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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL PROGRAMME OF THE MITHRAIC SANCTUARY IN HAWARTE (SYRIA)

ABSTRACT

Hawarte is a small village located north of Apamea, one of the most spectacular cities of Roman Syria. In the area of that small village, unexpectedly a large Mithraic sanctuary located in a cave was brought into the light. The shrine was richly decorated with paintings covering almost the whole available space. Those discovered paintings represented a very rare Mithraic programme, which shows some variants of the Mithraic doctrine. Moreover, some architectonic elements discovered during the excavations gave a chance to correlate the time of the cultic

ceremonies and rituals with the exact days of the calendar. Those unique elements recorded during the field works were a reflection of the broad-scale distribution of the Mithraic religion. In that field, doubtlessly an important role played Roman legions distributed almost in every corner of the Roman Empire. Those soldiers, who were dislocated in various places, and various locations effectively transferred a new doctrine. One of the variants of that doctrine or reflection of regional Mithraic tradition was discovered in Hawarte.

Keywords: Hawarte, Syria, Mithraic sanctuary, Mithraic religion, Roman legions, painting decorations

The discovery of a cave decorated with paintings in Hawarte located in north-western Syria happened by accident. For the academic community, as well as for enthusiasts of ancient cultures and art, the discovery of this cave confirms once again that the eastern part of the Mediterranean area, and Syria in particular, is still a great treasure trove that awaits a good moment to reveal its secrets to the audience. When the cave was recognised as a Mithraic sanctuary, thanks to Professor Gawlikowski's expertise, soon after an archaeological expedition began fieldwork.¹ The project was led by Professor Michał Gawlikowski, whose determination and proactivity in the field allowed all of the team members to take part in an unforgettable intellectual and archaeological adventure.

The remains of a Mithraic sanctuary were detected and recorded among other ruins distributed among modest buildings forming the modern village of Hawarte, situated atop a hill.² The local landscape seems to be much more important than the village itself since it has not changed much from Antiquity. The hills are the southernmost part of the Jebel Ziwije, which is a part of the

Limestone Massif stretching across northern Syria.³ The localisation of the Hawarte Mithraic cave seems to be in the middle of nowhere when looking at the map of the region (Fig. 1). This impression is misleading, however, since the prosperous and flourishing city of Apamea is located less than 20 kilometres to the south, which gives a much better perspective for the cultic activity.

To be clear, in late Antiquity the vicinity of Apamea was a stage of Christian monastic movement, which flourished due to the Christian community that settled in this region. Therefore, as a part of that process, religious structures – specifically churches – were constructed in Hawarte. Constructions recorded during the excavations carried out by Pierre Canivet demonstrated how the Christians were determined to create architecture dedicated to cultic practices.⁴ The so-called Photios Church was a typical basilica construction, erected upon the remnants of a Mithraic cave situated underneath the church's floor level. One of the characteristic structures dominating the excavation area is the so-called Maison Halil – the house of Halil – the building which undoubt-

¹ Gawlikowski 1999; 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; 2007.

² Jakubiak 2021.

³ Jakubiak 2012.

⁴ Canivet *et al.* 1987.



Fig. 1. Hawarte, the archaeological site's general plan, drawn S. Maślak.

edly had a sentimental significance for Pierre Canivet, who started excavations at the site. The house owner certainly knew that his property was built up upon the ancient ruins, but he did not even imagine that next to the western wall of the modest house, beneath the church, there would be relicts of the once-active *Mithraeum*.

Localisation of the Mithraic sanctuary under the church was proven beyond doubt. The irregular layout of the space dedicated to the cultic practices was irregular in shape and corresponded to the original shape of the cave (Fig. 2). At first glance, it is possible to recognise the correlation and relation between both sacral structures. It is evident that a part of the church's architecture was badly demolished and destroyed the previous structure – pagan if viewed from the Christian perspective. The general layout of the sanctuary devoted to Mithra shows three separate chambers, all of which form the core of the sanctuary. Chamber A was the central and most important architectural element of the whole sacral structure.⁵ The most prominent part visible on the plan is a semi-circular niche where a representation of the tauroctony was exposed to the secret community of Mithra worshippers.

Chamber B was located westwards of the central room. The function of this space is still difficult to decipher, but certain elements discovered during exploration can shed some light on its function. The last architectural unit recognised during fieldwork was recorded as Chamber C. From the functional point of view, this space was a kind of vestibule providing a potentially comfortable entrance for the worshippers.⁶ A stairway leads to the entrance, stepping down from the ground level towards the cave – located underground, inside the natural hill.

