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**From the Selected Works of Sarah Bowen Savant**

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# Al-Ṭabarī's Unacknowledged Debt to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr

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### **Al-Ṭabarī’s Unacknowledged Debt to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr**

Sarah Bowen Savant

The history of citation practices in Arabic is a story waiting to be told. In this story, the *isnād*, or transmission chain, will receive its due, but so, too, will a wide variety of other, until now comparatively neglected topics. A major concern running through all work on citation must be the “reuse” of earlier texts.\*

The concept of text reuse arises out of computer science and specifically the field of information retrieval. It is useful as a concept because it points to diverse writerly practices involving one person’s appropriation of the words of others. Computer software can identify, record, and visually display these patterns. The term “reuse” is intended to be value neutral; it is not equivalent to “plagiarism,” which carries a sense of literary theft—though such theft is one form of reuse. The numerous forms of reuse encountered in the Arabic literary tradition include (roughly from shorter to longer) literary devices (similes, metaphors, jokes, aphorisms, and parables); documentary formulae; poetry; taught texts, such as those used in hadith, law, and history; excerpts, commentaries, and other adaptations of earlier written works; anthologies and other collections of writings; and different versions of the same text.

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In each of these cases, as in many others, the reuse of earlier works was culturally mediated. Authors worked with, and occasionally against, the expectations of their intended audiences. Citation encoded not just a debt but also status, respect for a system of referencing as much as for any individual person, and obligations concerning how to reuse other people's words and how to acknowledge literary debts.

The following case is interesting because it touches on questions about citation, reuse, and the credit one does or does not owe one's forebears. It involves the great polymath of medieval Islam, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), and on the surface it might appear to be a case of what we today would consider plagiarism. Hugh Kennedy and I have discussed it at some length, as I have sought to understand al-Ṭabarī's working habits. The depth of Professor Kennedy's engagement with al-Ṭabarī is virtually unrivalled today, and it goes back to his early career, when he read the entirety of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'riḫ* at Cambridge. His interest and advice convinced me that there is still much work to be done on this well-studied author and that the case I describe here is important and of interest for historians.

### A Case of Literary "Theft"?

I start with the ostensible victim of the crime, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893), who was born in 204/819-20 into a Khurāsānian family that made its way to Baghdad, where Ibn Abī Ṭāhir enjoyed a productive career as a prolific writer of dozens of books. Among them we find titles such as "The book about the conciliatory king and the supportive vizier" (*Kitāb al-Malik al-muṣliḥ wa'l-wazīr al-mu'īn*), "The compendium of poets and accounts about them" (*Kitāb al-Jāmi' fī al-shu'arā' wa-akhbārihim*), "The book about the boasting match between the rose and the narcissus" (*Kitāb Mufākharat al-ward wa'l-narjis*), and "The book about Wahb's apology for breaking wind" (*Kitāb I'tidhār Wahb min ḥabqatihi*). The list of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's books contains three now-lost works pertaining to *sariqa*, a term that generally refers to theft but that can in this context be fairly translated as "borrowing" or, perhaps better, "plagiarism."<sup>1</sup> The subject of *sariqa* has been treated by scholars of Arabic literature, who have paid particular attention to the period in which Ibn Abī Ṭāhir lived.<sup>2</sup> Two of his books on *sariqa* deal with the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995) provides the most extensive list of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's works. See OpenITI, Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, search term: اخبار بن أبي طاهر. See also Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr* 95-6 and 168, n. 64. All OpenITI texts cited in this chapter can be accessed through the Zenodo release 10.5281/zenodo.5118900. Details of the underlying print editions can be found in the bibliography that accompanies this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Heinrichs, Evaluation of *sariqa* 358. Heinrichs notes that "the material offered by the *sariqāt* works is rather inhomogenous." See also Osti, Author as protagonist.

“modernist” poet Abū Tammām (d. ca. 232/845) and his student and rival al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897). These are “The book on the borrowings/plagiarisms of Abū Tammām” and “The book on the Borrowings/Plagiarisms of al-Buḥturī from Abū Tammām” (*Kitāb sariqāt al-Buḥturī min Abī Tammām*). The third book, “The book about the borrowings/plagiarisms of the poets” (*Kitāb sariqāt al-shu‘arā’*), treats the general topic of *sariqa* in poetry.<sup>3</sup> As well as writing about others’ literary theft, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir was himself accused of *sariqa*.<sup>4</sup> His personal legacy thus carries considerable memory of unpaid literary debts. Given this legacy, there is a certain irony in the fact that thousands of words from one of his books, *The history of Baghdad: Accounts concerning its caliphs, its governors, and events in their time* (*Kitāb Ta’rīkh Baghdād fī akhbār al-khulafā’ wa’l-umarā’ wa-ayyāmihi*),<sup>5</sup> were reused without attribution, often verbatim, by Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s younger contemporary, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), a scholar who is normally regarded as a careful citer of past authorities.

