

THE GIPSY AT THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST¹

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Not so long ago, I came across the scenario of a 13th Century cyclical Passion Play, in Greek, from the Island of Cyprus (1). It is the earliest known attempt at a complete cyclical dramatization of the events of Holy Week. Starting with The Awakening of Lazarus, it embraces all the stations of the Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and concludes with the Lord's Injunction to His Apostles.

In general, this *Cyprus Passion Cycle* follows closely either the Greek New Testament, or the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, and only in a few exceptional instances the homilies and similar authoritative sources. In other words, it represents throughout the accepted traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church of the period.

In view of such faithful adherence to the sacred traditions of the Church, one is perplexed by two stage directions in the scene that dramatizes Christ's Crucifixion and the Deposition from the Cross. The first of these acting directions reads: "And when they come to the place, the Smith shall appear and shall crucify Him, and the two thieves, one on the right hand, and the other on the left." The second reads, as follows: "And instantly the Smith shall come, and the Deposition from the Cross shall take place."

The two passages quoted do not employ the same Greek term for "Smith"; in the latter passage, "smith" corresponds to the classical Attic *chalkeus*, while in the former, it is a rendition of the Neo-Hellenic *komodromos*. Whereas the ancient word *chalkeus* is derived from *chalkos*, meaning, successively, "copper," "bronze," and "metal" (particularly, "iron"), the more recent term, *komodromos*, has no primary meaning connected with metal-working; basically, *komodromos* means "one who runs about the village." The famous 17th century Greek lexicon of DuCange (2) lists two meanings: "vagabond," and "itinerant metal-worker." In a footnote to his edition of the Scenario of the *Cyprus Passion Cycle*, the Byzantinist, Albert Vogt, of Geneva (Switzerland), remarks about this *komodromos*: *En réalité, ce personnage est un bohémien* ("In reality, this character is a Gipsy") (3). Unfortunately, Vogt fails to substantiate this interesting statement.

Until this day, the vagabonding metal-workers, especially the nail-smiths, in the Near East, as well as in the Balkans and the Greek Islands, including Crete, Cyprus and Rhodes, have been Gipsies; and, as the chronology of the Gipsy migrations shows, it is fully justifiable to assume the presence of Gipsy smiths on the Island of Cyprus, in the 13th Century, when the Passion Cycle originated.

Conclusive studies of the migrations of the European Gipsies were published, between 1872 and 1880, by the late Franz von Miklosich, of Vienna (4). He based his research on the fundamental discoveries about the provenience and structure of the Gipsy language, published, in 1844, by the German philologist, A. F. Pott (5). Miklosich analyzed the vocabulary of the Gipsy groups in the different countries of Europe and thus traced the migrations of these tribal units from the East to the West. He showed that all the Gipsies in the world share a common stock of basic words from some Hindi dialect, augmented by a considerable number of Persian words. Hence he drew the inference that their homeland was India—the particular basic dialect points to the Hindukush Mountains—and that from here they first turned to Persia. The presence of a vast amount of

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Greek roots in the dialects of all the Gipsy groups of Europe, and the absence of such Greek elements from the Gipsy dialects in Palestine, Egypt and North Africa, indicates that, after leaving Persia, the Gipsy people continued its migration in two columns: one following a southerly course toward Syria and Africa; and the other turning into Asia Minor and subsequently, with the Ægean Islands as stepping-stones, into the Greek mainland, in particular, the Peloponnesus. There is ample documentary evidence that they must have been living in Greece for about two hundred years when, from about 1400 A. D. onward, they began to appear in ever increasing numbers in Hungary, Bohemia, Germany, and all the rest of Europe, including the British Isles.

Although the chronology of their migrations preceding their arrival on the Greek mainland, about 1200 A. D., has not yet been clearly established, surely the afore-mentioned split into a west-bound and a south-bound column must have occurred at least another two centuries previously. Regardless of whether the Gipsies of Cyprus had branched off from the west-bound or the south-bound column, it is certain that, in the 13th Century, they must have been at home on the island for a long time. Since, moreover, the making of nails and other small iron-ware is an occupation common to both columns, the *komodromos* of the *Cyprus Passion Cycle* may be safely claimed as "a Gipsy nail-smith."

