THE CROSSE

A one-piece wooden stick with a curve on the lower end has probably been for hundreds of years the only stick used to hit balls in whatever sort of stick and ball game on the European continent.
Also in Ireland, England, Scotland, and Asia and South America, people used such sticks to hit a ball.

Although there is no evidence that jeu de crosse started with such sticks, we can assume that the first crosseurs used curved sticks. In many illuminations in books of hours, calendars, breviaries and other religious publications, and paintings from the 13th to 16th centuries inclusive, one can see this type of bat.
The 'Rôle de la Taille' (tax register of Paris), 1292, mentions two 'crossetiers' (club makers). Hercule Géraud, the 19th century publisher of these registers, clarifies that these crossetiers, named Pierre et Thomas, were craftsmen who made crutches for disabled people and canes for the elderly.

According to Jean-Jules Jusserand in 'Les sports et jeux d'exercice dans l'ancienne France', 1901, the two crossetiers were also producers of sticks for youngsters for use in the streets of the towns and on country lanes. Dependant on the variant of the stick and ball game, these craftsmen produced the sticks needed.

In the 20th century, makers of clubs for the jeu de crosse game called themselves still crossetiers.

In the 15th century, a new kind of stick appeared: a straight wooden shaft fitted into a parallelepiped wooden head. There is a theory that these sticks are for short games, played on beaten earth 'courses'.

Top: Illumination from a Flemish book of hours, attributed to Simon Bening in the first quarter of the 16th century. All players use a one-piece wooden stick with a curve on the bottom end. It is interesting to see that on the continent, at the beginning of the 16th century, stick and ball players holed the ball out. – By courtesy of Ian T. Henderson and David Stirk
Bottom: Not only in Europe but also in Asia and South America, people played with bent sticks. Frézier, 'engineer of the French king' , saw during his exploration of South America in 1712 – 1714 Chilean Indians playing the game of sueca, hitting a ball with a curved stick. – 'Reis-Beschryving door de Zuid-Zee' , Isaak Verburg, 1718

The two players use the strange-looking wooden clubs to hit the ball towards a small post. – Book of hours from Jean Fouquet, c. 1450 – Biblioteca Nacional (ms. vit. 25.3, folio 2), Madrid

In the 'Heures de la Duchesse de Bourgogne', an illumination shows people playing a stick and ball game with curved and 'composed' sticks (1460, Musée Condé in Chantilly, France). Could they have been used indiscriminately or had each a specific function in the game?

In 1992, Robert Albouker published a study about the history of table billiards. He wrote that 'billard au sol' (ground billiard) players used these 'billards' (the ones with the peculiar wooden block) for the accurate approach strokes and the bent sticks for the long-distance strokes.

The tapestry 'La Teinture des Amours de Gombaut et Macée', 16th century, in the Musée des Beaux Arts, Saint-Lô, France, shows the game of 'tiquet', a kind of ground billiard. In this tapestry, we see 'billards' with an iron parallelepiped club head.

Richard Stiévenart, a local Belgian crosse researcher, reports, that c. 1420, people played jeu de crosse with iron-headed clubs. Unfortunately, he does not mention his source of information.

