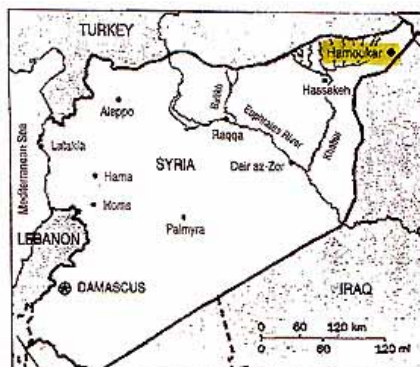




Hamoukar, Syria - A City Older Than 6000 Years?

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May 28, 2000 Chicago, Illinois - An archaeological discovery in Syria could mean that civilizations which reached city size and complexity might be older than previously thought. Scientists from the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute dug down beneath the already existing town called Tell Hamoukar in northeastern Syria. To their surprise, they found large ovens big enough to feed large numbers of people, more than a hundred clay seals with hieroglyphics used to record trade transactions, a large protective city wall and porcelain-like pottery as thin as an ostrich egg. Most importantly, the archaeologists believe this apparent city was thriving at least 4000 B. C. - which is 6,000 years ago and means it was already functioning independently from Sumer. Until now, the oldest cities with developed seals and writing were thought to be Sumerian Uruk and Ubaid in Mesopotamia which would be the southern one-third of Iraq today.

One of the Archaeologists on the Hamoukar excavation is Clemens Reichel at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. I asked him if Hamoukar could be as old or older than Sumerian cities that have traditionally been labeled as most ancient.

Interview:

Clemens Reichel, Archaeologist, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois:

"The elements of that settlement are distinctively urban so we are confronted with a city that existed before the Uruk people ever came up to Mesopotamia and that just opens up a number of new questions. Where did this concept of urbanization originate from in Syria?



Hamoukar, Syria step trench looking down from the top of the high mound and facing north.

The wall extending in the center foreground is Islamic (ca. 700-1000 A. D.) followed by two levels of early Bronze Age architecture around 3000 B. C. and a substantial Late Chalcolithic wall of 4,000 B. C. vintage, possibly an early city wall. Photograph courtesy Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, © 2000.

IN OTHER WORDS, WHY IF THE TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC VIEW WAS CORRECT - HOW COULD THERE HAVE BEEN A CITY THAT WAS ESSENTIALLY SOPHISTICATED AND PRE-DATING URUK WHICH WAS IN MESOPOTAMIA AND, UNTIL THIS DISCOVERY, CONSIDERED TO BE THE OLDEST?

That's correct. That's the question we are asking ourselves as well. A small correction - we wouldn't necessarily say that Hamoukar is older yet. I think that would be premature and not necessarily what we would expect. But the important factor for us is that it is an independent development and that just opens a number of new questions. We have cities in Syria in the 3rd Millennium B. C. In fact, they had very large cities. That was a well known fact and has been a subject of many conferences in the last ten years. So, finding a city that is yet another thousand years older than the earliest cities we had attested is a sensational discovery. And as I said before, it pre-dates the earliest attested influence of people from the south.

YEAH, IN FACT THIS WOULD BE A REVOLUTION I WOULD THINK IN ARCHAEOLOGY.

Yes, it will stir up quite a bit of controversy, I am sure about that. And quite obviously we need to do much more work there. We have just had our first season. We have certain clear elements that seem to indicate we have a city. Otherwise it would be very difficult to explain.

NOW, THE POPULATION THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN IN THIS SYRIAN CITY WHICH IS ACTUALLY UNDERLYING THE CURRENT DAY VILLAGE OF WHAT IS KNOWN AS HAMOUKAR, CORRECT?

That's correct.

SO, WE'VE GOT A CITY UNDERNEATH A CITY TODAY, BUT THE CITY UNDERNEATH THAT YOU HAVE EXCAVATED IS EXTREMELY

OLD AND SOPHISTICATED. WOULD THE POPULATION 4,000 OR SO B. C. HAVE BEEN MESOPOTAMIAN OR ANOTHER CULTURE?

