

Fig. 1. The main types of ritual shovel according to Zuffa (infra n.3) fig. 1.

# Funerary practices and sacerdotal rank in pre-Roman northern and central Italy: new data for interpreting the 'ritual shovel'

Federica Sacchetti

## The state of the question and present objectives

In Early Iron Age cultures (the Golasecca, Este and Villanovan/Etruscan of the Po valley in the 7th-4th c. B.C.), a characteristic metal object has often been linked to unspecified ritual practices of protohistoric Italic peoples, raising various archaeological, anthropological and religious questions. This object, a 'ritual shovel' (Italian: *paletta rituale*; German: *Bronzepalette*) was first described by G. Ghirardini, who published two examples, one from Padua and one in Rome's Pigorini Museum.<sup>1</sup> In 1902, he drew up a catalogue of 13 pieces and attempted to establish the first chronological sequence.<sup>2</sup> During the first half of the 19th c., various pieces were published, but no studies addressed the typological, chronological and functional questions relating to the ritual shovel until M. Zuffa focused on it, providing what is still the most recent catalogue and the only discussion (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

Zuffa's definition of the "paletta rituale" follows. He distinguishes it from similar objects, as these have complicated discussions in the past and must be excluded from present consideration:

Si tratta di una paletta in bronzo fuso di discreto spessore, lunga dai venti ai trenta centimetri, con il cucchiaino generalmente arrotondato agli angoli, la faccia anteriore quasi sempre rilevata lungo i bordi e la posteriore piatta (...) il manico non lungo terminante in alto con uno o più anelli. Questo si vuole precisare per delimitare nettamente l'ambito dell'indagine, senza trattare di altri oggetti che possono benissimo avere avuto destinazione analoga ma che divergono sostanzialmente da questa tipologia.

The ritual shovel is thus a cast bronze shovel, 20-30 cm long, often with projecting sides and a handle ending in one or more rings, but I add a slight amendment to his definition: it is cast bronze or iron. Zuffa points out that various objects from different material cultures in protohistoric Italy are morphologically similar, but typologically – and probably functionally – different. This is the case with the bucchero spoons and spatulas from Tyrrhenian Etruria described by L. A. Milani (fig. 2a), as well as with the bronze 'symbolic/votive axes' which have handles in organic materials (the palette-knives found in Mac Iver's book) and recur amongst Villanovan grave-goods in Etruria of the Po valley, centered on Bologna (fig. 3a), and which some authors include in the ritual shovel category.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent to Zuffa's study, no further treatment of this still-unclear aspect of the

1 G. Ghirardini, "Padova. Di un singolare bronzo paleoveneto scoperto presso la basilica di S. Antonio," *NSc* 1901, 314-21; id., "Paletta primitiva italica," *Bull. Paletnologia Ital.* 32 (1906) 271-81.

2 G. Ghirardini, "Palette primitive italiche," *Bull. Paletnologia Ital.* 28 (1902) 120-34.

3 M. Zuffa, "Le palette rituali in bronzo: contributo allo studio dell'età del Ferro in Italia," *Atti e Mem., Deputazione stor. patria prov. Romagna (Bologna)* 8 (1960) 67-170, with his definition on 68.

4 G. Gozzadini, *Di un sepolcreto etrusco scoperto presso Bologna* (Bologna 1854); id., *Di alcuni sepolcreti della necropoli felsinea* (Bologna 1868); id., *La nécropole de Villanova* (Bologna 1870); L. A. Milani, "Palette sacrali dell'Etruria e il *vatillum prunae* oraziano," *Bull. Paletnologia Ital.* 29 (1903) 28-37; D. R. Mac Iver, *The Iron Age in Italy* (Oxford 1927); G. Muffatti, "L'*instrumentum* in bronzo, Parte III," *StEtr* 39 (1971) 294-95.

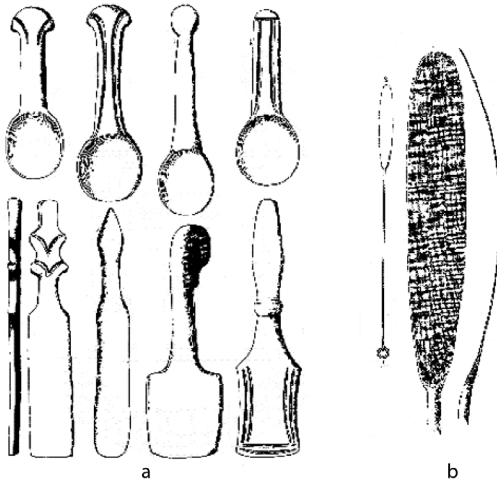


Fig. 2. (a) Bucchero spoons and spatulas from braziers at Chiusi; (b) shovel for hearth management from the Circoli di Cerrecchio Tomb at Vetulonia (Milani 1903, pl. 4 and 3.2, 2a, 2b; without scale).



Fig. 3. (a) Bronze 'ritual axe'; (b) real axe, from Marzabotto cemeteries, published as ritual shovels (Muffatti [supra n.4] tab. 61 c).

protohistoric cultures of N Italy has been published.

The present article intends to describe, analyse and discuss new data in order to enhance our understanding of the 'ritual' use of the object, and its funerary, votive, anthropological and social significance. Several new examples of the object were published subsequent to Zuffa, particularly from Golasecca and Este cultural contexts,<sup>5</sup> which not only increase the corpus but in some cases, given their archaeological context, provide evidence related to their use. In addition, recent re-examination and re-interpretation of some Felsinian *stelae*<sup>6</sup> improves our understanding of the symbolic significance and allusive meaning of the ritual shovel in relation to the social rank of the person holding it.<sup>7</sup>

### Geographic and cultural diffusion and typological characterisation

The evidence for the ritual shovel is mainly concentrated in N Italy, in the Pre-Alps and the Po valley, but there is a broader general diffusion from the N Alps, in what is now Switzerland (Portalban and Montlingen) and Austria (Lorch), to the southern Apennines and central Italy (Tyrrhenian Etruria and Picenum), with Civita Castellana (Latium) being the most southerly attestation (fig. 4). The cultures involved in this diffusion and cultural exchange are the Villanovan/Etruscan of the Po valley, the Golasecca and Este cultures in relation to several aspects of ritual and material culture, and, to a lesser extent, the Hall-

