

# *Jeu de crosse in medieval literature*

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Quote from 'the recent edition of 'CHOULE *The Non-Royal but most Ancient Game of Crosse*' (April 2021):

"In 1261, Jacob van Maerlant, a Flemish author, transcribes 'Le livre de Merlin' (Merlin's Book), written by Robert de Boron (c. 1200). Van Maerlant writes about a game 'mit ener coluen' (with a colf). Some authors (among them the Belgian author Jacques Temmerman [1993]) consider this 'coluen' game as being 'jeu de crosse'; the reason being that in their opinion, the game of crosse was a Flemish game and Van Maerlant a Flemish author."



Do Smit, ex-curator of the web museum colf-kolf.nl, is a friend and a stimulator to continue the research Geert and I started on the ancient games of colf, crosse, golf and mail. He made the following remark after having seen the recent edition:

*"It struck me that you elaborated in detail on Jacob van Maerlant, who is in my opinion rather a colf hero, and that you hint indirectly to Robert de Boron and ban him to the bibliography."*

An 'interesting remark' is what politicians say when they want to gain time to think about an answer. So did I, but certainly not in politics.

*Detail of the illumination  
'Merlin and Blaise' from a  
manuscript 1280-1290, Nor-  
thern France – Français 95,  
fol. 223, Bibliothèque national  
de France, Paris*

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In the first edition (2008) and its French translation (2012), we did not mention Robert de Boron in the bibliography only on the sidelines. A few of the reasons were that De Boron was born in the present department, Territoire de Belfort. He entered the service of the Seigneur (Lord) de Montbéliard, situated in the department of Doubs against the Swiss border. People did not play the game of crosse there.

That he figures in the bibliography of the 2021 edition is because today I am more accurate than in 2008, when I still had to learn the edition trade.

## Sources

« ... quil passoient j grant champ a lentrete dune uille & en cel champ auoit vne grant compaignie denfans qui chouloient & merlins qui toutes les choses sauoit i estoit & uit chaus qui le queroient si se trait a j des plus riches enfans de la uille por ce quil sauoit bien quil le mesameroit si haucha la croche quil tenoit & fiert lenfant en la iambe & cil commença a plorer & merlin mesamer & a reprochier quil estoit nes sans père ... »



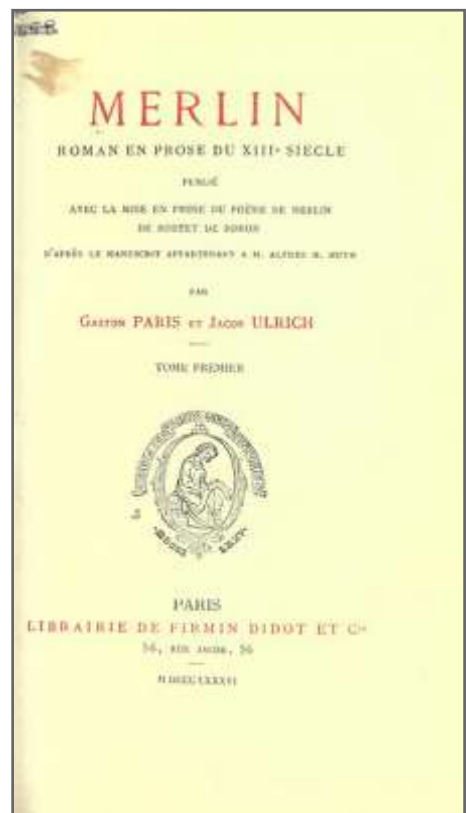
The original text in the manuscript (see above) is more detailed than the two transcriptions I found (see the following pages).

*The vulgate version of the Arthurian romances, edited from manuscripts in the British Museum, Volume II "Lestoire de Merlin", H. Oskar Sommer - Washington, The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908*

« *Quatre d'entre eux arrivent près d'une ville et voient des enfants qui jouent à la soule ; parmi eux est Merlin qui, exprès, frappe de sa crosse un autre enfant, qui l'appelle enfant sans père.* »

The four of them arrived in a town and saw children playing 'soule'; amongst them, Merlin was hitting another child with his 'crosse' (stick) deliberately. That child named Merlin: the child without a father.

In 1886, the authors didn't elaborate on the word 'chouloient'; they transcribed it as 'jouer à la soule' (playing with a stick and a ball) and did not mention the number of children playing the game.



*Merlin Roman en prose du XIII<sup>e</sup>me siècle publié avec la mise en prose du poème de Merlin de Robert de Boron d'après manuscrit appartenant à Alfred H. Huth par Gaston Paris et Jacob Ullrich Tome seond Paris, Librairie de Firmin Didot et Cie, 1886*



« A cheval tous les quatre, ils traversèrent un vaste champ aux portes d'une ville où de nombreux enfants jouaient à la choule (1). »

All four of them on horseback crossed over an enormous field at the gates of a town where numerous children played 'à la choule' (1).

Tusseau writes:

« (1) La choule : ce jeu consiste à pousser une grosse balle avec le pied (ancêtre du football) ou avec un bâton recourbé (ancêtre du hockey). »

Choule: in this game, one pushed with a foot (ancestor of football) or a curved stick (ancestor of hockey) against a big ball.

*Le Roman de Merlin Jean-Pierre  
Tusseau d'après l'édition et la  
traduction d'Alexandra Micha  
Paris, Flammarion, 2001*

And that is according to the first paragraphs of our chapter 'The name' (see page 37 in the 2021 edition). I quote:

*"In 1678, Charles du Fresne, Sieur du Cange, completes a dictionary containing medieval 'low Latin' words used between 800 and 1200. He explains 'choulla' as 'a ball struck with a stick (globulus ligneus qui clava propellitur).*

*The description shows the existence of stick-and-ball games in the Middle Ages.*

*The low Latin word choulla developed into the French words 'choule' and 'soule'.*

*Choule was used mainly in France's northern part, soule primarily but not exclusively in the south.*

*Over the centuries, the meaning of the word choule shifted from a stick-and-ball game to a generic term for any game played with a ball. It was later that choule meant only ancient French football/rugby. For the games played with a stick and ball, the term 'choule à la crosse' was introduced.*

*In the first 'Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française' from 1694, playing crosse is called 'crosser', the stick 'crosse' and the crosse player 'crosseur'.*

'Numerous' children played the game (usually, 'jeu de crosse' is played by four persons), and indeed, that looks more like hockey. Besides, Merlin used a 'croche' to hit another child.

That is why the translation, or rather the transcription, of Van Maerlant is interesting, because he introduces the word 'colven', translating 'chouloient' into a local game he knows.

Several authors see the game chiefly as hockey, while others think of 'colf' (see pages 129 and 130 in the 2021 edition). Back to De Boron, I think that the 'hockey' supporters are right.