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Short Fieldwork Report: Tell Hamoukar (Syria), season 2006

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Tell Hamoukar (Syria), season 2006

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Excavations at Tell Hamoukar (36°48'43"N 41°57'19"E) were initiated in 1999 by a joint Syrian-American expedition led by McGuire Gibson and were based chiefly in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Since 2004, expeditions at Tell Hamoukar have been directed by Clemens Reichel (now University of Toronto). Tell Hamoukar was an important urban centre from the late 5th to 3rd millennium BCE and was abandoned after the Akkadian period and re-settled occasionally to a much lesser extent in later periods. According to surveys, the site reached its maximum size, ~280ha, as early as in the Late Chalcolithic 2 (end of the 5th millennium BCE). Sherd scatter dating to the Late Chalcolithic 2 was found not only in the main mound, but also in the Khirbet al-Fakhar area to the south (Ur 2002). However, it was rather a seasonal or very dispersed occupation than a well developed urban centre. Only the main mound was occupied, covering ~15ha during the first half of the 4th millennium BCE. The most dramatic event in the history of the site is witnessed by a destruction layer dated to ~3500 BCE and was followed by the spread of the southern Uruk style throughout northern Mesopotamia (Lawler 2006). By the Early Bronze Age, Hamoukar was densely settled (~100ha) just before and during the Akkadian period (Ur 2010).

Several human remains were unearthed at Tell Hamoukar between 1999 and 2005. Following excavation, the skeletons were transported to the archaeological museum in Deir ez-Zor. Only the remains of five individuals excavated in 2006 were available for study in the dig house at Tell Brak in early October 2006 (for details see **Table 1**). The bones of these individuals were discovered close to the surface and as a result were incomplete and heavily weathered; even the enamel was demineralised with root etching present, which occasionally prevented tooth crown measurements from being taken and made the observation of the presence of enamel hypoplasia impossible in several instances. Following this study, the human remains were sent back to the storage rooms of the Hamoukar dig house.

Table 1. General description of human remains from Tell Hamoukar. LC2 – Late Chalcolithic 2, ~4200–3900 BCE, LC3 – Late Chalcolithic 3, ~3900–3500 BCE.

Id	Date	Sex	Age	Completeness	Comments
B 5750/5025 loc. 12	Late LC3	–	12	skull+humeri+femora	metopic suture present
B 5750/5025 loc. 13	Late LC3	F	40/45	fairly complete	covered by hard clay
B Dan loc. 112	LC3	–	child	incomplete	mixed with animal bones
Z Ibrahim loc. 252/1	LC2	?	adult	incomplete	
Z Ibrahim loc. 252/2	LC2	?	adult	incomplete	

In spite of the overall poor state of preservation of the Hamoukar skeletons, it was possible to take some bone measurements and to score a few non-metric traits. Teeth were present in four individuals and on average their crowns appeared to be smaller than in the roughly contemporary sample from Tell Brak, Area TW (**Table 2**, cf. Sołtysiak 2007), which may be a weak argument that the populations from these two sites were isolated from each other to some extent. No case of carious lesions was observed in all 40 available teeth. Enamel hypoplasia, however, was present in canines and premolars of all three individuals. This result is based on a very small sample and as such can only be used to cautiously suggest that these individuals had a diet consisting of low amounts of fermentable sugars. Furthermore, the high incidence of enamel hypoplasia can only be used to suggest the local population was subject to a high physiological stress load. Further research, however, is required to test these hypotheses. Eventually, it may be possible to examine more human remains excavated at Tell Hamoukar and to make comparisons between it and other contemporaneous collections e.g., Tell Brak.

Table 2. Selected tooth crown measurements from Tell Hamoukar and Tell Brak, Area TW. MD – mesiodistal diameter, BL – buccolingual diameter.

Id	UM1		UM2		LM1		LM2	
	MD	BL	MD	BL	MD	BL	MD	BL
B 5750/5025 loc. 12	9.7	10.6	9.3	11.1				
B 5750/5025 loc. 13							10.7	9.5
Z Ibrahim loc. 252/1	9.9	11.0	10.6	11.2	11.5	10.1	11.3	10.2
Z Ibrahim loc. 252/2	9.9	11.1			10.5	10.6		
Tell Brak mean (n)	(5) 11.2	(5) 11.4	(2) 10.4	(2) 12.0	(3) 12.1	(5) 11.2	(5) 11.6	(4) 11.5

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Tell Majnuna (Syria), seasons 2007-2008

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Large deposits of human remains were exposed accidentally at Tell Majnuna (36°40'27"N 41°03'13"E), a satellite mound close to Tell Brak, following the organisation of storage space for the harvest of 2006. A two-week salvage operation was undertaken in September 2006 by members of the Tell Brak regional survey expedition. The results of this operation suggested that the deposits were most likely the result of a massacre that took place during the Late Chalcolithic 3 period, ~3800 BCE (Karsgaard & Sołtysiak 2007; Sołtysiak 2008). Following the salvage operation, the central part of Tell Majnuna and areas west of the mound were subject to systematic archaeological excavations directed by Augusta McMahon (McDonald Institute of Archaeological Research, Cambridge) between 2007 and 2008. 15 trenches were explored in five areas: MTE and EM on the eastern and western slopes of Tell Majnuna respectively, EME in the central part of the site, EMS on the southern slope, and MTW on the plain west of the mound, along the destruction trench made by a mechanical digger in 2006 (see **Figure 1**). Although virgin soil was reached in several of the trenches (MTW), others (e.g., EM2, EM3 and EM4) were shallow and excavations exposed only the upper strata of the site. Few architectural remains were found, including a circular construction in EMS and some fragments of walls (with no clear foundation) in EME and EM2. After two seasons of regular excavations it was clear that Tell Majnuna was a large midden containing sherds, ashes, and other kinds of waste. In addition, human remains were found in almost all of the deeper trenches, some in loose bone scatter, most in dense clusters of partially articulated or disarticulated bones and bone fragments (**Table 1**). Moreover, in the eastern part of Tell Majnuna (MTE, EME, EME2), a regular cemetery was found on top of the midden. All strata containing human remains in this cemetery were dated to the Late Chalcolithic 3, ~3900–3700 BCE.