5 R. Peroni *et al.* (edd.), *Studi sulla cronologia delle civiltà di Este e Golasecca* (Florence 1975) with further references; G. Gambacurta, "La romanizzazione di Padova attraverso le sepolture: un esempio di scavo in laboratorio," in F. Veronese (ed.), *Via Annia: Adria, Padova, Altino, Concordia, Aquileia. Progetto di recupero e valorizzazione di un'antica strada romana* (Padova 2009) 39-65; S. Casini, "La necropoli golasecchiana di Brembate Sotto: revisione di vecchi dati," in Ph. Barral *et al.* (edd.), *Les Celtes et le nord de l'Italie (Premier et Second Âges du Fer): Actes du 36e colloque int. de l'A.F.E.A.F.* (RAEst suppl. 36; 2014) 387-92.

6 P. Ducati, "Le pietre funerarie felsinee," *MonAnt* 20.2 (1912) 358-728.

7 F. Sacchetti, "Charu(n) et 'les autres': le cas des stèles étrusques de Bologne," *RA* 2011.2, 263-307.

statt, Tyrrhenian Etruscan and Picene cultures.

The chronological range in Zuffa's catalogue runs from the 7th to the 4th c. B.C.,<sup>8</sup> but the first evidence for this kind of object dates to the Late Bronze Age (10th–9th c.). As for the typology, Zuffa was the only scholar to attempt morphological classification, chronological sequencing and topographic distribution. His corpus of 50 ritual shovels, defined on the basis of the aforementioned characteristics, is augmented by 13 examples published subsequently. His proposed evolution is based on comparison, on the one hand, between the various shovel types, and, on the other, between shovels and other bronze products, such as razors, pins, axes, swords and

horse bits. His stylistic evolution cannot be entirely verified using archaeological evidence since several shovels from early excavations have been removed from their contexts. His chronological sequence requires a renewed examination of the existing contexts.

The main purpose of the present article is not to discuss Zuffa's typological classification but to clarify functional use of the shovel, associated rituals, and the social implications of its presence among grave-goods. We should start, however, from Zuffa's classification, as this remains to this day a convincing morphological characterisation and helps to contextualise the main questions. According to him, the ritual shovel originated in the Villanovan zone — that is, in Tyrrhenian Etruria (south of the Apennines) or in Etruria of the Po valley (north of the Apennines). Bologna in the Po valley is a recognised production area due to the presence of scraps of bronze shovels in the San Francesco deposit.<sup>9</sup>

Zuffa's classification can be summarized in the following Table:

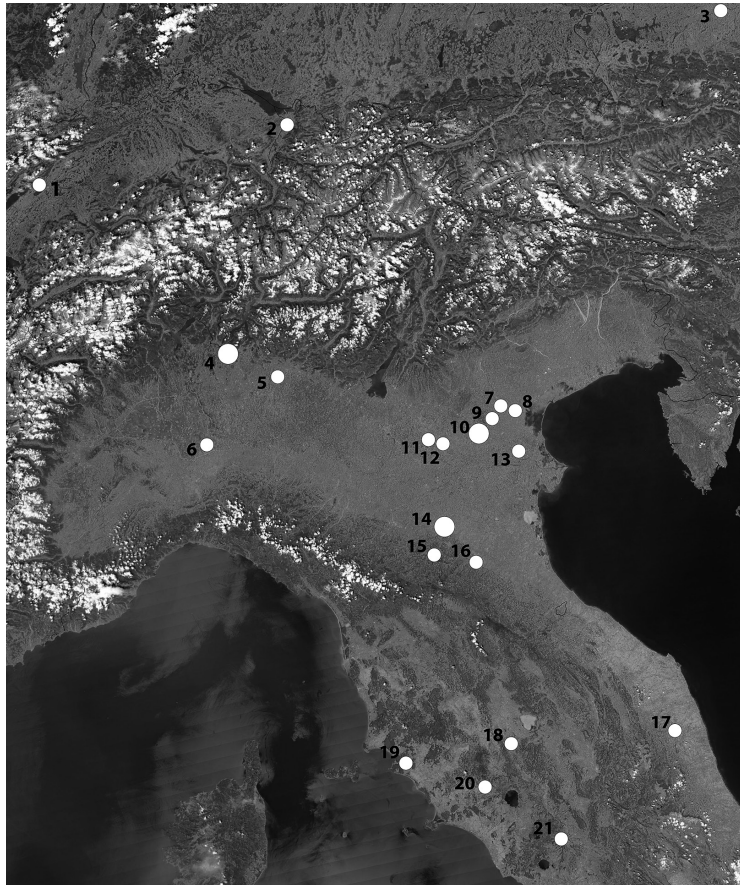


Fig. 4. Diffusion of the Early Iron Age ritual shovel (author after J. Descloîtres, MODIS Rapid Response Team, NASA/GSFC).








1. Portalban; 2. Montlingen; 3. Lorch; 4. Como; 5. Brembate Sotto; 6. Badia Pavese; 7. Padua; 8. Vigonovo; 9. Montegrotto; 10. Este; 11. Cerea; 12. Villa Bartolomea; 13. Adria; 14. Bologna; 15. Marzabotto; 16. Casalfiumanese; 17. Belmonte Piceno; 18. Chiusi; 19. Vetulonia; 20. Sovana; 21. Civita Castellana.

<sup>8</sup> All dates in this article are B.C. unless stated otherwise.




<sup>9</sup> L. Bentini, "Il deposito di S. Francesco," in G. Sassatelli and A. Donati (edd.), *Storia di Bologna*, 1 (Bologna 2005) 194–99.

