PETRONIANA
by W. H. Hewitt (University of Natal).

Miss Baumbach's suggestion ¹ that the game referred to in Petronius 64. 12 is similar to the familiar South African 'bok-bok' has much to recommend it. I should like to re-consider and perhaps expand some of the points made in her article.

Miss Baumbach refers to the equation of part of the game in Petronius with micatio, micare digitis. This was suggested by several of the older editors of Petronius, and is adopted by Sedgwick in his note on the passage, where he says 'the guessing part was called micare digitis' and compares Petronius 44. 7 and the Greek ποσίγυδα ². Mention of micare digitis in connection with the present passage has in the past given rise to considerable confusion, but P. G. Brewster ³ has shown clearly that it should be distinguished from 'bucca, bucca'. The passages from ancient authors usually cited to illustrate micare digitis and the proverb 'dignus est quicum in tenebris mices' ⁴ do not give a clear description of the game; the best is found in Nonnus' Dionysiaca:

\[ \text{λαχμὸς ἐν μιθέων ἐπετρότροπα δάκτυλα χειρῶν,} \\
\text{καὶ τὰ μὲν ὀρθόσαντες ἀνέσχεθον, ἄλλα δὲ καρπῷ} \\
\text{χειρὸς ἐπαφήςκοτο συνήδηρα σῦγγι δεσμῷ.} \]

This certainly seems like the game known in Italy as 'morra' and found also in other parts of the world; but it is not the same as ποσίγυδα which, according to Cobet, was a guessing game played with nuts ⁶. Nor is it the game referred to in Petronius 64. 12. Clearly in Petronius the 'horseback' and the guessing are parts of one game; to isolate the guessing and equate it with morra would hardly be reasonable. And we are equally clearly dealing with a child's game, and one which would be unsuitable to all but the most athletic adults. There is no suggestion in the passages dealing with micatio that it was ever played on horseback, and it was not by any means a child's game; it was used on serious occasions and even in business transactions ⁷, by adults. I have seen morra played by adults in S. Italy, though of course it is also played by children, and have some recollection of a similar game being used by children in South Africa as a means of 'counting out'. A further reason for rejecting the identification of the game in Petronius with morra is that in the latter both players extend their fingers, while in the former only Croesus uses his hands at all. For these reasons,

¹ Acta Classica II pp. 70, 71. The suggestion has also been made earlier by Prof. Haarhoff, C.P. XXXIX (1944) pp. 118ff.
⁵ Dion, 33. 77.
⁷ Marquardt, ibid., with refs.
Sedgwick’s note may safely be discarded, as indeed it is by the latest Italian editors, to whose works I shall refer below.

Having disposed of this confusion, we may turn to the game ‘bucca, bucca’. It is clear from Brewster’s researches and those of Prof. B. L. Ullman that we are dealing with a very ancient game which, in slightly varying forms, has either spread to or developed independently in many parts of the world, to such an extent that Brewster has collected more than eighty-five versions. Anthropologists and students of folk-lore have compared and discussed these, and editors of Petronius of various nationalities have quoted examples from their own experience and from the literature of their own countries. Typical of these are the descriptions given in two recent Italian editions, which I quote at some length, as they may not be readily available to readers in Southern Africa. Prof. E. Marmorale compares ‘bucca, bucca’ to an Italian game which he describes as follows: ‘Un fanciullo era seduto; un secondo gli poggiava la testa in grembo, curvandosi, e si faceva da lui bendare gli occhi colle mani; un terzo saliva a cavalchioni sul secondo e formava un numero con le dita distese (uno, due o tre dita, a volontà) e il secondo doveva indovinare di quant’era composto il numero’. He also quotes Sedgwick’s description of the similar game played in Cambridgeshire, and refers to F. Galiani’s ‘Del dialetto napoletano’. Prof. A. Maini states that the Petronian game ‘finds its continuation in the Neapolitan children’s game called “scaricavarile” and the chant “Ancà Nicola”’, and goes on to quote the same work of Galiani. According to Galiani, the game consists of one (boy) placing himself, bent down, with his head against the stomach of another who is seated, and the latter covers the former’s eyes with his hands. Then another boy jumps up on to him like a rider and sings: ‘Ancanicola, si’ bella e si’ bona, e si’ bella maretata; quante come tiene ‘ncapa?’ And meanwhile he raises as many fingers as he pleases of one hand, which he places on the other’s head. The one who is underneath has, without seeing them, to guess the number of fingers, and so answers either ‘one’ or ‘two’ or ‘three’ or another number up to five. If he guesses correctly he escapes punishment. If he is wrong, the one who is mounted replies: ‘E se... (he gives the correct number) ...avisse ditto, a cavallo fosse scritto, a cavallo de lu papa; quante corne tiene ‘ncapa?’ And so it goes on until he has guessed correctly.’

From these descriptions and those quoted to or referred to by Brewster and Ullman it is clear that ‘bok-bok’, so far from being indigenous to South Africa, has an ancient lineage and relations in many different countries. There are many variations of detail from place to place; sometimes we are dealing with a team-game, as in South Africa, Turkey and India, and at others, with a game played by individuals; but it is safe to say that they are forms of one game, the game referred to by Petronius. A striking point is the frequency with which the words ‘goat’, ‘buck’, ‘deer’ occur in the chant associated with the game, and this

8 Brewster, loc. cit.
9 B. L. Ullman: ‘“Bucca, bucca” (Petronius 64)’, C.P. XXXVIII (1943) pp. 94—102.
10 There is another brief reference to the game which I have not seen referred to by editors of Petronius in Norman Douglas London Street Games, London 1916, p. 31.
12 Marmorate, op. cit., on 64. 12.
13 Napoli 1923, p. 154.
14 La Cena di Trimalchione di Petronio Arbitro. Napoli MCMXLV.

91
renders all the more attractive Ullman's suggestion that in Petronius' 'bucca' we have an otherwise unattested word meaning 'goat', and not the familiar word which in classical Latin means 'cheek' and in Vulgar Latin, 'mouth'.

Brewster admits that his use of the word 'Roman' in the title of his article may not be strictly accurate, and that it was adopted merely because the game is known to have been popular among the early Romans and because the earliest reference to it (at least as far as my knowledge goes) occurs in Latin literature. To say that it was popular among the early Romans seems to me to overstate the case somewhat; the fact that it is not mentioned elsewhere in Latin literature, though not conclusive, at least allows the possibility that it was not well-known or generally popular in Italy. Though it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty where the game originated (if it did not spring up spontaneously in different parts of the globe), India and possibly even China and Egypt have to be considered; and I should like tentatively to suggest that it may have been brought to Rome from Asia Minor. Trimalchio does not hide his eastern birth; and the name Croesus suggests that his favourite, too, may have come from Asia Minor. Prof. Hadas has shown that there are a number of oriental elements in the Satyricon; perhaps 'bucca, bucca' is another.

15 Ullman, loc. cit., p. 96.
16 Petr. 29. 3, 73. 10.
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: