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UNUSUAL RELIQUARIES -FEMALE SAINTS' RELICS IN THE SHAPE OF HUMAN MASK

Key words: Ancient royal masks, tombs, female reliquary mask, carnivals, head reliquaries,

Abstract: *People have been making masks since ancient times. The most famous ancient masks are those made of gold, covering the face of the Micenians, and later on the Balkan nobility since the 6-5th C. B.C along with those of the Thracian kings. Etruscans and Cellts used them, too, as part of the funeral rite. The theatre masks were part of the drama effect, and the pagan carnivals have continued to be performed until nowadays in several parts of the Balkans.*

Medieval Christian reliquaries came in various forms, from sarcophagi, cosmetic boxes, small houses, churches, bags, human body parts, etc. Head reliquaries were popular in the medieval period.[1] The examples of two female heads covered by golden and silver masks from Struga and Ohrid are very rare, it seems, phenomenon that will be discussed in this text. St. Matrona and St. Spasica lived almost 1000 years apart. Yet the Matrona reliquary was made in the 18th century, while the one of St. Spasica seems to be close in date considering the filigree style.

The medieval reliquaries in the shape of a female mask may be related to the Ancient noble rites of covering the face of the dead, but also with the high priestess, who had high position in society, their tombs discovered in Milci, Marvinci, and Aigai. This speaks of a continuity in the preservation of the image of important men and women, as well as their children. High priestess seem to give similar importance to the female glory, only they enjoy earth life and the saints the after life.

The golden masks of the Ancient local royals made an impression and seems were not forgotten by the native inhabitants.

Village Višni where one of the mask reliquary was found, made for the local saint St. Spasica, is close to the village of Vevčani, where the carnival under masks is traditionally performed, one of the few pagan customs in our country that functions in continuity.

Introduction

Even though Christian reliquaries and burial human masks do not seem related, I would show the inspiration and meaning may be common point. The first are made to pay respect to a saint remains and ensure they are well protected and respectfully presented. The royal masks are made to ensure the memory of the important deceased nobility stays among their tribe or nation for millennia.

People have been making masks since ancient times. Masks are used to express or cover the face (identity), hide feelings, change the voice, or dramatize. As Frampton explains, in Latin, one of the words for mask is persona, which is thought to mean “something through which sound passes.”[2] Persona was used as a term to describe the “role” or “character that one plays in life,” the role or roles that one plays in society, as Cicero’s writings tell us.[3] The portraits of pharaohs on their coffins later transformed into the practice of realistically painting the deceased’s face on mummies (the famous Fayum portraits).

Making death golden masks usually by taking a wax cast or impression from the corpse is not unique

[1] Mabi Angar, *Byzantine Head Reliquaries and Their Perception in the West After 1204: A Case Study of the Reliquary of St. Anastasios the Persian in Aachen and related Objects. Mainzer Ferőffentlichungen zur Byzantinistic 13.*

[2] Stephanie Ann Frampton, “Persona: Masks in the Graeco-Roman World,” MIT School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, accessible online at https://shass.mit.edu/news/news-2020-pandemic-meanings-masks-classical-literature-stephanie-ann-frampton, September 2020.

[3] *The Cambridge Companion to Cicero*, ed. by Catherine Steel, Cambridge University Press 2013.

for the Mycenae kings or Archaic period rulers in the south Balkans. They were used in ancient Egypt as part of the mummification process much earlier. The funeral mask, an image placed on the face of the deceased before burial rites, is normally buried with them.

It was practiced in Etruria related to the ancestor cult. Excavations of tombs in the area of the ancient city of Clusium (modern Chiusi, Tuscany) have yielded a number of sheet-bronze masks dating from the Etruscan late orientalizing period.[4]It was also practices by the Celts, and Thracians.

Yet the practice of placing funeral masks on the deceased's face was particularly common in ancient Macedonia of the sixth and fifth centuries BC. As a constituent part of the grave furnishings, funerary face-masks or golden foliage covering the eyes and mouth have long been known in great numbers from sites such as Trebenište near Ohrid, Gorna Porta Ohrid, Korošišta, near Struga, Korešnica, near Demir Kapija, Beranci near Prilep, Sindos near Thessalonica, and other sites in Macedonia and Halkidiki.

