

**Vine Pruning and other types of Billhooks  
of Southern Italy and Sicily  
(a study of little known blade shapes).**

Roncole per la potatura della vite e di altri tipi  
del Sud Italia e Sicilia  
(uno studio di forme di lama poco conosciute)

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Serpes et serpettes à tailler la vigne et d'autres types  
du sud de l'Italie et la Sicile  
(une étude des formes de lames peu connues)

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Rebmesser und andere Arten von Haumessern  
aus Südtalien und Sizilien  
(eine Studie über wenig bekannte Klingenformen)

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Podone para la poda de la vid y otros tipos  
desde el sur de Italia y Sicilia  
(un estudio sobre las formas de la hoja poco conocido)



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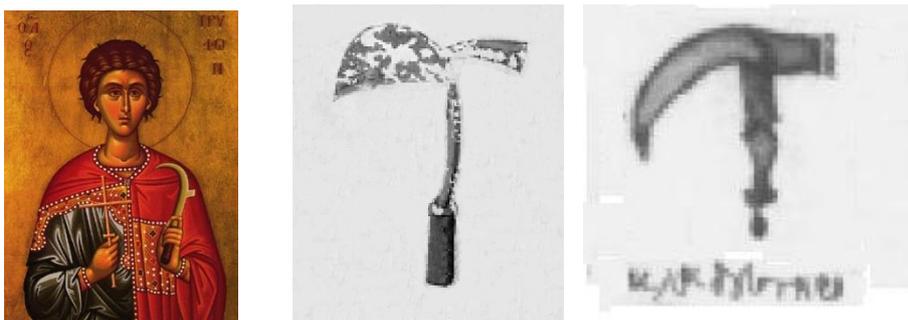
## Vine pruning and other billhooks from Southern Italy and Sicily

**Introduction:** The purpose of this study is to record some of the vine pruning hooks and other types of billhook used in Southern Italy, as there appear to be little or no existing published work on the subject. With the almost universal displacement of the traditional pruning billhook by the secateurs; those still being used in isolated vineyards, and any workers sufficiently skilled to use them (or to know where or how they were used), are fast disappearing. The following is thus based on several years of ‘armchair’ collecting, and will hopefully initiate some further local research. The majority of illustrations have been gathered from web auction sites (e.g. eBay); and the tools illustrated appear to be mainly 20<sup>th</sup> century in origin, with some possibly from the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (note: some illustrations have been ‘flipped’ to place the beak of the blade to the left in order to allow comparisons in blade profile).

**Historical:** Both much of Southern Italy and Sicily were ancient Greek colonies, and even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a result of seafaring links that have survived the millennia, in the coastal regions of Puglia and Salento some local dialects (e.g. Griko) remain closer to Greek than Italian. The [Italian Republic](#) dates from 1946: previously it was a kingdom, unified as a country by Garibaldi in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and before that it was a fragmented collection of small feudal kingdoms and city-states. As a result many regions have retained a degree of autonomy and independence from the ‘State’ and thus regional traditions, local culture, agricultural methods and tools (including some unusual variations in types of billhooks) have survived. While some billhooks would not look unfamiliar to English eyes, many are unusual in shape and more closely resemble those still found in Greece, parts of Spain and southern France.



Above: Double edged vine pruning hooks, kladeuteri (Κλαδευτήρι), from Greece: (left and centre) 19<sup>th</sup> century; (right) 20<sup>th</sup> century



Above: illustrations from 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Greek manuscripts

Below: Vineyard billhooks of similar shapes are found in other Mediterranean countries: (left) Spain; (centre) Portugal ; (right) France



Above: (left) 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century (Roman period) from Spain; (centre) probably 5<sup>th</sup> century from Greece/Balkans; (right) 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century from Germany

The billhook was used for a number of tasks, typically pruning of the vine in early spring (February to March), but also for clearing the ground cutting and sharpening stakes to the support the vines, and very small ones were also used for harvesting the bunches of grapes. The primary subject of this article is the vine pruning billhook, typically with two blades: a curved one to the front of the tool, and a hatchet type blade to the rear.



