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Re–inventing the Wheel: Romani ‘voices’, knowledge and the erasure of the past

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A Florentine account of early Romani identity

In 1384CE (Common Era), the Florentine nobleman, diplomat and traveller Lionardo di Niccolo Frescobaldi¹ was in the port of Modon with thirteen Tuscan companions and three servants. They were on their way to Egypt, the Holy Land, and Syria, ostensibly on a pilgrimage to the sites associated with Christ's life and passion, and to see the important monasteries and churches of the Levant. In reality the pilgrimage was also a spying mission. Encouraged by Onuphrius Visdomini Steccuti, an Augustinian friar and a great friend of Frescobaldi's who became bishop of Volterra and, from 1390CE to his death in 1403, the Bishop of Florence, Frescobaldi was commissioned by King Charles VI of Naples to,

*“...seek out the ports and lands over there... [the Holy Land], so that on my return I should be able to state where it was possible to find a convenient port for men-at-arms and to study rivers and places and sites for camps and terrain suitable for a battleground...”*² The friar *“...commanded me in the name of the said king and ...[also] begged me on his own behalf...”*³

These ‘pilgrims’ left Florence on 10th August 1384CE and embarked from Venice on 4th September to sail to Alexandria, arriving on 27th September. They stayed until the 5th October; Frescobaldi remarked upon the size and commerce of the city, being larger than Florence, before departing for Cairo by boat up the Nile. On 19th October he and his companions went to Sinai, visiting the great monastery of St Catherine and staying there until the 2nd November.

After they had visited Gaza and Bethlehem, they reached Jerusalem on the 22nd November, but stayed there only four days, before departing for the River Jordan, Ain Karem and Galilee. Arriving in Damascus on 9th December, two of the party died (probably from dysentery). They left for Beirut on 29th January 1385 and stayed until 10th April, returning to Venice, after enduring a “...terrible storm”, on 21st May. He later wrote:

“We stayed in Venice some days then we returned to Florence by way of Bologna, and at the end of 11½ months we entered again our homes, to the joy of our families.”

¹ Little is known about the youth of Frescobaldi, who belonged to one of the oldest and noblest Florentine families. In his account he states that he had taken part in seven battles. At the time of his pilgrimage, he was ambassador of Florence to Conte da Barbiano in Arezzo. After his return in 1385 CE he became mayor of Città di Castello, and in 1390 CE, he took possession of Montepulciano on behalf of the Florentine republic. In 1398 CE, he became Florentine ambassador in Rome to Pope Boniface IX. In 1405 CE he took part in the siege of Pisa, where he probably died, as his name does not feature in any later documents.

² Ancona & Bacci, 1906, *Manuale della Letteratura Italiana*, Florence, vol.I p.640

³ “Il suo viaggio ha singolare importanza, perch'ei non era un mero devoto in cerca d'indulgenze, ma anche un osservatore fino e arguto...”

The whole account⁴ was published in 1818 as *Viaggio di Lionardo di Niccolò Frescobaldi, in Egitto e in Terra Santa, con un discorso dell' editore sopra il commercio degli italiani nel secolo XIV*, by the Barberini Library in Rome⁵. Frescobaldi's account has always been highly regarded as a '*testo di lingua*', particularly for the importance of its vocabulary of early Italian⁶. Frescobaldi's narrative often mentions money⁷, and how the pilgrims were forced to pool their funds. He writes about the expenses of these journeys, the cost of goods in local markets in the Levant, his servant's wages and behaviour, and for these aspects this account has a particular importance in studies of mediaeval economics in the Levant.

It is also especially significant for one other reason; one might argue, in fact, it is critical to the discipline of Romani Studies. In the outward journey from Venice to Alexandria, between 4th to 27th September⁸ 1384CE, the ship entered the port of Modon (Methoni), in the Morea (the modern Peloponnese)⁹, to 'lade' (take on board) supplies of water, *biscotti* (hard, dried bread from whence we derive biscuit, or 'baked twice'), meat and salt for the trip across the Mediterranean Sea. The trip itself usually took seventeen to nineteen days to cross¹⁰, so Frescobaldi and his companions stayed in Modon for two or three days, exploring the city and its hinterland.

