

The Peoples of Europe

# The Gypsies

Angus Fraser



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## **The Gypsies** Angus Fraser

Since their unexplained appearance in Europe over nine centuries ago, the Gypsies have refused to fall in with conventional settled life. They remain a people whose culture and customs are beset with misunderstanding, and who cling to their distinct identity in the teeth of persistent rejection and pressure to conform. This book describes their history.

## **The Gypsies Details**

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Author : Angus Fraser

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## From Reader Review The Gypsies for online ebook

### Sara says

Didn't finish it. Progressively became less interesting

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### David says

I read this book because it was highly recommended in the bibliography of *Bury Me Standing* by Isabel Fonseca. Fraser's book is a good, serious, scholarly book for someone who wants to know more about the Roma, who are mostly called "Gypsies" in this book, which was published in 1990 in England. However, this is not as gripping or dramatic as the Fonseca book, and of course not up-to-date.

I imagine the ideal reader for this book as a university undergraduate who wants to write something about the Roma for a class because he/she finds them interesting, but who really doesn't know much about them. (Add a star if you fit this description.) The book starts on a very, very basic level: literally, with the dictionary definition of "gypsy". It then expands to include how the legal definition of this word in England has evolved in case law over many decades. The author writes clearly about the linguistic evidence that links Roma with an origin in India, and then their appearances (as a group) in the records of the civilizations that they had contact with as they moved eastward into Europe over hundreds of years: Persian, Armenian, Byzantine, and so on. (There is, unfortunately, no written Roma record with which to contrast these impressions.) The narrative follows them into Europe, where their initially friendly reception changed.

Toward the end of the book, there is a concise and easy-to-read summary of Roma sufferings under the Nazis, which similarly would be a good starting point for someone wishing to look into these things.

The author is sympathetic to Roma but also does not ignore the accusations of thievery which have followed them for hundreds of years.

If you are a Westerner reading this book (or any book about this topic) in a country where Gypsies are a sizable minority, I recommend hiding the book in the dust jacket of a different book, as a native who sees you reading this book may assume that you are a naïve and sentimental foreigner who knows nothing and needs a good talking to, which is only fun the first or second time it happens.

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### Lisa says

very good

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### Rama says

The Romani People; from a historical perspective

This is the story of gypsies, who arrived in the Balkans in medieval times and gradually spread over the Europe and Americas. For centuries these nomadic people have migrated aimlessly, but practiced their culture and maintained a distinct identity. They are traditionally known for music, metal-working, fortune-telling and horse-dealing. This book traces their origin to India and their trail out of the Indian regions of Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab and Sindh provinces of modern India. The Romani history shed light on their racial, ethnic and linguistic features and the uniqueness of their language that has grammatical characteristics of Indian languages. It shares the basic lexicon with Hindi and Punjabi, phonetic features with Marwari, and grammar with Bengali language.

Recent genetic study of 800,000 genetic variants (single nucleotides polymorphisms) from 13 different Romani groups are compared with the DNA from diverse group of Indian population. This study clearly suggests that ancestors of Romani people departed from northwestern India around 500 CE. From there, they traveled to Central Asia, the Middle East and subsequently to Europe, specifically to the Balkan region of Bulgaria. Romani migration continued around 1,100 CE into the heart of Western Europe.

Originally Romani ancestors came from Rajasthan province of India and moved to Punjab and Sindh areas around 250 BC. Their subsequent westward migration, possibly in waves, is now believed to have occurred beginning in about AD 500. Some scholars suggest that the exodus of ancestors of Romani to Europe occurred due to invasion of Islam into the Indian sub-continent. The ancestors of modern-day Romani people were Hindu, but in Europe, they adopted Christianity or Islam depending on their local traditions. Romani social behavior is partly regulated by Hindu purity laws. Some of their practices run parallel to the practices of "Shaktism," which gives prominence to a woman or female deity. For example, some Romani people worship Christian God, often prayers are conducted through the Virgin Mary, a practice unique to Romani people.