Only volume six of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s original *Kitāb Baghdād* survives. This volume pertains to the reign of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 198-218/813-33). The period covered in the volume begins with al-Ma’mūn’s arrival in Iraq from Khurāsān in the month of Ṣafar 204/August 819 and ends with his death. Al-Ṭabarī’s evident and extensive reuse of material found in this surviving section of the book in his own famous history, *The history of prophets and kings* (*Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*), has been mentioned repeatedly in scholarship, but to my knowledge it has been discussed in detail only by Hans Keller, in his 1908 edition, German translation, and discussion of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s book.<sup>6</sup> Keller labelled al-Ṭabarī an “Abschreiber” and a “Plagiator.” However, a scathing critique of Keller’s argument by Henry Frederick Amedroz, a senior British scholar of his day, may have discouraged later scholars from paying attention to Keller’s evidence.<sup>7</sup> They may also have assumed that Keller underestimated the intertextuality of the written tradition. Writing for the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* more than half a century after Keller, Franz Rosenthal concluded rather blandly that “Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s treatment agrees widely with that of the later Ṭabarī.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr* 96.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm quotes another Baghdadi, Ja’far b. Ḥamdān, as saying that Ibn Abī Ṭāhir was the most given to plagiarism (*asraq al-nās*), copying as little as a half or a third of a verse. OpenITI, Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, search term: أسرق الناس.

<sup>5</sup> OpenITI, Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, search term: أحمد بن أبي طاهر

<sup>6</sup> Keller, Stellung der “Annalen” XIII-XXVI.

<sup>7</sup> Amedroz, review of part 2 of *Kitāb Baghdād*.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenthal, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr. In his translation of al-Ṭabarī’s corresponding volume on al-Ma’mūn’s caliphate, C. E. Bosworth refers his readers to Keller’s treatment: “The whole question of the relationship between Ibn Abī Ṭāhir and Ṭabarī has been discussed in a highly detailed and masterly fashion, so as to require

Indeed it does. In early 2021, the digital humanities project that I oversee, KITAB, created evaluation datasets using the Open Islamicate Texts Initiative (OpenITI) corpus of digital Arabic texts to assess the precision and recall of passim, the main software we use to generate our data on text reuse. I checked and corrected the passim alignments generated by Ryan Muther between the *Kitāb Baghdād* and al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*. There were 33 such alignments, amounting to a total of more than 14,000 word tokens of shared text.<sup>9</sup> The very first alignment, in a passage describing al-Ma'mūn's arrival in Baghdad, is illustrative: the two passages are noticeably similar, but al-Ṭabarī's also features rearrangement and paraphrase (see fig. 1).



Figure 22.1: The first alignment between Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's *Kitāb Baghdād* (on the left) and al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* (on the right). Blue and green highlighting marks text present in one work but not in the other. Unhighlighted text is found in both. Beige highlighting indicates text contained

no further discussion here, by Keller in the Introduction to his German translation of the *Kitāb Baghdād*, II, pages XIII-XXVI." Bosworth, Translator's foreword 7.

<sup>9</sup> For the alignments, see 10.5281/zenodo.5118900.

in both works, but in different locations. Based on the KITAB Diff Viewer (a new application created by Peter Verkinderen).

Ibn Abī Ṭāhir first names three narrators, saying that they relied on history books (*kutub al-ta'rikh*) as their sources. Al-Ṭabarī jumps straight into the story, under a heading translated in the English edition as “Al-Ma'mūn's arrival in Iraq and what happened there.”<sup>10</sup> But the subsequent narrative is essentially the same in both works. Both depict al-Ma'mūn's stop in Nahrawān, southeast of Baghdad, on his way to the latter city. They use the same phrasing to say that the caliph arrived on a Saturday and remained in Nahrawān for eight days. In both, members of his family and notables come out to meet him. Al-Ṭabarī mentions also military leaders in this context. In addition, he provides details concerning the date of al-Ma'mūn's entry into Baghdad and the green attire, lances, and banners of his retinue that are not found in Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's corresponding text shown here. However, the latter does include these details, too, slightly earlier in the work, before the beginning of the alignment detected by passim. Such rearrangements can be harder to detect than overlaps occurring in the same order.

In gathering the alignments, we treated Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's *Kitāb Baghdād* as the base text and compared it to al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*. The numbering of alignments thus follows the order of the text in the *Kitāb Baghdād*. Al-Ṭabarī followed a slightly different organizing principle, adhering closer to chronological order than did Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, so the order of the aligned passages diverges in his work. The dataset indicates the locations of the passages in each book. In alignments 7 and 8, for example, al-Ṭabarī changed the order of his predecessor's text. These passages treat the rebellion of Naṣr b. Shabath and quote a letter from al-Ma'mūn. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's text leads with the letter and then describes exchanges between al-Ma'mūn and Ja'far b. Muḥammad al-ʿĀmirī, who communicates with Naṣr on the Caliph's behalf. Al-Ṭabarī's reverses the order, foregrounding the courtiers but necessitating some backtracking: he introduces the letter with “Before this . . .” (see figs. 2 and 3).

