

15 Masks and Maybe More

Dr. Debby Hershman, the curator of prehistoric cultures at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, spent a decade researching the world's oldest masks, which all come from the southern reaches of the Land of Israel. As she gradually discovered one mask after the other, her understanding of their significance and origins grew and evolved. The results of her lengthy, painstaking investigation are now on display in a new exhibition at the Israel Museum that centers on about one dozen of these prehistoric stone masks. > Dr. Debby Hershman tells ERETZ Magazine about her journey into prehistory.

Left: The mask decorated with paint found in the cave at Nahal Hemar. From the Israel Antiquities Authority collection. (Elie Posner/The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

In 1970, when he was Israel's defense minister, Moshe Dayan heard that in the midst of plowing a field in the southern Hebron Mountains, a tractor had unearthed a stone mask. An avid antiquity collector, Dayan acquired this distinctive mask, which was unlike anything that was known at the time. Following Dayan's purchase, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) conducted a salvage excavation in the field. Objects from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period, that is, from some 9,000 years ago, were found at the site, which is near Horvat Duma.

"Dayan really loved that mask," says Dr. Debby Hershman, the curator of prehistoric cultures at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and the curator of the ground-breaking exhibition that just opened at the Israel Museum: "Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World."

"His book, *Living with the Bible*, has a wonderful photograph of him sitting before his entire collection and this mask is to his right."

For many years, Dayan's mask was believed to be the only one of its kind. In 1986, several years after Dayan's death, the mask, which had been displayed at the Israel Museum immediately after its discovery, was donated to the museum. To this day, it is considered to be one of the ancient world treasures of the museum.

"No one knew anything about the mask: who made it, what it was used for, or precisely where it came from," says Hershman, who is an expert on religion and ritual among primitive and ancient societies. "One interesting detail in the history of researching Dayan's mask is that when Jean Perrot, the famous French prehistorian who specialized in Chalcolithic sites in the Land of Israel, examined it, he said it is very similar to the plastered human skulls from the ancient Neolithic settlement at Jericho."

In the winter of 1983, when Hershman was a master's degree student in archaeology and anthropology, she saw a notice in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute of Archaeology that volunteers with excavation experience were needed to join the small delegation – it would have only 14 members in the end – that was going to excavate a remote cave in Nahal Hemar, the southernmost riverbed in the Judean Desert. Prof. Ofer Bar-Yosef

The many findings in the small cave in Nahal Hemar in the Judean Desert included shards of masks. Archaeologists succeeded to piece together one full mask and the bottom section of a second mask. A handsome face adorned the fully reconstructed mask; human hair even had been attached to the mask to form a mustache and beard.

Facing page:
The mask from Horvat Duma. From the Israel Museum collection. (Elie Posner/Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

and the late David Alon, who then was the IAA supervisor in the Negev, were directing the excavation.

The site itself was a small cave in a cliff above the asphalt bed in the riverbed that gave Nahal Hemar its name. The bitumen or asphalt in the riverbed apparently is what attracted humans to the site in ancient times. The small archaeological delegation found itself excavating a small, stifling chamber full of fallen rocks and bat dung.

Antiquity thieves had plundered the cave in the 1960s and again after archaeological surveys of Judean Desert caves in the early 1980s. The second time, they were searching for ancient scrolls and dumped the dirt and dust that they dug up in the process into the riverbed below, where it piled up at the foot of the cliff under the cave. Apparently, when the robbers only found prehistoric items, such as arrowheads and organic objects that they did not recognize, they quickly abandoned the remote cave in Nahal Hemar.

Despite the thorough search that the thieves already had conducted of the cave, the excavation team still discovered four archaeological layers with valuable antiquities. The cave had served mainly as a storeroom for cultic objects, the oldest such cache excavated to date. The dry desert air had preserved the organic objects, which meant that carbon-14 testing could be performed to date them. Sometime after the cave had been in use, a conflagration left a layer of ashes and soot in it, making it possible to obtain an even more precise date for the objects discovered there. The tests showed that the objects in the cave were 9,000 years old. That was during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period, when humanity was in the midst of the agricultural revolution, gradually transitioning from a hunter-gather society to an agrarian one. The oldest unbroken sickle ever found in this part of the world was discovered in the cave. It was crafted from pieces of flint that had been joined together with asphalt. The team also discovered shards of plastered sculptures, small figurines, beads, and decorated skulls, among other items. The cave housed such a unique, rare, and signifi-





Above: Dr. Debby Hershman at the entrance to the exhibition hall. Chanan de Lange, who designed the exhibition, is in the background. (Elie Posner/Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

cant collection of cultic objects that it was dubbed, “the Masada of prehistoric research.”

The many findings also included shards of masks. The archaeologists succeeded to piece together one full mask and the bottom section of a second mask. A handsome face adorned the fully reconstructed mask; human hair had been attached to it to form a mustache and beard. Archaeologists found additional locks of human hair scattered throughout the cave at Nahal Hemar with the remains of prehistoric lice still on them – evidence that it was indeed natural human hair. Remains of hair and paint also were found on the small figurines discovered in the cave; they look exactly like the masks.

Baruch Arensburg and Israel Hershkovitz, of the Anatomy and Anthropology Department at the Sackler School of Medicine at Tel Aviv University, examined the decorated skulls found in the cave,

concluding that the majority were men’s skulls. The two experts hypothesized that the masks were used by placing them next to the bare faces of these skulls. The astounding similarity of Dayan’s mask and the masks of Nahal Hemar, which were discovered in a scientific excavation of a site that had strong evidence to date them, strengthened the evidence that Dayan’s mask was from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period as well.

Two and a half masks was sufficient to constitute a small collection whose shared characteristics could be analyzed. They all were made from a variety of local limestone, were crafted using sophisticated techniques and technologies, and shared similar features that together resembled a skull. Arensburg and his colleagues proposed that the masks were shaped that way so that they could be placed in front of skulls. Bar-Yosef thought that the

masks were not intended to cover the faces of living people since they did not have airholes by the nose and were relatively heavy. That said, at one to two kilograms on average, they actually are light compared to the masks that almost every African ceremonial dancer must deal with, Hershman notes. Bar-Yosef hypothesized that holes were punched along all the masks’ edges – the Nahal Hemar mask had 18 holes along its edges – in order to tie them to a column or staff or perhaps to a statue. However, even if that was the case, it is unclear why so many holes were necessary.

Then it turned out that there was another mask. Jozef Tadeusz Milik, a Catholic priest from Poland, bought an ancient stone mask in the 1950s or 1960s. In addition to being a biblical researcher, Milik also happened to be a brilliant archaeologist. He had worked on the excavation of the Qumran caves, discovering additional caves at the site. The Jordanians appointed him to serve as a senior member of the team that researched and published the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the late 1950s, Milik set out to buy antiquities from the southern Hebron Mountains. Antiquity thieves operating in the Judean Desert, who usually would sell their haul to antiquity dealers in Hebron, offered Milik a collection of objects from the Middle Bronze Age. As a bonus, they threw in an ancient stone mask. Eventually Milik, who was harshly criticized for being the one who delayed the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls for over 40 years, angrily left the Land of Israel and settled in Paris. He later left the church and married. He donated the Bronze Age items from his collection to a Catholic organization in Paris, the Bible and Holy Land Museum, that was preparing an exhibition on daily life in the holy land in ancient times. Its curators prepared a catalogue and Milik gave them permission to publish his mask for the first time, along with his thoughts about it. Like Perrot, Milik had an extraordinary eye for archaeology. He noted that even though the mask had been bought as part of a group of objects from the Bronze Age, it was not similar to objects from that time. He thought it was more similar in style to the face of the head of a Neolithic plaster statue that

Then it turned out that there was another mask. Jozef Tadeusz Milik, a Catholic priest, biblical researcher, and archaeologist from Poland, bought a collection of objects from the Middle Bronze Age in the 1950s or 1960s. As a bonus, the sellers threw in an ancient stone mask.

Kathleen Kenyon had discovered in ancient Jericho. Milik suggested that the mask had been attached to a pole to be used in cultic funerary rites.

