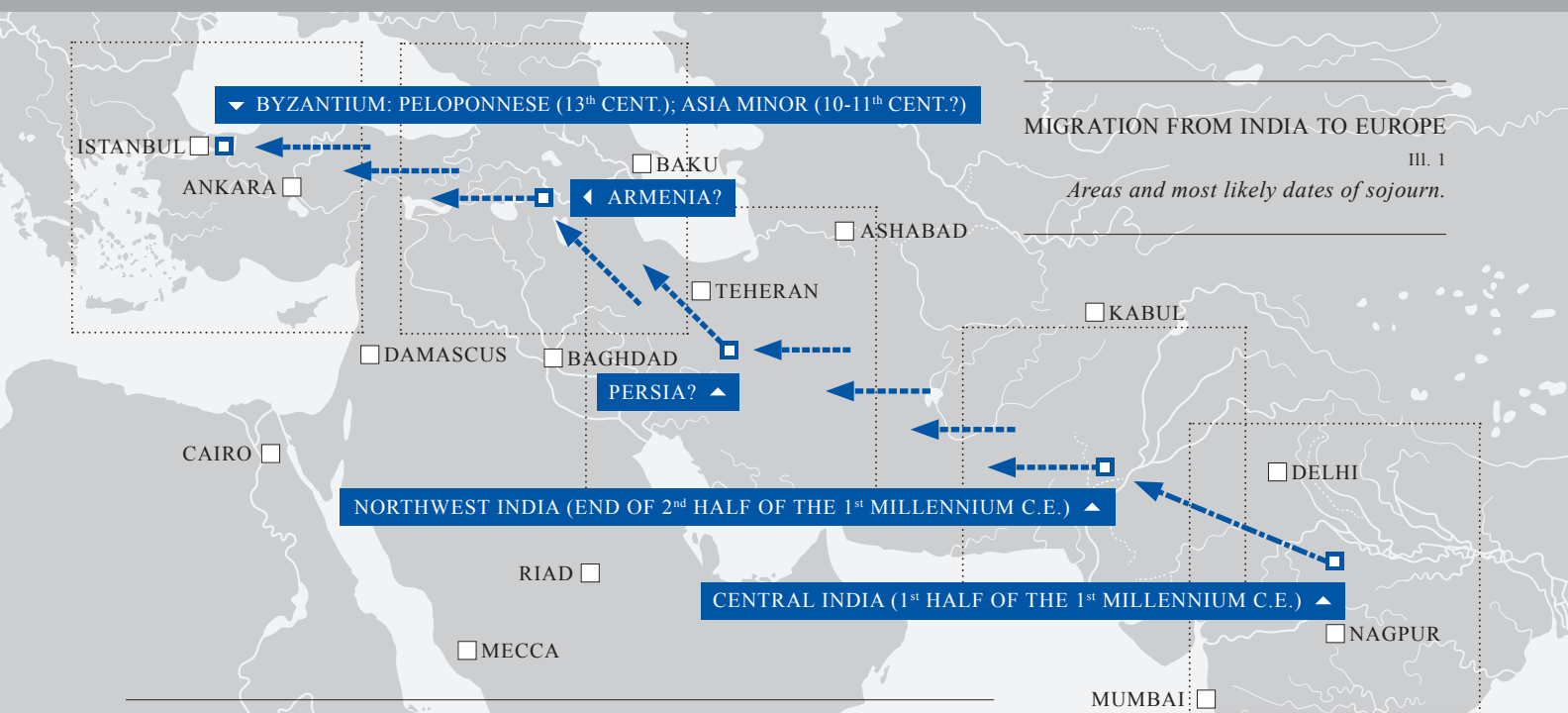


From India to Europe

compiled by the editors

India | Moving West | The Way to Byzantium – the Lexicon as Map? | Dom, Luri, Roma: Cousins, but not Siblings | Roma in the Byzantine Empire | The Athingani | Roma on Peloponnese

➤ According to the findings of linguistics, cultural anthropology, science of history and, in more recent years, population genetics, the Roma's Indian origin is considered a fact. How their ancestors came from India to Europe, and when this migration took place, its reasons and who exactly these people were is, however, open to assumptions. For want of direct evidence, the pre-European history of the Roma is a matter of reconstruction.



INTRODUCTION

The Roma's Indian origin is uncontested. By analysing Romani, the language of the Roma, and comparing it with other languages, it could be shown that the Roma migrated from Central India to the Eastern parts of Northern India, and probably stayed there for some time. Then, they possibly moved via Persia and Armenia to the Byzantine Empire, to Asia Minor and later on to Greece. Linguistic findings point at a fairly homogenous group which arri-

ved in the Byzantine Empire, because all groups of Roma existing today have a common linguistic basis, which also includes parts of lexicon and grammar taken from Greek.

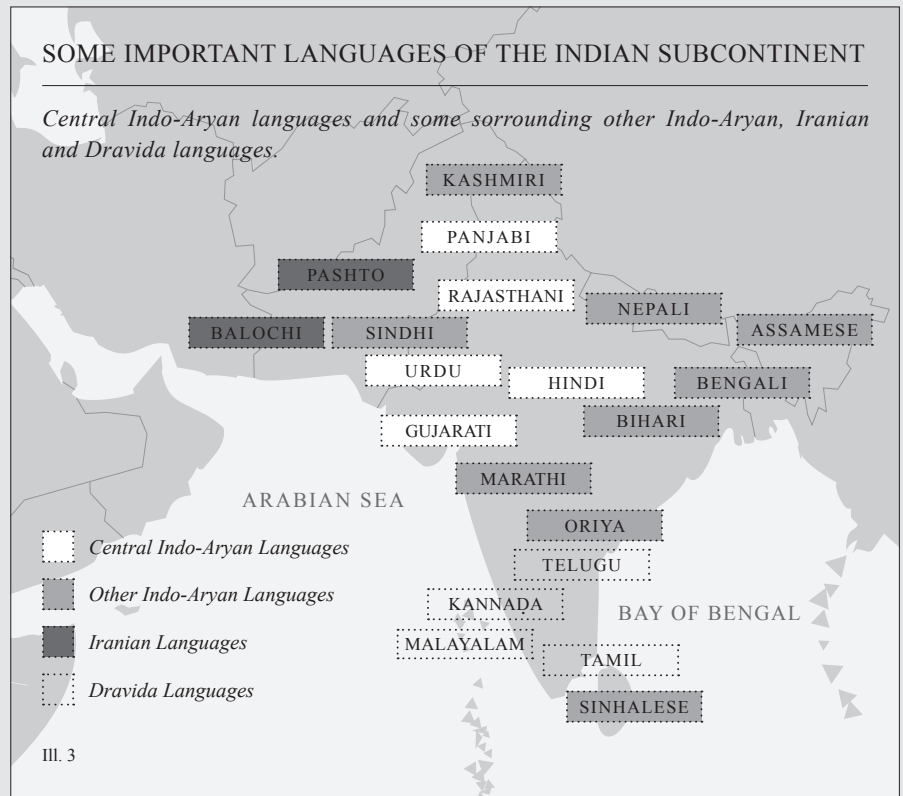
Also according to more recent, preliminary findings of population genetics, the Roma's ancestors were Indian. These were supposedly part of a relatively small homogenous group, as shown by analyses of blood groups. Differentiations within this group probably only occurred at the time of their arrival and their early spread into Europe.

Just like linguistics and genetics, cultural anthropology assumes that the Roma originally came from India. It refers, among others, to socio-cultural institutions like the traditional form of jurisdiction, or to certain rules within the groups, such as the commands of cleanness. Both, group-internal jurisdiction and the commands of cleanness, can also be found, like certain religious notions of some groups of Roma, on the Indian subcontinent. Direct socio-cultural connections between the Roma and Indian groups, however, have so far not been established.



Ill. 2

From a 16th-century Persian manuscript:
Shangul of India entertained by Bahram Gur.
(from Fraser 1992, p. 34)



Science of history has sources at its disposal which do not talk about the Roma, but about groups which are reminiscent of the Roma in many respects,

and which have been equated with them in the past. None of these assumptions could be proved; yet such documents from Persia and the Arabian region allow

us to form a picture of the nomadic population in those regions in which the Roma travelled in all likelihood in the course of their migration from India to Europe.

