
750 YEARS 'MIT ENER COLUEN'

By Geert & Sara Nijs

Exactly 750 years ago, for the first time in history the word 'colven' was used in the Netherlands. It was the famous Southern Netherlandish medieval poet and author Jacob van Maerlant who wrote the words 'mit ener coluen' (with a club) in 'Merlijns boec' (Merlin's Book). In all these 750 years, Netherlandish historians have never given attention to these few words, that stand for one of the most popular games ever played in the Low Countries.



Detail of the illumination Merlin, from a manuscript 1280 – 1290, North of France – Français 95, fol. 223, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Recently, after linguistic research, some historians concluded that the words 'mit ener coluen' written by Jacob van Maerlant, had nothing to do with the golf-like game of Netherlandish colf. In their opinion, the words colf and (Scottish) golf meant a medieval hockey-like game in which two teams of unlimited size on a limitless playing field, tried to capture with curbed sticks and brute force a ball from the opposing team and to pass that ball over the opponents target line. They concluded that both colf and golf in the Middle Ages were not games in which players, individually without interference from other

players, tried to reach a target decided upon beforehand in the fewest number of strokes as is done today by millions of golf players all over the world.

Their new way of thinking is based on a French text in 'Le Roman de Merlin' written by Robert de Boron, between 1180 and 1200. In this roman, De Boron writes about boys playing 'a la çoule' (at ball) and in which Merlin hits one of the other boys with a 'croce' (curbed stick); these bold written words would refer to medieval hockey.

In Scotland, where golf history is written in capitals, the attack on the originality of Scottish golf was received with contempt. The Encyclopædia Britannica of 2007 made ample space available for this new thesis. In the Netherlands and in Belgium nobody got upset. The authors of this short study were interested in the considerations and the resulting conclusions of the historians.

The name of the game

In 1678, Charles du Fresne, Sieur du Cange, compiled a dictionary of popular Latin words used between the 8th and 12th century. In his 'Glossarium Mediae Infirmae Latinitatis', he explained the word 'choulla' as a ball hit with a stick (Globulus ligneus qui clava propellitur). He did not say anything about the game in which the ball was hit with a stick.

In the course of time 'choulla' became the French words 'choule' (langue d'oc) and 'soule' (langue d'oïl), with the same original meaning. Subsequently the word choule/soule became a generic term for all ball games.

To distinguish the stick and ball games often ‘à la crosse’ (with a curbed stick) was added. With this addition one could still not distinguish which one of the many club and ball games were meant, nor did the contraction ‘crosse’ clarify the kind of game.

In the first ‘Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française’ from 1694, the word ‘crosser’ was explained as playing stick and ball games, the word ‘crosse’ meant stick (curbed at one end) and ‘crosseur’ meant stick and ball player. There was no mention about what kind of stick and ball game was meant.

We have found no indication that the words crosser, crosse and crosseur were used only for the ‘hockey’ team game.

Jean-Jules Jusserand, diplomat and sports historian, used ‘jeu de crosse’ as a generic term in his ‘Les Sports et Jeux d’Exercice dans l’ancienne France’ (1901) while at that

moment this name was used specifically for the individual stick and ball game played in Northern France and Southern Belgium and that the team game was called already hockey. The word crosse or crossage is the French name for the variant of Flemish-Netherlandish colf.

The games of colf and crosse

The game called ‘mit ener coluen’ as mentioned by Jacob van Maerlant was well-known and very popular in the Low Countries in the 13th and 14th century. Many ordinances from different parts of the region refer to the colf and crosse games.

In the county of Hainaut (Henegouwen), the French speaking part of the Low Countries, Count William bought balls to ‘choler’ in 1332 (Theo Mathy, ‘Le sport, miroir de la société’, 1995).

Because it is not likely that counts played the undisciplined rough game of ancient hockey or football, we could conclude that these balls were meant for playing the game of ‘crosse’, or choules as the Anglo-Saxons say.

