

HAWARTE

EXCAVATIONS, 1999

Michał Gawlikowski

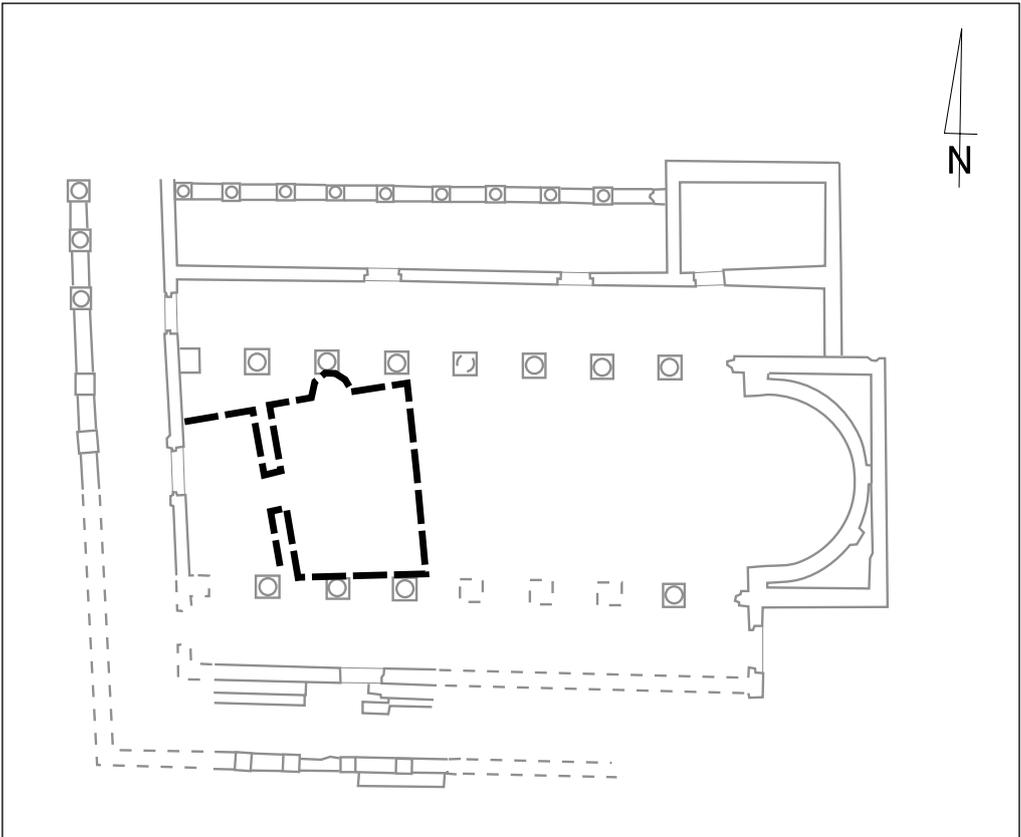
At the invitation of Professor Sultan Muheisen, Director General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, a team of the Polish Centre of Archaeology, Warsaw University, has continued this summer the work started in August 1998. We were working in Hawarte on behalf of the DGAM from June 5 to July 8, 1999.¹⁾

¹⁾ The team included, beside the present writer, Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, Dr. Karel Innemée and Ms Marta Żuchowska, archaeologists; Mrs. Ewa Parandowska and Mr. Janusz Smaza, restorers; Ms Aleksandra Trochimowicz and Mr. Bartosz Markowski, students of restoration from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Mr. Marek Puszkarski joined the mission for a week as draftsman. For a time, we were also assisted by two restorers from the Damascus Museum, Ms Nada Sarkis and Mrs. Daed Nehme. Mr. Piotr Parandowski participated in a private capacity. The DGAM has generously provided the mission with accommodation at Qalaat al-Mudiq, a car, a group of workers, tools and building materials as required. Our work was greatly facilitated by Mr. Nadim al-Khoury, Director of Afamia Museum, who spared no time and effort to assist us in every way. We could always count on ready help from Mr. Abdel Razzaq Zaquq, Director of Antiquities of the Hama region, and from Professor Sultan Muheisen himself.

