



## CHARIOT

---

**CHARIOT** (Av. *raθa*, *vāša*-, Mid. Pers. *rah*, *wardyūn*, etc.). Chariots in ancient Iran were light horse-drawn, two-wheeled vehicles designed for speed and maneuverability in battle and races. Originally developed in Mesopotamia in the third millennium, chariots were built and driven with superlative skill by Indo-Iranian peoples beginning sometime during the first half of the second millennium. The earliest datable evidence comes in the form of Indo-Aryan loanwords for chariot racing terms in the Kikkuli treatise in Hittite from the 14th century b.c.e. (Kammenhuber, pp. 6ff.).

The number of cognate words for “chariot” and related concepts in both Vedic Old Indian (*rátha*-) and Iranian (Av. *raθa*-) shows that chariots were used by both groups in the time of Indo-Iranian unity. The oldest Iranian literary reference is Zarathustra’s use of the word *raiθī*- “chariot-driver,” while the Younger Avesta contains many verses depicting the chariots of the gods as well as other bits and pieces of chariot vocabulary. Unfortunately the Avestan material cannot be dated with any precision.

From the beginning of the 5th century b.c.e. there are reliefs in splendid detail from the Apadāna at Persepolis showing contemporary Persian chariots (see, e.g., Schmitt, I, pl. 52). These *bigae*, with twelve-spoked wheels and rear set axle, driven by lone drivers bent slightly forward over the front of the box, provide not only a wealth of detail on construction, harnessing, and dimensions, but also a fairly certain point of comparison for literary references (see below). Chariots were prestige vehicles of the nobles (*raθaēštārō*, see [artēštār](#)). It is unclear how effective the chariot was in battle



(cf. Powell, pp. 165-69): too expensive and easy to lose in close combat and ineffective in uneven terrain, the chariot was probably first used as a mobile missile platform deployed at a distance from infantry troops. According to Greek historians, the Achaemenid armies had large numbers of chariots that could have their wheel hubs fitted with scythe blades to mow down infantry in a frontal assault. Initially terrifying, no doubt, in the long run, especially against Alexander, these chariots proved useless in the face of disciplined troops and far more mobile cavalry (Littauer, pp. 152-53). In post-Achaemenid Iran chariots fell into total obsolescence as vehicles of war.

Whether driving into battle or competing in races the swiftness of the horses and the skill of the charioteer in maneuvering are extolled in the Avestan texts. A poet invokes the goddess Anāhitā in the following terms: “I now ask for two coursers (*auruuantō*), a two-legged courser and a four-legged one: for the two-legged one who will be swift when mounted, skilled at turning the chariots in battles; for the four-legged one that will turn the flanks of the enemy army . . .” (*Yt.* 5.131). Driving into battle “. . . the warriors (*raθaēštārō*) worship [Miθra] at the manes of their horses [cf. the posture of the charioteers on the Apadāna reliefs] requesting speed for their teams . . .” (*Yt.* 10.11). The intimidating effect of the chariot assault is seen as: “The swift, fast-snorting horses (of those who worship Aši) inspire fear (as) they set the swift chariot (*raom vāšəm vāšayante*) [cf. *raoraθa-* “having a swift chariot”] in motion; they pull at the leather (as) they drive (*vaz-*) the brave poet whose horses are swift, whose chariot is strong (*dərəzi.raθem*) . . .” (*Yt.* 17.12).