In 1360, the council of Brussels banned the game of colf: “... wie met colven tsolt es om twintich scell’ oft op hare overste cleet ...” (he who plays at colf pays a fine of 20 shillings or his overcoat will be confiscated). In the archives of the city of Brugge there are several documents explaining that the town council regularly announced that playing colf in the streets or elsewhere inside the city walls was forbidden: “... verboden up de strate noch elders binnen deser stede **den bal te slane met colven** ...”.

(Jacques Temmerman, ‘Golf & Kolf, zeven eeuwen geschiedenis’, 1993).

In March 1870, a story was published in the governmental magazine ‘Nieuwe bijdragen ter bevordering van het Onderwijs en de Opvoeding’ (New Contributions for the advancement of Education and Upbringing). In this article, Hendrik Breuninkhof referred to a colf match in a village called Loenen a/d Vecht in 1297.



One of the oldest presentations of colf players is in this illumination from around 1510 in the so-called ‘Other Golf Book of Hours’. Players are clearly playing an individual game. – Golf Illustrated & Outdoor America, August 1915

In this match two teams of four players tried to reach four different targets, decided upon beforehand in the fewest number of strokes. This traditional colf match, played in memory of the murder on Count Floris V of Holland, was played every year until 1830.

In 1387, the regent of the county of Holland, Zeeland and Hainaut, Albrecht van Bavaria, sealed a charter for the city of Brielle (Den Briel), in which it was forbidden to play any game for money. One of the exceptions to this ordinance was “den bal mitter colven te slaen buten der veste” (to play the ball with a club outside the town walls).

(Steven J. van Hengel, ‘Early Golf’, 1982)



Map of the city of Haarlem from 1646. The light coloured field to the right of the city is the 'colf course' offered by Count Albrecht to the citizens of the town.

Two years later, in 1389, the regent Albrecht offered the citizens of Haarlem a field called 'De Baen' (the course) to be used exclusively for playing games – especially colf – because these were too dangerous within the city walls. (Robin Bargmann, ‘Serendipity of Early Golf’, 2010)

Some historians are of the opinion that 'De Baen', with a length of about 350 meters was too short for playing colf. However, in the Middle Ages colvers could not hit the smooth wooden ball with the crude curbed stick any further than 100 meters (Annemarieke Willemsen, article 'Van allen Spele' in the magazine 'Madoc', 1996).

In today's golf terminology 'De Baen' was a Par 5.

The above makes it quite clear that in the second half of the Middle Ages, playing 'colve' and 'crosse' in this part of the Low Countries was fairly common.

Jacob van Maerlant

Jacob van Maerlant was born near Brugge in the county of Flanders, around 1220. He is the most famous medieval author of the Netherlandish language region. He spent some years of his working life in the village of Maerlant near the town of Brielle. He returned to Damme near Brugge, where he died around 1300.

Jacob was the first poet/author who wrote in the ordinary language and had considerable influence on the diffusion of knowledge in the Netherlands. He has been of much importance to Netherlandish literature. The most important of all his works was the “Spiegel Historiael”, a world history in poetic form, containing not less than 90,000 verses.