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<sup>10</sup> Alignment 1: OpenITI, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, *Baghdād*, lines 57-79; OpenITI, al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, lines 108276-108298; al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī* xxxii, 94.

وهزم  
جيشه فكتب اليه المامون  
كتابا يدعوه فيه  
الي طاعته والمنارقه  
لمعصيته والمخالفة له  
فلم يقبل فكتب عبد الله  
اليه وكان الكتاب الي نصر  
من المامون كتبه عمرو بن  
مسعدة اما بعد فانك يا نصر  
بن شيث قد عرفت الطاعة  
وعزها وبرد ظلها وطيب  
مرتعتها وما في خلافتها من  
الندم والخسار وان طالت مده  
الله بك فانه انما يملئ لمن  
يلتمس مظاهره الحجة عليه  
لتقع عبره باهلها علي قدر  
امرارهم واستحقاقهم وقد  
رايت اذكارك وتبصيرك لما  
رجوت ان يكون لما اكتب به  
اليك موقع منك فان الصديق  
مدق والباطل باطل وانما  
القول بمخارجه وباهله الذين  
يعنون به ولم يعاملك من  
عمال امير المؤمنين احد  
انصح  
لك في مالك ودينك ونفسك ولا  
احرص علي استنقاذك والانتياش  
لك من خطائك مني فباي اول  
او اخر او سطره او امره  
اقدامك يا نصر علي امير  
المؤمنين في

كتب اليه قبل ذلك بعد ان  
هزم عبد الله ابن طاهر  
جيشه كتابا يدعوه  
الي طاعته ومنارقه معصيته  
فلم يقبل فكتب عبد الله اليه  
وكان كتاب المامون اليه  
من المامون كتبه عمرو بن  
مسعدة اما بعد فانك يا نصر  
بن شيث قد عرفت الطاعة  
وعزها وبرد ظلها وطيب  
مرتعتها وما في خلافتها من  
الندم والخسار وان طالت مده  
الله بك فانه انما يملئ لمن  
يلتمس مظاهره الحجة عليه  
لتقع عبره باهلها علي قدر  
امرارهم واستحقاقهم وقد  
رايت اذكارك وتبصيرك لما  
رجوت ان يكون لما اكتب به  
اليك موقع منك فان الصديق  
مدق والباطل باطل وانما  
القول بمخارجه وباهله الذين  
يعنون به ولم يعاملك من  
عمال امير المؤمنين احد  
انفع  
لك في مالك ودينك ونفسك ولا  
احرص علي استنقاذك والانتياش  
لك من خطائك مني فباي اول  
او اخر او سطره او امره  
اقدامك يا نصر علي امير  
المؤمنين تاخذ



Figure 22.2: The seventh alignment between Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's *Kitāb Baghdād* (on the left) and al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rīkh* (on the right), showing the reproduction of a letter from al-Ma'mūn to the rebel Naṣr b. Shabath.



<p>جعفر ابن محمد الرقي العامري قال قال المامون لثمامه اشرس الا تدلني علي رجل من اهل الجزيره له عقل وبيان ومعرفه يؤدي عني ما اوجهه به الي نصر بن شيبث قال بلي يا امير المؤمنين رجل من بني عامر يقال له جعفر بن محمد قال له احضرني قال جعفر فاحضرني ثمامه فادخلني عليه فكلمني بكلام كثير ثم امرني ان ابلغه نصر بن شيبث قال فاتيت نصرا وهو بكفر عزون بسروج فابلغته رسالته فاذعن وشرط شروطا منها الا يطا بساطه قال فاتيت المامون فاخبرته فقال لا اجيبه والله الي هذا ابدا ولو افضت الي بيع قميصي هذا</p>	<p>جعفر بن محمد العامري انه قال قال المامون لثمامه الا تدلني علي رجل من اهل الجزيره له عقل وبيان ومعرفه يؤدي عني ما اوجهه به الي نصر بن شيبث قال بلي يا امير المؤمنين رجل من بني عامر يقال له جعفر بن محمد قال له احضرني قال جعفر فاحضرني ثمامه فادخلني عليه فكلمني بكلام كثير ثم امرني ان ابلغه نصر بن شيبث قال فاتيت نصرا وهو بكفر عزون بسروج فابلغته رسالته فاذعن وشرط شروطا منها الا يطا بساطه قال فاتيت المامون فاخبرته فقال لا اجيبه والله الي هذا ابدا ولو افضت الي بيع قميصي هذا</p>	<p>جعفر بن محمد العامري انه قال قال المامون لثمامه الا تدلني علي رجل من اهل الجزيره له عقل وبيان ومعرفه يؤدي عني ما اوجهه به الي نصر بن شيبث قال بلي يا امير المؤمنين رجل من بني عامر يقال له جعفر بن محمد قال له احضرني قال جعفر فاحضرني ثمامه فادخلني عليه فكلمني بكلام كثير ثم امرني ان ابلغه نصر بن شيبث قال فاتيت نصرا وهو بكفر عزون بسروج فابلغته رسالته فاذعن وشرط شروطا منها الا يطا بساطه قال فاتيت المامون فاخبرته فقال لا اجيبه والله الي هذا ابدا ولو افضت الي بيع قميصي هذا</p>
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Figure 22.3: The eighth alignment between Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s *Kitāb Baghdād* (on the left) and al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh* (on the right), in a passage describing exchanges between al-Ma’mūn and Ja‘far b. Muḥammad al-‘Āmirī about the rebel Naṣr b. Shabath.