TABLE 1

RITUAL SHOVEL TYPES ACCORDING TO THE LATEST CLASSIFICATION  
(based on Zuffa [supra n.3])

<i>Zuffa's geographic type</i>	<i>Zuffa's morphological Type</i>	<i>Morphology</i>	<i>Zuffa's dates</i>	<i>Geographic diffusion</i>	<i>Image</i>
<b><i>N Alpine and N Italian Group</i></b>	PAVIA-N ALPINE TYPE (Zuffa fig. 1.A)	Twisted handle with a fixed ring (round eyelet) with a triangular section. Flattened elliptical blade.	c.900–800 B.C.	Pavia–Switzerland–Austria	
<b><i>Villanovan + Bologna Group</i></b>	VILLANOVAN TYPE B (Zuffa fig. 1.G)	Open handle with elliptical gaps in the bulging central part and upper part, between 2 terminal round eyelets ("scissors handle"). Quadrangular blade [pan] with rounded angles.	c.700/700–650 B.C.	Bologna–Vetulonia	
<b><i>Central Italian Group</i></b>	CENTRAL TYPE (Zuffa fig. 1.D)	Flat rod handle with 2 pierced lobes bearing 2 mobile rings. Sub-quadrangular blade with rounded angles.	650–500 B.C.	Civita Castellana–Sovana–Belmonte Piceno	
	CHIUSI TYPE (Zuffa fig. 1.C)	Handle with round eyelet turned up perpendicularly towards the exterior. Quadrangular blade with rounded angles.	c.500 B.C.	Chiusi territory	
<b><i>N Italian Group</i></b>	COMO TYPE A (Zuffa fig. 1.B)	Twisted decorated handle with round eyelet. Sub-quadrangular blade with rounded angles.	c.600 B.C.(?)	Como	
	COMO TYPE B (Zuffa fig. 1.E)	Open handle with rhombus gap in the upper part, between 2 terminal round eyelets. Sub-quadrangular blade rounded on the lower side.	600–550 B.C.	Como	
	COMO TYPE C (Zuffa fig. 1.H)	Open handle with rhombus gap in the bulging central part and pentagonal gap in the upper part, between 2 terminal round eyelets. Sub-quadrangular blade rounded on the upper and lower sides.	550–500 B.C.	Como	



<i>Zuffa's geographic type</i>	<i>Zuffa's morphological Type</i>	<i>Morphology</i>	<i>Zuffa's dates</i>	<i>Geographic diffusion</i>	<i>Image</i>
<b>N Italian Group</b>	ESTE TYPE A (Zuffa fig. 1.F)	Open handle with sub-circular gap in the upper part, between 2 terminal round eyelets. Quadrangular blade with rounded angles.	c.600 B.C.(?)	Venetian territory	
	ESTE TYPE B (Zuffa fig. 1.I)	Open handle, made by 2 joined rods forming an elliptical gap in the central part and a pentagonal gap in the upper part, between 2 terminal round eyelets. Quadrangular blade with rounded angles.	500–300 B.C.(?)	Venetian + Bologna territory	
	ESTE TYPE C (Zuffa fig. 1.L)	Massive flat rod handle with pierced sub-quadrangular termination. Trapezoidal blade with turned-up edges on the upper side (axe shape).	400–300 B.C.(?)	Venetian territory	

### Archaeological contexts and possible uses

G. Ghirardini, G. Pellegrini<sup>10</sup> and L. A. Milani were the first to propose some functional descriptions for this object. The data collected by Zuffa and some archaeological contexts published subsequently permit some advances. Of the 50 ritual shovels in Zuffa's catalogue, 19 are from unknown contexts. Of the remaining 31 items, 4 come from a sacred context (the Baratela votive deposit at Este), 4 from the San Francesco deposit at Bologna (possibly a foundry deposit), and 23 from grave-goods. Subsequent work on burials in the Cà Morta cemetery at Como brought to light bronze and iron shovels from 9 funerary contexts dating between 700 and 400 B.C.<sup>11</sup> If we add a miniature bronze example from a late 4th-c. burial at Padua and 4 iron shovels from the mid 6th- to early 4th-c. cemetery of Brembate Sotto, we have now 64 examples (19 from unknown contexts and 45 from known contexts, with 37 of those being funerary). The presence of the shovel in sacred or funerary contexts thus confirms the ritual meaning attributed to it by the earlier studies, and its inclusion amongst grave-goods in the majority of cases attests a funerary use. Further, three instances from burials of the late 7th-early 6th c. at Sovana in Tyrrhenian Etruria — tomb II in Cava di San Sebastiano cemetery, tomb 18 in Campo della Zinza cemetery, tomb 17 in Campo della Zinza cemetery (fig. 5) — were related to the 'brazier'. Previous scholars thus suggested a correlation between the shovel and fire,<sup>12</sup> which seems to be confirmed

10 G. Pellegrini, "Sovana (comune di Sorano). Scoperte nella necropoli," *NSc* 1902, 494-509.

11 Peroni *et al.* (supra n.5) 260, with references.

12 Ghirardini (supra n.2) 126-28; Pellegrini 1902 (supra n.10); Zuffa (supra n.3) 74 and 112-15, nos. 2-4, pl. I, 2-4.

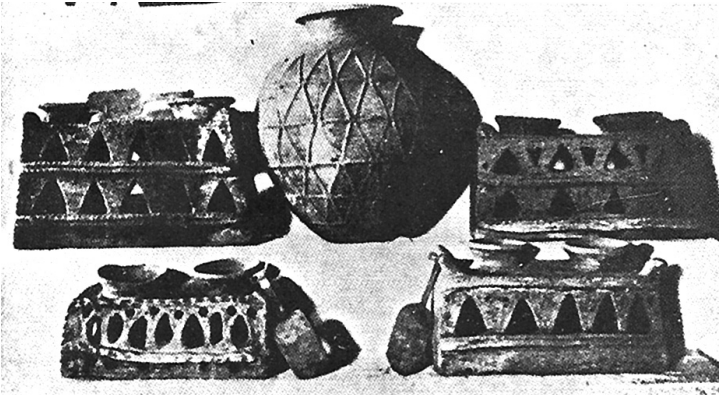


Fig. 5. Ritual shovels related to ‘braziers’ in grave-goods from Sovana (second half of the 7th c.): Cava di San Sebastiano cemetery, tomb II (top left-hand corner); Campo della Zinza cemetery, tomb 18 (bottom left-hand corner); Campo della Zinza cemetery, tomb 17 (bottom right-hand corner) (Zuffa [supra n.3] tab. 35.3-4).

by the miniature example from the late 4th-c. burial in tomb 122 at Padua, associated with fire or banquet tools (3 spits) and placed on a couple of andirons.

