

VISARD MASK

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Antiquities Scheme

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Continuing from my previous post (Go with the FLO) another find I spoke about this morning was one of my favourite finds I have recorded on the [PAS database](#) – a Post-Medieval Visard mask.

Recorded back in 2010, [NARC-151A67](#) was brought to me by a builder demolishing an interior wall in a 16th century cottage near Daventry. Folded in half and placed on a flat stone inside the wall infill, which consisted of horse hair, mud, straw, etc, was a mask. The mask is black velvet exterior, a white silk interior and a pressed paper middle layer giving it structure. Sewn just inside the mouth was a small black glass bead.

At first thinking this must be a Victorian Halloween mask, some research soon showed that this was an almost unique Post-Medieval artefact. The only object quite like it belonged to a 17th century doll, housed at the V&A museum. The [Lady Clapham doll](#) has a complete contemporary wardrobe, including a miniature mask almost identical to the full-sized Daventry mask. This gave me a potential date.

Concealed objects are not unusual inside older houses. Shoes are a common item discovered behind walls, under thatched roofs and under floorboards. There are a couple of potential reasons for concealed objects – to ward off evil spirits and witches (the theory being that if someone is afraid of being cursed by witches, you place a prayer or spell on one of their garments and conceal it to draw the evil spirits away from the individual) , or a way of keeping your ancestors close to the family. Of course, not everything is superstitious or ritual in archaeology – objects can just end up accidentally swept up or discarded as rubbish.

Looking for references to these masks being worn, some paintings appear to show women wearing them. The de Longhi paintings [Al Rodotto \(1751\)](#) and [la Rhinoceros \(1785\)](#) (both links taken from Wikimedia) feature women wearing these masks. And in 'Omnium Poene Gentium Habitus' by Abraham de Bruyn, published in 1581, the line: "in this fashion noble women either ride or walk up and down." is accompanied by an image depicting a [lady wearing a mask](#) with holes cut for the eyes (image taken from www.houseffg.org)

So what we appear to have is a mask that has survived in Daventry due to its superstition-led deposition inside a house in Daventry, and a mask type that was common among gentlewomen in France and Italy between c.1560 and c.1751.

It is possible that the masks were worn to shield noble women from the weather when out of doors, to avoid sun and wind burn in order to keep a pale complexion. The mask could also hide a woman's identity when out in public. But of course, held on with a bead between the teeth, the woman could not speak when wearing the mask. Raising interesting questions about women's actual role at social functions – were they meant to be neither seen nor heard in some social situations?

Quite an important and interesting find for the local area – and further evidence that, as a FLO, you never quite know what will be landing on your desk next!

Despite being found in 2010, this does fit in with 2015 Day of Archaeology because I have spent some of today looking into the mask for a talk on Concealed Objects that I will be contributing to at Northampton

Museum in September. I have also today written an email to the owner of the mask to discuss the possibility of it being loaned to the V&A and put on display with its miniature counterpart, and to allow for further research. Proof that once something has been recorded on the PAS database, it isn't forgotten. Research continues and all our over 1 million records are there to be used into the future.