

JUDIT SZABÓNÉ KÁRMÁN

The Church and the Gypsies

“Those who offer themselves to the church must be accepted regardless of age and nationality”¹

ABSZTRAKT

Mai ismereteink szerint a cigányoknak nevezett népcsoport elődeinek tekinthető proto-cigányok első kompániái a 11–12. században érkeztek Európa határaihoz. Megjelenésüket érdeklődéssel vegyes bizalmatlanság fogadta; korabeli krónikások felfjegyzései szerint külsejük és viselkedésük visszatetszést keltett, megélhetésüket biztosító tevékenységeik némelyike pedig az egyház tiltakozását váltotta ki. A Bolognai krónika egyik 1422. évi felfjegyzésében ezt olvashatjuk róluk: „...Meg kell jegyezni, hogy soha ilyen utálatos emberek nem fordultak elő ezen a vidéken. Soványak voltak és feketék, és úgy ettek, mint a disznók. Asszonyaik felváltva jártak-keltek a városban, durva ruhát viseltek a vállukra erősítve, gyűrűt a fülükben, és hosszú fátylat a fejükön. Egyikük a piactéren hozta világra a gyermekét, de három nap múltán már együtt járt a többi asszonnyal.”² Ennek ellenére az egyszerű nép egyre nagyobb érdeklődéssel fordult feléjük, s vette igénybe különféle szolgáltatásaikat; jövőmondó, rontást levevő és azt okozó mágiajukat, varázslásaikat. Érthető, hogy az egyház már korán, első megjelenésük idején fellépett ellenük. Tanulmányomban azt mutatom be, hogy miképp alakult, változott az egyház és a cigányság kapcsolata, közös története a 12–16. század között.

ABSTRACT

According to today's knowledge, the first groups of primary Gypsy people that are considered the ancestors of Gypsy people arrived to the borders of Europe in the 11th–12th centuries. They were welcomed with interest mixed with distrust; according to the records of chroniclers at the time, their appearance and behaviour was resented, and some of their activities of living provoked the protest of the church. We may read this in one of the entries of the Bologna chronicles in 1422: “...It should be noted that such abominable people have never set foot in this area before. They were skinny and black, eating like pigs. Their woman walked the streets by turns, wearing coarse clothes attached to their shoulders with rings in their ears and long veils on their head.”³ – Nevertheless, ordinary people had shown increasing interest in them, and resorted to their services of various kinds; their magic of fortunetelling or curse removal. It is understandable that the church took actions against them not long after their first arrival. In my study I aim to describe the relationship and the history between the church and Gypsies between the 12th–16th centuries.

The appearance of Gypsies and the first reactions of the church

Based on current knowledge, the ancestors of a part of today's Gypsy people are from Indian origin who roamed in the north-west part or the large subcontinent. These primary Gypsies – groups from different wanderer, artisan, and musician people – left the Indian subcontinent in several waves during the 4th–11th century due to various reasons (starvation, to escape from war,

1 KISS: A XVI. században tartott magyar református zsinatok végzései, 584.

2 FRASER: A cigányok, 76.

3 IBID. 76.

to acquire market share) in groups independent from each other.⁴ These groups of various composition, language and somewhat different culture wandered in many directions in several stages; some of them settled permanently, others temporarily, but most of them wandered continuously. The first source about these groups wandering from India was written by Hamza ibn Haszan al-Iszfaháni, who was a Muslim scholar of Persian origin. His work – *Annalium libri X.* – was written around 960 and tells that the Persian king (Bahram-e Gur, reigned between 421 and 438) asked for musicians from the neighbouring Indian king to entertain his subjects. After this, twelve thousand musicians a.k.a. *Zotti* people settled in Persia. The same story is told a few decades later by Ferdowsi – Firdauszi Abú'l-Qászem Manszúr ibn Haszan,⁵ the famous poet of Iran – in his work titled as the Book of Kings (*Sáhnáme*) in which he call these musicians *Lurs*.⁶