It's always very difficult to assign an ethnicity to a population that is pre-historic. On the other hand, we have relatively clear indicators from the archaeological material that we found that this is distinctly local northern Syrian culture. Our main tool, our main way to define that is the pottery. There is a clear and very distinct break. We can identify Uruk pottery very well. It's very well known from Uruk itself and in larger excavations. And you can find Uruk settlements in major parts of Syria, southeastern Turkey, western Iran and they are always very easy to identify because they are a distinct pottery. They have distinct architecture and certain artifacts that go with the Uruk period that are rather unmistakable.

In the earlier city, however, there are clear differences. The construction technique of the walls - the bricks are distinctively northern Syrian. They are larger and a very distinct kind of architecture. The pottery is by and large coarse. It has unoxidized. But at the same time, we have found a strikingly fine type of pottery which indicates that it's wheel-made and it definitely seems to be manufactured not on a household level anymore, but presumably in specialized pottery manufacturers.

AND ISN'T IT TRUE, IN FACT, THAT SOME OF THE POTTERY THAT YOU FOUND WAS AS THIN AND REFINED AS THE EGG SHELL OF SOMETHING LIKE AN OSTRICH EGG?

Yes, I held them myself. It's very difficult to believe when you hold them up against sunlight. They are very thin, very finely made. And again, this is one of the indicators that we are at a certain level of craft specialization that at least shows a certain development away from the village. I would caution that pottery in itself would indicate an urban development. We found other elements that suggest we are not dealing with an agriculture settlement any more, but a city. If I can elaborate those points.

I think first and most significantly, we have a wall which is about 10 feet high and 13 feet wide which is just about the right location and goes around the whole high mound which is the area of the oldest settlement. And it would be very difficult to explain it as anything but a city wall. Again, I have to say this is our first season. It still could be something else. But it seems very logical it as a city wall with terraces behind it. The area circumscribed, what we assume circumscribes it and matches with the distribution of this local pottery that we find on the surface is about 30 acres. Again, 30 acres in the 4th Millennium B. C. would be a very, very large village. In fact, it would be by and large the biggest village we would have at that time. And it would be more likely to identify it as a town.

At a different area on this site, we excavated several trenches to get a larger open coverage of what is there. At this particular part of the site, we knew from the pottery that the 4th Millennium was very close to the surface. We didn't have too much overburden from later periods. And what we found there is probably best described as a series of very large ovens.



Mud-brick architecture and pits facing southeast, Late Chalcolithic level.
The partially excavated circular feature in the right foreground is a large oven.
Photograph courtesy of Oriental Institute, University of Chicago © 2000.

Now, that may not sound very striking or sensational. But these ovens are common features found in excavations. However, those ovens are too big to be used in household productions. It seems more likely are a part of a bakery or also possible that it was a brewery. Beer is commonly known in that part of the world from very early on. And certain procedures in roasting the barley and fermenting processes are very similar at the beginning of bread making and beer making. So, we're not exactly sure what it is yet. We haven't excavated a whole one yet. They are too large to fit into one of our squares that we excavated. So, again this shows we are past the stage of households that just survive themselves, that works for their own subsistence.

IT'S AN ORGANIZED CITY.

It's an organized society and therefore, it's a society that seems to have labor division, craft specialization. The persons who worked there were probably making bread or beer all day. They weren't going out into the fields and farming.

AND ISN'T IT A FAIR CONCLUSION TO SAY THAT IF WHAT YOU'VE FOUND ALREADY IN YOUR FIRST SEASON OF EXCAVATION IS POTTERY SO FINE THAT IT'S AS THIN AS AN OSTRICH EGG THAT YOU'VE HELD IN YOUR OWN HANDS, LARGE OVENS THAT WERE CLEARLY DESIGNED TO DO MULTIPLE KINDS OF COOKING AND THE CITY WALL AND OTHER FACTORS THAT SUGGEST THIS ALREADY WAS AN ESTABLISHED TOWN OR CITY THAT MEANS AT THE DATE OF 4,000 B. C., IT WAS ALREADY THRIVING.

That seems to be the case and we obviously have to anticipate we are going to find earlier material below. We have some indication that the preceding Ubaid period which represents the 5th Millennium is also present. We only have a few pottery fragments from the mound so far. We haven't found it archaeologically yet, but it's very likely that one day when we have excavated deep down enough that we are going to find something of that period and the question will arise: What kind of society, what kind of a settlement do we have? We have a village. We already have a precursor of a city at that early stage. It's tempting to suggest that, but we'll have to wait for the excavation.

