BYZANTINE CHRONICLE WRITING

1: The early development of Byzantine chronicles

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The exact title of Malalas' work is not clear as there is no authentic manuscript heading preserved in any of the versions of the chronicle; perhaps it was entitled χρονικὴ ἱστορία since later writers refer to it both as χρονογραφία (John of Damascus; PG 94, col. 1369) and as ἱστορία (in the titles to the Constantinian excerpts De virtutibus and De insidiis), while the work's preface calls it an ἐγκύκλιον. This imprecision is not, however, a matter of major concern or import. It merely reflects the fact that from the seventh century onwards in the Byzantine world, as in the West, there was a less meaningful and consistent distinction between history and chronography, reflected in the titles of works, than suggested by modern handbooks which separate them emphatically. In fact the weakness of such a distinction is already evident in the time of Malalas who tends to use the term χρονογράφος to cover a range of writers who might otherwise be separated into historians, chronographers and others (e.g. Africanus, Arrian, Bottios, Charax, Clement, Didymos, Diodoros, Domninos, Eirenaios, Eusebios Pamphilou, Eustathios, Eutropius, Eutychianos, Fortunus, Josephos, Licinius, Magnus, Nestorianos, Palaiphatos, Tatian, Theophilos). In his preface Malalas claims to be setting out firstly to provide a summary account of what amounts to Old Testament history derived from the works of Africanus, Eusebios, Pausanias, Didymos, Theophilos, Clement, Diodoros, Domninos and Eustathios among others, and secondly to 'relate as truthfully as possible a summary account of events that took place in the time of the emperors up till the events of my own lifetime ...' (P 5). In effect what he provides is a summary of world history from a sixth-century viewpoint organised around a central chronographical framework and informed by an overriding chronographical argument. By describing and analysing the tradition of chronographical writing which influenced the chronicle, the first section of this chapter is designed to explain why Malalas wrote the sort of work he did. The apparent novelty and originality of Malalas' work are diminished somewhat when it is placed in its full historiographical context. The second part of this chapter looks more closely at the development of Byzantine chronographical writing after Malalas and the extent to which his chronicle influenced subsequent works.

By Malalas' day chronographical writing had a long and respectable heritage. Throughout the first half of the chronicle Malalas was obliged to synchronise the events
described in the Old Testament with what was known in the sixth century A.D. about the history of the Near East and Greece. This need to synchronise the history of various ancient nations which used completely different dating systems was what had provided the original impulse to chronographical writing many centuries before (cf. the survey in Adler, 1989, 15 ff.). In essence it was the emergence of the cosmopolitan civilization of Hellenistic times, especially in Alexandria where Greeks were confronted with Jews and Egyptians, that brought the need to synchronise by a uniform reckoning the history of various nations. Originally, throughout the Near East and Greece individual kingdoms and city-states dated events by their own local methods and for posterity compiled, sometimes in stone, a record of their rulers or office holders. Although he did not use them at first hand, Malalas cites some of these ancient lists of kings from Argos, Sikyon, Tyre, Corinth and Sparta as well as Phrygia, Lydia, Macedonia, Egypt and Italy (see chapter 6, pp. 124-35). It was not really until the third century B.C. that the Greeks and others seriously grappled with the problem of reconciling the different lists and chronological methods of different places. One of the first scholars to synchronise successfully the Egyptian dynasties with the chronology of the Hebrews was a third-century Egyptian priest Manetho whom Malalas actually cites (II §3, Bo 25; III §6, Bo 59) but obviously from one of the later chronographers who had utilised him.

The example of Manetho was followed by subsequent scholars, especially Jewish ones such as Demetrios and Eupolemos, who slowly expanded and refined a synchronous reckoning of Greek, Egyptian and Hebrew history spurred on by the cultural imperative of establishing the priority of Moses (argued by the Jews) or Plato (argued by the Greeks). All this research eventually enabled the Alexandrian Eratosthenes to produce a pioneering work of Hellenistic chronography in which he was able to set out a chronology for the whole of Greek history from the time of the Trojan war, using for the most part the sequence of Olympiads as the unifying chronological framework (FGrH IIb 241). He was followed by another influential scholar, Apollodoros, whose chronography was based on a different dating system (Athenian archons) and included destruction of cities, migration of races, games, alliances, treaties, deeds of kings, lives of famous men and other matters (FGrH IIb 244). In terms of content we can see here, and in the famous chronicle on the Parian marble (FGrH IIb 239), the pattern of material contained in chronographical works down to the time of Malalas, although he does not cite either Eratosthenes or Apollodoros. Subsequently, versions of Apollodoros were produced which incorporated Eratosthenes' Olympiad system while the works of both scholars were combined, excerpted, summarised, extended and corrupted into a variety of versions for a variety of purposes. By Malalas' time their works were long superseded although much of their original data was preserved in more recent works.

As the dominance of Hellenistic cultural and political hegemony came to be reduced at the hands of the Romans from the second century B.C. the chronology of universal history developed by the Alexandrian scholars had to make room for Roman chronology, although it was still not fully developed. Like many of the Eastern and Greek states before them the Romans dated by the cumbersome method of eponymous lists of annual office-holders; 'consuls' in the Roman case. This method of recording the passing of