

Games and Sport in al-Andalus: Practices, Culture, and Society

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Abstract: This study explores games and sport in al-Andalus as a significant cultural and social phenomenon that extended beyond recreation. Under Umayyad rule, Andalusian society developed a distinctive model that integrated physical activity with intellectual, artistic, and political life. Sporting practices such as equestrian games, hunting, polo, and chess were closely linked to military training, social values, and expressions of power.

The study highlights the role of intercultural exchange among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in shaping these practices, producing hybrid forms of leisure and performance. It argues that sport in al-Andalus functioned as a cultural system reflecting a broader philosophy of balance between body, intellect, and society, while also contributing to the transmission of these traditions to Europe.

Keywords: al-Andalus, Sport, Culture, Chivalry, Society

1- Introduction

Beginning in the ninth century, during the reign of the Caliph Abd al-Rahman II, a distinctive culture with a unique character began to take shape in al-Andalus, representing a synthesis of the Arab-Islamic spirit and the local Iberian particularity. Under the Umayyad state in al-Andalus, a highly developed civilization emerged, manifested in the flourishing of science, thought, and the arts (17), to the extent that al-Andalus in the Middle Ages became the most advanced and splendid civilization in the West, indeed in the world as a whole¹.

Al-Andalus was a meeting place for scholars, philosophers, physicians, poets, musicians, astronomers, jurists, and mystics, thereby forming a diverse civilizational fabric that combined reason and emotion, science and beauty, as well as religion and art. It can be said that al-Andalus represented a point of convergence between Islamic civilization and others; it assimilated the heritage of the East and, from it, created a new model of balance between spirit and intellect².

Muslims in al-Andalus inherited a great cultural legacy from earlier civilizations—Greek, Persian, and Byzantine—and skillfully employed it in building an integrated civilizational society. Andalusian Islamic arts were influenced by Syrian and Egyptian decorative motifs, as well as by the Persian Sasanian style, and this influence was also reflected in the realm of sports and leisure. Popular games and physical activities formed part of daily life, and steam baths were among the most widespread features of urban life in Andalusian cities.

Sports in al-Andalus were not merely a form of elite amusement; rather, they constituted a fundamental component of social and cultural life, encompassing all segments of society. Consequently, al-Andalus became the richest source of information on games and sports in the Middle Ages, whether in terms of organization, practice, or cultural significance³.

For a long time, the Christian Church in the West adopted an oppositional stance toward games, considering them remnants of ancient paganism. However, in the Islamic world—and particularly in al-Andalus—the sporting spirit was renewed within a new religious and ethical framework. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, ball games of various kinds became highly widespread in Andalusian cities, alongside equestrian competitions and duels. These activities were practiced in public arenas, attended by both the common people and the princes alike.

Games in al-Andalus adapted to the military character of Islamic life, serving as a means of training horsemen for combat and preparing soldiers for battle. Thus, play and physical training formed an integral part of military education, such as competitions in jumping, running, and javelin throwing, in addition to collective sporting activities⁴.

At the same time, Andalusian popular culture flourished, and itinerant performers and jesters (*al-jawāliqa*) were among its principal transmitters. The itinerant performer was a multi-skilled artist: he sang, danced, performed acrobatic displays, played musical instruments, and recounted heroic tales and popular poetry. During religious occasions or civic celebrations, these performers filled squares and streets with melodies and joy, transforming play and art into a means of expressing collective happiness and cultural identity⁵.

In al-Andalus, public celebrations were held on Eid al-Fitr, which concludes the month of Ramadan, and on Eid al-Adha, which commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham (peace be upon him). During these occasions, races and sporting competitions were organized, such as horse racing, wrestling, and contests in swimming and poetry, in addition to public banquets. Caliphs and princes

personally participated in these activities, which were regarded as a source of popular pride and collective joy⁶

Among the most widespread popular games was the game of nard (al-zahr), which, despite being religiously prohibited, continued to be widely practiced in Andalusian society. Ibn Khaldun noted that games of chance and entertainment were prevalent in social gatherings, practiced with skill and precision, and it is said that the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III brought them from the East⁷.

