

## A TERRACOTTA MASK OF HERCULES/HERACKLES FROM GERASA/JERASH IN JORDAN

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### Article info.

#### Article history:

Received: 12-10-2021

Accepted: 20-2-2022

Doi: 10.21608/ejars.2022.276171

#### Keywords:

Jerash

Terracotta

Masks

Theatre

drama

EJARS – Vol. 12 (2) – Dec. 2022: 249-256

#### Abstract:

This paper brings to the attention the newly discovered terracotta mask from the classical Decapolis city of Gerasa/Jerash in Jordan dated to the Roman period. The aim of this paper is to describe and to identify the personification and the function of the mask. The authors conclude that the mask is a miniature replica for character representing Hercules used as souvenir.

### 1. Introduction

The modern city of Jerash, about 50 km north of Jordan's modern capital Amman, fig. (1) is the site of the ancient Decapolis city of Gerasa [1].



Figure (1) Shows the city of Jerash with the excavation area (After: Google earth)

According to legend the city was established either by Alexander the Great or his general Perdiccas, but it is more likely that it was founded by Antiochus III or Antiochus IV, and therefore also named Antiochia at the Chrysorrhoeas (the Golden River) [2-4]. The city's name of Gerasa is the Hellenised version of the Semitic name Garshu which is attested in a Nabatean inscription found in Petra [5]. Later in the Islamic period the Semitic name retained again and the city was mentioned in the Islamic sources as Jerash [6]. The city flourished during late Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic periods [7-10]. Remains from the late Hellenistic represent a small settlement in the southern part of the city and a sanctuary of Zeus Olympios [11-16]. During the Roman period Gerasa/Jerash flourished

and grew into a large city fortified by city walls with towers, bastions, and controlled gates. Inside the city walls and along its main streets there are typical public monuments of any Roman city: residential areas, temples, theatres, macellum, shops, tetrapylon, hippodrome, Nymphaeum, and public baths. More than 20 churches have been discovered attests to a thriving religious life of the city in the Byzantine period [7,17-22]. In the Early Islamic period two mosques were built [23-26]. After the devastating earthquake of AD 749 Jerash had lost its status and abandoned for more than three hundred years [27,17]. During the Ayyubid-Mamluk times the city flourished again, and many building complexes had been found dated to medieval and latter Islamic periods [28-32]. In 2017-2018 the department of archaeology at the University of Jordan conducted an archaeological project near the city's northern gate. The project included full documentation by surface survey, photography, topographic maps, and archaeological excavations. The excavations were conducted in areas (A) and (B). The main discovery in area (A) was part of an east-west wall. 25 m. long of this wall was uncovered by excavations. The identity of the wall is yet to be determined, but it might be an external wall for a large building, or complex of buildings. This wall is perpendicularly connects with another wall extends northeast-south and contains a 1.2 m. wide opening (entrance), fig. (2).

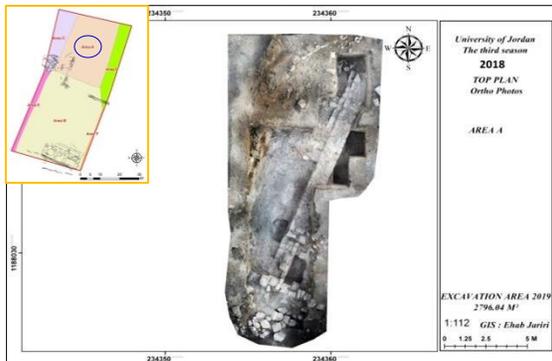


Figure (2) Shows aerial view of the south-north wall in area (A) squares J8 and J7

The stratigraphy of the site is consisting of eight (8) layers. The upper layers (01-04) were disturbed by recent agricultural works and dumping. The lower layers (05-08) are better stratified contain typical Roman material. Layers (05-07) representing soil deposit mixed with architectural remains, while 08 representing a very hard and compacted earthen floor. The mask discussed in this paper was found in front of the entrance, together with coins, decorated plaster medallion, glass vessel, and in situ smashed pottery. The cross dating of the pottery, mainly the oil lamps and other pottery objects, suggests that layers (05-08) represent a Roman phase dated to the second century AD. This dating is supported by three coins all dated to the first half of the second century AD. One coin related to Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD). The second one dated to Antonius Pius (138-161 AD), and the third is a Nabataean coin of the last Nabataean King Rabel II (70-106 AD) [33].

