

## Growing up in the Roman empire

### The *bullae*



Left: bust of boy wearing a *bullae* (Herculaneum). Right: various *bullae* (British Museum).

Roman boys, both rich and poor, would have been given a **bullae**, a special amulet to protect them until they safely reached adulthood. It is unclear when the child would have first received it but it is possible that it could have been as early as the **dies lustricus** (around 9 days after birth) to mark the child's entry into the paternal line.

A rich child may have had a *bullae* made of gold and a poor child of leather or a less precious but still shiny material. These tokens are not found buried with children who died prematurely so we can assume that the *bullae* would be passed on to the next born child with the hope that it might be more effective this time.

When a boy reached adulthood he would take off his *bullae* and lay it aside in a rite of passage that symbolised his safe passing into adulthood. However, it might still be worn after that point on certain special occasions. Along with the *toga praetexta*, it was symbolic of youth.

The *bullae* was only for boys. Girls would wear a *lunula* (a crescent moon-shaped pendant), to similarly ward off evil spirits. It would be dedicated along with the rest of her childhood toys to the goddess Venus on the eve her wedding day.

Why do you think *bullae* were worn for the duration of childhood only?

What are people's attitudes to "lucky charms" nowadays?  
Do you have any items that you believe bring you particular luck?  
When would you use them?

You might call *bullae* superstition.  
What do you think makes people superstitious?



*Etruscan bulla  
showing Icarus,  
5th century BC  
(Walters Art  
Museum)*

The story of Daedalus and Icarus shows a young man who doesn't follow his father's advice come to an unfortunate end...

To listen to an account of the story of Daedalus and Icarus, or to read a transcript, visit the *Classical Tales* website.

[http://  
classictales.educ.cam.ac.uk/  
stories/metamorphoses/  
daedalusandicarus/index.html](http://classictales.educ.cam.ac.uk/stories/metamorphoses/daedalusandicarus/index.html)  
(8 min 11 sec)

Do you think the story of Daedalus and Icarus is an appropriate subject for a *bulla*?