

The birth of the Tragic Mask through Ritual Practices

Sophia Baltzoi

Abstract

The proposed project offers a study of the ritual mask based on bibliographic research, as well as examination of archaeological findings in combination with literary sources.¹ More specifically, it will examine the places in which ritual masks have been found in the context of the rituals and the gods to whom they were offered. Also, the technique of their construction as well as the common traits or non-common traits they carry and whether they are connected to the tragic masks will be investigated. The research questions that this paper is called to answer are also part of the main research questions of the doctoral dissertation entitled: *The tragic mask in the performances of ancient drama and in the revival of ancient drama in modern and contemporary Greece*. The main objective of the paper through the proposed methodology is to answer the question of whether the tragic mask was the evolution of a primitive ritual source or was created deliberately to serve the needs of tragedy.

Key words: mask, tragedy, religion, rituals, theater

¹ I am extremely grateful to the academic committee of the Pre-doctoral Fellowship in Hellenic studies of the CHS Greece, which awarded me this fellowship encouraging me to investigate the topic of this paper further. I would like to express my gratitude to ass. Prof. Anna Lamari, my advisor in this project and to my supervisor ass. Prof. Maria Mikedaki for her knowledge and her contribution to my PhD thesis. Furthermore, I would like to thank ass. Prof. Nikolas Dimakis for his invaluable advice and for his useful comments, PhD Candidate Gerasimos Trasanis for his unfailing support from start to finish and my family for being always by my side.

Introduction

The word mask, the effigy of the face that covered the face or the whole head and was used by the hypocrites in the ancient Greek theater,² was attributed with the term face (πρόσωπον) in antiquity (fifth century BCE) and later with the term *prosopieion* (προσωπείον). The mask is a fake face that helps someone to disguise themselves and acquire a different look. In antiquity, the mask had different aspects (apotropaic, burial, decorative, funerary, theatrical, religious-ritual, votive), and it can be deduced that the use of masks was wide in all aspects of ancient Greeks' life.

The earliest example of a mask comes from a Mycenaean ring from Tiryns that represents zoomorphic figures (animal figures) that keep jugs full of the production of the new vine harvest and has a ritual background.³ Perhaps they were members of a troupe or mystics or priests. Despite there is a common ritual background in all ritual masks, they can be categorized in animal-theriomorphic masks (Mycenaean, Tiryns, Arkteia, Lycosura⁴) and in masks with human and special characteristics (Artemis Orthia). The use of the tragic mask can be directly related to the worship of the main gods of the mask, Dionysus and Artemis, whose mystics were masked and reached the point of losing their personality (ecstasy) in the context of worship.⁵

² Allard and Leffort 1989:37.

³ For Mycenaean seal stones see Sakellariou 1966.

⁴ Loucas-Durie 1935:401-419; Cavvadias 1893:11-13, pi. IV.

⁵ Simon and Vaphopoulou-Richardson 1982:10; Sifakis 2007:104-105. This can be seen through the representations of black-figure vases of the sixth century BC, where those who participated in *kommos* in honor of the god Dionysus are depicted wearing theriomorphic masks. Aspects of this practice are found in the theriomorphic dances of the ancient Attic Comedy. See Blume 2008:106-107.

Initially, the mask was used and associated with the religious events and institutional ceremonies of ancient society, emphasizing thus the affinity of tragedy with the sacramental disguises,⁶ which later, however, with the evolution of theatrical art obtained a social and political dimension.⁷ According to Lesky, “... the ecstasy of the Dionysian cult is the basis of the sacramental fact of the transfiguration, which is the fundamental condition for the genesis of the drama.”⁸ However, there is an opposite view, namely that the mask was discovered to serve tragedy rather than be the product of the evolution of a primitive ritual source.⁹ P. Hall even believes that the use of masks allowed the Greek tragedians to handle extreme passions which would be impossible to be expressed naturalistically.¹⁰

Rituals in Sanctuaries and Worship

The ritual masks cover a wide range of human expression. Although both funerary masks and burial masks bear a ritual character, in this article we will focus on the ritual character of the masks in the context of worship. Due to the mystical character of the festivals with a ritualistic character, sources from ancient writers are limited. Thus, our knowledge is enhanced by pottery, sculpture, figurative art and seal carving. In this subsection an analysis of the ritual masks will be made according to the archaeological findings and the written sources.

⁶ Baldry 1981:39-42.

