

# **The Radanites: Jewish Merchant Intermediaries of the Early Medieval Eurasian Trade Network**

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## **Introduction**

From a very early age, Jews were actively involved in trade between Europe and Asia. However, our knowledge of that trade and their trade routes come as a result of historical fragments. Here are two examples.

### **Kfar Samir shipwreck (off the coast near Haifa, Israel)**

In a find dating to approximately 1200 BC, tin ingots were recovered from a submerged shipwreck site near Haifa. A 2022 isotopic analysis showed that some of these ingots originated from tin deposits in Cornwall and Devon (southwest Britain). This provided the first direct physical evidence that British tin reached the eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze Age.

### **Cinnamon**

The Hebrew Bible explicitly mentions cinnamon as a temple consecration ingredient. Exodus 30:22–24 describes the ingredients in the holy anointing oil used for the Tabernacle: “Take the finest spices: 500 shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much fragrant cinnamon, and 250 shekels of fragrant cane...”

This text is traditionally dated to the Mosaic period (often placed c. 1400-1200 BC), but most historians agree the written form reflects practices established by the First Temple period (~1000-900 BC).

Thus, the earliest confirmed importation of cinnamon into Israel dates to approximately 1000 BC, during the early First Temple period. However, the trade routes bringing cinnamon from India to the Near East were already established by 1200–1500 BC, meaning cinnamon likely reached the Levant slightly earlier through Egyptian and Arabian intermediaries. This confirms that Israel was integrated into Indian Ocean trade networks over 3,000 years ago.

The Radanites, a group of merchant adventurer Jews, give us our first stable glimpse into the Jewish merchants who moved goods from Western Europe to Asia, and from Asia to Western Europe.

## The Radanites

The Radanites were a group of Jewish merchant-traders who played a central role in facilitating long-distance commerce across Eurasia during the early medieval period, particularly between the eighth and tenth centuries. Their activities connected Western Europe, the Islamic Caliphate, Central Asia, India, and China, forming a commercial network that linked previously isolated economic regions. The Radanites functioned not merely as traders but as intermediaries operating within a broader Jewish diaspora system, which provided institutional continuity, cultural cohesion, and logistical infrastructure across vast geographic distances. Their success arose from the intersection of geopolitical fragmentation, the expansion of Islamic civilization, and the widespread distribution of Jewish communities across Eurasia.

The primary historical source describing the Radanites comes from Ibn Khordadbeh, a ninth-century Persian geographer and official in the Abbasid Caliphate, who described Jewish merchants traveling between Western Europe and China using both maritime and overland routes. According to his account, these merchants transported goods such as silk, spices, musk, camphor, and aromatics from Asia to Europe, while exporting European products including furs, swords, and slaves eastward.<sup>1</sup> These trade routes followed established commercial corridors through the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean, integrating diverse political and economic systems into a single exchange network.

The Radanites were uniquely positioned to operate across religious and political boundaries that restricted other merchants. During the early medieval period, Europe was divided between Christian and Islamic civilizations, and political and religious tensions often limited direct contact between these regions. Jewish merchants, however, maintained communities in both Christian and Muslim territories, enabling them to function as neutral intermediaries.<sup>2</sup> Their diasporic distribution allowed them to establish trust-based relationships across political frontiers, facilitating trade where direct exchange between Christian and Muslim merchants was difficult or prohibited.

Jewish diaspora communities formed the institutional foundation of the Radanite network. These communities were located along major commercial routes, including cities such as Baghdad, Constantinople, Cairo, Antioch, Venice, Cordoba, and Cologne.<sup>3</sup> Shared religious identity, linguistic competence, and legal traditions allowed Jewish merchants to travel safely and conduct business across regions governed by different political authorities. Jewish law, communal courts, and rabbinical leadership provided mechanisms for resolving disputes and enforcing contracts, which enhanced trust and reduced the risks associated with long-distance commerce.

