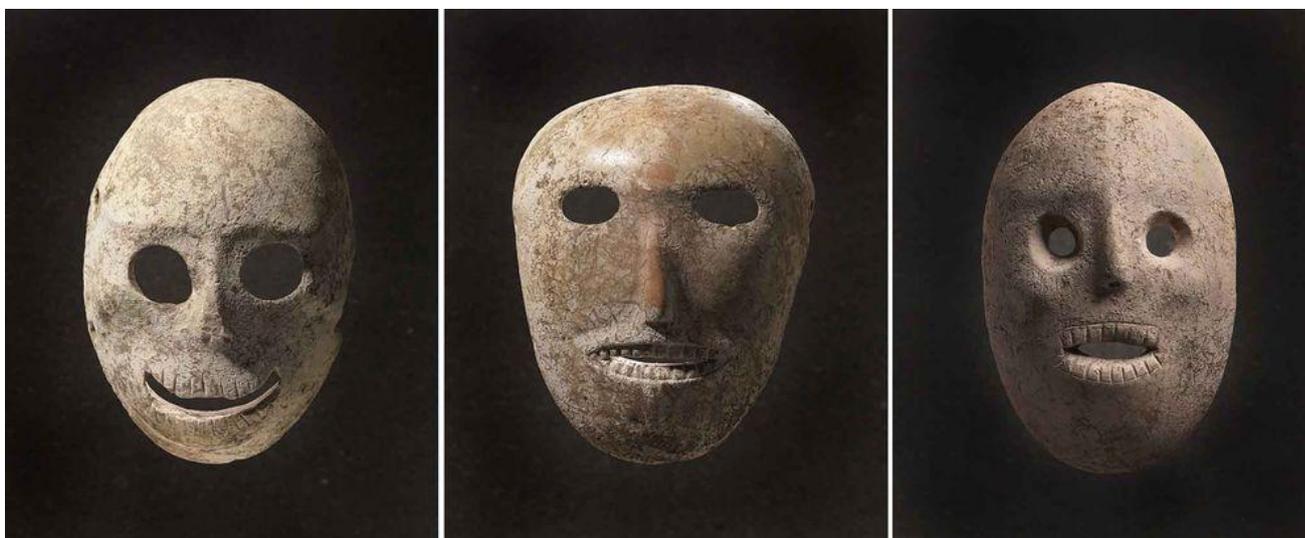


June 10, 2014

World's Oldest Masks Modeled on Early Farmers' Ancestors

Sculpted stone faces—9,000 years old—represented family links to the land.



Like most of the pieces in the exhibit, these masks from the Judean Hills or southern Judean foothills display skull-like features.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIE POSNER, COLLECTION OF JUDY AND MICHAEL STEINHARDT, NEW YORK © THE ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM

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A dozen of the world's earliest known masks have been brought together for the first time for an [exhibition at the Israel Museum](#) in Jerusalem. The rare stone artifacts were sculpted by early farmers whose immediate ancestors had given up hunting and gathering and settled in the Judean Hills, the location of the modern city of Jerusalem, and in the fringes of the nearby Judean Desert.

That momentous change in lifestyle, along with the first stirrings of organized religion, may have prompted the farmers to create the stark stone images for their cult rituals.

Debbi Hershman, curator of the museum's Prehistoric Cultures Department, has spent the last decade conducting the first comprehensive study of the 15 known stone masks

from the Neolithic era—those on exhibit plus three others. "Many of them look like dead people," she says. "In fact, I think they're portraits of specific people—probably important ancestors."



This limestone mask was reconstructed from 12 fragments that archaeologists found in the Nahal Hemar cave.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIE POSNER, COLLECTION OF ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY © THE ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM

The ancestral images were likely powerful symbols for families who had recently put down roots and who now needed to defend their claims to the cultivated fields they depended on for survival.

"These people had no writing," explains Hershman. "Their only connection to the land was through genealogy—your grandfather and great-grandfather lived here, and that means the land is yours."

Few of the masks come from sites excavated by archaeologists, so it's impossible to say for sure how they were used. But Hershman believes they served as more than just practical links to property. They had a spiritual dimension too, worn as evocative regalia in rituals associated with ancestor cults.

In 1983 Hershman was part of a small team of archaeologists led by Harvard prehistorian Ofer Bar-Yosef who excavated a recently looted cave in the southern Judean Desert. Known as [Nahal Hemar](#), the site appears to have been used to store thousands of [objects from an ancestor cult](#). The scientists uncovered rope baskets, wooden beads, shells, flint knives, figurines carved from bone, human skulls decorated with molded asphalt, and embroidered textiles that may once have been ritual costumes.



A ceremonial costume disguises a member of a modern ancestor cult in West Africa.

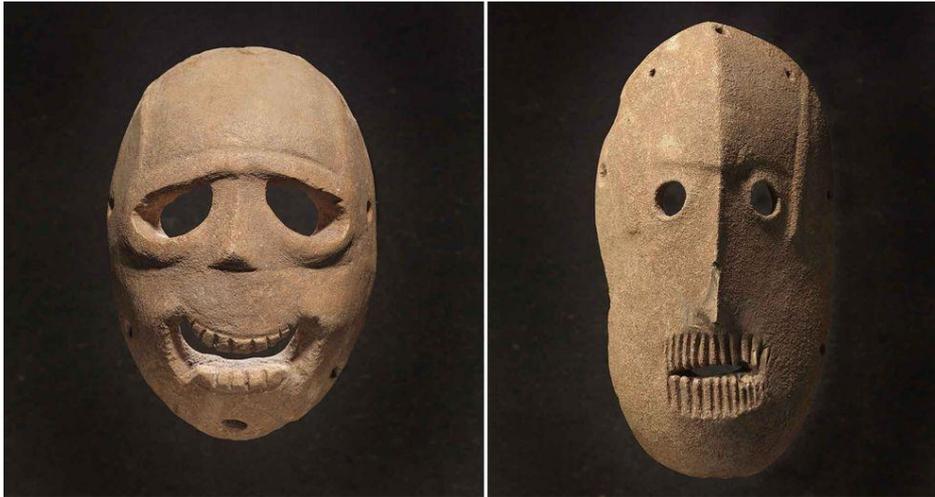
PHOTOGRAPH BY PHYLLIS GALEMBO

They also found fragments of two stone masks, which now belong to the Israel Antiquities Authority. Strands of hair, preserved for thousands of years in the dry climate, were stuck to the masks in clumps. "These were clearly adult males," says Hershman. "Each had a mustache and a beard." Hair may also have been attached to holes at the top of each mask.

A mask from the museum's own collection turned up while a farmer was tilling a field in the early 1970s. The artifact ended up in the hands of a dealer, who sold it to famed Israeli General [Moshe Dayan](#). Dayan was interested in where it came from and convinced the dealer to take him there—a place called [Horvat Duma](#), near Hebron, in the Judean Hills.

"Unfortunately, this kind of accidental find happens all the time in this area," says Hershman, but most artifacts make their way to the antiquities market with no information about where they're found.

That's the case with the exhibit's other masks, which belong to private collectors. To make sure these were not fakes, microarchaeology expert [Yuval Goren](#) of Tel Aviv University tested the sediment that had accumulated on each mask over the millennia. He also examined the masks under a microscope to study their crystalline structure and mineralogical composition and to verify that they came from the region around Jerusalem.



With a height of 11.6 inches (29.5 centimeters), the chalk mask at left is the largest of the group. The bags beneath the eyes of the limestone mask at right may have been meant to suggest advanced age.

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How Were the Masks Used?

To help answer the question of whether these masks were worn, a team of experts in archaeological computer simulation led by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem's [Leore Grosman](#) scanned them and created 3-D models. Each mask has unique dimensions and characteristics, but all the full-size examples have human proportions and follow the contours of a living face.

"The eye view was key," says Hershman. It was clearly meant for someone to look through. Many of the masks have holes around the edges. Straps or cords may have been attached there and would have tied at the back of a ritual participant's head.

The scans also highlighted the resemblance of several of the masks to skulls, with their prominent cheeks, temples, and eye sockets, and teeth bared in a macabre grimace. Some masks even appear to be modeled specifically on the skulls of old men.



Famed Israeli general Moshe Dayan bought this mask after a farmer's plow uncovered it in a field near Horvat Duma. PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIE POSNER, COLLECTION OF ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY © THE ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM

Hershman also weighed the masks for the first time. "They're not that heavy," she says. "Between one and two kilograms (2.2 and 4.4 pounds)." She likens them to the regalia worn by modern participants in ancestor cult rituals in traditional societies in Oceania and Africa. "Every dancer wears a costume that weighs 20 kilos (44 pounds)," she says. "They all dance with masks that are much heavier than the ancient stone ones."

Hershman believes that the stone masks must have been very special objects that were imbued with more prestige than other items of cult regalia. She cites as proof the time and care it took to create such objects of enduring beauty.



Masks worn in modern ancestor cult ceremonies in West Africa weigh every bit as much—or more—than the Neolithic stone masks from the Judean Hills.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHYLLIS GALEMBO

She's sure that there are more masks out there waiting for archaeologists to uncover. "Will they be from a special building? A private home? I can't even imagine, but that context is important," she says. "When we find them in situ, we'll learn a lot more about the society they came from."

To share the masks with a global audience, the Israel Museum will soon publish the exhibition catalog in English. *Face to Face, the Oldest Masks in the World* will explain the importance of the 9,000-year-old stone artifacts and detail the steps that scientists took to authenticate them.