INDIA

Linguistic methods make it possible to determine the spatial and temporal origin of an Indo-Aryan language. Particularly changes within the sound system of a language make it possible to

draw conclusions as to earlier origins. Romani, however, cannot be classified easily. It has many features of the so-called Central Indo-Aryan languages, like Hindi-Urdu, Panjabi, Gujarati or the Rajasthani group, but it also shares features with Northern Indo-Aryan languages like Kashmiri. From this, and other considerations, it has been conclu-

ded that the Roma's ancestors originally lived in Central India. Already before the Common Era, they moved to Northwestern India, where they stayed for a longer period of time, before leaving this area and moving west. This theory, postulated in 1927 by the British specialist in oriental studies Ralph Turner, is commonly accepted today. [Ills. 1, 3]

MOVING WEST

The precise time when the Roma left India is unknown. Linguistic data cannot provide precise dates, and there are no contemporary documents about the Roma's migration through the Middle East. It is only later writers who refer to events of those times, always from a distance of many centuries. In his

“Shahnameh” (The Book of Kings), written in 1011, the Persian poet Ferdowsi mentions a legend according to which the Indian King Shangul gave his Persian colleague Bahram V (420-438) 10,000 so-called “Luri” as a present, to entertain the latter's people with music. Bahram gave the Luri crops to sow for their service; they ate the corn and asked for more. Consequently, the Shah sent the Luri out into the world on the back of their animals.

Similar legends are told by other historiographers. [Ill. 2]

During Bahram V's reign there is actual evidence of the immigration of various Northern Indian groups into the Persian area. Some researchers identified the “Luri” (called “Zott” or “Jatt” in Arabian sources) with the Roma and consequently assumed that they had left India already in the 5th century. Thus, also the lack of Arabian words in the Romani lexicon was explained: during

ROMANI – A MODERN INDO-ARYAN LANGUAGE

The original Indo-Aryan words in Romani have great morphosyntactic potency, which means that it is possible to create, with a number of specific suffixes, out of one word a number of other words:

ROMANI	ENGLISH
<i>bar-o</i>	<i>large, big; powerful; elder</i>
<i>bar-ipen</i>	<i>size, distinction, pride</i>
<i>bar-ikanipen</i>	<i>pretentiousness</i>
<i>bar-ikanarel pes</i>	<i>to enlarge</i>
<i>bar-arel</i>	<i>to primp and preen, to overdress</i>
<i>bar-arel avri</i>	<i>to raise children</i>
<i>bar-arel pes</i>	<i>to brag</i>
<i>bar-uvel (barol)</i>	<i>to grow</i>
<i>bar-eder</i>	<i>officer (literally the “bigger” one)</i>

Similar to these features, a significant part of Romani grammar is Indo-Aryan; today’s Romani is considered a Modern Indo-Aryan language.

III. 4

ABOUT THE ROMA’S ORIGIN – MODERN LEGENDS

Quick research on the Internet shows the following: “Sinti, Roma and kin groups” originally came from “the Indian area”, and were “abducted” by the Arabs in the 9th and 10th centuries, and, in the 11th century, taken “as prisoners” “by the Moslems” in their campaigns (namely “about 500,000 ‘Gypsies’”) or immigrated – “in smaller groups” – in the 14/15th century “via Northern Africa and the Balkans into Europe”, where they had also been “brought as slaves” 200 years before that time, etc.

Rather than in the “facts” they pretend to describe, the value of theories or assumptions on the origin of Roma often lies in the motives out of which they emerge. It has to be noted, however, that Roma themselves have no myths or legends about the early origins of their people. Their tradition has been and to a large extent still today is preserved orally, and most Roma consider the question of their early origin, if anything, a political one in terms of the various emancipation processes that started only recently.

III. 5

the 7th century, Persia came under Arabian reign, and Romani included Persian, but no Arabian words in its lexicon. As a result, it has been concluded that the Roma had left Persia before the Arabian conquest. The legend about the Luri could thus very well refer to the Roma, who left Persia already in the 5th century, and India even earlier on their westward journey.

