

# WOMEN BURIED WITH WEAPONS IN NORTHERN ITALY DURING THE LATE LA TÈNE PERIOD

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*This contribution examines the conceptualisation of gender in the Iron Age, considering current theoretical perspectives and some case studies from the La Tène period in Northern Italy. It applies for the first time to these contexts a critical approach considering that gender as a social construct cannot be regarded as a binary and fixed category of social identity. The reflection is addressed through the analysis of ten published burials dated to the La Tène C2-D2 (c. end of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) from the cemeteries of Oleggio, in the territory of Novara (Piemonte Region), Isola Rizza and Santa Maria di Zevio in the territory of Verona (Veneto region). These burials contained weapons, usually considered to be representative of male gender, while the deceased itself appears to be anthropologically identifiable as female.*

*The almost automatic equation between weapons and men (warriors) has hidden some exceptional cases in which weapons could perhaps be considered as elements primarily linked with the social position of the deceased. It is here proposed that some women, in these La Tène communities, could have reached positions of prestige and weapons could maybe be symbolical means to communicate these roles. This reflection has the potential to change our perception of the gender divide in these communities and to contribute to the development of a more conscious methodology.*

## 1. Introduction

This contribution considers the conceptualisation of gender in the Iron Age, considering current theoretical perspectives and three case studies from the La Tène period in Northern Italy. Previous research has established that gender as a social construct cannot be considered a binary and fixed category of social identity. This subject will be addressed considering ten outstanding published burials from the cemeteries of Oleggio, in the territory of Novara (Piemonte Region); Isola Rizza and Santa Maria di Zevio in the territory of Verona (Veneto region) (fig. 1). The first cemetery is attributed to the *Vertamocori* group by Classical sources (Pliny the Elder III, 21), whilst those of Isola Rizza and Santa Maria di Zevio, in the territory between the Oglio and Adige rivers, are identified by the Classical sources with the *Cenomani* (Polyb. II 17, 4-5). These cemeteries are dated to La Tène C1-D2 (c. first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE<sup>1</sup>). In general,

spindle whorls and ornaments (such as bracelets and beads) are believed to be ‘female’ gender indicators, while ‘male’ gender indicators, by contrast, are typically weapons (and elements connected with warfare) (Deodato, Poletti Ecclesia 1999; Salzani 1998; Salzani 1996) and ‘toilet’ sets (composed by razors and shears)<sup>2</sup>. However, these ten burials associated with weapons are attributed to deceased anthropologically identifiable as females (cfr. § 2). In this study a gender critical approach will be applied to these burials of the Cisalpine region (where no similar studies have been done) to question the possible roles that women could have had and how gender might have been adapted and conceived.

corresponds to the Caesarian age of the chronology proposed by P. Piana Agostinetti *et alii* 2014 which is followed by a proto-Augustan phase. It should therefore be placed roughly in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.

<sup>2</sup> Usually shears and razors are considered to belong to the male gender as they are associated with body care and are in general more frequent in males’ burials (de Marinis, Rapi 2019: 126; Salzani, Cavazzuti, Tecchiati 2019: 25; Mordegli 2013: 16). However, it has been highlighted that shears can be used also for agricultural activities, (sheep) shearing and weaving (Salzani, Cavazzuti, Tecchiati 2019: 25; Deodato 1999: 333). The razor can also be connected with the scraping and incision of the leather (Deodato 1999: 332).

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<sup>1</sup> The LT D2 period, which corresponds to LT D 1b in D. Božič’s (2008) chronology, is dated to before the Augustan age by de Marinis and Rapi (2019: 125, 127). As such it



Fig. 1. Map of Northern Italy and its present drainage network. The white dots mark the three cemeteries analysed in this paper; the black dots mark the main cities of the region.

Other types of burials, including both anthropological females and males, which contained a gender mixed range of objects exist. Such burials could indicate the existence of different genders or more than two genders<sup>3</sup>. They represent an interesting and rather varied, but much more complex category. In fact, the coexistence of female and male gender indicators can be ascribed to different causes, not necessarily linked to identity choices (e.g. funerary gifts, the symbolic meaning of the object, re-functionalisation, specific ritual and cultural choices). The complexity of this group means that it is beyond the scope of the discussion for this paper and is merely mentioned to draw attention to the complexity of the burial record.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see grave no. 6 of Isengo, at Cascina Venina, discussed briefly below, as well as some burials from Oleggio mentioned in the text. Herdt 1993 on the existence of a 'third gender'.

## 2. Theoretical and methodological framework

Gender archaeological approaches<sup>4</sup>, as previously applied to a variety of Iron Age case studies in the transalpine world, recognise a potential difference between biological sex and socially ascribed gender. Sex is a biological feature and gender is a culturally constructed social variable<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the latter can vary between societies and periods and may not be conceived as a binary concept (and it is also possible that social agents negotiate it during their lives; Algrain 2020: 9; Belard 2015: 25; Belard 2014: 22-24).

Identity is of course constituted in more complex ways than just being based on sex or gender. For example, status, age and other factors contribute to complex forms of identity (Arnold 2016:

<sup>4</sup> For an overview on gender approaches and methodologies: Conkey, Gero 1997; Cuzzo, Guidi 2013; Moen 2019; Whitehouse (ed.) 1998.

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, see Algrain 2020: 9; Boucherie 2020: 42; Trémeaud 2015; Belard 2015 and Ramsel 2020: 12.

850; Ramsel 2020: 11). It is therefore necessary to consider a wider range of genders<sup>6</sup> and identity layers. Moreover, social identity should not be understood as fixed, but as a fluid ‘dynamic process’ in which the relationship with the other is pivotal (Brück, Fontijn 2013: 204; Wells 2001: 7-8, 28). Some choices of funerary representation could be influenced by age or by the position of the person in that community but also by preferences of the individual during their life (*agency*)<sup>7</sup> or by specific life stories (Haughton 2018: 2; Arnold 2001). However, funerary choices are made by the living and reflect ‘socially accepted’ forms of rituality (Arnold 2001; Parker Pearson 1993: 203-204; 1999). In fact, the selection of grave goods is the result of a conscious choice. Despite the possible presence of funerary offerings (cfr. Fahlander, Oestigaard 2008: 7; Oestigaard, Goldhahn 2006: 27-28), the burial as a whole has to be considered as a representation of the deceased by the community. Therefore, although filtered by the effects of the funerary ritual, it represents the social position of the deceased and/or of their family, manifested through the symbols in force in that particular culture and chronological period<sup>8</sup>. In a broader view, as C. Trémeaud (2013: 16) recently pointed out, what we find in the graves is a symbolic ‘transliteration’ of the social organisation, filtered by the ideological and cultural system of reference (also, Parker Pearson 1999: 8-9; Fahlander, Oestigaard 2008: 7).

Thus, a full understanding of social gender and its relationship to sex in a given society is only possible when anthropological data (sex and age) of the deceased are evaluated against the archaeological data. In the absence of an identification of the biological sex by anthropological or genetic methods, sex is often determined based on grave goods, to which a gender is attributed on the basis of modern day understanding of gender. The meaning of objects is assigned by the society and is thus context specific (Algrain 2020: 13; Belard 2015: 24), therefore it can be misleading if used to determine the sex as the outcome is based on (our) interpretation<sup>9</sup>.

For this reason, this contribution deals with those cemeteries for which anthropological data are known<sup>10</sup>. All LT period graves of the over mentioned cemeteries have been examined, comparing the grave goods – focusing particularly on objects considered linked with gender, such as metal objects (especially weapons), personal ornaments and spindle whorls – with the sex identified by anthropological analyses. Burials without sex attribution have not been considered. Female graves with weapons have been selected as considered the most outstanding. Their contexts, grave

absence of an anthropological determination of the deceased’s sex, this is attributed in an (almost) automatic way on the basis of the type of equipment (e.g., weapons = men; weaving tools = women). See the cases of the burials of Vix (Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, France) and Birka (Sweden), which were initially classified as male on the basis of the grave goods but which later turned out to be female individuals on the basis of anthropological analyses (Arnold 1991: 370; Algrain 2020: 11-13; Boucherie 2020: 43).