Diodorus Siculus describes, in the first century, about the Egyptians, that the bodies of the dead were carefully painted so that "the whole appearance of the body was unchanged." Very wealthy Egyptians kept the bodies of their ancestors in precious coffins in their home, and saw face to face those who had died many generations before them, thus having the impression of living with them. The Roman élites used during the funerals "death masks," casts made during life and displayed after one's death in his family's atrium as a sign of social and political prominence. This usage was already established by the 2nd century BC and continued to be used into the 4th- late 6th century AD. In the late Middle Ages, the masks of the deceased were used in funeral ceremonies and were later kept in libraries, museums, and universities. Death masks were taken not only of deceased royalty and nobility, but also of eminent people.

There are also Romanesque capitals in the churches of Tetovo and Kumanovo that show the frequent use of human heads and masks as a motif. In N. Macedonia, there are several examples of such capitals with human heads in the nave of churches from the 14th century (Holy Mother of God, Matejče) or applied to the iconostasis (the monastery church in the village of Lešok).[5]

In Macedonian fresco painting in the modern period, there are even painted capitals with human masks (Saint Panteleimon in Nerezi, wall arch in front of the altar apse, 16th century). Some of the medieval icons in the Ohrid icon gallery also depict human heads and a human mask, in addition to the colossi that "hold" the baldachin (the Annunciation icon from the early 14th century, inv. no. 10).

Medieval Christian reliquaries came in various forms, from sarcophagi, cosmetic boxes, small houses, churches, bags, human body parts, etc. Head reliquaries were popular in the medieval period. The oldest known head-shaped reliquary is the Carolingian reliquary of Saint Maurice in Vienna.[6]

Literature review on female head reliquaries with masks

There is no specialized literature about the female head shaped reliquaries. There are books and articles on head reliquaries, yet none resembles those I mention here.[7] That is why it is very important to proceed with further global exploration. The comparative in form golden masks from archaic tombs and other precious findings have been published frequently, and I will mention here only the last text from the catalogue made by archaeologists from several national museums of Skopje, Sofia and Belgrade, prepared for the exhibition that is still going on, changing the places. It displays the material taken away from Macedonia in the ½ of the 20th century in one place along with the new findings. It is the catalogue *100 years of Trebenishte,* Sofia: National Archaeological Institute with Museum, BAN, 2018.

The Sindos material has been first published in 1985, and the Aigai material has been treated in several books of Angeliki Kottaridi.[8]

[4] Niels Steensma, Some considerations on the function and meaning of the Etruscan bronze "masks" from Chiusi (seventh century BC), in: H. Duinker, E. Hopman & J. Steding (eds.), *Proceedings of the 11th annual Symposium Onderzoek Jonge Archeologen, Groningen 2014, pp. 65–74*.

[5] Snezhana Filipova, "Romanesque art in Macedonia", "I*ssues and Resources for the Study of Medieval Europe*," Budapest, Krakow, Prague, 2001, 16-18.

[6] One of the most famous examples is the reliquary of the head of Pope Alexander from Stavelot Abbey in the Ardennes, from the first half of the 12th century (now in the Brussels Museum). Several heads of popes and heads or torsos of European kings and queens were converted into reliquaries after their canonization (for example, the head and torso of Charlemagne in Aachen Cathedral).

[7] Barbara Drake Boehm, *Medieval Head Reliquaries of the Massif Central*, New York University, 1990; Angar, *Byzantine Head Reliquaries*, etc.

[8] https://www.aigai.gr/en/publications

Trebenište near Ohrid, grave findings, discovered in 1918 by chance by Bulgarian soldiers

The Ancient archaeological findings of golden masks will not be described in details since they are used only as comparative material. The theory that ancient golden masks were inspiration for the medieval reliquaries is not possible to be scientifically proved. The existence of Archaic female golden masks of important royal personae and priests may give us a base for visual analogy and comparison in the sense of expressing power.

Head reliquaries rarely represent individual portraits, they are usually idealized heads of figures who, due to their merits and values, are gilded or made of gold, glass, and precious stones and pearls to express their holiness and purity. This idealization reminds us of the quality of the art of the ancient Hellenes and Ancient Macedonians, which was continued by the Romans who introduced the true portrait in the 2nd century BC.

The cult of holy relics is very important for increasing the authority of churches, especially monasteries, and allows the spread of their influence over believers. In Macedonia, almost every church or monastery possesses at least fragments or parts of the bodies of saints.[9] In the late medieval Balkan states, the possession of holy remains and relics was very popular in order to gain greater authority not only from a religious but also from a state perspective. However, in order to achieve this goal, relics became the subject of well-organized "holy" thefts (such is the example of the head of St. Clement of Ohrid).

The Slavic terminology for relics, meaning power, differs fundamentally from the Greek and Latin words, τα λείχανα and reliquiae, meaning remains. Characteristic of Eastern Orthodox countries are the "unaltered" bodies of national saints, kept in large coffins (St. Demetrius, Thessaloniki, St. Clement, Ohrid), while the dismemberment of relics would become common much later.

Bust reliquaries for the skulls of saints in the West were placed on or near altars and, by the late Middle Ages, often assembled in large numbers in church

[9] Filipova, Early Christian reliquaries and encolpia and the problem of the so called crypt reliquaries in the Republic of Macedonia", *Rome, Constantinople and newly Converted Europe, Archaeological and Historical evidence*, vol. II, Krakow, Leipzig-Rzeszow-Warszawa 2012, 113-130.

Fig. 1 & 2 The grave of a child, found near the Gorna Porta, Ohrid in 2002

sanctuaries. Most of the female bust reliquaries in Europe are decorated in gothic style.

Archaic period

Life size golden masks made of gold and bronze were created across Europe in the 1st millennium BC. The most famous are those from the tombs of the rich dignitaries at village Trebenište, near Ohrid. Around 2600 years ago in the south western part of today's' N. Macedonia, around the Lake Ohrid, lived very rich community. Some think they were Enhelai, others Paeonians etc.

At Trebenište, village near Ohrid, grave findings, including 5 golden masks have been found on three separate occasions over the last century.[10] While the face of the Archontiko nobility masks show much geometrical and floral decorations and details, the one from Trebenište for instance has a unique bee above his nose. As well as in Greece, there are ancient female graves discovered in N. Macedonia whose face is covered with golden mask that had certainly high status (grave no. IX) and also children (Gorna Porta, Ohrid, and a couple (grave no 132, Trebenište). The last example is a pair, a man and a women buried with female golden mask and male golden hand cover, sward, knife and spear.

Compared to the Thracian kings, the Aigai and most of the Macedonian archaic tombs are far away in quality work and so that have to be local workshops. There the masks are made of very thin gold, while the Thracian mask is massive.[11]

In 2024, a rich Archaic tomb was found in the Struga village of Korošišta with a helmet, jewelry, and gold sheet metal stamped with the famous motifs of braid with an inner circle, swastika, and leafy cockades.[12] About fifteen years earlier, information had resounded in the public about a huge precious kantharos, decorated in relief, from Korešnica, illegally transported to America, from a tomb that very likely also contained gold finds.

According to Gonaghle in his *Seuthopolis and the Valley of the Thracian Kings*, this is another Macedonian complex built in the Balkan Mountains where tombs of a rich Macedonian type have been found, mistakenly treated by the Bulgarian archaeologists as Thracians. [13]

13 years ago, Viktorija Sokolovska thought about the possible Paionian ethnic origin of the inhabitants

[10] The first two masks were found by accident in the spring of 1918 by Bulgarian soldiers during their occupation of this part of Macedonia. Excavations were carried out by the Bulgarians which revealed seven royal tombs from which the material was taken to the Archeological Museum in Sofia, where it is still located today. In 1919, Macedonia was occupied by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, when part of the lake Ohrid shore with 22 Macedonian villages were transferred to Albania. In 1930-1934, NikolaVulić revealed six other royal graves in the same cemetery, and discovered 2 further golden masks, all of which were taken to the Serbian National Museum in Belgrade.

[11] Pero Ardjanliev, Cukalev, Krastju Evtimov, Cvjeticanin, Tatjana et alles, *100 years of Trebenishte,* Sofia: National Archaeological Institute with Museum and BAN, 2018. In August 2004, another golden royal mask was found in a tomb in a tumulus near Kazanlak, Bulgaria. It is much more elaborate with protruding eyes and eyebrows, and stylized hair. Dr Kitov at the Svetitsata mould, east of Shipka, found a grave with expensive imported vessels, weaponry as well as a golden mask of a bearded man, weighing 673 grams, he thought represents one of the Thracian king Teres.

