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The Chronicle of John Malalas, Book I: A Commentary*

The *Chronicle* of John Malalas, compiled initially c. 530 and subsequently extended into the last quarter of the sixth century, marks both an end and a beginning — an end in that it can be viewed as the last representative of late antique chronographical writing, since so many of the sources on which Malalas relied are no longer extant, and a beginning in that Malalas became in his turn a source for subsequent chroniclers. On a first reading this chronicle appears to be a disorganized rag-bag of snippets, an impression reinforced by the layers of sources that can be discerned within it. However, there are certain patterns of interest which must reflect the impact of a well-defined personality. That is to say, Malalas the individual can arguably be seen selecting the chronicle's contents and moulding a narrative out of the material that was available to him. Our problem is to understand the reasons for his choices. Almost every other Byzantine chronicler can be seen to have some major underlying theme, or a reason for producing his work: for Africanus it was a matter of aligning the seventy year-weeks of Daniel's prophecy with a world chronology for the incarnation; the author of the *Chronicon Paschale* was attempting to calculate accurately the date of Easter; Syncellus was concerned with the question of aligning the postulated dates for the week of creation with the week of Christ's Passion. Why should Malalas be different in this respect? The fact that, wherever they can be checked, his versions differ from the usual should lead us to wonder whether there is a reason for the distortions, before we turn to dismay. Answers, however, are elusive since the only explanations Malalas gives of his purposes and techniques are the brief comments in the Preamble; other patterns present in the chronicle have to be deduced from the text itself.

Some of the choices are explicable in terms of a writer trying to understand the apparatus of city life visible around him (hence the passages on Roman dress, local history, statues in Antioch). Less immediately obvious is his religious standpoint which would appear to belong to the level of "popular religion", a combination of gnostic Hermeticism tinged with theurgical magic, which had little or no interest in complex and abstract Trinitarian speculation; this would account for the presence of the "pagan oracles" and the absence of notices on theological debate, other than the occasional indication of a major council. Less apparent still is the rationale behind the chronicle's main chronological framework, though it can be demonstrated reasonably clearly that this had its origin in the millennial expectations occasioned by the passing of the year 6000 (by the conventional Byzantine calculation) at some point between 492 and 507. These points, and others, have been dealt with in the collection of *Studies in Malalas* but it is also proposed that these studies be amplified in a series of commentaries since much remains to be elucidated: Malalas still seems *sui generis*, a product of a culturally mixed milieu

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standing "at a slight angle to the universe". Life is short, however, and commitments many, and thus it is not clear when the commentaries are likely to be finished. As an interim measure, this paper presents a sample commentary on Book I: corrections and comments would be very welcome. The lemmata are taken from the translation published in 1986,¹ a revised version of which will appear when the new edition of the Greek text prepared by the late Hans Thurn is available.

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Preamble²

Though not preserved in Ba, which lacks Book I and the opening of II, the Preamble is securely attested by P, a collection of ecclesiastical and chronological texts which includes this section of the chronicle (M. Richard, "Les chapitres à Epiphane sur les hérésies de George Hiéromoine (VIIe siècle)", *EEBS* 25 [1955], 331-362), and its existence is confirmed by B, which is a version of John of Antioch, and the Slavonic texts. It has, however, suffered the mutilations so common to the opening and closing pages of a text and the initial sentence is now garbled, several names are corrupt and there are evident lacunae. The Preamble, setting out the chronicle's programme, and its heading are, however, to be attributed to Malalas.³

A report (P 5.1): ἐγκύκλιον (sc. γράμμα), literally an encyclical or synodal letter, a term most usually found in an ecclesiastical context (cf. Evagr. III.4); "report" is a not entirely satisfactory attempt to find a neutral phrase that does not prejudge either the status of the work or the writer's social or bureaucratic position. Slav gives a more general phrase, "account of world history", cf. "account" (ἐκθεσις) B.

John (P 5.1): The only part of the author's name that is securely attested in the mss. "Malalas" is attested by later writers, though often in the form "Malelas" (e.g. in the headings and closing attributions of the extracts in the Constantinian excerpts *De insidiis* and *De virtutibus* and Tzetzes, *Chil.*, II.33, though Tzetzes also refers to Malalas as "John of Antioch"). It is not preserved in P and is supported only through a plausible

¹ *Malalas Translation*. References are to book and paragraph according to the translation, and to page numbers of Istrin's edition of P and Dindorf's Bonn edition of Ba (see next note).

² Authors' names are abbreviated according to *LSJ*, Lampe, *Lexicon* and Sophocles and are cited (by book and section or by page and line, as appropriate) from the standard editions; the following sigla are used:

A – Paris, Graecus 1336, ff. 143-161 (ed. J.A. Cramer, *Anecdota Graeca e manuscriptis Bibliothecae Regiae Parisiensis* [Paris 1839], 231-242;

B – Paris, Graecus 1630, ff. 234-239 (ed. C. Müller, *FHG*, vol. 4 [Paris 1851], 540-549);

Ba – Oxford, Baroccianus 182;

Bo – Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn 1831);

P – Paris, Supplementum Graecum 682, ff. 9-14 (ed. V. Istrin, *Zapiski Imp. Akademii Nauk*, ser. 8, vol. 1, no. 3 [1897]);

Slav – the Slavonic translation of Malalas (details of its variations recorded in the 1986 translation);

V – Athos, Vatopedi 290, f. 148 (= continuation of P).

³ Textual points will be mentioned only when they have especial significance for the understanding of the chronicle. Comparisons will be made selectively with the chronological systems developed by other chroniclers; those that are of particular use to contrast with Malalas are found in the *Chronicon Paschale*, which is close in time but working from different principles, and Syncellus, writing very much later but making comprehensive use of earlier historians.