

Adel Ouafia et. al

Late Roman Necropolis in the Territory of Aquae Thibilitanae's Thermal Resort: New Archaeological Discoveries at Hammam Dbagh in Guelma, Algeria

Late Roman Necropolis in the Territory of Aquae Thibilitanae's Thermal Resort :New Archaeological Discoveries at Hammam Dbagh in Guelma, Algeria

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Abstract:

Archaeological remains were unearthed during the construction of a rest center (CRP) initiated by the civil protection department of the Wilaya of Guelma, located in the municipality of Hammam Dbagh, the historical Aquae Thibilitanae, also known as Hammam El Maskhoutine. This discovery occurred during our visit to the site on May 25, 2021, as part of an archaeological survey commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts. Subsequently, we strongly recommended the immediate initiation of rescue excavations to comprehensively document and understand the site's precise characteristics, extent, and chronology. Such efforts are expected to result in the preservation of valuable archaeological artifacts and the revitalization of the ancient territory of Aquae Thibilitanae. Additionally, it will enhance the appeal of the thermal resort, frequented by individuals suffering from various chronic illnesses, particularly respiratory diseases, by showcasing the historical significance of the region. Our archaeological survey uncovered a substantial late Roman necropolis, evident through the presence of numerous tombs featuring gabled roofs, interred beneath jars, amphorae, and sarcophagi carved into the rock. This newfound discovery promises to expand our knowledge of ancient funerary beliefs and practices in the region, enriching the archaeological landscape of Aquae Thibilitanae. This harmonious blend of health and tourism is sure to delight both tourists and spa visitors alike.

Keywords: Aquae Thibilitanae, Hammam Dbagh, Thermal Resort, Health, Necropolis, Funeral, excavations.

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Introduction:

The territory of Aquae Thibilitanae is situated on a plateau at 320m altitude in the municipality of Hammam Dbagh, which is also called Hammam al-Maskhoutine meaning the bath of the damned. This name is linked to an old legend about incestuous weddings where the bride and groom were transformed into cone-shaped stones as a result of their sins. In reality, these are nothing more than geological formations resulting from the deposition of limestone from the very hot thermal waters in the region, which have become very famous thanks to this natural phenomenon and the medical benefits that are attributed to its waters. The territory is geo-referenced as follows: 36° 27' 35" North 7° 16' 10" East. The municipality is located 23 kilometers northwest of the City of Guelma, the capital of the Wilaya of the same name, 108 kilometers east of the wilaya of Constantine, while in the north it is bounded by the wilaya of Skikda and that of Annaba. Approximately 8 kilometers to the south is the ancient city of Thibilis. This city gave its name to the ancient Hammam Dbagh, which was Aquae Thibilitane ("the waters of Thibilis"). Let us note that this site has been from antiquity to the present day an important thermal resort "Aquae Thibilitanae", The waters, which can reach a temperature of 95°C, also offer a number of benefits, and studies have proven their effectiveness in alleviating the symptoms of certain illnesses, treating them or improving the quality of life and ensuring good health.

In fact, statistics from the Tourism Directorate of the wilaya of Guelma (Bouaicha, F.2018) indicate that Hammam Dbagh thermal resort receives between 250,000 and 500,000 visitors annually, coming from various regions of the country and sometimes from abroad for health reasons: Visitors come to relieve their respiratory problems, generally due to the harmful effects of smoking (infections of the respiratory system, diseases of the nose and throat, heart and arteries, veins), chronic illnesses, growth problems, skin diseases and gynecological diseases. The site was inscribed on the list of national natural sites in 1993, despite the fact that it harbours significant archaeological potential which, unfortunately, has remained little known until now. And that We will try to highlight this in this article, focusing mainly on our new discovery uncovered during the archaeological surveys and excavations that we undertook in situ in 2021.



Photo N°01: Positioning of Hammam Dbagh municipality in the wilaya of Guelma .