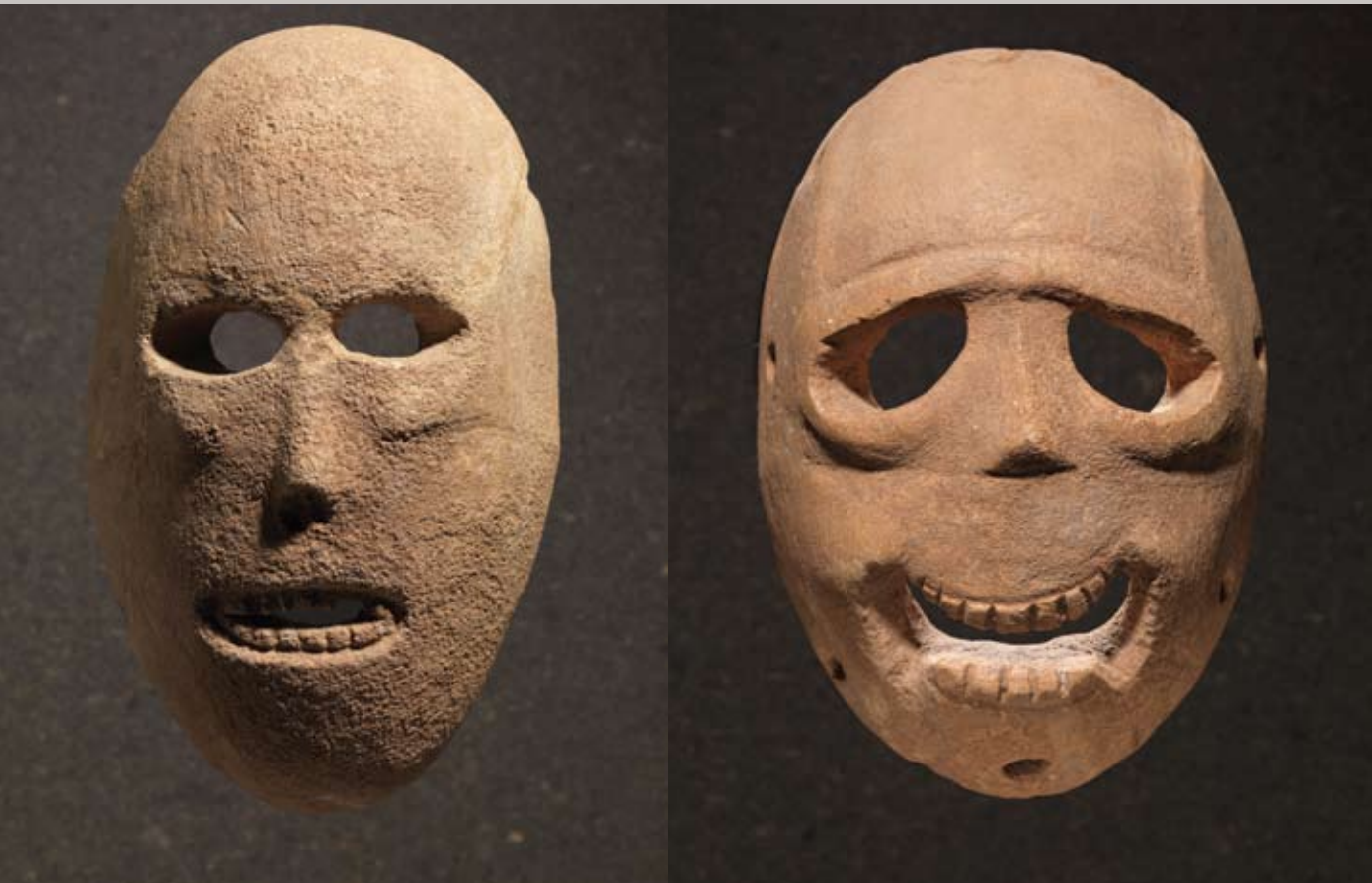
In 1969, the exhibition on daily life in the holy land became the permanent exhibition at the Bible and Holy Land Museum in Paris. The mask was one of the central items in the exhibition. Renowned artist Pablo Picasso made his way to the small museum to view the mask, as did Perrot, who suggested that the mask was not from the Middle Bronze Age, but from the Neolithic Period. A year later, Dayan showed him the mask from Horvat Duma; Perrot was struck by their similarity and wrote in his book about the two stone masks, classifying them as Neolithic for the first time. He also was the first to mention the masks’ similarity to the

decorated human skulls from the ancient Neolithic villages in the Land of Israel. Milik’s mask, like those discovered at Nahal Hemar a decade later, has traces of paint on it. It too appears to have come from the Judean Desert.

