

A PUBLIC TALK BY PROF. CALEY SMITH, GEORGIA COLLEGE & STATE UNIVERSITY

PROLEGOMENA TO ANY FUTURE CASTE



The Harike Wetland, Where the Beas and Sutlej meet.

The study of the complexities of caste in modernity and the medieval period has flourished, thanks in part to shared interest and methods of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars of religion, gender, and queer studies. The following monographs represent a broad range of methodologies all applied to understanding the phenomenon of caste: *Beyond Caste* (Sumit Guha, 2013), *Caste in Contemporary India* (Surinder Jodhka, 2017), *Caste Matters* (Suraj Yengde, 2019), *The Vulgarly of Caste* (Shailaja Paik, 2022). Why has there not been a similar flourishing of caste studies in the earlier period?

Indeed, discussions of the origins of *varṇa* in recent monographs such as *Religions of Early India* (Richard Davis, 2024) and *India: 5,000 Years of History on the Subcontinent* (Audrey Truschke, 2025) are virtually unchanged from *The Wonder that was India*, vol. 1 (A. L. Basham, 1954). Namely, *varṇa* is presented as the defining timeless and immutable social hierarchy of India, charitably called “social estate” instead of caste. This inertia is striking when a major challenge to the stability of *varṇa*’s past had already been issued over twenty years previous in the form of *Castes of Mind* (Nicholas Dirks, 2001). Indeed, important research on the conceptual history of *varṇa* has, in fact, been on-going, although without being integrated into a new communis opinio. In this talk, I will discuss why this arrested development may have occurred as well as survey significant scholarly advances from the past twenty years in the study of *varṇa* in the preclassical period, through which I will suggest how this research might serve as a basis for a new historical narrative the invention and re-invention of *varṇa*.

Caley Smith is a scholar of early South Asian religious history and political imagination. His work focuses primarily on the conceptual continuities and disruptions between the Vedas and emergent ascetic and householder traditions. His current book project, *The Invisible Mask*, explores the ritual impersonation of the god Indra and its influence on the recitation traditions of early Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

Thursday, Feb 19, 2026 @ 17.00

Location: Faculteitszaal, Blandijn

faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte

Blandijnberg 2

9000 Gent

All are welcome. This talk will be in-person and hybrid online. No registration necessary, online attendees may join on Teams by scanning the QR code on this poster.



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online.



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