

PORTABLE ARCHITECTURE

By MAUDE DE SCHAUENSEE

What is a Bedouin tent but an eminently practical, completely portable house demonstrating all the principal elements of permanent architecture. The tent has supports for the roof at the four corners, at intervals along the sides and down the center, as well as a roof and "curtain" or non-bearing walls. These walls, being literally curtains, have the advantage of being movable or completely removable at will depending on desirability or the weather. The supports are thin poles placed in holes in the ground. The roof consists of a covering of tightly woven black strips made from goat or sheep hair sewn together to create the desired length and width. The walls, also suspended from the roof supports, are made in the same manner, but are often of lighter color and sometimes less tightly woven. These curtain walls are hung so they can be raised or lowered at a moment's notice, depending on whether they are needed to keep out sun, wind, and dust, and sometimes rain, or for privacy. A very simple tent has no sub-divisions, being essentially all one room. But a more elaborate, though not necessarily larger, one is divided into two or more parts. The main division occurs more or less in the middle so that one part, which is sometimes smaller, can be used to receive and entertain visitors. The other part, whose walls seem never to be opened up, is usually defined by a curtain of tightly woven strips of brightly colored geo-

metric designs sewn together to the proper size. Sometimes, however, this curtain and the walls of this end of the tent are replaced by a fence of reeds tied together by rope which does not reach all the way to the roof but shields the interior from view. The "apartment" thus formed is used for domestic chores, for sleeping, and as the place to which the women and children retire should visitors arrive.

During the spring of 1967 in Syria we passed several tents of all types and sizes during a trip from Selenkehiye, a site fifty miles east of Aleppo on the west bank of the Euphrates, to el-Kom, about half way between Selenkehiye and Palmyra. Both sites were being excavated by the Euphrates Valley Expedition of the Oriental Institute of Chicago under the direction of Dr. Maurits van Loon. At el-Kom we had the unexpected pleasure of observing a band of Bedouin passing us on its migration north, and later enjoyed tea and the hospitality of some Bedouin who live permanently at Qasr el Heir, an eighth century A.D. site with two well preserved castles. The reason for our trip to Palmyra was to complete the recording of the test excavation the first team from the Expedition had made at the oasis site of el-Kom in order to discover what periods of time and civilization were represented there. The result was exciting, as the entire site dated to eight or nine thousand years ago and repre-