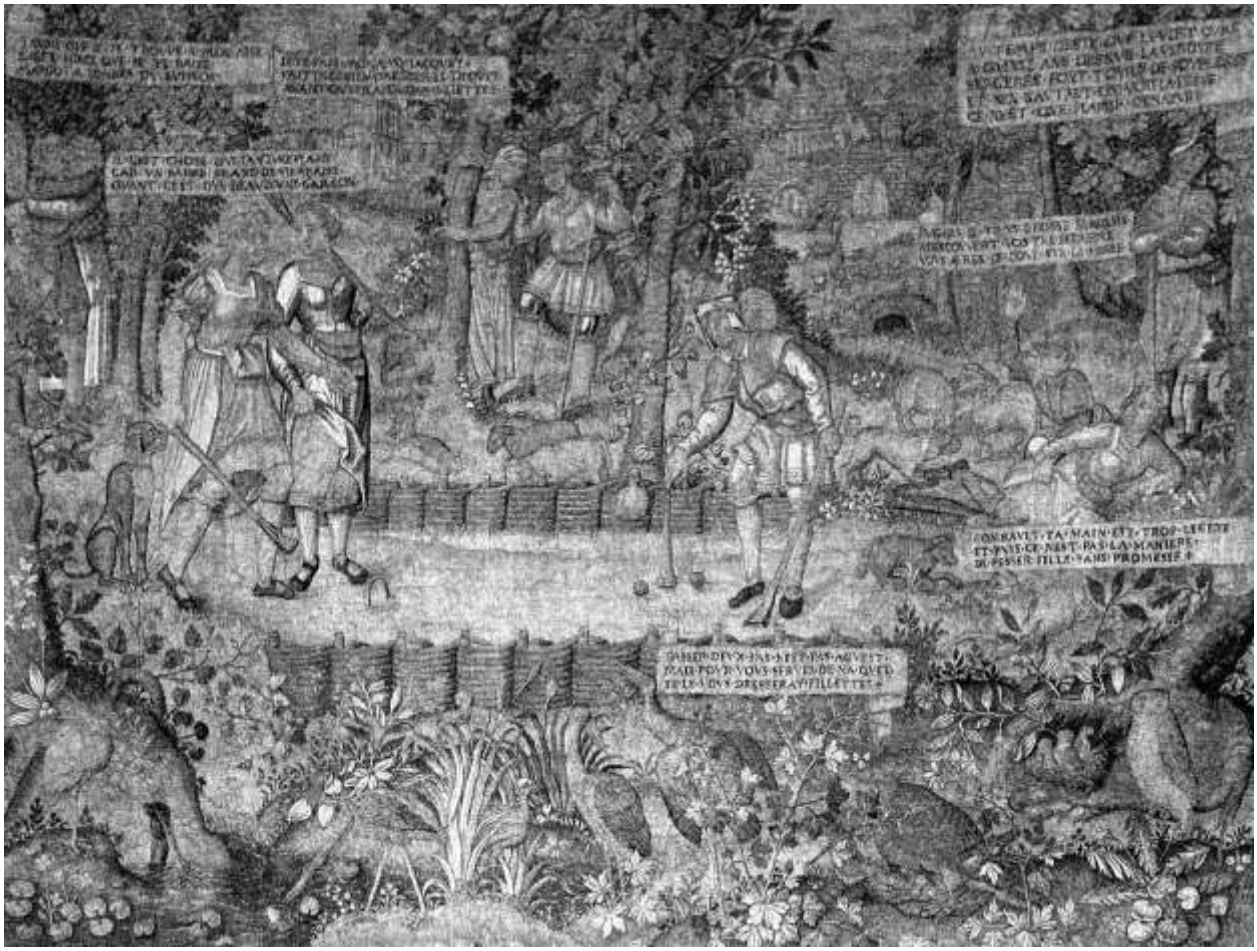
Regrettably, we have not found any pictures or descriptions of crosses during the following centuries. The first description is from Charles Deulin (1873).

Textually, there are various references to crosses.
In the battle of Quévy (south of Mons) in 1570, a soldier used 'une crosse ferrée' (an iron club) to hit (and kill) an enemy soldier (Archives Sainte Waudru at Mons).
(Richard Stiévenart)

Pierre-Ignace Chavatte, writes in his chronicle in 1700, "… the council (in Lille) forbade everybody to play with clubs both of metal and wood and other comparable clubs".
(Alain Lottin, 1979)

In 1753, the council of Ath prohibited to play the game of crosse with wooden or iron crosses.

In 1775, the bailiff of Havré expressed concern about irregularities during and after the 'crosse tournament'.



On this famous tapestry (The Love Affairs of Gombaut and Macée), two shepherdesses and a shepherd play 'tiquet', a kind of ground billiard. The 'billards' (clubs) they use, have an iron parallelepiped club head. –
By courtesy of Musée des Beaux Arts, Saint-Lô, France

Therefore, to avoid breaking the chapel's windows, crosseurs were no longer allowed to use iron clubs, but only wooden ones.
(Jean Pierard, 1968)

Charles Deulin (1873) is the first to mention the double face of the crosse head. How long before 1873 were double-faced crosses used? Did the soldier in Quévy or the youngsters in Lille use crosses with 'pic' and 'plat' faces?

After Deulin, it is Emile Zola (1885) who mentions the crosse as 'a mallet with its bent iron (the pic face), long handle (the shaft) and the tight strung network (the grip)'.

