

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TENT

Portable homes par excellence, tents can be included amongst some of the most primitive types of lodging known to man. They incorporate all of the principle elements of any small house: partitions, supporting pillars, a roof, flooring and an entrance; however they are much more than just a rudimentary canopy under which a person can eat and sleep: tents are mobile shelters and represent the “portable home” par excellence.

The tent is associated with the earliest forms of nomadism and is an essential accessory for all human activities that require a shelter capable of being set up and dismantled in a relatively short time. Nomadism however does not only involve constant or periodical migration and the concomitant need for “mobile” dwellings: nomadic populations have always tended to look for pastures where they might reside on a more permanent basis. This is an important point to some extent as it undermines the distinction that has often been made between the “sedentary-agricultural” and the “nomadic-pastoral” tribes or communities. Until recently, the two were considered rivals and that is to say as there were two potentially conflicting ways of exploiting available land. To grasp the point one has only to think of the marauding barbarian tribes, whose lifestyle contrasted rather considerably with that prevalent in the civilized Roman towns. Stereotypes such as these have long supported certain models of thought.

Today, and thanks to new research, a new and more civilized form of nomadism has emerged. Nomadism has always existed in every continent of the world: from the Sahara to Mongolia, from Arabia to America and from India to Siberia. The word “Arab” actually derives from the Semitic word used to indicate a “nomad” and is not specific to any particular place. Over time the term has come to indicate the migratory Bedouin tribes moving and trading with considerable success across the whole of Nabatea, Sinai and Mesopotamia. The common element however has always been the tent and with this, from the end of the 2nd century AD, the rearing of camels and dromedaries. In the Bedouin language the word “beit” still refers to both the tent and constructed urban dwellings. The Bedouin tent has in general a rectangular base, measures 3x4 meters and is divided into two distinct areas, one public the other private. The public area is for receiving guests and is on the left of the entrance. The private area is on the right and is reserved for women and other members of the family.

In the Old Testament, the place where the Jews worshipped God was in a tent erected by Moses, the very tent in which the Arc of the Covenant was placed (Exodus 39, 32-40, 38). Such a desert sanctuary was conceived as a sort of portable temple, a tradition which became widely diffused. The Arabs adopted it in ancient times and continued to use it right through to the present day. For religious purposes, the Bedouin made use of a small tent, a type of portable four-poster bed that accompanied the tribe wherever it went. It was the last object to be packed when leaving camp. It was transported on the back of a camel and during battles the daughter of the Sheik or some other beautiful young girl would sit upon it and shout encouragements to the combatants.

Tents were not only used as shelters and shrines, they were also part and parcel of standard military equipment. The Romans made extensive use of them and during their expansion, the technique of camp building was refined to a fine art. Such was the size and sophistication of their camps that they actually gave birth to real cites such as Turin, Verona, Chester and York, which preserve to this day their camp-like form. Given that a Roman soldier would pass anything up to twenty eight years of his life in a camp and that a legion numbered nearly six thousand men, it is not difficult to imagine how many of them soon became small-scale cities, attracting a network of associated activities (merchants, craftsmen, camp followers). The military camp was square or rectangular in shape, each side measuring around 500 meters. It was surrounded by a ditch about two meters deep

behind which the soldiers climbed up an earthen ramp surmounted by a wooden palisade. Camps were crossed by a perpendicular and a horizontal road that would meet in the middle outside the tent of the commander. Camps would be built close to rivers; the more permanent ones would be equipped with a bathhouse, storerooms, stables and a parade ground. The legionaries generally slept eight to a tent; the officers had tents that were larger and more luxurious according to their rank. Military camps of this kind appear on several Roman monuments, on Trajan's Column, on the column of Antoninus Pius and on the Arch of Septimius Severus. The Roman tent tradition continued under the Byzantines and went on to influence European models. Viking tents were perhaps more remarkable in that they could even be deployed inside the boats themselves during long voyages.

In Asia the history of the tent is just as long. When describing the region between the Black Sea and what is now Mongolia, Herodotus explains that the inhabitants live in a "yurta", a round structure built on a wooden framework and covered by felt. The word "yurta" is Turkish and originally referred to the land upon which the nomad camp was set. By extension, the word came to signify the camp and eventually the nomad tent itself (in Mongolian the tent is referred to as "ger"). The yurta was also described by the Franciscan monk, Giovanni da Pian Del Carpine, who traveled through Central Asia in the 13th century and befriended the Tartars (Mongols). Even today the Mongol people use their traditional nomadic home. The average "yurta", holding four to five people, would have a surface area of approximately 18-20 square meters. The round walls would attain no more than 1.5 meters in height and the ventilation hole in the roof would be approximately 3 meters above the ground. The exterior of the "yurta" would often be coated in white earth in order to reflect sunrays. Internal furnishings would be simple, bedding with mattresses made out of coarse wool and fur quilts, a couple of stools and wicker basket containing arms, clothing and crockery. The "yurta" tent went on being built in the same way for centuries. One would still come across them in the period of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, from China to Europe. The Mughal dynasty, originating in Central Asia, was responsible for introducing the tradition into India.

The Ottoman Turks were also great tent makers. An example of an Ottoman Turk tent, dating to the late 17th century, is preserved in the Real Armeria in Madrid. Needless to say the armies of the Ottoman Turks had thousands of them. The tent of the sovereign and his accompanying dignitaries would have been luxuriously decorated. Such a tent was used to receive guests, hold banquets, negotiate alliances and perform all sorts of other ceremonies. Unsurprisingly, they were fitted with every conceivable type of comfort, including baths and even en-suite bathrooms, something the Turks had inherited from the Romans. The external covering was red, blue and white, while the interior was lavishly decorated in golden and silk embroideries and embellished with zigzag patterns.

The American Indians also made use of tents ("wigwams" or "tepees"). The latter were usually made out of small pieces of hide sewn together and carried by the women and the dogs. With the introduction of horses in the 16th century, tents became even bigger. The "tepee" was an invention of the Apache and Blackfoot Indians who resided in the eastern half of what is today the United States. Construction consisted of three or four poles tied together at one end and covered with bison hides that were often decorated by the women. In warmer climates, the tents might be made of cotton. The tents belonging to the chiefs could attain anything up to 5 meters in height. The shape of the tent was oval and on the summit had an aperture which allowed smoke to escape and air to circulate. The bison hides were waterproof and protected the interior from outside elements. Furnishings were basic and tools and other paraphernalia could be hung in the interior. The camps might even count hundreds of tents, which could be taken down and removed in a day.