⁷ Rehm 1992:3-4.

⁸ Lesky 1975:76.

⁹ Wiles 2007:15.

¹⁰ As mentioned by Arvaniti 2014:253. The same perception is expressed by the director in his book Hall 2010:27. As far as the non-surviving masks are concerned, the recreation of their form is possible due to iconography and written sources.

Prehistory

Mycenaen Masks

Masks from Cyprus and Minoan Crete are considered to be predecessors of the Mycenaean masks, which date back to the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE and coincide with the Mycenaean period. In Minoan Crete as well as in Cyprus the bull is a common element and symbol.¹¹ In Mycenae, seal stones have been found depicting *bucrania* (βουκράνια). It is possible that the *bucrania*, after a treatment on the bones of the skull and with the addition of a piece of skin or fabric, were used for face masks.¹²

In the Mycenaean seal stones as well as in the frescoes of the Mycenaean acropolis, there are portrayed masks which either have a demonic or an animal character in the form of a lion, bull, deer or horse. (Possibly, in these early stages of disguise, people used the animals with as little processing as possible to identify more closely with them.) The lion's head of Hercules can be seen as a form of such an early mask, indicating his superiority and victory over the animal.

Historical Times

Masks in Tiryns

In Tiryns, in a pit-deposit (βόθρος) associated with the sanctuary of Hera,¹³ four animal-shaped masks with special features were found, which have been dated back to the Late Geometric

¹¹ In Minoan Crete the bull is an important element of religion, in the festival of the Ταυροκαθάψια and in the classical myth of the Minotaur. In Cyprus there are indirect references to bull faces, where in statuettes the faces bear bulls' faces and skulls of bulls and other animals.

¹² Karageorghis 1971:262-63.

¹³ According to a myth, the daughters of the king of Tiryns, Proetus, mocked the goddess' wooden statue (ξόανον) and described it as ugly. Enraged, the goddess Hera transformed them into cows, seizing them with madness. Perhaps this myth reflects an initiation ceremony.

period. Their use has not been verified yet, but they were probably either hanging in sacred places or were used in rituals.¹⁴

These portraits are life-size and are probably copies of the originals that were likely made from perishable materials. As the masks do not have openings in the eyes, it is likely that people were seeing through the mouth which has a large opening. Their appearance is ugly and they have human and animal features.¹⁵ These have the form of a boar¹⁶ with tusks referring to Medusa and suggesting an apotropaic character.¹⁷

As we have observed in this paper, the Mycenaean and Tiryns' masks and also the *bucrania* shared a common cult background of the primitive vivisection. In addition, the worship of a chthonic deity with animal characteristics, a snout and tusks was known since the Homeric times.¹⁸

The cult of Dionysus

The festivals in honor of Dionysus¹⁹ were the Lenaea,²⁰ the Anthesteria,²¹ the Rural Dionysia²² and the City Dionysia. In all these festivals orgiastic dances in honor of the god took place.

¹⁴ Foley 1988:145.

¹⁵ They all have protruding bulbous eyes, large human ears with holes, a large open mouth with sharp tusk-like teeth, and an animal-shaped nose with two nostril holes. Also, on a large surface next to the mouth there are small holes.

¹⁶ Karo 1948:33 and pl.III.

¹⁷ Baumbach 2004:177.

¹⁸ Loucas-Durie 1989:302.

¹⁹ See Jeanmaire 1985.

²⁰ For more information about Lenaia see Pickard-Cambridge 1968:25-42.

²¹ For more information about Anthesteria see Pickard-Cambridge 1968:1-25.

²² For more information about the Rural Dionysia see Pickard-Cambridge 1968:42-56.

Despite their different character and content, these festivals shared the common elements of disguise and transformation through the use of mask.

The Lenaea took place from January to February and had a chthonic character. Initially, only comedies were presented in the context of the Lenaea, but in 432 BCE an official competition of tragedy was held, but on a smaller scale. As we know from the Lenaeian vases, Dionysus himself is depicted wearing a bearded mask and being honored on a stake or column (περικλιόνιος).