History documents the atrocities committed on Romany populations. They were expelled from parts of Germany in 1416, Milan in 1493, France in 1504, Sweden in 1525, and England in 1530. During WWII, the Nazis embarked on a systematic genocide of the Romani population. They were often killed on sight, especially by paramilitary death squads. It is estimated that between 220,000 and 1,500,000 may have been killed. In the summer of 2010, French authorities demolished at least 51 Roma camps and began the process of repatriating their residents to other European countries. Romani people are continued to be victimized and politicians and the media largely ignore these problems and focus on politically correct issues.

This book was first published in 1992, although somewhat outdated and does not contain the recent genetic studies that positively links the Romani (gypsy) people to India, but the linguistic evidence discussed in this book gave credence to their Indian origin. The book is a scholarly work of one of the experts in this field. This is a fascinating account of Romany migrations into Persia, the Byzantine Empire and Balkan nations; and latter into Europe, and the Americas. This work is recommended to readers interested in the ancient history of gypsy people and their distinctive culture.

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**Andreea says**

too historical I guess, though it has interesting bits on culture and tradition

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**Philip says**

This text makes a fine effort at trying to determine the origins of the Roma people. Further, the reader finds out how this minority was treated as they first entered Europe and about how the quality of their treatment declined dramatically throughout the Middle Ages and Modern Era.

**Jenna says**

Bought it for \$1 and so far it's worth it. Historic images and a moving history—no pun intended.

## Nikolas Larum says

This is an excellent general history on the experience of the Gypsies since their entry into Europe centuries ago. If you are curious about "real" Gypsies, this book is a must read. One of the testaments to its scholarship and authority is the numerous time other authors of Roma studies cite it.

## Benjamin says

that rare find -- a no bullshit book about the romanies. this is a history book.

## Doina says

Foarte superficial tratat capitolul despre Holocaust. In ultima treime stilul isi pierde farmecul, devine tehnic si sec, iar lectura ultimei parti e posibila cu chinuri din partea cititorului. Primele capitole sunt, insa, fascinante

## Cicely says

This book is a fascinating story about the history gypsies, from their start in India, and gypsy diaspora from Europe to the United States in present time.

## Hytham says

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## Liz Wager says

I found this fascinating -- I'm trying to trace a rumour that my paternal grandmother had gypsy blood, and this book renewed my resolve. I liked the way the author tackles uncertainties and doesn't try to ram his own theories down your throat but presents all the options. Scholarly but very readable.

## Eitental says

Although the title had me dubious about this work's academic merit (the terms "Roma" or "Romani" usually preferred to "Gypsy" by serious academics, in my experience), my doubts were quickly assuaged upon starting the book. Within a few pages it was apparent that this is certainly an academically thorough, well-researched and serious scholarly work, in which the author demonstrates a deep understanding of linguistics, history the social sciences as well as dabbling in such fields as musicology and folkloristics. Fraser defends his use of the word "Gypsy" as an overarching term that encompasses groups identifying variously as Roma, Sinti, Manouches, Dom and Lom.

This work is clearly intended as a comprehensive overview and, unlike in most academic monographs, the author doesn't push any particular theories or interpretations. This is especially relevant to the opening chapters about the origins and early migrations of the Roma, where Fraser makes no secret of the uncertainty of the matter and presents a range of different theories, offering only hesitantly his own appraisal of their respective likelihoods. This means that instead of a straightforward narrative history being provided, the (sometimes very limited) evidence is presented and sensible deductions are proffered, but readers are left to make their own ultimate conclusions.

I can imagine that a casual reader might find it too heavy going at times, as Fraser often goes into great detail – for example describing numerous, quite similar, records of dealings with “Egyptians” throughout fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe and explaining how linguistic analysis gives clues about their earliest migrations – but I for one found it riveting reading. It really felt as though I was going along with Fraser, taking part in the investigation, piecing together the evidence to create a picture of Romani history. I found the writing style clear and engaging – certainly not at all dry – though Fraser’s erudite vocabulary did have me reaching for a dictionary a couple of times. The text is broken up with lots of relevant paintings and photographs, though as they are printed in low-quality monochrome, they aren’t exactly beautiful and details aren’t really visible. The maps provided are fairly useful though.