Iranian *raθa-*, unlike Old Indian *rátha-* referred both to the body of the chariot and to the entire vehicle. The first must be the original usage, since the meaning of Indo-Iranian *\*ratha-* must have been “wheeled,” that is, the chariot-box riding on the wheels (< IE. *\*rotə-a-*, a derivative of IE. *\*rotā-* “wheel,” cf. Lat. *rota*). The entire vehicle is also designated in Avestan by the word *vāša-* (< *\*varta-* from *vart-* “to turn, revolve”; cf. *varətō.raθa-* “with rolling chariot,” an epithet of Druuāspa, and the *vāšəm vāšaya-*, see above). The terminological distinction between *raθa-* and *vāša-* is brought out in a dramatic Avestan passage (*Yt.* 19.43-44), where the knave Snāuui’ka threatens: “If I come of age I shall make the earth into a wheel (*čaxra-*) [note that Miθra’s *vāša* is both *bərəzi.čaxra-* “with high wheels” and *aēuuō.čaxra-* “one-wheeled”]. I shall make the heaven into a chariot box (*raθa-*) . . . They will draw my chariot (*vāša-*), both Spənta Mainiiu and Aṅra (Mainiiu).” The same distinction was maintained in Buddhist Sogdian in the *Vessantara-jātaka* (343,



ed. Benveniste, p. 22), where a *raθ-* (spelled *r*”) “chariot box” is said to be fastened to the *wartan* (cf. W.B. Henning apud Gershevitch, 1961, p.76).

*Chariot terminology.* While the Vedic literature is very rich in vocabulary for parts of the chariot, the Avesta yields little. Apart from *čaxra-* (OInd. *cakrá-*, IE. *\*k<sub>1</sub>ek<sub>1</sub>ulo-*) we have none of the words for axle (OInd. *ákṣa-*) or parts of the wheel, which are so well attested in Old Indian (*ará-* “spoke,” *āṇi-* “axle-pin,” *paví-* “tire,” *nemí-* “felloe,” *nábhya-* “nave”). In Old Indian the word for “yoke” is *yugá*, but the cognate Avestan word, attested in two compounds, must have been *\*yuguuā-*, found in *hqm.iuuā-* (< *\*ham-yuguuā* “complex, double yoke”; Gershevitch, 1959, pp. 274-75) and *yuiiō.səmī-* (scribal error for *\*yuuuō.səmī* < *\*yuguua-samī-*) “(plough) together with the yoke and yoke-pin” (cf. OInd. *yoga-śamyá-*; Mayrhofer, *Dictionary* III, p. 19; on Av. *uu* < *guu* see Bartholomae, 1895, par. 275; cf. Debrunner, par. 700). The yoke-pin (cf. Piggott, p. 280) occurs in Avestan as *səmī* (for *\*samī*) and *simā-* (for *\*samiiā-*, cf. Munji *sām*, Gershevitch, loc. cit.; OInd. *śamyā-*, *śamīā-*, *śamī-*; Mayrhofer, *Dictionary* III, p. 302). The chariot-pole was the *upairispāt-* (Gershevitch, loc. cit.; cf. the epithet of the god *Vāyu hupairispā*, nom. sing. of *\*huupairispāt-* “having a good chariot pole”; cf. also OInd. *īṣā-* “chariot/plough pole,” Av. *aēša-*, Pahl. *ēš*, Pers. *xēš* “plough”). The yoke, braced by the yoke-pin, was lashed to the chariot-pole by means of leather thongs called *yaoxədra-* (< *\*yauθra-*, OInd. *yóktra-*; in the epithets *dərəzi.yaoxədra-* “(Vāyu) whose yoke-straps are strong” and *fraspāiiaoxədra-* “(Daēnā) who (causes men) to loosen their yoke-straps,” i.e., “who brings peace”). While it is unattested in Old Iranian, the word for the part of the pole extending in front of the yoke may be posited as *\*fra(y)ug(u)a-* on the basis of OInd. *prāüga-* and Yidgha-Munji *frāiyo* “yoke-rope,” Sangleci *fəryay* “yoke” (Mayrhofer, *Dictionary* II, p. 354). In a difficult passage (*Yt.* 10.125) a term *aka-*, probably meaning “hook” or “ring,” occurs as some part of the yoke. Rather than a hook used to fasten the end of the pole to the yoke (Gershevitch, 1959, p. 275), the *aka-* is more likely to mean “terret,” which were the rings attached to the yoke through which the reins (*qxnah-*) passed (cf. the Apadāna reliefs). As we can see in the Apadāna reliefs, the horses were harnessed to the yoke by straps, which must be what is referred to in Avestan with the expression *mrāta- čarəman-* “leather” (*Yt.* 17.12) and perhaps also *simōiθra-*, which seems to be a scribal error for *\*mōiθra-* (< *\*maiθra-* to IE. *mei-* “to bind,” cf. from the same root *miθra-* “covenant, binding agreement”). Again, the Apadāna reliefs show details of bridles with bits; contemporary articulated bits of bronze have also been found at Persepolis. In Avestan the term *aiβiδāna-* occurs in the compound (*aspa-*) *zaraniio.aiβiδāna-* “horse with



