

“Gypsies” as “Foreign Immigrants” from Egypt (1732)

Abstract

This article comes from the 1732 edition of the *Allgemeines Historisches Lexikon* [*General Historical Dictionary*]. Dictionaries claimed to provide generally valid, objective knowledge. Here “Gypsies” (Sinti and Roma) are presented as an exotic people from old Egypt, as “vagabonds” and “roamers” who had been immigrating to Europe and Germany since the fourteenth century. The text stereotypes them as thieves and sorcerers, and as non-Christian, coining pejorative topoi that fed perception, discourse, and policy all the way into the twentieth century.

Source

Zeugitana, a region in Africa on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, is separated from Numidia by the Tusca [Zaine] River and is now part of the Kingdom of Algeria. It is said that the inhabitants of this country were very devoted to palm-reading, and that the vagabonds, who are called Bohemians or Egyptians, come from there. The Germans call the latter “Zigeuner” [Gypsies]; the word has some similarity to the word “Zeugitane.” The former, who appeared in Germany in 1417, were black, ugly, and badly dressed. They took their wives with them and had a captain, called “Zundel,” whom they venerated, and who was better dressed than the others and was thus distinguished from them. They called themselves Egyptians, professed that they had been banished from their country because their ancestors did not wish to accept the Holy Virgin Mary and her son when Joseph took them there and sought to make their people white, as a result of which they were condemned by an order of God to atone for this sin with seven years of exile during which they would have to move around and would have no fixed place. Afterwards, when they arrived in France, they declared that the Pope had imposed that official penance on them because they had renounced the Christian faith and become Mohammedans, and that this punishment would be passed on to their descendants. It may be that these roamers came from Nubia or Egypt and after that spread out unnoticed into the countries around the Danube, from where they passed through Hungary into Bohemia, at which time they then first appeared in Germany, Italy, and France. In the countries through which they traveled they took with them the people who wished to join them and whom they thought suited their purposes. Some claim that they were descended from the inhabitants of the city of Singara [Sinjar] in Mesopotamia (now called “Atalib” and located in Diarbeck [Diyarbakir]), who were chased out of their country by Julian the Apostate. In contrast, [Johann Christoph] Wagenseil maintained, not without plausibility, that the first *Zigeuner* were Jews, who were beaten down in the fierce persecution of this people around the middle of the fourteenth century, on account of the plague raging at the time, and [who], in order to be more secure, had claimed completely foreign and distant origins. This view seems to have been confirmed both by the time at which these people first appeared and by the many Jewish and Hebrew words that are mixed into the *Zigeuner* language. Although it is not known with any certainty where they came from originally, it is in fact certain that Charles V banished them from Spain and Brabant in 1549; Charles IX, from France in 1561; and the United Netherlands, from their territories in 1582, after they had made themselves hated by their thievery and sorcery. There are also similar people in Turkey who are called *Torloquen* [*Torlaquis* = Qalndariah, actually a sect of Sufism] and were chased out of various places by Bajazi[d].

[....]

Source: "Zeugitane," in *Allgemeines Historisches Lexicon*, Third and Fourth Part, H-Z, Leipzig: Thomas Fritsch, 1709, p. 722. Available online at: <https://digital.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/hd/content/pageview/1715539>

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