#### *An evaluation of previous proposals*

Based on this archaeological evidence, various proposals have been advanced concerning the specific use and exact meaning of the shovel:

1. Given the connection with fire and the short external and sometimes sharp-edged side, some scholars have assumed that the shovel was used for preparing alimentary gifts, particularly for cutting or taking food (such as cakes and flat breads) to the burner during funerary and sacred ceremonies.<sup>13</sup>
2. Other scholars make allusions to management of the domestic hearth (*rutabulum* in Latin),<sup>14</sup> particularly the action of ransacking the embers to revive the fire, as in the case of other fire tools (irons, tongs, spits) especially in female Villanovan burials,<sup>15</sup> as well as in the Golasecca, Este and Latial cultures.
3. Milani considered that the shovel could have been used in connection with the combustion of aromatic essences, whether to place embers in an incense-burner or to burn fragrant substances directly on the shovel’s blade.<sup>16</sup> He also suggested this kind of use for the small ritual axes (fig. 3a) in the Villanovan burials of Bologna and in Etruria of the Po valley which, following the ambiguous statements made by G. Gozzadini,<sup>17</sup> were often confused with the ritual shovel.
4. Milani also presumed that the ritual shovel could be used as the main *ossilegium* instrument,<sup>18</sup> to collect selected bones from the pyre (*ossa legere*). Later, highlighting the S-shaped section and turned-up edges, M. Zuffa re-affirmed the idea that the tool was compatible with a function of collection, particularly gathering remains burned on the pyre.<sup>19</sup>

For or against the above proposals one can make the following observations:

- 
- 13 Prosdocimi and Pellegrini in Zuffa (supra n.3) 74, n.14; Zuffa *ibid.* 189, n.45; more recently, L. Capuis, *I Veneti: società e cultura di un popolo dell’Italia preromana* (Milan 1993); G. Zampieri, “Introduzione,” in *id.* and B. Lavarone (edd.), *Bronzi antichi del Museo Archeologico di Padova* (Rome 2000) 1-22.
  - 14 Milani (supra n.4) 36.
  - 15 Ghirardini (supra n.2) 133.
  - 16 Milani (supra n.4) 34-37.
  - 17 Gozzadini 1854 (supra n.4) pl. 5, fig. 4.8; *id.* 1868 (supra n.4) 7-8; *id.* 1870 (supra n.4) 57.
  - 18 Milani (supra n.4) 34-35.
  - 19 Zuffa (supra n.3) 74.

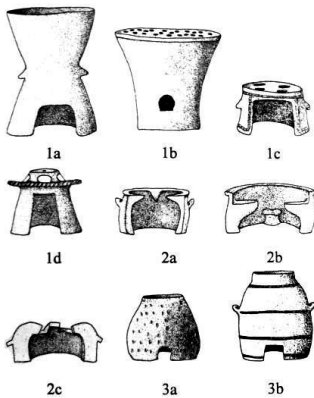


Fig. 6. Types of Etruscan braziers according to C. Scheffer (*infra* n.22).

Fig. 7. (right) Bucchero incense-burner from Tumulus C at Artimino, Prato Rosello (650-625 B.C.) (Artimino, Museo Archeologico 'Francesco Nicosia').



1. One cannot rule out the possible use of the ritual shovel for food preparation due to the aforementioned association between shovel and 'brazier'. It is possible that braziers were used for cooking because of their recurring connection with sets of tableware in Etruscan burials. But note that the shovel/'brazier' association is known only in three 7th-c. Etruscan burials which are geographically restricted to the Sovana cemetery. Possibly the pieces at Sovana are functionally connected to other objects associated with braziers in Etruscan territory south of the Apennines, such as bronze or bucchero spoons and spatulas, rather than to the ritual shovels of the kind known from N Italy. These rather different types of objects were presented in Milani's catalogue of shovels, but other scholars criticized this decision.<sup>20</sup>

2. With respect to a use of these objects for the management of domestic hearths, I observe that shovels associated with fire tools (fire shovels) usually have much longer handles than ritual shovels (as in the Vetulonia, Circoli di Cerrecchio tomb)<sup>21</sup> (fig. 2b). The short handle of the ritual shovel is more compatible with actions with extinguished coals rather than with naked flames or smouldering embers.

3. As to a connection with burning incense, there is no adequate proof apart perhaps from the 'braziers' in the 7th-c. burials at Sovana, where we cannot rule out that this particular type of brazier may have been used as an incense-burner rather than as a portable stove. Unlike the other types of Etruscan braziers described by C. Scheffer<sup>22</sup> with a flat tray shape in their upper part (fig. 6), the examples at Sovana have two cups which by reason of their open, wide and shallow basin could receive embers and aromatic substances (fig. 5), in the same manner as the contemporary incense-burner from Artimino (fig. 7). Scheffer's suggestion<sup>23</sup> that this type of 'brazier' from Sovana would not necessarily be connected with fire but used to support round-bottomed pots seems more problematic.

20 Ghirardini 1906 (*supra* n.1) 281; Zuffa (*supra* n.3) 70 and 74.

21 Milani (*supra* n.4) pl. III, fig. 2.2a-b; O. Montelius, *La civilisation primitive en Italie depuis l'introduction des métaux* (Stockholm 1895-1904) vol. II, pl. 179, nos. 6 and 11.

22 C. Scheffer, *Acquarossa*, vol. II, Part 2. *The cooking stands* (ActInstRomRegSuec ser. in 4°, 38; 1982).

23 Ead., *Acquarossa*, vol. II, Part 1: *Cooking and cooking stands in Italy 1400-400 B.C.* (ActInstRomRegSuec, ser. in 4°, 38; 1981) 58-61.



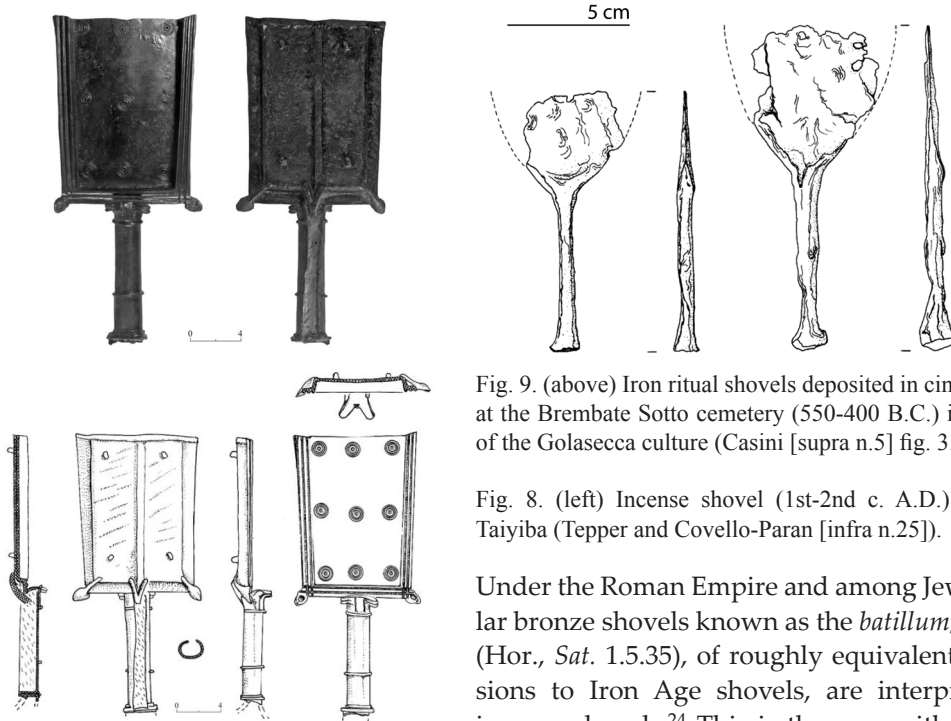


Fig. 9. (above) Iron ritual shovels deposited in cinerary urns at the Brembate Sotto cemetery (550-400 B.C.) in the area of the Golasecca culture (Casini [supra n.5] fig. 3.6-7).

Fig. 8. (left) Incense shovel (1st-2nd c. A.D.) from Et-Taiyiba (Tepper and Covello-Paran [infra n.25]).

Under the Roman Empire and among Jews, similar bronze shovels known as the *batillum/vatillum* (Hor., *Sat.* 1.5.35), of roughly equivalent dimensions to Iron Age shovels, are interpreted as incense shovels.<sup>24</sup> This is the case with an item

from Et-Taiyiba (Israel) (fig. 8),<sup>25</sup> which is similar in its details to 4 incense shovels from the Cave of the Letters at Nahal Hever.<sup>26</sup> Clearly they belong to a common type. Y. Yadin presented analogies between the Palestinian and Roman pieces (which include those from Pompeii and Herculaneum),<sup>27</sup> most of the incense shovels of this type being dated to the 1st and 2nd c. A.D.

4. As for the function of collecting human remains, Zuffa noted that this is possible because the majority of the burials that include shovels (18 out of 23 in his catalogue) are cremations, but he acknowledged that other uses are possible since shovels are also attested in some inhumation burials, namely:<sup>28</sup>

- Tomb II, Vigneto Tarquini cemetery, Civita Castellana (Falerii Veteres);
- Tomb II, Cava di San Sebastiano cemetery, Sovana (Pellegrini [supra n.10] 499, fig. 5.1);
- Tomb 17, Campo della Zinza cemetery, Sovana (ibid. 503, fig. 5.5);
- Tomb 18 (12.12.1900), Campo della Zinza cemetery, Sovana (ibid. 504, fig. 4);
- Tomb 19, Belmonte Piceno cemetery.

The hypothesis of use of the ritual shovel for collecting human remains seems to be the most plausible one. The 5 instances of shovels in inhumation burials can be explained by saying that:

- a) they are among the earliest known occurrences of the ritual shovel, and date to the Orientalizing period (second half of the 7th to the end of the 6th c.);
- b) they are the southernmost discoveries — in Tyrrhenian Etruria (Sovana, Civita Castel-

<sup>24</sup> Milani (supra n.4) 36.

<sup>25</sup> Y. Tepper and K. Covello-Paran, "Et-Taiyiba," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot/ESI* 124 (2012), available at [http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report\\_detail\\_eng.aspx?id=2200](http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=2200)

<sup>26</sup> Y. Yadin, *The finds from the Bar-Kokhba period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem 1963) 48-60, nos. 3-6.

<sup>27</sup> A. Niccolini, *Real Museo Borbonico* (Naples 1834) vol. X, pl. LXIV (from Pompeii).

<sup>28</sup> Zuffa (supra n.3) cat. nos. 1-5, pl. I.

lana) and Picenum (Belmonte Piceno) — and fall well outside N Italy, the main area of diffusion of the ritual shovel;

c) the 3 Sovana burials are the same ones just considered exceptions because of their association with 'braziers'.

In the burials at Sovana, where shovels are connected to 'braziers', we could perhaps see a function associated with ritual food preparation, or rather, as I propose, with the burning of aromatic substances, but in most cases, including cremation burials or in votive contexts in N Italy, it is probable that the shovels were used for selecting and collecting human remains (the practice of *ossilegium*) or the burned bones of sacrificed animals.

The recently re-examined and published evidence from the Brembate Sotto cemetery backs up this hypothesis. This necropolis, the chief one for the Golasecca culture after the Cà Morta cemetery of Come, was in use from the middle of the 6th to the beginning of the 4th c. In the case of some burials excavated by G. Mantovani and G. Nievo in 1888-89, iron ritual shovels were deposited in the cinerary urn; this was the case with the B/1988 female burial and the 8/1989 double burial (fig. 9). (The same necropolis did contain two other iron ritual shovels but they have unknown or unclear contexts<sup>29</sup>.) These funerary deposits show that, at least in the Golasecca contexts of N Italy, the ritual shovel was used for collecting selected charred remains. The cremation process will have been carefully monitored by a religious official. During the course of the ritual the operator could have been required to re-position the remains using specially designed instruments. A re-positioning was required to ensure that remains were thoroughly cremated. At the end of the cremation process, the human remains had to be removed from the pyre by means of another specially-designed tool, one which assumed a ritual significance from the sacred nature of the remains. In protohistoric cultures (Golasecca, Este, and Villanovan/Etruscan of the Po valley) this instrument could have been the ritual shovel.

