



BĪGĀR

BĪGĀR, BĪGĀRĪ, a term of taxation in Iran and central Asia, generally meaning “corvée,” the duty of supplying workers without pay for the construction and repair of irrigation systems, roads, fortresses, palaces, and other public buildings, as well as sometimes for agricultural work on the estates of rulers and landlords. The etymology has not been firmly established; Petrushevskii (1960, p. 394) surmises that it may have been borrowed by Middle Persian from Greek *aggaria* (on the latter term in Byzantium, with the same meaning “corvée, compulsory work,” see Dölger, p. 62). The Pahlavi term apparently existed already under the Sasanians, since its use is attested in Persarmenia in 641 a.d., in the form *bekar*. The term *bīgār*, apparently in the same general meaning “compulsory work,” is found in two documents of the time of the K̅vārazmšāhs (in both together with *šāhkār*, cf. below; see Horst, p. 83), and it is mentioned in various literary works of the first centuries of Islam (see quotations from Ferdowsī, Nāṣer(-e) K̅osrow, Bayhaqī, and Afzal-al-Dīn Kermānī in Dehḡodā, s.v. *bīgār*), but the real meaning of this duty has been studied only for later periods, beginning with the Mongols.

The duty of *bīgār* was imposed on all taxpayers (*ra'iyats*), both rural and urban, holding land, unless they were exempt from it by a special decree. Most commonly, one worker was required either from each household (especially in the cities) or from each unit of arable land (usually one *joft-e gāv*, but it could be also 510 *tanābs* or some other square measure; sometimes two or three workers had to be supplied from a *joft-e gāv*). In some cases, when *bīgār* consisted of irrigation works, the workers were supplied by those who had the



right to a share of the water for irrigation, in proportion to the number of their shares. The number of days per year for *bīgār* varied and was probably determined by local tradition; it could be as low as one to three days a year (e.g. under the Āq Qoyunlū Uzun Ḥasan; see Hinz, p. 182) or up to twelve days a year (mostly in central Asia in the 13th/19th century; see Abduraimov, I, p. 292; Gulyamov, p. 263). There could probably be longer periods for urban artisans, whose skills were needed for construction works. The beginning of a *bīgār* was announced by the central government or by provincial authorities, depending on the location and importance of the work to be done, and it was conducted under the supervision of specially appointed officials.

The term *bīgār* was very often used together with the term *ḥašar* (from Ar. *ḥašara* “to gather, bring together”) as synonyms (cf., for instance, Bayhaqī, pp. 499-500: *ḥašar* and *mard-e bīgārī* on the construction of a palace). However, the term *ḥašar* also had different meanings: 1. auxiliary troops, usually peasant levy, mostly used for siege work, or as sappers, and sometimes as a reserve (in central Asia in the Uzbek period a Turko-Mongol term *qara čerik* was used for such auxiliary troops rather than *ḥašar*); 2. communal help provided by relatives and the members of a village or neighborhood community to one another on various occasions (agricultural works, building of a house, family festivals, etc.). In the Khanate of Bukhara in the 10th-14th/16th-20th centuries, the term *bīgār* was mostly replaced by the term *mardekār* (lit. “time-worker”; cf. *mard-ebīgārī* above; see Akhmedov, p. 144; Abduraimov, I, p. 292), which meant both the duty and a single worker performing it (as a synonym for such worker the term *ḥašarčī* was also used; see Troitskaya, *Materialy*, p. 33). Some documents, however, mention all three terms side by side: *ḥašar*, *bīgār*, and *mardekār*, and it is not clear what distinction, if any, was made among them (cf. Chekhovich, pp. 98-99: a decree of the early 18th century). In the Khanate of Kīva, the term *bīgār* was used for the corvée organized by the government, of which the most important was *qāzū* (apparently from Turk. *qazmaq* “to dig”; see Gulyamov, p. 261), construction and repair of main irrigational canals, dams, etc.; *qāzū* done on sub-canals, which was organized not by the government, but by local communities, was not considered a part of *bīgār*. For 13th/19th and early 14th/20th-century central Asia in general, some researchers distinguish between *bīgār* (also *bīgārī*), or *mardekār*, mainly work on construction of public buildings, roads, etc., and *ḥašar*, i.e., mainly forced labor in agriculture on behalf of owners of large estates and local governors (see Kislyakov, pp. 114-15). Such distinction is attested for the eastern, mountainous part of the



Khanate of Bukhara, but it is not clear whether it existed elsewhere. A colorful description of *ḥašar* in Bukhara (from personal recollections) is found in *Yāddāsthā-ye 'Aynī* (Tehran, 1362 Š./1983, pp. 62-69; S. Aīni, *Vospominaniya*, Moscow, 1960, pp. 77-86).

Various forms of corvée known as *bīgārī* still existed in most regions of Iran as late as the 1320s Š./1940s. According to Lambton (p. 331), it consisted “of so many days of free labour by a peasant or the provision of an ass for free labour on so many days of the year. In the latter case the asses are used, for example, for the transport of the landowner’s produce from the village to the town, or for the transport of building materials, etc.” At that time, as before, *bīgārī* included labor on the construction of buildings, canals, and roads, but also work in the fields which the landowner cultivated himself. It appears from the data gathered by Lambton that, as a rule, *bīgārī* was now levied by the landowner, not by the government, and the rate of it varied from one to seven days per year (in Kurdistan the seven days’ free labor were known as *haft nafar*, and four days’ free labor of an ass were called *čahār olāg*). Only in Sīstān, where most of the land was crown land (*kāleša*), as well as in Baluchistan, labor service was levied by the government and consisted mainly of construction, cleaning, and repair of irrigation canals, as well as the building of roads; these works were called *ḥašar* (*ibid.*, pp. 331-33). Thus, in 14th/20th-century Iran the terms *bīgār* (*bīgārī*) and *ḥašar* mean just the reverse of what they probably meant in central Asia.

Other terms used in Iran as synonyms of *bīgār* were *qalūn* (a local term, registered only in Kermān; cf. *qalūnī*, “futile,” in local Shirazi), and, more generally, *sokra* and *šīkār*, or *šīgār*. Persian dictionaries derive the latter from *šāh kār* (see above, under the *Ḳvārazmšāhs*), cf. *šākār* in *Šāh-nāma*, and see Dehḳodā for further references; cf. Petrushevskiĭ, 1949, pp. 289-90. The explanation of *šīgār* given by Minorsky (p. 950; *Camb. Hist. Iran VI*, p. 553), who read *šekār* and interpreted the term as “some particular obligation with regard to the princely hunting, e.g. participation in battues,” is most probably wrong.

On the use of *bīgār* (*bekar*) and other terms for corvée in Transcaucasia see Petrushevskiĭ, 1949, pp. 285-89; Bournoutian; Bogdanova, II, p. 55. On corvées in modern Afghanistan see A. Hottinger.



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