

The Homeric Charioteer

By Paavo Roos*

The persons driving horses in Homer are rather numerous, especially on the battlefield but also on the racecourse and transport. They are usually called by name and although we are seldom informed about their social status, we can see that they often belong to the same class as the warriors. On the battlefield, they live a dangerous life and are often more liable to be killed than the warriors.

Keywords: *Homer, charioteer, chariot, horse-race*

Introduction

Among the innumerable persons mentioned in the Homeric epics there is a great number who with reins in their hands, conduct a chariot or a wagon. The conditions may vary – battle, racing, transport – what is striking is that a considerable part of the persons are named by name. On the other hand, it is not as often we are informed about their social status: who is a prince or his relative, who is his subordinate, who is a poor free man? Who drives his own horses and who drives those of somebody else, and what relation has he in that case with the horse-owner? Part of the question list can also concern Greek and Roman periods – except those concerning battle narratives; here we shall be confined to the situations described by Homer, which will give us sufficient material.

If we start with the racing the material is in fact rather scanty. Of course the main piece is the race at the games held at Patroclus' funeral, referred in the 23th song of the Iliad, and apart from that, one of Nestor's usual reminiscences that he communicates to the audience and thus to the afterworld (*Il.* 23.629-45). The participants in the funeral games are princes and all are listed by names (differently from later periods when we often only are informed about the winner) and their teams are their own. We have Diomedes and his team (which he had conquered from Aeneas), Antilochus and Menelaus, who like Diomedes are famous warriors. Eumelus is much less known, and when he is especially mentioned, it is for his swift horses. The fifth one, Meriones, is a complicated person who also participated in other disciplines, he too was a successful warrior even if he was not a prominent charioteer, nor were his horses swift. Homer makes a great affair of the race with the divine intervention that decided the final outcome between Eumelus and Diomedes, and an internal skirmish between Antilochus and Menelaus.

The chariot race in the funeral games of Patroclus is said to be the motif of one of the most famous Greek vase paintings, that on the François vase from Chiusi from about 570 B.C. One of the many picture strips show a line of partly

*Retired Lecturer, Lund University, Sweden.

preserved chariots racing from left to right, and at the right end, thus at the goal, a man with a tripod. The tripod is a prize and signifies a competition; other such are visible under the chariots. The motif is not uncommon – the interesting point here is that both the participants and the standing man are listed by name, which has caused considerable trouble. The person in the middle is called Diomedes, who was one of the participants in the games all right. To the right of him are two scarcely preserved figures named Automedon and Olyteus (i.e., Odysseus) who both took part in the war but not in the race in the funeral competitions. By the way, Automedon was sent by Achilles to fetch an additional prize to give to Eumelus (*Il.* 23.391-7, 532-8)¹ so he could not participate in the race; as for Odysseus he participated in other disciplines like foot-race and wrestling but not in chariot-race (*Od.* 4. 605-8)². To the left of Diomedes we see two quite preserved teams with the names Hippothoon and Damasippos, who not only are lacking in the competition but are not named as participants in the war at all³.

Now what is it that causes everybody who speaks about this scene to say that it displays the chariot-race at Patroclus' funeral games, when it shows one chariot who took part in the games, two who were present but did not participate in the race, and two whom we do not know at all? It is the single standing figure to the right with the inscription Achilles. Thus it is he who arranges the competition, and as far as we know Patroclus' funeral games were the only competition that Achilles ever arranged; therefore everybody seems to accept that those are depicted here although the other names do not fit Homer's narrative. We may also put the question why the vase-painter Cleitias has chosen names that do not fit the description – surely Greek painters used to know their Homer well enough to get the names right. In fact, the number of the participants is correct, so that the scene cannot have been painted quite at random⁴.

But let us leave the chariot-race that after all was only a small incident in the Trojan War – neither horses nor charioteers had been transported to Troy primarily in order to participate in the chariot-race. It was on the battlefield they were expected to be active. The warriors could drive their own chariots or be driven by a charioteer, but if so, who was this person and what was his relation to the warrior? In fact, the charioteers are rather numerous, and many are named by name, but to be named by name in this connection is nothing to be sighing for; many of them do not live for many seconds after they have been mentioned for the first and only time.

¹Eumelus crashed with his chariot through Athene's machinations and had to drag it to the goal.

²Ithaca, the native island of Odysseus, is not suited for horses, as Telemachus points out to Menelaus.

³Their names, "swifthorsed" and "horsetamer" point to skill in dealing with horses.

⁴If we compare with the other motif on the same vase, the hunt of the Calydonian boar, we can notice that also there the participants are named and are no less than 20 persons. About the same number is given by Apollodorus *Bibl.* I 8.2 whereas Ovid. in *Met.* 8.299-318 has twice as many. Many of the names in the picture occur only there, and less than half of the named persons in the picture are found in the authors. A difference from the rendering of the horse-race is of course that the literature that we can compare the boar hunt with is considerably later than the vase and thus cannot be its source like the *Ilias* could be.

Poor charioteers! Life on the battlefield was not at all so easy as to drive the warrior to the battlefield, put him down and move the chariot to a safe place in order to wait for him (see *Il.* 4.226-30, 11.239-42, 17.679)¹. They had also to encounter the fiery glances and flying lances of the enemies, and although they had like the warriors a helmet and a cuirass as defense they had no shield to catch thrown weapons. Often the charioteers are hit by missiles meant for the warriors, as Hector's charioteer Eniopeus is hit by Diomedes, his charioteer Archeptolemus by Teucer or Meriones' charioteer Coeranus by Hector (who in fact is aiming at Idomeneus). But it happens also that a charioteer is hit on purpose, sometimes when he is going to drive away after letting the warrior leave the chariot, as Pylaemenes' charioteer Mydon was hit by Antilochus or Rhigmus' charioteer Areïthous by Achilleus. And to enhance the iniquities the prospect for survival was worse for the charioteers than for the warriors; whereas a hit or wounded warrior could retire from the mêlée or be carried away by a god or be healed by a summoned doctor it was evidently an irrevocable end for a charioteer to be hit, whether it was with an arrow like Archeptolemus, a stone like Cebriones or a lance like the others.

What did a warrior do when he lost his charioteer in the battle? Since he often fought on foot anyhow it would not be strange if he was forced to do it in such circumstances. But when Hector's charioteer Eniopeus was killed, Hector immediately tried to find a successor; he engaged Archeptolemus, who, however, immediately met with the same misfortune. The next charioteer was Hector's half-brother Cebriones who succeeded in surviving longer, from the 8th song until the 16th, when Patroclus killed him with a stone and a violent struggle was fought about his corpse. In the meantime, he appears a couple of times as warrior or even as leader (*Il.* 12.91-2).

Of course, it happens often that either a warrior or a charioteer remains alone in the chariot and either tries to find a substitute or fights on foot or drives the chariot away. It is difficult to drive and fight at the same time, whether it is with lance, stones or bow and arrow, and with a sword it would hardly be possible to reach an enemy even if you would be able to handle the sword simultaneously with the reins.

An interesting exception is when Automedon after the death of his companion Patroclus takes over his chariot (which in fact belongs to Achilleus) to continue the struggle in his own way, in spite of the impossibility to deal with both chariot and weapons, and the horses are incited by Zeus (*Il.* 17.458-65):

Ὅς εἰπὼν ἵπποισιν ἐνέπνευεν μένος ἦϋ·
τῷ δ' ἀπὸ χαιτᾶων κονίην οὐδάσδε βαλόντε
ρίμφα φέρον θοὸν ἄρμα μετὰ Τρῶας καὶ Ἀχαιοῦς.
τοῖσι δ' ἐπ' Ἀὐτομέδων μάχετ' ἀχνόμενός περ ἑταίρου,
ἵπποις αἴσσωσιν ὥς τ' αἰγυπιὸς μετὰ χῆνας·

"So saying he breathed great might into the horses. And the twain shook the dust from their manes to the ground, and fleetly bare the swift car amid the

¹We have examples that this indeed occurred sometimes.