And so, after the Nahal Hemar excavation, the number of masks actually grew. In addition to the mask and a half discovered in the cave, there were Dayan’s mask and Milik’s mask.

Then another mask turned up, Hershman recalls. In the late 1980s, archaeology professor Ram Gophna and his colleagues were preparing to write an article about the Early Bronze Age in the wake of their excavations at Nahal Besor. During their survey of previous articles on the topic, they paged through old publications of the British Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF). They found

that from 1881 to 1891, there had been a lively and lengthy discussion of a stone mask that had been acquired by Dr. Thomas Chaplain, a British physician from the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. Chaplain was working in a hospital in the Old City of Jerusalem and like many of his generation, was a dedicated archaeology buff. The inquisitive doctor’s wanderings in the Jerusalem area brought him to the village of A-Ram, which is northeast of the city. A local woman came out of one of its houses while he was strolling around the village and offered to sell him a strange stone mask. After bargaining over the price, he bought it. Pleased with his purchase, Chaplain



prepared to leave the village, but found a group of men blocking his path. They demanded that he return his new mask because it was the village's talisman and the village's continued existence depended on it. He persuaded them to change their minds and continued on his way.

Chaplain had a sketch of the mask drawn. He published an article relating the story of the mask's discovery alongside the sketch in a PEF journal, launching a decade-long debate. Sir William Flinders Petrie, the father of the academic discipline of archaeology, estimated that the mask was very ancient and proposed dating it to the early Canaanite period. Other participants in the discussion were sure that it was Phoenician. The debate continued from there until it finally petered out in 1891. It remained listed in the scientific literature and from time to time, when someone needed an example of such a mask, he would add it to his article's footnotes. No one asked where the mask itself actually was – the entire debate was based on the sketch.

Gophna and his colleagues decided to publish an article on Chaplain's mask and not a mere footnote. They classified it as a member of the growing group of Neolithic masks and began to hunt for the actual mask. They even went to the old mission building near the Jaffa Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem to search for it in the archaeology collection there today. The mask was nowhere to be found, prompting Gophna to conclude the article with an unusual request: he asked readers if they had any clue where the mask the British doctor had bought in A-Ram could be found.

In 1996, Hershman succeeded Dr. Tamar Noy as the curator of the Israel Museum's prehistory department. Noy had established the museum's prehistory collection and developed its permanent display. She also filed every bit of information she could gather about prehistoric stones, sculptures, and figurines in an impressive but unorganized archive. At the time, Hershman was writing her doctoral dissertation about the origins of religion.

This eventually led her to curate an Israel Museum exhibition on the origins of religion as reflected in cultic objects found in the Land of Israel. Titled "In the Beginning: Prehistory and the Origins of Myth," it was one of the major exhibitions in the "Beauty and Sanctity" series that the museum hosted to mark its fortieth anniversary in 2004.

"When I prepared that exhibition, I also rummaged through Tamar's archive," Hershman says. "I suddenly came across three black-and-white photographs of masks that appeared very similar to those already at the museum. The quality of the photographs, which were taken in the 1960s or 1970s, was excellent. The words, 'Neolithic masks, private collection,' were written on the back of them – and nothing more."

The existence of three Neolithic masks that she knew nothing about captured Hershman's imagination. Noy was no longer alive, so Hershman could not ask her about the photographs.

"I'm doing an exhibition on the origins of reli-

gion," Hershman told herself, "and if these masks are authentic, and if they originated in the Land of Israel, they must be in the exhibition."

Hershman's first step was "to ask if anyone knew about or had seen these masks," she recalls. Hershman began phoning her academic colleagues in prehistory.

"Yes, Noy said something about that," some told her, but no one had details or had seen the masks. Since questioning her fellow prehistorians did not advance her search, she started interrogating her colleagues at the Israel Museum. She wandered through the corridors, asking if anyone had heard or seen anything. She searched in other collections. These type of masks tend to stand out. However, no one knew anything.