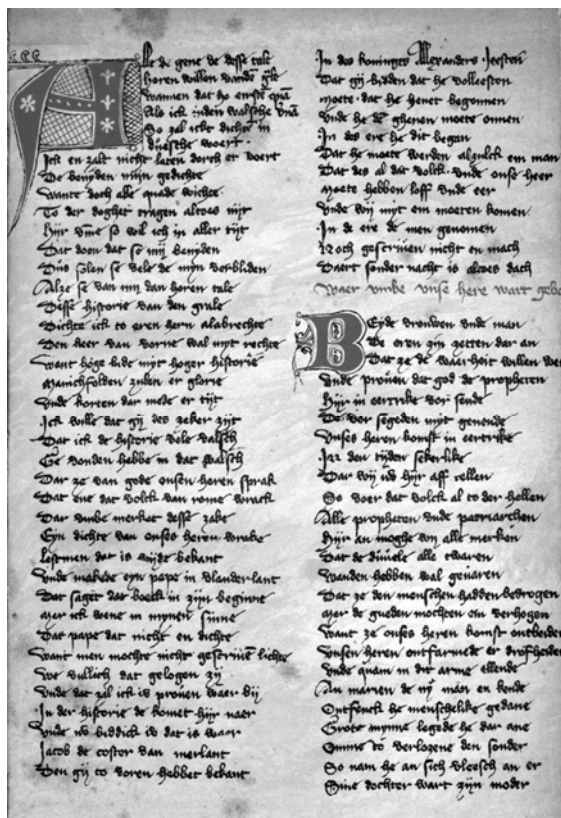


Statue of Jacob van Maerlant on the market place at Damme (Flanders, Belgium), where he lived the last part of his life and was buried around 1300

Many of his books found its origin in more ancient European manuscripts. His books, mostly in poetic form, are no straight translations and not his own creations, but transcriptions of older Latin and French texts. In his works he wrote his own story and placed the events in his own time and environment. In the Middle Ages this was a fairly common method of working as we will see in the continuation of this short study.

‘Merlijns boec’ from Jacob van Maerlant

Jacob van Maerlant wrote the words ‘mit ener coluen’ in 1261 in ‘Merlijns boec’. The story is about a sorcerer who had been fathered by a virgin and who became the tutor of King Arthur.



First page of the so-called Steinforter manuscript, the original holograph of Jacob van Maerlant's 'Merlijns boec', kept at Benthaim in Germany

The original manuscript of the book written in the Netherlandish language, containing no less than 36,000 verses, is kept at Benthaim (Germany).

The phrase with the word ‘coluen’ can be found in the 3rd book in the verses 4613 up to and including 4625:

- 4613 Dat ze to enen dorpe quamen
Dar liepen harde vele kinder
4615 In enen mersche meere vnde mynder
Vnde sloegen dar eynen bal
Merlijn de dit wiste al
Sach de boden want he was daer
Vnde he trat een deel dar naer
4620 Vnde gaff den rikesten enen slach
Van den dorpe dat he lach
Mit ener coluen vor zine schene
Omb dat ene schelden zolde de gene
Dat kint weende vnde sprack to
merlijne wart
4625 Onreyne vaderloze bastert

The translation in English, based on the Netherlandish translation of ‘Merlijn, de tovenaer van koning Arthur’ by Frank Brandsma and Lodewijk van Velthem, 2004:

“They came at last in a village
where a group of children in a meadow
were *playing with a ball*.
Merlin who was there, saw
the messengers coming.
He went in their direction
and hit the richest boy of the village
with a colf against his shin,
so that the boy would abuse him.
The child roared at Merlin:
“Dirty fatherless bastard!”
(Translation by the authors)

Nothing in this text points to an undisciplined game of hockey. Hitting the rich village boy had nothing to do with the game itself.

‘Le Roman de Merlin’ from Robert de Boron

‘Merlijns Boec’ is an adaptation of a work called ‘Le Roman de Merlin’, written in the French language by Robert de Boron, probably

between 1180 - 1200. It is generally accepted that 'Merlijns Boec' was not just a translation in the Netherlandish language of 'Le Roman de Merlin' but much more a presentation of Merlin's story, set in Van Maerlant's own time and age.

The verbatim text of one of the many unrhymed versions of 'Le Roman de Merlin' from Robert de Boron reads as follows:

"Einsis chevauchierent tuit .IIII. tant qu'il avint un jor qu'il passerent .I. grant champ a l'entree d'une ville et en cel champ avoit grant plenté d'enfanz qui **jouoient a la çoule**. Et Merlins qui toutes les choses savoit vit cels qui le requeroient, se si traist pres de l'un des plus riches de la ville, por ce que il savoit bien que cil le messameroit : si hauce **la croce**, si fiert l'enfant en la jambe, et cil commence a plorer et Merlin a messaamer et a reprocher qu'il est nez sanz pere."

(Alexandre Micha, 'Merlin, Roman du XIIIe siècle', 2000)

The translation in modern English, based on the French translation of 'Le Roman de Merlin' by Jean-Pierre Tusseau, 2001, reads as follows:

*"All four of them on horseback, crossed a big field near a town gate where several children were **playing ball**. Merlin who did not miss a thing, noticed that they were looking for him: he went to one of the richest children in town, knowing that the child did not like him.*

***He raised the stick** and struck the leg of the child, who started to cry and offended Merlin by blaming him for having no father."*

(Translation by the authors)

Nothing in this text points to an undisciplined game of hockey. Hitting the rich village boy had nothing to do with the game itself.

Robert de Boron was born in France in what is called today Territoire de Belfort. He lived at the end of the 12th century and at the beginning of the 13th century. As knight-clerk he wrote several stories about the Arthurian world. From his 'Roman de Merlin' only the first 500 verses have been preserved, the main part is based on a 13th century adaptation in prose.

Are these transcriptions or adaptations of De Boron's work a reliable source to decide what kind of game was really meant?

'Historia Regum Britanniae' from Geoffrey of Monmouth

The 'Roman de Merlin' was not the creation of Robert de Boron himself. As Van Maerlant adapted De Boron's roman in the Netherlandish language into his own time and age, Robert de Boron did the same with parts of the contents of an ancient book from Geoffrey of Monmouth, written in Latin, 'Historia Regum Britanniae' (Histories of the Kings of Britain).



Statue of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Tintern, Wales

Geoffrey of Monmouth was born around 1100, probably in Monmouth in Southeast Wales. He became bishop of St Asaph in 1152 and died in 1155. He was important to the development of British history and the popular tales of King Arthur. His book 'Historia Regum Britanniae' was written in 1136 in the Latin language. It was transcribed in different languages. There seem to be more than 200 medieval transcriptions.

In the translation by Sebastian Evans (1904), the lines about the playing youths read thus: *"... they came into the city that was afterward called Carmarthen, they saw **some lads playing before the gate** and went to look on at the game.*

And being weary with travel, they sate them down in the ring and looked about them to see if they could find what they were in quest of.

At last, when the day was far spent, a sudden quarrel sprang up betwixt a couple of youths whose names were Merlin and Dalbutius. And as they were wrangling together, saith Dalbutius unto Merlin: 'What a fool must thou be to think thou art a match for me! Keep thy distance, prithee! Here am I, born of the blood royal on both sides of the house; and thou? None knoweth what thou art, for never a father hadst thou!'"

Other translations are:

*"... they saw **some young men, playing before the gate** ..."*

(Aaron Thompson, 1999)

*"... they saw there **some boys playing ball** ..."*
(Bill Cooper, 2002)

In some adaptations of Geoffrey of Monmouth, crosses and balls are not mentioned at all. In his adaptation of the Merlin story, Robert de Boron has inserted the 'çoule' and 'croce'



Fighting was not the 'prerogative' of ancient hockey players. This detail from a 16th century illumination shows that in colf fighting was not as exceptional as some wants us to believe. – Inventory number 133 D10, folio 154 recto, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, The Netherlands

story, to place that story in his own place and time, as Jacob van Maerlant, placed the 'coluen' (colf) story in his own (Flemish) environment.

It is not known what kind of stick and ball game was played in the region of Belfort, where De Boron lived. It is very well known that the game of colf was popular in the Low Countries.

The fact that a player is hurt with a 'croce' (crosse or colf) does not automatically mean that the boys played the rough undisciplined game of ancient hockey. There are several documents and even pictures where fights are shown in other than hockey-like games.

'Historia Brittonum' from Nennius

But what about Geoffrey of Monmouth? Was he the original author of the Merlin story? No, he used again parts of the book 'Historia Brittonum' from Nennius, an 8th century historian, a major source for tales of King Arthur.

