

A solid tenet of archaeology is that civilization first sprang to life in the cities of southern Mesopotamia. But was there a parallel—or even earlier—development of urban culture to the north?

North Versus South, Mesopotamian Style

HAMOUKAR, SYRIA—They attacked from the south, flinging oval-shaped, clay bullets over the earthen walls with slingshots. After a fierce struggle, the invaders stormed the battered ramparts and set fire to the buildings. Those inhabitants of this northern Mesopotamian settlement who still survived fled, leaving behind a smoking ruin. “This was ‘Shock and Awe’ of the 4th millennium B.C.,” says Clemens Reichel, a University of Chicago archaeologist and co-director of the dig here; his team collected an astonishing 1200 small clay spheres and 120 softball-sized balls at the site last fall. After the violent confrontation 5500 years ago, pottery and other clues hint that southerners took over this site a few kilometers from the modern-day Iraqi border.

Other scholars are skeptical that Reichel’s evidence can back up this detailed battle scenario, and some even dismiss the claim that the clay balls were weapons. But there is little doubt that the settlement fell under southern influence. And the eclipse of Hamoukar and other nearby sites in the same period seems to mark an end to an emerging urban culture that existed at least as early as the one in southern Mesopotamia, say Reichel and a growing number of archaeologists. History may belong to the victors, but if Reichel’s view is correct, it would upend the long-held assumption that civilization began first in the marshes where the Euphrates and Tigris rivers flow into the Persian Gulf.

As archaeologists flock to sites in Syria (see sidebar, p. 1459), they are finding large settlements with monumental architecture and long-distance trade at the same time as the first stirrings of city life appear in southern Mesopotamia. “The possibility exists that the south was the periphery,” says Harvard

University archaeologist Carl Lamberg-Karlovsky. “It’s a heresy.”

Monumental finds

The century-old doctrine of the dominant south goes to the heart of our understanding of civilization’s origins. Although villages sprang up in the Near East as early as 10,000 B.C.E., researchers have long thought that truly complex urban areas first evolved in southern Mesopotamia in the mid- and late 4th millennium B.C.E. People from the preeminent southern city of Uruk expanded north and east after 3500 B.C.E., bringing with them the trappings of urban life, possibly in a quest for wood, stone, and other natural resources in exchange for finished goods such as grain and cloth. Uruk’s increasingly complex economy led to writing and monumental architecture by 3200 B.C.E. Within centuries, other complex societies with similar traits appeared from the Nile to the Indus.

But a handful of excavations in what is now northwestern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, and northeastern Syria haven’t borne out the story of the south’s preeminence. For example, at Turkey’s Hacinebi Tepe, archaeologists in the mid-1990s uncovered a 3-meter-wide wall

