“HUN, KA, OX, LIFT”: A BEHIND THE SCENES LOOK AT REHOUSING 720 PLASTER CASTS
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“hun, ka, ox (osh), lift” or, to translate Yucatec Mayan, “1, 2, 3, lift” is often heard in the High Bay area of the 38 Oxford St. facility, a former particle accelerator, and is symbolic of the Peabody’s current undertaking to rehouse our invaluable plaster cast collection of a series of expeditions to Copán and other Mesoamerican sites between 1891 and 1895. During this period, Expedition members made paper molds of dozens of monuments and hieroglyphic inscriptions. These molds were brought to the museum by mule and ferry and were cast in plaster in the 1890s and 1900s. Since then, the casts have been stored in many different locations, first in the Peabody Museum and for the past several decades, in the aisles of the Museum’s Annex or in a large metal storage structure in the adjacent 38 Oxford St. facility. The casts preserve many details of the glyphs and carvings that have since eroded or been destroyed by looters or vandals. This summer, Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) began planning a major renovation for the 38 Oxford St. facility and an upgrade of the conditions in the Annex. A major “obstacle” to this project was the plaster casts. Could we get them all out of the way by February 29, 2008? We were thrilled at the possibility

Floor of the High Bay. November 2006, photo by Jeffrey Quilter.
To most of us, the dense concentrations of people, economic goods and services, and power that we term "cities" seem quite natural, a perfectly logical way of spatially organizing ourselves. Even those of us who do not live in a city can readily identify with the nearest one, whether it is because we read a newspaper printed there or that is where we go when we need to fly somewhere, go to a concert, or petition the government. Over the long stretch of human existence, however, cities are a recent phenomenon. They represent a radical change from our previous existence as small groups of foragers and hunters, or small villages of subsistence farmers.

Cities appear to have developed independently in several regions of the New and Old Worlds, but their earliest appearance was in the Near East, where archaeologists have given Uruk the title of "world's first city." Today, Uruk is an abandoned group of sandy mounds in the deserts of southern Iraq (southern Mesopotamia), but around 3100 B.C. it was an enormous city of perhaps as many as 50,000 persons, covering 250 hectares (618 acres). From here, the idea of the city spread throughout the Near East and beyond. As a result of its association with the mythical king Gilgamesh and the boastful building inscriptions of later rulers, the creation of Uruk and its successor cities has been attributed, implicitly or explicitly, to the acts of strong-willed and powerful individuals.

Recent research in northeastern Syria (northern Mesopotamia) has now challenged this scenario. Tell Brak is a 40 meter high artificial mound in the midst of a vast agricultural plain, its bulk having formed over at least four millennia of continuous settlement. Under the direction of David and Joan Oates, the British School of Archaeology in Iraq has been digging at Tell Brak since 1976, but only in recent years have they reached the deeply buried, earliest levels of the city (ca. 4200–3400 B.C.). In these levels, they have recovered all of the signs of social complexity that we associate with early cities: monumental architecture, specialized toolmaking, mass production of pottery, exotic materials imported from afar, and objects clearly designed to mark their possessor as a socially prestigious individual.

The Harvard component of the Tell Brak project has focused on the question of the size and population of the ancient city. How large was the city at the time that these signs of social complexity were first appearing? Arriving at an estimate of the spatial extent of an ancient city is impossible through excavation alone. At the typical rate (about 300 m² uncovered per field season), it would take literally thousands of years to excavate the entire site. While traces of stone architecture on the surface of some sites—Maya cities, for example—allow archaeologists to map houses without excavation, the architecture of Brak was entirely mud brick and long since eroded into a low-mounded surface; detailed mapping is only possible via excavation.

My colleague Philip Kargaard of the University of Edinburgh and I decided to tackle the distribution of the ancient population by mapping something that they

Archaeologists collecting surface artifacts from Tell Brak's lower town. The central mound in the background is entirely artificial, the product of over 4,000 years of continuous human settlement. Today Brak's outer city hosts agricultural fields and sheep pasturelands.
produced in great quantity, household debris. Throughout Mesopotamian history, house interiors were kept rather spotless, but exterior spaces were considered fair game for dumping the fragments of that broken dish or the remains of last night’s meal. The position of these artifacts then is a general indicator of the location of households. Conveniently for archaeologists, this debris is often brought to the surface by erosion, wind deflation, and modern agriculture (most of Tell Brak is today beneath wheat and barley fields).

Given this situation, Phil and I, along with Fahid Jumaa and Shilian Ramadan of the University of Damascus, made controlled collections of surface artifacts at regular intervals across the site but avoiding excavations on the central mound. We were guided by handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers to calculate our exact position on the earth’s surface.

Ultimately, we made 963 collections and examined over 55,000 potsherds. Many of these potsherds are “diagnostic” of a particular chronological period, meaning that some attribute (painted decoration, manufacturing technique, or rim shape) had a limited chronological lifespan. For example, at the time of Brak’s maximum urban expansion (ca. 3900 to 3400 B.C.), its inhabitants used pottery characterized by orange-red surfaces, coarse pieces of chaff and sand as tempering material, and the general carelessness of manufacture that comes with mass production (proving that some aspects of daily life did not improve in an urban setting).

By plotting the distribution of diagnostic potsherds on a map, the spatial patterning of Brak’s urban genesis unfolded. Prior to 4200 B.C., a village existed under the central mound. As yet we know nothing of its size and characteristics because it is so deeply buried, but enough stray sherds have been found on the site to establish its presence. Brak’s urban explosion began around 4200 B.C., but not in the way we anticipated. Rather than expanding outward from its pre-urban core, the city produced satellite settlements of 200–300 persons that appeared in a halo around the central mound. These satellites were too close to be considered separate settlements, but they seem to have been placed to maintain spatial separation from the central settlement and from each other. Between 4200 and 3900 B.C., Brak was a city of 55 hectares (136 acres) and perhaps 5,000–10,000 persons, a time when few of its neighbors exceeded 3 hectares.

Through time, these satellites expanded inward toward the core, and grew together to form a near-continuous corona of settlement. At the same time, the increase in artifact density suggests that more people were living in even more cramped conditions. By 3400 B.C., Brak had grown to at least 130 hectares (321 acres) and probably over 20,000 persons. On present evidence, it was the largest settlement in the Near East at the time. Brak’s urban institutions continued to develop; around this time, the famous Eye Temple was constructed, so named because it contained hundreds of tiny alabaster idols with disproportionately large eyes.

At the end of the fourth millennium B.C., perhaps at the same time that Uruk was expanding (around 3100 B.C.), the extensive outer settlement area was abandoned for reasons that remain unknown to us. Those who remained retreated up onto the central mound, which continued to grow upwards into the 40m artificial hill visible today. Brak continued to be settled in later times and was for a time the capital of a large kingdom, but it never regained its great scale.

We can derive two major conclusions from Brak’s early urban history. The first concerns the primacy of southern Mesopotamian cities such as Uruk. It is incontrovertible that after 3100 B.C., southern Mesopotamia hosted a dense network of city-states unmatched elsewhere in the Near East; it now appears certain, however, that urbanism developed simultaneously, if not slightly earlier, at Tell Brak in northern Mesopotamia. This conclusion stands on present evidence, because we do not have comparable information about the earliest history of Uruk and other southern cities. The southern cities were ultimately the most durable, but

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Asad Ali Ahmed has been appointed assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology. He received the Ph.D. in sociocultural anthropology in 2005 from the University of Chicago. Ahmed's current research centers on secularism and religion, language and the law, colonial and post-colonial studies, ethnography of the state, identities and surveillance, and South Asia.

Peter Ellison, John Cowles Professor of Anthropology, was awarded the distinction of Fellow by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Duana Fullwiley has been appointed assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology. Fullwiley received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California, San Francisco in 2002 with a joint degree in medical anthropology. Her current research is based on multi-sited ethnography, on how global and historical notions of health, disease, race, and power yield biological consequences that bear present definitions of what it means to be human. Fullwiley's geographical areas of interest include France, Senegal, and the U.S. Fullwiley's publications include "From Discriminate Biopower to Everyday Biopolitics: Views on Sickle Cell Testing in Dakar," Medical Anthropology 23.22 (2004) 157–94; and "Contingencies of Illness: the Cultural Politics of Sickle Cell Trait Suffering in Senegal" in La drépanocytose: Regards croisés sur une maladie orpheline, Agnès Lainé, ed., Paris: Karthala, 2004.

Kelly Askwe, Melissa Caldwell, and Yusan Jung organized a double panel at the 2007 AAA meetings in Washington, D.C., titled "Intimate Engagements with Difference, (In)equity, and Justice: Working through the Looking Glass of Michael Herzfeld's Contributions to Critical Ethnography."

Arthur Kleinman, who is on leave in the 2007–2008 academic year, delivered the S. C. Fan Memorial Lecture to the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong and was a keynote lecturer at the celebration of the 80th anniversary of the Shanghai Medical University. Also in October, Kleinman was made an honorary professor at Fudan University (Shanghai) and co-director of the Harvard-Fudan/Fudan-Harvard Medical Anthropology Collaborative Research Center. In early November, he participated in a conference organized at the University of Stockholm on European responses to his work on social suffering; and later in November he became Cleveringa Professor at University of Leiden (The Netherlands) for 2007, and presented the Cleveringa Address to the faculty of the University. Kleinman co-edited a special issue of the Journal of Infectious Disease on Pandemic Flu: and his essay on "Catastrophe and Caregiving," which inaugurated a new series on the medical humanities, was featured on the cover of The Lancet. Kleinman was appointed a member of the Council at the National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.


Jason Ur conducted a pilot field survey season on the banks of the Tigris River near Diyarbakir,

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we must consider urbanism to have had multiple centers of initial development within the Near East.

Our second conclusion concerns the social and political processes underlying Brak's growth. The careful maintenance of space between the early satelites and the city's central mound suggests to us a corresponding social space, and probably the deliberate expression of autonomy through distance. Yet at the same time, the inhabitants of the satellites were clearly part of Brak. Contrary to the idea that early cities were the product of powerful men and coercive political power, this spatial pattern suggests to us that Brak emerged though a bottom-up process. Immigrants may have flocked into Brak's satellites for their own reasons, perhaps because the growing city offered economic advantages, or maybe for less functional, more ideological reasons related to the growth of temple institutions such as the one seen later at the Eye Temple. Far from being the intentional result of centralized decision-making, urbanism might have been the unintentional outcome of many hundreds of individuals and families deciding for their own reasons that Brak was where they should be.

References: