# Studia Orientalia 114

# *TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME*

**Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg**

Edited by

Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila
& Inka Nokso-Koivisto

**Helsinki 2013**

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Studia Orientalia, vol. 114, 2013


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P.O. Box 59 (Unioninkatu 38 B)
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FINLAND



**Typesetting**
Lotta Aunio

ISSN 0039-3282
ISBN 978-951-9380-84-1

Picaset Oy
Helsinki 2013

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# IBN TAGHRĪBIRDĪ'S VOICE

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In recent years, the scholarly work on Mamluk period historiography has shown a growing interest in the social and intellectual context in which the various chronicles and biographies were written. The texts are no longer studied solely as repositories of historical facts, but also as expressions of the personalities and interests of their authors. The texts are seen as narratives that reflect the authors' choices in presenting and describing various events. Historical writing was a popular genre in the Mamluk period and a wealth of texts has survived to the present day. Edited texts have opened up the possibility of comparing texts with each other. For a long time, the purpose of comparison was to establish interrelationships between texts, in order to better determine the authors' sources. The underlying goal was still to establish the reliability of historical information reported in the texts. However, focus is increasingly shifting from facts to extracting and analysing the individual voices of the historians. These voices are influenced not only by the authors' identities and backgrounds, but also by their audiences and the wider social context that they were addressing with their literary products.

Ibn Taghrībirdī (*c*.812/1409-1410–874/1470) was an interesting figure among the Muslim scholars, because he was one the very few sons of the Mamluks who managed to gain a high scholarly standing. His father was Taghrībirdī (d. 815/1412), a high-ranking Mamluk who attained the position of *Nā'ib* of Damascus. Ibn Taghrībirdī wrote about his father and told that he was a *rūmī*,[1] which indicates that he may have been Greek. His true ethnicity was irrelevant in Mamluk society, however, where the Arab population, both scholars and commoners, generally labelled all Mamluks as "Turks", regardless of their actual ethnic origins.

As a son of a Mamluk, Ibn Taghrībirdī was barred from entering the elite military corps, which was only open for slave soldiers. The father's high rank in the Mamluk hierarchy secured his children good connections with both the civilian and military circles. Due to the early death of his father, Ibn Taghrībirdī

1 Ibn Taghrībirdī XIV: 115.

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was brought up by his sister, who was married to the chief Hanafī *qāḍī* and later to the chief Shāfiʿī *qāḍī*. His relations with the most powerful Mamluks were also close: another of his sisters was married to Sultan Faraj, and he was himself a close companion to various other sultans.[2] Ibn Taghrībirdī's connections with the elite, as well as his knowledge of the Turkish language and Mamluk customs, gave him an opportunity to write his reports as a kind of "insider", a companion of sultans and *amīrs*.

Earlier I studied Ibn Taghrībirdī's presentation of some contemporary events and his chronicle, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr al-qāhira*, as a source for information on the living conditions of the civilian *ʿāmma*, the broad group of commoners who formed the majority of the Cairene population.[3] *Al-Nujūm* proved to be a meagre source of information on the lives of commoners, clearly revealing that the author's focus was on the sultans and power struggles among the Mamluk elite. He did report on riots and other disturbances caused by dissatisfied commoners, but he tended to view them from a distance, as if looking down at the unruly masses from the ramparts of the Cairo citadel high above the city.

In the present article, I will discuss some aspects of Ibn Taghrībirdī's individual voice and in this way nuance the picture of Ibn Taghrībirdī as a court historian. I will look into his descriptions of the first turbulent decades of Mamluk rule. I have chosen to focus on this period because the establishment of Mamluk rule took place about 150 years before Ibn Taghrībirdī's birth, meaning that he had to rely on earlier reports when describing events. Ibn Taghrībirdī was forced to choose those reports and details that he wanted to include, and these choices are indicative of his motives and aims in portraying the first rulers of the Mamluk dynasty.

