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## What is a City? Perceptions of Architectural and Social Order in 15th-Century Damascus

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# What is a City? Perceptions of Architectural and Social Order in 15<sup>th</sup>-Century Damascus

By Torsten Wollina (Berlin, Bonn)

## *About the author*

Torsten Wollina was born in Potsdam, Germany, in 1980. He graduated in Islamic Studies, Modern History, and Intercultural Communications from the Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena in 2008. Subsequently he began his doctoral thesis on the journal of the 15th-century Damascene notary Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq. In the course of these studies he has been a member both of the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies and of the Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg for the History and Society during the Mamluk Era (Bonn).

Torsten Wollina's research interests include arabic ego-documents, economic and social history as well as the organisation of knowledge in Islamicate societies. Besides his doctoral thesis, he has followed these interests in a number of talks. Furthermore, he explores the uses that can be made of spatial theories for research on Arabic cities by linking the sociological, administrative, and architectural perspectives on the subject. In an article in an upcoming special volume of the *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales*, Wollina uses the journal of Ibn Ṭawq as an example to show how he perceived of his hometown, how he distinguishes it from its hinterland, and how he described the location of places within it.

In his doctoral thesis, Wollina analyzes Ibn Ṭawq's journal as an ego-document. In order to do so, he attempts a reassessment of the genre of *yawmiyyāt* within the historiographical and Arabic literature in general. In addition, he demonstrates how the author presents himself in the text in relation to different reference groups. Wollina has recently submitted his thesis under the title „Twenty years of everyday life“ (Zwanzig Jahre Alltag).

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## 1. Introduction

This paper deals with the question how one occupant of 15<sup>th</sup>-century Damascus perceived his hometown and how he transferred this perception into writing.<sup>1</sup> The key witness in this endeavour is the notary Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Muḥammad, known as Ibn Ṭawq (834-915/1443-1510). He amassed a lengthy account encompassing several decades of his life. As Li Guo stated in a recent review article: “It is evident that the author’s motivation and impulse for writing the diary lay in his consummate interest in the wellbeing of himself, his community [...], and his place: Damascus and its suburbs.”<sup>2</sup> But is this really his place? Is it restricted to the city and the suburbs?

In this paper, I aim to address the question of whether 15<sup>th</sup>-century Damascenes made a distinction between the city and the countryside. This question will be approached from two directions. Firstly, does the author describe the rural geography differently from the urban one? Does he make a distinction between a physical entity of the city and its surroundings? And secondly, does he single out any groups as alien or different because of their rural background? I will approach this question both through the terminology employed by the author as well as via an analysis of how he actually applied it. My approach is informed by Henri Lefebvre’s concept of space. According to Lefebvre, space consists of three dimensions: the physical space, the mental space which encompasses all ideas of what space is and how it is structured, and the social space. These three dimensions interact with each other, forming and changing space but Lefebvre grants the mental space the greatest influence within the triad. It is normative and in this it dominates the social space, which he also calls the lived or endured space. In this paper I concentrate on Ibn Ṭawq’s description of the physical and social space he inhabited.

I wonder if the concept of *ḥisba* could be considered such a representation of space. It influenced both the way in which cities were shaped as well as how one should behave in a given context. Another example would be the *waqfiyāt*, the foundation deeds, which exerted a strong influence on the language which writers employed when describing buildings. For instance, whilst writing about a house sale he was notarizing, Ibn Ṭawq described the respective building only in terms of its localisation: “In the south and the west it is confined

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<sup>1</sup> A different version of this paper has been presented at the conference „Middle Eastern History and Theory“ (MEHAT) in Chicago on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Guo, *Al-Ta’līq*, 211.

by the seller's property (*milk*), in the east it is confined by a road blocked by gate, in the north (*shām*) by a path which is accessible".<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The source

The journal of Ibn Ṭawq is structured by year, visible from phrases at the beginning and the end of each and every one. It consists of entries written on a daily basis shortly after the narrated events took place. The language is a mix between classical and vernacular Arabic. The text may look like a chronicle. However, there is strong evidence suggesting that it is indeed a diary of sorts. A portion spanning twenty years has been published by the French Institute in Damascus in four volumes.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to providing information regarding political developments, Ibn Ṭawq included notes about his daily activities as well as his professional and domestic life. The largest part of the text thus deals with events taking place in or having an effect on Damascus.