## 2. The Mask

This mask (*Jerash2018.A.J8.08.20*), fig. (3-a & b), is a single mould mask. Hollow to the interior with thumb impression.

- **Height:** 10.9 cm.
- **Width:** 7.2 cm.
- **Thickness:** 4 mm.



Figure (3) Shows **a.** front, back and profile of the mask, **b.** drawing shows the front and the left profile of the mask

Fine ware 5YR Orang 7/6, with very fine lime grits. Traces of slip on the exterior face to give darker complexion, and traces of yellow on the beard and hair. Complete, except small chip including the right ear is missing. Bearded with close mouth and straight nose. His beard is styled in curvy locks

and parted from the middle. The moustache is long and twisted. The forehead is frowning, and the head is helmeted with lion head. A small hole for suspension was pierced in the left eye of the lion. In Greek mythology, the lion skin and lion head are main attributes of Hercules, the greatest hero of the Greek mythology, and son of Zeus. According to the Greek legend when Hercules become 18 years old he visited King Thespius of Thespieae, who asked him to rid the land of a lion that had been terrorizing Mount Cithaeron. Heracles killed the lion with a club of wild olive, another of his well-known attributes [34]. Other sources mention that Eurystheus, the Mycenaean king of Tiryns, set Hercules 12 immense tasks. The first task was to kill and bring back the skin of the Nemean Lion, the son of Typhon, or Orthros, and Echidne, which lived in a cave on a hill at Nemea near Cleonae. As the lion's pelt was impenetrable to any weapon, Heracles fought it bare-handed, strangled it, skinned it with its own claws, and thereafter wore its pelt as his armor, and its head as helmet. Henceforth Hercules is usually distinguished in Greek and Roman art by these attribute, i.e. the lion skin and the lion head as helmet [35, 36]. As for the personification of the mask subject of this paper, it can be identified with certain degree of confidence as Hercules. This identification based mainly on the lion head helmeted the mask. Similar examples of Hercules mask and terracotta figurines with lion head as a helmet were found in many places over the Mediterranean world and the Near east [37-39] is interesting here to mention that on Muse sarcophagi Melpomene is usually depicted holds a mask of Heracles [40,41].

### 3. Results

Based on the previous analytical data, the following results can be deduced: **a)** As for the personification of the mask, it can

be identified as Hercules. This identification based mainly on the lion head helmeted the mask. **b)** The closed-mouth mask is a main signifier for pantomime masks (*see above*). The small scale, and the un-pierced eyes surely indicate the non-functionality of it in theatrical performance. It is known that miniature masks were produced to be sold as a souvenir (*see below*). Accordingly, this mask can be identified as pantomime souvenir replica of Hercules mask.

### 4. Discussion

In Greek and Roman cultures masks have wide varieties, and differ in its forms and functions. Some type of masks used as votive offerings, such as that of Dionysus/Bacchus [42,43]. Another type is masks of the ancestors, *Imagine*, used by the upper class to celebrate the achievement of the family during the funeral ceremony [44,45]. Masks, however, were essential feature of Greek and Roman drama [46]. Greek had three types of drama. The oldest type was tragedy which developed in late 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century BC and inspired the development of the other two types, *i.e* comedy and satyr plays. Satyr play is a form of comedy drama makes fun on the unfortunate conditions of the characters of tragedy. Roman drama, on the other hand, was many divers. It included mime (satirical treatment of myths and domestic affairs), spectacle, recitations, literary drama, comedy, and pantomime [46]. Pantomime was first developed in the third century BC and became well established during the 80s BC. During the second and third centuries AD pantomime received wide popularity throughout the Roman world. The main aspect of pantomime was a masked solo dancer (*pantomimos*) who is usually a male dancer performed famous mythological stories. The same dancer performed all important roles of the story by changing the mask for each character in the story [47]. Masks of tragedy in both Greek and Roman forms are characteristically have

