

Who were the *elčis* in the Mongol period?

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The highly important role of the *elčis* in the diplomatic relations of the Mongol era is beyond dispute. This originally Turkic word spread into many other languages of Eurasia (Persian, Arabic, etc.) in the 13th–14th centuries, mostly with the mediation of Mongolian. Due to its meaning in the modern Turkic languages for a long time scholars translated even the Old Turkic word *elči* as ‘ambassador, representative of government in foreign countries’ (ED: 129a) and the like. Marcel Erdal proved that the original meaning of the word before the 13th century was ‘statesman’ (Staatsmann) and it was used as ‘ambassador, envoy, courier’ in Middle Mongolian for the first time. According to Erdal later the word was re-borrowed into Middle Turkic with these latter meanings (Erdal 1993: 94–98). Even though, Igor de Rachewiltz pointed out that the word *elči(n)* in the §254 of the *Secret History of the Mongols* about the Otrar incident were actually merchants who were on state business (SH II: 923), this latter interpretation is not yet widely accepted among the specialists.

The present paper aims at investigating further this topic, through a philological study of the Uyghur and Middle Mongolian documents concerning the postal system of the Mongol Empire. It will show that both meanings were applied in the daily praxis of the Mongol administration in the eastern part of the Chaghadaid *ulus*.