



Sports as Performance:  
The *Qabaq*-game and Celebratory Rites  
in Mamluk Cairo

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## Sports as Performance: The *Qabaq*-game and Celebratory Rites in Mamluk Cairo

“The present life is naught but a sport  
(*laʿb*) and a diversion (*lahw*). Surely the  
Last Abode is better for those that are  
godfearing.” Qurʾan, 6: 32<sup>1</sup>

Sports is not the most talked about subject in medieval Islamic sources, much less a worthy topic for scholastic discourse. Case in point is the crown jewel of Arabic encyclopedias, al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 1333) *Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab*, or “The ultimate goal to branches of erudition,” whose Book Two (consisting of five volumes) is devoted to “the mankind.” It begins with human body – from body parts to corporal postures – and goes on to garden-variety human activities, from the sacred to the profane: literature, politics, law, warfare, music and wine. Conspicuously missing is sports and fitness.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, the human body was no small matter in Islamic tradition. Jurists tried to regulate corporal cleansing and police bodily movements. Philosophers speculated on the relation between body and mind. Poets marveled at the beloved’s desirable physique and seductive postures. Sufis saw their bodies to be the vessel for performing cosmic and ritual functions. While body featured significantly in these discourses, little, if any, was said

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<sup>1</sup> *The Koran Interpreted* (New York, 1955), by A. J. Arberry. The terms *laʿb* and *lahw* are also translated as “play” and “amusement” respectively in *The Holy Qur-ān: English translation of the meanings and commentary* (Medina: King Fahd Holy Qur-ān Printing Complex).

<sup>2</sup> al-Nuwayrī, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad, *Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab* (Cairo, 1923–97), vols. 2–6. While weaponry is covered at length (6: 151–247), the *furūsiya*, or “horsemanship,” probably the closest to “sports,” is not.

about how to keep it in shape. Even in medical writings, healing seemed to be the sole concern.

On the other hand, it is evident that in medieval Islamic world men were engaged in various physical exercises, competitive or recreational: fencing, boat racing, swimming, and weightlifting (also relevant were animal fighting, falconry, and hunting).<sup>3</sup> In the Mamluk period (1250–1517), certain military skills evolved into games. Little wonder the games these warriors – known as “slaves on horseback” – played were of the *furūsiya*-variations. What motivated them to play if not primarily for physical wellbeing? What functions the games were to perform other than combat-readiness? What about non-*furūsiya* games? Did commoners play sports? Were there public sporting events in Mamluk Cairo? Where and how? In the following pages I seek to address these questions, if not in a comprehensive manner. Drawing on narrative sources, literature, and art, I purview sports and sporting events in Mamluk Cairo through a case study of one particular game, the *qabaq* horseback archery. I then discuss the use of sporting events in Mamluk celebratory rites from the perspective of power and performance.

### *The qabaq game*

In the year 672, the month of Ramaḍān (March–April, 1274), Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–77) celebrated his son’s circumcision. The featured event was a game called *qabaq*. The court historian, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir (d. 1293), describes the feast in semi-rhymed prose, adorned with flowery verses. Among the three poems cited on this occasion, which is extraordinary even for a royal biography, one read:<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Boaz Shoshan, “Sports,” in Josef Meri ed., *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An encyclopedia* (New York, 2006), 768–70.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, Muḥyi al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh, *al-Rawḍ al-zāhir fī sirat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1976), 424–25; al-Manṣūri al-Dawādār, Baybars, *Zubdat al-fikra fī ta’rikh al-hijra*, ed. D. S. Richards (Beirut, 1998), 141.

Drawing on narrative sources, literature, and art, this essay purviews sports and sporting events in Mamluk Cairo through a case study of one particular game, the *qabaq* horseback archery. It then discusses the use of sporting events in Mamluk celebratory rites from the perspective of power, performance, and production of pleasure.

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