It was just outside the city walls¹¹ that the Florentine traveller found groups of black tents in which there lived *Aiguptoi* (modern Greek *Aigyptoi*) or 'Egyptians'. Frescobaldi describes their living circumstances as poor and "ragged", as had other travellers¹², but he is almost unique in asking the inhabitants of the tents who they were and what they called themselves.

⁴ In his account is a list of places visited that qualified for indulgences.

⁵ Guglielmo Manzi (1784–1821), who prefixed this edition with an essay (also in Italian) on the activities of Italian merchants abroad in the 14th century CE. His account of the journey was not the only one; Giorgio Gucci and Simone Sigoli independently wrote accounts of their adventures.

⁶ This is among the most complete and accurate accounts of monasteries and churches in the Muslim lands and gives a clear idea of the state of Christianity in the region at the end of the 14th century CE.

⁷ Not surprising perhaps, as the family had been bankers to the kings of England in the 13th century CE.

⁸ Late in the mediaeval 'sailing season', when mid–September to mid–November was considered 'chancy' at best in the Mediterranean.

⁹ The Venetian crusaders had conquered it from the Byzantine Empire c.1204 CE. The Venetians also held Coron, Nauplia and Argos with their fortresses, before losing them to the Ottoman armies c.1460 CE. A brief resurgence of the 'Kingdom of Morea', from 1684 to 1715 – with the islands of Lefkada, Leucas and Aegina also included, as part of the kingdom. A lack of investment in strengthening defences and poor relations with the local Greek Orthodox population led to the Ottoman reconquest of Morea in 1715, until the Greek War of Independence in 1821.

¹⁰ Öhler, Norbert (2010), *The Mediaeval Traveller*, Caroline Hillier [trans.], Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer

¹¹ The city was fortified against increasing Ottoman attacks and the notorious Maniot bandits.

¹² An account written by Felix Fabri, a pilgrim and Fr., in 1483 CE, shortly before Frescobaldi travelled. He stopped in Modon, before he and his fellow pilgrims continued on to Crete Fabri, Felix (1887–1897), *The Wanderings of Felix Fabri*, Jerusalem: The Library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, Vol.7, pp.184-186

The reply to this enquiry is the central point in the establishment of a record of early Romani identity in the late 14th century, as the ‘Egyptians’ told Frescobaldi they were *Romiti*, or more probably *Romitoi*, i.e., ‘little Romans’, or the ‘sons of the Romans’.

The Byzantine Greeks referred to themselves not as ‘Byzantines’ of course, but as the inheritors of the classical Roman Empire, i.e., *Romioi* or *Romaioi* (modern Greek *Rhómaios*). The Saldjūk Turks and Ottomans always accepted this definition, calling the Byzantine Empire, *Rum*¹³ (Rome)¹⁴. It was the ‘Empire of the *Romioi*’ (Βασιλεία Ῥωμαίων) or *Basileia Romaion* to the Greeks. It was also called, *Romānia*¹⁵, according to modern historians¹⁶, and may even have been more republican than imperial in character (with ‘Romanland’ being the nation–state of the ‘Romans’). In this, the ‘Romans’ or *Romioi* were the rulers and inhabitants of the territory where *Aiguptoi* first appear as a distinct and recognisable ethnic community, c.1100CE. Their subsequent coalescence into a ‘nation’ (as Mazaris, writing in c.1415CE, describes the ‘Egyptians’ in the Peloponnese), with their ‘barbarous’ (*barbarophonos*) language, i.e., *Romanës*, (a language that the Greek-speaking Romans did not understand) was one of several observed by the bereft and despairing exiled courtier, in his satirical letter to his friend Holobolos, who was living in ‘Hades’ (e.g. recently died)¹⁷.

These two sources, together with an earlier one from Constantinople¹⁸, are key to understanding and observing, through the eyes of contemporaries, the emergence of the Romani identity, as an *ethnonym*, alongside the *exonym* of *Aiguptoi* or ‘Egyptians’. The *Romitoi* were a ‘nation’ e.g., *natio* or ‘people’, in the eyes of the *Romioi*; they were skilled performers, diviners (fortune tellers) and entertainers, with a language of their own (mediaeval *Romanës*). The Romans considered them

¹³ Modern Greek populations in Muslim lands, including those in Turkey and Alexandria, are still referred to as ‘Rum’, often with ‘Ortodoks’ added.

