

# Origin of Roma and its interdisciplinary discourse

Michael Beníšek

[michael.benisek@ff.cuni.cz](mailto:michael.benisek@ff.cuni.cz)

# Introduction

- One of first topics discussed in Romani studies
- Romani Studies were born out of discussions on the origin of Roma
- Primarily a linguistic issue (origin of the Romani language)
- Many non-linguistic theories, hypotheses and speculations
- In the following: the academic discourse on the origin of Roma during history is presented
- Questions that were asked by scholars and their answers, sometimes also motivations of answers
- Only a selection of the most important discussions

# CONJECTURES OF THE PRE-SCIENTIFIC PERIOD

- 15th century in Central and Western Europe: speculations and hypotheses about origin
- **Egyptian origin:** the most widespread (attested from 13th century in Byzantium; Greek Αἰγύπτιος, pl. Αἰγύπτιοι > English *Gypsy*, Spanish *Gitano* etc.)
- Roma lived in regions called Little Egypt in the Balkans (Byzantium) and claimed their origin to be there
- Some scholars regarded Romani as a language from Egypt

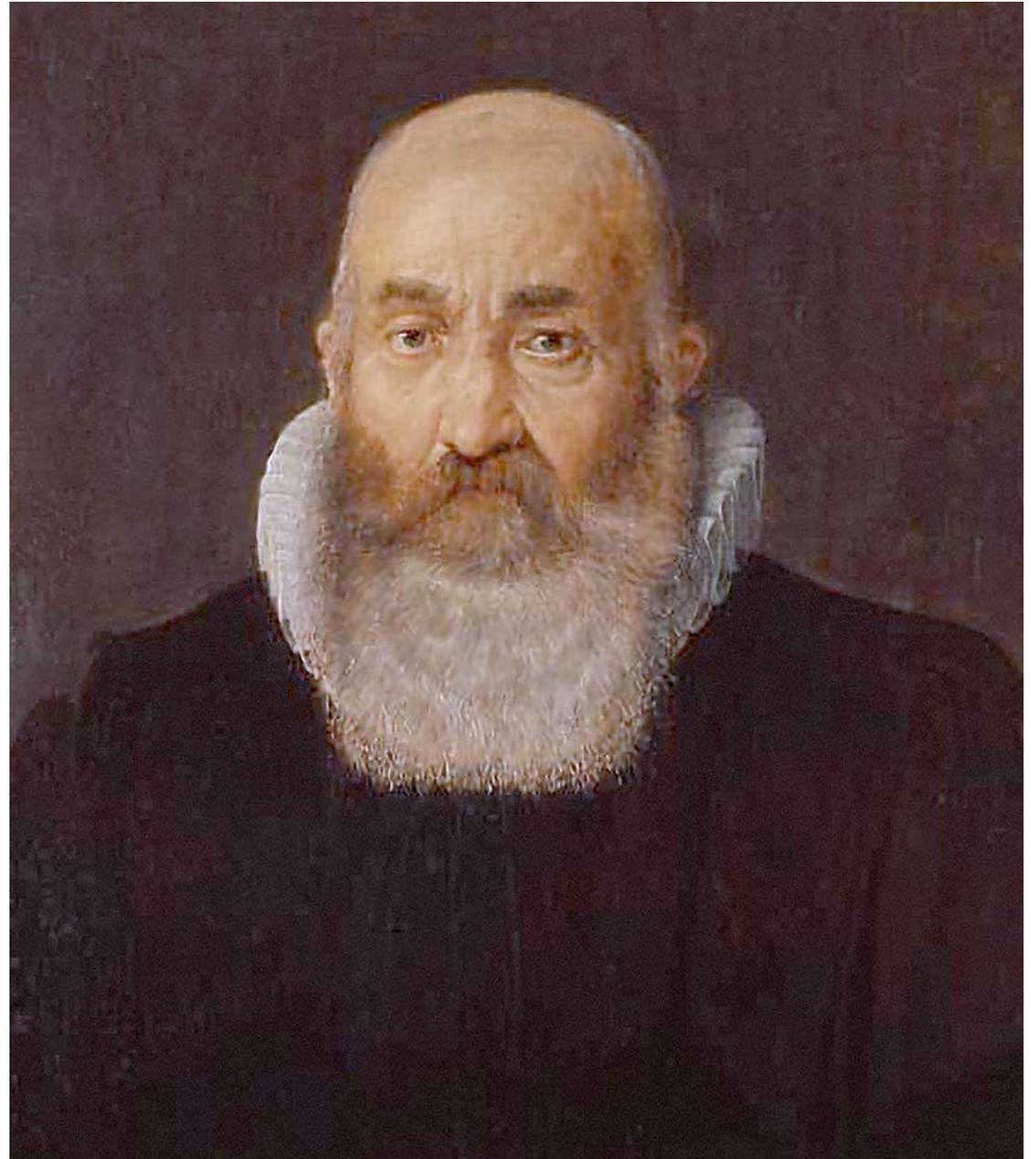
# Andrew Borde

- physician, writer and traveller
- 1547 (written 1542) *Fyrst Boke of the Introduction to knowledge*
- geographical part: description of Egypt, contains a specimen of 'Egyptian' language: 13 sentences in Romani
- one of the first documentation of Romani; probably an ancestor of British Romani



# Bonaventura Vulcanius

- Dutch professor of Latin and Greek
- 1597 *De literis et lingua Getarum sive Gothorum*
- contains vocabulary of 71 Romani words
- language of 'Nubian vagabonds'
- from Nubia (region in southern Egypt, northern Sudan)

