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EXCAVATIONS IN HAWARTE 2008–2009

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Abstract: Seasons 2008 and 2009 were the terminal ones on the site of the Hawarte mithraeum. They led to the uncovering of the western part of the cave, nearly half of the whole, which lay beyond the outline of the basilica of the Archbishop Photios and whose very existence had not even been suspected. No new paintings were found on the walls of this part of the cave, but new data on chronology and early use of the grotto was secured. A dependency of the early church was also excavated. It was originally a baptistery, transformed later into a reliquary chapel. Two inscriptions give the name of the founder, Bishop Alexandros, and the date of the first church, AD 421. A separate cave under the apse, already explored by Pierre Canivet, was revisited and mapped. With this, the Hawarte project, which started in 1998, came to a close.

Keywords: Hawarte, mithraeum cave, mosaic pavements

The mithraeum found under the church of Archbishop Photios in Hawarte is notable for its mural paintings unrivalled not only in Syria but also in the whole Near East, and arguably in the Roman world in general (Gawlikowski 2000a; 2000b; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; 2007). Excavations ran from 1998 through 2003 (Majcherek 2004), followed by restoration work in the Hama Museum (Parandowska 2008; Zielińska 2010). A short control visit on the site by Michał Gawlikowski and Krzysztof Jakubiak in 2007 led to the excavations being resumed in 2008 and 2009 in order to explore the possibility that the cave extended further to the west than first assumed. A

An area to the west of the main church was opened in an effort to trace the extent of the subterranean complex. Digging about

4.50 m below the ground surface, in fill obstructed by huge chunks of the collapsed rock ceiling, was a trying task owing to the hazards of falling stones and sliding earth. At the end of 2009 further exploration was judged to be of little interest, as the remaining parts of the cave had been utterly destroyed in antiquity and their clearing would be too dangerous without reasonable promise of important results. For all practical purposes the exploration of the cave should be considered as closed now.

The work by Nadim al-Khoury in the southeast baptistery adjoining the church excavated by Maria Teresa and Pierre Canivet in the 1970s (Canivet, Canivet 1987) was completed, in order to evaluate its significance for the chronology of the mithraeum.

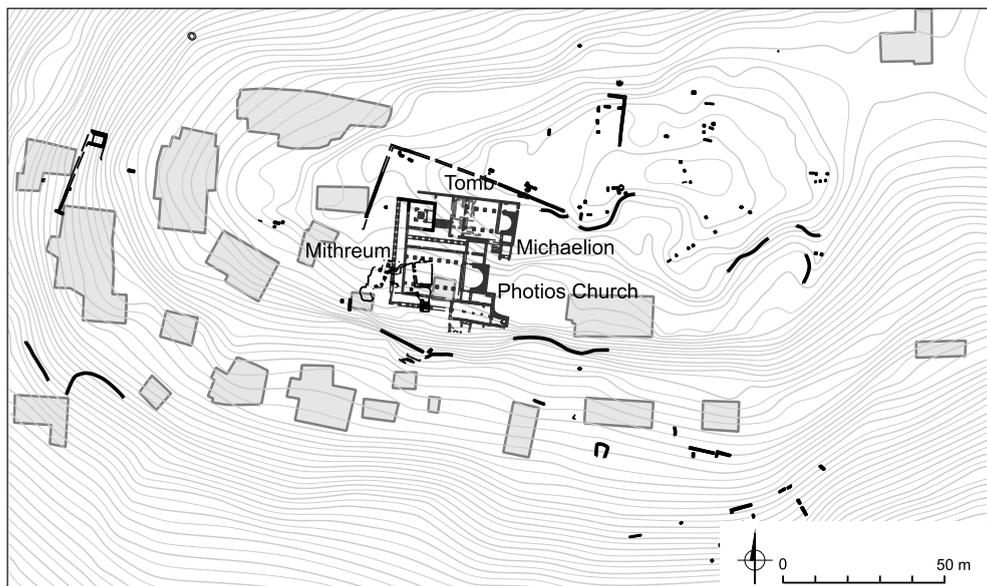


Fig. 1. General map of the site (Mapping and processing W. Małkowski)

Team

Dates of work: 3 May–5 June 2008; 7 September–20 October 2009

Co-directors: Prof. Michał Gawlikowski, archaeologist (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), Nadim al-Khoury, archaeologist (DGAM, Afamia Museum)

Deputy director: Dr. Krzysztof Jakubiak, archaeologist (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw)

Archaeologists: (2008) Tomasz Kowal (Center for Research on the Southeastern Europe, University of Warsaw); (2009) Dr. Dobrochna Zielińska (Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), Artur Kaczor (Warsaw)

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Conservators: Aleksandra Trochimowicz, Bartosz Markowski (freelance)

Acknowledgments

Our work was followed with interest by Mr. Jamal Ramadan, Director of the Hama Museum, and Mr. Abdel Wahhab Abu Saleh, who became the new Director of the Afamia Museum in 2009, after the retirement of Mr. Nadim al-Khoury.

TOPOGRAPHICAL PROSPECTION

Addressing an outstanding need, a general map of the hill on which the village of Hawarte and its antiquities stand was prepared [*Fig. 1*]. On this occasion, several new features were observed and mapped, including at least three Christian buildings, probably monasteries, but also an earlier enclosure wall around the caves on the top of the hill. It was one of these caves that was adapted to serve as a mithraeum.

Many caves, no doubt of natural origin, but enlarged and adapted for human use,

were pierced in the limestone hill. Some of them certainly go back to antiquity and most were inhabited in the recent past. None have been investigated, except for the two under the main church, but it seems that these two were the largest.

At least one important ashlar building from the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the neighborhood is attested by the presence of some reused stone blocks in the mithraeum cave. However, it has proved impossible to locate this structure.

WESTERN EXTENSION OF THE CAVE (ROOM D)

During the brief season in 2007 it was determined that the Mithraic cave extended much farther to the west than previously assumed [*Fig. 3*]. It was necessary first to remove a short stretch of the east–west foundation of the aisle of the Church of Photios (all below the church floor), allowing passage between the entrance room and the vestibule excavated in 2000. On this occasion, a new painting was discovered, representing two black demons back to back and bound together to a pole [*Fig. 2*]. Only their legs and one head have been preserved. The composition filled a separate panel adjoining that of a horseman guarding the entrance to the main room on the right. The two chained demons are thus a parallel to the one held on a chain by the rider on the left.

Unimpeded circulation was reestablished throughout the underground rooms without touching the foundation of the western façade, except for opening a narrow passage under the level of the church. The



Fig. 3. Two captive demons, panel on the vestibule wall (All photos by the author unless otherwise stated)