¹⁴ The Saldjūk Turks had successfully conquered much of the Anatolian lands of Byzantium, following their victory (and capture the ‘Roman’ emperor, Romanos IV Diogenes) at the Battle of Manzikert on 26th August 1071 CE, and called their state the ‘Sultanate of Rum’ as a result. Likewise, the Ottomans claimed the title of ‘emperor of the Romans’ (*imperator* in Turkish) after the conquest of Constantinople on 29th May 1453 CE.

¹⁵ The decision by the Rumanian state, to adopt the term ‘Romania’ was a direct attempt to ‘claim’ this inheritance, and recall the inter-war irredentist terms, ‘Romania Mare’ or ‘Greater Romania’. It also had the consequence of deliberately damaging the success of the Roma emancipation movement in Rumania in challenging racist terminology, through refuting the use of ‘Roma’ and returning to the term, ‘Tsigan’ with all its pejorative overtones, in documents and pronouncements.

¹⁶ Kadelis, Anthony (2019), *Romanland: Ethnicity & Empire in Byzantium*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, p.ix; “They also had a proper name for their state, Romānia (i.e., Romanland), which is absent from most modern discussions.”

¹⁷ Seminar, Classics 600 at SUNY Buffalo, (1975). Mazaris’ *Journey to Hades; or Interviews with Dead Men about Certain Officials of the Imperial Court*, Greek text with translation, notes, introduction and index. Buffalo: Arethusa; Garland, Lynda (2007), “Mazaris’s Journey to Hades: Further Reflections and Reappraisal”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no.61, pp.183-214.

¹⁸ Nicephoros Gregoras (1295 CE to 1360 CE), in his monumental *History of the Romans (Byzantines)*, describes an encounter with a group of travelling acrobats c.1326 CE, whom he calls ‘Egyptians’, performing in the area of the Eleutheria harbour (now Eminönü). They are, he writes, supremely skilled and their act is not one of magic and sorcery, but of technical ability and mastery. Gregoras thus challenges the perception that the Byzantine ‘Egyptians’ are sorcerers and magicians, instead suggesting that their skills are learned and practised over many years, a significant difference from most other commentators on the ‘Egyptians’.

‘sorcerers’ and ‘magicians’, ‘barbarous’, or more simply, ‘foreigners’, and ‘aliens’. Despite the attitudes of Byzantines towards them, as a group they strongly identified with ‘Romanland’ and the ‘Romans’ amongst whom they lived.

The notion that Romani people were articulating a self-conscious identity, to a non-Romani person, a self-awareness of what Anderson calls “the imagined community”¹⁹, in the Byzantine Empire in the 14th century, is something that has been largely ignored in much scholarly debate and the public consciousness, in the period since. On or around 5th or 6th September 1384CE, Byzantine ‘Egyptians’ stated they were ‘Romani’, not, as is frequently argued, because of the linguistic relationship between Sanskritic *dhomba* and *rrom*²⁰, but because they were ‘the sons of the Romans’, and from that, ‘men’ or *Rom*²¹. The *Rom* **are** *Rom* because they were ‘Romans’²².

The presence of an ethnonym amongst the *Romitoi* (Romani people), and an exonym of *Aiguptoi* (‘Egyptians’) used by both Romani and non-Romani Byzantines (*Romioi*), Venetians, Genoese, Florentines, Paduans, *Franks* (French, Germans, English, and Europeans in general), and *Latins* (Catholic Christians in general), in no way contradict each other. Many ethnic communities maintain a self-ascription that is different from a more general, ascribed term for them, in most other languages, especially in this period²³. Mediaeval Byzantine *Romitoi* did so in order to both articulate their idea of community from within (as *Romitoi*), and to enhance their economic opportunities and exploit valuable niches as *Aiguptoi* fortune-tellers, diviners, acrobats, and bear-leaders²⁴.

Romani and Traveller people have always maintained and used these distinctions in nomenclature, in common with many ethnic communities and cultural groups; it is part of establishing group boundaries, as Barth has shown²⁵.