Indirectly, this inference is further substantiated by a Greek folk-tale and by several of its Slavic variants. In this popular legend, which I will discuss later, a Gipsy nail-smith figures at the Crucifixion of Christ.

Naturally, the questions arise: How did it happen that a Gipsy nail-smith could have ever become connected with this most sacred event which, moreover, was attested, in all its phases, by all four canonical gospels? And how may we account for the fact that the clerical author of the *Cyprus Passion Cycle* introduced this questionable character into his play as a perfect matter of fact; into that play which otherwise so strictly follows the Orthodox tradition? Indeed, not only once but twice does this character appear; for the smith who takes the Lord's body off the Cross, is doubtless meant to be the same fellow.

Medieval Greek literature offered not the faintest clue toward the solution of the mystery; the one Greek folk-legend with its Slavic variants helped to deepen rather than solve it. At the point of giving up, it occurred to me that iconography might provide a hint. In quest of this Gipsy Smith, I turned to Byzantine pictures of both the Crucifixion and the Deposition. The former yielded nothing; but all those of the Deposition showed a man in a short tunic who, with a pair of large pincers, extracted the nails that pierced the Lord's hands and feet.

All these pictures of the Deposition can be traced back to a pre-Byzantine prototype best represented by the miniatures of the so-called Rossano manuscript of the Greek gospels (6). The Byzantine type based on it represents the canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church, for it is this type that is described in the *Byzantine Guide to Painting*, a well-known compendium of rules for ecclesiastical artists (7).

With this in view, it was all the more perplexing to discover that the situation shown in this compositional pattern of the Deposition (Fig. 1) in no way illustrates any of the four canonical gospel accounts of this event, but that it depicts the incident such as told with much elaborate detail in an early medieval Greek legendary Life of Christ which, in turn, is based on the fanciful account of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* (8). According to these non-canonical records, it was Nicodemus who, together with Joseph of Arimathaea, took down the Lord's body from the Cross; and it is minutely described, how they climbed up two ladders to the arms of the Cross, and how Nicodemus pulled out the big iron nails.

In a very few of the numerous cases where this elaborate and unbiblical pattern of composition was used in mural frescoes, we find the name of "Nicodemus"

inscribed near the nail-extracting figure; the *Byzantine Guide to Painting* also expressly states that it is Nicodemus who extracts the nails. The manner, however, in which the nail-extracting man is generally represented in the pictures of that pattern, was more likely to obscure, than to stress, his identity as Nicodemus: in the vast majority of pictures, he wears a short tunic and has bare legs and feet, while all the other sacred personages in the picture wear long tunics draped with cloaks; this applies equally to murals and to miniatures of gospel books. In the miniatures, moreover, the name of "Nicodemus" is never found ascribed, and it occurs in only a very few of the murals. Not a single miniature is known in which the nail-extracting man possesses a halo, while there is only the one or the other mural in which he is nimbed. In the majority of pictures this man is also much smaller of stature than the other sacred persons. How then could the people be expected to know that this swarthy little fellow was intended to be Nicodemus and not just what he looked like: a lowly *komodromos*, a Gipsy nail-smith, the kind that were roaming about the country-side making and peddling nails and metal-ware?

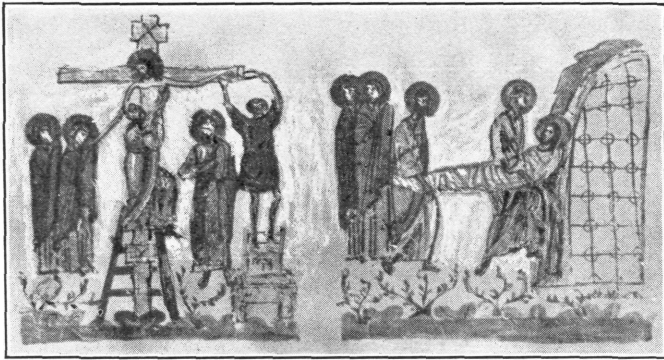


Fig. 1

Miniature from Byzantine Gospel Manuscript, 11th Century (*Paris, Bibl. Nationale, gr. 74, fol. 208v*). From H. A. Omont, *Evangelies avec Miniatures Byzantines de l'XIe Siècle* (Paris, 1908), p. 181.