## SHAJAR AL-DURR AND AYBAK

The Ayyubid Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ died in 647/1249 during a battle with the French crusaders who had landed on the Egyptian coast earlier the same year. In order to keep the Sultan's army united and fighting, al-Ṣāliḥ's widow Shajar al-Durr maintained secrecy of his death until the Sultan's son Tūrān Shāh could take the reins of power. Tūrān Shāh was posted in Iraq and it took him couple of months to reach Egypt. During that time, Shajar al-Durr kept inquiries at bay by claiming that the Sultan was ill and could not meet with anyone. Finally Tūrān Shāh arrived and established himself as the new Sultan. He had brought with him his own Mamluks, which led him into a conflict with his father's Mamluks who with

2 For details of Ibn Taghrībirdī's life, see Darrāǧ 1972: 163–181.
3 Perho 2001: 107–120.

good reason felt themselves threatened by the new arrivals. Tūrān Shāh also alienated Shajar al-Durr by intimidating her and by accusing he of hoarding funds and jewels that were not rightfully hers. The conflicts culminated in the murder of Tūrān Shāh in 648/1250, less than three months after his arrival in Egypt. After the murder, Shajar al-Durr became the ruler supported by al-Ṣāliḥ's Mamluks. But after only three months on the throne, Shajar al-Durr married Aybak, one of al-Ṣāliḥ's high-ranking Mamluks, and relinquished power to him. Aybak formally became the vice-regent (*atabeg*) of a young Ayyubid prince, but in fact he ruled as the Sultan of Egypt until 655/1257, when he was murdered in the Cairo citadel, presumably by Shajar al-Durr. She herself was killed a few days later.

These dramatic developments caused a commotion in Cairo, but very little information was available to people without access to the citadel. The contemporary historian Ibn Wāṣil (d. 697/1298), who was living in Cairo at the time, stated that nobody really knew what had happened but rumours were rife.[4] The Syrian historian Abū Shāma (d. 665/1267) accorded the final events a minimum of attention. According to him, the exact reasons for Aybak's death were unknown, but his Mamluks had suspected Shajar al-Durr and executed her.[5] Other historians provided much more detail in telling how and why Shajar al-Durr had killed Aybak and how she herself met her death. Götz Schregle has compared the various historians' descriptions and observed how the incident became a legend that grew ever more detailed with the passing of time.[6]

Ibn Taghrībirdī's presentation tells the story of Shajar al-Durr in a matter-of fact manner. He mentions her close relationship with Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ, adding that she was very powerful and practically ruled Egypt, not only during al-Ṣāliḥ's final illness but even earlier.[7] Ibn Taghrībirdī characterises her rule as competent, and he clearly approves of her decision to conceal al-Ṣāliḥ's death during a precarious military and political situation. In his opinion, Tūrān Shāh should not have treated Shajar al-Durr with disrespect, but instead he should have been grateful to her for keeping the throne safe for him. Tūrān Shāh's unjust treatment of Shajar al-Durr only aggravated the resentment that al-Ṣāliḥ's Mamluks felt against him, paving the way to his murder. According to Ibn Taghrībirdī, the choice to institute Shajar al-Durr as the new ruler after Tūrān Shāh was grounded

4 Schregle 1961: 86, 89.
5 Schregle 1961: 89.
6 Schregle 1961: 84–92. Shajar al-Durr became one of the characters in the popular story *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, which developed in the 14th–15th centuries. About the portrayal of Shajar al-Durr in the story, see Schregle 1961: 97–122.
7 Ibn Taghrībirdī VI: 373.

in Shajar al-Durr's proven abilities: "her good conduct, her abundant intelligence and her good governance".[8]

Ibn Taghrībirdī often presents events in the same way as his teacher al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1422), but the description of Shajar al-Durr is one of the occasions where the two historians' presentations significantly vary. Al-Maqrīzī does not offer any adjectives to describe Shajar al-Durr or any comments, either positive or negative, on her way of ruling. Nor does he present any reasons why Shajar al-Durr was chosen as the new ruler. He simply states that the decision was based on an agreement concluded by the *amīrs* and notables.[9]