The expansion of the Islamic Caliphate during the seventh and eighth centuries played a crucial role in facilitating Radanite trade. The Caliphate unified vast territories from Spain to Central Asia under a single administrative system, creating a stable environment that encouraged

economic integration. Islamic cities such as Baghdad became major centers of commerce, attracting merchants from across Eurasia. Jewish communities within the Caliphate benefited from relative religious tolerance and economic opportunity, allowing them to participate actively in trade and finance.<sup>4</sup> This environment enabled Jewish merchants to function as key intermediaries between Islamic and European markets.

The Radanite trade network also extended eastward into Central Asia, India, and China, regions connected by the Silk Road. Jewish merchants established commercial relationships with Persian, Indian, and Chinese traders, facilitating the exchange of luxury goods and cultural knowledge. Central Asian intermediary populations, including Sogdians and Persians, played important roles in maintaining these routes, but Jewish merchants were uniquely capable of linking eastern and western markets due to their presence in both regions.<sup>5</sup> Their ability to operate across multiple cultural and political systems made them essential participants in early medieval globalization.

The role of the Radanites must also be understood within the broader historical context of Jewish diaspora mobility. Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and subsequent dispersal of Jewish populations throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, Jewish communities became established across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> These communities maintained religious and cultural cohesion through shared texts, institutions, and traditions, allowing them to function as interconnected nodes within a transregional network. The Radanites emerged from this diaspora infrastructure, utilizing existing communal connections to support long-distance trade.

By the tenth century, the importance of the Radanites declined due to political and economic changes, including the fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate, the rise of new trade networks, and increased participation of other merchant groups such as Muslim and Italian traders.<sup>7</sup> However, the legacy of the Radanites persisted in the continued prominence of Jewish merchants in medieval European commerce. Jewish communities in cities such as Venice, Barcelona, and Mainz played significant roles in finance and trade, building upon the commercial foundations established during the Radanite period.

The Radanites represent one of the earliest documented examples of a transcontinental Jewish merchant diaspora operating across Eurasia. Their success demonstrates how diasporic identity, institutional cohesion, and geographic mobility enabled Jewish merchants to function as intermediaries between diverse civilizations. They contributed not only to economic exchange but also to cultural transmission, facilitating the movement of ideas, technologies, and knowledge across regions. The Radanite network illustrates the importance of diaspora communities in maintaining economic connectivity during periods of political fragmentation.

The Radanites were a critical component of early medieval Eurasian trade networks, serving as intermediaries between Europe, the Islamic world, and Asia. Their activities were made possible by the widespread distribution of Jewish diaspora communities, the political stability provided by the Islamic Caliphate, and their unique ability to operate across religious and political

boundaries. The Radanites helped sustain long-distance commerce during a period when direct interaction between major civilizations was limited. Their legacy reflects the enduring role of Jewish diaspora networks in shaping global trade and economic history. However, it must be said, Jewish merchants were operating between Western Europe and Asia centuries never entirely disappeared.

### **The Afghan Geniza**

The Afghanistan Geniza, sometimes called the Afghan Genizah, refers to a remarkable collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts discovered in caves in northern Afghanistan, primarily in the Bamiyan and Samangan regions, beginning around 2011. These documents date from approximately the 10th to 13th centuries CE and were written in Hebrew, Judeo-Persian (Persian written in Hebrew script), Aramaic, and Arabic.

The collection includes religious texts, personal letters, legal contracts, business records, and biblical commentaries. This provides direct evidence of a previously little-documented Jewish community living along the Silk Road who were connected to Jews who traded along the silk road.

Many of the texts reflect commercial activities, including trade, credit, taxation, and partnerships. These historical documents demonstrate that Afghan Jewish merchants were integrated into trans-Eurasian exchange networks linking the Europe, the Islamic world, Central Asia, and India. Some documents also include correspondence between Jewish merchants and rabbinic authorities, illustrating continued intellectual and religious ties with major Jewish centers such as Baghdad.