Some of the groups left Persia towards Armenia, and then they wandered further towards the East Roman Empire, the Balkans, and later Europe probably due to the Byzantine conquest, Arabic invasion, and the offenses of Seljuq Turks. Remains of the first data about Gypsies (*adsincanik*) living in the East Roman Empire are from the 11th century; a hagiography from Georgia written around 1068 tells the life of Saint George (Giorgi Mt'ac'mideli 1009–1065) who lived in Mount Athos. According to the legend – recorded by his loyal follower Giorgi Hucesmonazoni – around 1050 the emperor, Konsztantinosz Momomakhosz was fed up with wild animals that nested in the Emperor's park in Constantinople, and invited Simon, the magician of Adsincani origin, – who were considered scoundrels –, to exterminate those wild animals. The Adsincani exterminated the wild animals; meat chunks “bewitched” with magic (probably poisoned) were thrown to the animals which instantly killed them. The emperor was thrilled by this knowledge and power, and ordered to repeat the performance in his presence. The “enchanted” meat chunk was thrown in front of a dog. Saint George was at the scene. He was angry by witnessing this superstition and deception, and he prayed to God so that the trick would not work. (The dog ate the meat but remained unharmed to the surprise of the Adsincani people.) The emperor then proclaimed that he cannot be harmed as long as this man is beside him. (The Georgian Royal Yearbook or the Iberian Chronicle contains further references to the Adsincani people).⁷

From the 12th century, the church started to take a stand more firmly against the schemes of Gypsies (*athinganos/adinganos*). In his explanation to the documents of the Council in Trullo (692) even Theodore Balsamon – a 12th-century canonist – threatened with six years of excommunication those members of the church who engaged in fortune telling, superstition, magic, or making and selling amulets against evil eye while travelling around the world. The label *athinganoi* clearly refers to Gypsies; their ventriloquist skills were considered Satanic, and associated with witches, false prophets, and other suspicious societies. The church's fight against

4 SZABÓNÉ KÁRMÁN: A magyarországi cigányság I., 60–65.

5 HARRIOTT: Observations on the Oriental origin, 518–558.

6 Gypsy is called *Zott*, while the wandering, musician people of Iran are called *Lurs* in Arabic speaking areas.

7 SOULIS: The Gypsies in the Byzantine Empire, 145–147.

athinganoi had been vain as the Patriarch of Constantinople – Athanasziosz I. (1294–1303, and again 1310–1315) had to take actions against them almost a hundred years later. Decades later Joseph Bryennius (1340/1350–1431), a monk and preacher from Byzantium stated in one of his essays⁸ that among other things, the misfortune of the empire is the result of people meeting jugglers, magicians, *and athinganos* on a daily basis. The punishment of those who engaged in a conversation with fortune teller, magician gypsy women or let them in their houses was an anathema of five years by a 15th-century canon.

There are numerous records about Gypsies often called as “Egyptians” from the 14–15th centuries; their appearance, crafts, homes, habits were recorded by wayfarers, pilgrims, and wanderer monks. Typically, they lived separately from the majority of society in the outskirts or remote areas in small cabins or tents, sometimes in caves within poor conditions. From time to time, they would set out and wander on. Their dark appearance and various crafts – especially the males’ peculiar smithery – are described in the chronicles. The history of Gypsy people took a special turn in the 15th century, when they appeared in Europe pretending to be pilgrims and wandered throughout the countries as such.

The “pilgrims”

Pilgrimage is a part of almost every religion; Muslims, Buddhists visit the stages of the founder’s life on Earth. The primary purpose of Christian pilgrimage is to visit scenes where Jesus was born and where he died, as well as to visit the grave and relic of saints and martyrs. At the beginning of pilgrimage – in the 4th century – peregrination to Rome or the Holy Land was the sign of respect, love, and ascetism. However, from the 6th–7th century it began to be more about penance, therefore the purpose of pilgrimage was atonement, remorse, spiritual renewal, to find absolution, and to fulfil a vow. Pilgrims usually wandered in groups with a leader. Certain documents were also required. A safe-conduct (*salvus conductus*) or a letter of recommendation from a church or secular principal was required for the long, dangerous and costly journey. This official document had to include the following: the name, rank, address, signature and seal of the issuer, the data of the protégée, and the date and place where the document was issued. Safe-conducts were kept by the leader. The group was admitted to municipalities after presenting this document. Pilgrims were usually warmly welcomed; they received food, accommodation, occasionally even some money.

According to records, large groups of Gypsies were living in the Peloponnesus. Moreover, they established a settlement called Little Egypt on a mountain (Güppe/Gippe) near the port city of Methoni (which is a clear explanation why Gypsies who wandered further to Europe called themselves Egyptians). Presumably, they met Christians in Methoni – a station of the pilgrim trail towards the Holy Land –

⁸ Referring to SOULIS, Original text in French translation: L. Oeconomos: L'état intellectuel et moral des Byzantins vers le milieu de XIV e siècle d'après une page de Joseph Bryennios, Mélanges Charles Diehl I., Paris, 1930.

and observed their behaviour, and the “essence” and toolbox of a pilgrimage. Seeing how Christians were welcomed, Gypsies understood that they can wander with a different purpose, thus receive more favourable treatment in municipalities. Welcoming pilgrims was considered a benign act as per the teachings of the church. Therefore, by following the practices of Christian pilgrims, they acted as if they were repentant – obtained safe-conducts (forgeries, prepared in several copies so that different groups could use them), appointed a leader (often titled as “Prince” or “earl”), and made up stories about the reason of their pilgrimage (there are three or four such stories) – and arrived to the European countries in such groups of various size. Records about such Gypsy groups – firstly described by Fraser as the designers and implementers of the “big trick”⁹ – were first written in the beginning of the 15th century.

