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*To Peter
with high regards*

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Peter Alford Andrews, *Felt Tents and Pavilions: The Nomadic Tradition and its Interaction with Princely Tentage* (London: Melisende, 1999), 2 vols.

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Tents, made of perishable materials, have very short life spans, scarcely more than a century or so. Yet despite the near absence of historical tents for direct investigation, Peter Andrews has produced a massive study of two interrelated tent traditions found across Eurasia, the “monumental” princely style developed by urban cultures and the more homely tribal tents associated with the nomads of the steppe zone.

He is interested, naturally, in the technical and structural evolution of these tents but he also gives much attention to their social-cultural contexts and to the subtle interplay of local traditions and transcontinental currents that provided the stimulus for the emergence and elaboration of tent styles and fashions. This is an ambitious undertaking and to the formidable tasks he sets himself the author brings some formidable qualifications: training in architecture, history, Islamic studies, ethnography and years of field work on the surviving tribal tentage of the Middle East and Inner Asia. The resulting volumes, each about 800 pages in length, are detailed, daunting, exhaustive, exhausting and richly rewarding for anyone interested in cultural history that is both wide and deep.

Contrary to the assumption held by many in the field, myself included, the collapsible trellis tent, commonly called the yurt, is a relatively recent development. The early nomads, Scythians and Sarmatians, lived in cart tents; these carts, carrying shelters of various types, rapidly diffused across Eurasia. Drawn by oxen the originals had four spoked wheels that in time were reduced to two for ease of turning. Such carts not only provided the mobility essential to the pastoral life but could be circled for purposes of defense or herd management.

True trellis tents, consisting of trellis walls, a roof wheel and roof struts, covered in felts, come much later. The materials and technologies underlying this new type tent were native to the steppe and in Andrews' view first appear in the eighth century among the Turkic-speaking nomads in the east. Its chief advantage is that it can be rapidly assembled, disassembled, placed on a pack animal, usually a camel, and easily transported. By about the ninth century the trellis tent had assumed its modern form.

Andrews is careful to point out, however, that the trellis tent, despite its undoubted advantages, did not immediately supplant the older cart tent. The Mongols, for example, do not appear to have adopted the trellis tent until shortly after the death of Chinggis Qan. In the long term, of course, the new type of tent came to dominate the steppe with one notable exception, the Noghais of the North Caucasus, who continued the ancient tradition of cart tents into the nineteenth century.

The early history of princely tentage, which certainly goes back to the Achaemenids if not before, is not investigated by Andrews. He picks up the story in the Middle Ages when tribal- and urban-generated tentage began to interact through the mediation of nomadic empires that embraced both the steppe and the sown. The princely tent was far larger – some had a capacity of several thousand people – and was decorated with sumptuous materials, silks, satins, gold brocades, and gilded tent poles. Because of their great size these were typically guyed for stability and pitching them required considerable skill and experience. The apex of princely tentage in Andrews' opinion was the age of the Il-khâns, Temürids and Mughals under whom guyed tents quite literally reached new heights. Indeed, some were so monumental that they required several thousand men, working with windlasses and elephants, weeks to erect. Such efforts became themselves public spectacles and a striking demonstration of a rulers' majesty, his command of time, talent and resources, and his ability to organize and coordinate large-scale human activity.

In the midst of such princely splendor, the humble trellis tent, it is important to note, still had its place. The Mughal court combined both types and added Indian ones as well to their elaborate traveling camps. Andrews is most careful to place all these tents in their proper political, social and ecological settings. He thus makes a detailed study of royal camps from the Huns through the Qitans, Mongols and Temürids. He explores the logistics of these huge moving cities, the historical continuities in their internal organization and symbolic significance. He points out that such a camp (*ordo* in Turkic) was essentially a mobile headquarters that enabled a ruler to rule while on a royal progress, hunting expedition, inspection tour or military campaign. Over time, however, the courtly functions became so elaborate and cumbersome that the royal camp became more of a hindrance than an asset to the exercise of imperial authority. By the reign of Aurangzîb (1658-1707) his camp, even though he quite consciously tried to de-emphasize the display element, had clearly begun to inhibit his military operations in the Deccan against the highly mobile Marathas.

The insides of tents, princely and tribal, are also examined at length. Tent interiors defined and framed social roles and provided vital ceremonial spaces. At the Mughal court trellis tents elaborately furnished and decorated acquired a wholly ceremonial use, most frequently in rites of passage – births, marriages and deaths. Princely tents became the court “out of doors” in which each tent's external setting and internal space were defined by gates, enclosures, awnings, panels, and baldaquins, all properly arranged to display the royal person to best advantage. Color, too, delineated status and communicated important political messages. Tents were not therefore simply eye-catching props serving as background on a larger stage, nor were they merely clever technical contrivances, means of keeping dry, warm or cool. For Andrews tents function materially, socially and symbolically and consequently “they engage those who use them in a form of life.”

In pursuing these interrelated lines of inquiry Andrews has exploited an impressive array of sources. He has mined the Arabic and Persian materials in the original as well as the European travel accounts which often yield the most explicit and use-

ful descriptions of the tents of Inner Asia and the Middle East. Rubruck, as usual, is highly informative, as is Marco Polo, but Ruy Gonzalez Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador to Temür in the early fifteenth century, provides perhaps the most extended and accurate discussion of tentage in pre-modern times.

To these literary sources he has added the important information contained in Russian-language publications on the archaeology of the ancient nomads and in the ethno-historical studies of more recent nomadic populations inhabiting territories from southern Siberia to the Crimea. Andrews also makes extensive use of art historical data. The second of his volumes contains 257 reproductions of paintings, drawings, sculptures, etc., all of which are minutely analyzed in the text. The linguistic evidence is similarly treated. Andrews is scrupulous in giving the original terms for tents, carts and their various parts, and effectively incorporates this data with the textual and pictorial. There is an invaluable set of glossaries of English, Arabic, Persian, Indian, Turkic, and Mongolian terminology on tents, textiles, carts and camps. Lastly, his decades-long study of tents in the field has obviously given him many insights into their technical characteristics and social-ideological functions.

What then is left to be done? The one great reservoir of information on tents, not yet systematically tapped, is certainly the voluminous Chinese records. Andrews makes use of some through translation but much that is pertinent remains in the original. To cite one example, the *Yuan shih* has an interesting entry on the internal organization of the Tents Office (*Ch'a-tieh-erh chü*) founded in the reign of Möngke Qaghan (1251-59). The Chinese transcription goes back to the Turkic *chadir* which in turn comes from the Persian *châdur*, “guyed tent.” This office, which had wide construction responsibilities, was headed in the time of Qubilai (1260-94) by a man from the Western Region (*Hsi-yü*), in this instance an Arab. A thorough survey of the Chinese sources, I am confident, will shed additional light on both the tribal and princely tentage of medieval Eurasia and of course on China's own interaction with these two traditions. What did the Chinese borrow and what did they contribute? Such questions have hardly been broached, much less investigated.

This leads us to the larger issue of cultural diffusion and technological transfer. In his conclusion Andrews argues that nomadism was the major mechanism of trellis tent diffusion across the steppe, especially in consequence of tribal displacement occasioned by the creation and disintegration of large empires like that of the Türk and Mongol. Princely tentage was also spread by these same empires which regularly acquired such tents as tribute, as gifts from other rulers and as booty. Andrews on several occasions points out that sumptuous tents and baggage trains are typically abandoned in the course of military defeat and that much tentage changed hands in this fashion. We know, for example, that the victorious Mongolian armies captured intact the rich tents of the Seljuq sultans at the Battle of Köse Dagh in 1243. There can be little doubt that sumptuous tenting became an “international” standard for princes of the Middle Ages and that the Middle East provided models that circulated from North China to Western Europe.

How to sum up a work of this magnitude and detail? One measure of its value and success is the great variety of scholars who will read it with profit. Any such list would surely include historians of the Islamic world, India, China and the steppe; specialists on material culture and technological transfer; art historians, most specially those working on textiles; as well as Turkologists and other linguists. The point here is not that his arguments and evidence will satisfy every specialist but that he has something important to say to all of them.

Most obviously, Andrews has made a major contribution to the history of tents; not only does he tell us much about the histories of specific tent types, he convinces me at least that the history of tents is itself important, important to small scale local history and to large scale transcontinental history.

The word definitive has rightfully dropped from the scholarly vocabulary. I do not intend to revive it and would rather say that Andrews' two volumes will have a long, very long shelf life.