<sup>10</sup> The cemetery of Dormelletto, ascribed to the *Vertamocori* group in the same study region, is a relevant funerary context (Spagnolo Garzoli 2009; Arslan 2007: 126). However, it lacks anthropological data as skeletons did not survive (the analyses were carried out only for a small sample due to the bad conservation status of bones) and has simpler grave goods (rare weapons). Regarding the other cemeteries in the *Insubri*’s area (e.g., Valeggio Lomellina: Vannacci Lunazzi 1978; Garlasco Madonna delle Bozzole: Arslan 1995; Romanengo, etc.) we do not have reliable data. The same situation also exists in the province of Cremona, a border area between *Cenomani* and *Insubri*, which has yielded a variety of finds and burials. For example, a grave is noteworthy from a small cemetery at Isengo, located near Cascina Venina. These burials are dated to the late La Tène period (probably LT C2-D) and, since they have not been completely recovered, the data are partial and furthermore no anthropological analysis of the remains has been carried out (Passi Pitcher, Baiguera, Mete 2014: 460). At least one burial (no. 6) demonstrated indicators of ‘mixed’ gender, that is, both female (a glass bangle/arm ring and a necklace made of glass beads) and male (elements of weaponry), which has led to considerable uncertainty regarding the sex / gender of the deceased (*ibid.*: 461-464). Similarly, regarding the area attributed to the *Cenomani*, cemeteries or individual burials which are not yet published, are lacking certain data and / or anthropological analyses are not considered here: Povegliano Veronese (Vitali *et alii* 2010); Megliadino San Fidenzio (not examined also due to the presence of multiple burials in which the grave goods cannot be differentiated, see Voltolini 2011); Tagliate di Remedello Sopra (Perini 1977); Carzagheto (of which, however, there are four torcs which may be connected to female burials, Ferraresi 1976); Ca’ di Marco in Fiesse (Vannacci Lunazzi 1977); Lazisetta (Santa Maria di Zevio).

<sup>6</sup> See Quesada Sanz 2012: 331; Ramsel 2020: 12.

<sup>7</sup> As noted by Brück, Fontijn 2013: 204: «agency [...] is a product of relationships; one’s relationships with others (both people and things) open up particular possibilities for action while others are foreclosed. [...] identity itself must therefore be considered a cultural construct».

<sup>8</sup> Trémeaud 2013: 16-17; Baray 2011: 315-316; Lejars, Gruel 2015: 232-233; d’Agostino 1985; Wells 2001: 26.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Quesada Sanz 2012: 323-325. As is logical, in the

goods, inscriptions (when available) have been examined and compared with the most updated gender theories. The social organisation of these communities has been considered and compared with the contexts.

However, the burials studied in this article are cremations. This impacts the survival of grave goods, when placed on the pyre, and on the information that can be gained from osteoarchaeological analysis. This often leads to uncertainty regarding the attribution of the sex of the deceased<sup>11</sup>. In fact, of the ten burials analysed here the degree of the sex attribution certainty (following the osteological outcome) is variable: burials nos 53 of Oleggio; 25, 51, 74 of Isola Rizza and 43 of Santa Maria di Zevio are attributed to women with a relative certainty. By contrast, burials nos 57 of Isola Rizza and 10, 35, 95, 137 of Santa Maria di Zevio are only possible females. The uncertainty of anthropological analyses calls for caution regarding the interpretation of these burials.

### 3. Case studies

From the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE (LT B) literary sources place two main groups of people (ἔθνη/*nomina*)<sup>12</sup> North of the Po river<sup>13</sup>. These come from the transalpine area: the *Insubres*, who settled between the Sesia and Serio rivers, and the *Cenomanes*, located East of the *Insubres* and West of the *Veneti* (Polyb. II 17, 4-5; Vitali 2014: 9)<sup>14</sup>. Within the *nomen* of *Insubres*, however, it is possible to identify other minor groups (known thanks to the classical sources) such as the *Comenses*, the

*Vertamocori* (Vitali 2014: 9)<sup>15</sup>, the *Laevi*, the *Marici* (and perhaps also the *Lepontii*)<sup>16</sup>.

Archaeological evidence dating to the Second Iron Age is remarkably scarce and fragmentary within the area in question. This is due both to a lack of systematic (modern) excavations, and a limited rate of publication (de Marinis 2001: 203-204). This is especially true for the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE for which the information we have is very scarce and problematic, often deriving from chance discovery of finds (usually without precise data on the context of recovery)<sup>17</sup>.

The Oleggio Loreto cemetery, attributed to the *Vertamocori* group and dated to LT C2 will be considered first (§ 3.1). Women's burials with weapons dated between LT C2-D2 have also been found in the two cemeteries of Isola Rizza, Casalandri (§ 3.2) and Santa Maria di Zevio, Mirandola (§ 3.3) in the area ascribed to the *Cenomani* and will be considered subsequently.

Oleggio, located in the territory of Novara next to the Ticino River, is dated to a chronological horizon which suggests a close connection with Rome (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE the *foedera aequa* were stipulated with the *Insubres*). Moreover, in the year 100 BCE the *civium romanorum* of Ivrea was founded, thing that might suggest the presence of the Roman army close to Oleggio and even a possible recruitment of soldiers (for the Roman army) from this area (Spagnolo Garzoli 1999b: 15-20).

Santa Maria di Zevio and Isola Rizza are in the eastern part of the territory attributed to the *Cenomanes*, on the Adige River, close to the territory of the *Veneti*. It is possible that the Adige River represented a boundary with the *Veneti* and that these sites in the first phase were 'garrisons' for the control of the territory and became permanent settlements subsequently (Gambacurta, Ruta Serafini 2019). The presence of LT elements and

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on the problem of the sexing of cremated remains, cfr. Quesada Sanz 2012: 320-322.

<sup>12</sup> S. Bourdin (2012: 179-180) refers to *nomen* as: « *Enfin, le sens de nomen glisse de «nom» à «nom d'un peuple», «nation».*», and to ἔθνος as: « *Le champ sémantique couvert par le terme ἔθνος est très large. Il dérive peut-être de ἔθος et désigne à l'origine l'ensemble des êtres de commune condition, d'où les sens de «race» (appliqué aux humains comme aux animaux), «peuple», «nation».*».

<sup>13</sup> The Po river appears to be an important cultural 'border': the groups north of the river maintained a stronger bond with the La Tène culture, while the groups south of the river reconfigured themselves to greater or lesser extents and therefore acquired 'Italic' elements (cfr. Bourdin 2012: 666; Lejars 2006: 15).

<sup>14</sup> More precisely, the territory of the *Cenomani* seems to have been between the Oglio and Tartaro rivers during the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, and between Oglio and Adige during 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> BCE (de Marinis 2001: 220).

<sup>15</sup> Although of secondary importance for the purposes of this contribution, it should be noted that the origins of the *Vertamocori* are far from clear in the sources: Pliny (III, 21) states that they were of *Vocontia* origin (that is Celts from Southern France), Cato instead reports that they were of Ligurian descent (see Arslan 2007: 126).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Livy XXXIII 36 on the subordination of the *Comenses*. The *Insubri* appear as «*il gruppo egemone di una confederazione di popoli*» ("the hegemonic group of a confederation of peoples", my translation) according to Vitali 2014: 9.

<sup>17</sup> See de Marinis 2001: 219; Vitali 2014: 9-10, 12. For an overview of the numerous finds from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE (mostly circumstances which are not usable for the purposes of this study because of the fragmentarily data), see Poggiani Keller *et alii* 2017.

sites around Verona is the result of a gradual process of expansion toward East at the expense of the *Veneti*, process that involved in the LTC2 even the attempt of crossing the Adige River (*ibid.*: 85-87). It seems also noteworthy that although the eastward expansion probably involved clashes between the two groups, both have been allies of the Romans since at least 225 BCE. This may have meant mostly peaceful relations between the two groups (or at least not major wars) and that the presence of weapons in graves may also represent an identity factor, especially in the later phase (Gambacurta, Ruta Serafini 2019: 170-173; *cf.* also Livy XXXIX 3).

