Truly Hoover’s sign, not Babinski-2

Those who know my hang-up with Babinski will understand that I could not resist the temptation to respond to Jim Howe’s question regarding when and where Babinski described the ‘heel pressure phenomenon’ that is now known as Hoover’s sign (Howe 2001). Well, the answer is he didn’t. What Babinski did report, in a two-part paper listing all the signs known at the time (Babinski 1900) that could help to distinguish organic from hysterical hemiplegia, was involuntary flexion of the ‘truly’ paralysed leg when the supine patient attempts to sit up without using the arms (Fig. 1) (Babinski 1900). When a healthy person performs this movement, both legs are pressed against the surface by action of the hip extensors (gluteus maximus); otherwise the legs would go up instead of the trunk. On the side of an organic hemiplegia (the left side in the figure) there is no such stabilizing activity and so the leg indeed does go up. So Babinski came close to discovering Hoover’s later sign, but firstly his instruction was to sit up, not to lift the good leg, and secondly the sign was involuntary flexion on the truly paralysed side, not extension on the pseudo-paralysed side.

REFERENCES
Babinski J (1900) Diagnostic différentiel de l’hémiplégie organique et de l’hémiplégie hystérique. Gazette Des Hôpitaux, 73, 533-7