

Crosse, a long and a short game

Today, the ancient game of crosse (choule) is still played in the Franco-Belgian border zone in the neighbourhood of Maubeuge in France and Mons (Bergen) in Belgium. What the origin of this game is we do not know. Has it always been a local game or was it originally much wider spread and has it lost the interest in the other parts of France and Belgium?

The oldest allusion to a crosse-like game is according to Camille Algrain ('Pour que vive le bon vieux sport de la crosse', 1980) from a will of 1262. Alas, Algrain did not mention his source.

As an individual stick and ball game, crosse was played in the ancient county of Hainaut from the 14th century onward. In the accounts of the court of Hainaut it is stated that in 1332 the Count of Hainaut bought balls for the games of hand-tennis and crosse.

('Le Sport, miroir de la société', Theo Mathy, 1995, www.wallonie-en-ligne.net)

Because we suggest that the count did not play a rather uncivilized game of hockey, he must have played the individual stick and ball game.

In 1369, the famous chronicler Jean Froissart listed jeu de crosse as one of the oldest games played in Hainaut in his poem 'Espinette amoureuse'. Unfortunately no explanation is given of how the game of crosse was played at that time.

(Jean Froissart – 'Espinette amoureuse', 1394, edited by Anthime Fourier, 1963)

According to Dom Grenier, official regional historian in the 18th century, the game of crosse was already played in 1387 in Valenciennes, a part of the ancient county of Hainaut (Alexandre-Joachim Desrousseaux, 'Mœurs Populaires de la Flandre Française' [Popular customs in French Flanders], Tome I, 1889).

For centuries, historians, linguists and authors have played (and sometimes still do) with the name-given to all kinds of stick and ball games. To get an idea what game is being referred to when finding the name 'crosse' in documents, it is necessary that some explanation about the nature of the game is given.

Unfortunately renowned historians such as Roger Vaultier, Jean-Michel Mehl, Jean-Jules Jusserand, Arnold van Gennep and others did not do so.

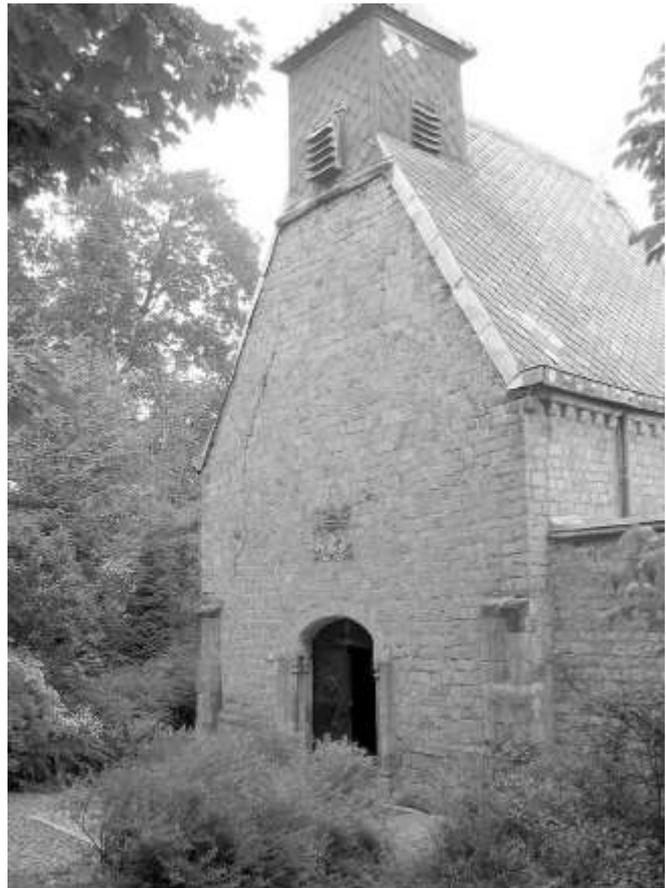
Fortunately, sometimes this additional information was written down in the documents themselves.

Up to now the oldest evidence of an individual stick and ball game dates from 1319 when, according to a letter of remission, players were ‘hitting balls in turn’. No further explication is given but players who hit a ball in turn are not playing a rude medieval hockey. It must have been an individual crosse game. In 1385, in another letter of remission it was written that some crosse players reproached a comrade that he did not play the ball through the ‘anneau’ (ring). (‘Le folklore pendant la guerre de Cent Ans d'après Les Lettres de Rémission du Trésor des Chartes’, Roger Vaultier, 1965)

Was it a short (‘putting’) game or was playing through the ring the final stroke of a long ‘hole’, called a ‘partie, in the crosse game?

In the 14th century, pilgrims went from the city of Mons to the chapel of St Anthony in Havré. After the religious celebrations, crosse playing pilgrims played their game in the fields near the chapel. Certainly the crosseurs played a long crosse game. (‘Les Origines du jeu de crosse’, Richard Stiévenart)

From the 14th century to the 20th century, there were pilgrimages from Mons to the chapel of St Anthony in the woods and fields near the village of Havré. After the religious celebrations the crosseurs played their game in the fields near the chapel. In the course of time St Anthony has become the patron saint of the crosseurs.



In 1426, in a letter of remission it is written that the villagers of Balzas were involved in betting on crosseurs: which crosseur could reach the neighbouring village by hitting a ball with a club in the fewest number of strokes? This game could not be anything else but the individual, long distance stick and ball game.