At the beginning of the excavation project, only the basic and minimal layout of the Mithraic cave in Hawarte was cleaned up – the three aforementioned chambers. There, however, more details are recognisable. Bearing in mind the plan of the sanctuary, chambers C and A deserve a short commentary.

Chamber C, which acted as a kind of vestibule to the sanctuary, was not only a kind of space that separated the sacred from the profane – the outside world, as the people who were not members of the Mithraic congregation should keep away from the underground sacral space. The chamber – besides its basic function as the vestibule –

⁵ Gawlikowski 2012.

⁶ Gawlikowski 2012.

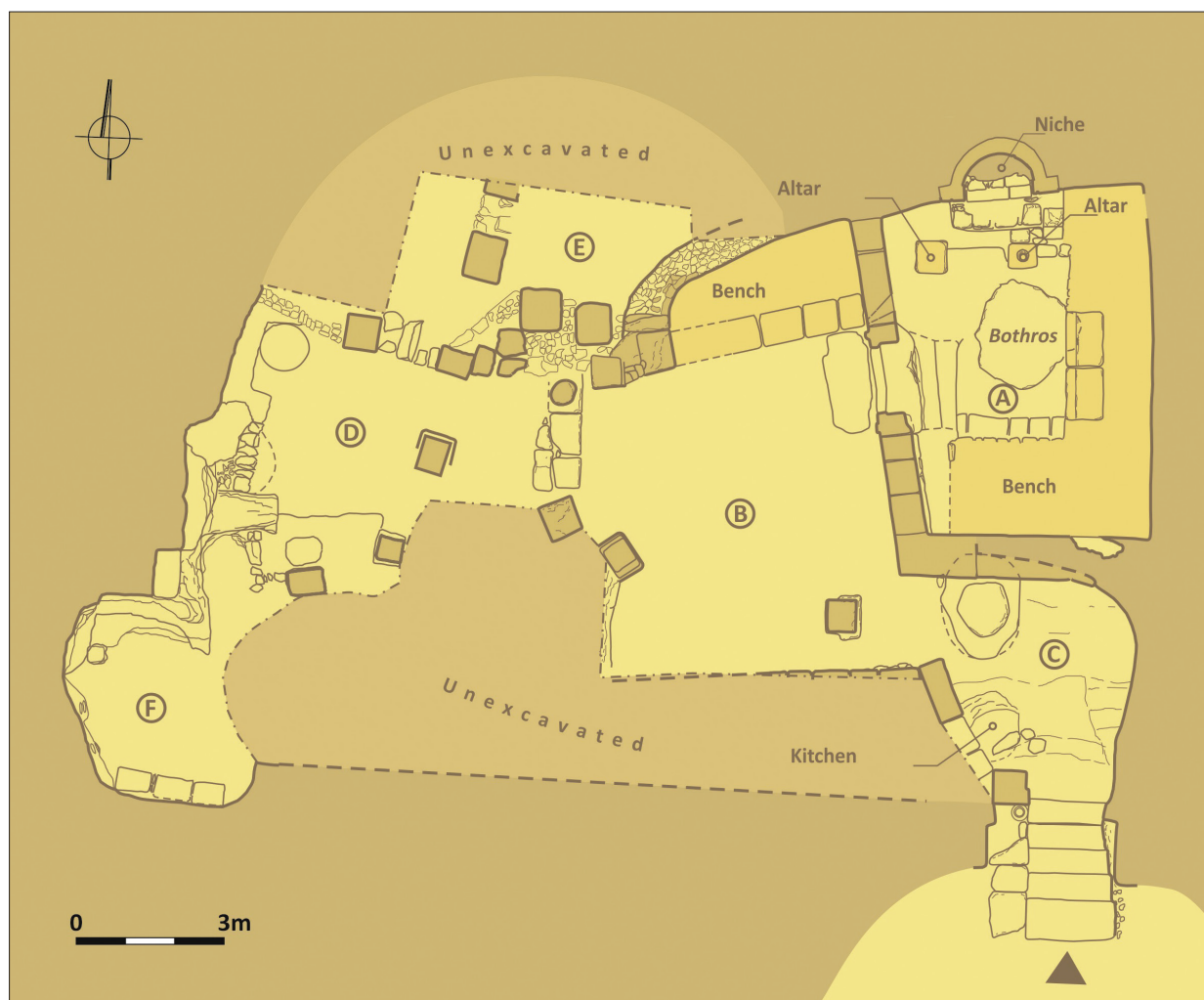


Fig. 2. Hawarte *Mithraeum*, general plan, drawn S. Maślak.

had another, additional purpose. During the excavations, two different structures which shed some light on that additional function, were already postulated. In the plan view, an oval-shaped pit (*botros*) hewn in the bedrock can be identified. The inside of the pit was filled with numerous potsherds and a collection of animal bones. Traces of an ancient grill were detected on the eastern wall of the vestibule, manifested as numerous small holes drilled in the wall to fix a grill, which was a part of a kitchen-like construction. Near the “kitchen” section, more animal bones were accumulated by the cave wall.⁷ Additionally, in the western part of the vestibule, which was badly damaged by the later church building, a large deposit of pottery was found. Bearing in mind that all the objects that were brought to the shrine for ceremonial purposes would somehow become sacral too, the sacral objects,

even if not used anymore, could not be taken outside of the sacral space and thrown away into an ordinary refuse heap. The sacral behaviour and practices required finding a space for the sacral waste, and the need was served by the nearby entrance to the sacral space. Inside Chamber A, a similar *botros* (large pit) hewn in the central part of the room was brought to light. Additionally, two relatively large banks were attached to the eastern and southern walls. These structures, except liturgical elements, were the dominating features in the chamber interior.

Returning to the sanctuary vestibule – it is clearly visible how the entrance to the cave was finished. At the first glance, at least two separate phases could be postulated there. The original entrance was hewn and formed a roughly rectangular entry. Later, the steps leading to the cave were rearranged, just as the entrance, which was

⁷ Piasecki 2000.



Fig. 3. Hawarte, Zeus fighting against anguipedae, computer rendering D. Zielińska.

partially blocked with large stone blocks, visible on the left side of it. Inside, traces of painted decoration survived on the vestibule's back wall. A lion standing among poppy flowers had originally ornamented this part of the sanctuary.

Doubtlessly, Chamber A analysed above was the main one and originally served as the area or space where the most important ceremonies and practices, as well as sacrifices, were performed by the initiated members of the Mithraic congregation. The most significant fact about the sanctuary discovered in Hawarte is that it was richly decorated and covered with paintings. In a way, it resembles the famous Mithraic sanctuary discovered in Dura Europos. In Hawarte, however, the style of decorations, their character, finesse, and mastery of the decorative elements and finishes is very unique when compared to other similar sanctuaries, commonly found within the Roman Empire. The central point of the chamber – as it is recognised – as a deep niche decorated with a curved frame situated to the left from the entrance to Chamber A. This element of the architectural decoration was changed over time. Originally, the niche was decorated with a relatively modest stone frame. Then a podium below the niche was added – extending the space for offerings dedicated to Mithra, whose sculpture depicting the act of slaying a bull was doubtlessly the focus of worship there. Also, several

stone altars located in front of the podium, or a platform, were used for religious ceremonies. Most probably, nonetheless, a kind of wooden shutter hiding the Mithra sculpture was the final episode in the development of the niche. This supposition seems corroborated by the remains of a frame fixed around the niche. The remains of the frame are manifested as a shallow carving, semi-circular in shape and originally serving as a technical element connecting the shutters to the wall. Bearing in mind that the whole chamber was richly painted, it cannot be excluded that the wooden shutters were also decorated with multi-coloured motifs associated with Mithraic mythology. Unfortunately, nothing of the sort survived, rendering the above supposition a speculation.

As it was already mentioned, what makes the Hawarte Cave unique is its rich painting decoration covering almost every corner of the walls. Inside Chamber A, however, the most important elements of the original decorative program were painted, and they established a kind of Mithraic circle and narrative illustration of the Mithraic mythology that in a way resembles modern comic books. In effect, just near the cultic niche, a Mithraic iconographical programme started. As always, the gallery is opened with the creation of the world – or more precisely – the fight of Zeus/Jupiter against the chthonic snake-legged creatures or monsters (Giants).



Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the painted decoration of the eastern wall in the Chamber A, computer rendering D. Zielińska.

From a symbolic point of view, this iconographic representation shows how the world was created in an act of confrontation with chaos. The final effect is the world in order, as perceived by the people living on the planet. The final act of creation and the fight against disorder is closed in a representation of enthroned Zeus located in the central part of a tondo painted as a wreath of leaves – most probably laurel (*Laurus*). The creation of an orderly world opens another chapter of the story, where Mithra plays the main role for the first time (Fig. 3).

