

A curious French billhook shaped tool

The billhooks of France are as varied in shape as those of the UK, and most are readily identifiable as such. Occasionally a tool will turn up that is difficult to identify. A few years ago I bought one in the Savoie region that was sold as a slater's axe, it turned out to be a Spanish vine pruning billhook. Later I bought one in the UK, sold as a billhook that turned out to be a Cumbrian slate dressing tool....

The French trellis maker's billhook is similar to the Hampshire hurdle maker's, with a pronounced nose that allows it to be used to split or cleave the wood. The action is similar to that of a froe.



(Left) A French '*serpe à trellisage*'.

I have now come across three examples of similar shaped tools, but not sharpened like a billhook. The most recent was for sale in the 69 (Rhône) region, and has a handle with two ferrules, similar to that more usually found on the French cooper's '*cochoir*'.



(Left) Unknown '*serpe*' from Givors (69700) (in the south of the Burgundy region). Note the sharpened tip to the beak and the two ferrules on the handle.

It has a distinct sharp and angled end to the beak of the blade. It is not possible to see if the rest of the blade is sharpened.

I had previously saved an image from the web of a similar tool, with a pointed beak and sharpened only on the section of blade next to the handle, but not on the rest of the blade.



(Left) a '*serpe*' with a sharpened and pointed end

Both of these appear similar in appearance, and thus it is probably they have the same usage. I have so far been unable to find any description of these nor any catalogue reference. I thus contacted French tool expert Daniel Boucard, author of several excellent books on edge tools*. He was unable to help me, but did send me an image of a similar tool in his collection.



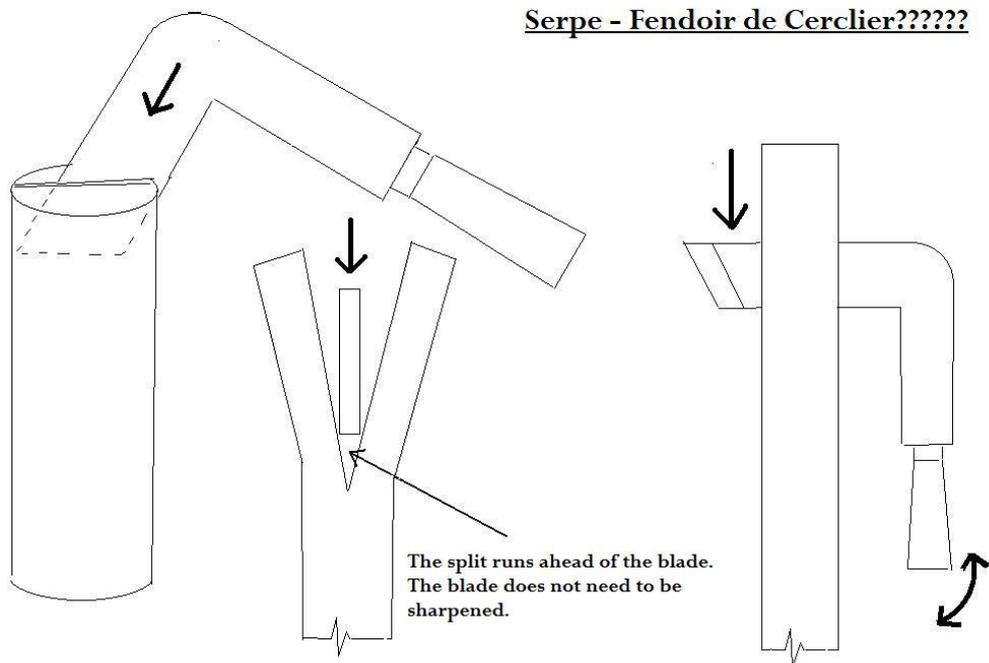
(Above) a '*serpe*' from Daniel Boucard's collection. Stamped J GUYONNET Chalon sur Saône (in the north of the Burgundy region).

This one has the sharpened tip of the others, but no other part of the blade is sharp.

It would appear that the sharpened tip of the tool is its principal cutting edge, however the rest of the tool may also have secondary use.

My hypothesis is that this is a tool used by French coopers (*tonneliers*) of the Burgundy region. Further it was used to split the chestnut saplings used to make the wooden hoops (*circeaux*) that held the barrels together. (Before metal hoops, wooden hoops were used exclusively on wine barrels and survived on dry cooperage well into the 20th century. Today their usage is more decorative, but they also prevent damage to the barrel if it is being rolled on the ground).

The tip of the tool is used to start the cut, and then the rest of the blade is inserted to act as a cleaving tool, similar in action to a froe. However, unlike the cutting edge of a froe which has to start the cut, the cleaving action does not need a sharp edge as the split line runs ahead of the tool.



Two of the tools are from the Burgundy region, a wine making centre, and previously home to many cooperages that supplied the barrels. The '*cerclier*' did not work in the cooperage, but in the woods in a similar way to the coppice workers in the UK. They cut, split worked and bent the hoops, supplying them in rough form for final fitting to the barrel by the cooper (who used the '*cochoir*' to cut the '*encoches*' or notches that formed the joint). Most '*taillandiers*' (edge tool makers) would have supplied both the cooper's tools and the '*serpes*' (billhooks) for use in the woods.

For more information on the '*cochoir*' see my paper "The Cochoire (or Cauchoire) as used in the tonnelleries of France", link: <http://www.billhooks.co.uk/serpes-et-serpettes-fr/cochoirs-ou-cauchoir-e-s-de-tonnelier/>

* Books by Daniel Boucard

- **Les haches**
- **Les outils des métiers**
- **Les outils taillants**
- **Dictionnaire des outils**
- **Dictionnaire illustré et anthologie des métiers**
- **Les outils de tradition**

Link: http://www.editionsjcgodefroy.fr/presentation_auteur.php?id=6