The book's most obvious shortcomings are, I think, due not to any failing of the author, but rather due to a lack of information. As such, questions about religious beliefs and practices upon departure from India, and the timing of conversion to Christianity and Islam, are unaddressed. Similarly, up until the eighteenth century Fraser makes few attempts to even guestimate population sizes. These kinds of uncertainties are somewhat frustrating, but cannot be blamed on Fraser.

However, one shortcoming for which Fraser could be criticized is the issue of the Dom and Lom. As I

understand, there is much academic debate about the relation of these groups to the Roma. Fraser claims that the ancestors of the European Roma probably split off from the Dom and Lom while in Persia or Armenia, but does not directly address the theory that the ancestors of the Roma and those of the Dom and Lom might have left the Subcontinent at different times. Furthermore, while apparently including Dom and Lom in his understanding of the term “Gypsy”, Fraser more or less forgets about them after the first chapter. This absence of the Dom and Lom from most of the book brings me on to a second criticism: that of geographical scope. There seems to be slight undue weight given to Britain – a bias presumably due to the author’s own nationality – England and Scotland receiving nearly as much attention as the Balkans and Central Europe, where the Roma population is most concentrated. The Low Countries, France, Iberia and Scandinavia are all given due coverage, but the Roma of the Russian Empire/the USSR are given surprisingly little attention and those of Asia Minor and the Americas are scarcely mentioned at all. Of course it would be impossible for this work to cover all corners of the Earth in detail. I can only assume that Fraser decided to focus on Europe as the book was published as part of the “Peoples of Europe” series. In any case, this is far from a major problem.

The only serious criticism that I have is the fact that Fraser tends to treat the Roma only as objects of history, never as actors. The predominant focus of the work is the treatment of Roma by non-Roma and, above all, by states. Although it is clear that for much of their history Roma were overwhelmingly illiterate, and thus left behind no insight into their own perspectives, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did see the formation of Roma intelligentsias and Roma cultural organizations, of which Fraser makes but passing mention until the very end of the book, where a scant four pages are given to explaining that a pan-Roma movement has developed and to listing some of the issues they have turned to. Similarly, the book does not make a single mention of any kind of Roma activist, politician, community leader or public intellectual. Furthermore, for most of the book Fraser laments a lack of sources revealing anything of Roma lives and social organization, then when he reaches the modern day he makes surprisingly little use of the sources that I can only assume are available (I find it hard to believe that there are not plenty of first-hand accounts, interviews and anthropological studies). A couple of accounts of the lives of two Sinti individuals towards the end of the book really helped me to picture the reality of their lives and I feel that The Gypsies would definitely have benefitted from more such Alltagsgeschichte integrated throughout, rather than just added as a kind of afterthought. This criticism is a serious one, but thankfully only really affects the last part of the book, because, as mentioned, up until the nineteenth century there is very limited scope to view history from the Roma perspective.

If you know nothing whatsoever about the Roma and want a general introduction to them – especially if you aren’t used to reading academic literature – this might not be the book for you. If, like me, you have a general interest in the Roma, have read most of the relevant information on Wikipedia and were left unsatisfied, this is perfect. It could also be very useful for writing an undergraduate-level essay. Though it is probably too general to be of much use as a source for more advanced academic work, it would certainly provide a good overview and you could make good use of its extensive bibliography (sources are cited on almost every page). Although the section dealing with the twentieth century is a little bit weak, the vast majority of the book could scarcely be better.

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### **Mircea Poeana says**

Un studiu extrem de bine documentat si obiectiv. O lucrare obligatorie pentru cei interesati a afla de unde au venit si incotro se indreapta tiganii.