This is also due to the author's occupation. He was a *shāhid*, a notary, professional witness and scribe, and as such he was "the link between the judges, who tended to derive from the civilian elite, and the masses of population. [...] Fixed in their local districts, in contrast with the judges who moved between them, the notaries were indispensable to the established procedure of litigation."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this was not his only way of income. He had a hand in agriculture, served as a broker for financial exchanges, rented out real estate and may even have been a small-scale slave trader. These occupations, as well as his familial and other obligations, took Ibn Ṭawq to many parts of the city and beyond and brought him into contact with members of almost every social stratum.

## 3. The physical city

Three questions will be addressed here: What is the terminology used by Ibn Ṭawq to refer to the city? Where are its limits? Does he treat the urban space differently from the rural space?

I have been able to identify three terms which denote the urban: *dimashq*, *madīna* and *balad*. *Dimashq* is used first and foremost when Ibn Ṭawq places his hometown in an imperial context. Egyptian Mamluks on their way to the northern front or the Ottoman prince Cem pass through *dimashq*. Thereby Ibn Ṭawq denotes the city at large. More often the author

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<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* 4:1670. For the influence of *waqfiyāt* on the way medieval Arab authors described architecture, see Rabbat, *Perception*, 162-3.

<sup>4</sup> The edition covers the years 886 through 906 (1480-1501).

<sup>5</sup> Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 226.

speaks about Damascus in a local context. There he distinguishes between the *madīna* and the *balad*. By *madīna* Ibn Ṭawq denotes the old core city in contrast to the suburban quarters. He also calls it *dimashq al-maḥrūsa* or *shām al-maḥrūsa* – the part of Damascus that was secured by walls.<sup>6</sup> The term *balad*, on the other side, includes the suburban quarters as well. The *madīna* is easily discernible from its surroundings by the walls around it. Furthermore, it was the commercial and religious centre, Ibn Ṭawq’s principal place of work and a focal point of the author’s social life, since the *shaykh al-Islām* had a residence on the central *qaymarīya* street. Some of his shortest entries consist only of the statement, “I did not go to town,” indicating that he also did not know what was happening on that particular day. The old city was, therefore, synonymous with the city.

The term *balad* is much more nebulous. Does the author speak about the old city and its belt of suburbs, does he include the settlement of Ṣāliḥīya or the villages of the oasis (*al-ghūṭa*), or does it encompass the city’s sphere of influence in general? Ibn Ṭawq uses the term to emphasize the scale of certain events or news. For instance, when the troops of the governor committed a massacre among the followers of a popular Sufi sheikh Ibn Ṭawq remarked: “the *souks* were shut, the whole city (*balad*) is in unrest (*ikhtabaṭat al-balad jamī‘uhā*)”.<sup>7</sup> Also, the first Ottoman-Mamluk war evoked anxiety in the “whole *balad*”.<sup>8</sup> The term designates the city of Damascus but is by no means restricted to it. It does not indicate a clear distinction between the urban and the rural. On the contrary, it subsumes the urban centre of the *madīna* and the peripheral rural settlements into one entity.

The logic to this is that Damascene jurisdiction and administration extended to rural settlements and actors on the Damascene political scene often took up residence there. For instance, the above-mentioned Sufi sheikh owned a house and a convent (*zāwiya*) in the village of Qābūn.<sup>9</sup> The *shaykh al-Islām* Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr Ibn Qāḍī ‘Ajlūn, with whom the author enjoyed close relations, also bought a residence there in order to accommodate a slave wife he had married on a trip to Beirut.

