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Insigne ingenuitatis – Early Roman bulla from Serdica (Abstract)

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During archaeological excavations in 2011 in the centre of Sofia, a bronze pendant (Fig. 1-4) was found, with the following dimensions: 2.8 cm long, 1.5 cm wide and 0.9 cm thick. The metal plate is 0.05 cm thick. The shape identifies the find as a specific amulet, known as *bulla*. It was made of a folded bronze plate with rounded edges. Both ends were bent into convex shape, in order to make a hollow sphere when folded. The lower end of the back side of the capsule is bent to overlap the front side, keeping the two parts together. Inside the amulet, there was a small pebble that was found after the *bulla* was opened (Fig. 4). The archaeological context, most of all coins and imported pottery (*terra sigillata*), suggests a date of the amulet in the third quarter of the 1st c. AD.

Wearing a *bulla* was related to its apotropaic power and its ability to ward off evil. However, the specific meaning of this amulet was related to the age and gender of the wearer. In Late Republican

and Early Imperial times, *bullae* were given only to male children, born free. The amulet was worn for protection and as status symbol until the boy entered maturity at the age of 14 to 16. When he was ready to become a man, the *bulla* was taken off and dedicated to the domestic deities, the Lares and the Penates, along with the *toga praetexta*.

Most probably, the *bulla* from Serdica belonged to the domestic altar of one of the wood-and-earth houses of the pre-urban period of the settlement. Having in mind the available archaeological evidence, it is not possible to say if the *bulla* belonged to the owner of the house, or to his son. What is most important is the attested practice of a purely Roman rite in a provincial settlement. This fact, along with the imported pottery and glassware, as well as the pieces of Roman weaponry, provides additional arguments to support the emergence and early development of Roman Serdica under the strong influence of a Roman military unit.