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Prester John and the Gypsies

David J. Nemeth

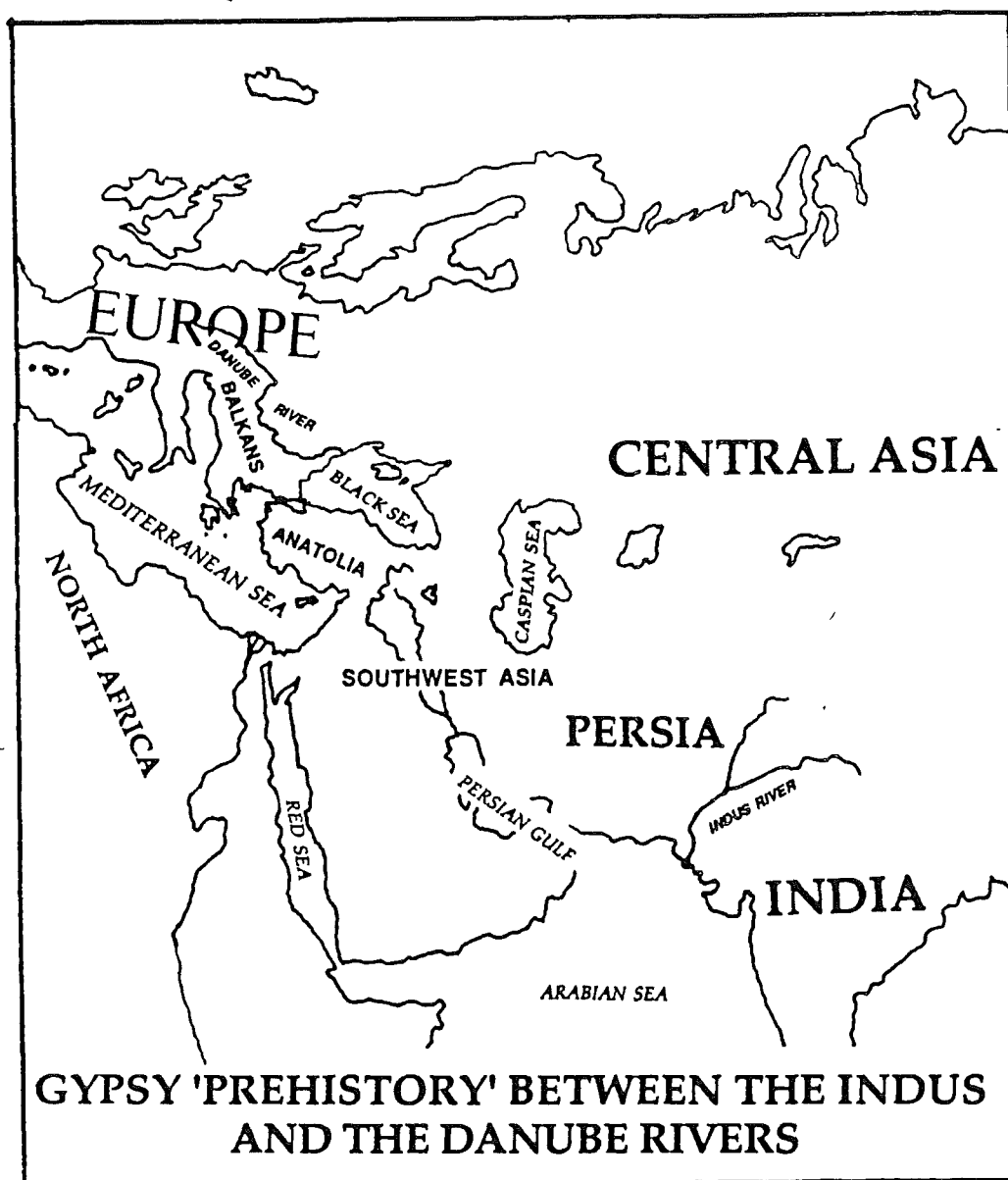
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Introduction: The Problem of Gypsy Prehistory Between the Danube and the Indus Rivers, circa A.D. 1000-1400

It has been said that "the prehistory of the Gypsies ends, and their history begins, at the beginnings of the fourteenth century" (Vaux de Foletier, quoted in Liegeois 1986:38). Gypsy prehistory is—in a word—uninformative. As for the Gypsy historical period, it begins quite suddenly in the chronicles of late 14th-century medieval European towns and cities. These chronicles report widely on the first arrivals of Gypsy itinerant bands, whose leaders professed to be Christian kings, dukes, and earls of a kingdom in the East, which they called "Little Egypt" (Hancock 1980). They claimed to have been driven from their Christian land by infidels, meaning the Islamic Turks. Apparently, these claims went undisputed, which indicates that Gypsy leaders were very convincing representatives of their people.

A good case in point is the encounter in the year 1530 between King James V of Scotland and a Gypsy chief called the Earl of Little Egypt. The Earl persuaded the King to sign a treaty that pledged the support of the King's armies to help the Earl recover "Little Egypt" for the Gypsies from the Turks—in essence, to embark on another Crusade (Quintana 1972:14). King James' reaction indicates that Crusader anxiety was strong in Western Europe in the early 16th century, when the Ottoman Turks were still advancing against Christian lands in Central Europe. It also indicates that Western Europeans were even somehow predisposed to accepting the credentials of these exotic Gypsy chiefs as authentic.

Walter Starkie called this kind of early diplomatic encounter between Gypsy chiefs and Western European leaders—a recurring event then—a most clever hoax on the part of the Gypsies (Quintana 1972:14); but we should recognize it in a positive light for what it actually was—a pattern of successful Gypsy diplomacy. Moreover, we should not assume that this diplomatic initiative originated during early Gypsy history in Western Europe, but look for precedents also in that long period of Gypsy prehistory between the 11th and 14th centuries, when Gypsy peoples—it is now agreed—were strung out over the vast area of Southwest Asia located approximately between the Danube and the Indus Rivers. (See map: "Gypsy 'Prehistory' Between the Indus and the Danube Rivers".) That the Gypsies were



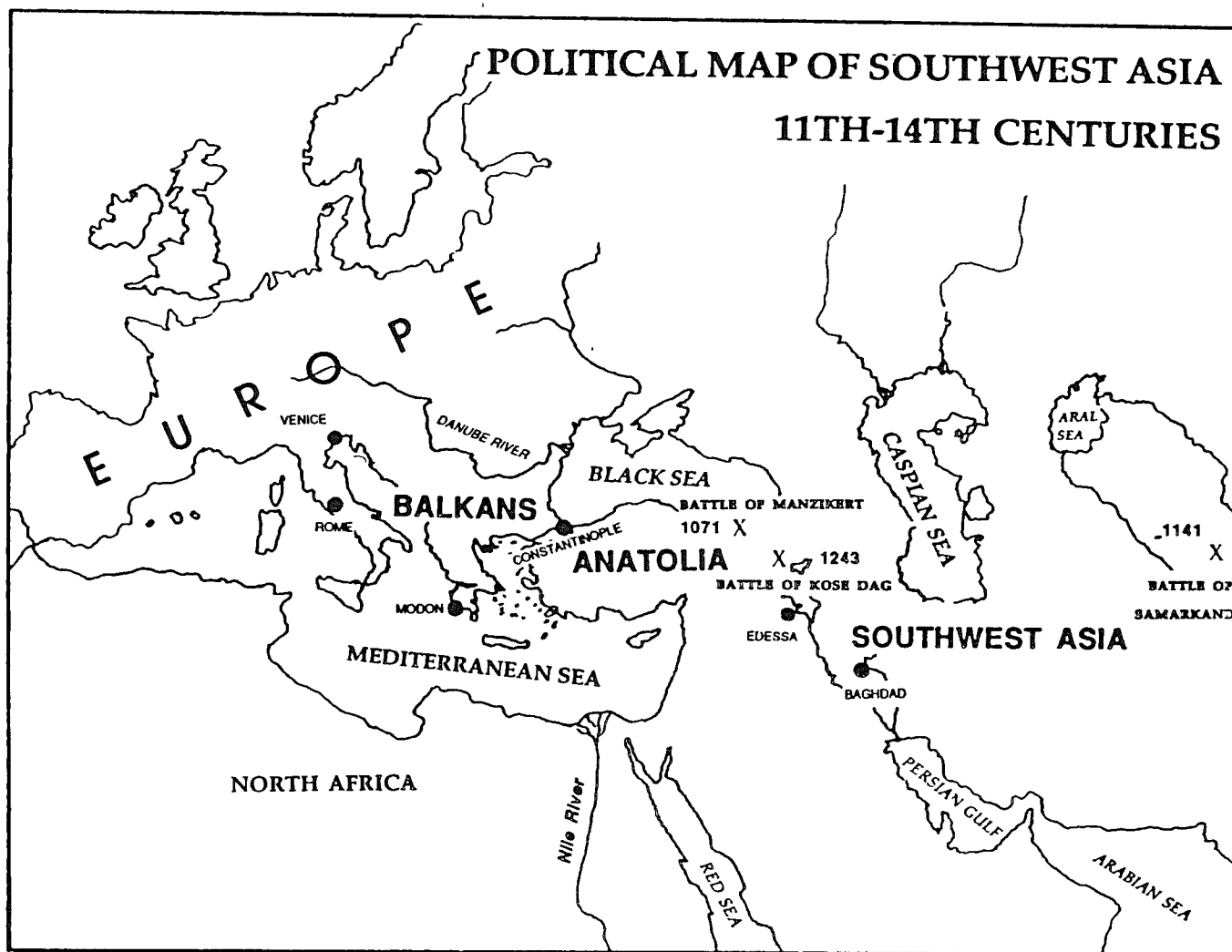
there, we know—mainly from the evidence provided in historical linguistic studies of the Romani Gypsy language (e.g., Lipa 1981, 1984, 1985: 231). But, again, the problem of Gypsy prehistory is that we have scarce little information about the exact locations, concentrations and durations of stay of the ancestors of European Gypsies during their sojourn in Southwest Asia, or about their lifestyles and economics.

That entire Crusader era appears extraordinarily confusing today, for truth and fiction are often hopelessly tangled. Nevertheless, it was a fascinating era: contrasts and conflicts between forces of commercial pragmatism and religious mysticism created some quite bizarre incidents and circumstances. Great legends were born in that superheated crucible of commerce, religion and war centering on the city of Constantinople during the final centuries of the Byzantine Empire. And here is also where the ancestors of most of America's contemporary Gypsies once sojourned during their prehistoric westward migrations; perhaps for centuries (Soulis 1961:141). One of the most durable and widespread legends to come out of Southwest Asia during the Crusading era involves a man called Prester John. But before I introduce the major character, I must set the stage on which his drama unfolds.

Southwest Asia: Site and Situation

Southwest Asia has a strategic position between Europe, Africa and the bulk of Asia (Cressey 1963:478; see map: "Political Map of Southwest Asia 11th-14th Centuries".) Since the beginnings of history, its diverse peoples have served as middlemen at the crossroads of civilization (ibid.). "Every world conqueror since Alexander the Great has coveted Southwest Asia" (ibid.), and its vitality as a commercial and trade center has been a magnet for enterprising peoples. It has always been a land in dispute.

The Gypsy minority peoples in Southwest Asia and the Balkans between the 11th and 14th centuries were not merely passive witnesses to these power struggles, but active participants to the extent that their economic activities and special skills were useful and available to the major groups in conflict. Five of the major powers fighting to control Southwest Asia and the Balkans during Gypsy prehistory there include: The Christian Byzantine Greeks, founders of Constantinople as the center of Christian Orthodoxy; the Islamic Seljuk and—later—the Ottoman Turks, who usually controlled their territories from Baghdad; the Christian Latins, with major powers based in Rome and in Venice; and the Mongols, whose origins were in East and Central Asia. The changing fortunes of these major combatants can provide us with



some insights into early Gypsy migration, and also set the stage for a discussion of the origin of Prester John and the spread of his legend.

The Christian Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Christian Empire was founded in A.D. 324 when Constantine deserted Rome as his imperial capital. He founded Constantinople as the heart of a new Christian Empire, located at a superior coastal location on the strategic Bosphorus Straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, at the western tip of the Anatolian peninsula. Constantinople soon became the largest commercial center in medieval Europe, with an excellent and well-protected harbor (Vryonis 1967:27).

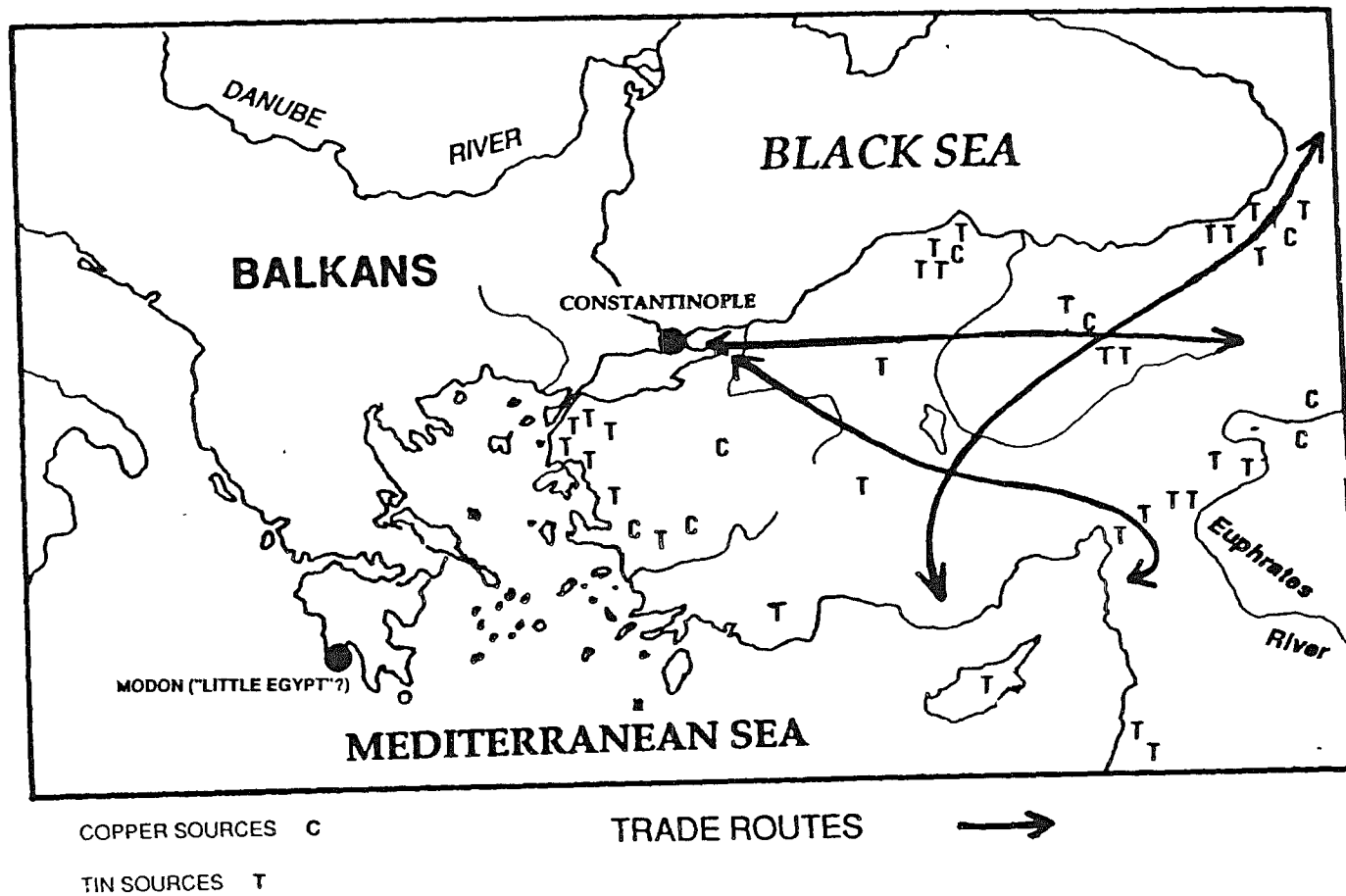
After the 9th century, the inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire were largely Greek speaking and Orthodox Christians. Under Basil II, circa 1025, the Byzantine Empire was considerably smaller in extent than previously, yet well consolidated between the Danube River in central Europe and the Upper Euphrates River in eastern Anatolia. (See map: "Historic Trade Routes and Tin and Copper Sources in Anatolia".) The strength of the Empire is said to derive from its Anatolian resources: particularly rich agricultural lands scattered amidst vast natural pastures supporting a free and prosperous peasantry that provided soldiers to protect the realm (Geanakoplos 1984:7). There were also important commercial centers and trade routes; mineral wealth; and skilled metal craftsmen. So the resources of Byzantine Anatolia were coveted by every power in the region, but the most powerful challengers to Byzantine power in that era were the Latins in the west, the Mongols in the north, and the Turks in the east.

The Christian Latin Empire

The Christian Latins, in Western Europe, were motivated against Byzantine power by both their religious zeal and commercial greed. Venetian and Genoese merchants gained a toehold in Anatolia as early as the 9th century, and their influence and power in that region grew rapidly with the advent of the Crusades. The first Christian Crusade organized by the Latins to regain the "Holy Land" from the Islamic Turks was launched in 1096, and the last was launched in 1271. (See Table: "A Comparative Chronology".) The Byzantines were not particularly enthusiastic about the Crusading movement, since it brought hostile Latin armies to their borders. Their worst fears were realized in 1204 when the military forces of the Fourth Crusade were encouraged by Venetian commercial interests to sack Constantinople,

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which created a short-lived Latin Empire. However, the Orthodox Christian forces of the Byzantine Greeks regained Constantinople in 1261. Thereafter the Byzantine Greek leaders neglected their eastern Anatolian lands, allowing the Islamic Ottoman Turks to grow and spread rapidly, and to encroach on Constantinople and the Balkans from the east (Vryonis 1967:166).

The Islamic Turks

The first major victory of the Turkish forces against the Byzantine Greeks had occurred as early as 1071 at the Battle of Manzikert, near Lake Van, in eastern Anatolia (Vryonis 1967:132-133). Nearby were those historic trade routes between Europe and Asia, and important tin and copper deposits, which had been worked since Roman times (Cressey 1963:509). These particular Turkish peoples were called the Seljuks of Rum, and they spread their empire from central Anatolian plateau and pasture lands in all directions, between 1100 and 1243, forming a sizable empire (Pitcher 1972:24). It was at this time that many eastern Anatolian peoples were moving westward. We conjecture that many Gypsy peoples may have moved with them.

The Mongol Empire

In 1141, non-Islamic Central Asian Turkish peoples thought to be Nestorian Christians defeated eastward-spreading Seljuk forces near Samarkand, in Central Asia. This battle had great impact in the west by raising the morale of the Christian Crusaders (Vasiliev: 57). Eventually, in 1243, Mongol forces swept out of Central Asia to defeat the Seljuk Turks completely at the Battle of Kose Dag (Pitcher 1972:28). This initiated a hundred-year period of commercial stability in Southwest Asia called "The Nomad Peace" (Power 1926:158). The Mongols, or Tatars, were remarkably tolerant of all religions, but their princes finally converted to Islam in 1316, which further weakened the Byzantine Christian hold on Anatolia. By 1320, a few remaining Christian territories in Anatolia were hopelessly isolated, and occupied only the fringes of western Anatolia. Worse, the Byzantine territory in the west, especially in the Balkans, was now being seriously contested by the Turks. By 1354, the Ottoman Turks had forced a bridgehead into Europe and subsequently engulfed Thrace, Bulgaria, and eastern Macedonia in the Balkans. Constantinople was itself bypassed and isolated, though still an impregnable fortress. "The City" fell finally to the Turks in 1453 (Geanakoplos 1984:12).

During the time that Turkish Islam was spreading westward at the expense of Christianity, armies of Crusaders and other mercenaries were being organized in Western Europe to turn back the infidels, and to recover lost Christian territories.

The Crusaders

Crusaders consisted of feudal nobility, soldiers, pilgrims and adventurers of all sorts, and from all parts of Western Europe, joined and manipulated by Italian merchants. It has been said that:

before the Crusades communities throughout the greater part of Europe had lived very much to themselves, in limited contact with the outside world; but by the year 1200 it is safe to infer that practically every town and village of France, England, Germany and Italy held someone who had visited the East (Wright 1965:293)

—and brought back marvelous tales about it. Meanwhile, Western Europe toward the end of the Crusades had launched itself into an era of rapid economic growth and change, involving cathedral building, urbanization and forest clearing, and its ambitious yet deeply religious and highly superstitious peoples lived in constant anticipation of receiving more marvellous news and gifts from the East. Their expectations no doubt had some specific relationship with Scripture; for example Matthew 2:1-12 in the Bible describes the arrival of "Wise Men from the East bearing rich gifts." There is an interesting paragraph written in the 13th century by the English philosopher-scholar Roger Bacon, about some exotic strangers in Western Europe called "Aethiopians":¹

The reptile that the Aethiopians eat is the dragon ... for it is well known that wise Aethiopians have come to Italy and Spain and France and England, and those countries of the Christians where there are good flying dragons, and that by occult arts which they possess they drive the dragons out of their caves, and ... they have an art of preparing their flesh ... and they partake of it against accidents of old age, and prolong their lives and make their intellects subtle beyond all estimation (*Opus Majus*, 1266).

It is not necessary to speculate here that these so-called "Aethiopians" were in fact Gypsies, but only to comment on the suprisingly amicable attitude of the Western European toward Gypsy-

like strangers in their midst in the 13th century. The prevailing attitude seems to be one of awe and respect—and we know that this is generally how the Gypsies were perceived and treated on their first verified arrivals into Western Europe in the late 14th century. To explain part of the reason why Gypsies were well regarded and well treated on their first arrival, we can turn now to a discussion of Prester John and his legend.

Prester John: The Person, the Letter and the Legend

The year is 1122, nearly 50 years after the Byzantine Army had been defeated by the Seljuk Turks at the Battle of Manzikert in Anatolia. The Turks are moving swiftly against all the Christian territories in and around Anatolia. A mysterious visitor calling himself "John" the "Patriarch of India," suddenly appears in Constantinople, claiming to have travelled from the distant East over a period of one year (Vasiliev:41). While in Constantinople, he attaches himself to a visiting diplomatic mission from Rome, and travels back to Rome to meet the Pope, Callixtu II. Patriarch John describes his own country of "India" as being a place of marvels and miracles. The impact of his arrival and tales on the Pope is tremendous, for "No one from such a distant country had ever come to Italy ... It was regarded as a miracle" (Vasiliev:42). Then Patriarch John disappears from the historical stage just as suddenly as he had arrived.

Approximately two decades later, in the year 1141, a vast army of Turks is soundly defeated at Samarkand in Central Asia by nomadic peoples said to be Christians (Vasiliev:57). Jubilous Europeans quickly associate the victorious Christian army with the power of the Kingdom of Patriarch John, although no one in the West is quite certain where exactly John's kingdom is located (Ullendorff 1982:5). Three years later in 1144, the Latin Crusaders themselves suffer a terrible defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Turks, at Edessa (Slessarev 1959:22). Crusaders everywhere are now extremely discouraged and apprehensive about the future. However, rumor has it that somewhere to the east Prester John's army is coming to their aid; and more—Prester John is now rumored to be a lineal descendent of the Wise Men from Persia, of whom mention is made in the Bible (Vasiliev:56; Slessarev 1959:27-28). Such good news heartens the Western Europeans, who wait, and wait, and wait. But the armies of Prester John never arrive.