In 1407, donations allotted to arriving “*Tatars*” (a name for Gypsies at that time) were registered in Lower Saxony. Afterwards, more and more records were put down in the German speaking area about alms given to Gypsies called “*heiden*” (pagan). Their safe-conduct described

*“how their ancestors left the Christian faith in Little Egypt (a minori Aegypto) for a few years and turned towards culpable paganism; after that they confessed their sins, and were ordered to leave their families for the same amount of time of sinning, and go for pilgrimage as atonement to receive forgiveness as a pariah.”*¹⁰

Detailed reports are available about groups of *secanus* people – presumably Gypsies – who arrived to German towns at the end of 1417 in the *Chronica Novella* (1435) written by a Dominican monk, the chronicler of Lübeck, formerly a chief mercenary:

*“An odd, unfamiliar horde of people arrived from Alemannia (namely Swabia) who roamed the whole region all the way to the coastal provinces. They travelled through cities: starting from Lüneberg, then entered Prussia and passed through Hamburg, Lübeck, Wismar, Rostock, Stralsund and Greifswald. They moved in groups, camped in the fields outside the towns, as they were afraid to stay in the towns in fear of revenge for their thefts. There were about 300 men and women, not including children and infants; with a hideous look and dark skin similarly to Tatars, and they called themselves secanus. They appointed a prince and an earl as leaders to administer justice and to command. Nonetheless, they were great thieves, especially women. Many of them were captured and sentenced to death. Furthermore, they possessed safe-conducts acquired from Princes, firstly from the Roman king, Sigismund who ordered that those states, monarchs, fortified locations, towns, bishops and prelates who are visited by these people shall offer help and support to them. Some of them rode horses, other travelled by foot. They claimed that they are forced to roam in foreign countries because of leaving their faith and drifting into apostasy. Their bishops ordered them to roam in foreign land for seven years as a form of atonement.”*¹¹

⁹ FRASER: A cigányok, 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 69.

¹¹ HERMANN CORNERUS: *Chronica novella usque ad annum 1435*, in: Eccard, J. G.: *Corpus historicum medii aevi*, Leipzig 1723, 2. köt. 1225. hasáb (Idézi FRASER: A cigányok, 70.).

The origin of *secanus* is still disputed, but it is certain that the abovementioned safe-conduct issued by King Sigismund in 1417 was forgery as it is clearly shown by researches.¹²

In the first decades of the 15th century, they received donations in the hanseatic cities as “Indigents from Little Egypt”. A different version for their pilgrimage was known in Zurich, Switzerland. According to that, Turks chased them away from their homes for being Christians, and they must do penance for seven years. According to the records of contemporaries, in 1419 in France they wandered with the leadership of “Andrew, the Prince of Little Egypt” in a group of 120 people and called themselves “Saracens”. The fearsome strangers – as they were described – camped in the fields and made a living out of palm reading and witchcraft. They appeared in various cities with copies or updated versions of the same safe-conduct. Mostly they arrived with the leadership of “Andries, the Prince of Little Egypt”, or “Lord Andreas, the Prince of Little Egypt” with a safe-conduct issued by King Sigismund. They received food abundantly, as well as accommodation and money. According to the Brussels Chronicle, beer, wine, bread, one cow, four sheep, and 25 pieces of silver was donated from the city to the “Prince” in January, 1420. Their city of Mons was visited by *Prince Andrew* and his team, followed by *Prince Michael* with another group. In other places the name of the leader was not preserved but the denotation “*Egyptians*” and the following description: “*they were thieving, women did fortune-telling while children were picking pockets, and men were the masters of horse-trading.*”¹³

