

ROMA IN THE BALKANS DURING THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE¹

Mariyana Farkova²

Abstract

The article presents a picture of the Roma in our lands during the times of Ottoman Domination, from the 14th to the 19th century. Regarding these dramatic times, the author has used authentic testimonies and scholarly texts by researchers of the Roma. Their way of life (traditional occupations and skills), their military duties within the empire, the taxation system imposed on them, their attitude to religion, have been studied in the article. The author has traced the specific way in which the Roma fitted into the institutions of the Ottoman Empire, their particularity as a community living parallel with, yet isolated from, the others, and the attitude of those others towards them. During their long centuries of life in the Balkans within the Ottoman Empire, the Roma succeeded in preserving their specific way of life, their crafts and culture, thereby demonstrating their power of endurance.

Key words: history of the Roma, Ottoman Empire, way of living, religiosity, occupations, taxation.

Gypsies or Roma! This enigmatic community has the magic ability to survive in time. For hundreds of years the Roma population, differentiated along the “crossroads of history” (as phrased by the French scholar Jean-Pierre Liegeois), succeeds in preserving itself despite hundreds of legislative examples in Western and Central Europe aiming at their destruction, assimilation, and exclusion from public life, including within the mighty Ottoman Empire. The Muslim Millet did not assimilate them even during the hardest periods for the Ottoman Empire’s subjects.

According to several Roma intellectuals, one of the secrets of the survival of the Roma over the centuries is rooted in their ability to coexist with other peoples and nations without aspirations for their own state, which would set limits on their feeling for freedom (M. Courthiade, S. Savchev, Y. Nunev, V. Chaprazov). They have the gift to adapt to others, to learn their language, to internalise the fundamental codes of their culture and simultaneously to preserve their own ancient customs and traditions, to stand up for their uniqueness and authenticity. It is not by chance that the Ottoman geographer, historian and traveler Evliya Çelebi, who lived during the eighteenth century, wrote about them: “The Rumelia Gypsies celebrated together with the infidels the misfortunate festivity of the red eggs, together with the Muslims – the celebration of the sacrifice, and together with the Jews – the celebration of cane, without accepting any of the religions. Because of that when there is a funeral none of our Imams reads prayers and close to the skewed gate they are given a separate place for graves of Gypsies.” (Челеби 1972: 111).

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² **Mariyana Farkova** works at the Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. E-mail: marnifark@abv.bg

Roma people's enduring ability to maintain their own identity can be observed in the Ottoman Empire. The invasion of the Ottoman Turks, which led to the fall of the mighty Byzantine Empire and many Balkan states, is considered one of the most tragic events in Balkan history. Thus, around the end of the fourteenth century and at the beginning of the fifteenth century a drastic change occurred on the peninsula. Bulgarians, Serbs, Albanians, Greeks and Moldovans, in spite of their resistance, were forced to surrender their independent states and accept the rule of the invader – sometimes forcibly, at times voluntarily. For ages, the cultural-religious, social-economic autonomy of the *promillet*, evolving from non-Muslims (*zimmis*, plural form of *zimma*) to millets, preserved and mobilised different peoples and ethnic groups in the Empire – Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs, Wallachians, Gypsies, Albanians and so forth (Иванова).

When it comes to the Roma people prior to their contact with the Turks, they most likely have lived in these territories in earlier centuries, but explicit evidence of their settlement in the lands of the current-day Bulgarians, Serbs and Croats before the fourteenth century is rather limited. (Byzantine scholars, for example, accepted that there was evidence of Roma people in Byzantium.) There are data regarding their migration from Asia to Europe that started in the fifth and sixth centuries and most likely continued throughout the following centuries. Additionally, the prevailing claim that India is their true land of origin has already become quite popular.

A number of researchers who studied the Roma people during the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Bulgarian territory (Stojanovski, Zirojevic, Mujic, Crowe, Fraser, Marushiakova and Popov), categorically assert that the Roma mass settlement of these territories occurred in period between the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, with a few settlements of *atsingani* (derived from the Greek *ατσιγγανοι* - *atsinganoi*) in the beginning of the ninth century in the region of Thrace (Зиројевић 1976; Стојановски 1974). According to David Crowe, most likely the initial active migrations of Roma people in Bulgarian territories occurred during the period of Byzantine rule in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Crowe 1994).

Regardless of scholarly hypotheses concerning the earliest Roma settlements in Bulgarian lands, one thing remains certain: the Roma population began to increase with the invasion of the Ottoman Turks. The increase in population numbers was duly detected when the Ottoman army invaded the peninsula's lands during the fourteenth century. The specific "registration" of the Roma people in the Ottoman Empire differentiated them by ethnic micro groups, divided by kinship, occupation and religiosity in parallel communities. In doing so this often functioned to isolate them from "the others" – both other Roma and non-Roma--despite their constant contact.

SOCIAL ORDER OF THE LIFE OF THE ROMA PEOPLE IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Svetlana Ivanova, a renowned Bulgarian researcher on the Ottoman Empire, has noticed that the Roma people called *kıptî*, less often *çingene*, are referred to as "a specific ethnic community strictly differentiated in the Ottoman documents not only from Christians and Muslims, but also from the other nomadic