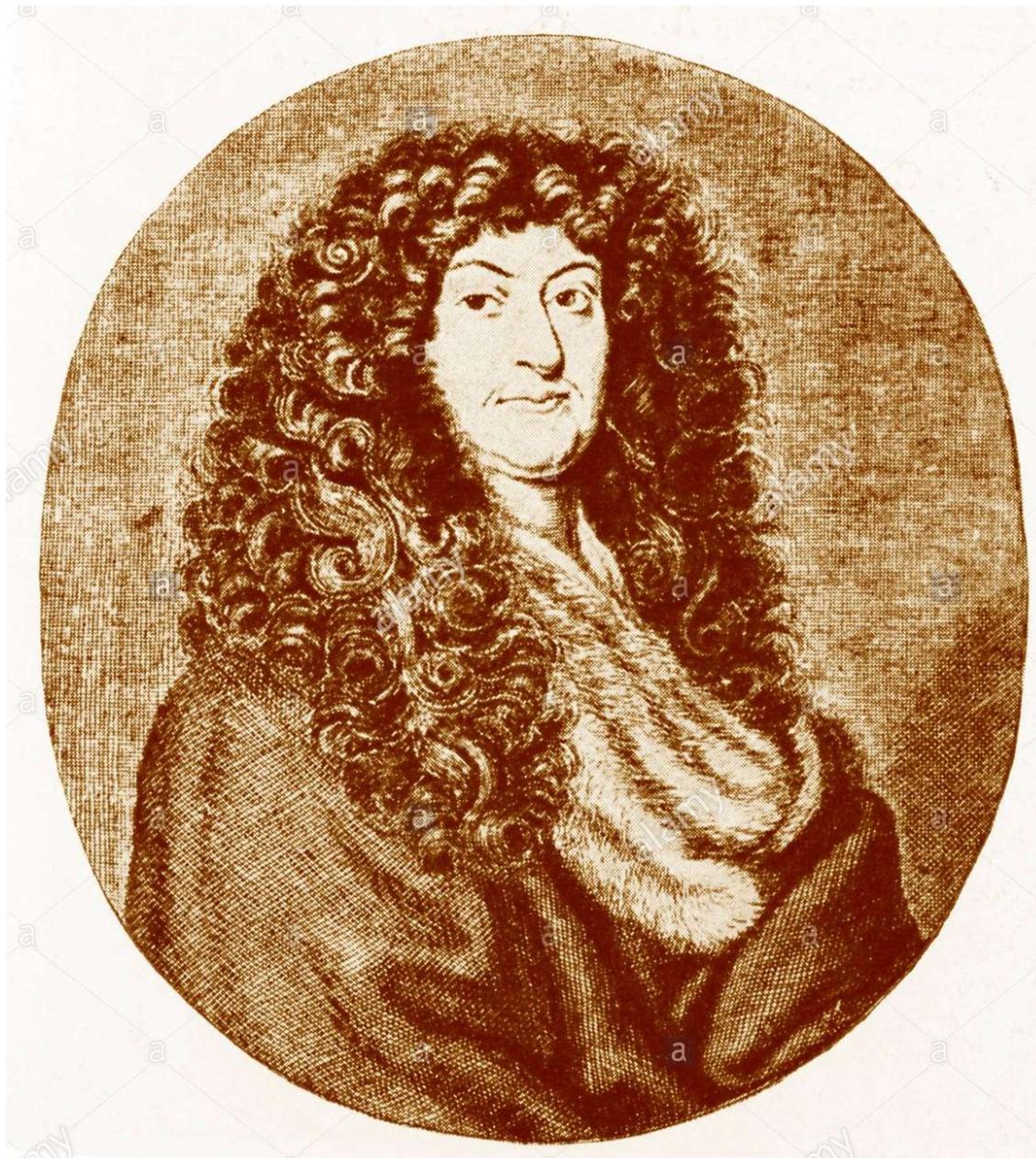


# CONJECTURES OF THE PRE-SCIENTIFIC PERIOD

- 15th century in Central and Western Europe: speculations and hypotheses about origin
- **Egyptian origin:** the most widespread (attested from 13th century in Byzantium; Greek Αἰγύπτιος, pl. Αἰγύπτιοι > English *Gypsy*, Spanish *Gitano* etc.)
- Roma lived in regions called Little Egypt in the Balkans (Byzantium) and claimed their origin to be there
- Some scholars regarded Romani as a language from Egypt
- Marginal theories: **Jewish origin**

# Johann Christoph Wagenseil

- Professor of Law
- 1697 *De civitate noribergensi commentatio*
- First who used linguistic comparisons to prove the origin of speakers
- He analysed Rotwelsch (German cryptolect/argot) and not Romani
- Due to numerous Hebrew loanwords in Rotwelsch, he concluded that Gypsies were Jews who had concealed their Jewish origin by fabricating the Egyptian origin
- Confusion of Romani with cryptolects based on non-Romani languages was common at that time



# CONJECTURES OF THE PRE-SCIENTIFIC PERIOD

- 15th century in Central and Western Europe: speculations and hypotheses about origin
- **Egyptian origin:** the most widespread (attested from 13th century in Byzantium; Greek Αἰγύπτιος, pl. Αἰγύπτιοι > English *Gypsy*, Spanish *Gitano* etc.)
- Roma lived in regions called Little Egypt in the Balkans (Byzantium) and claimed their origin to be there
- Some scholars regarded Romani as a language from Egypt
- Marginal theories: **Jewish origin**
- Locally popular theories (reflected in ethnonyms): **Slavic** (cf. French *bohémien*), **Tatar** (cf. Low German *Tater*), **Saracen**, etc.

# DISCOVERY OF INDIAN ORIGIN: introduction

- Later half of 18th century: growing knowledge about Indian languages, written mainly by missionaries
- Comparison of Romani with works on Indian languages
- Initially hints and anecdotes about the Indian origin of Roma(ni) and later compelling evidence
- Origin was discussed primarily or exclusively in connection with the language
- Period of romantic interest in language comparisons, searching for language origins
- Unfounded conjectures were replaced by a truly scientific approach

# Wilhelm Büttner

- German philologist, philosopher and linguist
- 1771 *Vergleichungs-Tafeln der Schriftarten verschiedener Völker in denen vergangenen und gegenwärtigen Zeiten*
- Gypsies identified as a Hindustani-Afghan tribe



# Samuel Augustini ab Hortis

- German Protestant priest from Szepes (Spiš)
- 1775-1776 **Von dem heutigen Zustande, sonderbaren Sitten und Lebensart, wia auch von den übrigen Eigenschaften und Umständen der Zigeuner in Ungarn**
- A series of articles in *Kaiserlich Königlich allergnädigst privilegierte Anzeigen aus sämtlichen kaiserlichen Königlichen Erbländern* (abbreviated as 'Wiener Anzeigen')
- Anecdote about a Hungarian student Stefan Váli in Leiden who obtained more than 1,000 words from his classmates from Malabar. After his arrival to Hungary, Váli presented the words to Roma in Győr who understood most of them
- Malabar: southwestern coast of India (mainly Dravidian, but Konkani communities)
- Maybe referred to Ceylon (Sinhalese)
- Second-hand information (anecdote, hearsay), the original event probably distorted