Two more decades pass. The year is 1165. The monk Albericus reports that "Prebister Johannes, King of the Indies" has sent a magnificent letter full of great wonder to various Christian Kings (Vasiliev:68). The letter from Prester John consists of 100 paragraphs,

which, in summary, claim that John is the greatest sovereign in the world, and Lord of the Three Indias, where the terrestrial paradise is located, and where rests the magical body of St. Thomas, who first converted John and his people to the Christian faith. The letter goes on to describe in fantastic detail John's palace, and also his territories, which are inhabited not only by Christian men and women of great virtue, but by pygmies, giants, and serpents, and strewn with precious stones.

The Prester John letter had great impact on the Christian Crusaders, who were experiencing a very critical period in their campaigns against the Turks. It is now widely believed that the Prester John letter was a forgery designed to give heart to the faltering Crusaders. It has been called "one of the biggest literary hoaxes ever attempted" (Newton 1926:178-179). Today, in European libraries, there are more than 100 manuscript copies of the Prester John letter, written in Latin, French, English, German, Hebrew, Italian, Icelandic, Slavonic, and Old Russian. The legend of Prester John seems to have spread as rapidly as his letter, as Crusaders returned home and told the tale in the cities, town, villages, and wayside camps of Western Europe. Let us now turn to the situation of the Gypsies during the origin and spread of the Prester John legend.

Gypsy Sojourners in Anatolia

The presence of Gypsies in Constantinople by the mid-eleventh century has been debated, and remains unproved. One account from this prehistoric era indicates that the Gypsies (called "Adsincani") were employed by the Emperor Constantine Monomachus (1042-1055) to rid the imperial park of its wild animals (Soulis 1961:145); we may recall here that the "Aethiopians" described by Bacon two centuries later were busy ridding Western Europe of its "flying dragons." There are two noteworthy points about this early reference to Byzantine Gypsies: First, their employment in a useful service requiring specialized skills; Second, their spatial proximity to the Imperial household, where they might observe the ways of the rich and mighty, and their guests from throughout the empire, while providing services to them.

The next reference to peoples now presumed to be Gypsies in Byzantium is from 1204. It calls them "Athinganoi" and describes them as animal handlers, fortunetellers and magicians (Soulis 1961:146). Subsequent 13th and 14th century references to Gypsies in Byzantium are less ambiguous about the Gypsy group identity and indicate diverse Gypsy economic activities, including metal-working (Soulis 1961:154).

The scholar Slessarev (1959:23), who has studied the Prester John legend and letters at length, has written: "to say that [the mysterious] Patriarch John came in fact to Constantinople and Rome [in 1122] does not mean that he really was what he pretended to be." It is inviting, but far too risky, to speculate that Patriarch John was in fact a Gypsy chief engaged in some kind of diplomatic mission, or that Gypsies might have forged or commissioned the Prester John letter. On the other hand, there is very small risk in assuming for the sake of discussion that the Gypsies knew well the Prester John legend: As service nomads, they could have spread the legend throughout Europe and Asia as a form of entertainment—and got paid for doing so! Their familiarity with the legend and their observations of its impact on credulous Europeans may have inspired the Gypsies to exploit the legend to their own ends.

I should like to add here that Gypsies, all during their prehistoric westward migration between the Indus and the Danube, were not necessarily always being "pushed" westward by adversity, but were also "pulled" westward by economic opportunity. What we have here is a fairly homogenous group of enterprising and skilled commercial nomads whose economy depended on their interactions with a free and prosperous peasantry, secured by a fairly stable political environment. When these productive conditions began to fade in Southwest Asia and in Anatolia, many Gypsies would have been attracted to similar conditions in Europe, home of the Crusaders.