[12] https://antropol.mk/2024/11/08/vredno-arheolosko-otkritie-od-6-vek-pne-otkrieno-vo-koroishta/

[13] See Brandan Mac Gonagle, Behind the golden mask - Sevtopolis and the 'Valley of the Thracian Kings', https://www.academia.edu/4126512/Sevtopolis_and_the_Valley_of_the_Thracian_Kings

Fig. 3 Tomb in the village of Korošišta, researched in November 2024, dated in the 6th C. B. C.;

Fig. 4 Tomb from the village of Korešnica where exclusive bronze crater was discovered, illegally dig up and exported (https://arheo.com.mk/2010/09/18/the-case-with-bronze-krater-from-koreshnica-demir-kapija/)

of Trebenište and Sindos.[14] The grave from the village of Korošišta (sounds similar to Korešnica, another royal tomb site) speaks again about the continuity of burial with golden masks or coverings of decorative gold sheet for the body in the Archaic period in this area.

An exclusive bronze krater from Korešnica, near Demir Kapija, has been illegally dug in 1996, with 7,2 m. height.[15] It resembles the large precious bronze cantharos from Tetovo, now in Belgrade national Museum, and the one from Derveni near Thessaloniki. The tomb might also had golden masks of the buried rich men or man inside it.

In August 2004, another golden royal mask was found in a tomb in a tumulus near Kazanlak, Bulgaria. It is much more elaborate and heavy with protruding eyes and eyebrows, and stylized hair that might represents one of the Thracian king, Teres I.[16] The last Balkan Celtic mask has been looted somewhere from the Balkans in the late 90es od the 20th C.

[14] Викторија Соколовска, Повторно за златните погребни маски во архајските погребувања, *Patrimonium.mk V* (2012), 27-31, 31. She thinks that the content of the tombs in Trebeništa, Beranci and Sindos show great similarities which may indicate they belonged to the same tribe – people who managed to uprise to high society level. "..if golden funeral masks were found in Korešnica, then there would be no dilemmas about who the ethnic bearers of the Trebeniška and Sindos necropolis were. Then we would be sure that only the Paionians practiced the old Egyptian custom of covering the faces of their deceased with golden masks."

[15] By illegal channels the crater was transferred through Serbia in Swiss, and sold at an auction in London to the Shelbi family from New York, who then offered it to a Museum in Huston. It was on display in Metropolitan Museum. Later there are mentioning of similar craters returned to Greece. The drawings of the finding appeared online. A bronze calyx-krater in the Shelby White & Leon Levy collection appeared in a catalogue of *Greek bronze vessels from the collection of Shelby White & Leon Levy* (2005), no. 9 (for illustration see Mc Lung Museum exhibition, "History contained: ancient Greek bronze and ceramic vessels", September 17, 2005 - January 2, 2006). The entry for the White/Levy calyx-krater states: The best stylistic parallels for the White/Levy krater may be found in examples associated with the Macedonian court. See https://lootingmatters.blogspot.com/search?q=bronze+krater Its previous history is unstated; its first mention in a publication comes from 1998.

[16] Георги Китов, *Долината на тракийските владетели,* Славянско дружество, 2005

High priestess in the Ancient and Medieval period

Not only royal tombs, but also the tombs of the Ancient female priestess had important funeral gifts adequate to their status, and the Lady of Archintiko was also a wife of a king and a high priestess herself. The Sindos priestess was buried in approximately 510-500. Rich in gold grave gifts, her burial was one of the cemetery's most opulent, demonstrating the deceased's important place in the settlement's society. She probably belonged to the ruling class, and her priesthood is inferred from the rituals performed at her grave, the jewelery value and symbolism, and the ritual vases and iron models laden with sacerdotal symbolism that accompanied her body.[17]

I shall stress the importance of women in the Balkan societies of the south, and this tradition may have had impact in the future religion that spread first here, in the region of Ancient Macedonia.

Christian female ktetors and deaconesses

It is not only Lydia from Philippi, that stands out as important Christian woman of the earliest times, but also the anonymous and known by name female ktetors from Stobi, and Lychnidos that the mosaic inscriptions tell us about. The new researches of early Christian liturgy and religion practice shows that women were aloud in the altar in Early Christian period.