The dataset identifies the overlapping passages by page numbers in the Leiden edition and the Bosworth translation. These numbers reveal the comprehensive extent of al-Ṭabarī’s reuse of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s text in his account of the period 204-18/818-34 in the *Ta’rīkh*.

Topics that pass freely from Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s book into that of al-Ṭabarī include the caliph’s entry into Baghdad (including al-Ma’mūn’s adoption of the black clothes of his ‘Abbāsid forefathers and his rejection of green as his symbolic color); much relating to the Ṭāhirids; al-Ma’mūn’s consummation of his marriage with Būrān, the daughter of al-Ḥasan b. Sahl; the intrigues of the ‘Abbāsid court and the postings of governors and military units; ‘Alid and other rebels (including Naṣr b. Shabath); al-Ma’mūn’s conflicts with the Byzantines; anecdotes showcasing the caliph’s generosity, poetic talents, and discerning ear; attitudes toward Arabs and non-Arabs; and much else. The parallel texts contain much poetry and long letters, including a missive of about 2,400 words from Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn to his son, ‘Abd Allāh, advising him how to govern (Bosworth called this letter “an early example of the ‘Mirrors for Princes’ genre in Arabic”)<sup>11</sup> and a letter sent by al-Ma’mūn to his Byzantine counterpart,

<sup>11</sup> Alignment 4; Bosworth, Translator’s foreword 3.



Theophilus, summoning the latter to Islam.<sup>12</sup> Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s treatment of the so-called *miḥna*—in which al-Ma’mūn required judges and traditionists to endorse the theological position that the Qur’an was created—is also found in al-Ṭabarī’s work, though the precise extent of the reuse cannot be ascertained because there is a gap in Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s surviving text.<sup>13</sup>

At no point does al-Ṭabarī give credit to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir as his source; the latter is not named anywhere in the reused sections. Historians working on the *Kitāb Baghdād* and this section of al-Ṭabarī’s work have remarked on the close relationship, and Hugh Kennedy, in particular, has pointed out the different style of writing used in the latter parts of al-Ṭabarī’s text.<sup>14</sup> But the extent of the reuse has gone largely unnoticed, and historians have not considered what it suggests about al-Ṭabarī’s working habits more generally. Yet examining the cases of alignment between the two texts yields some interesting insights.

To begin with, cutting out Ibn Abī Ṭāhir involved some work on al-Ṭabarī’s part. Consider the following two examples of rewriting, both by chance involving an account of a death:

1. Alignment 5: The circumstances of Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn’s death

Ibn Abī Ṭāhir: “Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥasan *told me* (*ḥaddathanī*) that ‘Abd al-Khāliq reported from Abū Zayd Ḥammād b. al-Ḥasan, who said: ‘Kulthūm b. Thābit b. Abī Sa’d, whose patronymic was Abū Sa’d, told me: “I was in charge of the intelligence and postal service in Khurāsān, and the place where I usually sat each Friday was at the foot of the pulpit . . .””

Al-Ṭabarī: “*It is related that* Kulthūm b. Thābit b. Abī Sa’d, whose patronymic was Abū Sa’d, said: ‘I was in charge of the intelligence and postal service in Khurāsān, and the place where I usually sat each Friday was at the foot of the pulpit . . .”<sup>15</sup>

2. Alignment 33: The cause of al-Ma’mūn’s fatal illness

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<sup>12</sup> Alignment 26: OpenITI, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, *Baghdād*, lines 3658-3680; OpenITI, al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, lines 109398-109421; al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī* xxxii, 195-7.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Ṭabarī’s text follows Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s but then breaks off suddenly. See the last alignments in the dataset, as well as Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād* 346 and al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī* xxxii, 199-209 (pages 209-22 continue to treat the *miḥna* but are not found in the surviving portion of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s text).

