

## REVIEW

### ESSAYS ON MALALAS IN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Jonas Borsch, Olivier Gengler, and Mischa Meier, ed., *Die Weltchronik des Johannes Malalas im Kontext spätantiker Memorialkultur*. Malalas Studien 3. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2019. Pp. 372. Hardback, €68.00. ISBN 978-3-515-12011-1.

[*Editor's note:* The lateness of this review is due to delays in obtaining a review copy and is not the reviewer's responsibility.]

It is unusual to offer a review of a book this long after its publication. For a number of reasons it is perhaps worth doing in this instance to draw scholarly attention to the virtues of a significant collection that deserves a wider Anglophone reception. The sixth-century *Chronographia* of John Malalas is usually described as a chronicle (or a 'Byzantine World-Chronicle'), but actually stands in the tradition of epitome histories, as it lacks the primarily chronological interests of actual chronicles. However its genre is defined, Malalas' work was long under-valued, usually treated as a necessary, but thoroughly inferior, source for contemporary and very recent history. Johannes Thurn's CHB edition of 1995 marked a turning point, replacing Dindorf's primitive CSHB edition which was little better than the *editio princeps* of 1691. Mischa Meier, who edits the *Malalas-Studien* series, used Thurn's edition as the basis for his 2009 translation (*Johannes Malalas: Weltchronik*, Stuttgart), the extensive introduction to which carefully delineates the drawbacks to Thurn's text and is perhaps the best short introduction to the author currently in print. The volume under review is the third to appear in what one hopes will be an ongoing series. Based on a 2016 Tübingen conference, it presents thoroughly reworked versions of nearly all the contributions presented there. Continuing the thematic approach of its predecessors, this collection looks at John Malalas' approach to ancient history and memorial praxis more generally. It thus shifts the focus away from the usual, and understandable, focus on the history's utility as a primary source for the reigns of Anastasius, Justin, and Justinian. It takes more than half the history's length to reach the reign of Augustus and it is really only with Book 12, and the third century, that Malalas includes historical material that is both potentially authentic and not also treated in more reliable sources. Recognising the potential importance of the early books for understanding the work

as a whole marks a welcome new direction in scholarship. Among the thirteen papers, several are particularly important.

One of the collection's editors, Jonas Borsch, takes up the question of the physical portraits of emperors and legendary heroes in the *Chronographia*, of which there are very nearly a hundred. He leaves unresolved the question of sources, that is whether Malalas for the most part freely invented them or whether in many cases, for instance the descriptions of Trojan War heroes, he goes back to an earlier source with deep Hellenistic roots, e.g., the Dictys Cretensis tradition. Borsch does, however, sketch the tradition in which Malalas' portraits stand, showing that while the hero portraits belong in the long Hellenistic pattern of extrapolating physiognomic traits from moral traits (and vice versa), those of Peter and Paul go back to the apocrypha of the second century, and those of the emperors display characteristics that are firmly rooted in the tradition of imperial biography but also common in history. Borsch convincingly argues that, just as Malalas' frequent descriptions of physical buildings of great antiquity in Antioch and other *poleis* are meant to represent the continuity of the antique past into the present, so his physical portraits create a memory gallery that links the mythical to the Graeco-Roman and the Christian past in a seamless progression.

Laura Mecella deftly untangles Malalas' story of a Persian occupation of Antioch during the reign of Trajan, an occupation that of course never took place in reality. She shows that, mixed in to the usual Malalan tangle of folklore, local legend, and historical detail, there is (unusually for the sixth century) a recognition that the contemporary Persians had been preceded in their role as eastern antagonists by Parthians. Von Gutschmid long ago articulated the now commonly held opinion that Malalas has simply retrojected to the reign of Trajan the 253 capture of Antioch by Shapur I. But as Mecella drives home, Malalas also reports that third-century capture in detail that differs dramatically from his Trajanic account. In Mecella's view, the very different narrations exclude the possibility of a mere doublet. She also rules out any connection to the Parthian revolt of 116 or the Parthian *razzia* of 162 repelled by Lucius Verus. Instead, she argues convincingly that we have here a jumbled folk memory of the confused years between 40 and 38 BC when Quintus Labienus, allied with the Parthian ruler, seized much of Rome's eastern territory from Mark Antony as the Roman civil war dragged on. Antioch was in fact briefly occupied in 40, while the participation of Labienus helps explain the element of treachery present in Malalas' account of the fictitious Trajanic capture.