Some scholars think that square western annexes, or divisions of the narthex with one apse in the early Christian churches may have been related to certain pious women helping the priest. Todorov explains that the deaconesses as part of the clerks of the early Christian church, that were responsible for the women, may have entered the altar space. One of the earliest liturgy codex that is preserved (Barberini Gr. 336 dated in the VIII C.), informs the chierotonia of the female deacons was the same as the male happens in the altar space. After the last Amen, they put at the door under the maphorion the deaconesses orarion and after she has received the sacrament the archbishop gives her the holy chalice and it is put on the holy altar table. Todorov raise a question if the deaconesses enter the altar only during their chierotonia? In Constantinople the deaconesses of the Great Church stay during the liturgy in the eastern part of the northern aisle and take care about the order in the ginakion, and about the doors to the altar? Also from there they can sing and enter the altar to take the sacrament. They also bring over the sacrament to the ill people and they take the communion sacrament inside the altar, but Todorov thinks they may enter the altar also for other reasons.[18]

There are several mosaic inscriptions mentioning female donors found so far in N. Macedonian churches, two in Stobi Episcopal basilica, and one in the five aisled basilica on Plaošnik in Ohrid.[19] The position of the female donor vow inscription in the southern-male aisle in the Episcopal Basilica in Stobi is unusual.[20] I think the panel with inscription was actually liturgical stop in the southern nave, to show respect, or intended for a sermon in honour of the ktetor.

Human head

The head was the main symbolic part of the body for Western culture in the Middle Ages. Since antiquity, the head has signified not only the intellect, the center of power, but was also considered the seat of the soul. The face is the most important part of the human body that shows identity and is the primary means of human expression of emotions and character. Therefore, the depiction of the head becomes a real test of the quality of the artist and an indicator of style.

A special respect for reliquaries in the form of heads of local male saints developed in France during the Middle Ages, in the Limoges region, which continues to this day. Some European medieval reliquaries openly display the skull of a female saint, and much later they were covered with transparent glass, and even embellished with the application of various precious stones, jewelry and textiles (the head of Mary Magdalene or St. John Chrysostom).

More than a dozen relic skulls of saints are kept in Greece, for example in Meteora (Saint Charalambos), the Kleiston Monastery in Attica or in museums (Benaki), etc. The skull of Saint Andrew the Apostle from Borne was recently returned to Patras by the Catholic Church as a gesture of goodwill, but there are doubts that it is not authentic.[21] In the Fere Mon-

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[17] *Sindos,* Catalogue of the Exhibition, Thessaloniki 1985 (in Greek).

[18] Тодор Енчев Тодоров, Деамбулаториумът в ранохристиянската архитектура IV-VII век, Велико Трново 2015. Not published, sent to me by mail by the author.

[19] Snezana Filipova, Examples of Early Byzantine Plastics and Capitals from Macedonia with applied inscriptions / or letters, *SYSTASIS 7,* p. n. 5 http://www.systasis.org.mk/arhiva.asp

[20] John Wiseman and Dj. Mano Zissi, Excavations at Stobi, 1972, 397. ΥΠΕΡΕΥ[ΧΗΣ] ΤΗΣΜΑΤ[ΡΩΝΑΣ] ΗΕΥΛΑΒ[ΕΣΤΑ] ΤΗΔΙΑΚ[ΟΝΙΣΣΑ] ΤΗΝΕΞ[ΔΡΑΝ] ΕΨΗΦΩ[ΣΕΝ] „ὑπὲρ εὐ[χῆς] τῆς ματ[ρώνας] ἠεὐλαβ[εστά] τηδιακ[όνισσα] τὴν ἐξέ[δραν] ἐψήφω[σεν]

[21] The National History Museum in Sofia has a reliquary of a male skull dated 1744, made of silver and gilded (inv.

Reliquary head of St. Clement of Ohrid, stolen and brought to Greece in Veria in the late 18th C. by a Greek monk. The eyes and the nose are only features represented as in the case of the Matrona from Perivleptos

astery is the head of Saint Clement of Ohrid, put in reliquary in the late 18th century.

In Greece, more than a dozen relic skulls of saints are kept, for example in Meteora (Saint Charalambos), the Kleiston Monastery in Attica or in museums (Benaki), etc. Recently, the skull of the Holy Apostle Andrew of Borne was returned to Patras by the Catholic Church as a gesture of goodwill, but there are doubts that it is not authentic.

Within the existing shapes of relic containers, the form of female human mask may over the skull of the saint may be distinguished as specific for Macedonia (Holy Matrona, Ohrid, and St. Spasica Višneska, from village Višni, Struga).

