering heavy damage. Even Apamea's world-famous colonnaded streets that traverse this city — once one of the largest cities in the eastern Roman Empire — have suffered damage in these attacks. But other major sites don't seem to fare any better: at the Roman/Nabatean site of Bosra in southern Syria, famous for its fully preserved theater, bomb damage to ancient houses and vaults has been reported. In summer 2011, armed gunmen stormed the Krak des Chevaliers in western Syria, evicted the staff, and looted it. Heavy destructions to mosques, churches, houses, and the historical souq are reported from Homs and Aleppo. And even Palmyra, a World Heritage Site since 1980, has seen damage due to military action.

The Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) is doing what it can to protect sites as well as museums, but in light of open hostilities its means are limited. Even more worrisome, there have been numerous reports of DGAM staff being attacked or having their work intercepted.

Most of us have been caught by surprise by the escalation of hostilities. In 2010, following our last field season in May and June, I undertook two more trips to Syria. In October I traveled with a group from "Archaeological Tours" (New York). My last trip to Syria was in December 2010, when I traveled with members of the New Media Department of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) to obtain film footage for its new gallery on "Rome and the Near East." For ten days we traveled, literally uninhibited, from site to site gathering material. Our ROM crew agreed that Syria was one of the most magnificent and friendliest countries to work in, and they were determined to return in due course to work on a Hamoukar documentary.

While the situation in eastern Syria, notably the Jazirah east of the Euphrates, is somewhat quieter, different challenges and dangers are posed to archeological sites. With limited government control there is widespread danger to sites due to uncontrolled agricultural or irrigation projects. And there is the ever-present danger of new building projects on mounds outside of the agricultural land.

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From what we can find out, Hamoukar has suffered some damage. In April 2011 Salam al-Kuntar, my co-director, undertook a trip to the site, having heard from the site guard about damage to the roof of our dig house after the 2010 winter storms. Fortunately it turned out that the damage was limited to parts of the metal cover which Mahmoud el-Kittab, our house-keeper, had installed in 2004 to protect the underlying mud roof from rain damage. I managed to send Salam some money to perform the necessary repairs. The site otherwise seemed fine, with the village hoping for our return in the near future.

Much changed over the ensuing year. When Salam returned in spring 2012 our hopes of resuming work in the near future had evaporated. The absence of government control in the village was immediately noticeable to Salam when she got out of the car and almost fell into a huge bulldozer cut of about 100 x 30 feet right in front of our house (fig. 1). It turned out to have been dug by local administrators who were working on an add-on to a school building



Figure 1. Hamoukar, April 2012: illegal bulldozer cut into site for new school building



Figure 2. Hamoukar, April 2012: substantial Early Bronze Age wall visible in illegal bulldozer cut

that had been built a few years ago to the northeast of our dig house. The contractors, upon being challenged, claimed to be unaware of the fact that they were digging a hole into a major archaeological site. Even to an untrained eye, the damage caused by this trench is immediately apparent. One of the photographs (fig. 2) forwarded by Salam shows a 2 meter (6 ft) wide mud-brick wall which had been dissected by the bulldozer. We had long suspected that there is a major Early Bronze Age building (2500–2000 BC) below and next to our dig house. Over the years we had taken every precaution to avoid damage to it — at times even uprooting trees that could have damaged the brickwork. Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine that we would save it only to have it bulldozed. More damage, unfortunately, is being done, with new houses appearing all over the site (fig. 3). The overall damage may still be minor, but more houses on

the site means less available excavation area in the future, whenever we (or someone else) will be able to resume work.

The danger to the site has not remained unnoticed, and I was pleased to hear that Hamoukar has been entered into Syria's list of National Heritage Sites. Plans are in the making to curb the development of houses through a zoning plan, but we will have to see if its implementation is going to be possible right now.

Our thoughts are with our colleagues with whom we have established much more of a working relationship, and hope for their safety. Despite the current halt on excavations work on Hamoukar has by no means stopped. Salam continued her work on the Late Chalcolithic materials from the Southern Extension, which formed the basis of her PhD research. Kate Grossman, who has undertaken several soundings in 2008 and 2010 to study the Ninevite V period — the earlier part of the third millennium BC occupation at Hamoukar — has completed a first draft of her dissertation, which she hopes to defend during the course of the upcoming academic year. My own work has focused on Area B on the high mound, where we had exposed the remains of Hamoukar's Late Chalcolithic city, which was destroyed by warfare around 3500 BC. Tate Paulette resumed his work on Area C, where we exposed a complex of late third millennium BC public buildings.