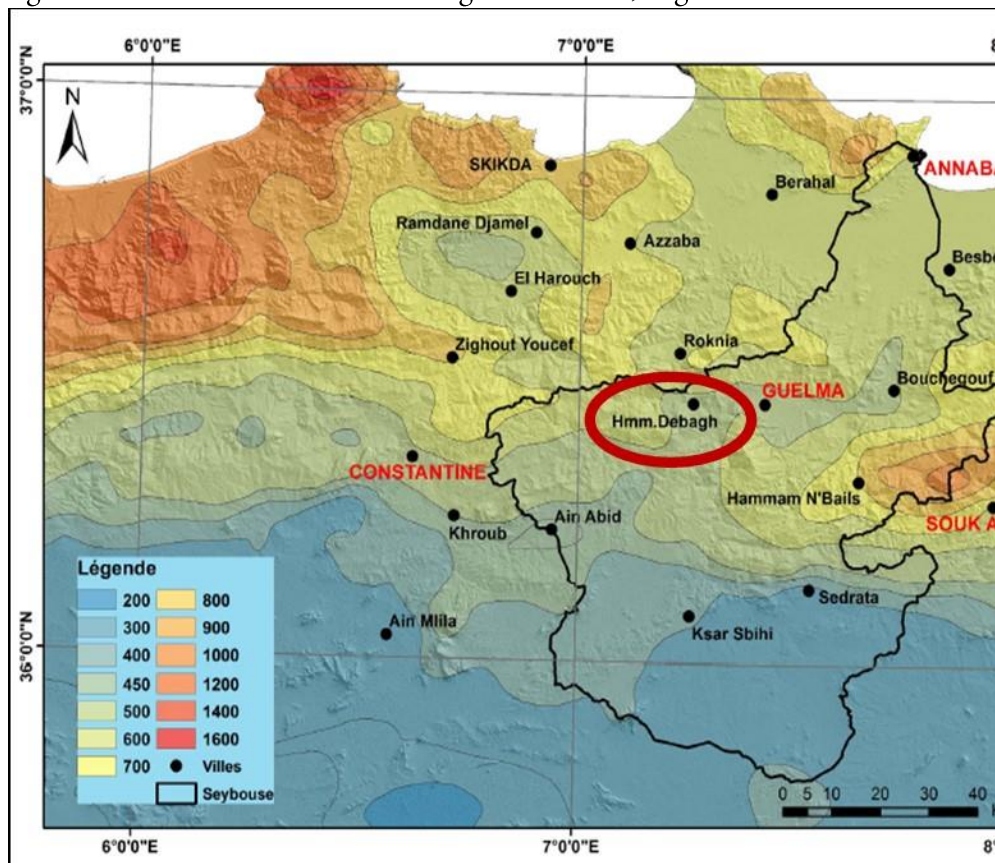


Photo N°02: Geographical location of Hammam Dbagh "Aquae Thibilitanae"

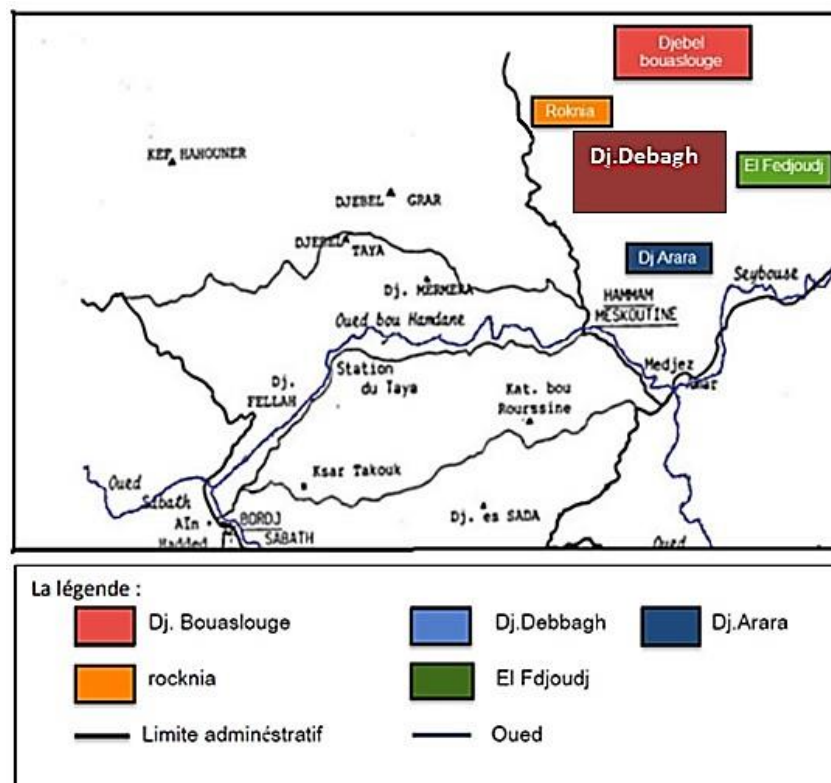


Photo N°03: The mountains and rivers of the territory of Aquae Thibilitanae



Photo N°04: view of the natural landscape of the Aquae Thibilitanae site (waterfalls, conical rocks and thermal waters).