### 3.1 Oleggio

The cemetery was in use from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century CE. The funerary rite is predominantly cremation (very few dubious inhumations are attested)<sup>18</sup>. A total of about 263 graves have been found, of which 32 are not datable. About 40 burials are dated to the Augustan period (end of the 1<sup>st</sup> BCE-beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> CE) but this transition period (between the LT and the Roman Empire period) is nuanced and not always clear; 94 graves are dated to the Roman period (1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> CE approx.). The LT burials are about 97, dated between the LTC2 and the LTD2 (mid 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE). Among the LT burials 66 are anthropologically indetermined, 6 are children, 15 are anthropologically females and 10 are males. Among the 10 (anthropologically identified) men's burials elements of weaponry are present in 5, the razor in 4, shears in 3, strigils in 2. Brooches are present in both males and females' graves – without a clear distinction in number or metal type (iron/bronze) – as well as knives, rings, coins and vessels. Among the 15 (determined) females' burials spindle whorls are present in 4 graves, glass or amber beads in 3<sup>19</sup>. However, a (anthropologi-

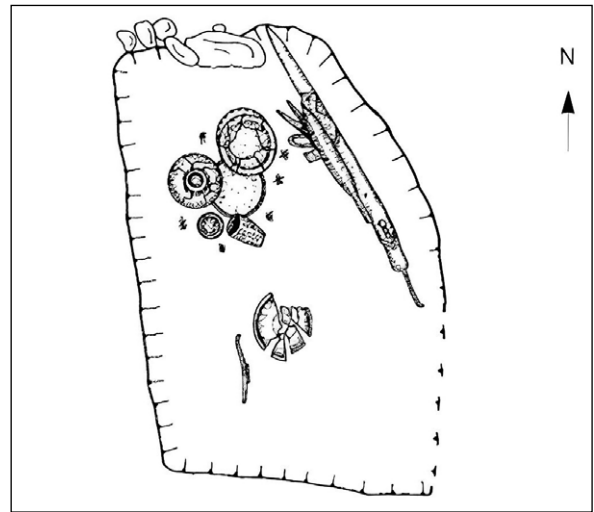


Fig. 2. Plan of the grave no. 53 in Oleggio (after Deodato, Poletti Ecclesia 1999: 112).

cally determined) mature woman's burial (no. 53) contained largely 'male' grave goods (Porro 1999: 407)<sup>20</sup>.

This grave (no. 53) was dated to 125-100 BCE, during the first part of LT D1 (Deodato, Poletti Ecclesia 1999: 115) (Figs 2-3), and contained a complete set of weapons<sup>21</sup>: a sword with a rectan-

these knives seem instead to have had a function linked to butchery, and perhaps also for offerings at the funeral banquet, and maybe even to hunting (*ibid.*: 341-342; on this topic, see also Salzani 1998: 61-62; Vitali 1988: 21; Di Fazio, Chericci 2010: 42). Grave no. 59 (attributed to a probable young woman) also had shears, along with numerous pottery vessels, raw clay, an iron razor (usually found in male burials), small bronze rings, brooches, an axis (coin) and the inscription *sura* (female name) on a vessel. To conclude the list of 'outstanding' burials, grave no. 4 (disturbed context, indetermined sex) included a spearhead and a spindle whorl among other grave goods, while graves nos 29 and 52 (and maybe also 228) have been attributed to male individuals, but with equipment considered 'feminine' (spindle whorls and for no. 52 *parure* elements). Anyway, as noted above, a thorough analysis of such graves is beyond the limitations of this work.

<sup>20</sup> In the osteological study of this cemetery the robustness and frailty of bones (especially the limbs) and the average thicknesses of the crania and femurs have been considered when sexing the deceased (Porro 1999: 399). In regard to burial 53 cranial fragments have been recognised as well as fragments of femur and tibia.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the published excavation plan (Deodato, Poletti Ecclesia 1999: 112) shows three spatial groups of objects. We can distinguish weapons and shears to the North-East, pottery to the North-West. However, due to the lack of references in the plan, it is not possible to comment further.

<sup>18</sup> The data of this cemetery has been obtained from Spagnolo Garzoli 1999a.

<sup>19</sup> Females' graves nos 48, 56, 59, 68 and 92 (and maybe also grave 57) also contained a large knife (length 33-48 cm). The function of these knives, which are known also from other transpadane cemeteries such as Santa Maria di Zevio and Isola Rizza, remains uncertain. What is striking about these objects is the length of the blade, which has led to them being called '*coltellacci*', and initially associated with warfare (Spagnolo Garzoli 1999d: 341). Furthermore, it should be noted that the knife from grave no. 48 (and of two other graves in Oleggio) was intentionally deformed; a practice that recalls the de-functionalisation of weapons (*ibid.*: 342). Despite this,

