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The Necropolises of the Roman Colony of Deultum

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ABSTRACT
Colonia Flavia Pacis Deultensium, or Deultum, is located in today's Southeastern Bulgaria some 15 km west of Burgas. It is one of the two Roman colonies in the province of Thrace and was founded between 70-80 AD. The archaeological site has been regularly excavated since the 1980s. Information about Deultum throughout various periods of its existence has been published several times. However, this is not valid for the necropolises of the city. Although some of them have been excavated, the results have either gone unpublished or been very scarce. In this way, a considerable amount of data concerning the burial practices and rites of the inhabitants of Deultum have remained unavailable to the public so far. The paper presents the current state of knowledge on the necropolises of the colony by taking into account their locations, boundaries, dates, and grave types. Special attention is given to the latest archaeological research on the necropolises, as well as the most significant results. The article complements the information about daily life, burial, and commemorative rituals in the Roman colony of Deultum.
Keywords: Thrace, Roman colonia, Deultum, tumular necropolis, flat necropolis

Colonia Flavia Pacis Deultemsium, or Deultum, is located in Southeast Bulgaria some 15 km west of Burgas. It is one of the two Roman colonies in the province of Thrace and was founded between 70-80 AD by Emperor Vespasian. It is situated on a small plateau along the lower course of the Sredetska River along its north bank. Deultum currently falls within the modern village of Debelt. The archaeological site has been subject to regular excavations since the 1980s, with the first surveys being related to the planned construction of a metal-working plant.

Unlike the colony itself, Deultum's necropolises have been studied mostly by accident. The purpose of this paper is namely to draw attention to this important but overlooked issue

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by presenting and summarizing the current available information on the necropolises of the Roman colony.[1]

So far, we are aware of the existence of a number of cemeteries related to the ancient city (Fig. 1). They have been provisionally labeled with respect to their geographic location as West, North, and South. Apart from these, a tumular necropolis consisting of nine mounds is known to be located northwest of Deultum. Only one of its tumuli has been studied so far.

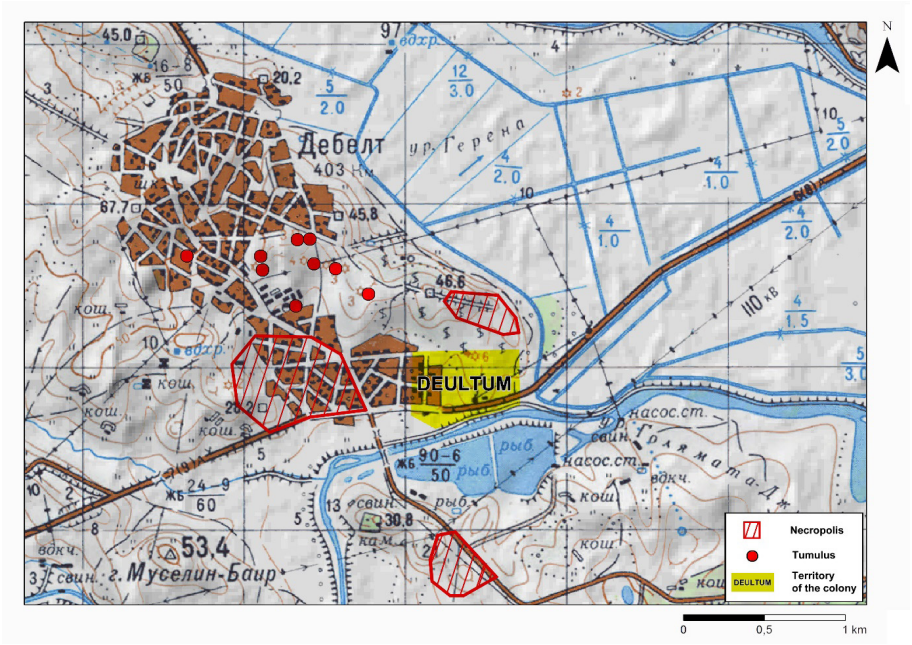


Figure 1. Location of the colony and its necropoleis.

