

## Odysseus's Trip to the Underworld in Ancient Art

This resource offers a series of questions that will help students engage with two ancient artifacts that represent Odysseus's trip to Hades, which is also called his *katabasis* (from the ancient Greek words κατά, "downwards," and βαίνω, "go"). Both 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 three works of art (the two artifacts and the epic poem) represent slightly different versions of Odysseus's *katabasis*. This resource assumes that students already will have read Books 10 and 11 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 *pelike* (jar) at the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston)

Made in Athens (Attica, Greece) ca. 440 BCE

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/153840/jar-pelike-with-odysseus-and-elpenor-in-the-underworld?sessionId=31E168DC9A32CBB824DCBBFFA1671DC1?ctx=bb1a3a19-ebc8-46ce-b9b1-03dc137d5b86&idx=0>

Accession number 34.79

1. Both sides of this vessel are decorated. We will be focusing on the side (between the handles) where the central figure appears to be seated. Let's start by naming how many figures we see on this side.

*(There are three figures.)*

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?

*(There are three male figures. The figure on the left is naked and beardless; his lack of a beard suggests that he is younger than the other two figures, who are bearded. The figure in the center has a hat hanging behind his head. He is also wearing a sheath for his sword and has something draped across one of his legs, but otherwise he is not clothed. He is wearing sandals. The figure at the right is fully clothed, wears a winged hat and winged sandals, and carries a staff in one of his hands.)*

3. Do you recognize who the figure at the right is, based on his attributes (i.e., what he wears and holds)?

*(The figure at the right is Hermes. His staff is called the caduceus.)*

4. What is depicted *between* the figure at the left and the figure in the center?

*(The carcasses of two rams. Both animals have horns.)*

5. Let's describe the poses and gestures of the three figures and make some suggestions about what they are doing, based on those observations. Can you suggest why the sword of the central figure is unsheathed?

*(The figure at the left is reaching upward with one of his hands and making eye contact with the figure in the center. The figure in the center is sitting on something. There is no blood on the sword that the central figure holds, but his sword might be unsheathed because he just used that sword to kill the two rams that lie beside him. The figure at the right, Hermes, is looking in the same direction as the figure in the center is.)*

6. Do you see any details that suggest where this episode is taking place?

*(Depending on the image that you look at, this vase might look a bit strange at first glance. The figure at the left looks like he is magically emerging from the ground: his legs are cut off just below his knees. The figure in the center is seated, but we are not really able to see what he is sitting on. The description on the museum website tells us that the space in front of the figure at the left and beneath the central figure used to be decorated with a rocky landscape outlined in white pigment.*

7. The two rams in this scene correspond to an offering that Odysseus makes when he is attempting to consult the seer Teiresias. The figure at the left is thought to be Elpenor, a companion of Odysseus who died on the island where Circe lives (Aeaea). Let's compare the Homeric account of Odysseus seeing Elpenor in the Underworld with its representation on this vase: what is the biggest difference that you notice between the two representations?

*(The biggest difference is that Hermes is not part of Odysseus's katabasis in the Odyssey – but Hermes does guide the dead to Hades, so it is fitting for him to be a part of this Underworld scene.)*

#### Artifact #2: A silver drinking cup at the Getty

Roman, circa 25 BCE-100 CE

<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/32044/unknown-maker-two-handled-cup-with-relief-decoration-roman-25-bc-ad-100/>

Object number 96.AM.57

1. We are going to look at the space between the handles that includes a tree at the far right. Let's start by counting how many figures we can see on this side of the cup.

*(There are three figures.)*

2. Now 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?

*(All three figures appear to be bearded, i.e., adult, men. The figure at the left and the figure in the center are both seated and wrapped up in long garments. The figure at the right is wearing a shorter garment and brandishing a sword.)*

3. Why is the figure at the right brandishing a sword? Let's look closely at that man's surroundings for clues as to why he might be using a sword.

*(Between that figure and the cup's handle is the carcass of a ram. It appears that the man may have just killed that ram.)*

4. Where does this scene appear to be taking place?

*(It is outdoors, and the landscape is very rocky.)*

5. One of the seated figures is thought to be Tiresias, while the figure at the right is thought to be Odysseus. When you compare the visual representation on this drinking cup to Odysseus's summoning of Tiresias in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, what similarities and differences do you notice?

*(Odysseus draws his sword and sacrifices one or more animals in both representations. In The Odyssey, Odysseus digs a hole before he makes his libation and sacrifice, and the dead crowd around him as soon as he does carries out those actions; see pages 280-284 of Emily Wilson's 2018 translation of The Odyssey.)*

6. The decoration of drinking cups in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds was thought to inspire conversations at the dinner parties where people used these objects. What kinds of conversations do you think that this cup would inspire? Try to think of more than one direction that the conversation could take.

*(For example: This cup might inspire people to discuss what the afterlife might be like or how important it is to make the sacrifices in the proper way.)*

Additional resources:

1. Researchers at the Getty have tried to learn more about the silver drinking cup by performing a 3D scan of it, which is described in the following blog post:

<http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/3d-scanning-meets-ancient-art/>

2. You can find more information about the Underworld in a blog post for an exhibition at the Getty called “Underworld: Imagining the Afterlife”:

[https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/ancient\\_underworld/inner.html](https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/ancient_underworld/inner.html)