

# Romany Origins and Migration Patterns

*There has been much conjecture as to the origins of the Romany peoples. Romanies themselves ask for information about their early history. Donald Kenrick traces the answers which have been put forth.*

by Donald Kenrick

*From Europe I follow the roads of the Roma into the Orient: to Armenia and Iran where the Sassanids once ruled, and before them the Achaemenids. From here the road leads to another land where the Indus River flows, to the land where the Kushans once held sway.*

From the poem by Leksa Manus, "The Roads of the Roma"

The Romanies are a people living in Europe and elsewhere who, it is generally believed, originate from India. Most of them still speak one of the many dialects of the Romani language. In the past, many, though not all, were nomadic, travelling with their families with carts and tents, and later with caravans. They were not nomads with cattle, but did a variety of jobs. Others have been settled in the same place for centuries. Since the end of the Second World War in 1945 most governments in Europe have been trying to get the nomadic Romanies to settle down.

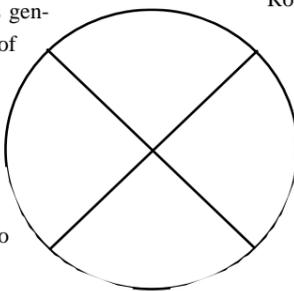
On many occasions I have been asked by Romanies about their early history and I have had to reply that there was nothing easily available which told the story in full. Now, there is.

When the Romanies first came to Europe they still preserved a vague memory of an Indian homeland. One of the outriders who came to Spain in advance of the main companies of migrants called himself Count Thomas of Sabba in India, while in Italy the fact that they came from India was recorded by a local historian. In spite of this, many other theories were bandied around concerning the origin of the newcomers, and even today we cannot be sure of the circumstances of the Romanies' departure from India.

In western Europe the Romanies stood out as different. All the early chroniclers drew attention to the blackness of the newcomers at a time when there were few black faces to be seen, and as Henriette Asseo writes, many fantastic theories were put forward. In eastern Europe no one seems to have taken much interest in where the Romanies came from, or—if they did—no record of the discussion has survived.

My own hypothesis is that the Romany people formed outside, rather than inside, India;

that Indian immigrants from various tribes intermarried and intermixed in Persia forming into a people there with the name Dom (or Rom); and that a large number of them then moved into Europe and their descendants are the Romany Gypsies of today.



In this discussion I therefore reprint my survey of the various groups who emigrated westwards from India. The original source for my work is M. J. de Goeje's lecture in Amsterdam in 1875, the text of which is hard to find and not easy to follow when found. I have gone back to his original Arabic and Persian sources.

## Theories of Origin

The companies that arrived in Western Europe in the 14th century said they had come from Little Egypt—an area in Greece—and this became confused with Egypt itself. The migration of the Gypsies became confused with that of the Israelites.

With the Indian connection forgotten, historians and geographers strove for three centuries to reconstruct another origin. Most tried to fit the tribe into

what was then considered as the history of the world contained in the first book of Moses, Genesis.

One story saw the first Gypsy as the son of Eve, from her mating with Adam after his death. The fact that such a person's offspring would not have survived the flood was conveniently ignored.

Agrippa wrote in 1530: "Those people (the Gypsies) coming from a region lying between Egypt and Ethiopia, descendants of Chus, son of Ham, son of Noah, still bear the mark of the curse of their progenitor."

Yet others have seen in Tubal Cain and his half-brother the ancestors of the Gypsies. As the Book of Genesis (4:19-22) puts it: "Lamech took unto him two wives and the name of the one was Adah and the name of the other Zillah. And Adah bore Jubal. He was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ. And Zillah she also bore Tubal Cain, a instructor of every artificer in brass and iron."

Another theory which is still believed by many today is that the Romanies are

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descended from Abraham's children by his second wife, Keturah. She bore him six children Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbah and Shuah (Gen. 25:1-2). Their descendants later accompanied the Israelites when they left Egypt, for the Old Testament says, "And a mixed multitude went up also with the Children of Israel" (Exod. 12:38).

