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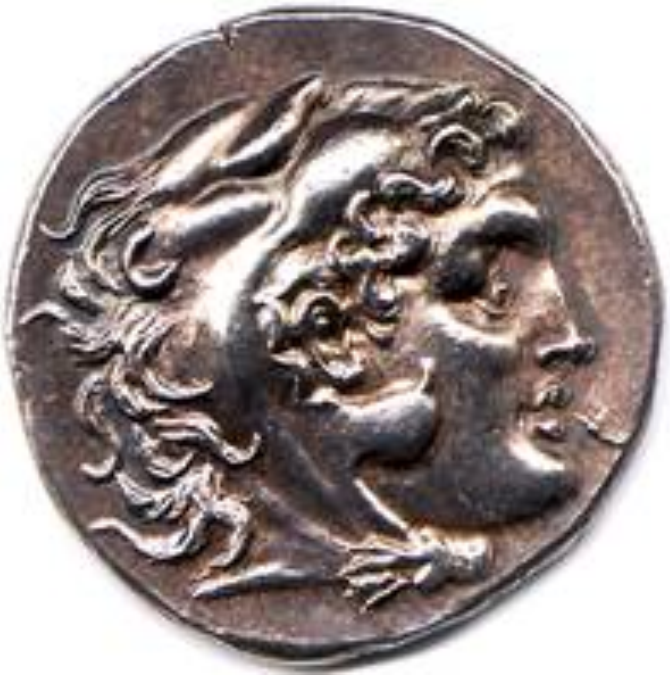

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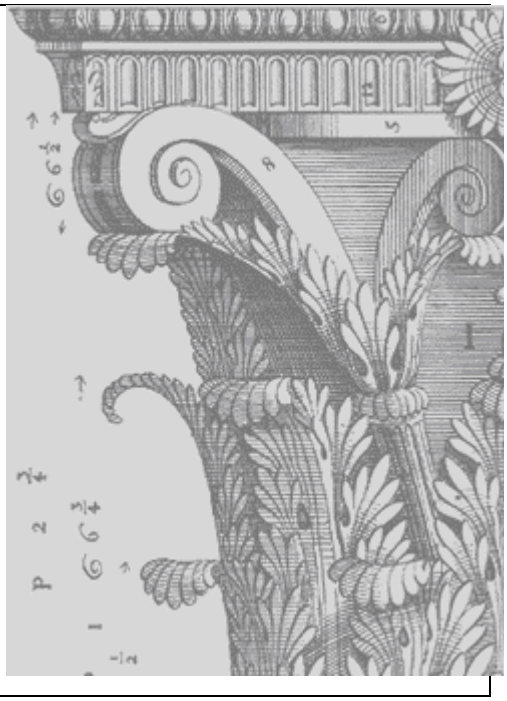

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Once More on the Origin of Scythed Chariot[1]

Alexander K. Nefedkin

Abstract: In the present article I point out that Jeffrey Rop's arguments for the Assyrian origin of the scythed chariot are not based on the historical evidence. The only note of Ctesias on Assyrian scythed chariots is questionable. The Assyrian hypothesis is not supported either by Mesopotamian cuneiform or the abundant Assyrian iconography. The Persian origin hypothesis remains more probable and widespread among modern scholars. It is based on more reliable ancient sources (Xenophon, Arrian) and should be supported.

In 2004 my article about the origin of scythed chariots was published in the German journal *Historia*.[2] In this article it was shown that chariots with scythes appeared among the Persians in the mid-fifth century B.C. for combat against Greek infantry phalanxes. This same thesis was examined in much more detail in a separate chapter of my monograph about war chariots of the ancient Greeks.[3] In 2013 an article appeared in this same journal, *Historia*, by the American historian Jeffrey Rop, who subjected the above-mentioned Persian hypothesis to criticism and supported the old Assyrian hypothesis about the origin of scythed chariots.[4]

