

Odysseus's Homecoming in Ancient Art

This resource offers a series of questions that will help students engage with two ancient artifacts that represent Odysseus returning home to Ithaca after fighting in the Trojan War. Both artifacts were made on the Greek island of Melos 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 Odysseus's homecoming (*nostos*). This resource assumes that students already will have read Books 13-24 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 terracotta plaque at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Melian (Greek), circa 460-450 BCE

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253053>

Accession number 30.11.9

1. Which figure seems to be the most important, based on the arrangement of the figures?

(The three figures at the left and the figure at the far right are all gazing toward a central figure who is seated and whose gaze is directed downward.)

2. 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?

(The central figure is a woman who is clad in a long garment that shows the shape of her body. She rests her cheek in one of her hands. Her posture suggests that she is in a state of mourning. The rightmost figure seems to be an older man, judging from his beard as well as his stooped posture. He wears almost no clothing. The figure just behind the seated woman is a beardless (i.e., younger) man who is also not wearing much clothing. The figure standing behind the younger man is a (bearded) adult who leans on a staff, wears a hat, and is wrapped in some sort of outer garment. There is also a man sitting on the floor who is holding a staff.)

3. The stooped figure at the far right is Odysseus, disguised as a beggar. Who do you think that the other four figures are, and what is your reasoning for identifying them as such? This scene does not directly correspond to a scene in the *Odyssey*.

(The seated woman is Odysseus's wife Penelope. The younger man behind her is their son Telemachus, and the man behind him is Odysseus's father Laertes. The man who is seated on the ground is Odysseus's loyal swineherd, Eumaeus.)

4. In the *Odyssey*, Athena disguises Odysseus in Book 13 (see pages 329-330 of Emily Wilson's 2018 translation), and again in Book 16 (page 384). When Odysseus returns to his house in Book 17, Penelope speaks with Eumaeus about having the stranger come to her (page 403). Odysseus does not actually see Laertes until Book 24 (page 514). Why do you think that the artist who crafted this plaque chose to put these specific figures together in this configuration? What does the artist achieve by doing this?

Artifact #2: A terracotta plaque at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Melian (Greek), circa 450 BCE

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/251812>

Accession number 25.78.26

1. This plaque is damaged, but it is still possible to figure out what it is depicting. First: what details can you identify that signal where this scene is taking place?

(There is a figure seated on a chair receiving a footbath. Behind the figures is a series of columns that suggests a building. The figures are in Ithaca, at Odysseus's home.)

2. Let's describe the genders, ages, and dress of the figures who are involved in this scene. What are they each doing?

(The bearded (i.e., adult) man seated at the far left is naked. He is looking down toward the person who is bathing his feet. There is person kneeling at his feet – and that figure is damaged. Standing in the center is a beardless young man who looks in the direction of the seated figure but does not make eye contact with him. At the right is a female figure who looks in the same direction as the younger man.)

3. In the *Odyssey*, where is Telemachus when Eurycleia bathes Odysseus's feet?

(Telemachus has already gone to his room: see page 426 of Wilson's 2018 translation.)

4. In the *Odyssey*, where is Penelope when Eurycleia bathes Odysseus's feet?

(Penelope is seated beside the fire: see page 426 of Wilson's 2018 translation.)

5. Why do you think that the artist who created this plaque chose to combine and position the figures as he does here?

(The composition offers a reunion of Odysseus's immediate family – although the lack of eye contact among them suggests that they do not fully recognize one another yet.)