The Anthesteria took place from February to the beginning of March, during the month of Anthesterion when orgiastic dances took place in a festive context, after the celebrations for the first wine of the year. This festival had a chthonic character as on its last day the Hydroforia were celebrated, which was a feast for the dead. During this festival, plenty of water was poured into the earth so the dead could catch it and rise on the surface. In addition, seeds were thrown inside holes (χύτροι) that were made on the ground so to feed the dead. Philostratus mentions that the name Anthesteria, must have been related to wreaths of flowers worn by boys and girls at the passage from infancy to childhood. The main connection between the Anthesteria and drama lies in the αγώνες χύτρινοι, contests that took place at the Anthesteria and included a competition of comic actors.

The Rural Dionysia festival was a celebration that had an agricultural character where the core of this celebration was a procession for the transport of the phallus (φαλληφορία). Aristophanes (III. 26) informs us about this procession: *kaniphoros* (κανηφόρος) was leading the way, followed by the *phallophoros* (φαλλοφόρος); then a crowd of believers disguised as Satyrs, Seilenoi, Bacchus, holding the symbols of Dionysus, which were the thyrsus, the phallus and vases with wine, were dancing and singing a chant to Falis, who was the personification of the god.

The City Dionysia took place during the month of Elaphibolion, during the period from March to April. The core of the celebration was the representation of the transfer of the god's sword from the village Eleftheres, located between the regions of Attica and Boeotia, to his sanctuary on the south side of the Acropolis. This transfer took place once, but then every year there was a symbolic representation by transferring the wooden statue (ξύανον) of the god from the sanctuary of Eleftherios Dionysus to another small temple of Dionysus that existed outside Dipylo.²³

Pottery is rich with depictions of Dionysus and his entourage. As early as the seventh century BCE, at least, some male figures, the so-called *comastes* (κωμαστές), appear in vase painting.²⁴ The *comastes* are directly related to the banquet and the Dionysian circle and are depicted with bulging bellies, bulging buttocks and dancing with intense or “obscene” movements.²⁵ Also the protosatyr, are depicted, who in the iconography follow an evolutionary course, where they gradually acquire human and animal characteristics.²⁶

In vase painting, ritual ceremonies in honor of Dionysus are represented where the mask is placed on a column, playing a dominant role. The main symbols of Dionysian worship, the thyrsus, the deer skin costume, the drums, the flute, the ivy and the grape are depicted on most of the vases. The god's wooden statue (ξύανον) is usually surrounded by women dressed in deerskin costumes, holding the thyrsus in their hands, drums and flutes. In the fifth-century black-figure vases these female figures are usually presented as maenads and their ecstatic dance is evident. In the red-figure vases the mask is depicted crowned with ivy, the crown

²³ Pickard-Cambridge 1968:57-58.

²⁴ These vases were made in Corinth, Attica, Boeotia, Laconia and in various centres of the Eastern Aegean.

²⁵ Isler-Kerényi 2007:18-24, 30-43; Vierneisel and Kaeser 1990:283-302.

²⁶ Isler-Kerényi 2007.Vierneisel and Kaeser 1990:325-326.

becomes richer and the end of the beard ceases to be pointed. The image of the mask is complemented by the garment, indicating the body of the god, something that does not appear in the era of the black-figure vases. Furthermore, the movements of the maenads gradually change from being restrained to more intense and their dance has an ecstatic rhythm.

The disguise at the beginnings of the drama

Around the seventh century BCE, when the tragedy²⁷ takes shape, we observe the use of masks worn mainly by the followers of Dionysus in a religious context. Unfortunately, due to the perishable material of their construction, we do not have remains of the original theater masks or the earlier ones which were worn by believers in early mimic events. The latter might have been made of either perishable materials or the believers just painted their faces. Classical pottery as well as votive masks made of clay, marble or bronze mainly reflect the crystallized form of the mask and do not give information about the mask of the archaic era.²⁸

Lesky states that the problem of the genesis of tragedy “has remained since the time of Alexandrian science one of the most difficult and most difficult problems”.²⁹ Regarding the origins of drama and the birth of tragedy, Aristotle’s *Poetics* informs us that tragedy was born through improvisation.

γενομένη δ’ οὖν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς —καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ ἡ κωμῳδία, καὶ ἡ μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐξαρχόντων τὸν διθύραμβον, ἡ δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν τὰ φαλλικά ἄ ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐν πολλαῖς τῶν πόλεων διαμένει νομιζόμενα.

Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a IV

²⁷ See Spandodides 1964.

²⁸ Lampraki 1984:22.

²⁹ Lesky 1975:326-27.