The Afghanistan Geniza is often compared to the famous Cairo Geniza because of its importance in reconstructing medieval Jewish daily life, but it is particularly significant because it confirms the presence of stable Jewish communities deep within Central Asia, functioning as commercial intermediaries within Silk Road trade systems. This discovery has provided critical new evidence for understanding Jewish diaspora mobility, merchant networks, and the geographic reach of Jewish economic and cultural life in medieval Eurasia.

Thus, while history indicates the Radanite period came to an end, Jewish merchants, travelling from Europe to Asia, and Asia to Europe, continued well into the medieval period.

### **Footnotes**

1. Ibn Khordadbeh, *Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms), ninth century.
2. L. Rabinowitz, "The Routes of the Radanites," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 35 (1945): 251–280.
3. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in the Middle Ages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 88–95.

4. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 45–62.
5. Richard Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1996), 134–142.
6. Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem* (London: Penguin, 2007), 497–505.
7. Abraham Udovitch, “Merchants and Trade in the Islamic World,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Middle East*, ed. M. A. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 261–304

## **An Alternate Origin Story for Some Romani Groups**

The most widely accepted origin story of the Romani people is that they descend from a migration of northern Indians making their way to Europe, sometime after the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Based on recent DNA research into several Romani communities, an alternate origin story is emerging. The Romani communities we have tested may descend from the Radanite Jews. The Radanite Jews were described by Rabbi L. Rabinowitz in his book entitled "Jewish Merchant Adventurers". The genetic profile of the communities test thus far, closely mirrors the path of the Radanite Jews trade routes.

To date, we have ancestry DNA tested over 340 members of different Romani communities around Europe. This includes:

100 Spanish Gypsies

50 French Gypsies

100 Slovakian Gypsies

75 Swiss Jewish -German Sinti Gypsies

15 Anglo-Romani

There are several facts that have come to the surface because of this testing.

1. Members of all 5 ethnic groups appear as 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> cousins to members of other ethnic groups. In other words, the Anglo-Romani have 2<sup>nd</sup> cousins living in Spain. Though they are unlikely to have had any real contact with each other for at least 300 years. This is true for all members of all groups. This can be explained by the practice of strict endogamy within the different ethnicities.

2. All five groups display the same ethnic profile. Rather than carrying one Jewish ethnicity, they carry many Jewish ethnicities. All persons tested display a mixture of the following Jewish ethnicities in varying amounts.

This includes:

European Jewish ancestry (Ashkenazi and Sephardi)

North African Jewish ancestry (Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, and Libyan)

Mizrahi Jewish ancestry (Yemenite, Iraqi, and Iranian)

Caucasian Jewish ancestry (Georgian and Azari)

Central Asian Jewish ancestry (Uzbeki)

Indian Jewish ancestry (Cochin, Bnai Israel, and Benei Menashe)