J. Rop rejects my three theses: that chariots with scythes appeared in the mid-fifth century B.C., that these chariots were intended for breaking up the formation of the Greek hoplites, and that mention by Ctesias of Assyrian chariots with scythes is unreliable. For his part the critic presents his hypotheses: that special conditions of locality were required for scythed chariots to function, that they were used against all types of cavalry and infantry, and that chariots with scythes appeared in the Assyrian period.[5]

We will examine J. Rop's arguments in detail and see if they are justified. The only mention in the sources on which the Assyrian hypothesis of the origin of chariots with scythes is built is the one by Ctesias. He tells of a campaign of the legendary Assyrian king Ninus to Bactria with an army of 1,700,000 infantry, 210,000 cavalry, and 10,600 scythed chariots (Diod. 2.5.4). But Ctesias did not even mention the ordinary unarmed chariots, which must have been present in the Assyrian army of the ninth century B.C. He considered all chariots scythed, as was the case during his time in the Persian Empire. J. Rop somehow missed other evidence of Ctesias about the campaign of the wife of Ninus, the legendary queen Semiramis, to the east. In

[1] Translation from Russian into English by Richard L. Bland (Eugene, Oregon, USA). I am very grateful to R. Bland for this translation of this paper.

[2] A.K. Nefiodkin, "On the Origin of the Scythed Chariots." *Historia* 53 (2004): 369–378.

[3] A.K. Nefedkin (А.К. Нефёдкин), *Боевые колесницы и колесничие древних греков (XVI–I вв. до н.э.)* (Chariotry of the Ancient Greek, the 16th-1st centuries BC). (St. Petersburg 2001) 268-327, the English summary on the subject— pp. 517-518. My article was published after my book, since it for five years lay in the editorial board of "Historia". Unfortunately, the book remained unknown to the critic.

[4] J. Rop, "Reconsidering the Origin of the Scythed Chariot." *Historia* 62 (2013): 167-181.

[5] Ibidem: Passim.

Semiramis's army there were 3,000,000 infantry, 200,000 cavalry, and 100,000 chariots (Diod. 2.17.1). Even so, the Assyrian chariots are not called scythed there. Consequently, Ctesias himself did not give special significance to the type of battle chariot. But this evidence is not so important for a discussion about the origin of armed chariots. Ctesias's information was already considered doubtful in antiquity (Aristot. *Hist. anim*. 8.158; Strab. 11.6.3; Plut. *Artax*. 1.2; Aul. Gel. 9.4.3; Phot. *Bibl*. 72.36a). The same negative assessment is given to the work of Ctesias by modern scholars.[6] Historians are of the opinion that the Assyrians never went that far to the east[7] and the sources of Ctesias's information on Assyrian history were not Asian but rather Greek, from a logographic tradition.[8] To build a hypothesis only on the basis of one mention by an unreliable source is impossible. Additional confirmation is needed. The rich Assyrian iconography does not offer a single image of chariots with scythes, and the cuneiform inscriptions are quiet about it also. In Akkadian sources we do not encounter a designation for chariots armed with scythes either in Assyrian or in New Babylonian or in Achaemenid or in Seleucid times.[9] In addition, Xenophon himself believed that the chariots of the Assyrians were simple ones, without scythes (Xen. *Cyr*. 3.3.60; 6.2.17; 7.1.29; cf. 6.1.27).

At the same time one must agree with the critic that the evolution of Assyrian chariots occurred along a course of increasing the weight in the construction of chariots. Indeed, chariots transmitted their mobile tactical functions to the cavalry.[10] In the late Assyrian chariot of the seventh century B.C. the crew was four people (driver, two shield-bearers, and archer), which says that in battle they themselves were fighting. But in a scythed chariot there was only the driver (Xen. *Cyr*. 6.1.28-29), who now himself did not fight but only managed the team.[11]

