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Hawart Preliminary Report

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 11, 197-204

2000

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HAWARTI

PRELIMINARY REPORT

Michał Gawlikowski

The village of Hawarti (also known as Huarte) lies 15 km north of Apamea, on the southern slope of a little outcrop among the first hills of Jebel Shahshabu. Situated there are the ruins of an important church complex excavated in the 1970s by Maria-Teresa and Pierre Canivet and published some years later.¹

¹ M.-T. Fortuna-Canivet, P. Canivet, *Huarte. Sanctuaire chretien d'Apamene (IVe-VIe s.)* (Paris 1987)

* * *

The extant church was built and paved with mosaics by the Archbishop Photios of Apamea in the 480s. It is a three-aisled basilica, adjoined on the north by a portico, baptistry, and, on a higher level, a small church dedicated to the Archangel Michael, built above a monumental tomb containing several sarcophagi. The basilica of Photios overlies an earlier, smaller church, also provided with mosaics, dated by the excavators toward the end of the 4th century. Both earlier and later mosaics have been removed and are now stored in the Museum at Qalaat al-Mudiq. Only a few insignificant patches have been left in places where their removal was hindered by ancient and modern structures.

The excavators noted the presence of numerous caves all over the hill, including many cisterns, tombs, and no doubt living quarters, hewn in the rock. One of the caves was found under the apse of the Photios church and was summarily investigated, but could not be excavated. It was also observed that the mosaic covering the fore part of the nave of the first church had sunk in the middle, before being buried under the fill of the Photios church.

Some time during the winter of 1996/1997, the ground below the removed mosaic collapsed, revealing a large hollow space at the foot of a modern house standing in the middle of the nave ("maison Khalil"). This drew robbers, who cleared a rock wall belonging to an underground room and removed a fragmentary painting found on it. They also discovered a painted ceiling overhanging a hollow some 1.50 m below the church

floor, and tried to remove this, too. The enterprise proved too dangerous, however, and the ceiling remained in place.

Confiscated by the police, the stolen painting (now in Damascus Museum) alerted the authorities. Mr. Abdel Razzaq Zaquq was the first to see the site and to attempt some rescue measures. He collected many fragments found in the rubble and transported them to Hama Museum, while the hole in the ground was closed and protected with metal sheets.

Prior to this, in September 1997, the site was visited by Dr. Karel Innemée of the University of Leiden, at the request of the Director General of Antiquities, Prof. Sultan Moheisen. Dr. Innemée took some pictures of the exposed wall and of the visible parts of the ceiling.

Having seen these pictures by chance, I was convinced that they had once decorated a mithraeum and informed Professor Moheisen of this conclusion. He responded by asking me to try and save the remaining paintings.

As a result of my correspondence with Professor Moheisen, a team from the Polish Center of Archaeology, Warsaw University, went to Syria in August 1998.² Working on behalf of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, we were generously provided with accommodation at Qalaat al-Mudiq, a car, workers, tools and building materials as required. The work in Hawarti lasted from August 12 to September 8, 1998, and was greatly facilitated by Mr. Nadim al-Khoury, director of the local museum, who spared no time and effort to assist us in every way.

² The team included, beside the present writer, Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek and Mr. Piotr Parandowski, archaeologists; Mrs. Ewa Parandowska, restorer; and Dr. Karel Innemée, archaeologist.

EXCAVATIONS

We found upon arrival that the paintings on the east wall seen in September of the previous year, exposed to robbery and to natural factors of degradation, have practically disappeared. At the same time, the intervention to save the painted ceiling seemed extremely risky under present conditions and could not be undertaken. We started instead to excavate the nave of the Photios basilica, corresponding to the presumed limits of the underground chamber [Fig. 1]. Soon, paintings appeared on both sides of a niche in the northern wall of the grotto. These were immediately taken care of by the expedition's restorer.

During a visit to the site on August 23, Professor Moheisen saw a part of the monument already excavated and discussed with us the options that presented themselves as to the future course of action. It was decided that the discovered paintings should be left in place and the whole monument protected and made accessible to the public. As it was not possible this year to excavate the mithraeum completely, we agreed to shield the exposed walls with sand and a light wall, and to cover the whole place until the next season. In the future, the cave should be entirely cleared and covered with permanent roofing. Access

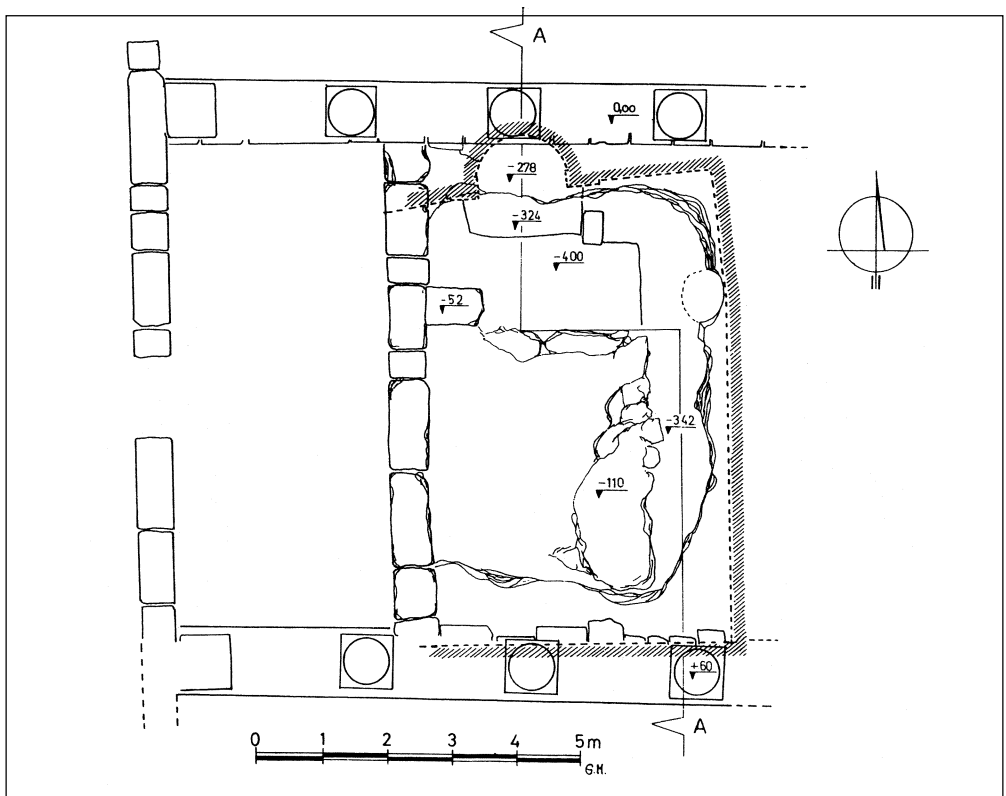


Fig. 1. Plan of the mithraeum under the church of Photios
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

would be arranged probably through the original entrance, as yet unexcavated.

At the end of two weeks of work, a major part of the northern wall of the mithraeum had been cleared, in addition to the eastern wall previously exposed. The floor of the cave was found some 3.50 m below the mosaic level of the earlier church, whose narthex wall stood on a solid foundation of eight large courses of stone set directly on the rock floor and against the western wall of the grotto [Fig. 2:5].

This foundation was built in a trench after the rock ceiling of the mithraeum had collapsed on some 1.50 m of rubble and earth heaped directly on the ancient surface. A large part of the ceiling fell in one piece [Fig. 2:7]. It was covered with an earth fill on which the mosaic of the early church had been laid, but soon caved in as a result of subsiding.

The dimensions of the cave are 7.40 m from east to west, and estimated at 6 m from north to south. The entrance was most

probably in the middle of the southern wall, from the hill slope. On the opposite, northern wall there is a rounded niche, 1.38 m wide and raised above the floor level. It is built of sandstone blocks inserted into the live rock, and was rather plain, except for two pilasters supporting a flat arch in front. Such a niche is a constant feature of all mithraea, being intended to house a relief slab representing the *taurobolium*, or sacrifice of a bull by Mithra. This piece of sculpture has yet to be found, but there is a good chance that it is still somewhere in the rubble.

At some point, the original frame of the niche was plastered all over, and soon afterwards the walls of the cave received painted decoration. In different places, two to five or even six layers of painting could be observed. At one point, a podium was added in front of the niche, apparently carrying a light structure fixed into the grooves in the original pilasters and forming a new setting for the Mithra relief. Later on,

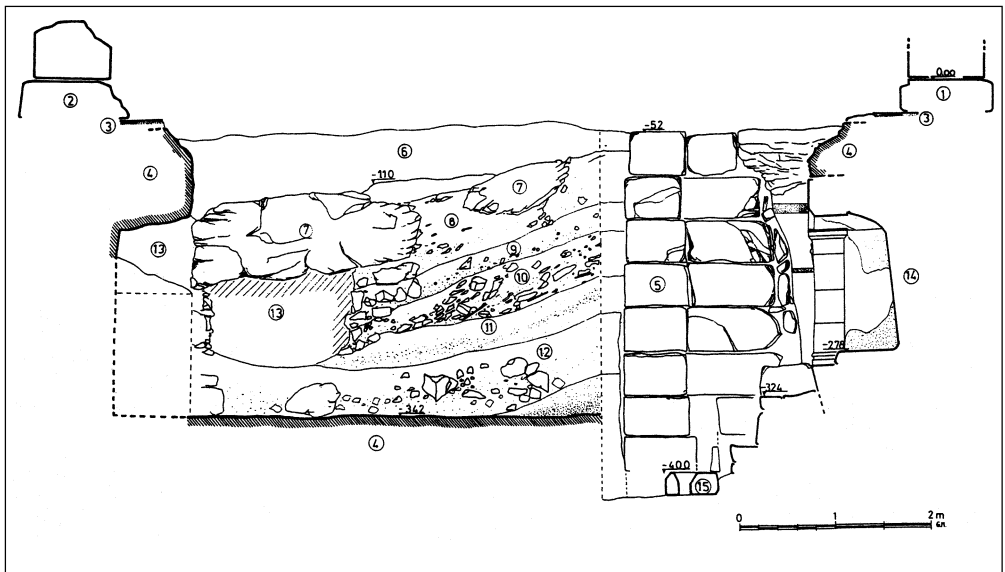


Fig. 2. Cross-section through the mithraeum
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

a small pedestal was added on the right side of the podium, with two steps leading sideways to it. The last two layers of painting go over from the walls onto the podium and the pedestal. The earlier paintings, of which we do not have any clear idea, thus predate the installation of the podium, while the last two, the only ones that can be at least partly understood, are dated by the contents of the fill in the steps in front of the podium to not earlier than c. AD 360.

In the last period of use, the paintings of the mithraeum covered the entire northern wall and the structures in front of the niche, while the niche itself remained remarkably plain. This can be explained only if it is assumed that the niche held a Mithra relief. In front of the podium to the right, there stood during the last phase of use an altar, which we have found knocked down and lying with its front face, painted twice, to the ground.

CHRONOLOGY

The small finds connected with the latest changes in the decoration of the mithraeum, as well as with its destruction, can hardly be more telling. Altogether 23 coins were found, all of them of the 4th century, the latest one being attributed to Arcadius (Augustus since AD 383, though reigned only from 395); lamps and pottery belong to the same chronological horizon.

The inevitable conclusion from the dating evidence is that the mithraeum remained in use at least until the last years of

the 4th century, when it was finally sacked and filled in, and a church was built above it. It makes the mithraeum of Hawarti the latest known to have been used anywhere in the Roman world. Indeed, the most recent monuments of the cult of Mithra known so far are an inscription of AD 387 in the city of Rome and sculptures found more than 100 years ago in Saida in Lebanon, which E. Will ascribed to AD 389. In Syria, the only mithraeum found so far was in Dura-Europos, dated to the mid-3rd century (now at Yale University).

PAINTINGS

Apart from the obvious historical importance, the most interesting aspect of the discovery are the preserved paintings. Painted decoration in the mithraea is very rare, and in the known cases (again, Dura-Europos, Aquincum on the Danube, and a few in Italy) it is mostly limited to a frame around the niche. The mithraeum at Huarte, however, preserved quite uniquely the decoration on the walls. It depicts symbolical scenes related to the myth of Mithra. As this is very imperfectly known, the discovery at Hawarti shall no doubt add considerably to our knowledge of mithriacism. Quite certainly, this monument will be

quoted in every future work on the subject.

The latest layer of painting, the only one of which we can have any idea, covers the wall right and left of the niche, which was only whitewashed, no doubt behind the lost sculpture. The figures are aligned frontally in a continuous frieze 110 cm high, separated from the ceiling by a wide red band [*Fig. 3*].

Below the figures there is a dado with varied geometric patterns (sets of lozenges, scaled panels, etc.) covering also the podium added in the middle.