Hershman finally showed the three photographs to James S. Snyder, the director of the Israel Museum, in the hope that he would be able to help her locate this unnamed collection. Perhaps his many connections around the globe would enable

Below: Plastered and decorated human skulls from the cave at Nahal Hemar and Beisamun in the Hula Valley. From the Israel Antiquities Authority collection. (Meidad Suchowolski/The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

Facing page: Masks from the Judean hills or Judean foothills. From the Steinhardt collection. (Elie Posner/The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



PREHISTORIC MASKS

her to broaden her search, she thought. Not long afterwards, he not only told her that he had seen the masks, but that he also had received permission to borrow them for the exhibition. Snyder asked Hershman if she wanted to display all of the Neolithic masks in this collection, leading her to realize that the collection included more than the three masks in her predecessor's photos. She gasped in awe upon hearing that the collection consisted of six masks.

"That is the largest collection of Neolithic masks in the world," she explains.

Hershman later learned that the masks were positioned next to a series of works by Picasso in Judy and Michael Steinhardt's home in New York. The Steinhardts had been collecting both modern and ancient figurative art for years, accumulating a breathtaking collection. They particularly liked the way the six masks and the Picasso works looked together, displaying them in their quiet, tranquil library. That apparently was the reason that this important collection of rare Neolithic masks remained almost unknown until then. The Steinhardts, who are longtime supporters of the Israel Museum, agreed to put their collection of masks at the museum's disposal for the exhibition.

"By that point," Hershman recalls, "I was responsible for a large group of masks – such a large group that it was possible to develop a list of characteristics and iconographic codes."

She began taking a series of measurements of the masks and analyzed the iconographic symbolism of their visual features: the shape of the eyes and noses and groves that typified the masks. When she put all the data together, it indicated the shape of a skull. That is, the data indicated that the masks were not portraits of living people, but of the deceased.

Then Hershman decided to examine the authenticity and geographic origins of each mask. She turned to her old friend and colleague Prof. Yuval Goren for assistance. As a young student, he too had been a member of the Nahal Hemar delegation. Goren had gone on to establish the Laboratory for Comparative Microarchaeology at Tel Aviv



Above: Head of a 9,000-year-old ancestor statue from Jericho. From the Israel Antiquities Authority collection. (David Harris/The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

Facing page: The mask from Horvat Duma from the Israel Museum collection (bottom right) and three masks from the Judean hills or Judean foothills from the Steinhardt collection. (Elie Posner/The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

University, which he heads to this day.

Goren agreed to help Hershman with the bold research project that she had envisioned: searching for and examining the world's oldest masks. By employing microarchaeology methods, Goren proved Hershman's suspicions that one mask was a forgery – because it did not match the symbolic code that she had developed from her measurements – were correct. The others, however, all were authentic. After conducting a comprehensive microscopic examination of the stone and the patina on some of the masks from the Steinhardt collection, Goren concluded that they originated in the same area as Dayan's mask.

Goren then turned to Dr. Avner Ayalon, a senior scientist at the Geological Survey of Israel. He asked Ayalon to check the stable isotopes in the stone of the masks in order to shed further light on the masks' geographic origins and perhaps reinforce his own findings. The tests revealed that he had been correct to conclude that the ancient masks known of prior to the Steinhardts' collection came from the southern Hebron Mountains and that those in the Steinhardts' collection came from the southern slopes of the Judean Mountains bordering the Shefela. He found that another fascinating skull mask came from the Judean Desert fringe (apparently from the Arad Valley). The tests revealed that all the masks originated in Israel's southern reaches, from the southern part of the Judean Mountains and the Judean Desert and its fringes.

After the exhibition "In the Beginning," finding Neolithic masks became an integral part of Hershman's professional life. She checked everything, investigating every rumor and crumb of information that reached her about Neolithic masks. Some leads panned out, while others proved false, but her knowledge of Neolithic masks was slowly growing. Her research continued for a decade; an ongoing journey to trace Neolithic masks from the Land of Israel, that had spread around the globe during the twentieth century. By the time the exhibition, "Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World," began to take shape, Hershman had collected data about 16 masks, including shards of two





Above:
Prof. Yuval Goren conducts microscopic tests on the patina to ascertain authenticity. (Andre Vainer/ The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

Facing page:
Figurines of human heads from the cave in Nahal Hemar. From the Israel Antiquities Authority collection. (Nahum Slapak/ The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

masks. Some were completely unknown beforehand and were documented and examined for the first time as part of the research project she initiated at the Israel Museum. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition is the first publication of the whole group of masks.