1-The territory of Aquae Thibilitanae:

1-1- Name of the site:

The territory of Aquae Thibilitanae is located 8 kilometers north of the ancient city of Thibilis and 16 kilometers southwest of Mount Taya where the famous cave of Taya is located, whose walls are covered with Latin votive inscriptions dedicated to the local god Bacax and featuring the names of magistrates originally from Thibilis. The name Aquae Thibilitanae appears in certain geographical and literary sources, but it is very rare. For geographers, its mention is limited to the Itinerary of Antoninus in the form of Aquis Thibilitanis and under the same name on the Peutinger table (Photo N°05). As for the literary sources, they go back to the late period, where we find the name of the site in the form of Aquae Thibilitanae, both in Saint Optat de Milev¹ and in Saint Augustine. During this period, Augustine indicates that the city had a bishop named Marinus while he called it "the waters of Thibilis" in Latin Aquae Thibilitanae². According to

¹ - Gsell, St. (1911). *Atlas Archéologique de l'Algérie*, Vol.1, Paris : Adolphe Jourdan ; Fontemoing & Cie., F. n°9, p. 144.

² - Lettres, LIII, 4, p.280; Gsell, AAA, F. n°9, p.144.

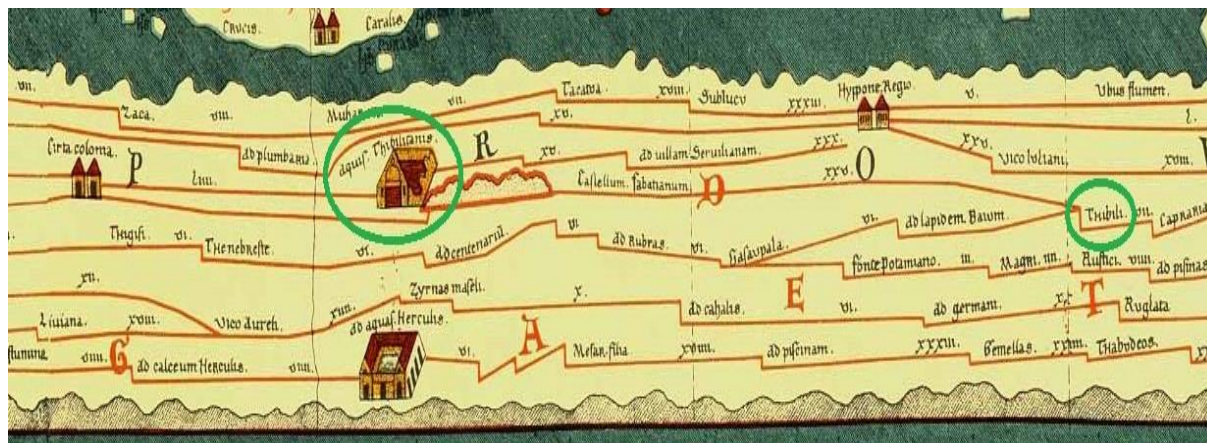


Photo N°05: Positioning of Aquae Thibilitanae "Aquis Thibilitanis" on the Peutinger table

1-2- The administrative situation of Aquae Thibilitanae in antiquity:

Despite the scarcity of references to the administrative status of Aquae Thibilitanae in the sources, we already know from writings, studies and inscriptions found, that during the imperial period, the town of Thibilis was part of the list of provinces of the Cirtéan confederation (Pagi); Consequently, Aquae thibilitanae, which is only 8 kilometres to the north and which takes its name from it, could have been a vicus of Thibilis. This opinion was supported by Gascou J., who believes that when Thibilis obtained municipium status much later, the city of Aquae Thibilitanae became independent. According to him, this occurred during the reign of the emperor Gallien (253-268 AD), with 268 AD as the most recent date and 247 AD as the earliest, coinciding with the period of the reign of Philip the Arab⁴. On the other hand, in the early years of the fourth century, the town had a bishop, meaning that it had religious authority. In contrast, and in the early years of the 4th century, the city had a bishop, that is to say, it had a religious authority. On this basis, considering that the episcopal boundaries were the same as the civil boundaries, it has been suggested that the town enjoyed administrative independence from the city of Thibilis and was not affiliated to its territory or even to the authority of the capital Cirta. Finally, we know from a funerary inscription on the site⁵ that the deceased was a servant of the imperial court and more specifically an assistant in the accounting office⁶, which indicates that

³ - Grellois, E., (1852), *Etudes archéologiques sur Guelma (ancienne Calama)*, Metz (Extrait des Mémoires de l'Académie nationale de Metz) : Imprimerie La mort. p. 58.

⁴ - Gascou, J. (1983), « Pagus et castellum dans la Confédération Cirtéenne », *Ant Afr*, T.19, p. 177 (footnote) and p. 183.

⁵ - CIL VIII, 18813 = ILAlg II, 4591

⁶ - ILAlg II, 4591, p. 423

2- Historical research and archaeological landscape in Hammam Dbagh:

2-1- Historical research in Hammam Dbagh:

The city of very hot thermal waters stretched across a plateau bordered to the north and north-west by the Oued Cheddakha a tributary of the Oued Bou Hamdane , which flowed into the famous Oued Syebousse known in antiquity by *ubus Flumen* and which traced the natural boundaries between Numidia and the Proconsular in the 3rd century. The remains and the picturesque nature of the region have attracted the attention of many researchers and travellers, most of whom were soldiers and doctors in the French colonial army, who devoted part of their publications to the remains of the region and the ancient road network (Map N° 06). We will briefly mention the most important ones:

- In 1830, Shaw T., a British traveller, visited the area and called it "the magic baths" and quoted the remains in his writings.
- In 1847 Ravoisié A.
- In 1850 Delamarre A.
- In 1852, Grellois A. undertook archaeological excavations at the site of Aquae Thibilitanae and a detailed descriptive study of everything he discovered in the city of Guelma, as well as in the Hammam Dbagh region.
- In 1856 Crowley M. became interested in the location of the Villa Servilliana, due to its distance from Aquae Thibilitane.
- In 1867 De Vignéral Ch.
- In 1868 and Bourguignat A.
- In 1870 Delamarre A. published sketches depicting the archaeological landscape of Aquae Thibilitanae.
- In 1885 Mercier became interested in the road network of the region and quoted it in his Notes on the ruins and ancient roads of Algeria.
- In 1891 Marthy, J. and Rouyer L. carried out a detailed descriptive study of the ancient defensive structures, thermal baths and traces of dwellings in the region.
- In 1891, Bernelles R. focused his research on the ancient sites of the commune of Oued Charef in his capacity as the manager of the time, in which he evoked the remains of Hammam Dbagh.
- In 1893, Piot A. published notes and observations relating to three seasons spent in the region (1890-1891-1892).

⁷ - Gsell, S. et Joly, Ch.A. (1918), *Khamissa, M'daourouch et Anouna, (Fouilles exécutées par les Services des Monuments d'Algérie, troisième partie : Anouna*, Alger : Librairie Jourdan.A., Paris : Frontemoing et Cie, p. 24 ; Gascou J.1983, p. 177, footnote

- In 1893, Houses A. published a geographical, geological and hydrographical study of the region, with a historical overview of the appellation, based on local accounts.
- In 1901 and 1911, Gsell St. recorded everything concerning the site in the Atlas archéologique d'Algérie Feuille N°9, as well as in his book Monuments antiques de l'Algérie in its first part. In 1918, together with Joly A., he published his research in the region in the book "Khamissa, M'daourouch et Anouna".
- In 1993, Joffroy H. presented a work entitled "Aquae Africae" in the form of an inventory of sites bearing the term "Aqua" in the provinces of Roman Africa, in which the site of Aquae Thibilitanae is cited in one paragraph.

2-2- archaeological landscape in Hammam Dbagh:

Various archaeological remains have been discovered here, bearing witness to the ancient Aquae Thibilitanae, , most of which were uncovered during the archeological excavations undertaken by Grellois which he published in 1852, and which mainly relate to thermal structures (thermal baths, swimming pools) (Photos N°,8and 9), defensive military structures (remains of a small fortress with control towers as well as remains of a fort dating back to the late period) (Photo N°7), residential structures (Remains of houses)), as well as traces of an amphitheatre 300 meters from the bus station, and in the same place, an inscription dedicated to the god Pluto was also found⁸. Two inscriptions in Neo-Punic have been found in the immediate vicinity of the town, along with Latin inscriptions, some of which include the name Thibilis⁹(Map N°1).



Photo N°06: Aquae Thibilitanae is cited in "the road network linking the towns of Cirte (Constantine) and Calama (Guelma)". Mercier, 1885, p.557, pl.19

⁸ - Grellois, 1852, p. 64-65

⁹ - Gsell, AAA, f° N°9, 144



Photo N°7: Remains of the fort seen from all sides. Extract from: Marthy & Rouyer, 1891, p.229, pl.6

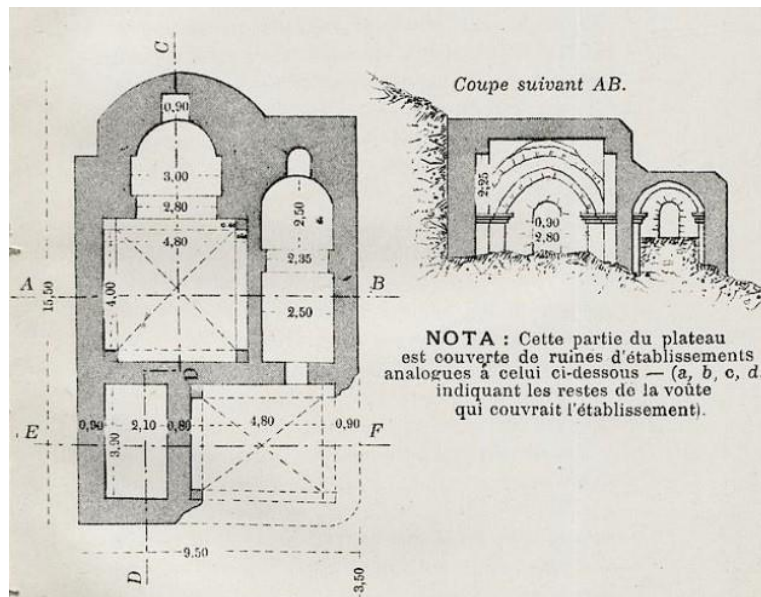


Photo N° 08: Plan and cross-section of the thermal baths of Aquae Thibilitanae, Extract from: Marthy & Rouyer, 1891, p.207, pl.I.

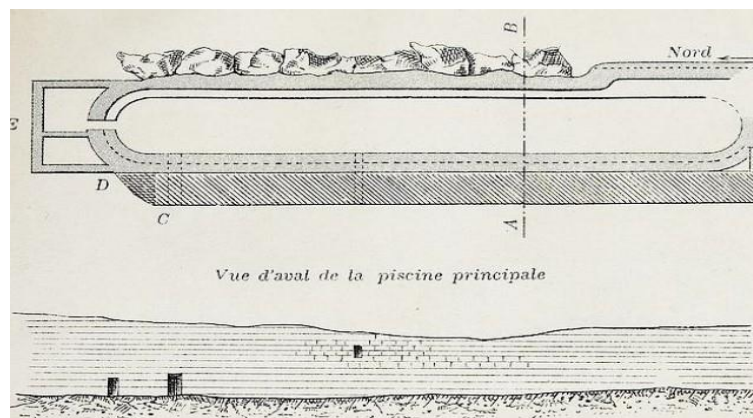
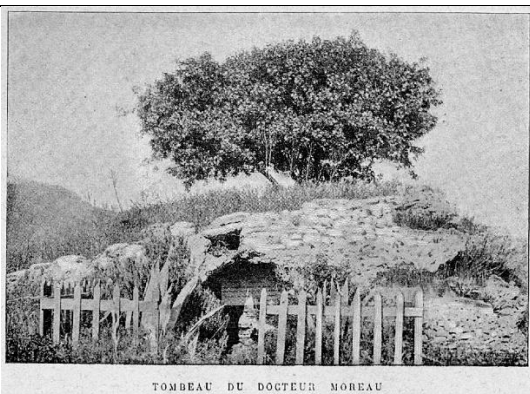


Photo N°09: The large Roman swimming pool at Aquae Thibilitanae, Extract from Marthy & Rouyer, 1891, p.229, pl.5

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Regarding the area of the funeral, according to Grellois A. – who carried out archaeological excavations at the site of Aquae Thibilitanae in the French colonial era – the few funeral monuments exhumed at the time suggest a low population density. Among the monuments is a brick tomb containing human bones, as well as a few objects, including an oil lamp and a flask. As for the inscriptions, according to the same author, there were a satisfactory number. He pointed to the passage, a stele carrying a decor in the shape of a cross and a scene performed in bas-relief and of poor quality¹⁰. As mentioned above, most of the available inscriptions were in Latin and some in the Neo-Punic language, and many of them carry various iconographic representations mentioned by Gsell St.¹¹, including a funerary inscription in memory of the priest of God Saturn¹². The existence of large rock masses with a sedimentary composition has been reported, one of these rocks takes the form of a hypogeum which contained two tombs from the Roman era, one of which received during the French colonial period the body of Dr. Moreau, (Photo N°10) founder of the civilian establishment in which the French military settled¹³. As for the coins collected in situ, the oldest dates from the reign of Alexander Severus (235-238 AD) and the most recent from the reign of Constantine II (337-361 AD).



TOMBEAU DU DOCTEUR MOREAU

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k131387h>



Photo N°10: Tomb of Doctor Louis
Isidore Eugène Moreau
(reuse of a Roman tomb)

3-Recent archaeological discoveries 2021:

The Late Necropolis of Aquae Thibilitanae (Hammam Dbagh Municipality, Guelma, Algeria):

3-1- Location of the Late Roman Necropolis:

the site is situated in the centre of the town of Hammam Dbagh, about 300 metres south-east of the large natural waterfall and about 250 metres north-east of the public thermal complex. The

¹⁰ - Grellois, 1852, p. 65

¹¹ - Gsell, St. (1896). *Inscriptions inédites de l'Algérie*, BCTH, p. 197- 198.

