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978-0-521-18128-0 - Early Greek Warfare: Horsemen and Chariots in the Homeric and Archaic Ages

P. A. L. Greenhalgh

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is an attempt to trace the military history of the chariot and the mounted horse, both as they were represented in poetry and art and as they were used in reality, from the Dark Ages which followed the collapse of the Mycenaean world to the end of the sixth century B.C. The reason for my distinction between representation and reality is that our literary and artistic sources cannot always be taken at face value. In the case of the Homeric bards, and of the Late Geometric vase-painters who similarly depicted chariots in their battles, I argue that the warfare of their own experience can be revealed only by removing a simple and transparent but highly effective veneer with which they sought to heroize it. In the seventh and especially the sixth centuries it is true that vase-painting of at least two states provides us with a good many mounted warriors whose accurate portrayal from contemporary life need not be doubted. But even here the task of the military historian is not easy because he finds few who are actually shown in combat: it often requires a very careful analysis to deduce how the majority would have fought, and scant help is provided by what little remains to us of the contemporary poets.

Chapter I examines the war-chariot as it is treated in the Homeric epic, whose battle-scenes depict it in vast numbers (to the complete exclusion of the mounted horse) but reveal no conception of its proper tactical role. The real advantage of the war-chariot lay in massed attacks at speed. This is how it was used by the Mycenaeans and by the kingdoms of the Near and Middle East which maintained large forces of chariotry both in the Bronze Age and after the Mycenaean collapse. The Homeric picture could not be more different. There the warriors use their chariots merely as transport vehicles

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from which they dismount to fight on foot, and they are not equipped with either the lance or the bow, the two weapons which made chariotry so formidable an arm after the invention of a light and fast spoke-wheeled chariot in the first half of the second millennium. J. K. Anderson has recently argued that the epic could nevertheless represent realistic Greek practice in the Geometric period, but his evidence for the parallels which he sought in British and Cyrenaic chariotry does not stand up to close examination. Moreover the fact remains that if the use of the chariot for transport to and from the battlefield is not impractical (granted reasonable terrain), the same cannot be said for the individual taxi-service which operates in the middle of the battle itself. Finally the economic argument reinforces the tactical one. The Homeric poems know nothing of the complex, bureaucratic palace-administrations which enabled the great Bronze Age kingdoms to produce and maintain their large bodies of chariots. Beneath a transparent veneer of heroizing and archaizing the economic, social and political background of the poems is seen to belong to the Geometric Age no less certainly than the pair of throwing-spears carried by the chariot-borne warrior, and it has rightly been doubted that warriors in that period could have afforded the expensive luxury of a 'war-chariot' from which they would never actually fight.

The second chapter examines the chariot as represented in Attic Late Geometric art in the second half of the eighth century. A. M. Snodgrass has argued against the existence of any true chariot in mainland Greece after the Mycenaean collapse until the very end of the eighth century, when he cites a single sherd as evidence for the introduction of what he calls the canonical form of racing-chariot from the East. All other Geometric representations of chariots he dismissed as influenced by Mycenaean representations, by the epic, or by carts and wheeled vehicles of other uses. This chapter gives the first typological analysis of the representations, which demonstrates two facts: that even the earliest were modelled on contemporary racing-chariots which were basically the same as those raced by the Athenians and other mainland Greeks in the sixth and fifth centuries, and that racing-chariots had been known for a considerable time before their first appearance in Geometric art. It is important to distinguish between the uses of the chariot. Contemporary racing-

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chariots were familiar both to the Homeric bards and to the Late Geometric artists, but they were not used in war. Their appearance in the battle-scenes of the epic and of the vases is attributable to archaizing on the part of the bards and, under their influence, of the Late Geometric artists. One basic fact known to the bards about their poems' ostensible period was that chariots had featured in its battles.

If then the Homeric picture of chariotry is not based on a clear knowledge of Mycenaean warfare, or even upon an exaggerated picture of the chariot as used in Geometric Age battles or upon contemporary Oriental practice, is it all invention built on nothing more than the tradition that there had been war-chariots in Bronze Age battles, and attributable only to an attempt to heroize the epic picture by making all the nobles possess something which was a sign of the greatest wealth in the Geometric period? Chapter III advances a thesis which explains the primary use of the Homeric chariot as a means of transport for warriors who fight on foot with the javelin as their main weapon; which keeps the picture of the chariot as the *sine qua non* of a nobility who really are what Odysseus maintains, the only people who count in war or in government; and which reconciles these aspects, and the vast numbers of chariots envisaged, with the essentially Geometric Age background of the epic, which for all its exaggerations fails to approach the vast wealth and complex organization of the great Bronze Age chariot-using powers, and knows nothing of their palace bureaucracies or their feudal structure with its absolute kingship. I believe that the Dark Age bards have heroized and archaized warfare of their own experience simply by transferring to the more heroic chariot the military role of the contemporary mounted horse. Aristotle speaks of the military and political dominance of aristocracies of knights after the fall of kingship, and his statement is proved credible by archaeology. There is evidence in the Homeric poems themselves not only of the knowledge of riding but also of the suppression of the mounted horse in the narrative. And there is evidence from the seventh and sixth centuries that heavy-armed warriors paralleled Homeric practice by riding to battle accompanied by mounted squires who would hold their horses for them while they fought on foot.

The main subject of Chapter IV is the invention of the double-grip 'hoplite' shield and its effect on the role of the war-horse, but

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first I examine the properties of one of its predecessors, the incurved 'Dipylon' shield, which is much the commonest type in Geometric art. A weighty body of opinion dismisses it as I dismiss the war-chariot, as a piece of heroic property; and if it is right to do so, the value of Geometric art to the military historian is seriously undermined. Now the defenders of the Dipylon shield have discussed at length how it might have been made, but they have never asked why such a shape was chosen. If it was a real shield, there must have been good military reasons for reducing its protective area by cutting a large scallop from either side. I argue that there were two, both simple and readily comprehensible in the context of the contemporary weapons and of the fluid, unorganized type of battle depicted in Homer and on the vases. Then the double-grip shield was invented, and because it could not be slung round to protect the back it stimulated the development of the organized and disciplined phalanx of hoplites. And the phalanx in turn affected the role of the war-horse. As a transport animal, though still equally valuable before and after the battle, the horse was no longer able to operate in the battle itself until the phalanx had broken and it was needed for flight or pursuit. But if the new style of warfare limited the traditional role of the war-horse, it may also have suggested a new one: because the phalanx was so vulnerable in the rear and flanks, and because it was generally lost once it had been broken, its invention may have prompted the development of true cavalry, whose potential effectiveness against hoplites on suitable terrain is revealed by Thucydides' narrative of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in the later fifth century. In this chapter I also examine the sociology of the new style of warfare, and suggest how far and under what conditions the needs of the hoplite armies were likely to extend the class of heavy-armed infantry beyond the horse-owning gentry.

Chapters v and vi illustrate the evolution of the roles of the mounted warrior in the seventh and sixth centuries, mainly by means of a detailed, descriptive catalogue of the contemporary vase-paintings (which was last attempted by Helbig in his article of 1904). In the absence of all but a minute amount of literary evidence, the military historian must concentrate on the invaluable testimony of the artists. Even with their help of course he fails to get anything like a complete and continuous picture of Archaic Greek warfare either

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geographically or chronologically. Most of the vase-paintings belong to the Ripe Corinthian style, which provides evidence from about 625 to 550 B.C., or to the more prolific Attic Black Figure style of the sixth century; and even these must be treated with care to allow for possible heroizing and archaizing or for the dictates of fashion. Then again there is the problem already mentioned, that the majority of scenes depict the horsemen out of battle, and it is hard to deduce how they actually fought. All the same it has been possible to build up a picture of the mounted warriors at least of Corinth and Athens in the Archaic period, and on this basis the rival theses of Helbig and his recent detractor Alföldi are analyzed and shown to be equally wrong in treating mounted hoplites and true cavalry as mutually exclusive arms. Chapter v concentrates on seventh-century Corinth, Athens, and the knightly aristocracies of Euboea, for whose warfare I suggest an original reconstruction based on a fragment of Archilochus. Chapter vi continues the story of Corinth and Athens in the sixth century, and ends by examining the so-called 'Chalcidian' pottery and the East Greek sarcophagi, which go a little way towards filling the geographical gap at least for the second half of that century.

Chapter vii is part summary and part development of what has gone before, and in particular it examines what constitutional repercussions the military developments are likely to have had. First there is a brief outline of the history of horsemen in war as far as the evidence for the several states permits a reconstruction, and I suggest some external influences which may have contributed to the development of true cavalry in some of them. I then pursue the questions raised in Chapter iv, where I examined how far the hoplite reform was likely to change the sociology of warfare. How far is it likely to have produced a politically self-conscious hoplite class distinct from the horse-owning aristocracy, and what was its relation to the rise of tyranny and to trends to more democratic constitutions? Finally I have added an appendix which states in greater detail than was possible in the relevant chapters my position on the controversial question of the historical basis of the Homeric background picture, which is fundamental to my thesis about the Homeric warriors and their chariots. If it is true that Homeric warfare is not Mycenaean but a heroized picture of what the bards knew in the Geometric Age, the

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same should be true of other, non-military aspects of the basic picture. The Appendix outlines the evidence and suggests a pivotal date in the ninth century B.C.

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# I

## THE CHARIOT IN HOMER

When we think of Homeric warfare we immediately think of the war-chariot. It is the *sine qua non* of the Homeric nobleman, and that is why Pandarus is made to give a good explanation for not having one with him at Troy: he had no less than eleven brand-new ones at home, and eleven magnificent pairs of horses to pull them, but he decided to come to Troy on foot against his father's advice because he feared that there might be a shortage of the good fodder which his horses were used to.<sup>1\*</sup> But when we consider how the large numbers of war-chariots are used, we find that apart from a very few exceptions the Homeric poems reveal no conception of the proper tactical role of massed chariotry, as it was used by the Bronze Age kingdoms of the Near and Middle East and by the Mycenaean.

There is, it is true, just the occasional hint of a realistic use of chariotry, and especially at *Iliad* 4.293–309, where Nestor is haranguing his forces before battle. The chariots are drawn up in the van, and Nestor urges them to keep in line: 'neither let any man, trusting in his horsemanship and manhood, be eager to fight the Trojans alone before the rest, nor let him fall behind, for thus you will be enfeebled. But whenever a warrior gets within reach of an enemy chariot, let him thrust out with his spear, since this is much the better way. In this way men of former time used to sack cities and walls' (303–8).

This passage however is very exceptional in three ways. The first is that in the whole narrative of the *Iliad* there are only three other allusions to massed chariot attacks, although it is in the massed attack at speed that the chariot is most effective as a weapon of war. In

\* The notes for all the chapters start on p. 173.

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*Iliad* 11.289 Hector, seeing the wounded Agamemnon withdrawing from the battlefield, calls to his own troops to ‘drive straightway the whole-hooved horses against the Danaans’. Or in *Iliad* 15.352–4 Hector smites on his horses and calls aloud to the Trojans along the ranks: ‘and they all cried out, and level with his they held the steeds which drew their chariots’. But in neither of these passages is there a direct clash of massed chariots: a direct clash appears uniquely in the *Iliad* in the last of the three ‘massed chariotry’ passages, *Iliad* 11.150–4, which is commonly held to be a late interpolation in which the *hippeis* are cavalry (see below, p. 55). Second, not only is this one of the very few references to massed chariots in action, but it is one of the very few references to any sort of fighting from the chariot, moving or stationary, in mass or alone: usually the warrior dismounts to fight on foot. And third, Nestor enjoins the use of the thrusting-spear, which may suggest a Mycenaean survival: the Homeric chariot-borne warrior’s usual style is to throw his spears. Snodgrass can find only four occasions in the *Iliad* when even individual warriors fight from the chariot:<sup>2</sup> in one (11.531f) it is not explained how the spear is used; in another it appears as though the spear may have been thrust rather than thrown (16.377f: perhaps a thrust rather than a throw at 399, 404); but in the other two the warriors are clearly depicted throwing javelins and not thrusting with spears as Nestor advised. At 5.13 Phegeus from his chariot hurls a javelin at Diomedes, who is fighting on foot: Diomedes then topples Phegeus from the chariot with his return throw. And at 8.118ff we find Diomedes and Nestor in one chariot closing with Hector and Eniopeus in another. Diomedes hurls a javelin at Hector, misses him, but hits and kills his charioteer. To Snodgrass’ four examples we may add the case of Euphorbus, described as an expert in fighting from the chariot; but he too is found throwing javelins (*Iliad* 16.809–11). Curiously Marcel Detienne offered this passage as an example of Nestor’s advice being followed: ‘he [Euphorbus] reaches out from his galloping chariot to strike an enemy warrior or driver with his lance’.<sup>3</sup> But on the contrary it is an example of how very exceptional Nestor’s advice is. The lines which Detienne quotes only say (a) that Euphorbus excelled his contemporaries ‘in the spear, in horsemanship and in fleetness of foot’, and (b) that he had brought twenty men from their chariots (βῆσεν ἄφ’ ἵππων). We are



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then told that Euphorbus was the first to 'let fly' a weapon at Patroclus (πρῶτος ἐφῆκε βέλος).

