

During the latter half of the fourth century A.D., an anonymous author published the De Rebus Bellicis, a treatise aimed at reforming the imperial financial policy, the currency, provincial administration, army and law. It seems to have been addressed to the emperors Valentinian I and Valens (A.D. 364-75). One of the author's main purposes was to offset increasing shortages of manpower throughout the empire by increasing the "mechanisation" of the Roman army. Among numerous ingenious suggestions, the currus drepanus, although possibly never employed in battle, seems to have been one of the most practical. It can best be described as a type of unmanned scythed heavy chariot with cataphract (fully armoured) lancers mounted on the horses. The two fully armoured horses pulled a very simple chariot axle. This axle beam was covered in upward-pointing spikes to keep infantry from "boarding" the cataphracts from the rear. Each of the chariot's two wheels was equipped with huge scythes to cut down enemy infantry and cavalry. The armour of both horse and rider would make the chariot somewhat impervious to either arrow or javelin fire. Its sheer weight and the awesome offensive potential of the scythed blades made it capable of either crippling enemy cavalry or mowing down undisciplined barbarian infantry.

Although it appears to be an excellent weapon on paper, its weight and lack of manoeuvrability make it very cumbersome and impractical. Indeed, it would suffer from a poor power/weight ratio since its weight would require a long charge to build up the necessary impetus on contact. If this was not achieved, the chariot would have little effect on an enemy formation, be outflanked, and then destroyed.

The drawing of the currus drepanus is taken from a reproduction of an illustration in a Latin manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The details are closely based on an original illustration, although the riders are portrayed in mediaeval-style plate armour. Side, rear and top views are supplied to give a more complete picture of the peculiar design of the chariot.