The West Necropolis

The West Necropolis is found around 0.5 km west of the colony and is located on the east slope at the feet of a rocky height that continues to the northwest. Some of its burials are within the urbanized territory of the village of Debelt and have been affected by contemporary construction works. To date, six different sites belonging to this necropolis have been

1 The text of this article was submitted in 2018 for the Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Roman and Late Antique Thrace Series (RaLATh) and presents the current state of archaeological research I Deultum. The archaeological excavation of the South Necropolis is still ongoing. By the end of 2023, a total of 388 burial structures had been excavated at the site, 323 of which were associated with the Roman colony and 65 with the nearby medieval fortress. A publication on all structures is forthcoming. Since 2024, the project "Upgrading the Historical Narrative: From Deultum to DigiDeultum" (КП-06-ПН80/11) has been underway. Various relevant interdisciplinary methods will be applied to the study of the colony and its necropolises.

identified. Regular small-scale excavations on parts of the necropolis were carried out in 2008 and 2012.

In 1973, a tomb was discovered in a private yard within the boundaries of the West Necropolis. Brief reports about the rescue excavation and its results were published in the local press.[2] The tomb was built of bricks and its floor was plastered with mortar. It was covered with three marble slabs, whose inside surfaces were polished but whose outside surfaces were only roughly carved. The walls of the structure had been lined with waterproof mortar. The tomb is rectangular in shape with an approximately east-west orientation. It had been already pillaged in ancient times through an opening made in the southeast corner. The human bones discovered in the course of the excavations were not in anatomical order, and no grave goods were found with them. The gender of the deceased was not specified in the publication. In close proximity to and south of the structure, a simple burial pit with the same orientation was found. The deceased there was a female individual, and the inventory consisted of a pair of bronze earrings with glass pendants. Both structures were dated by their excavator to between the 3rd-4th centuries.

In 1982 during the regulation of the village street network, some graves were accidentally discovered, which entailed this part of the necropolis to be excavated over the course of two seasons. The limited information we have about it pertains to 18 graves dated to between the 2nd-4th centuries. Dug into the bedrock, some of burials had been covered with tegulae and others with limestone slabs.[3]

In 2003, three looted rock-cut graves were registered in the central part of the site.[4] Two of these were rock-cut graves placed next to one another at a northeast-southwest orientation and were fully excavated in 2008.[5] They were roughly rectangular in shape with vertical walls and horizontal floors carved up to 1 m deep into the ground. Steps for the placement of roof slabs were also discovered. Both graves have traces of mortar plastering observed on the vertical walls and mixed in some places with ground bricks. Although the graves had been looted, the floors yielded a small number of fragmented human bones. The anthropological analysis revealed the bones from the first grave to belong to an adult male (20-40 years old). The bones from the second grave indicate more than one skeleton. The discovered fragments suggest an adolescent (16-18 years old) and two adult individuals (20-40 years old). The presence of more than one individual in the grave points to the possibility that it had been used as a family tomb. The few discovered fragments of pottery in these graves belong to the 2nd-3rd

2 Иван Карайотов. Некрополът на древния Деултум. *Орбита* [София], 6, № 7(267), 16 февруари, 1974, p.2.

3 Стефан Дамянов and Петър Балабанов et al. Спасителни разкопки при с. Дебелт, Бургаски окръг. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 1983 г.* Смолян, 1984, p. 63-64.

4 Красимира Костова and Петър Балабанов, Теренни проучвания в НАР „Деултум–Дебелт“ през 2003 г. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2003 г.* София, 2004, p. 150-151.

5 Иво. Д. Чолаков and Наталия Пеева, Н. НАР „Деултум–Дебелт“. Проучване на обект „Западен скален некропол“. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2008 г.* София, 2009, p. 337-339.

centuries, to which the burial structures have also been dated.

During construction works in the southwest part of the contemporary village and at the foot of the hill in 2012, a complex of three rock graves and a burial pit was discovered.[6] These have an east-west orientation and were cut into the bedrock. The first one is a plain inhumation pit with a southwest-northeast orientation and no grave goods. The second structure is a grave that demonstrated some traces of carved steps for the placement of a roof slab. The grave had probably been looted as early as antiquity. The discovered bones belonged to an individual approximately 30 years of age. The human remains were not in anatomical order, and no grave inventory was found. The last grave consists of two compartments divided by a brick wall. The walls were well made, bricked over, and additionally plastered. The tomb was covered with marble slabs of various sizes. In each of the two chambers, two inhumations were studied, which makes this structure likely to have been a family tomb. The grave goods included gold earrings, glass beads, glass and bronze anthropomorphic unguentaria, and an iron strigil. The most impressive find were two adjoined gold amulets with engraved stones depicting Helios and Abraxas (with a Greek inscription ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ).[7] These were found together with coins of Septimius Severus and Caracalla. These graves were dated between the late 2nd-early 3rd centuries.