These conclusions, however, do not necessarily appear convincing. Firstly, there are several versions of the Luri legend, which differ in decisive issues, and which were recorded only 500 years

after the alleged event. The reliability of such sources can be judged by looking at the “legends” about the Roma’s origin circulating today. If one was to search these legends for historical facts, other than the fact that a long time ago a then unknown people came to Europe, it would be in vain. [III. 5]

Also the second argument, the lack of Arabian words in Romani is not conclusive. The Arabs constituted only a very small ruling caste; the language spoken in the country, particularly among the not-so-well educated and the less influential part of the populati-

on, remained Persian even under Arabian reign. The Roma could just as well have lived in Persia under Arabian reign without having adopted Arabian words. [III. 6]

There is no doubt, however, that already in the 3rd to 5th century mobile groups with service professions came from India to the West. The Roma were either among them – or they were not. As a consequence, most scientists today assume it was over a long period of time – between the 3rd and 10th century – during which the Roma left India, most likely between the 8th and 10th century.

THE WAY TO BYZANTIUM – THE LEXICON AS MAP?

The lexicon of Romani (that is the vocabulary of the Roma’s language) is divided into an older, pre-European lexicon, and a younger, European lexicon by linguists. The pre-European lexicon comprises the Indo-Aryan, Persian, Armenian and Greek words in Romani. It is more or less shared by all Romani-speaking people.

The European lexicon was formed only in the course of individual groups’ migration to Europe to become what it is today, and thus developed differently within different groups of Romani speakers. In contrast, the native lexicon in a way shows the pre-European history of the Roma: from India via Persia and Armenia into Byzantine Asia Minor and finally Greek Byzantium. It might seem reasonable to derive the Roma’s route through Europe in a similar way. [III. 1, 9]

Scientists often – explicitly or implicitly – correlate the relative number of borrowed words with the length of the Roma’s stay in the various regions. Consequently, the large number of Greek words could point to a relatively long stay in the Byzantine sphere of influence, and the small number of Armenian words to the assumption that the Roma only passed through Armenia on their way to Europe. The facts, however, could also be interpreted differently.



The linguist, Yaron Matras, argues in favour of a connection between the Roma and castes of commercial nomads in India itself, the “Dom”:

“The Dom hypothesis allows us to attribute the socio-ethnic profiles shared by groups like the řom, lom, dom, luti, or kurbati with the řom of India to ancient traditions, rather than view them as coincidental similarities or as features acquired by the respective groups separately in different places and at different times. It can also account for ethnonyms that are derived from caste names, some of them shared (řom, dom, lom), and for shared terms for outsiders, and it can furthermore accommodate westward migra-

tions rather easily by allowing for repeated ventures by individual groups seeking employment opportunities in special trades. [...]

What makes the Dom hypothesis attractive however is precisely the fact that it can explain similarities in social organisation and ethnic identity while allowing for linguistic diversity: Caste origin need not at all overlap with geographical or linguistic origin, beyond the mere fact that all groups concerned come from India and speak Indo-Aryan languages. Thus the ancestors of the Rom, Dom, Lom and others may well have been a geographically dispersed and linguistically diverse population, sharing a socio-ethnic identity.”

III. 7 (from Matras 2002, p. 16)

The fact that Romani shows more loan words from Persian than from Armenian does not necessarily mean that the Roma lived longer in Persia than in Armenia. Perhaps their contact with the majority population was – for instance because of economic reasons – more intense in Persia than in Armenia. Ac-

tually, linguists today assume that apart from the length of stay it is mainly the means of contact between different population groups which determine their linguistic relationship. It could even be possible that the non-Indo-Aryan parts in the Romani inherited lexicon reflect various influences the Roma underwent

in one single region, and are thus not a representation of their migration. Recently the linguist, Yaron Matras, has pointed to Southern Anatolia in this respect: In the Antioch area the Roma could have come into contact with speakers of all languages which influenced Romani in Asia.

DOM, LURI, ROMA: COUSINS, BUT NOT SIBLINGS

A whole lot of population groups with close contact to India lived – and still live – in the Middle East – today’s Eastern Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan. They all tend, like some of today’s and probably most of earlier Roma, to itinerant professions and

jobs in the service sector, mainly in metal processing and entertainment. They are excluded from the majority population and their contact with the latter is typically restricted to economic relations only. Some of these groups (still) speak Indo-Aryan languages: the Dom, Karači or Kurbati of the Middle East (Syria, Palestine, Jordan, in the past also Iraq, Iran, Azerbaijan) speak Domari, the Parya in Tadzhikistan

use a variety of Rajasthani, the Inku and Jat in Afghanistan use a Central Indo-Aryan language, just like the Doma from the Hunza-valley in Northern Pakistan.