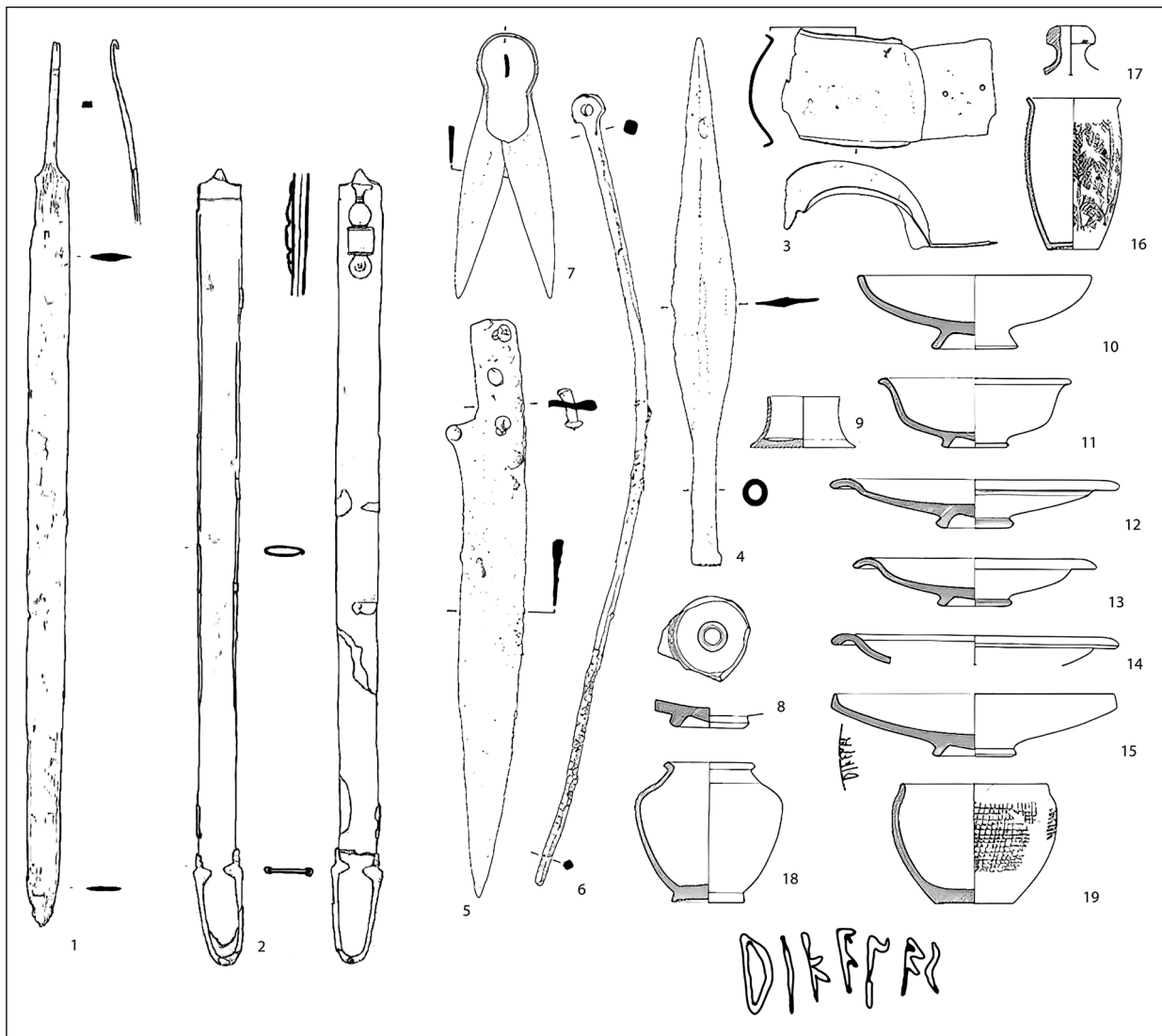


Fig. 3. Grave goods of grave no. 53 in Oleggio (after Deodato, Poletti Ecclesia 1999: 113-114) with drawing of the 'rikanas' inscription (after Gambari 1999: 393).

gular mark of what seems to be a boar and three small dots<sup>22</sup>, a scabbard, a shield umbo with rectangular wings (one missing), a spear head (slightly deformed)<sup>23</sup>; and also, a knife (L 45 cm), a *spiedo* (spit/skewer) and shears<sup>24</sup>, all composed of iron. There were also 11 ceramic vessels<sup>25</sup>. The exterior

of a fine ware shallow bowl (*patera*)<sup>26</sup> was inscribed in the so-called 'leponic' alphabet<sup>27</sup> and with

<sup>22</sup> There are different interpretations about the possible meaning of this mark: maker's mark, magical symbol, territorial/tribal symbol (Spagnolo Garzoli 1999: 348).

<sup>23</sup> All the other weapons are not defunctionalised nor deformed.

<sup>24</sup> Deodato (1999: 334-335) interpreted these shears as functional to shearing.

<sup>25</sup> Among these it is interesting to point out the presence of

one goblet and the upper part of a 'vaso a trottola' (usually associated with the consumption of wine, see Poletti Ecclesia 1999: 308). At least two vessels (nos 12, 13 cfr. fig. 3) have blackened parts and are deformed by the fire, other three (nos 11, 15, 16) have blackened parts.

<sup>26</sup> Deodato, Poletti Ecclesia 1999: 115. It was found in fragments and (partially) reassembled, it has internal and external areas blackened but this seems not to affect the inscription.

<sup>27</sup> For a general overview on the Leponic alphabet and language see Eska 1998; Maras 2020: 943-945 and de Hoz 1992.

a ‘Celtic’ word, *rikanas*. It can be unequivocally traced back to the masculine *rix* or *rikos*, here conjugated to the feminine genitive<sup>28</sup>, and translatable as ‘of the queen’ (Gambari 1999: 388-389)<sup>29</sup>. The meaning of this inscription, however, is not clear: F. M. Gambari proposes an institutional value of the word, interpreting the deceased from burial no. 53 as the ‘queen’ or *regula* of the community (Gambari 1999: 388-389)<sup>30</sup>. Instead, P. Solinas suggests that it is a votive dedication to a female deity, a goddess addressed as *rikana* and F. Motta and A. Morandi think that the word could be a personal (female) name, not necessarily the deceased’s one<sup>31</sup>. Independently from the specific value of this word, the inscription has an outstanding significance in relation with the funerary ritual and grave goods, demonstrating the particularity of this burial<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> In this case, the genitive declares possession according to P. Solinas (2010: 151). On the linguistic aspects, see Solinas 2010: 151-152; Motta 1992: 317.

<sup>29</sup> See also Solinas 2010: 150; Motta 1992: 317; Morandi 1999: 184-185.

<sup>30</sup> If it had institutional value, it would in fact be a unique case also for the isolation of the word. The only possible comparisons for the area treated here are in some coin inscriptions (*rikoi*) and in two identical ‘rik’ inscriptions on vessels from Gottolengo, Cascina Riccio, interpreted by Morandi as an abbreviation of an anthroponymic (Gambari 1999: 388-389; Morandi 2004: 674-675). It should also be noted that the masculine *rix* is always attested in composition (Delamarre 2003: 258).

<sup>31</sup> According to P. Solinas (2010: 151) the vessel belonged to a goddess: «una ‘Regina’ divina per cui si usava l’oggetto per atti rituali» (“a divine ‘Queen’ for which the object was used for ritual activities”, my translation). The Tiberine period inscription in Latin cursive from Lezoux (Puy-de-Dôme) is also considered to be linked to a deity ‘[...] *rigani rosmerti-ac*’ in which ‘*rigani*’ is to be translated as ‘queen’ (although, it is not clear if it is an adjective / epithet to refer to Rosmerta / Rosmertia or if they are two separate goddesses). On this last inscription see: Lejeune, Marichal 1976: 151-156; Lejeune 1981: 29-30; Bammesberger 1992: 99-101; Delamarre 2003: 258. Motta 1992: 317; Morandi 1999: 184-185; Morandi 2004: 578. Morandi (*ibid.*) suggests to interpret this inscription as an offering made by *Rikana* to the deceased; an offering that had to be translated into the food inside the vessel (almost all of Oleggio’s inscriptions are found on *paterae*, intended to contain foods offered to the deceased: see Gambari 1999: 391-392).

<sup>32</sup> If we interpret the inscription as a votive offering, this remains a remarkable find since it is very rare to have such attestations linked to individuals. Moreover, the placement of a ritual tool in this burial highlights the importance of the deceased. Furthermore, a possible ritual role of the deceased does not exclude her having a high rank among the community. In the La Tène period we have limited information about rituality and religiosity, and this does not allow us to fully understand ritual

The significant amount of pottery (the highest quantity for the La Tène D1 period<sup>33</sup>) and the *spiedo* (spit/skewer) refer to the consumption of food and alcoholic beverages. The weaponry suggests the deceased was likely recognized as part of the warrior elite (Spagnolo Garzoli 1999b: 19)<sup>34</sup>. While the spear on its own (as represented in 9 burials or together with the shield as represented in 1 case)<sup>35</sup> could suggest a light armament type (perhaps connected with assault infantry), the presence of the long sword (length 96 cm in total) more likely evokes combat on horseback (Spagnolo Garzoli 1999e: 345-347)<sup>36</sup>, which could possibly locate the deceased in an even higher social position (similarly to the other 7 graves with sword). In any case, the presence of this panoply undoubtedly connects this woman, at least symbolically, to the military sphere.

Even if other interpretations are possible, the grave goods – in particular the military and status connotations of the burial – leads to consider the deceased hierarchically at the top<sup>37</sup> of this small community or *pagus*<sup>38</sup>, as a female chief or ‘*regula*’,

practices and cults (for an overview of Northern Italian contexts and issues related with the topic see Vitali 2001; Vitali 2000). However, it is interesting that Polybius (II, 32) writes about a ‘temple of Athena’, situated in the *Insubri*’s territory, which could probably be associated with a (‘Celtic’) goddess of war (Vitali 2001: 281). Thus, the feminine sex and the presence of weapons could perhaps be linked to this deity. However, the data available are too poor to go further with this interpretation.

<sup>33</sup> Spagnolo Garzoli 1999c: 51. It is also noted that for the LT D1 burials with the highest number of vessels are attributed to women (*ibid.*).

<sup>34</sup> Regarding the relevance of the armament in funerary contexts of the period and its role as marker of belonging to the ruling class: Lejars, Gruel 2015: 239.