From 1422, new safe-conducts had to be prepared resulting in letters originated not only from Sigismund and other rulers but from the Pope himself. The Egyptian Prince Michael’s group arrived to Basel with such “papal safe-conduct” in the summer of 1422. Although, safe-conducts originated from the Vatican are mentioned in the chronicles several times, it is certain that these were forgeries. No visit or request to the Pope from Gypsy people is mentioned in the documents, records, or chronicles of the Vatican, and papal documents do not include any sign of safe-conduct issued to Gypsies or Egyptians. On the contrary, the church never patronized them in any way. In July, 1422 another group of 100 people under the leadership of Prince Andrew passed through Bologna, and camped there for two weeks. According to the city chronicle, they claimed that their land was confiscated for leaving Christianity, and after reclaiming their faith, the king ordered them to roam for seven years and visit the Pope as well. Prince Andrew asserted that the Hungarian king allowed them to fill their needs by thievery. It was recorded in the Bologna Chronicle that besides witchcraft and fortune-telling, they often robbed stores and homes as well. This resulted in conflicts between residents and Gypsies; they were ostracized and even obliged to pay compensation. A long and negative description was written about them by the chronicler. These records – by painting a more and more negative picture about these passing groups – unambiguously reflect that instead of a warm welcome, residents started to turn away from Gypsy “pilgrims”

¹² NAGY: „Fáraó népe”, 10.

¹³ FRASER: A cigányok, 71–75.

everywhere. In 1423, a group of Gypsy people arrived under the leadership of Ladislaus (*“waydona Ciganorum”*) – presenting a safe-conduct received from King Sigismund in 1422 – in Ratisbon, Bavaria. According to the chronicler:

“They settled near Ratisbon in small groups: all together 30 men, women and children at most. They camped in the field, as they were not allowed to sleep in the city due to their infamous skill of taking what is not theirs. They came from Hungary and claimed that their exile is a reminder to the fact that Jesus Christ was hiding in Egypt from Herod who wanted his blood. However, common people thought they were scummy spies.”¹⁴

We know today that this safe-conduct was also forged; it is proven that Sigismund of Luxembourg was not in Spiš on 19 April (on the Sunday before St. George's day as per the signature) – as indicated in the place of issue in the document – but he was in Prague. Original version of this false “copy” was not found in the archives from the Sigismund era.¹⁵ In 1427, Thomas, the “Earl of Little Egypt” led his group to the suburbs of Paris by presenting a papal safe-conduct where – as proven by a record from that time – the dark skinned, exotic, Egyptian people (women with huge silver earrings, dressed in peculiar and strange clothes, reading palms) were received with great interest. However, the Bishop of Paris threatened fortune tellers and those who took their service with anathema, and they were even chased out of the city. In the 1430's, numerous Egyptian groups arrived to Spain under the leadership of “Earl Thomas” and “Earl John” from Little Egypt. They used a safe-conduct received from the king of Aragon, thus they were exempt from paying any customs or fees. They were not shabby-looking or broke, as according to the declaration of assets they possessed *“5 horses, each worth 20 pieces of silver; 5 gowns woven from silver; 4 silver chalices, each weighed approx. 230 grams.”¹⁶*

In the 15th–16th centuries, similar wanderer groups crossed almost every country in Europe;¹⁷ the first records about their appearance in Portugal were found from the 15th century, and they appeared in England, Scotland, Denmark, Wales, Finland, Norway, Estonia and Sweden in the 16th century. They arrived to Russia in the first half of the 16th century, and later in the 17th century – mainly due to the relocations from Portugal and Spain – they reached Africa and America as well. According to available sources, migration of Gypsies at that time was not coherent but a movement of groups different and separate from each other, following different paths and rhythm. Some of them would stop sometimes and spend shorter or longer time at places depending on the reception and market opportunities, some of them would settle down, while others would move on. Groups in the Greek islands, Macedonia, and Thrace stopped wandering in the 15th century. They settled in as blacksmiths and farmers in the southern region of Italy, and as merchants and handicraftsmen in Spain among natives and other immigrated nations. Unlike

¹⁴ MEZEY–POMOGYI–TAUBER: A magyarországi cigánykérdés dokumentumokban, 76.

¹⁵ NAGY: „Fáraó népe”, 11–12

¹⁶ *IBID*: 80.