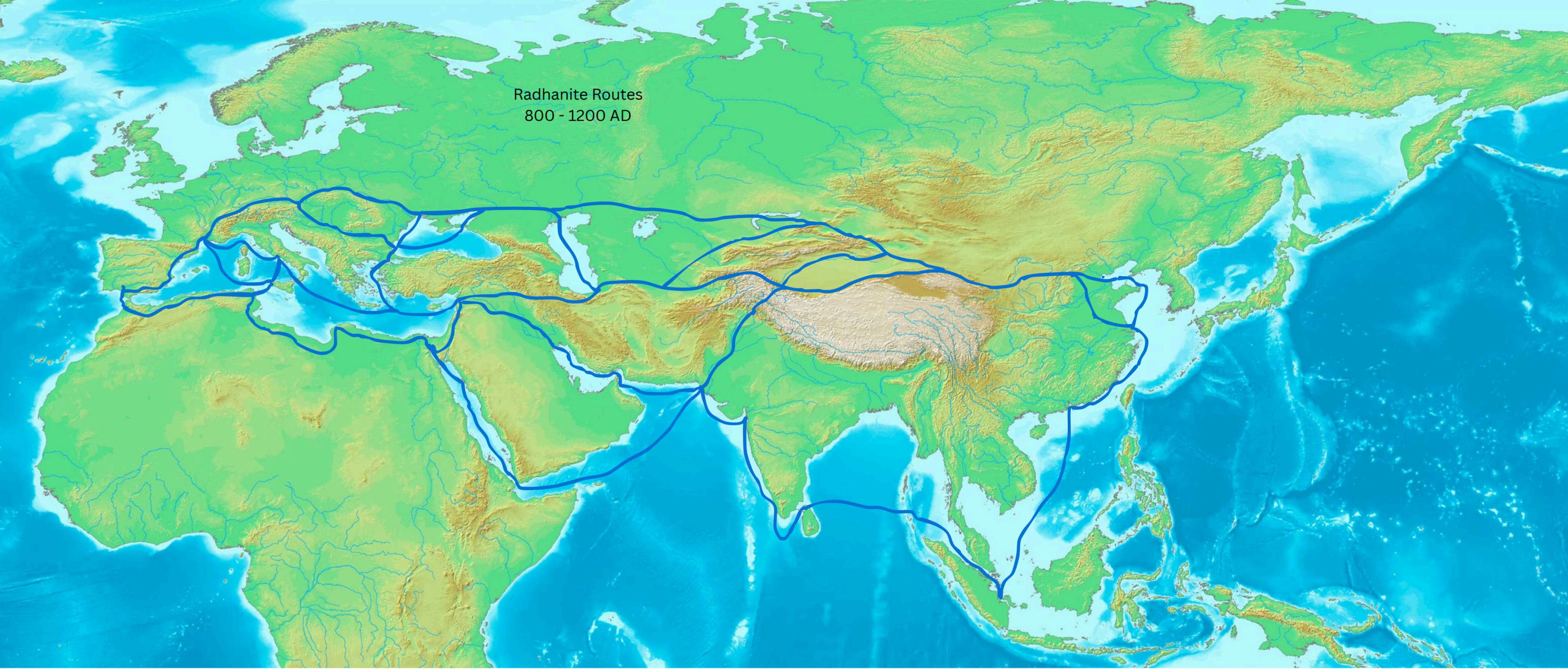
Asian Jewish ancestry (Kaifeng)

3. Based on DNA analysis of all tested individuals, their DNA based Jewish ancestry is between 65-90% Jewish.

4. All tested persons display ancient Jewish ancestry (Canaanite and Levantine), Medieval (DNA matches to the 11<sup>th</sup> century Norwich England Jewish cemetery and the 12<sup>th</sup> century Erfurt Germany Jewish cemetery) and matches to modern Jews who currently live in the state of Israel.

We are presently testing our way east through the Gypsy world, currently working our way to Kazakhstan, Dagestan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to see if the finding of Jewish origins for the European Romani communities test, continues beyond Europe and into the east.