<sup>35</sup> The cemetery of Oleggio has produced only 8 swords, belonging to graves dated between LT C2 and D1. In total, there are 20 burials with weapons (many of these have no anthropological attribution): 7 with a complete panoply (including our grave no. 53 and grave no. 226, which was equipped with 2 spearheads), 1 with sword and umbo, 2 with only an umbo, 1 with a *sauroter* and an umbo, and 9 with only the spearhead. Among these, 5 burials with weapons are dated to the end of the LT C2 (of which 3 with sword); 6 are dated to the transition between LTC2 and LTD1 (of which 2 with sword) and 6 date to the beginning of the LTD1 (of which 3 with sword). 6 graves with weapons (but with no sword) date to the LTD1.

<sup>36</sup> See also Rapin 1999: 62. On the importance of weapons and in particular of the sword among ‘Celtic’ groups see also Vitali 2004: 321-322.

<sup>37</sup> On the topic of the possible connections between women and power, see Belard 2017: 223-232.

<sup>38</sup> To be interpreted as a little rural territory (village). It is

in agreement with one of the interpretations of the inscribed patera from this burial<sup>39</sup>.

### 3.2. *Isola Rizza*

The cemetery of Isola Rizza, Casalandri (Verona) contained 111 burials (mainly cremations) dated to La Tène C2-D2 (Salzani 1998). Among those burials where the anthropological assessment established the sex<sup>40</sup>, there are approximately 26 infants or young individuals, 28 women's burials and men's graves are 14. In anthropologically male graves elements of weaponry are present in 8 cases<sup>41</sup>. Vessels, brooches, coins<sup>42</sup>, knives or food offers are attested in graves of both sexes without a clear difference. In females' graves<sup>43</sup> there are no clear 'gender' markers: a spindle whorl is present only in 1 case along with a chain belt; a bracelet is present in only 1 burial; in grave no. 19 shears are present<sup>44</sup> and 4 burials show an apparent mis-match between the anthropological sex and the gender implied by the grave good (discussed below). Nonetheless, a spindle whorl is attested also in a possible (anthropologically identified) male burial.

Among all the graves (also those without anthropological assessment of the sex) there is a total of 17 graves with weapons<sup>45</sup>: 2 dated to the LT C2, 4 to the LT C2-LT D1, 10 are dated to the LT D1 and only 1 dates to LT D2. Swords and shield umbos have been found only in the LT D1 phase, in 3 graves. Interestingly, only one grave with weapons is dated to the LTD2 (burial 51 considered below). A single axe is present in 3 cases (two dated to LT D1 and one to LTD2) and two axes

estimated that on average the Oleggio community was made up of about 5 or 6 families in the initial phase (LT C2-LT D1), perhaps organised into *clans* (Spagnolo Garzoli 1999b: 17, 19; Spagnolo Garzoli 1999c: 49).

<sup>39</sup> Thus Gambari 1999: 388-389. See also Spagnolo Garzoli 1999e: 347.

<sup>40</sup> There is no specific information about the techniques used for sexing these individuals (Corrain 1987).

<sup>41</sup> It is important to underline again the fact that anthropological analyses on cremations are not completely reliable. Among burials of this cemetery with an anthropological identification of sex, inhumation rituality is attested only in 3 males' burials and in 7 females' burials.

<sup>42</sup> Coins have been interpreted as a 'Charon's offering' or indicator of wealth (Salzani 1998: 63) but indeed the meaning of their deposition in graves remain uncertain (Bergonzi, Piana Agostinetti 1987; Barello 1999).

<sup>43</sup> Considering only burials where the sex has been established through anthropological analysis.

<sup>44</sup> Grave no. 104 also produced shears along with glass paste beads (adult of uncertain sex).

<sup>45</sup> The knife has not been considered a weapon (in accordance to what stated for Oleggio).

are present in grave 12 (LT D1). The function of these is unclear.

Moreover, grave no. 56 differed, on the one hand, because it is the only double burial and, on the other, for the type of grave goods it contained. This burial contained a child and possibly a female adult. In addition to numerous vessels, brooches, rings, and coins, it also featured a spindle whorl, a needle, two spearheads, a spear butt, three iron knives and a chisel. Even if it is conceivable that the spindle whorl and needle accompanied the female deceased and the weapons were intended for the child as symbols of status and social position (not a unique occurrence<sup>46</sup>), the arrangement of the cremation and grave goods in the burial does not help to differentiate between two sets of grave goods. It is interesting to briefly note the presence of weapons in some child burials as they could not be actually used. It thus seems reasonable to assume they were a symbol of what that child would have been when they became an adult and/or of the child's social position.

Among the graves with weapons, four anthropologically female cremations – burials nos 25, 51, 57, 74 (fig. 4) – contained a spearhead each among other objects (fig. 5). Grave no. 51 also contained an axe and a javelin head<sup>47</sup>. Among the other elements of the grave goods (such as pottery, present in all the 4 graves) burials nos 51 and 74 also contained a *graffione* (metal tool with spikes used in meat preparation) and a *spiedo* (spit/skewer), objects linked to the consumption of meat, and, like the coin of grave no. 51 may possibly be indicators of wealth. Even if spearheads (as only element of weaponry in the grave) in the cemetery are relatively numerous (14) compared to the three graves with (additionally) a sword and a shield umbo (nos 'recupero 81', 4, 12<sup>48</sup>, all dated to LT D1)<sup>49</sup>, these are not automatically lower in

<sup>46</sup> Consider for example grave nos 65 of Isola Rizza, Casalandri, 112 of Oleggio (infant with small spear point) or the wagon grave with panoply of the cemetery of Santa Maria di Zevio, Lazisetta, attributed to a child (Salzani 2004).

<sup>47</sup> Between the other objects grave no. 25 had also a '*vaso a trottole*', considered to be a typically *Insubrian* vessel by scholars, probably originally from the Ticino area and used to contain wine, but frequently found in the territories considered here (Poletti Ecclesia 1999: 308).

<sup>48</sup> Burial 4 is perhaps male (based on anthropological analyses), for graves 12 and rec. 81 there is no indication of sex. Of these, along with other artefacts, grave 12 also had two axes, a *spiedo* and several coins.

<sup>49</sup> There is also one deceased individual (grave no. 27) buried with a shield umbo but without a sword.



