



Gypsy, Roma, Travellers¹ in Europe – a brief overview²

Dr. Adrian Marsh, 2015

Numbers of Roma in Europe

It is often suggested in policy, strategy and other official documents that there are between ten and twelve million 'Roma' in the European member states, though very little evidence is given for this figure. Country figures are equally unreliable; at best, figures for two million Roma in Romania are guesses from voluntary sector organisations and partial figures from government officers. The picture is similar elsewhere in Europe, as there are simply no reliable population figures for people who might consider themselves to be included in the category of 'Roma'. So, the question of how many 'Roma' there are is unanswerable.

Ancestry

Fortunately, the questions of who are the 'Roma' or 'Gypsies' or 'Travellers' are more easily answered, in the sense that the evidence is better, though frequently argued over by scholars and researchers.

Romani people have their ancestry in the north-western and north-central Indian sub-continent, as is evidenced by the Romani language (Romani-chib). The time frame for the ancestors of modern Romani populations leaving these lands is between 997-1040 AD, largely as captives and soldier-slaves under the Turkish Muslim Ghaznavid rulers Sebuhktigin and Mahmud. Defeat by the Turkish Saldjuks and subsequent collapse of the Ghaznavid empire

in the 11th century, began the long process of migration for these former Indic servitors through the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires into mediaeval and early modern European dynastic states such as France, England, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark and Russia.

The 16th and 17th centuries saw large numbers of 'Egyptians', as these groups became called – by association with Egyptian magic and fortune-telling in Byzantium – settling in Spain and Italy. In the same period, the German principalities began to restrict settlement and actively persecute 'Gypsies'. Harsh English, French and Dutch laws punished Gypsies for being 'counterfeit Egyptians' in the same period.

Slavery in the Wallachian and Moldavian (modern Romania) principalities for Romani people began in the 14th century and intensified in the 17th century and the conditions for 'Gypsies' in the Ottoman Empire, which had been much better, began to worsen as the Empire's economy declined. The 18th and 19th centuries saw interest in scholarship about the Gypsies, as they were generally called, increase, albeit as part of the increasingly colonial exercise of Europeans documenting 'savages'. The 'discovery' that their language was related directly to Hindi and Urdu suggested the path of migration was one that Romani peoples had forgotten or 'lost' though customs and beliefs amongst many Romani communities remained to recall the past.

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Racism

With increasing cataloguing and demarcation of Gypsies in the hierarchy of European peoples, the notions of racial biology and scientific racism came to dominate and Gypsies were considered very low in the scale. Such views fed directly into the destruction of Europe's Roma and Sinti in fascist states, 1939-1945 and the sterilisation policies that were carried out in Sweden, Norway and Denmark until the early 1970's (and in the Czech Republic until very recently). Racism and discrimination in the wake of migration of Romani populations from central, eastern and southeastern Europe has remained a constant feature of the description and demonization of 'Gypsies' as Romani and Traveller groups have become defined.

EU homogenization

The EU has also contributed to homogenization by defining differing groups under the catch-all label of 'Roma' despite there being clear differences between groups. Irish Travellers have no connection with Indian ancestry or Byzantine notions of 'Egyptians', yet are also lumped together with English and Welsh Gypsies and Romanian and Bulgarian Roma.

Domari, Abdallar and Lomavren groups in Turkey and the Middle East are barely recognised, despite substantial numbers and a more complex history but clearer Indian ancestry. Beyash in Croatia and Ashkali in Kosovo are recognised in EU policies, but as part of the 'Roma', although they argue differing origins and patterns of migration. There are a series of inter-related ethnic communities which share common experiences of exclusion, persecution and discrimination on the basis of being perceived as 'Gypsies' and being treated, in law and in society, in very similar, negative terms. This is clearly the common bond that draws together different groups of what outsiders call 'Gypsies'.

1. The use of the terms Gypsies, Roma, Travellers is intended to reflect current usage in the UK and acknowledges the diversity of communities identifying with these terms, whilst respecting the different ethnonyms used by Romani and Traveller groups. It is important to respect the terms groups use to define themselves.

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