Other stories said the Romanies were descendants of a prehistoric people, or a race of Jews who later became mixed with Christian vagabonds. In the Turkish-occupied Balkans, the story was told that the first Gypsy was born from a union between a brother Chen and his sister Guin, hence the Turkish name for the Romanies, Cingene.

Yet others did not believe that the Romanies existed at all as an ethnic group. They were ordinary citizens who had darkened their skin with walnut oil. Archbishop Cajanus issued an order that Gypsies must not blacken their children's faces.

### Modern Theories

It was not until around 1780 that a number of scholars discovered that the Romani language was closely related to North Indian languages such as Punjabi and Hindi. Following this discovery they naturally assumed that the Gypsies had migrated from India, and the ground for speculation was narrowed. The German Heinrich Grellman, in a much translated and widely circulated book, established that the Romanies were an ethnic group.

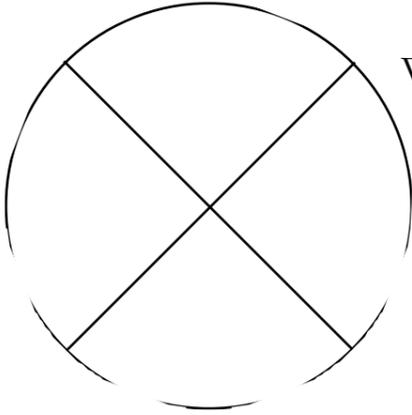
Early in the twentieth century the compiler of a comprehensive grammar and dictionary of the Gypsies of Wales—John Sampson—had a simple explanation for the arrival of the Romanies in Europe. This was based on a comparison of the phonetics of Romani and Indian languages. According to Sampson, a company of the caste known as Dom left India, and spent some time in Persia and the borders of the Mediterranean (the "D" is a particular *d* with the tongue turned upwards, typical of Indian languages). The Dom settled there and are known as Dom to this day. The company then moved into Armenia. Again some settled and these are known as Lom (or Boshia)—the initial D of their name changing to L under the influence of Armenian. The rest moved into Europe where the D became R (still with the tongue turned up!) and later a guttural sound, and these are the Rom or Romanies of Europe.

There was much discussion among John Sampson and his colleagues in the Gypsy Lore Society about which part of the Indian subcontinent the Romanies had occupied before leaving for the west. At times the debate was quite heated, but there was little opposition to the "Dom theory" itself.

After 1945 doubts were expressed concerning Sampson's derivation for the name Rom. Other etymologies than Indian Dom were proposed, such as Ramta (wandering). Very recently, Dr. Ian Hancock of Texas has cast doubt on the Dom-Lom-Rom link.

### More Recent Theories

In recent years a new interpretation of all the documentation has emerged, the so-called Rajput theory, first put forward in the writings of the Latvian Romany, Dr. Jan Kochanowski, and the Indian linguist, W. R. Rishi. Rishi describes how Prithviraj Chauhan organized a confederation of Rajput clans to fight the Muslim invader,



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Muhammed Ghori. In 1192 the Rajputs were defeated and, as Rishi writes, "Prithviraj's defeated army split up into three groups. The third group, which called themselves Romane Chave (the sons of Rama), set off across Afghanistan towards Europe. These Rajput emigrants were joined by men and women from many other population groups that had been attached to the army, such as blacksmiths, astrologers and musicians, as well as some bear leaders and potters."

In the most up-to-date version of this viewpoint, as presented by Dr. Hancock, himself of Romany origin, the emigrants were not defeated soldiers but a victorious army. He also places the emigration some hundred years earlier. He writes that the Kshatriya warrior caste did not in fact fight but organized other people to fight for them. So, the rulers of India assembled troops from different ethnic groups to fight the Muslim invaders, in particular the army of Mahmud of Ghazni. In 1015 Mahmud's soldiers were defeated and retreated to the west, followed by the victorious Indian troops—the early Roma—who eventually crossed over into southeastern Europe about the year 1300.