Further analysis of the elements of decoration shows how the story of Mithra started according to the Hawarte Cave iconographical programme. One of the motives painted there shows how Mithra was born. This representation is typical, known from other sanctuaries, and shows Mithra emerging from the rock and holding a Phrygian cap in his left hand. Next to the rock, another episode from the Mithraic mythology was painted on the wall. Young Mithra is hiding among the branches of a cypress after climbing up the tree. Next to the tree, Helios is standing in his whole glory. The deity is shown frontally in a radial tiara. He is performing a gesture that can be interpreted as a benediction of Mithra hidden among the cypress branches (Fig. 4).

Unfortunately, the subsequent parts of the story did not survive. In some places, however, several very badly preserved fragments of earlier phases of the painted decorations were preserved, which can suggest how that part of the composition should be reconstructed. Based on those observations, it can be postulated that the next scene would represent the moment when Mithra carried a bull on his back to the place where the animal would be slain as an offering.

Following the mythological narratives, the next scene based on the fragments of preserved decorations should

be reconstructed as the slaying of the bull by Mithra. It means that in this place, beside the statue of the deity depicting the act of bull sacrifice, the same motif was additionally painted on the cave wall. Beneath that essential scene, which constituted the main axis of the Mithraic religion, some Mithraic attributes in a rectangular paneau completed the whole composition. These attributes quite frequently accompanied the bull slaying scenes known from other sanctuaries, especially those active on the Rhine and Danube limes.⁸ The selection of attributes painted in Hawarte resembles to a certain extent the attributes typically seen in the already-mentioned regional sanctuaries dedicated to Mithra. Pieces such as a large crater or a lion were rather unknown in other regions but are present in Hawarte.

As has already been pointed out, much of the original painted decoration perished or survived in a very bad condition. Nonetheless, the next mythological episode, which originally decorated the wall next to the reconstructed representation of bull slaying, shows the image of Helios kneeling in front of Mithra. A torch, a symbol of solar glory, is held in the hand of Mithra, who is clad in oriental Persian dress and a Phrygian cap. Helios, on the other hand, is dressed in the Roman style. This act of respectful obedience or submission expressed by Helios is observed by two persons assisting and watching it. On one side is a partly preserved person in a Phrygian cap holding an arrow, while the other side bears a partly preserved depiction of Luna.

Although quite a large part of the decorations is missing, thus making a full-scale reconstruction of the original decoration impossible, some fragments of the so-called Mithra's hunt were recorded opposite the cult niche (Fig. 5). This episode, also known from the *Mithraeum* in Dura Europos, decorated two walls in Hawarte – the

⁸ Campbell 1968, 291–334.



Fig. 5. Hunted animals, Chamber A, western wall, computer rendering D. Zielińska.

southern and the western ones in Chamber A.⁹ The figure of Mithra riding on horseback survived in a very bad condition on the southern wall. To be precise, this representation originally belonged to one of the earlier phases of the cave decorations. After a careful analysis of the paintings, it was possible to distinguish that in Hawarte the same painted Mithraic programme was renovated five times. It is highly possible that the chronological bracket between the oldest and the latest phase of the paintings was not so wide. Certainly, the remnants of the latest phase survived in a much better condition. In some places, only the earlier relics of the painted decorations were detected. It seems to be highly possible that all of the phases were painted within an approximate time span of 100 years, no more than 150.

Returning to the Mithra's hunt scene, the surviving depicted animals were all male – what seems to be obvious bearing in mind the character of the Mithraic doctrine – and can be identified as a stag, wild boar, panther, or even a bear. Most probably, the group of hunted animals was originally much larger, but most of them vanished.

The last decorative element which closes the whole Mithraic programme is a representation of the so-called stronghold of darkness.¹⁰ This element decorates the

northern wall of Chamber A, next to the cultic niche, which was the central point of the whole sanctuary. There (Figs. 6–7) a fortification wall with a broadly opened dark gate can be recognised – it seems to be welcoming evil spirits, or rather giving a chance for the evil to spread or enter the world. On the top of the wall, numerous devilish or demon-like creatures are gathered and looking forward. One of such creatures additionally crawls through the gate. It is difficult to judge whether this demon is escaping or just leaving the stronghold of darkness, but the motif is very intriguing. The character of the devilish creature is also peculiar and has no analogy to the other sanctuaries devoted to Mithra. These demons were not fully anthropomorphic in shape but limited or reduced to heads only. Particularly characteristic, however, is that every single demon is depicted as struck by a painted yellow beam, which symbolises the solar power of Mithra or the Sun. This element symbolically closes the decoration programme painted inside the most important area of the whole sanctuary.

Completely different decorations were painted outside Chamber A. Most probably, Chamber B was originally a space where the candidates of the Mithraic congregation gathered and waited for permission to join the initiation ceremony. Plausibly, these people were acting

⁹ Rostovtzeff 1939; Cummont 1975; Leriche 2001.

