

## REVIEW–DISCUSSION

### MALALAS AS HISTORIAN OF HIS TIMES

Olivier Gengler and Mischa Meier, edd., *Johannes Malalas: Der Chronist als Zeithistoriker*. Malalas-Studien 4. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2022. Pp. 304. Hardback, €56.00. ISBN 978-3-515-12645-8.

In this, the fourth volume in the on-going Malalas-Studien series, the rehabilitation of John Malalas continues. Based on a conference at Tübingen in February of 2018, the study offers twelve chapters in German, English, and French by an appropriate blend of established scholars and newer voices. Building on the work of the previous volumes, the bulk of chapters here examines how the cultural and political discourse in Malalas' world(s) shaped John both as a person and author.<sup>1</sup>

Separating Malalas from the text he composed, however, is a challenging, if not impossible, task. This is particularly true in the case of Malalas since John and later sources provide only minimal auto/biographical details. Moreover, as the editors discuss in a succinct yet informative introduction, what has come down to us are truncated and sometimes embellished versions of his work. Certainly the differing renditions that we consult today are the product of a complicated textual tradition, and hence offer substantially different recensions from one another and more importantly the original text of Malalas.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these difficulties, the first section ('Ein Chronist in seiner Zeit') offers two chapters examining Malalas first as a man and then as a writer. In an illuminating opening contribution, Lea Niccolai gamely takes up the challenge of investigating John, as she puts it, as a 'Greco-Roman and a Syrian'. While acknowledging that the chapter raises as many questions as it answers, Niccolai concludes logically that as a native of Antioch, John had been shaped by both his local Syrian customs and the dominant Greco-Roman imperial culture. Here, Niccolai enters hotly contested territory that

<sup>1</sup> The previous three volumes have tackled diverse topics such as: Malalas' education, religious views, genre, and manuscript transmission in Meier–Radtke–Schulz (2016); use and engagement with his sources in Carrara–Meier–Radtke (2017); and approach to ancient history in Borsch–Gengler–Meier (2019). For summaries and sound critiques of these previous volumes, see respectively Wahlgren (2017), Greatrex (2017), and Kulikowski (2022).

<sup>2</sup> See Greatrex (2016).

has seen recent debate over the ways individuals like John articulated their social, political, religious, and ethnic identity.<sup>3</sup>

What were some of the unique and lingering markers of identity for a Roman citizen from the province of Syria Prima in the sixth century? Language, as Niccolai explains, was an important one. The local dialect, Syriac, was a variety of Aramaic and the preferred tongue of the lower classes. By the fourth century Syriac had become ‘the literary *lingua franca* among Aramaic Christians, its script serving as a visual marker of Christian religious affiliation’ (27). And yet, despite the epithet later writers gave him of Malalas/Malelas, which derives from the Syriac word for ‘the eloquent’, *mll*,<sup>4</sup> John wrote in the language of power: Greek. His grasp of the Greek spoken on the streets of sixth-century Antioch allows us to speculate that he had been raised in an elite Greek-speaking household and received a solid if not spectacular education. Though Niccolai does not mention it, Malalas possibly belonged to a monolingual Greek-speaking Roman family distinguishable from the Syriac-speaking groups in Antioch. Nonetheless, it is more likely that Malalas was bilingual or even trilingual.<sup>5</sup>

Identity, moreover, as Niccolai rightly highlights, also involves the stories that one embraces or rejects. Niccolai finds indications in Malalas’ anecdotes that he knew some Aramaic history, myth, and, at the very least, basic terms in Syriac. As an instructive example of his wider cross-cultural awareness, Niccolai uses Malalas’ conceptualisation of the emperor Julian’s reign (361–3) and death, with its blend of Greek, Syriac literature, and local oral history. In this digression she finds evidence of John’s familiarity with non-Greek historiography. For instance, in his account of the martyrdoms of two members of Julian’s personal guard, the *candidati* Juventinus and Maximianus, Niccolai senses the influence of Antiochene folklore. The account of another martyr, Dometius, Niccolai attributes to unnamed Syriac sources. Here one regrets a lack of cross-referencing across the volume since other chapters such as Benjamin Garstad’s and Agnese Fontana’s come to similar conclusions and offer further testimony about John’s knowledge of Syriac literature and folklore.