¹² - Gsell, St. BCTH, 1896, p.198, no. 122.

¹³ - Marthy, J. et Rouyer, L (1891). Notes archéologiques sur Hammam-Maskhoutine et ses environs, RSAC, p.219-220.

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necropolis is currently surrounded by the Djihane spa complex on the south-western side, by the commune headquarters on the north-eastern side and by the mujahedin rest centre on the eastern side. (Photo N°11)



Photo N°11 Image sat. Location of the late necropolis of Aquae Thibilitanae (in red the test pits and in yellow the salvage excavation).

3-2-Circumstances of discovery and nature of the remains :

Archaeological remains were unearthed as part of the work to build a rest centre (C R P) undertaken by the Guelma wilaya civil protection authority in the municipality of Hammam Dbagh, in the ancient Aquae Thibilitanae. During our visit to the site of the accidental discovery dated 05/25/2021, in order to make an archaeological finding diligently carried out by the Ministry of Culture and Arts, we noticed at the foot of the walls of the trenches (made by the mechanical pile during the groundwork), the presence of several tombs in building, under jar and under amphores from the late Roman period a priori and human bones In situ. We have therefore strongly recommended that rescue excavations be carried out as soon as possible, in order to document and understand the exact nature of the site (photos 12 and 13), its extent and chronology. This will undoubtedly enable valuable archaeological finds to be saved, studied and rehabilitated.



Photo N° 12: -Land concerned by the salvage excavation -(CRP Hammam Dbagh)



Photo N°13 : -Land concerned by the archaeological soundings-(CRP Hammam Dbagh)

3-3-First Campaign (October 2021): Archaeological Surveys:

Following the archaeological findings, a second mission to this area was scheduled from 10/13/2021 by a team of researchers from the CNRA led by Dr. Adel Ouafia to begin the survey work in the field chosen for the realization of the project of a rest center for the civil protection (CRP). After starting the work of archaeological surveys on an area that does not exceed 100 square meters of 500 square meters of the total area, we have uncovered more than 20 burials of four different types of which 15 are in the form of gable roof tombs (tombes en bâtière), which is

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a common type of burial of late antiquity, made of large flat tiles (tegulae) forming a pignon above the body. The tiles are of beige to whitish colour have a porous texture and have cracks (Photo N°14, 16 and 17), 02 burials under the coffin (Photos N° 19), 02 in the open ground or have been revealed in each, a skeleton in long dorsal decubitus (Photos N° 20), (Photo N°15. The discovery was very interesting in that, or on the entire surface surveyed, the tegulae ends of the gable roof's tombs appeared.

However, the heavy weather (diluvian rains) that swept the region ended up stopping the momentum of our work. We were therefore obliged to stop this operation in consultation with the local authorities, and we had to sign a provisional closure report for the site. The work had to be resumed as soon as the weather conditions were milder. The resumption of our work was also conditioned by the very busy schedule of our missions.



Photo N°14: Tombs with gable roof (CRP Hammam Dbagh)



Photo N° 15: Tomb under the jar (CRP Hammam Dbagh)



Photos N°16 and 17: The different types of tombs exhumed in 2021 at Aquae Thibilitanae



Photo N°18: The different types of tombs exhumed in 2021 at Aquae Thibilitanae (Plan view)



Photo N° 19: Type of tomb in masonry chest



Photo N°20: Type of tomb in the ground

large quantity of lime (Photo N°22).

3-4- Second campaign (2021): Rescue excavation:

After the archaeological discovery and the first campaign consisting of archeological surveys in the planned site for the realization of a rest center for civil protection; A second campaign was

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conducted in 2021, by CNRA researchers led by Dr. Adel Ouafia, this time to undertake a rescue excavation on the southern side of the plot. This area is in fact a large mass of greyish limestone rock, interspersed with a few layers of clay soil with a vegetable cover. Our work in this part of the necropolis has revealed a dozen tombs in the form of sarcophagi cut into the rock and bearing all around traces of grooves (Photo N°23) that were used to encapsulate the stone lids that were probably adorned with mosaic as indicated by the large number of polychrome tesserae found nearby and in all the tombs, adjacent to a significant amount of limestone (Photos N° 22).