AND IF CITIES WERE THRIVING WITH THIS KIND OF

SOPHISTICATION 4,000 B. C., SIX THOUSAND YEARS AGO, AND ALREADY THRIVING, IT MEANS THAT WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO PUSH BACK QUITE FAR I WOULD THINK THE BEGINNING OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION AND THE APPEARANCE OF WHAT ESSENTIALLY WOULD BE SEALS AND WRITING.

In part, absolutely. We don't have to overthrow the Mesopotamian factor yet. I don't think there is any need for that. But you're bringing up a very important point. You mentioned the words seals and writing. And in fact, Hamoukar could contribute quite a bit to that discussion. As you may know, writing originates in Mesopotamia. And I don't think we want to change that picture at the present time.

BUT IT MIGHT BE CHANGED AS YOU CONTINUE WITH THIS SYRIAN DIG?

The last word certainly has not been spoken! But even if we don't overturn that picture, the interesting, one of the most interesting discoveries that we made were about 100 seals all of which date to the 4th Millennium and most of which seem to clearly pre-date the Uruk period.



Stamp seal made of bone in the shape of a deer laying down.
The seal design on the reverse depicts three horned animals, possibly ibexes.
Found in excavated level with large ovens circa 4,000 B. C.
Photograph courtesy Oriental Institute, University of Chicago © 2000.

Seals are a very important step in the direction of writing. An important administrative tool at that time. Let me just give you a quick example. Say if you have a container, a seal, a jar, or box and there are certain goods that get delivered to the temple or the palace or any kind of administrative unit, you want to control who is taking out material, who is removing it and is he authorized. So the way you do that at the time, you close the container, say you wrap string around the back or close the jar by putting a lid on it, put a piece of cloth over it, fasten a string around it. Then you take a lump of clay and press it on the jar neck or the string or over the string on the back. Then you take your seal and press it into that clay. As the clay dries out, the only way to remove it is to break it. And you can do that. But the minute you break the clay, there's the evidence that somebody has tampered with it. So, it is a very simple but highly ingenious way of administering control.

We don't have to guess on that one because along with the 100 seals we found, we also found 21 seal impressions on clay ceilings close by to the seals that we found. So we know that was the concept they had.

SO THEY HAD SOME SORT OF INVENTORY IN A CEILING TO COMPARE AGAINST SEALS?

That might be. The archaeological context of the seals was not revealed enough to pattern what their function is, or their exact context is. It was too close to the surface. But we have comparative material from other sites where such practice of keeping seals once they were removed for reference before they get discarded, so they become accounting tools. And that's a very important discovery because once you have that administrative level that you keep track, that the bureaucracy has progressed to a degree where you have to keep control of your officials who have legitimate, who does not legitimate access - by that time you have a fairly advanced level of social organization and bureaucracy.

AND AGAIN, REINFORCING THAT IF YOU ALREADY HAVE DATES BACK TO 4,000 B. C. THIS HAD TO BE ALREADY FUNCTIONING BEFORE 4,000 B. C.

Certainly, the prototypes, the forerunners, must have been in place. Human development sometimes takes very great leaps in very short time, but yes, there have to be forerunners, prototypes, and indeed, we know there are Ubaid periods stamp seals. We don't know very much about their usage at the present time. But we know there are forerunners. But we don't have them in urban complexes so far.

NOW COULD YOU DESCRIBE SOMETHING ELSE THAT I FOUND TO BE VERY FASCINATING IN THE IMAGES THAT HAVE BEEN PHOTOGRAPHED AND THAT IS THE EYE IDOLS WITH THE ENORMOUS EYES AND THE DOMED HEADS.



1 HM 105

"Eye idol" made of bone. These figurines with their characteristic oversized eyes are well-known from the site of Tell Brak as well and date to 4,000 B. C. Exact purpose is unknown. Were they depictions of the humans? Or the alleged gods? Photograph courtesy Oriental Institute, University of Chicago © 2000.