We also learn in Niccolai’s and others’ chapters, that later intellectuals writing in Syriac found Malalas’ account useful and adapted large parts of it into their own works, a sign perhaps not only of a shared value in the type of history Malalas composed, but also of a shared cultural outlook. As Niccolai recognises, one can rightly ask whether we should attribute all of these connections to Malalas or the sources he consulted to construct his history.

<sup>3</sup> See Stewart–Parnell–Whately (2022) and Stouraitis (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Burgess–Kulikowski (2013) 223.

<sup>5</sup> For Malalas’ knowledge of Latin, see Gengler (forthcoming).

Malalas utilised a combination of over 200 literary texts, inscriptions, and oral sources, so determining John's own words and ideas from those of his primary sources or later excerptors (or maybe a continuator) is extremely challenging.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that—at the very least—Malalas selected these diverse and multi-lingual accounts for his history indicates that these were the sources with which he was comfortable.<sup>7</sup>

There are a few areas with which one might quibble. Niccolai sometimes draws too stark a contrast between 'Greco-Roman' and 'Syrian' identity, where there was surely greater overlap. As Niccolai admits, Christological views, class, and other factors created a wider spectrum of identity than is drawn in this chapter.<sup>8</sup> Niccolai's own selection of terms may face scrutiny. The description of John's audience as primarily made up of 'Greek laymen' might touch a nerve with some scholars, since one suspects they would emphasise that Malalas and his contemporary audience saw themselves as Romans. Within its wider geographic framework, Malalas—as with other intellectuals of his generation—exhibits a keen interest in Rome and the Roman past, detailing key figures and events in the Roman Republic and Empire. Greek was the language Malalas spoke and expressed himself in, not an important part of his political self-identity, which might explain his and other contemporary Byzantine historians' lack of interest in classical Greek history.<sup>9</sup>

These criticisms aside, Niccolai is surely correct that any future search for the enigmatic Malalas must begin via the precise language and vocabulary that he uses and the cultural stories he relates. One hopes that some of this work can be done when Meier, et al. complete their more definitive edition of Malalas' text, which will supersede Thurn's critical edition from 2000.

It is well known that Malalas failed to narrate through a strict chronological sequence of events or create a monotonal and authoritative authorial persona as did his famous contemporary Procopius of Caesarea. As a result, some scholars have criticised John's history as an incoherent hodgepodge of fragments mindlessly cut and pasted (or indeed plagiarised) from earlier sources.<sup>10</sup> Adam Goldwyn insists in his chapter, however, that there was a method behind the seeming madness. It is the very cacophony of voices that John consults and the resulting chaos that for him lends to its value.

Goldwyn makes a good case that many of these idiosyncrasies 'must be regarded as a conscious literary choice made for some specific purpose'.

<sup>6</sup> For Malalas' sources, see Kulikowski (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Less likely, but possible is that John—like Theophanes in the eighth century—may have read these Syriac sources via Greek translations.

<sup>8</sup> See the views expressed in Kaldellis (2022).

<sup>9</sup> See Kaldellis–Kennedy (2023).

<sup>10</sup> Treadgold (2007) 245–6.

Goldwyn hypothesises further that one of Malalas' aims was to offer 'mundane explanations for supernatural events' and thereby make the mythical past and the pre-Christian era more palatable to his contemporary Christian readers. So, rather than following the classical myth where Zeus transforms into an eagle and abducts Ganymede, in Malalas' version—which expunges the miraculous elements—Ganymede is set upon while making sacrifices at the temple of Zeus and then accused of being a spy; panicked by the peril he is now in, the cowardly Ganymede dies of fright. Malalas then rationalises the mythical version, by explaining that the 'false' story about Ganymede being seized by the eagle arose because of his sudden death.

The polyphonic nature of Malalas' narrative, according to Goldwyn, is another reason for its value as a historical source. Without the intellectual straitjacket of the classical literary genre that restricted Procopius and Agathias largely to one authorial voice and to the topic of war, the format Malalas chose allowed him the freedom to include many different views and voices from a wide trove of topics and genres and multiregional and temporal angles.