In the Museum of National History in Sofia, is the Holy Matrona from Constantinople reliquary box taken from Ohrid during the Balkan wars. She was a historical figure who lived in the late 5th/early 6th Cs, and also a Byzantine female saint who has dressed in male clothing, so her cult combines both male and female aspect.

The form of a female human mask shaped reliquary has been preserved in N. Macedonia in two cases, associated with St. Matrona, from the church of St. Peribleptos, Ohrid and St. Spasica Višneska, a local woman from the village of Višni, Struga, who, in order not to be sexually abused by the local Turks, hid and spent her life in a nearby cave.

Which specific Saint Matrona is this? It is Saint Matrona of Constantinople, due to the scenes depicted on the box that was later made to store the head reliquary. According to her beautiful and precious reliquary, she was a popular saint along with the cults venerated by the Ohrid Archbishopric. Together with Lydia of Philippi and Saint Paraskeva (Saint Petka), they were among the most popular saints on the territory of the Ohrid Archbishopric.

The reliquary of Saint Matrona

The reliquary of Saint Matrona, which is a golden mask on the saint's skull, comes from the treasury of the Mother of God Peribleptos, and has a skull cover made of gilded filigree, pearls, precious stones and enamel, and was made in 1798 (dimensions: 16.5x13 cm.). Today it is in the National History Museum in Sofia (inv. no. 29116). Thirteen years later, in the monastery of St. Spas in Naus (Njeguš), a box for storing the head was made in the form of an octagonal prism (21.5X20.5X22 cm.). This octagonal shape is typical of early Christian baptisteries and martyriums. The relic was made a few years after the abolition of the Ohrid Archbishopric after its over one millennium existence. Such a precious object was paid for by the local believers, weavers for their internal memory, and the abbot Theon and brought to the church of Peribleptos in Ohrid in 1798, as mentioned in the inscription.[22] I would not investigate this

no. 29115). The Museum's catalog, where it was first published in 1995, does not explain its origin. The hair and beard are made very realistically and skillfully, while the eyebrows are stylized, like those of archaic masks.

[22] Божидар Димитров, Нина Вутова, Цвета Евлогиева Кацарова и други, *Бягарската Автокефална Архиепископия в Охрид 1018-1767* (каталог), София 2014, 51-52.

Holy Matrona, reliquary from Holy Virgin Perivleptos church in Ohrid and its box, Nat. H. Museum in Sophia

object in depth or situate it within a relevant historical religious context, since that is not the purpose of this article nor it is possible. I could not find literature about the place where the reliquary was positioned within the church or its treasury or any mentioning of the rites related to it. If we have in mind the rites related to St. Spasica from Višni, on the day the saint was murdered the relic may have been exposed to the believers and ritually washed with wine. 9th of November is the day she is remembered.[23]

Since Virgin Perivleptos church is not a big church, most of the relics and valuable objects, liturgical stuff must have been kept elsewhere in its vicinity. This church became the main cathedral of the Ohrid Archbishopric after St. Sophia cathedral was turned into a mosque, until the Turkish ruling was over.[24]After some time, the treasury has been transferred to St. Nahum Monastery. Later on, the treasury was transferred to holy Virgin Church in Skopje. From there it ended to Bulgaria, after the church was put on fire by the Bulgarian army in order to cover the theft.

The cult of Saint Spasica Višneska

The cult of Saint Spasica Višneska originated in the late 14th or early 15th century when the saint lived in a nearby cave near the village of Višni, Struga, fleeing persecution by the Turks. The church dedicated to Saint Athanasius, built nearby, houses the relics of the saint, made in the form of a female filigree mask with a halo placed above the skull. The saint was canonized by the Ohrid Archbishopric in 2024. Every year on the day of Saint Spas, the villagers of Višni begin the ritual with a young girl chosen to carry the relics of St. Spasica to the cave in the mountain where she died, where a small church was later built. According to a traditional story, the reliquary in the form of a female mask with a halo was made in Wallachia, at the request of a woman from the village itself.