¹⁹ Anderson, Benedict (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso

²⁰ Or perhaps not only, if any trace of awareness of this connection remained amongst the *Aiguptoi* of Byzantium.

²¹ And having connotations of ‘human’, as in human being, in the Romani language, in which ‘Rom’ is the masculine singular personal. Bertil Tikkanen draws the conclusion that ‘Rom’ originates in *Rum* i.e., ‘Roman’ during this historical period; see (2013), “Romanikielen intialaiset juuret (The Indian Origins of the Romani Language” in Grandqvist, K. & Salo, M. [eds.], *Romanikieli ja sen tutkimusalat*, Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, pp.38–76 (in Finnish).

²² Still maintained the Turkish, *Romanlar*, plural of Roman meaning ‘Romani’, also in *Romanichals*, the plural for English Romanies, in *Rromani-chib*.

²³ Saldjuk Turks, for example, were frequently referred to as ‘Saracens’, ‘Iranians’, ‘Tatars’, and ‘the Devil’s horsemen’ by Christian sources from 11th to 14th centuries.

²⁴ Biblical Egyptians were perceived to be the most powerful practitioners of magic and the inheritors of ancient wisdom from the Chaldeans.

²⁵ Barth, Fredrik (1981), *Ethnic Groups & Boundaries: the Social Organisation of Culture Difference*, Boston: Little Brown

An Oxford doctor's record of "Egipt speche" c.1547CE

In his thirty–eighth chapter of the *Fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge...* (1547CE), Dr Andrew Boorde, physician and traveller, "*treteth of Egypt, of theyr mony and of theyr speche.*"²⁶. In this chapter we find one of the earliest records of *Romanës*, or "*Egipt speche*" as Boorde calls it²⁷. Before giving us samples of this, he describes the country and people: "The people of the country be *swarte* [black], and doth go *disgisyd* [disguised, *e.g.*, dressed] in theyr apparel [clothing]..."

Hall's *Chronicle* (1510CE) gives some more details about this "apparel" from what must have been a very early observation of 'Egipcians' in England, when describing two fashionable court ladies engaged in a court masque²⁸:

"Their heades roulded [wrapped] *in pleasauntes and typpers* [turbans], *lyke the Egipcians*, [like the Egyptians] *enbroudered* [embroidered] *with gold.*" [my emphasis]

Clearly, 'Egyptians' were apparent enough in England in 1510CE that their dress and headgear could be referred to as both well–known and modish. It should also be noted on Hall's description that the fashionable court ladies wore fine "*blacke... Lumberdynes* [muslin cloth, originally 'cloth made by the Muslims']"²⁹ on their faces, necks, arms and hands,

"...so that the same ladies seemed to be nygroat [African] *or blacke Mores* [north Africans]."

Boorde (1547CE) goes on, in his description of *Egipcians* "*...they be lyght fyngerd, and vse* [use] *pyking*³⁰ [pick–pocketing]; *they haue litle maner... yet they be pleasaunt daunser*", clearly referring to the common stereotypes associated with Romani people ever since. There are few 'Egyptians' living in Egypt anymore, suggests Boorde, as the land is now filled "*...with infydele alyons* [infidel aliens, *i.e.*, foreigners]", suggesting that the 'Egyptians' were common enough in European countries, and in such numbers, that English people could imagine Egypt as an empty land.

²⁶ p.217, chap.38

²⁷ Boorde is remarkably inconsistent in his spelling of the same words throughout.

²⁸ An event something between a formal dance and a theatrical performance of symbolic meaning, popular and Tudor, Elizabethan, and Jacobean courts in England and Scotland in the 16th and early 17th centuries. One such masque, by Ben Johnson (c.1621) was called, *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, and featured the Duke of Buckingham, King James VI & I's favourite at the time. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gypsies_Metamorphosed

²⁹ Barbara Lowe (1957), "Early Records of the Morris in England", *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp.61–82

³⁰ From which comes the pejorative term, 'Pikey', *not* from the suggestion that English and Welsh Gypsies 'sneaked' past 17th century turnpikes without paying the tolls.

