CHAPTER 1

Early Lexicographical Activity

1  The Background of Linguistic Study

It is virtually impossible in the period which precedes the writing of linguistic treatises to separate between philological activity and interest in studying the Qur’ānic text. Indeed, a linguistic component is discernible in the earliest material we have on Qur’ānic reading, prophetic tradition, jurisprudence and exegesis. Versteegh (1993), for example, has demonstrated that the non-technical terms used by early exegetes such as Muǧāhid b. Ġabr (d. 104/722), Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), and Sufyān al-Ṯawrī (d. 161/778) constituted the link between every-day vocabulary and the later technical terminology of the traditional grammarians. Obviously, this could not have been the case had there been an early distinction between philology and exegesis. The material available in the sources concerning the early vocalization and dotting of the Qur’ānic text and thus Arabic script in general, irrespective of its trustworthiness, provides another example of the link between philology, particularly grammar (naḥw), and serving the Qur’ānic text, at least as presented in the sources. Both the emergence and the refinement of the system of vowels and diacritics are associated with early grammarians, starting with Abū l-Aswad al-Du’ālī (d. 69/688), who is universally credited in the sources with being not only the first to vocalize the text of the Qurʾān, but also the first to lay the foundations of grammar (awwal man waḍaʿa l-ʿArabiyya).2 His pupil, Naṣr b. ‘Āṣim (d. 89/708), also credited

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1 It is now almost certain, for example, that dotting letters cannot be attributed to Naṣr b. ‘Āṣim (d. 89/708), or even to Abū l-Aswad al-Du’ālī (d. 69/688) if we are to understand that the naqṭ (lit. dotting) attributed to him refers not merely to vowels – as the sources explain – but also, more generally, to dots. The dates of the two men cannot support such an allegation. To take the earlier of the two, Abū l-Aswad, most sources agree that he died in 69 A.H., and a few (e.g. Zubaydi, Ṭabaqāt 26; Qifṭi, Inbāḥ 1, 55) indicate that he lived eighty-five years. This would place his birth date at about 16 before Hijra or 606 A.D. However, we possess an undated document whose archaeological context suggests that it was written between the second quarter of the sixth century and the beginning the seventh century A.D. and which consists of one fully vocalized word (the proper noun Nāyif); cf. al-Ghul (2004: 106). Furthermore, several words in the Zuhayr inscription, dated 24 A.H., are fully vocalized; cf. Ghabban (2008: 211–212).

2 Abū l-Ṭayyib, Marātib 26–29; Sirāfī, Aḥbār 13–16; Zubaydi, Ṭabaqāt 21.
with being the first to lay the foundations of grammar (awwal man waḍa’a l-ʿArabīyya), is said to have been the first to differentiate between similar symbols in script by using dots. Other pupils of Abū l-Aswad’s who are reported to have adopted and spread his system of vocalization include grammarians such as Maymūn al-Aqrān (d. ?), ‘Anbasa b. Ma’dān al-Fīl (d. ?), ‘Abdallāh b. Abī Ishāq (d. 117/735), and Yaḥyā b. Ya’mar (d. 129/746). More significantly, none other than al-Ḥalīl b. ʿĀbd al-Ḥamīd b. ʿĀbd al-Raḥmān b. Hurmuz (d. 117/735), ʿAbdallāh b. ʿĀbd al-Ḥamīd b. Hurmuz (d. 175/791), who with Sībawayhi (d. 180/796) is the real founder of the Arabic grammatical theory, is said to have introduced further improvements to the Qur’ānic text, including marks for long vowels, hamza, šadda (doubling), and several phonetic phenomena. Accordingly, an uninterrupted chain which extends from Abū l-Aswad to Ḥalīl is established in the sources with respect to script improvement in order to minimize error in the recitation of the Qur’ān.

Qur’ānic readings (qirāʾāt) is another domain that reveals the link between linguistic enquiry and the study of the Qur’ān, which the sources highlight. It is thus no coincidence that most of the early scholars interested in luğa (philology) and/or nahw were Qur’ānic readers (qurrāʾ). These include Naṣr b. ʿĀṣim, ʿAbdalrahmān b. Hurmuz (d. 117/735), ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Ishāq, ʿĪsā b. ʿUmar (d. 149/766), Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. 154/771), and Hārūn b. Mūsā (d. c. 170/786), in addition to Kisāʾī (d. 189/805), who, like Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ, was one of the seven authorized readers. Furthermore, early linguistic activity is linked with other domains of religious enquiry, such as Ḥadīṯ (prophetic tradition), fiqh (jurisprudence) and tafsīr (exegesis). Accordingly, it is safe to assume that the collection of the material which later formed the basis of Arabic lexicography took place within the wider context of these nascent domains which later developed into independent sciences.