For Aristotle tragedy is an act of imitation, not recitation.³⁰

ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης,
 ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι'
 ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων
 κάθαρσιν.

Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b-1450b

At this point, the importance of mimesis is emphasized as its meaning includes the theatrical element. In addition, the basic element of mimesis is the disguise as the transformation which were achieved through the mask and the costume.

Researchers who have made ethnological approaches suggest that the beginnings of some form of theatrical act can be spotted in primitive dances and mimetic ceremonies concerning vegetation, while they have their reservations about the information Aristotle gives in the *Poetics*.³¹

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle considers the starting point of tragedy to be the dithyramb³² and its *prototragoudistes* (ἐξάρχοντες). In these early stages of the dithyramb, we must bear in mind that the *canonarchos* (κανονάρχος) was standing, facing and responding to the chorus. It is clear at this point that Aristotle identifies the element of the dialogical-dramatic part. *Suda* informs us that dithyramb was presented by satyrs. Although, many researchers disagree that

³⁰ Aristotle also refers to imitation in other parts of the *Poetics*: Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447a = 1448a = 1448b.

³¹ For more bibliography see Lesky 1975:327n2.

³² About dithyramb and origins of Greek tragedy see Pickard-Cambridge. 1929; See Csapo and Miller 2007.

there were satyrs in Thebes' group.³³ In any case we can distinguish the element of disguise with the mask and the costume.

The point to be made is that Arion presented the dithyramb with the participation of satyrs, which links Aristotle's theory with the word satyr and must be distinguished from satyr play.³⁴ Thus, we need to focus on the last information as the presence of the Satyrs implies a form of disguise, possibly by using costumes and masks, which in turn constituted core elements of the development of tragedy.

Thespis, apart from being the inventor of prologue and speech, is also considered the inventor of the mask in the theater. The image we have formed of him was twofold. On the one hand, peripatetic school considered him the creator of tragedy since he helped in the decisive development of the genre by making some important additions and innovations. On the other hand, there is also the image of rural Thespis, since he came from an Attic municipality of Ikaria and is combined with myths and orgiastic dances of Dionysian character. Based on this, the opinion of the wise men of the Hellenistic era about the song for the goat was reinforced.³⁵ The fact that Thespis placed his tragedies on chariots can be said to be identical with the entrance of Dionysus into the city on a boat during the Anthesteria, according to the myth.³⁶

We know from the *Suda Lexicon* that around 536–533 BCE Thespis presented some form of tragedy, which it was included in the festive program of the City Dionysia in Athens. Thespis, made the decisive step to the tragic mask by smearing his face with either a sprinkle or a musty sediment and eventually created masks with linen cloth. The first masks introduced by

³³ Pickard-Cambridge 1966:pl 12.

³⁴ Lesky 1975:330.

³⁵ Meuli 1955:226.

³⁶ Frickenhaus 1912:61.

Thespis would have had a grotesque character, but with the development of the tragedy they acquired a more serious and realistic character. The evolution of the tragic mask was facilitated by Choerilus who perfected what Thespis had created and added some characteristics. Then Phrynichus introduced the female character and Aeschylus is the one who added color on the masks.³⁷

The cult of Artemis

Artemis Vrauronia

A sanctuary of Doric style found in Vravra, in eastern Attica, has been connected to the worship of the goddess Artemis of Vravra. The worship seems to be connected to a myth, according to which a bear³⁸ was given to the sanctuary in which a little girl was playing, but at some point, the bear scratched her eyes.³⁹

ἀρκευόμεναι γυναῖκες τῇ Ἀρτέμιδι ἑορτὴν ἐτέλουν, κροκωτὸν ἠμφιεσμένοι, οὔτε πρεσβύτιδες ἰ ἐτῶν, οὔτε ἐλάττους ε, ἀπομειλισσόμεναι τὴν θεόν· ἐπειδὴ ἄρκτος ἀγρία ἐπιφοιτῶσα διέτριβεν ἐν τῷ δήμῳ Φλαυιδῶν· καὶ ἡμερωθεῖσαν αὐτὴν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις σύντροφον γενέσθαι. παρθένον δέ τινα προσπαίξειν αὐτῇ καὶ ἀσελγαινούσης τῆς παιδίσκης παροξυνθῆναι τὴν ἄρκτον καὶ καταξέσαι τῆς παρθένου· ἐφ' ᾧ ὀργισθέντας τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς αὐτῆς κατακοντίσαι τὴν ἄρκτον, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο λοιμῶδη νόσον τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἐμπεσεῖν. χρηστηριαζομένοις δὲ τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις εἶπε λύσιν τῶν κακῶν ἔσεσθαι, εἰ τῆς τελευτησάσης ἄρκτου

³⁷ Pickard-Cambridge 1968:101-103.