Although there is no clear-cut border between the urban and the rural, a transition is visible between the two. It is dependent on both the distance between the respective place and the *madīna* and the author’s social and commercial contacts. The suburbs are designated by the omission of any attribute. The name itself is enough to explain the place. Settlements further away, however, are considered villages (*qurā*). But the author is selective in this

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<sup>6</sup> Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta‘līq* 2:714, 894.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 3:1288.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 2:765.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 3:1288; Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith*, 255-6.

practice. The settlement of Ṣāliḥīya is treated as a suburb, despite its distance from the city centre (2 miles). Important members of the author's family lived there whom he visited regularly.

The transitory position of such locales in the vicinity of Damascus becomes even clearer in the example of the village Qābūn. Whereas Ibn Ṭawq refers to it as a village in the beginning of the journal, he omits that description in the later years. This shift happened due to the fact that Ibn Ṭawq spent a lot of time in Qābūn. When the *shaykh al-Islam* stayed there with his new wife, Ibn Ṭawq would note his "going there" (*tala'a*) on every second day. At other times they would both go there to visit Qāsim the Pilgrim. Ibn Ṭawq also owned land there on which he grew wheat. Finally, Qābūn was the place where parties would meet to set out to travel north to Ma'lūla or Jarūd to collect taxes or supervise reparation works of *waqf* property. Ibn Ṭawq travelled to this village more often than to many of the suburban quarters.

This was, however, only due to the possibility for him to make the return journey there on the same day. Ibn Ṭawq enjoyed relations with the inhabitants of these places which were as regular as his contacts to people from the city centre or the suburbs. But should Qābūn therefore be considered part of his Damascus?

Another perspective on the question can be gained from the itineraries Ibn Ṭawq provides of his journeys to more distant parts of the countryside. He joined the entourage of a *qadi* on an annual basis in order to extract taxes from the villages north of Damascus. They led him as far as Ma'lūla and Jarūd which both lay about 30 miles north of the city.<sup>10</sup>

Generally, Ibn Ṭawq does not give much information about "going somewhere" itself. He only notes the destination of a given leg of the way. Michel de Certeau used the linguistic term *asyndeton* to describe this method of describing a passage in space.<sup>11</sup> Only certain places with a local authority are mentioned on which the story of the journey is hooked and by which it is proven as authentic and real. The movement itself is omitted from the text.

Within the city, Ibn Ṭawq uses landmarks such as mosques, markets, schools and even some private houses as local authorities to localize places. Especially the residence of the *shaykh al-Islām* was used in this way. On the 21<sup>st</sup> *Rabī' I* 887 (10.5.1482), "I met with the Shafiite chief *qadi* in the house of Ibn Sālim, which is in the neighbourhood of the shaykh's

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<sup>10</sup> In the years 886 (21.6.-10.7./17.8.-4.9.1481), 888 (14.7.- 11.8./18.8.-14.9.1483), 902 (26.4.-10.5./1.-14.1.1497), 904-5 (14.12. -2.1./23.7.-9.8.1499) Ibn Ṭawq travelled to *Jarūd*, in 893 (1.11.-7.12./7.10.-12.11.1488), 899 (10.1.-20.2./21.10.-30.11.1493), 905 (14.4.-3.5./18.11.-6.12.1499), 906 (4.4.-2.5./28.10.-24.11.1500) to *Ma'lūla*, in 902 (17.1.-16.3./25.9.-22.11.1496) and 903 (7.5.-18.6./1.1.-11.2.1498) he visited both places on the same trip. See Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* 1:76-7, 270-72; 2:802-806; 3:1225-1233, 1442-1451, 1460-62; 4:1574-81, 1737-39, 1767-1770, 1867-1873.