Nennius wrote (in transcription form):

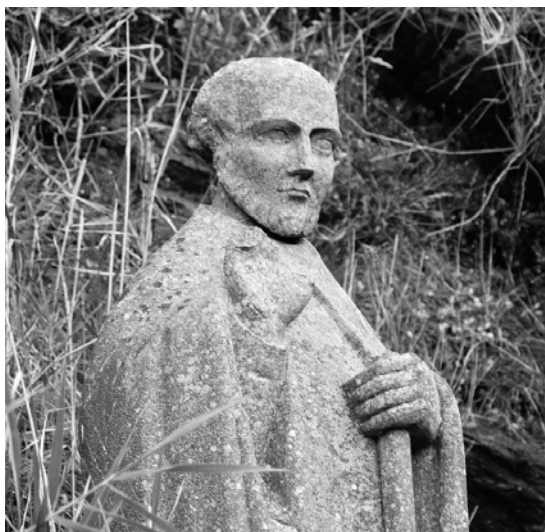
*"After having inquired in all the provinces, they came to the field of Ælecti, in the district of Glevesing, where **a party of boys were playing at ball**. And two of them quarrelling, one said to the other: "O boy without a father, no good will ever happen to you."*

(*'Six Old English Chronicles'*, J.A. Giles, 1848)

It is not possible to find out what kind of game 'playing at ball' the boys were playing in the fields of Ælecti, because we do not know the original text used by Nennius. There is no mention of a stick or club.

'De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae' from Saint Gildas

For the story, Nennius in his turn made probably use of sources going back to the 5th century, but these sources are not known anymore.



This statue shows Saint Gildas at Saint-Gildas-de Rhuys, France. Gildas, an early British historian, lived between 482 and 570.

It is suggested that these sources could have been the 'De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae' (On the ruins and Conquest of Britain) from Gildas, an early British (Saint) historian, who lived between 500 and 570 in Brittany.

Conclusions

All authors have only used several of the items from earlier books or poems, to transcribe their own story and placed it in their own time and age. Fairly often the relationship and contents of the subsequent poems is difficult to recognise. There is no sensible way to compare from only a translation point of view the different books word by word. Most of the original manuscripts are lost. From each book, there are several translations or transcriptions written by different authors in different times and places. Each transcription differs from the other.

It can be said that the story of Merlin told by Jacob van Maerlant written in his own Netherlandish language, is his own interpretation, made in a setting and using words and expressions of the second half of the 13th century in Flanders.

An interesting comparison can be made with paintings from some of the great painters from the 16th and 17th century. Pieter Breugel the Elder for example painted the famous 'Census of Bethlehem' in 1566. He placed the census not in Judea as described in the gospel according to Lucas (2:1.5) in around 30 BC, but in a Brabant village setting in the 16th century.

The census certainly did not take place in such a setting and moreover, we are sure that in Judea, there was not a man queuing up with a colf club in his hands. What Breugel painted was an adaptation, placing the subject in his own time and age.



The famous painting from Pieter Breugel, showing the census in Bethlehem is placed in the 16th century in a Brabant's village instead of in a Judean village in the year 0

Because so far no information has passed down through the ages showing the existence of hockey-like games in the Low Countries it seems all right to say that colf (and crosse/cho[u]le) in different configurations was played in the time and the region where Jacob van Maerlant lived and worked.

Unless proven otherwise the words 'mit ener coluen' could be considered as representing the ancient game of colf.

We conclude this short story by quoting a sentence from the introduction from the former mayor of the city of Ghislain in the Belgian Borinage in the book 'Mail Crosse Golf ou l'Histoire du crossage en plaine' (1983) from the journalist and historian André Auquier:

“The next Thursday afternoon when there were no school lessons, a group of young boys occupied the fields. They all had their own borrowed ‘chambots’ (clubs).”

(Translation by the authors)

These boys were playing the game of crosse as boys in this region are playing for hundreds of years. They certainly did not play hockey.

N.B.

This short study was carried out in close cooperation with Do Smit, independent colf and kolf historian, member of the Foundation Early Golf, initiator and producer of the web museum about colf and kolf from the Koninklijke Nederlandse Kolfbond (www.colf-kolf.nl), member of the Kolfclub Utrecht Sint Eloyen Gasthuis and regent and 2nd secretary of the Sint Eloyen Gasthuis Utrecht.

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