Other population groups, from the Caucasus to Sudan, know secret languages whose lexicon is completely or partially of Indo-Aryan origin; among them the Karači and Luti in Iran, the Nawar from Egypt, the Bahlawan in Sudan and

LEGACY OF SOJOURN OF ROMA IN BYZANTIUM
IN THE ROMA'S LANGUAGE, ROMANI

The sojourn of Roma in Byzantium was reflected in the Roma's language. All dialects spoken by the various groups of Roma in the world contain a great number of words taken from Greek.

EXAMPLES OF WORDS OF GREEK ORIGIN

ROMANI	amoni, amoji, lamoni, amuni	ENGLISH	anvil
	drom, drumo		road
	foros, foro		town, city
	karfin, krafin, karfi, krafni		nail
	angalin, angali, jangali, gani		embrace
	cipa, cipo, cepa		skin
	xolin, xoli, xoj, holi		anger, grief, passion
	kurko, kurke		sunday
	sviri, sivri, svirind, sfiri		hammer
	skamin, skami, štamin		chair, bench

In the Byzantine Empire, Roma came in contact with other ethnic groups, too. Words from other languages – especially Armenian – penetrated Romani on Byzantine soil. The Armenian minority in Byzantium was quite substantial. Specialists reflect, for example, on how the Alani word “verdan” (car) came into the Roma language. Alania (today's Ossetia) was a rather small kingdom in the Northern Caucasus. Roma probably never got there during their stay in the Middle East. The Alani, like members of other ethnic groups, were hired into Byzantine armies and their word “verdan” could have easily become a Romani word either directly or through another of the other languages spoken in Byzantium.

III. 8

LAYERS OF THE PRE-EUROPEAN
LEXICON OF ROMANI

INDO-ARYAN

jekh, duj, trin	one, two, three
daj, dej	mother
bokh, bok	hunger
thud	milk
vast, vas, va	hand

IRANIAN

ambrol, brol	pear
baxt, bax, bast	luck
phurt	bridge
angušto, anguš	finger

ARMENIAN

dudum	pumpkin
čekat, čikat	front
grast, gra, graj	horse

GREEK

efta, oxto, enja	seven, eight, nine
papin, papni	goose, duck
ora	hour
zumi	soup

III. 9

Words from the pre-European lexicon common to all Romani varieties.

the Boša or Lom in Armenia, whose language is called Lomavren.

Also in India itself, there are groups of nomads in various regions which are specialised in certain services, such as smiths, basket weavers, knackers, musicians and dancers. Within the caste system, these nomads are called “Dom”. This term is related to the autonym of the “Dom” in the Middle East, the “Doma” in Pakistan, the “Lom” in Armenia – and the Roma (“Řom”, “Rom”) in Europe. Many of these nomads, living this life because of economic reasons, in and out of India have similar names for people who do not

belong to their group: Romani “gadžo” (“non-Rom”), Domari “kažža”, Lomavren “kača”; in India Dom “kājwā”, Kanjari “kājārō”, Sasi “kājā”, Nati “kājā”. This word additionally has – e.g. in Romani – the meaning “settled” or “farmer”, which shows that they identified themselves as non-settled groups early on.

The striking similarities of these different Indian or former Indian population groups in social and linguistic regards made some researchers assume a common source for all or most of these groups. In fact, notwithstanding all linguistic similarities, recent research rather

points to different source languages, and certainly to different periods of migration for Rom, Dom and Lom. Whichever argument is thought right, it remains a fact that there are population groups in the Middle East whose social and ethnic roots probably lie in a specific Indian caste: the “Dom”. A caste is defined neither in a linguistic nor in a closer ethnic sense; even if in this caste, the Roma and all other ethnic groups mentioned above belonged together at some point in time (which would be quite possible), this does not necessarily presuppose a common genetic or linguistic-genetic origin. [III. 7]

ROMA IN THE BYZANTINE
EMPIRE

Apart from Indian, the biggest part of the lexicon common to all Romani varieties derives from Greek. Even more so: Ro-

mani adopted completely new and very characteristic parts of its grammar from Greek. [Iills. 8, 9]

TAX COLLECTION

The following correspondence is of importance to the history of the Roma in Byzantium for two reasons. In the first place, it is the first clear proof of the presence of Roma in the Byzantine Empire because both texts use the Greek name of this contemporary ethnic group. Secondly, it is the oldest mention of the taxation of the “Egyptani and Athingani”, which by then must have already become common practice; thus, Roma had already been included in Byzantine society by that time, the late 13th century.