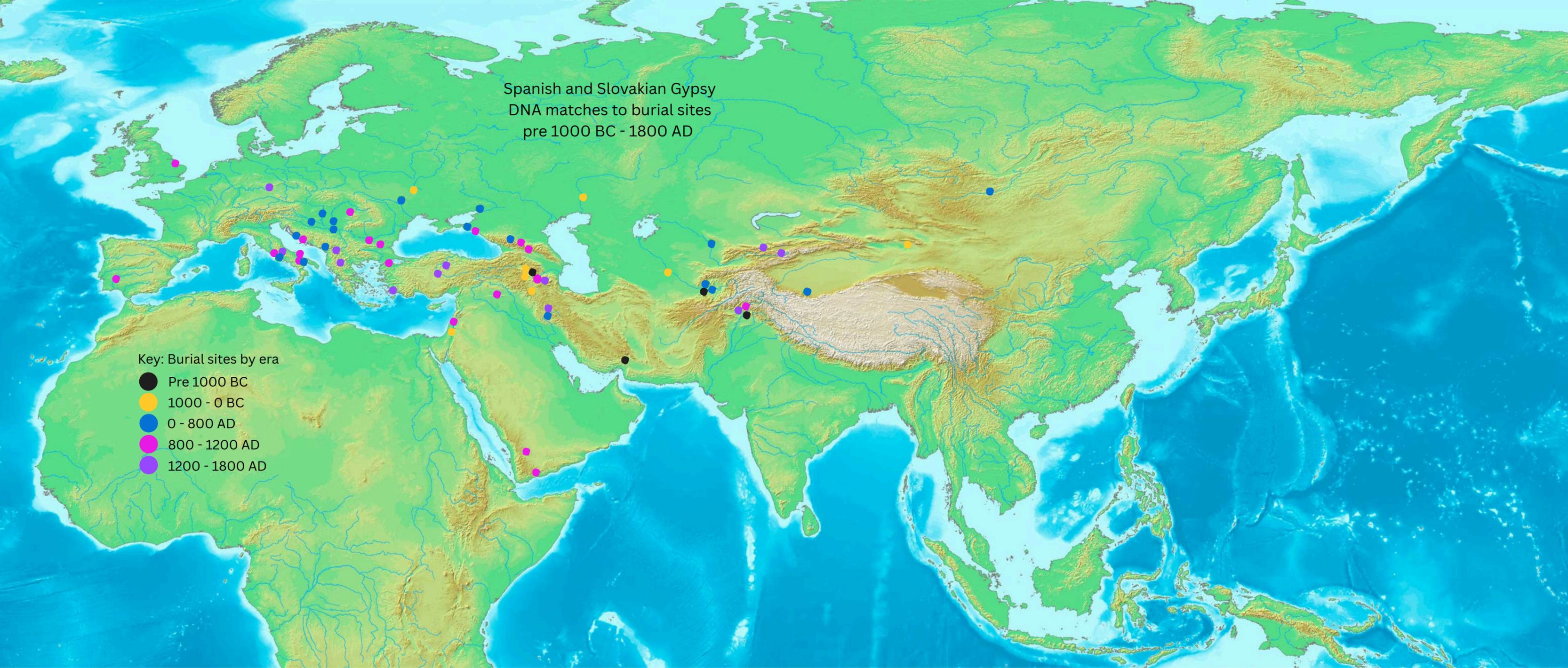
Radhanite Routes  
800 - 1200 AD



Spanish and Slovakian Gypsy  
DNA matches to burial sites  
pre 1000 BC - 1800 AD