a golden bridle,” where “golden” would indicate not the entire bridle but just the bit (cf. OInd. *abhidā'nī-* “bridle”; Ir. cognates show both “bridle” and “bit”), while Avestan *aīβiδāiti-* (see below) may have meant the headstall together with the bit. The team of horses was called *hita-* (to *hai-* “to bind”) found in the dual for a *biga* and in the plural for a *quadriga* (cf. *Y.* 9.22; *Yt.* 10.11; also *Yt.* 5.13; *Vd.* 7.41). Two verbs seem to have been used for the act of hitching up the team: 1. *hai-* “to bind” (see above; cf. the proper name *Hitāspa*, lit. “whose horses have been harnessed”; *Vištāspa*, lit. “whose horses have been let loose”), 2. *yaug-* (in *yuuua-*, *yaoxəδra-*, see above; and the proper name *Yuxtāspa*, lit. “whose horses have been yoked”).

The common verb for driving or riding in a chariot as well as pulling it is *vaz-* (OInd. *vah-*), but *θanj-* “to draw, pull” is also found. While the Vedic texts make it clear that in combat two men rode in the chariot, the driver (*sūtá-*, *sārathi-*) and the warrior (*rathesthā'-*), the Avestan indicates that either one or two might go into battle. Beside *raθaē.štā-* (*raθōi.štā-*), *raθaēštar-* (cf. OInd. *sthā'tr-* “charioteer”) literally “he who stands in the chariot” (i.e. the warrior), there also occurs *raiθī-* “chariot driver” (whence perhaps Mid. Pers. *rahīg* “page”). With the exception of *Yt.* 10.68 where Aši controls (*hangrəβnāiti*, cf. Rigveda 10.18.14) Miθra’s chariot, all Avestan passages describing chariot maneuvers speak of only one person, whether deity or man. In addition to the reins held to control the horses, the charioteer could use an *aštra-* to urge them on. On the Apadāna reliefs this appears to be a switch about a meter long. In Avestan it may be a whip (cf. *xšuuuāēβaiiat.aštra-* “with snaking whip” and So. *xwšyp*, NPers. *šēb* “whip”), though in some contexts the *aštra-* is a goad or prod. The sound raised by the whip is described by a verb of onomatopoeic nature *kahuuqñ-* (*Yt.* 10.113).

*Chariot racing.* Warfare was only one area in which chariots were employed. Achaemenid kings may have used them for hunting, as did Assyrian kings, but evidence is lacking. Necessary evidence is also lacking to determine whether, as in some Vedic sacrifices (Sparreboom, pp. 28-74), chariots were employed in ritual contests forming part of more elaborate rites. Nevertheless, chariot racing must have been a popular sport among the nobility. The most noted race was the legendary contest between Kavi Haosravah and Nərəmanah (*Yt.* 5.50; 19.77). The course, apparently similar to the Greek *stadion* and Roman *circus*, was called a *čarətā-* (also *čarətu-*, *tačar-*) “course, run.” One half of the *čarətā-* was a *hāθra-* “interval,” which in late Avestan was about 700 meters (Henning, pp. 236ff.). The term *razura-* found in this context usually means



“forest” but may be a technical term for the *meta*, or turning post, which Haosrauuah wanted to avoid cutting with his wheel.