### Representations of the ritual shovel: symbolic and social significance

Iconographic sources from Iron Age N Italy strengthen the interpretation of a ritual scope for use of the shovel. The images confirm the deeply allusive meaning and a connection with a high sacerdotal rôle.

Ghirardini and Milani suggested that the shovel is represented on the famous bronze situla from Certosa cemetery at Bologna (fig. 10).<sup>30</sup> Used as an urn in a later cremation burial (the early 5th-c. tomb 68), it is at present dated to the first half of the 6th c.<sup>31</sup> The ritual shovel would be represented in the second register which illustrates an offering procession. It would be held in the right hand by the last figure, probably a sacrificial official carrying spits in his left hand (figs. 10b-c). Later, Ducati interpreted this object as an axe, similar to the axes carried by armed men in the parade illustrated in the first register.<sup>32</sup> Due to a gap in the bronze, it is not possible to verify the shape of the handle of the object and thereby determine if it is an axe or a shovel. The handle is advanced in relation to the upper part

29 G. Mantovani, "Brembate Sotto," *Notizie Archeologiche Bergomensi* 1884-90, 35-83; Casini (supra n.50).

30 Ghirardini 1901 (supra n.1); Milani (supra n.4).

31 G. Bartoloni and C. Morigi Govi, "Etruria and situla art. The Certosa situla: new perspectives," in J. Swaddling, S. Walker and P. Roberts (edd.), *Italy in Europe: economic relations 700 BC-AD 50* (BritMusOccPap 97; 1995) 159-76.

32 P. Ducati, "La situla della Certosa," *Mem R. Accad. Sci. Ist. Bologna. Cl. Sci. Mor.* 5-7 (1920-23) 54.



Fig. 10. (a) Certosa situla (sheet bronze) from Bologna (first half of 6th c. B.C.); (b) development of the decoration in 4 registers; (c) last figure in the offering procession of the second register (Bologna Museo Civico Archeologico).

of the axe-shaped object, which may suggest a perpendicular (not an axial) handle, and that would be a feature of axes, not shovels.

On the other hand, I have identified ritual shovels in the hand of the psychopomp demons on three reliefs on sandstone Felsinian *stelae* – Certosa 169 (fig. 11), Polisportivo B (fig. 12), and San Michele in Bosco (fig. 13) – of the 5th-/early 4th-c. at Etruscan cemeteries at Bologna.<sup>33</sup> In these three *stelae* psychopomp demons are present in scenes depicting the journey to the afterlife. In the first case, the demon precedes and guides the chariot of the dead while

carrying in his other hand an axe; in the other two cases, the demon escorts the dead by foot while grabbing his wrist or hand. In the case of the Certosa 169 and San Michele in Bosco *stelae* (figs. 11 and 13) the size of the object held by the demons, when compared with the head and bust of the individuals, seems to correspond to the size of a ritual shovel (20–30 cm). In the Polisportivo B *stela* (fig. 12), the handle is longer but the blade is the same size, which

Fig. 11. Sandstone *stela* from Certosa Etruscan cemetery, Bologna (Bologna Museo Civico Archeologico).



33 Sacchetti (supra n.7).



could make it *c.*50 cm long (like a fire shovel?). The San Michele in Bosco *stele*, having the clearest depiction, provides more details than the others. The object is shown with a massive handle with a perforated termination. The axe-shaped trapezoidal blade has concave upper sides and a convex lower side; its upper and lateral sides are in relief but the lower side is not. The blade is marked by geometric decoration in the form of two axial rings. I would identify this object as a ritual shovel of Este type C in Zuffa's typology (fig. 14).

Previous scholars identified these objects as oars<sup>34</sup> or steering oars<sup>35</sup> on the basis of comparisons with Charon, the Greek ferryman demon. I previously observed that, other than the name itself (*Charu(n)* in Etruscan, which comes from *Charon* in Greek), the Greek ferryman demon had not really been assimilated by Etruscan religion, which was based on quite different eschatological concepts, beliefs which were materialized through dead demons who had other functions, and thus other iconographic characteristics, not related to water. This was the case with the mallet, the door to the afterlife, wings symbolizing a non-earthly context, and the snake as a supremely chthonic animal, all found in representations of *Charu(n)* in Tyrrhenian tomb-paintings and reliefs.<sup>36</sup> In Archaic and Classical Etruscan culture, the notion of the journey to



Fig. 12. Sandstone Etruscan *stele* from Polisportivo excavation, Bologna (Bologna Museo Civico Archeologico).



Fig. 13. Sandstone Etruscan *stele* from San Michele in Bosco excavation, Bologna (Bologna Museo Civico Archeologico).

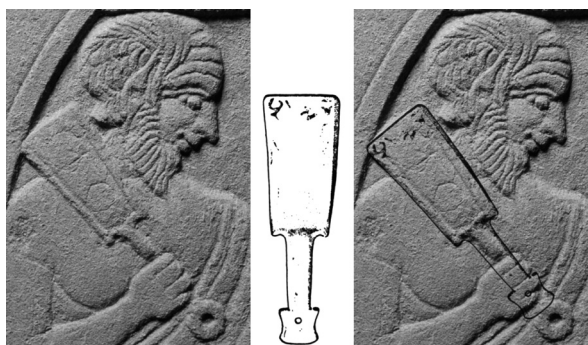


Fig. 14. *Stele* from San Michele in Bosco. (a) detail of the object held by the demon; (b) ritual shovel of 'Este type C' according to Zuffa's typology; (c) overlay of 'Este type C' shovel (fig. 14b) on the *stele* (F. Sacchetti).