Today, what has been preserved in this former monastic dwelling is part of a fresco painted on the rock. In the altar part of the cave church, that is, its ceiling, the image of the Holy Mother of God - (cave), with Christ on her chest, the Lamb of God in a liturgical composition with the holy hierarchs: St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom as well as the archdeacon and protomartyr Stephen dominates. In a separate composition, St. Marina, St. Nedela, St. Thecla are painted, then the holy doctors: St. Kuzman and St. Damian, as well as St. Petka. According to typological features, the fresco dates back to the end of the 14th or beginning of the 15th century. The saint and her brother were canonized by the MOC on June 8, 2024 in the church "St. Athanasius" in the Struga village of Višni, where an evening service was held, after which the relics of Saint Spasica were washed and put in a new box and transferred to the church "St. Sophia" in Ohrid. On June 9, at a Liturgy presided over by His Beatitude Archbishop of Ohrid and

[23] A few years before the church was abolished, the Archbishop of Ohrid was gifted a precious mitre, commissioned by the citizens of Moskopole. It is now in the Historical Museum of Sofia, stolen by the Bulgarian army during the Balkan wars, along with the relic of Matrona. It would be worth investigating how the relics ended up in Ohrid after her church in Constantinople ceased to exist.

[24] Снегаров, Иван, *История на Охридската Архиепископия*, София 1924; Радослав Грујић, *Споменица српског православног храма Свете Богородица у Скопљу*, Скопље 1935; Филипова, *Од трезорот на Охридската Архиепископија*, Македоника Литера 2021; Гоце Анѓеличин Жура, Традицијата на Јустинијана Прима во титулатурата на охридските поглавари, *Годишен зборник*, год. 1, бр.1., УГД Штип, Штип 2010, 100-107 etc.

Frescoes from the cave church in village Višni, the ritual of putting the reliquary wooden box of St. Spasica in the church and opening the relics on display.

Macedonia, His Holiness Stefan, concelebrated with all the hierarchs of the local Church, the decision to include the righteous Spase Vevchanski and Spasa Vishenska in the list of saints was announced.[25] 25th of May is the day they are celebrated.

The Matrona reliquary was made at the end of the 18th century, while the one of St. Spasica seems to be close in date considering the filigree style. It has not been dated yet.

It is worth mentioning the Veil of Veronica, or Sudarium / a Christian relic consisting of a piece of cloth said to bear an image of the Holy Face of Jesus, (acheiropoeton, "made without hands"). The veil is said to quench thirst, cure blindness, and even raise the dead. This is also a kind of face mask-imprint, such as the golden masks are made from a wax print.

Visual ornamental analogies

In the village of Trebenishte near Ohrid during the First World War, not only masks but also golden hands/gloves were found in a dozen archaic graves. These masks and gloves remind me of the medieval reliquaries in the shape of saintly hands-arms that are still revered everywhere today, and one of them is the hand of St. George in the women's monastery of the village of Rajčica.

The same parts and decorative motives of eight petalled flower that were put in the archaic tombs of the kings, high priestess and warriors, are used in the mask of St. Spasica, on her chicks and above her head.

The shape of the hallo of the Saint Spasica reliquary resembles a lot the golden breast cover from one Trebenište grave, ornamented with a rosette, a lotus flower and two lions placed heraldically. There are similar objects found at Gorna porta Ohrid tomb and Korošišta tomb. Same rosettes decorate the golden findings in Sindos and Archintiko and Gorna Porta Ohrid.

In 2002 in the grave no167 at Gorna Porta, Ohrid, archaeologists found bones of a 15-year-old girl with a unique funeral mask made of thin gold eyes covers, gold plate for the mouth and a plaque with an engraved sun placed on her chest. The gold foil in the form of glasses was certainly placed over the eyes of the deceased, the gold rhomboid plate over the mouth, the large discoid plate decorated with a rosette certainly covered the part of the body near the heart, and the gold belt (40 cm long) covered the part of the body from the chest to the navel. All of these objects had a ritual camouflage function over the face and upper body.

The wife of a Bottiaean ruler Lady of Archontiko, 540 B.C. also had golden death mask. She served as high priestess and the incarnation and mediator of divine blessings for her community northwest of Pella. Her grave (No. 458) was excavated in the elite section of the western cemetery of ancient Archontiko in the same burial cluster as some of the warriors of the community. High priestess seems to be of similar importance to the female glory, only the first enjoys earth life and the other after.