The very fact that the Nestor passage is so exceptional is a measure of the unfamiliarity with the effective role of the chariot in war. In the first place it is otherwise inconceivable that everywhere except in the few passages just cited such apparently vast numbers of chariots could be assigned to the role of mere transport vehicles for noble warriors who dismount to fight. Moreover, if their use for transport behind the lines is at least not impractical (granted reasonable terrain), the same cannot be said when they are found transporting individual warriors hither and thither through the thick of battle. And finally it is the javelin which is the main weapon of the Homeric chariot-borne warrior, and not the long thrusting-spear or the bow, the two weapons which made the chariot so formidable a weapon of war after the revolutionary invention of the light spoke-wheeled chariot in the first half of the second millenium. Before that invention the javelin had helped the bow to provide the fire-power of the heavy, slower-moving, solid-wheeled 'chariot' or war-waggon, which often appears equipped with a capacious javelin-container.<sup>4</sup> But it looks as though the increased speed of the new, lighter chariot meant that the javelin was considered to be too feeble and uncertain a weapon to remain effective. And so it was that the great Bronze Age chariot-powers either turned to the longer thrusting-spear and relied for success on the speed, accuracy and weight of their massed attack, or else they relied on the bow to provide more accurate and forceful fire-power than the javelin over a longer range. The Hittites were the great exponents of the first method, and the Egyptians, followed by the Assyrians, of the second.<sup>5</sup> And the chariot tactics of these two great powers, the Hittites and the Egyptians, are clearly and vigorously represented on the Abu Simbel reliefs commemorating the Battle of Kadesh in 1288 B.C.<sup>6</sup> T. G. E. Powell, presumably seeking to draw parallels between Celtic chariotry and Ancient Egyptian as well as 'Homeric' chariotry, makes the extraordinary statement that the Egyptian reliefs show no head-on clash of chariots, and that massed charges are in any case impossible.<sup>7</sup> He believes that the chariots were used in only two roles: first, before battle was joined in earnest, they drove up and down in front of their own lines exchanging arrows, 'but presumably

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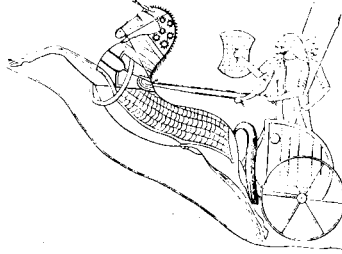
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FIG. 1  
Hittite chariot in  
the Battle of  
Kadesh of 1288  
B.C., from the  
Egyptian reliefs at  
Abu Simbel



at a range which did not endanger the horses'; and later they were used again for pursuit by the winning side. Certainly pursuit of a fleeing enemy was an important use to which the Egyptians put their chariots, and scenes depicting this are very popular on the self-congratulatory Egyptian reliefs. But that the initial role of the Egyptian chariotry was as 'shock troops' for massed, head-on attack at full speed is clear from our Abu Simbel relief. A massed chariot attack could best be withstood by a similar force, and here we see the Egyptian and Hittite chariot-forces charging each other at full speed. The Egyptian chariots carry archers, and are equipped with quivers attached to the chariot-body, but the Hittites are armed with long thrusting-spears, apparently about seven feet long, and their chariots have no quivers or javelin containers (*fig. 1*).<sup>8</sup> And before the Hittite lancers can come within striking range of the Egyptian bowmen, both they and their horses are being decimated and thrown into disarray by their opponents' arrows. To return to the *Iliad*, I said that Nestor's advice was possibly a Mycenaean survival. There is no direct evidence that the Mycenaeans used massed chariots in the manner of the Hittites, but it is a sound conjecture. Monuments<sup>9</sup> and Linear B tablets attest the use of the chariot in war; and the very large numbers of chariots revealed by the tablets suggest that chariotry was a major arm, and make it very likely that massed chariot charges were as much a feature of Mycenaean tactics as they were among the other Bronze Age monarchies. According to M. Lejeune,<sup>10</sup> the series 'S-' tablets at Cnossos reveal that the palace magazines had in store more than a thousand pairs of wheels (So), more than three hundred chariot-bodies of type 242 (Sf, Sg), and at least forty chariot-bodies of type 241 (Sf, Sg). Series Sc is a long, mutilated list of men to whom are distributed chariots (type 240, i.e.