

## RONCOLE E PENNATI

The Billhook is known through all regions of Italy, from the Tyrolean Alps in the north, where it has many similarities with those from Austria and Hungary (and other parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire such as Slovenia and Croatia) to the southern tip and Sicily, where it is much closer in appearance to those from Greece, Spain and France.

The general term for a single edged billhook is RONCOLA (pl roncole) and for a double edged one it is PENNATO (pl pennati), but usage (even by manufacturers) is inconsistent. However, many regional and dialect names exist, and as in other countries the distinction between wood chopping and meat cleaving tools is often confused, and the word MANNAIA or MANARESSO (both of which also mean a meat cleaver) is also used for square bladed types. The distinction between billhooks and sickles (FALCE pl falci) is often equally indistinct and one finds descriptions such as *'una falce usata per la potatura della vite'* (a sickle used for pruning vines). The word FALCETTO, also spelled FALCETTA (small sickle) is also often used



Above: (left) a roncola from Rome known locally as MARRACCIO (a design unchanged since the Roman period, see below); (centre) a pennato from Terni in Umbria; (right) a manaresso by Angelo-B



Above: (left) detail of roman statue of Vertimus (Vertumnus), husband of Pomona, a nymph or hamadryad (or minor goddess) of fruit trees and orchards. Both deities are often depicted holding a billhook or pruning hook. The handle and blade shape of this one are identical to the marraccio (see above), indicating that the statue is probably from the region of Rome, and that the design of this particular shape (which has a type of handle unique amongst Italian billhooks) has remained little changed over 2000 years (courtesy of the Lowe Museum, Florida USA); (centre) Vertumnus et Pomona, engraving by Jacob Matham c1606 (courtesy Los Angeles Museum of Art USA); (right) detail from Vertumne et Pomone by Adriaen van Stalbemt (courtesy of Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique).

As in most European countries many regional variations in blade shape and size exist, and they were mainly made in the village smithies and workshop. Later, as elsewhere in Europe, they were mass produced in larger factories, such as that of Angelo (of Bergamasco\*) located in Calolziocorte in the province of Lecco (LC), Leonelli from Castelraimondo in the province of Macerata (MA) or Panzeri from Bergamasco in the province of Alessandria (AL) - all of whom are still manufacturing. In the past blades were forged of iron and a steel edge fire welded on, but most of modern hooks have the blades laser cut from rolled steel sheet. Compared to France where the 'taillandiers' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later marked their tools with both their name and that of the place they worked, many Italian roncole and pennati only have the initials or the mark of the maker. Much work needs to be done on recording these and finding out to whom and where they originate.

\* Angelo of Bergamasco (Angelo-B) is their trade mark, I guess originally they were from that region, not Calolziocorte.



Above: Modern manufacturing methods: (from left) automatic profiling of blades; roller forging to reduce thickness; roughly sharpened blades; finished roncole ready to leave the factory (courtesy of Panzeri Tools)



Above: maker's marks (from Angelo-B website which appears to have been copied from, N. MONELLI, *Roncole e pennati*, Firenze 1977).

Imports from other countries are also to be found, including from Pakistan (but I have yet to find out who is distributing these).

Wooden handles (fitted with using tang as in Britain and elsewhere) are often found, but also many regions have them made as two scales riveted through the tang, often with an extension to the tang that forms a curved hand guard. Horn was also widely used in the past.



Above: (left) wooden handle from Castiglio (TO); (centre) horn handle – northern Italy (region uncertain), sold in USA as being 16<sup>th</sup> century, it is probably only mid to late 19<sup>th</sup>; (right) northern Italy; (far right) from Emilia-Romagna region (note two methods of fixing the handle - left with a forged and riveted washer, right integral to the tang)

The most common type of handle is made from rings of compressed leather, a method also used in Austria and parts of France.



Above: (left) pattern (tipo) from Lucca in Tuscany, made by Angelo-B; (centre) from Bergamo in the region of Bergamasco, by Leonelli - this model is made by many makers in other countries and sold throughout Europe, often called a Swiss pattern (e.g. Schweizer Gertel); (right) mannaia from the region of Piacentino in Emilia-Romagna also called a TAGLIALEGNA (wood chopper).

In the north, tubular handles (not a socket intended for a wooden insert) are common: a type also found in Austria; western Hungary and the Alpine regions of France.



Above: (left) northern Italy, marked Ghisolli (or Ghisolei – it had been double stamped, and difficult to read); (centre) from Austrian border region (note typical stamped decorations on the blade); (right) from Padova (PD) in northern Italy, east of Venice; (far right) detail of a tubular handle showing folded edges, not suitable for a wooden handle to be inserted (region uncertain).

There are types with a socket for a long handle, c.f. the english staff hook or slasher, that are common in many regions, also known as FALCIGLIA (pl falciglie):



Above: (from left) examples from Sicily; Parma (PR) in Emilia -Romangna; Scansano (GR) in Tuscany; Sulmona (AQ) in Abruzzo; Siena (SI) in Tuscany.

Angelo also now make a 'European' pattern with a plastic handle in response to the ubiquitous Fiskars' model (also sold under Wilkinson Sword brand in the UK and by Gerber in the USA)



Above: (left) Angelo-B (right) Fiskars (this model is made in Finland and sold throughout Europe – by aggressive marketing it is replacing many local variants)

The vine pruning hooks from the southern regions and from Sicily are similar to those found in Greece; Spain and southern France, and to British eyes are unusual in shape



Above: (left) from the west of Sicily; (centre) from the east of Sicily; (right) from Corato in Puglia

A wide range of smaller folding pruning knives can also be found in most regions. Often known as RONCHETTA (pl ronchette) or RONCOLETTA (pl roncolette), meaning small roncola, they were often used in the vineyards but now commonly carried by anyone who lives or works in the countryside..



Above: the four on the left are from Atessa (CH) the others are from Maniago (PN) (left) and Schio (VI) (right) - both cities situated in the northeast of Italy (north of Venice).

Maniago is a centre of cutlery making c.f. Sheffield in the UK, Thiers in France, Toledo in Spain or Solingen in Germany.

As with the fighting bill, and other pole-arms, of Europe the roncola, especially if a spike or two have been welded on, will also make a formidable weapon for foot soldiers. Usually mounted on a long pole it is also known as a RONCO or a RONCONE:



As in other languages a word may have other meanings, and roncola is also used to describe any crescent shape, e.g. the guide bar on the speed controller for an electric train:



My sincere thanks to Carlo, Nunzia, Michele and Fabio (Nedo) and others whose names I do not know for many of the images used in this section.

Note: the origins of most of the images used are confirmed, but some may be incorrect (i.e. sold outside the region of origin). If you can give additional information, or correct errors, please send me an e-mail.