Despite the current hiatus in fieldwork we have been making discoveries, even if only in our notebooks, on drawing boards, and through pottery charts. As I indicated above, most of my own work has focused on completing the plans for Area B. Last year I reported the results from 2010, which added substantially not only to our understanding of the layout of this area of the city, but also to its origins. I was able to offer a preliminary plan of the area, but I had not been able to study the architecture and its phasing in detail. Anyone who has written up an excavation in detail knows what the challenges are: reading through notebooks, trench summaries, and locus descriptions; adding locus numbers and elevations to walls, floors, features in the plans to re-evaluate the phasing of the architecture; plotting artifacts to study their distribution, allowing us to draw conclusions on the functions of these buildings; comparing field photographs with the plans to check for accuracy. And so on.

Over the past year, the story line evolved. Since the resumption of excavations in 2005, our focus in Area B always had been on those buildings that had been destroyed by fire. As I outlined in previous reports the architecture from this period — which represented level 3 within the architectural sequence of Area B — consisted of two complexes (Complexes A and B), each built around square central courtyards that opened up to tripartite buildings along their northern sides (see fig. 6). Already in 2006, however, we had encountered the remains of buildings in the northern part of the excavation area that did not show



Figure 3. Hamoukar, April 2012: illegal building next to dig house

any fire destruction. When in 2008 we expanded the excavation farther to the north it became apparent that the burning magically stopped along the northern walls of Complex B. This riddle was finally solved in 2010, when we picked up the destruction level again farther to the north and discovered a third tripartite building. It became obvious that, prior to their destruction, extensive terracing had been undertaken in the southern part of Area B to form an even ground level for Complex A and B. Stratigraphically, this created an interesting challenge: Though these Complexes were found at a lower level than the architectural remains to the north of them they actually were later. Any architecture in the latter area that would have been contemporary with Complexes A and B would have been built at a higher elevation, and hence has eroded away. The architecture that we had encountered in this area, accordingly, predated level 3. Unlike the burnt buildings, the morphology and stratigraphy of these earlier pre-level 3 buildings had remained poorly understood. With their incomplete plans and having been excavated accidentally to some degree, I largely ignored them during previous discussions, hoping to excavate them more comprehensively in the foreseeable future.

With no prospect of further excavations in sight, however, I started connecting the dots (quite literally), only to be surprised. The earlier architecture belonged to two major levels (6 and 4) that were separated by a poorly defined intermediate phase (5). Despite the incomplete plans it became clear that these were the remains of much more substantial buildings than those associated with burnt level 3. The architecture of both levels 6 and 4 is dominated by large rooms and courtyards. At level 6, at least one corridor with bent-axis entrance appears to have been lockable, confirming that some level of administrative control was exercised here (fig. 4). Surprisingly, only two clay sealings, found in one of the courtyards (-cj-), can be associated with this level. The architecture of level 4, which followed a series of ephemeral rebuildings grouped together as level 5 (though not necessarily all contemporary), was similar in size and morphology to level 6, but not following its layout, reinforcing the notion that there was some discontinuity between them (fig. 5). As in the earlier level, the architecture is dominated by large rooms and courtyards, but here we find the building units separated by narrow corridors (-dd-, -dl-). One of these corridors (-ba-), which opens toward a square central courtyard (-ax-) in the south, had a lockable doorway on its northern and possibly also on its southern end. Unlike in level 6, we found a large number of clay sealings in association with level 4 — most of them, in fact, in courtyard -ax- just outside corridor -ba-. All the sealings from level 4 were impressed with stamp seals of local Late Chalcolithic type and, as far as I can tell, all of them represent container sealings.

The plan of Phase 3, which I have rendered in previous reports but now can be shown in a much more complete version, appears to be a departure from the previous architecture (fig. 6). The southern part of the architecture is now dominated by Complexes A and B with their respective tripartite buildings. Remains of a third complex (labeled C-C), of which only the tripartite building survived, were found along the northern edge of the excavation area, with the remains of the building to the south eroded away. Due to the fire destruction we found a rich artifact pattern that had been left in its functional context. Most notably, we recovered over 2,000 clay sealings from it. As already explained in a summary in *News & Notes* (#211, Fall 2011), the distribution of these sealings is anything but random. Door sealings were found on floors or on dumps close to doorways. Sealings found in the debris, seemingly coming from an upper floor, were used to close containers, mostly baskets or bags. Compared to the walls of levels 6 and 4, the level 3 walls appear thin and unimpressive. Was level 3, with all of its rich finds, already representing a period of decline?

