

Natural Disasters in the *Chronographia* of John Malalas: Reflections on their Function—An Initial Sketch

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Christian chronicles have been regarded for a long time as an inferior sub-genre of historiography. One of the intentions of this article is to contribute towards a revision of this assessment—it does so through analysing the way natural disasters have been handled in the Chronographia of the Byzantine chronicler John Malalas. In accordance with the norms specific to the genre of Christian chronicles, Malalas too writes within a mould of salvation history, and interprets events as a manifestation of the workings of divine will. Especially during the reign of the emperor Justinian (527–65) the author observes the occurrence of several natural disasters, yet adheres to the view that these were not to be regarded as signs of an approaching end of the world. Instead, it would seem, that he wished to characterise the age of Justinian as an age of fear. As God spread fear through natural disasters so as to induce people to lead a life pleasing to God, the emperor too, at another level, disseminated fear in order to live up to his role as God’s representative. Malalas interpreted contemporary events in terms of a retributive theology rooted in the Old Testament and for whose currency evidence could be found at different places during the sixth century.

I

For a long time Christian chronicle writing of Late Antiquity was considered among researchers as being of little value. It was thought to be a

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secondary genre propounded by naively pious monks, existing in the shadow of more important sacred and profane historical writings—at best a more or less rich quarry for extracting material from which historical events could be reconstructed or classified more exactly.¹ This preconceived notion, one that has stubbornly persisted since the nineteenth century, is now undergoing a long over-due revision.² For about a decade and a half now, researchers have been delving more deeply into late antique historiography in general and have focused more on chronicles.³ It is becoming increasingly clear that these works constitute much more than tedious lists of dates and events, and that they were in fact extremely popular in late antique society—not just with a wide, largely uneducated audience (whose world view they were believed to articulate), but among scholars as well.⁴ Among the authors of chronicles we thus find very prominent names, suggesting that the genre was by no means ‘literature for the common people’: Eusebius, Jerome, Cassiodorus, Isidore of Seville and others were among the most brilliant minds of their time. In his *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum* which appeared

¹ See the influential verdict of Herbert Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, vol. 1: 257ff.

² See above all the programmatic essay by Hans-Georg Beck, ‘Zur byzantinischen Mönchschronik’: XVI; also Muhlberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers*: 2ff. See also Croke, ‘Origins’ and ‘Byzantine Chronicle Writing’.

³ At this stage I will list a few recent studies on late antique chronicle writing: Croke, ‘Origins’; idem, ‘Byzantine Chronicle Writing’; idem, *The Chronicle of Marcellinus*; idem, *Count Marcellinus and His Chronicle*; Jeffreys et al., *Studies in John Malalas*; Muhlberger, *Fifth-Century Chroniclers*; Burgess, *The Chronicle of Hydatius*; idem, *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography*; de Hartmann, *Philologische Studien zur Chronik des Hydatius von Chaves*; Weber, *Die Chronik des Sulpicius Severus*. Still important are Mosshammer, *The Chronicle of Eusebius* and van den Brincken, *Studien*.

⁴ Here is a programmatic statement by Brian Croke: ‘There is simply no evidence for the common claim that in late antiquity chronicles were written for the masses [...] while educated readers shunned chronicles in preference for more literary and stylised forms of historiography [...]. In particular, there are difficulties in assuming that Malalas was Justinian’s mouthpiece to the masses [...]. Likewise, there is no evidence for the corresponding assumption that histories were written by the properly educated but chronicles simply represented the best efforts of ill-educated monks [...]. Malalas has often been taken to be a monk for no better reason than that he wrote a chronicle. So too one must be careful not to dismiss too readily the content of late antique chronicles, such as that of Malalas, as trivial and miscellaneous [...]’, see Croke, ‘Byzantine Chronicle Writing’: 37. See also Croke, *Count Marcellinus*: 164ff.

in the middle of the sixth century, Cassiodorus specifically brought out the significance of chronicles for contemporary scholarship as *imagines historiarum* or *brevissimae commemorationes temporum*.⁵ At this time the genre was already able to look back over an extensive history with its roots stretching back into the pre-Christian era.

