CHAPTER ONE

SĪBAWAYH, HIS KITĀB, AND THE SCHOOLS OF BASRA AND KUFA ACCORDING TO THE CLASSICAL ARAB TRADITION

This introductory chapter surveys the manner in which Arab grammarians and historiographers referred to both Sibawayh’s Kitāb and to the professed grammatical schools of Basra and Kufa. The first paragraph (1.1) relates what the sources have to say about Sībawayh and his Kitāb. How the Arab tradition describes the schools of Basra and Kufa with focus on the use of the term madhhab, is the subject matter of the second paragraph (1.2). Paragraph 1.3 compares the results of the two sets of references of paragraphs 1.1 and 1.2.

Further, this chapter will argue that the Arab tradition conveys the impression that the Kitāb Sībawayh was generally accepted from its very inception as the grammatical analysis par excellence of the Arabic language. And while the Arab tradition emphasized a strict division between the two schools of Basra and Kufa and considered Sībawayh as the founder of the former, his book was all the same important to representatives of the Kufan school.

1.1 References to the Kitāb Sībawayh

From the beginning of the third/ninth century onwards, many grammarians wrote commentaries on the Kitāb Sībawayh. Among them we find al-Akhfash al-Awsat (d. 215/830 or 221/835), Sībawayh’s pupil—his Ta’līqāt is probably the oldest commentary—al-Jarmī (d. 225/839), al-Māzinī (d. 248/862), al-Siṣṭānī (d. 255/869), Ibn Abī Zur’ā (d. 257/871), al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898), al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923), Ibn al-Sarrāj (d. 316/928), al-Zajjājī (d. 337/949 or 340/953), al-Naḥḥās (d. 338/950), al-Sīrāfī (d. 368/958) and al-Rummānī (d. 384/994). Most of these works carry the title of Sharḥ Kitāb Sībawayh or Tafsīr Kitāb Sībawayh which probably means that they provided explanatory notes rather than critical remarks.

There are, however, two exceptions. One is a work by Ibn Abī Zur’ā entitled Nukat ‘alā Kitāb Sībawayh which suggests that it was at the very

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1 Sezgin (1984, 58-63) includes a list of 76 commentaries. See also al-Ḥadīthī (1967, 151 ff.).
least a critical commentary. We do not know anything about this work beyond al-Qifti's (d. 624/1227) description of it as "rather useful" (lā ba's bi-fawā'īdihi). The other exception is al-Mubarrad's Radd 'alā Kitāb Sibawayh which undoubtedly was a critical treatise. This work by al-Mubarrad, which has been included in edited form at the end of this book, will be the focus of attention in the chapters to come.

The large number of early commentaries on the Kitāb indicates that this work did arouse much attention. However, such an abundance of commentaries in and of itself provides no real insight into how Sibawayh's ideas were received during the formative period of the science of Arabic grammar. In order to gain this insight we need to know, amongst other things, how often Sibawayh was quoted in these works and where commentators agreed or disagreed with his ideas. Filling this gap is one of the major aims of this study. We commence, however, with a description of the manner in which Sibawayh and his book are portrayed in the sources.

A mere glance at the Nuzhat al-alibbā' fi ṭabaqāt al-udabā' indicates that in the life and times of the sixth/twelve century grammarian Ibn al-Anbarī, the author of this work, the reputation of Sibawayh's Kitāb had been firmly established and the schools of Basra and Kufa were considered a well-known fact. This is the reason why I have not used works written after Ibn al-Anbarī's compilation—though invaluable for other purposes—for the reconstruction of the development of references to the Kitāb Sibawayh offered here since we are interested in the reception of the Kitāb before it received its unquestionable status which it has retained till this very day.

1.1.1 Sibawayh in the biographical sources

The oldest extant biographical sources scarcely mention Sibawayh. A biographical entry on him was made by Abū al-Ṭayyib and al-Sīraffī to-

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2 Al-Qiftī, Inbāh IV, 190. Muhammad b. Abī Zur'a al-Bāhilī was a colleague of al-Māzīnī. Al-Suyūṭī (Bughya I, 104), a scholar of the ninth/fifteenth century, also mentions the Nukat 'alā Kitāb Sibawayh.


4 Abū Ḥamīd al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 280/893) refers to Sibawayh only once and on the authority of his teacher Abū Sa'īd al-Ḍarīr, who claims that al-Kisā'ī (d. 183/799) was more accurate in handling oral information than Sibawayh was (Makhjū ṭh 141). This corroborates the anti-Sibawayh reaction from the Kufan side which appears in the later sources. We will discuss this later. Abū Ṭāhir al-Muʿqrī (d. 349/960) does not mention Sibawayh at all in his Akhbār.