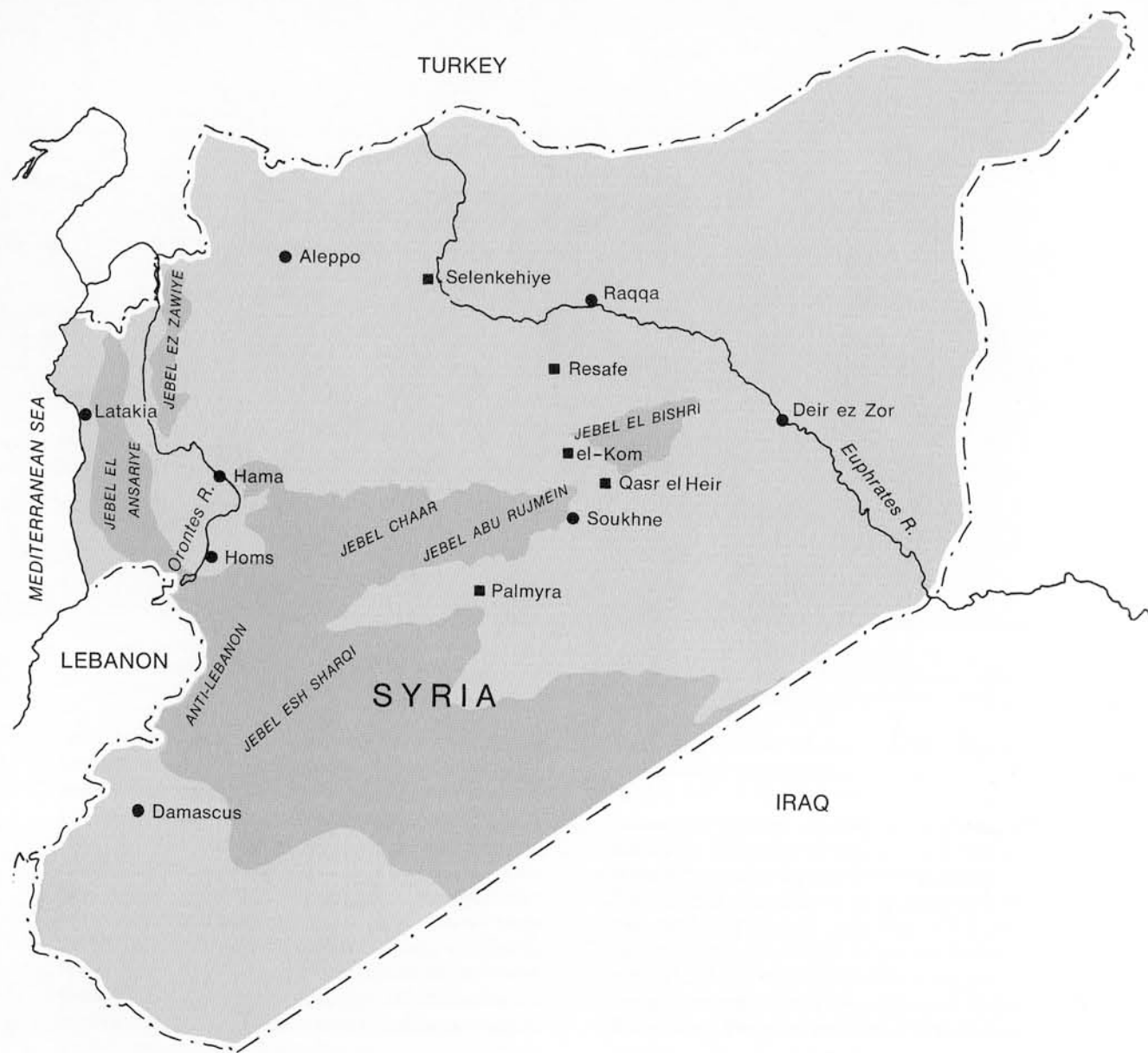
Tent of some Bedouin camped along the road from Resafe to el-Kom. This is an example of the simplest type of tent with only roof supports, a roof, and a sunshade at one end to protect the small enclosures containing food from sun and wind. Lambs graze on the sparse vegetation near the tent.

sented almost entirely a pre-pottery neolithic settlement. The objects found here then had to be taken to the museum at Palmyra.

Thus, one morning early in May we, as the second team, left the partly irrigated and well cultivated banks of the Euphrates at Selenkehiye, where winter wheat and cotton were grown, and turned south through the steppe and then the desert in the direction of Palmyra. As there had been a lot of rain combined with a late spring, the steppe—that large, flat, treeless area which receives just enough rain to support grass and like vegetation—was still in full bloom with large areas of yellow or purple flowers and smaller ones of white, as well as grass, all standing to an even height of about eight inches so that anything appearing on the horizon seemed three times its normal size. This vegetation lasted, though diminishing in size and luxuriance, as we penetrated deeper into the steppe and approached Resafe, a large fifth century ruin, built on the spot where St. Serge is said to have been martyred. The ruin now loomed like a large ghost town on the horizon. Although no one lives there any longer one of the wells, reaching to a depth of 120 feet, is still used by nearby villagers. At first on the road to Resafe there were a very few villages or single houses. Later there were only a few bands of camels or an occasional patch of grain planted in a slight depression where runoff water provided

just enough moisture for it. Such planting is also done in the much drier region farther south near el-Kom, though with less success, particularly during the last two years when the rains have been less than in some other years. As the road, which became a mere track after it passed Resafe, went farther south the vegetation was lower and more sparse, with no flowers and a change in the grass to a coarse, tough variety. There were also many more of the few plants which can survive considerable drought, one of which is said to have a root reaching twenty feet in length. Where clumps of this and other larger plants provided sufficient cover and a small amount of water remained, there was a quite large and pretty yellow-green Sand Grouse with dark bars on the wings, which appeared in quite large bands.

