

The mithraeum at Hawarte and its paintings

Michał Gawlikowski

The monuments of the cult of Mithras found in the Near East are few and far between. While the great majority of the known mithraea can be seen either in Rome and Ostia or on the European frontiers, there is not much to show in Syria and Asia Minor, in spite of the supposed Oriental origin of the mysteries of the Persian god. Recent years, however, have brought to light some new Mithraic discoveries in these parts, including two natural caves in Commagene,¹ the alleged homeland of Roman Mithraism,² a mithraeum in Sha'ara in S Syria,³ and another cave in Hawarte, a village in the territory of Apamea.⁴ The Hawarte mithraeum is relatively well preserved and its wall-paintings present some entirely new imagery, contrasting with the standard Mithraic iconography that we find with no significant variations from one end of the Roman world to the other and across the cult's entire lifespan.

Today Hawarte⁵ is a small village 11 km north of Apamea as the crow flies; it sits on the first outcrops of the N Syrian limestone massif of Jabal Zawiyé, above the middle Orontes valley.⁶ The modern village was settled by the Beduin only about half a century ago, although some of the caves visible all over the hill were inhabited within living memory by the tenants of an absentee landlord from Aleppo; these caves are partly natural formations, enlarged and adapted by man since antiquity. The ancient name is not reported, but there is every reason to suppose that it has not changed since antiquity: in Aramaic, *ḥawartā* (or *ḥawrtā*, *ḥawrā*) means 'cave, grotto', a name applying well to the local conditions.⁷

Hawarte emerges from obscurity in the 5th c. A.D. Two churches were built close to each other, one over a rock tomb containing the burials of some saintly characters; they were excavated between 1969 and 1978 by P. Canivet and M. T. Fortuna Canivet. Two volumes of the final publication appeared in 1987,⁸ offering a clear and detailed account of the excavation, the architectural history of the churches (the Photios basilica and the Michaelion, above the rock tomb), and a thorough description of the mosaics found (now kept in the National Museum in Damascus and the Afamia Museum in Qalaat al-Mudīq). Holy relics apparently attracted large crowds of pilgrims: the layout of the twin churches allowed circulation to and from the tomb, and spacious porticoes provided shelter. The hill contained at least one more unexcavated church and a building which could have been a hostel. All this clearly exceeded the means of the local population and in the course of the 5th c. it was patronized by at least two bishops of Apamea. The main basilica excavated had its nave covered with a mosaic laid in 483 by Archbishop Photios of Apamea⁹ and surrounded on three sides by colonnades, along with a

1 A. Schütte-Maischatz and E. Winter, "Die Mithräen von Doliche. Überlegungen zu den ersten Kultstätten der Mithras-Mysterien in der Kommagene," *Topoi* 11.1 (2001) 149-73; eidem, *Doliche — eine kommagenische Stadt und ihrer Götter: Mithras und Iupiter Dolichenus* (Asia Minor Studien 52, Bonn 2004) (reviewed in this issue).

2 R. Beck, "The mysteries of Mithras: a new account of their genesis," *JRS* 88 (1998) 115-28.

3 M. Kalos, "Un sanctuaire de Mithra inédit en Syrie du Sud," *Topoi* 11.1 (2001) 229-77.

4 Short summary accounts already published: M. Gawlikowski, "Le mithraeum de Haouarte (Apamène)," *Topoi* 11.1 (2001) 183-93; "Un nouveau mithraeum récemment découvert à HUARTÉ près d'Apamée," *CRAI* 2000, 161-71. The paintings have been commented upon by R. Gordon, "Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine," *Topoi* 11.1 (2001) 106-16.

5 Hawarte is the form adopted by the Syrian administration. Locally, the name is also spelled Hawarti, and was noted as Hūarte by the excavators (the variants do not reflect any real difference in pronunciation).

6 These hills, rising up to 760 m asl, are called locally Jebel Shahshabu. Hawarte itself lies at 470 m, separated by the higher hills from the Orontes valley (after J. Demangeot in Canivet [infra n.8] 27-30, fig. 3).

7 Cf. S. Wild, *Libanesische Ortsnamen* (Beirut 1973) 141. An etymology from the homonym meaning "poplar" (178, quoting a Syrian village Baḥwarte), is unlikely in the landscape of Hawarte.

8 P. and M. T. Canivet, *Hūarte: sanctuaire chrétien d'Apamène IV^e-VI^e s.* (Paris 1987).

9 P. Canivet, "Un nouveau nom sur la liste épiscopale d'Apamée: l'archevêque Photios en 483," *Tr&Mém*