Our analyses were not restricted to Area B. More recently, Tate Paulette, Kate Grossman, and I prepared a paper for a workshop called Seven Generations after the Fall of Akkad, held in conjunction with the 8th International Conference for the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Warsaw (April 30–May 5, 2012), which addressed the possibility of a “post-Akkadian” settlement at Hamoukar. Many readers might be aware that, during the mid-third millen-

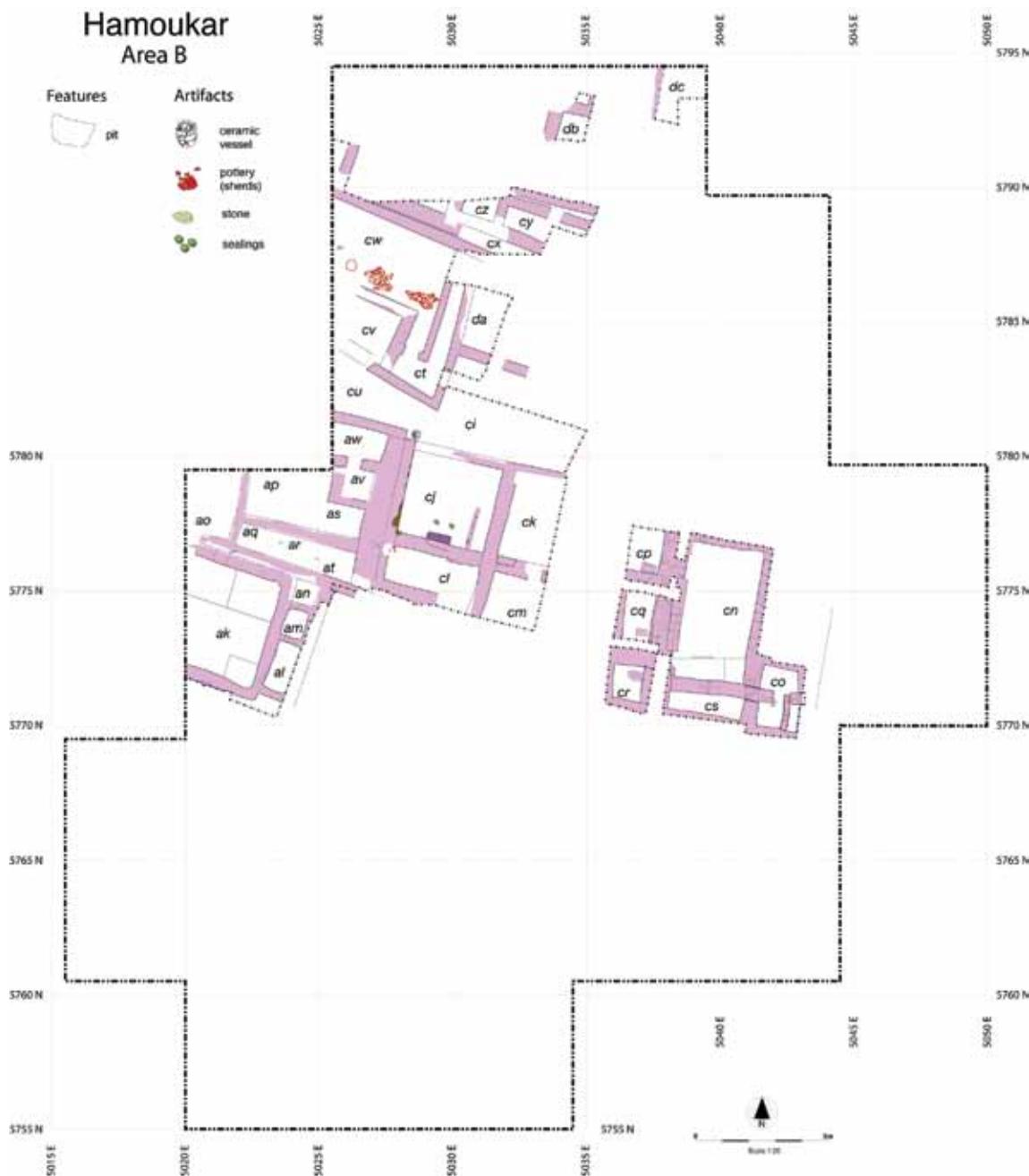


Figure 4. Area B: Phase 6 architecture

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nium BC, the Upper Khabur region experienced an urban “explosion” that remains unparalleled in the history of Mesopotamia and Syria. This urban phenomenon continued after the conquest of much of northern Syria by the Akkadian king Naramsin (2213–2176 BC). Shortly thereafter, however, it was ended by by some cataclysmic event (a volcano eruption? meteorite?) that resulted in a severe depopulation of the Khabur basin and an abandonment of a



Figure 5. Area B: Phase 4 architecture. Findspots of sealings are marked with gray circles

