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## Hawarte: Project for the Reconstruction of the Painted Decoration of the Mithreum

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# HAWARTE

## PROJECT FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAINTED DECORATION OF THE MITHREUM

Dobrochna Zielińska

*Salvage excavations of the cave mithreum in Hawarte in the years 1998–2005 uncovered walls covered with murals, a collapsed ceiling also bearing painted decoration and countless fragments of painted plaster in the fill inside the sanctuary (Gawlikowski 1999; 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; 2003; Majcherek 2004). Once the excavations were completed in 2005,<sup>1</sup> and the preservation of the murals that were still in situ was accomplished, the conservation project moved to the stores in the archaeological museum in nearby Hama, where the loose fragments had all been painstakingly transported (Parandowska 2006).*

*The purpose of the conservation project required many hours and skilled attention of trained specialists to identify and classify the fragments and to separate the different coats of painted plaster that frequently made up given fragments. The excavator, Michał Gawlikowski, launched a separate reconstruction project to help with the process. Apart from its practical side, the program has among its prime objectives studies of the iconographic program of the mithreum's painted decoration. The results will prepare the ground for a graphic representation of the decoration.*

*The present report discusses the methodology and successive stages of the work, as well as some of the issues that are involved in the study of this class of iconographic finds. Two of the more comprehensive themes have been chosen for this preliminary presentation: the Mithraic cycle and the ceiling decoration in Room A.*

1 Since then another campaign of fieldwork was carried out in 2009 in order to clear the big hall that was discovered to the west of rooms A and B. No new wall paintings were uncovered.

## METHODS

The groundwork in the case of this project involved preparing two-dimensional views of all of the mithreum walls based on the architectural records, photographs of the interior and archival photographs supplied by the Syrian antiquities service.<sup>2</sup>

Studies of other, painted or carved, examples of Mithraic art constituted the next stage. Most useful in this respect was Reinhold Merkelbach's *Mithras. Ein persisch-römischer Mysterienkult* (Wiesbaden 1998). The reconstruction of ornaments and animal and rider representations benefited substantially from a study of Roman and Byzantine mosaic floors and various elements of

architectural decoration from the territory of Syria. The neighborhood of Hawarte was given particular attention; objects now kept in museums in Apamea, Hama and Maarat an Numan proved to be especially important.

The scope of the reconstruction project is naturally determined (and limited) by the state of preservation of the wall paintings in particular interiors of the mithreum. Room A presents the greatest potential for interpretation owing to the number of preserved paintings as well as the recognizable nature of the decoration. This room appears to have been the main interior in the complex.

## THE MITHRAIC CYCLE IN ROOM A

The general outline and expected iconographic program of the painted decoration on the walls of Room A was established on the grounds of the arrangement of particular representations and their interdependence in Mithraic iconography, and previous identification of some of the scenes from Hawarte. There seems to be no doubt that most of the walls, with the exception of the northwestern corner where the nature of the scenes is not entirely clear, were decorated with scenes from the Mithraic cycle [Fig. 1]. The cycle commenced on the north wall, to the right of the niche and appears to have been continued on the east and south walls, and part of the west wall, reaching the entrance to the room. The initial scenes have been preserved *in situ* — Zeus battling two *anguipedes*, the birth of Mithra from the rocks and a representation of Helios.

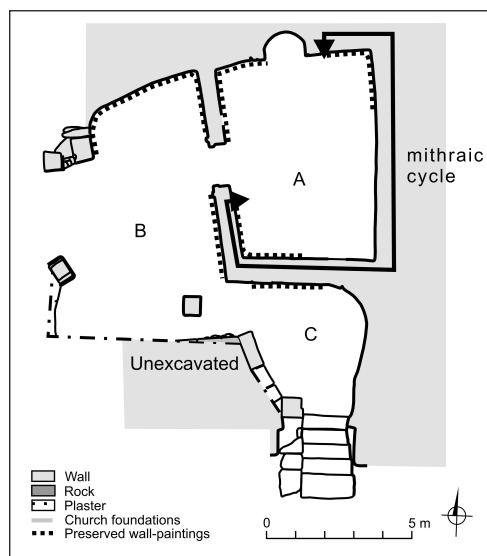


Fig. 1. Plan of the mithreum, state in 2007 (Drawing PCMA archives)

2 Preliminary work including digital processing of archival photography and partial retouching of two scenes were performed by graphic designer Monika Ozdarska.

