

Mongol Yurts

Travels of William de Rubruquis, Franciscan friar from Flanders, ambassador of St. Louis IX of France to the Mongols, from his book, 1253 CE

The houses in which they sleep are founded on a round structure of wattled rods, and the roof is formed of wickers, meeting above in a small roundel, from which arises a neck like a chimney, all of which they cover with white felt; and they often cover over the felt with lime, or white earth and powdered bones to make it bright: sometimes their houses are black; and the felt about the neck of the dome is decorated with a variety of pictures. Before the door, likewise, they hang a felt, ornamented with painting; and they employ much colored felt, painted with vines, trees, birds, and beasts, for decorating their dwellings. Some of these houses are so large as to measure thirty feet in breadth. I once measured the distance between the wheel ruts of one of their wagons to be twenty feet, and when the house was upon the wagon, it spread beyond the wheels at least five feet on each side. I have counted twenty-two bullocks dragging one wagon, surmounted by a house; eleven in one row, according to the breadth of the wagon, and other eleven before these. The axle of this wagon was very large, like the mast of a ship; and one man stood in the door of the house, upon the wagon, urging on the oxen. They likewise make quadrangular structures of small split wicker, like large chests, and frame for them an arched lid or cover of similar twigs, having a small door at the front end; and they cover this chest or small house with black felt, smeared over with suet or sheeps' milk, to prevent the rain from penetrating; and these are likewise decorated with paintings or feathers. In these they put all their household goods and treasure; and they bind these upon higher carts, drawn by camels, that they may be able to cross rivers without injuring their contents. These chests are never taken down from the carts to which they belong. When their dwelling-houses are unloaded from the wagons, their doors are always turned to the south; and the carts, with the chests which belong to each house, are drawn up in two rows, one on each side of the dwelling, at about the distance of a stone's throw.

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