

Odysseus and Nausicaa in Ancient Art

This resource offers a series of questions that will help students engage with two ancient artifacts that represent the Greek warrior Odysseus meeting the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa while trying to get back to his home on Ithaca after fighting in the Trojan War. Both artifacts were made in the Greek region of Attica 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 three works of art (the two artifacts and the epic poem) represent different versions of the story of how Odysseus meets Nausicaa. This resource assumes that students already will have read Book 6 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 covered kantharos at the British Museum

Made in Attica (Greece), ca. 440-430 BCE.

Excavated in Nola, in the Italian region of Naples

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1867-0508-1132

Museum number 1867,0508.1132

1. What do you notice about the shape of this vessel? What do you think it was used for in the ancient world?

(It has two handles, so it's meant to be held by someone with both hands. The kantharos is a type of drinking vessel, but this kantharos has a closed-in top, so it seems to have been meant for display rather than for holding liquids.)

2. There are two scenes depicted on this vessel. We will focus on the side that does not include a winged figure. How many figures do you see?

(There are two figures.)

3. Let's describe the gender and age of each figure in this scene. Do you see any physical features that suggest certain ages for the figures? How are the figures dressed?

(There is a man at the left who is bearded, which suggests that he is an adult, as opposed to boy or young man. He is naked and his hair is slightly unkempt. There is a female figure at the right. Her age is less obvious. She is dressed in a long garment and her hair is arranged in a specific style, as opposed to flowing loosely.)

4. Let's describe the pose, gestures, and motion of the figures that you see. Where are they looking?

(The man walks toward the female figure, holding out both of his hands. The two figures make eye contact. The female figure is moving more quickly than the man and in the same direction as he is. The female figure cranes her head backward to make eye contact with the man. She seems to be sinking toward the ground, and her arms are directed toward the ground. Her mouth is slightly open.)

5. Can you tell where this scene is taking place?

(There are not details that suggest a particular landscape. The only hint as to the activity of the figures is the lack of clothing for the man, coupled with the appearance of his hair.)

6. How do each of these figures seem to *feel* in this moment?

(The male figure seems to be pleading with the female figure, while the female figure seems to be nervous or fearful.)

7. It may be difficult for you to see this in the image of the vessel, but there are two inscriptions that serve as labels for the figures in this scene. Beside the figure at the left is inscribed ΟΔΥΣΣΕΥΣ, his name, while beside the figure at the right is inscribed ΚΑΛΕ, a Greek adjective that means "beautiful." It is common in ancient Greek vase-painting to label young figures – both female and male ones – with a form of the adjective that means "beautiful." If you know that the female figure is Nausicaa, how closely does this visual representation match how she is depicted while meeting Odysseus in Book 6 of the *Odyssey*?

(In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tries to cover himself up with a broken branch and Nausicaa, with help from Athena, stays still while the other girls run away from Odysseus; see page 201 of Emily Wilson's 2018 translation.)

Artifact #2: A pyxis at the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston)

Made in Athens (Attica, Greece) ca. 420 BCE

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/153860/pyxis-depicting-the-meeting-of-odysseus-and-nausikaa;jsessionid=31E168DC9A32CBB824DCBBFFA1671DC1?ctx=bb1a3a19-ebc8-46ce-b9b1-03dc137d5b86&idx=3>

Accession number 04.18a-b

1. What do you notice about the shape of this vessel? What do you think it was used for in the ancient world?

(It is a cylindrical box with a lid. This type of container was often used to hold cosmetics or jewelry.)

2. How many figures do you see?

(There are six figures.)

3. Let's describe the gender and age of each figure in this scene. Do you see any physical features that suggest certain ages for the figures? How are the figures dressed?

(There are five female figures, dressed in long garments, except for one whose knees are exposed. One of the female figures wears a helmet and holds a spear. There is one male figure who is bearded, which suggests that he is an adult. He is naked.)

4. Who is the female figure with the helmet and the spear? (Hint, if needed: she is a goddess.)

(She is Athena.)

5. Let's describe the pose, gestures, and motion of the figures that you see. Where are they looking?

(The man is hunched over and extending both arms toward Athena. Athena points away from the man, in the direction that she is walking, but also looks back at the man to make eye contact with him. Two of the other female figures run away from the man and Athena, while looking back at Athena and the man and holding their arms up as they run. Another female figure appears to wash or fold a garment, while the last female figure, completely opposite the man, moves much more slowly than the ones who run.)

6. Can you tell where this scene is taking place?

(It seems to be outdoors, based on the presence of some plants near the male figure.)

7. The description of this artifact on the MFA website says that the names for the figures are inscribed on the vessel. The male figure is Odysseus. How closely does this visual representation match how the meeting of Odysseus and Nausicaa is depicted in Book 6 of the *Odyssey*?

(This depiction has a lot of features in common with Book 6 of The Odyssey. It includes Athena, and Nausicaa is not running away from Odysseus. Athena points in the direction of Nausicaa, if you follow where is she pointing in a clockwise manner. The plants that are included might be the source of the branch that Odysseus tries to use to cover up his body, so as not to frighten Nausicaa.)