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Isis in Ancient Ostia: Religion, Commerce, and Politics

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ISIS IN ANCIENT OSTIA: RELIGION, COMMERCE, AND POLITICS

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This paper examines the various epithets of Isis associated with shipping and harvest that gained importance in Ostia and later the Roman Empire due to Isis's strong connection with the Egyptian grain trade during the Imperial period. The grain trade was essential to Rome because the city could not feed itself without the importing grain from Egypt into Ostia. As a main port city, Ostia attracted sailors who brought with them traditions from other cultures creating a more open and diverse environment. This enabled for the cult of Isis to flourish, when previously the worshippers of Isis were scorned in Rome. In exploring Isis's popularity I examined archaeological evidence from Ostia such as frescos, coins, and terracotta objects in order to document how her iconography is depicted throughout Ostia. I found that Isis's popularity grew in direct correlation with the increasing importance of the grain trade causing her to become a popular symbol representing the imperial cult at the height of her popularity. This is significant because it demonstrates Ostia's unique synergy through its interconnection of religion, commerce, and politics within the Mediterranean world.