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INNOVATION OF THE STEPPE - HORSE RELAY SYSTEM

The communication was one of the most important elements for great empires from the ancient times, the kings or rulers were able to get connected their provinces. The relay system was established in antiquity, it was one of the great innovations of the equestrian steppe empires, and at certain intervals stops were established, reserved specifically for equestrian envoys. The earliest source data on communications in the Inner-Asian region is found in the Chinese Chronicles, where in relation to the Huns and their descendants, it says that on arrival at the emperor's court, the envoy had to provide a certain object in order to prove their identity. It was the first diplomatic passport, which provided exemptions and special rights for their holders.

We find data on the fact that not only in Inner Asia, but the Huns living in Europe have also operated such an advanced communication system. The *Chronicum Pictum* or *Picture Chronicle* of Vienna has captured that Attila the Hun king had also had a very well-functioning communications network in the 5th century AD. Envoys also mentioned the ferry system also operated inside the relay system both in Hunnic and Mongolian period. The description of this system in many respects is the same as the post network of Inner-Asia, of which the most detailed records are from the time of the Mongolian Empire, when foreign envoys and travellers have accurately described how it works.

Keywords: Relay system, Inner-Asia, Mongols, Attila the Hun, Huns, diplomatic passport, gереge, belge, postal system, communication

Communication and even fast communication between people is not only a necessity of the modern world, but there were efforts for achieving this in the antiquity and in the Middle Ages, too.

Communicating by smoke signals was common practice because this way news was quickly passed from one end of the empire to the other. The alternative communication system- that was regarded to be modern at the time- was the postal service, when messengers were travelling delivering news and reports between realms. In ancient times, however, the real communication revolution exploded with the use of the horse. The steppe peoples – Scythians, Sakas, Huns – employed horseback messengers and couriers, who travelled extremely fast, so that the flow of information has speeded up.

The relay system was established in antiquity, it was one of the great innovations of the equestrian steppe empires, and at certain intervals stops were established, reserved specifically for equestrian envoys. They had access to get rested horses and got food and drink, and this way a rider was able to do 200 kilometers a day. Below we can see that ferrymen were on duty at the rivers, who also helped carrying the riders. Unfortunately, we have only fragmentary resources about the operation of this well-established system, and we have detailed information only from the Mongolian period (13-14th centuries). The Mongols developed this system to perfection in the 13th century and additional innovations have been introduced.

Ancient operation system

It is worth to get to know this ancient communication technology that has worked so well for long centuries. One of the foundation stones of the effective operation and cohesion of the Eurasian steppe's horseman realms was the advanced communication system all across the entire empire by which the sovereign was able to send resolutions to herdsmen and tribal leaders who lived a long way away and also the sovereign could find out about events in his empire. Based on historical sources, it appears that in the Eurasian steppe region, an advanced communication system has been established since antiquity. Unfortunately, there are only fragmented records on the origins and the early operation of this system. Most of the data on this can be found in the ancient Chinese chronicles, and there are also some references on the operations in the medieval Greek and Latin records. There are a few lines on King Attila's postal network in the medieval Hungarian Chronicles and historical sources that recorded the history of the European Huns. Fortunately, early records are complemented by a growing number of records from the Middle Ages. Based on these the operation of the steppe's communications system and the use of messengers can be well reconstructed. According to them we can state it was an effective communication system of the Eurasian steppe. In addition to the historical sources, archaeological records are also available. Chinese, Russian,

Hungarian, etc. archaeologists have explored the most important asset of the postal system: the old «diplomat» passport, which is known as Belge or Paizi.

The old steppe communications system was researched mainly by Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese historians. Based on 13th-14th century Mongolian sources they reconstructed how news was transmitted by the ruler's postmen. Some great English, German and French literature on the Mongolian empire mention the advanced post system in the Mongolian empire. Most Mongolian era researchers believe that Genghis Khan has developed and expanded a completely new communication system in his realm. As I present below, the ancient postal or relay system already existed in the ancient period, Genghis Khan has probably reformed the already existing steppe model.

The earliest source data on communications in the Inner-Asian region is found in the Chinese Chronicles, where in relation to the Huns, it says that on arrival at the emperor's court, the envoy had to provide a certain object in order to prove their identity [1]. 3rd-6th century sources give an accurate picture of the steppe communication system. Today's North China was dominated by the «Sixteen Kingdoms of the Five Barbarian states» at that time, who were predominantly Huns and tribes related to the Huns. They had made regular records on their administrative system, on the operation of post stations and the names of its workers. Peoples such as the Topa or Tabgach sent delegates regularly who carried a seal on a thread to their destination to identify themselves. In addition, there was a well-organized postage network through which the news and ruler decrees were carried all over the country. The Wei-Shu Chronicle that contains the history of the Tabgach's, listed some of these. The communication system itself was called pürtü, which can be related to the Mongolian word of örtöö meaning postal station. The postal station workers were called pürtükchin i.e. postmen. By these steppe peoples, the word jam was also known, which was the commonly known name for the postal station in the Mongolian age (13th - 14th century) [2]. These are the earliest records on what an advanced communications

¹ The xianbei state has been established in the course of the 1st century BC in the Chinese sources. They related to Eastern Hu, or Donghu, inside them Huns lived. After the division of great Hunnic Empire, who occupied the Donghu territory, the xianbei became powerful and began to invade the ex-Hunnic places in present-day Northern-China. One branch was named as Tabgach who established Wei-dynasty in 386-534.