Yes, the eye idols are again a very interesting indicator and I don't think it's too far fetched to connect them with an urban development. What the eye idol

symbolizes is better understood from a neighboring site which was excavated by a British excavation some 60 years ago called Tell Brak. There a temple was found where those eye idols showed up in great masses. And by analogy with later periods where we found more elaborate versions of those eye idols, we can understand what they are about. In later contexts, we do have real human statuary in part very elaborate that was left, put up in the temple as a votive gift. You have to understand that the worshiper or the person making a plea before God leaves his own image in his own place to be there permanently and to have his image, the eye idol, speak on his behalf in front of the god or goddess. And I think that's where the eye idols fit in. There are other possible interpretations, but they seem to represent humans. From Tell Brak we actually have eye idols that are either couples - and there is one that has a child, a baby eye idol incised in front of the bigger one. So I think the interpretation as a humanoid figures, although highly stylized, is pretty certain now.

AND HOW DO YOU AS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST EXPLAIN THE FACT THAT HUMANS IN MESOPOTAMIA AND SYRIA WOULD REPRESENT THEMSELVES AS HAVING HUGE EYES AND DOMED HEADS?

Well, the eyes are one of the most striking things in the human body, I guess. That's a very good question - why the eyes are so important? But I suppose you can make the argument that you are gazing at the deity. You want to catch their eyes and you want them to catch your eyes. Eye contact then and now plays a very important role in the Middle East.

ANY POSSIBILITY THAT THESE MIGHT BE THE HUMANS DEPICTING THE ALLEGED GODS SUCH AS THE SUMERIAN GODS THAT BUDGE AND HARRIET CRAWFORD DID SO MANY EXCAVATIONS IN THE EARLIER PART OF THIS CENTURY AND THE END OF THE LAST AND THEY TALKED ABOUT THE GODS LIVING AMONG THE SUMERIANS. COULD THESE BE DEPICTIONS OF THE ALLEGED GODS?

We're having some trouble at that early time to identify how gods were depicted. I have no real doubts that they were depicted. But we really have a great absence of cult statues themselves. We know how gods were depicted from seals and terra cotta from later periods. But at that early time, it's difficult to say for sure how, what the nature of those gods were? Were they anthropomorphic? Were they, did they have animal gods or goddesses? At that time with that writing, it's very difficult to conceive how those gods - especially up in Syria would have looked like.

HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE THESE EYE IDOLS AT HAMOUKAR WITH THE THOUSANDS OF STATUARIES, CALLED UBAD FIGURINES, AND THEY ALSO HAVE EXTREMELY LARGE EYES, VERY ODD SHAPED HEADS AND BODIES?

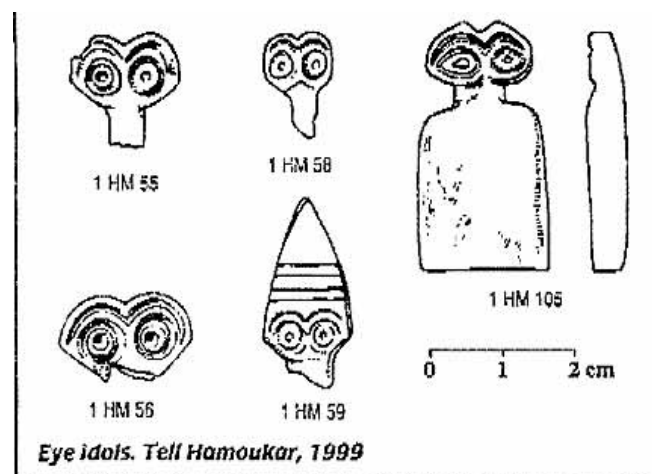
They might fall into the same category, but again it's very difficult to tell because obviously the eye idols at least where they were found in good context are from religious context. The Ubaid figurines are also found in part in a religious context in southern Mesopotamia they are found in a site called Eridu in a temple for that period. And again, the correct interpretation of those Ubaid figurines is very difficult. They might or might not represent gods. They could also identify human worshipers. I would not necessarily hazard a guess.

Many suggestions have been made about the eye idols in the past. And some of them. I know that at least one scholar has suggested to seeing a parallelism between them and certain Chinese figurines. And that is probably going too far. But keep in mind, the eye idols are abstractions of certain elements to depict humans. And as you already pointed out, the important elements about them are the eyes. It is presumed that visual contact with the deity that was the most important part for the ancient people that made them.