Trojans and Achaeans. And behind them fought Automedon, albeit he sorrowed for his comrade, swooping with his car as a vulture on a flock of geese, for lightly would he flee from out the battledin of the Trojans, and lightly charge, setting upon them through the great throng. Howbeit no man might he slay as he hastened to pursue them, for in no wise was it possible for him, being alone in the sacred car, to assail them with the spear, and withal to hold the swift horses."

In the end, however, he finds somebody to leave the chariot to, Alcimedon, who is one of the few persons who can handle the horses, and Automedon continues to fight on foot rather than – as we perhaps would have expected – continue in the chariot with Alcimedon as charioteer. By the way he admonishes Alcimedon to keep near him so that Hector or somebody else will not put his hands on the team – they are the immortal horses of Achilles.

His short and unique incident is enough for Automedon to be remembered for the driving and in later literature be regarded as synonym with charioteer¹.

When Achilles and Hector meet in the 22nd book their chariots are not on the spot (see below). On the other hand, when Achilles has killed Hector his chariot is at hand, but then the other Greeks have assembled, so a certain amount of time must have passed. When Achilles has tied Hector's corpse by the feet in order to drag it after his chariot it is not expressly said that he has no charioteer but drives himself². The illustrators however, both ancient and modern, seem to have supposed that the chariot was driven by a charioteer and that this was Automedon, a supposition that had no support in Homer.

It looks like a curiosity when Nestor in one of his speeches boasts with his skill in whatever he performed and tells that he in the funeral games of Amarynceus at Buprasium won every discipline except the chariot race. In this he was defeated by Actor's sons, twins who collaborated on the chariot, one with the reins and the other with the whip (*Il.* 23.638-42). On the race-course such an arrangement that makes the chariot heavier seems to be unwarranted differently from the battlefield³. On the Trojan battlefield we meet several cases of pairs of brothers on the same chariot, not expressly twins and in one case only half-brothers. Beside the pair of brothers Hector and Cebriones mentioned above we meet with six pairs, but only in one case it is expressed that one was a charioteer and the other a warrior, in the other cases only that they stood in the chariot together. But as a curiosity these six cases have another thing in common. They

¹Both Cicero, Ovid and Juvenal treat his name as synonym with charioteer (skillful or reckless), and evidently Varro has also had his name in mind. On the other hand, he does not seem to be actual for Greek authors. We may also keep in mind how a comment from a watchman concerning the driving by a captain of the host in 2 *Kings* 9.20 has caused that the name Jehu after nearly 3000 years is still a notion: "The driving is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi; for he is driving violently."

²According to a commentator to the passage in question there is no room for more than one person on the chariot because Hector's cuirass lies there.

³This has evidently confused the ancient commentators so much that the brothers could be regarded as Siamese twins both by authors and artists although Homer does not hint it, see Harris (1972) 172. If Nestor's memory is correct he confronted the same pair of brothers also in a battle (where it is not expressly said that they were standing in a chariot) and would have killed them if Poseidon had not snatched them away from the battlefield, *Il.* 11.750-2.

are mentioned only once and the pairs are always killed together in the same attack, one by Aeneas (expressly twins), one by Achilles, two pairs by Agamemnon and two by Diomedes. By the way Diomedes had set eyes on a third pair before that, but since they were sons of a priest of Hephaestus the god enfolded one of them in darkness and saved him (*Il.* 5.9-23)¹.