Unfortunately, a considerable part of the West Necropolis falls onto private property, and research here has been very limited. Graves have been detected in a number of locations in the southwest part of the contemporary village during agricultural and public utilities-related digging activities. Most often, however, only traces of burials are registered, with no research having been conducted so far.

The North Necropolis

The excavations that took place in the territory of the North Necropolis were planned, although studying the graves was not the main goal. Over the course of three seasons between 2004-2006, excavations were carried out of the medieval earthen dike Erkesia, which runs through the contemporary village.[8] The dike was studied through a number of cross-trenches. In one of the sectors, the researchers came upon an inhumation grave. The deceased was a female individual whose head had been oriented to the west. Personal belongings were found, among which were a few small bronze bells, beads, and glass pendants. The grave was dated to the 4th century.

6 Красимира Костова, Археологически проучвания на обект „Антична гробница“ в НАР „Деултум–Дебелт“. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2012 г.* София, 2013, p. 239-240.

7 K. Kostova and N. Sharankov “Burial with Magical Gems in the Western Rock-cut Necropolis of the Roman Colony of Deultum in Thrace” in *Archaeologia Bulgarica* XXVII, 1, (2023), p. 49-60.

8 Димчо Момчилов and Красимира Костова, Проучвания на обект „Еркесия“, подобект 05 в НАР „Деултум–Дебелт“. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2005 г.* София, 2006, p. 349-0350; Димчо Момчилов and Красимира Костова, Проучвания на обект „Еркесия“, подобект 05 в НАР „Деултум–Дебелт“. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2006 г.* София, 2007, p. 539.

Field surveys were conducted over five archaeological seasons (2011-2015) on the higher part of the plateau northeast of the colony.[9] The main goal was to search for the Thracian settlement that predated Deultum. During each season, scholars came upon grave structures from the North Necropolis of the colony. The greater part of the dead had been laid in plain pits at varying orientations, with no or scarce grave inventories. Only one of the graves was covered with roof tiles set gable-wise. The dates of the graves range from the 1st-4th centuries, with most graves belonging to the 2nd-3rd centuries. Within the studied archaeological trenches, a total of 27 graves were registered at different states of preservation. This part of the necropolis had been very disturbed, both by the medieval Erkesia dike as well as the heavy mechanical digging activity in the 1970s.

The Tumular Necropolis

The Tumular Necropolis is located northwest of the colony, and some of its mounds fall within the bounds of the contemporary village. **(Fig. 2.)** The size and location of the mound embankments have largely prevented them from looting. The two highest tumuli of the necropolis are located in the center of Debelt village on a small hill. One of these is the only tumulus that has been fully studied so far, the so-called Helicon mound. Archaeological excavations took place over five seasons between 2003-2007.[10] The tumulus is approximately 7 m high with a diameter of around 50 m. Part of the embankment in the west and central part had been mechanically removed in the early 1950s. The archaeological research has revealed several smaller mounds to have been piled at first for the construction of the embankment in order to overcome the elevation of the terrain. Under the embankment, a total of 36 graves from different time periods have been registered. The earliest burials contained deceased who'd been placed in a fetal position, with a probable date from the Late Bronze age. The majority of graves date between the 1st-2nd centuries and 3rd-4th centuries. Some of

9 Петър Балабанов, Сондажни разкопки на обект „Дебелт" в АР „Деултум–Дебелт". *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2011 г*. София, 2012, p. 254-255; Петър Балабанов, Добелт. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2012 г*. София, 2013, p. 240-241; Петър Балабанов, Археологически разкопки на обект „Добелт" в НАР „Деултум–Дебелт". *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2013 г.* София, 2014, p. 285-286; Петър Балабанов, Обект „Добелт" в НАР „Деултум-Дебелт". *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2014 г.* София, 2015, p. 383-385; Петър Балабанов, Археологически разкопки на обект „Добелт" в НАР „Деултум–Дебелт" през 2015 г. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2015 г*. София, 2016, p. 420-423.Formun Üstü

10 Петър Балабанов and Красимира Костова, Разкопки на могила № 4 от некропола на Деултум през 2003 г. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2003 г*. София, 2004, p. 149; Петър Балабанов, Разкопки на могила № 4 („Хеликон") от некропола на Деултум през 2004 г. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2004 г*. София, 2005, p. 233; Петър Балабанов, Разкопки на надгробна могила – обект 04 („Хеликон") край античния град Деултум. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2005 г*. София, 2006, p. 181-183; Петър Балабанов, Археологически проучвания на обект 04 – надгробна могила №4 (*Хеликон*) в НАР „Деултум–Дебелт" през 2006 г. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2006 г*. София, 2007, p. 241-242; Петър Балабанов, НАР „Деултум–Дебелт". Разкопки на могила №4 „Хеликон". *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2008 г.* София, 2009, p. 336-337.

the graves that were dated between the 1st-2nd centuries have rich grave inventories. Many inhumations have been encountered, as well as some cremations. The deceased were laid in rectangular pits, while the cremations were done on the spot. In singular cases, the graves are covered with tiles set gable-wise. A rare bronze anthropomorphic unguentarium decorated with the images of Dionysus, Pan, and Silenus should be noted among the grave goods. This was discovered together with a gold medallion and earrings, two bronze strigils (one of which was decorated), and other glass and clay unguentaria. The remaining mounds are 3-6 m high with diameters ranging between 35-40 m. Most are overgrown with grass and shrubs and so far do not seem to have been impacted by treasure hunting.



Figure 2. Part of the tumular necropolis.

The South Necropolis

Nine graves dug into the bedrock and dated to the 2nd-3rd centuries were documented on a small hill south of the Sredetska River in 1980 (Fig. 3). The manner in which they were shaped is similar to that of the rock tombs discovered in the colony's West Necropolis. They were able to be divided into three groups of one, three, or five graves. Their sizes vary in length from 1.80-2.30 m and in width from 1.00-1.5 m. Six of the graves had steps cut out in their upper parts for the placement of lids. One of the graves was unfinished and had only been slightly dug into the rock surface. All of the graves had been looted, and none have been subject to archaeological excavation.



Figure 3. Rock tombs.

So far, the South (flat) Necropolis of the colony has been the one most thoroughly studied.[11] It is located approximately 1.2 km south of the colony on a small hill slightly dominating the surrounding terrain. The necropolis is situated east of the rock tombs and is likely to also be a part of them. In connection with upcoming construction activity, rescue archaeological excavations took place on part of this territory in the autumn of 2013. As a result, 84 graves with a total of 87 buried individuals were studied, of which 35 were cremations and 52 inhumations (Fig. 4). Two of the graves had already been plundered in Antiquity and had neither grave inventory nor bone material. The others had more than one individual buried. The graves demonstrate a great variety. The simple pits prevail with 50 in number. They were rectangular, some of which had been dug shallowly into the ancient terrain, while others had been carved at a considerable depth into the bedrock. Another type of grave found there is the stepped pit, of which 14 are found, all of which are single-stepped though with varying step widths. One case is seen of two graves with a shared step and wall. Two masonry brick graves were also explored, with seven rows of the bricks and the white mortar having remained preserved. In 17 of the graves, the outlines of the pits were untraceable. Some of the graves had been covered with bricks and tiles. A more intriguing situation could be seen in one of the deeply dug graves covered with a gabled sarcophagus lid with undecorated corner

11 Красимира Костова and Иво Чолаков, Плосък римски некропол, с. Дебелт, област Бургас. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2013 г.* София, 2014, p. 277-279.

acroteria. The grave had already been plundered in antiquity, and the looters had broken into it through an opening drilled in the lid. Another grave of interest was a family grave dug deep into the bedrock around 1.7 m. Due to the sloping terrain, its two lower sides were additionally built with stones bound with mortar and ground brick. This necropolis had remained in use for a long time, which is why some graves overlap. The later graves were laid on top of already existing ones, partly disturbing them in places.



Figure 4. Inhumation in the south necropolis.

In the course of the excavations of the necropolis, various grave inventory items were uncovered, among which were personal belongings, tools, toiletries, and grave goods. The personal belongings of the dead were often made of precious metals. The finds amounted to: four pairs of gold earrings, two engraved carnelian gems (one of which was set in an iron ring), beads, a unguentarium, a heavily fragmented cosmetics box with a lock mechanism and two anthropomorphic appliques, a bronze silver-plated mirror, a glass die, and iron objects (e.g., strigils, knives, instruments, nails). The great number of iron nails in almost all

excavated graves suggests the presence of wooden constructions in which the deceased had been buried. Several iron hobnails that had been found near the feet of some of the dead had belonged to shoes that did not survive to the present. Information about the profession of the buried people can be inferred in five cases. According to the grave inventories, physicians had probably been laid in some. Among the finds are a bronze box for the storage of medicines and tools, stone plaques for drug grinding, bronze spatula-probes, scalpel blades, bronze tubes and vessels, fragmented scissors, and an iron tool, most likely a chisel for bone surgery. One of the most impressive finds from the necropolis is a folding iron chair with six legs terminating in sandal-clad human feet made of bronze. The few discovered parallels come from the territory of Great Britain and date to the 1st–2nd centuries.

