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Behind the Mask: Early Neolithic miniature masks (and one larger-than-life example) from Göbekli Tepe (and beyond)

By Oliver Dietrich, Jens Notroff, and Laura Dietrich

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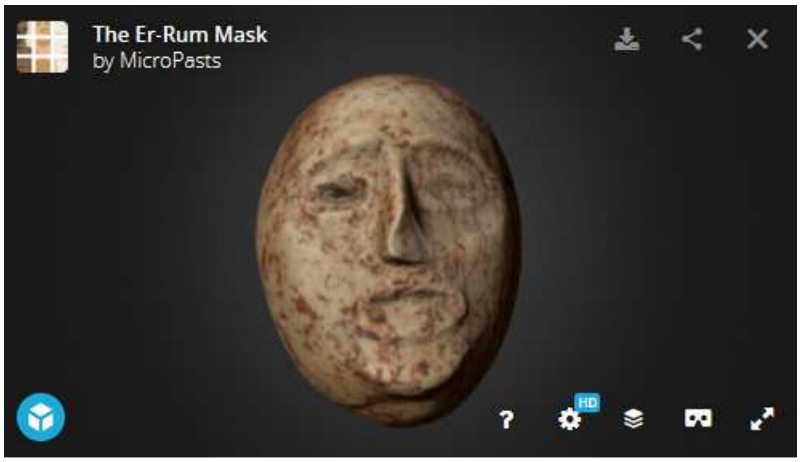
Today people wear masks to hide their identity but also to impersonate another real or imaginary being. All Neolithic cultures in the Near East made masks. Why? What were the rituals and ideas behind the masks?

In the corpus of Neolithic stone masks, those from the Judean Hills and Desert are among the most well-known. Weighing up to 2 kilograms, these masks strike the modern observer with their almost expressionistic facial features – each is individual, as if depicting specific human beings. Some have holes around the rim, probably to allow them to be attached to something, or to even be worn.



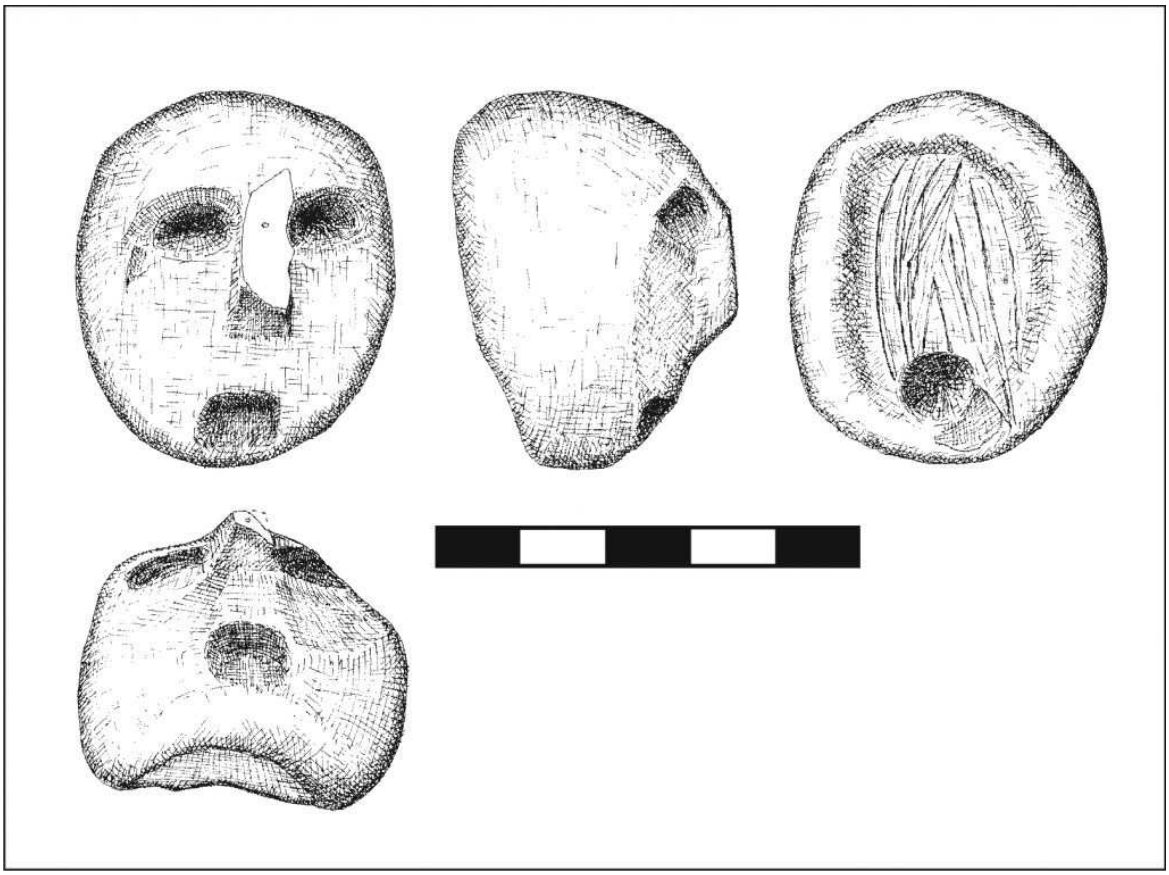
LINK: The Er-Rum Mask by MicroPasts on Sketchfab

Pre-Pottery Neolithic B mask from Er Ram in the collection of the Palestine Exploration Fund. Modeled by Hugh Fiske. Used under Creative Commons license.

The oldest of these Southern Levantine masks belong to the Pre-Pottery-Neolithic (PPN) B, that is, the mid 9th and 8th millennia BCE. Since examples excavated in the Nahal Hemar cave in Israel during the early 1980s were found in a 'cultic' assemblage, a ritual use of these

masks was assumed. The Southern Levantine examples are special and important, but they are no longer not unique. Within the rich repertoire of sculpture from contemporary Neolithic sites elsewhere in the Near East, there is a growing corpus of artefacts that could be interpreted as masks or depictions of masks.

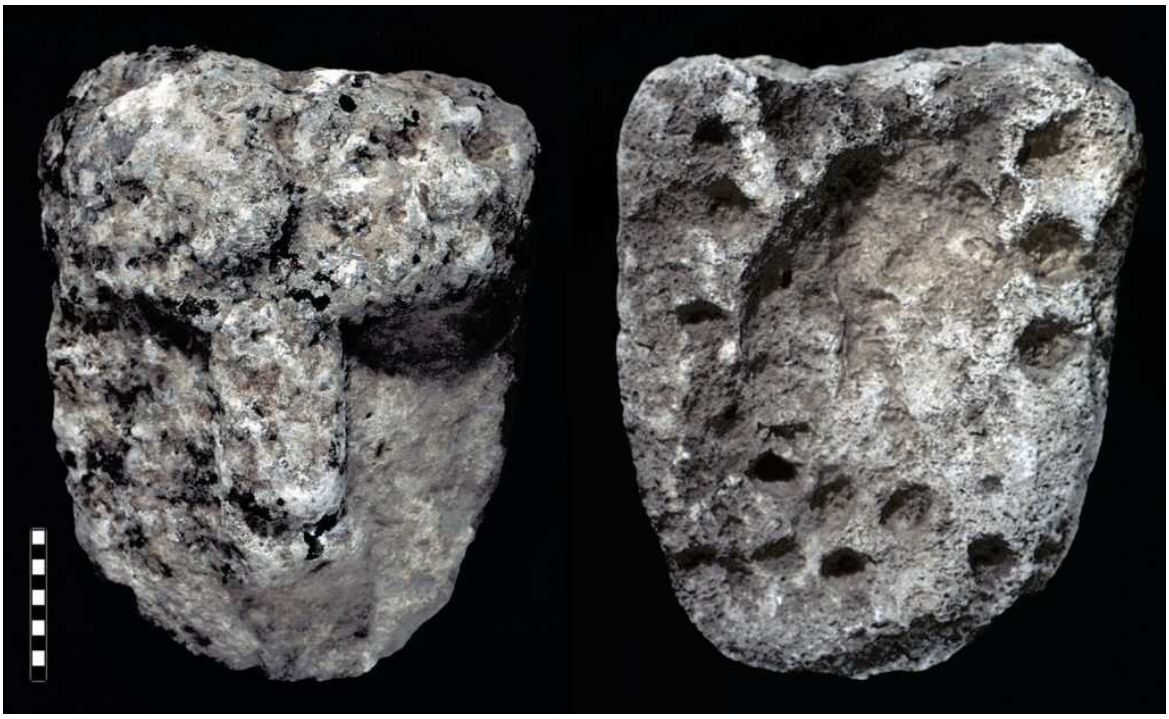
At Jerf el Ahmar, a transitional PPNA to PPN B site in northern Syria dating to the 10th millennium BCE and characterised by round and rectangular buildings with limestone foundations, two little stone heads were reported which show a conspicuous concave cavity on their back. They are made from pebbles, only about 4 cm high and show eyes, a nose, and mouth. Another miniature stone mask or depiction of similar size is known from Nevalı Çori in southeastern Turkey.



Miniature mask from Nevalı Çori (Drawing: K. Schmidt, courtesy of H. Hauptmann).

Eyes, nose, and mouth are again depicted, and the back is concave. From its find context, a middle-PPN B date can be assumed for this mask. Nevalı Çori furthermore has become well known as the first place where an important characteristic element of PPN architecture of the region was discovered: T-shaped, apparently anthropomorphic, pillars. These link it to another nearby site that also has produced a number of comparable masks: Göbekli Tepe.

Aerial of Göbekli Tepe showing the excavation areas (Photo: E. Kücük, DAI).



Larger than life-sized mask from Göbekli Tepe (Photo: K. Schmidt, DAI).

One is a larger than life-sized and complete human mask, 42 cm in height made from limestone, found during clearance work before beginning of excavations in 1995. The depiction of the face is minimalistic, almost abstract. They eyes are very faint and the mouth

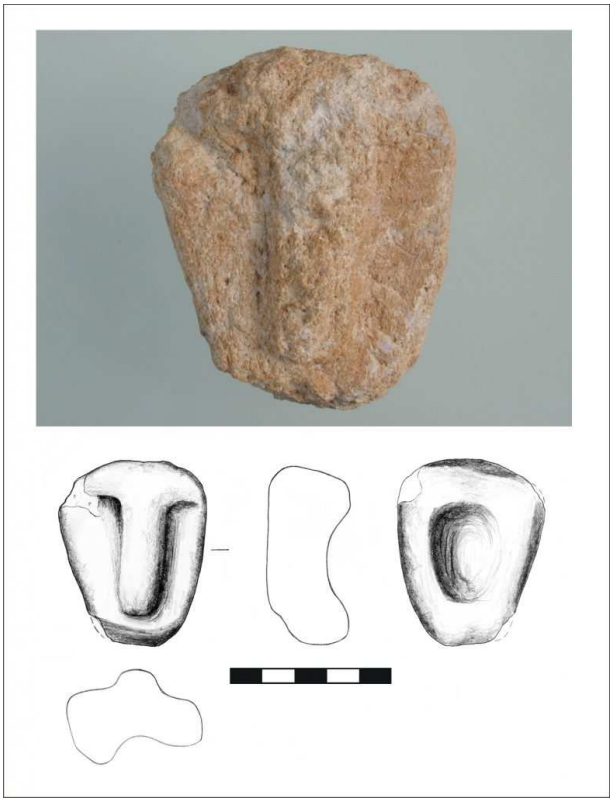
is absent, and the forehead and nose are carved in a geometrical manner, almost resembling a ‘T’. This manner of portraying the human face is characteristic of three-dimensional anthropomorphic sculpture at Göbekli Tepe and thus a clear indicator that a human face is depicted here.

Collection of life-sized naturalistic limestone heads from Göbekli Tepe (Photos: N. Becker, DAI).

Due to its height it seems too large to be actually worn, but could have been fixed to a wall or another kind of support. The second example is another miniature (height: 5.7 cm), also made from limestone, found in the upper layers of the filling of Enclosure D in 2001.

With a concave rear, like the specimen reported from Nevalı Çori, it follows the same minimalistic principle as the large mask from Göbekli Tepe. Again, it is clear that a human face is depicted, but individual characteristics are not present. The eyes are not even suggested, and the mouth is absent.

The third mask, another miniature (height: 4.7 cm) is of a different type. Not only was it made from a flint cortex, it also is much more expressive, due to curved chevrons engraved into its forehead, not unlike the mask from Jerf el Ahmar discussed above. This may indicate a headdress, but the fairly low setting of the lines could also hint at tattooing or scarification. The back was not finished. This mask was found in 2010, high in the stratigraphy, during excavations in Enclosure H, next to (central) Pillar 51.