Photo N° 21 :The rocky mass containing tombs excavated



Photo N°22: Mosaic tesserae



Photo N°23 : Tombs dug into the rock

Interventions and works:

After decapitating the surface of the plot that was covered with weeds and thorns, we uncovered around ten tombs dug into the rock, averaging 2m12x 0.63m in length and width, and 0.60m in depth. The tombs are rectangular in shape, and are almost all rounded at the ends. They are arranged in pairs, sometimes in threes, and are mostly oriented North/South and some East/West (Photo N°25).

-The first layer uncovered, at the highest level of the burials, is a rather loose, damp, dark brown soil containing a mixture of organic plant matter (perhaps the result of the leaves from a large olive tree above). This layer is about 30cm thick and does not contain archaeological artifacts.

- The Second layer of 25cm thick, is of light brown color and somewhat compact. It is in fact a mixture of stony earth and remains of lime mortar, in addition to the presence of pockets containing earth mixed with ash, followed by a very loose archaeological layer (presence of skeletons and a few artefacts). Some of the graves contain fragments of reworked human bones, suggesting that some of them may have been despoiled in the past (Photo N°24).

-The final layer at the bottom is a compact stony soil mixed with mortar, about 10 cm thick. It is the layer containing the remains of the skeleton in place, in an elongated dorsal decubitus, with the absence of the skull and the upper limbs in tomb N° 01 of zone 03.



Photo N°24: Human bones out of archaeological context

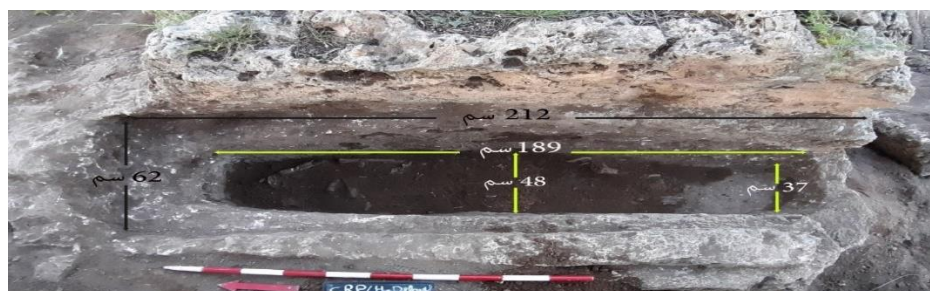


Photo N°25: Type of grave dug in the rock

Synthesis:

The archaeological surveys and rescue excavations carried out at hammam Dbagh in 2021 took place for very short periods (about fifteen days for the first campaign and only ten days dedicated to the second), which is not long enough to be able to present complete results; especially since

the discovered necropolis exceeds 500 square meters, and burials in this space took place on several levels, sometimes superimposed.

The number of fully or partially exposed tombs exceeds 300, of various types: The predominant type is the gable roof tombs, followed by burials under jars, others in the ground and others under a safe, and finally, the tombs dug in the rock in the form of sarcophagi. The latter were placed to the south of the necropolis, at a higher level, on a rocky mass dominating the site, just below the former Christian chapel from the colonial era, later transformed into the municipal museum (Photo N°27).

Wouldn't the latter itself be built on the trail of an ancient chapel overlooking the ancient Christian necropolis of the town of Aquae Thibilitanae? The numerous stones strewn across the ground at the foot of this building may be evidence of the existence of an ancient 'religious' building on the site. The large number of burials would undoubtedly indicate a high population density in the region between the 4th and 5th centuries, contrary to what Grellois suggested during the excavations he carried out in the region in 1852¹⁴. We noted that the funeral furnitures were not at all abundant in the tombs excavated and in the surrounding area (see table) (Photo N°25), which is quite normal when we are dealing with late burials as is the case and which was attested by the discovery in the archaeological layers of 03 bronze coins bearing the effigy of the emperor Constantine 1st. However, an interesting metal belt connector with an emerald green bronze patina and stylized wave geometric decoration (Photo 26). The triangular-shaped belt connector with a hole in each corner was used by the military in late times (in the 4th and 5th centuries) was collected in zone 03, tomb 01. A few pieces of ceramics without any particularity. Some burnt shards were collected. Fragments of colored glass, a large quantity of polychrome mosaic tesserae, fragments of mortar and lime. Here's most of the furniture resulting from the rescue excavation. Finally, what we can say after this short rescue excavation is that everything points to this necropolis dating from the late period. The same types of tombs known and documented throughout ancient Algeria (in Tipasa for example) date back to the late ancient period: The funeral practices, the position of the deceased in elongated dorsal decubitus, the coins dating from the 4th century and found in Situ with the belt attachment of the military, comfort our approach.

