

Circe and Odysseus in Ancient Art

This resource offers a series of questions that will help students engage with four ancient artifacts that represent the goddess Circe's interactions or influences upon Odysseus and his companions. All these artifacts were made several centuries after the *Odyssey* was composed, but they should *not* be approached as straightforward or mere illustrations of episodes from the *Odyssey*. Rather, all five works of art (four artifacts and the epic poem) represent different versions of the story of how Circe interacts with Odysseus and his men. This resource assumes that students already will have read Books 9 and 10 of the *Odyssey*.

This handout is formatted as a guide that an instructor can use to facilitate a conversation during a class meeting. The questions are meant to be asked by the instructor while students actively look at images of each artifact, using the weblinks provided. After each question, examples of possible observations that students might offer are included in *italics*. The italicized answers also sometimes include extra information that the instructor can share.

Artifact #1: A kylix (drinking cup) at the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston)

Attributed to the Painter of the Boston Polyphemos

Made in Athens (Attica, Greece) ca. 550-525 BCE

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/153469/drinking-cup-kylix-depicting-scenes-from-the-odyssey?sessionId=31E168DC9A32CBB824DCBBFFA1671DC1?ctx=bb1a3a19-ebc8-46ce-b9b1-03dc137d5b86&idx=1>

Accession number 99.518

1. We are going to look at both sides of this kylix, but we will begin with the first image on the website ("Side A" of the kylix, which does not include anyone holding a shield). How many figures (including people, gods, and/or animals) do you see?

(There is a small four-legged creature in the center, plus eight standing figures.)

2. Let's describe what the figures look like. Are they human, animal, or a mixture of both? What are they wearing?

(At the center are two figures that are facing each other. One of them appears to be fully anthropomorphic. Two other figures – one almost at the far left and one at the very far right – are fully anthropomorphic. Both of those figures are bearded, so they are clearly adult men, and they wear decorated garments that are draped around their shoulders.)

3. Let's describe who is moving and who is stationary.

(The anthropomorphic figure near the far left brandishes a sword as he moves toward someone. The anthropomorphic figure at the far right is turned away and moving away from everyone else, but twists his head to look behind him, at the figures at the center of

the scene. The figure at the far left is also turning away from the rest of the figures. The other figures are standing in place. One of the central figures mixes something in a vessel that the figure facing it is holding and/or receiving.)

4. The anthropomorphic figure in the center is thought to be the goddess Circe. Who do you think is brandishing the sword on the left, and who do you think is fleeing the scene at the far right? Why?

(The person with the sword is Odysseus, coming to rescue his men whom Circe is transforming into animals, and the person escaping at the far right is probably Eurylochus, the only man whom Circe does not successfully transform into an animal.)

5. What do you think the tiny markings in the spaces between the figures might be?
6. Those markings are unintelligible ancient Greek inscriptions. We can't understand what they say. They don't appear to form "real" ancient Greek words. Can you think of why it might be fitting to have unintelligible inscriptions (words) decorating this scene?

(It could possibly be because the upper bodies of the men who are being transformed into animals have already changed, so they no longer possess human speech.)

7. Now, let's look at the other side of this kylix. There is a big chunk missing from the top of this side in the center. How many figures do you see?

(There are seven figures total.)

8. Let's try to describe the dress, attributes, and movement of these figures in as much detail as we can.

(At the center is a very large kneeling figure. The head of this figure is gone, due to the damage to the cup, but it is obvious that if this figure stood up straight, it would be much larger than the other figures are. To the left of the central figure are three adult men, all of whom have beards. The man just behind the central figure is carrying something – it's a wineskin (a container of wine). The two men behind him brandish swords. On the right we can see the lower half of a person who carries a vessel of some sort. To the right of that person is a female figure dressed in a long garment and holding a shield and a spear. At the far right is a bearded man who is running away from the action at the center of the scene.)

9. The large figure kneeling at the center is thought to be the cyclops Polyphemus. Who do you think the female figure with the sword and the spear must be?

(It is Athena.)

10. Who do you think the figure holding the vessel between Polyphemus and Athena is?

(It is thought to be Odysseus, providing Polyphemus with more wine, to get him very drunk and make him fall deeply asleep.)

11. Do you see any major differences between this representation of Odysseus's plot to get Polyphemus drunk and the depiction of the same story in the *Odyssey*?

(Athena is not present in Polyphemus's cave in the Odyssey.)

