

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

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## 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.