

New Perspectives on the Genesis of Gypsy History

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Scientific studies and historical research have confirmed that, due to idiomatic and cultural similarities between Gypsies and Indians, the Gypsy people come from India. However, after centuries of experiences in other areas and the consequent modification of their linguistic, cultural and genetic background, at present proto-Gypsies are citizens of the countries where they live. The history of the Gypsy people is chronologically divided into four main stages: *teljaripé*, “the beginning”, shows the historical process that consolidated the proto-Romani language; *nakhipé*, “the march”, describes the creation of Gypsy ethnicity after their experiences in Asia and Asia Minor; *aresipé* marks “the arrival” in Europe; and, finally, *buxjaripé*, “the deployment”, consists of the expansion and settlement of the Gypsy people throughout Europe.

For centuries, the history of Gypsy origins has been surrounded in mystery. The idea that Gypsies came from Egypt led to them being misnamed in many European countries (*gitanos*, *gitans*...). It was from the 18th-century when academia rediscovered Gypsies’ Indian origins. The 20th-century saw the emergence of a mutual recognition between Indians from India and Gypsies and some degree of solidarity. Yet, however close they may feel, the distance between Indians and Gypsies is unquestionable and permanent. Centuries of experiences outside India, in Khorasan, Asia Minor and, above all, Europe, transformed the linguistic, cultural and genetic background of proto-Gypsies of Indian origin.

Nevertheless, a historical narrative on the Indian origins of Gypsies free from any kind

of politicisation, historicist manipulation, romanticist and/or colonialist approaches is essential to understanding the genesis of this people, whose essence, *Romanipén* (the feeling of belonging to the same people) is reflected in the European motto itself: “united in diversity”. Unfortunately, Gypsy history until today has only been based on events. There has been no research on social, cultural, political, religious or gender history. All work on universal Gypsy history has been carried out from the prism of a temporality characteristic of Eurocentrist and Western historiography.

Personally, I have opted for a structure of Gypsy historical time based on the linguistic works of Doctor Ian Hancock. It is for this reason that this rapid journey through the proto-history of the Gypsy people is divided

into four parts. The first division of time is called *teljaripé* or “the beginning”. The meaning of this word also involves the notion of “founding event”. The second part, known as *nakhipé* (“the march”), corresponds to the period between the proto-Gypsy experiences in Asia and Asia Minor; that is, the proto-Gypsy march towards Europe. The third part is the *aresipé* and literally corresponds to “the arrival” of the Gypsy people in Europe. The fourth, called *buxljaripé*, is “the deployment”, and corresponds to the expansion and settlement of the Gypsy people throughout Europe.

Awareness

In contrast to what historiography usually suggests, the first Gypsies to arrive in Europe were aware of their Indian origins. Once in Europe, Gypsies began to have false origins attributed to them, which they made their own. This process must be understood from the prism of the medieval concept of origin which is different to how we understand it today. In that period, people did not always introduce or identify themselves as a native of their own country but according to the geopolitical context of the time and its potential advantages. However, there is clear evidence of the awareness of the geographical origins of the first Gypsies who arrived in Europe. Documentary sources from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries confirm this.

It is well-known that Gypsies were long considered to be Egyptians. The words *gitanos*, *gitans* and Gypsies come from “Egyptians”. This mythical origin replaced the true origin of Gypsies, through recognition

by the majority of society and by Gypsies themselves in the Middle and Modern Ages. As this transposition of origin offered more prestige for several reasons, it brought about the entrance and acceptance of the Gypsy people in Europe thanks to the myth of the errant penitent who is guilty of apostasy, and the myth of an Egyptian origin was believed to be true.

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Teljaripé: from Historical to Linguistic Documentation

Comparisons between Romani and the different vernacular languages of India suggest an exodus from Uttar Pradesh, but more exhaustive research determined with greater precision the exact point of this departure and the moment and causes of this event.

In fact, in the first quarter century of the second millennium of our era, the north-east of India was the object of a series of attacks by the troops of Sultan Mahmud, whose headquarters were in Ghazna (now, Ghazni, in Afghanistan).

Another key and influential element is the fact that three linguistic facets link Romani to languages used exclusively or almost exclusively in the Kannauj district. Both the chronology and the geographical location that appear in the documentary sources are corroborated by science, in this case, linguistics.

