

RITUAL PIT WITH HUMAN REMAINS FROM THE MID-FIRST MILLENNIUM BC AT BRESTAK, NORTHEAST BULGARIA

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Abstract

This paper discusses the results of the archaeological investigation of a pit with human remains dating to the mid-sixth century BC. Some 66 pits from three different periods – the Early Copper Age (early fifth millennium BC), the Early Bronze Age (early third millennium BC), and the Iron Age (sixth–fifth century BC) were uncovered during the 2021 rescue excavations at a pit site near the village of Brestak in northeast Bulgaria. Pit 2 is of particular interest due to the unusual context with bones of three human individuals: a complete skeleton of a pre-adolescent child, remains of a six-month baby, and leg bones of an adult (articulated femur and tibia bent sharply at the knee joint).

Human remains have been recorded at a number of pit complexes in the territory of Ancient Thrace, mostly dating to the first millennium BC. The opinions of modern researchers on the interpretation of such finds diverge greatly, with the two major theories opposing human sacrifice against unconventional graves.

The author proposes a set of characteristics which distinguish the material evidence of ritual human sacrifice from burial practices. With reference to the adduced parallels and excerpts from classical authors, the context in pit 2 at the site of Brestak is interpreted as a multiple human sacrifice with evidence of ritual dismemberment.

Keywords: *ritual pits – pit sites – human sacrifices – dismemberment – Thracian culture – ritual practices.*

<https://doi.org/10.53250/stprae19.123-135>

A rescue project was conducted in 2021 at an archaeological site, which had been identified during excavations for the construction of a gas pipeline. The site is located in a large plot of cultivated land, on a prominent hill with a gentle slope to the north and west, about 1 km south of the village of Brestak, Valchidol Municipality, Varna District, northeast Bulgaria (fig. 1).

The site

Over 70 features were recorded during the archaeological excavations at the site of Brestak (fig. 2). They belong to three different periods: the Early Copper Age (early fifth millennium BC), the Early Bronze Age (the early third millennium BC), and the Iron Age (sixth–fifth century BC). Most of them were cut contexts – pits, demonstrating not



Figure 1. Map of ancient Thrace with the location of the archaeological site at Brestak. Image Credit: 1988–1998 Microsoft Encarta Reference Suite and P. Delev.



Figure 2. *Aerial view of the site at Brestak. The position of pit 2 is shown with a red arrow. Image Credit: the author.*

only a topographic continuity, but also common ritual practices repeated over very large time lapses. The greatest number of excavated pits – a total of 43 – date to the sixth or early fifth century BC, followed by 12 pits from the Early Copper Age, and only three from the Early Bronze Age; the dating of eight pits remains undefined. All the excavated pits share similar characteristics, with small specific deviations. Although the dimensions vary considerably, the pits of medium depth, from 0.5 to 0.7 m, prevail in number. Quite a few of the cuts were, however, shallower, while some were as deep as 1.6 m. Earlier pits were never truncated by later ones. The pits from the Early Copper Age were mostly wider and shallower in comparison to the later contexts and did not contain any pieces of burnt daub, while the latter were common in the pits from the Early Bronze Age and from the sixth–fifth century BC. The pits were usually filled with black or dark grey sediment, different in composition and color from that of the subsoil into which they had been cut. The fill often contained ceramic sherds, small stones, and numerous animal bones; less frequent finds included household items such as spindle whorls, iron knives and spearheads, and flint flakes. Sealing of pits with piles of ceramic sherds and stones was a common practice for all three periods. Complete pots were found in some of the piles as well as in the pits.

Human bones and skeletons were revealed in three of the pits dated to the sixth–fifth century BC; one of these finds, which has rather specific characteristics, will be presented and discussed in the following pages.

Pit 2

The pit had a round opening and was rather deep (ca. 1 m), with almost vertical walls and a concave bottom (fig. 3). The fill was relatively homogeneous, consisting of dark sediment mixed with small stones, pieces of charcoal, and only a few ceramic sherds from hand-made and wheel-thrown household pots (figs 4 and 7). Bones from a small rodent were recorded in the southern periphery of the pit.