Above: from Book of Days (March: Vine Pruning) Tours (France) 15<sup>th</sup> century

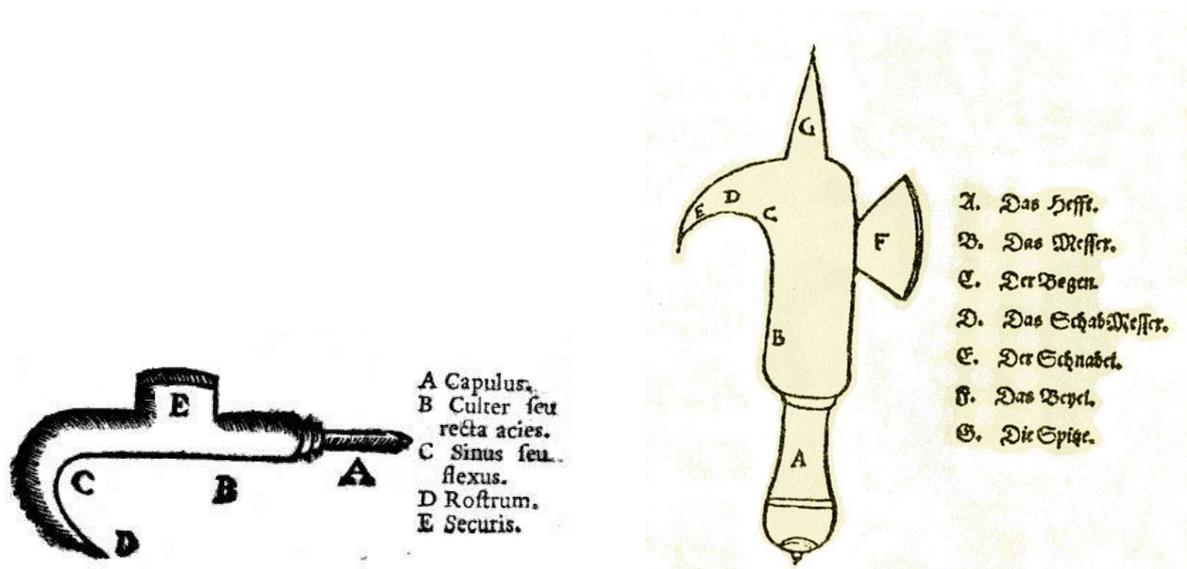
The billhook (pruning-hook) was well known to the ancient Greeks, and vine-pruning is mentioned in Hesiod's *Works and Days* ca. 800 BC. It was in use in Britain before the first Roman Invasion in 55BC and the different types are first documented in Chapters 10 and 11 of *De Agri Cultura* by the roman author, Marcus Cato (234 BC - 149 BC) and the vine

pruning hook (vine dressing knife) described in detail in Book 4 Chapter 25 of *De Re Rustica* by Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella (AD 4 - ca. AD 70):

1 Now the shape of the **vine-dresser's knife** is so designed that the part next to the haft, which has a straight edge, is called the culter or "knife" because of the similarity. The part that is curved is called the sinus or "bend"; that which runs on from the curve is the scalprum or "paring-edge"; the hook which comes next is called the rostrum or "beak," and the figure of the half-moon above it is called the securis or "hatchet"; and the spike-like part which projects straight forward from it is called the mucro or "point." Each of these parts performs its own peculiar tasks, if only the vine-dresser is skilful in using them.

2 For when he is to cut something with a thrust of the hand away from him, he uses the culter; when he is to draw it toward him, he uses the sinus; when he wishes to smoothe (sic) something, he uses the scalprum, or, to hollow it out, the rostrum; when he is to cut something with a blow, he uses the securis; and when he wants to clear away something in a narrow space, he makes use of the mucro. But the greater part of the work in a vineyard must be done by drawing the knife toward you rather than by hacking; for the wound which is made in this way is smoothed with one impression, since the pruner first puts his knife in place and so cuts off what he has intend to cut.

3 One who attacks the vine by chopping, if he misses his aim, as often happens, wounds the stock with many blows. Therefore that pruning is safer and more advantageous which, as I have said, is accomplished by the drawing of the knife and not by striking.



Above : images from Columella – *De Re Rustica* – (left) Latin edition of Jacobi Vanierii 1664-1739 (Amsterdam 1731) ; (right) German translation (Strasbourg 1538)

**Puglia:** Generally in Italian a single edge billhook is known as a roncola (pl roncole) and a double edged one as a pennato (pl pennati), but in both Puglia (Apulia) and Sicily (Sicilie) the double edged vine pruning hook is invariably called ‘una roncola’, although in the franco-provençal dialect of Puglia it is also known as ‘lu marràce’.. Occasionally the word for sickle, falce (pl falci) which is more commonly the word for scythe, is used (possibly through ignorance of the correct term e.g. *una falce usata per la potatura della vite*).

To date two distinct styles of billhook from Puglia have been discovered. Those from the Putignano, a town in the Bari (BA) province, are closer in appearance to those from the west of Sicily (and indeed one edge-tool maker, Angelo of Bergamasco (AL) from the north of Italy informed the author that although not shown in their catalogue, upon request (2009), they would supply the identical pattern to both regions).