Our activities during this season were meant to complete the excavation and restoration of the mithraeum (*Fig. 1*) found recently under the church of Archbishop Photios, excavated by Maria Teresa and Pierre Canivet in the 1970s.²⁾ Last year we were able to determine the approximate dimensions of the underground room and to uncover its north and east walls, decorated with mural paintings. We were, however, hindered in our

investigations by a large piece of rock ceiling fallen on the fill of the room. The ceiling has largely preserved its painted decoration and had to be handled with the utmost care.

Over the course of the season the rock ceiling was removed and the room was excavated, but the third objective, building a permanent shelter over it, could not be carried out based on the prepared design, as the mithraeum complex turned



*Fig. 1. General situation of the Mithraeum within the Photios church
(Drawing G. Majcherek)*

²⁾ T. and P. Canivet, Huarte. Sanctuaire chrétien d'Apamene (IVe-VIe s.) (Paris 1987).

out to be at least twice the expected size. A temporary shelter was thus erected at the close of the season over the now exposed part of the structure. All the exposed murals have been cleaned and reinforced with appropriate chemicals to await the next season. A workable project for permanent site protection will be viable only after the complete uncovering of the mithraeum and this will not be possible without the expropriation and demolition of two houses built over the ruins of the church.

One of the planned objectives of the season was to find and excavate the original entrance to the mithraeum, to serve, if possible, as the regular means of access to the underground site. We could reasonably expect that the doorway would be located, as it is usually the case, opposite the main niche of the mithraeum, that is, in this case, on the south wall of the room. Accordingly, a trench was opened from the surface on that side. An intact mosaic was found immediately, covering the southern aisle of the first church, left in place after the removal of the later mosaic of the Photios church. The new mosaic, display-

ing a floral design and a geometrical border, runs under one of the modern houses built on the site.

Another trench was opened to the south of the church, only to find yet another mosaic, plain white this time. It apparently belonged to the first church, too, possibly as the floor of a subsidiary chapel. Later on, it was disrupted by the construction of the lateral portico of the Photios church, a feature unsuspected until now.

Needless to say, our task is definitely not to verify or complete the excavations of Canivet, even if here and there we might uncover new evidence concerning some minor point. Our objective is the excavation and preservation of the mithraeum under the church. I do think, however, that the final presentation of the site should make clear for visitors the complex history of the place: How the mithraic cave was supplanted by the first church and then the second. Accordingly, all elements of both churches should remain in place, unless the removal of some might prove necessary to expose other valuable remains, such as mural paintings, as was the case this year with one foundation wall.

REMOVAL OF THE CEILING

After having cleared the rubble over the fallen rock ceiling it was determined that it consisted of two adjoining fragments, about 2 m wide east to west, 2 m and 1.50 m long from south to north. Both were about 90 cm thick. This part of the ceiling matched the outline of the overhanging rock to the south and in the southwest corner of the room; to the west, it was neatly cut by the church builders, while to the east it was broken irregularly. From the northern part of the ceiling we could collect only many

disconnected fragments. All in all, by our estimate we have about 20-25% of the original painted surface of the ceiling.

The ceiling was painted five times, as were the walls of the mithraeum. Of the earlier three layers of painting not much can be said, as they are either covered by later layers or found in tiny fragments in the debris. The last but one layer included the name of Mithra painted in large letters, recovered last year, and so probably the figure of the god, of which

unfortunately nothing has remained. The last layer, well preserved, if not complete, featured two birds on either side of a basket full of grapes. The composition was surrounded by an elaborate frame, consisting of a red outside strip, a vine scroll, and in the corners red *gammadia* and red circles. All this could be seen already last year, overhanging a void in the fill. This year we saw the vine scroll in the southwest corner, still in place, and the tail of a peacock, probably one of two, painted over the first pair of birds.

An early attempt to remove the visible parts of the painted plaster was abandoned before our arrival last season, after the surface has been cut into smaller fields without much regard to the composition. These cuts, however awkward, had to be followed now. Our restorers started with covering and supporting the painted plaster from beneath. After this, the rock was removed from above by sawing it off layer by layer, leaving at the end about 15 cm of the original 90 cm thickness. This was manageable

enough, and the extant part of the ceiling could be lifted in three pieces. The job was completed, as planned, during the first two weeks of work.

The next step consisted in detaching the remaining stone support and securing the painted surface between two layers of plaster, carefully preserving the original bumps and concavities. We are grateful for the permission of the DGAM to transport these pieces to the ateliers of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw for further treatment, to be returned as a consolidated panel ready for exhibition. Detaching and restoration of the earlier layers of painting shall also be attempted. The procedure is lengthy and costly, and cannot be conducted during the brief stay of the conservators in Syria.

Many smaller fragments were collected and recorded. They should enable us to reconstruct graphically a larger part of the ceiling but, unfortunately, most of it is lost. While our hopes to have it suspended in the cave after restoration were obviously exaggerated, we still hold valuable evidence and a potentially interesting exhibit.

REMOVING OF THE NARTHEX FOUNDATION

The mithraeum was installed in an artificial cave, one of the many to be seen at Hawarte, originally hollowed out for some other purpose. The cave was divided into two rooms by means of a wall of ashlar masonry built inside from south to north. When the construction of the first church over the cave was decided, the first move was to break down the rock ceiling, in order to erect from the very bottom two foundations meant to support the front wall of the church and the partition between the narthex and the nave. The latter was laid parallel to the mithraeum divide, using in the first courses the

blocks taken from the top of the older wall. When the two were made even, the four higher courses used both of them to follow the different orientation of the church.

It seems that the partial filling of the underground rooms occurred only after the two foundations had been completed. The still overhanging part of the ceiling was then sawed off and broken, resulting in a void left beneath the part that could be retrieved. However, the rock ceiling in the SW corner remains in place to this day, having been carefully supported by two courses of the church foundation.

It was already clear at the end of the last season that the painted wall of the mithraeum is hidden behind the narthex foundation. A DGAM crane from the Hama Directorate was made available and during five days of work removed the entire late foundation down to the bottom of the cave. As expected, the original wall, or rather what was left of it, appeared. It was covered with paintings.

In the middle of this wall, a doorway was discovered leading to the main room from a vestibule to the west. Parts of the door-jambs were reused in the later foundation, along with some blocks with painted plaster still adhering. In front of the door there was a step hewn in the rock. To the west, another room was discovered, also covered with paintings.