Various ceramic vessels and other objects had been placed as grave goods. The finds include multiple pitchers, cups, bowls, amphorae, lamps, and terracotta pieces. Part of the commemorative practices registered at the necropolis involved the deposition of ceramic vessels on top and beside the pits after being filled. In the stepped pits, the objects were often placed on the step that had been formed into the side of the pit.

According to the numismatic data and a small part of the grave inventory, the necropolis had bene used most actively at the end of the 1st and the entire 2nd century. It is one of the earliest cemeteries related to the colony. The first settlers were buried in it, the veterans of Augustus' Eighth Legion and the founders of the colony. The studied burial structures and the earlier discovered nearby rock graves probably belonged to a large necropolis situated south of the colony. So far, no data are found to suggest its use in the Late Roman Era or Late Antiquity. In the Middle Ages, part of the necropolis was also used by the people who inhabited the nearby fortress located about 600 m to the northwest.

The anthropological analysis did not confirm the presence of individuals in the age range from newborns to 4-5 years of age, nor of individuals aged over 60. In the former case, the reason is probably the aggressive soil conditions, while the lack of senior individuals is hardly a typical situation. One possible reason may be that the preferred rite for people of these ages was cremation, which makes determining a clear age difficult. In general, females were less represented among those buried in the necropolis, totaling 45 % of the cases. Severe changes probably due to infectious diseases were registered in two individuals. In one case, the cause of death had been violent. The paleobotanical analysis established the presence of oak and stone pine fruits (quite rare for Bulgaria), which were possibly remnants of caskets and grave goods.

Conclusion

The paper has presented a general overview of the currently available information on the necropolises in the colony of Deultum and the research that has been dedicated to them

over the years. A more detailed publication of the data regarding all the necropolises and the structures, burial rites, and commemorative practices is currently in preparation.

This brief review has shown the necropolises of Deultum to have been used during the 1st-4th centuries. The earliest graves are those in the South Necropolis, which was used mainly at the end of the 1st and throughout the entire 2nd century. The 1st-4th century burials in the tumulus inside this necropolis were most probably secondary, as the mound embankment had been piled on due to the presence of Late Bronze age graves. Until now, the only excavated graves concerning life in Late Antiquity for Deultum are in the Kostadin cheshma locality, southeast of the settlement.[12] The medieval graves in the South Necropolis are connected with the fortress located nearby.

The grave structures found throughout the years of research have varied. In the West Necropolis, graves dug into the bedrock and covered with slabs or tegulae were prevalent. The use of this type of grave was necessitated by the rocky terrain. Similar burials also occur in the South Necropolis, though it has greater variety, with plain and stepped pits being predominant. This is again related to the peculiarities of the terrain, with the graves having been dug into the rock in places that have an insufficient layer of soil. Simple pits were also the structure of choice in the North Necropolis. The burials in the excavated mound were made in plain or stepped pits. The only masonry-built graves registered so far are the two brick-made ones and the tomb from the West Necropolis. The construction of the tomb was probably in connection with the higher social status of the dead, but the chamber had unfortunately been looted already in ancient times.

Both inhumation and cremation were practiced in the cemeteries of the Roman colony. The inhumations should be noted to prevail in number. Inhumation was the rite used in the burials in the West and North Necropolises. Some of the deceased from the Tumular Necropolis had been cremated, and similar is the situation in the South Necropolis, the number of cremations was almost equal to that of the inhumations. A possible reason for this might be the early date of its use. All cremations had been carried out on the spot inside the burial pits. In graves dating after the 3rd century, the preferred rite was inhumation.

Many of the graves in all the listed necropolises of Deultum show traces of commemorative rituals. Usually these involve fragmented ceramic vessels used for libations being found inside or near the graves. In a number of instances, clay platforms or pits containing pots and animal bones were found. Such structures are encountered mainly in the North and the Tumular Necropolises.Formun Üstü

12 Стефан Дамянов and Петър Балабанов, Спасителни разкопки в местността Костадин чешма край с. Дебелт, Бургаски окръг. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 1984 г.* Сливен, 1985, p. 107; Стефан Дамянов and Петър Балабанов, Спасителни разкопки край с. Дебелт, Бургаски окръг. *Археологически открития и разкопки през 1985 г.* Велико Търново, 1986, p. 49.

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