

Rare sestertius of Britannicus from Serdica (preliminary report) (Abstract)
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The excavations in the centre of Sofia that cover the territory of ancient Serdica, and in particular the area to the northwest of the presumed crossroad of the two main streets, *cardo maximus* and *decumanus maximus*, continued in 2011. A highdenomination bronze coin – a sestertius of Britannicus – was discovered in the investigated area and more precisely in a wooden dwelling from the earliest archaeological layer (Fig. 1). The exceptional rarity of this coin and the information it provides are the reasons for its early publication, before the other numismatic material.

The description of the coin is as follows:

Obverse: TI CLAVDIUS CAESAR AVG F BRITANNICVS. Bareheaded, draped bust of Britannicus to the right. A beaded circle, preserved in the left part of the coin, is framing the device. Britannicus is depicted as a young man with raised head and determined gaze that is emphasized by the wide-open expressive eyes. His nose is straight, slightly pointed, the nostrils are emphasized and the lips are slightly open. The hair is curly, combed to the left at the forehead; there is a big curl on the pate, while several locks fall free over the back of the head, gathered towards the ear. The drapes of the clothing are carefully arranged and fastened with a fibula. The inscription's letters are in relief and correctly written, their size is proportionate to the coin and the image that they frame.

Reverse: S C. Mars barefooted and fully accoutred: Corinthian helmet, a mantle (sagum), pacing to the left. He holds a spear in his right hand, and in the left a round shield with a Macedonian star in relief in the centre. Beaded circle.

The letters are clear, thick and in relief. The image of Mars is very detailed in terms of body, clothing and equipment. The bearded face, the details of the helmet and the shield, and the relief greaves are noteworthy. The posture emanates vitality and vigour.

Aurichalcum, 33 mm, 28.46 g

RIC I, 130 (note); von Kaenel 1984, Typus A, 130, B 3 (Taf. 20, 3).

There are two types of sestertii with the name of Britannicus that are distinguished by the device on the obverse – turned to the right (Type A) or to the left (Type B). There is no difference in the inscription on the obverse and the image on the reverse. According to von Kaenel, there are three specimens of Type A and 12 of Type B in museum collections around the world. The newly-found coin from Serdica is the fourth of Type A and it is also the best preserved, with clearest devices and inscriptions. Two coins of Britannicus found in Bulgaria – one from Aquae Calidae and another with unknown provenance – belong to the second, more numerous Type B.

The limited number of coins with the name of Britannicus raises doubts among the scholars about their origin. This uncertainty is additionally fuelled by the number of fake Type B coins that increased in the late 19th century. In his detailed study, von Kaenel analyses the known coins of Britannicus and shows that there are common features, but also essential differences between the originals and the forgeries.

The uncertain date of Britannicus' sestertii is directly related to the ambiguity around the mint that struck the coins. The argument that they were issued in Rome is based mainly on the letters S C on the reverse. According to von Kaenel, the

discussed coins were not minted in Rome, despite the letters. These coins differ from the sestertii of Claudius, on which the letters S C are thick and in high relief. The sestertii of Britannicus have thin and shallow S C letters and as a whole their quality and the execution of the relief are below the standard of the coins from Rome. These observations of von Kaenel are not confirmed by the evidence, provided by the coin from Serdica. As already mentioned, the letters are in relief and thick and the depiction is of the best quality. However, this does not mean that the coin should be related to a mint in the capital.

The unspecified provenance of the three sestertii of Type A known so far deters von Kaenel from specifying their origin, while he relates the coins of Type B, found in the Balkans, to an unidentified mint in Ancient Thrace. The undoubtedly similar style of the images on both types of sestertii provides grounds to suggest that they have a common origin, related to Thrace. The discovery in Serdica of a Type A coin, under consideration here, is a new argument in this direction.

Similar, in terms of style of the devices and the Latin inscriptions, is a series of bronze coins of Agrippina the Younger, Nero as Caesar and Nero as Augustus that are found in the Balkans and were probably struck by a local mint. The analysis and the comparison of this numismatic material are the basis of the hypothesis that the coins of Britannicus are local products of a mint in Thrace. They

were minted on a special occasion and probably were destined for the Roman legions in the region.

The article also discusses inscriptions with the name of Britannicus and their evidence is compared with the numismatic data in order to support the thesis for the Balkan origin of Britannicus' issues.

The sestertius of Britannicus from Serdica, the fourth of this type in a museum collection, is the only one with a clear origin and context. The data from the field show that the life in this part of Serdica began in the first decades of the first century AD. The significant amount of imported material – fibulae, glass, red-glazed pottery, first century AD monetary issues minted for the Roman army and circulating in military milieu – provides grounds for the cautious suggestion of the excavations' director that Serdica was established with the participation of individuals related to the Roman army. The absence of pottery and finds that could be related to the local population shows that the emergence of the settlement in the first decades of first century AD is due to new settlers. This conclusion corresponds to the opinion that the coins of Britannicus are among the issues minted for the Roman legions stationed in the Balkans.

The coin of Britannicus published here is extremely valuable, for it was discovered in a secure archaeological context, in a dated layer of ancient Serdica. This enhances its significance as a comparandum for the date, the production and the distribution of these coins.