a spaceship at the start of the 4th millennium B.C., you would probably not be able to tell which would take off—northern or southern Mesopotamia,” he says.

To many, the evidence suggests that northern and southern societies were distinct. Settlement patterns were different: In the south, settlements tended to be concentrated on high mounds, in part because of the danger of flooding. Southerners developed complex irrigation systems, whereas northerners generally could count on enough rain to rely on dry farming. Culturally, the eye idols found at Brak and Hamoukar hint at a religious tradition quite different from that of the south, with famed gods such as Enlil and Inanna. The very reason for the founding of cities may be different. In the south, the confluence of rivers on the flat plain spawned intensive agriculture and extensive urbanism. In contrast, fewer sites appear in the north. Places such as Hamoukar are difficult to irrigate but sit astride Turkey’s mineral-rich mountains to the north. “It may be the oldest story in the world,” says Reichel of the growth of Hamoukar. “Someone figured out how to make a buck.”

The end of the experiment
Not all scholars are ready to concede an autonomous development in the north, however. Gibson—who dug for decades at the Sumerian city of Nippur in the south of Iraq—argues that places such as Hamoukar and Brak got their initial push during the Ubaid period in the 6th millennium B.C.E., when a dramatic transition at Hamoukar, but several scholars, such as Yale University archaeologist Harvey Weiss, say that Reichel’s so-called bullets are actually clay blanks used for sealings. Reichel counters that the balls are similar to those flung today by local shepherd boys at Hamoukar, and he counters that the Ubaid—the first in nearly 20 years—is a sign of growing interest in that period.

In the meantime, Stein wants to see more supporting evidence to prove that the north had its own indigenous tradition. “If this is urbanism, it seems to come out of nowhere and then disappear—a failed experiment,” he says. Whatever the race between north and south, agrees Al’gaze, “by the end of the 4th millennium B.C.E., the competition is over.”

Sometime after 3500 B.C.E., Uruk colonists arrived at sites such as Brak and Hamoukar. But just how northern society fell is a source of dispute. Reichel contends that it was a violent transition at Hamoukar, but several scholars, such as Yale University archaeologist Harvey Weiss, say that Reichel’s so-called bullets are actually clay blanks used for sealings. Reichel counters that the balls are similar to those flung today by local shepherd boys at Hamoukar, and he counters that the Ubaid—the first in nearly 20 years—is a sign of growing interest in that period.

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A Rising Star in the Trenches
Thirty-two-year-old Salam al-Quntar discovered her first potsherds as a young child playing in the ancient olive groves surrounding her grandfather’s house, which was made in part with recycled Roman stones. Today, al-Quntar is co-director of the key Hamoukar dig, where excavators are uncovering dramatic evidence of early urbanism in northern Mesopotamia (see main text).

She is also a startlingly outspoken female scientist in this predominately Muslim country. Busy working on her Ph.D. to synthesize controversial finds at both Hamoukar and nearby Tell Brak, she splits her time among those two sites, Cambridge, Damascus, and her hometown of Suweida in southern Syria. “Her heart is really beating with archaeology, and she is uncompromising and very passionate,” says Clemens Reichel, a University of Chicago archaeologist and the other co-director at Hamoukar.

A daughter of two teachers and a member of the minority Druze ethnic group, al-Quntar chose archaeology at the university because, as she admits with typical forthrightness, “my grades were not good enough” for economics. Upon graduating, she struggled to find a job for 2 years, until her family’s connections landed her a position at the museum in Suweida, famed for its 4th century C.E. Roman mosaics. She watched, outraged, as local authorities built an underpass that destroyed ancient parts of the city. But she also frequented a French archaeological expedition in the area and honed her excavation skills with American and German teams.
And many still maintain that the Uruk expansion was a gradual acculturation based on trading rather than military aggression.

Yet there is evidence of burning in at least one area at Brak at roughly the same time as Hamoukar, says Geoff Emberling, a University of Chicago archaeologist who was field director there until 2004. Uruk pottery thereafter appears at Brak, which also shrank in size and importance. In one room, Emberling adds, excavators found a pile of 40 fist-sized clay balls—possibly an unused ammunition dump.

On the site of Brak’s old temple, the new inhabitants built a temple in the southern style of Uruk with its characteristic decorations of conical clay cones. “People didn’t just move in; they took ideological control,” says Emberling.

Whatever the trigger, the evolution of an indigenous urban society in northern Mesopotamia ground quickly to a halt, while southern Mesopotamia continued its evolution into the world’s first literate society with large cities and a complex religious and political elite. Algaze speculates that the flat plain and myriad waterways of southern Iraq made transportation easier, giving that region the edge. And whereas many cities sprang up in the south, perhaps spurring competition and accelerating the development of technologies and trade, the north had only a few scattered urban areas that proved easy to dominate.

The Syrian finds are prompting researchers to rethink civilization’s beginnings. Could the north have led the way in urbanism, passing its knowledge on to southerners? Algaze suggests that “parallel clusters” of urban growth could spur each other on, through cooperation and competition. Could the near-simultaneous bubbling of ideas about writing, monumental architecture, and trade in Egypt and Mesopotamia—and later along the Indus River—have fed one another? Such an approach could enable archaeologists to move beyond sterile questions about who was first and instead explore the complicated ingredients required for civilization to coalesce.

—ANDREW LAWLER