A letter from the Patriarch Gregory II Cyprus of Constantinople (1283-1289) to the Megas Logothetes Theodor Muzalon, a high imperial official (letter 117, published in Eustratiades), concerning his mediation in a request made by a particular Monembasan:

“(…) A certain Monembasan, who is getting ready to collect taxes from the so-called Egyptani and Athingani, strongly entreated me, saying, ‘Put in a word for me somehow, my lord, and ask, and quickly move the imperial heart for me who am completely dest-

royed, and open it so that he grant me the favour of forgiveness and take away my anxiety, so that I do not again fall into danger when I have already gone through so much which is beyond the limits of justice (…)’”

The patriarch asked the Megas Logothetes to grant a hearing to the supplicant and help him. The Megas Logothetes answered the patriarch (letter 118, published in Eustratiades):

“(…) With respect to this request to his most merciful emperor concerning the tax collector who has suffered an injustice: If an injustice is perpetrated against a tax collector and he is robbed of what he has previously collected, the one who keeps most of what the tax man collected is not always perpetrating an injustice, and it is better if someone sometimes wrongs him so that he himself cannot perpetrate an injustice (…)”.

III. 10

The pilgrim Arnold von Harf recorded in 1497:

“We headed for the outskirts. Many poor, black, naked people live there. Their dwellings are small homes with roofs covered with reeds; altogether about hundred families live in them. They are called Gypsies [“Sujginer”], known in our country as pagans from Egypt [“Heiden”] travelling through our lands. They work at many trades such as, for example, shoemaking, cobbling and smithery.

It was very strange to see an anvil right on the floor. A blacksmith sat at it in the same way that tailors sit at work in our country. Near him, also on the ground, sat his wife, and she spun so that there would be fire between them. Two pairs of leather bellows half buried in the ground by the fire lay next to them. From time to time, the spinning woman picked up one pair of bellows from the ground and worked them. Thus a stream of air moved along the ground to the fire and the blacksmith was able to work.

It is assumed that the Roma spent a longer, and in any case formative, period of time in the Byzantine Empire. In the 10th century, the Byzantine Empire stretched from Armenia and

the Caucasus in the East over Asia Minor to Greece in the West. But up to the 13th century, when we can assume the Roma’s presence on the Peloponnese with a high degree of probability, we

also lack explicit documents from Byzantium. The first clear proof of Roma in Byzantium dates from the 1280s and appears in a letter commenting on tax collection from “Egyptani.” [III. 10]