³⁸ Kontis 1967:163; Osborne 1994:148.

³⁹ With minor variations the myth is also found in the commentaries to *Lysistrata* (schol. Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 645 Leiden and Ravenna).

ποινας ἀρκεύειν τὰς ἑαυτῶν παρθένους ἀναγκάσουσι. καὶ ἐψηφίσαντο οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι μὴ πρότερον συνοικίζεσθαι ἀνδρὶ παρθένον, εἰ μὴ ἀρκεύσειε τῇ θεῷ.

Suda s.v., *Arktos e Brauroniois*

After the girl's death, her brothers killed the bear. Artemis got angry with the death of the bear and she punished the city of Athens by sending an infectious disease. The Athenians were informed by an oracle from the Oracle of Delphi that in order to atone and appease the goddess they had to send every little Athenian girl, from five to ten years old, to the goddess's sanctuary in Vravra so to impersonate the bear. Consequently, a festival called *Vravronia* (Βραυρώνια) was held every four years, which ended with a procession from the Acropolis of Athens to Vravra.⁴⁰

In the context of the Vravra, a ritual called *arkteia* (ἀρκτηία) was also held. During this ritual young girls, who were called *arktoi* (ἀρκτοί), were disguised as bears by wearing the famous *chitons* (κροκωτοί),⁴¹ imitating the fur of the bear, as well as animal-shaped masks in the form of the head of the bear. Information about *arkteia* can be collected from the iconography of little crater vases (κρατηρίσκοι)⁴² that were found in the sanctuary, which depict some ritual events that took place in the sanctuary. Several researchers argue that the *arkteia* (ἀρκτηία) were a rite of passage for young girls from childhood to adulthood and by extension to marriage and motherhood, while other researchers argue that these ceremonies were simply services to the state.⁴³ In these ceremonies the means for young girls to pass from

⁴⁰ Kontis 1967:170; Dowden 1989:38; Ferguson 1989:212; Lonsdale 1993:172.

⁴¹ Harrison 1963:115-117; Foley 1988:131; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000 (b):42; Mikalson 1998:62-63; Perlman 1893:121, 125-126; Cole 1998:27-43, 223.

⁴² These craters are described by: Kahil-Ghali 1965:20-23; Scalon 1990:109-120.

⁴³ Kahil-Ghali 1977:89; Scalon 1990:74; Dillan 2002:221; Connelly 2007:33; Matthew 2002:221.

one age stage to another was the mask of the bear, which was a sacred animal and symbolized motherhood.⁴⁴

Artemis Orthia

The sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta, which was unearthed by excavations carried out from 1906 to 1910 by Bosanquet and then by Dawkins, has been dated back to the mid-eighth century BCE.⁴⁵ Initially, Artemis Orthia was identified with the Mycenaean deity Orthia, goddess of fertility and vegetation, and then with Artemis. The main role of both deities of Orthia and Artemis was the protection of children and adolescents.⁴⁶

According to the findings, the sanctuary was mainly used for the rites of passage of young boys and girls. Unfortunately, the written sources for the girls' ceremonies are incomplete. Although, we know that in the wider region of the Peloponnese girls performed ritual dances⁴⁷ in honour of the goddess Artemis and, also, in the region of Laconia, orgiastic dances by men and women, the so-called λόμβαι,⁴⁸ took place during which they wore obscene female masks,

⁴⁴ The worship of the goddess Artemis in Vravra was associated with the bear by local legends. For E. Simon, "The bear [...] is a Neolithic relic in the cult of Artemis". Simon 1983: 85-86. Several researchers believed that in ancient times the bear had many characteristics in common with humans, such as its upright posture, its strength, its intelligence, its way of raising its cubs, which made it a symbol of motherhood. Aristotle, *History of animals*, *Generation of animals*, Plinius. *Natural History* 8.54.129, *Oppian Cynegetica*. 3.144-175, Aelian. *De Natura Animalium* 6.9. So, for the girls in *arkteia* it was a model of imitation, where symbolically in the ceremonies through the wildness they passed through taming and went on to marriage and motherhood. Seaford 1987:108; Lloyd-Jones 1983:97; Bevan 1986:25; Perlman 1983:112-127; Scalon 1990:102; Fowler 2000:327-328.