¹⁰ Gawlikowski 2007.



Fig. 6. Stronghold of Darkness, original painting, photo M. Gawlikowski.

as a kind of supporting staff during religious ceremonies. The iconographic programme of this room also has its own dramaturgy and symbolism. The wall separating Chamber B from Chamber A was decorated with representations of white stallions and people clad in Persian dresses holding dark-skinned human figures. One of them, which was preserved in a much better condition than others, shows unchained Siam twins who were firmly held by the person dressed in Persian garb. It cannot be excluded that it was Mithra himself, but since the upper part of the original decoration is missing this supposition is only speculative. Both of these representations flanked the entrance to Chamber A, thus symbolically protecting the sacral space against infamy and desecration by evil spirits, which had to be kept away from the holy space. There, the second guardian of the entrance is visible. Unfortunately, the one found on the southern part of the separating wall was preserved in a much worse condition.

On the northern wall inside Chamber B, some other representations decorated this part of the sanctuary. This part of the construction was painted a bit differently compared to the wall that originally divided chambers

A and B. Although the original paintings survived in a very bad condition, with some of them destroyed in late Antiquity and simply vanished, turning into dust after they fell off the walls, some motifs can still be recognised. These surviving fragments shed some light and make it possible to attempt a reconstruction of the iconographical programme located in that part of the *Mithraeum*. The lower part of the wall was decorated with several decorative wreaths of palm leaves situated on both sides of each circular motif. Above it, originally there were dynamic and very brutal scenes where large lions were killing black-skinned male figures. Since the representations survived in bad condition, it is still difficult to judge whether the people attacked by lions were men or young boys (Fig. 8).

Returning to the layout plan of the Mithraic cave, it is necessary to take a look at the final shape of the sanctuary, which was made possible after the last excavation season. During the latest fieldwork, two additional chambers marked on the plan as D and E were partly unearthed. Unfortunately, no other decorations were recorded on that part of the site. It means that the western



Fig. 7. Stronghold of Darkness, reconstruction, computer rendering D. Zielińska.

part of the cave did not play any important role during the Mithraic rituals and ceremonies. Supposedly, this part, originally used as an active cellar in the cave, played a supporting role in the ceremonies organised in the eastern section. It cannot be excluded that some of the goods needed for the ceremonies were stored there. Regrettably, further excavations could lead to the destruction of the church built on top of the cave, thus precluding further archaeological exploration.

All of the scholars who have been interested and focused their scholarly fascination on the Mithraic doctrine know that searching for facts and separating them from “myths” is not an easy task. Since this religion had a mysterious character, it is quite futile to search for written sources describing the character of the doctrine and ceremonial behaviour directly and objectively. Consequently, the excavations in Hawarte, with the discovered rich

decorative programme, can shed some light on key concepts of the Mithraic religion and its internal dynamics. Even if the iconographical programme did not survive in its entirety, its character and the narrative expressed on the cave walls belong to the most complete visualisations of this religious formation. The iconography and the sequence of the paintings show the whole Mithraic cult and its mythological arch, from the creation of the world to the last struggle between the forces of light and darkness. This element of the final confrontation was shown in a symbolic way, as a stronghold of darkness, where the demons are struck by the beams of sunlight. It is difficult to find inspiration for that element of the iconographical programme. To some extent, this component can be interpreted within the framework of Persian religion, as was pointed out by Lucinda Dirven, which provides a very intriguing explanation for the icono-



Fig. 8. Hawarte, Chamber B, painting decorations, computer rendering D. Zielińska.

graphical concept.¹¹ This possible interpretation shows that the Mithraic doctrine was much more dynamic and open to other religious influences. This would, in turn, mean that the Mithraic religion was not a petrified dogma, system of beliefs, and vision of transcendence. As a consequence, it cannot be excluded that a local version of the Mithraic doctrine was cultivated in Syria, or more precisely in Hawarte.