² Bernat Munkácsi cited Shiratori's publication. Shiratori has mentioned some important Tabgach words in the Wei-shu, relating to postal station. E.g. pi-teh-chen or writer, (Mongolian: bichigchin, Hungarian: betű). In: Munkácsi, 1902. 322. The same words were mentioned by Ligeti, 1970. 293-294.

² According to Shiratori the name of the postal station in the Wei-shu is jam or yen, the former is the word for post. The jam-chen, or yen chen means postman. L. Munkácsi, 1902. 323, Ligeti, 1970. 294-295. Exc. de. Leg. Roman. 3. In: Blockley, 1983. 249.

system was already in operation amongst the East or Asian steppe peoples related to them.

We find data on the fact that not only in inner Asia, but the Huns living in Europe have also operated such an advanced communication system. The Picture Chronicle of Vienna has captured that Attila the Hun king had also had a very well functioning communications network in the 5th century AD. This is however not known to foreign researchers because the record was not considered important by Hungarian scientists. They could not imagine that the Huns had a modern communication system as described in the source. However, on the basis of contemporary eastern sources, it seems certain that in Attila's court, such an advanced system probably had operated. This was propably not invented by him but the Huns brought it with them from Inner Asia. In the aforementioned work we read the following description: «He has appointed and sent guards to the four directions of the compass. The first team of his guards, starting in Sicambria, at a distance from one another so that they could hear the cry of each other- stood guard day and night all the way to the German city of Cologne, another group of guards to Lithuania, the third group to the banks of the river Don, i.e. river Etel, and the fourth group were stationed all the way to the town of Zadar in Dalmatia. This way the four cardinal points of the world could hear what Attila was doing with his own warfare».

Barrier-free and fast transport for the envoys was not only secured on dry land but both the Huns and the Mongols worked out the fast and efficient crossing of rivers. A credible eyewitness, Priskos Retor, who was in Attila's court, reported that in the Hun Empire the envoys were transported through the great rivers by ferrymen¹, which was an important element of the postal station. The same sort of ferry service was prescribed by the 13th century so-called Mongolian-era travellers: Plano Carpini and Wilhelmus Rubruk, who were transferred across the great rivers in the country of Batu [2]. An important tool of the steppe communications system was the billog, formerly known as the belge (stamp), which was given to the envoys to identify themselves with along their journey.

The description of this system in many respect is the same as the post network of Inner-Asia, of which the most detailed records are from the time of the Mongolian Empire, when foreign envoys and travellers have accurately described how it works.

Thanks to the Western European envoys, there is a relatively wide source on the Mongolian Empire from which we can find out more about the steppe's postal station system. The Mongolian resources also report how the communication system functioned. The Secret History of Mongols mentioned movement of envoys, who were able to change saddles in special stations. It may connect with the steppe communication systems [3]. According to this, Genghis Khan has designed the stations in such a way that the stations were not too far apart. According to the sources of the period, rest stations were established generally 40-50 kilometres apart from each other, but in the desert or sparsely populated regions they were 100 or up to 200 kilometres apart. We know from Marco Polo that in the Yuan Dynasty, foot messengers were employed for short distances, who have forwarded local commands [1]. The messengers of the khagan usually used the well-known major trade routes. Ögödei Khan proposed at the National Assembly or Kurultai in 1235 that the postal stations should avoid the cities, so that the envoys can move faster [1]. The Mongolian Kurultai has adopted the new legislation and has ordered its postal network to be introduced in newly conquered areas. In addition, the Mongolian National Assembly expanded the post network to the newly conquered areas, including the country of Batu. The envoys received rested horses, free food and drink at the rest stations. The highest rank envoy of the khan was to be looked after above all. Some people have abused this system and they asked for more benefits than they were entitled to so after the end of the 13th century, the sending party gave not only a metal passport to its envoys but also a written command called jarlik. It was stated in the jarlik what kind of supply needed to be provided to the envoy [i]. The system remained in use for a long time in the Great Mongolian Empire. For example in the central areas of today's Mongolia and northern China, the post network was in use until the first half of the 20th century [1].