Human remains belonging to three individuals were uncovered at the bottom of the pit (figs 3, 5, and 6). The well-preserved skeleton of a pre-adolescent child (based on dental development, between 7 and 12 years old)¹ occupied the center, lying in supine position, with the legs flexed at the knee joint. The bones of the feet and the distal epiphyses of the lower leg bones were missing. The first metatarsal was found near the right knee joint. The skull was more or less intact, with a fragmented left side. The sex could not be determined adequately.

The remains of a second individual – a baby about six months old – were lying to the west, close to the first skeleton. The bones of one forearm were somewhat displaced relative to the humerus. Only the left femur was preserved of the lower limb bones.

Remains from a third individual were located north of the first skeleton, next to its

¹ The human bone material was assessed by Victoria Ruseva of the Institute of Experimental Morphology, Pathology and Anthropology with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.



Figure 3. Pit 2 at Brestak, view to the south. Image Credit: the author.

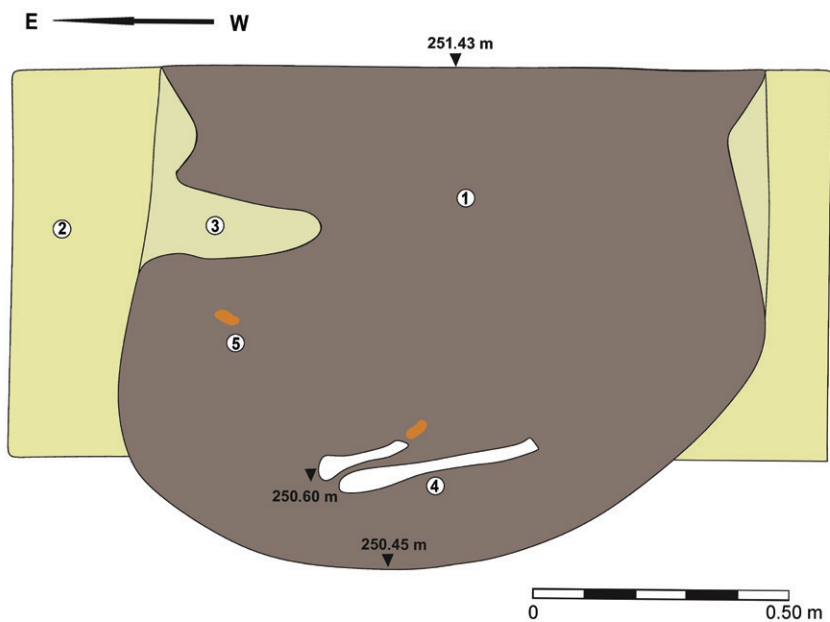


Figure 4. Cross-section of pit 2 at Brestak. Key: (1) dark brown soil; (2) yellowish subsoil; (3) intrusion of yellowish subsoil; (4) human bones; (5) pottery sherds. Image Credit: the author.