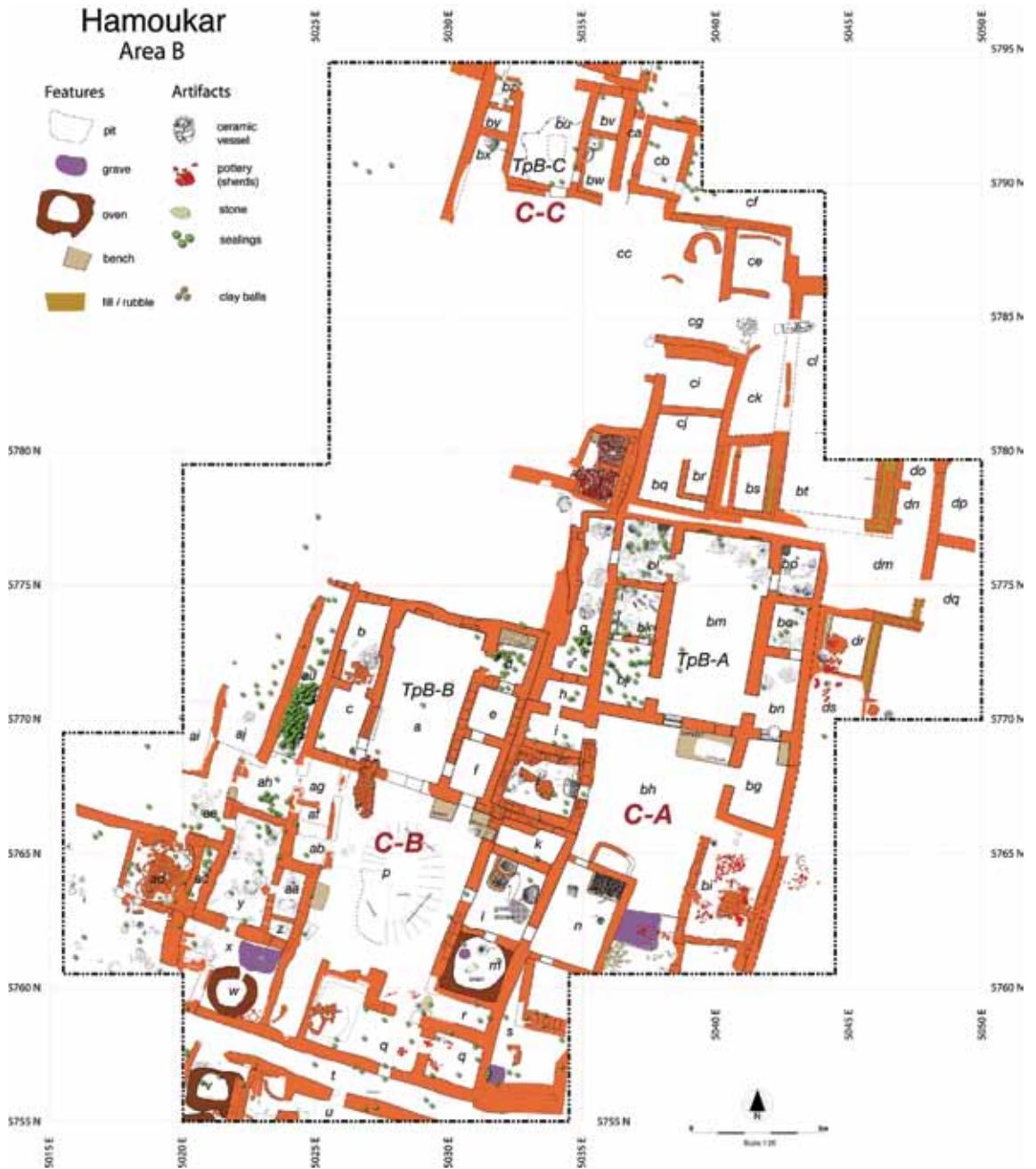


Figure 6. Area B: Phase 3 architecture. Findspots of sealings are marked with gray circles

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large number of settlements well into the second millennium BC. More recent research, however, has shown that — contrary to initial assumptions — numerous settlements in this area survive the end of the Akkadian domination. As one of the largest sites of the area, the question as to whether we have a post-Akkadian settlement at Hamoukar is of particular interest in this context. As so often at our site, the answer is not straightforward. So far we have no historical data that would allow a correlation with historical events in Mesopotamia. The lack of usable radiocarbon dates, in addition to that, makes it difficult date the end of occupation in Area C. The absence of any cultural material that can be identified as “Akkadian,” moreover, raises the question as to whether this city ever fell under the control of the Mesopotamian overlord or whether its location in the extreme northeast (at least when coming up the Khabur) would have put it out of his reach. If there was no Akkadian occupation at Hamoukar we might be looking in vain for a “post-Akkadian” settlement, but it might still be that the city at Hamoukar was occupied after the Akkadian incursion into Syria had ended.

The discussions of perils that Hamoukar faced in the past cannot make us forget the ones that it is facing in the present. I hope that it will be possible for me to do an assessment trip some time in the upcoming year. If not, our loyal friends and supporters within Syria have to be our eyes and ears. We can only hope for better times to come soon.