The first «diplomat passport»

Not only ancient records remained behind on this subject, but it also came up during several archaeological excavations. Chinese sources written on the Juanjuans are talking about post horses and the method of sending couriers [1,2]. This object was later called different names by the descendants of the Huns. The Turkish and the Mongols called it «belge», the Hungarians called it «billog», the 13th century Mongols called it «gerege» and in Chinese sources the most popular name for it is «paizi». The Mongolian historian, H. Perlee stated, that the word of «seal» the most Mongolian language use tamga, but the form of belge has spread among the South-Siberian and Turkish tribes [5]. From late sources we know that the ruler's oral and later on, written orders were sent by couriers who carried a round or oval shaped identity card. This was known and

accepted by everyone in the realm. Based on records and archaeological findings, it seems that this being made out of metal was the most common, but in the local public administration they used some made of wood [1]. According to Mongolian researchers, there were two types of billog or paizi: oval and round. The old round form could only be received by members of the ruling family and by the delegates of the chancellery. Long ones were made for the regimental commanders (of ten thousand soldiers). The «paizi» or «gerege» i.e. the passports were made out of gold or silver depending on the rank of the administration officer. The rank of colonel and the leaders underneath them

received only silver billogs. Delegates were required to return the passport after fulfilling their duties.

From the territory of today's north China, there are such passports from the time of the Tang dynasty (618-907), with a short inscription on them saying: «Command to the Running Horses» [2]. In the inner-Mongolian Museum there are similar finds from the time of the Jin Dynasty (1115-1231) and the Da Xia dynasty (994-1227), which also have written inscriptions on them. Some of the passports were oval shape while others were circular. Similar passports and written records on them were found not only in Asia, but also in Europe, in the region of the former Hun Empire. Theophanes, an East Roman chronicler at the beginning of the 8th century, related to the governing of the Kazar areas, mentioned a dignitary title: *belgichi*, who could have been the seal guard at the time. According to Peter B. Golden, this term originates from the early Türk, Uygur word: *belgü*, the meaning of which is sign, symbol. So the origin of the word is the same as the Hungarian «billog». Golden added that *belgecsi* (later on: *tamgači*) was a special title [2]. He was carrying a special object with him: the paizi. Golden thus refers to the relationship between the billog and the paizi. This publication is also excellent to prove that the ancient steppe people really introduced the internal Asia communications system in their European home. The ancient passports in Europe remained in use for the longest in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary, where the billog i.e. the quotation seal was used by our Árpád-house kings, but they were also used in rural administration for many centuries [2]. There are also diplomas and artifacts certifying this. The artifacts formally are very similar to those of the Inner-Asian Huns and Hun descendant peoples. Even their purpose is the same as the later paizis or the gereges.

As the use of this object in Europe can only be found amongst Hungarians, it is worth looking briefly into its history and the special way it was used. In Hungarian, it was called a billog or a citation seal. These are not only seen in royal documents, but some were excavated by archaeologists, too. From the time

of Andrew I (1046-1060), two identical billogs were found. The billog of King Solomon (1063-1074) has been found in Szentes which has disappeared since but its description can be found in the local museum. There is a billog found in Veszprém depicting the Archangel St. Michael. There is one from the 12th century that belonged to judge Lazar, and one was also found from the time of Béla III (1172-1196) [1].

Based on the surviving specimens, we can observe that the billog was made of metal, bronze and possibly copper, with a diameter of approx. 6 cm. At the upper end was a small hook on which a cord was placed and carried around the neck by the assigned messengers. The sender was usually depicted on the billog, so the royal billogs had the image of the given king, while the church ones had patron saints on them. There is no writing on them unfortunately. We can get detailed information on the use of the billog and the activities of the royal judges in the laws of St. Laszlo and King Kalman [1]. From the early laws we can find out that the royal judges were the primary judges of the royal counties. They were the rural representatives of the central royal power. These officials were able to judge over mainly the castle peoples and the free classes. The royal courtiers, and the peoples under the rule of the «ispan» (land agent), were not under their jurisdiction. Imre Hajnik pointed it out that the royal judges acted mainly in criminal cases, but their activities were ordinary judicial activities. The widespread use of the billog can be detected in the early stages of the Kingdom of Hungary. Since literacy was not yet widespread in the rural areas of the country at that time, the court exercised its judicial functions with a unified symbol accepted by the majority. The presentation of the citation billog proved that its wearer was acting on behalf of the king. This probably was a well-established, conventional form of signaling for the early Hungarians, which was collectively accepted by the rural people. Such signal system probably could not have been introduced by the reforms of St. Stephen, since it would not have become an established system in a short period of time accepted broadly by the population. It took much longer for a habit to manifest at that time. It seems more likely that the conquering Hungarians inherited the long-established, therefore well-known communication system from the nomadic equestrian peoples of the East. From the end of the 13th century, the use of the billog was gradually disappearing from the national judicial practice, however it remained in use by the Seklers and the Saxons.

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