His record of “Egipt speche [Egypt speech]” contains what is recognisably Romani language (in the same way as his English is recognisable to modern speakers), though at a distance of nearly five centuries. “Good morrow! *Lach ittur ydyues!*” for example, and “Much good do it you! *Iche misto!*”, “Good nyght! *Lachira tut!*”³¹ and so forth.

Despite Boorde’s work and that of later writers, such as Johan van Ewsum (1560’s), Bonaventura Vulcanus, and Joseph Scaliger (1597CE)³² knowledge about Romani people as a migrant, ethnic community with traditions and a language of their own, steadily disappeared in the 16th and 17th centuries. By the time of Jakob Thomasius’ dissertation³³, the notion of a group of penitent pilgrims fleeing persecution in the East, was being dismissed³⁴. Instead, argued Thomasius (and the Dutch theologian, Voetius), these people were a rabble, spies for the Turks and deserters from Christendom’s armies, undesirables ‘pretending’ (*counterfeit Egyptians* was a theme of 16th century laws) to an exotic heritage that was not theirs (a consistent theme in popular, and academic writing to this day).



¶ The .xxxviii. Chapter treteth of Egypt, and of theyr mony and of theyr speche.

An Egyptian from Andrew Boorde’s chapter on Egypt; the distinctive headgear and striped cloak is apparent in this woodcut.

Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopædia* of 1728 followed a pattern of repetitions regarding the negative traits of ‘Gypsies’ (a contraction derived from ‘Egyptians’), largely copying text from a century earlier, such as that of Minsheu (1617)³⁵. Johan Zedler (1749), continued to do so in his *Universal-Lexicon...*³⁶ (as did Diderot in his *Encyclopédie*, 1751)³⁷. The Byzantine recognition of early Romani people as a *natio*, albeit as ‘Egyptians’ or *Aiguptoi*, had been forgotten.

³¹ p.218, chap.39

³² Fraser, Angus M. (1995), *The Gypsies*, Peoples of Europe Series, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p.186

³³ Thomasius was Professor of Moral Philosophy, Leipzig University; *Disseertatio philosophica de Cingaris* (Leipzig University 1671).

³⁴ And described as ‘the Great Trick’ (see Fraser, A. 1992), though actually ‘Egyptians’ *were truthful* in seeking redemption for their early apostasy as soldiers in the Muslim Ghaznavid Empire, 10th century, before converting to Orthodox Christianity in Byzantium 11th to 14th centuries, then Catholicism in early modern Europe, from the 15th century onwards.

³⁵ John Minshieu himself had copied the wording of earlier Tudor legislation in using the familiar ideas about ‘forged’ identities, which Chambers repeated wholesale; “...a counterfeit kind of rogues, who being English, or Welsh people, disguise themselves in uncouth habits, smearing their faces and bodies... [with dye and using] ...an unknown, canting language, wander up and down; and under pressure of telling fortunes, curing diseases, &c. abuse the common people...”

³⁶ Zedler, Johan (1749), *Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaft und Künste* (Universal Dictionary of All Science & Arts), Leipzig. For further reading see Willems, Wim & Lucassen, Leo (1990), “The Church of knowledge”, in Salo, M. T. [ed.], *100 Years of Gypsy Studies*, Cheverly, MD: GLS, pp.31–50

³⁷ “...vagabonds who profess to tell fortunes by examining hands. Their talent is to sing, dance and steal.”

The self-identification of *Romitoi* was entirely ignored in these early modern treatises on the ‘Egyptians’, as they were degraded and literally ‘blackened’ by 17th and 18th century writers, developing early notions of ‘race’ and ethnicity. The European Enlightenment proved dark indeed for knowledge about Romani people, with the culmination of these themes in Heinrich Grellman’s *Die Zigeuner* (1783)³⁸, which was both more accurate, coherent and ordered, and more scurrilous³⁹. The material regarding Indian origins and Romani language came mostly from the *Weiner Anzeigen* journal articles (1775–1776) by Samuel Augustini ab Hortis⁴⁰ and possibly the pastor István Váli⁴¹, whom Grellman unashamedly ‘borrowed’ from.

