



## Les Carnets de l'ACoSt

Association for Coroplastic Studies

16 | 2017  
Varia

---

# Representations of Masked Figures: A Comparative Study and an Interpretative Approach to their Cult-Use and Meaning

Maria G. Spathi

---



**Publisher**  
ACoSt

**Electronic version**

URL: <http://acost.revues.org/1018>  
ISSN: 2431-8574

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 29 April 2017

**Electronic reference**

Maria G. Spathi, « Representations of Masked Figures: A Comparative Study and an Interpretative Approach to their Cult-Use and Meaning », *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* [Online], 16 | 2017, Online since 01 June 2017, connection on 08 June 2017. URL : <http://acost.revues.org/1018>

---

This text was automatically generated on 8 June 2017.



Les Carnets de l'ACoSt est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

---

# Representations of Masked Figures: A Comparative Study and an Interpretative Approach to their Cult-Use and Meaning

Maria G. Spathi

---

## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> This forthcoming study presents terracotta figurines representing dancers with masks that have been discovered in the Cave of the Nymphs in Lechova, Corinthia, in the northeast Peloponnese. In addition, this paper also discusses other masked figures and isolated masks unearthed from cult sites across Greece that are predominately dated to the Classical period. An interpretation of their use and meaning within their ritual context can shed light on the figurines from Lechova that offer the opportunity for a more holistic understanding of such masked figures of humans and animals. There is a consensus that these figurines and masks were associated with some kind of “δρώμενα” (ritual performances), during which masks were used in initiation rites. Their distribution appears extensive, suggesting that they were of considerable importance in Greek religious practices.

## The finds from the cave in Lechova

- <sup>2</sup> The cave from which these figurines were recovered is located on a forested slope of Mt. Vesiza in Corinthia and was excavated between 1995 and 2003 by the Ephorate of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology of southern Greece. The excavation produced large quantities of figurines and pottery dated to the Classical period, with the majority of the figurines belonging to common Corinthian types. From the graffiti surviving on six

fragments, it was possible to identify the deities worshipped at the cave with the Nymphs.

1

- 3 The figurines that form the basis of this study are handmade with moldmade faces and date to the Classical period; they come mainly from sites in the Argolid and Corinthia. They belong to a group of figurines comprising largely standing or dancing satyrs and apes supported by a strut at the rear. Their body is that of a nude male, with some examples appearing to wear a knee-length, short chiton that covers all anatomical details. In general, the body is very basic without any details except for the male genitals. The head usually rests directly on the body without a neck, and its back is nearly flat and unworked. The masks with human features consist of hyperbolic features, representing rather enigmatic figures: bulging eyes, a flat nose, a half-opened mouth, full lips, high, prominent cheekbones, and a protruding chin. The mask-traits are rarely indicative of gender but through a comparison with finds with similar characteristics one can discern male and female examples, along with examples that have animal heads portraying rams or monkeys. These figurines can be subdivided into the following categories: *masked male* (fig. 1), *males wearing a mask with "negroid" features*, *masked females*, *males with a Silenus mask*, and finally humans with *animal masks*, such as, the above-mentioned rams or monkeys (fig. 2).

Figure 1: Figurine of a masked male, Ephorate of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology of Southern Greece

Figure 2: Figurine of a male with a ram's mask, Ephorate of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology of Southern Greece



Photo Maria Spathi

## Figures and isolated masks from other cult-contexts

- 4 An evaluation or interpretation of the figurines from Lechova is difficult without taking into consideration similar figurines from other sanctuaries, including life-size masks, as well as literary sources referring to rituals associated with masks in sanctuaries. The largest and best known group of figurines with animal masks comes from the sanctuary of Despoina at Lykosoura, where part of the drapery of the cult statue also was discovered. This was decorated with relief compositions of similar human figures with animal limbs and heads.<sup>2</sup> The figures on the drapery are usually interpreted as masked worshippers taking part in cultic ritual dances, as is also a terracotta figurine of a human wearing an animal mask that was found at the sanctuary of Artemis and Pan in Megalopolis.<sup>3</sup>
- 5 Five life-size masks in terracotta, each representing a Gorgoneion, were found in a deposit in Tiryns and have been associated with initiation rites.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation has also been suggested for clay masks discovered at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta,<sup>5</sup> for two figurines of masked humans from the sanctuary of Artemis Mounichia in Piraeus, and for a number of masks discovered in the Samian Heraion representing Silenus and grotesque or demonic figures. Several figurines with animal or human masks and actual terracotta masks also have been found on Cyprus and have been associated with ritual performance.

