

Call for papers

***Forms of (un)freedom: emancipation and post-slavery in the Red Sea region***

International conference at *Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient*, Berlin

November 13-14, 2025

Conveners: Steven Serels & Magdalena Moorthy Kloss

The Red Sea is one of the world's most enduring arteries of human trafficking. Over the past two decades, scholars have shown that the forced migration of enslaved people played a crucial role in linking the African and Arabian littorals into a complex, multifaceted region. This research has helped reshape the academic study of global slavery, which originally focused narrowly on the transatlantic slave trade and the American plantation system. Scholars working on the Red Sea region, as well as on the broader Indian Ocean world, have challenged the study of global slavery to consider the full range of forms of human bondage that developed under other social, political, and economic conditions. This scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that the binary of slavery-freedom elaborated within the trans-Atlantic context fails to describe dynamics in other parts of the world. Some scholars have even gone so far as to suggest that the terms 'slavery' and 'freedom' should be replaced with other analytical concepts. For example, Winnebeck et al. have recently proposed using the substitute term 'asymmetrical dependency,' which they say "allows for the study of a wide range of societal, group-related, and individual varieties of hierarchization and oppression."<sup>1</sup>

This international conference seeks to contribute to this ongoing debate by critically examining the concept of 'freedom' in the study of slavery and its aftermath in the Red Sea Region. Building off earlier collaborative initiatives, this conference aims to further consolidate the subfield of Red Sea slavery studies by expanding the scope of inquiry beyond the processes that enslaved people and held them in bondage. Instead, the conference will focus on what happens "afterwards" – i.e. when human bondage ends. In the Red Sea Region, abolition and emancipation have been incompletely implemented. This has had complex ramifications that continue to reverberate at the individual, communal, and societal levels. For individuals, emancipation from slavery was shaped by manifold and often overlapping legal, cultural and religious norms. These at times contradictory norms shaped the position of former slaves and their descendants within the broader community. This was true both while slavery was a state-supported institution and after it was officially prohibited over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars working on other regions have also identified legacies of slavery at the macro-level that persist long after abolition and emancipation. They have proposed that these societies should be studied within a lens of 'post-slavery' even after the institution has been formally eradicated.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Winnebeck, et al. 'The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency.' *Journal of Global Slavery*, 8 (2023): .7

<sup>2</sup> Benedetta Rossi, 'African Post-Slavery: A History of the Future,' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 48/2 (2015): 303-324.

In the Red Sea Region, this is further complicated by the fact that people continue to be held in bondage, albeit illegally.

We invite contributions that address these processes. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Political, philosophical and religious conceptualizations of 'freedom' in the Red Sea region
- European colonial understandings of 'freedom' and their impact
- Formal routes to emancipation and their consequences
- Marronage and self-manumission
- The descendants of formerly enslaved people
- The economics of abolition and emancipation
- Social/racialized hierarchies and their links to historical forms of bondage
- The connection between slavery, indentured labour and modern forms of coerced labour in the Red Sea.

This two-day conference will be held at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin. Selected papers will be published in an edited volume. Please submit a title and a 300-400 word abstract for your proposed paper, as well as a brief biographical note (100 word maximum), to [steven.serels@zmo.de](mailto:steven.serels@zmo.de) and [magdalena.moorthy-kloss@zmo.de](mailto:magdalena.moorthy-kloss@zmo.de) by 1 May 2025.