In Greco-Roman antiquity the interest in schematically ordered⁶ descriptions of the past can be traced back to the late fifth century B.C. (Hellanicus of Lesbos)⁷—genealogical constructions that can in a broader sense also be numbered among the ‘early forms’ of chronicle writing were even older. The chronicle-type narration of events seems to have developed more as a separate genre above all in the Hellenistic period. For example, the universal scholar Eratosthenes of Cyrene, working in the third century B.C. in Alexandria, wrote *Chronographiai* about the period from the Trojan War to Alexander.⁸ In the late second century B.C. the Athenian Apollodorus took up the threads with his *Chroniká*⁹ which was, in turn, edited in late republican Rome by Cornelius Nepos.¹⁰ In the first century before the Christian era, the scholar Castor of Rhodes worked on a *Chronicle*, which extended from the supposedly concurrent governments of Ninus the Assyrian and Aigialeus the Sikyonian to the year 61/60 B.C. and which, in its synchronisation of oriental, Greek and Roman history, was an important stimulus for Eusebius, the actual archegete of Christian chronicle writing (see below).¹¹ The ongoing interest in the work of chroniclers in the imperial era (first to third century A.D.) is manifested, for instance, in a work by Phlegon of Tralleis who, in the first half of the second century A.D., dealt with the phase from 776 B.C. to the principate

⁵ Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* 1, 17, 2.

⁶ In taking the schematic ordering of past events as a criterion for defining a chronicle, I particularly follow the *Chronicle* of Eusebius, rightly regarded as the first and in many ways leading product of Christian chronicle writing; however, it was also possible to embed schematic lists in narrative contexts, as demonstrated by John Malalas’ *Chronographia*.

⁷ Meister, *Geschichtsschreibung*: 41f. (‘der erste Chronograph [42]’). For more on Hellanicus see Möller, ‘The Beginning of Chronography’.

⁸ Meister, *Geschichtsschreibung*: 190f. On Eratosthenes see Geus, *Eratosthenes von Kyrene*; Möller, ‘Epoch-Making Eratosthenes’.

⁹ Meister, *Geschichtsschreibung*: 191f.

¹⁰ Hermann Peter, *Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae*, vol. II, Stuttgart 1967 (reprint of the first edition of 1906): XXXXff: 25f.

¹¹ Meister, *Geschichtsschreibung*: 192.

of Hadrian (†138).¹² Roman historiography, in particular, has among its manifold roots some traditions that already clearly reveal features typical of late antique chronicle writing. For example, one of the most important tasks of the *pontifex maximus*, the Roman high priest, was to record and publish what he saw as the most significant events of a year—centred in his view mainly on cultic activity—on a white-washed tablet displayed outside his official premises. These Roman priestly annals were revised between 130 and 114 B.C. by the then *pontifex maximus* P. Mucius Scaevola (probably very thoroughly) and put into book form. The resultant (not preserved) *Annales Maximi*, whose reliability as far as the recovery of the original *tabulae* of the priests is concerned, is doubtful, made a repeated appearance in later Roman historiography—e.g. in Livius—and exerted considerable influence on it.¹³

How significant pre-Christian chronicle literature was for the development of Christian chronicle writing is not altogether clear from the current state of research. What is certain, however—and that is my point—is that any engagement with Christian chronicle writing will also have to consider this strand of tradition, particularly as they are both frequently based on common source material. This is regardless of the fact that the objectives of Christian chroniclers were entirely different from those of their pagan precursors and competitors. The earliest Christian historiographers were not as concerned with producing an overview, as comprehensive as possible, of the supposed past or the actions of people, the fate of cities, regions, peoples and so on. Rather, their works must be situated, first, in the context of ongoing conflicts between pagans and Christians, and secondly, in an internal Christian field of discourse. *In relation to the pagans*, these works sought to buttress one of the primary apologetic arguments, the view that Judeo-Christian tradition went back earlier in time than pagan tradition. Drawing upon Jewish tradition for the ‘proof of age’, apologetic arguments proceeded to demonstrate this lucidly as fact. This indeed was one of the central concerns of early Christian chronicle writing

¹² Croke, ‘Origins’: 119f.