34 Ducati (supra n.6) 645.

35 G. Sassatelli, "Una nuova stele felsinea," in P. Delbianco (ed.), *Culture figurative e materiali tra Emilia e Marche: studi in memoria di M. Zuffa* (Rimini 1983) 107-37; L. Cerchiai, "Daimones e Caronte sulle stele felsinee," *ParPass* 50.3-6 (1995) 376-94.

36 F. De Ruyt, *Charun. Démon étrusque de la mort* (Rome 1934); J.-R. Jannot, "Charon et Charun: à propos d'un démon funéraire étrusque," *CRAI* 135 (1991) 443-64; F. Sacchetti, "Charu(n) nella pittura funeraria etrusca," *Ocnus* 8 (2001) 127-64.



the afterlife through watery elements is not so clear, other than in the single case of the Blue Demons tomb (late 5th c.) at Tarquinia.<sup>37</sup>

Allusions to water (e.g., representations of sea or sea-monsters) in a presumed relation to death are suggested on the basis of comparisons with Greek culture.<sup>38</sup> Other references such as aquatic birds are attested at Villanovan Bologna and are common to Italic and European Bronze Age cultures.<sup>39</sup> In most cases they remain evocative of the journey to the afterlife,<sup>40</sup> often ornamental or forming part of mythological scenes, and are not confirmed by explicit representations of the crossing of water to reach the other side.<sup>41</sup> With respect to the oar, in Etruscan funerary iconography demons with recognised oars are attested only in a few reliefs from Tyrrhenian Etruria south of the Apennines, and those only of the Hellenistic period (e.g., a sarcophagus from Tarquinia, two ash urns from Perugia, the Tomb of the Reliefs at Caere with the 'Skylia', or a sarcophagus from Norchia and an ash urn from Volterra, accompanied by other anonymous demons).<sup>42</sup> By contrast, as is shown by the iconography of Felsinian *stelae* and Tyrrhenian Etruscan tomb-paintings, the journey to the afterlife with a demon escort takes place across land, in a horse-drawn chariot or by foot.<sup>43</sup> In Late Archaic and Classical Etruscan culture north of the Apennines I think it unlikely that a steering oar could evoke the transition to death. Moreover, in order to do so, it would have to be taken out of its aquatic context, unlike all the Greek Charon images which systematically represent him on his boat.<sup>44</sup>

Thus for Etruscan communities the objects held by the three psychopomp demons on the Felsinian *stelae* will have evoked the eschatological notion of the transition between life and death, giving demons the recognizable function of priests ensuring the passage. Nor would this be a unique case of a demon serving in such a sacerdotal rôle. In Etruscan representations of the mythological scene of the sacrifice of the Trojan prisoners (as in Vulci's François tomb or the sarcophagus of the priest from Tarquinia) *Charu(n)* seems to assume the rôle of minister of the sacrifice.<sup>45</sup> If the attributes of these demons are ritual shovels, for the protohistoric cultures of N Italy this item could have fulfilled the function

37 M. Cataldi Dini, "Tarquinia. Tomba dei Demoni Azzurri," in M. A. Rizzo (ed.), *Pittura etrusca al Museo di Villa Giulia* (Rome 1989) 151-53.

38 L. Cerchiai and B. d'Agostino, *Il mare, la morte, l'amore: gli Etruschi, i Greci e l'immagine* (Rome 1999).

39 J. Ortalli, s.v. "Riti e culti della morte: l'Etruria padana," in *ThesCRA VI* (Los Angeles 2011) 160-61.

40 G. Colonna, "Il *dokanon*, il culto dei Dioscuri e gli aspetti ellenizzanti della religione dei morti nell'Etruria tardo-arcaica," in L. Bacchielli and M. Bonanno Aravantinos (edd.), *Scritti di antichità in memoria di Sandro Stucchi* (St.Misc. 29; 1996) II, 165-84.

41 Sacchetti (supra n.7) 268-70.

42 R. Herbig, *Die jüngeretruskischen Steinsarkophage* (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs 7; Berlin 1952) 109, pl. 28b; N. Icard and A.-V. Szabados, "Monstres marins étrusques et romains: analyse et filiation," in I. Izquierdo Perail and H. Le Meaux (edd.), *Seres híbridos: apropiación de motivos míticos mediterráneos* (Madrid 2003) 88-89, fig. 15; H. Blanck and G. Proietti, *La Tomba dei Rilievi di Cerveteri* (Rome 1986) pls. IVc, X and XII; G. Colonna, "Divinités peu connues du panthéon étrusque," in F. Gaultier and D. Briquel (edd.), *Les Étrusques. Les plus religieux des hommes* (Paris 1997) 167-84, fig. 6; B. Hartmann, "Circolazione dei modelli. Il sacrificio dei prigionieri troiani," in A. Maggiani (ed.), *Artigianato artistico: l'Etruria settentrionale e interna in età ellenistica* (exh. cat., Milan 1985) 211-12, fig. H.

43 Sacchetti (supra n.36); ead. (supra n.7).

44 C. Sourvinou Inwood, s.v. "Charon I," in *LIMC III.1* (1986) 210-23.

45 Hartmann (supra n.42) 208-12; Sacchetti (supra n.36) 131 and 152.

of the sacerdotal insignia of the cult official who was officiating at the funeral ceremony. As shown by the representations of the demons (figs. 11-13), it is raised and carried like an emblem. Its display, evoking funeral ceremonials, secured and confirmed the status of a religious officer.

In my opinion, this identification was not taken into account by previous scholars because the shovel was considered to be

un tipico prodotto dell'età del ferro continentale alla cui origine e alla cui fortuna furono estranee — almeno allo stato attuale delle nostre conoscenze — le culture rapidamente evolutesi nel bacino mediterraneo. Se ne ha una riprova osservando che nell'Etruria (ivi compresa Bologna) il tipo fu adottato e rielaborato fino al periodo orientalizzante e non oltre, mentre nel Veneto ancora dopo più di due secoli esso si manteneva in auge (Zuffa [supra n.3] 167-69).

