

A Brief History of the Rom

By Karina Bates

Gypsies have been misunderstood and, therefore, persecuted since their exodus from India a millenium ago. That misunderstanding — though not the persecution — penetrates the SCA and influences both those who are trying to portray Gypsies and those who are audience to our portrayals.

Over the last fifteen years the interest in Gypsies has grown in the SCA, particularly as a new and different persona to have. Due to both the relative lack of documentation about Roma and difficulty in obtaining much of that documentation, many of us who have portrayed Roma have done so enjoying the fact that few can knowledgeablely argue our choice of names, clothing or history. This article stems from my research on the Rom (and my own persona) during the past decade. It begins with a brief introduction to the Roma before exploring their origins, motivations for traveling and the extent of their migrations. I hope this will help others researching the Rom as personas for themselves or just for interest's sake.

Throughout this article I will be referencing the Rom by their modern name: Rom (singular), Roma (plural) and Romani (adjective), as well as by the term Gypsy. Gypsy is used as a connection mostly to the historical texts, acknowledging that most Roma prefer not to be referred to by that name.

Who are the Rom?

Over the last thousand years, Roma have been referred to by a seemingly endless variety of names, many of them occurring through error and prejudice. Wanderers, Vagrants, Bohemians, Travellers, Gypsies, Sinti, Zott, Luri, Nawar, Jats are only a sampling of these names. Many of these names are linguistically similar. For example, in the 11th century the Gypsies were referred to in a Byzantine text, *Life of St. George the Athonite*¹. In this text the Gypsies are referred to as *Adsincani*, which is interpreted as a form of the Greek word *Atsinganoi/Atzinganoi*². This word was borrowed into other European languages: Tsiganes (French), Czigán (Hungary), Ciganos (Portugal), Gitano (Spain), Zingari (Italy), Zigeuner (Germany), amongst others.

The Rom are not a people with a written, or even an oral history. They are a people of the moment, transforming themselves into the personas that would find most acceptance in the lands through which they traveled. Indeed over the years, until more modern and unbiased research came into being, Gypsies were who we wanted them to be. Nevertheless, some information about their earlier travels can be discerned from the source material.

The Rom emerged from India circa A.D. 1000. The reasons behind this migration are not clear. Nor is there very much information on the social position the Rom held within the

Indian tribal and caste systems. Until the early 1900s, there were still arguments that they were either a random selection of people who chose to wander the earth together; or that they were originally from Egypt, which has long been a popular myth. The study of linguistics, however, brought the answer of the Rom's origin home to India.

As early as the 16th c., in Andrew Borde's *Fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge* there were some examples of Romani. It took until the mid to late 1900s to place them, relatively unequivocally, in the north-western section of India, in Rajasthan and the much fought-over Punjab. The argument behind the location of the Rom is due to the fact that most of the southern and eastern parts of India speak Dravidian-based languages, significantly different enough from those spoken in the north-west of India to not even be of the Indo-Iranian language family. Modern linguists have attached Romani to the Indo-Iranian family of languages, making it most similar to Hindi with ancient Sanskrit the common parent.³

This reasoning was not obvious to early linguists, as Romani has no single standard of uniformity. Their language has evolved and changed as the Rom themselves have altered, to fit their circumstances. Therefore, as the Rom traveled through the Arabic, Persian, Byzantine and other European countries, their language adopted words and syntax from other languages. When the tribes split into different sections and went their separate ways, so too did their language.⁴

However, while isolating the location of origin may be possible, discerning the status of the Rom within the tribe and caste system is much more difficult, if not impossible. Much has changed in India over one thousand years, not the least of which are names of tribes and castes, locations and attitudes. Those who might have been members of a pot-making tribe one thousand years ago could now possibly be in some other line of work. Isolating them by their manner of speech or physiognomy over a thousand intervening years is well nigh impossible.

By the time of the Rom's supposed mass migration out of India, the country had already been under Aryan rule for about two thousand years. Under the Aryans, the Indian caste system gained its true state. While the caste system might have existed to a minor degree in India before their arrival, it became much more defined afterwards. The caste system likely started as a differentiation of classes, and evolved into a pervasive cultural stratification where insults, marriage, employment and aspirations would be deeply entwined with notions of purity and uncleanness.⁵ Thus, the motivations behind the Romani migrations would have been unequivocally bound up in the social organization of tribe and caste.

Why did they leave?

A number of reasons behind the exodus of the Rom from India have been suggested. Unfortunately, the lack of evidence for this people means that most are difficult to refute. What follows is a brief investigation into a few of these various arguments.