The Military Origin of Gypsies

In 1992, a serologic study was carried out in India which concluded that the Rajputs, warriors descended from the invaders of Central Asia and who arrived with the Huns in the 6th-century, were genetically closest to the Gypsy people. However, at present we have greater and more detailed knowledge of these events. We know that, along with being war prisoners, captives of the Ghaznāvids, the Indians themselves at that time fought as Ghulams, slave warriors, in special units of the Ghaznāvid troops but also as Mawali mercenaries.

We are, therefore, faced with the deportation to Khorasan of a socially, ethnically and religiously heterogeneous Indian population, condemned to slavery in Ghaznāvid lands. The Indian Ghulams were headed by their own leader and they occupied a specific district in the city of Ghazni. They were usually captured when they were young or received as taxes from lands outside the Empire, educated, trained and converted, with the exception of Indians.

In fact, this moment in Gypsy history is very important and deserves greater attention as, along with constituting its genesis (this was when the concept of “proto-Rom” emerged), these Indians would not have reached Transoxiana (in the Dandaqan plain) if they had not formed part of the Ghaznāvid army and its palace guard. If Masud, the son of Mahmud, had not encountered the Turkmen of the Oghuz tribe, he would not have lost his empire and the nascent Gypsy history would have ended here.

Nakhipé

This crucial period in Gypsy history is the most difficult for the historian as there are hardly any written or documentary sources related to Indians or any other group that we can identify as proto-Roma or proto-Gypsies. There is only an interesting and intriguing reference in the chronicles of Matthew of Edessa in which he mentions the high number of refugees and destitute people passing through Asia Minor in the late 11th-century.

However, and despite these difficulties, I will try to clarify the logical relation between the soldiers of the Indian contingents who survived the battle of Dandaqan in May 1040 and those who were called “Egyptians” or “Aigupta” in the capital of Constantinople in the late 11th-century. Saldjūkid Turkmen were the force that drove the proto-Romani migration after the defeat of the Ghaznāvid army and its Indian contingents following the Battle of Dandaqan in 1040.

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However, the “Saldjūkid factor”, necessary for understanding the arrival of the proto-Romani in Byzantium, is very important. Unfortunately, understanding what happened at that moment continues to be based on the narrative context of the historian. In fact, there was no large-scale incorporation of Indian soldiers into the Saldjūkid forces after Dandaqan, and the mechanism through which that group became an independent group of “Egyptians”

upon arriving in Constantinople in the late 11th-century is not a complete mystery but requires more documentary evidence.

The nomadic and Shamanic Turkmen tribes, the main component of the Saldjūkid military machinery, were the leading force which may have driven the proto-Romani migration, making it advance. Given the advance of the Turkish-Mongol forces, the practice of “pursuing” the defeated was designed to inspire terror and intimidate the threatened communities. They followed the “Silk Route” from Merv to Nishapur, from the southern coast of the Caspian Sea to Rayy, reaching the lands of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the former transport and trade routes from the East to the West.

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In the chaotic areas bordering the Saldjūkid Empire and the Armenian lands, this group of defeated Indians, Persians and people of other origins passed unseen by the chroniclers of the time. And because of lack of documentary sources, their passage through these lands continues to be, from a scientific point of view, historical speculation, a necessary narrative construct which, today, has only been corroborated by linguistics.

The Fall of Armenia

Located in the southeast of the Byzantine Empire, Armenia fell under the yoke of the Saldjūkid army in 1071 in the Battle of

Manzikert. It was then when the foundations were laid for the establishment of a new Sultanate called Rum, which occupied Armenia and some Byzantine territories in Anatolia, in the area which is now Turkey.

The perception that we can have of the Byzantine Empire of that period is of a territory to the east of Anatolia immersed in increasingly more chaotic situations. The defences were irreversibly weakening following the internal disorder and rebellions, the conflict between the Armenian and Georgian kingdoms in the region and the incursions of the Saldjūkids and their Turkmen followers.

In fact, the east of the Empire was experiencing chaos and they needed soldiers to defend the kingdom. Due to the needs of the Byzantine army at that time, it is quite likely that Indian soldiers had been recruited to the armies of the empire although there is no mention of this in historiographic sources. Byzantines used a multiethnic army often including mercenaries, among them the Pecheneg. The possibility, considered by some researchers, that the proto-Romani formed part of the Byzantine military machinery, cannot be dismissed. This hypothesis rests on the later emergence in Venetian sources of Gypsy companies defending the island territories of the Most Serene Republic against the Ottoman Turks.

Moreover, the possibility that relatives of the Indians who fought in Dandaqan could also have participated in the fall of Armenia 20 years later seems to be reflected in the description of the settlements located outside the defence walls of the besieged town of Ani.

We should point out that the chaos into which eastern Anatolia sank was not only the consequence of Byzantine and Saldjūkid pressures. The different principalities were

divided and came into conflict with each other. This situation brought about the increase of the use of mercenary soldiers who were usually Turkmen, Persians, Dailamis, Franks, Normans, Varangians and, quite probably, among those mercenaries there were also those who in their time were Ghulams and other Ghaznāvid Indians who survived the battle of Dandaqan.

In short, the material or historiographic evidence of the presence of the proto-Roma in Armenian lands is quite circumstantial. The alternative idea that the proto-Roma could have been involved in the defence of Armenia is far more likely, although it continues to be speculative.

There was a mixture of different peoples in the area after the proto-Gypsies left the Persian territory located in the west of Merv

I expressly argue that proto-Gypsies in the period between the destruction of Ani, in 1064, and the second important defeat caused by the Saldjūkids against the Byzantines, in Myriokefalon in 1176, fall into three interrelated identities. These identities were forged, first, with the cultural and cosmogonic elements of the groups of the Ghaznāvidkoine (i.e., the Indian and Khorasani proto-Romani displaced by the defeats of the Ghaznāvid in Dandaqan and Merv), and second, later, by the Armenians defeated after the loss of Artsn, Ani and Kars in 1064.

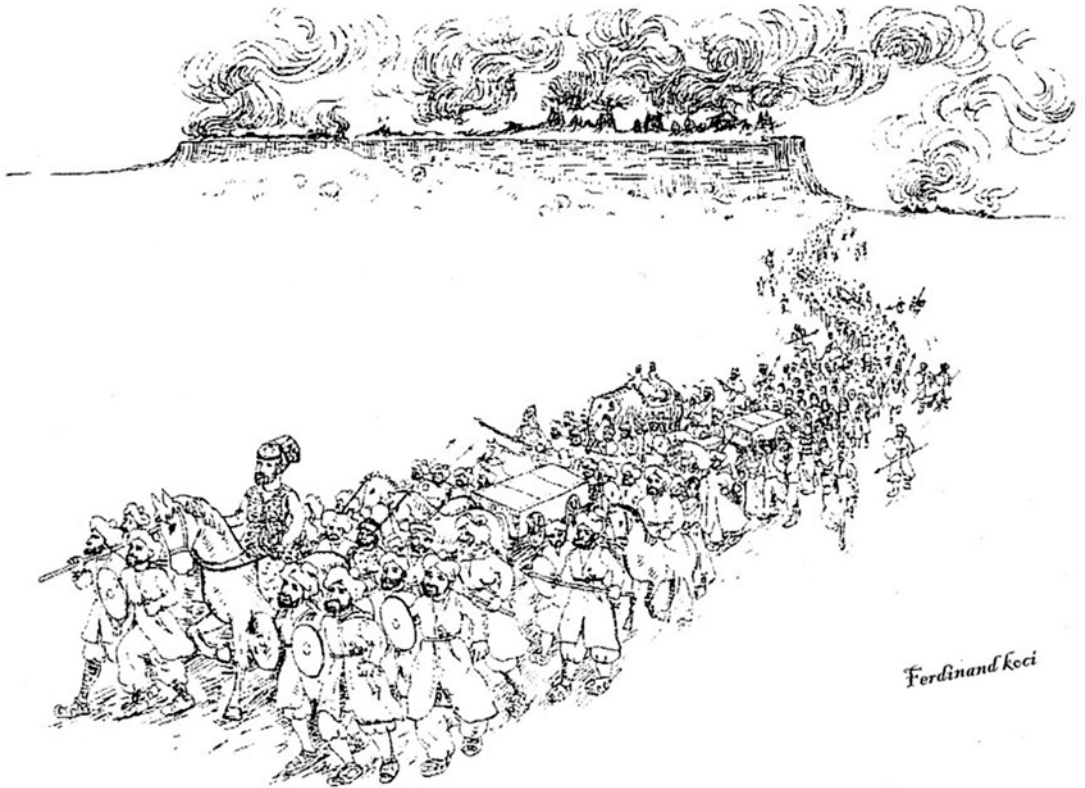
Nevertheless, it is quite likely that those proto-Gypsies, whose ethnicity began to homogenise, shared a set of characteristics; i.e., a social structure based on clans, nomadic trade as an economic strategy based on the skills of the group, and cultural elements from the Indian “core”.