A little farther on, where there were only low, coarse, sparse grass and a few low, hardy desert plants, were several Bedouin tents all at considerable distances from each other, never in tight clusters. The Bedouin were camping here temporarily on their way farther north. The tents were either a single completely open unit with a flat roof stretched on poles and the sides down or perhaps no sides at all, or were of the same form but divided into two parts by a curtain, leaving one end open for visitors and the men, and the other reserved for domestic activities. Whether these small tents were further subdi-



vided we could not tell as we did not go into them. All had their bands of sheep and goats or a few camels grazing nearby on the sparse grass. Finally we passed into almost total desert where there was only an occasional live plant and the ground was completely covered by a low plant long since dead. Then suddenly we came to el-Kom, with patches of lush grass and trees marking the oasis itself. We spent several days here recording and packing the objects unearthed by the first group who were now able to leave and return to their duties at Selenkehiye, and also in making a small survey of parts of the surrounding area.

It was here one morning that a large band of Bedouin passed by on their way north to Re-

safe where they had heard that the grass was still good, and where there would be water for them and for their flocks. They had some of their flocks of sheep and goats with them—others having gone ahead and others coming behind—and their tents rolled up into small bundles and put with the poles on the camels. Most of their other belongings—bedding, cooking utensils, etc.—were on large numbers of donkeys. Some were packed in sacks woven in the same bright geometric patterns as the tent curtains, some tied on by woven straps of again the same patterns or by rope made from goat hair. Some of these donkeys were also ridden, usually by women with babies or by old men and women, or sometimes by tired or sick sheep, all perched comfortably on the



(Top) Bedouin passing by el-Kom on their migration north to near Resafe. Donkeys carrying colorful loads of bedding are being ridden by men and women. (Center left) A rather elaborate tent on the road from Resafe, with an enclosure for the living quarters made from a shoulder-high fence of reeds bound together with rope made from twisted goat hair; sheep are kept near the tent. (Center right) A girl riding a donkey carrying bedding and saddlebags made of tightly woven red and blue material. (Bottom) A woman who, with her husband, has just finished tying a tired or sick sheep onto a donkey loaded with saddlebags woven of black, tan, and brown wool. The sheep is tied on with a rope of twisted goat hair while the load below is bound with bands woven in red, black, and tan designs.



A completely enclosed tent at the mound of Hleyle, with horses and donkeys grazing on a small patch of grass in the dry terrain.

light loads of bedding. Other men and women walked, keeping the animals from straying and driving the flocks. Some of the camels too were occasionally ridden, as they had been since very early times in the region. Usually, we were told, they were ridden by women in the heat of the day in a covered howdah mounted on the camel's back.

Turning south again as we finally left el-Kom, the landscape became increasingly drier, more barren and desert-like, with no signs of any kind of animal, bird, or plant except at the small oasis of Taibe about a mile south of el-Kom, and at the large oasis town of Soukhne, half way between el-Kom and Palmyra. There was only the dead ground cover with an occasional deep-rooted plant or other desert plant, or an occasional area where salts encrusted the ground. During this part of the trip we saw tents only in two places—a small band of Bedouin who lived permanently under the imposing shadow of Qasr el Heir, and a solitary tent at the small site of Hleyle where there was a very small patch of grass for

the animals and a well about 120 feet deep which showed considerable signs of use. Otherwise there was nothing but dry ground cover.

It was at Qasr el Heir that we were given tea and allowed to look at and photograph our host's tent. It was large—about forty-five feet long and eighteen feet wide—with about eight poles down each side and a double row set in a V-shaped arrangement down the center to keep the roof taut. There were also long guy ropes from each side pole for the same purpose. The tent seemed to be inhabited by about ten people. When we arrived we were taken into the "public" end of the tent where pillows were brought for us and placed on the rugs which made the floor. The one wall curtain still up, of a natural tan color and more loosely woven than the black cloth of the roof, was let down so that the breeze could blow through (and because it was no longer needed to keep out the sun). The far end of this part of the tent was being used to store the wool from the shearing until it could be taken, probably to Soukhne, for sale. This wool was prob-



The exterior of the living quarters of the large tent at Qasr el Heir. The open area at the left of the picture shows part of the end used to receive visitors, where we were given tea. The wall curtain, which was let down on our arrival, is visible where it is attached to the roof pole at the corner. Five of the women living in the tent can be seen in the doorway at the far end of the living quarters and standing beside the tent.

ably piled on a bed of stones as were grain sacks in other tents, but it overflowed the edges so this was not visible. These platforms are usually the chief evidence of a deserted Bedouin encampment, sometimes associated with the remains of a sheep enclosure. If the tent site has only recently been abandoned, holes where the tent poles were set may also be found and perhaps a shallow line marking where the sides had been, and maybe the remains of a small hearth. If the encampment site is an old one a sherd or two may also be found, but if recent there will be none as modern Bedouin generally use enamel or aluminum vessels. In fact, the first thing we were offered was water from an aluminum bowl. Water was even more precious at Qasr el Heir than usual as it all had to be brought in by truck for both the flocks of sheep and goats, which were only watered once a day, and for the people. The original water source for Qasr el Heir has not yet been found and there is some mystery as to where it may have been or from where and how the water may have been brought.