*Metaphorical uses.* Since Darmesteter (1883, pp. 116ff.) it has been known that Avestan preserved an idiom inherited from Indo-European poetic diction: \**uek̥uos takθ-* “to fashion speech (like a carpenter),” in the compound *vačastašti-* “the construction of speech,” that is, the strophes of the Gathas. In the Rigveda *takṣ-* occurs not only with *vācas-*, but also with various nouns meaning “thought, poem, song,” and so on, in contexts where the poets describe their art of poetic composition. Further, the type of carpentry seems restricted exclusively to analogies with the craft of chariot building. In Indo-European, too, chariots seem to have been associated in the minds of the poets with their inspiration and poetry itself (cf. Durante, pp. 242ff.). Although the evidence is slim, there is an indication that chariots played a role in metaphors of poetry among the Iranian poets. In *Y.* 50.6, where he identifies himself as a “poet (*mąθran-*) who raises his voice,” Zarathustra requests Mazdā the Creator to instruct him “so as to become the charioteer (*raiθī*) of his intellect and tongue.” Rather than a chariot-builder, here Zarathustra regards himself as the potential chariot driver guiding the process of poetic formulation. The metaphor of poetry is continued in the following strophe when Zarathustra says, “I shall yoke the swiftest horses for you . . .” Further, by the fact that the tradition refers to the Gathic *maθras* themselves as *vačastašti-*, we may guess that Zarathustra also saw himself, or was seen by his followers, as a “fashioner of speech,” since in Avestan *taš-* was the appropriate verb for chariot-building, as Miθra’s “chariot (was) constructed by (Spənta) Mainiiu (*vāša mainiiu.hąm.tāšta*, *Yt.* 10.67). In *Yašt* 9.26 (cf. Hoffmann, pp. 199f.) Haoma is said to “hold(?) the *aiβi’āiti* and the *grauuas* of the *mąθra*,” and, in the light of Indo-Iranian poetic idiom, it would not be surprising to find chariot terms in connection with the Holy Word and the sacred juice that inspired poetic insight. Here *aiβi’āiti-* is certainly “bridle”; *grauua-* (if from \**graβa* “grasp”) might mean “stick, cane,” perhaps a synonym of *aštrā-*, or “reins,” a synonym of *ąxnah-*. Finally, it should be noted that in *Yašt* 17.12, cited above, it is a poet (lit. “praiser”) whose swift horses carry him in his chariot.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- C. Bartholomae, *AirWb*. Idem, "Awestasprache," in *Grundriss I*, pp. 152-246.
- E. Benveniste, ed. and tr., *Vessantara Jātaka*, Paris, 1946.
- A. Debrunner, *Altindische Grammatik II/2*, Göttingen, 1954.
- J. Darmesteter, "Une métaphore grammaticale de la langue indo-européenne," in his *Études Iraniennes II*, Paris, 1883.
- M. Durante, "Epea pteroenta," in R. Schmitt, ed., *Indogermanische Dichtersprache*, Darmstadt, 1968, pp. 242-60.
- I. Gershevitch, *A Grammar of Manichean Sogdian*, Oxford, 1961.
- Idem, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959.
- W. B. Henning, "An Astrological Chapter of the Bundahish," *JRAS*, 1942.
- K. Hoffmann, "Zur Avestischen Textkritik," in M. Boyce and I. Gershevitch, eds., *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume*, London, 1970.
- A. Kammenhuber, *Hippologia Hethitica*, Wiesbaden, 1961.
- M. A. Littauer and J. H. Crouwel, *Wheeled Vehicles and Ridden Animals in the Ancient Near East*, Leiden, 1979.
- S. Piggott, *Prehistoric India*, Harmondsworth, 1950.
- T. G. E. Powell, "Some Implications of Chariotry," in I. L. Forester and L. Alcock, eds., *Culture and Environment*, London, 1963.
- E. Schmidt, *Persepolis I-II*, Chicago, 1953, 1957.
- M. Sparreboom, *Chariots in the Veda*, Leiden, 1985.
- (William W. Malandra)