The first scene on the right side of the niche depicts the struggle of Zeus with

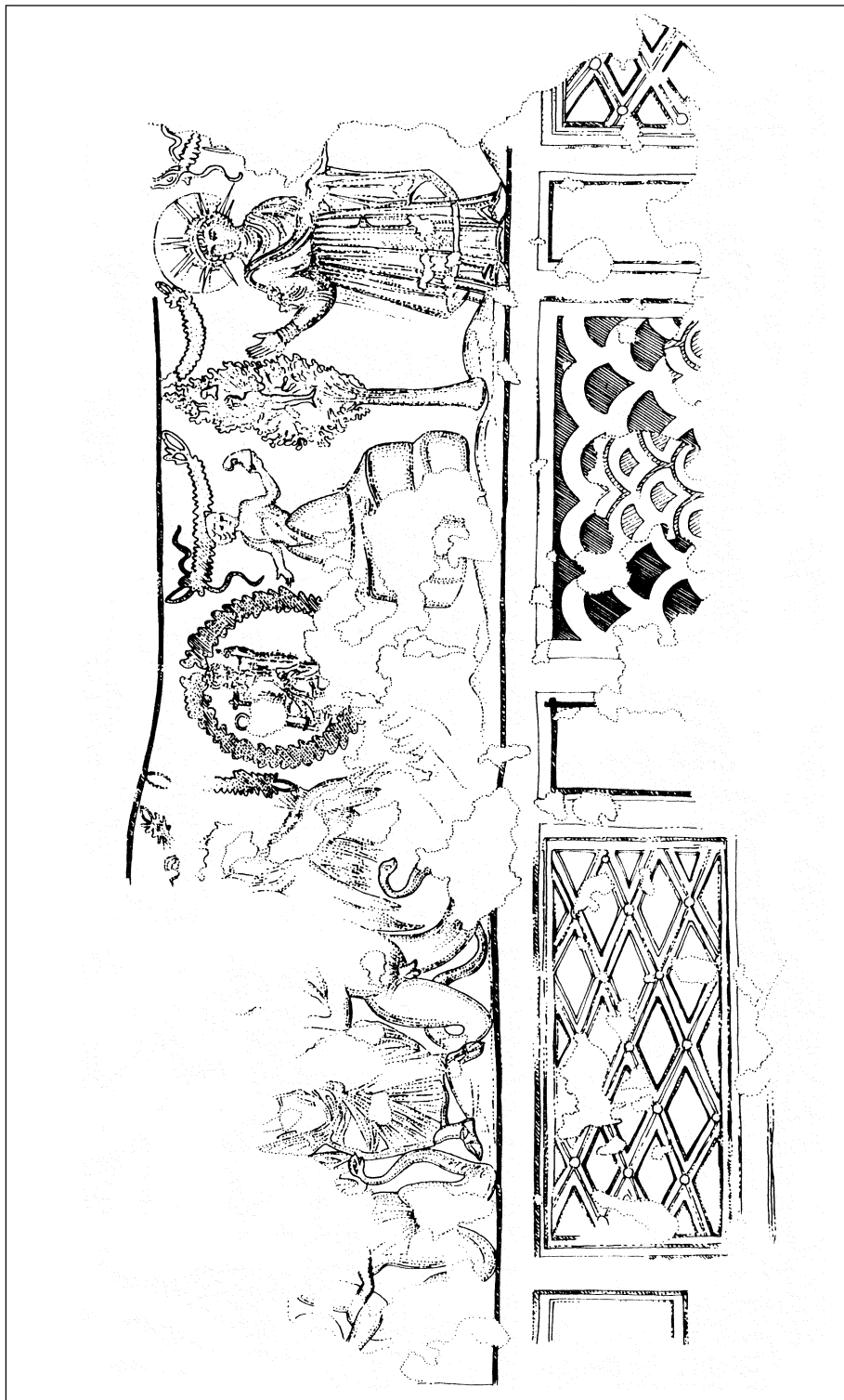


Fig. 3. Paintings on the north wall of the mithraeum
(after G. Majcherek)

the giants as known from a Greek myth adapted in the Mithra cult. While the figure of the supreme god is poorly preserved, and surprisingly clad in a cloak and boots, the two monsters on either side are nude, and their human legs end in serpents winding up around them; the heads are lost. A victorious Zeus is shown in the northeastern corner of the cave, next to the battle scene, seated on a throne inside a circular wreath. In Mithraic mythology, the battle with the giants symbolized the establishment of the world order prior to the birth of Mithra.

