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Hawarte: Mithraic Wall Paintings Conservation Project : Season 2005-2006

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HAWARTE

MITHRAIC WALL PAINTINGS CONSERVATION PROJECT SEASONS 2005-2006

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The Polish-Syrian conservation project concerning the wall paintings from the Mithraeum excavated by a Polish Mission in Hawarte (for the most recent digging season in 2003, cf. Gawlikowski 2004) continued conservation and restoration efforts on the hundreds of fragments of painted plaster recovered from the rubble filling the cult cave.¹ The fragments, which were stored in three separate museum collections in Hama, Afamia and Damascus, have now been effectively moved to the Archaeological Museum in Hama, where all further work will be conducted.

The mural fragments, which usually consist of a number of successive layers of painted plaster, have been the object of separating and classification ever since the beginning of the excavations. Now, in an effort to study this new material augmenting the murals preserved on the walls of the Mithraic cave, an iconographic reconstruction project has been established under the direction of Michał Gawlikowski. It is aimed at preparing a final publication of the painted decoration found inside the Mithraeum, reconstructing the full iconographic program of the decoration based on all available sources. This includes photographic records from the first excavations, made available by the Syrian Antiquities Department, the current documentation work by the Polish team and the results of ongoing conservation and restoration efforts.

1 The team, headed by restorer Ewa Parandowska, put in month-long seasons in 2005 (24 April – 24 May) and 2006 (29 April – 31 May). Participating in the work in 2005 were restorers Cristobal Calaforra-Rzepka and Monika Czerniec, and archaeologists Michał Aniszewski and Dobrochna Zielińska. In 2006, the work was carried out by wall painting restorers Nada Sarkis (National Museum in Damascus), Najwa Abou Roubijah, Haned Qanas and Eslam Masry (Archaeological Museum in Hama), Cristobal Calaforra-Rzepka (Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology); Michał Aniszewski and Dobrochna Zielińska, archaeologists. The present report has been prepared with the help of Iwona Zych.

CONSERVATION PROCEDURES

In 2005, the team monitored the condition of the paintings preserved in the cave and undertook whatever maintenance conservation was required. A digital documentation of all the paintings was completed in preparation for the iconographic reconstruction project [Fig. 1].

Work on the fragments kept in the Hama Museum stores followed the same standard procedure in the two seasons: cleaning the backs of plaster fragments of embedded chunks of the original rock from the walls and ceiling of the cave, followed by cleaning and protection of the painted surfaces. In the course of this work, it is essential to separate the five different painting layers that have been identified during the preparation of the first bigger panel, the scene of Mithras as Helios [Figs 2, 3]. Each layer has to be documented in terms of the coloring and style of painting, and judged by its merits whether it will be mounted separately on new support [Figs 4, 5].

These activities have tripled and quadrupled the amount of restoration work to be done, but have also led to the discovery of whole figures and fragments of the composition restorable from the pieces. In 2006, three bigger fragments of ceiling were thus recomposed, and three fragments from the walls. As there is still hope of new fittings to be made to the compositions, like the peacock with poppies from the ceiling (chronologically the latest layer), placing the recomposed fragments on rigid supports is being delayed wherever possible.

The scene representing Mithras as Helios (conserved as a separate panel for display in 2002, cf. Paradowska 2003: 296-297) had been cut from the wall of the mithraeum with two earlier coatings of painted plaster. In 2006, layers 2 and 3 received comprehensive treatment, that is, they were separated, cleaned and consolidated. The composition turned out upon analysis to be thematically the same, although different in size and colors.