Al-Maqrīzī is rather laconic when reporting on the ascension and rule of Shajar al-Durr, but he waxes prolific when he recounts the events leading up to Shajar al-Durr's death. He provides a very detailed story that culminates in a description of how the mother of Aybak's son had her servants beat Shajar al-Durr to death with clogs and throw her scantily dressed body over the wall into the trench surrounding the citadel. Her body was left to rot for several days, and the waistband of her trousers was ripped off by commoners. Finally the stinking body was unceremoniously put in a basket and buried in the mausoleum that Shajar al-Durr had built for herself.[10] According to Schregle, al-Maqrīzī's description is a hotchpotch of fact and fiction where the various sources are no longer identifiable.[11]

Ibn Taghrībirdī is a lot less detailed in his report. He restricts himself to telling that after Aybak's murder, the mother of Aybak's son urged his Mamluks to kill Shajar al-Durr, but al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb's Mamluks continued to protect her. Then one day she was found dead outside the citadel walls and, subsequently, the body was carried to her mausoleum for burial. Ibn Taghrībirdī ends his report of Shajar al-Durr's reign by asking God to be merciful to her, adding that she had not only been a formidable ruler but also a devout Muslim who established a number of pious foundations.[12] By turning the focus from death and murder back to Shajar al-Durr's virtues and achievements, Ibn Taghrībirdī succeeds in concluding her biography on a positive note. His tone is in marked contrast to al-Maqrīzī, who does not have anything positive to say about her. Furthermore, al-Maqrīzī gives his relatively neutral report a decidedly negative turn by allotting a lot of space for the detailed description of her death and the disrespect accorded to her dead body.

As to Aybak, Ibn Taghrībirdī describes him as a brave and intelligent ruler who was far from being unjust, but instead conducted himself with moral

8 Ibn Taghrībirdī VI: 373.
9 al-Maqrīzī I: 361–362.
10 al-Maqrīzī I: 403–404.
11 Schregle 1961: 92–93.
12 Ibn Taghrībirdī VI: 377–379.

integrity.[13] Al-Maqrīzī agrees that Aybak was indeed brave, as well as a firm ruler. However, al-Maqrīzī does not consider Aybak to have been just, and he blames him for executing several innocent persons.[14] Ibn Taghrībirdī presents a much more positive picture of Aybak, not only as a good ruler but also as a pious Muslim who was regular in his prayers and did not drink wine.[15] As a further proof of Aybak's piety, Ibn Taghrībirdī points to his generosity in establishing pious foundations to support Islamic scholarship. In addition, Aybak was also personally interested in scholarship, as evidenced by his study of Islamic subjects under the guidance of a *qāḍī*.[16]

Ibn Taghrībirdī clearly sought to establish both Shajar al-Durr and Aybak as pious Muslims, who appreciated scholars and used their wealth to advance and support scholarship. Ibn Taghrībirdī also comments positively on their abilities as rulers and seems to hold the opinion that they – and, by extension, the Mamluks in general – were entitled to assume power because they were qualified to rule. In Ibn Taghrībirdī's description, Tūrān Shāh, the last Ayyubid sultan, is portrayed in negative terms as a person who was only interested in power for its own sake and the wealth that it brings. In contrast, both Shajar al-Durr and Aybak appear as responsible, intelligent rulers whose main objective was to assure Egypt's continued safety. The scandal of Aybak's murder and the subsequent demise of Shajar al-Durr were incidents that did not require a shift in the general assessment that they were good rulers.

However, even Ibn Taghrībirdī had to admit that despite Aybak's excellent qualities, the Egyptians did not want him as their ruler. Instead of appreciating him, they abused him to his face, shouting at him, "We want a [real] Sultan, a regent who is born to rule!"[17] The sentiment of the population was understandable, as the Ayyubid dynasty had ruled Egypt for several decades. Al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb's son, Tūrān Shāh, was not necessarily a very intelligent ruler,[18] but his pedigree was impeccable; he was the son of a sultan, and both his grandfather and great-grandfather had been sultans. In comparison, Aybak's background as a slave who had been purchased by al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb was not as impressive.

