

Religion and the game of crosse

In the past, the 'en plaine' and 'en rue' games were not different from what they are today. From the Middle Ages onwards, people played the game in the fields and the streets of towns and villages. Playing in the fields did not provoke much trouble, but the game often deteriorated into fighting and swearing when reaching the streets (and the taverns).

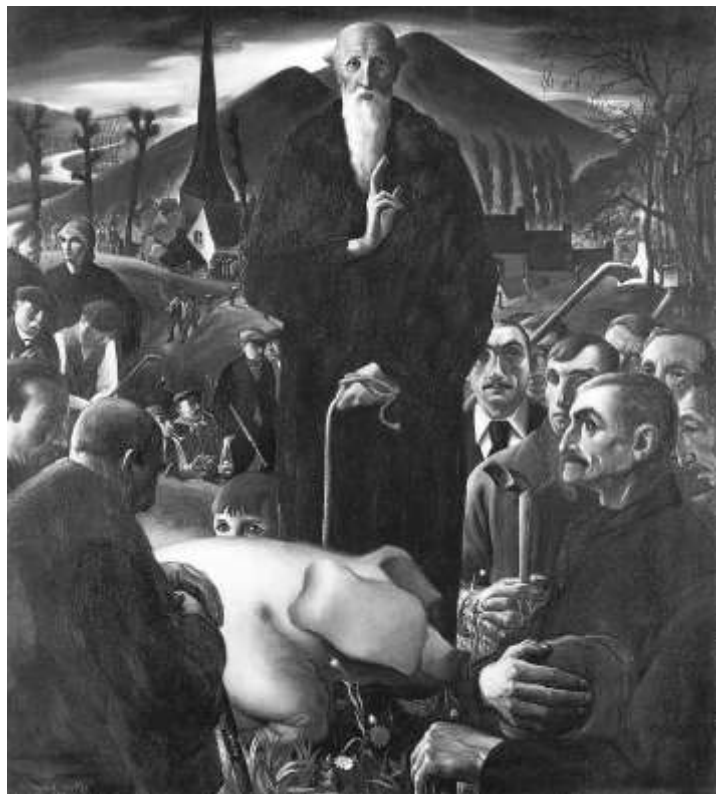
Accidents caused by the iron clubs and wooden balls were the order of the day.

The council and church authorities regularly forbade, limited or altered the game, as with other violent sports such as football and hockey. Ordinances show that players were sometimes severely fined: playing in towns with iron clubs was forbidden, and only wooden mallets were allowed. The church authorities tried to control the game of crosse by incorporating its activities into the religious calendar, such as saints' days, Easter, All Saints' Day, Shrove Tuesday, and Ash Wednesday. All activities in town became religious.

It is uncertain why crosseurs play the ratio of 3 to 1 (three choules and one déchoule), but some local historians suggest a religious symbolism. The ratio may represent the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (3) in one Godhead (1). When playing, one is also praying. In this playing, one acknowledges one's belief in the Holy Trinity.

During the last period of the 19th century, with the growing influence of liberalism and socialism and the increasing secularisation, religious feast activities changed. The barrel at the tavern's entrance replaced the church door as the target for the crosseurs, and a drinking bout took the place of the Holy Mass. Crosseurs organised themselves into carnival crosse societies, as they had previously done in parishes.

In the Roman Catholic region of the ancient county of Hainaut, jeu de crosse was part of the religious calendar. St Anthony was even the patron saint of all crosseurs.- 'Saint Anthoine bénit les crosseurs', Marcel Gillis, 1953 – Musée des Beaux-Arts, Mons





The life-sized statue of St Anthony in the chapel at Havré, worn out by the time, but worshipped till the 21st century. When the crosseurs went on the pilgrimage to the chapel at Havré, a crosse (club) was placed in the right hand of the patron saint.

St Anthony, patron saint of all crosseurs

By the end of the 14th century, a hermit lived in the woods in an area called Barbefosse, near the village of Havré, situated approximately 10 kilometres east of Mons. The hermit lived close to a small chapel devoted to St Anthony the Great, also named the Hermit.

In 1387, a severe contagious skin disease called 'dry gangrene' broke out. Many people went on pilgrimage to St Anthony's chapel and to the hermit. They prayed for protection against or healing from this disease. When several sick people miraculously recovered, church authorities made the pilgrimage official. On 30th October 1389, Pope Clemens VII permitted the Lord of Havré, Knight Gérard d'Enguien, to build a larger chapel, again devoted to St Anthony, finally constructed between 1406 and 1409.