<sup>11</sup> De Certeau, *Kunst*, 195.

house”.<sup>12</sup> The route from one appointment to the next is never provided. Within the city, it was self-explanatory to the author. He writes schedules, not itineraries, which provide evidence of his daily presence at a succession of unrelated, isolated locations.

His journey to *Ma lūlā* in 893 (1487-88) provides a differing view of his relationship with spaces he inhabited. Coming from Damascus, his party took their first rest and a meal in the village *Minayn* before they continued towards *Balqīna* where they spent the night. On the following day, they crossed the *Qulqās* mountain pass and reached *Tall Qiṭāyā* whence Ibn Ṭawq and his cousin departed to *Ma lūlā*. They reached it by “going down a difficult path to the vineyards of *Ma lūlā*”, emerging close to the orchards of the monastery. The beginning and end of every leg of the voyage is framed by the terms “*ṭala ‘a*” and “*waṣala*”. Furthermore, his use of landmarks is decisively different. With regard to the villages he stops in, he dispenses with the application of landmarks altogether. However, he refers to topographical landmarks in order to describe the route taken. He places emphasis on the movement, rather than the sites of stopovers. Such explanations do not seem to have been regarded necessary when Ibn Ṭawq negotiated his way through Damascus.

However, in this regard the voyage of 893 (1487-88) is an exception. In most other itineraries Ibn Ṭawq applies the same techniques as he does within Damascus. He clarifies that the party took a rest in *Minayn* either close to the mills or at the grave of the local saint Sīdī Abū al-Rijāl. Further indications about the way taken are not to be found. This might be due to the fact that the parties usually took the same route albeit with minor deviations. Since Ibn Ṭawq departed on these journeys on a yearly basis they became routine and thus his descriptions did likewise. Furthermore, the end of such a journey is signified by his return to the *madīna*, the walled city centre, and not to *dimashq* or the *balad*. The main difference to itineraries remains his indication to the beginnings and ends of the legs of his journeys.

Ibn Ṭawq describes his visits to *Qābūn* in the same way. Whereas he only mentions his presence (*ḥaḍartu*) in the case of appointments within the city, he uses “*ṭala ‘a*” and “*waṣala*” in describing his trips to the village. Based on this evidence, *Qābūn* was considered as distinctive from Damascus despite the fact that Ibn Ṭawq stopped denoting it as a village. But what lies behind this difference in treatment? Does it betray specific notions of urban and rural spaces? This question cannot be answered on the basis of the material analyzed so far. Instead we shall turn our attention to Ibn Ṭawq’s categories of social ascription.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta līq*, 1:157.

#### 4. The social cosmos

There are irregular references to the depiction of urban society as consisting of the three strata of Mamluks, *'ulamā'* and an ill-defined populace. But in view of the fact that Ibn Ṭawq did not write a normative text in any way, he also uses other categories in order to identify people. He proffers information regarding their religion, ethnicity, occupation, place of residence or origin, their age and gender and even their wealth. Also it is evident that it was important to him whether or not these people were known to him personally. I will not go into detail here, but restrict my observations to groups generally considered to be rural elements: peasants, Bedouins and Turcomans. Did Ibn Ṭawq perceive them as the “other”, as an alien element?

In his lines of work Ibn Ṭawq often came into contact with peasants. They worked in his gardens and fields, took part in repairs, or they would require his services as a notary.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, they made up the majority of his contacts in *Ma'lūlā* and other villages. When depicted collectively as *al-fallāḥīn* or the *ahl* of a given village, they appear to have been perceived as a threat to the public order and even to the military might of the Mamluks.<sup>14</sup> Peasants were often accused of being criminals and highwaymen. Even a chamberlain was ambushed by a group of some 50 peasants who allegedly deprived him of a sum of 10,000 dinars.<sup>15</sup> In the aftermath of the above-mentioned massacre among the Sufi sheikh's followers, a rumour went through the city that he would come back, leading an army of Bedouins and peasants.<sup>16</sup> Although Ibn Ṭawq was very much afraid of being robbed, he still acknowledges the unjust treatment the peasants suffered at the hands of the authorities.<sup>17</sup> The population of *Ma'lūlā* was even forced to flee their village when news of the notorious amir Ibn 'Ulūṭa became known.<sup>18</sup>

