Early Migration: Persia

Helmut Samer

Initial Context

For about 200 years, linguistic inquiries have proven the Roma’s origin to be situated in northwest India. The causes and time frames for their emigration to Persia, as well as the duration of their residence in the Persian Empire and probably familiar ties to groups still living there today, however, remain unclear.

Due to the lack of any written Roma documents, investigation of this early chapter of Roma history relies entirely on Persian or Arabic sources. Every once in a while, these sources point to immigrants of Indian origin, which are thought to be the first references to traces of Roma culture. However, it remains hard to prove whether these groups called Zott and Luri were in fact the true predecessors of the Roma people.

Immigration to Persia

Three sources from the 10th and 11th century document the migration of "Roma-like" groups from India to the empire of the Sassanides as early as in the 5th century A.D:

In 961 A.D., Arab historian Hamza al-Isfahani reported that once upon a time, due to a lack of singers in his own country, Shah Bahram V. Gur (420 -438 A.D) asked the King of India for musicians. It is told that 12,000 singers were sent to Persia from India and were spread throughout up into all the regions of the empire by Bahram Gur. There they married and had children, which, according to Hamza, "although fewer in numbers, are still to be found there." The report closes with the statement that "they belong to the tribe of the Zott."

A second version of this story can be found in the Persian national epic "Shahnameh", completed in 1011 A.D. In his description of the immigration process, its author Firdausi hardly differs from Hamza. The fact that he only talks about 10,000 musicians is of no importance. What is more striking, however, is that Firdausi calls the immigrants "Luri".

Of equal importance are his writings on their fate: according to the poet, the Luri upon their arrival were given each an ox, a donkey and seeds by the King. Instead of taking up farming life, however, the Luri ate the corn and animals and returned to the King the next year. Angrily, the King banned them from his empire. "So it happens that to this day, the Luri keep wandering around the world in search of a living, keeping the dogs and wolves company."

Only nine years later (1020), a third version of this incident was recorded. Arab historian Al-Talibi translated a later-on lost Persian text into Arabic, including it in his "History of Persian Kings". The essence of his version corresponds to the two other texts. However, the number of Luri is again different: this time, 4,000 musicians are mentioned.

It is tempting to draw a relation between the Shah’s musicians and the Roma. First of all, the "white Huns" had attacked and entered India between 415 and 500 A.D. It is not impossible that the group called Luri in the texts by Firdausi and Al-Talibi actually fled Persia under pressure from these hordes. After the Persian King Ardaschir (224-241 A.D) conquered northern India in the year of 227 A.D, the
political situation likely allowed for such extensive migration. Furthermore, descriptions of the Immigrants lifestyle allow for the assumption that they may have been predecessors of the European Roma.

Even today, there are nomadic groups in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan known as Luri, Nuri or Luli. As opposed to the Roma, however, they speak Beluchi instead of an Indian idiom. Although until recently they, too, travelled around as craftsmen and musicians, their migrations tended to aim east rather than west. It can therefore be disclaimed that today’s Luri are identical with those of former times.

This, in turn, raises the question of how reliable the entries in both texts are, which were composed long after the described incident had taken place. It is not the immigration itself that must be questioned, but rather the notion that the Indian immigrants were Luri.

Possibly, the name used by Firdausi and Al-Talibi for the Roma’s predecessors resulted from a mix-up due to a similar lifestyle and romantic aura surrounding both groups.

Equally unclear as the Roma’s relation to the Luri is Hamza’s claim that the Indian immigrants belong to the tribe of the Zott, who originally lived from raising water buffalos in the Punjab. The Zott eventually left the area in several phases for different reasons.

Already after the conquering of north-west India (227 A.D) by the Sassanides, the Zott had extended their migrations to the border regions of India and Persia. Up until the 7th century, a greater number of them served at the Persian court. In the course of Arabic expansion, they changed sides, turned to Islam and started settling in Basra. Having been followers of the Shah, the Arabs however judged them to be unreliable, eventually moving them to Antiochia on the Mediterranean coast.

After Muhammad ibn al-Quasim had conquered the Indus region, the Arabs deported several thousands of Zott to the mouth of the Tigris for the sake of border protection. There, these Zott became so powerful that they began to charge travelling salesmen tolls and openly rebelled against the Caliphate of Bagdad. As a result, Caliph al-Mutasim sent troops to fight them in the year 820. It was not until 834, however, that he managed to break the Zott’s opposition.

Arab historian Al Tabari reports that 27,000 Zott were brought back to Bagdad after their surrender, where they were presented to the people in their original clothes and with their musical instruments. After that, a smaller number of the rebels were deported to Khanikin, a place north-east of Bagdad. The great majority, however, were sent to settle in Ain Zarba at the border of the Byzantine Empire.

When the Byzantines attacked the Arab Empire in 855, as reported by Al Tabari, they kidnapped the Zott living in the border region and made them prisoners in their Empire.

The most important indication supporting the notion that the Zott may have been the predecessors of today’s Roma, is their continuous migration to the west. With the help of Arabic sources, their route can be traced from north-west India to Syria and on to the Byzantinean Empire.

However, fundamental problems arise from the fact that the Arabs didn’t only call the buffalo growers from the Punjab Zott, an Arabic form of their Indian tribal name Jat. They in fact used the same name for all the people and tribes of Indian origin who arrived in the empire throughout the centuries. When
sources mention Zott, they can actually mean the Jat or other immigrant groups from India. It thus remains unclear whether these texts can tell us anything about the Roma’s predecessors.

Likely, the name Zott, which is still common for the Roma in the Near East today, merely stems from a lack of differentiation at the time of immigration. To the Arab historians, the Roma appeared to be Zott just like all the other people from India they met. Based on their texts, the Roma cannot be grasped as a separate ethnic group.

Although the texts by Hamza, Firdausi and Al-Talibi hardly prove that the first Roma arrived in Persia in the 5th century, their writings at least allow for an important conclusion: when they were composed, around the year of 1000 A.D, they proved that the Indian immigrants must have already been established there to the degree that their arrival was moved far back in time. Even if it was not as early as during the time of the legendary King Bahram Gur, they must have arrived clearly before the 10th century.

Opposed theories moving the Roma’s immigration to Persia forward in time seem less plausible. Best known of all is the theory by Ian Hancock, who claims that the Roma’s emigration from India only began in the course of the attacks by Mahmud of Gazhna at the beginning of the 11th century. However, his linguistic evidence can be disclaimed by the simple argument that the Roma cannot possibly have left India the very same century they already appeared in Byzantium. Even by a maximal extension of the time-frame to about 200 years, Hancock’s theory cannot be made to correspond to the development of a Romani lexicon containing one third each of Persian, Armenian and Greek words.
References