In spring and fall, the narrow hallway on the second floor on the back side of 9 JUNE 2006

Deep cut in the mound, with sheer cliffs of southern cities such as Eridu and Uruk. Although a far cry from urbanism, these finds surprised archaeologists, because they predate the Uruk expansion.

More dramatic evidence with the hallmarks of urbanism is now coming out of northern Mesopotamian sites in Syria as archaeologists uncover surprising sophistication in very old layers. That apparently indigenous culture challenges fundamental ideas about how the first cities began. Rather than a dominant south bringing civilization to the primitive north, some combination of cooperation and competition between the two areas may have intensified urban evolution.

Some of the most important evidence of an early complex culture in northern Mesopotamia comes from Tell Brak, a massive mound just west of Hamoukar that rises 40 meters above the flat Mesopotamian plain. Settled as early as 6000 B.C.E., Brak’s towering height is the result of thousands of years of building and rebuilding mud-brick houses, temples, and palaces in the same spot. The mound is so steep that local children hop on pieces of cardboard and ride screaming to the bottom.

Previous excavations revealed that residents had built an impressive temple with hundreds of mysterious small figurines with pronounced eyes, dubbed eye idols, which are not found in the south. That temple was dated to about 3000 B.C.E. when found in the 1930s. But in the late 1990s, Cambridge University archaeologist Joan Oates (see sidebar, p. 1460) and her late husband David determined that the temple and idols were in fact 5 centuries older—from before southerners exerted control over the north.

The Oateses also began digging deeply into one side of the mound during the 1990s, exposing additional layers that predate the long reach of the powerful southern city of Uruk. Access to such levels is rare, particularly in the south, where later buildings often make it difficult to access earlier periods. But at Brak, Oates has successfully uncovered a large building with a massive basalt block at the entrance, dating to about 4000 B.C.E. That’s a surprise, because most researchers assumed that monumental buildings first arose in southern cities such as Eridu and Uruk.

At Brak, Oates leads the way into the deep cut in the mound, with sheer cliffs of monumental architecture from 4000 B.C.E.