In *Tall Qiṭāyā* Ibn Ṭawq and his companions suffered “the greatest hardship” from the peasants. They refused any collaboration and finally attacked the tax collectors with stones. Since this report appears after a gap of several days in his account the reasons for his lament must remain unclear but it seems plausible that money was involved.

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<sup>13</sup> The most prominent among Ibn Ṭawq's employers appears he peasant Yūsuf, sometimes as “Yūsuf the peasant”, sometimes as “Yūsuf of Jaramānā” (*al-jaramānī*) who seems to have worked regularly for the author. Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'līq*, I:98, 182, 223.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, I:275 (peasants rob merchants), 276 (looting and killing), 281 (peasants become robbers), 450 (peasants imprisoned); 3:1435-6 (peasants become robbers); 4:1535 (peasant kills *naqīb*), 650 (peasants occupy a meadow), 1752 (peasant kidnaps boy), 1849 (peasants produce alcohol).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 2:1065.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 3:1289.

<sup>17</sup> On a patrol the chamberlain (*ḥājib*) captured thirty peasants from Qābūn under the pretence that they were robbers. Although, as the author relates, they never stole anything. Still, the village was forced to pay 150 gold dinars for their „crime“; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'līq*, 1:281.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 3:1227.

In spite of this, Ibn Ṭawq does not generally distrust the rural population. He employed two peasants named Aḥmad and Yūsuf al-Jaramānī. He also received some peasants as guests in his house, amongst whom were Christians. He even trusted them with the transportation of letters although one was brought to him completely wet, the content rendered unreadable.<sup>19</sup> All said, Ibn Ṭawq's perspective on peasants is twofold. He usually was on good terms with those whom he was familiar with but would still concur with rumours about their association with crimes and violence.

His tone is the same with regard to the Bedouins. News of their sighting in the vicinity of Damascus is greeted with anxiety.<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath of the rebellion of the Sultan's executive secretary (*dawādār*) Āqbirdī Ibn Ṭawq describes the extent of destruction and unrest by explaining that the Bedouins had taken over the deserted quarters.<sup>21</sup> Irregularly, the governor also led expeditions against the nomads. In a few instances, however, they are depicted as the victims of the authorities who rob their flocks and, at times, also their wives and children.<sup>22</sup> That Ibn Ṭawq depicts them generally in a more one-sided view might be a result of having no personal acquaintance with them.

The Turcomans are on the whole depicted very differently from the other two groups. Firstly, they appear in about half of the entries as inhabitants of Damascus. There seems to have been a rather big community of Turcoman tanners.<sup>23</sup> A Turcoman woman called Fāṭima owned a bathhouse in Ibn Ṭawq's neighbourhood.<sup>24</sup> Even the tribes are depicted in a benevolent light. They never appear as the aggressors, always of the victims of either the Bedouins or the Governor's troops.<sup>25</sup> Neither in the urban nor in the rural context do they appear to be depicted as elements associated with unrest.

In conclusion, it has to be said that Ibn Ṭawq felt certain distrust to the rural population. Peasants and Bedouins presented a potential threat to the status quo. They were to some degree alien to the author. But was it because of their rural nature, or rather, because of

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<sup>19</sup> To one peasant the author gave six Dirham (*fiḍḍa*) although the letters were in miserable condition: „We saw that they were soaked; nothing was readable.“ Ibid, 1:91. Another example for peasants as carriers of letters is found Ibid, 511.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 1:484 (Bedouins pillage the *ghūṭa*, the *ḥawrān* and *al-marj*), 489 (they kill someone in a village); 2:529 (spies for the Ottoman sultan); 3:1312 (attack pilgrims); 4:1540 (obstruct the pilgrimage), 1546 (fear of the Bedouins), 1850 (rumours that they captured the sultan), 1904 (“there are many Bedouins”).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 4:1569.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 1:485.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 3:1491 (Turcoman tanners are attacked by the *zu'ar*).

