

PETRONIANA

by Lydia Baumbach (Rhodes University, Grahamstown)

Most South Africans know the game "Bok-bok", a favourite of school-boys — and school-girls, though against their mothers' wishes — and have probably thought about it as something typically South African. Indeed, when it was met with in the British Navy, the opinion was expressed that it must have come from South Africa.

But anyone reading the description of the dinner-party given by Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*, will be struck by the similarity between the formula of a game mentioned there and the formula of the South African game. Trimalchio makes a slave boy get on his back: "ille usus est equo, manuque plena scapulas eius subinde uerberauit, interque risum proclamauit: 'bucca, bucca, quot sunt hic?'"¹ The South African game is a team game, in which one member of the "supporting" team acts as anchor by standing against a wall or tree, the next faces him, stooping and placing his head in his hands, the rest line up behind him, stooping in the same way, so that a whole line of backs is offered to the other team, who jump on in turn, leap-frog fashion, the first jumping as far as he can go. The object, of course, is to make the whole bunch collapse, but if everyone is on, and stays on, the jumpers lay a number of fingers on their opponents' backs, and say, "Bok-bok staan styf, hoeveel vingers op jou lyf?" There are local variations, such as holding up a number of fingers instead of laying them on. It is interesting to note that a game similar to the Latin one is still played in Cambridgeshire, where the rider holds up a number of fingers and says, "Buck, buck, how many fingers do I hold up?"² In Scotland, more specifically in Aberdeenshire, something similar to the South African game is played, with the exception that there is no guessing of the number of fingers. This game is known in Scotland as Backie, while in Holland a similar game is found under the name of "Bok sta vast."³ Howard Spring in his *Heaven lies about us* speaks with nostalgia of a game he played in his childhood in Cardiff, and his description fits in well with our other evidence, except that he does not give a name.

The question now is, are we justified in finding a common origin for all these in the Latin game? It is always dangerous in linguistics to base a relationship on phonetic similarity alone, so that, though bucca, bok, buck, backie, all have the same consonants, we must first examine the meaning before coming to any conclusions. The word "bucca" in Latin means cheek, particularly the part which becomes round when inflated (hence Fr. bouche). Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary* makes no mention of the Petronius passage, but does note that the word was applied to other parts of the body such as the rounded part of the knee. Nowhere, however, is there any reference to the word as applied to any part of the back, or more specifically to its lower extremity, though one could, without much stretch of imagination, conceive of such a possibility. Now, in none of the games, except the Scots variety, is there any mention of the back,

¹ Petr. *Sat.* 64, 12.

² Note on *Sat.* 64, 12 in W.B. Sedgwick's edition of the *Cena Trimalchionis*.

³ Dr. Jos. Schrijnen *Nederlandsche Volkskunde*, p. 229.

but only of buck, bok. Could it be that we have here an example of a mistaken etymology (Afr. Volksetimologie), where a word, imperfectly understood, is replaced by a familiar word of similar sound? (Cf. Sparrowgrass for Asparagus, familiesous for vaniljesous.)

The Latin game is usually equated with one still played in Italy, known as morra. In Latin the term was 'micare digitis', and according to the evidence the game was played by two people, who held up a number of fingers simultaneously and tried to guess at the sum (Cf. a similar game played in China). That it was a popular game among the Romans, is proved by the fact that it gave rise to a proverbial saying. If someone was completely trustworthy, the saying was: "You could play morra in the dark with him" (cum quo audacter posses in tenebris micare).⁴ There is no suggestion, however, of one or more players getting on another's back, so that, unless the game described in Petronius is a combination of the two, there is not sufficient evidence to enable us to equate the bucca-game with the Italian morra.

Though the evidence is by no means conclusive, it is at least tempting to suggest that our South African game "Bok-bok", together with similar games in other countries, is also part of our inheritance from Rome.

(Any further information would be greatly appreciated.)

⁴ Cic. *de Off.* III, 77, *de Fin.* II, 52.
Petr. *Sat.* 44, 7.
Augustine, *de Trin.* VIII, 5.

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