Ancient military theorists specifically contrasted ordinary chariots ψιλά with the scythed chariots δρεπανηφόρα (Asclep. *Tact*. 8; Ael. *Tact*. 22.3; Arr. *Tact*. 2.5; 19.4). Also ancient authors separated ἅρματα Περσικά into an original individual type of chariot, armed with scythes (Arr. *Tact*. 2.5; Poll. 1.141). This kind was called the "Persian" type, and, for example, not Median, which for the Greeks was synonymous with "Persian." What is more, in the account about the war of the Median king Astyages with the Persian king Cyrus, those chariots of the

[6] For example, see I.V. Piankov (И.В. Пьянков), *Средняя Азия в известиях античного историка Ктесия* (Central Asian in the notes of ancient historian Ctesias). (Dushanbe 1975) 3-4, 24.

[7] M.A. Dandamayev (М.А. Дандамаев). *Политическая история ахеменидской державы* (Political history of the Achaemenid empire). (Moscow 1985) 29.

[8] M.M. Dandamayeva (М.М. Дандамаева). "Легенда о трех ассирийских владыках." (The legend about three Assyrian kings). *Вестник древней истории* 4 (1995) 18-20, 23, 33.

[9] A. Salonen, *Die Landfahrzeuge des alten Mesopotamien*. (Helsinki 1951) 69-167; idem. *Hippologica Accadica*. (Helsinki 1956) 208-218.

[10] Rop (n. 4)176-179.

[11] For more detail abut the development of chariots in antiquity, see А.К. Nefedkin (А.К. Нефёдкин). Основные этапы развития боевых колесниц в древности (Main stages of development of war chariots in the ancient world). In: Ju. E. Berezkin (ed.). *Взаимодействие культур и цивилизаций: В честь юбилея В. М. Массона* (St. Petersburg 2000) 116-126; about late Assyrian chariots: N. Stillman, N. Tallis, *Armies of the Ancient Near East 3000 BC to 539BC*.(Worthing 1984)160, 163, 166-167; Nefedkin (n. 3) 93-96, 109.

former appear to have been ordinary, while those of the latter, scythed chariots (Nicol. Damasc. Frg. 66 FHG. 3. P. 403-404).[12] In general, it turns out that for the ancient Greeks themselves scythed chariots were Persian ones.

Xenophon in the *Cyropaedia* attributes the appearance of scythed chariots to the military genius of the Persian king Cyrus II (Xen. Cyr. 6.1.27-30). However, the *Cyropaedia* is not a historical work; this is a fictional novel on a historical theme, in which the author attributed to his hero the introduction of many Persian customs of his time.[13] From this emerges the problem of verification of data from this source. J. Rop himself agrees that Xenophon attributed the introduction of chariots to Cyrus II without basis.[14]

We will turn attention to the fact that neither Herodotus nor Aeschylus nor even later Thucydides mention the scythed chariot. It appears especially strange that Herodotus does not speak about chariots with scythes, though he describes the Persian army of Xerxes in some detail. As Herodotus presents the description of Xerxes's army, it is clearly not a description of a specific campaigning army, but a description of the whole army of the Persian Empire.[15] And the number of such chariots from the whole empire had to amount to at least 200, as many as there were in 401 and 331 B.C. in the battle of Cunaxa and the battle of Gaugamela (Xen. *Anab*. 1.7.11; Arr. *Anab*. 3.11.6-7). Indeed, after his defeat at the battle of Marathon Darius I prepared for war for three years (Hdt. 7.1; Diod. 11.2.2; Just. 2.10.1), and after his death Xerxes assembled an army for five more years (Hdt. 7.20; Diod. 11.2.3; Just. 2.10.12). The troops were drawn from all satrapies, and all existing kinds of troops were represented in Xerxes's army: marines, cavalry, infantry, mounted camels, and ordinary chariots, but scythed four-horse chariots were not there. Of course, *argumentum ex silentio* is not absolutely reliable, but nevertheless this silence of the sources is rather representative.