Still, it is difficult to judge whether some Persian influences can be recognised there or whether the choice of painted decorations reflects local beliefs flourishing on the substate of the Mithraic religion. If the latter was true, then it would mean that the local Syrian religion survived until the Roman Period. It is hardly surprising, given that religion tends to be very conservative, and the local populations were strongly tied to old beliefs. Therefore, it is possibly pointless to search for analogies of the demonic creatures depicted in Hawarte within the realm of Persian culture. As far as we understand it, the only Persian element in the Mithraic religion is Mithra himself, an enormously powerful Oriental god. As it was already mentioned, every religion is characterised by the conservative status of rituals, mythological concepts, and perception. Therefore, the inspiration for the iconography of the stronghold of darkness should, perhaps, be sought in the local Syrian tradition. If this postulate is accepted, the local Syrian mythology needs to be taken into consideration. The Ugaritic tradition provides in-

formation about the sons of darkness active in a cave.¹² Hence, possibly, the traditional cave motif could have been transferred and survived through the centuries only to undergo a change and become the Mithraic stronghold of darkness. In some sense, therefore, the cave, as a place that is very easy to defend and an isolated hidden space, conceptually corresponds to fortification. Additionally, the old Canaanite religion survived and transmuted during the later periods in the form of the Western Semitic tradition. Some aspects of the Aramaic beliefs were included, surviving in an almost untouched pantheon which endured the collapse of the Bronze Age societies. With this evidence in mind, it cannot be excluded that the concepts of the Sons of Darkness also survived there, elaborated into the ultimate enemies in the Hawarte iconographical programme. The supposition postulated above is based not only on an analysis of the regional tradition but also application of possible syncretistic mechanisms deeply rooted in the religious behaviour of the Greek-Roman Period recorded in the territories of Syria and Levant. For that reason, it can be observed by analysing syncretic concepts and changes in religious behaviour in the provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire.

It remains possible that in Hawarte, which is situated in the vicinity of Apamea, one of the most important cities of Syria and a community open to many intellectual influences, several concepts of local beliefs

¹¹ Dirven 2016.

¹² Healey 1977, 81–83.

intermingled and merged with the original conceptual framework of the Mithraic religion. In a way, it brought new values, as manifested in the unique cultic decoration. If the reorientation of the sacral space is taken into account as an additional factor, the idea of dynamic changes in the concept of religion seems to be corroborated. The orientation of sacral space belonged to the most important drivers determining the character of ritual practices and behaviours since the beginning of sacral architecture. Two places inside a single chamber where the tauroctony scenes were originally located are unique among the sanctuaries dedicated to Mithra. This essential element of the Mithraic religion, providing a kind of intellectual “backbone”, was the main symbol exposed for veneration by believers. Therefore, the change in orientation needed to either involve a radical shift in religious conceptualisation or be influenced by astronomic orientation (Fig. 9).

The painting decoration which makes the Mithraic cave in Hawarte unique among other similar religious structures and facilities provokes a question: How did it happen that such a specific structure could have been active in the Syrian province, catering to the religious needs of a local community or a local Mithraic congregation? How large was the group of Mithra believers and how many of its members were gathering inside the cave? Answering these questions, I am afraid, is still beyond our reach based on the present knowledge. However, while searching for the final inspiration for the Mithraic cave in Hawarte, it is necessary to take a closer look into the history of Roman military presence in Syria. As commonly accepted, Roman soldiers were supposedly the main drivers behind the swift spread of the Mithraic doctrine to every single corner of the Empire. It is also assumed and accepted that one of the oldest structures dedicated to the cult of Mithra was brought to light during archaeological excavations in Novae (Bulgaria). Recently, the results of older excavations were once again carefully revisited, providing the latest confirmation for the early dating of the sanctuary.¹³ When the dating of Novae’s *Mithraeum* – postulated to the mid-1st century AD – is compared to the oldest pottery associated with the religious practices performed inside the Hawarte Cave, the artefacts from Hawarte seem to have originated from a period contemporaneous with the construction of the sanctuary.¹⁴ Knowing that Novae was a military post and home to the *Legio I Italica*, the association of the soldiers with the believers of Mithra is almost self-explan-

atory. If members of the military were the medium that distributed the Mithraic religion rapidly within the vast territories of the Roman Empire, then, maybe, there is a chance that traces of their activity and dislocation are found in the vicinity of Hawarte.