13 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 13.
14 al-Maqrīzī I: 404.
15 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 4.
16 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 14.
17 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 13.
18 al-Dawādārī VII: 380 comments that Tūrān Shāh was thoughtless (*ṣabīy al-ʿaql*) and of weak understanding (*ḍaʿīf al-raʾy*).

## QUṬUZ

After Aybak's death, his young son became Sultan. But about two years later, after the Mongols had started their conquest of the Abbasid caliphate, he was deposed by Quṭuz, one of Aybak's Mamluks. According to al-Maqrīzī's account, Quṭuz had expressed doubts about the young Sultan's ability to counter the Mongol threat. But the military concern was not the only reason behind the deposition. In al-Maqrīzī's view, an important factor was Quṭuz's greed (*ṭam'*) for power; he wanted to be Sultan himself. Quṭuz waited until Mamluk *amīrs* loyal to Aybak's son went hunting and then used their absence to imprison the Sultan. Later the *amīrs* opposing Quṭuz's actions were also arrested.[19]

Ibn Taghrībirdī's account of the events is quite different from that of al-Maqrīzī. To begin with, he argues that the idea to depose Aybak's son did not originate with Quṭuz himself but various notables around him. According to Ibn Taghrībirdī, Quṭuz had assembled *qāḍīs*, *faqīhs*, and other notables for consultation (*mushāwara*) on the Mongol threat. The Sultan was present in the meeting, but his ignorance prevented him from contributing to the discussion. Ibn Taghrībirdī further states that the notables were keen on shifting power from Aybak's son to Quṭuz.[20] Some days later, Qutuz again met with the notables and explained that due to the impending war with the Mongols, the realm should not be ruled by a young sultan but by a vigorous man who could lead the armies to jihad. The notables responded, "There is only you!"[21]

In Ibn Taghrībirdī's report, Quṭuz does not appear as a power-hungry *amīr* plotting against the Sultan, but as a responsible Mamluk officer worried about the Sultan's ability to defend the realm against the Mongols. Quṭuz did not desire power for himself, but was willing to accept the responsibility to rule the realm in a difficult situation. In fact, al-Maqrīzī quotes Quṭuz's own words, which can be seen as supporting Ibn Taghrībirdī's view that Quṭuz was not interested in power for its own sake, "My only intention is to collect everybody to fight the Mongols and I cannot do this without being a Sultan. When we have fought and beaten them, the decision is yours. Choose the person you want to appoint as a Sultan."[22] Taken at face value, the statement would seem to indicate that Quṭuz was willing to relinquish power after danger was averted. However, al-Maqrīzī promotes another interpretation by reporting that the words were directed towards the *amīrs* who had criticized Quṭuz for pushing the Sultan aside; because

19 al-Maqrīzī I: 417–418.
20 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 72–73.
21 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 55.
22 al-Maqrīzī I: 417–418.

Quṭuz feared them, he used these words to defend his actions.[23] In this way, al-Maqrīzī made Quṭuz's words appear only as an attempt to appease his fellow Mamluk *amīrs* and not as a sincere statement of only accepting the sultanate as a temporary measure in a time of crisis.

Soon after the accession of Quṭuz, the Mamluk army marched to Syria to fight the advancing Mongols. The enemy was defeated in the battle of 'Ayn Jālūt in 658/1260. Later historiography described the battle as a decisive victory because it marked the end of the Mongols' westward advance. The Mamluk attack was led by Sultan Quṭuz, but in the aftermath of the battle Quṭuz was assassinated by Baybars, who became the new Sultan.