Whenever in church any of the four gospel accounts of the Deposition was recited, was there ever a word said about Nicodemus' taking the Lord off the Cross, let alone, extracting the nails with pincers? Not even the clerics, when reading these accounts in their gospel books, could be expected to identify as Nicodemus the little nail-extracting figure of the miniature which, most inconsistently, accompanied each of the gospel accounts (9) but in no way fitted any of the four versions. Besides, there is another factor contributing to the belief that this figure was nothing but a common Gipsy smith: very frequently, the miniatures of this compositional pattern show, on their right side, Joseph and Nicodemus carrying the body of Christ to the grave (Fig. 1); in this half of the pictures, both figures invariably are equally tall, both have haloes and wear the long tunic with the himation; and since this part of the illustration actually fits the gospel account in which both Nicodemus and Joseph are mentioned by name (10), there could be no doubt in Nicodemus' identity, while the little nail-extracting fellow, over on the left, was all the more certain to be taken for just a common Gipsy nail-smith.

For the anthropologist, it is of especial interest to observe that the very existence of this notion presupposes a thorough familiarity on the part of the people with the Gipsies as the makers of nails and other ironware. It was so much a

matter of course to buy whatever nails were needed from the vagabond Gipsy smiths, that the people could not see how this ever could have been different; and since they had no feeling for anachronisms either, they naturally believed that the nails for the Crucifixion of Christ could not have come from anyone but a Gipsy. Weren't there in the very gospel book the pictures of the Gipsy pulling the nails, and was it not just as likely that this same Gipsy nail-smith also had hammered them in?

I have mentioned the Greek folk-legend about the Gipsy nail-smith at the Crucifixion of Christ. It was found on the Ægean island of Lesbos and also occurs in a few Slavic variants. As was the case among the Greeks, the basic notion was doubtless spread among the Slavic peoples by the pictures of the Deposition which, in the Slavic gospel books are essentially the same as those in the Greek gospels. They show exactly the same swarthy little nail-extracting fellow in the short tunic and with the bare legs.

Now as to the legend itself, in the Greek story, from Lesbos (11), the Virgin Mary meets the nail-smith, a Gipsy, and asks him whether he had seen her son. He replies that he was going to make five nails, instead of four, toward her son's impending crucifixion. Whereupon she curses him to be homeless forever.

Two variants, almost identical with each other as well as with the Lesbos version, are somewhat more explicit about that fifth nail; one is from Bulgaria (12), the other, from Bessarabia (13). In these stories, the Gipsy says that he has induced the Jews to drive the fifth nail into Christ's side [*Bulgaria: . . . into Christ's heart*]. Accordingly, the punishment is more clearly defined than in the Lesbos version: the Virgin curses the Gipsy to be black, enslaved, to be a smith, and to be despised by all [*Bulgaria: . . . never to get anything to eat unless he begs for alms*].

The Little Russians of Galicia have the following version (14): When Christ was crucified, the Gipsy nail-smith brought four nails and said that all of them were likely to be useful. However, only three were used; but Christ cursed the Gipsy that he should stray as useless as that fourth nail.

Another legend of Little Russia, from Galicia (15), tells this story: The Jews themselves dared not nail Christ to the Cross but commissioned a Gipsy to hammer in five nails. The Gipsy, however, drove in only four and swore that this was the number he had been hired for. Thenceforth, the Gipsies have been privileged by God to swear false at the fairs.

All these stories clearly express the people's contempt for the Gipsies. However, there is another set of versions that are favorable to the Gipsy in that they modify the basic motif: far from providing the nails for the Crucifixion, let alone, making them more than necessary, the Gipsy, now, steals one nail and, instead of being cursed, is being blessed, by Christ.

As the Gipsies strayed farther and farther away from the Greek domain into the Slavic Balkan countries and beyond, they appear to have learned how to take the sting out of this legend so persistently harmful to their reputation, by twisting it in their favor and peddling it themselves. A feeble attempt in this direction may perhaps be seen in the last-told of the two Little Russian variants, the tone of which is decidedly conciliatory.

I do not doubt, for instance, that the Gipsies had a hand in spreading among the Little Russians of Galicia, a story (16) in which the Carpenter (*not being a Gipsy*) is cursed never to become rich because he has made Christ's Cross, but the blacksmith (*being a Gipsy*) is blessed because he stole one of the nails.

Obvious pro-Gipsy propaganda may be seen in the following story from Lusatia (17), an East-German region inhabited by Slavic Wends: The Gipsy is blessed by Christ because he steals one of the four nails, so that Christ may be crucified with only three, thus sparing Him the disgrace of hanging on the Cross with His legs parted.

I want to conclude with two stories that were collected in a Gipsy camp in Alsace (18); sure proof that this type of the legend is actually peddled by the Gipsies themselves. Here is one of them: When Christ was about to be crucified, a Gipsy woman who was walking past, stole one of the four nails, so that Christ was crucified with only three. Therefore, the Gipsies are privileged to steal once in seven years.

This is the other story: When Jesus was about to be crucified, there were in the crowd two Jewish brothers, called Schmul and Rom-Schmul. Schmul showed a cruel satisfaction at the impending suffering of the Lord, but Rom-Schmul would have loved to save Christ from His terrible doom. That being, of course, impossible, he at least wished to show his good will; so he stole one of the four nails, and Jesus was crucified with only three. Later Rom-Schmul became a Christian, while his brother remained a Jew. It is this Rom-Schmul who became the ancestor of the Roms, as the Gipsies call themselves in their own language.

NOTES AND LITERATURE

- (1) Vogt, A. 'Études sur le Théâtre Byzantin', in *Byzantion*, VI (1931), p. 49-63.
I have recently completed a reconstruction from this scenario of the entire *Cyprus Passion Cycle* in the original Greek. It is ready for the printer, together with an English translation, notes, and a detailed discussion of its literary character and history.
- (2) DuCange, C. Dufrense, Sieur. *Glossarium ad Scriptores Mediae et Infimae Graecitatis* (Bratislava, 1891; re-impression of the edition of 1699).
- (3) Vogt, A. *op. cit.*, p. 72, note 2.
- (4) Miklosich, F. von. *Ueber die Mundarten und die Wanderungen der Zigeuner Europas*, in *Denkschriften der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* (Wien, 1872-1880). See also Hopf, K., *Die Einwanderung der Zigeuner in Europa* (Gotha, 1870).
- (5) Pott, A. F. *Die Zigeuner in Europa und Asien*, 2 Vols. (Halle, 1844).
- (6) Smith, E. B. *Early Christian Iconography*, etc. (Princeton University Press, 1918), p. 183.
- (7) There exist numerous manuscript versions of this work which has been in use—basically unchanged but modified in detail—in the painters' workshops of the Greek Orthodox Church throughout the greater part of the Christian era. One of them is printed, in translation, in Didron, A. N., *Christian Iconography*, etc. (English edition by J. Millington and M. Stokes), 2 Vols. (London, 1907), II, pp. 312-321.
- (8) See Donehoo, J. D., *The Apocryphal and Legendary Life of Christ*, etc. (New York, 1903), p. 366. For the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, see *Evangelia Apocrypha*, ed. C. Tischendorf, 2nd edition (Leipzig, 1876).
- (9) *Mark XV: 46-47; Matt. XXVII: 59-61; Luke XXIII: 53; John XIX: 38-42.*
- (10) *John XIX: 39-40.*
- (11) See Dähnhardt, O., *Natursagen*, 2 Vols. (Leipzig, 1907), II, p. 294, from Georgeakis & Pineau, *Folklore de Lesbos*, p. 273.
- (12) *ibid.*; II, p. 216. See also Rappoport, A. S., *Medieval Legends of Christ* (London, 1934), p. 232.
- (13) *ibid.*; II, p. 217; from *Jubilejnyi Sbornik v cest Millera*, etc. (ed. W. A. Jancuka), p. 95.
- (14) *ibid.*; II, p. 216 f.; from Hnatjuk, *Galicko-ruski narodni legendi* (= *Etnograficnij Zbirnyk*, XII and XIII).
- (15) *ibid.*; II, p. 217; see also Polivka, *Archiv für slavische Philologie*, XIX, p. 263.
- (16) *ibid.*; from Hnatjuk, *op. cit.*
- (17) *ibid.*; from Schulenberg, W. von, *Wendische Volkssagen and Gebräuche* (Leipzig, 1880), p. 47 f.
- (18) *ibid.*; II, p. 293 f.; see also *Gipsy Lore Journal*, I (1889), p. 253.