

10. THE TERRACOTTA FACE MASK

Hannelore Rose, with comments on the fabric by David Williams

10.1 Description

Three conjoining pottery fragments were recovered from the northern end of a section of drainage ditch (LBL 1) on the east side of a trackway leading down from the *vicus* to the road that bypasses the fort (above, 6.2 and Illus 6.1, 10.1 and 10.2). The pottery fabric (10.2, below) is medium hard orange clay with a fine texture and some grit inclusions and particles of mica. A fourth fragment (LBR 4) in the same fabric from further down the same drainage ditch probably belongs to the same mask because of the texture of the surface and the treatment of the rim. If so, however, its position relative to the larger fragments is not clear because it is small and its features insufficiently specific, though it would most likely have been part of the hair or of a hairband. Alternatively, it could be part of a terracotta figurine as it can be difficult to distinguish between masks and figurines if the fragments are as small as this (see 9.1.5: P7 and P10, above).

The position of the three larger conjoining fragments within the mask is discernible only upon careful and close observation. The outer surface is mostly covered by a representation of hair, the inner form of the strand scored with a sharp instrument when the clay was leather-hard (Illus 10.3, 10.4 and 10.5). The rim or edge of the mask is preserved on two of the fragments and has been crudely scored with a sharp instrument. Some 20mm from the edge of the largest fragment is a hole with a diameter of 6mm, tapering to 8mm on the outer surface. A further defined edge on the second largest fragment is very helpful in identifying its position within the mask. Because of its shape and location it can only be the left part of the lower lip, as seen from the spectator's point of view. Thus, the three conjoining fragments can be identified as the lower left part of a bearded face. A portion of the chin, the lower lip and the cheek are preserved, and the ear would have been located not far above the hole. Indeed, there is an oval raised area with a roughened interior just above the hole that might be part of the ear, the surface of which has partly flaked off. The representation

of the beard comes to an end on the upper part of the right broken edge and the skin then bulges slightly towards where the nose would have been. The proportions indicate that the complete mask would probably have been life-sized (Illus 10.2).

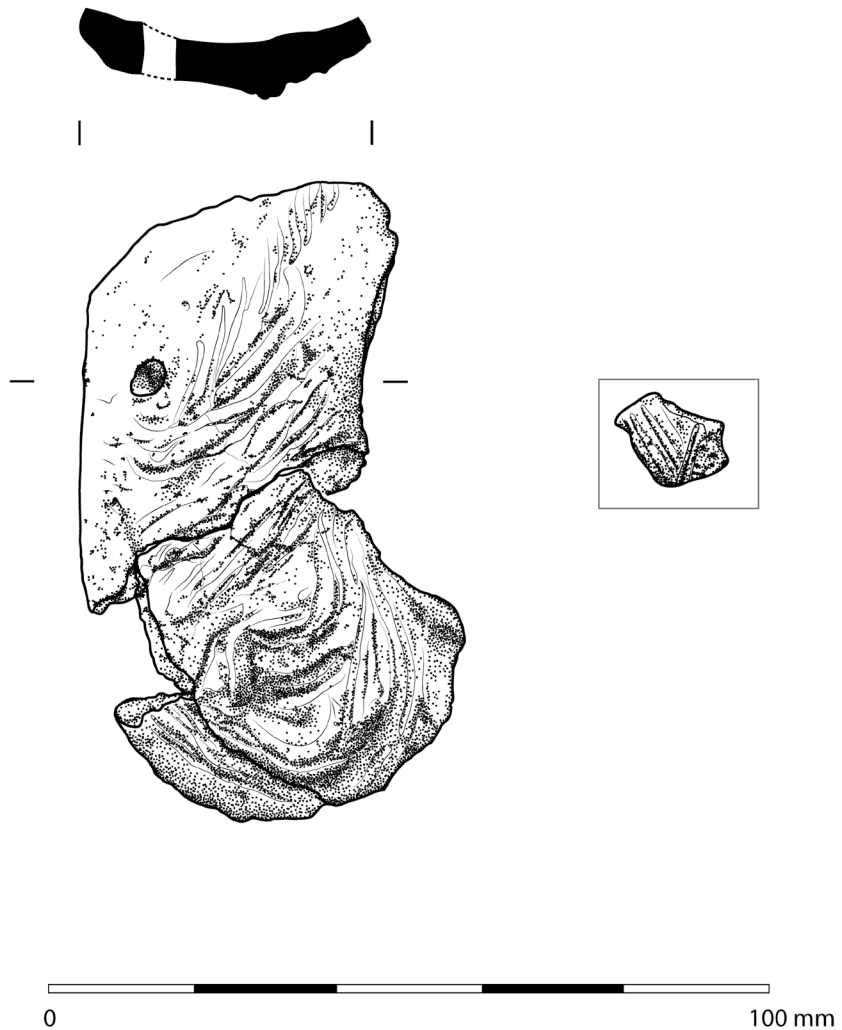
The structure of the inner surface (Illus 10.5) and the texture of the clay layers on the edges reveal that the mask was made in a mould. There are no explicit indications, such as small clay beads located especially in gaps and fissures, that a plaster mould was used, but in the north-western provinces life-size terracotta masks were regularly made in such moulds. The extensive reworking of the surface in particular and the subsequent treatment of the beard strands suggests a flawed and worn-out mould that is typical of plaster moulds after long use.¹² There are no traces of paint visible, but normally such terracotta masks were painted, especially those of red or orange clay which mostly had a white or beige cover of paint. Structures like wrinkles, eyelids and lips were then accentuated by a contrasting dark colour (black or red-brown) (eg Rose 2006: 74f fig 29, cat 172, pl 12; <https://arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092092>). Thus, it is likely that the surface of the mask was originally also variously coloured.