2- Games and Sport in al-Andalus

2-1 - Bathhouses (hammam)

Public bathhouses constituted one of the most prominent features of daily life in al-Andalus since the early Middle Ages. Archaeological evidence discovered in Andalusian cities confirms their widespread presence, as the remains of hundreds of such bathhouses have been found in Córdoba, Seville, Granada, Valencia, and Murcia.

Historical sources indicate that by the end of the eleventh century, Córdoba alone contained between three hundred and six hundred public bathhouses, a striking figure that reflects the significance of personal hygiene in Andalusian Islamic society. These bathhouses were open to both men and women, albeit at separate times, and they fulfilled social, cultural, and religious functions simultaneously⁸.

The design of Andalusian bathhouses relied on heating the air beneath the ground in order to raise the temperature of the chambers. They typically consisted of a sequence of rooms with varying degrees of heat:

1. The cold room (Frigidarium),
2. The warm room (Tepidarium),
3. The hot room (Caldarium).

Aromatic oils and plant-based preparations were used for massaging and cleansing the body. As for the larger bathhouses, they were decorated with domes, marble, and elegant columns, reflecting the refined artistic taste of al-Andalus.

Bathhouses within palaces and mosques were reserved for the elite, whereas public bathhouses were accessible to all people for a small nominal fee. Strict regulations were established to govern conduct within them, including rules concerning etiquette, dress, and interaction, in order to prevent any violation of modesty or improper mixing⁹.

2-2 - Recreational and Sporting Activities

2 – 2 – 1-The Game of “La Tabla”

The game of “La Tabla” was among the most prominent equestrian games known in Islamic al-Andalus. It constituted a military-recreational exercise that combined physical skill with combat precision. It consisted of horsemen, while riding at high speed, thrusting spears or long sticks into a target placed on the ground, such that success required precise balance and considerable speed¹⁰.

From the early fourteenth century onward, Muslim princes began to practice these games in enclosed arenas designated for military training. The Sultan Muhammad V of Granada, in his youth, personally participated in these exercises and supervised the training of soldiers' sons in the arts of

combat and lance play. Equestrian competitions were held in the palaces of the Alhambra and in the wide squares within Andalusian cities¹¹.

Accounts indicate that the celebrations held by the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III included these military exercises, alongside duels, combat contests, and martial games on horseback. Andalusian poets—including the poet-king Al-Mu'tamid ibn Abbad—described these events in their poetry as expressions of chivalry, honor, and martial prowess.

These games were held in the presence of the public, as well as princes and ministers, and witnessed competition between Muslim and Christian horsemen alike, particularly in frontier regions such as Castile, Jaén, and Córdoba. These competitions were announced several months in advance and were sometimes organized on the occasion of concluding a truce or celebrating a victory¹².

Some documents indicate that the royal palaces in Granada preserved records of these games, which included competitions in striking targets with spears or piercing metal rings while riding at speed. The historian Ibn al-Khatib mentioned in his book *al-Ihata* that these games represented the pinnacle of equestrian skill in al-Andalus, and that the Catholic Monarchs themselves participated in some of them during the later period of coexistence in Granada.

These games were regarded as a form of training school for the preparation of horsemen, as they combined speed, precision, and daring¹³. They were also organized in a manner resembling the rituals of religious ceremonies, whereby the king or prince would sit on an elevated platform to observe the participants and reward them¹⁴.

2–2–2 - Equestrian Challenges and Duels

The practice of equestrian challenges is regarded as one of the most prominent features of military culture in the Middle Ages. The historian al-Turtushi (al-Turtusí) reports that these competitions were a customary tradition shared by both Muslims and Christians alike. The challenge consisted of a single combat between two horsemen—one Muslim and the other Christian—before an audience, in which they displayed their combat skills within a framework of honor and fairness, without intent to kill¹⁵.

The difference between the two sides in their modes of armament was evident: Christian knights favored heavy weapons and solid armor, whereas Muslim horsemen relied on lightness, speed, and lighter arms, such as the short lance and the curved Arab sword. This distinction persisted until the fifteenth century.

These challenges gradually developed into what resembled public tournaments held in open arenas, where horsemen competed in demonstrating strength, skill, and agility. The historian Juan de Mata Carranza notes that these challenges constituted a form of extended collective tournament that combined both military and ceremonial characteristics¹⁶.

Among the earliest attestations of these practices is a famous panel depicting the Battle of Higuera (1411), which shows the horsemen of Granada performing martial displays with horses and lances in the presence of the Umayyad Caliph al-Hakam II (975), who encouraged such activities. Prominent soldiers among the senior commanders were accustomed to holding symbolic matches among themselves, using sticks or reeds instead of swords, in consideration of safety¹⁷.

These duels were also regarded as a means of strengthening the chivalric spirit within society, as people took pride in their horsemen, and successive generations transmitted accounts of those who

triumphed or were injured. Notably, caliphs honored the participants and presented rewards such as gold gifts, horses, or luxurious garments to the victors.

Through these duels, a class of skilled Andalusian horsemen emerged, distinguished by their proficiency in combat, speed of movement, and accuracy in striking, becoming a model to be emulated throughout the Islamic world. Sources indicate that Andalusian horsemen were known for the length of their lances and the quality of their swords, which enabled them to surpass their European adversaries in many battles¹⁸.

2– 2 – 3 - The Game of al-Qaşab

The game of al-Qaşab is regarded as one of the most ancient equestrian games in history, and it is believed that its origins date back to pre-Roman times, having been practiced by ancient Mediterranean peoples such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, as a form of military training that combined skill, speed, and maneuverability.

The Romans practiced it under the name *trovas*, substituting metal lances with “dry reeds” for reasons related to safety. With the Islamic conquest of al-Andalus, this game was revived in a new form that combined both martial and ceremonial characteristics, until it came to resemble a social and sporting institution practiced by the noble classes of both Muslims and Christians alike¹⁹.

Horsemen would face one another in two opposing groups, riding on horseback and launching reeds at their opponents without intent to cause harm, in swift and coordinated movements resembling military displays. The game retained its dual character—recreational and training—serving as a means of strengthening the skills of horsemen, affirming their courage, and training them in controlling their mounts during battle.

The historian Rodrigo Caro describes this game in his book *Hombres Ilustres* as “a magnificent equestrian festival introduced by the Muslims into al-Andalus and which continued until the eighteenth century; reeds made of bamboo were used instead of lances and were launched with speed and precision at opposing horsemen.” This game is regarded as a symbol of Andalusian Islamic chivalry, which combined Islamic heritage with refined taste, embodying in its essence the spirit of honor, courage, and military skill²⁰.

Some researchers hold that the game was transmitted from Persia to Byzantium and then to al-Andalus, and that it was a well-established practice at the Umayyad court of Córdoba²¹, where the caliphs themselves participated in it, including Abd al-Rahman III and al-Hakam II, both of whom were among the most ardent admirers of equestrian sports.

2– 2 – 4 - Hunting

In addition to religious celebrations that reflected the spiritual values emanating from Islam, al-Andalus witnessed the emergence of seasonal festivities of Persian origin representing the natural cycles of the seasons, such as Nowruz (the Persian New Year) and Mehregan (the festival of light and radiance). These occasions involved various segments of society, during which recreational and sporting activities were practiced, most notably hunting competitions of wild animals and bullfighting, which became associated, within the ruling authority, with official celebrations and with rituals of glorifying and consolidating political power.

Abd al-Rahman II introduced a new form of hunting known as *al-qahf* (falconry), an art based on hunting birds of prey and small game using trained birds such as eagles, falcons, and hawks.

Andalusian poets extolled these practices in their poetry as symbols of royal chivalry and leadership courage, as they demonstrated the ruler's bravery and mastery of control²².

During the ninth and tenth centuries, hunting became one of the principal forms of recreation among the Umayyad caliphs in al-Andalus. Abd al-Rahman II ordered the establishment of vast reserves near Córdoba for breeding wild animals—such as gazelles, bears, and lynxes—specifically for hunting. Under the rule of Al-Mansur Ibn Abi Aamir, hunting assumed a military dimension, as it became a means of training for warfare and maneuvering in the field²³.

Andalusian hunting was governed by precise rituals and a well-organized system: hunters were divided into groups led by a “chief of hunters,” and they followed exact instructions in tracking and capturing prey. Trained falcons, greyhounds, and hunting dogs were employed, in addition to nets and traps.

During the Nasrid period in Granada, the royal hunting reserve of Dehesa del Generalife became renowned, as it abounded with gazelles and wild boars²⁴.

