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Abstract:

Demeter, the grain, and the sea: between religion and political economy in ancient Greece

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The Greeks thought of themselves as an agricultural people. Yet, unpredictable climates and the ecological fragmentation of the Mediterranean made harvests unreliable, and self-sufficiency was rarely achieved, if ever: many cities depended on others and on each other for basic provisions, notably importing a substantial proportion of their grain from across the sea. Starting from the grain supply as a mainstay in the moral economy of the Greek city, this paper examines the role of the cult of Demeter in relation to changing policies of grain provision in the cities of Aegean Greece from the archaic to the early Hellenistic periods. Myths, rituals and cults delineate a goddess surprisingly active in patterns of maritime connectivity and economic reciprocity. More broadly, the paper aims to build a case for the importance of public cult in the political economy of the ancient Greek city-state.