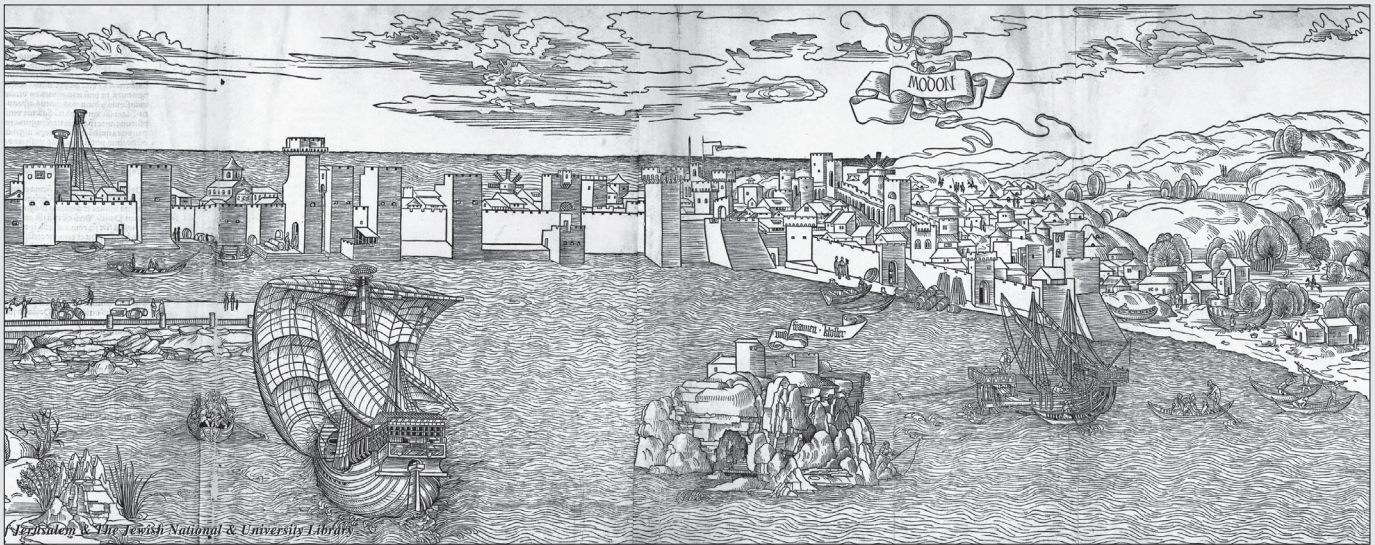
THE ATHINGANI

Similarly, there were population groups in the Byzantine Empire which were equated with Roma by scientists. In the first place, these were the Athinganoi or Athingani, the Aigupti, and the Mandopolini, Katsibeli and Lori. Similarly to the groups in the Middle East, social parallels to the Roma were drawn based on the Indian caste system. The term “Athingani” and “Aiguptos” later developed, as is often assumed, into the commonly used

exonym for Roma: according to some researchers, the exonyms for Roma in Slavic languages (Czech “Cikán”, Slovakian “Cigán”, etc.) and German “Zigeuner” or Italian “Zingaro” derive from “Athingani”; the term “Aiguptos” is assumed to be at the basis of English “Gypsy”, Spanish “Gitano” or French “Gitan”.

The Greek word “Athingani” means “people who do not want others to touch them, who do not want to be touched, who are untouchable”. The late Prague indologist and Roma specialist, Milena Hübschmannová, suggested, that the origin of the name “Athingani” might

be found in the commands of cleanness, as they are common in India and which are respected in some Roma groups; thus the Athingani, like some Roma groups today, distanced themselves from the rest of the population in certain respects or, at least, were found to be different. But these conclusions are not generally accepted. For example, Yaron Matras has derived “Cigán” etc. from the old-Turkish term “cighan” (poor) and rightly points out the scanty state of sources which would corroborate the “Athingani”-hypotheses. In fact, we do not know, who the Athingani really were.



III. 11
The Utrecht painter Erhard Reuwich accompanied Bernhard von Breydenbach on his pilgrimage to Palestine in 1483-4. He sketched several cities, among them Methoni, and had woodcuts of his sketches printed for the first time in 1486.

(1486, Modoni, by Erhard Reuwich, woodcut; from the book by Bernhard von Breydenbach (1486) *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam*; digitalised by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and The Jewish National and University Library)

These people came from a land called Gyppe, lying about forty miles from Methoni. The Turkish ruler occupied it sixty years ago, but many noblemen and lords refused to submit to his will and escaped to our country, to Rome, to the Holy Father, looking to him for safety and support. Upon their request he dispatched letters to the Roman emperor and all the princes of the empire with a recommendation that they guarantee the safety of movement and support of these people because they were expelled from their land for their

Christian faith. However, not one of the princes who were addressed helped. And so they died in poverty, leaving Papal letters to their domestic staff and descendants who still wander around the country, calling themselves Little Egyptians. Naturally, this is not true, for their parents were born in the region of Gyppe, called Tzingania, which lies not even halfway on the road from Cologne on the Rhine to Egypt."