Other theories have emerged. Ronald Lee/Derek Tipler held that the Romanies formed as a nation outside India, then immigrated to India and finally emigrated from there. Robert Moreau has an unusual theory—that the Romany people emerged from a mixture of different tribes held as slaves by Tamerlane in an internment camp near Samarkand. In Montenegro until recently people thought that their local Gypsies were the descendants of a Serbian warrior named Vuk Brankovic.

A very recent political movement, that of the so-called Egyptians of the Balkans, has a different explanation. They claim that four centuries before Christ, their ancestors emigrated from Egypt to Greece and founded a region called Little Egypt. From there they migrated to Macedonia and Kosovo. They do not speak Romani and see themselves as a different group from the Romanies who live in the same regions.

If there is any truth in this story, then we need to at least consider whether the nomadic groups which came to western Europe in the 15th century were Egyptians or Romanies. They said they came from Little Egypt and we have no record of their speech. They may have been driven back to the east by harsh legislation at the end of the century and been succeeded by industrial nomads of Indian origin.

### Denial of the Indian Origin

Finally a small group of sceptical academics in western Europe have returned to medieval ideas and reject the idea of an Indian homeland. They see Gypsies as Europeans

who were socially excluded. Most of them conveniently ignore the existence of both the Romani language, which in most countries is preserved as a full-fledged language with its own grammar and sound system, and the massive Romany communities in eastern Europe.

The Dutchman Wim Willems accepts at least that Gypsies exist: "The history of the persecution of persons and groups . . . labelled [as Gypsies], continuing as it does in the present, is already in itself sufficient to establish the reality of their existence beyond denial." However, he claims that at the end of the 18th century a widely read writer called Grellman "constructed a Gypsy identity which previously had not existed as such."

In Holland, too, Luc Lucassen suggests that the emergence as a group of the Kalderash, Lovara, Ursari, and Sinti clans in the period 1400-1900 is more a result of their being labelled as being different than because they actually are different from the general population. In one of his books, he looks at three groups of nomads who arrived in the Netherlands towards the end of the 19th century and claims that they were called Gypsies (Zigeuners) by the authorities, not because they were Gypsies but because they resembled nomads called Gypsies who had come to Holland in the 15th century. The groups were Bosnian and Piedmontese

animal trainers, and the Coppersmith Kalderash. The last named visited other countries, and in England contemporary scholars took the trouble to record their language, which was clearly Romani.

Lucassen further claims that “English anthropologists and sociologists reject the notion that Gypsies are a separate race of people.” He is referring particularly to the anthropologist Judith Okeley who worked as a site warden in Hertfordshire, England, and whose early works are based on the families she met there. They seem to have intermarried considerably with native English and, as a result, were not particularly Indian looking. They also did not speak Romani but a variety of English with Romani words. On the basis of this, Dr. Okeley decided that all English and Welsh Gypsies are of local origin. Their grandparents perhaps somehow had learnt Romani when, during a visit to the continent of Europe, they met some Indian merchants. They managed to learn this complex language, which has more case endings than Latin and a subjunctive verb, during these contacts. Judith Okeley writes, “It may be the case that groups of so-called ‘Egyptians’ were composed of largely disenfranchised and indigenous persons. In this case they may have adopted an exotic nomenclature, parts of a second secret ‘language’— either a creole or pidgin which had crossed many national frontiers of Europe; and exploited certain occupations such as fortune telling and entertainment which were consistent with a magical mysterious nomenclature.”

When Dr. Okeley was later confronted with dark-faced Bosnian asylum seekers in London, she was not shaken in her ideas and wrote, “Although Mr. X was dark his wife might have been white.”

Finally, I should at least mention the French writer of the volume *Tsiganes* in the *Que sais-je?* series, Nicole Martinez, and the linguist Paul Wexler, who maintains that Romani is a European language, in spite of its large basic vocabulary of Indian origin.

(Continues on page 56.)

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