Marriage rites

Brides face is painted white and decorated with sequins, as survived customs in two remote villages Ribnovo, southern Bulgaria and Donje Ljubinje,

[25] https://tvm.mk/news/struga/kanonizacija-na-svetite-spase-spasa-visenski/

Archaic tomb, Trebenište near Ohrid, breast decoration, same shape as the hallo of St. Spasica, v. Višni, and similar decorative motives applied on both objects,

border region between N. Macedonia and Kosovo. It may indicate of an older tradition that has been transferred to the female saints, since they are by default virgins and Jesus' brides.[26]That is another trace to be followed by ethnologists.

Conclusion

There is an obvious continuity in the visual way the death masks of tribal rulers (kings) found in Macedonia were executed and the way they were made in the Archaic period (on the territory of present-day S. Macedonia, village Trebenishte, Ohrid and Upper Gate Ohrid, and in northern Greece, Sindos and Aiga, the province of Macedonia), with those made as cover for saint's heads in the medieval and later period on the same territory. This to me speaks of a continuity in the preservation of the image of important men and women, as well as their children, through the metal masks from the Archaic period, into the Christian and modern world.

It is interesting to mention that Višni is close to the village of Vevčani, where the carnival under masks is traditionally performed, one of the few pagan customs in our country that functions in continuity.

The golden masks of the royals made an impression and were not forgotten by the native inhabitants and this facts and historical data transferred in time. Otherwise, why would someone remember and how would he know of the tradition and history of people living here thousand years ago?

To sum up, Ancient high priestess, female donors and deaconess in Early Christian period, as well as female saints in the late Middle Ages had highest possible role in the religion of the society and were praised afterlife with the burial rite or special attention to the head that was preserved and turned into reliquary. Some of this respected important females may have become part of the bridal rites or the carnivals that emerged as a way of preserving the ancient culture.

Certainly this can not be proved with any scholar method, by sources like inscriptions, life, books. Yet folk tales like Vasilisa Prekrasna (The Beautiful

[26] https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-village-painted-bride/31416488.html

High priestess tombs from the site Milci and Marvinci, N. Macedonia,

Basileusa) or folk songs, along with the rare bridal customs of painting the bride face to resemble a mask may be indication to explore further the myths and the ancient past, folklore and to relate it to the Christian objects that were praised high. That is a job of an ethnologist, and historian of culture.

I hope this article serves as base for further possible explanations of the origin of the rare female mask shaped reliquaries.

Снежана ФИЛИПОВА

НЕОБИЧНИ РЕЛИКВИЈАРИ НА СВЕТИЦИ ВО ФОРМА НА ЧОВЕЧКА МАСКА

Резиме

Луѓето изработувале маски уште од античко време. Најпознатите антички маски се оние изработени од злато, кои го покривале лицето на Микенците, а подоцна и на балканското благородништво од 6-5 век п.н.е., заедно со оние на тракиските кралеви. Етрурците и Келтите ги користеле и како дел од погребниот обред.

Театарските маски биле дел од драмскиот ефект, а паганските карневали продолжиле да се изведуваат до денес во неколку делови од Балканот.

Средновековните христијански реликвијари се појавувале во различни форми, од саркофази, кутии за козметика, мали куќи, цркви, торби, делови од човечкото тело итн. Реликвијарите за главите на светците биле популарни во средновековниот период. Примерите на две женски глави покриени со златни и сребрени маски од Струга и Охрид се многу ретки, се чини, феномени што ќе бидат разгледани во овој текст. Света Матрона и Света Спасица живееле речиси 1000 години временски оддалечени една од друга. Но реликвијарот на Матрона е направен во 18 век, додека оној на Света Спасица се чини дека е близок по датум со оглед на филигранскиот стил.

Средновековните реликвијари во облик на женска маска може да се поврзат со античките благородни обреди на покривање на лицето на мртвите, но и со првосвештеничката, која имала висока позиција во општеството, чии гробници се откриени во Милци, Марвинци и Ајга. Ова зборува за континуитет во зачувувањето на ликот на важните мажи и жени, како и на нивните деца. Првосвештеничките се чини дека даваат слично значење на женската слава, само што тие ја уживаат во земниот живот, а светците во задгробниот живот.

Златните маски на античките локални кралски семејства оставиле траен впечаток во меморијата и се чини дека не биле заборавени од домородните жители.

Селото Вишни, каде што е пронајден еден од реликвијарите со маски, направен за локалната Света Спасица, е близу до селото Вевчани, каде што традиционално се изведува карневалот под маски, еден од ретките пагански обичаи во нашата земја што функционира во континуитет.

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