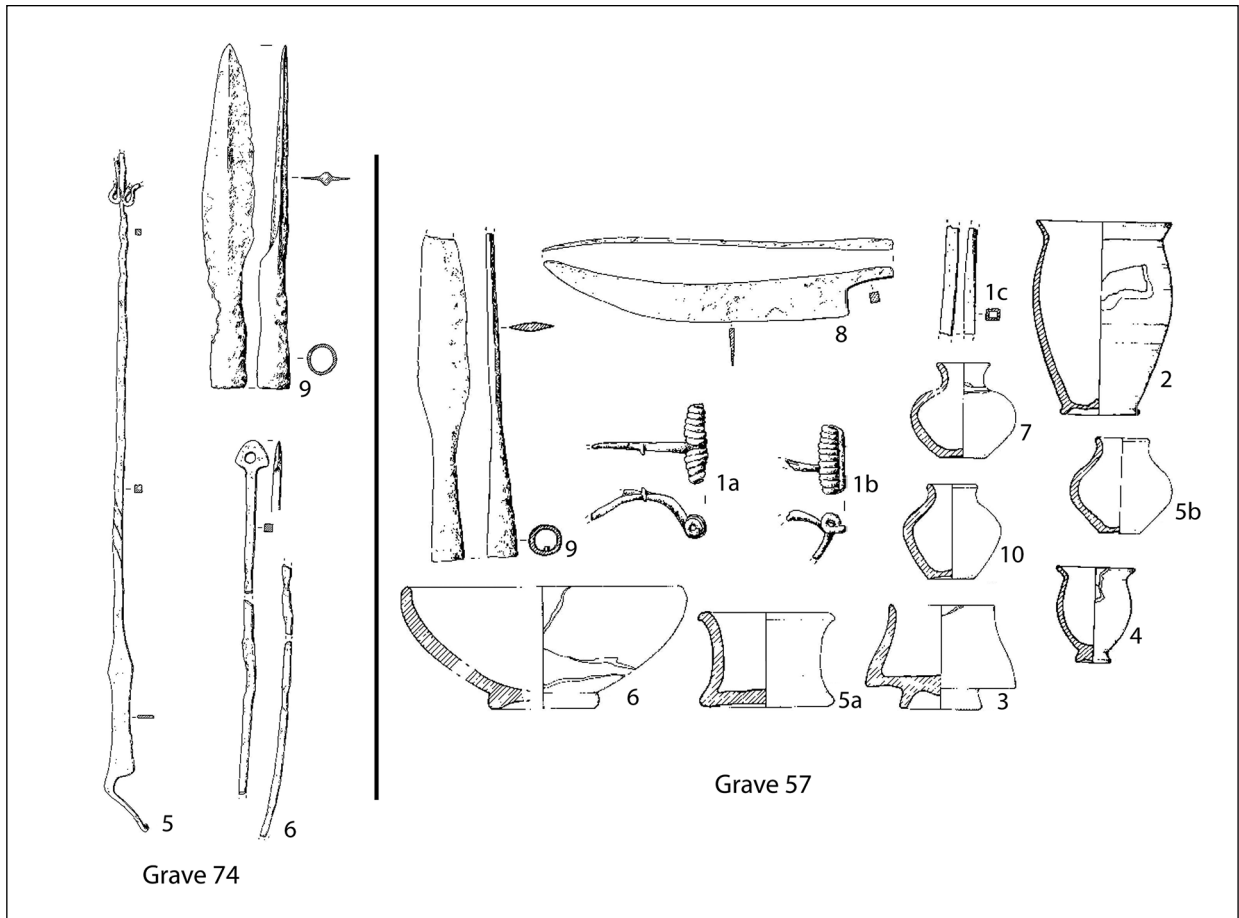


Fig. 4. Grave goods from grave no. 57 and part of the grave goods from grave no. 74 of Isola Rizza, Casalandri (after Salzani 1998: 99, 104).

rank (cfr. what stated for Oleggio §3.1). In fact, weapons and especially swords tended to become less frequent in burials after the granting of the *ius Latii* (89 BCE, *Lex Pompeia de Transpadanis*). Therefore, the presence of the spear alone could indicate not so much a lower social position but rather the gradual process of ‘Romanisation’ of the considered community (Di Fazio, Cherici 2010: 45-46)<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, beyond the social significance of the various panoplies, what is important once again to underline is that the four women were represented according to a typically male military funerary language.

<sup>50</sup> On the problematic concept of Romanisation see Cecconi 2006.

### 3.3 Santa Maria di Zevio

The cemetery of Santa Maria di Zevio, Mirandola<sup>51</sup>, consists of c. 168 cremation burials (c. 86 dated to LT C2-D2) with a relatively high proportion of armed individuals<sup>52</sup>. This cemetery is dated to LT C2 and continued in use until the early Middle Ages. Among LT burials where an-

<sup>51</sup> Information on this cemetery was obtained from Salzani 1996.

<sup>52</sup> 44 graves (not all datable) out of 168 are attributed by anthropological analyses to children or young individuals. Of the 86 graves dated to the LT period the majority has a type of equipment usually associated with the ‘male’ gender (only 11 burials had a female gendered type of equipment against 31 burials with weapons), however the sex has been obtained for only a relatively small number of them. A similar impression is gained also for the cemetery of Povegliano Veronese (in the same region) where only few burials had a ‘female’ gendered type of equipment (Vitali *et alii* 2010: 204).

Grave No.	Anthropological Analysis	Spearhead	Javelin head	Sword (and scabbard)	Shield umbo	Axe	Other elements	Chronology
57	Adult, maybe female	x					Vessels, brooches, knife	LT C2-D1
25	Adult woman	x					Vessels, joint of meat	LT D1
74	Adult woman	x					Vessels, brooches, knife, joint of meat, <i>graffione</i> , <i>spiedo</i>	LT D1
51	Adult woman	x	x			x	Vessels, <i>graffione</i> , <i>spiedo</i> , knife, coin (axis), brooch	LT D2

Fig. 5. Isola Rizza, Casalandri - women's burials with weapons.

thropological analysis established a sex, 9 are of women and 19 of men (but 2 of these have an uncertain chronology). Females' graves (excluded the five examined below) present spindle whorls in 2 cases, one of which with also a needle. Vessels, brooches, coins, knives are present in the majority of burials without a clear distinction between genders. A couple of bronze brooches has been found in burials nos 152 and 63 and is associated with the female gender (Salzani 1996: 51, 91), however burial 152 is identified as belonging to a woman and grave 63 to a man (buried with also a spindle whorl and a glass bead). Among burials attributed to men, weapons are present in 12 cases.

Burials nos 10, 35 (fig. 6), 43 (fig. 7), 95, 137<sup>53</sup>, mostly dated to LT D, stand out as they are anthropologically attributed to women but contained elements of weaponry (fig. 8).

Burial no. 10 produced a javelin head, burials nos 35 and 95 a spearhead each. Burial no. 43 was accompanied by a complete set of weaponry, consisting of a javelin point, an iron chain for the sword suspension with hook with mushroom-shaped button and a fragmentary shield umbo. The northern part of this pit had been disturbed by illegal excavation, and fragments of an iron sword<sup>54</sup>, the suspension loop of the scabbard, a sickle<sup>55</sup> and the remains of a javelin were found on

the ground surface. Burial no. 137 also contained a complete panoply composed of spearhead, sword and umbo.

When comparing all the 31 burials from the cemetery containing military equipment<sup>56</sup> (also those without anthropological attribution of sex) (fig. 9), it is possible to observe different degrees of complexity of the assemblages. These range from those with a complete panoply of weapons, to burials with only a spear or a chain belt. However, it is unlikely that the range and complexity of grave goods could automatically indicate as many hierarchical and status levels<sup>57</sup>.

A further element of interest is provided by the changes that the general funerary assemblages in this cemetery underwent over time<sup>58</sup>. In phase I (the transitional period between LT C and D) 17 graves had weapons, of which 9 had also the sword. Moreover, complete panoplies of weaponry are best attested in this phase (of the 14 graves with sword, umbo and spear, 10 date to this phase, including

from burial 123, perhaps a female one with, among other things, a spindle whorl. The sickle can be used, more generally, to cut (so it is not necessarily related to mowing). A sickle was also found in burial 78 of Isola Rizza (of which it is not possible to establish the sex) together with, a spindle whorl and other grave goods.

<sup>53</sup> The sex has been attributed on the basis of the richness of cranial sutures for burial no. 10; gracility of the skeleton for burial no. 35; slight thickness of some fragments of the skull case for burial no. 43 (Meneghello 1989). No specific information about the techniques used for sexing graves nos 95 and 137 has been found.

<sup>54</sup> Perhaps stolen (Salzani 1996: 99).

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that a billhook or '*roncoletta*' also comes

<sup>56</sup> The knife was present in almost all the burials with weaponry (missing only in 7 cases) as well as in burials of unarmed (see Salzani 1996: 97-100) but it is not considered to be a weapon.

<sup>57</sup> For a critical discussion of the archaeological approaches linked to status and the automatic assignment of a high level based on the grave goods, cfr. Babić 2005: 67-84 and Ramsel 2020: 13.

<sup>58</sup> For the three phases division of the La Tène burials, see Salzani 1996: 97-98.

