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Loyal servants of the realm or swarms of locusts? Mobilisations of military and civil labour for the empires of western Afroeurasia in the aftermath of the First Plague Pandemic, eighth - ninth centuries CE

Abstract:

The actual demographic impacts of the so-called "Justinianic Plague" of the sixth century CE and the subsequent outbreaks of the plague are still strongly debated. The end of the First Plague Pandemic in the mid-eighth century CE, however, was clearly accompanied by signs of socio-economic recovery in the empires of western Afroeurasia. This revival also became manifest in the repopulation (Constantinople) or foundation (Baghdad) of major urban centres.

For this and other purposes, civilian and military labour, both free and unfree, was mobilized at different scales and over various distances. The increasing number of Arab silver coins imported into eastern and northern Europe from the late eighth century CE onwards indicates an increase in the slave trade from those regions to the Islamic empire. Written sources describe the recruitment of new groups for the military retinue of the Abbasid caliphs and the Byzantine emperors in the early ninth century CE. Furthermore, we read about large-scale resettlements of population at the command of these imperial regimes. These movements of individuals and larger groups, however, also evoked severe criticism from members of long-established elites and even contributed to tensions within ruling networks.

This paper explores these developments in comparison and also connects them to new findings on the disease ecology of early medieval western Afroeurasia and its interplay with human mobility.

Bio:

Johannes Preiser-Kapeller is team leader of the research group "Byzantium and beyond" and of the research area "Complexities and Networks" at the Department of Byzantine Research of the Institute for Medieval Research at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. He also teaches Byzantine and Global History at the University of Vienna. His research interests include historical complexity and network research as well as the global, environmental and migration history of the Middle Ages. His most recent monograph on "Climate, Pandemics and the Transformation of the Old World" in two volumes ("Die erste Ernte und der große Hunger" and "Der Lange Sommer und die Kleine Eiszeit") was published in spring 2021. He is also co-editor of the volume "Migration Histories of the Medieval Afroeurasian Transition Zone", published open access with Brill in 2020 (<https://brill.com/display/title/55556>).