It is an absolutely unique design. It does not compare with any other stick for ball games. It is unknown how long this very ingenious club head exists. With an inclination of less than 15°, the plat face is meant for teeing off, and for distance, when the choulette has a good lie. Depending on the distance and condition of the field, the plat face can also be used for 'doquer' (putting in golf) and approaching.

The mallet used in the game of mail (pall mall) had two strike faces, one for distance and one for hitting the ball through a ring or reaching the target picket. Metal rings protected both wooden faces.

With the extreme concave pic face, the crosseur retrieves the choulette from bad lies such as hedges, ruts, muddy pools, natural bunkers and water. This face is also used for shorter distances, to surpass hazards and, depending on the distance and the condition of the field, for approaching and 'putting'.
Because crosse fields have no groomed fairways and greens, but mainly rough and heavy rough fields, the pic face is used for more than 70% of all strokes made in a partie.

The stick used in 'jeu de mail en boulevard' and 'jeu de mail en plaine' had also two faces, one at each end of the mallet. The side with an inclination of approximately 5° was for long-distance, the other side with 15° was for approaching and targeting.

Flemish/Dutch colvers used one stick with just one face, made of an alloy of lead and tin. The head was folded around the bent end of the shaft. How they managed on the 'colf fields' we do not know, but on the ice of rivers, lakes and canals one face seemed sufficient.

In the game of golf, different clubs were developed for different situations. Golfers had so -called long irons (and woods) for teeing off and for distance and short irons for difficult lies, approaching and putting.

The Flemish/Netherlandish colf club head, made of an alloy of lead and tin, had only one strike face. The head was folded round the bent end of the shaft.

For more information about the clubs used in the games mail and colf, see chapter 'Clubs for hitting far and sure' in 'Games for Kings & Commoners – Part Three ', Geert & Sara Nijs, 2015.

To retrieve the choulette from small ruts, the pic or bec was added onto the iron head. Experience taught that such a concave face could improve hitting the choulette out of any difficult lie.

During the years, the size of the pic increased considerably. At a 'puces' (village fair) near Mons, Belgium, we found an old rusty 'crosse à brochon', from before the Great War. The pic face of the crosse head was less than half the size of the plat face. More recent crosse heads have pic faces of at least the same size as the plat face.

Elderly crosseurs explained that in the 19th century, farmers used carts to collect the milk from the cows in the fields. These carts could carry four milk jars. With their high thin wheels, sometimes fitted with iron hoops, they made deep, narrow tracks in the muddy fields. When a choulette finished in such a rut, it was difficult, if not impossible, to play the choulette out of the track. The small concave face of the crosse head made it easier to hit the choulette out of the track.

When these milk carts fell in disuse, it was no longer necessary to play with such a small pic face. Crosseurs had already experienced a long time that the pic face was a useful tool on the crosse field. Increasing the size of this face would improve the quality of their game. Today almost 70% of all strokes are made with the concave face.

Scottish golfers, confronted with the same 'rut' problem, developed a separate club for retrieving the golf balls from the tracks, the so-called rut iron.

One crosse club combines the properties of two golf clubs: the plat represents a long iron, the 'pic' or 'bec' equals the pitching wedge. As one can see, the strike face of the crosse is relatively small compared to the golf clubs.

In Scotland, golf players were confronted with 'ruts' like their 'Hainaut/Avesnois' colleagues. The Scots invented a particular club for such difficult lies, the rut iron.

The shaft

Originally the shaft of a crosse was made of ash wood (fraxinus excelsior) with a length of 1.00 to 1.20 metres. The lower part consisted of a piece of root. Ash wood had various advantages:

- the wood was sturdy, and it would not break easily
- the wood was supple, a property very much appreciated by crosseurs for striking at the choulette
- the roots had a shape, easy fitting into the iron club head at a proper angle.

Also in Flemish/Dutch colf and Scottish golf, shafts were made of ash wood.

An ash wood shaft in the making. First, the root part is cut into an octagonal form and later into shape to fit into the iron club head's opening. – By courtesy of Musée d'Histoire et de Folklore, Ath, Belgium

For making crosse shafts, a crossetier would select an ash wood tree with a trunk diameter of 25 to 30 centimetres. This tree was cut (not sawn) at the height of approximately 1.50 metre. The best period for cutting the selected young tree was between October and March when no leaves were on the tree.

