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Egypt's Rise as a Great Power: Slavery, Forced Migration, and Accumulation of Wealth by Dispossession

Abstract:

Between 1550 and 1300 BCE (the New Kingdom), the Egyptian state expanded from a small area centred on Thebes to eventually incorporate most of Nubia and the southern Levant in its empire; in Egypt proper, temples expanded and crafts flourished, producing artifacts celebrated as great works of art today. This talk problematizes ancient Egyptian foreign policy and labour policies in relation to their neighbouring societies. Connecting with research on contemporary uneven geographical development, the question to what extent Egypt's rise as a great power relied on its redistribution of labour power from abroad to Egypt is of particular interest. David Harvey's theory of accumulation by dispossession forms the theoretical lens of my considerations. In this context, the talk illuminates the intricacies of forced migration surrounding Late Bronze Age Egyptian society. Egyptian policies were apparently adapted to meet local conditions and varying situations. The result was a kaleidoscope of agendas and experiences that together formed a Late Bronze Age forced migration-unfree labour nexus, very much centred on Egypt and involving state and non-state actors alike. Forced migration and compulsory foreign labour seem to have been an essential part of New Kingdom policies and may have contributed to Egypt's rise as a regional great power and cultural powerhouse. This realization may lead to a more realistic image of the ancient Egyptian state and to a better connection between ancient Egyptian and global history.

Bio:

Christian Langer is a postdoctoral fellow at Peking University School of Arts under the 2020 International Postdoctoral Exchange Fellowship Program. He currently investigates the adoption of obelisks in modern Chinese memorial culture. He holds a doctorate in Egyptology from FU Berlin. He is the 2017 award recipient of the 'Foundation for Postgraduates in Egyptology' and "2022 Outstanding Postdoctoral Fellow of Peking University." In 2016/17, he was a Visiting Research Student at UCL Institute of Archaeology. His research interests revolve around the political economy of pharaonic Egypt as well as the colonial heritage of Egyptology and the modern reception of ancient Egypt. His publications include *Egyptian Deportations of the Late Bronze Age: A Study in Political Economy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021) and the edited collection *Global Egyptology: Negotiations in the Production of Knowledges on Ancient Egypt in Global Contexts* (London: Golden House Publications, 2017).