Despite his status as a privileged male, as Goldwyn underlines, Malalas is the rare Late Antique author outside of hagiography who gives women a historical voice. For instance, he records a woman named Veronica's inner thoughts, which John tells the reader he had discovered in an obscure document. Goldwyn attributes this diversity to Malalas' interest 'in different forms of narration, in this case, an autobiographical sketch which offers insight not just into a woman's life, but also her interiority: her thoughts, emotions and reasoning' (64). By putting the diversity of the Byzantine present and past on display, Goldwyn concludes provocatively that Malalas offers his reader 'a more accurate version of history'. I agree that John provides greater agency to marginalised groups like ethnic and religious minorities, foreigners, the poor, and women, who do not feature as prominently or as sympathetically in other sixth-century literary sources like Procopius and Agathias.

Considering, as Goldwyn records, that a respected scholar once described Malalas' work 'as undoubtably the world's worst chronicle' (58), the reader of this chapter can see just how far the tide has turned. This point, however, made me ponder the extent to which this shift in consensus concerning the sophistication and value of Malalas' work in the past thirty years has been influenced by societal changes in parts of the modern world, which promote greater diversity and grant greater agency to minorities.<sup>11</sup>

The second section ('Über die eigene Zeit berichten') offers five contributions that consider Malalas' work as a reflection of the cultural milieu of the age of Justinian. In an important chapter, the project leader and co-editor of the current volume, Mischa Meier, turns his perceptive intellectual eye to the

<sup>11</sup> For both the dangers and benefits of looking at the past through the lens of the present, see Sessa (2022).

complex and fluid depictions of German-speaking peoples found in Malalas. When it came to Germanic-speaking peoples—or more generally peoples of the north—Meier contends that John did not have either a concise or sophisticated concept of this language-group as a unified people. The ethnonym ‘Germanic’, in fact, occurs only once, in an episode during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Though there is not enough space here to delve too deeply into Meier’s detailed unpicking of Malalas’ depictions of individuals and groups of Germanic speakers, here I will draw attention to some of his particularly insightful ‘discoveries’.

Meier perceives a shift in Malalas’ conceptions of Germanic-speaking groups in the course of Book 14; from this point onward, John’s approach becomes more differentiated and one finds individual actors and groups acquiring stronger political connotations. As the chronicle moves into the fifth century, German-speaking individuals and groups appear as key players in Roman politics; yet Meier finds a notable lack of ethnic attributions in Malalas’ text, which he rightly considers to be meaningful. For instance, both in the vocabulary he deploys and the ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ roles they play, Malalas differentiates between individuals like the Visigothic king Alaric who served the emperors of Rome and implacable enemies like Vandal king Gaiseric. He posits that these portraits of individuals like Alaric and episodes such as the sack of Rome in 410, which contain many factual errors and differ greatly from accepted versions, make better sense if we interpret them through the lens of the politics surrounding Germanic-speaking peoples within and outside the territories ruled by the Roman emperors at the time (the sixth century) Malalas composed his history.

Meier here and elsewhere demonstrates that the more complex ethnic denominations found in Malalas’ later Books function primarily to identify groups/individuals as either allies or opponents of the *imperium Romanum*. Hence John deploys no ethnonym when describing Alaric, but simply describes the Visigoth as Honorius’ *magister militum*. Even more interesting, in Malalas’ distorted version of the sack, it is Honorius, out of a desire to punish his rivals in Rome, who orders a reluctant Alaric to attack the city. When Alaric and his ‘forces’ (Malalas does not label these troops as Goths or barbarians) enter Rome, John, downplaying the pillaging, reports that the general ‘harmed no one’ but only took some gold from the palace and instead betrayed Honorius and, after kidnapping the emperor’s paternal half-sister, Galla Placidia, allied himself to ‘the senatorial enemies of Honorius’ (Malalas *Chron.* 13.49, trans. Jeffreys–Jeffreys–Scott (1986) 190).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Malalas then mistakenly claims that Alaric then went to Gaul to rebel, when, in actuality, he died in 411. So too does John strangely record that Honorius had left Constantius III in control in Rome, while he returned to Constantinople to rule jointly with Theodosius II.