## Literary sources on the use of masks in ritual

- 6 In addition to the coroplastic evidence, the literary sources on the use of masks in cult rituals are of particular interest. Examples of such rituals are attested from Pheneos, during a mystery ceremony in honor of Demeter Kidharia (*Paus.* VIII 15. 1-4), where the priest wore a mask. Also, in the sanctuary of Artemis Korythalis in Sparta (*Hesych.* s. *κυριττοί*) the worshippers appear to have used wooden masks. Furthermore, we find descriptions of performances in which the participants covered their faces with gypsum or mud, creating a mask, as in the case of Alpheionian Artemis (*Paus.* VI, 22,8) or Proitides in Arcadia.
- 7 Interpretative approach of the use and meaning of figures with ritual masks
- 8 In summary, figurines, such as the examples from Lechova, as well as representations of masked figures on vases<sup>6</sup> and reliefs have been found in sanctuaries of female deities and have been interpreted as elements relating to initiation rites. Most of these sanctuaries hosted ceremonies and initiation rites that marked the passage from childhood to adulthood.
- 9 The use of masks is a common element in ceremonies and rites of passage in many cultures, both as a means to express the change and transformation from one state to another when worn by the initiate (*myste/youth*), and as an object of fear when worn by others in order to intimidate the *myste*, a consistent aspect of the rites of passage. It appears that at the Cave of the Nymphs in Lechova a kind of *dromena* (ritual performance-drama or mimetic action) took place. The figurines may reflect this ritual and serve as a reminder of the participants.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bosanquet, R. C. 1905–1906. “The Cult of Orthia as Illustrated by the Finds.” *BSA* 12: 331–570.

Jameson M. H. 1990. “Perseus, the Hero of Mykenai.” In *Celebrations of Death and Divinity in the Bronze Age Argolid*, edited by Hägg R., G. Nordquist, Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Symposium at the Swedish Institute at Athens, 11-13 June 1988, 214–222. Stockholm: Paul Astroms Forlag.

Kormazopoulou L., Zygouri I., Papathanasiou V. 2011. “Excavations at the Cave of Lechova: A Preliminary Report.” In *Land of Sikyon: Archaeology and History of a Greek City-State*, edited by Y. A. Lolos, *Hesperia Suppl.*, 39, 589-598. Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

Kourouniotou K. 1912. “Το εν Λυκόσουρα Μέγαρον της Δεσποίνης,” *Archaeologiki Ephimerida*: 155–160.

Marinatos, N. 2002. “The Arkteia and the Gradual Transformation of the Maiden into a Woman.” In *Le orse di Brauron: Un rituale di iniziazione femminile nel santuario di Artemide*, edited by B. Gentili and F. Perusino, 29–42. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.

## ENDNOTES

1. Kormazopoulou 2011.
2. Kourouniotou 1912.
3. Housed today at the Museum of Tripolis in the Peloponnese, unpublished.
4. Jameson 1990.
5. Bosanquet 1905–1906.
6. Marinatos 2002

## ABSTRACTS

This note is a condensed version of a forthcoming study to appear in *Popular religion and ritual in Prehistoric and ancient Greece and the east Mediterranean*, edited by G. Vavouranakis, K. Kopanias, K. Kanellopoulos and Y. Papadatos, Oxbow, 2017. It focuses on handmade figurines of the Classical period with mold-made, mask-like faces that were brought to light at the Cave of the Nymphs in Lechova, Corinthia. An examination of their iconographic characteristics in relation to other representations of similar iconography, as well as literary sources mentioning the use of masks in ritual, shed light on their use in initiation rites.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Cave of the Nymphs, masks in ritual, masks, ritual performance

## AUTHOR

**MARIA G. SPATHI**

Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies

[maria.spathi@hotmail.com](mailto:maria.spathi@hotmail.com)