Ibn Taghrībirdī's description of the battle is very much focused on Quṭuz, whose personal participation is presented as a vital factor in the victory. Al-Maqrīzī's report is less detailed, but he does specifically mention Quṭuz's bravery, stating that both Quṭuz and his companions showed true valour. The difference between Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-Maqrīzī can be found in their final remarks on Quṭuz's life and achievements. Ibn Taghrībirdī devotes a couple pages to quotations from earlier, mainly Syrian historians who had praised Quṭuz for his military prowess and good leadership. Ibn Taghrībirdī also includes some anecdotes told of Quṭuz. In one of these, when confronted as a young boy with his status as a recent convert to Islam, Quṭuz responded by claiming that he was actually a nephew of the Central Asian Muslim ruler Khwārizm Shāh, and thus not a convert but a son of a Muslim.[24] Ibn Taghrībirdī may have included the anecdote to further justify Quṭuz's accession: he was not only the competent military leader that a difficult situation required, but also someone with royal credentials. Whereas Aybak had been criticised by the Egyptians for not being a "real" sultan, Quṭuz's relationship to Khwārizm Shāh provided him with a royal ancestry and thus a birthright to rule. In addition, the anecdote described Quṭuz as someone who had been born Muslim, not a pagan convert, which also added to his credibility as a ruler.

Ibn Taghrībirdī presents two further anecdotes dating from the early years of Quṭuz's military career: predictions by a soothsayer and an astrologer about Quṭuz's glorious future,[25] according to which Quṭuz was predestined to both become Sultan and lead the Muslim army to victory against the Mongols. The inevitability of his fate is further stressed by a fourth anecdote, which relates that the prophet Muḥammad himself foretold Quṭuz's success. This anecdote is told

23 al-Maqrīzī I: 417.
24 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 85.
25 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 85–86, 89.

by Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Baraka Khānī, Quṭuz's fellow Mamluk (*khushdāsh*),[26] who, after Quṭuz's ascension to the throne, remembered how the young Quṭuz had told him that he would one day be Sultan. At the time, Ḥusām al-Dīn had laughed at him, but then Quṭuz explained that the Prophet had manifested himself to him in a dream and said, "You will rule Egypt and crush the Mongols." This convinced Ḥusām al-Dīn and silenced his laughter.[27]

In Muslim historiography, dreams are a frequently occurring topos. Biographical dictionaries report dreams that describe the company surrounding a scholar in paradise, reflecting the status he had acquired within his school or field of expertise. The anecdote quoted by Ibn Taghrībirdī involves the Prophet, which lends weight and authority to the message of the dream. According to the anecdote, Quṭuz himself remarked, "The Prophet speaks the truth without any doubt."[28]

Ibn Taghrībirdī's choice of anecdotes indicates that he sought to portray Quṭuz as a person who identified himself as a Muslim. He was destined to defend Islam against the non-Muslim Mongols, and the Prophet himself appeared in his dream to predict the success of this endeavour. In contrast, al-Maqrīzī chooses not to include any of these anecdotes. He mentions in passing that Quṭuz may have been related to Khwārizm Shāh, but he qualifies this by beginning with the word *yuqālu* ('it is said') in this way relegating the royal connection and Muslim genealogy to the sphere of rumour.[29] For al-Maqrīzī, Quṭuz was a well-trained soldier, a good military leader and brave in the war against the Mongols. God favoured Muslims by granting them victory, but Quṭuz's presence was not necessarily decisive. In al-Maqrīzī's report, there are no anecdotes portraying Quṭuz's actions as being predestined by God and foretold by the Prophet, which would raise Quṭuz above the rest and make him something special.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ibn Taghrībirdī began writing *al-Nujūm* for Sultan Jaqmaq's son Muḥammad, whom he expected to follow his father to the throne.[30] Ibn Taghrībirdī had himself been present at court when one of his teachers, the historian Badr al-Dīn al-'Aynī (d. 855/1453), was guiding the current Sultan by telling him of historical

26 Quṭuz's *khushdāsh* (i.e. a Mamluk who had belonged to the same household as Quṭuz and trained together with him).
27 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 88.
28 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 88.
29 al-Maqrīzī I: 435.
30 Ibn Taghrībirdī XV: 504.

precedences.[31] Obviously Ibn Taghrībirdī wanted to play a similar role in the education of the future sultan, letting the biographies of past rulers function in an instructive way and teaching him what it meant to be a good ruler. The didactic goal was one of the factors that affected Ibn Taghrībirdī's choice of material. Another was his general attitude towards the Mamluk rulers.