10.2 The fabric

The face mask was submitted to Dr David Williams, University of Southampton, for comment on its fabric and how it compared with mortarium Fabrics 5–7, which were considered to be locally produced (12.3, below). He comments: ‘The fabric is reddish-buff in colour and the fabric is noticeably “soapy” to the touch, which is usually characteristic of “grog-tempered” pottery. However, on this occasion the “grog” is in fact naturally occurring reddish-brown argillaceous inclusions in the clay, one or two of them really quite large. Also present are quartz grains, some mica and a little quartz sandstone. By eye, I thought originally that the argillaceous inclusions were mudstones, but Gillings has identified “shale” as being a major component of some of his fabrics [14, below], and so, following the local pottery, these argillaceous inclusions could also be shale. Both mudstones and shale (sandstone too) are commonly found in the local Ballagan Beds of the region. The latter generally underlie the volcanic Campsie Fells formations, but here and there they



Illus 10.1 Face mask elements (© H Rose)



Illus 10.2 Face mask elements conjoined

are exposed at the surface. There is then no reason on the basis of the fabric to suspect anything other than a fairly local origin for the mask. The fabric also has similarities with some of the mortarium fabrics, as some of them too contain argillaceous inclusions. The same “soapy feel” is particularly noticeable with Fabric 6.

“The mask and the mortarium Fabrics 5 and 6 all have argillaceous inclusions in the clay matrix, plus quartz and a little quartz sandstone, all of which are probably in the local Croy Hill clays, though as Bar Hill is very close by, this would probably apply there as well. The fabric of the mask and mortarium Fabric 6 are especially similar.’

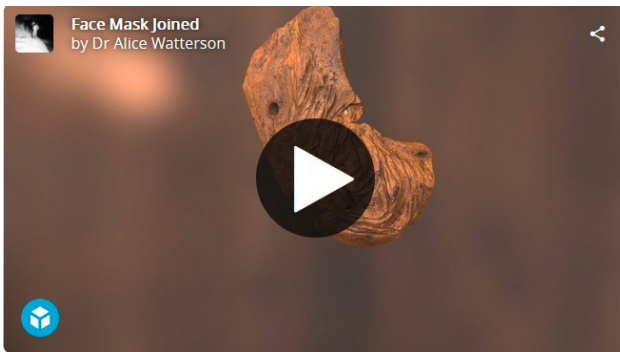
10.3 Discussion

Representations of masks are very common in Roman art, and terracotta masks are a widespread