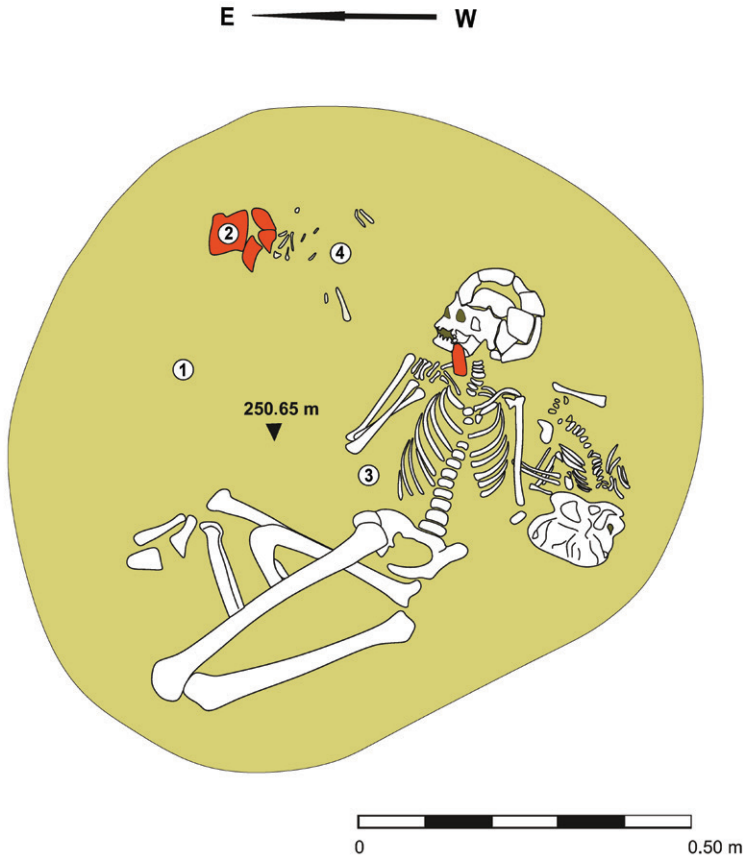


Figure 5. Pit 2 at Brestak, layout at bottom level. Key: (1) yellowish subsoil; (2) pottery sherds; (3) human bones; (4) animal bones. Image Credit: the author.



Figure 6. Detailed view of the human bones in pit 2 at Brestak. Image Credit: the author.

pelvis. Only an articulated femur and tibia from this body were present in the pit, flexed at the knee at a 30° angle. The size of the femoral head (48 mm) and the bone development suggest that the leg belonged to an adult male. Based on the articulation of the bones, they were placed in the pit before the decomposition of the soft tissues.

Based on the ceramic finds and on a radiocarbon date on a sample from the pre-adolescent individual (SUERC–103179 / GU59861: ca. 540 cal. BC), the pit can be dated roughly to the third quarter of the sixth century BC (figs. 7 and 8).

Analysis and discussion

The pit contained the relatively well-preserved remains of two individuals (a child and a baby) as well as the lower limb of an adult individual, probably a male. The context indicated that the pit was a completely closed complex, with no evidence of any secondary interventions. The pit was filled completely only after the remains of the three individuals had been laid to rest at its bottom, and had not been opened since, until the 2021 excavations.

Given the interpretation of the entire site (a pit site, a ritual place)² as well as the nature of the cut and the existing parallels, it must be assumed that this was a ritual pit containing the remains of human sacrifices. What are the grounds for such an interpretation?

Pits containing human skeletal remains were discovered at a number of pit sites excavated in recent decades in Bulgaria. A paper discussed this phenomenon in detail, supporting the human sacrifice theory with a number of examples, arguments, and parallels (Tonkova 2010). Such pits are not common; a pit site – or the excavated areas of a pit site – which might often include tens or hundreds of cuts, would usually yield a single feature with human remains or rarely two or more (Tonkova 2010, 507). According to Milena Tonkova, the whole or partial human remains found articulated in such pits are definite evidence of ritual killing (Tonkova 2010, 504). These arguments are also supported by the osteological assessment of the skeletons. Tonkova used examples from 10 sites excavated before the date of the paper's publication (Tonkova 2010, 503). Fieldwork has since provided new striking examples of pits with human remains dating to the first millennium BC; their number has grown by now to several dozen.

Doubts have been expressed in the meantime about the ritual interpretation of both the round pits with human remains and of the pit sites in general, even if no reasonable alternative theories seem to have been put forward. One such author asks whether these might not be unusual graves, while correctly listing all the arguments against such a claim (Georgieva 2015, 151; Nikov & Georgieva 2023, 165ff). Similar debate is now playing out in Romania on the pits with human skeletons found north of the Danube and their interpretation; for some authors, they are ritual in nature (Sîrbu 1995), while for others these are graves with special characteristics (Oanță-Marghitu et al. 2016).

² The conventional term for a pit site in Bulgaria is 'pit field'. For discussion on pit sites in Thrace, cf. Georgieva 2015 and Bozkova 2016.



Figure 7. Pottery sherds from pit 2 at Brestak. Image Credit: the author.



Figure 8. Pottery from other pits of the sixth–fifth century BC at Brestak. Image Credit: the author.

This is the real problem, and it's not purely terminological ('sacrificial pit' vs. 'grave'), but is rather essential. How should human skeletal remains, either whole or partially preserved, be explained when found in cut contexts which, on the one hand, are part of a pit site (not a cemetery) and, on the other hand, don't have the typological characteristics of the usual burials in the respective period? In my opinion, the most significant arguments for the interpretation of this feature type can be summarized as follows:

(1) The archaeological contexts of this specific type appear almost without exception at pit sites, among dozens, and often hundreds of other excavated and recorded cuts, identical in their principal characteristics, and regarded by a considerable number of authors as ritual places.

(2) The formal characteristics of these contexts – round pits of various depths – significantly differ from the rectangular graves typical of the first millennium BC inhumation burials in Thrace.

(3) The sacrificial pits containing human remains most often produce no evidence of reverence or demonstration of respect for the deceased, which is the principal characteristic of burial rituals in general, usually expressed in carefully arranged contexts containing personal belongings and other burial gifts.

(4) In some cases, the human remains found in circular pits show clear evidence of intentional homicide; e.g., a skeleton from a pit site at Yabalkovo showed traces of cutting with a heavy tool or weapon (Tonkova 2010, 508).

(5) The lack of associated finds in over 90% of these pits comes as a striking and suggestive observation. Complete finds such as pottery, jewelry, etc. are extremely rare (an iron fibula in a pit at Malko Tranovo: Tonkova 2010, 506; complete pots at Svilengrad: Iliev 2019, 124). The usual deposits in ritual pits in first-millennium BC Thrace contain mostly sherds of various ceramic vessels, small household items such as spindle whorls and loom weights (Tonkova 2010, 508), animal bones, and stones of various sizes; these differ widely from the standard inventories of contemporary burial contexts.

Atrocious and disturbing as it is from a modern perspective, human sacrifice has actually been practiced for millennia almost all over the world, from the Far East (China, Japan, India) to the lands of the Aztecs in America (see e.g., Bremmer 2007; Nagy & Pre-scendi 2013; Bonnechere & Gagné 2013; Walsch et al. 2024). The evidence is conclusive rather than speculative, and the scientific research is abundant. The ritual sacrifice of human beings was also practiced in Ancient Greece, as is demonstrated by written evidence and art monuments, if mainly in works of a legendary and mythological character (Bremmer 2013; Mylonopoulos 2013). Pits with human and animal remains, similar to the ones in Thrace, were also found in central Anatolia; in the publication they are defined as ritual sacrifices, dated to the Hellenistic period and ascribed to the Celtic (Galatian) population of the area in this age (Matsumura 2007).

The pit at the site of Brestak contained two skeletons of young individuals, a baby and a pre-adolescent; similar remains were recorded for other pit contexts of the

same age in Thrace. It seems that pits with child remains are a common and consistently present feature in the territories occupied by various Thracian tribal communities (Nehrizov & Tzvetkova 2008, 335f; Tonkova 2010) dating both to the Early Iron Age and the Classical Period. Many of them typically feature various types of disturbances in the integrity of the skeletal remains (Tonkova 2010, 507). Given such repetition, it is reasonable to assume that they were the result of deliberate actions related to the specifics of the ritual.

Besides the two children, the pit at Brestak yielded the surprising find of a single lower limb of an adult individual; the bones' articulation and the bent position of the leg suggest that the femur and tibia were not relocated from another place after the decomposition of the body. The only plausible explanation is that this was a case of deliberate dismemberment of the body and placing a part of it in the pit before the disintegration of the soft tissues. While some sort of a criminal act without religious connotations could be inferred theoretically, the context of the find suggests otherwise in my view. The dismemberment of the body was a traditional practice in Thracian culture, traceable both in pit finds (Tonkova 2010, 508) and in a number of grave complexes (Dimitrova 2023, 30ff). For example, the skeleton of an adult individual missing one upper and one lower limb was found at Gledachevo in south Bulgaria (Tonkova 2010, 504).

Some further interesting examples come from the northern Thracian territories (the lands of the Getae, where the site of Brestak is located). A disarticulated skull without other bones was found in a pit in the Shumen area (Madzharov & Bonev 2021, 490). A skull separated from the body (of which only a few bones were preserved) was found at the pit site of Durankulak, Dobrich region (Burow & Todorova 2016, 127: *Grube 18*). Skull fragments or entire human skulls were also found in south Thrace (Tonkova 2010, 506 and 510; Nikov & Georgieva 2023, 161ff).³ Together with the remains from the pit at Brestak, all these and other similar finds testify to the persistent practice of dismembering human bodies and the placing of severed parts in ritual pits; both seem to have been an established tradition in the lands of the Getae (for human dismemberment and sacrifices, cf. Popov 1995, 59ff).