Meier calls attention to several instances of Malalas deploying this strategy in subsequent episodes. Attila and the Vandal Gaiseric (r. 428–77) belong to the category of ‘enemy/threat’, which in turn would be consistent with their persistent threat to Rome, Constantinople, and the rest of the empire. In contrast, subsequent Vandal rulers Hilderic (r. 523–30) and Gelimer (r. 530–4) appear in Malalas only as kings over Africa and the Africans, respectively.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Meier finds it possible that Malalas was adhering to the terms found in the peace treaty between the Romans and Vandals from 474, the terms of which Justinian still respected when Malalas was writing. In any case, Malalas does not deploy the ethnonym ‘Vandal’ in Book 18 to describe these leaders; instead, John chooses the term, ‘African’, which includes Romans and newcomers (Vandals), and sharply distinguishes them from the Berbers/Moors. Hence, Malalas adds needed nuance to Procopius’ simplistic dichotomy in his history of barbarian Vandals and native Africans/former Romans.<sup>14</sup>

Meier detects another subtle shift in Book 18, with John describing a broader spectrum of groups and confederations such as, Heruls, Sabirs, Avars, Slavs, Gepids, and Goths, all of which adheres to the more complicated politics during Justinian’s reign.

Meier concludes with another apt reminder that the historiographical aims and tastes of Malalas and his reader could and did differ from our own. He concedes that when describing events in the fifth century Malalas (like Procopius and other sixth-century historians) made some embarrassing chronological and factual mistakes. Nevertheless, he rightly avers that Malalas deserves our respect for utilising an unwieldy patchwork of sources to provide our most coherent and detailed chronological narrative of the complex and mysterious fifth and early sixth century from an Eastern viewpoint through the lens of the reigns of Theodosius II, Marcian, Leo II, Zeno, Basiliscus, and Anastasius.

Meier’s arguments are compelling. But they did make me wonder just how much these Books represent examples of Malalas’ careful planning and attitudes towards Germanic-speaking peoples and not just his attitudes to non-Roman allies and enemies more generally. Meier, moreover, regrettably fails to engage with or cite much relevant secondary literature throughout the chapter, which may make the uninitiated reader believe that some of Meier’s conclusions are more revolutionary than they really are. Despite this complaint, one can only hope that Meier builds on some of the intriguing points made here in a future volume in the series or in a separate article.

<sup>13</sup> Though Malalas (18.57), like Procopius, is clear on the point that Gelimer was regarded as a usurper by Justinian.

<sup>14</sup> For these simplified dichotomies in Procopius, see Merrills (2022).

The next pair of chapters by Vincent Puech and Fiona Haarer examine Malalas' portrayals of two key emperors, Zeno (r. 474–91) and his successor Anastasius (r. 491–518). Once again it is unfortunate that neither Haarer nor Puech seems to have read the other's chapter before publication, especially since Puech answers some of the questions raised in Haarer's short chapter. As Puech establishes, what Malalas excludes concerning Zeno's reign is sometimes as important as what he includes. Malalas' omission of two major revolts, and the role that the dowager empress Verina played in them during Zeno's reign may, in Puech's view, indicate that John sought to underplay political and social discord during his reign. Each author joins the current debate surrounding the intensity of Malalas' religious views, which in the text that remains are opaque. As Haarer points out, this neutrality over imperial Christological policy set John apart from his literary contemporaries Marcellinus Comes and Pseudo-Zacharia. This may be, as Warren Treadgold has argued plausibly, because John held undogmatic religious views.<sup>15</sup> Haarer struggles to explain Malalas' lack of focus on Christological strife, noting with some reservation that it may be connected to the more conciliatory religious politics at a time when 'the neo-Chalcedonian movement was enjoying some success in reconciling supporters and opponents of the Council' (125). Puech offers the most plausible explanation, suggesting that Malalas was more interested in lionising emperors who punished dissent in a fractious Empire. Hence, Malalas praised any emperor who protected the Roman *politeia* from social, political, and religious discord that disrupted the harmony of the Empire. This would further explain why, as Haarer underlines, Malalas focused so much on Anastasius' successes in quelling urban unrest across the Empire, be it spurred by religious disputes or public entertainments.