According to the theory by Franz Cumont, Commagene was that part of the Middle East where Mithraism was born as a religious concept.¹⁵ This concept, more than one hundred years old, was rejected by later scholars, albeit without presenting any better ideas or regional alternatives pointing to the origins of Mithraism. In light of the excavations, not only in Hawarte but especially in Doliche,¹⁶ where another discovery of a Mithraic cave was made, the discussion around Cumont’s thesis should be revived. Taking into consideration that Doliche is situated not so far from Zeugma (less than 50 km as a crow flies westwards from the afore-mentioned town), it cannot be excluded that this urban centre, a long-time headquarters of the *Legio III Scythica*, could be associated with the dissemination of the Mithraic cult in that region. Given that Mithra had been venerated there in the past, only in a different form than in the Roman version, it seems highly likely that in Commagene the Persian-inspired form of the original local religion could have been transmuted into the Roman variation of the Mithraic cult. Therefore, the soldiers dislocated in Zeugma could be familiar with the Oriental religion and beliefs. The troops, especially active in the eastern flank of the Roman Empire, certainly contacted and operated side by side during that period. These activities were a perfect opportunity for the new religious idea to transfer from one military unit to another. If this supposition is right and accepted, then the next Roman legion based in Syria could play an important role in the transfer of the Mithraic cult to western Syria. The *Legio III Gallica*, located in Raphanea until the 4th century AD, could well be the unit that accepted the Mithraic doctrine before spreading it among the troops. Bearing in mind that Raphanea was located in the vicinity of modern Hims,¹⁷ the distance from the legionary fortress to Apamea and onwards to Hawarte was not that long. The third factor or Roman unit possibly active in the veneration of Mithra in Hawarte was the *Legio II Parthica*, which was stationed in Apamea in AD 218–234.¹⁸ In the last case, it seems to be imaginable that some of the soldiers making up the legionary staff could have quite well known the cave in Hawarte as a place of veneration of Mithra.

¹³ Lemke, Tomas 2015.

¹⁴ The pottery was analysed by Grzegorz Majcherek. I wish to express my thanks for the information he shared.

¹⁵ Cumont 1956.

¹⁶ Shütte-Maischatz, Winter 2000.

¹⁷ Parker 1957, 134–140.

¹⁸ Balty 1988.