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, Caliphs and their chroniclers; see also Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir* esp. 103-8. For a different perspective on this period and on reading al-Ṭabarī, see El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic historiography* 12-3.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī* xxxii, 132.

Ibn Abī Ṭāhir: “Saʿīd al-ʿAllāf, the Qurʾan reciter, *told me (ḥaddathanī)*: ‘Al-Maʾmūn sent [for me] when he was in the Byzantine lands. I was then brought to him at Budandūn . . .’”

Al-Ṭabarī: “*It is mentioned from (dhukira ʿan)* Saʿīd al-ʿAllāf, the Qurʾan reciter: ‘Al-Maʾmūn sent for me, at the time when he was in the Byzantine lands, having entered them from Tarsus on Wednesday, the sixteenth of Jumādā II [July 9, 833]. I was brought to him at Budandūn . . .’”<sup>16</sup>

Such changes and omissions are found throughout the 33 alignments that passim detected and I reviewed. Al-Ṭabarī’s omissions are telling: in all of these cases, he appears to have decided not to cite Ibn Abī Ṭāhir directly, even though the latter says that he received the reports through personal contact with the major historical actors involved in the events. Al-Ṭabarī thus left considerable cultural capital just sitting on the table.

Indeed, in his entire work, al-Ṭabarī cites Ibn Abī Ṭāhir by name only once, in connection with a Ḥusaynid rebellion in the year 250/864 that would have been addressed (if it was at all) in the now-lost later parts of the *Kitāb Baghdād*. However, even here al-Ṭabarī does not refer to the book itself.<sup>17</sup>

### **What This Means for the *Taʾrīkh***

This evidence of reuse has implications for how we read and interpret the *Taʾrīkh* because it seems possible—even likely—that al-Ṭabarī relied on Ibn Abī Ṭāhir much more extensively than is currently recognized (see Figure 22.4 below).

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī* xxxii, 224.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ṭabarī writes: “Ibn Abī Ṭāhir mentioned that Ibn al-Ṣūfī al-Ṭālibī told him (*ḥaddathahu*) that he . . .”; OpenITI, al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, line 115986.