The *terminus post quem* of the appearance of scythed chariots seems rather evident (479 B.C.). J. Rop tries to prove that in Herodotus's list (7.60-96) of the Persian troops of King Xerxes, scythed chariots are not mentioned simply because they were just not taken on the campaign as a consequence of the rugged terrain of Greece.[16] However, this thesis is not tenable. Battle

[12] Nefedkin (n. 3) 272. The fragment is considered as going back to information of Ctesias (I.V. Piankov (И.В. Пьянков). "Борьба Кира II с Астиагом по данным античных авторов" (The fighting of Cyrus II against Astyages according to ancient sources). *Вестник древней истории* 3 (1971) 18, 22-23; cf. B.Z. Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1962) 67, 121, n. 16). J. Rop omitted this fragment altogether.

[13] I.M. Diakonov (И.М. Дьяконов). *История Мидии от древнейших времен до конца IV в. до н.э.* (The history of Media from the origin to the end of the 4th century BC). (Moscow, Leningrad 1956) 29-34; H.R. Breitenbach, "Xenophon" In *Pauly's Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumwissenschaft*. 2.R. Hbbd. 18 (1967) 1716; E.D. Frolov (Э.Д. Фролов). "Ксенофонт и его «Киропедия»" (Xenophon and his "Cyropaedia"). In Ксенофонт. *Киропедия,* 243-267. (Moscow 1976) 257-258.

[14] Rop (n. 4) 175.

[15] Probably, the "father of history" cited a list and approximate number of the different peoples of the empire who had to show up in case of mobilization (O.K. Armayer, "Herodotus' Catalogues and the Persian Empire in the Light of the Monuments and the Greek Literary Tradition." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 108 (1978) 1-9).

[16] Rop (n. 4) 168-169.

chariots were actively used both in Greece and on Crete in Mycenaean times, especially in the late Mycenaean.[17] The Hittite Empire, located in the mountainous territory of Asia Minor, used thousands of chariots, 3,500 of which were thrown into attacks at the battle of Kadesh.[18]

Continuing to search for support for his hypotheses, the critic maintains the opinion that chariots were not used even in Egypt because of unfavorable territory, and that chariots were used only in foreign campaigns.[19] However, such is the specificity of Egyptian sources in which victorious foreign campaigns of the pharaohs are usually described, but when internal wars are cited then chariots are mentioned, as for example, on the well-known "Stela of Piankhy" (second half of the eighth century B.C.).[20]

First, for use of battle chariots in the mountain regions, opponents simply chose a suitable locality where it was possible to deploy their chariots. Second, as already mentioned, Herodotus's description of Xerxes's army was clearly not a description of a specific campaigning army, but a description of the whole army of the Persian Empire. That is why there were Libyan and Indian chariots among other contingents of the king's army (Hdt. 7.86). If we follow the logic of the critic, there should be no chariots in this expedition, since because of the mountainous terrain of Greece the chariots would not be able to run. On the whole, J. Rop's thesis about insurmountable hindrances to the action of chariots in the locality in Greece cannot be considered convincing.

J. Rop's thesis that level territory was necessary for scythed chariots is banal and does not merit a reply.[21] In fact, even for the actions of unarmed chariots level territory was more necessary than for cavalry, and for scythed chariots such territory was even more necessary. Indeed, one of the special specific tactical uses of chariots with scythes was acceleration to great speed (Diod. 17.58.2), which was not so necessary for the ordinary chariot. For this acceleration, the territory where action was to be carried out by chariots with scythes had to be leveled, as before the battle of Gaugamela (Arr. *Anab.* 3.8.7; cf. Curt. 4.9.10).

The *terminus ante quem* of the appearance of scythed chariots is evident—the battle of Cunaxa (401 B.C.), when chariots were present on both sides of the conflict (Xen. *Anab.* 1.7.10, 8.10), which clearly speaks of their not-recent appearance among the Persians.