(*'Calvaires et Chapelles en Hainaut'*, 3rd year, N^o 2, June 1950)

A large wooden statue of St Anthony was placed in the chapel. For centuries, the faithful invoked St Anthony against contagious diseases such as gangrene and the plague, which ravaged Europe for several centuries. Usually, the pilgrimages to the chapel at Havré took place in winter, mainly on Sundays. On 17th January, the name day of St Anthony, many pilgrims went to Havré. Pilgrimages also had a profane side. While the pilgrims gathered for the worship ceremonies, the bustle attracted lookers-on and merrymakers: people went to the pilgrimage kermes to meet people, drink, eat, dance, and play games. After the pilgrimage, accidents often occurred on the way back home, and fights regularly broke out. Council and church authorities had to interfere. In 1478, the officials of Mons and surrounding villages interfered with the pilgrimage to the chapel of St Anthony.

The game of crosse was one of the most popular outdoor games in the Mons region. Young people joined in the pilgrimage by playing crosse towards the chapel. According to Paul de Saint-Hilaire (*'Atlas du Mystère'*, 1985), the crosse pilgrims played with a T-shaped stick, like St Anthony's staff.

Playing crosse during the pilgrimage became so popular that the game became closely linked and inseparable from 17th January.

St Anthony the Great or the Hermit

Anthony was born in Egypt in 251 AD. He became a hermit in the Egyptian desert at the age of 20. According to tradition, Anthony had to fight many demons. He had many students whom he inspired through his personal life. Nevertheless, he remained a hermit and never founded a convent community. Anthony died in the desert in 356 at the age of more than 100. His remains were brought to France, and since 1491, he has rested at Arles in the St Julien church.

In religion and folklore, St Anthony plays an important role. He is the patron saint of animals, farmers, butchers, brush makers and last but not least, all crosseurs.

On 17th January, his name day, guilds and brotherhoods drank the traditional half-barrel of guild beer.

Many worshippers held a novena from the 17th to the 25th of January.

St Anthony was invoked for protection against, or healing from, contagious diseases such as the plague, gangrene, ergotism (St Anthony's fire), and various animal diseases (in particular, pig diseases).

St Anthony is portrayed in a brown habit with some of the following attributes: in his hands a bible and 'tau' (T-shaped staff) with a bell, and at his feet a pig and flames.

During the 17th century, diseases like the plague reduced considerably. The animation to participate in the pilgrimage to Havré diminished, though the crosseurs continued to celebrate St Anthony, for he had become their patron saint. The day of St Anthony became a day of pleasure for the working class, who played jeu de crosse.

On 17th January, the crosseurs from the different estates and villages assembled in the centre of Mons. They distinguished themselves by their banners, scarves, sashes and cockades. They left the town and went through the fields towards the chapel of their patron saint in Havré. Upon arrival at the chapel, the assembled pilgrims greeted the crosseurs with applause and bells ringing. After the religious celebrations —attending Mass, kissing relics, and singing sacred songs —the crosseurs started playing their game. In the chapel, they placed a crosse in the right hand of St Anthony's statue. The crosseurs played the matches in the fields around the chapel. The door of the chapel was the final target of the game.



It is a quest to find the chapel of St Anthony, for this is the only sign, and it stands close to the chapel.

The sign confirms the authorisation of the chapel's construction by Pope Clemens VII in 1389. Regretfully, there is no indication of the connection between St Anthony and the crosseurs.

The chapel of St Anthony, built at the beginning of the 15th century, has been an important centre for the crosse game in the Hainaut region.





On the pilgrimage to Havré, the door of St Anthony's chapel was the final target for the crosseurs. The present door does not carry any damage from the impact of the many choulettes, so it is undoubtedly not the 14th-century one.

In 1775, the bailiff of Havré expressed his concern about the irregularities during the pilgrimages to the chapel. The crosseurs caused breakage of the chapel windows; people were afraid to enter the chapel. The bailiff ordained that crosseurs should play with wooden mallets instead of iron crosses. (Jean Pierard, 1968)

For the crosseurs, St Anthony's name day was the ultimate day of crosse tournaments. It was the only day the most powerful and skilful crosseurs received medals. Probably, the players also organised longest drive and target contests.

When the games finished at sunset, an end had come to an animated day of playing. The crosseurs went homewards, in their midst the victors, proudly wearing the medals on their chests. A brass band or a group of tambours accompanied them. In the light of resin torches, the crosseurs swarmed the streets of Mons, yelling 'Vive Saint Antoine!'



The ancient relief, once placed at the window of the tavern Chez l'Borgne (or l'Bagne) in the Rue de Basse at Mons, is now exhibited in a showcase in an unsightly corner in one of the local museums. – By courtesy of Musée du Folklore et de la Vie montoise, Mons

The last tavern the crosseurs entered was the 'Chez l'Borgne' (or 'l'Bagne') in the Rue de Basse. Behind the window of this tavern, a relief depicting St Anthony was placed with two lit candles. This relief can still be seen in the Musée du Folklore et de la Vie montoise. In the tavern, the crosseurs sang, during the meal, the centuries-old song again and again:

<i>A Saint Antouaine</i>	On the day of St Anthony
<i>On va crocher</i>	We are going to play crosse
<i>Avee une soule et ein macquet</i>	With a ball and a club
<i>Vive Saint Antouaine!</i>	Long live St Anthony!

The above information about Havré is derived from *Félix Hachez* (1848), *Léopold Devillers* (1865) and *Karl Petit* (1943).

In 1865, Léopold Devillers ('La Chevalerie et le Prieuré de Saint-Antoine-en-Barbefosse') writes that St Anthony's name day was still a festive day for the working class and that crosseurs continued to go to the chapel in Havré with beating drums and colours flying.

In 1870, Baron de Reinsberg-Dürenfeld confirmed that 17 January was still an exuberant feast of the working class ('Traditions et Légendes de la Belgique').

By the end of the 19th century, after the glorious St Anthony feasts, only a few crosseurs made their way to the chapel. Karl Petit quotes his grandfather, who told him the chapel door was the final target. Even the worst weather could not refrain the crosseurs from respecting with perseverance this old Walloon custom.

During the war in 1943, the few remaining crosseurs gathered in Havré in the tavern 'La Longue Roïe', named after an ancient knight of the St Anthony's Order, Raoul de Longherowe, who once had a manor in the neighbourhood. (Karl Petit, 1943)

Because of the diminishing interest in the game and the building activities around the chapel, the last St Anthony celebration took place in 1971.

('Religion et traditions populaires dans la region du Centre à la mémoires de l'abbé Louis Smars, 1855-1933, èl curè d'Bornivau', 1982, Robert Dascotte)

It is a pity that such a tradition, kept alive for hundreds of years, has vanished forever.

The surroundings of the chapel have changed so dramatically that it is hardly possible to imagine how crosseurs celebrated the name day of their patron saint here.



In 1943, a handful of crosseurs gathered in La Longue Roïe, a tavern named after an ancient knight of the St Anthony's Order, Raoul de Longherowe.

The present occupants placed a statue of St Anthony ... of Padua, the patron saint of lost things, in the niche above the entrance. Well, if he can help find lost choulettes, why not?

In the 1960s, a hospital for women was built adjacent to the chapel. In later years, another institute raised a building on its other side. In 2003, the chapel, one of the oldest historic sites of the county of Hainaut, looked already dilapidated. The fence around the chapel made it difficult to approach. In 2020, Havré's council granted a subsidy to avoid the chapel's collapse before its complete restoration.



The relationship between crosseurs and St Anthony extends beyond the area around Mons.

In the tale of Charles Deulin (1873), the leading character, Roger, who lived in a fictitious small hamlet near Condé-sur-l'Escaut in French Flanders, was approached by two men. These men asked Roger if he could repair a crosse. When Roger asked who these men were, the answer was: "I am St Peter, and my companion is St Anthony, the patron saint of crosseurs."

The song 'A Saint Antoine on va crocher, avé eene soule et ein maquet. Vive Saint-Antouaine!' was not only known in the Mons area. In the 19th century, hundreds of crosseurs, coming from all directions, played the crosse game in the streets of Maubeuge on Ash Wednesday. After playing crosse during the day, they ended with a large meal while agreeing to meet again on 17th January, the name day of St Anthony, the patron saint of the crosseurs. They sang the St Anthony song loudly. The story does not say whether the crosseurs went from Maubeuge to Havré on a 'jeu de crosse pilgrimage' or to a St Anthony chapel near Maubeuge.

(Pierre Pierrard, 1976)

Crosseurs not only played crosse as part of a pilgrimage to chapels devoted to St Anthony. In Anvaing (Belgium), they play on 19th March, the name day of St Joseph; if the 19th was a weekday, the event took place on the first Sunday after that. The final goal is the door of St Joseph's chapel in the fields near Anvaing. On this day, crosseurs from all over Wallonia besieged the village to play their game. It was the season's closing tournament.

As in other places, the game evolved over the last decades from a religiously oriented one into one in which barrels in front of taverns replaced chapel doors as the final target.

Also in Isières, Belgium, le jeu de crosse is played around 19th March to celebrate St Joseph's name day.

According to Walter Ravez (1949), the game was played in the surroundings of Tournai in French Flanders on Shrove Tuesday. The crosseurs played, contrary to other towns and villages, without *déchoules*, as they played up the steep Rue de Poètes to the 'Mont Saint Aubert'. The final target was the portal of the church of St Aubert.

On 12th March, crosseurs of Montrœul-au-Bois, Belgium, celebrated the name day of St Grégoire by playing 'à la cholette' (jeu de crosse) in the fields around the village.

The small, somewhat dilapidated chapel in the fields near Anvaing, situated in front of a castle's entrance.