This event is represented next, already on the eastern wall of the grotto. Mithra is a young man emerging from the rock, around which a huge serpent is coiled. He is entirely nude, but holds the Phrygian cap in his hand. Next to this we see a nude boy in a cypress tree, associated again with the Phrygian cap. Immediately to the right, a fully dressed huge figure of the Sun god stands with raised hands. It seems that this entire series was intended to express Mithra's identification with various gods of other myths, here perhaps Apollo, Attis, and Helios.

Further along the eastern wall, the paintings have been all but completely lost. A fragment still in place could represent a bull being carried upside down by Mithra. As is known, the god dragged the animal into a cave to slaughter it there, a sacrifice intended to save the world from evil forces.

The evil element opposed to the good, darkness to light, so typical of the Iranian religious outlook and inherited in the mysteries of Mithra, was remarkably absent from the Mithraic iconography known so far. This is no more so: The evil demons are depicted on the left side of the Hawarti mithraeum. The western wall has not been uncovered as yet, being hidden behind the later church foundation, but the part of the

northern wall to the left of the niche is visible, and survives in good condition. The masons who laid the foundations of the church limited themselves to scratching out the eyes of the figures they found.

What can be seen now is a city wall with an arched gate. Over the top of the wall, there is a row of hideous and dreadful heads, with shaggy hair and teeth being ground. Each is stricken by a long yellow line, apparently a ray of light. One of the heads has already fallen to the ground outside the gate. No doubt the gates of Hell are being assailed here by Mithra himself, in a scene entirely new in the extant documentation [Fig. 4].

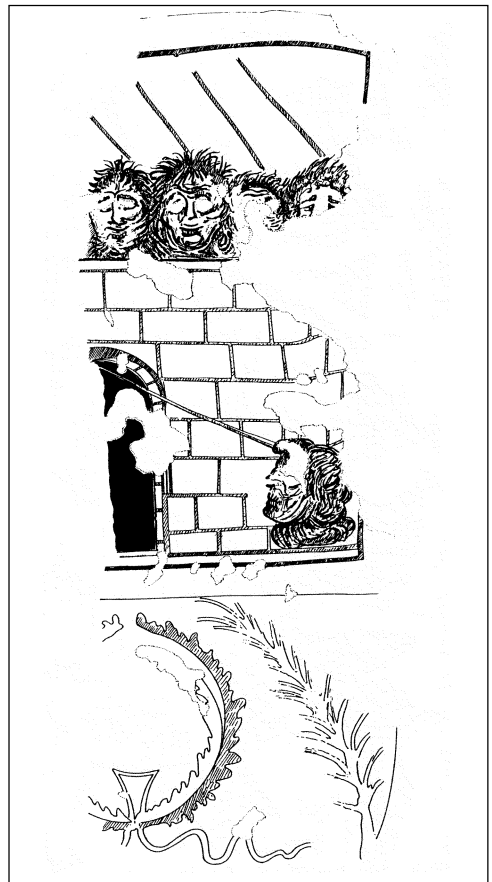


Fig. 4. *Paintings on the eastern wall (after G. Majcherek)*

OTHER REMAINS

Not surprisingly, there was no reclining bench under the devilish painting. As a result, everybody present would have had to be accommodated on the right hand bench, elevated above the floor. It was also on this side that the altar was found standing on a slab pierced with a round cavity which allowed sacrifices to be poured into the ground. There are also remains of the last sacred meals taken in

the cave by the worshippers: according to Dr. Karol Piasecki from Warsaw University, they consist mainly of chicken and some pork. The grotto was dim, as was usual in mithraea, so it is only natural that several lamps and lamp fragments, in pottery and in glass, were unearthed. As far as can be established now, all were made in the 4th/5th century. This dating is confirmed and refined by coins.

PROSPECTS

About three quarters of the cave remain to be excavated. There are many difficulties ahead, including, first and foremost, the problem of recovering the painted ceiling. Several large fragments have already been found, but the main piece still overhangs a void in the middle of the grotto. The technical task seems tremendous indeed. From what could be established by now, it is clear that the decoration of the ceiling was symmetrical and depicted inside an elaborate vegetal frame a basket full of grapes flanked by two birds (peacocks?) and two disks. On an earlier layer, there must have been a fig-

ure of Mithra himself, because a fragment of plaster bearing his name in large Greek letters has been recovered.

The next season will be long and difficult. Beside the strictly archaeological problems, we must secure a permanent roofing of the grotto; given the dimensions to be spanned, it can rest only on an iron frame. The access to the cave, rainwater run-off, lighting of the monument are all issues to be considered. We count very much on the help of the Directorate General in completing our common venture appropriately.