Chaplain's mask, which was found in the basement of the PEF museum in London, was included in the catalogue, but not in the display because its iconography is nothing like that of the others. The lab tests also found it differed from the other masks, so it remains a riddle for now. However, most of the others fit the iconographic code that Hershman developed. Her analysis led her to conclude that most of the masks are visual representations of skulls and exhibit "personal characteristics," a hint that they were associated with specific people who had died. Perhaps they all were people who had a special social status, she suggests. For example, the masks from Nahal Hemar, which had remains of facial hair, undoubtedly represented men. The other masks' similarity to the Nahal Hemar masks could indicate the same symbolic and visual association. Judging by the sunken jaw, which is characteristic of the appearance of elderly people, some of the masks depict elderly people. That said, some also appear to depict people who died in the midst of their best years.

Another breakthrough came when, as part of her preparations for the exhibition, Hershman asked a new lab for computerized archaeology that was

established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2010 to examine 10 masks.

"I presented the lab's director and senior researcher Dr. Leore Grosman and researchers Ahiad Ovadia and Alexander Bogdanovsky with two research questions," she explains.

First, Hershman asked if it were possible to examine her symbolic code of the masks by using 3D modeling to compare models of the masks to models of real skulls. The second question was whether it was functionally possible for living people to wear these masks over their faces or if they tied the masks to a pillar or a statue.

The lab results confirmed Hershman's symbolic code and indicated that the masks were depictions of the skulls of specific people as she had surmised. Some tests showed that the masks could have been shaped in the image of specific people, some of whom were elderly men. A revolutionary scientific finding that resulted from the analysis by Grosman and her colleagues, who checked the field of vision from the masks' eyeholes, the distance between the eyes on the masks, the masks' center of gravity, and how they were thought to be worn, indicated that unlike the accepted opinion prior to that point, the masks had been designed to be worn over the faces of living people.

After she was confident that her first impression about the masks' symbolic significance was correct, and after the computerized archaeology lab clarified the masks' functional use, Hershman turned to her other field of expertise: anthropology. She began, with the necessary caution, to compare the masks with those used in ceremonies and customs of traditional societies in Africa and Oceania that still utilize masks of skulls in their cultic rites. They use masks depicting the skulls of their ancestors. The use of these types of masks is characteristic of tribal agricultural societies, whose social, economic, and spiritual frameworks are very similar to those of Neolithic societies. The tribal ancestors are second in importance only to the supreme God in their rituals and worship, taking precedence even over the tribal gods. In those traditional agrarian societies, land, territory, water sources, and estates require cooperation among the families working the land. Tradition determines who owns the land, who has the right to work the land, and who possesses the right to territory. The elders were there when everything began. As a result, the elders are seen as the embodiment of knowledge, cus-

toms, history of ownership, obligations, and rights. They are depended upon to resolve tension and to maintain cooperation between the growing number of families. They are the unifying factor whose image defines the clan.

From an anthropological viewpoint, the economic and social structure of a group centering around ancestral figures suits communities in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period. That was when the agricultural revolution was at its peak and a new social order was being established: an expanded agrarian society not based on nuclear families. Many of the human images from this time appear to be related to worshipping the spirit of ancestors.

If this interpretation is correct, then ceremonies in which masks of this type are employed are known today. They generally are used in ceremonies marking significant social occasions, such as transitions, as well as those for predicting the future and healing. The person who wears the mask goes into a trance and is believed to be possessed; the mask serves as the medium that allows the ances-

Grosman and her colleagues in the lab for computerized archaeology found that, unlike the accepted opinion prior to that point, the stone masks had been designed to be worn over the faces of living people.

tor's spirit to descend upon him. The person wearing the mask temporarily withdraws and the spirit of the mask works through his body.

"These masks are the eternal portraits of the first farmers, the people who laid the foundations for the first organized, complex societies, the forerunners of the social structures and cultural institutions that accompany human society until today," Hershman writes in the introduction to the catalogue accompanying this unique exhibition that brings together masks from around the globe and displays them for the first time as a group in their birthplace. "We shall never know for sure what was hidden behind these carved stone countenances. But if we look straight into the eye sockets that seem to be watching us, we will find the reflection of the spirit of our ancestors, the creators of civilization." ■

"Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World" is on display at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, in the temporary exhibition gallery of the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Archaeology Wing from March 11 to September 13, 2014.