John certainly had positive things to say about both Zeno and Anastasius, regardless of their differing Christological views or circles of supporters. Puech's thesis also adds needed nuance to Haarer's contention that John was not always beholden to the pull of Justinianic propaganda. Rather than a criticism of Justinian's religious or political policies *per se*, his praise of Anastasius merely adhered to his overarching purpose as a historian. Haarer, less plausibly, attributes a large part of Malalas' positive opinion of Anastasius to an important oral source for Anastasius' reign,<sup>16</sup> Marinus, who had served the emperor both in civilian and military roles.

If I may make another minor point, Anastasius' appointment of the civilian Marinus to a military command was not as unusual as Haarer makes it. Liberius, Scholasticus, Narses, and Areobindus are just some of the individuals with little or no prior military experience whom Justinian had appointed as

<sup>15</sup> Treadgold (2007) 236.

<sup>16</sup> This thesis is not, however, original: see Treadgold (2007) 237.

generals. In times when Justinian may have felt politically vulnerable, it was each of these men's prior service to the emperor in a civilian capacity, and in the case of Aerobindus his marriage to Justinian's niece, which likely served as a key aspect of their appointments. One suspects a similar motivation had led to Anastasius granting Marinus the command against the rebel Vitalian at a particularly precarious time for his regime.

Haarer also finds other aspects of Malalas' depiction of Vitalian's revolt against Anastasius strange. It goes unstated in her chapter, but it is possible that the gaps and inconsistencies in Malalas' account of Anastasius' reign that Haarer points out, such as Malalas' possible apocryphal inclusion of elemental sulphur in his depiction of the naval battle between the rebel Vitalian and Anastasius' forces led by Marinus in 515, indicate his superficial understanding of these events or, more likely, are a sign of John sometimes preferring the sensational over the more mundane.

Malalas is indeed often our only source for what Haarer describes as 'entertaining trivia', all of which adds needed texture to the Age of Justinian. Henning Börm's contribution about a mysterious religious group in Sasanian Persia, the Mazdakites, touches on the valuable snippets of information that can be found scattered throughout Malalas' history. Though Malalas incorrectly describes this sect as Manicheans, Börm posits that it offers hitherto unappreciated evidence of this politically influential group at a fraught period at the close of the Persian Shah Kavad's second reign (r. 488–96, 498/9–531). John vividly describes Kavad's brutal executions of the group's leader, Indarazar, and a number of its clergy. Kavad then confiscated their property and Churches and supposedly redistributed them to Persian Christians. Malalas' account here and elsewhere, according to Börm, adds vital details about several topics that have provoked recent debate amongst specialists. First, John seems to confirm the Mazdakites had been around for centuries longer than some scholars have assumed. Second, there is evidence of Kavad's initial close relationship with the Mazdakites—an association that appears to have only soured when the group became more radicalised after 516, when a new prophet Mazdak the younger arose and 'shook' the realm with a series of radical social reforms which threatened the position of the political and religious elites. Before this shift, Börm detects the hand of the Mazdakites in Kavad's decision to end a century of peaceful relations and attack the Roman Empire in 502.

Börm closes the chapter with a fascinating depiction of Kavad's son and successor Khusro I's (r. 531–71) delicate political/religious balancing act at the start of his reign to avoid the machinations of either the Mazdakites (whom he had ruthlessly persecuted) or their enemies, some of which explains his foreign policy at the time. Börm contends that it was the powerful faction of anti-Mazdakites at the Persian court who pushed Khusro to sign the treaty known as 'the endless peace' with Justinian and the Romans in 532. Recognising the



danger of allowing this faction to dictate policy to him, Khusro had granted their rivals the Mazdakites the freedom to ‘practice their religion as they wished’ (Malalas *Chron.* 18.69, trans. Jeffreys–Jeffreys–Scott (1986) 274). According to Malalas, this new policy agitated the Persian *magoi* (Zoroastrian priests) and they plotted with members of the Persian elite to replace him with his brother. Discovering their plan, Khusro executed many of the plotters but continued to be restrained politically by the anti-Mazdakites. Relying on Procopius (*Wars* 1.23.28) Börm suggests that Khusro only severed their influence once and for all after executing a key figure in the anti-Mazdakite clique, Mehbod, and then in 540 gathering his army and storming into a sparsely defended Roman Syria, which led to the Persians sacking Antioch.