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 1:230.

<sup>25</sup> See Ibid, 2:636-38 (wedding of a Turcoman woman, proof of her virginity), 646 (scrutinizing of a Turcoman bride in the *ḥammām*), 696 (Turcoman is paraded in chains); 3:1118 (,.000 sheep are taken from the Turcomans), 1370-1 (Turcomans attend a wedding), 1402 (Ibn Ṭawq copies a document for some Turcomans); 3:1845 (the governor of Ḥamāh has Turcomans in his entourage), 1907 (Bedouins of the *Bānū Lām* steal livestock from the Turcomans).

their low social status? After all, Ibn Ṭawq applies an even harsher tone when relating news about Shiites or Venetians who lived in Damascus, and even more so when he writes about the neighbourhood gangs of the *zu‘ar* who increasingly challenged the Mamluks’ superiority.<sup>26</sup> They and the Egyptian mamluks who also were an urban albeit foreign element appear as the main threats to the public order.<sup>27</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

A city is at once a physical entity as well as a social reality. But it does not exist in a vacuum independent from its hinterland. Ibn Ṭawq’s involvement in the administration of this hinterland is reflected in his writings.

He differentiated between the city and the countryside as two poles of the same space, the *madīna* being its centre and everything else being peripheral - to differing degrees. His description of itineraries is not so much concerned with a difference between an urban and a rural sphere but rather with the author’s knowledge of the respective area through which he travelled. Only if an area or a route was new and unknown to him he made an effort to describe it. Otherwise he only relates the places where he made a stop to work, pray, meet with someone, eat or sleep. The more often he travelled a particular road, the more the itinerary resembles the ones within the city.

Due to the author’s line of work he came into contact with a lot of members of the rural population. They appear as his subordinates in agriculture, his equals as hosts or guests, and sometimes at odds with the author when they are required to pay their taxes. In these reports there is no general pejorative attitude discernible. Even more so, since the author’s own travels as well as his employment of peasants in the orchard that adjoined his house in the quarter of the tanners.

Ibn Ṭawq moved constantly between the *madīna* on the one side and the outlying villages on the other, between the circles of the *‘ulamā’* and the agriculturalists. His various jobs put him at the hinge between the elites and the populace, and thus, also between the urban and the rural. In light of this, how could he perceive these two important realms of his

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<sup>26</sup> For the impact of the *zu‘ar* in Damascene politics at the end of the Mamluk era, see Toru, *Society*; Grehan, *Street Violence*; Lapidus, *Middle Ages*, 154-165. Apparently, the term *zu‘ar* did not carry the same connotations in contemporary Cairo; see Haarmann, *Injustice*, 70.

<sup>27</sup> For intrigues, fights and battles of the *zu‘ar*, see Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta‘līq*, 3:1101, 1281, 1300-1, 1437, 1478, 1491, 1500, 1511, 1516; 4:1536, 1566, 1567, 1615, 1632, 1633. In 893 (1487-88) the population was anxious about the arrival of the Egyptian Mamluks because, as Ibn Ṭawq relates, “in Ghaza they looted and killed three people“. When Egyptian Mamluks came to Damascus in Rajab 904 (1498-99) meat became very rare and its price skyrocketed; Ibid, 2:773; 4:1689-90.

life world as distinctive spheres while it was his task to integrate the both of them? After all, would that not have made him accept being nothing more than a peasant on the fringes of the jurists, as the editor of his works has recently called him?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Al-Muḥājir: introduction in Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 1:11.

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