

TWO FACE MASKS IN THE GUILDFORD MUSEUM

BY

JOAN P. ALCOCK, M.A.

IN the Guildford Museum are two face masks of solid bronze. Apart from their being mentioned in the original excavation reports nothing is known about them. There is a strong possibility, however, that although their purpose cannot be determined, they have been designed in the tradition of the "tête coupée".

A face mask, nine-tenths of an inch high, was found during the excavation in 1883 of the Roman villa at Chiddingfold (pl. VI*b*). It was described as being "apparently silvered", but no traces of this seem to have remained, although the head has a somewhat mottled appearance. Several other objects were picked up on the site, forming a very miscellaneous collection; some of them may be bronze fitments.¹ This mask has an appearance similar to that of the bronze masks found in the Belgic burial at Welwyn, Hertfordshire,² and now in the British Museum. The straight strokes representing the hair are a feature common to both, but the beard of the Chiddingfold bronze is lacking in the Welwyn masks, which are distinguished by their flowing moustaches. Two of these masks had deeply drilled pupils in the eyes; the third did not, and the eyes of this are similar to the Chiddingfold head.

The Welwyn masks served the purpose of bucket mounts, and as the back of the Chiddingfold mask appears to have been attached to something, it was probably used for a similar purpose. The Welwyn heads have been dated to the late first century B.C., and the impassive features and the quiet dignity of the Chiddingfold mask invites comparison with the features of the Aylesford bucket mount³ of the same period. In view of the fact that the mount was found on the site of a Roman villa, a later date might be proposed for it; and the vigorous human head from the bucket burial at Brough-on-Humber⁴ shows that the head escutcheon continued as a feature in the second century A.D. The report in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries says that a "coin of the Constantine period" was found

¹ The excavation was mentioned in *V.C.H.*, IV (1912), 360 which summarized reports in *The Antiquary*, VII, 276, and *Proc.Soc.Ant.*,² IX, pp. 307-9, 334.

² *Archæologia*, LXIII (1921), pl. ii.

³ *Later Prehistoric Antiquities of the British Isles*, British Museum (1953), pl. xxi.

⁴ *Antiq. Journ.*, XVIII (1938), 69, pl. xxix.

nearby, but this may bear no relation to the find of the mask. A tentative date of the late first century or the early second century A.D. is therefore proposed for this mask.

The second bronze mask (pl. VIa), $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, $1\frac{9}{16}$ inches wide, and filled at the back with lead, was found in 1863 whilst cutting a drain 200 yards south of the Roman villa at Titsey which was excavated in the following year.⁵ The excavators suggested that it was a head of Neptune, but there seems no reason why it should be taken as a representation of this deity.⁶ It is far more likely that this head is also in the tradition of the Celtic face masks. The staring eyes probably contained enamel or coral. The flowing moustaches merge into the hair and beard, these latter forming a patterned, curled framework for the features. This stylized design is to be seen in the masks which decorated the Wilton Crowns, though in the latter case the hair and beard are formed by a pattern of raised dots;⁷ it can also be seen in a more elaborate form in the features of the Bath Gorgon⁸ and in those of a Celtic god found in York.⁹ The Titsey head could be a representation of some local deity, and the nearby Romano-Celtic temple at Titsey provides evidence of Celtic religious associations in the area.¹⁰ The object is fairly heavy for its size and is perhaps a little large to be fixed to a crown; it may have been part of the fittings of a box, possibly of religious significance.

The motif of the tête coupée is a common one in Celtic art. It derives ultimately from the practice of head-hunting, a practice reported by Diodorus and Strabo in their descriptions of Celtic Gaul.¹¹ They remark that the Gauls cut off the heads of their enemies and preserved them in cedar oil, holding them to be of great value. They also attached them to the necks of their horses; and this has a striking parallel in the Irish legend of Cu Culainn who returns from his first fight with his chariot "graced with the bleeding heads of his enemies".¹² Gallic coins show a warrior holding a severed head in his left hand¹³ and, if this can be taken to be an example of head hunting, a coin of Cunobelin showing a male figure stepping forward and holding in his right hand a severed head by the hair may reveal the same practice.¹⁴ This figure could be a priest or warrior dedicating the severed head of an enemy to the god.