The interior of the visitors' part of the same tent, showing the far end where the large pile of wool is stored and at the moment being used as seats for two other visitors from another tent in the group. The wife of the owner of the tent stands behind them with her head and the lower part of her face covered with a black cloth. The two poles show the V-shaped arrangement used in the center of the tent to support the roof.



Views in the interior of the tent shown on page 37. (Upper left) Having tea with the curtain screening the domestic part of the tent from view behind. The curtain is woven in designs of black and red with narrow stripes of light tan near the top and bottom. A corner of the wall curtain made of strips of brown, light tan, and black shows in the left background. Again the V-shaped arrangement of the central roof supports placed along the horizontal bands strengthening the roof is evident. (Upper right) The sleeping area for the owner of the tent and his wife is just behind the dividing curtain. The owner's wife stands in the entrance to the area flanked by our government representative and several children. The area is enclosed by a low reed fence. In the foreground are the mattress and pillow put out for us when we entered. Lambs lie in the corridor to the left of the sleeping enclosure. (Center left) The center of the domestic area with its neatly swept floor. The hearth with the two iron bars across it is in the middle of the area with fuel in front. Behind it are the round convex disc on which bread is baked, and also a basket containing sacks of what is probably either grain or flour. Hidden behind the women are the food enclosures. (Center right) The far end of the domestic part showing the low reed-enclosed areas for food and water. In front of this is a low reed-covered shelf with an enamel bowl and other domestic implements. (Lower right) A view through the doorway of the domestic part of the tent with a large metal tray propped against a food enclosure. The hearth is in the center and to the left is the sleeping enclosure with the dividing curtain just beyond.

As soon as it was ready, tea was brought and drunk as we were entertained by the owner of the tent, a man of probably about fifty-five with a white beard, and his wife, who stood apart, the lower part of her face covered with a black cloth, as were those of other women in the tent.

The other women and children remained behind the dividing curtain peering around it at us. Then the women of our party were allowed to go behind the curtain into the living quarters. We first passed through a short corridor formed by the exterior tent wall and by what appeared to be a



Overlooking part of the oasis of Palmyra with rain-storm which turned all the wadis into torrents and made the desert tracks treacherous as it approached us.

reed fence of a little more than waist height. The fence, on closer inspection, was one wall of the sleeping area reserved for the owner of the tent and his wife. This area was enclosed on all sides except for a door opening in the front, backing onto the dividing curtain and enclosing just enough space for their bedding and little else. The corridor that we walked through was also the resting place for the very young lambs which had to be sheltered from the sun in the heat of the day. It was matched by another corridor on the other side of this sleeping area. Beyond the sleeping area we came into a large, open, well swept area where it seemed that the other people in the tent slept and where cooking and other domestic activities took place. In the center of the floor an oval hearth had been dug and two iron bars laid across to support cooking pots and the convex iron disc on which they cooked thin flat bread. If these people had only intended to stay here for a short time they most probably would not have dug such a large and deep hearth, as none of the abandoned camp sites we had seen had one. At the far end of this part of the tent, beyond the area with the hearth, were several small areas enclosed with low reed fences in which water, milk, cheese, and other food was kept to protect it from any animals that might wander into the tent and to keep it generally out of the way. This part of the tent had a separate entrance which was on the same side as the entrance of the other end—away from the prevailing wind. This entrance was quite large—the width of the space between two poles—and was the only source of light. So it is easy to see how readily one could pack up all the parts of the tent—supports, roof, walls, and partitions—and move on at will.

When we had duly inspected this tent we

thanked our host, said good-bye and again embarked on our way through the desert to Soukhne and the very large oasis and magnificent site of Palmyra where we deposited our archaeological findings. After the unusual experience, at least for Palmyra, of a rainstorm in May (it had not rained since November) which turned all the wadis into raging torrents and would have made the desert track treacherous if not impassable, we headed for home by a more ordinary route. 2



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