In A.D. 950, the King of the Persians declared that the people were working too hard and that relaxation and enjoyment of the good things in life were important, too. He therefore instituted a shorter workday and insisted that feasts and entertainment were to be had by all. When he traveled around his country and found that some of his people were without entertainers, he grew agitated and demanded to know why. His people informed him that they had no one to play music or dance for them and so had no entertainment. It is said that he then wrote to the King of India and requested the shipment of some entertainers for his people. He was sent over twelve thousand men and women who settled in Persia and did little else but play music, dance and sing. It is also said that having carelessly abused gifts of wheat and cattle from the Persian King, the entertainers were subsequently driven out of Persia to wander.⁶

This story is the basis for one of the more popular theories. It also implies a higher likelihood of multiple migrations of Roma from India over a greater period of time than the tale suggests. The musicians sent to Persia were called the Zutti, a term later thought to refer to Gypsies. However, at the time, it may have merely referred to their profession, origin or class. Further clouding this issue is the possibility that the classical authors, including those of Greek origin, had for some reason, forgotten where India was, and had mistakenly labeled those from other countries as being from India.⁷ It would not be inconceivable that this confusion lasted throughout the first millenium A.D., during the time when the Zutti were said to have sailed to Persia.

India has very rarely been a peaceful place to live, suffering invasions throughout its history. Afghan raiders, specifically Mahmud of Ghazni, spent at least twenty-five years (commencing around A.D. 997) repeatedly invading, warring, pillaging and sacking any portion of the country reachable through the Khyber Pass. Supposedly, Mahmud's main goal was the destruction and defilement of Hindu temples, but the gold and gems present within also captivated his interest.⁸ While Indian records may exaggerate, they note the looting of many thousands of elephants and pounds of jewels and treasures as well as the enslavement of hundreds of thousands to carry what the elephants could not. Who were the slaves and where were they taken?

While some have tried to speculate about those who were enslaved, it is practically impossible to be specific about who the victims were. This does not mean that researchers have not speculated about this particular possibility. It is however, fairly safe to assume that most of the slaves would be from the northwestern portion of India, the easiest and closest to the Khyber Pass. As already discussed, these people linguistically fit the requirements for being ancestral Roma. While not all of the slaves might have become Roma—if indeed they were associated with a particular caste—there is the possibility that this enslavement could account for the beginning of the Romani migration. Furthermore, fifty miles northwest of Ghaszni, in Afghanistan, is Dasht i Nawar. The name Nawar itself is an Arabic word for Gypsy, and Dasht means desert. It is an area, surrounded by mountainous terrain, centering on what was purportedly a lake one thousand years ago.⁹ Without a conclusive date as to when this desert was first labeled for those who would later become Gypsies, it is merely a supposition that

maybe they were held there, in something akin to a concentration camp waiting to be sold into slavery elsewhere. With war tearing apart much of that part of the world today, any archeological investigation has been impossible. The Afghan empire that had spent so long invading India finally began to deteriorate within the next hundred years or so. If there were Roma left behind when Mahmud's army dispersed, they may have had the opportunity to leave. So why wouldn't they go home? One could assume numerous reasons, but the main one to be considered is their 'uncleanness'. Once likely of many tribes and castes, these people had been forced together under terrible circumstances. Over many years it is possible some of them married, had children and continued living as many will do given the opportunity. Some may have been raped by their captors and had children of mixed race as a result. They had likely mixed castes at this point, and more importantly mixed cultures, meaning that there would be no one at home, possibly not even the lowliest of castes, who would accept them again. With that kind of homecoming, especially for a newer generation that had never known India to be home, what difference would it make to continue on elsewhere?

Another possibility outside of invasions and slavery for the Rom migration from India could be any number of the many recorded droughts or natural disasters that occurred around that time. Like Afghanistan now, which has experienced drought for over ten years, many people have moved away looking for better ground. It seems questionable, however, whether this theory could have generated enough of an exodus to account for the many thousands of Gypsies who later entered Europe.

It is also worth considering, although this theory is certainly at the bottom of the list of possibilities, that the Romani ancestors could have left India on a course of normal migration. This might have been especially true if their castes or tribes were of a transient nature. However, India's northwestern section is not an easy section of country to travel through, being surrounded on many sides by mountains. If one wants to travel through such hazardous territory, it could be assumed it was anything but a 'normal' migration.

Lastly, it is possible that the cause of the emigration could be a combination of any or all of the above. Due to the cohesiveness of their language and their cultural beliefs and habits, however, all causal factors would likely have occurred in a relatively compact period of time, and those who emigrated would have been from a relatively localized area.

Where did they go?

About four hundred years elapsed between the Gypsies leaving India and their entrance into Europe. Although there are few references to what might have been Gypsies in Europe before 1400, this was not the norm. The Rom spent many years in Albania, Persia, possibly Arabia and certainly Turkey. While the documentary evidence for this is slim, the linguistic evidence is not.¹⁰ Again, there are some references to Gypsies making their way north through the Balkans, but the majority of documentation comes from Europe once they passed through Constantinople.

