

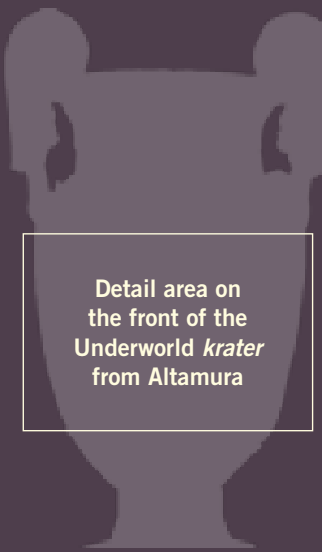
# The Underworld *Krater* from Altamura



Map of southern Italy marking key locations mentioned in this gallery

The inhabitants of southeastern Italy—collectively known as Apulians—buried their dead with assemblages of pottery and other goods, and large vessels were produced for graves of the local elite. Though not Greek themselves, Apulians engaged closely with the culture of Greece, and many of their funerary vases are decorated with scenes from Greek myth and drama. No literary sources document Apulian views of the afterlife, but the Underworld *krater* from Altamura and other vessels like it suggest that Greek traditions were influential. Depictions of notorious wrongdoers, those who died young, and judges of the dead are all drawn from Greek mythology. Yet the practice of visualizing the Underworld so fully and the prominence accorded to Orpheus are distinctly Apulian approaches to imagining the afterlife.

The display of the Underworld *krater* from Altamura in this exhibition follows two years of conservation treatment. The vase was substantially overpainted when it was reassembled from fragments in the early 1850s. More information about the extent of these nineteenth-century restorations is presented with the *krater* in the center of the gallery.



Detail area on the front of the Underworld *krater* from Altamura

## 1 Persephone and Hades

Hades, ruler of the Underworld, was the brother of Zeus (king of the gods) and Poseidon (god of the sea). He abducted Persephone, daughter of the goddess Demeter, to be his wife and queen. Although Hades eventually agreed to release Persephone, he had tricked her into eating the seeds of a pomegranate, and so she was required to descend to the Underworld for part of each year. Here Persephone sits beside Hades in their palace.

## 2 The Children of Herakles and Megara

The Herakleidai (children of Herakles) and their mother, Megara, are identified by the Greek inscriptions above their heads. Herakles killed them in a fit of god-sent madness and was compelled to carry out twelve labors to atone for the bloodshed. His unfortunate family members are depicted in other Underworld scenes on Apulian vases and stand as victims of innocent or untimely death.

## 3 The Furies

The Furies were fearsome deities of vengeance. Two are named here together as Poinai, personifications of punishment, and appear to wait for their next victims. The third looms over Sisyphus with a goad in her hand. Her name, Ananke, is the Greek word for “necessity.”

## 4 Orpheus

The mythical poet and seer Orpheus figures prominently in Apulian Underworld scenes. He descended into Hades to recover his dead wife, Eurydike, and through the power of song persuaded the otherwise intractable rulers of the Underworld to restore her to life. Famously, he lost Eurydike forever when he turned back to her as they were leaving. His significance for beliefs about the afterlife is explored more closely in Gallery 203.

## 5 Sisyphus

Sisyphus’s crime was to try, on two occasions, to elude death. In the first instance, he overcame Thanatos, the personification of death, by catching and binding him. Later, after Thanatos had been freed, Sisyphus was brought to the Underworld but tricked Persephone into returning him to life. When Sisyphus finally succumbed to old age, the gods ensured that he would never escape by imposing on him an endless labor—to push a rock uphill, only for it to fall back down repeatedly.

## 6 Hermes

Hermes was a messenger god, able to travel and communicate between different realms. A mediator between the living and the dead, he acted as *psychopompos*, a conductor of souls into the Underworld. In this scene he oversees Herakles’s capture of Kerberos (Latin, Cerberus), the guard dog of Hades, and the hero’s safe return to the world above.



## 7 Herakles and Kerberos

The most terrifying of Herakles’s twelve labors was to kidnap the guard dog of the Underworld. For anyone who attempted to leave the realm of the dead without permission, Kerberos (Latin, Cerberus) was a threatening opponent. The poet Hesiod (active about 700 bc) described the “bronze-voiced” dog as having fifty heads; later texts and depictions give it two or three.

## 8 Woman Riding a Hippocamp

The young woman riding a creature that is part horse, part fish is a puzzling presence in the scene, with no known parallel in other depictions of the Underworld. Given the considerable restoration in this area of the *krater*, the figures may have been invented by the nineteenth-century restorer using fragments from this or another vase.

## 9 Theseus, Perithoös, and Dike

Partially visible Greek inscriptions suggest that these figures are Pelops, Myrtilos, and Hippodamia, protagonists in a mythical tale of love and bribery. Their appearance in an Underworld scene is highly unusual, and in view of the extensive overpainting in this area of the vase, it is likely that the names identifying them were applied in the nineteenth century. The figures should be Theseus and Perithoös, watched over by Dike, the personification of justice. This trio appears in other representations of the Underworld, where their presence relates to Perithoös’s misguided attempt to seduce Persephone, an episode illustrated on two vases in this gallery.

## 10 Triptolemos, Aiakos, and Rhadamanthys

In the Underworld, these three figures presided as judges of the dead. Aiakos and Rhadamanthys were both sons of Zeus (king of the gods), renowned for their wisdom and justice. Triptolemos, a prince of Eleusis, a Greek town near Athens, had close links to Persephone through the Eleusinian Mysteries, a religious festival with rites related to the afterlife. The Eleusinian Mysteries are presented in more detail in Gallery 202.

## 11 The Danaids

Images of young women carrying water jars are found in several Apulian Underworld scenes. They are commonly identified as the daughters of the North African king Danaos, who were forced to marry their own cousins. All but one of the brides murdered their husbands on their wedding night. They atoned for this crime in Hades by eternally pouring water into a leaky vessel. The depictions on Apulian vases predate the earliest surviving literary sources for this punishment, however, and in a number of cases the emphasis seems to be more on the Danaids’ purification than on their endless suffering.