(‘Autour du billard’, Robert Albouker, 1992)

In his book about the history of the Parisian diocese Abbot Jean Lebeuf (1757) tells us that in the 14th century many Parisians played crosse on the ramparts of the town. Lebeuf unfortunately did not elaborate on how the game was played.

(‘Sports et Jeux d’adresse’, Henry René D’Allemagne, 1900)

In 1499, the crosse players in Mons caused so much disorder in and round the town that the authorities had to take severe measures and forbade the game altogether (Camille Algrain). The crosseurs seemed to play both in and outside the town, which could mean that they played both variants, the long game as well as the short game.

The oldest description of how the game of crosse was played can be found in the famous novel ‘Germinal’ written by Emile Zola in 1885. This description shows that the game of crosse was an exceptionally long game.



The game of street crosse as it could have been played as early as the Middle Ages, with crude clubs and large wooden balls, starting from the village into the fields and back to the village. Today the game is mainly played during Carnival and other religion-related festive occasions. Crosseurs and non-crosseurs from all over the region come to the towns and villages in the Belgian Borinage to join in this ancient game of street crosse.

Zola himself was not a *crosseur* but he learned about *crosse* when visiting Anzin, a mining community near Valenciennes in the *crosse* region in northern France. The match he described in ‘Germinal’ consisted of nine parties. The total distance covered in this match by the four miners was approximately twenty kilometres.

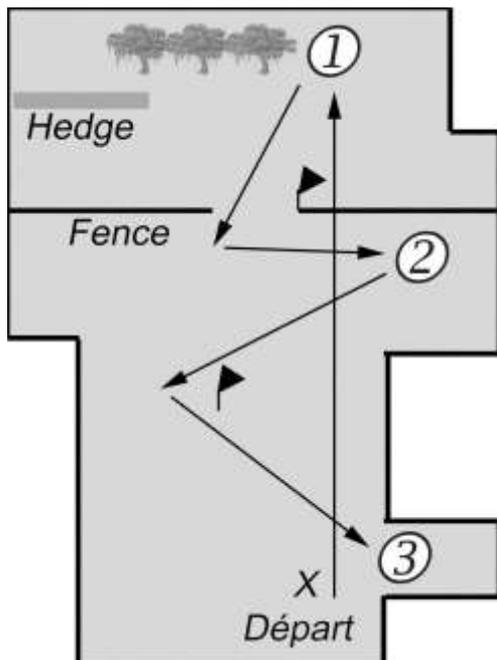
Today, the game of *crosse* consists of two main variants: ‘*crosse en rue*’ (street *crosse*) and ‘*crosse en plaine*’ (field *crosse*).

The game of *crosse en rue* is still the game played through the streets of the villages and the surrounding countryside. It is only played during carnival or on special religion-related festive days such as All Saints’ Day, Christmas, Easter and patron saints days. Most of the tournaments during such festive days are played with crude clubs and crude wooden balls. The length of the ‘course’ depends on the size of the village and sometimes the distance of the ‘historical targets’, for instance a chapel. It could well be that in the Middle Ages the street game was played on religion-related festive days.

In places such as Anvaing, Isières and Montrœul-au-Bois players used metal-headed clubs during the ‘festive’ tournaments but in most other places the traditional crude wooden clubs and crude wooden balls were used to play, for example, towards the chapel of the saint in question.

The street crosse course in the small town of Blaton in the Belgian Borinage, 2013. This game is played on Ash Wednesday. The number of ‘holes’ depends on the number of beer barrels, mainly in front of the taverns and used as targets for the game. The course on the map looks like a fairly long game with twenty holes. – <http://crossage-blaton.skyrock.com>





Originally *crosse en plaine* was played on the open fields round the towns. There were no limits to the size of the playing field. The urbanisation of the *crosse* region had severe influence on the playing fields for the *crosseurs*. The development of housing estates and industrial estates with their infrastructures has reduced considerably the availability of open fields. Most *crosse* societies are playing now on specific playing fields varying in size between a few to 15 hectares. The length of such a course depends very much on the routing from the various ‘*planchettes*’ (holes in golf).

During the last sixty years, the infrastructure of the crosse region has changed significantly. Motorways, industrial and housing estates have cut up and reduced the available wasteland and meadows for the crosseurs. To keep on playing a long game some societies have introduced on the playing fields flagpoles around which the players had to play the ‘choulette’ (ball) on their way to the next target. – Playing field of the society ‘Le Rat d’Eau’ in Fayt-le-Franc, Belgium

*In Baudour near the city of Mons, the members of the ‘Pic et Plat’ society play on a field of approximately 40 acres (15 hectares) on which thirteen ‘planchettes’ (holes in golf) are laid out. Players are free to distinguish the routing and the parties to cover during their weekly round with friends. At official meetings however it is the organisation who distinguishes the routing and the number of *planchettes* to cover. At the ‘Grands Tournaments’ only a few *planchettes* are used to support the regular forward flow of the parties, which is not self-evident in a game where one plays ‘to and fro’.*



On the crosse field of the society 'La Renaissance', outside the city of Maubeuge (14 hectares), a course is laid out in winter consisting of nine planchettes with a distance of approximately 350 metres between each of them.

In Feignies (France) the 'Société La Revanche – La Soulette finisienne' plays on a large meadow in winter with nine different stakes, standing several hundred metres from each other.

More information about the game of crosse is to be found in the book 'CHOULE - The Non-Royal but most Ancient Game of Crosse', written by Geert & Sara Nijs.