In that period, the last quarter of the moon was the best cutting time, because of the tree's descended fluid.

To conserve the wood, the crossetier immersed it in linseed oil for two or three months, or four or five months in the slurry. Depending on the thickness and position of the roots, he split the trunk into several parts.

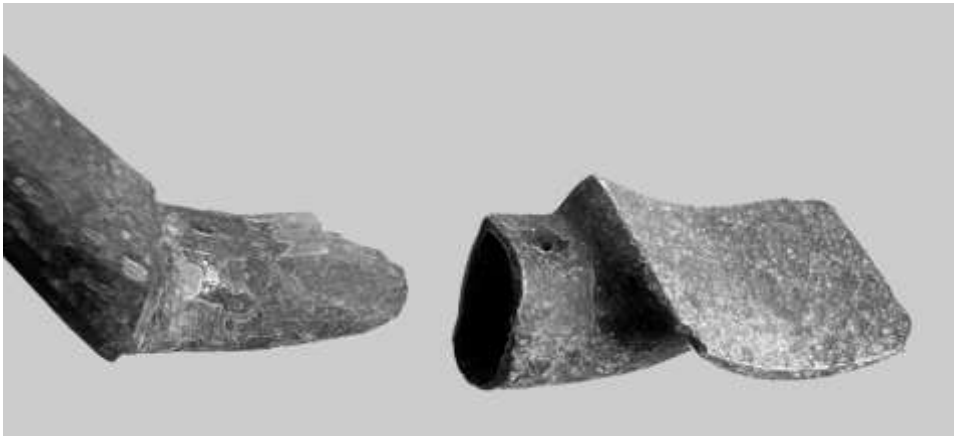
The wood was then carved into a rough model of the shaft and left to dry. After the drying period, the club maker finished the model into the final shaft, manipulating the root stump to fit into the iron club head. The angle between root stump and shaft was on average 120°, but within certain limits, adapted to the requirements of the specific crosseur.
The small delicate root end had to fit exactly in the opening of the iron head and was fixed with glue and a peg. A club, manufactured in this way, is called a 'crocheton' or a 'crosse à brochon'.

To conserve the flexibility of the shaft, he drilled a hole in the top of it, 15 to 20 centimetres deep, and the owner of the club filled it once a year with linseed oil. Another method was to submerge the crosse for some time in the slurry. The crossetier heated the curved end of the shaft in a fire to harden it.

Crossetiers were mainly woodworkers, skilful in carving the shafts with the root stumps and inserting them into the iron heads. The many blacksmiths forged these iron heads. We don't know if these crossetiers and blacksmiths were specialists, who produced only shafts and club heads. In any case, it must have been an essential part of their business.

A lot of skills were required to produce these 'rooted' shafts. It was not an easy job and time-consuming. One young ash tree just gave a few shafts.

The original double-faced crosse à brochon with the shaft inserted directly into the back of the metal head.



Crosse à brochon or crocheton

Initially, people played the game of crosse with one club and one choulette. The oldest reference to a metal-headed crosse club dates back to the 15th century. Such a club was called a 'crosse à brochon', a 'crossillon' or a 'crocheton'.

The metal-headed crosse clubs have two faces; the 'plat' for distance playing and an extremely concave 'pic' face for playing in the rough and other difficult playing positions. The shaft was made chiefly of young ash wood. The wooden shaft with the curved end was inserted straight into the opening on the back of the club head.

Compared to the size of the heads of golf clubs, the crosse heads are pretty small. Often the choulette is larger than the face of the crosse. Crosseurs must have a very constant swing.

A crosse, composed of an ash wood shaft with a root stump fitted straight into the iron club head was called a 'crocheton', a 'crossillon' or a 'crosse à brochon'.