Key: Burial sites by era

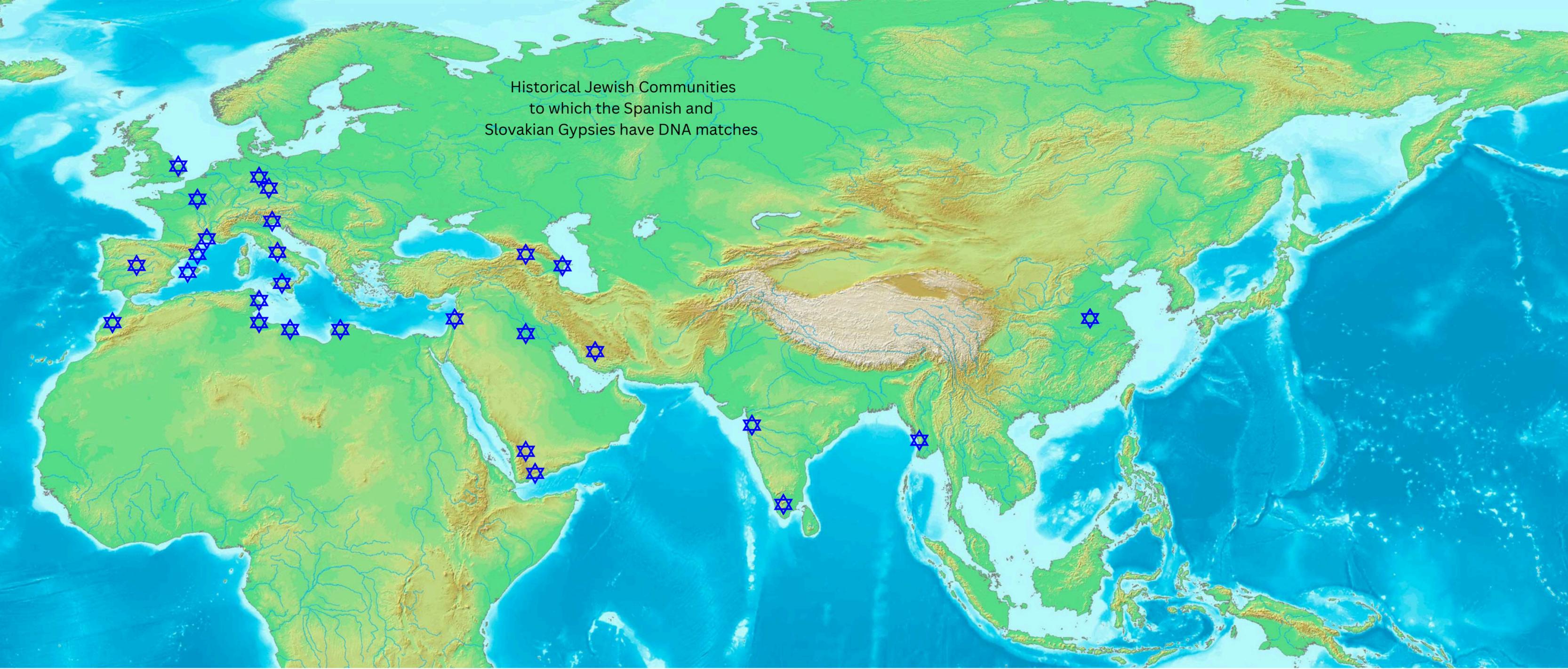
- Pre 1000 BC
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- 0 - 800 AD
- 800 - 1200 AD
- 1200 - 1800 AD



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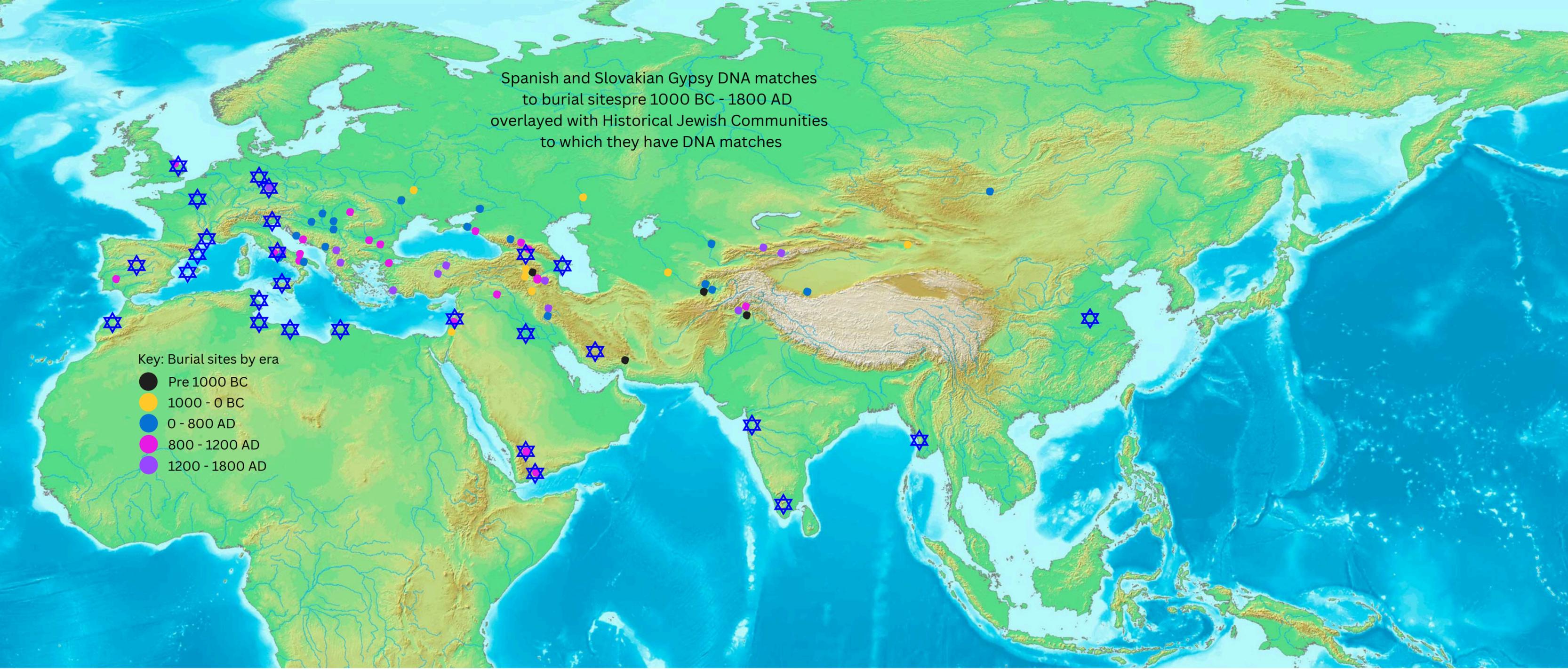


Historical Jewish Communities  
to which the Spanish and  
Slovakian Gypsies have DNA matches



Spanish and Slovakian Gypsy DNA matches  
to burial sites pre 1000 BC - 1800 AD  
overlayed with Historical Jewish Communities  
to which they have DNA matches

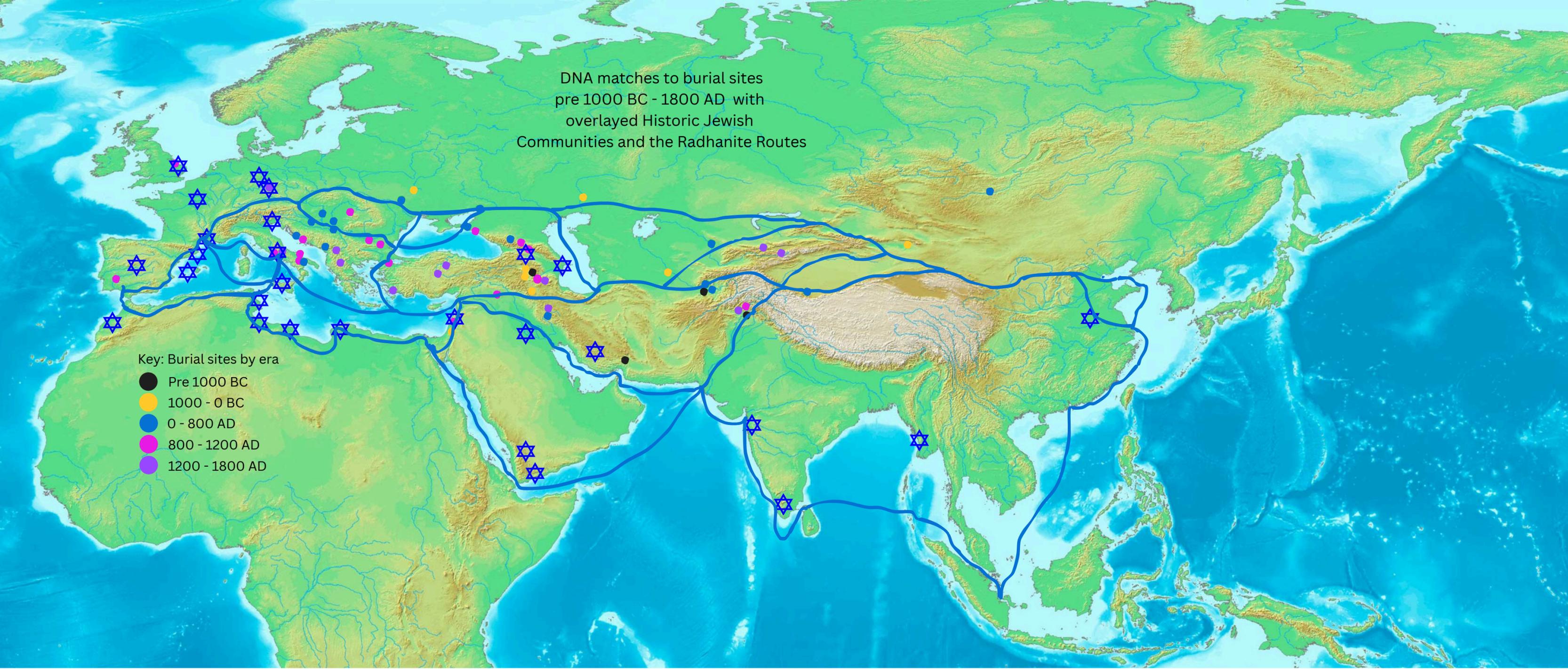
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  - 1000 - 0 BC
  - 0 - 800 AD
  - 800 - 1200 AD
  - 1200 - 1800 AD



