Ulrich Haarmann Memorial Lecture ed. Stephan Conermann

Volume 5





ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL KOLLEG History and Society during the Mamluk Era (1250 - 1517)

Li Guo

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

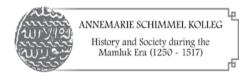


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"The present life is naught but a sport (*la*^{*b*}) and a diversion (*lahw*). Surely the Last Abode is better for those that are godfearing." Qur'an, 6: 32^1

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 fī 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.² 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

¹ The Koran Interpreted (New York, 1955), by A. J. Arberry. The terms lab 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).

² al-Nuwayri, Shihāb al-Din Ahmad, Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab (Cairo, 1923–97), vols. 2–6. While weaponry is covered at length (6: 151–247), the furūsīya, or "horse-manship," probably the closest to "sports," is not.

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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).³ 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 *furūsīya*-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-furūsīya 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 *qabag* 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 Ramadān (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:⁴

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³ Boaz Shoshan, "Sports," in Josef Meri ed., Medieval Islamic Civilization: An encyclopedia (New York, 2006), 768–70.

⁴ Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd Allāh, al-Rawd al-zāhir fī sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Khuwayţir (Riyadh, 1976), 424–25; al-Manşūrī al-Dawādār, Baybars, Zubdat al-fikra fī ta'rīkh 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.

THE AUTHOR

Li Guo (PhD, 1994, Yale University) is Professor and Director of The Program in Arabic Language and Culture, The Department of Classics, University of Notre Dame (Indiana, 46556, USA; lguo@nd.edu). He is the author of *Early Mamluk Syrian Historiography: al-Yūnīnī's* Dhayl Mir'āt al-zamān (Brill, 1998), *Commerce, Culture, and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic documents from Quseir* (Brill, 2004), and *The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow play and popular poetry in Ibn Dāniyāl's Mamluk Cairo* (Brill, 2012).

