

Kazakh national dwellings

Most of the population of Kazakhstan, whose occupation was nomadic and semi-nomadic herding, lived in movable dwellings of various shapes, sizes and designs. In warm weather the herdsmen and their families lived in light portable dwellings, while in cold weather they lived for the most part (nomads excepted) in warm, permanent housing – dug-outs and dwellings above ground, the names for which were zheru, qara-tam and shoshala. The summer dwellings of the Kazakhs were of two types: the felt tent or yurt, and the covered wagon or kuyme (kheyma). The most usual form was the yurt, which is an easily assembled dwelling. It was circular in shape, outwardly resembling a rotunda (Fig. 1). The base of the yurt was formed by the wall (kerege), over which a dome-shaped vault of radially arranged poles was erected, with their lower ends fastened to the wall and their upper ends held by a circle of wood (shaniraq) forming the uppermost point of the dome. The yurts of wealthy people and nobles were noteworthy for their elegance and costly furnishings; their frames were often decorated with bone inlay, and the interior was hung with many-coloured carpets and expensive textiles (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. A Kazakh yurt.
(Photo: Courtesy of K. M. Baipakov)



Fig. 2. Interior of a Kazakh yurt.
(Photo: Courtesy of K. M. Baipakov)

Covered wagons formed another common type of mobile home among the Kazakhs. As described by Ibn Ruzbihan:

their homes [those of the Kazakhs] are constructed in the shape of bullock-carts (caraba), mounted on wheels (garduna) and curved like the vault of the heavens. Camels and horses draw

them from one camp site to another, strung out one behind the other like a caravan train, and if they all start to move together in this way, the trains may extend for 100 Mongol farsangs (about 600 km?), with no more than a single pace between each of them [1].

As mentioned previously, the Kazakhs also constructed permanent dwellings: dug-outs and houses. Considerable groups of Kazakhs lived in rural settlements and in winter camps (kstaas, qestaas), usually along river-banks, in mountain gorges. Permanent, settled areas were a more advanced type of rural settlement, sometimes protected by walls and ditches. They varied in size and could have as many as 500 inhabitants.

Materials from the archaeological excavations at Otrar and other settlements enable us to distinguish the traditional type of urban dwelling. The basic and most simple living unit was a room with an aywan (arched portal, the chamber open at the outside). Practically all domestic functions were combined in the single warmest and most comfortable room, which had a stove (tandir, tanur; Persian, tandur). This room served as bedroom, dining room and kitchen. The walls of the houses were built of unbaked brick, without foundations. Frame construction was also used, usually for internal partitions. Ceilings were flat, supported on a central elm or poplar beam. The roof was made of reeds with a top coating of clay.

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References:

1. Ibragimov 1960, Vol. 8, p. 154; Fazlullah b. Ruzbihan Isfahani, 1962; Russian tr., 1976, pp. 143, 222