⁴⁵ Antonaccio 1994:97; Bosanquet 1906(b):310-313; Boardman 1963:1-7; Chrimes 1971:257-259; Pavel 1971:133-134; Fitzhardinge 1980:15; Hooker 1980:32-34; Piper 1986:182; Carter 1987:374; See also Papachatzis 1987.

⁴⁶ Page 1951:72; Den Boer 1954:265; Chrimes 1971:149-150; Hooker 1980:34-35; Bevan 1986:110; Lipka 2002:126-127.

⁴⁷ Calame 1997:159. The girls participated in dances in honor of Artemis Karyatidas, Limnatidas, Alfeiaia, Cordaca, and Corythalia.

⁴⁸ Hesychius Lexicon s.v. λόμβαι.

the *varyllika* (βαρυλλικά).⁴⁹ As for young boys, we know that they took part in ritual events of harsh nature aimed to toughen them for the passage from adolescence to adulthood and military life. This ceremony was quite widespread and was called *diamastigosis* (διαμαστίγωσις). In these ceremonies, it seems likely that both the priestess who was holding the goddess's wooden statue (ξόανον) and the mystics who were practicing the event of *diamastigosis* wore masks.⁵⁰

Apart from the aforementioned rites, some other ceremonies were also performed in the sanctuary where believers asked for the goddess's favor for a better harvest as she was the protector of nature. In these ceremonies, believers participated in ritual events and wore masks.⁵¹ The masks found in the sanctuary are dated back to 600–570/560 BCE and are probably copies of the originals which were constructed with wood or leather.⁵² Carter and Dickins⁵³ have proceeded to categorize the large volume of masks found in the sanctuary. Carter⁵⁴ suggests the following types: wrinkled portraits, heroes, satyrs, grotesques and gorgons. Accordingly, Dickins suggests the following types: old women, young men, warriors, portraits, satyrs, caricatures, gorgons and some subcategories of the above types.⁵⁵ The characteristic feature of these masks is that they were humanoid but also had some strange and ugly

⁴⁹ Bosanquet 1906:338-343.

⁵⁰ Karagiorga 1970:114.

⁵¹ Rosenberg 2015:251-252.

⁵² Papachatzis 1987:168-170.

⁵³ See Dickins 1929:163-186.

⁵⁴ Simon 1992:167; Carter 1987:356-358. Especially for those in the form of gorgons Vernant 1992:34-35; Bevan 1986:278-279.

⁵⁵ Simon 1992:164.

features.⁵⁶ This particular aspect of the masks contributed to the ritual intimidation of the young people who took part in these ceremonies and through the orgiastic dances and the exaltation of these characteristics, they were toughened and ready to pass into adulthood.⁵⁷

The cult of Demeter

Demeter Kidaria

Pausanias informs us that in ancient Pheneos in Arcadia there was a temple of the Eleusinian Demeter, having also the epithet *Kidaria* (Κιδαρία). Besides being the goddess of agriculture, in Sparta Demeter was also the goddess of the earth and had a chthonic character, with the epithet *Chthonia* (χθονία) attributed to her.⁵⁸ According to the sources, near the temple there were two rocks where the sacred written texts of the *hieropraxia* (ιεροπραξία) and the divine ritual mask were kept.

Καί επίθημα και επ' αὐτῶ περιφερέες ἐστί, ἔχον ἐντός Δήμητρας πρόσωπον
κιδαρίας τούτο ὁ ἱερεὺς περιθέμενος το πρόσωπο ἐν τῇ μείζονι καλούμενη
τελετῇ ράβδοις κατὰ λόγον τινα τούς υποχθονίους παίει.

Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Arkadika* VIII,15,3

Due to the mystical and occult character of the ceremony along with the lack of archaeological remains, our knowledge of the ritual is limited. However, it seems that the ritual event took place every two years. The priest was taking the sacred texts and the mask out of the rocks' opening and in front of the mystics he wore the mask embodying the divine

⁵⁶ Dietrich 1962:70, 129-148; Papachatzis 1987:170.

⁵⁷ Vernant 1992:226-231, 238.