Poets of that period depicted hunting scenes in their verses as ceremonial rituals that combined strength and agility, and they likened trained falcons to warriors on the battlefield in their courage and speed. The historian Ibn al-Khatib records that the Caliph al-Hakam II would personally go out hunting in the plains of Córdoba to pursue waterfowl and cranes, and that these expeditions were conducted as part of majestic royal processions accompanied by music, poetry, and panegyrics²⁵.

2– 2 – 5 - The Art of Falconry

The art of falconry—also known as “royal hunting”—dates back to the depths of ancient Eastern history. Although humans did not require this form of hunting in prehistoric times due to the abundance of game, this art emerged as a necessity in arid desert environments where hunting was scarce.

The writings of Aristotle and Pliny the Elder indicate that the origins of this art are most likely to be found in the plains of Central Asia, from where it spread to the Near East and Egypt, then to the Islamic world and the Maghreb, and finally to Europe, where it became an established discipline in the ninth and tenth centuries²⁶.

In Islamic al-Andalus, the art of falconry reached a high degree of development and refinement; it was not merely a form of entertainment, but also an educational and training system for horsemanship. Caliphs and princes raised falcons and hawks in gilded cages and personally supervised their training. These birds were treated with special care, fed fresh meat, and transported during royal hunting expeditions within lavish ceremonial processions.

Abd al-Rahman II was among the caliphs most devoted to this art, practicing falconry in the valley of the Guadalquivir River (al-Wadi al-Kabir), a principal corridor for bird migration. His falcons were trained to hunt cranes and wild ducks during their seasonal passage, and such scenes were regarded as among the most striking manifestations of royal power and control.

Hunting in al-Andalus was not merely a recreational activity; rather, it symbolized authority and social status, as the ownership of hunting birds was restricted to the ruling class and the nobility. Falcons, hawks, and saker falcons were symbols of honor and prestige, and were also exchanged as gifts among kings and sultans²⁷.

2– 2 – 6 - Polo

Polo is considered one of the most prominent sports inherited by the Andalusians from ancient Eastern cultures, particularly the Persian civilization, where it was practiced by nobles and horsemen as a refined training for horsemanship and warfare. Some sources indicate that the term “polo” is of Tibetan origin and means “ball,” referring to the wooden ball used in the game.

The game of polo originated in Persia (present-day Iran) more than two thousand years ago, where it was known as “Chaugán” (Chawkan), and was described in ancient Persian poetry as the game of kings, combining equestrian skill, competitive spirit, and military symbolism. It was mentioned by the Persian poets Ferdowsi and Nizami Ganjavi in their poetry, affirming that polo was not merely a form of entertainment, but an art embodying discipline, courage, and leadership.

With the expansion of the Persian Empire and its contact with neighboring civilizations, the game spread to India, Byzantium, and then to the Arab lands. It is reported that Alexander the Great, during his eastern campaigns, became acquainted with polo and admired it, and subsequently worked to transmit it to the Greeks, and then to the Hellenistic world. From there, it passed to the Byzantine Empire, where it became a courtly sport practiced by emperors and nobles.

In the fifth century CE, Byzantine emperors practiced polo in designated fields in Constantinople as an official activity during major occasions. Following the Islamic conquest of the East, the game passed to the Arabs, who developed and celebrated it, and the Umayyads later introduced it to al-Andalus during the flourishing of Umayyad Córdoba. Thus, polo became part of the sporting life and military culture in al-Andalus, representing one of the manifestations of luxury and nobility.

The game was played on horseback between two teams of riders, each attempting to strike the wooden ball toward the opponent’s goal using a long stick (a wooden mallet). It required a high level of coordination between the rider and his horse, as well as precision in striking and control of movement, making it a comprehensive training for strengthening the body and sharpening perception and attention.

Sources mention that the city of Isfahan in Persia contained in the tenth century CE a famous polo field established by the grand vizier by order of the shah, which remained in existence approximately two hundred years after the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and in which official tournaments and grand celebrations were held, indicating the high status this game enjoyed among kings and scholars²⁸.

In this context, Ibn Sina (Avicenna)—the renowned physician and philosopher born in Bukhara (980–1037 CE)—mentioned in his book *The Canon of Medicine (Canon Medicinæ)* the importance of regular physical exercise for physical and mental health, including polo, which he described as “a noble exercise that strengthens the muscles, refines the nerves, and balances bodily movement.”

As for Islamic al-Andalus, despite the scarcity of texts that have reached us regarding the details of polo practice there, historical indications and literary evidence confirm that it was among the games of the nobility in the palaces of caliphs and princes, particularly during the reigns of Abd al-Rahman III and al-Hakam II.

In royal gardens, such as the gardens of Madīnat al-Zahrā’ and al-Ruṣāfa in Córdoba, equestrian and polo competitions were held among horsemen in the presence of the caliph and senior state officials. The historian Ibn Hayyan describes these scenes, stating that the Caliph al-Hakam II used to organize polo matches among his army officers and award prizes to the winning team, as an expression of his encouragement of horsemanship and discipline.

Polo in al-Andalus fulfilled two main functions:

1. A sporting and training function, as it served as a means of preparing horsemen for speed of movement and precision of maneuver;
2. A ceremonial and symbolic function, as these matches reflected the refinement of the Umayyad court and its concern with aesthetics and order.

Some accounts indicate that Andalusian caliphs possessed vast stables containing hundreds of purebred horses prepared specifically for such games. For example, Abd al-Rahman III established in the suburb of al-Ruṣāfa near Córdoba a stable containing more than one thousand two hundred horses, with pastures extending over an area of approximately eight square kilometers.

Some sources also indicate that the Andalusians' passion for polo was not merely an imitation of Eastern traditions, but rather a natural extension of Arab equestrian culture, which regarded the horse as a symbol of honor and strength, and play as a means of military training and moral refinement.

Historical comparisons show that Andalusian horsemen developed distinctive riding methods that distinguished them from Europeans, as they used a high saddle equipped with front and rear horns that provided the rider with stability and precision in balance.

Andalusian equestrian art reached its peak during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, combining elegance and military effectiveness, as reflected in games such as polo, al-Qaṣab, symbolic wrestling, and equestrian displays, which formed part of the sporting and political culture of that period.

Historians agree that al-Andalus was the bridge through which polo passed into Europe, and the source from which European chivalry derived its artistic spirit and discipline. Thus, this game became a symbol of civilizational interaction between East and West, and an example of how Andalusian Islamic culture transformed horsemanship from a mere military exercise into a noble art that integrates body, intellect, and spirit.

2–3–Other	Recreational	Activities
Dance and Music		

As for music and dance in al-Andalus, they were present in various occasions and celebrations, although certain periods witnessed religious and moral restrictions that limited their public expression. Nevertheless, dance and music constituted an essential component of cultural and social life in major cities such as Córdoba, Seville, and Granada²⁹.

During evening festivities held in the palaces of princes and governors, musical and vocal performances accompanied by dance were presented, in which both men and women participated, accompanied by stringed and percussion instruments such as the 'ūd, the daff, and the ṭunbūr. These gatherings were regarded as among the most refined manifestations of Andalusian culture, combining poetry, music, and coordinated artistic movement.

The Umayyad Caliphate in al-Andalus provided clear official patronage to the musical arts. During the reign of the Caliph Abd al-Rahman II, the renowned Persian musician Ziryab was brought from the East; he settled in Córdoba and established there the first musical school in Europe. Ziryab was a musician, singer, and innovator in taste, fashion, and etiquette. He introduced to al-Andalus the styles of Baghdadi singing and Persian melodies, and added the fifth string to the Arab 'ūd, thereby bringing about a cultural and artistic transformation in Andalusian musical taste.

Ziryab's contributions were not limited to music; they extended to the arts of cuisine, dress, and table etiquette, making his influence a distinctive hallmark of refined Andalusian culture. Owing to him, music became associated with refined dance, and Andalusian dances came to represent a synthesis of Eastern rhythmic movement and local Iberian flexibility, which constitutes the historical root of later dances such as flamenco.

In major palaces, singing slave-girls (*qiyān*) performed music and dance before the elite, and some of them were among the most distinguished artists of their time, receiving rigorous musical and poetic training in specialized institutions. The Andalusian historian al-Shaqundi mentions that in al-Andalus there existed "groups of female slaves skilled in music and dance, endowed with presence and refined femininity," and some of them exerted influence on cultural and political life through their proximity to men of power.

In popular life, streets and squares were filled with entertainment performances, where itinerant performers, singers, and acrobats displayed their talents in music, dance, and storytelling. These arts functioned as a means of social interaction, bringing together the general public in markets and festivals, and expressing the spirit of joy and celebration of life that characterized al-Andalus.

2– 3 – 1 - Chess

Chess entered the Iberian Peninsula through the Arabs coming from the East, who had themselves inherited it from the Persians, and it later became the preferred intellectual game among nobles and princes. From al-Andalus, chess spread to southern France (Provence) and then to Central Europe, inaugurating a new phase in the history of mathematical and logical thought in the West³⁰.

In al-Andalus, chess was more than mere entertainment; it represented a means of cultivating both intellect and spirit. It was regarded as a symbolic reflection of the monarchical system as well as of the military and religious order, with each piece representing a social rank or a military function. It was taught in courts as a strategic art that fostered thinking, planning, and contemplation, and that cultivated patience and emotional control—values that corresponded to the philosophy of governance and Islamic chivalry.

It is believed that the term "checkmate" derives from the Arabic expression "*al-shāh māta*," meaning "the king is dead," a phrase signifying the end of authority in the game, which was later adopted literally by Europeans (Shah Mat → Checkmate).

With the transmission of the game to Christian Europe, it became a symbol of strategic thinking and inner balance. Chess pieces were crafted from ivory, carved wood, or precious stones, and were considered markers of prestige and luxury. Their designs also carried profound cultural symbolism: the king, the vizier, the knights, the soldiers, and the pawns represented the political and social hierarchy of the medieval world.

In Islamic urban centers such as Córdoba, Granada, and Toledo, special schools were established for the teaching of chess, and it was regarded as a prestigious intellectual activity. Chessboards were crafted from colored mosaics or inlaid marble, and were considered among the most exquisite artistic objects combining intellect and aesthetic refinement³¹.

In Andalusian literature, narratives appear that highlight the status of chess in political life. Among these is an account of an encounter between King Alfonso VI and the Andalusian vizier Ibn Ammar, who saved his city from occupation through a stratagem in a game of chess, keeping the king engaged in play until military reinforcements arrived. This story symbolically expresses the superiority of Arab intelligence in diplomacy and political strategy.

Thus, chess in al-Andalus became a symbol of acumen and systematic thought, and one of the pillars of Islamic rational culture that laid the foundations for the subsequent flourishing of European thought.

2– 3 – 2 - Juglarismo

The art of *juglarismo*—that is, the art of itinerant performers, jesters, and popular singers—is considered one of the most significant cultural phenomena transmitted from the ancient classical world to the Islamic and Christian Middle Ages. Its origins can be traced to the Roman theater, which included actors, jesters, and singers (*histriones*, *mimi*, *thymelici*), who traveled through cities presenting performances that combined music, acting, dance, and comic entertainment.

Over time, and with the decline of classical theater following the fall of Rome, this art evolved into a more popular form known as *juglarismo*, which spread throughout Western Europe and the Islamic world alike. In al-Andalus, it acquired a distinctive character shaped by the interaction of Arab, Berber, and Christian cultures³².

The *juglares* (itinerant performers) presented their performances in markets, public squares, and palaces, gathering audiences through melodies, poetic narratives, and acrobatic displays. They functioned as transmitters of news and interpreters of events, conveying heroic and religious stories while blending them with music and social critique, thereby serving as intermediaries between the elite and the populace in the dissemination of ideas and values.

Historians indicate that the earliest reference to Arab *juglares* in al-Andalus dates back to the mid-eleventh century (1047 CE) in the city of Huenca, where records describe the activities of groups of itinerant singers who traveled across Andalusian towns and villages. Their presence in cultural life continued until the fourteenth century, when a gradual decline began due to changing social tastes and the increasing dominance of the Church.

The *juglares* were divided into two principal categories:

1. “Inferior” *juglares*, whose performances relied on amusement, frivolity, and simple acrobatic acts, often accompanied by trained animals such as monkeys and small dogs;
2. “Superior” *juglares*, who were cultivated artists and performers, narrating heroic tales and epic songs about knights, heroes, and kingdoms, accompanied by music and dance.

Juan Ruiz, in his well-known work *Libro del Buen Amor*, refers to both categories: he describes the “inferior itinerants” as those who “carry their monkeys and small dogs and wander from one village to another,” while he praises the “superior itinerants” who “revive heroic tales with elevated melodies and refined moral lessons.”

The role of the *juglares* was not limited to entertainment; they were also transmitters of oral culture, disseminating religious and moral narratives among the general public. They traveled through cities in exchange for payment, food, or clothing, and often enjoyed the protection of princes or bishops, who employed them to spread political or religious propaganda.

Within the framework of cultural interaction among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in al-Andalus, the *juglares* became a symbol of artistic coexistence, performing *muwashshahāt* and *zajal* poetry alongside religious hymns and ecclesiastical chants. Andalusian sources indicate that Arab and Christian itinerant performers frequently collaborated in festivals and seasonal celebrations, presenting joint performances that blended Arabic and Romance elements in both lyrics and melodies.

Muslim *juglares* in al-Andalus were also distinguished by their ability in imitation and satirical performance, reenacting stories of kings and knights in a humorous and critical manner, which made them an indirect medium for popular and political expression. Some of their performances combined music with theatrical movement, resembling what may be considered the early beginnings of popular Andalusian theater.

The researcher López Izquierdo indicates that the dual roots of bullfighting, both in its religious character and its secular dimension, date back to very ancient times, when the bull accompanied humankind throughout its development since the earliest stages of agricultural civilization, serving as a symbol of strength, fertility, and inspiration, and as a companion in both daily life and sacred rituals alike. In ancient cultures, both Eastern and Western, the bull was a symbol of divine grandeur, representing simultaneously the forces of nature and the instinct of life and death. Its image appeared in wall carvings and prehistoric caves as a symbol of strength and protection, as evidenced in cave paintings in Spain and France, where humans are depicted confronting the bull in scenes that embody the relationship between courage and survival.

Over time, and with the consolidation of Islamic rule in al-Andalus, the presence of these practices continued, but in a markedly different form: they assumed an elite, equestrian character and became associated with horsemanship and military training rather than with violence or killing. Muslim horsemen practiced the pursuit of bulls or wild animals in designated arenas known as the *maydān* or the *muṣallā*, the purpose of which was to train horses and prepare warriors in maneuvering and confrontation. During major celebrations, displays involving bulls were organized in the presence of princes and governors, while the general public was permitted to observe. These displays constituted a combination of military training and popular spectacle, forming the foundation from which Spanish bullfighting later developed after the fall of al-Andalus³³.

Over time, these displays evolved into grand chivalric celebrations in which both Muslims and Christians participated, particularly during the Nasrid period in Granada. The historian Ibn al-Khatib recounts that in the year 1351 CE, envoys of the Nasrid court attended a spectacle featuring a confrontation between a lion and a bull in the palace square, in the presence of Sultan Muhammad V of Granada, where spectacle blended with violence, and bravery with political symbolism. The purpose of these practices was not merely entertainment; rather, they served as a means of glorifying strength and heroism, and of affirming the status of the Arab and Muslim horseman in Andalusian society, as confronting a wild beast was regarded as a symbol of mastering instincts and triumphing over chaos³⁴.

Andalusian historians such as Ibn al-Khatib and Ibn Hayyan describe these scenes in detail, noting that some caliphs organized symbolic combats between bulls and predatory animals as an expression of power and control, and that horsemen who demonstrated exceptional skill were rewarded with gifts or valuable horses. Over the centuries, these rituals transformed into large popular festivities that attracted crowds, especially in major cities such as Córdoba, Seville, and Granada. People would gather in large numbers in public squares to watch equestrian displays and bullfighting, which were held in honor of saints, to celebrate military victories, or on courtly occasions³⁵.

3- Conclusion

Andalusian sport was a reflection of a rare civilizational spirit that brought together pleasure and intellect, art and the body, religion and worldly life. For the Andalusians, sport was an art of living,

practiced with honor and observed with dignity. Through it, the Andalusian individual expressed a profound understanding of humanity and a longing for spiritual and physical perfection.

Sports, equestrian practices, and festivals formed part of a broader cultural project aimed at celebrating the human being, creation, and nature, in a balance seldom paralleled in history. Thus, this study concludes by affirming that al-Andalus was not merely a vanished civilization, but rather a philosophy of life, in which intellect is manifested in play, the spirit in the body, and the human being in its completeness.

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