The central section, the southern part of the east wall and the eastern part of the south one posed the greatest difficulties in view of the damages to the paintings. The cycle presumably ended with a hunting scene, which is suggested by fragmentarily preserved figures of riders in the western part of the south wall and a scene depicting animals occupying part of the west wall (Parandowska 2008: Fig. 1).

The reconstruction of the decoration in the central part of the east wall, where the most important representation was expected, made use of parallel representations from the Mithraic cycle as a base and archival photos depicting the various symbols accompanying the tauromachy scene [Fig. 3, top]. The photos helped to divide proportionately the entire surface of the east wall and to position the central scene. In turn, it became possible to complete the cycle with a big fragment of painting which is currently in the museum in Hama and which depicts Mithra giving Helios a torch. Thanks to the image of a personification of the moon, which was preserved on this fragment and which is traditionally positioned to the right of a tauromachy scene, the entire scene was returned to its proper position as the next scene in the cycle.

The next stage of the reconstruction project took place in the Hama museum where all the small plaster fragments from the Hawarte mithreum have been stored.<sup>3</sup>

The best results were achieved in the reconstruction of the main scene, the tauromachy, not the least because particular elements are the most easily recognized. It was possible to identify a personification of the sun, a representation of a serpent and raven and altars with burning flames. Bands of decoration preserved on these fragments were useful in reconstructing a border that imitated a niche. This was indeed one of the most interesting and most surprising findings of the reconstruction project, because room A already has a traditional three-dimensional niche for a statue of the tauromachy. It would suggest the simultaneous presence in one room of two such representations [Fig. 2]. Photographs in the mithreum, processed archival photographs and photos of identified fragments were combined in a digital reconstruction of the scene of the tauromachy. Based on all these elements, the presumed appearance of the decoration on the east wall was reconstructed [Fig. 3, bottom].

## THE CEILING IN ROOM A

The decoration of the ceiling in Room A has proved to be the most questionable part of the mithreum's interior decoration. Despite large fragments having been preserved (when the roof of the cave collapsed under the load of the later basilica built directly on top of the mithreum),

the reconstruction of this ceiling has remained hypothetical.

A major problem is the absence of any parallels whatsoever. Floor mosaics have proved to be of help in reconstructing the general principles of the composition. So was the meticulous positioning of particular

3 The museum currently holds 40 trays (100 by 50 cm and 50 by 30 cm) with the unattributed plaster fragments from Hawarte.