III. 12 (from Giltsenbach 1994, p. 114)

Around 800, the Athingani were mentioned in religious texts for the first time. They speak of people who tell fortunes, hold ceremonies and try to influence others with their "reprehensible" – that is unchristian – teachings. One source from Mount Athos, dated back to 1068, mentions the "Adsincani" (the Georgian version of the name) as "magicians and charlatans"; in the 12th and early 14th century, religiously moti-

vated texts warn about the Athingani's fortune telling. In the 13th century, the Athingani were for the first time equated with the so-called "Egyptani" in a correspondence about tax matters in the town of Monemvasia (former Malvasia) in the Peloponnese; this term is still used in Greece as an exonym for Roma. [III. 10]

Exonyms, that is terms used by others, cannot be used straightfor-

wardly to make assumptions about the people they describe. In the Athingani's case it seems at least plausible that the term referred to Roma – and perhaps other groups as well. If we accept this, then the Roma could have lived in the Byzantine Empire as early as the 8th or 10th century. The only thing we know for sure, however, is that from the 13th century on Roma lived on the western coast of today's Greek Peloponnese.

ROMA ON PELOPONNESE

We owe many indications to Italian and German travellers, who stopped off in the city of Methoni on Peloponnese during their pilgrimage to the Holy Land Palestine. Methoni (Modon)

was half-way between Venice and Jaffa, and was an anchorage appreciated by travellers because of its safe natural harbour. [III. 11]

In 1381, the Venetian Leonardo di Niccolo Frescobaldi wrote that he had seen a number of "Romnites" outside of the Methoni city walls. A hundred years later Bernhard von Brey-

denbach, the Dean of the cathedral in Mainz, on the return journey from a pilgrimage to Palestine wrote that there were 300 huts around the city, where "Egyptians, black and ugly" lived. He added that the "Saracens" in Germany, who allegedly claimed that they were from Egypt originally in fact came from "Gyppe" near Methoni and that they

SOJOURN OF MAZARIS IN HADES

In a work drafted as a fictional letter of August 21, 1415, and addressed to Holobol from the Underworld, Mazaris describes the existing conditions on the peninsula:

“On Peloponnesus, as you very well know yourself, oh, my friend, there live a miscellany of numerous nations; it is not simple or too necessary to trace the borders between them, but every ear can easily distinguish them through their languages. Here are the most important ones: Lakedaimons, Italians, Pe-

loponnesians, Slavs, Illyrians, Egyptians and Jews (and among them there are quite a few people of mixed blood), of all the seven main (nations).”

On the basis of Mazaris' mentioning that “Roma” were one of the main Peloponnesian nations at that time and that they spoke their own language in public, we may suppose that they were numerous on the peninsula.

III. 13

were spies and traitors (“Saracens” was a European umbrella term for Turks and Arabs). In 1491 a Dietrich von Schachten reports that there were many poor huts outside of Methoni’s city walls, on a hill, the home of “Zigeuner” (“Gypsies”), as these people were called in Germany; according to von Schachten, many of them were smiths with great skill.

The traveller Arnold von Harf also reports in his notes, in 1497, about the Methoni “Sujginer” (“Gypsies”). According to von Harf, these people called themselves “Little Egyptians”; however, they had not come from Egypt, but from a region near “Gyppe”, called “Tzingania”, about 40 miles from Methoni. Allegedly, they had fled in 1440 because of the Turkish con-

querors. However, evidence about the Roma of that time does not only come from pilgrims. There are also allusions in 13th century poems of Byzantine folklore which most probably refer to Roma. One of those works mentions the “Egyptians” on Peloponnesus in such a natural way that we can assume that these people were well-known in the Byzantine Empire. [Ills. 12, 13]

CONCLUSION

Ever since the Roma’s first appearance in Europe, the question of their origin has been asked repeatedly. It has led to hair-raising answers. Modern scientists are by no means in agreement. But the fact that up to this day there are no unambiguous sources about pre-European history of the Roma, still encourages new assumptions and

hypotheses. The scant facts allows ample space for the predilections, motives and goals of those who deal with these questions. For instance, the Roma’s Indian ancestors were warriors or scholars, Brahmins or Pariahs in the more recent history of science; one could read that “the Roma” did not exist at all, that they were solely a construction by non-Roma; it has been said that they left India in the late 12th

century, and also that they did so in the 3rd. None of these assumptions are “true”; at best more or less conclusive. And even if the scientific reconstruction of the Roma’s pre-European history did not yield many irrefutable results, it created scientific discussions about the conclusiveness of the possible hypotheses. Linguistics and cultural anthropology played the main part in that development.

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