The Indian connection of the people, not merely their language, was made by Jacob Bryant (1785)⁴², and William Marsden (1785), both pursuing the work of cataloguing and enumerating the ‘contents’ of the British Empire in India. Rüdiger (1782) was more sympathetic about ‘Gypsies’, condemning their treatment⁴³ and identifying more closely the connection between people and place, in history. Comparative philologists, pursuing a developing field of imperial study of non-European populations⁴⁴, became fascinated by an Indian language in Europe that had been present from the mediaeval period at least. The development of *Gypsy-Lorism*, a concomitant to *folklorism*, throughout the Romantic period, became recognised as a discipline more formally in 1888, with the establishment of the Gypsy Lore Society in Edinburgh⁴⁵.

As folklorism bifurcated into ethnology, anthropology and musicology, all in service to knowledge produced for the empires and bound into increasingly rigid categories of ‘race’, class and religion, *Gypsy-Lorism* adopted elements of all these.

³⁸ Of Göttingen University, Grellman, H. (1783), *Die Zigeuner: ein historischer Versuch über die Lebensart und Verfassung, Sitten und Schicksale dieses Volks in Europa, nebst ihrem Ursprung*, Dessau & Leipzig; 2nd ed. Göttingen 1787; *Dissertation on the Gypsies*, London 1787; 2nd ed. London 1807

³⁹ He described the European population as 700,000 to 800,000 ‘Zigeuner’ (Gypsies), mostly in south-eastern Europe, differentiated by occupation, such as gold-washers, tavern-keepers and smiths. His views on sexuality, cannibalism and a slew of other crimes were either copied from earlier encyclopaedias or invented by himself; see also Hancock, Ian (2008), “The ‘Gypsy’ stereotype and the sexualisation of Romani women”, in Glajar, V. & Radulescu, D. [eds.], *‘Gypsies’ in European Literature & Culture: Studies in European Culture & History*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.181–192

⁴⁰ Fraser, op.cit. pp.190–191

⁴¹ Though there is some dispute about this; see Hancock, I. (1991), “The Hungarian student Vali Istvan and the Indian connection of Romani”, *Roma*, No.36

⁴² *Archaeologica*, No.7, pp.387–394

⁴³ Treatment “...which our enlightened century should be ashamed to tolerate further.” *Neuster Zuwachs der teutschen fremden und allgemeinen Sprachkunde*, Leipzig, pp.37–84. Part one contains the material, *Von der Sprache und Herkunft der Zigeuner aus Indien*.

⁴⁴ And later, of smaller European populations in the Balkans, Basque country and other isolated, mountainous regions, such as Wales.

⁴⁵ And its concomitant publication, the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, now *Romani Studies: The Continuing Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*.

From a basis of philology and linguistics, wrapped in *Orientalism*, a 19th century fascination with the ‘Other’, and the ‘Noble Savage’ of so much Victorian scholarship and race–theory:

“British [and other]... ‘scientific knowledge’ actuated and allowed for the support and strengthening of racism in the imperial Empire of Britain”⁴⁶.

As knowledge increased (once more) about Romani peoples, ‘Gypsy voices’ were indirectly heard through the collections of tales and stories, songs, and origin myths, though mostly these were re–interpreted to conform to the hierarchy of ideas about ‘white’ superiority and ‘Gypsy’ (or other, ‘lesser races’) inferiority, even whilst recognising their ‘Aryan’ heritage in the explosion of interest in the origins of Indo-Europeans amongst the *Indo-Aryans*. ‘Gypsies’ became part of the iconic *Orientalised* images of the East, such as ‘Girls Dancing and Singing’ (1902), by Etienne Dinet (1861–1929), especially in the Ottoman Empire, deployed semiotically to enormous effect in portrayals of the Seraglio⁴⁷ or the streets of Algiers, Istanbul and Cairo.

