



ELČĪ

ELČĪ (*īlčī*), envoy, messenger, or official traveling on government business during the Mongol period and thereafter. The Mongols were especially insistent on the sacrosanct status of ambassadors, especially their own; and the murder of an *elčī*, together with the ill-treatment of two others, helped precipitate Čengīz Khan's (q.v.) invasion of the Sultan Moḥammad K̄vārazmšāh's empire in 616/1219. The Mongol empire, being of unparalleled size, inevitably required an elaborate communications network if it was to function effectively. During the time of Čengīz Khan, *elčīs* had made ad hoc exactions of remounts and provisions as they traveled around on official business. A regular system, the *yām*, was set up in 631/1234 during the reign of the Great Khan Ögedei (624-39/1229-41). Post stations were established at regular intervals throughout the empire, from which *elčīs* could draw whatever was necessary (*Histoire secrète*, pp. 256-57; Rašīd-al-Dīn, ed. Blochet, pp. 42, 49; tr. Boyle, pp. 55, 62). They carried tablets of authority (*paiza*) varying in form according to their status. According to the Persian sources, the system was much abused by *elčīs*. Jovaynī (ed. Qazvīnī, III, pp. 76-77; tr. Boyle, II, p. 599) recounts how in the 650s/1250s Möngke (Mangū) attempted to reduce the burden on the countryside imposed by the exactions of traveling *elčīs* by laying down clear instructions as to their behavior. Rašīd-al-Dīn (ed. Blochet, p. 312; tr. Boyle, p. 219) adds that merchants had been using the official facilities, which they were now forbidden to do. Möngke's reforms evidently had no more than a temporary effect, at least in Persia. The misbehavior of *elčīs* was among the many abuses tackled by Ġāzān Khan in his program of administrative reforms. Prior to Ġāzān's accession in 694/1295, if



Rašīd-al-Dīn is to be believed, *elčīs* traveled with anything from 200 to 1,000 attendants. They were in the habit of stopping caravans and even commandeering the horses of army officers, government officials, and *qāzīs*. Bandits would take advantage of this practice, masquerading as *elčīs* in order to rob travelers they had succeeded in stopping (Baku, p. 480). The ill-repute of *elčīs* as a class and the consequent lack of cooperation they encountered interfered with state business insofar as genuine *elčīs* abroad on important missions were also delayed. Ġāzān laid down detailed provisions intended to put a stop to such abuses (Rašīd-al-Dīn, pp. 483-85; *Tārīk-e Waṣṣāf*, p. 387), though as usual in the case of his reforms, it is difficult to know what practical effect, if any, this had. The malign reputation of *elčīs* survived the Mongol regime: Clavijo (p. 189) records how, during the reign of Tīmūr, their approach was dreaded by villagers and townspeople, “for with the arrival of ambassadors they know that a black day is on them.” The term continued in use during the Safavid and Qajar periods. See also ČĀPĀR.

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