# Johann Christian Christoph Rüdiger

- German linguist
- 1782 **Von der Sprache und Herkunft der Zigeuner aus Indien**
- First systematic evidence of Indian (Indo-Aryan) origin of Romani
- Sample text translated into German Romani and compared with a description of Hindustani
- Convincing analyses and insightful interpretations of the similarities and differences between the two languages
- Overshadowed by Grellmann's 1783 *Die Zigeuner, ein historischer Versuch über die Lebensart, Verfassung und Schicksale dieses Volkes in Europa, nebst ihrem Ursprungewerk* where Rüdiger was plagiarised



# William Marsden

- Irish orientalist
- 1785 **Observations on the language commonly called Gypsies**
- 39 Romani words compared with Hindustani, Bengali and Marathi
- Demonstration of the genetic relationship of these languages

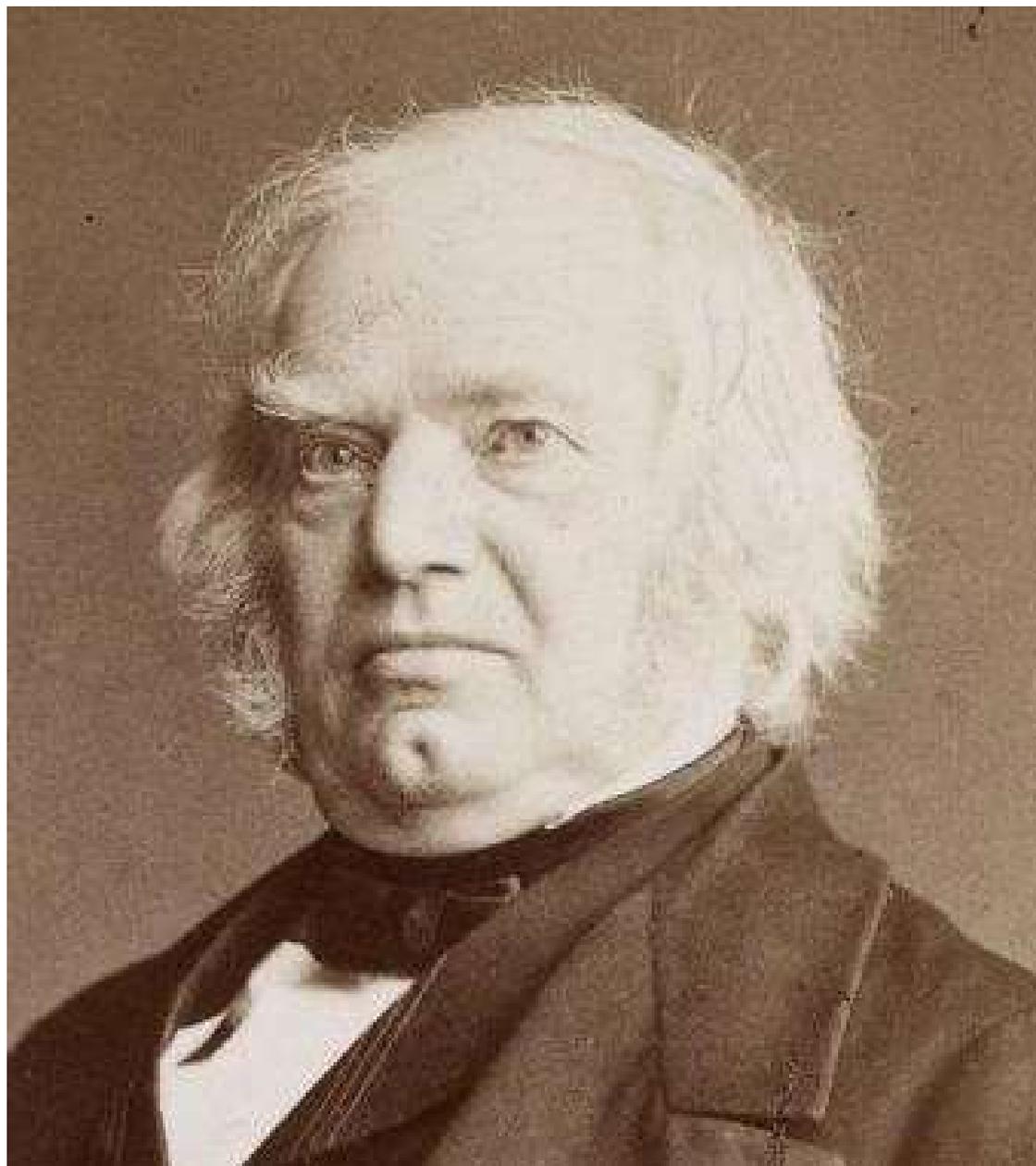


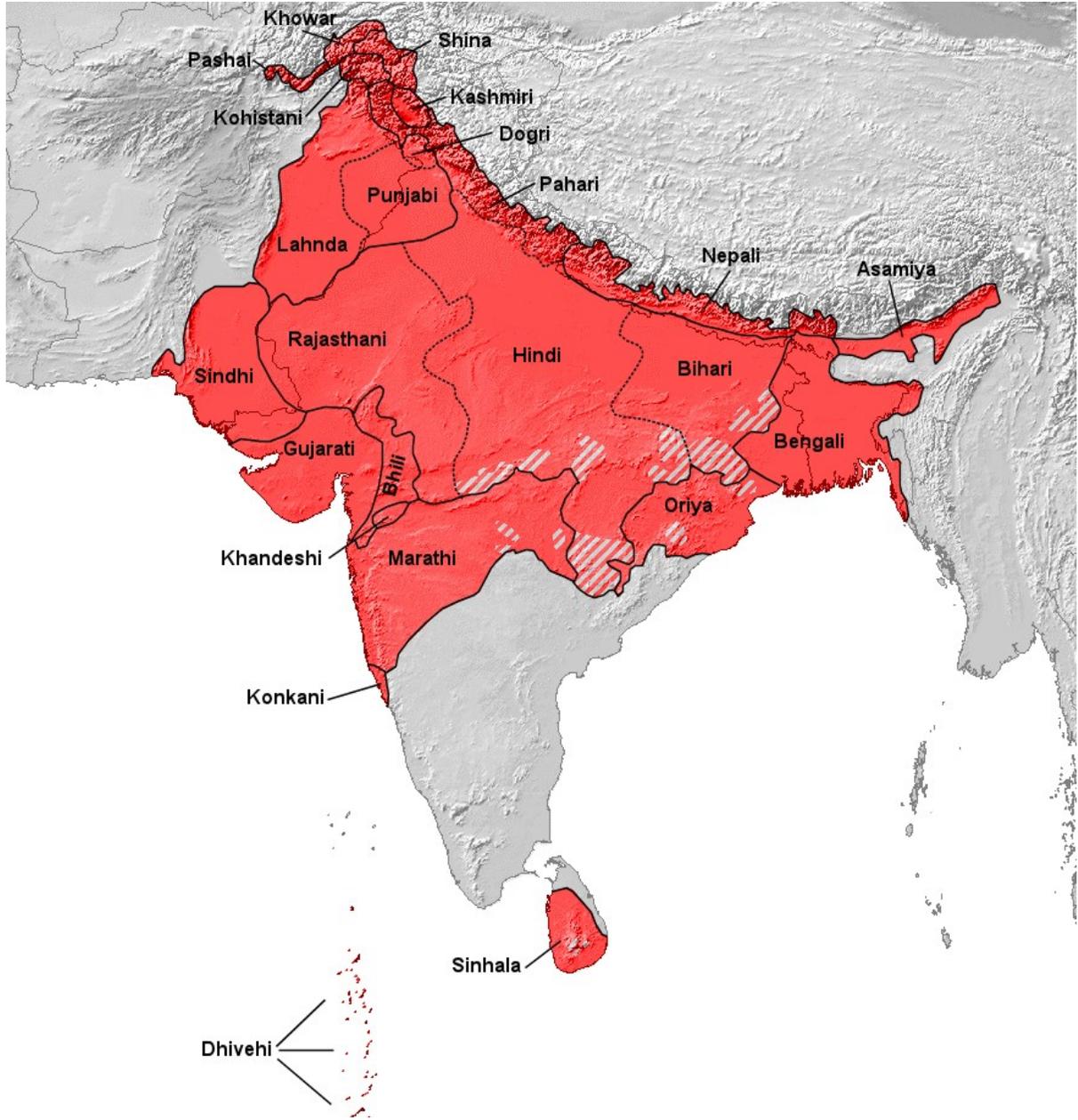
# DISCOVERY OF INDIAN ORIGIN: conclusion

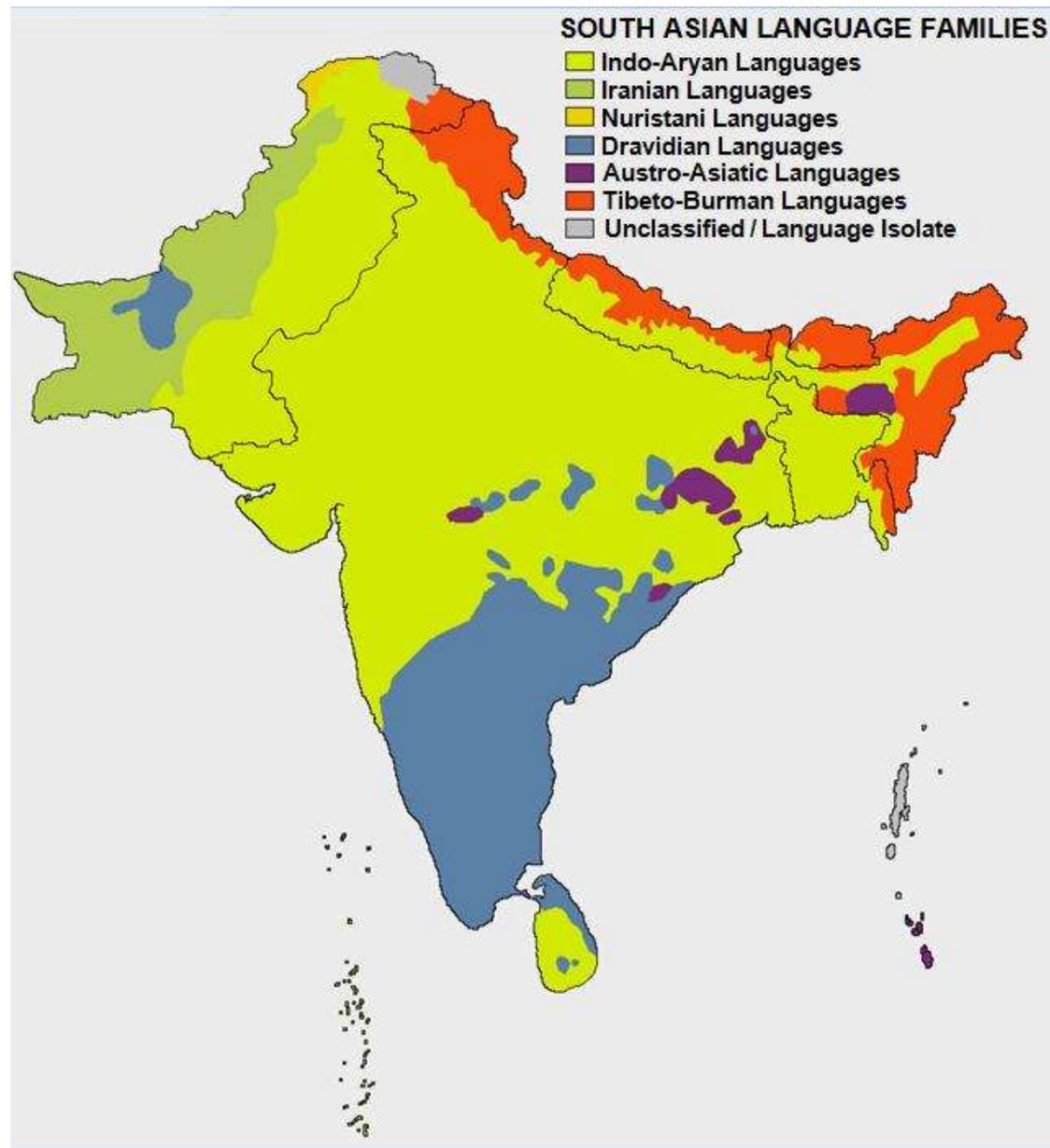
- Rüdiger was the first author who demonstrated Indian (Indo-Aryan) origin of Romani on scientific grounds
- Idea was probably present in some scholarly circles before his discovery (hints, anecdotes)
- Birth of Romani Linguistics
- Discovery was made at the same time when the relationship of Europe's classical languages to Sanskrit was revealed
- Beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: birth of Indo-European historical and comparative linguistics