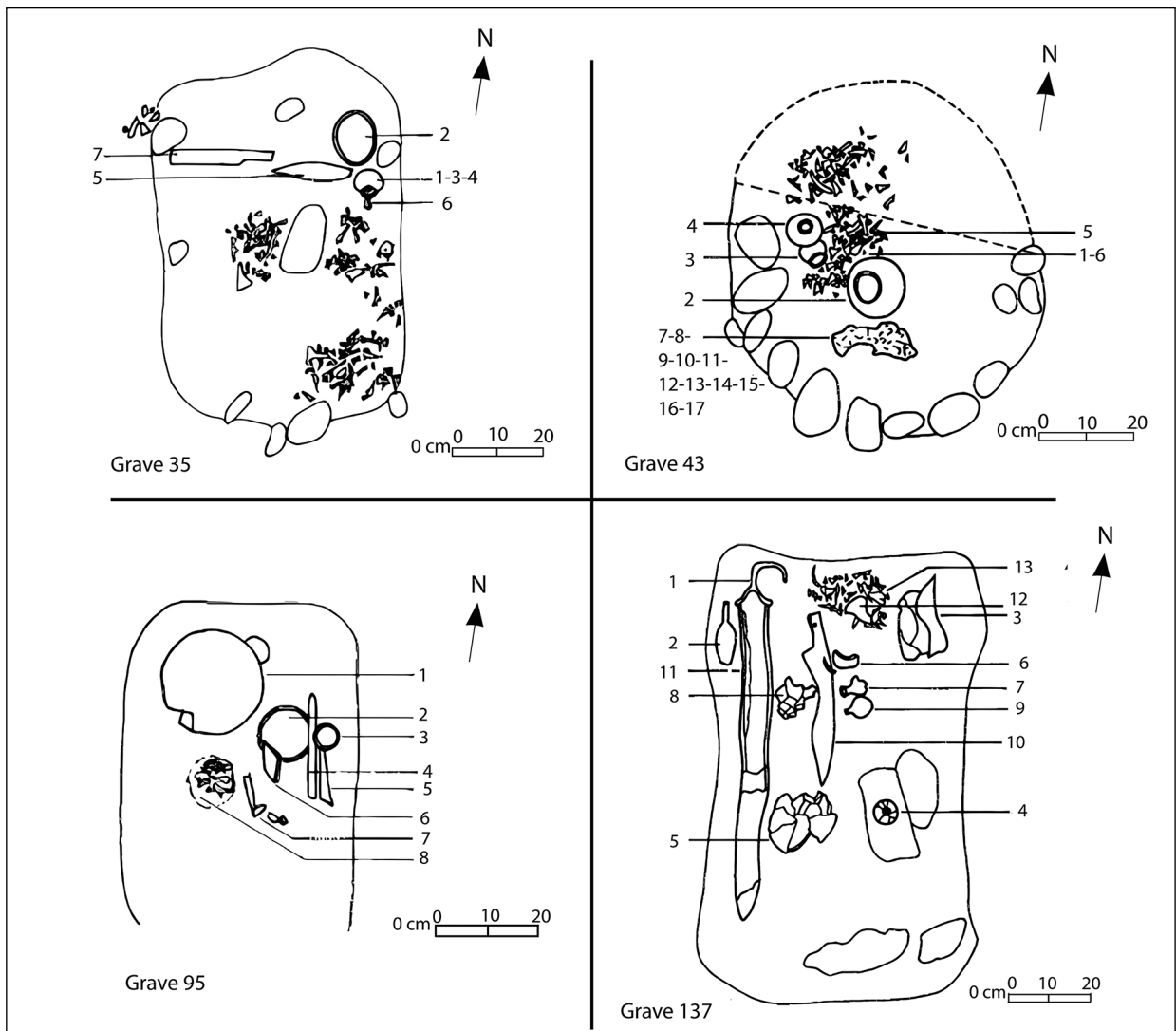


Fig. 6. Plans of graves nos 35 (no. 5, spearhead), 43, 95 (no. 4, spearhead), 137 of Santa Maria di Zevio, Mirandola (after Salzani 1996: 38, 41, 66, 85).

the no. 43). Additionally, the (sword-suspension) chain belt and belt hook are attested only in this phase. By contrast, only four burials contained a single spearhead. During phase II (LT D1) 6 graves had weapons, of which 4 had also a sword, beyond the spear and the umbo (including no. 137) and 2 graves were equipped with only a spearhead (including the no. 35). By contrast in phase III (LT D2) no deceased had a complete panoply (in accordance with what also happens in Isola Rizza, §3.2) but only a spearhead or, in one case, a javelin (including grave nos 10 and 95) for a total of 8 graves with weapons (Salzani 1996: 99). Therefore, the female burials examined above are coherent with the chronological phase to which they date in respect to the other burials with weaponry.

#### 4. Conclusions

The women's burials examined above (fig. 10) stand out as different with respect to the usual gender divide. The contexts in fact suggest that the categorisation of two genders corresponding with the sex as opposite and alternatives (a female one dedicated to weaving, food preparation, house management; a male one dedicated to war) is rather reductive. We do not want to deny that most of the women of these communities might be actually defined by the aforementioned activities but rather to call attention to the 'divergent' cases which speak of a non-automatic correspondence between sex and gender and a more complex reality.

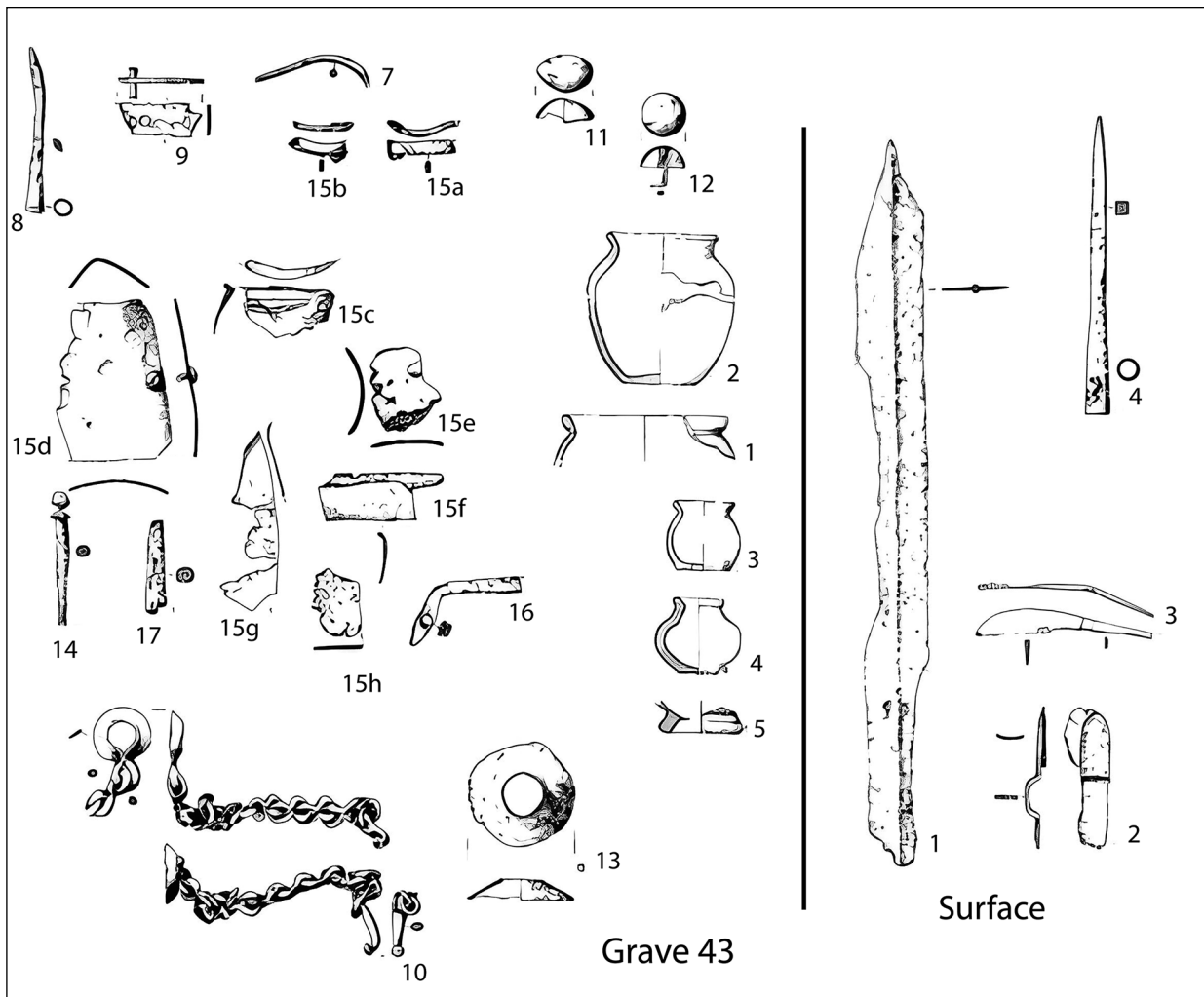


Fig. 7. Grave goods from grave no. 43 of Santa Maria di Zevio, Mirandola and materials found in surface, attributed to the same grave (after Salzani 1996: 115, 116).