12. This vessel is a drinking cup that that people would use to consume wine. Let's talk about what makes these stories (about Circe's potion and Odysseus's captivity in Polyphemus's cave) especially suitable for a drinking cup. Would you *want* to drink out of a drinking cup decorated with these stories? Why or why not?

(Both stories depict drinking causing harm – to Odysseus's men and to Polyphemus. It might be scary to drink out of a cup with these kinds of stories decorating it... it might make you more careful about what you consume!)

Artifact #2: A kylix (drinking cup) at the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston)

Attributed to the Painter of Boston C.A.

Made in Athens, Attica, Greece, circa 575-550 BCE

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/153470/drinking-cup-kylix-depicting-herakles-fighting-achelooos?ctx=4a237e89-053a-4f22-8173-07a68e8fc253&idx=17>

Accession number 99.519

1. We are going to focus on the first image on the website ("Side A" of the kylix, which does not include a depiction of a bull). How many living creatures (people, animals, and/or gods) do you see?

(There is a small four-legged creature in the center, plus nine standing figures.)

2. Let's describe what the figures look like. Are they human, animal, or a mixture of both?

(There is some damage to the kylix that makes it hard to see parts of the decoration, but there appear to be seven figures with animal upper halves and human lower halves. At the center is a figure whose head is not visible, but the body appears to belong fully to a human or deity. At the far left is a fully human man (an adult, with a beard).

3. How are the figures positioned? What are they doing? Which ones are moving and in which direction(s)?

(There are two figures facing each other in the center; the one on the left is holding a vessel that is either being handed to or taken from the figure on the right. Almost at the

far right, one of the half-human, half-animal figures is twisting its torso vigorously: its feet are pointing toward the central figures, but its arms and face are turning away from the central figures.

4. The center-left figure, holding the vessel, is thought to be Circe. Who do you think that the rest of the figures are? Who is the figure with the human head at the far left, and who would it make sense for the twisting figure almost at the far right to be?

(The half-human, half-animal figures are Odysseus's men who are being transformed by Circe, the figure at the far left is Odysseus, and the figure who is twisting away might be Eurylochus, the one man who escapes Circe to tell Odysseus about what Circe has done to his companions.)

Artifact #3: A terracotta calyx-krater (bowl for mixing wine and water) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Attributed to the Persephone Painter

Made in Attica ca. 440 BCE

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253627?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=1000+B.C.->

[A.D.+1&ft=odyssey&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=16](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253627?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=1000+B.C.-A.D.+1&ft=odyssey&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=16)

Accession number 41.83

1. We are going to focus on the upper row of this two-row krater, and on the side where the upper row contains four figures. Let's describe what the figures look like and how they are moving through space.

(The two figures at the left have human lower halves and the heads of animals. The leftmost figure is turning away from the others but twisting its head to look back toward them. The other half-human, half-animal figure is stretching out its arms and moving in the same direction as the person to its right, a (bearded) adult man who brandishes a sword toward the rightmost figure. The rightmost figure is a female dressed in a long garment. The fluttering of a garment behind her shoulders suggests that she is moving with great speed. She is running away from the two figures who are pursuing her, but she twists her outstretched arm and her face back toward them.)

2. What is between the two central figures?

(A chair of some sort. The man to its right seems to have just gotten up out of the chair.)

3. What is falling between the two figures toward the right?

(There is a vessel, and beneath that, something that looks like a stick – which turns out to be Circe's wand.)

4. Let's compare this depiction of Odysseus and Circe with page 269 of Emily Wilson's 2018 translation of *The Odyssey*. What is similar and what is different?

(The chair, the cup, the wand, and a sword or knife appear in both. In The Odyssey, Circe grasps Odysseus's knees – which either has not yet happened, or is not going to happen, in the version on the vase.)

Artifact #4: Scarab Carved in Intaglio with a Pig-Man at the Walters Art Museum

Etruscan, 5th century BCE

<https://art.thewalters.org/detail/34022/scarab-carved-in-intaglio-with-a-pig-man/>

Accession number 42.847

1. Look closely at the decoration on this object. What is being depicted here? How does this fit into the story of Circe and Odysseus's men?

(There is a crouching figure who seems to have an animal's head, but a human's legs. Resting atop its knees is a vessel – perhaps which previously held Circe's potion.)

2. According to the *Odyssey*, what does Circe's potion do to those who drink it? What else does Circe use besides her potion to transform men into animals?

(Circe's drugs make men forget their home. After Odysseus's men drink her potion, Circe strikes them with her magic wand. See page 266 of Emily Wilson's 2018 translation of The Odyssey.)