## August Friedrich Pott

- Professor of Indo-European linguistics at Halle
- He collected dozens of published and unpublished sources on Romani and analysed them
- 1844–45 *Die Zigeuner in Europa und Asien* (two volumes)
- Romani material compared with other Indo-Aryan languages, as well as with Persian, Greek, Slavic, etc. (for the study of borrowings)
- Definitely confirmed by scientific methods that Romani is an Indo-Aryan language of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family







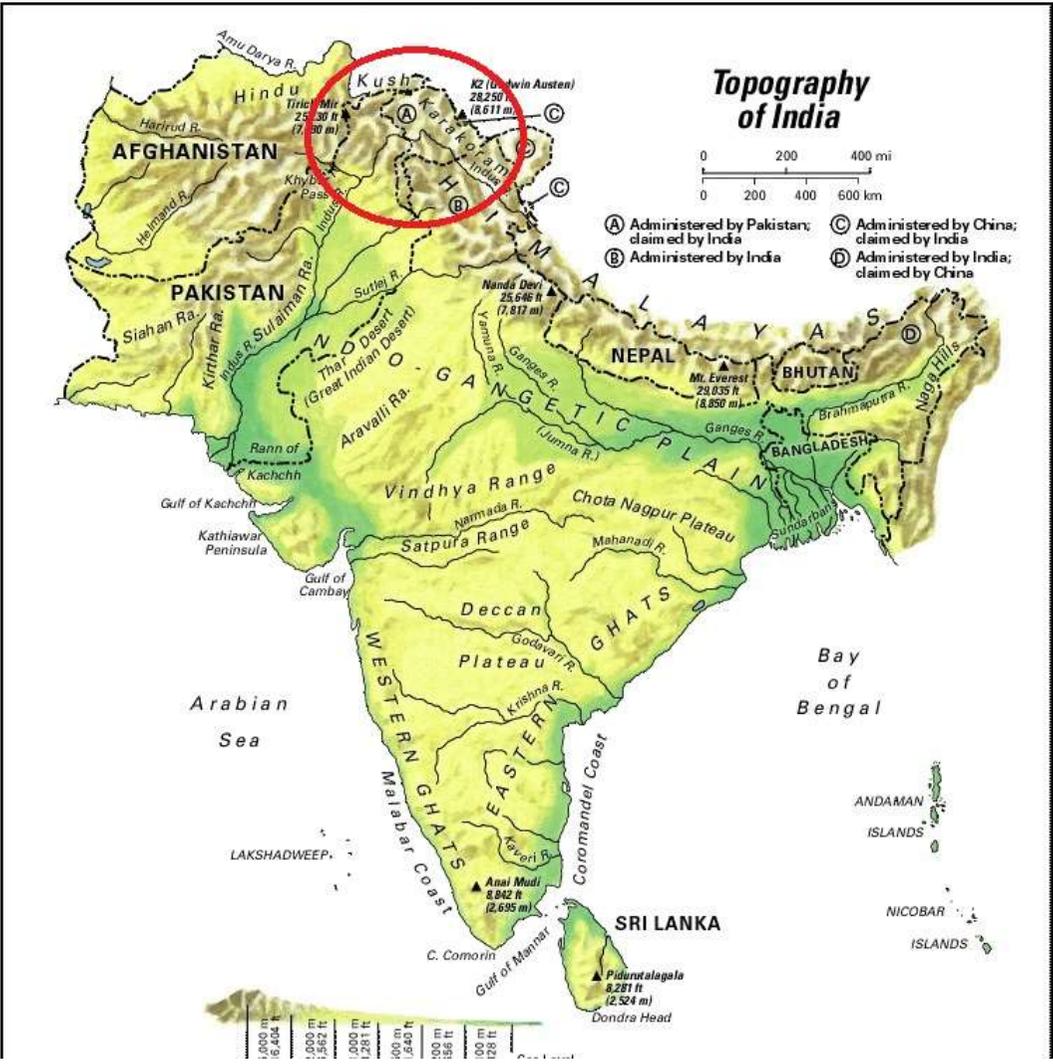
# WHERE IN INDIA (FROM)

- **2nd half of the 19th century – beginning of the 20th century:** numerous works and studies on Romani and Roma
- *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*
- Indian origin of Romani was definitely established in academic circles
- Question: in which area of India did the ancestors of Roma live, from which area did they come out
- Position of Romani in Indo-Aryan (which are the Indo-Aryan languages or dialects closest to Romani)
- Increasing knowledge about Indo-Aryan languages (British works)
- First attempts at dialect classification of Indo-Aryan languages

