CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE BEGINNING OF BYZANTINE CHRONOGRAPHY:
JOHN MALALAS

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The chronicle of John Malalas, written in the course of the sixth century, is the earliest extant example of a Byzantine world chronicle. This is a genre which, combining secular and biblical history, presents a Christian account of world history from creation to the author’s own day. Malalas’ chronicle was influential; it was quoted and excerpted very soon after it reached its final form and material derived from it shaped the Byzantine perception of the past throughout the Byzantine millennium. However, though the chronicle was treated as a serious work by the author’s contemporaries and immediate successors, scholars in the West from the Renaissance onwards have regarded it with contempt since it conspicuously fails to conform to classical norms of language, style and presentation. Only in recent years has there developed an awareness that this text might represent something more than ignorant and semi-literate babblings. Much, however, still remains uncertain about the purposes and nature of the work, which may be clarified now that a new edition of the Greek text has appeared.

The Chronicle: Contents and Purpose

Malalas’ chronicle survives in many extracts and translations. In its main witness, the eleventh or twelfth-century Oxford manuscript Barocci 182, the chronicle is presented in eighteen books, which

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1 Frequent reference will be made in this chapter to papers which were produced in conjunction with the 1986 English translation (cf. Bibliography): E. Jeffreys, ed., with B. Croke and R. Scott, Studies in John Malalas (Sydney, 1990) (hereafter, Studies).
2 Henceforth Ba; for a description, see E. Jeffreys, “Malalas in Greek”, Studies, 245–8.
run from the creation of Adam to the reign of Justinian. Thus Book I deals with Adam, Noah and the Flood and its consequences, and the Egyptians; II–IV covers the early Greek states—Argos, Athens and Thebes—and the early history of Israel after Abraham; V treats the Trojan War at great length; VI deals with the Babylonian captivity, the kingdoms of Lydia and Persia and Roman history in the person of Aeneas; VII is concerned with the foundation of Rome, VIII with Alexander and the Hellenistic kingdoms, IX with Roman republican history, leading up to Augustus and the birth of Christ at the beginning of book X, where there is a chronological excursus; X ends with Nerva (A.D. 98); XI–XII deal with the period from Trajan to the Tetrarchy, focussing on Antioch (A.D. 98–305); XIII runs from Constantine, the first Christian emperor, to Theodosius I (A.D. 305–402); XIV deals with Theodosius II to Leo II (A.D. 402–474); XV to XVIII each deal with one emperor—Zeno (XV: A.D. 474–491), Anastasius (XVI: A.D. 491–518), Justin (XVII: A.D. 518–527) and Justinian (XVIII: A.D. 527–565).

In its present form Ba, in addition to other lacunas, has lost its final folios and so breaks off in 563. However it is clear that the chronicle in this manuscript would have continued to the end of the reign of Justinian, in 565. For this the main arguments are that the two folios missing from the last gathering would have been sufficient to cover the remaining two years of the reign, to judge by the average space for each year taken at this point, and that the opening entry for XVIII gives the total number of years for Justinian (XVIII § 1; Th 354, Bo 425: 38 years, 7 months and 13 days), indicating that the chronicle was completed after his death. Furthermore, other witnesses, such as John of Ephesos (d. ca. 580), knew that Malalas’ chronicle extended to the end of Justinian’s reign.³

³ See Jeffreys, ibid., for a discussion on how the number of folios lost from Ba can be gauged accurately on the basis of gathering marks.

⁴ References are to Books (in Roman numerals) and paragraphs (§) according to the 1986 translation (the paragraphing does not always correspond to that of the new edition), and to page numbers according to both Thurn’s edition (Th) and the 1831 Bonn edition (Bo). All translated quotations are taken from the 1986 translation.

⁵ The Laterculus Malalianus, a late seventh-century Latin text, much of whose material derives from Malalas, concludes with an emperor list clearly related to Malalas’ entries on imperial reign lengths; the last entry lists Justin with a reign of 9 years (inaccurately). This suggests that Malalas may have extended his chronicle into Justin’s reign. Though there is a little further evidence in favour of this proposal, it is ultimately unconvincing.