In his article about the Arab image of the Turk, Ulrich Haarmann showed how Turks were usually portrayed as bloodthirsty and brutal barbarians by Arab scholars over the centuries. The stereotype was also applied to the Mamluk rulers of Egypt. Scholars tended to portray them as foreign usurpers, who were by nature uncouth and incapable of any cultural achievement. Their religiosity was also suspect and they were often blamed for following their own traditional laws instead of applying Islamic law.[32]

Ibn Taghrībirdī was well versed with the Arabic historiographical tradition, where Turks were usually portrayed as barely civilised people who followed Islam on the surface but were in fact still pagan barbarians. The examples presented above of Ibn Taghrībirdī's portrayals of the Mamluk sultans can be seen as a conscious attempt to offer an alternative vision. The reports clearly stress the sultans' virtues as good rulers and their religious credentials are carefully listed, from Aybak's piety to Quṭuz's dream of the Prophet. Furthermore, Ibn Taghrībirdī makes an effort to clarify details that may appear strange to people unacquainted with Mamluk culture. For example, Ibn Taghrībirdī offered an explanation of why the Mamluks of al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb continued to protect Shajar al-Durr even after she had killed Aybak, a member of their house. According to Ibn Taghrībirdī, the first loyalty of the Ṣāliḥī Mamluks lay with Shajar al-Durr because she had been the wife of al-Ṣāliḥ, the master of their house, and they could not let Aybak's Mamluks kill her.[33] In such a crisis, their ties of loyalty bound them more strongly to her than to Aybak. Another example of Ibn Taghrībirdī's explanatory style is his habit of providing details on the spelling of Mamluk names; often he even translated Turkish names into Arabic. For example, he translated Aybak's name as Amīr Qamar, Lord Moon, whereas Baybars became Amīr Fahd, Lord Leopard.[34] This habit of translating names can be seen as a conscious attempt to render them accessible to the Arabs and to make the strange appear more familiar.

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31 Ibn Taghrībirdī XV: 110–111.

32 Haarmann 1988: 175–196.

33 Ibn Taghrībirdī VI: 378.

34 Ibn Taghrībirdī VII: 19, 94. The Arabic word *fahd* is used both for 'leopard' and 'cheetah'. The Turkish word *pars* means 'leopard'.

Ibn Taghrībirdī used historiography to present the Mamluks as rulers who belonged to the Muslim community, shared its values and, accordingly, were not alien usurpers of power whose only merit lay in their military prowess. Ibn Taghrībirdī was not able to change the views of the scholars who subscribed to the traditional stereotypes, however. Some of them even criticized Ibn Taghrībirdī for his attempts to familiarize his readers with Mamluk culture. One of these critics was the biographer and historian al-Sakhāwī (830/1427–897/1489), who was Ibn Taghrībirdī's contemporary. He did not appreciate Ibn Taghrībirdī's special knowledge, but stated, "I heard him consider himself better qualified than his predecessors who have written on history in the past 300 years, because he knows the Turks, their customs and languages." Al-Sakhāwī admitted that it may be that Ibn Taghrībirdī was knowledgeable in these things, but – in al-Sakhāwī's estimation – he was ignorant of everything else. Al-Sakhāwī summarized his opinion of Ibn Taghrībirdī's standing as a historian by exclaiming, "And what can you expect of a Turk?"[35]

In spite of this contemporary criticism, modern historians have found Ibn Taghrībirdī's individual voice interesting and informative. His *al-Nujūm* does indeed offer an alternative view, and it gives valuable information on the culture and values of the Mamluks.

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35 Ibn Taghrībirdī I: 19, 20. The biographical entry is extracted from al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ*, and printed in the Introduction (Muqaddimat al-kitāb) of *al-Nujūm*. Al-Sakhāwī's entry on Ibn Taghrībirdī is discussed in more detail by Popper 1956: 371–389.

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