The documentation from A.D. 1200-1400 is harder to come by than that of later years for a number of reasons. Not all early records have been translated into other more modern languages. Nor are many of these documents immediately accessible to everyone. It is highly questionable whether early references to Gypsies are really referring to Gypsies and not to some mislabeled travelers or itinerant strangers. Terminology in early documentation is almost as much of a problem as it is in Victorian research. The greatest likelihood, however, is that there were very few Gypsies actually present in Europe before the 14th century.

During the 1300s we begin to see notations for Roma entry into Greece, Italy, Moldavia, & Wallachia. From what starts to become fairly reliable documentation, we can track their travel around the north end of the Mediterranean, then north into the Germanic countries, and then back east towards the Balkans.¹¹ Unfortunately there is no concrete evidence indicating whether those who reached the Balkans had separated before or after the passage through Constantinople. By the 1400s, however, most of the major cities in Europe and Western Russia including the Balkans and the Baltic states, had recorded the presence of travelers described as Gypsies.¹²

There are a number of important considerations here. Firstly, it should be pointed out that even today, the concept of a transient population of people for food, trade or culture, is normal in the Arab states and much of the Middle East. So while the Rom attracted attention in Europe for their disinterest in settling down, this would not have drawn any undue notice south of Constantinople.

Secondly, it is worth considering how a Rom and his traveling family would plan to make a living in a country where they were likely unfamiliar with the language, culture or religion. There were vast cultural differences in those regions east of Constantinople, the city itself acting like a wall between east and west. It is quite possible that the Rom would have spent some time gathering information and learning the language and learning what might make them accepted in western European culture.

The Rom quickly ascertained that the early Europeans were a devoutly religious group of people. During the waning centuries of the Holy Roman Empire, it was essential to obtain Papal Letters for travel, much like our passports today. The Rom learned this early on and repeatedly obtained letters by regaling those in power with tales of their eternal damnation and repentance. Whether the Gypsies invented these stories themselves or heard themselves described as such by non-Gypsies is now a moot point. The Rom were quite happy to tell of how they were the ones who made the nails that lashed Christ to the Cross and therefore were required by God to serve their penance by traveling the world until the end of all time. They also described themselves as the lost children of Zion, or the dispossessed of Egypt (hence the term Little Egyptians and then Gypsies). In the end, they would often use whatever story would work.

By the late 1400s there start to be almost as many new reports of Gypsies entering towns or entertaining lords as there are of banishments and punishments for being "Gypsy". The Holy Roman Empire (HRE) had decided that the Letters were used as ruses and that those "Gypsies" were maybe not quite so repentant as they had originally let on. So the HRE stopped issuing Letters and ordered all within their empire to stop harboring, supporting, or providing letters of merit or travel to these people. They continued issuing these decrees for almost one hundred years. Finally, in the 1500s, they solved the loophole problem by declaring that "any pass carried by a Gypsy is to be void" and banning all such documents in the future.¹³

This didn't deter the traveling Roma. Instead of being penitent travelers seeking redemption for their past deeds, the heads of Caravans became 'Lords', 'Princes', 'Barons', traveling with their retinue. They would present letters of Marque from kings and queens with whom they had had previous good relations. In this way many managed to keep moving and in doing so tried to avoid persecution.

In many cities and countries, lords and princes were paying Gypsies for entertainment, allowing them to settle on lands and pass through their holdings despite the HRE's decrees. News of this nature of course, didn't travel at speeds much greater than the Romani caravans themselves, so in many cases, those who harbored them may not have ever received notice of the HRE's wishes. In the early 1500s records indicate that the Gypsies reached Britain. While it is possible that the Rom reached Britain in the 1400s, the documentation indicates that the numbers only became significant enough to report after the turn of the century.

It didn't take England long to join other countries in banishing Gypsies, however. King Henry VIII issued decrees that anyone even posing as a Gypsy must leave England within so many days or be forcibly removed, imprisoned or otherwise punished. Queen Elizabeth I issued one of the most punitive and racist laws of the time for any country in Europe, which was only repealed later in the 1600s: it became law that a Gypsy could be hanged for simply being a Gypsy.

England brings up a point that should be mentioned. There is often much confusion regarding the terms Gypsy and Traveler. It is important to note that while a Gypsy is likely a traveler, a Traveler is not necessarily a Gypsy. Travelers and Irish Tinkers have been documented in Ireland and England since long before the first Gypsies reached England. While these traveling cultures would have likely met and may have intermarried and otherwise related, those who still live in the UK today and call themselves Travelers or Tinkers are indeed making a distinction.