It seems to me that chariots appeared in the second quarter of the fifth century B.C. for the purpose of attacking the phalanx of the Greek hoplites. The most probable time of appearance of scythed chariots can be considered the period between 467 and 458 B.C., when the central government was occupied with preparation for battle against the Greeks.[22] Still, J.

[17] For more detail, see Nefedkin (n. 3) 113-171.

[18] A. Gardiner, *The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II*. (Oxford 1960) 37; Nefedkin (n. 3) 76.

[19] Rop (n. 4) 169-170.

[20] M.A. Korostovtsev (М.А. Коростовцев), I.S. Katsnelson (И.С. Кацнельсон), V.I. Kuzischin (В.И. Кузищин). *Хрестоматия по истории древнего Востока* (Reading-book on the history of the ancient East). Part 1. (Moscow 1980) 116-127.

[21] Rop (n. 4) 168-171.

[22] For more detail, see Nefedkin (n. 3) 325-327.

Rop supposes that the Persians could not introduce scythed chariots into action against the Greeks in Egypt since the Athenians were unable to send a large number of their hoplites on a maritime expedition.[23] However, the Persians clearly did not precisely know the Greek forces during their prolonged preparations and prepared for a conflict with traditional Greek forces, with hoplites.[24]

J. Rop asserts that chariots were "used against all types of infantry and cavalry." He drew this conclusion mainly based on the fact that in the battle of Thymbrara, chariots with scythes "charge enemy light infantry, cavalry, chariots, and heavy infantry."[25] Describing the disposition of Cyrus in this theoretical battle, Xenophon (Cyr. 6.3.34) relates that Cyrus placed 100 chariots before his front line and also 100 chariots along the column at each flank. However, Xenophon himself describes only the charge of the chariots from the Persian front on a square of Egyptian infantry shield-bearers (Xen. *Cyr.* 7.1.29-32). The description of this attack is not strict historical evidence—this is only the idea of the author about the functions of chariots as machines capable of destroying the formation of heavy infantry. Indeed, as I have said, even the *Cyropaedia* itself is not a strict historical work; rather it is tactical ideas of the military theorist Xenophon, who in particular based them on his personal experience of participation in the battle of Cunaxa.[26]

If we turn to the historical sources, we see that in the battles and engagements of the chariots that are known to us, scythed chariots charged precisely the formation of the heavy infantry. In the battle of Cunaxa the chariots of King Artaxerxes were intended to break up the detachments of the Greeks (Xen. *Anab.* 1.8.10). And since the Greeks in the army of Cyrus the Younger were 10,400 hoplites and 2,500 peltasts (Xen. *Anab.* 1.7.10), the chariots were intended primarily for attacking the formation of the hoplites. In 396 B.C., 400 horsemen and two scythed chariots of the satrap Pharnabazus unexpectedly clashed with 700 Greek foragers near Dasceleion. The Greeks ran together and tried to create a battle formation, which was broken up by the Persian chariots with the support of the cavalry (Xen. *Hell.* 4.1.17-19). In this case, the type of infantry that the chariots charged is not as important as the fact that the chariots broke up the infantry formation. In 331 B.C. at Gaugamela chariots charged a Macedonian phalanx (Curt. 4.15.14-17; Diod. 17.58.2-5; Arr. *Anab.* 3.13.5-6). For some reason J. Rop limited his analysis of the tactics of the chariots to the Achaemenid era. However, it pays to look at how chariots were used in the following Hellenistic era, when we know about this. In 86 B.C. at the battle of Chaeronea, scythed chariots of the Pontic general Archelaus were thrown at

[23] Rop (n. 4) 170-171.

[24] Additional data of J. Rop about the forming of a phalanx of hoplites after the beginning of the Graeco-Persian wars (Rop (n. 4) 172, n. 23) does not affect anything. About the final formation of a phalanx of hoplites at the end of the 7th-6th century B.C., see A.K. Nefedkin (А.К. Нефёдкин), Основные этапы формирования фаланги гоплитов: военный аспект проблемы" (The main stages of formation of hoplites' phalanx: Military aspect). *Вестник древней истории* 1 (2002) 87-96.