⁵⁸ Pausanias III 14.5.

presence of Demeter. He would strike the earth with a rod to drive away evil spirits.⁵⁹ This was a ceremony in which believers asked the goddess for an abundance of fruit through these mysteries.

Despina Lycosura

The sanctuary of Despina Lycosura was in ancient Arcadia. The cult of Despina had its roots in primeval chthonic deities. There are many interpretations of the name Despina. According to Pausanias, the deity Despina is either identified with Artemis or with Demeter, or with her Daughter (Κόρη) Persephone or with the daughter of Demeter and Poseidon.⁶⁰

As Pausanias⁶¹ mentions, at the sanctuary of Despina in this secret mansion, orgiastic ecstatic ceremonies and the *cutting into pieces*, the so-called διασπαραγμός, a primitive sacrificial event, took place.⁶² In the southern part of the temple there were seats from which the spectators could watch the ritual events. Information about these rituals is derived from the garment of the statue of Despina and from the figurines found near the sanctuary.

The bottom of the garment depicts eleven dancing female figures with animal heads, arms and legs. The heads of the animals are of a pig, donkey, cat or hare, ram and horse, and one figure on the edge of the garment features the head of a bear.⁶³ The figurines have similar

⁵⁹ This act of the priest probably existed as part of the ritual and referred to the so-called κίδαρις. Athenaeus 14.631. Pausanias VIII, 15,3 (τους υποχθονίους παίει).

⁶⁰ Loucas 1989:101n32; Pausanias VIII, 37, 9, separates Despina from the Daughter-Persephone, the Eleusinian goddess of the underworld who is identified by modern scholars with the Daughter-Persephone. Burkert 1993:280. Furthermore, Despina of Lycosura is identified with Artemis: she was honoured with an Artemisia possession-ritual, where her sacred animal was a deer (Pausanias VIII 10.10) and an inscription dedicated to “Artemis Despina” was found. (IG, V 2, 522).

⁶¹ Pausanias VIII 37.8.

⁶² Pausanias VI n, 10.10 = 27.6 = 35.2 = 36.9 = 37.1-10 = 38.2 = 42.1.

⁶³ Full description of the garment by Kavvadias 1893:11-12. The restoration of the complex was based on the description of Pausanias VIII, 37.3.

characteristics and depict figures with the heads of rams and oxen.⁶⁴ All the above inform us that in the Megaron of Despina initiation ceremonies took place where people wore animal-like masks through which they identified themselves with the deity of wild nature, Despina.

Discussion

According to the aforementioned information, we observe that the mask was a common element mainly in the cult of Dionysus, Artemis and Demeter. Although the names of Dionysus and Artemis are inscribed on the tablets of Linear B,⁶⁵ we cannot identify the Mycenaean era masks with the worship of the two gods.

The worship of these three gods shared some common characteristics. The most significant element was the transformation through the mask. More specifically, the transformation of nature, the transformation of the wild nature of people, the transition from one state to another along with the chthonic element in their worship.

The rites of passage were in both cases of the worship of Artemis Orthia and Vravraia rites of initiation into adulthood. The young people who participated in these ceremonies should go through all these stages to reach the stage of adulthood, with the first step to be their marginalization and their isolation in sanctuaries. Young girls in both Vravraia and Sparta took part in these ceremonies to gradually pass from childhood to marriage and motherhood, while boys are prepared for adulthood through hardships. The main goal of the process was the mental test of the initiates through the fear that the masks caused to them.

Apart from the Dionysian festivals, where participants wore masks, elements of Dionysian character can also be found in the ritual dances with masks at the sanctuary of

⁶⁴ Kourouniotis 1912:156.

⁶⁵ Lekatsas 1989:71-73. Burkert 1993:344.

Artemis Orthia and also in other regions of Greece. Like the believers of Dionysus that anointed their faces with ointment (τρογγία), the believers of Artemis anointed their faces with soot or pitch in order to be transformed accordingly. The worship of Artemis had ritual elements with Dionysian character, like the dance of masked people in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia and like the ecstatic dances that took place in various regions of the Greek world in honor of Artemis, as well as Bacchic elements.

The profanity and laughter⁶⁶ that were attested in the worship of Demeter were also Bacchic elements in the festivals of Dionysus. The disguise of the goddess Demeter as an old woman, i.e. in something barren, and again her transformation into her immortal youth, turning the earth to be fruitful again, could also be associated with the clay masks (type Old Women) from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. These masks from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, in combination with the choric chants of Alcman and the myth of Alpheus,⁶⁷ can be said to be the forerunner of the choric chants of Attic tragedy. For the first time, we have a rough categorization of mask types which, in turn, reminds us the later work of Pollux⁶⁸ who describes in detail the types of masks of the theater, allowing us to see some similarities. As Simon states, the cult of Artemis Orthia “was as important for the early history of Greek dramatic poetry as the cult of Dionysus in Athens.”⁶⁹

Conclusions

This paper was focused on the ritual masks that we find in the context of the cults of Dionysus, Artemis, Demeter, Despina etc. Also, a short reference to the beginnings of the drama through

⁶⁶ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 202.

⁶⁷ Pausanias VI.22.8. Thespis may have been influenced by this means of disguise.

⁶⁸ Pollux *Onomasticon* IV.

⁶⁹ Simon 1996:166.

the written sources, and to the early mimetic events before the birth of tragedy, was made. In all of the above, the core element was the mask itself and we observed that the crystallization of the masks of the drama is the result of the long evolutionary course of the processes of the mask.

Thespis, then, was not the inventor of the theater mask but he *reinvented* it and he contributed to its evolution by giving to it a new use or hypostasis beyond its religious context. So, the correct phrase should not be the *birth or genesis of the mask* but *the evolution of the mask* from ritual to drama. Despite the use of the mask in ritual practices varied, their use was familiar in various regions as well as widespread in all its aspects. Therefore, Thespis adopted an already existing practice, the simple coverage of the face, and he managed to give to the role of the hypocrite another hypostasis through disguise, thus maintaining the connection with the religion-ritual practices of the Dionysus' worship.

In earlier times ritual dances of disguised persons took place in the context of the worship of various deities. Additionally, in the context of early mimetic events we can deduce that the early theatrical masks can be dated back to the seventh century BCE. Since ritual events also had an inherent theatrical content and character, it is likely that in the early phases of tragedy the worshippers might sought to identify themselves with the divine element through disguise.

Through the archaeological findings, we observe that the masks were originally mainly animal-shaped, and at some cases people wore even the skulls of animals (*bucrania*). The fact that worshippers wear animal-shaped masks indicates their intention to symbolically connect with the deity with which they have identified each animal, as we have discussed above, as well as to connect with the deeper animal element inside themselves. Over time, we observe

that some animal disguises were refined while some other masks became anthropomorphic, having particular characteristics (Artemis Orthia).

Early signs of drama can be found or observed in the religious festivals along with the ritual events and the rites of passage using the mask as a means. In the rites of passage of the young people, the means of transition from one age stage to another was achieved through the mask and disguise through ritual intimidation. In these ceremonies we detect the theatrical character through the use of disguise and the distribution of roles.

The theatrical character was also presented in the ceremonies where the divine presence was declared in the face of the priest through the mask (Demeter Kidaria). Thus, we can conclude that the aforementioned representation was a forerunner of the later roles in the theater, which were played exclusively by male actors who wore masks, remaining the priest who was a man.

We can say that in its early stages, tragedy had a strong connection with religious ritual and in a way was a ritual evolution. The fact that tragedies were performed in the context of the great religious festival of the City Dionysia reinforces this connection. Furthermore, this connection is reinforced by the fact that at least in Hellenistic theaters an altar has been found at the periphery of the orchestra, but also the use of themes from the religious background. The religious element is evident in Aeschylus' early tragedies where it is quite strong. We notice that with the passage of time and the birth of democracy, the themes that poets deal with relate to politics and society.

Of course, in its evolution, the mask was used in tragedy in its crystallized form to serve the needs of the drama, which were mainly visual, but also the practical need for frequent role changing by the same actors. The early use of the mask in ritual events, not only in honor of Dionysus but also in honor of other deities combined with the cultic context of Dionysus, along

with the political and the social developments and changes that took place in Attica, set the base for the birth of tragedy and the development of Attic drama.

The mask even when placed on a cradle or on a column bears the divine presence (Lenaean vases). The mask, therefore, functions as the means for the prosperity of the harvest, the reconsecration (καθοσίωση) of the wine, the purification (κάθαρσις) and the consecration (καθοσίωση). What we observe is that the mask is an inseparable element of unity with the past and the religious context, and this is inferred from the continuous presence of the mask as an indispensable object in all three types of drama.

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