It was thus believed that in the late 6th-early 4th c. (the time of the Felsinian *stelae* from Bologna) the ritual shovel was still present exclusively in Este and Golasecca cultural contexts, and was used for longer in Este, but was not attested in Etruscan contexts either south and north of the Apennines after the Orientalizing period (the early 6th c.). The same understanding also concerned the symbolic axe. However, other evidence shows that the shovel and symbolic axe are present during the 6th-4th c. in Etruscan funerary contexts north of the Apennines. One example (now lost) of small ritual shovels or symbolic axes was found in tomb 104 (the 'Mirror tomb') in Bologna's Arnoaldi cemetery dating to 450-420.<sup>46</sup> Other examples (one surviving, the other now lost) came from tombs 1 and 120 of Marzabotto's E necropolis (late 6th-early 4th c.).<sup>47</sup> From Marzabotto's N necropolis came an object published as a "paletta rituale" which is probably a symbolic axe (fig. 3a).<sup>48</sup> Lastly, Zuffa included in his catalogue a shovel from Casalfiumanese near Bologna perhaps attributable to the 5th c. (fig. 15).<sup>49</sup> As has been shown in some cases,<sup>50</sup> it is difficult to say whether objects described in early studies as 'shovels' but now lost are actually ritual shovels or rather symbolic or real axes (figs. 3a-b). The only certain shovel from an Etruscan context during the Felsinian period (late 6th-early 4th c.) comes from Casalfiumanese, and it must be added to the contemporary examples from contexts connected with the Golasecca and Este cultures. The ritual shovel is thus attested throughout the N Italian area from contexts that are contemporary with the newly-identified representations from Bologna. It is a shared object in Early Iron Age material culture extending from the Alps to the Apennines. Nonetheless, the rarity of this item is clear, and this may relate to its special significance in relation to the social rank of a deceased.

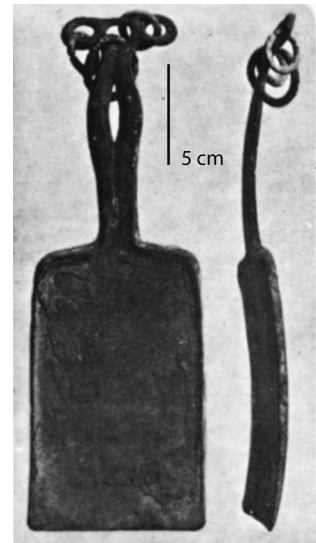


Fig. 15. Ritual shovel from Casalfiumanese near Bologna, dated to the Felsinian period (Zuffa [supra n.3] pl. 37.17).

46 R. Macellari, *Il sepolcreto etrusco nel terreno Arnoaldi di Bologna, 550-350 a.C.* (Venice 2002) 222.

47 M. Marchesi, *Le necropoli della città etrusca di Marzabotto* (Ph.D. diss., Università degli Studi di Bologna 1995-96).

48 Muffatti (supra n.4) 295, no. 928.

49 M. Zuffa, "Antichità del podere Malatesta (Casalfiumanese)," *Emilia Preromana* 2 (1952) 30-32, no. 118; id. (supra n.3) 120-21, no. 17, and 169, pl. III.17.

50 Muffatti (supra n.4) 294-95, nos. 927-28; Macellari (supra n.4) 222.

## Outcomes and questions

The reconsideration of known archaeological data, coupled with an analysis of new finds, provides evidence for defining the specific ritual use of the shovel and its symbolic significance. The archaeological data overall, and particularly the occurrence of the shovel in votive deposits and especially in funerary contexts, confirm its sacred rôle (ritual use) in funeral ceremonies. In this context, two specific uses are possible:

A. The predominant deposition of the shovel in burials with cremation rites, and especially the B/1988 and 8/1989 burials in the Brembate Sotto cemetery, where the shovel was placed in the cinerary urn, point to a funerary use for collecting selected charred remains (the practice of *ossilegium*), at least for the Golasecca culture.

B. The association of the shovel with possible incense-burners at Sovana, and especially the morphological similarity with shovels from the time of the Roman Empire that are interpreted as incense shovels (see examples from Pompeii, Herculaneum, the Cave of Letters and Et-Taïyiba) suggest that the Iron Age ritual shovel from N Italy may have been used in that way. We may have new reason to claim that the incense shovel of Roman, Jewish and Christian ritual derives from Early Iron Age Italic rituals.

As for the symbolic significance, the newly-identified representations of the shovel on Felsinian *stelae* at Bologna highlight this tool as an evocative emblem of religious and funeral ceremonies. This hypothesis is backed up by three observations:

1. In the iconographies where I identify the shovel (Certosa 169, Polisportivo B, San Michele in Bosco *stelae*), the psychopomp demons carrying this tool play a supernatural rôle, acting as guarantors of the journey to the afterlife.
2. The shovel is clearly exhibited, raised and carried to the fore like an emblem, evoking the identity of its bearer and its specific function.
3. The strength of the evocative significance of the shovel for the local populations (in this case, the Etruscan communities of the Po valley) is shown by the fact that the object is not contextualised in any scene (i.e., used by its bearer).

I consider it plausible that this distinctive emblem was in practice a sacerdotal insignia of the priest who officiated at the funeral ceremony. It formalized in a ritual manner the transition between life and death and will have been thus perceived by social groups. By this symbolic, 'social' and sacerdotal interpretation, whether the sacred character of the shovel was specifically linked to the *ossilegium* practice or to the burning of incense is a secondary question; in any event, both of those activities involved paying religious respect to the dead and evoked ceremonials that ensured the transition between life and death.

The above hypothesis should be taken into account in future examinations of grave-goods that include shovels and in the accompanying interpretations of funeral rituals. For the moment it is possible to say that the shovel could be included in grave-goods for two distinct funerary/ideological purposes. The first is for its allusive significance in relation to the core rite of incineration which was prevalent in the cultures of N Italy from the 9th to the first half of the 6th c. (later on, cremation and inhumation are equally represented) or in relation more generally to funeral ceremonies through the burning of fragrant substances or the clearing of the burnt remains of sacrificed animals. The second may relate, in exceptional cases, to a distinguishing of the social rôle of the deceased, and particularly the sacred function of the official in charge of funerary and religious rituals.

sacchetti.federica@gmail.com

Aix-Marseille Université

CNRS, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, CCJ, Aix-en-Provence