[25] Rop (n. 4) 167, 175, 179.

[26] H. Baldes, *Xenophons Cyropaedie als Lehrbuch der Taktik. Programm der Gymnasien, Bikenfeld.* (Ostern 1887) 1-16; Nefedkin (n. 3) 287-288, 311.

Roman legions (App. *Mithr.* 42), and in 47 B.C. at the battle of Zela chariots of King Pharnaces unsuccessfully charged Caesar's legions (*Bel. Alex.* 75; Dio Cass. 47.47.5).

In general, it turns out that in the known historical cases chariots were used against an infantry standing in formation, in which predominantly heavy infantry fought. And this information from the sources is not random. As already shown in my article and in my book, the only tactical task of the scythed chariots was to break up the formation of the heavy infantry,[27] not to charge a quick cavalry and mobile light infantry against which the cavalry and skirmishers could fight.

As additional proof that chariots with scythes were not intended for charging formed heavy infantry, the J. Rop appeals to the thesis that the horse, as an animal, will not go into a formation of people.[28] This thesis goes back to the discussion of military theorists of the 19th century about the possibility of cavalry breaking through a square of infantry. More widespread was the opinion that, confident in their forces and prepared to repel attacks, the infantry square will repulse a cavalry charge with its shooting.[29] Nevertheless, in reality the squares sometimes were broken up, as did, for example, some Mamelukes at the Battle of the Pyramids (1798).[30] Yet we note that the infantry of the 19th century had guns, while the classic Greek hoplites generally did not have weapons for distance fighting. The hoplites had to interact with light infantry by defending themselves from afar. In addition, the ancient Persians used special methods of training war horses, which permitted the horses not to fear the conditions of battle and to fight with infantrymen. Aelian (*Nat. anim.* 16.25) describes this Persian training in detail.[31] On a whole, horses could charge infantry formations.

In general, J. Rop's arguments supporting the old Assyrian hypothesis about the origin of scythed chariots do not look convincing, based on the sources. This hypothesis is not supported either by the cuneiform or by Assyrian iconography. The only probable hypothesis of the origin of the Near Eastern chariot with scythes remains the Persian one. The primary function of this chariot was to break up the compact formation of the infantry. The time of the appearance of the scythed chariot can be considered the second quarter of the fifth century

[27] Nefedkin (n. 3) 310-314; Nefiodkin (n. 2) 372.

[28] Rop (n. 4) 174. This view, incidentally, is contrary to the proposal of J. Rop himself that scythed chariots were intended for attacking any kind of the opponent's infantry.

[29] L.E. Nolan (Л.Э. Нолан), "История и тактика кавалерии" (The history and tactics of cavalry). In: *Военная библиотека,* Т. 3. (St. Petersburg 1871) 230-242; A.F. de Brack (А.Ф. де Брак). "Аванпосты легкой кавалерии" (The out-posts of light cavalry). In: *Военная библиотека,* Т. 8 (St. Petersburg 1872) 328-358; G. Denison (Г. Денисон), "Организация, вооружение и употребление кавалерии на войне" (The organization, arms, and use of cavalry at the war). In: *Военная библиотека,* Т. 8 (St. Petersburg 1872) 89-102.

[30] Napoléon, *Correspondance de Napoléon I^er^ publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III*. T. XXIX. (Paris 1870) 449.

[31] For a special article on the methods of training Persian war horses, see A.K. Nefedkin (А.К. Нефёдкин), "Лошадь как оружие: методы тренинга коней в Ахеменидском Иране" (Horse as a weapon: Methods of horse training in Achaemenid Iran) *Stratum plus* 3 (2011): 265-274.

B.C., the time of active Greco-Persian conflicts. Indeed, it was too difficult for the Persians to break up the formation of the Greek phalanx by other methods.

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