Some of these proto-Romani who settled in Epirus in the mid-14th-century introduced themselves to those curious about their origins as Rhomiti or Romitoi. The exact composition of these Romitoi in 11th-century Anatolia is, of course, impossible to trace. But given the blood and genetic tests carried out in 2004 on Gypsies in the area, it is clear that there was a mixture of different peoples in the area after the proto-Gypsies left the Persian territory located in the west of Merv.

My reflection leads me to suppose that although the atomisation of the Armenian kingdoms involved the rupture of the proto-Gypsy group and the migration of part of the group to the West and to Constantinople, others remained isolated, caught between the Turkmen incursions, and finally emigrated to Georgia and the Caucasus. The latter developed a type of Romani with many influences of Armenian currently known as Lomavren. In short, in my view, after the battle of Dandaqan there was a triple division of the proto-Romani group.

One group maintains a military characteristic linked to the military leadership of the Doux and the Komes. The second group, or perhaps groups, travelled through Anatolia to Constantinople. It was made up of individuals without a military function, probably auxiliary personnel linked to the primary group of soldiers. They adopted nomadic trade and survived with arts and crafts and services. Finally, a third group emerged from the chaos experienced in the east of Anatolia. Disconnected because of the Saldjūkid incursions, they migrated to Karabakh (in current Azerbaijan), Georgia and the Caucasus, where they developed a different vocabulary which would become Lomavren.

This schematic description aims to contextualise the complex factors involved



Engraving of the invasions of the Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (Ferdinand Koci).

in the emergence of a Gypsy identity in 11th-century Anatolia. Moreover, it enables us to better understand the variety and differentiations which since then have been present in the historical sources.

In conclusion, and as I have mentioned on many occasions, this moment is fundamental as it represents the step prior to arrival in Europe and, above all, the moment when both Gypsy ethnicity and identity began to be shaped.

It is in the Byzantine Empire where the proto-Gypsy is linked to the notion of magic and witchcraft, thereby creating the first stereotyped image of the Egyptian

The emergence of a Gypsy identity in the chaotic Anatolia of the 11th-century is the central point of the historical narrative of the Gypsy people. It is the historical moment when the fusion of different elements from the culture of refugee soldiers from India and Khorasan, Persians, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Armenians, Greeks and others, fused to create a new entity: ours, the Gypsy entity.

The Byzantine Empire, that bridge between the East and the West, and the passage of the proto-Gypsies through these lands are key and founding elements of the endogenous identity of what would be the Gypsy people and of the exogenous image that

began to be forged of this people. It is in the Byzantine Empire where the proto-Gypsy is linked to the notion of magic and witchcraft, thereby creating the first stereotyped image of the Egyptian.

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It is worth noting that in little more than 50 years, these Indians from Kannauj, of Vedic and Buddhist culture and spirituality, were deeply imbued with foreign cosmogonic elements, mixing with the Islam of the Ghaznāvids, the Shamanism of the Turkmen, Zoroastrianism, Armenian apocalyptic Christianity and Byzantine orthodoxy, forging what would be the Gypsy cosmogony.

Aresipé

As we have seen, the main and final stage of the three major migration movements of the Gypsy people in Europe was also the consequence of Islamic expansion, this time by the Ottoman Turks, who sacked Byzantium in 1453 and spread their influence in the Balkans. However, it would be a mistake

to believe that that migration had happened at the same time. The bubonic plague had reached Western Anatolia in 1347 and led to a general migration through Europe, which must have included Gypsies, as they were even accused of having introduced it into Europe. Moreover, linguistic evidence shows that there was an early exit by a Gypsy group from Greek territory. Indeed, in at least one Romani dialect, Istriani, spoken in Slovakia, Greek vocabulary is quite limited.

Islam was a key factor to understanding this departure towards Europe, as it was in the case of the departure from India. However, both events shared the same military element, as Ottoman Turks used Gypsies in their militia or as craftsmen at the service of the army. In 1300, there were specifically Gypsy military garrisons both in Modon and in Nauplia, in the Venetian Peloponnesus, today Southern Greece. Gypsies had already arrived in Europe.

We do not know how the different groups of Gypsies reached Europe for the first time. Most of them probably crossed the Constantinople isthmus, although it has been suggested that others could have left Anatolia by sailing on the Aegean Sea or the Black Sea. However they reached the Balkans, in 1500 their presence is recorded throughout Europe.