



## Urtuu or Medieval Post (图)

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An old leather bag hangs on the wall inside old Shagai's gher reminding him about his youth days, an uneasy job, places he went. A former postal courier, Shagai carried this bag made of solid hide and weighing no less than five kilograms, almost whole his life.

"The postal courier service operated round the clock. Were it a cold winter night or hot summer day, rain or snowfall, we were ready to receive the post and make it to the next station, as well as to provide food and fresh horses to other travelers," recalls he. "A smallest delay could result in fines, or even prison. Control was very strict and each postal shipment had an accompanying paper where all passed stations put their sign, date and time of passage," says with smile Shagai Sandagiin, who lives now in Songino locality of Zavkhan province.

The state postal service, or called "urtuunii alba" in Mongolian, was set up way back in 1234 by the decree of Chinggis Khaan with the purpose of "all state affairs learnt fast." The postal service existed almost unchanged until the arrival of telegraph and radio in 1949.

Every year all herders, except poor ones, have had to fulfill this duty for 45 days. Usually three men were serving at each station staying there with their families and herds. Postal men would put out a spare gher (felt covered, traditional nomadic dwelling) for travelers and also were obliged to provide food. The state paid small money for the use of horses.

The prompt and reliable service was highly appraised by contemporaries. Marco Polo, an Italian trader who lived 17 years at the court of Kubilai Khaan in 13th century, called it a "miracle" noting that it is possible to cross within a week the vast Mongolian Empire stretching all the way from Adriatic to Yellow Sea. A French Franciscan monk Plano Carpini who traveled from Golden Horde (presently Tatarstan Autonomous Republic in Russia) to Khar Horin, the capital city of Mongols, wrote: "Each day we changed horses 5-6 times at postal stations covering about 300-375 kilometers distance."

The network of postal station had two levels: state and local one. The state network served on the main routes while local one served within provinces. Each route had a chain of stations some 30 km from each other. That is why horse race distance nowadays is about one urtuu or the length between two stations.

Altogether more than 100,000 horses were used to maintain the network. Urgent mail was delivered by special couriers carrying gold or silver medallion with the sign of a falcon. Such couriers would blow a horn when approaching next station and the postal men should have a fresh horse ready by time he reaches it. Envelopes with urgent mail have had a seal with a bird and horse footprints meaning "to ride at flying bird speed."

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