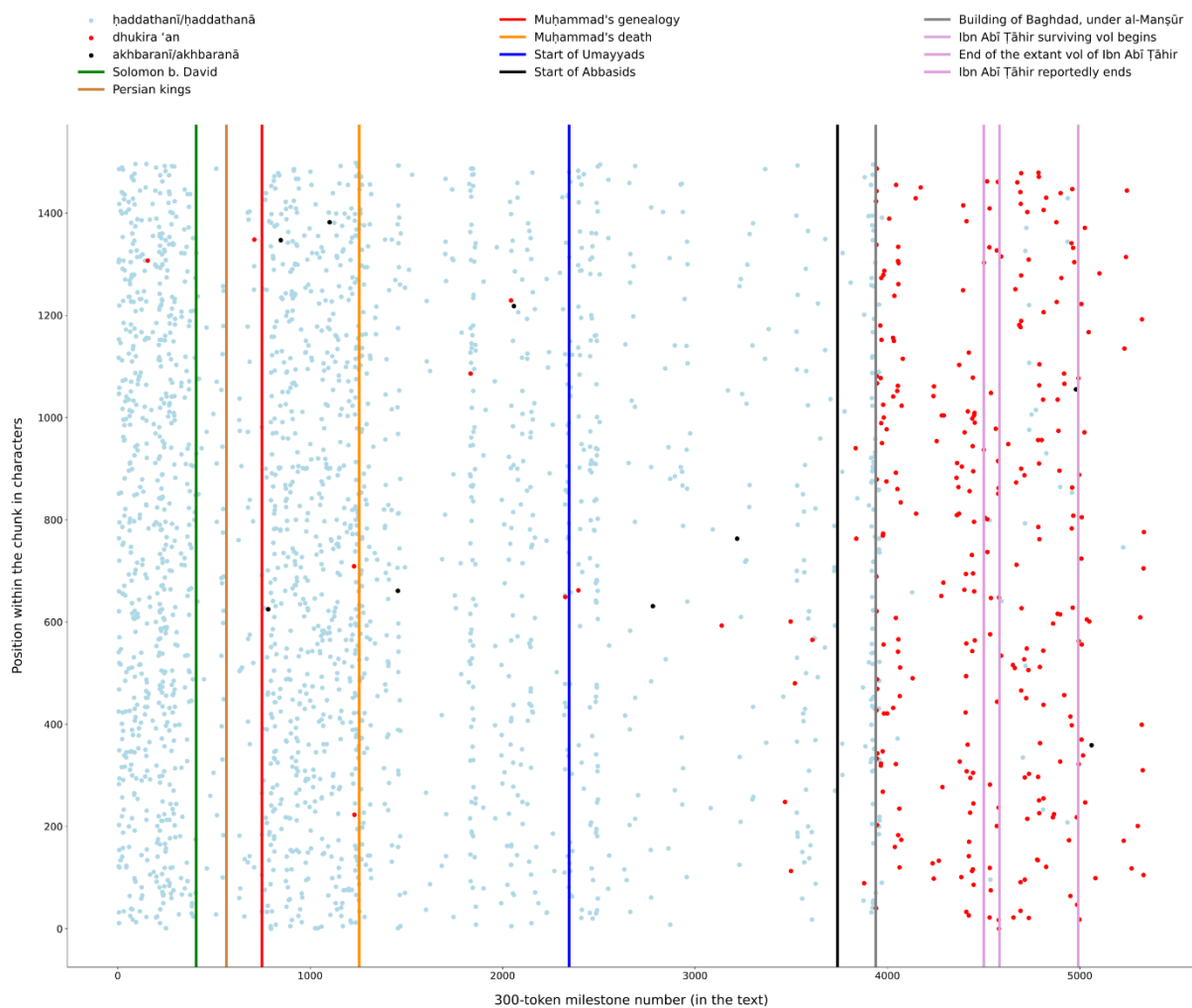


Figure 22.4: The passive voice as a potential indicator of text reuse in al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'riḫ*. Blue dots mark occurrences of the phrases *ḥaddathanā/ḥaddathanī* as the first element of an *isnād*. Red dots indicate uses of the passive-voice phrase *dhukira 'an*. Vertical lines identify section beginnings as well as the segment that corresponds to the extant volume of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's *Kitāb Baghdād*. Figure created by Peter Verkinderen and Masoumeh Seydi.

In Figure 22.4, the *Ta'riḫ* is broken down into chunks of 1,513 characters—the average number of characters in a chunk of 300 word tokens (all texts in the OpenITI corpus are divided into 300-token chunks). The location of each *isnād* that starts with the active-voice *ḥaddathanī/ḥaddathanā* (“he told me”/“he told us”) is marked with a blue dot; *isnāds* beginning with *dhukira 'an* (“it is reported from”) are marked in red. Imagine the figure as a great scroll on which the text is written with 1,513 characters per line. The top of the scroll is the figure's left edge, and its bottom is the right edge.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For the more technically minded: To produce this figure we defined Regular Expression patterns to find the transmissive terms *ḥaddathanī/ḥaddathanā* and *dhukira 'an*. We then searched for the terms in the text of the

The data in Figure 22.4 allow us to make the following observations.

First, the *ḥaddathanī/ḥaddathanā* formula is the dominant marker of citation in most of the book. Masoumeh Seydi and I are working on a separate study of this citation pattern in al-Ṭabarī's writings, and we argue that this formula points to a small number of persons from whom al-Ṭabarī took down well-organized notes that he kept for decades and used to create his *Ta'riḥ* as well as his Qur'an commentary, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, and his *Tahdhīb al-āthār*, an incomplete work on traditions

Second, al-Ṭabarī's method of citation changes with the founding of Baghdad in 145/762. He largely stops quoting his informants directly with *ḥaddathanī/ḥaddathanā* and instead begins using predominantly the passive voice *dhukira 'an*. His use of the passive voice eventually tapers off, right around the point at which Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's book reportedly ended—namely, with the reign of al-Muhtadī (r. 255-6/869-70).<sup>19</sup>

We do not know precisely where Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's book began, but it is likely that his account started with the founding of Baghdad (the book, after all, is known as the *Kitāb Baghdād*). Therefore, al-Ṭabarī's use of the passive voice is concentrated precisely in the part of the narrative that overlaps with Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's book. Without a more complete version of the *Kitāb Baghdād*, we cannot prove that al-Ṭabarī relied on Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's book for the history of Baghdad from its founding to 256/870, but the conspicuous shift in the citation pattern, together with the evidence of al-Ṭabarī's rewriting provided by our dataset, points to a significant, though unacknowledged, debt to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir.

This presumption finds further support when we search the *Ta'riḥ* using an expanded list of transmissive terms (that is, phrases that introduce a citation) that also includes phrases such as *ruwiya 'an*.<sup>20</sup> An initial search using a list prepared by R. Kevin Jaques produces interesting results. The first part of the *Ta'riḥ*, up to the founding of Baghdad, represents 74% of the entirety of the book, but it contains 96% of all citations. In this part of the work, a transmissive

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*Ta'riḥ* to determine the character positions of those terms. We scaled the positions to the x- and y-axes of the graph, which represent the length of the text and the approximate length of the 300-word token chunks, respectively. To identify the beginnings of sections, we searched for the section headers (annotated through OpenITI mARkdown) and marked these with vertical lines. The script for doing this is available at 10.5281/zenodo.5118900.