¹⁷ LIÉGEAIS: Romák, cigányok, utazók, 17–24.

settled Gypsies, those who wandered were welcomed less often from the middle of the 15th century; at first they would receive donations, but mostly they were not even allowed in the towns, and were given money to move on at the earliest. The most common complaint against them was thievery and their behaviour causing disturbances. People often believed that they were spying for the Turks, or betrayed Christian countries. Some even thought that they spread plague. Their clothing, behaviour, appearance and crafts of jugglery, magic, fortune-telling and snake charming, furthermore the titles they used such as Earl and Prince provoked the disapproval and refusal of citizens, common people, offices, and the church. In the Holy Roman Empire, the first edict was issued against them in 1497, then in 1498 and 1500; all Gypsies had to leave the German territories, and those who resisted the law was condemned as an outlaw and violence could be used against them (they could be abused or murdered without any consequences). In 1510, they were banned from Luzern under penalty of hanging, and then they were banned from England and Wales in 1530. In 1537, they were given four days to leave the empire by the imperial decree issued in Brussels, threatened by capital punishment and confiscation of property. In 1532, these “low-class Egyptic Gypsies” were banned and outlawed from the Italian duchies under penalty of hanging. In 1536, Denmark, Norway, and then Sweden expelled Gypsies. In Portugal, a law was introduced for deporting Gypsies or relocating them to African colonies. This law was also applicable to those “leading a lifestyle similar to Gypsies even though they are not Gypsies themselves.” In 1541, they were banned from the Czech Republic, then a decree was issued against them again (they were accused for the fire of Prague). In 1557, Gypsy groups were expelled from Poland. In 1561, Charles IX of France threatened those who did not leave the country with three years of galley slavery. In 1580, a regulation was issued in Switzerland that those Gypsies who stayed or entered the country must be tortured then released. Afterwards, they could be murdered freely without any consequences. This is when the so-called “Gypsy hunters” started to spread in the German speaking territories.

Unlike in other European countries, there was not any law or regulation for deporting Gypsies out of the country in historical Hungary. However, in Wallachia and in the Principality of Moldavia immigrating Gypsies were to expect enslavement.

The Church and Gypsy people in the 16th century

The church had the strong suspicion that gypsies - especially due to their behaviour, “crafts”, and aversion from the church – were actually heretics. The papal bulls of the 1500’s such as *Licet ab initio* (Pope Paul III. 1542), then *Immensa Aeterni Dei* (Pope Sixtus V. 1588)¹⁸ that confirmed the roman inquisition to take action against heretics and those who became detached from faith, thus making it possible that sanctions against gypsies – even without naming them – to created. The church leadership of the following century also distanced itself from them; the decrees

¹⁸ VÁRNAGY: A cigányok és a katolikus egyház, 96.

of the Trnava Synod of 1611 and 1629 – which however did not name gypsies but made obvious references to them – ordered the clergy against their activities:

“Spells, magic, fortune telling, casting of lot, palm reading, quackery is often scourged in sermons, and if superstition turns out about someone, the bishop shall be informed.”

“Ordinary people easily become superstitious, wise-women heal with superstition and use spells.”¹⁹

It was stated at the Hungarian reformed synods that the attitude towards Gypsy people shall be clarified when creating the church ordinance. The article – *“Those who offer themselves to the church must be accepted regardless of age and nationality”* – of the XLV Synod of Debrecen in 1567 include the following:

“As ordered by the scripture, each and every man and woman, child and infant of all ages shall be taught and baptized. (Matthew 18). Therefore, we are responsible for baptizing those who offer themselves, accept and take the knowledge and the faith, and are not dogs or pigs. (Mark 16). Gypsies and similar apostates unfamiliar with the foundations of the true faith shall not be allowed to the Holy Communion or to be baptized. Those who despise the word of God and the foundation of the Christian faith, and do not wish to listen to the word of God, shall not be served with the sacrament of Holy Communion or baptism, such as Gypsies and similar deniers. ‘Do not give that which is holy to the dogs’. Clergymen shall be prohibited from marrying such people.”²⁰

The collection of church decrees in Upper Hungary in 1595 also rigorously defined who is entitled to receive sacraments from the clergyman. Article XIV. – entitled as *Those who shall not be granted sacraments and a decent funeral* – includes the following:

“We have decided that who despise the word of God and the axioms of the Christian religion and do not know the Lord’s prayer and despise Him, such as Gypsies and similar sinners: those must keep away from Christianity and must be denied of the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. Even when they are dead, they do not deserve a decent funeral: ‘Do not give that which is holy to the dogs, or put your jewels before pigs’.”²¹

It is proven by numerous records – which will be detailed in the next part – that these decrees did not exclude Gypsies from the church on a universal or general level. Strict requirements were set out on them – like on every believer – however catholic, reformed and evangelic registers serve as an evidence that Gypsies had been married, buried and baptized in each congregation already in the first years of the 17th century.

¹⁹ DIÓS–VICZIÁN (eds.): Magyar Katolikus Lexikon.

²⁰ KISS: A XVI. században tartott magyar református zsinatok végzései, 584.

²¹ IBID: 713.

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