Egypt had just thwarted another invasion of a Crusader army, the second within thirty years, when, on 2 May 1250, Mamluk troops staged their coup d'état in Cairo. It was a time of grave peril for Islam. Emboldened by the obvious success of the Reconquista in the west, Christendom had for some time entertained a most audacious plan. Relying more on rumor and wishful thinking than on knowledge of the geopolitical and geographic realities, they hoped for the conquest and occupation of Egypt and a link, at Aswan, with the Christian powers of Nubia and Ethiopia, in alliance, perhaps, with the Mongol heathens. The terrifying Mongol armies had already brought ruin and destruction to vast portions of the Eastern Caliphate and reduced the most powerful Muslim state of the day, the empire of the Anatolian Seljuqs, to the status of a protectorate. The Christians hoped for no less, in short, than the elimination, once and for all, of Islam.

None of this came about, of course. A mere decade later, Mamluk troops had brought the tide of the seemingly invincible Mongol hordes to a halt in Galilee, and before the century was over they had driven the last remnants of the Crusader army from Muslim soil. The Mamluk slave warriors, with an empire extending from Libya to the Euphrates, from Cilicia to the Arabian Sea and the Sudan, remained for the next two hundred years the most formidable power of the eastern Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean—champions of Sunni orthodoxy, guardians of Islam’s holy places, their capital, Cairo, the seat of the Sunni caliph and a magnet for scholars, artists, and craftsmen uprooted by the Mongol upheaval in the east or drawn to it from all parts of the Muslim world by its wealth and prestige. Under their rule, Egypt passed through a period of prosperity and brilliance unparalleled since the days of the Ptolemies. The titles and honorifics of their sultans reflected pride in their achievements: “pillar of the world and of the faith, sultan of Islam and of the Muslims, lord of kings and sultans, slayer of infidels and polytheists, supporter of the truth, helper of mankind, ruler of the two seas, lord of the qibla and servant of the Holy Places, reviver of the illustrious caliphate, the shadow of God on earth, partner of the Commander of the Faithful, Baybars, son of Ābd-Allah, the former slave of al-Šāliḥ, may God strengthen his authority.”

They ruled as a military aristocracy, aloof and almost totally isolated from the native population, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, and their ranks had to be replenished in each generation through fresh imports of slaves from abroad. Only those who had grown up outside Muslim territory and who entered as slaves in the service either of the sultan himself or of one of the Mamluk amirs were eligible for membership and careers within their closed military caste. The offspring of mamluks were free-born Muslims and hence excluded from the system; they became the awliāʾ al-nās, the “sons of respectable people,” who either fulfilled scribal and administrative functions or served as commanders of the non-Mamluk halqa troops. The exceptions were the sultans’ sons, who for the sake of stability were allowed to succeed their fathers in the post of chief mamluk; beginning with Sultan Qalāʾūn al-ʿAlī (1279–90), and until the end of the “Turkish period” in 1382, the empire was ruled by a Mamluk royal dynasty.

Some two thousand slaves were imported annually: Qipchaq, Azeri, and Uzbek Turks, Mongols, Avars, Circassians, Georgians, Armenians, Greeks, Bulgars, Albanians, Serbs, Hungarians. Sultan Lājin (1297–99) apparently came
from the Baltic area; the father of Sultan Barquq (1382–89, 1390–99) was a peasant in the Danube region. Khūn Maṣrūr was the slave market in Cairo, and a year-round market solely for Mongol slaves was maintained in Alexandria. Genoese and Venetian traders vied with each other as chief suppliers. Up to 100,000 dirhams, we are told, were paid toward the purchase of a single slave; the maintenance costs for the slaves amounted to 70,000 dirhams per month during al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s second reign (1299–1309) and had more than tripled by the time his son al-Ḥasan ascended the throne in 1347. Exaggerated as these figures may seem, there can be no doubt that the number of slave warriors owned by an amīr—his tulf—meant not only strength and prestige, but often survival in the almost continual power struggle within the Mamluk system. In Qalā‘ūn’s words, “All kings have done something for which they are remembered. Some amassed treasures, others erected edifices. I have built ‘walls’ and ‘strongholds’ for myself and my descendants—the Mamluks.”