# Franz von Miklosich

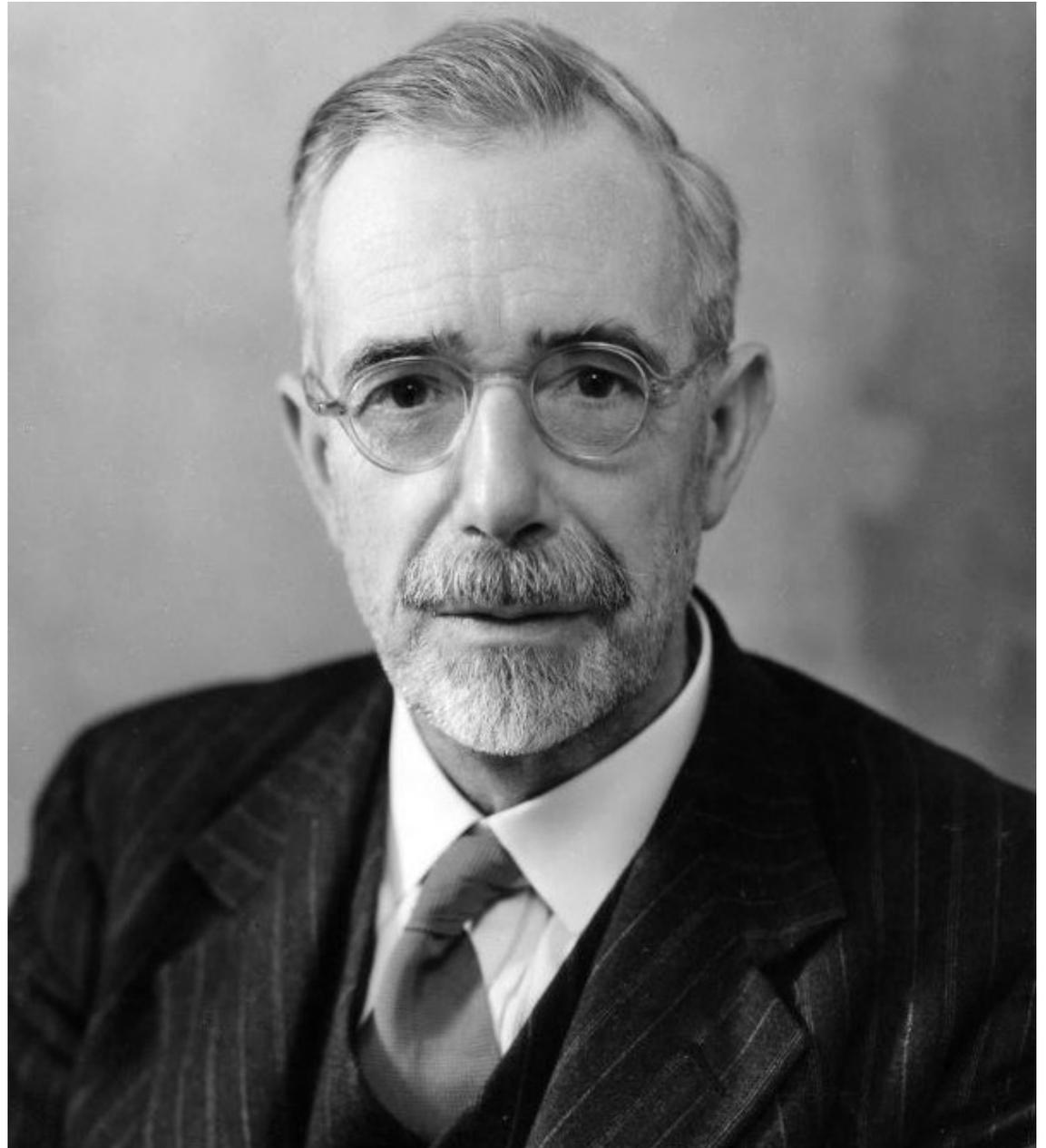
- Slovenian linguist and Slavist at Vienna
- Author of two large works on Romani in several volumes (compilations of articles, vocabularies, texts, analyses)
- **1878. Über die indische Heimat der Zigeuner und die Zeit der Auswanderung dieses Volkes aus Indien**
- Analysis of archaic features of Romani phonology shared with Dardic languages in the extreme northwest of the Indian subcontinent (Kashmir, Hindu Kush, Karakoram)
- Conclusion: Romani is a Dardic language and Roma originate in northwestern India
- 'Dardic' theory quickly adopted and became the prevalent opinion

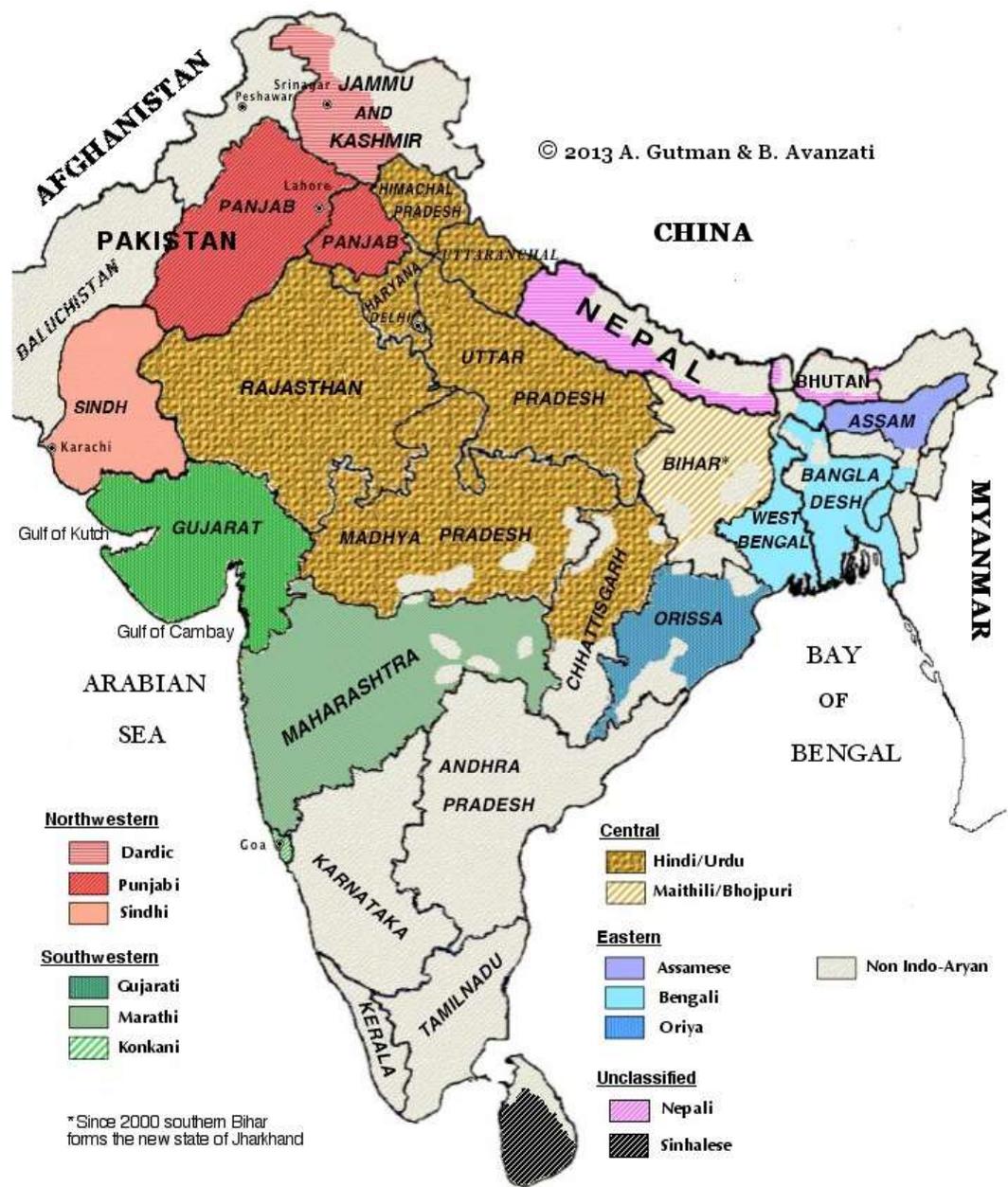




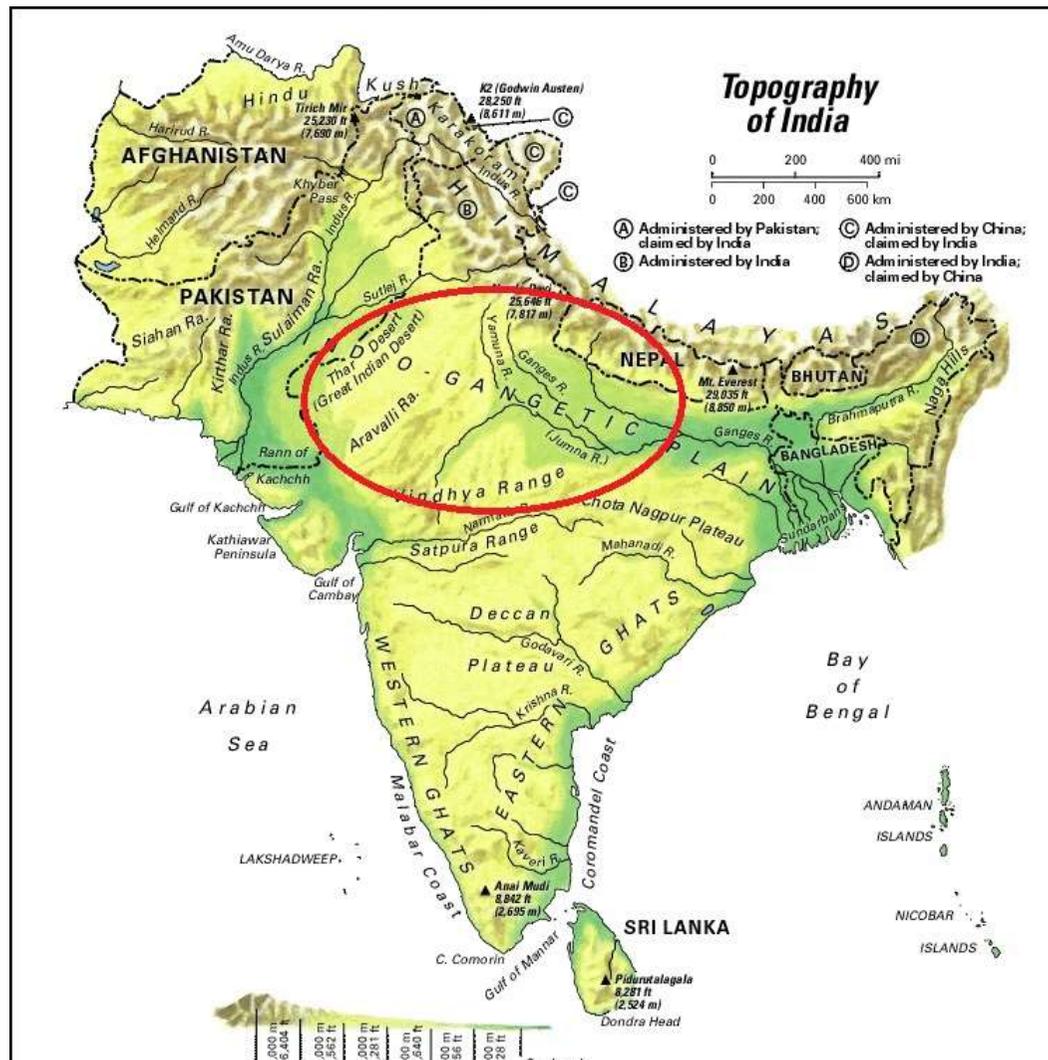
# Ralph Lilley Turner

- British linguist and Indologist, Professor of Sanskrit at SOAS in London
- 1926. **The position of Romani in Indo-Aryan**
- Romani reflects early changes (innovations) typical of Central Indo-Aryan languages (such as Hindi)
- Innovations shared with northwestern Indo-Aryan languages (not only Dardic, but also Sindhi, varieties of Panjabi) are later
- Romani is a Central Indo-Aryan language (origins in central Indo-Gangetic plains)
- Speakers migrated to the northwest before 3rd century BCE
- Turner's theory still holds true (but the northwestern migration may have occurred later)





\*Since 2000 southern Bihar forms the new state of Jharkhand



# WHO were Roma in India: introduction

- Social and ethnic diversity of the Indian subcontinent
- Social stratification known as caste system
- Caste: endogamous group with hereditary transmission of lifestyle (occupation, ritual status, customary social interaction), complementary to other castes
- Since 19th century: researchers were asking questions:

**Is there any social group in India, any caste or tribe, to which we could historically link Roma?**

- Although not a linguistic question, methods of linguistics were often used to answer this question and as a starting point for further speculations that were not of linguistic nature
- Primary linguistic evidence: Romani self-appellation (endo-ethnonym)

# WHO were Roma in India: etymology of *rom*

- The original Romani ethnonym: *rom* (Proto-Romani \**řom*)
- In some dialects: part of historical compounds *řomani-čhel*, or in its secondary meaning 'husband' (in India group names are used in the meaning 'husband', 'wife')
- Pott (1844: 42) cites a letter from **Hermann Brockhaus**, dated 16. 7. 1841, who suggested that *rom* might be related to a Sanskrit name of a group of musicians *ḍomba-* and Hindi caste name *ḍom*
- Etymological suggestion was accepted by most scholars and became a mainstream opinion in Romani and Indo-Aryan studies
- Etymology is based on valid linguistic methods of regular sound correspondences between *ḍomba-* (Hindi *ḍom*) and *rom*

# WHO were Roma in India: Ḍom(ba)s

- Earliest mention of Ḍombas: 6th century CE, a group of wandering musicians
- In modern India and Pakistan: Ḍom (variants Ḍum etc.) functions as a cover term for various castes that share a similar social status in the lowest segment of the caste society ('untouchables')
- According to anthropologists: Ḍom groups from hunter-gatherer tribal population which was assimilated into the caste-based agricultural society
- Ḍom castes found in many regions of the Indo-Aryan area of the subcontinent and beyond, differing in occupations, lifestyle, religion with hardly any defining feature
- Cultural parallels between Ḍoms and Roma discussed, but rejected by modern anthropologists as plain coincidental similarities
- Social status of Ḍoms was treated differently by scholars in Romani Studies

# József Vekerdi

- Hungarian Indologist and Romologist
- 1981. **On the social prehistory of the Gypsies**
- Origin of Roma discussed in the context of reproducing the inferiority and low social status of their Ḍomba ancestors
- Roma are descendants of Indian criminals
- 'The above story presents the Ḍombas [...] as fearful robbers and murderers. [...] The Ḍombas were one of the well-known criminal tribes in Ancient India.' (1981: 251) 'It is likely that the ancestors of these Vlax Gypsy groups formed one of the professional criminal Ḍomba groups.' (1981: 254).