**Above: marked CC – note handle is badly worm eaten. It is uncertain whether the maker's initials are CC, or if he has repeated the stamp twice.**



**Above: unknown maker – note riveted repair**



**Above: marked BLANCO STEFAN PUTIGNANO with blade guard and wrist loop**



**Above: marked GILBERT PUTIGNANO**

Similar shapes are found in the commune of Veglie in the province of Lecce (LE) and Sava in the province of Taranto (TA) in Puglia, and also near Montescaglioso in the province of Matera (MT) in the region of Basilicata at the southern end of the foot of Italy:



**Above: (left) from Veglie; (centre) from Sava; (right) from Montescaglioso**

The other type, from Corato, also in Bari, (about 60km to the north-west of Putignano) is different, although it shares some features in blade shape with those from the Umbria region (to the north of Puglia, in the centre of the mainland, and separated from it by the regions of Abruzzo and Molise):



Note the small decorative 'nibs' where the back blade meets the main (front) blade. This feature is found on many of this pattern of billhook, and also on those from other regions:



**Left: detail of back of blade.**

**Above: probably late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century, from Praia a Mare situated in the province of Casenza (CS) in the region of Calabria to the east of Puglia. Note both the decorative nibs and the angular front blade: similar features to those found on billhooks from Corato.**



Left: mark CF (?)



The Putignano and Corato types both have a similar handle, a broad conical shape with a narrow ferrule. Generally, those from Sicily appear to be thinner, but both types are similar in that they have a number of incised bands turned into them....



Above: from the Corato Region

With the billhooks from Corato, there are two distinct types, those where the back blade projects from the middle, and one where it is in line with the top of the blade, similar to those from Umbria (in central Italy). As previously mentioned they have similarities in appearance, but are more curved, and lack the part of the blade in line with the handle:



Above and below: from Umbria (although the one above was sold on eBay.fr as being of French origin) – those below were from a Portuguese seller in a French brocante (note slight variations in shape on those on the right)



More research is needed to discover if similar or intermediate shapes exist in the regions of Marche, Abruzzo and Molise on the Adriatic coast between Umbria and Puglia, or in the western regions of Lazio or Campania, on the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea, or to the south in Basilicata or Calabria.

**Sicily:** The vine pruning billhooks so far discovered from Sicily fall into two distinct groups, those from the east, in the region around Catania, and those in the west, from Marsala to Palermo (in the middle is the port of Trapani, (or Drapani) whose name comes from the Greek word 'drepanon' (pruning sickle) on account of the shape of its harbour).

In the east of the island the shape is very distinctive, having a wide but thin blade with a pronounced 'beak' and a second narrow chisel like blade close to the handle:



Few of this type bear any maker's mark, and many are crudely forged (as if made by a smith rather than an edge tool maker) but some are finely worked and have a swaged and fullered spine to the blade.





Occasionally the back blade is rounded, and does not appear to have been sharpened.



Sadly few of these have survived with their original handle, and most of the ones shown above have been re-handled by the seller who bought them locally between 2006 and 2010. They have been cleaned them up and subsequently re-sold on eBay it. However three, shown above right and below, (one of which is made from an old file) retain their original handle showing a lack of ferrule and a distinct caulk to the base of the handle. Olive wood appears to be the main timber used in both Puglia and Sicily.



Those from the west are closer in shape to the ones found in the Putignano region of Puglia, and although seemingly similar, there appears to be several distinct variations (indicating that more local research is required). Some have a short, wide back blade, some a long, narrow one, and in some it appears to spring closer to the handle, like those in the east. The angle of both blades to the axis also varies, but whether this is a regional variation, or just a result of the user's preferences is not known.

Most of the billhooks illustrated have been sold on eBay.it from 2007 to 2009 by a number of different sellers, so it has been difficult to place them accurately. Fortunately one or two bear the maker's mark, allowing us to know where it was made (but not necessarily where it was used as specialist edge-tool makers often tended to make several different models for sale in a number of (sometimes geographically widespread) local village markets):



**Left: riveted repair to blade - note lack of any ferrule to the handle.**





**Above: maker's mark PB.**

Many of the billhooks shown are not marked, but some bear the maker's initials, e.g. PB, SS or CC and others have a stamp showing both the name of the maker, e.g. Grillo, Genre (??) or Caruso, and the name of the place they worked, e.g. Salemi or Misilla. Both Grillo and Caruso worked in Salemi, and on some tools the name punch used for the town is identical, thus indicating that they either worked together in the same forge (master and apprentice??) or that one took over the business of the other.