¹³ There is disagreement among researchers about the scope, dating, content and reliability of the Roman priests’ notes, their relationship to the *Annales Maximi* of P. Mucius Scaevola and their influence on Roman historiography. For the state of the discussion see Mehl, *Römische Geschichtsschreibung*: 38ff. Walter, *Memoria und res publica*: 196ff.; further, and particularly, Frier, *Libri Annales Pontificum Maximorum*.

from the late second century B.C. (Tatianus, Theophilus of Antioch)—the underlying motive of which was, as stated, apologetic.¹⁴ By contrast, an important element of the *intra-Christian* discourse was the eschatological component.¹⁵ While Christians of the first generation continued to live in expectation that the end of the world was at hand, a belief that was based on the words of Christ, and on the promises of the apostles and evangelists, the dawning realisation that the Second Coming of Christ (Parousia) was evidently not going to happen as quickly as expected raised a whole lot of chronological and eschatological questions. Early Christian chroniclers (Julius Africanus, Hippolytus) intervened in these discussions and tried first to make chronological calculations determining the exact date of the Parousia and the respective position of their contemporaries in the chronological continua. One of the objectives was to prove that the end of the world was not to be expected in the coming few years, rather it lay in the distant future. It was in this context that the idea, based on a specific interpretation of Psalm 90:4 and postulating a terrestrial world age of 6000 years, began to spread from the third century onwards. Since according to this view the birth of Christ dated to 5500, Parousia was still a long way ahead. The period of earthly history seemed in this scheme to be part of God's plan and purpose. Accordingly, the purpose of documenting this history in incipient chronicle writing was described as follows: 'to declare the entire space of world history as a promised path to salvation, and to make the meaningful earthly context understandable, in which the place and duties of the individual are embedded'.¹⁶ Against this background, the basic goals and tasks of a chronicle in contemporary understanding were aptly summed up in the early fifth century by the Gallic chronicler Sulpicius Severus as a selected description of human history since the Creation, for both the uneducated and scholars, as short as possible, emphasising chronological questions,

¹⁴ Croke, 'Origins': 120f.; idem, 'Byzantine Chronicle Writing': 30; Timpe, *Römische Geschichte und Heilsgeschichte*: 123; Weber, *Sulpicius Severus*: 25ff.

¹⁵ Here see, for example, van den Brincken, *Studien*: 50ff.; Weber, *Sulpicius Severus*: 19ff.

¹⁶ 'den Gesamttraum der Weltgeschichte als heilsgeschichtlichen Weg der Erfüllung des Verheißenen [zu] erklären und als sinnvollen Realzusammenhang, in dem der einzelne seinen Platz und seine Aufgabe hat, verständlich [zu] machen', Timpe, *Römische Geschichte und Heilsgeschichte*: 108.

with reference to the *divina* (i.e. the divine plan of salvation and its earthly manifestations) and considering material of interest to older secular historians as well.¹⁷

These goals markedly distinguished Christian chronicle writing from pagan literature of a similar genre right from the outset. For the understanding of historical processes as conceptualised by the doctrine of salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*)¹⁸ as well as the Christian interpretation of history as teleology meant that very different meanings were attributed to the fundamental factors of historical thinking from those of earlier discussions. Events, chains of happenings and their contexts, the role of the individual and superhuman forces in historical processes and, not least,