WELL, IT STRUCK ME ALSO THAT THEY WERE SHOWN WITH THOSE CONE HEADS WHICH REALLY ARE THE SAME SHAPE AS THE ALLEGED GODS IN SUMERIA WHO ARE DEPICTED WITH THOSE TALL HATS WITH THE ROPEY COIL AROUND THE HAT AND THE HEAD SEEMED TO GO UP. AND I WONDER IF THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THIS CONE SHAPE WHICH SEEMS TO BE VERY MUCH DEPICTED IN THE SUMERIAN?

That's an interesting suggestion. I don't know if anybody has ever examined that. The cone shaped head that you're talking about in Mesopotamia is actually a later development, a so-called "Horn Crown." It's a rendering of a multiple sets of horns that indicate deity, a deified status, and there are forerunners in the 3rd Millennium B. C. However, those are usually indicated by a simple set of horns on each side of the head. I don't know whether it's possible to see a direct connection between them. But I must admit, I hadn't thought about that. That's an interesting suggestion and somebody could look at that.

IN ONE OF THE GRAPHICS THAT HAS COME OUT FROM THE UNIV. OF CHICAGO, YOUR GROUP, SHOWING THE EYE IDOLS. THERE ARE 5 DEPICTED IN THE GRAPHIC AND ONE IS IDENTIFIED AS 1 HM 59 HAS A PERFECT CONE SHAPED HEAD WITH ENORMOUS EYES AND LOOKS LIKE BANDS GOING ACROSS THE CONE.



Eye idols discovered at the Hamoukar, Syria excavation at the 4,000 B. C. level.
Note 1 HM 59 on bottom row with cone shaped head and large eyes, reminiscent of God depictions in Sumer.

Drawings courtesy Oriental Institute, University of Chicago © 2000.

That's correct. And there are actually parallels to that I believe from Tell Brak.

And we do have them elsewhere. That's correct. You have to understand that the local culture does not simply disappear when the Uruk people show up. On the contrary, they do co-exist and one of the big questions for us that we still need to address and understand in the next few years is what the nature of this interaction was: Was it peaceful? Was it violent? Was it a matter of one side dominating the other? Was it trade-based? It's very difficult to estimate that. There has been some research in it, but it's still very poorly understood what the nature of that relationship was about.

AND THE BOTTOM LINE IS: IF PEOPLE FROM URUK GOT TO HAMOUKAR AND HAMOUKAR WAS ALREADY WELL-ESTABLISHED, WHO ESTABLISHED HAMOUKAR?

Now, that is the question in a nutshell. Who established Hamoukar? If we had the answer I guess we wouldn't have to dig there anymore. We don't have the answer. That's the problem. We don't know it. It seems to be a local culture on the basis of what I said, we are pretty certain it's a northern Syrian culture. But who exactly? And why? What is the nature? What is the impetus of people to move into cities? That is something that needs to be examined in the next years."

More Information:

Mr. Reichel stressed that the transition from villages and towns to cities that can serve large populations is what needs to be studied. Perhaps the beginning of city structures goes back further than previously thought. If so, was it increasing populations or other factors that provoked humans to move together in urban centers? Hamoukar seemed to be already thriving with urban facilities in 4,000 B. C.

I asked Mr. Reichel how he would compare Uruk and Hamoukar with what was happening in Egypt at that period.

Reichel: "That's also a good question. Egypt seemed to form states at a very early time. We know there was a social complexity emerging in Egypt, but what appears to be missing is the urban development. So far, we don't have much evidence of an urban development (as in Hamoukar and Uruk). An important question is: what stimulates urban development? And that is something that has not been understood. We do see small cities in Egypt, but nothing like Mesopotamia. Or even Hamoukar.

BECAUSE EVERYTHING WAS FOCUSED AROUND TEMPLE DEVELOPMENT?

We know a lot of things about Egyptian funerary practices and temples, but by comparison to Mesopotamia or Syria, there are very few excavations that have been done in domestic architecture. There is the Workman's Village in Thebes, but not very much else is known in detail. But there are interesting projects going on in Giza right now where bakeries have been excavated. Did they serve elaborate royal households? Or were they connected to larger city life?"

Websites:

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