However, the appearance of the Gypsies, their being dark-skinned Asiatics, in 14th-century Western Europe amidst veterans of the Crusades, was likely to trigger some paranoia, where Europeans might accuse the Gypsies of being spies for the Turks (Soulis 1961:54). Thus, there was a need for the Gypsies to cultivate a diplomatic strategy whereby their credentials as Christians would not only be honored, but favor them with gifts and other opportunities. In this way the mysterious Gypsy homeland of "Little Egypt" became vaguely associated with the equally mysterious "Kingdom of Prester John," and the Gypsies became its envoys, of sorts, or refugees from there, themselves descended from Biblical Wise Men and therefore presumed to be well qualified to spread magic and wisdom in the West.

Conclusion

Western Europe at the onset of mass 15th-century Gypsy immigrations can be compared to a splendid banquet where empty seats had been reserved since the 12th century, anticipating the arrival of envoys from the marvelous Eastern Christian kingdom of Prester

A Comparative Chronology:
Events In Southwest Asia and the Balkans
During the Era of Gypsy "Pre-History,"
circa 11th -14th Centuries .

<i>Crusades (#)</i>		<i>Important Related Events</i>	<i>Gypsies Appear</i>
1096 (1)		1071 Battle of Manzikert	in their ambiguous prehistory: 1068 and 1204 in Constantinople
		1122 "Patriarch John" appears in Constantinople and Rome	
		1141 Islamic Turks defeated at Samarkand by "Christian" nomads	
1147 (2)		1145 Christian Edessa falls to the Seljuk Turks	
	circa	1160 Prester John letter appears in Byzantium and Europe	
		1177 Pope Alexander III sends personal envoy to find Prester John	
1190 (3)			
1201 (4)		1204 Latin Crusaders sack Constantinople	
1217 (5)			in Europe? (see Roger Bacon, <i>Opus Majus</i> , 1266)
1229 (6)		1243 Mongols defeat Seljuk Turks at Battle of Kose Dag; century of "Nomad Peace" begins	
1248 (7)		1261 Byzantine Greeks regain Constantinople from Latins	unambiguous "official" documentation begins:
1270 (8)		1316 Persian Mongol Khans convert to Islam; "Nomad Peace" ends	1322 in Crete 1348 in Serbia and Corfu
		1354 Ottoman Turks sweep Anatolia; force bridgehead into Balkans, war and chaos between Christian and Islamic forces become commonplace in Eastern Europe	1370 in Wallachia 1378 in Zagreb, Modon, Moldavia, Hungary 1406-1417 in Germany
			(widespread "diplomatic initiatives" reported; e.g 1530 treaty between the "Earl of 'Little Egypt'" and King James V of Scotland)
		1463 Byzantine Constantinople falls to Turks	
		1500 Venetian Modon ("Little Egypt"?) falls to Turks	

John. How could the Gypsies resist exploiting this opportunity? Would their migrations into Western Europe have been as successful otherwise? And—perhaps the most interesting question—what active role had the Gypsies played in preparing the stage for their own arrival? The relation between Prester John and the Gypsies certainly begs for closer inspection.

NOTES

¹ The term "Aethiopians" was often used by medieval Western Europeans as a gloss for all exotic dark-skinned peoples, rather than to designate a particular people from "Ethiopia" in Africa. This was the way Homer used the term in the *Odyssey*. The term "India" was also vague, and covered all territory in Southwest Asia stretching from the Indus River to the Nile.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

David "Jim" Nemeth has been active in Gypsy Studies for twenty years. His M.A. thesis in Geography "Nomad Gypsies in Los Angeles: Patterns of Livelihood" (California State University, Northridge, 1970) explored Macvaya Rom Gypsy territorial behavior in that city. He worked with a semi-itinerant Rom Gypsy tinsmith between 1967 and 1972, travelling the Western United States. He has published articles in academic journals on the following topics: Gypsy justice, the Gypsy motif, Rom occupations and industries, Rom oral history, and the American tradition of Gypsy Studies. His interest in East Asia, leading to the Ph.D. in 1984, inspired his search for "Gypsy-like" peoples there. His research and publications have since expanded to reflect a global interest in all kinds of peripatetic peoples. He is now exploring the concept of "commercial" and "service" nomadism worldwide.