<sup>19</sup> This portion of the *Ta'riḥ* runs from the end of volume 28 through the middle of volume 36 in the translation published by the State University of New York Press English translation; in the Brill edition, it corresponds to series 3, pt. 1, 271-1839.

<sup>20</sup> Specifically, we searched the text for transmissive terms that begin a paragraph, as a useful though not perfect proxy for the beginnings of *isnāds*.

term occurs on average every 331 words. By contrast, in the second part, which probably corresponds to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's book in its original form, such a term occurs on average every 1,728 words. Though the search requires further refinement for greater accuracy, it is safe to say that al-Ṭabarī is far less transparent about his sources in the later parts of his book.

### **Why Did al-Ṭabarī Not Acknowledge His Debt to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir?**

There is much work to be done on citation practices, using data such as the above. In particular, we need to combine such data with a fresh consideration of terminologies, periodizations, topics, and literary and historical contexts. We will then be able to better understand literary borrowings such as al-Ṭabarī's.

What might al-Ṭabarī have been thinking? First, it is worth remembering that the earliest surviving physical evidence of books dates to al-Ṭabarī's lifetime and the period in which he was amassing material for his works.<sup>21</sup> These were early days, in which it may have been clear how one should cite certain types of written materials, but expectations were perhaps fuzzier for other writings, including books about events close to one's own time. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's book may have been viewed as a "practical data carrier" that did not require citation, much as many people today view Wikipedia.<sup>22</sup> Both Figure 22.4 above and the statistics yielded by the search of wider terms support this possibility. For the years 204-18 (that is, the period represented by the alignment dataset), al-Ṭabarī mentions only one other source, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Makhlad, by name, using the formula *ḥaddathanī*. This person had direct contact with al-Ṭabarī and was acknowledged for that.

A second possible explanation for al-Ṭabarī's practices lies in the general expectations surrounding the genre of history writing. In a similar case, discussed by Letizia Osti, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Ṣūlī (d. ca. 335/947) copied from an older contemporary's book (or notebooks) material that went back to an early 'Abbāsīd poet. Ibn al-Nadīm, judging al-Ṣūlī ill for it, writes, "He copied it altogether and claimed it as his own." Pondering the effect on al-Ṣūlī's reputation, Osti asks: "Can an author who is known to have stolen another's work be

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<sup>21</sup> The earliest dated Arabic codex written on paper is from the year 866, and it contains Abū 'Ubayd's (d. 238/838) *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*. Gruendler, *Rise of the Arabic book* 15; see also Déroche, *Manuscripts arabes*.

<sup>22</sup> Gruendler, *Rise of the Arabic book* 23; I thank Letizia Osti for the analogy. An alternative expression, from an era less publicly grateful to public servants, is "You don't thank the postman." Ilkka Lindstedt has noted also al-Ṭabarī's selective quotation of al-Madā'inī (d. ca. 228/843). Al-Ṭabarī does not provide an *isnād* when reproducing al-Madā'inī's material pertaining to the Prophet. Lindstedt, *Life and deeds* 243.

considered a good eyewitness?” She notes, however, that the question “does not seem to have been taken into consideration by any of the historians whose opinion we have reviewed.” It appears, then, that the rules governing reuse of poetry seem to have differed from those applied to historiographical material, which permitted “the appropriation and reworking of themes and forms.”<sup>23</sup> The concept of *sariqa* may have been deployed in conversations about poetry, less often in those about prose. If this is the case, the only extraordinary feature of al-Ṭabarī’s borrowing from Ibn Abī Ṭāhir would be the scale of the reuse.

Given this scale, however, a third explanation seems even more persuasive to me. This relates to al-Ṭabarī’s view of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, including the latter’s origins and status (he began his career as a schoolteacher), his reputation in literary circles, and the methods he favored. As Shawkat Toorawa has noted, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir is one of “very few writers who does not appear to have been involved in the many sectarian, doctrinal, and theological issues of the day.”<sup>24</sup> There is nonetheless ample evidence that his contemporaries and the generations that followed disparaged him. Their criticisms arose in literary circles, but they express sensitivities that might well have resonated with al-Ṭabarī. For example, al-Ṣūlī complained that Ibn Abī Ṭāhir got his facts and citations wrong when recounting an anecdote in which a caliph sought a courtier’s opinion on an appointment. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir named the caliph as al-Ma’mūn, but al-Ṣūlī claims that the incident in fact took place in the earlier context of the Umayyad caliph Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 105-25/724-43). According to al-Ṣūlī, the error is characteristic of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir:

I have reported [the story] according to the transmissions of reliable authorities and from several sources, but Ibn Abī Ṭāhir attributes it to al-Ma’mūn and Aḥmad b. Yūsuf without naming an authoritative source. This is because he is someone who gets his knowledge from books [without the aid of a teacher; a *ṣaḥāfi*], someone who does himself harm by speaking too much (*ḥātib layl*). He imposes as a condition the selection of good poetry for inclusion in his anthologies, but he actually includes bad poetry. And he claims to be picky and careful. Furthermore, he relates untruths and makes mistakes in his dating and in his attribution of poetry. . . . I saw him in Basra in 277 [890 or 891]; Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Mādarā’ī had summoned him there. I took down in writing two or three of his [Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s] lectures, but when I realized he was a *ṣaḥāfi*, in whom I

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<sup>23</sup> Osti, Author as protagonist 244-5.