But battlefields and racecourses are not everything in the world. Even for a battle- or race-chariot there is a life outside these fields. A chariot could of course also be used for travels and transports, and who did then drive it? For transports naturally heavier vehicles were often used, sometimes certainly four-wheelers, but for journeys no doubt lighter vehicles as in the connections mentioned above were used. As far as can be seen from the Homeric source material the travellers did not use a driver but drove themselves. Naturally it was also a question of the number of travellers since there were usually not more than two persons on such a chariot, neither in battle nor on a journey. So, with two travellers on the chariot there would be no room for a charioteer (no luggage is ever mentioned, but anyhow Telemachus has room for a few gifts from Menelaus) (*Od.* 15.131-2). When Telemachus on his journey around Greece to ask for Odysseus visited Pylos and planned to go to Sparta together with Nestor's son Peisistratus it was he who drove the chariot and not a charioteer (*Od.* 3.471-3). Slightly more astonishing is when Paris and Menelaus are going to fight their duel about Helen outside Troy and the Trojan herald Idaeus is sent to the town in order to, among other things, ask king Priam to attend to the event. Priam departs immediately, but it is not Idaeus or somebody else who is his driver – certainly there are many other possible persons at hand – but he takes the reins himself. But Priam takes Antenor with him in the chariot, and then there would anyhow not have been room for a charioteer in the chariot. By the way we can notice that Priam cannot think of standing to regard the duel between Paris and Menelaus but immediately after the sacrifice ceremony he immediately drives back to Troy, also now with Antenor in the chariot (*Il.* 3.249-63, 303-13).

We meet Priam in the act of driving also on another occasion. This time it is the nocturnal expedition when he heads for the camp of the Greeks in order to try to redeem the corpse of Hector from Achilles. This time he is alone in the chariot, but his friend Idaeus drives a four-wheeler, an *apene*, loaded with gifts and drawn by mules instead of horses. On the way back, it is still Idaeus who drives this, now used to transport Hector's corpse, whereas Hermes, whom they have already met on their way to Achilles, after having closed the heavy gates takes over the role of the driver on Priam's chariot (*Il.* 24.320-471, 690-1).

In the *Odyssey* we can also notice that the driver of the heavy wagon drawn by mules, also an *apene*, with the washes of the Phaeacians to the shore is the princess Nausicaa herself, not one of the other girls or a charioteer. She is the only

¹Moreover also many cases occur of charioteer and warrior being killed together without any relationship being indicated as well as of brothers being killed in the same attack without being fighting from the same chariot.

female driver we meet in Homer, if we not shall count the goddesses who also drive their chariots sometimes¹.

We must not forget the question what happens to the horses (and mules) when the driving is finished. Of course, somebody took care of them, just as somebody harnessed them before the journey², and it could not always be expected that the exhausted charioteer would do it himself. Or as an old Turkish proverb puts it, *sen mi ağa, ben mi ağa, atlara kim bağa?* - if you are a lord and I am a lord, who shall look after the horses? But it looks as in Homer the prince or warrior looks after the horses or at least unharnesses them himself, Priam, Achilles and others. It is only Nausicaa who lets her brothers take care of the animals (and the washes) when she returns from the shore. In the world of the gods we find often that somebody else than the driver unyokes the horses. For example, Zeus' horses are unyoked by Poseidon and Hera's by the Hours (*Il.* 8.433-41)³.

To return to the position of the charioteer in the Homeric world we can note that we in the relations between the persons have a varying offer which of course could be additionally complicated by the translations. The underlings of a prince may be called *hetairos* and *opaon*, almost always rendered in English with comrade and very seldom with follower or friend, or *therapon*, which is always rendered with squire. *Hetairos* and some of the translations could differently from others be mutual. Some persons have their standing epithets as Meriones, who even has two, "ἀτάλαντος Ἐνυαλίῳ ἀνδρειφόντη", "the peer of Enyalios, slayer of men" and "θεράπων ἀγαπήνορος Ἰδομενῆος," "squire of kindly Idomeneus." In the second he is thus linked with Idomeneus, whereas we can observe that other persons in similar connections, like Patroclus to Achilles or Sthenelus to Diomedes, never have standing epithets. Concerning Meriones we can observe that if he is subordinate to Idomeneus, it is not by much – in the Ships' catalogue it is evident that Meriones rules over the Cretans together with Idomeneus (*Il.* 2.649-50)⁴.