⁵ *V.C.H.*, IV, 368.

⁶ *Sy.A.C.*, IV (1869), 229, pl. i. It was exhibited at the Society of Antiquaries in 1864 and was described as a "bearded face with a moustache not unlike a head of Neptune." The indentation on the forehead was made by a workman's spade.

⁷ *J.R.S.*, LVII (1957), pl. ix. Found at Wilton by Hockwold, Norfolk, and now in the British Museum.

⁸ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain* (1960), pl. 60.

⁹ In the Yorkshire Museum, York. R.C.H.M. *Eburacum, Roman York*, pl. 46, (70).

¹⁰ *Sy.A.C.*, XLIV (1935), 81; *J.R.S.*, XXV (1935), 262.

¹¹ Diodorus V, 29, 5; Strabo IV, 4, 5.

¹² T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (1936), 151.

¹³ *Ogam*, 1950, 35, p. 152, Figs. 19-20.

¹⁴ *P.P.S.*, XXIV (1958), pl. viii, 68-9.

The head itself seems to have been treated with awe, for it had a power of its own, being regarded as the centre and controlling element of man's being. In the Irish legends Sualtach's head continued to shout, after it had been struck off, to warn the warriors in the castle of Emain.¹⁵ In the Mabinogion, Bran's severed head entertained his companions for several years before it was finally buried beneath the site of London; it will shout, according to legend, if danger comes near.¹⁶ The head could be regarded as the seat of the soul, and removal of it, in the form of ritual decapitation, was a means of preventing the dead from returning from the other world to haunt the living.¹⁷ Lambrechts speaks of "l'exaltation de la tête," implying that the head is the seat of the spirit of the dead friend or enemy where magic and virtue are to be found.¹⁸ Benoit, who has studied the Entremont heads extensively, went further and implied that those heads could be regarded as a sign of the victory of the heroes over death.¹⁹ Death has been transcended; man is resigned to his fate but the victory lies ultimately with him. The impassive features on these heads support this view; and similarly withdrawn, impassive and dignified features are to be found on other heads in Britain.

When head-hunting was suppressed by the Romans, first in Gaul, and then presumably in Britain, because it was distasteful to them,²⁰ the cult of the human head itself was replaced by the cult of the stone head. The Gaulish temples at Entremont and Roquepertuse²¹ show that the cult of the human head and the cult of the stone head existed together, for stone heads were carved alongside the niches for human heads at Roquepertuse.²²

There are no such elaborate traces in Britain of this cult, but the numerous examples of stone heads show that the cult did exist here, and that it continued throughout the Roman period.²³ The heads were used as cult objects or antefixes, and a stone head from Cor-

¹⁵ E. O'Faolain, *Irish Sagas and Folk Tales* (1955), 77-8.

¹⁶ *The Mabinogion*, translated by T. and G. Jones (1949), p. 39.

¹⁷ See pp. 102-4 and Appendix A in my unpublished M.A. thesis *Celtic Religion in Roman Britain*, University of London, 1962.

¹⁸ P. Lambrechts, *L'exaltation de la tête dans la pensée et dans l'art des Celtes*, 1954.

¹⁹ F. Benoit, "Têtes Coupées," *Latomus*, 1955, p. 291.

²⁰ Strabo IV, 4, 5. The severed heads carried by the auxiliaries on Trajan's Column present a problem. P. Bartoldi, *Colonna Trajana*, 17. Are these Celtic or Danubian auxiliaries who kept up the custom or did their commanders allow them to do it in the heat of battle?

²¹ *Gallia*, V (1947), 427-32; VI (1948), 186-7; F. Benoit, "Les Fouilles d'Entremont," *Comptes rendus à l'academie des inscriptions*, 1946, p. 395.

²² M. Pobé and J. Roubier, *Art in Roman Gaul*, pl. 26. These might have been a form of inducement magic—the stone heads "willing" the human heads to come to them. The laps of the squatting figures (pl. 35, 36) in this temple were formed into round hollows as if they were sacrificial bowls to receive the heads.