¹⁴ - Grellois, 1852, p.65

The Late Necropolis of Aquae Thibilitanae CRP. Hammam.Dbagh. Guelma	
List of furniture and artifacts exhumed during excavation	
Ceramic fragments	91 (Without interesting shape of the commune for the most part, calcined fragments)
Bronze Coins	03 from the period of Constantine 1st
Weight (measure) bronze square	1
Bronze triangular belt attachment	1
Bronze ball	1
Slab (fragments of tomb lids)	1
Batch of polychrome mosaic tesserae	Lot
Glass fragments	19
Tiles (Tegulae)	7
Mortar (fragments)	10

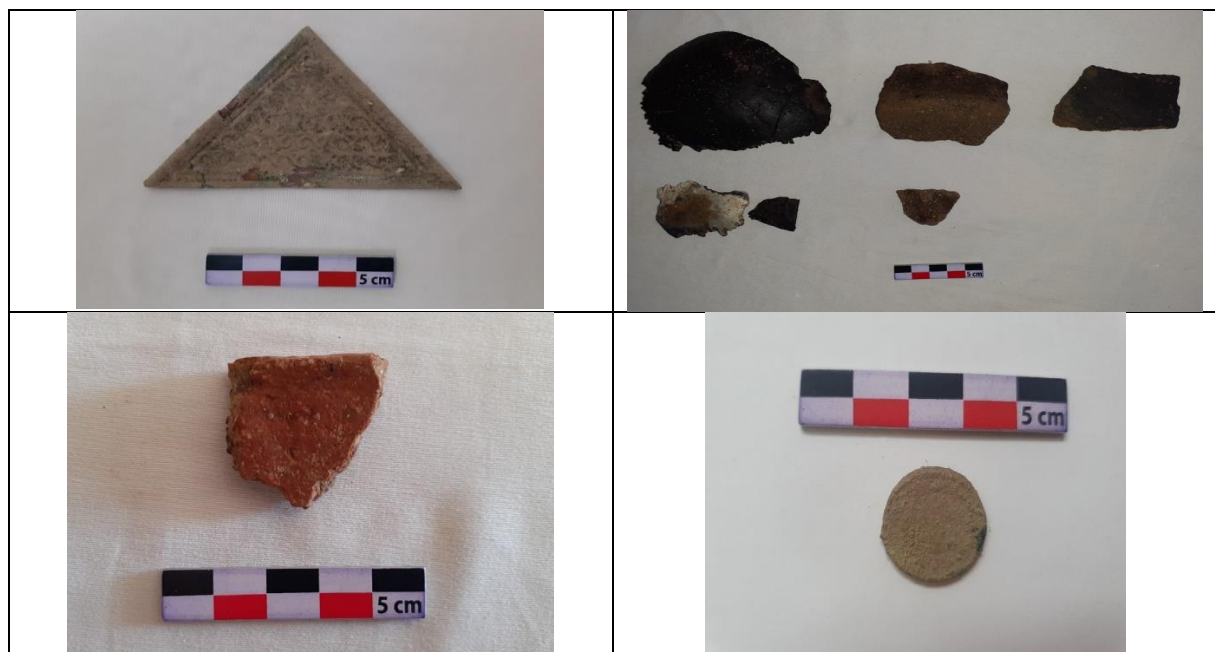




Photo N° 26: Various samples of the artifacts collected



Photo N° 26: Overview of the tombs overlaid by an old chapel (currently a museum)

Conclusion:

We have concluded our work with the firm decision to return for further campaigns, as the Aquae Thibilitanae site has not finished delivering us all its archaeological secrets. We need to define the exact surface area of the late necropolis, which exceeds the 500m² we have surveyed, in order to enhance, protect and preserve it. We recommend fencing to act as a deterrent, adequate

lighting around the site and the provision of signposting, given the importance of variety in funerary architectural design and diversity. With the discovery of the late necropolis of Aquae Thibilitanae, we have rehabilitated and brought to light a part of its history. The Christian period from the 4th to the 5th, mentioned by Optat de Milev and Saint Augustine, was a time when the episcopal city experienced significant growth and achieved an autonomy that enabled it to feature on ancient maps and itineraries. Aquae Thibilitanae the present Hammam Dbagh has now become a tourist and attractive area very popular in Algeria thanks to its picturesque nature, its thermal waters and its archaeological vestiges that we must preserve and preserve. Tourists will be able to enjoy their spa treatment in a healthy environment surrounded by archaeological remains and the most wonderful natural surroundings, which will be able to dissuade the most addicted to smoking and cure them in the same way as patients suffering from neurological problems, chronic illnesses, etc. Health means living in a healthy, calm and attractive environment...as is the case with the site and Thermal Resort of Aquae Thibilitanae, now Hammam Dbagh.

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