# Milena Hübschmannová

- Czech Indologist and Romologist
- 1997. **Domští hudebníci Indie** (and elsewhere)
- Ḍom origin of Roma discussed in the context of subjugation and victimization
- Indian Ḍoms described as indigenous people conquered by the Indo-Aryan invaders
- Ḍoms had a glorious past and later they were degraded
- References to the pre-Indo-Aryan urban cultures in India in the 3rd millennium BCE



# WHO were Roma in India: ethnography- and history-based theories

- Numerous theories tried to connect Roma with different groups, often without solid methodological foundation, based on plain ethnographic similarities
- ‘Indian Gypsies’ (often nomad groups, tradition of rich ornaments, jewellery, stereotypical depictions)
- Frequent association of Roma with these ‘Gypsies’ in popular texts
- More serious and influential hypotheses were based on analyses of historical documents and linked the question of ‘who’ to ‘when and why did Roma leave India’

# Michael Jan de Goeje

- Dutch orientalist, specialist in Arabic
- 1875. *Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der Zigeuners*
- 1903. *Mémoire sur les migrations des Tsiganes à travers l'Asie*
- Historical analysis of Arabic sources (10<sup>th</sup> century Al-Tabari's chronicle)
- Roma associated with deportations of Indian populations (called *zutt* from Indian caste name *jāt*) to the Middle East in the 7th and 8th centuries by Arabs
- One of few serious historical approaches to the origin of Roma (based on analysis of historical documents)
- Theory popularized by Donald Kenrick (*From the Ganges to the Thames*)



# RAJPUT THEORY

- Popular theory propagated by some Romani and pro-Romani activists in the context of civil rights movement
- First presented by Latvian Rom **Vania de Gila (Jan Kochanowski)**, elaborated by **Weer Rajendra Rishi** (India), **Ian Hancock** (USA) and **Marcel Courthiade** (France)
- Attempts to connect the departure of Roma from India with Muslim invasions in the Indian subcontinent in 11th and 12th centuries
- Roma linked to a social class of Indian warriors called Rājput̥s who were fighting against the Muslims
- Glorification of the origin of Roma by associating their ancestors with high classes of the Indian society
- Instead of drawing conclusion from material evidence they look for 'evidence' that would support their convictions

# Ian Hancock

- Romani linguist at Austin
- 2000. **The emergence of Romani as a Koïné outside of India**
- 2006. **On Romani origins and identity**
- (and elsewhere)
- Composite origin of Roma: military caravans accompanied by servicemen, who left India in the 11th century
- Common origin in India led to the sense of belonging and social amalgamation outside of India
- Romani emerged from different Indo-Aryan dialects as a military koiné ('Rajputic')
- Distorted linguistic arguments to support Rajput theory (military vocabulary)



# DEPARTURE OF ROMA FROM INDIA: attempts at sociological explanations

- Anthropological parallels between Roma and service nomads in India
- Service nomads: non-food producing, endogamous and itinerant peoples who subsist through the sale of goods and provision of services
- Assumption that Roma were service nomads throughout their history and their westward migration was a venture of seeking employment opportunities in specialised trades
- **Hübschmannová** 1972. 'What can sociology suggest about the origin of Roms': natural and social factors of migration (famines, loss of economic role and the search for new livelihoods) > possible reasons of the departure
- problematic due to ecological (mountainous) and eco-societal (pastoralist) conditions to the northwest of the Indian subcontinent

# DEPARTURE OF ROMA FROM INDIA: linguistic evidence

- Proto-Romani separated from other Indo-Aryan languages at the transition of Middle Indo-Aryan (up to 1st millennium CE) to New Indo-Aryan, maybe before the end of the first millennium
- Borrowed elements (e.g. loanwords) are indication of contact with West Iranian languages (Persian and Kurdish), Armenian and Medieval Greek (slight evidence also for other languages)
- **Yaron Matras 2002. *Romani. A linguistic introduction***: Romani could be in contact with all these languages in Anatolia (Asia Minor, then part of the Byzantine Empire, now the core of Turkey)
- Rapid migration rather than gradual movement from India (cf. also a lack of loanwords from East Iranian languages)
- In the Greek-speaking territory (Byzantium): split of a single Proto-Romani or Early Romani into various dialects (coinciding with migrations to Europe)

# DENIERS OF INDIAN ORIGIN

- Rather marginal but ideas of some of them are influential in respective fields
- **Judith Okely**, British anthropologist (1983. *The Traveller-Gypsies*)
- **Wim Willems**, Dutch historian (1997. *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution*)
- Tendency to view Roma in Europe as indigenous groups that emerged in response to the socioeconomic processes at the end of feudalism
- They argue that the Indian origin was ascribed to Roma during the Romanticism period as a way of making them exotic
- Confusion of Roma and non-Romani nomads (Travellers, vagrants, etc.)
- As non-linguists they disregard or belittle the linguistic evidence and have naive linguistic thoughts

# DENIERS OF INDIAN ORIGIN

Judith Okely



Wim Willems



# CONCLUSION

- The origin of Roma is primarily a linguistic issue (research of Romani language), but ethnological, anthropological, historical and sociological studies also contribute to the topic
- The origin of Roma is a field where scholars tend to project their own social attitudes, sentiments, and goals so individual contributions have to be taken with an utmost caution
- Danger of transition from evidence- and methodology-based research to unfounded speculations
- Genetic studies have not been discussed (their repeated conclusions are in conformity with linguistic findings: Romani population in Europe is derived from a single ancestral population of South Asian origin with an admixture of people from West Asia)