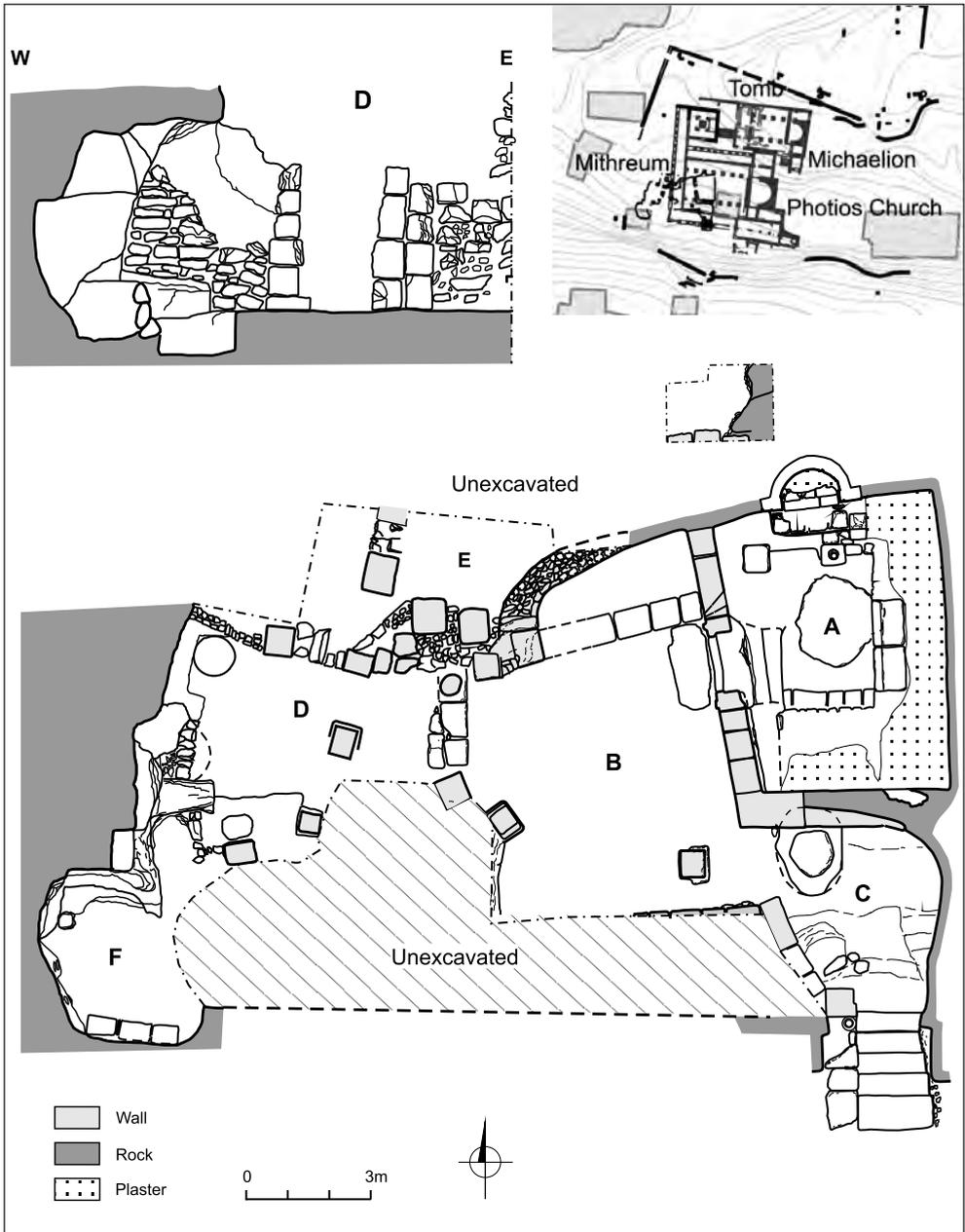


Fig. 2. Plan of the mithraeum at the end of 2009; inset, position of the mithraeum in relation to the superimposed Church of Photios; bottom, cross-section through the mithraeum, east to west (Plan and drawing K. Jakubiak and others)

work proceeded in very tight quarters and in extremely difficult conditions. The floor of the cave lies 4.50 m below the present surface and the fill accumulated on top of it is covered by large chunks of stone. The huge limestone blocks of the fallen rock ceiling, partly intentionally broken, partly collapsed, were removed one by one, either by crane or by breaking them into manageable pieces, constantly on the lookout to avoid a dangerous collapse. Some 70 m² was cleared in this fashion down to the bottom of the cave, compared to some 140 m² excavated prior to 2007.

The western extension of the cave now excavated (Room D) [Fig. 4, see also Figs 2 and 5] stretches for 7.50 m from east to west, that is from the previously excavated Room B to the western end of the cave. The cleared part measures about 14 m, from north to south but the cave most certainly extended further to the north. This part, as well as some corners, has been left unexcavated, digging there being too dangerous to be contemplated. The original cave has been much disturbed by the foundation trenches of the 5th century churches built over it and by



Fig. 4. Room D of the mithraeum, as seen from the south

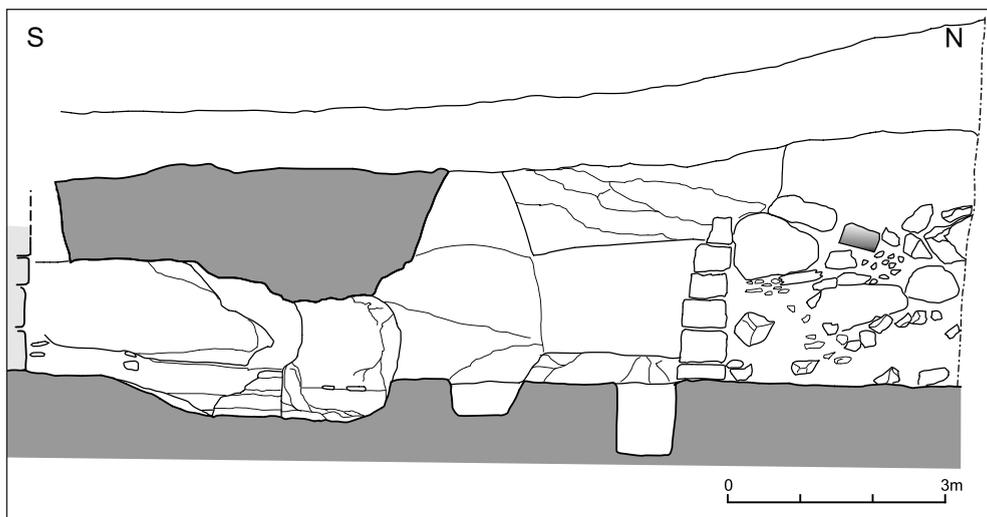


Fig. 5. Cross-section north to south through the part excavated in 2008–2009
(Drawing K. Jakubiak)



Fig. 6. Pits under the west wall of the cave

the resulting collapse of the rock ceiling. In particular, the foundations of the colonnade in front of the Photios basilica of AD 483 go all the way down to the cave floor and cannot be uncovered without risking their collapse, whereas it is certain that they have entirely destroyed the older stratigraphic evidence.

The roof was once supported by at least 15 stone pillars disposed irregularly throughout the cave [see *Fig. 4*, and sections in *Figs 2* and *5*]. The recently excavated part features a row of five such pillars extending south to north, in addition to some more pillars scattered on either side of the row. It seems probable that the apparently haphazard disposition of the stone supports corresponded to weak points in the rock vault, now missing, but this of course cannot be verified.

The pillars are made of well-squared ashlar blocks measuring, on average, 0.50 m by 0.70 m and obviously salvaged from an important monument. A few of them still bear patches of painted plaster, too small to say anything about the murals of the original building. Contrasting with their careful cutting, these blocks are heaped one upon another without any attempt to form vertical surfaces and angles from bottom to top, the latter at about 2.40 m above the rock floor. The dark cave, extending for about 20 m through 15 m, was lit by, at least, one opening in the ceiling, at its western end. It seems that, at the beginning, it was not divided into rooms; yet, at the southwestern corner there is a rock-cut, subsidiary grotto, 4 m across and 5.50 m deep, still complete with roof, hanging less than 2 m above the uneven floor. The wall seen at its back end [see *Fig. 5*, far left] is a foundation of a late building, which cut through the roof

without destroying it, but left some 6th century material in the fill.

The part of the cave that was excavated in the 2008 season features four pits cut into the floor, two of them containing ceramic fragments allowing an approximate dating. The contents of one of the pits (locus 23) goes back to the 1st century BC, while another (locus 26) was filled with debris from the first half of the 1st century AD. Both are associated with benches, in the first case sealing the pit, in the other possibly contemporary.

It should be recalled at this point that back in 2003 a much larger pit was explored in the main room of the mithraeum. It was sealed by a bench of definitely Mithraic character, containing remains of bones, ashes, and elegant tableware dated to the later part of the 1st century AD (Majcherek 2004: 332 and *Figs 8, 10*) [*Fig. 7*]. In earlier reports I had been reluctant to press this point and fix the beginning of the Mithraic cult in Hawarte that early. The new finds are even more surprising, but it should be conceded that these fragments, while still earlier, are not related obviously to banqueting activities. The beginnings of the Mithraic cult should nevertheless be reconsidered in view of these new facts.

At some point, the northwestern part of the cave was blocked with rubble walls between some of the pillars, reserving a space probably completely closed on all sides. There is no means of knowing whether it was deemed too dangerous to be frequented, or if it was secluded for some other reasons. Due to massive damages imposed by the church foundations it was not possible to fully excavate this part of the cave.

The walls blocking the northwestern part of the cave include the northern

wall of Room B, bearing five layers of painting, same as in the main room of the mithraeum. There is every reason to think that the walls of the main room were contemporary with it. If so, the operation of condemning the northwestern part of the cave also brought about a division of the cave into separate rooms as we have found them. The painted decoration is dated, on the present evidence, from about AD 360 to AD 420. In the cleared part of the cut-off cave, however, the scarce ceramic material does not seem to go beyond the 2nd century AD. On the other hand, the southwestern part (Room D) was in use till the end, as can be seen from two coins of Arcadius found on the floor, and from pottery in the lower fill, all representing 4th–5th century types.

The ancient fill of the newly excavated part of the cave, pouring through an orifice in the roof, resulted in a conical pile of debris containing a great number of painted plaster fragments [Fig. 8]. Unfortunately, no joints or complete motifs could be identified, but a careful study, already undertaken by Dobrochna Zielińska, will perhaps give an idea of the murals represented by these remains. The plaster appears to have been chipped off from some painted walls. Having fallen from above, the paintings could not have belonged to the mithraeum; most likely, they were part of some overground building dismantled in view of reusing the blocks. The most probable occasion for this would seem to have been the building of the first basilica, under Bishop Alexandros in AD 421. It is easy to imagine that the decoration of the mithraeum patron's house would have been judged unfit to remain on church

walls. This supposition is supported by the pottery found in the debris, beneath the broken and collapsed roof.



Fig. 7. Skyphos found in 2003, completed with a fragment found now at the other end of the cave (see Majcherek 2004: Fig. 10) (Photo A. Zajac)



Fig. 8. Painted plaster from a surface building

THE CANIVET CAVE

A neighboring cave under the apse of the Photios church, already partly explored by Pierre Canivet, was also investigated and a plan made; it was not excavated, as digging would have been extremely difficult and probably unrewarding [Fig. 9]. This cave is parallel to the mithraeum, but was certainly not connected with it. There is no reason to think of any relation of purpose between the two. Nevertheless, both were included in a common enclosure which could be

observed on three sides north, west and south, and which is definitely older than the churches [see Fig. 1].

Some of the blocks forming the church foundations inside the cave bear paintings of the same type as the pillars in the mithraeum, but they appear to have been reused at a much later than the material in the cave [Fig. 10]. No features going back to the original use of the cave could be identified.



Fig. 9. The Canivet cave behind the apse of the Photios church (left) and view inside (Photo M. Czech)



Fig. 10. Examples of painted blocks reused in the church foundations inside the Canivet cave (Photo M. Czech)

BAPTISTERY OF BISHOP ALEXANDROS

Two inscriptions found by Nadim al-Khoury in a northeastern extension of the church [Fig. 11] in 2006 identified it as a baptistery built under Bishop Alexandros of Apamea in AD 421, while an Apollo was (probably) archdeacon and a Sergios the

parish priest. The mosaic pavements of the baptistery, slightly later than the building itself, are strikingly parallel in style to those of the first church built at the site. Both buildings were obviously interlinked and must have been contemporary, which

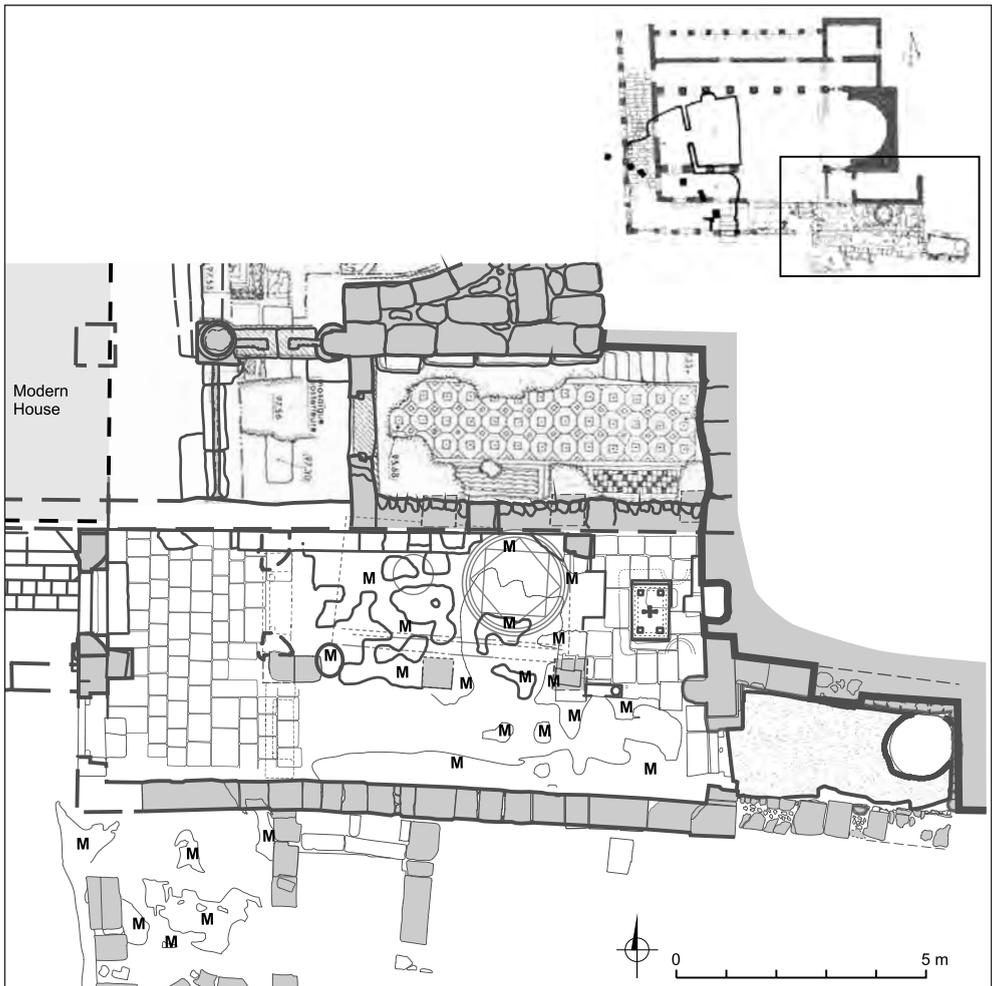


Fig. 11. Plan of the Baptistry; inset, general plan of the Church of Photios (Drawing Ahmad Bush)

means that the church is 40 years later than previously thought. By the same token, the timespan of the mithraeum is extended to include this period of time, because the first church was apparently built directly on the fill of the cave.

