

THE WOOD GATHERERS AND THE “UNCINAIA” TOOL - PRETOLA - PG

THE WOOD GATHERERS

The wood gatherers were men from the village of Pretola, namely bricklayers or unskilled labourers who travelled from the village to the city each day to work. These men didn't go to work on the days the river was swollen so they could gather the wood needed to cook and warm their homes.

There were about ten wood gathering families using the “uncinaia” hooking technique. Other families that did not use the “uncinaia” tool waited for the water level to return to normal to gather the wood stuck in the branches of the trees along the banks.

We know from news and stories told by local personalities that the “uncinaia” hooking technique was mainly in use in the village of Pretola. The technique was called “lima” or “limatura” (referring to the rope) in other villages found along the Perugian section of the river.

THE PLACES OF THE “UNCINAIA” TOOL USERS

Wood gathering with the “uncinaia” hooking technique was practised along the riverbanks during the autumn and spring, when the river was in spate. Each wood gathering family had its own “pòsto”, or “station”, from where it could gather wood with the tool. The bank was about 2 or 3 metres wide and high enough so that it was impossible for the water to inundate the station during a large swell, allowing the gatherer to do his work.

These stations were like small dry stone docks, built by the families using river stones. Each “station” was named after the gatherer that built it. For example: pòsto di Vergone, pòsto di Gigio, pòsto di Cencio, pòsto del Bianchino, pòsto dei Diarena, pòsto d'Armando, and so on.

WHAT IS AN “UNCINAIA” (or “uncinèa” in the local dialect)?

The “uncinaia” was – and still is – a wooden tool commonly made of field maple wood and shaped like an anchor, with four hooked arms and a shank, to which the rope used to throw and retrieve the “uncinaia” tool was tied (called “lima”).

FIELD MAPLE (“STUCCHIO” in the local dialect)

Until a few decades ago, field maples were only used as a support for grapevines. The two plants grew symbiotically, with the grapevine developing around the trunk and branches of the tree until the two eventually fused, becoming a single body. Maple-grapevine couples were commonly planted in long rows in between cultivated fields, about 10 metres apart.

HOW DO YOU USE AN “UNCINAIA” TOOL?

The wood gatherer holds the “lima” rope bundle (about 30 metres long) with his left hand, after tying the free end of the rope to his left forearm. With his right arm, he grabs the “uncinaia” tool by the shank, to which the other end of the rope is tied. When the gatherer sees a tree trunk floating down the river, he prepares for the throw by taking the tool behind his body, making sure the rope has not caught on anything and rapidly gauging the throw based on the trunk’s distance and the speed of the water. He finally throws the tool in the air so that it lands on the other side of the log with the rope behind it and then quickly yanks at the rope in order to hook the log with the tool. To pull large logs, several people are needed to counteract the dragging force of the current.

A TRADITION STILL ALIVE

The practice is still popular to this day. When the Tiber River is in spate, village residents who want to keep the tradition alive meet at the riverbank to show off their “uncinaia” rope throwing skills, just like a sport.