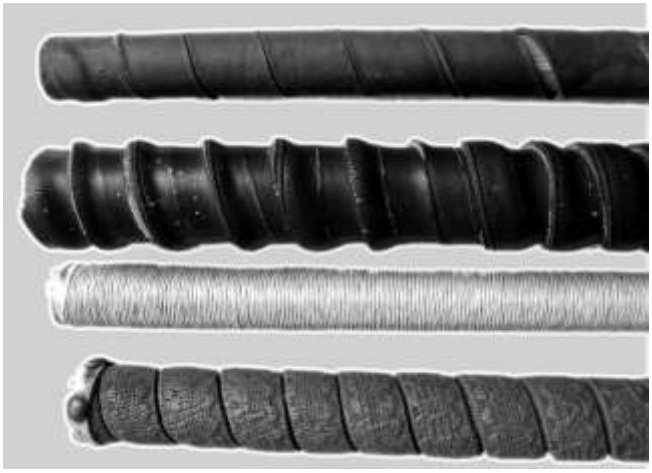
Development in France

Pontoise crosse club

Deviating from the standard two face crosse head is the so-called 'pontoise', a crosse head with only one plat face and on top of that a miniature concave one. Some crosseurs say that this pontoise was the first crosse head to use in difficult situations and that in the years its concave face increased in size.

According to Albert Hanze, former president of the 'Franco-Belge' Crosse Association in Gognies-Chaussée, France, and Raymond Véron, former president of 'Les Amis Réunis' in Gommegnies, France, the pontoise was designed at the end of the 19th century by a local crossetier in the town of Pont sur Sambre, hence its name. This club was specially designed for the démarrage, but later players used it in crosse au but. The extreme small pic face must be seen only as decoration.

The 'pontoise' has only one clubface, the 'plat'. The tiny 'pic' is just decoration, consider most players. The crosse was mainly used in the 'au but' game. This rooted shaft is reinforced with copper wire, protecting it from breakage.



Top: To reduce the impact of the hard celluloid ball on their hands, crosseurs replaced the leather or cord grip with thick strips of a bicycle tyre. This rubber material also had the advantage that the player had a better grip on the club, and to enhance their grip further, it was not exceptional to see the crosseurs spit in their hands.
Bottom: A beautiful collection of many dozens of old crosses à brochon with an infinite variety of grips. – Private collection

'Au but' crosse club

In the crosse au but (target crosse) game, crosses with a very upright face are used. Crosseurs do not play the pontoise anymore, because there are not many of these crosses left. Various players use golf putters with a piece of rubber stuck onto the face, as midget golf players often do. The shafts are considerably shorter (75 centimetres), and the head has an upright flat face.

Development in Belgium

Several centuries, the design of the club did not change until the 1930s with the introduction of the celluloid ball.

Celluloid crosse club

Those players who could afford to play the 'courcelle' had to adapt the construction of their crosse. The impact of the hard celluloid ball could damage the 'plat' face of the club. The chance of breaking the lower end of the shaft increased.

Crosse players started to reinforce the shaft near the club head by winding copper wire tightly round this end. For the better players, this was not sufficient, and it did not solve the problem of the deformation of the 'plat' face.

Additionally, crosseurs replaced their leather or cord grips with strips of bicycle tubes to reduce the fierce impact on their hands.

To prevent breakage of the shaft, a socket was forged onto the club head. Into this socket, a straight wooden shaft was inserted. Such a connection reduced the chance of breaking considerably.

Nylon crosse club

To overcome the deformation problem, crosseurs started to cut off the 'plat' face of the head and soldered a metal piece inside the cavity. However, this metal plate made it impossible to re-enter the curved end of the shaft into the club head. This problem was solved by forging a socket onto the club head in which they inserted the end of a straight shaft.

The new connection of the shaft to the club head had several advantages. The shaft would not break so easy. Furthermore, ash trees with a trunk diameter of 25 to 30 centimetres and a good position of the roots became rare. Moreover, the treatment of such a trunk piece to fit into the club head was difficult, time-consuming and expensive.

Soon after the introduction of this nylon ball, it became clear that the weight and size of the club head played an essential part in energy dispersal. It became interesting to develop a new crosse club with a bigger metalhead, a socket connection for straight shafts and a thicker 'plat' face, being resistant to the impact of the extreme hard nylon ball.

The 'crosse à manchon' (top) equipped with a socket, an enlarged 'plat' face and an impact-absorbing thick grip (see picture on page 66) became the new standard after the introduction of the nylon choulette. It replaced the crosse à brochon (bottom) with the significantly smaller club head, used in the past for the boxwood and 'stape' choulettes. – By courtesy of Freddy Gallez

Several Belgian crosseurs have reconstructed golf iron-woods; they replaced the thin strike face with a stronger piece of metal that can withstand the impact of the nylon balls. A good 'swinger' can reach up to 200 metres with this combination.

Some crosseurs hardly use the original crosse clubs anymore. The remodelled 3, 5 and 7 iron-woods together with the nylon and 'combined' wooden balls serve the player for every situation in the field. Only for the short approaches to the target, the crosse à manchon is used.

Golf crosse club

Many Belgian crosseurs say: "You cannot stop progress".
They searched for further improvements and changes in the design of the nylon crosse clubs. Crosseurs are often good golf players too. The titanium golf woods gave them ideas for the crosse game.

Many crosseurs cut off the thin strike face of the metal wood and replaced it with a non-corrugated thick piece of metal, for example, a part of a motor car leaf spring. They looked for the strongest metal shafts on the market and started to hit the nylon ball with full force over longer distances. It is a long time ago that the Belgian crosseurs played with only one crosse club and one choulette.

Mainly the younger players carry a golf bag with several 'mutilated' metal woods (drivers up to 7 woods) for all kinds of distances and a string bag with a full range of choulettes for all types of situations.
After the démarrage with a (spherical) nylon ball, the crosseur deliberated with himself or his partner which ball and club to use for the next stroke. Points of attention on the barely or non-maintained fields are light rough or nearly unplayable heavy rough, swamps, water, molehills, deep cavities, trees or the approach. Whatever the player concludes, he always has to keep in mind what the adverse team could do with the result of his decision.

In general terms, one could say that the higher the rough, the larger the ball played. To recover the distance lost by such a large ball, the player will choose a different metal wood.

The French traditionalists

The French crosseurs preferred to stick to the old tradition of playing crosse as their forebears have done for ages. They decide together in the League about the rules of the game and the equipment used.

French crosseurs are now allowed to carry a maximum of three double purpose crosses à brochon or à manchon. They only play with the official French choulette, turned of hornbeam, and provided by their society at a price set by the League.

Final

The game of crosse has mainly been a game for the working class. In the past, many players could not afford to have a crosse of their own. Crosse societies owned just a few clubs for 20 to 30 players; crosseurs shared crosses during play.
Today, crosseurs can afford to have more than one crosse, although a newly made crosse with a wooden shaft costs around € 250.

In the years, the game of crosse has developed so differently between Belgium and France that the crosseurs cannot play together anymore as they have done for hundreds of years. They play two completely different games, both facing a rather bleak future.

Crosseurs are growing older. They stop playing when they cannot climb the fences, creep under the hedges anymore, or start playing on the eternal crosse fields. Their sons and grandsons don't play the game of crosse anymore, so there are no successors.

Their crosses and choulettes will end up in the attic or the shed in the back garden or sold on flea markets. Collectors comb regularly boot sales, fairs, etc., hoping to find an old crosse or some dogwood balls.

In the past, players used the concave 'pic' part of the crosse for getting out of the heavy rough. Today, the Belgian crosseur uses an adapted golf iron-wood and a larger ball to get out of the rough without losing to much distance.

Top: A very ancient specimen of a crosse en rue 'chambot' (mallet), used on Shrove Tuesday or Ash Wednesday in the city of Ath. – By courtesy of Musée d'Histoire et de Folklore, Ath, Belgium

Bottom: A wooden mallet ('maillet', 'maquet' or 'mailloch'), made by José Fagot, the president of the 'Comité du Crossage' in Chièvre, Belgium. The mallet is 1.10 metre long. The diameter of the shaft is 3,5 centimetres. The wooden club head has a height of 10 centimetres, a width of 8 centimetres and a length of 21 centimetres. The weight of the club is 1.5 kg.

'En rue' crosse club

The production of the wooden 'crosse en rue' clubs (clubs for street crosse, only used once a year during carnival) looks somewhat like do-it-yourself jobs.
The shaft is mostly a simple broomstick, fixed in the wooden head's hole and secured with glue and a screw.
The size of the head varies considerably, while the shape of the head is very identical.
Traditionalists make their 'maillets' or 'marochs' or 'chambots' from strong regional shockproof wood, like ash, beech, oak and elm. The shaft is made mostly of ash wood and fits in the wooden head at an angle of 10°.
It is remarkable that some historians, reading the word 'maillet', wrongly classify this 'en rue' game automatically under jeu de mail.