In order to prepare a new background, the surface of preserved fragments of layer 2 still attached to layer 3 was protected with Japanese tissue and gauze, glued with a 20% solution of PVA in water, then cut off. These fragments, backed with gauze and PRIMAL AC33, were then detached for separate treatment. Layer 3 turned out to be full of cracks and gaps. The surface was cleaned mechanically and chemically with 20% strong vinegar, after which the painting layers were consolidated with PLEXTOL B500 in water. A 5% PARALOID B86 in ethanol was applied for surface protection, while cracks and empty spaces were filled with stucco (lime-calcium carbonate-PRIMAL AC33 in 1:1:1.5 parts). This was then turned upside down in order to prepare a supporting construction of gauze, canvas, polystyrene foam, honeycomb aluminum panel and fiberglass fabric to carry the panels. After reversing the panel the surface of the transfer was cleaned, the ground leveled and protected with paraloid. Work on the final esthetic arrangement (color unification of the new plaster – *tratteggio*) was begun.

Layer 2 with the fragment of the Mithras-Helios scene was preserved in only about 15-20%. The reverse side of the painting, protected on the painting surface with Japanese tissue and gauze, was impregnated with PLEXTOL B500 and leveled with a layer of ground (lime, sand, calcium carbonate, and PVA). A layer of cotton gauze and another of canvas were stuck with PRIMAL AC33, then a sheet of

polystyrene foam (1 cm thick) was glued with PVA as an intervention layer. It presented the opportunity for reversing the panel and removing the facing with hot compresses, aided by acetone and alcohol where required.



Fig. 1. Example of digital reconstruction work: Fragment of hunting scene from the southwestern corner of Room A in the Mithraeum (left) and proposed digital reconstruction (Photo and processing D. Zielińska)



Fig. 2. Transfer of the Mithra scene from layer 1, now a separate panel on exhibition (Photo D. Zielińska)

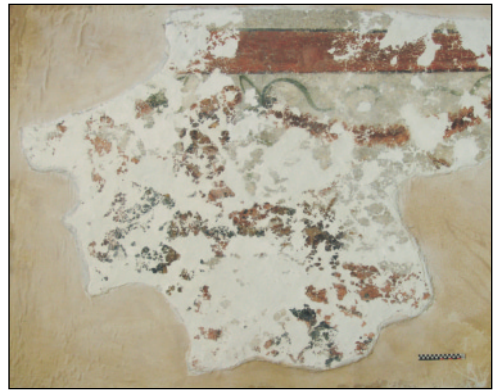


Fig. 3. Fragment of the Mithra scene from layer 3 after separation, presented on artificial support (Photo D. Zielińska)

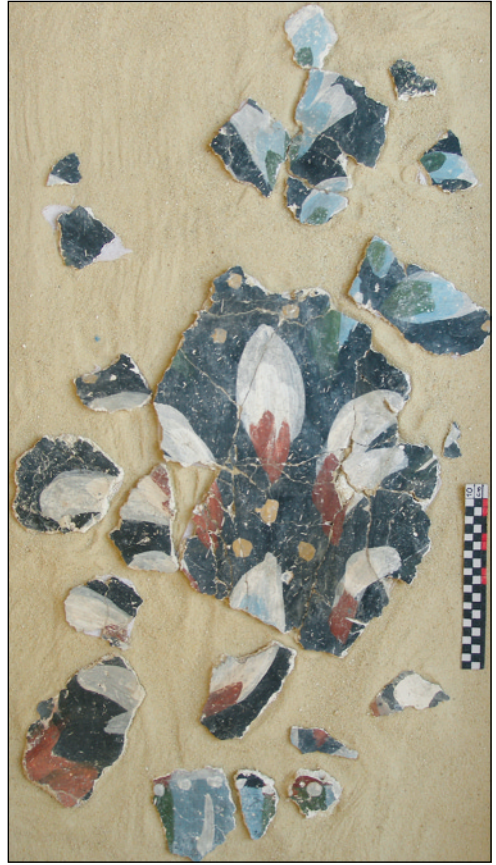


Fig. 4. Fragment of a floral motif from layer 5 (left) and from underlying layer 2, painted in different style (Photo D. Zielińska)



Fig. 5. Assembled fragments with grapevine and inscription from the ceiling from layer 2 (left) and from underlying layer 1, painted in different style (Photo D. Zielińska)

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