CHAPTER ONE

THE BACKGROUND OF THE KITĀB

1. Introduction

The premature death of Sibawayhi\(^1\) around 180/796 meant that it was left to his contemporaries to give a title to his huge and possibly unfinished opus. They could have hardly chosen a more appropriate name than al-Kitāb to express their appreciation of Sibawayhi’s insight into syntactical and morphological issues of Arabic. The introduction of the definite article al- to Kitāb, hence al-Kitāb, is an example of the formation of what is known as ʿalam bi-l-ġalaba (noun of prevalence),\(^2\) and in this case it refers either to the Book of God (i.e. Qur’ān) or the Book of Sibawayhi, also referred to as Qur’ān al-nahw\(^3\) in a rare instance of associating the word Qur’ān with something other than the Revealed Book.

The fact that Sibawayhi’s Kitāb is the oldest extant grammatical work in the Arabic tradition and at the same time the most comprehensive and influential for centuries to come is perhaps striking but not unparalleled. Pāṇini’s (c. 400 B.C.) Aṣṭādhyāyī is also the oldest extant grammar of Classical Sanskrit, and it can be argued that the Indian and Arabic grammatical traditions are “remarkably similar, with the best linguist standing right in the beginning of the recorded history in both cases”\(^4\). But whereas Indian grammatical activity, which goes back several centuries before Pāṇini, was quite considerable, particularly in phonetic-phonological analysis and etymology,\(^5\) one can go back no more than a few decades before Sibawayhi to ascertain any meaningful contribution to linguistic study in the Arabic tradition. This fact is essential for the appreciation of the efforts of Sibawayhi, and certainly of his master al-Ḥalil b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791), in establishing a grammatical

\(^1\) For details of Sibawayhi’s biography, see Ḥadīthi (1967: 9 ff.), Šayh ’Abdō (2000: 13 ff.), and Carter (2004: 7 ff.).
\(^2\) Ibn ʿAqīl, Šarh 92; Ušmūnī, Šarh I, 86.
\(^3\) Abū l-Ṭayyib, Marātib 106; Marzubānī, Muqtabas 58; Baġdādī, Ḥizāna I, 371.
\(^4\) Itkonen (1991: 130).
\(^5\) Ibid., 10–12.
theory which by far transcends any previous activity attributed to various scholars of the second/eighth century.

At the risk of oversimplification, the Arabic grammatical tradition, which extends from the second/eighth century up to the relatively recent past with authors like Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) and Baġdādī (d. 1093/1682), may be roughly divided into three stages, based on Sibawayhi’s Kitāb as the point of reference. Thus, one can speak of a pre-Sibawayhi stage, which accounts for the early linguistic activity leading to the phase of grammatical writing; of the stage which the Kitāb represents through its content and the set of grammatical notions and methods which it embraces; and finally of a post-Sibawayhi stage in which Sibawayhi’s overall system of grammatical analysis and the body of his analytical tools were largely adopted although a few notable developments did take place during that stage. Based on this oversimplified, but basically sound, division of the grammatical tradition, the Kitāb can best be appreciated within the context of the scholarly activity which took place in the second/eighth century and which reflects an interest in lexicographical matters in general as well as a more defined interest in grammar, particularly syntax. This chapter deals specifically with the relationship between the Kitāb and the linguistic activity with which it was contemporaneous.

2. Early “Grammatical” Activity and the Kitāb

Although the accounts given in the biographical sources from the fourth/tenth century onward about the beginnings of what can be loosely described as “grammatical” activity are at times contradictory and may well be unauthentic, they help us learn about the reasons thought to be behind the interest in grammar during the first/seventh century. Among those who are said to be the first to lay the foundations (rasama, wada’a) of Arabic grammar are Naṣr b. ʿĀsim (d. 89/708) and ʿAbdalrahmān b. Hurmuz⁶ (d. 117/735). But the most widely accepted view according to the sources is that the founder of Arabic grammar is Abū l-Aswad al-Du’alī⁷ (d. 69/688). It is quite possible that the proponents of this

⁷ See a list of sources which claim that Abū l-Aswad is the founder of Arabic grammar in Muṣṭafā (1948: 69–71) and Dağanî (1974: 162–165). More recently, Talmon (1985b: