

Aleksandar Loma

White Tent

Summary

Unlike many other formulas of Serbian epics, *b(ij)eli grad* 'white fortress' has no counterpart in Russian byliny, but 'white tent' is largely attested in both traditions (Serb. *b(ij)eli šator / čador*, Russ. *belyj šatër*). The epithet is motivated here by the colour of the material tents are made of, the canvass, which is itself conventionally designated as 'white' (Serb. *b(ij)elo platno*, Russ. *beloe polotno*). There is a problem with the noun, for it is not a genuine Slavic word, but an early borrowing, ultimately of Iranian origin, perhaps via some Turkic idiom. The question is, could it have been borrowed early enough to enter a Common Slavic epic formula? A 'white tent' occurs generally in the epic contexts dealing with clashes in a border area, cf. Russ. *ukraina* 'borderland', Serb. *krajina* 'id.' and also 'war'. A bylina describing a guard post somewhere on the frontier between the land of Kiev and the steppe with three *bogatyry* keeping watch under a 'white tent' found an intriguing archaeological match in Voznesenka, a village on Dniepr downstream of Kiev beyond the rapids (historical Zaporozhye), where, on the elevated river bank, the remnants of a stronghold were unearthed, which was established there in the early eighth century A.D. obviously against the steppe intruders from the south. The post has been provisional, with a tent, and short-lived; in a sudden attack, its garrison was massacred, the evidence of which is given by a collective cremation burial of thirty three warriors, three of them chieftains distinguished by their funeral gifts. It was probably in the same region a few centuries earlier, before the great migration of the Slavs to the South, that both the epic motifs of the frontier skirmish took shape and the word for 'tent' was borrowed into Slavic, directly from the North Pontic Iranians (Sarmatians, Alans) or through the Turkic tribes who replaced them there since the second half of the fourth century A.D.