DNA matches to burial sites  
pre 1000 BC - 1800 AD with  
overlayed Historic Jewish  
Communities and the Radhanite Routes

Key: Burial sites by era

- Pre 1000 BC
- 1000 - 0 BC
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- 800 - 1200 AD
- 1200 - 1800 AD



## European Romani: Descendants of the Merchant Adventurer Jews

The Radanite Jews were merchant adventurers who traded and travelled from Western Europe to China and India and back between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. They lived and traded out of Carwans; travelled in Caravans; and stayed at Caravanserai, or merchant forts, along the way. They traded through sedentary Jewish communities along the trade route, from Germany all the way to Southern India.

The ancestry testing of 100 Spanish Gypsies and 100 Slovakian Gypsies reveals Jewish ancestry that mirrors the Radanite trade routes. This includes:

European Jewish (Ashkenazi Jewish and Sephardic)

North African Jewish (Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, Libyan)

Mizrahi Jewish (Iraqi, Yemenite, and Iranian)

Caucasian Jewish (Georgian, Azari)

Central Asian Jewish (Uzbeki)

South Asian Jewish (Benei Menashe, Bnai Israel, Cochin)

At its face, it seems odd that one person could have so many Jewish ethnicities. However, when one looks at the Radanite routes, which were in fact travelled by Jews before that Radanite s and by Jews after the Radanite s, it raises the prospect the origin story for this group of Romani lies with the Jews that travelled the Silk Road.

In addition to this, the Spanish and Slovakian Roma populations showed genetic similarity to multiple medieval populations discovered and documented from archaeological digs distributed from South Asia to Northern Europe and the western Mediterranean. This would indicate this group traded along the ancient trade routes before, during, and after the Radanite period. This includes:

Medieval Swat Valley (MG Mosque)

Sogdian layer

North Caucasus (Anapa, Alans)

Danubian Bulgars

Carpathian Basin

South Slavs (Ryahovets)

Byzantine Anatolia

South Italy (Foggia)

Early Medieval Iberia AD 800–1100

Medieval Jews of Erfurt and Norwich

That is not a random group of ancient ancestors. It indicates a founder population that lines up with the most ancient trade routes:

Swat / Gandhāra → Sogdiana → Caucasus passes → Danube–Carpathians → Byzantine Balkans & Anatolia → Adriatic & South Italy → Northern Europe

This set of facts suggests the Spanish and Slovakian Roma are the descendants of the human infrastructure of the Silk Road world. The only historical population pattern that fits all of these layers together is one of long-term participation in a trans-regional intermediary trading network. Not conquest, not a single migration, not one ethnic origin. In other words, these group's ancestors repeatedly lived at or traded through the Jewish exchange nodes along the ancient trade routes.