wide open mouth “allowing the actor’s voice some unhindered passage”, while comic mask have slightly open mouth, [46,42]. Masks of Roman tragedy have clear emotional expressions [48]. In new comedy (from 4<sup>th</sup> century BC on) the comic masks were more realistic in shape, and contrary to that is the tragic mask with its wide open mouth tended to be more stylized [46]. In some cases, comic masks were used in tragedy as well [49]. The Pantomime masks are distinguished from both tragic masks and comic masks by their closed mouths, greater visual beauty and were more naturalistic. The closed mouth, however, remain the main signifier to pantomime masks [47,50,51]. The pantomime masks were very popular and reproduced in abundance on numerous monuments by the second century AD. [52]. In general, there had been two forms of mask. The first covers the entire head and face of an actor, and the second cover the face only [40,46]. As masks should be light, easy to remove, and easy to transport, they originally were made from organic material, fabric, linen, wood etc. Therefore, they were perishable that they, unfortunately, did not survive in archaeological record. However, fresco, mosaic, terracotta figurines, sculptors and most importantly the terracotta replicas of mask are generous sources for masks research. Terracotta replicas of masks are of various sizes. Larger size (live size) was mostly used as wall decorations, while the miniature replica was used either as dedicatory gifts to Dionysus, or as souvenir [40,53]. People used to buy the terracotta mask replica for their favorite character. In fact, these replicas were highly valued and appreciated, that people took them to their graves [54], and henceforth Mask-making was a big industry in ancient Rome [52]. As Hercules is concerned in this paper it should be mentioned here that he was a hero of several Greek and Roman drama. He was the hero of Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, which reflect the tragic story of Hercules’

death at the hand of Deianeira, his second wife [55]. Hercules is also the subject of the Greek tragedy of Euripides’ *Herakles Mainomenos* [56-58] and its Roman version in the Seneca’s tragedies [59]. More recent publication and comments on Seneca works [60-62], focused on the story of Hercules getting mad and killed his wife and children. Hercules also appear as one of the main characters of Greek middle comedy, e.g. the play of *Birds* by Aristophanes [63] which was played for the first time in 414 BC. at the city Dionycia [54]. The birth of Hercules is celebrated in the Roman comedy of Plautus’s *Amphitruvo* [64]. Furthermore, the insane Hercules was performed in pantomime style during the Roman period [65,66]. Based on the above discussion, the function of the mask subject of this paper can be determined. It should be demonstrated here that, the general characteristics of this mask, fig. (3) are: *the closed mouth, the miniature scale, the whole for suspension, and it looks naturalistic*. The closed-mouth mask is a main signifier for pantomime masks (see above). The small scale and the un-pierced eyes surely indicate the non-functionality of it in theatrical performance. It is known that miniature masks were produced to be sold as a souvenir (see above). Accordingly, this mask can be identified as pantomime souvenir replica of Hercules mask.

## 5. Conclusion

*This paper brought to the attention a new terracotta mask from the Classical city of Jerash/ Gerasa in Jordan. The identity of the mask is interpreted as a pantomime souvenir replica of Hercules mask, which in turn may indicate that pantomime plays were performed in the city of Gerasa/Jerash.*

## Acknowledgements

The authors would sincerely thank the *Department of Antiquities of Jordan* for permission and support, and the *Univ. of Jordan* for funding the project.

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