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# Migrations of the Romani People

Read the text below.

The Romani are a people and culture mostly native to central Europe. There are many sub-groups of Romani people including, Roma, Sinti, Kale, and Manush. Sometimes, Romani people are called Gypsies, although this is not the preferred term.

The origins of the Romani people were a mystery until the 18th century. In 1763, a Hungarian theology student named Stefan Valyi met three Indian students whose speech patterns were similar to Gypsies he knew in Hungary. Valyi published a paper on his findings, which prompted other scholars to analyze the Romani language. They traced it back to Sanskrit, an ancient language spoken in India. Historians now agree that Romani culture originated in northwest India.

## Early Migrations

The Romani began to leave India about 1,000 years ago. They probably left to escape the invasion of Afghan general Mahmud of Ghazni early in the 11th century. Mahmud's troops likely pushed the Romani out of northern India and into the area that is now Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran.

The Romani did not have a strong tradition of written or oral history, so scholars studied their language to piece together the path of their migration. (The Romani borrowed words from people they met in their travels.) In Iran, they split into two groups. One group went south, through Syria to northern Africa and Greece. The other group went north through Armenia before arriving in what is today Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. Many Romani stayed in these Balkan countries, while others migrated farther west into Europe.

In addition to language, Romani migration patterns can be documented in the written accounts of people who met them on their travels. Europe's earliest record of the Romani may be in the writings of a monk at Mount Athos, Greece, in 1100. German officials wrote about encountering Romani near Hamburg in 1417. People wrote about the Romani in Barcelona, Spain, in 1425. By the early 1500s, Romani were living in Sweden, England, and Scotland.

## Modern Migrations

Europeans who first encountered the Romani people greeted them warmly. Aristocrats who met Romani in the 15th century gave them letters of protection to travel from one country to another.

Romani adapted to the surrounding culture wherever they went. For instance, most Romanis adopted the dominant religion of the area. Today, many Romanis in the Middle East and Iran are Muslim. In South America, most are Catholic. In North America and Western Europe, they are Protestant.



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## Migrations of the Romani People, continued

Romani kept many of their traditions, however. Performing arts and metalworking were skills suitable to migration. Sculpture, jewelry-making, and practical metal arts continue to be a strong component of Romani culture. Romani are often recognized as excellent musicians and dancers. For example, flamenco, a song and dance style still popular today, originated from Romani in the Andalucia region of southern Spain.

The early goodwill toward Romani migrants eventually disappeared. Europeans began to resent Romani who refused to fully integrate into society. Romani were blamed for begging, thievery, kidnapping, prostitution, and witchcraft.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, many European countries enslaved the Romani people. In 1445, Vlad Dracul—the man who would become the basis for Dracula—captured more than 10,000 Bulgarian Romani and sent them to Romania as slaves.

In the 1700s, Portugal became the first country to deport Romani slaves to work in colonies in India, Brazil, and Africa. The French sent Romani servants to plantations in the Caribbean. The Spanish shipped Romani to colonies in North and South America. In North America, many were brought over as indentured servants. Most of these Romani were single people seeking a wealthier, more independent lifestyle in the New World.

The greatest number of Romani who came to the United States and Canada arrived in the 19th century. These immigrants fled famine, conflict, and political oppression in Russia and the Balkans.

During World War II, Romanis were victims of the Holocaust. Nazis isolated Romanis and forced them to wear identification patches—either black or green triangles. They were rounded up in concentration camps and executed. About 1.5 million Romani died during the time they call *O Porraimos*, or The Great Devouring.

In 2010, the French government began to break up camps of Romani people living in the French countryside. Under the program, hundreds of Romani holding Romanian passports are deported back to Romania—accused of illegal immigration into France. Currently, the deportation is a voluntary program, but it has stirred up a lot of anger between the French and Romanian governments.

Today, there are an estimated 12 to 15 million Romani. They live on every continent except Antarctica, some maintaining nomadic lifestyles and some in settled communities. The largest concentration of Romani is in southeastern Europe and Russia.

### Sources

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