These victories, I would add, earned Khusro great prestige. As a result, military prowess became a vital feature of Khusro’s and his successor Khusro II’s independence and self-fashioning, a shift that may partly explain the next eighty years of devastating warfare between the two formidable agrarian empires, which had coexisted peacefully for much of the fifth century.

Christoph Begass deftly uses another informative nugget from Malalas—a notice about Justinian establishing the Province of Theodorias in Northern Syria in honour of his wife, the empress Theodora (r. 527–48)—to extrapolate further about the consequences of this event from both an imperial and local perspective. The new province contained the communities of Laodikea, Gabala, Paltos, and Balaneai. As Begass demonstrates, this was no empty honour, since we learn Justinian had granted metropolitan status to Laodikea, though Malalas tells us the local bishop remained subordinate to the patriarch of Antioch.

As Begass discusses, granting the province his beloved wife’s name not only signalled the emperor’s favour and followed precedents, but guaranteed manifest economic privilege for the newly minted territory. Although the immediate financial and infrastructure measures were intended to bring short-term relief to a northern Syria battered by a series of devastating earthquakes (Malalas 18.28), Justinian was also pursuing longer-term goals, which would establish further imperial control over this region and assure the legacy for his low-born wife. This buildup also benefited the citizens of Theodorias. For locals, the need for a new provincial administrative apparatus led to more attractive positions in their native communities; in some cases, these positions could offer some a stepping-stone to Constantinople. As Begass points out, establishing this new bureaucratic infrastructure came at a cost, however, and might help us better understand some of the emperor’s financial difficulties in the coming years.

The third section (‘Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in der Chronographia’)—which could have been fruitfully merged into the first—offers two contributions that take another deep dive into the ways Malalas interpreted

the ancient past through the lens of the socio-political world of the Justinianic Roman Empire.

Benjamin Garstad's chapter is another standout, offering a series of ambitious and original insights into Malalas' possible creative process. Through a close intertextual reading of both the early and later Books, Garstad seeks to test two main theses. The first, which strives to demonstrate that Malalas sought to connect the Persian nation with 'the origins of universal paganism' is convincing; the second, that Malalas strove to link sixth-century pagans/Hellenes in the age of Justinian with the pagan enemies in Sasanian Persia is less so.

To support his first argument, Garstad insists that Malalas made it clear that the Zoroastrian Sasanian Persians did not represent a unique strain of paganism, but instead were portrayed vaguely as 'the very cradle of the Gods best known to the Greek tradition and paganism as a whole' (181). It was the Persians'/Assyrians' (who, in Garstad's eyes, Malalas considered to be the same people) 'false' deification of the mortal Nimrod that led to the origins of 'false religion'. Malalas then brings the Greek pantheon of gods into it when he discusses the Persians'/Assyrians' key role in the deification of Picus-Zeus, Ares, and other Olympian gods and goddesses. Here, Garstad has convinced me that some of the anachronisms found throughout the early Books of Malalas' account ought to be connected to John's (and Justinian's) contemporary concerns to link the sixth-century Sasanian Persians and 'the false religion of Hellenism' (191).

Garstad is also likely correct that Malalas approved of Justinian's strict measures towards those Romans labelled 'pagans'. As Garstad discusses, Hellenes/pagans were an amorphous group, which in a sixth-century context could consist of a wide array of individuals—unbaptised Christian Romans, non-Christian Romans such as Neoplatonic philosophers, baptised Christian Romans accused of failing to follow 'proper' doctrine or dabbling in non-Christian practices like games of chance or astrology, and non-Romans, to name just some.