This second room served probably as an entrance hall to the mithraeum. It should

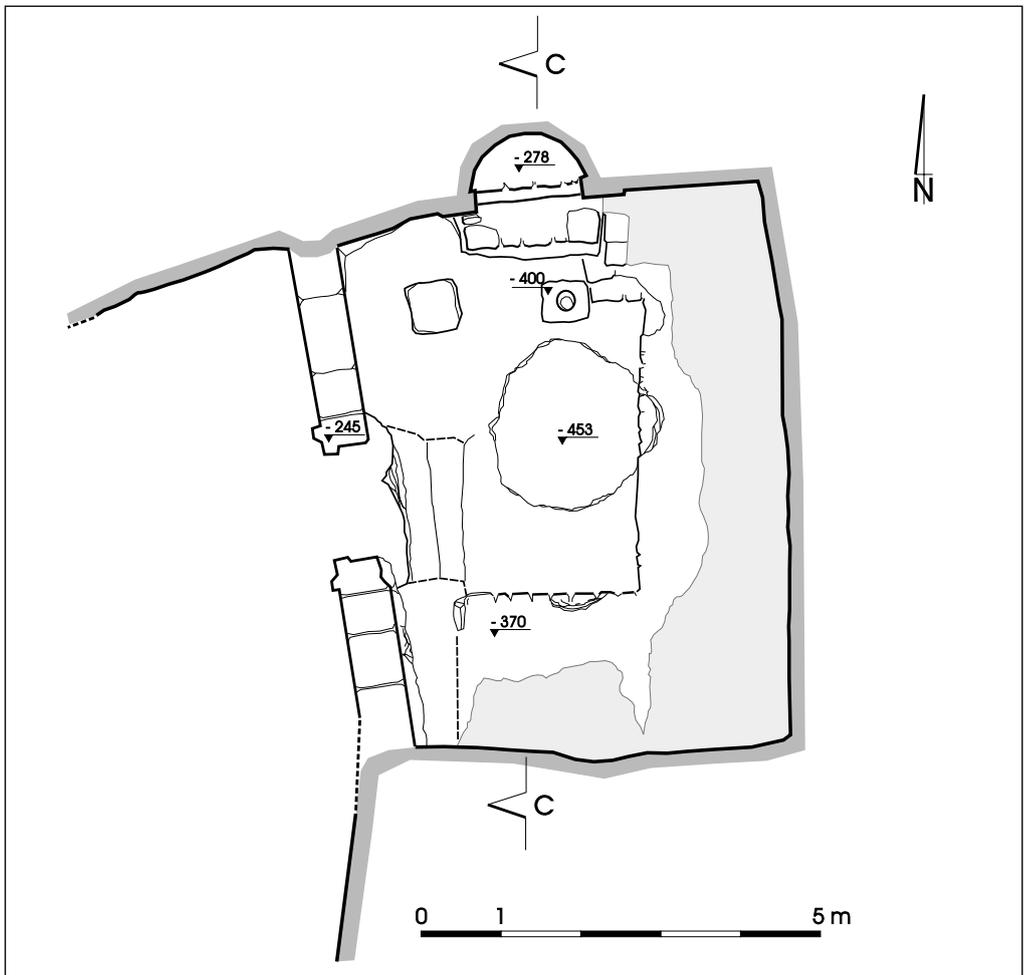


Fig. 2. Plan of the main room
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

have been approached from the south, where the hewn rock under the side aisle of the church probably marks an open corridor leading to this room and possi-

bly to yet another. It was not possible to excavate more of this complex, due to the presence of a modern house over the ruins.

MAIN ROOM

The main room measures 6.45 m along the dividing wall and 7.20 m along the eastern wall, which is the original rock wall of the cave (*Fig. 2*). Across, the room is 4.80 m wide. While the north and south walls are mostly rock, the southwestern corner adjoining the dividing western wall is also built of ashlars. In places the uneven rock surface has been completed with small stones and brick prior to being plastered and painted.

Because the room had no axial entrance as is common, so there were no two lateral benches either. Instead, the right-hand

bench under the eastern wall turns at right angles along the south wall (*Fig. 3*), to stop short leaving a passage 60 cm wide along the western wall, probably meant to allow easy access to the benches. These are 2 m wide from the walls to the central space about 35 cm below. They are mostly rock on the eastern side, in one place completed with a rough stone structure, and built entirely on the southern side. All are plastered over. The benches were further reinforced with huge stone slabs provided with a raised border. Several of these, badly broken, were found in the rubble.



*Fig. 3. The south wall of the main room and the L-shaped bench
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

The space in the middle of the room displays on the rock surface a roughly circular concavity 15 cm deep, apparently overhanging a void. This is earlier than the mithraeum which, however, had used two orifices leading into the hollow space beneath as libation outlets.

Over the rock surface there were two earthen levels, 10-15 cm thick on average: the lower one is dated by a coin of Diocletian, suggesting an approximate date for the foundation of the mithraeum. The upper level contained material of the late 4th century, including lamps and coins,

matching closely those found last year. The rubble contained several stone altars originally displayed somewhere in the room, but overturned during the final destruction.

The door-jambs are preserved complete, even if only the lower blocks remain in place, while the two upper ones were reused in the narthex foundation. Each was 2.25 m high and displays at the top the surface waiting for the lintel, not found as yet. While the inner surface of the jambs was painted and not marked off from the adjoining wall, on the outside there were the usual vertical moldings.

VESTIBULE

Of the room on the western side from which the mithraeum could be entered we can see now only the northeastern corner. While the visible part of the right, east-

ern wall corresponds only to its lower half (*Fig. 4*), because the higher courses have been removed as described above, the north wall is practically complete in its



Fig. 4. The partition wall between the main wall and the vestibule under excavation (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

excavated part, but the paintings are badly mutilated because of the poor quality of the support. This wall is crossed by the completely preserved foundation of the church facade.

If the symmetrical composition painted on this wall is any guide, the room would be no larger than some 3 m, meaning that its western wall would be doubled with the church foundation, just as was the case with the narthex foundation. Only four courses of the facade foundation are now exposed beneath the threshold. A trench meant to establish the original width of the room was opened outside of the church, only to find a paved floor in the front portico. The flagstones block all earlier layers, including naturally the remaining part of the underground room.

At any rate, the vestibule was clearly accessible from the south. A part of the passage has been found under the narthex

mosaic, right at the foot of the modern house. The rock is cut there vertically, forming one side of an open dromos leading to the cave. At the bottom of the relevant trench there can be seen the top of a door leading to yet another underground room, apparently situated under the mosaic of the southern aisle. Later, this rock was used to erect the corresponding part of the narthex wall, with a mosaic laid practically on the same level, on the fill above the passage. While most of the mosaic has been removed and is now on display in the Museum, a corner fragment remains still in place, partly under the modern building.

The builders of the Photios church destroyed a part of this mosaic in order to dig a deep trench for the foundation of the stylobate in its first tier between the nave and the aisle, where it was not standing on the rock. This foundation cuts across the original entrance to the mithraeum.

MURAL PAINTINGS

The murals discovered this year, in addition to those found previously on the northern and eastern walls, can be seen in the southwestern corner of the main room and on the northern wall of the vestibule, as well as on both sides of the dividing wall. They enrich considerably the known Mithraic iconography.

First the main room. In addition to the scenes from the myth of Mithra to the right of the niche, and the entirely novel scene representing devils on the rampart of their stronghold being hit by sun rays, we have found close to the latter the lower part of two other mythological scenes: a richly clad person standing beside a huge *cantbaros*, unfortunately preserved only from the waist down, and another, smaller figure of which nothing certain can be said. As elsewhere, these scenes

were repeated on the last two layers of painting.

On the same wall but close to the southwest corner, behind the dismantled church foundation, a hunting scene was discovered (*Fig. 5*), recalling the one found in the mithraeum at Dura-Europos, but also more commonly on many mosaics, including the one in a *triclinos* residence in Apamea. In the extant part, there are several animals running to the right; they include an antelope, a boar, a panther, and probably a bear. The same animals were represented in the last two layers, that is, after AD 360.

On the poorly preserved southern wall there are still fragments of a mural from a previous phase. We see there, in rather small scale, a horse moving to the right and, above, the top of a typically

Persian hairdo in frontal view. This last detail is repeated three times at intervals, strongly suggesting a line of advancing riders.

The most interesting, however, and also the best artistically, are the murals discovered in the vestibule. They belong to the last but one layer of painting, generally

better than the next. Their quality makes it regrettable that they are not better preserved.

On the front, northern wall, one can still see, above a floral dado, the remains of a scene representing two lions opposite each other, tearing apart black human figures. While the huge bodies of the lions are



Fig. 5. *The hunted animals*
(Drawing M. Puzzkarski)

preserved only enough to be recognizable, their victims fared much better. There remain the lower bodies of two of them, clad only in a short skirt, red for one fallen on his knees, being held by the lion's paw, and green for the other, standing behind the animal. The third Negro is writhing, blood running from a grimacing mouth; his garment unpreserved.

As this is the wall crossed by the church foundation, and it can be presumed that the scene was symmetrical, it is to be expected that the left-hand limit of the underground room should be found right behind the church facade. It could have preserved its murals, just as was the case

with the dividing wall between the two rooms of the mithraeum.

For the time being, we have uncovered only the upper part of this wall north of the door. Further digging is impossible for fear that the modern house overhead will collapse, once it is so undermined. What is there to be seen represents the lower part of a very curious scene (*Fig. 6*), which I cannot explain on the grounds of any Mithraic or other iconography that I have knowledge of.

There is a huge white horse passing to the right, one of its forelegs lifted. The hoof is partly concealing a four-legged stand or altar, around which a serpent is coiled. In front of the horse there stands a magnificent

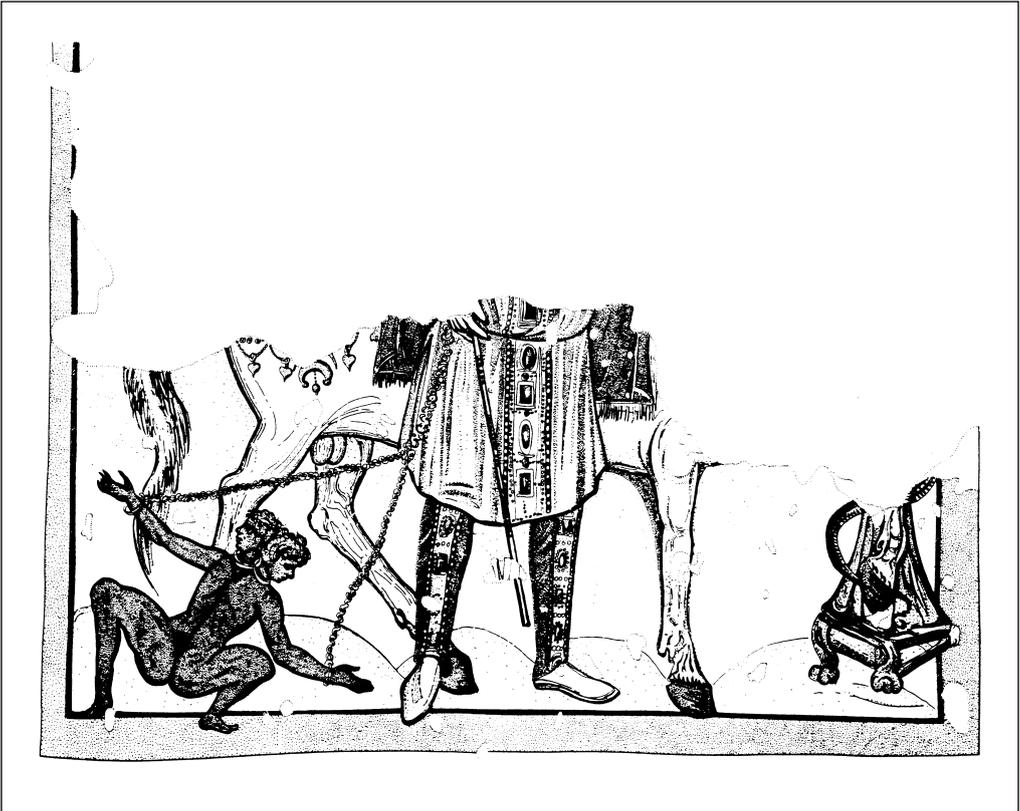


Fig. 6. Mithra, his horse and a black prisoner
(Drawing M. Puzzkarski)

figure of a man preserved from his waist down. He wears a red tunic reaching to the knees, adorned in front with a band set with precious stones between two vertical rows of pearls. The tunic is passed over his trousers, of which each leg is likewise knit.

This garment is of course well known in Syria, being commonly represented in sculpture from Palmyra. The rich citizens of that city indulged, one century before our paintings, in banquets and hunting parties wearing the kind of costumes that our rider presents.

The upper part of his body unfortunately disappeared when the wall was being dismantled. There is, however, some hope to recover it, as hundreds of tiny fragments were chipped off and have remained in the rubble. Much more will surely follow once the room is excavated down to the floor level. It is clear already that the arms of the tunic were blue and lined with pearls. It would be particularly interesting, if the headdress of the figure could be recovered, however fragmentary.

Indeed, a figure of this stature represented in a mithraeum should normally be Mithra himself. The Persian dress fits the god perfectly, of course. On the other hand, in 4th century Syria, a horse-rider clad in such a way must have inevitably recalled the Persian grandees and the Sassanian king himself. The most striking particularity of this mural is, however, the wretched fellow held on a chain by the heroic figure.

The chain is double, reaching from the hand of the rider to each of the wrists of a Negro, who is entirely naked and shown from behind, crouching. The figure is preserved whole, so it is very clear that the otherwise normal body has two distinct heads, turned in opposing profiles and wearing metal collars on the neck.

What the painter of both murals intended seems not to be simply a search for exotic genre scenes from Africa. The black figures apparently represented some evil forces being destroyed or held in check. Both scenes are entirely new and give a fascinating, if tantalizing, glimpse of Mithraic doctrines.

PROSPECTS

We are probably about half-way through this excavation. There remains to be dug the vestibule, only probed so far, the entrance, and possibly another room opening from the entrance, to say nothing about the unexpected. The murals need lengthy on-site treatment on site, if they are to be preserved on the walls. The shelter over the mithraeum should be at least twice as big as initially expected.

The shelter should, in my opinion, not only protect the underground rooms, but also show their relation to the later church. The most satisfactory solution would be to use the lateral walls of the church, complete with ancient blocks to offer support at the height of about 2 m from ground level. An architect will study this problem in the coming season, but the final decisions should, of course, wait until the excavations are completed.