



## The gold mask of Plaza Independencia

By Jobers Bersales

Cebu Daily News

On the first day of monitoring excavation activities at the Plaza Independencia, last Monday alone, a very important treasure that Cebuanos can very well be proud of was recovered: a death mask made of hastily etched thin gold sheets. A second one, or just a piece of it (one covering the eyes) was also recovered in the same location. These are vital proofs of the wealth of pre-Hispanic Cebuanos and the burial practices they carried out for their dearly departed.

The death mask is exactly as the Jesuit Pedro Chirino described in his *Relaciones de las Islas Filipinas* (published in Rome in 1600), where he wrote that, to Bisayans who could afford it, gold was pounded into a thin sheet when a person died. It was then cut to size and etched with decorations. One piece would cover the eyes, another, the nose, and still another, the mouth.

To date, there is only one gold death mask recorded in the annals of Philippine archaeology: that of the Oton Gold Mask recovered in the pre-Hispanic port settlement of Katagman (now San Antonio) in Oton, Iloilo in 1973. It is a National Cultural Treasure (NCT), like the Boljoon Church, Cebu's only NCT. Is it not far down the road when this mask too will perhaps be declared a second NCT for Cebu?

There are some antique collectors around who boast of their so-called marvelous collections of gold, including these masks. Unfortunately for these people who have arrogated the heritage of all Filipinos unto themselves for their personal vanities, theirs have no unassailable proof whatsoever (what archaeologists call *provenance*?) that will allow those collections to withstand the scrutiny of science now as well as in the future.

Here at last is the genuine proof of the possibilities by which to imagine the pre-Spanish past so well described by early missionaries but very little seen in terms of archaeological evidence.

Here at last is the ultimate vindication that the need to monitor this subway project should have been done right when this project began.

Here at last is proof to run after those who knowingly abetted the illicit removal and sale of untold treasures that lay hidden in the plaza as the subway excavation progressed last year and this year.

These excavations for the final third of the subway in the area of Plaza Independencia went into full swing last Monday. A team from the National Museum and the University of San Carlos were around to finally begin monitoring the progress of work. I am proud that this column helped usher this monitoring work when I wrote about the massive looting at the plaza that was going on under the very noses of those whose responsibility it was to ensure that the city's cultural heritage is protected and conserved.

There is still time to make amends. I urge local city officials and the Cultural and Historical Affairs Commission as well as the City Parks and Playgrounds Commission to run after those who abetted this illicit trade in ceramics and gold jewelry as the subway project proceeded. All they have to do is talk to the workers I talked with since Monday while we were carefully removing artifacts and burials amidst the constant drone of backhoes. They told me of how richer the finds were in the middle section of the excavation, of how a gray-haired old man waited outside for artifacts to be sold to him.

If nothing is done regarding this rape of the city's heritage, then I leave it to history to judge us all.

**Look more about Cebu Heritage here: [www.cebuh heritage.aboutphilippines.ph](http://www.cebuh heritage.aboutphilippines.ph)**