The presence of weapons in female graves (a very particular and rare fact), such as those examined above, clearly connects these women to the military sphere<sup>59</sup>. Although this does not automatically make such women warriors<sup>60</sup>, it remains a hypothesis to consider. However, it is also possible to see the presence of weapons in such graves as representing the status and social position in-

<sup>59</sup> Other graves of women buried with weapons are attested in Austria, Slovakia and Bohemia (Ramsl 2020: 167-168). For a reflection on warrior women; Jordan 2009.

<sup>60</sup> *Cartimandua* and *Boudicca* took military decisions and led men into battle but they are not described as warriors nor is mentioned their direct involvement in the fighting (Tacitus *Ann.* XII 36, 40; *Ann.* XIV 35-37 and *Hist.* III 45; Dio Cassius 62).

herent to the belonging to a ruling class (making these deceased a sort of symbolic warriors, Jordan 2009: 98). The deceased were buried with weapons perhaps precisely because of the organisation of these communities into groups under the control of local warrior elites, in which the link with the war was felt to be of primary importance in affirming the power of the hegemonic group. In fact, if we consider the military element as fundamental to the belonging to the elite group and eventually to a leadership role, it seems likely that weapons could act as a marker of social position in LT C/D (See Grossi, Knobloch, Lumacone 2010: 35; Quesada Sanz 2012: 354; de Marinis, Rapi 2019: 127). In fact, it has been already highlighted that the weapons played an important role in the participation in the politic life in this period. In Northern Italy, as well as in Gaul, political

Grave No.	Anthropological analysis	Spearhead	Javelin head	Sword (and scabbard)	Shield umbo	Chain belt	Other elements	Chronology
43	Adult woman	x	x	x	x	x	Vessels, brooch, nail, iron fragment, knife, sickle	LT C-D
137	Adult, probably female	x		x	x		Vessels, brooches, knife	LT D1
35	Adult, possibly female	x					Vessels, 1 or 2 knives	LT D1
10	Adult, possibly female		x				Vessels, coins	LT D2
95	Few remains of an adult, maybe female	x					Vessels, knife, brooch	LT D2

Fig. 8. Santa Maria di Zevio, Mirandola, women's burials with weapons.

Weaponry	Quantity
Iron chain belt (no weapons)	2
Spearhead	13 (grave nos 35, 95 included)
Javelin head	1 (grave no. 10)
Spearhead + shield umbo	1
Spearhead + sword + shield umbo	10 (grave no. 137 included)
Spearhead + sword + shield umbo + belt hook	2
Spearhead + 2 swords + shield umbo + iron chain belt	1
Spearhead + javelin head + sword (fragments) + shield umbo + iron chain belt	1 (grave no. 43)

Fig. 9. Santa Maria di Zevio, Mirandola, type and quantity of weapons buried in the burials.

decisions are reported to have been taken during assemblies, when the armed part of the community gathered (For example, Livy XXI 20; XXXII 30; Polybius II 21; Verger 2009: 67-69). Brunaux (2002: 237) suggested that exactly the armed assembly, formed by the warriors, was the basic form of political assembly in Gaul. This might again underline the importance of weapons at a 'social' level (and possibly also at a religious level if the interpretation of Brunaux 2002 which identifies a strong bond between war and religion is true). Moreover, even if more difficult to demonstrate, Plutarch *Mul. Virt.* 6 states that the women of the 'Celts' – before the crossing of the Alps, but also in 218 BCE when Hannibal looked for the alliance of the communities of Northern Italy – had an

important role in the decisions of war and peace, suggesting their participation in the politic life of the community and maybe to the assembly (even if our burials are later, mostly dated to LT D1, 130/120-100/70 BCE ca.).

Finally, it is useful to recall the concept of '*honorary males*', as used by B. Arnold (1995) for the initial LT in some European contexts. The '*honorary male syndrome*' is applied to those cases in which a woman acquires a political position, or in any case a prestigious one, in a patriarchal society. In doing so she acquires some 'masculine' attributes (*ibid.*: 161). Therefore, in these cases the women 'of power' would be characterised as men to be able to exercise power in a society in which women are recognised at a lower hierarchical level.

Cemetery	Grave no.	Chronology	Rite	Anthropological identification	Objects associated with male gender
Oleggio	53	LT D1	cremation	mature woman	sword, shield umbo, spearhead, shears
Santa Maria di Zevio - Mirandola	43	LT C-D	cremation	adult woman	javelin head, chain belt, shield umbo; from the surface: fr. of sword and scabbard, fr. of javelin
	137	LT D1	cremation	adult, probably female	spearhead, sword, shield umbo
	35	LT D1	cremation	adult, possibly female	spearhead
	10	LT D2	cremation	adult, possibly female	javelin head
	95	LT D2	cremation	few remains of an adult, maybe female	spearhead
Isola Rizza - Casalandri	57	LT C2-D1	cremation	adult, maybe female	spearhead
	25	LT D1	cremation	adult woman	spearhead
	74	LT D1	cremation	adult woman	spearhead
	51	LT D2	cremation	adult woman	spearhead, javelin head, axe

Fig. 10. Summary table of the women's graves with weapons.

Society is therefore patriarchal and men occupy a higher hierarchical position, but some women can access the most eminent roles and to do this they must 'disguise' as men<sup>61</sup>. This reading is useful if applied to the examined contexts. There do not seem to have been, for the late La Tène period, real 'feminine' symbols of prestige comparable to weapons for men. Therefore, the acquisition of symbolic elements related to war seems coherent within a militarised society. Nevertheless, we are not suggesting that all the (ten) contexts examined here should be referred to as 'queens' or '*regulae*', but rather (perhaps) to women belonging to the hegemonic warrior group.

To conclude, the funerary deposition of objects related to war could have been a socially accepted communication code attesting the social role of some women<sup>62</sup>. Nevertheless, other interpretations might be possible. These rare graves may inform us of the possibility (also) for women to ne-

gotiate their own gender as active agents<sup>63</sup>. In fact, the absence of female markers in these burials but rather the presence of weaponry could even suggest a shift in their gender, maybe linked to their social position, but perhaps also due to specific gender preferences. In fact, even if not discussed here, there are some burials containing indicators referred to both female and male genders. These findings along with the burials examined in this paper, could inform us of the possibility for some people to negotiate their gender and more generally, to a broader range of genders and of social roles. Only with further studies we will be able, perhaps, to better understand the social context of these communities. This preliminary study did not aim to solve the issues related to these burials, but instead to raise questions and possibilities in order to start clarifying these findings. Waiting for new analyses and data, what is possible to underline for the moment with more certainty is that during the late La Tène period there seems to be more complexity of social and gender identities than previously imagined.

<sup>61</sup> B. Arnold cites as examples of this situation the 'female-pharaoh' Hatshepsut and Queen Elizabeth I of England (*ibid.* 1995: 161).

<sup>62</sup> It is important to note that personal appearance and clothing, among other things, play an important role in the non-verbal communication of identity (Wells 2001: 18).

<sup>63</sup> For ethnographic comparisons, see Ramsil 2020: 12-13.

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