phenomenon across the whole Roman Empire.¹³ More than 600 examples are currently known from the north-western provinces alone (Germania inferior and superior, Gallia Belgica and Britannia) (van Boekel 1986; Rose 2006; 2012: 55). Like oil lamps or terracotta figurines, the masks were made in a hollow form or model (for a detailed description of the process, see Rose 2006: 14–19) and so were produced in series. This kind of production allows us to draw conclusions about the manufacturing sites. Currently, mask production can be proven only in major potter’s workshops that were producing other sorts of mould-ware as well. Masks were a niche product in the repertoire of these potters, whose primary interest was in the production of lamps, terracotta figurines or terra sigillata. In only four potteries in the north-western provinces (Nijmegen, Cologne, Frankfurt-Nied and Trier) is mask



Illus 10.3 Face mask with fragments conjoined: front view (© H Rose)



Illus 10.4 Face mask fragments conjoined in a 3D model; available by clicking the image or this link: <https://skfb.ly/6oQqY> (© Alice Watterson)



Illus 10.5 Face mask with fragments conjoined: rear view (© Amanda Clydesdale)

production attested by discoveries in production contexts, though Rheinzabern may be added to that list with some degree of probability. The large potter's workshops in Cologne-Rudolfplatz and Trier-Süd represent two important production

centres that fabricated masks in large numbers and in different series for supra-regional export. The other potter's workshops mentioned above supplied only a local or at most a regional market. It can be assumed with some certainty that there would have been more production places that have not yet been identified.

Accordingly, it is highly significant that, because of its close similarity to one of the mortarium fabrics in which distinctive and unparalleled forms were being produced (10.2, 12.3 and 12.4, below), the fabric of the mask is highly suggestive of local production. It is somewhat surprising that masks were apparently being made in a local pottery producing mortaria, as mask production can usually be proven only in major pottery workshops specialising in other sorts of mould-ware, as noted above. It seems possible, therefore, that an imported mould or prototype was being used because its production was an elaborate process and a great challenge for the artist, and there are indications of moulds being traded elsewhere (Weidner 2009).

All of the masks that were produced in the north-western provinces are almost life-sized.¹⁴ Production started at the end of the 1st century AD and was at its peak during the 2nd century, though most of the potteries had given up manufacturing by the end of the 2nd century. Only in Trier can fabrication be traced until the 3rd century AD (Rose 2006: 72–3). The moulds used were one-piece hollow moulds of plaster that show the mask in negative form. Clay of very high quality that was very plastic and had a very good dimensional stability was pressed into these moulds and left to dry until it was leather-hard. After that the masks were removed, reworked and smoothed with a sharp instrument, for example a knife or cutting wire. Often, this was not done very carefully. In the next step several holes were drilled through the mask: normally two suspension holes were placed at the top and two more on each side in the ears or nearby. Pupils, nostrils and often the corners of the mouth were also perforated, and almost all masks had a cut-out mouth. The final step before firing was to paint the surface.

It is possible to group the masks into series based on the process of their production. More than 20 individual masks may be allocated to some of these series. From others, however, only a single

example is known, as is the case for the mask from Croy Hill, since no comparative pieces are known. Indeed, only a few bearded masks are known from the north-western provinces and none of these are even close to being complete (eg Rose 2006: cat 253–263b.286, pl 18–20). For this reason it is not possible to assign the Croy Hill example to a particular type of mask. The dominating type in the north-western provinces are farce masks, which are typically represented by bald and beardless male masks with grotesque or caricatured facial features. Masks that are orientated towards types from the new comedy or tragedy are also common. Only a small number of masks that are related to the god Dionysos or his companions, like satyrs or maenads, are known today.

A few masks do not fit into the pattern described above, but have their own very specific and unique characteristics. This is the case, for example, with the masks from Xanten,¹⁵ the nearly complete mask from Regensburg-Kumpfmühl or the one from Catterick (Rose 2006: cat 225 and 224, pl 16 (arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092235 and arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092101); Hartley & Fitts 1988: 58–9). All of these examples were handmade, rather than fabricated using moulds, or, in the case of Catterick and Xanten, produced from a vessel shaped on a potter's wheel and then halved and reworked further.

Face masks are rare in Roman Britain. A total of eight¹⁶ examples have been found in the following locations: Baldock (Stead 1975; Rose 2006: cat 53, pl 4; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092097); London (three different examples) (Marsh 1979; Rose 2006: cat 80, pl 6; cat 264, pl 19; cat 424, pl 29; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092098; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092099; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092100); Dover (Jenkins 1981: 146, 149 and fig 30; Rose 2006: cat 193, pl 14; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092191); Wilderspool (Kendrick 1874: 11–13; Thompson 1965: 85 and fig 2; Rose 2006: cat 223, pl 16; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092025); Catterick (Rose 2006: cat 224, pl 16; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092101); and Harlow (Rankov 1982: 371–2; Rose 2006, cat 163, pl 12; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092102). Those from London, Dover, Harlow and Baldock were imported from Germania inferior. It is even possible to assign the fragment from Dover and

the first two of the fragments from London to the pottery production centre at Cologne-Rudolfplatz on the basis of their fine white fabric and the series to which they belong. The mask from Baldock may be assumed to have been produced in the potter's workshops at Nijmegen.¹⁷ The Cologne potteries as well as those of Nijmegen are characterised by an excellent connection to the River Rhine, which was the most important transportation route for the trade in masks. The mask from Catterick and probably the one from Wilderspool are, however, of local or indigenous character.¹⁸

The mask from Croy Hill, however, is in more of a Roman than an indigenous tradition. Admittedly, the piece is unique and does not much correspond with the masks of the classical theatre genres, but it is preserved only fragmentarily and, therefore, the general impression might originally have been different. In particular, the way the mask was produced and the manufacturing technique executed are clear characteristics of a Roman product. The production in a mould is a typical Roman method for various objects (terra sigillata, oil lamps, terracotta figurines) and requires a shop that is familiar with this technique. Until now the production of masks, as noted above, is verified only for those potter's workshops that were producing other kind of goods using that specific technique. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that mould-made products are always produced in series. It was possible to obtain up to 100 impressions from one mould and usually several moulds were made from one prototype. Even if there are as yet no analogies for the mask from Croy Hill, it would originally have been part of a series. The manufacturing details such as the design of the rim, the position, nature and size of the holes, and the additional reworking of the surface with a sharp instrument when the clay was leather-hard, are readily comparable with other masks from the north-western provinces. On the basis of these technical indications, a design that is characterised by Roman or provincial Roman traditions can be assumed. Its direct association with the Antonine Wall confirms a date in the period *c.* AD 140–60 for the Croy Hill mask, which fits excellently into the main period of mask production during the 2nd century AD.

One important aspect to consider is the use or purpose of such face masks. Although they represent

various types of actor's masks, they were not used in that way. The contexts of the discoveries provide the main information about their function, but contexts that are really significant in this respect are rare. An analysis of all relevant contexts reveals that terracotta face masks were used as an element of decoration in different kinds of houses (Rose 2006: 53–6). This function can be proven by technical features as well as representations in wall paintings and analogies from other regions of the Roman Empire. From some contexts one can draw the conclusion that there was a strong connection between masks and porticos or peristyles, where the masks were suspended like *oscilla* between the columns.

