



### Artefacts in Roman Britain, Their Purpose and Use

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Care of the growing crop, pruning of orchard and fruit crops, as well as tree surgery and collection of leaves and branches for winter fodder and bedding require a range of different tools, generally given the generic term 'hooks' or 'pruning hooks' or pruning saws. Again nomenclature bedevils rather than clarifies, as the numerous small curved blades which are found so frequently on Iron Age and Roman sites could have had a multiplicity of tasks. The billhook, however, is found in the Iron Age (e.g. Glastonbury) in a form that is instantly recognisable to modern farmers. The well-nigh perfect design of this tool means that it has survived intrinsically unchanged for centuries, but this very conservatism of design has resulted in regional differences evolving so that the cognoscenti can distinguish a bill from Suffolk, shall we say, from one made for use in the Midlands. This offers us the possibility of an evolution of regional styles from the beginning. Inevitably the sample from the archaeological record is too small to make any statistically significant conclusions, but there are certainly various blade shapes: the standard two-directional cutting edge set at right angles to one another (e.g. Shakenoak and Hod Hill: Rees 1979: fig. 208); long and mostly upright with just a beak at the top (e.g. Caerwent: Rees 1979: fig. 217a); and straight, upright blades, sometimes with an added projection at the back of the blade, useful for reaching for and securing branches in position prior to cutting (e.g. Colchester, Lakenheath, Thealby Mine: Rees 1979: figs. 221–2). Interestingly, the first of these, the standard shape often associated with the bill now, is one of the few tool types to be

more commonly found in the Iron Age, thanks to numerous examples found at the Somerset Lake Villages of Glastonbury and Meare, some of which retain their wooden handles (Rees 1979: figs. 215–16, 218–19). The other blade shapes are commoner in the Roman period, during which time other more axe-shaped blades are introduced, some of which could have been used as bills or for more general woodworking, hedging, forestry or even ceremonial use (Rees 1979: figs. 224–31). Socketed and tanged implements are found, though the Iron Age tools seem generally to be socketed with transverse or front to back nails. The larger Roman bills also prefer a socketed attachment for the handle, though some of the smaller perhaps more multi-purpose tools which gradually slide into the category known as pruning hooks are tanged (e.g. Colchester and Milbourne St Andrew: Rees 1979: figs. 214, 213).

The introduction of the billhook certainly implies the cutting of shrubby growth, but this, of course, can be for a variety of purposes. The modern bill is generally considered a hedging tool, and its use in the establishment and maintenance of field boundaries, separating stock from crop and animals from one another and marking one farm's fields from neighbouring land, coincides with the establishment of a widespread enclosure of field systems which then continued into the Roman period, spreading further afield on to heavier soils. The provision of winter fodder for animals before we have evidence for the establishment of specific hay fields may have depended to a greater extent on late autumn branches. Bills were important tools for cutting and pruning orchard fruit trees, but also for less specifically agricultural tasks such as cutting branches for wattle-and-daub panel infill for house wall construction.



Finer pruning of crops and fruit trees, and harvesting of non-cereal crops such as legumes, fruits and plot vegetables, required a variety of knives and saws. The archaeologist is faced with a bewildering variety of curved blades, angled blades and curving saws which could have been used for these purposes but frankly could have been used for many other purposes as well. There are large numbers of these tools in the Iron Age and Roman assemblages and the attribution of function to any of them is extremely hazardous. They have been given the generic title 'pruning hooks' and some undoubtedly are just that. They can be socketed with or without transverse or front to back nails, flanged with tangs or simply tanged (Rees 1979: figs. 193–200). They can have acutely curved blades, short straight blades set at an angle (Rees 1979: fig. 201) and miniature bills. One example from Walbrook retains its short wooden handle, and is similar to a knife the author has used in a nursery to take pelargonium cuttings. Interestingly, their distribution is more strongly concentrated in the south-east of England and far more so than that of reaping hooks (Rees 1979: maps 12 and 13), so it is possible that their traditional identification as tools associated with horticulture and fruit growing is not entirely spurious. Continental tools usually associated with viticulture are uncommon in Roman Britain though some of these smaller bill-like tools with back projections have been found – e.g. Shakenoak (Brodribb, Hands and Walker 2005: fig. 4:57, no. 386).

Inevitably, during any attempt to categorise curving blades into types for attribution of function, there are tools which do not fit comfortably into any tool type. Another term, that of 'slashing tools', has grown up, which may not be too far from the truth, as they seem an appropriate size for vegetation and scrub clearance. Two heavy curving-bladed tools from Bigbury and Wroxeter (Rees 1979: fig. 232) and, more probably, a series of fine wide-bladed tools from Bigbury, one of which has a scythe-like rolled rib on the back (Rees 1979: figs. 244–7), may represent an intermediate tool between hook and scythe.