Another striking contribution is Emmanuèle Caire's piece on the relationship of space and time in the *Chronographia*. Malalas' interest in the material remains of the past is well known and amply documented in the scholarly literature. Notices of significant buildings dot his pages and are a kind of shorthand for the characteristics of a given king or emperor's reign. Frustratingly

for art and architectural historians, Malalas' ample notices are not matched by descriptive detail and it is only in Antioch that the amplitude of his description expands to the point of utility. Caire draws this out using a single example, the Epiphania neighbourhood of the city, and the way its townscape is treated in our historian's pages. She draws particular attention to the nuances in Malalas' choice of prepositions to distinguish the siting of the ancient Iopolis from the original city of Seleucus, and likewise to his capacity for distinguishing different phases of construction at the same site, with the mountain, the river, and the plain as the consistent points of orientation. She then shows how precisely Malalas localises the construction, during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, of Epiphania outside the Seleucan walls, how without being explicit he nevertheless clearly signals the location of the Caesarian reforms of the townscape, and how the theatre, with its successive expansions, becomes a focal reference for other elements of urban topography. Something of a *tour de force*, Caire's exposition ought to prompt others to transpose its lessons, and its sensitivity to grammar and vocabulary, to Malalas' less frequent descriptions of other sites.

Raf Praet seeks to put Malalas in the context of the state 'university' at Constantinople, specifically by looking at the antiquarianism of John Lydus and Cassiodorus in comparison to that of the *Chronographia*. Using a case study of their distinctive accounts of the colour purple and its history means his sweeping conclusions about an *érudit* circle rest on rather too narrow an evidentiary base. Praet's contention that Malalas was thoroughly familiar with Lydus' works is *prima facie* attractive (see the suggestive list of instances in his n. 37) and one awaits the fuller demonstration promised by the author. Olivier Gengler provides a thoroughly documented examination of historical *memoria* in the *novellae* of Justinian (with useful tabular summary on p. 243), which provides a certain amount of intellectual context for Malalas, without directly affecting our understanding of the *Chronographia*.

The *Chronicon Paschale* has featured extensively in earlier volumes of the *Malalas Studien* and here is the focus of two valuable contributions. Christian Gastgeber examines several aspects of the text's use of historical material. The *Chronicon*, being largely a cut-and-paste job from older, often known, sources (Gastgeber winningly terms it a 'Quellentext'), lends itself to this sort of investigation. He draws out the euhemeristic tendencies in the treatment of both the Olympian gods and the foundation stories of Rome, and gives a comprehensive summary of the non-Christian Classical authors cited in the text. That this leaves open the question of precisely what constituted the author's/authors' 'reading circle' does not detract from the utility of the material collected here. Erika Juhász offers a similar excavation of the Christian martyr narratives retained in the chronology of the *Chronicon*, though one that is inevitably less rich given the compiler's almost complete reliance

on Eusebius, and then Malalas, for this material. Disappointingly, though I think correctly, Juhász concludes that the compiler's main principle of selection in this material is to find items that would fill in any gap in the chronological sequence.

As with all such collections, there are contributions that stand a bit further away from the volume's advertised theme. Hans Christof Brennecke's account of the way the *Vita Danielis* treats emperor Zeno is interesting, but only tangentially relevant to Malalas, whose Book 15 treats Zeno perfunctorily and not very positively. The conceit of 'Hagiographie als Kaisermemorie' does, however, point up the ways in which hagiographical accounts can preserve assessments of past emperors in a fashion rather different from the main-streams of the historiographical tradition. Volker Menze's treatment on the historical reception of Chalcedon and its legacy is thorough and usefully explores the multivalent readings of the council by sixth-century authors, but it gets us no closer to assessing Malalas' own preferred flavour of Christianity, which remains obscure. There are also a handful of true outliers. Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp's opening contribution on the republican *gens Fabia* and their curation of familial *memoria* is excellent, but is unlikely to find the audience it deserves in the company of twelve articles to which it bears no relation. Likewise, Sebastian Watta's piece on material memories in church floor mosaics is interesting, but it stands steadfastly apart from the other contributions, as does Philip Niewöhner on the 'antiquarian' townscapes of western Asia Minor and Miletos in particular. Meanwhile, Carlo Scardino on continuators of Eusebius-Jerome is topically more relevant, but covers well-trodden ground at considerable length.

Collections of essays, especially those derived from conferences, are always a mixed bag and almost never truly cohere. The *Malalas Studien*, this one included, are generally more consistent than the norm. Indeed, were one to combine the best and most on-point essays from all three hitherto published volumes, they would make up an essential 'companion' to a text and an author who has yet to give up all his many mysteries.

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