Most of the slaves, especially the Qipchaq Turks, were brought in while still at a young and malleable age. After assignment to barracks—there were twelve of these tibāq in the Citadel alone, each comprising several buildings and accommodating about a thousand mamluks—they received instruction in Muslim faith and practice, including some rudiments of Islamic jurisprudence, by selected members of the indigenous clergy. Their commandant was the muqaddam al-mamālik; their supervisors were palace eunuchs. During their training period, they received monthly stipends ranging from three to ten dinars, in addition to food rations and clothing allowances. Discipline was strict; all contact with the local population was prohibited. Qalā‘ūn’s mamluks were not allowed to leave the Citadel at any time. The rules were somewhat relaxed under al-Ashraf Khalil (1290–94), who granted occasional daytime leaves, only to be tightened again by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, whose mamluks, by rotation, were marched under the close supervision of their eunuchs to a weekly bath in town. Such iron discipline carried over into palace service later on: amirs and mamluks in attendance on the sultan were not permitted to speak to each other, nor as much as exchange a glance. Joint excursions by two or more royal mamluks, on a hunting trip, for instance, were not only discouraged, but could mean banishment from court and even more drastic punishment for those involved, had they failed to obtain the sultan’s prior permission. On the other hand, the sultans as a rule lavished every attention on the well-being of their mamluk trainees. Qalā‘ūn even went to the length of periodically inspecting and tasting their food in person.

Toward the end of the fourteenth century, the steady supply of young slaves began to dry up, owing to the upheavals caused by Tamerlane’s invasions in the east and demographic changes in the Qipchaq steppe, and the system found itself compelled to fill the ranks with mostly adult mamluks from other parts—“ex-sailors, bakery helpers, water carriers, and their ilk,” in the words of the contemporary historian Maqrizi—who were neither capable nor willing to fit into this strict regimen. Rules had to be relaxed, the standards of training lowered, and, by the time of the second reign of Sultan al-Nāṣir Faraj (1405–12), the royal mamluks, once the elite, had become an impoverished, despicable, ignorant rabble, “more promiscuous than monkeys,” laments Maqrizi, “more larcenous than mice, more destructive than wolves.”

In the earlier system, once the young trainees had reached a certain age, instruction in the martial arts was added to their curriculum: fighting with lance and spear, sword and dagger; archery; and, above all, horsemanship. These skills were then constantly honed, not only in routine practice on their barracks grounds, but in frequent contests under the eyes of the sultan on specially designated and prepared fields (muḥādān), such as the Midān al-Kabīr below the Citadel, the Midān al-Qabāa east of Cairo, the Midān al-Nāṣiri in the area now occupied by Garden City and Taḥtir Square, and the Midān Siryāqīs north of Cairo. There the mamluks and their amirs would demonstrate their military prowess and dreaded horsemanship. Sultan Baybars al-Bunduqdārī (1260–77), a first-rate archer himself, made qabāq contests—qabāq (from Turkish qabāq, “pumpkin”) designated a wooden, disk-shaped target mounted on top of a very tall pole at which the contestants, each lying supine on the back of a galloping horse, fired their arrows—a daily afternoon event, and later sultans, Qalā‘ūn, Khalil, and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, continued the practice. The winners were rewarded with robes of honor or fully bridled and caparisoned horses. Slaves were sometimes given their freedom on such occasions.

Manumission by the sultan meant integration into the mamluk command structure and the beginning of a career in court and palace service, in the military, or as an administrator in the prov-
inches. Advancement and promotion depended almost entirely on the sultan’s favor, and often his whim, as did demotion and disgrace. There was little room for friendship in such a system. Even the camaraderie of the *khushadhāshiyya*, that is, slaves who had served under the same master, seems to have remained binding only as long as the stakes in advancement were not too high. At the same time, the system excluded nepotism and favoritism: each on his own must claw and intrigue his way up the career ladder. Yet in spite of all this competing for position, the constant realignment of rival factions, and the brutal power struggle that could spill over into pitched battles in the streets of Cairo, toward the outside world the mamluks never failed to display a remarkable esprit de corps, combined with an aristocratic aloofness. No mamluk would deign to eat at the same table with “natives,” no matter what their rank and station.