These epithets and relations are static and permanent – once a companion, always a companion etc. For the charioteers the situation is slightly different. It is true that the sibling relations mentioned above are permanent, but they would hardly be described that one was the charioteer of the other. And we see from Hector's case how the charioteers change for natural reasons. One interesting case is when Aeneas and the Lycian Pandarus discuss who shall drive and who shall handle the weapons before the imminent fight with Diomedes; Aeneas will be the driver because the horses know him better (*Il.* 5.221-40)⁵. In spite of the fact that

¹Hera drives with Athene as a passenger, *Il.* 5.745-54, 8.338-92, Iris borrows Ares' chariot to drive the wounded Aphrodite, *Il.* 5.363-9, Eos is supposed to drive her chariot alone, *Od.* 23.244-5. Athene takes Sthenelus' place in order to act as charioteer for Diomedes, *Il.* 5.840-5. The messenger Iris evidently does normally not drive but fulfils her tasks without a chariot, see Wiesner (1968) 24.

²Sometimes both gods and human beings harnessed their horses themselves, sometimes there were others who did it for them.

³However, both Zeus and Poseidon also unyoked their horses themselves, *Il.* 8.50 and 13.34-5.

⁴He is also called prince in other places and is mentioned together with other princes.

⁵In fact, Pandarus has not brought his own horses although he has eleven chariots with belonging horses, *Il.* 5.192-203. Then he has left in the stable in Lycia and travelled to Troy on

Pandarus happens to hit Diomedes – already the second time that day – the encounter means his death, and Aeneas is not far from sharing his fate.

When we study the terminology, we find that the occasional function of somebody's coach or charioteer, *heniochos* or rarer *heniocheus* is not uncommon. But it is more uncommon than could be expected from the translation – when the charioteer Eurymedon drives Agamemnon's horses far away from the mêlée he is not at all called *heniochos* in Greek but *therapon* (*Il.* 4.224-8). When we will check how it is formulated when you are somebody's permanent charioteer we discover that it in fact is never formulated like that – in the mêlée you can be described as somebody's *therapon* or *heniochos* or sometimes *therapon heniochos*, but in common life nobody is characterized as the charioteer of somebody at all, at least not as *heniochos*, whereas it is common to be characterized as somebody's *therapon*, which has in fact a wide notion (Cf. Krischer 1992, 97f). The only time we find Patroclus mentioned as somebody's charioteer it is not Achilles but the horses who mourn him when he is dead (*Il.* 17.427, 439; see also 19.401). When we know Automedon as the charioteer of Achilles it is true that it is from a description in the *Iliad* but hardly from a formulation. If Automedon shall thank anybody for the formulation "charioteer of Achilles" it is instead Vergil.¹ He formulates it so when he describes Pyrrhus' attack on the palace of Priam in the narrative of Aeneas (Verg. *Aen.* 2.476-7):

"una ingens Periphas et equorum agitator Achillis, armiger Automedon, una omnis Scyria pubes"

"With him huge Periphas and Automedon his armour bearer, driver of Achilles' horses; with him all the Scyrian youth."

But from where has Vergil got the information that Automedon was regarded as Achilles' charioteer? Does it never occur that he drives with Achilles in the chariot? It sure happens, even if it is only one single day Achilles participates in battle in the *Ilias*, the very day when he kills Hector. The campaign starts with Automedon at the reins. When Achilles descends we are not informed about, but it is evident on several occasions that he is on foot. But it also looks as if he is driving himself, and what becomes of Automedon that day we are not informed of.² Of course Vergil has had access to more source material concerning the Trojan War than we, for example the epic cycle that describes other parts of the

foot for fear that there would not be enough fodder for them in Troy, see Delebecque (1951) 88.