<sup>24</sup> Toorawa, Notes toward a biography 131.



saw nothing I wanted, I left him. I am sorry that I have to speak ill of and belittle a littérateur (*aḥad min ahl al-adab*), but I have no choice but to speak the truth and state matters as they are.<sup>25</sup>

As Toorawa and Osti point out, the label *ṣaḥāfi* that al-Ṣūlī applies to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir is loaded with meaning. It denotes “someone who relied on books and on libraries for his knowledge rather than on memory and on oral and direct acquisition from others” (Toorawa);<sup>26</sup> in other words, “someone who relied on books exclusively without the aid of a teacher” (Osti).<sup>27</sup> The term *ṣaḥāfi* derives from the word for a leaf or a page of a book and by extension, a piece of writing, a letter, or a book. Other derivatives of the root carry negative associations: *taṣḥīf* signifies corrupt speech. One also finds *ṣaḥāfi* used to mean “someone who errs while reading or writing.” Toorawa observes that “the connection between the meaning ‘someone who relies on books’ and the meaning ‘someone who errs when reading’ is, of course, significant in a context where the precise value of book and book-related knowledge has not yet been settled.”<sup>28</sup> It is possible that al-Ṭabarī considered Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s method of collecting information unreliable, or feared that others would see it so.<sup>29</sup> If not compelled to cite Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, he might have preferred to avoid naming him.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, al-Ṭabarī’s decision not to cite Ibn Abī Ṭāhir may have had several related reasons. He worked at a time when the rules for citation were still taking shape, especially for the medium and the genre in which he worked. The person of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir did not inspire him to extend the rules to accommodate a fellow compiler. But al-Ṭabarī was also a writer of these rules

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<sup>25</sup> Translated by Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr* 22, citing al-Ṣūlī, *Awraq* 209-10.

<sup>26</sup> Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr* 22.

<sup>27</sup> Osti, *History and Memory* 70-1. Osti notes that al-Ṣūlī also refers to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir as a *ḥātib layl*, meaning “somebody who mixes reliable and unreliable material as if he were gathering wood in the dark.” Al-Ṣūlī’s assessment of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir “was not concerned with the books themselves, but with how they were used and composed.” For the origins and meaning of *ḥātib layl*, see also Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr* 140, n. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr* 22-3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, too, paints an unflattering picture of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir. He quotes Ja‘far b. Ḥamdān (author of a *Kitāb al-Bāhir*), who reports that Ibn Abī Ṭāhir began his career as a schoolteacher but went on to establish himself in the booksellers’ market in the eastern district of Baghdad. According to him, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir was a most prolific compiler, but also most banal (*ablad ‘ilman*) and prone to grammatical errors. Ibn al-Nadīm also quotes an apparently embittered al-Buḥtūrī: “I have never seen anyone . . . whose speech was more corrupt, whose mind was duller, and whose language was more ungrammatical. . . . No one plagiarized more than he did (*asraq al-nās*).” Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, “Akhbār b. Abī Ṭāhir.”

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the story that, according to al-Ṣūlī, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir recorded erroneously is also found in al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh* (although briefly). See alignment 19 in the dataset; al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī* xxxii, 179-80 (year 212, “al-Ma’mūn appoints Ghassān b. ‘Abbād governor over Sind”).

through the example he set. His own *Taʿrīkh* was reused extensively in other works, often without explicit citation. In this way, arguably, his choices regarding whom to cite and whom not to cite shaped both the legacy of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir—who is invisible within al-Ṭabarī’s work—and his own legacy, insofar as his work was subsequently mined without citation, much like Wikipedia is today.

### Concluding Remarks

Thanks to the OpenITI corpus, it is now relatively easy to search texts for the terms mentioned in this chapter and to see whether an author includes or omits the name of a predecessor. Such searches are useful and important. When we find long chunks of overlapping text, we should ask what an author is doing, how he cites past authorities, and why. A starting point of this investigation, I believe, should be the assumption that authors such as al-Ṭabarī worked in ways that largely made sense to their contemporaries. Cases of extensive reuse like al-Ṭabarī’s should thus prompt us to consider the ideas and expectations that drove this practice. Tracing these across the body of material made available by the digital age will enable a fresh picture of authorial practices to emerge.

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