Whether in military, administrative, or court service, the ranks were the same: amīr of five, of ten, of forty, of a hundred. The actual number of mamluks under the command of an amīr fluctuated. An amīr of a hundred, for instance, could be in charge of as many as five hundred mamluks and traditionally had the additional title of “commander of a thousand,” which designated his function in times of war. Fiefs, with an annual tax yield of between more than 200,000 dinars in the case of senior amīrs of a hundred and 9,000 dinars or less for amīrs of ten, furnished their material support: one-third belonged to the fief-holder, two-thirds was to be set aside for the upkeep and equipment of the mamluks in his charge. Those in court service were entitled to regular allocations in cash and kind commensurate with their rank, the nature of their assignment, and their degree of closeness to the sultan. A court assignment could be quite lucrative, if one played one’s cards right. A certain ʿAlī ibn al-Ṭabbâkh, who for thirty-seven years had faithfully served al-Nāṣir Muḥammad as master of the table (*khwān-sālār*), left at his death, in addition to a sizable fortune (the man had drawn five hundred silver dirhams per day), twenty-five pieces of real estate in choice locations.

A strictly hierarchical system and meticulous attention to rank and status, dress and appearance, protocol and ceremonial, characterized the Mamluk regime. This is hardly surprising, given their diverse ethnic backgrounds and their lack of shared traditions. Some of their offices and functions, their customs and manners, were obviously carried over from earlier Islamic practices either in Egypt or in the Eastern Caliphate; others had distinctly Asiatic—Turkish, Mongol, Caucasian—origins. Especially striking is the similarity with Fatimid institutions. Unlike their former Ayyubid masters, who, as restorers of orthodox Sunnism, went out of their way to eradicate the memory of two hundred years of Shiʿite rule, the Mamluks felt free to reach back to the older institutions and adapt and expand them to suit both their own needs and their role as rulers of Sunni Islam’s supreme power. A minutely organized court ensured discipline and enhanced royal dignity; pomp and ostentation on public occasions were designed to impress their own subjects as much as visitors from abroad with the spectacle of regal splendor and military might.

An elaborate, almost modern, protocol governed the visit of a foreign dignitary or emissary from the moment he was admitted on Egyptian soil. In the case of a visiting monarch, the sultan might himself ride out to meet his guest on his arrival in Cairo or might delegate a high-ranking amīr, such as the viceroy (*naʿīb al-saltāna*) or the chief chamberlain (*ḥājīb al-ḥujāb*), for that purpose. The sultan would dismount and, after an exchange of greetings, drape his royal visitor in a robe of silk brocade; this ceremony was customarily followed by a large banquet. Lesser dignitaries and diplomatic emissaries were received by the *mihmandār*, the “meeter and greeter” of the royal court. Ranking visitors were accommodated in one of the royal palaces overlooking the polo field below the Citadel, envoys and lesser dignitaries in the royal mansion (*al-dār al-suṭṭāniyya*), a carry-over from the vizier’s residence (*dār al-wiṭāra*) of Fatimid and Ayyubid days. In charge of these guesthouses was the superintendent of hospitality (*nāẓir al-ṭiyāfa*), who provided the visitors with horses and fodder, rations and money allowances, even female companionship, on occasion. He was likewise responsible for making out a report on the guests, for recording the gifts they had brought, and, if they were non-Muslims or came from an enemy country, for tightening security.

On the day set for the royal audience, the visitor, previously instructed in the proper etiquette, was stripped of his arms and ushered by chamberlains through several anterooms lined with soldiers to the great portico (*iwan*) of the Citadel. On such occasions, the sultan was seated on the most awesome throne, the *takht al-mulk*, an elevated structure similar to the pulpit of a mosque, flanked on either side by the amīrs—resplendent in their finery and carefully arranged according to rank—and guarded by the captains of the guard.
(ru'ūs al-nawb). As he approached the sultan, the visitor, unless he was a king, was expected to kiss the ground three times, beginning at his end of the carpet that led to the throne. The kātim al-sirr, or head of the chancery, who had issued the invitation to the audience, would then formally present him to the sultan. Only in rare instances was a visitor allowed to sit in the royal presence. Interpreters and translators would stand by to translate documents and act as linguistic intermediaries, although the sultan rarely addressed a visitor directly. Rather, he spoke through the mushir, or counselor, who otherwise acted as the sultan's mouthpiece during sessions of the royal council (mājlis al-saltāna, al-mashwara), a body composed of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (ātābeg al-āsākir) as chairman, the caliph, the vizier in his capacity as head of the bureaucracy, the justices of the four orthodox rites, and the amirs of a hundred, which would convene by royal summons to deliberate on vital matters of state, such as war and peace. The reason, we are told, was to safeguard royal dignity, since the sultan might be overruled by the council. On the other hand, since quite a number of sultans had only a somewhat shaky command of Arabic and some of the later ones spoke no Arabic at all, it may have been deemed wiser that they open their mouths as little as possible.

The relationship between the sultan and the Abbasid caliph as "partners" remained ambivalent. While the spiritual weight of the caliph's office was needed to lend the regime an aura of respectability and legitimacy, its holder could obviously not be tolerated as co-ruler and had to be relegated to a purely ceremonial function without power. Sultan Baybars, who in 1261 installed a descendant of the house of Abbas in Cairo, was the man who established the tradition of the monthly audience: on the first day of every month, the caliph, at the head of religious dignitaries and representatives of the Sufi orders, would betake himself to the Citadel to felicitate the sultan on the completion of the month just past and to extend his blessing for the month to come. When the caliph attended the Friday prayer, the sultan would assign amirs to escort him as, riding on a mule, he approached the Great Mosque of the Citadel. There the sultan would go forth and meet him with every sign of respect and honor, even kissing his hand at times, and invite him to join him in the royal enclosure. On such occasions, the caliph would deliver the sermon, perhaps exhorting the worshippers, at least in the early years, to join in holy war against the infidel Mongols and Crusaders and the heretic Isma'īlis.

Equally fraught with intended symbolism was the ceremony attending the accession of a new sultan. Black—signifying the Abbasid caliphate—was the dominant color as the ruler-to-be, escorted by the amirs of his retinue on foot, made his way on horseback from his residence to the great portico of the Citadel: he wore the takhfīfa, a small, round, black turban, its two ends dangling between his shoulders (as distinguished from the nāʿīra, an oversized turban worn, as the equivalent of a crown, on special ceremonial occasions only), rode a horse with a black neck caparison and saddle blanket, and was flanked by two standard-bearers carrying black banners. Heralds (jawishīyya) cleared the way for the sultan-to-be, who was surrounded by halberdiers (tabardāriyya); the shabbāba, a small silver trumpet, was sounded to announce his coming, and the ghāshīya, a highly ornamented cushionlike saddle cloth of cotton and quilted leather, was carried before him as an emblem of royalty.

Inside, he would take his seat on the imperial throne, the takht al-mulk, and the amirs, in succession of rank and followed by the commanders of the ḥalaqa, or corps of non-Mamluk professional soldiers, would approach him, first kissing the ground and then his hand. (This form of obeisance, which was to be observed by all except kings who approached the sultan, survived until the time of Sultan Barsbīy [1422–37], who changed it to a simple hand kiss preceded by a genuflection and the placing of a finger on the ground as a symbolic gesture of ground-kissing.) Next, the caliph made his appearance and joined the sultan on the throne in order to place the black caliphal robe of honor (al-khil'a al-khālīfiyya, as-sawād al-khālifiyy) over the sultan's green farajīyya, a flowing, long-sleeved atlas robe. The head of the chancery then read the caliph's investiture of the sultan as ruler of the Muslim territories under Mamluk sway and of lands yet to be conquered from the infidels.

After the formal witnessing of the document by the four justices and an exhortatory speech by the caliph, the assembled amirs would again kiss the ground and swear on the Koran that they would not betray or deceive or attack the sultan—an oath not always kept. The caliph, after having received tokens of royal favor, shook the sultan's hand and departed with the four justices. Robes of honor—more than twelve hundred at the accession in 1309 of Sultan Baybars II al-Jāshnagīr, according to Maqrīzī—were bestowed on the "men of the sword" and the "men of the pen," who then paraded, led by the new sultan, through the fes-
tively decorated streets of Cairo. The document of caliphal investiture, wrapped in a black silk pouch, was carried ahead of the vizier on the occasion. The day ended with a royal banquet for the amirs.

Generally, the sultans would spend the morning hours of each day, except during the month of Ramadān, attending to state business and administrative matters of a more or less routine nature. The daily morning report (ruq‘at al-ṣabāḥ) of the police chiefs of Old and New Cairo on fires, murders, and thefts during the past twenty-four hours would usually be the first item to require their attention. As a rule, the captain of the guard (ra‘s al-nawāḥi) on duty—there were four of them, one an amir of a hundred and three amirs of forty—would be the first person to see the sultan in the morning. He had direct access to the sultan at any time, day or night, and enjoyed the distinction of being addressed by the sovereign as “friend” (yā ʿokh), rather than the usual yā khūnd, “lord.”

Mondays and Thursdays (until the time of Barquq, who changed the schedule to Sundays and Wednesdays, and later to Tuesdays and Saturdays, with Friday afternoons thrown in) were set aside for public audiences—initially held in the House of Justice (dār al-ʿadl), that is, the great portico of the Citadel, and at other times at the Courtyard of the Bench (qā‘at al-dīkka), the viceroy’s residence, or other places—to hear grievances (qiṣṣā, mağālim), a practice observed by the rulers of Egypt since the Tulunids. The sessions were convened in the very early morning hours, in winter sometimes by torchlight, and presented a veritable tableau of Mamluk protocol. On such occasions the sultan, since he was to act as neutral judge, sat on a stool placed below the imperial throne, or even on the ground, flanked on his right by the justices of the four rites, the Shi‘ite as the highest-ranking immediately next to the sultan, followed in descending order of rank by the Hanafite, the Malikite, and the Hanbalite representatives, and next, in succession, the secretary (wakīl) of the treasury and the superintendent of the prefecture of Cairo. On the sultan’s left sat the head of the chancery, and opposite him the superintendent of the army (nāẓir al-jaysh), the superintendent of the privy purse (nāẓir al-khāṣṣ), the muftis of the four rites serving as legal experts, and a group of recording scribes (kuttāb dast), the whole forming a circle. If the vizier was one of the “men of the pen,” he would sit between the sultan and the head of the chancery; but if he belonged to the “men of the sword,” he would stand at some distance with the rest of the officers of the household, as did the viceroy—if there was one present, since the office was temporarily abolished in 1338 by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. Behind the sultan, on the right and left, stood two rows of arms-bearers, masters of the wardrobe, and mamluks of the sultan’s entourage (khāṣṣāgiyyān). At a distance of nine yards on the right and left sat the amirs of the royal council, and behind these stood the rest of the amirs positioned according to rank. Chamberlains and secretary-bailiffs (dawādars) were stationed on the outside of the circle to sift and pass on the grievances and petitions.

The closest thing to a folksy appearance of the court in public was the annual celebration of the Prophet’s birthday. Some three hundred to five hundred porters were needed to erect the gigantic tent on the Ḥūsh, consisting of four halls topped by a cupola with vents to let the light in. The sultan would be seated at the far end of the tent, together with the caliph, the four justices, the learned sheikhs, and the reciters of the Prophet’s story in poetry and prose, as well as ranking members of the awlād al-nās, amirs, and various state functionaries. Leather tanks filled with sugar water were set up to provide refreshment for all comers, high and low. The celebration would begin in the late afternoon with readings from the Koran and the recital of poems and homilies appropriate to the occasion. After a joint sunset prayer, a meal and seasonal sweets would be served, and the recitals continued. Around nine o’clock, the various Sufi orders, with their emblems and banners, arrived and began their singing and swaying and dancing, which would last throughout the night. Money purses and other tokens of royal favor were bestowed as the night went on, for the Mamluks were much attracted to Sufism and their sultans were generous sponsors of its practitioners.

A frequent display of royal bounty was part of a sultan’s duties and a way to stay in power: vanities had to be flattered, loyalties bought, jealousies assuaged. Not only did the medieval state feed and clothe its servitors, but the bestowal of robes of honor and generous money gifts, the donation of horses, and the extension of other royal favors accompanied almost every occasion on which the sultan officiated or even appeared in public. Robes of honor (khilā‘), meticulously designed to fit the recipient’s rank and station—red over yellow atlas, for instance, for senior amirs, white silk chenille for ranking members of the bureaucracy, white wool for judges and ulema—were so frequently and commonly bestowed (even slavers and horse traders were so rewarded) that their production kept an entire royal industry busy. Marks of signal distinc-
tion were the garments that came literally off the sultan’s back, as when he bestowed the robe he wore during the Little Bairam prayer on one of the attending senior amirs.

Aside from five regular meals served daily at the court, three in the morning and two in the evening, there were huge banquets (asmitta, wala’im) on special occasions. The master of the table (khwān-salār) supervised the preparation of the food in the royal kitchens, the majordomo-in-waiting (ustādār al-shuḥba) acted as a sort of maître d’hôtel, a swarm of cupbearers (sūqāh) headed by the royal cupbearer (ṣāqi’-mulk, al-sāqi’) served food and drink and cleared the table afterward, and a staff of tasters under the command of the jāshnāqir (the shishni of colloquial Egyptian) stood by to sample food and drink for possible poison. Guests ate and drank from gold, silver, and porcelain vessels. Although forks and spoons were known, eating was usually done with the fingers, which were constantly rinsed with water poured from ewers into large fingerbowls. Truly gargantuan amounts of food might be served: at a banquet given by al-Ashtar Khalil on the occasion of the completion of the Ashrafyya Palace in 1293, for instance, the guests consumed 3,000 sheep, 600 cows, 500 slaughter horses, and countless chickens and geese, not to mention the almost 90,000 kilos of sugar that went into drinks and sweets.

This bash cost the sultan 300,000 gold dinars alone for food and drink, robes of honor, and other royal gifts and favors, such as embroidered material, saddles, dresses for the women, and the like. Several high-ranking amirs received, in addition, gifts of a thousand dinars, thirty of the royal guard (khāṣṣaqiyya) received five hundred dinars each, and every amir was given a fully bridled and caparisoned horse. Besides, treasury officials scattered gold coins during the circumcisorion ceremony for the sultan’s younger brother Muhammad and his nephew Mūsā, which was celebrated on the same occasion, and the entertainer of the day, a singer named al-Bulaybil ("Little Nightingale"), was paid a thousand dinars for his labors. A few years later, when young Muhammad himself sat on the throne, he outdid his brother in extravagance on a similar occasion. For a party he gave in 1314 to celebrate the completion of the Qaṣr al-Abīaq, he ran up a bill, if one can believe Maqrizi, of 500,500,000 dirhams.

Horses were a mamluk’s prized possession, and to give them as gifts was a favorite way for the sultan to show his pleasure and favor. There were numerous occasions for it—in the spring, for instance, when the sultan went out to the royal paddocks; at the conclusion of military and sporting events; at various ceremonial affairs; when the sultan rode out on the hunt—so that senior amirs and members of the royal entourage might each receive as many as a hundred horses, some with full accoutrements, in the course of a year. Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, a hippophile of the first order, had 4,800 horses in his stables and is said to have spent one million dirhams in a single day toward the purchase of Arabian purebreds. As many as eighty hundred functionaries—amirs of ten and an assortment of troopers, grooms, veterinarians, and the like—worked in the royal stables. In charge of them was an amir of a hundred, the amīr-akhir, or equerry, while an amir of forty, the sar-akhr, was the official responsible for fodder. The sultan’s horses, all branded with the royal dāgh, were not only walked and exercised daily, but occasionally displayed in horse shows—as in Fatimid times, before a royal procession, for instance. Moreover, there were the royal camel pens (manāhkät), where al-Nāṣir Muḥammad kept five thousand riding camels, and even stables for elephants.

Seven times in the spring, the sultan, accompanied by the mamluks of his retinue, the majordomo (ustādār), and an assortment of other functionaries, such as falconers, drivers, animal keepers, and physicians, members of his harem, and a train of amirs with their own mamluks, would go on hunting excursions—any one of which could easily last for a week. On such occasions he rode an unadorned horse; no banners and standards were carried over his head. If the procession passed through the stables of a senior amir, it was customary for the local feudatory to supply sheep, geese, chickens, sugarcane, and barley for the hunting party; the sultan, in turn, would bestow on him 4.2 kilos of gold, a robe of honor, and a fully bridled and equipped packhorse with a gold-embroidered housing (kunbush).

Royal hunting preserves stocked with game and wildfowl, and similar preserves of the ranking amirs, were the hunting grounds. When the hunting was done with falcons, the sultan would be accompanied by the master of the hunt, the amīr-shikār, who directed the falconers, or bāzāriyya. Hunting dogs, decked out for the occasion in gold-embroidered silk and led by the dog-masters (kilābziyya), were used to hunt ostriches, antelopes, and gazelles, as were trained cheetahs, which had their own special keepers. Large game was hunted with javelins, arrows, or crossbows shooting lead, clay, or stone pellets (qusiyy al-juḥāqiṣ), birds
usually with a blowgun (zabānā) and pellets called bunduq, which were carried in a sack by a special official, the bunduqaḍār. Even away from home and roughing it, the comforts of life were not forgotten: at the end of a day’s hunt they could return to fully furnished and carpeted tents attended by a myriad of servants, enjoy the pleasure of a leisurely bath in wooden tubs, and eat well-prepared meals from lead camping dishes.

Numerous occasions throughout the year called for royal processions. Some were minutely designed to bring out the full panoply of royal and Mamluk splendor, such as the processions on the two highest Islamic festivals or during the annual parade of the mahmil in the streets of Cairo in preparation for the pilgrimage; others were relatively low-key, as the weekly procession to Friday prayer or the procession on the occasion of the annual “anointing of the Nilometer” (takhlíq al-miqāyās) and “breaking of the dam” (kāsr al-sadd) to mark the opening of the irrigation season. A full-dress procession must have been a colorful spectacle indeed: ahead rode two files of rikābdāriyya, or stirrup holders, under the command of the amir-jandār, the man responsible for the sultan’s safety, to clear the road. They flanked others on foot who carried the gilded and gem-encrusted saddle cloth, the ghāshiyya, which they waved from side to side. Behind them rode a horseman who sounded the royal trumpet (shabbāba), and then a pair of Mamluk squires, al-jiṭṭāh, dressed identically in gold-bordered yellow silk tunics and mounted on identical white horses. Golden ribbons connected them with the sultan behind them, a safety device in case the sultan’s horse stumbled or shied. Next came the sultan, riding a gray horse bedecked with a gold-embroidered neck caparison (raqaba) of yellow atlas—yellow being the color of Mamluk royalty—and a red atlas cloth, called zunmāri, over the croup. A senior amir riding by his side held the royal parasol (jatā) of yellow silk above the sultan’s head, while halberdiers on foot, commanded by the amir-ṭabar, surrounded him on all sides as bodyguards. By his side strode the jumāq-dār, or mace-bearer, his eyes fixed on his lord, holding the gold-tipped mace aloft, and the jūkān-dār, or polo master, carrying the royal curved dagger (nimqā) and a steel buckler. At times, the chief chamberlain carrying a staff of office, or the treasurer (khāzīn-dār) lugging a sack of money intended for charity would precede the sultan. Behind the sultan, a group of squires led royal horses covered with richly embroidered and gem-studded housings. Then followed the standard bearers, headed by the ‘alamdār who carried the great royal banner (jūlīsh) of gold-embroidered yellow silk adorned with a tuft of horsehair, and behind them the armor bearers headed by the silah-dār. The amirs, on horseback or on foot, came next with their retinue of mamluks, in similar order and with hardly less pomp, and the tail end was brought up by the royal band, al-tāblkhāna al-sharīf, an ensemble more noisy than melodious, composed of four big drums, forty brass cymbals, four double-reed clarinets, and twenty small kettle-drums.

It was Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad who made polo games twice a week, at noon on Tuesdays and Saturdays, an obligatory part of Mamluk court ritual. The two teams were captained by the sultan and the commander-in-chief of the troops. At the end of the games, the sultan would reward the players as well as the polo master and his helpers with robes of honor. Horse races, not surprisingly, were a favorite pastime of the Mamluk elite. A hundred and fifty horses, or even more, at a time could be on the starting line. The race was between the sultan’s horses and those of the amirs. The horses raced between two marble columns, the ‘awāmid al-sibāq, erected on either end of the field, and were usually ridden by bedouin jockeys. The owners of the winners were rewarded with horses and robes of honor. As on other occasions, such as martial exercises or wrestling displays, betting was encouraged.

Despite the role they played as guardians of religious decency and sponsors of the Islamic establishment, the Mamluks rarely let religion interfere with their personal ambitions and pleasures. They did their drinking—except during Ramaqān, of course—unabashedly in public: fermented mare’s milk (qimīz), the drink of their Asian homeland; buza, a brew made from flour and fermented date juice; and mizr, a beerlike wheat or barley brew as old as Egypt. Although Baybars at one point cracked down on vice and immorality and had all breweries in Cairo destroyed, liquor concessions remained on the whole an important tax source. The Mamluks liked a good songfest in the Citadel and showered lavish rewards on the top entertainers, just as they enjoyed the performance and company of belly dancers, most of them Jewish and Armenian girls, some of whom they even brought into their retinues. And at celebrations like weddings and circumcisions, the royal mamluks and their amirs did not mind joining the fun and doing a bit of dancing themselves.

With all their general aloofness and isolation
from the indigenous population, there were times at which the court and the great feudal lords showed generosity to their Muslim and non-Muslim subjects, as when they provided free public meals on the two great Muslim holidays, the 'Id al-Fitr and the 'Id al-Aḍḥā, or contributed food and money when their Coptic employees celebrated their New Year (nawrūz) in early September. Until the public celebration of the latter was banned by Sultan Barqūq in 1385, the court would even put a state representative, the amīr al-nawrūz, in charge of the festivities, which sometimes were attended by the sultan himself. But such tokens of Mamluk benevolence and interreligious harmony had already been seriously threatened by the time of Barqūq. Thirty-one years earlier, Sultan Šalāḥ al-Dīn Šāliḥ (1351–54), amid a wave of anti-Christian sentiment, had altogether abolished a festival that used to bring non-Muslims and Muslims together: the traditional Coptic Feast of the Martyr, celebrated for three days beginning on 18 or 19 May. The immersion of a box containing a martyr's finger in the Nile in anticipation of the river's annual rise was deemed pagan and offensive; besides, the people had the habit of drinking themselves silly on the occasion. And four years later, his brother al-Ḥasan, much in the same vein, had put a ban on the public celebration of Coptic Christmas on 7 January.

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NOTE

The sources on which this chapter is based are al-Maqṣūrī (Taqīy al-Dīn Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. 'Alī), Al-Mawā'īṣ wa-l-'l-tihār fī dhikr al-khītāt wa-l-āthār (Būlaq, 1270/1853) and Kitāb al-sulūk li-maʿrīfat duwal al-muṭālā (Cairo, 1925); al-Qāṣqashāndi (Abū l-'Abbās Ahmad b. 'Alī), Ṣubh al-dīn shā li-sināʿat al-insān (Cairo, 1383/1963); Ibn Ṭaḥhībirī (Jamāl al-Dīn Abū l-Maḥṣūn Yūsuf), Al-Nujūm al-zāhirā fī muṣāl Mīr wa-l-Qābir (Cairo, 1383–92/1963–72); Ibn Iyās (Muḥammad b. Aḥmad), Badāʾiʿ al-zahār fī waqāʾiʿ al-duḥār, ed. Mostafa (Cairo, 1960–75); Ibn Shāhin (Ghars al-Dīn Khuṭlū), Zubdat kashf al-muṣālik wa-bayān al-tuq al-muṣālik, ed. Ravaisse (Paris, 1891); and al-Umārī (Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Fadl-Allāh), Al-Tārīkh bi-l-muṣālaḥ al-sharīʿ (Cairo, 1312/1894).