Miniature mask from Göbekli Tepe (Photo: K. Schmidt, Drawing: Ç. Köksal-Schmidt, DAI).

View into Enclosure D in the main excavation area (Photo: N. Becker, DAI).

Miniature mask from Göbekli Tepe, made from a flint cortex (Photo: N. Becker, DAI).

Miniature mask from Göbekli Tepe, engraved in a flint cortex (Photo: K. Schmidt, DAI).

A fourth miniature (height: 4.5 cm) of a mask was also engraved into a flint cortex. Its form again follows the reduced depiction of the face of the first two examples, with more pronounced eyes. It was found in 2008 next to the eastern central pillar of Enclosure C.

While as a surface find the first mask can only broadly be dated to the PPN, the second mask from the filling of Enclosure D could indicate a PPN A date, as could the miniature mask from Enclosure C, with its position nearby one of the central pillars. Enclosure C has been damaged and disturbed in prehistory by a large pit directed at the central pillars, but the mask seems to come from an untouched floor layer. The third mask was found next to a central pillar of Enclosure H. The stone circle was also damaged and disturbed in prehistory.

Schematic plan of Göbekli Tepe's main excavation area (plus Enclosure E) (Plan: K. Schmidt & J. Notroff, DAI).

Selection of limestone heads from Göbekli Tepe, not to scale (Photos: N. Becker, D. Johannes, K. Schmidt, DAI).

Three of the masks found at Göbekli Tepe have similar styles to the example from Nevalı Çori, with non-individualized faces. However, at Göbekli Tepe the mouth is not depicted, while the Nevalı Çori mask almost gives the impression the face is screaming. Together with the finds from other sites, a large repertoire of masks in different styles is suggested. All types, with and without mouths, more individualized or abstract, are also well attested for in the large repertoire of limestone sculpture found at Göbekli Tepe. Their treatment during episodes when parts of the site were deliberately filled in and put out of use can shed some light on the larger use of masks during the PPN.

Burial rites at Göbekli Tepe seem to have been applied to the hierarchical system of anthropomorphic depictions. The enclosures' central pillars are abstracted and clearly anthropomorphic. The surrounding pillars are also stylized, but smaller and contain zoomorphic decoration. They are orientated towards the central pillars and evoke the association of a gathering. Naturalistic anthropomorphic sculpture, which may partly depict masked people, is smaller and intentionally fragmented. The stone masks are strongly related to this category through form and deposition treatment.

During backfilling of the enclosures, a selection of fragments, mostly (masked?) heads, and complete masks, was placed inside the fills, most often near the central pillars.

Pillar 43 in Enclosure D whose rich decoration clearly indicates an apparently narrative character of many of the reliefs (Photo: K. Schmidt, DAI).

Inside Enclosure D: one of the enclosure's central pillars (P18) in front of the original backfilling sediment, illustrating the mighty layer forming the mound (Photo: K. Schmidt, DAI).

If we assume that the stone masks are miniature or supra-sized representations of real organic masks worn by humans, they might attest that ritual activity at Göbekli Tepe and other sites included masquerades, where people acted out parts of a complex mythology. When enclosures were put out of use, masks and miniatures were buried with them, freezing rituals in time and space.

During the early Neolithic in the Near East, masks and masking played a significant role in rituals re-enacting mythological narratives closely related to death, taking place at sites with special purpose buildings and rich iconography. This importance apparently justified the time-consuming and complicated manufacture of these paraphernalia as well as miniature and larger-than-life-sized representations. A small number of masks in stone are all what remains of what was likely a widespread Early Neolithic tradition of ritual masquerade.

Oliver Dietrich, Jens Notroff, and Laura Dietrich are research assistants in the Göbekli Tepe project of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) excavations at Göbekli Tepe, carried out in close cooperation with the Şanlıurfa Haleplibahçe Museum. Archaeobiological research is conducted by the Institute of Palaeoanatomy, Domestication Research and the History of Veterinary Medicine, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. The project is funded by the DAI and the German Research Foundation (DFG). For more on their research at the site see the blog at "The Tepe Telegrams."

For further reading:

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