**Above: marked Grillo Salemi (TP)**



**Left and above: found near Terrasini (PA)**



Above: mark (indistinct, possibly crossed axes) and 'Garantie'



Left: made by Caruso from Salemi (PA), right: maker's mark GM



Above: maker's or owner's (?) mark in individual letters - Genre (?) Misilla (TP)



Above: both from Terrasini (PA) - note decorated blade (more common in north Italy)



Above: (left) maker's mark SS (right) marked Bacile Ignazio Partanna (TP)



Above: (left) the thick handle with a narrow ferrule is similar to those from Puglia..



A thinner handle (compared to those from Puglia) appears to be more common in Sicily... Close examination of the handles indicates that possibly several different makers obtained them from the same maker, or that the handles have been replaced by those from the same source....



Above: these three were found together in a charity shop in Palermo. The shape appears to be related to those from the east (similar shapes can be seen below).



One of the above is also very similar to those from Veglie in the province of Lecce, on the mainland (see page 5, above). In some cases, the blade shape may have been altered by sharpening, but the overall outer profiles of the main blades vary considerably, as does

the point at which the rear, narrow, blade springs from the main blade; its angle with the axis of the handle; and its length, shape and width – indicating they are probably from a number of different villages or regions.



**Above and previous page: all found near Terrasini (PA) - offered for sale as several lots during the period 2007 to 2009**

Other shapes of billhook are also found in Sicily, the following having been collected from various (unrecorded and thus, for this study, unknown) villages of the island:





One seller also offered one of similar type also with a socketed handle, but bearing the stamp of a (not stated) French maker:



**Left: French made**

Whether French billhooks were widely sold in Sicily is not known, but in her booklet on vineyard tools, Mme Saury-Serres of the Vine Museum at Lézignan-Corbières in Languedoc (France) shows a Sicilian/Puglian pattern billhook from France made for export to Italy. French makers commonly mark both their name and location on the blades. Some Italian makers also do the same, but many appear not to stamp them, indicating they were probably made and sold locally, and the end user bought directly from the maker, e.g. at the local market or from his forge, and there was no need to state what was to them obvious..



Above: (left) ‘roncoletta’ (small roncola), from Salva (TA) in Puglia, (centre) unknown location in Sicily, (right) from Palermo

Several unanswered questions remain:

- *Are the differences in blade shape or profile a result of historical and regional variations, with each village having had a distinct type??*
- *Are they due to the requirements of the client, the vagaries of the smith, or the result of accidental (or even deliberate) design of a tool best suited for a particular task??*
- *Have the shapes from any one locality changed through the centuries, and if so, how??*
- *What, if any, are the historical links with similar shapes found in other countries – are these a result of ancient migrations of the populous or just coincidence??*

**Geographical:** Sicily lies off the south-western tip of mainland Italy. Famous (or infamous) as the home of the Cosa Nostra (Mafia), it has retained much of its own culture and traditions. The centre is mountainous (thus often remote and inaccessible), with the volcanic peak of Mt Etna to the east. The volcanic soils of the narrow coastal plains are rich and fertile, and (as in Puglia) the growing of grapes and wine production are important agricultural activities.

In the area of the Madonie mountain, around the villages of Pollina and Castellbuono in the province of Palermo, the local ash trees (*fraxinus angustifolia*) known locally as ‘*frassino*’ are still harvested in July and August for their sweet sap (c.f. maple syrup in Canada), which when dried produces a sweet edible cake, more widely known as ‘[manna](#)’. A type of roncola known locally as ‘*il mannaruòla*’ is used for harvesting the sap (again, more research is required into these).

Historically Southern Italy had closer links to Greece than to the rest of Italy, and geographically Sicily is closer to Tunisia (and Puglia is closer to Greece) than to Rome. In the past both countries have been quicker and easier to reach by boat, so it is possible the origins of their vine pruning hooks are to be found in Greece, and due to the relative isolation from the rest of Italy that they survived the influence of the Roman period. More research is required to discover if they had spread westwards into Spain, North Africa and Southern France prior to the Roman occupation (modern (20<sup>th</sup> century) billhooks from Morocco are almost identical to those from Greece illustrated at the beginning of this paper).



Above: Map showing the 20 regions of Italy



Above: Map of Ancient Southern Italy

The main cities of Sicily are the coastal ports, Messina, Catania and Siracusa to the east and Marsala, Trapani and Palermo in the west.

The author's two principal sources of information live in Terrasini (near Palermo) and Aci Sant' Antonio (near Catania).



Above: Regional map of Sicily

Mt Etna lies in Catania, its fertile slopes extend towards the borders of Enna and Messina



Above: Map of Sicily

Thanks to Michele Panebianco of Sant' Antonio (CT) in the east and Nunzia & Dominic Messina of Terrasini (PA) in the north for supplying the images of many of the vine pruning hooks shown above.