

Revisiting the Masks from the Sanctuary of Orthia at Sparta

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The British excavations at the sanctuary of Orthia in Sparta in the beginning of the twentieth century brought to light great numbers of terracotta masks of various kinds: faces with striking grotesque features, masks of 'ordinary' human appearance, Satyrs, Gorgons, and others. The masks have been objects of great fascination and controversy. In the years that have elapsed since their discovery scholars have drawn on Near Eastern parallels, domestic developments in ancient Spartan society and comparative studies of the ritual uses of masks in modern cultures to advance widely different interpretations. With the exception of the Satyrs and the Gorgons, there is still no agreement as to whom the masks represent, who and to what purpose used them, or what was their connection to Orthia. In my paper I discuss the major theories that have been proposed and make some fresh suggestions based on comparisons with other finds from the sanctuary of Orthia.