²³ A. Ross, "The cult of the head in insular Pagan Celtic Religion," *P.S.A.S.*, XCI (1957-8), 17-43.

bridge has a hollow in the top which was used for libations.²⁴ The stone head placed between the paws of the sphinx at Colchester could have an interpretation similar to the Entremont heads making the group more than just a funerary monument.²⁵ A head from Castlesteads²⁶ shows a face indicated by rough lines and a beard by pick-marks. The features are crude and the workmanship poor. Perhaps the absence of definite eyes and mouth, however, might indicate that death robs men of sight and speech, or the crude scoring of the features may be a magic way of preventing the dead man from returning.

Heads such as these can also be taken to represent the deities themselves. Those from Towcester²⁷ and Colchester²⁸ with their striking features and thick twisted locks may portray goddesses. Furthermore, the Colchester head has the suggestion of a diadem. The remarkable head from Gloucester²⁹ and the one from Caerwent³⁰ with prominent staring eyeballs may be portraits of local godlings. The back of the Caerwent one was flat as if it had been placed against a wall and intended to be viewed from the front, perhaps in a shrine.

It was not only in stone, however, that these heads were portrayed. The Celts were adept at metalwork and the bronze heads from Aylesford, Welwyn and Brough-on-Humber show how effective their skill could be. More complex symbolism is seen in the bronze mount of a goose with a head on its back from Rotherley³¹ and a handle mount from Thearby, Lincolnshire.³² A deity who was sometimes represented by the head alone was Cernunnos who is portrayed in metal in a bronze harness mount from Aldborough³³ and a bucket mount from Boughton Aluph, near Ashford, Kent.³⁴ Two face masks, both hollowed out and curved as if to fit on to a piece of wood, one in the Bath Museum made of lead and found in a blocked-up culvert in the baths, the other in the Bristol Museum made of bronze and found at Charterhouse-on-Mendip,³⁵ are probably more portrayals of local deities. These would link up with the heads shown full-face on the Farley Heath sceptre³⁶ and on the Marlborough Vat³⁷ where

²⁴ A. Ross, *ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁵ M. R. Hull, *Roman Colchester* (1958), pl. xxxviii b. J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain* (1962), pl. 50.

²⁶ *Trans. Cumberland & Westmorland Arch. Soc.*, N.S. III (1903), 348, Fig. facing.

²⁷ *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities*, British Museum (1951), 55.

²⁸ *Trans. Essex Arch. Soc.*, XXV (1955), p. 13.

²⁹ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain*, pl. 8.

³⁰ *Bull. Board of Celtic Studies*, XV (1952-4), 188.

³¹ Pitt Rivers, *Excavations in Cranborne Chase*, II (1888), pl. ciii.

³² *Antiq. Journ.*, XXXV (1955), 222.

³³ *J.R.S.*, XLIV (1954), 49; Sir Cyril Fox, *Pattern and Purpose in Celtic Art*, 73, pl. 43a.

³⁴ *Arch. Cant.*, LXXII (1958), 212, plate ii.

³⁵ *V.C.H. Somerset*, I, 337, Fig. 94.

³⁶ *Antiq. Journ.*, XVIII, 1938, pl. xviii; *Sy.A.C.*, L (1946-7), 150.

³⁷ *Arch. LII*, pl. xiii; *Later Prehistoric Antiquities*, British Museum, pl. xxi. I.

a definite distinction is made between deities, who are represented full face, and warriors, who are represented in profile.³⁸

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the cult of the head in all its forms, but briefly to show that both the actual head and, later, the pictorial representation of it was a deep-rooted feature of Celtic religion. In addition to representing mainly itself, the head could portray the dead person or the individual deity. Both of these would be featured in the heroic vein. There is no definite evidence that the two bronze heads in the Guildford Museum have a religious origin, but there is a strong possibility that both could be connected with the cult of the head, being *têtes coupées* placed on objects perhaps used for religious or funerary purposes, or if not this, then retaining some lingering memory of the once universal Celtic cult of the head.

³⁸ This compares with the representations of the men and deities on the Gundestrup cauldron, a Danish find which sheds a good deal of light on Celtic religious beliefs. See O. Klindt Jensen, *Foreign Influences in Denmark's Early Iron Age*.



(a) BRONZE HEAD, TITSEY VILLA. GUILDFORD MUSEUM. (c. 3)
(p. 46).



(b) BRONZE HEAD, CHIDDINGFOLD VILLA. GUILDFORD MUSEUM. (c. 3)
(p. 45).