

## The Uses of History in Romani Studies: Theory and Practice

University of Liverpool, 28-31 May 2013

### Final Report

#### Introduction:

The workshop started with an informal roundtable of introductions and discussion. The organisers outlined the main aims of the workshop: to discuss the uses of archival research for historians and non-historians working in Romani Studies, taking the archives of the Gypsy Lore Society (GLS) as an example. The GLS Collections are clearly a problematic repository of material, given the particular historical and ideological context in which the Society operated, yet nonetheless contain valuable sources for historians. Thus one aim of the workshop was to explore the GLS as a possible starting point for writing the social history of Roma in Europe from a transnational and comparative perspective, using private and unofficial archives as well as official records. The final part of the discussion moved on to related themes, such as approaches to the narration of Roma histories.

Katy Hooper, Special Collections Librarian, then launched the workshop with an introduction to the archives of the Gypsy Lore Society housed in the University of Liverpool library. Ms. Hooper explained the history of the Gypsy Lore Society and the provenance of the archival collections, as well as the successive shifts in cataloguing (from theme to provenance) that reflected the changing uses and audience for the collections. The GLSC contains a wide range of material, from books to correspondence between Society members, manuscript submissions to the Gypsy Lore Society Journal (published and unpublished) and the personal papers of leading Society figures. Drawing on specific examples, Ms Hooper provided an introduction to some of the material in the Scott Macfie Collections, as well as a sample of some of the visual images (photographs) that had been collected by the Society.

In the next session, titled '*La formation des sociétés romani à l'époque moderne, XVIe siècle-XVIIIe siècle*', Professor Henriette Asséo used a series of documents to show the misunderstanding concerning the historical inclusion of Roma in Europe during the Renaissance period. She criticized the vision of a process of exclusion and the cultural construction of an Other, determined by an essentialist vision of the Roma. She contextualized the presence of Roma during the multiple waves of populations belonging to the Greek Byzantine Empire in all the Mediterranean Area, at the age of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. The resettlement of communities in the Western Mediterranean indicated the common interests and exchanges between Roma as a social group totally integrated into local society, economical market and political power, as has been testified by many iconographic and written sources. She showed the creation of different "national" model linked to political construction in Western or Eastern Europe and analysed the specific cases of Spanish Gitanos, Italian Zingari, French Bohémiens and Balkan Roma at the border of the Central European empires and the Ottoman regulation system.

The final workshop of the first day was led by Dr. Ilse About on *The Policing of 'Gypsies' in Western Europe 1900-1930: A Comparative History in Progress*. Dr. About challenged the narrative of 'victimization' that has dominated histories of Roma during this period, situating his research in the 1890s as a period of economic crisis, urbanisation, huge population movements (especially rural to urban migration) and fragmentation of the labour market, as well as the transformation of media / mass communication in new democratic societies and the nationalisation of state / society. These processes created the notion of a 'citizen' to be both protected and used by the state, leading to the problem of defining citizenship. A particular focus of Dr. About's talk was the professionalisation and centralisation of police forces in Western Europe during the early twentieth century, and the changing nature of borders – no longer merely a symbolic but also a practical problem. From 1900-1930 this led to the progressive criminalisation of the „Gypsy way of life“ from the 1895 ‚recensement des nomades et bohemiens“. A large part of the newly professionalised police force activities were focused on monitoring „Gypsies.“ Dr. About drew on his own research in police and government records to provide examples of state surveillance of „Gypsy“ groups – but also the agency of those groups. He also discussed proposals for international cooperation to ‚solve the gypsy question‘, such as a Swiss proposal for an international conference, as well as the French *carnet anthropometrique* introduced after the 1912 Law on Nomads was introduced.

Dr. Margaret Procter, a lecturer in Archives and Records Management, ran a session on 'archives and human rights' from the perspective of archival theory and practice. The aim of the talk was to provide a perspective on archive management that historians – as users of archival material – rarely consider. This wide-ranging talk gave a broad overview of the history of archives and record-keeping, but focused particularly on the recent interest among archivists in how the preservation of records can potentially assist in the redress of human rights violations, by furnishing claimants with evidence to back up their claims. Drawing on examples from Guatemala and Cambodia, for example, the talk demonstrated how the preservation of police records was vital in tracking down victims of state repression and claiming compensation. Finally the talk considered the emerging interest in the archival profession in the broader 'community archives' project, which aimed to enable communities to participate in the preservation of heritage and community histories.

The final workshop session was led by Professor Eve Rosenhaft and titled *Archaeologies and genealogies: The Weltzel-Althaus collection as a record of German Sinti-Gadje relations in the shadow of Nazism*. This talk focused on a specific collection that has been added to the Gypsy Lore Society Collections, and was exemplary for the way in which historians could use private and unofficial records alongside state archives (in this case, the German *Bundesarchiv*) to narrate a history that included Romani subjectivities as well as the 'official' narrative. Professor Rosenhaft made extensive use of photographs, and the discussion focused on ways of reading these images, as well as the ethics of interpretation and ownership of photographs of individuals depicting moments of intimacy. Connecting back to the previous talk about archives and human rights, Professor Rosenhaft made the point that the Bundesarchiv housed material relating to the genocide of Roma as a direct result of Sinti

activism, which had demanded that the remaining records of Robert Ritter's unit devoted to genealogical research on Gypsies be moved to the Federal Archive.

The closing discussion focused on paths forward, and the participants agreed that there was certainly scope for further cooperation. Two main avenues were suggested: first, projects revolving around community archives and local histories, which would involve partnerships with non-academic institutions and what is currently termed in UK academia 'knowledge exchange'. Second, projects that seek to contribute to a transnational and comparative social history of Roma in modern Europe. Overall, the workshop was viewed as a success and a useful first step towards future cooperation.



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CONFIRMATION OF ATTENDANCE

‘THE USES OF HISTORY IN ROMANI STUDIES: THEORY AND PRACTICE’

In association with the European Academic Network on Romani Studies (<http://romanistudies.eu>)

Please find below the list of participants (instructors and students) at the Romani Studies workshop held at the University of Liverpool from 28-31 May 2013.

Henriette Asséo (ÉHÉSS Paris)  
Ilsen About (MMSH Université Aix-Marseille)  
Paola Trevisan (ÉHÉSS Paris)  
Aleksandra Pudlitzak (CEDLA Amsterdam)  
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Alice Vezzoli (University of Leiden)

Yours sincerely,

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