

The Yurt in history: a brief history of the yurt on the central Asian steppes

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The Yurt. Famed home of the nomadic peoples of the endless grasslands of inner and central Asia. How far back into time does this adaptable and timeless design reach? Below we outline real life examples of its historical status.

The depiction of a yurt on an engraved bronze bowl of circa. 600 BC

In 1982 the discovery of the “Arjan tomb,” a rich burial deep in the Zagros mountains of southern Iran. Brought to light a number of precious and non-precious metal objects. When the first detailed description of the tomb and its contents appeared in English in 1985 the bronze bowl (*Fig. 1*) was merely described as a “large shallow bowl”.



Figure 1. The “Arjan Bowl”



Figure 2. A detail of the yurt or “ribbed tent” in the outer border of the Arjan bowl. The lower parts of a number of struts have been deleted in order to give a clear view of the internal details.

As *Figure 2* shows, the outer border of the Arjan bowl includes a representation of the basic wooden elements of a circular, domed “ribbed tent”. The tent is shown without its felt covering in an illustration that was clearly intended to show the structure’s characteristic, long curved struts and the all important roof wheel. This last item is deliberately shown in an unreal, upright position, in order to stress its vital role. The doorway is also of special interest; for, while modern yurts are often equipped with double wooden doors that are side-hinged, the Arjan tent appears to show a single, broad wooden door that was top-hinged.

This design had the same advantage in an emergency as a felt door flap: it could be closed in a split second. As an enlarged view shows, the door would have been propped open by a tall pole with a lion- or wolf-headed finial — a distinction reserved for those of high status.

Another hint that nomadic peoples used yurt like structures in the course of their migrations across the endless grasslands of Asia comes from a no-longer-extant wall painting found in a Sarmatian tomb of the first century AD. The tomb came to light in the city of Panticapaeum (in the vicinity of modern Kerch, in the Crimea) you can see it’s unusual, square-shouldered appearance and prominent ventilation hole, the felt-covered structure in *Figure 3* is, in all probability, the second earliest known depiction of a yurt. Indeed the prominent “shoulders” that appear in the painting might represent an attempt to suggest the presence of an inward-leaning trellis wall. This structure appears to represent a dwelling of some quality; a similar, more or less square design which was used in Inner Mongolia to celebrate “the Sacrifice of Chinggis Khan at Ejen Horo”.



Figure 3. A wall-painting found in a tomb of the 1st century BC at Panticapaeum, near Kerch.



Figure 4. Drawing of an elite yurt depicted in a funerary relief from the tomb of the Sogdian Sabao, An Jia circa 579 AD

Yurts in Sogdian funerary reliefs of the 6th century AD

Recent archaeological discoveries from north China, most of which have only begun to be described in print within the past ten years, have shown that the period of the fifth and sixth centuries marked a peak in Sogdian emigration to China. By the second half of the 6th century numbers of Sogdian officials of a high status appear to have been in a position to order Chinese-style stone funerary beds for their tombs. The carved and painted panels were an integral part of such beds. This provided space for the owner to record his Sogdian way of life (Fig. 4). In the illustration the yurt is reduced to little more than a frame for the two principals; nonetheless the near-vertical sides of the tent strongly suggest that it could have benefited from the presence of a trellis wall. Beyond this, the elite rank of the yurt is indicated by the fact that it had a covering of tiger skins. In addition, the inner side of the open doorway had a curtain of fine quality (perhaps silk) and the floor of the yurt appears to have been at least partly covered by a long fringed circular carpet.

Chinese testimony

The Chinese taste for the exotic reached unprecedented heights during the days of the Tang dynasty (c. 618 - 917 AD), members of the highest ranks of Chinese society found pleasure in exploring, especially in the winter but in certain cases even in the summer as well the attractions of an urban, tented existence. In the capital, Luoyang, where the leading literati of the 9th century frequently occupied grand villas with extensive grounds, the celebrated poet, Bai Juyi (772-846), not only set up a yurt in the front courtyard of his Luoyang villa, but he wrote a poem, in 833, in praise of the virtues of his tented abode. Through Bai Juyi's vision, we learn of the advantages of a yurt:

The Sky-Blue Yurt by Bai Juyi

The finest felt from a flock of a thousand sheep, stretched over a frame shaped like the extended bows of a hundred soldiers.
 Ribs of the healthiest willow, its colour dyed to saturation with the freshest indigo.
 Made in the north according to a Rong invention, it moved south following the migration of slaves.
 When the typhoon blows it does not shake, when a storm pours it gets even stronger.
 With a roof that is highest at the centre, it is a four-sided circle without corners.
 With its side door open wide, the air inside remains warm. Though it comes from far beyond the passes, now it rests securely in the front courtyard.
 Though it casts a lonely shadow during nights brilliantly illuminated by the moon, its value doubles in years when the winter is bitterly cold.
 Softness and warmth envelop the felt hangings and rugs; the tinkling of jade enfolds the sounds of pipes and strings. It is most convenient after the earth has been covered with frost, and it is the best match when snow fills the sky.
 Positioned at an angle is the low chair for singing, evenly disposed are the small mats for dancing.
 When I have leisure time, I lift open the curtain and enter the yurt, and when I am drunk I wrap myself up in a cover and sleep there.
 Behind me an iron lamp-stand that bears a candle; a silver incense censer that flames is suspended from the ceiling.
 Kept deep within is the flame that lasts till dawn; stored inside is the fragrant smoke that lasts till evening.
 When the animal-shaped charcoal is close by, fox furs can be cast aside.
 When the ink-stone is warm it melts the frozen ink and when the pitcher is heated it becomes a stream in springtime.
 An orchid canopy will barely attract a hermit and a thatched hut is inferior for meditating.



Little remains to show the life of the working man. One exception is known. The wooden frame of a yurt from the grave of a commoner who was buried in the Khentei Mountains of Mongolia in the time of Chinggis Khan. This grave provides the first incontrovertible evidence for the existence of the trellised yurt.

(But invited to my yurt) an impoverished monk responds with praise, and a threadbare scholar stays in place, unwilling to leave. Guests are greeted with it, descendants will hand it down to posterity. The Wang family boasts of their antiques, but they have nothing to equal this Sky-Blue Yurt.

Bai Juyi's testimony is important. It proves, in many ways, that the more significant yurts of the second half of the first millennium AD were of considerable size and that such "satisfying, logically designed" structures were luxurious and far more impervious to the bitter winters than a Chinese mansion.



A yurt circa 1900's. Note the felt covering over the door.



Kazakh yurts being investigated by a foreign hunting party, circa. 1900's. Note the intricate pattern of ropes used to hold the covers in place.



Father and son transporting their yurt on horseback.