¹According to Krischer (1992) 97 it is in fact Patroclus who is the charioteer of Achilles and Automedon takes over the role only after Patroclus' death. Since the *Ilias* starts with the retirement of Achilles from the battle we have no narration of him on the battlefield earlier.

²It is striking that it is more than once formulated as if it is the warrior himself who drives the chariot in spite of the fact that it is mentioned that he has a charioteer on the chariot. It does not only concern Achilles but also Hector and Patroclus and others. It can even be so that the term *heniochos* denotes the warrior when he has a charioteer as Hector in *Il.* 8.89. And who was Thestor, who, crouched on his chariot and frightened was killed by Patroclus in *Il.* 16.401-10 – a warrior or a parked charioteer? If he was a charioteer it is at any rate not expressed whose charioteer he is as it is usually done.

war than those included in the *Ilias*. In *Aethiopsis*, which describes events in the war after Hector's death but which is not preserved, there are, for instance, descriptions of how Achilles kills the Amazon queen Penthesilea and the Aethiopian king Memnon, and the latter episode we see depicted on a Late Corinthian amphora (*LIMC* Automedon 49). In the background we see the chariots and charioteers of both parties. Automedon's name is legible, but of the name of Memnon's charioteer nothing is preserved.

Finally, also a few words concerning the counterpart, the horses. It is not often they obtain speech, but when Achilles' steed Xanthus starts speaking it is the warfare and the prospects of the warriors he deals with, not the driving and the role of the charioteers (*Il.* 19.404-17). Concerning the use of horses we can notice that two horses were used before the chariot as well in race as in battle, and probably also in transport. Three horses were never used nor one single, even if suggestions of the latter have occurred (see Wiesner 1968: 20, n. 67, Delebecque 1951: 98). Nor do we encounter a four-in-hand, but the battle descriptions give us a problem. Sometimes a *pareoros*, a loose horse or a side-horse beside the team is mentioned¹. These side-horses are the only ones who are killed in battle, and in Achilles' team the side-horse Pedasus is the only one who is mortal (*Il.* 16.152-4, 466-71). This means that as a motif for the existence of side-horses it can hardly be the question of acting as a spare horse – a mortal spare horse for an immortal one can hardly be imagined. It is more probable that they had a function as some sort of speed keepers, even if it is difficult to believe that they would be of any use compared with the complications it would mean to have them in the *mêlée* (Wiesner 1968, 21f).

It seems quite clear that the charioteers in the Homeric epos like the warriors in the chariots are of noble origin, although perhaps not always as noble as the warriors. The same concerns them who drive the chariots in horse-races. Also for other use than in battle and races the chariots may be driven by men of the same class, but we have very few examples of that. How will be the case in centuries to come during Antiquity may be the subject of another study.

References

- Delebecque E (1951) *Le cheval dans l'Iliade*. (The horse in the Iliad). Paris: Études et commentaires, IX.
- Fairclough HR (ed) (1934–1935) *Virgil: in two volumes*. London/New York: W. Heinemann/Putnam.
- Harris HA (1972) *Sport in Greece and Rome*. London & Southampton: Cornell University Press.
- Krischer T (1992) Patroklos, der Wagenlenker Achills. (Patroclus, the charioteer of Achilles). *RhM* 135: 97–103.
- Murray AT (ed) (1985–1988) *The Iliad*. Cambridge Mass. & London.
- Murray AT (ed) (1995) *The Odyssey*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge Mass.

¹It seems as if two side-horses also may occur, *Il.* 8.185, see Wiesner (1968) 22f.

Wiesner J (1968) Fahren und Reiten (Archaeologia Homerică - Lieferungs Ausgabe).
[Driving and riding (Archaeologia Homerică - Delivery edition)]. Vandenhoeck &
Ruprecht.