Garstad then claims Malalas strove to equate this ill-defined group of Hellenes/pagans with the non-Christian Sasanians. Malalas, Garstad writes, 'sought to cast suspicion on the pagans of the Roman Empire in order to create a counterpoint to the Christians of the Persian Empire'. In this way Malalas could 'lump together the internal and external enemies of Justinian's regime' (200). The evidence for this association is, however, very thin. Even Garstad admits that Malalas never makes an 'explicit connection between the Persians and contemporary pagans in the Roman Empire' (199), which to me is telling. Moreover, Garstad never discusses in enough detail just who these pagans described by Malalas were and how many were actual practising pagans and not just devout or lax Christians who had merely run afoul of powerful adversaries.

There were, of course, very few practising pagans left by Justinian's time. The term offered a convenient rhetorical weapon for those involved in political and religious disputes of the day.<sup>17</sup> As Alan Cameron remarked, accusations of paganism in the sixth century were like accusations of 'magic' in the late fourth, which explains why even devout Christian bishops could be denounced as 'pagans'.<sup>18</sup> Just as important, sixth-century Romans were used to such over-the-top vitriol amongst political and social rivals and hence they would have seen through the veneer of many of these accusations and rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> The various crackdowns on pagans discussed in Justinianic propaganda and Malalas must, then, be interpreted through the lens of Christology and other contemporary religious and political disputes. Hence the supposed 'pagans' discussed on the pages of Malalas were quite different from the actual non-Christians found in Persia, a point which I suspect John and his readers were aware.

Agnese Fontana's brief but thought-provoking chapter takes the reader through a careful analysis of the text in a search for deeper meaning in some of the outwardly innocuous digressions scattered throughout Malalas' work. The chapter adds nuance and detail to the long-established thesis that one of Malalas' main goals in his coverage of the reign of Justinian in Book 18 was to associate the glorious past and mythical and Biblical heroes found in the earlier Books with the Christian Justinianic present. To borrow Fontana's own words, 'In shaping ancient history, Malalas would have shared with Justinian's Novels the tendency to distort, or rather to construct, the past in order to fit the needs of the present' (218). For instance, Malalas' obscure opening digression concerning Justinian's restoration of Palmyra, Fontana proposes, functioned to connect Justinian with the city's legendary founder Solomon. In this way, Malalas seeks to highlight Justinian not as an innovator but as a restorer of a glorious Biblical past. Fontana effectively wields intertextual analysis to probe how Malalas used his unique and chronologically discombobulated portrait of Herakles and his legendary links to Rome and the foundation of the city of Bosphoros to craft a similar parallel, whereby Malalas underlines the ancient connection between Rome and Constantinople and moreover justifies Justinian's current campaign of reconquest in Italy, while simultaneously linking the emperor to both the pagan mythical past and the hero Herakles. When taken in this context, the earlier Books, long dismissed in modern scholarship as largely nonsensical pseudo-history, take on a new significance.

While I concur with Garstad, Fontana and others in the volume in their revisionist view of Malalas as a more sophisticated historian than portrayed in

<sup>17</sup> Rochow (1991). Cf., however, Cecconi (2022).

<sup>18</sup> Alan Cameron (2016) ch. 12.

<sup>19</sup> For the sixth-century audiences' ability to see through such accusations and rhetoric, see Averil Cameron (1985) 68.

the older consensus, at times, in this chapter and others, the authors go a bit too far and present John as some sort of master-strategist whose every utterance or digression—even the error-ridden and garbled sections—are part of his well-laid-out literary plan. How far beneath the surface of any text can one dig before the view that one uncovers is mostly our own and not that of the author we are trying to understand? The truth when it comes to comprehending ancient historians like John is sometimes more banal; narrative pathways can lead nowhere and sometimes episodes contain no deeper intertextual messages. Put another way, when we dive so deeply into the subtext and metanarrative of a source like Malalas, are we discovering how clever Malalas was—or how clever we are?<sup>20</sup>

