

# What Was Soil in Antiquity? A View from Ritual

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## ***ABSTRACT ORIGINAL***

This article examines the ritual uses and cultural meanings of soil in the ancient Mediterranean (c. 8th century BCE-6th century CE). It analyzes rituals involving the physical manipulation of soil across Greek, Roman, Jewish, and early Christian traditions. Through a thematic examination of practices such as burial, mourning, purification, healing, and symbolic transfer, the article identifies two primary, often overlapping, symbolic dimensions: soil signifying lowliness, humility, dirt, and purification (often 'placeless' soil), and soil representing specific, potent locations such as homeland, sacred sites, or burial grounds ('placed' soil). Significantly, rituals manipulating soil rarely centered directly on agricultural fertility, diverging from interpretations focused solely on earth goddesses. This provides some insights for contemporary relationships with soils. © Moshe Blidstein, 2025.