The baptistery of Alexandros [Fig. 12] is remarkable on several accounts. To begin with, it is a large building, which looks like a small, independent church, with three aisles divided by square pillars carrying four arcades at each side of the nave. The building is 12 m long and 7.25 m wide, with the side aisles 1.60 m and the central nave 3.25 m wide, as measured between walls and pillars. The pavement of each aisle has a different pattern of geometric

design, and the spaces between the pillars are filled with separate panels. The eastern end is straight and cut into the rock. Two doorways opened into the nave and the southern aisle, while the northern aisle was aligned with a contemporary church aisle and abutted directly on its end wall (Canivet, Canivet 1987: 100–102, 126). The floor is placed notably lower than that of the main church and there was no direct access from one to the other, but there is no doubt that they had been built together. We can quote only one other baptistery of similar layout, to be seen in Hippos on the Jawlan, whereas a much smaller tripartite baptistery has been found in Palmyra (Gawlikowski 1999: 189–196).



Fig. 12. General view of the baptistery seen from the east

At the far end of the central nave, there was a small basin (78 cm by 40 cm) barely 30 cm deep, in the middle of a sunken extension paved with marble, the whole inserted into a mosaic border surrounding it on three sides [Fig. 13].

This arrangement was badly disturbed later on, but its right half is more or less preserved and could be studied. It seems that catechumens entered the building from the south, through a vestibule and the southern aisle, descended into the baptismal basin and after the ceremony left through the main nave to enter the neighboring basilica in a solemn procession, as was usual in Antiquity. The basilica and baptistery were built in Hawarte as one of the last

steps in the process of the conversion of the Apamene to Christianity, well advanced already thirty years earlier (Canivet, Canivet 1987: 267–277).

Fairly soon after being built, the baptistery of Alexandros was replaced by another, more elaborate baptismal complex on the other side of the church, accessible through a narthex added to the original basilica. It was discovered and studied by Pierre Canivet, who rightly noticed that the mosaic pavements of the narthex and in the baptistery were more advanced stylistically than those in the church nave (Canivet, Canivet 1987: 107–109, 119). The old baptistery became therefore redundant and was converted to other use.



Fig. 13. Baptismal font and the surrounding mosaic

The far end of the nave was transformed into a chapel featuring a marble altar; its limestone base (130 cm by 71 cm), with sockets for four legs and marked with a cross in the middle, survived in place, inserted into a stone pavement [Fig. 14]. The original baptismal font disappeared under stone slabs covering also a part of the mosaic floor. A small reliquary was placed behind the altar; only its socket (31 cm wide) remains, while the corresponding sarcophagus cover was found in the dump. Another, bigger reliquary was set against the wall between the aisles to the south. It was provided with a well-known device to pour oil from the top and collect it after it passed through the holy remains (Canivet, Canivet 1987: 124–126).

A little later, the left aisle of the baptistery was closed off by a continuous wall and became a kind of cellar accessible through a flight of rock-hewn steps from outside [Fig. 15]. This transformation was contemporary with the second, larger church, built in AD 483 by Archbishop Photios of Apamea over the first church of AD 421. The main aisle was equipped on this occasion with stone benches along this new wall.

Another interesting feature of the baptistery is a small room opening from the southern aisle toward the east. It is obviously not a martyrion, as would be usual at this location, but a simple storage facility in which, in fact, a remarkable collection of broken marble fragments was



Fig. 14. Altar base above the baptismal font and its mosaic, looking west



Fig. 15. Mosaic floor in the northern aisle and later steps, seen from the west



Fig. 16. Cover of a small marble reliquary



Fig. 17. Broken altar table found in a side room of the baptistry

found. They could be reassembled into two altar tables [Fig. 17] complete with their marble legs. There was also a cover of an exquisite, small, marble reliquary [Fig. 16]. These objects are now on display at Afamia Museum.

The mosaic pavements of the baptistery were covered at the end of exploration. This task was undertaken because in their

incomplete state any sort of presentation would have been difficult to arrange and the outcome need not have been attractive. This does not derogate from their importance as a remarkable specimen of early church mosaics in Syria, and especially as dating evidence for the first church in Hawarte, marking at the same time the abandonment and destruction of the mithraeum.

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