The final section ('Jenseits der Chonographia'), contains two chapters less obviously relevant to Malalas or the volume's wider theme, and therefore I will keep my discussion brief. In a meticulous comparative analysis, Jan-Markus Kötter concludes that the fifth-century Latin chronicle of Prosper closely followed the chronicle of Jerome, but the function of his Chronistic preoccupation with history was different from that of his predecessor. While Jerome remained attached to the apologetic tradition of his literary predecessor Eusebius, Prosper pushed an explicitly and thoroughly Romanised story of salvation to the fore. Kötter demonstrates how Prosper managed to link a prehistory based on Jerome with his own contemporary history through exclusions, additions, and transformations, a process in which, as we have observed in this volume, Malalas also engaged.

In the final contribution, Christian Gastgeber considers the seventh-century *Chronicon Paschale* (CP), which he interprets as a compilation of different strata, one of which seems to correspond to the first version of Malalas' chronicle. It is well known that CP (like Theophanes) sometimes copied sections of Malalas word for word and hence offers valuable evidence for the longer original. This is particularly apparent for instance in his unique account of the Nika Revolt in 532 in CP, which is more detailed than found in any of our surviving manuscripts of Malalas.<sup>21</sup> Where past contributors to previous volumes in the Malalas-Studien have focused on the parts of CP that closely copied the original Malalas, Gastgeber here considers thematic differences between the two.<sup>22</sup> Gastgeber's careful comparisons are instructive. Nevertheless, since the author of the CP was writing a more typical chronicle, we would expect it would differ stylistically and thematically from Malalas,

<sup>20</sup> I owe the sentiment in this statement to John Moorhead's sage personal comments about my own work on intertextuality in Procopius as a graduate student.

<sup>21</sup> *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. Dindorf (*Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* I (Bonn, 1832)), 620, 3–629, 7.

<sup>22</sup> From Malalas-Studien 1, see Gastgeber (2016) and Juhašz (2016).

who, as Kulikowski and Burgess demonstrated in the first *Malalas-Studien* volume, followed the different ancient historiographical genre of a *breviarium*.<sup>23</sup>

Some final comments to conclude. I learned a great deal from each and every chapter, even those that only dealt marginally with the overall theme or indeed Malalas and his work. There is, nonetheless, much still to say about Malalas' views and representations of gender, sexuality, minorities, politics, theology, textuality, and a myriad of other subjects. I hope that future volumes in the series step out of the relative comfort zone of this and the previous volumes' conservative methodological approach to Malalas, which has moreover seen some repetitions of topics across the four volumes. More chapters from specialists offering more dissenting views would also be welcome. The contributors in this and the previous volumes generally toe the party line that insists that Malalas was a sophisticated historian who purposefully and deftly wielded his chosen sources to craft a history that reflected the contemporary world around him. This unified approach is certainly understandable, given that the wider project's ultimate goal is to provide both a commentary and edition of Malalas. Moreover, the large funding that this project has rightly garnered is not usually provided for work on 'inferior' historians. Yet contributions from scholars who either reject or nuance this growing push to present Malalas as a historian on par with his contemporary Procopius would add needed balance and reveal to the more uninitiated reader that there are alternative views about Malalas and his history.

Overall, the volume is clear of obvious factual errors. It does contain, however, some grammatical infelicities. Niccolai's conclusion, for instance (49) is marred by an unintelligible sentence.

Yet let me close on a more positive note. Though much of the innovative work in the volume is necessarily speculative, when taken as a whole, the study makes a solid case that Malalas should be taken seriously both as a historian and commentator on his own time—even if he was not quite the master-strategist and 'reflector' of his age that some of the contributors would want us to believe. By offering fascinating and edifying details about Malalas' influences and incisive observations about his creative process, even scholars well versed in the debates surrounding John and his world will find in this volume important new arguments to consider.

MICHAEL EDWARD STEWART  
michael.stewart@uq.edu.au

*University of Queensland*

<sup>23</sup> Burgess–Kulikowski (2016). The chapters in this volume largely skirt this issue of genre. See, e.g., the caveat offered by Niccolai (25 n. 1): 'I use the term *Chronicle* as an operative definition ...'.

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