Thus, masks belonged to the inventory of different kinds of houses: from simple strip houses or large town houses to villas and even military barracks. Two relatively recent discoveries are a nearly complete mask from a strip-house in the *vicus* at Groß-Gerau (Schallmayer 2010) and a very similar and also nearly complete example from the south-western part of the town of *Ulpia Noviomagus* (Heirbaut 2009: 20, fig 2). A perfect example of a mask in a Roman villa is from the 'Villa am Silberberg' in Ahrweiler (Fehr 1993: 15–32; Rose 2012: 60), which provides very good evidence of context. Fragments of two masks were found in this large villa with a central entrance portico and corner projections. Both can be dated to the second phase of utilisation of the building, so in the period between the first half of the 2nd century and AD 256/260. The first mask (Rose 2006: cat 103; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092115) was found directly on the south wall of the portico next to the entrance staircase. Four fragments of a second mask (Rose 2006: cat 204; arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092114) were found in the northern courtyard. All of these fragments were found in a layer of debris that contained a lot of roof tiles. So it is probable that originally the masks were hanging between pilasters in the courtyard and between the columns in the entrance portico. Masks have been found mainly in civil contexts but also remarkably frequently in forts, for example at Straubing, Stockstadt, Wiesbaden, Frankfurt-Heddernheim, Zugmantel, Saalburg, Bad Ems, Bonn, Cologne-Alteburg, Aardenburg, Dover and probably also at Vechten, Vleuten-De Meern, Valkenburg and Leiden Roomburg (Rose 2006: 62).

Sometimes masks have also been found in sanctuaries: the temple district of the Altbachtal near Trier has a particularly large number of examples (Gose 1972: 10 and 107–8; Rose 2006: 56–7). However, even there the contexts usually indicate use as a decorative element in connection with the buildings, which might be the temples themselves, the portico surrounding the sanctuary, or a building interpreted as priest's residence. A few finds, especially from Britain, suggest a connection with votive deposits, so their use as votive offerings also seems possible. Thus, in Harlow three fragments of a mask were found in the filling of a well in proximity to a temple (Grew 1981: 350; Rankov 1982: 371–2; Rose 2006: cat 163, pl 12 arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092102); the mask from Baldock comes from a pit in the neighbourhood of temples (Stead 1975: 397–8; Rose 2006: cat 53, pl 4 arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092097); while ritual deposition is suggested for the two fragments from the River Walbrook in London, given the large number of votive objects recovered from that river (Marsh 1979: 263–5; Rose 2006: cat 80, pl 6 arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092098 and cat 264, pl 19 arachne.dainst.org/entity/1092099). However, none of these associations is sufficiently strong to prove this assumption without any doubt and not a single fragment of a life-size terracotta mask in the north-western provinces has been found in a secure burial context.

A high degree of romanisation is characteristic of the contexts in which masks are found in the north-western provinces. Their appearance in elaborate houses, which are strongly Roman in both design and equipment, allows us to conclude that a typical Roman way of life could be expressed by means of such masks. First and foremost this holds true for masks that are based on models of tragedy and new comedy. However, it appears that farce masks had the same effect, because no difference can be observed in their use. An essential characteristic of Greek and Roman masks was their connection to the theatre and thereby also to the cult of Dionysus. Through this connection to the divine sphere, the masks had a positive connotation, in contrast to the Christian perspective that interprets masks as a symbol of the devil (eg Gutjahr 2012: 143). Given that theatre was one of the most important indicators of education in the ancient world, it is understandable that the use of terracotta masks

as an element of decoration should emphasise an affiliation to Roman culture. This demonstration of cultural affinity was an important aspect of self-representation, especially in the provinces in the area of tension between indigenous and Roman populations. Though the majority of masks come from civil contexts, the remarkably large number of masks found in frontier forts shows that the military was an important transmitter and motor for the development for the Roman culture in the north-western provinces (Hesberg 1999).

In this context the mask from Croy Hill, probably the most northerly example in the Roman

Empire, is of particular importance. Even if its discovery in a drainage ditch on the periphery of the civil settlement provides limited contextual information, the proximity to the adjacent Roman fort leaves open the possibility that it could have had an important function for the local soldiers. In any case, no matter whether it comes from a civil or military context, it was a decorative element that expressed the *romanitas* of its owner. Seen from this perspective, the terracotta mask from Croy Hill is an important example of how the army spread Roman culture to the outer frontiers of the Roman Empire.