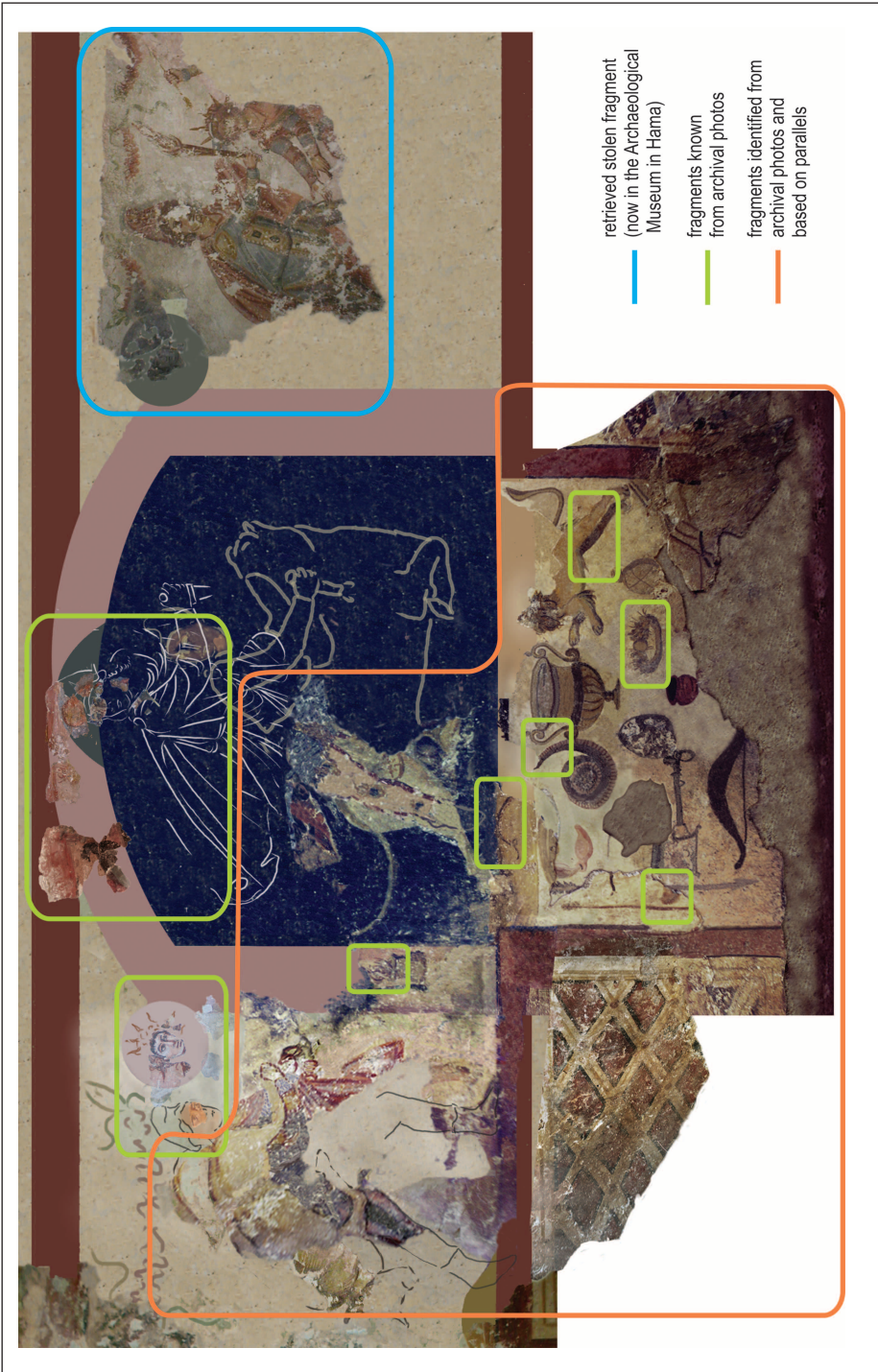


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the tauromachy scene marking the source of particular elements (Processing D. Zidnińska)





Fig. 3. The east wall of Room A, present view (top) and reconstruction of the painted decoration (Photo C. Calafornia-Rzepka; processing D. Zielinska)



Fig. 4. Reconstructed peacock motif and parallel from a mosaic from Apamea (Museum in Qalat el-Mudiy) (Photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka; processing D. Zielińska)





Fig. 5. Possible arrangement of the ceiling composition  
(Interpretation and processing D. Zielińska)



fragments found during the exploration of the room.

The combined data permitted particular elements of the ceiling composition to be distinguished. The biggest fragment, depicting birds with a basket of fruit, was cut away from the rock during exploration.<sup>4</sup> The remaining elements were reconstructed based on grouped fragments of plaster with different motifs. These include a border with scrolling vines, a peacock amidst poppy

flowers, a lion, a scrolling vine with bunches of grapes and a bouquet of flowers with an inscription dedicated to Mithra.

For the appearance of particular elements the reconstruction also drew upon representations known from mosaic decoration [Fig. 4].

Despite the preservation of so many elements, the overall arrangement and the interdependence between particular motifs still defies reconstruction [Fig. 5].

## RECAPITULATION

The assemblage of wall paintings from Hawarte is undoubtedly one of the richest sets of Mithraic art recovered from a single structure. Indeed, it is so far unmatched as far as the painted decoration is concerned. This very richness and elaborateness of the scenes, not to mention the presence of many elements hitherto unrecognized by researchers of the subject, is the source of major problems for the reconstruction of the interior decoration of this mithreum.

The absence of any parallels, especially in the case of extremely rare representations, and ones like the ceiling composition that are seldom preserved, have made this work intuitive in part.

The reconstruction project will be continued until the mithreum is completely explored and will serve as the basis for a final study of the complex and the preparation of a display of the paintings deposited in the Archaeological Museum in Hama.

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<sup>4</sup> A fragment with this representation, treated by conservator A. Trochimowicz, is now on display in the Archaeological Museum in Hama

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