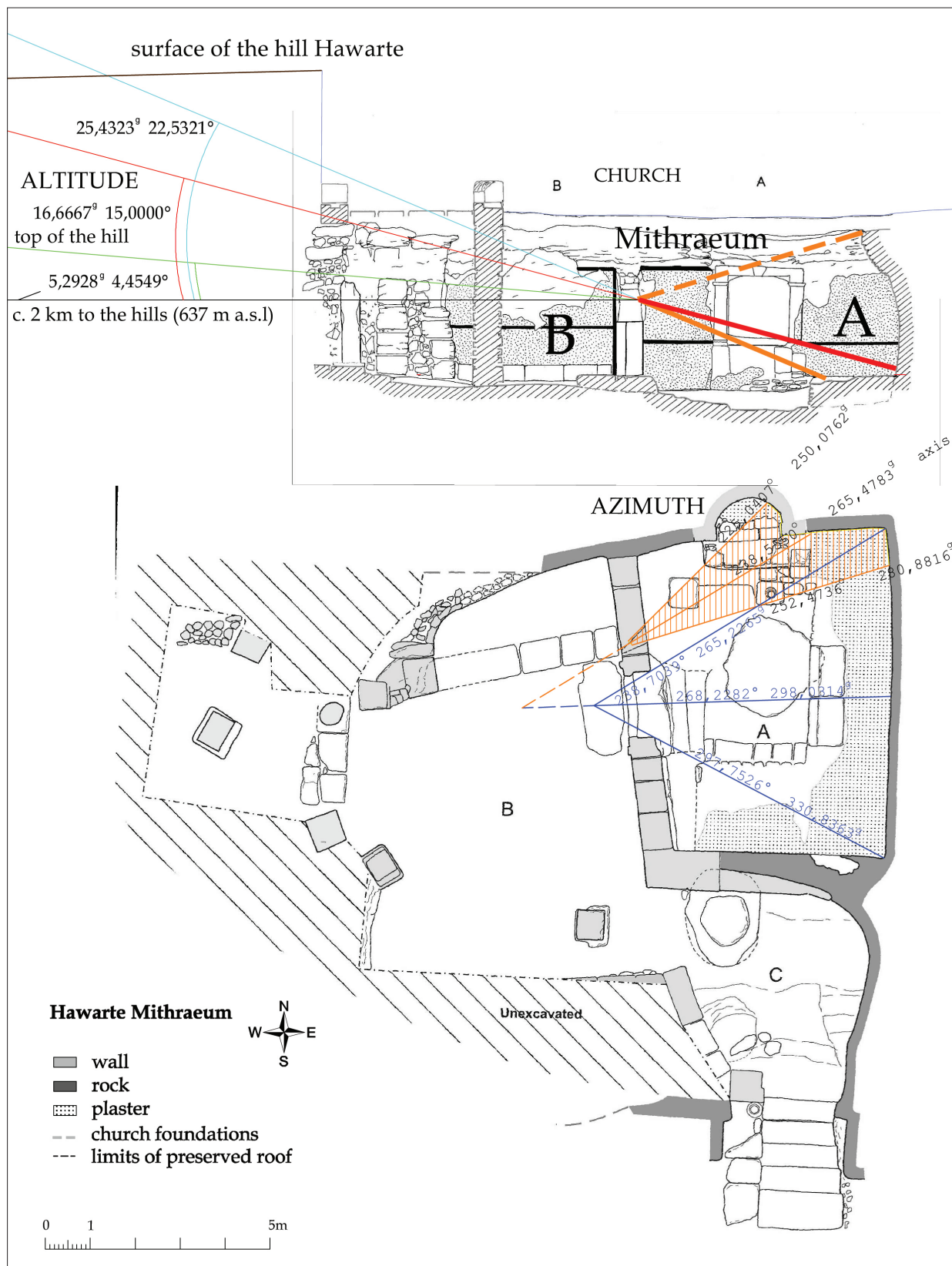


Fig. 9. Hawarte, plan and calculations, drawn S. Maślak, W. Małkowski.

Even if the spread of the Mithraic religion was strongly supported by the Roman military units, it certainly does not mean that the group of believers was only limited to soldiers and military men. Without a good religious ground, intellectual foundation, and society open to novel religious concepts and new religious factors and systems, the Mithraic religion would not have reached the high position and popularity it enjoyed among diverse communities of the Roman Empire. It means that even if the religion was transferred from one place to another in a very dynamic way, thanks to the movements of the Roman legions, the civilians needed to be open-minded and fascinated by the new religious concept. Therefore, in a way, Mithraism is shown to have had universal value which was commonly accepted among a relatively large part of the male population of the Roman Empire. These, somehow “magnetic”, theological concepts and ideas needed to be attractive to potential new members of the Mithraic congregations. The admiration for this concept is recognised in Hawarte. Even if the Hawarte Cave is located some distance away from Apamea, it does not mean that the sanctuary had a provincial character. The finished cave decorations present during the final phase of the religious activity show that the congregation or the donators or founders of the sanctuary were not only very rich but also belonged to the local elite and, in addition to that, had good artistic taste.

In conclusion, the iconographical programme discovered in Hawarte is unique in some respects and represents quite an intriguing episode in the development of the Mithraic doctrine. On the other hand, it recycled episodes already very well-known from other sanctuaries, for instance, Dura Europos. What makes Hawarte nevertheless exceptional is the special motif associated with the final struggle against evil spirits hiding behind the walls of the stronghold of darkness. Another element, which is at the same time puzzling, is the second original representation of the bull-slaying scene (Fig. 4). It means that the original orientation of the *Mithraeum* was, most probably, aligned along the E-W axis. Therefore, it seems that this orientation can be associated with the original

Mithraic doctrine. The change of orientation and localisation of the cultic niche along the S-N axis consequently seems to be a later concept. During that later time, the last phases of the painted decorations were finished inside the sacral space. Paying attention to the fact that this period in the functioning of the Mithraic sanctuary should not be dated earlier than the Aurelian rule opens new possibilities for deciphering the iconography. All the crucial elements of the programme were strongly associated with solar aspects. In other words, the lion from the vestibule and the lions fighting the black-skinned figures can be interpreted as symbols of the sun. These iconographic elements were not placed accidentally and seem to keep the evil spirits and darkness out of Chamber A, which was the most important space within the whole sanctuary. The next element associated with the sun as the highest deity activity is the sunbeams falling upon the demons from the fortress of darkness. When were solar aspects boldly manifested in the Mithraic doctrine? It was during the time of the Aurelian rule that a strong association of Mithra with Sol Invictus could be observed.¹⁹ Precisely, the association of both deities – Mithra and Sol – known from the beginning of the Mithraic religion, gained added value and legitimisation in the Aurelian period, most probably owing to the support of the Roman emperor. This explains why the astronomical connotation needed to be officially changed, as recorded in the Mithraic sanctuary in Hawarte. This new concept and intermingling of the two deities sharing similar characters manifested itself as the association of Sol Invictus and Mithra since at that time both gods were sharing their powers and aspects. It cannot be excluded, however, that in Hawarte this new concept was set in stone. The main festival of Sol Invictus, which took place on December 25th, prompted changes in the internal axis of the sanctuary (Fig. 9). The struggle of light (the sun) against darkness – during the winter solstice – was recorded in Hawarte based on the astronomical observation.²⁰ This value was accentuated additionally by the iconographic elements which made the Hawarte Cave unique among other Mithraic sanctuaries.

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¹⁹ Halsberger 1972; Pichard 1976; Clauss 2010.

²⁰ Gawlikowski, Jakubiak, Sołtysiak, Małkowski 2011.

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