Questions about this heritage played into the increasingly racial ideologies of nation-states of the early 20th century, ultimately underpinning policies and legislation regarding Romani communities within national boundaries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, the Austrian–Hungarian Empire and latterly, the Ottoman Empire⁴⁸. The late 19th century and early 20th century eugenics policies of states such as Sweden meant the adoption of forced sterilisation⁴⁹, whilst Norway attempted to eradicate Romani language, culture and family life,

⁴⁶ Conlin, P. H. (2018), “Victorian Racism: An Explication of Scientific Knowledge, its Social Character, and its Relation to Victorian Popular Culture”, *Inquiries Journal*, Vol.10, No.1, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1719/victorian-racism-an-explication-of-scientific-knowledge-its-social-character-and-its-relation-to-victorian-popular-culture>, accessed 25th November 2021; see also Mackenzie, John M. (1995), *Orientalism: History, theory & the arts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

⁴⁷ Penzer, Norman (1936), *The Harem: An account of the institution as it existed in the palace of the Turkish Sultans, with a History of the Grand Seraglio from its foundation to the present time*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co.; Pierce, Leslie Penn (1993), *The Imperial Harem: Women & Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press; Marsh, A. R. (1996), *The Kadınları Sultanatı [The Sultanate of Women]: Women & Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1556 to 1666*, London: University College London/SSEES, Andrew Ferguson Memorial Prize Dissertation

⁴⁸ The Ottomans approach to Ottoman *Çingene* and *Kipti* in the ‘Well Protected Domains’ had always been markedly different from Europe. Much more integrated into Ottoman classical society and economy, the ‘Gypsies’ of the Empire had experienced discrimination on the basis of religion, initially, and then on the grounds of occupation; under *shari’a* law, dancers and singers were ineligible to provide legal testimony and considered unreliable. Romani complex religious and confessional beliefs and the practice of fortune–telling, also made them suspect in the eyes of the *ulema* and *sheyh-ul Islam*. Hugely popular amongst ordinary Ottomans for these skills, for their production of a myriad of products such as baskets, spoons, copper coffee pots, lamps, shoes and boots, *etc.* and for the numerous opportunities for entertainment as acrobats, puppeteers, musicians, dancers, singers, storytellers, illusionists and magicians. Attitudes hardened with the revivalist Islam of late Ottoman sultans (Abdulhamid II, 1878 to 1908) and the penetration of European ideas about ‘race’ and reform that developed into a fully–fledged Ottoman Orientalism; see Usaama Makdisi (2002), “Ottoman Orientalism in an Age of Western Dominated Modernity”, *American Historical Review*, pp.768–796

⁴⁹ In operation, with regard to *Resandefolket* and *Tavringer* (*Tattare* was the term used in policies) from 1935 until 1976; <http://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/report-reveals-that-romani-women-were-sterilised-against-their-will-in-sweden>;

through forced labour camps run by the Norwegian Church⁵⁰. Similarly, state efforts in Finland and Denmark were aimed at aggressive assimilation of Romani and Traveller communities for many decades and across Europe, the control of the ‘the Gypsy menace’ was a constant theme of restrictive measures and surveillance. The attempted erasure of Roma and Sinti knowledge of the past was through the mass murder and genocide of the Nazi racial state and its allies in occupied Europe, 1936–1945, what is referred to as the *Porrajmos*, or *Sa o mudaripén*⁵¹.

The scientific knowledge, gathered through the efforts of *Gypsy–Lorists* and other scholars, ethnographers and anthropologists, was used in ways that *may* never have been intended by those collecting data and information, but nevertheless, this was the ultimate outcome when adopted and adapted to the twisted, pseudoscientific racism of Nazi and fascist racial ‘philosophy’, much of which had come from universities across Europe. Research amongst the Romani people was not then, nor remains today, value free, but was underpinned by the dreadful heritage of racist pseudoscience and ultimately, ethnic extermination.

The post–war period of Romani recapture and recapitulation of the past was slow and painful. Memories of the mass destruction of the European Roma and Sinti were hidden away by Romani people who’d survived. There was also the realisation of the eradication of an enormous oral heritage, lost in the smoke of the chimneys at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chelmno and the other death-camps of the Nazis and their allies. The wider, non–Romani world either ignored or refused to acknowledge this cultural and physical genocide, casting off those who spoke of it as liars and ‘counterfeit victims’ in a terrible repetition of the language of 16th century anti–Gypsy legislation. Small numbers of memoirs were published, and accounts were gathered by the few advocates for restitution, but it was a long time (1945 to 1995) until any degree of Romani knowledge was again collected into coherent accounts of traditions and memories of the past, fragmented as they had been by the appalling experiences of the mid–20th century.

⁵⁰ From the late 19th century, Norwegian *Romanifolket* and *Tatere* were incarcerated in camps such as Svanviken, conditions at which were exposed by Johan Lauritzen and documentary filmmaker, Vibeke Løkkeberg, in 1973; <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/norway-narrating-essay-long/>

⁵¹ *Porrajmos* is not a term that is always accepted as a description of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust, especially amongst Scandinavian *Romer och Resandefolket*, who prefer to use the less explicit *sa o mudaripén* or *sa o mudarimós*, ‘the murder of us all’; see Marsh, A. R. (2011), *The Mechanics of Marginalisation: the Gypsies and Genocide (O Baro Porrajmos)*, <http://romaniarts.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Dr-Marsh%E2%80%99s-2011-lecture-%E2%80%93-PDF-file-Gypsies-Genocide.pdf>

The Internet of things... Romani

The advent of the publicly available Internet in the mid-1990's and especially the shift to HTML 4⁵² by 1998, changed that. It led to an explosion of Romani and Traveller web-sites, portals and individual web-pages (many of them dealing with the 'forgotten' Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti), which brought greater numbers of Romani peoples into contact with each other, in ways that had not been possible for Romani rights advocates and community activists previously. Websites such as 'Patrin'⁵³, 'Jekhipé Tripod', 'Verein Roma' and many others opened up a whole world of *Romanipé* to other Gypsies⁵⁴, Roma, Travellers, and to non-Roma alike.

Online Romani magazines, such as 'Romani Patrin'⁵⁵ expounded a variety of differing views, opinions, arguments and propositions, allowing for contact between communities that had been largely closed to each other (those under Communism in the east of Europe and those elsewhere), for a distance of many miles and centuries in some cases, whilst bulletin boards, such as ROMNET, encouraged rigorous debate and robust scholarly argument. What might be termed 'the Golden Age' of the Internet, before computers became shopping terminals and the World Wide Web the domain of the 'post-truth' generation, established a popular Romani internet that contained an enormous amount of material produced by Romani people, about Romani people, without filtering through *gorgio* or *gadjé* sensibilities and biases.

That period has now ended, with an Internet that is a great deal more sophisticated in terms of design, security and delivery, but arguably poorer in breadth of content and actual information, especially from marginalised communities. The conversation and debate about a 'digital divide' appears to have receded and been replaced by the notion that if one has access to social media and online shopping on a mobile device, one is no longer impoverished or excluded. Yet the loss of a huge amount of Romani and Traveller webpages and websites that represented the broadest possible community of 'voices', with a potential to grow even further, is a major erasure of the past, particularly the political and cultural past.

⁵² <http://theoldnet.com/get?year=1996&scripts=false&decode=false&url=http://w3c.org>

⁵³ <http://theoldnet.com/get?url=http://patrin.com/>;
<http://theoldnet.com/get?url=http://jekhipe.tripod.com/>;
<http://theoldnet.com/get?url=http://verein-roma.at/>

⁵⁴ Through the 1960's and 1970's, Romani people in the U.K. had argued for, and won, the right to be recognised as Gypsies, with a capital 'G', in the media and legislation, following the model of the US civil rights movement who had reclaimed the term Black, and the LGBTQ communities who had done the same with Queer. As a consequence, the term Gypsies in the U.K. is the preferred nomenclature for English and Welsh Romanies, but *not* for those Roma from eastern and south-eastern Europe.

⁵⁵ <http://theoldnet.com/get?url=http://verein-roma.at/>

This past is now only partially accessible through The Old Net dot com, and the Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive, but few Romani or Traveller community members are likely to search through these somewhat esoteric sites, when the ‘ease of use’ of the post–truth era social media offers such seductive opportunities for apparent access to Romani organisations and community groups, surrounded by adverts and misinformation.

The *Barvalipé Digital Library of Critical Romani Studies* will be a repository for some of that older material, as it expands and grows into a genuine reference point for departure into a more varied, more inclusive view of Romani e–world opportunities for the future, without forgetting the past and allowing the erasure of Romani heritage to go unnoticed.

We don’t always need to re–invent the wheel and knowing where we have been and what has been built in the past will strengthen our journey into the future...