In connection with the finds from the Getic territories, it is worth recalling another, slightly different example from several burial mounds near Histria (again in northeast Thrace), where human remains were found around central graves with cremated corpses. The human skeletons were located on the periphery of the mounds, in a trench surrounding the cremation area or in particular pits, in some cases together with dismembered remains of horses and donkeys. According to the excavators, the human skeletons were either carelessly dumped or had unusual positions, suggesting a forceful death in place (Alexandrescu & Eftimie 1959, 146ff, 152f, and 157ff; Alexandrescu 1966, 146ff). Despite the continuing debate about the ethnic affiliation of the mounds (cf. Damyanov 2012,

³ The severed head as a sacrificial offering is also attested in characteristic rituals of the Celtic cultural and religious tradition (Kaenel 2013).

42ff), most authors agree that these were undoubtedly human sacrifices (Fowler 2021).

These examples from north – and also from south – Bulgaria directly correspond to the well-known account of Herodotus about the religious customs of the Getae, who used to send periodically an envoy to the god Zalmoxis, killing him by throwing him onto upright spears (Hdt. 4.94). This is one of the most striking examples of a ritual involving human sacrifice, and it refers to a time that corresponds to the chronology of the pit at Brestak. Herodotus provides also another account of human sacrifice, this time in the lands of the Apsinthians in southeast Thrace; in 479 BC they caught a fleeing noble Persian named Oiobazos and sacrificed him to the local Thracian god Pleistoros ‘in their special way’, and slew his companions (Hdt. 9.119). Another ancient author, Diodorus Siculus, recounts that in the second century BC two young Greeks from Anatolia were captured by the king Diegylis of the Caeni (again in southeast Thrace), who killed them both with one stroke, like sacrificial animals (Diod. 33 fr. 14).

Although the literary evidence seems to confirm unequivocally the existence of rituals involving human sacrifice in the religious practices of the ancient Thracians, it offers little help in determining the criteria by which the victims were selected. Some of the adduced texts seem to suggest that at least in some cases they were foreigners or perceived enemies (the Persian Oiobazos, the Greek brothers killed by Dyegilis who was at war with the Attalid Kingdom at the time). According to Herodotus (4.94), the choice of the envoy to Zalmoxis was made by lot, while Clement of Alexandria mentions that only the worthiest men were chosen for such sacrifice (Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.8.57.2–58.1). This, in turn, recalls the popular story about the funeral practices of the Thracians, who killed and buried the most deserving of the dead man’s wives together with him (Hdt. 5.5; cp. Mela 2.2; Solin 10; St. Byz. s. v. Γετία) – an act that also represents a specific kind of sacrifice.

Similar reasons, however, cannot explain the significant presence of child skeletons in sacrificial pits. Most human skeletal remains found at some of the excavated pit sites belonged to children (Nekhrizov & Tsvetkova 2008, 335) – sometimes two or more individuals in the same pit (Tonkova 2010, 507). Unfortunately, there is insufficient evidence suggesting any physical or mental pathologies that may have been decisive for the selection of the victims. There is even less reason to consider in these cases causes such as atonement for mortal sins, family and other feuds, etc. Some authors have suggested that the skeletons of children found at pit sites may be related to the traditional practices of some ancient communities not to bury children under a certain age at the common cemeteries (Nekhrizov & Tsvetkova 2008, 336), but the absence of typical burial attributes such as grave goods contradicts the theory that these pits are regular burial complexes. An additional argument against their interpretation as ‘non-standard grave features’ comes from the fact that the remains of children are often accompanied by those of adults (Tonkova 2010, 505 and 508) – in the case of the pit at Brestak, just a lower limb, therefore considering it a grave doesn’t make much sense.

Finally, it is important to note that human remains have been found in pits together

with similarly articulated animal bones (Tonkova 2010, 507; Iliev 2019, 124; Madzharov & Bonev 2021, 490). The archaeological contexts show very similar principles for both human and animal sacrifices in pits.

Pit 2 at the site of Brestak evidently doesn't provide final solutions and answers to many of the questions related to Thracian religious rituals, but it adds new evidence and arguments to the interpretation of this unusual and specific segment of Thracian history and culture.

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