By the end of the SCA's period of interest, the Rom were facing dogged persecution from just about every European country, including northern countries such as Finland and the Netherlands. There were few safe refuges for Gypsies, as indicated by banishment and punishment decrees from the time period.¹⁴ Russia and Hungary were to be, for many years, two of the safest countries for Gypsies. Russia became especially enamored of the Rom's

musical talents. It later became the 'in thing' to have a Gypsy choir or musical ensemble present at soirees. Franz Liszt was so taken by Roma music he borrowed many aspects for his dance pieces.¹⁵ While there are many Hungarians who would not currently appreciate the sentiment, it is often held up by the Rom themselves that the Hungarians would not have cultural music if the Gypsies had not lived there for so long.

Perhaps these locations were safe because both countries were mostly out of the European 'community' of the time, and especially in Russia's case, had so much space through which to travel. This is not a conclusive argument, as both Moldavia and Wallachia hold the infamous reputation for having immediately forced any Rom entering their countries, from the earliest times, into complete and total slavery. This occurred long before the first banishment and HRE decrees made their rounds. The general instability caused by war, invasion by the Ottoman Turks into Europe and other political changes both caused strife for the Rom and ironically likely gave them the ability to hide from persecution by including themselves with the other refugees fleeing unstable areas.

Obviously over the years, Roma found a way to localize themselves to different countries. Certainly they would still travel, some more so than others, but often only within a country or as time progressed, maybe only within a county or province. This tendency has induced Gypsiologists to try again to break the Rom up into whatever their distinctive castes might have been when they left India so long ago: musicians, pot-menders, animal tenders. The musicians became the Spanish Gypsies and Russian choirs and Hungarian entertainers. The pot-menders joined the Tinkers in England and France. The animal tenders moved through Germany, Italy and Austria. This is not to say that there were not and are not Gypsies in Africa, the Middle East the Eastern Balkan states. Again, the main problem with verification is the lack of accurate documentation. There is little likelihood that, even if the documentation exists, we can determine why specific tribes of Roma remained in particular countries, especially with the possibility of continual persecution.

Conclusion

For the later time periods that apply to the SCA, Gypsies actually would have been a relatively common occurrence in larger populated areas. This does not mean that they were well received; even if they were accepted, they were undoubtedly not trusted. In rural areas, it is highly likely that strangers were treated with even greater suspicion and mistrust due to banditry and thievery common to less travelled places.

The Rom bring another aspect to any portrayal of them by SCA members. Unlike practically every other cultural group that we portray in the SCA, Roma in many cases still live much like they did five hundred years ago. The technologies have changed, their caravans are modern campers, many more of them are settled than ever before, but much of their way of life and their culture, as we are given to understand it, are almost exactly the same. This means that unlike the tournament fighters of the 14th century, we are representing a culture

that still exists today. Those of us who choose to portray a Romani personae must bear in mind that doing so in a frivolous or careless fashion is potentially doing a disservice to a 'living' culture already burdened by misunderstanding and prejudice.

References

- Crowe, David M. 1994. *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*. St. Martin's Press (New York)
- Fraser, Angus. 1992. *The Gypsies*. Blackwell Publishers (Oxford)
- Hourani, George F. 1995. *Arab Seafaring: Expanded Edition*. Princeton University Press (Princeton NJ)
- Lang, D.M. ed.1956. *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints. Selected and Translated from the Original Texts*. (London)
- Moreau, Roger. 1995. *The Rom: Walking in the Path of the Gypsies*. Key Porter Books (Toronto)
- O'Grady, William & John Archibald. 2000. *Contemporary Linguistic Analysis: An Introduction Fourth Edition*. Addison, Wesley, Longman (Toronto)
- Wolpert, Stanley. 1999. *India*. University of California Press (Berkley)

Footnotes

1. D.M. Lang, ed., *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints. Selected and Translated from the Original Texts*. London, 1956, p. 154.
2. David M.Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, p. 1.
3. William O'Grady, John Archibald, *Contemporary Linguistic Analysis: An Introduction Fourth Edition*. Toronto: Addison, Wesley, Longman, 2000, p. 339.
4. Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992, p. 39.
5. Stanley Wolpert, *India*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 26, 83-84.
6. Fraser, p. 33.
7. George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring: Expanded Edition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 39.
8. Wolpert, p. 40.
9. Roger Moreau, *The Rom: Walking in the Path of the Gypsies*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1995, p. 53, 58.
10. Fraser p. 38-41.
11. Fraser, p.45-59.
12. Fraser, p. 60-84.
13. Fraser, p. 90-91.
14. Fraser, p.149-150.
15. Crowe, p. 78.