¹⁷ Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicon* 1, 1, 1–4: *Res a mundi exordio sacris litteris editas breviter constringere et cum distinctione temporum ufue ad nostram memoriam carptim dicere aggressus sum, multis id a me et studiose efflagitantibus, qui divina compendiosa lectione cognoscere properabant, quorum ego voluntatem secutus non peperci labori meo, quin ea, quae permultis voluminibus perscripta continebatur, duobus libellis concluderem, ita brevitati studens, ut paene nihil gestis subduxerim. visum autem mihi est non absurdum, cum ufue ad Christi crucem Apostolorumque actus per sacram historiam cucurrissem, etiam post gesta conectere: excidium Hierosolymae vexationefue populi Christiani et mox pacis tempora, ac rursus ecclesiarum intestinis periculis turbata omnia locuturus. ceterum illud non pigebit fateri, me, sicubi ratio exegit, ad distinguenda tempora continuandamque seriem usum esse historicis mundialibus atque ex his, quae ad supplementum cognitionis deerant, usurpasse, ut et imperitos docerem et litteratos convincerem.* ‘Die Geschehnisse vom Anbeginn der Welt, die in den Heiligen Schriften genannt sind, kurz zusammenzufassen und mit einer Unterscheidung der Zeitphasen bis zu unserer Erinnerung stückweise zu benennen, das habe ich mir vorgenommen; viele, die Eile hatten, die göttlichen Dinge in einem kurzgefaßten Text kennenzulernen, haben dies durchaus eifrig von mir gefordert. Ihrem Anliegen folgend habe ich nicht an meiner Mühe gespart, um das, was in sehr vielen Bänden niedergelegt und enthalten ist, in zwei Büchlein zusammenzufassen, wobei ich mich so um Kürze bemüht habe, daß ich fast nichts den Geschehnissen entzogen habe. Es erschien mir aber nicht abwegig, als ich bis zur Kreuzigung Christi und den Taten der Apostel durch die Heilige Schrift geeilt war, auch spätere Ereignisse anzufügen: Der Untergang Jerusalems, die Drangsale des Christenvolkes, dann die Zeiten des Friedens, und erneut die durch die inneren Gefährdungen der Kirchen entstandene Verwirrung von allem—darüber will ich sprechen. Im übrigen werde ich mich nicht schämen dies zu gestehen, daß ich, wo immer ein Grund es erforderte, zur Unterscheidung der Zeiten [Datierungen] und zur Fortsetzung der Ereignisgeschichte, weltliche Historiker benutzt habe und aus ihnen mir angeeignet habe, was zur Auffüllung des Wissens gefehlt hatte, um die Unerfahrenen zu belehren und die Gebildeten zu überzeugen’.

¹⁸ On the concept of salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*) see Timpe, *Römische Geschichte und Heilsgeschichte*: 1ff.

time as such appear in Christian historiography—not just in chronicles—in entirely new interpretative contexts, although large portions of the material dealt with in Christian and pagan historiography were identical. Accordingly, to take one instance, quite apart from its banal event character, the same earthquake had a quite different meaning and function in a historical work by Livius from the narrative of a Christian chronicler—the interpretative frameworks of the two texts differ fundamentally. The solar eclipse, to cite another example, which Phlegon of Tralleis observed in the reign of Tiberius, certainly had a different relevance in his (not preserved) *Chronicle* than it did in Christian chronicles, which reported this event as an offshoot of the crucifixion of Christ.¹⁹

Natural disasters²⁰ and their treatment offer, more than other subjects, rich material for studying the differing approaches of pagan and Christian historiography, since these events were one of the central constituents of antique historiography from its inception. Herodotus, in his writing, had the gods comment on human thinking and action through the medium of natural disasters,²¹ and Thucydides used these happenings to bring out the cosmic importance of the war he was describing between Athens and Sparta.²² In Roman historiography, natural disasters were always taken seriously as signs sent from the gods and, as time went on, interpreted as portents of future events. Natural disasters pointed to a disturbed relationship between humans and gods, to be restored by means of a complicated

¹⁹ The fact that Phlegon of Tralleis, the pagan chronicler in the first half of the second century (FGrHist 257 F 16), referred to the solar eclipse under Tiberius is emphasised by several Christian authors and related to the crucifixion of Christ, inter alia by John Malalas, cf. Malal. p. 182, 61–66; Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae*: περί οὐ σκοτόους συνεγράφατο ὁ Ἀθηναῖος εἰς τὴν ἰδίαν αὐτοῦ συγγραφὴν ταῦτα: ‘τῷ ὀκτωκαιδεκάτῳ ἔτει τῆς βασιλείας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος ἐγένετο ἔκλειψις ἡλίου μεγίστη, πλεόν ἐγνωσμένων πρότερον· καὶ νύξ ὑπῆρχεν ὥρα ἕκτη τῆς ἡμέρας, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς ἀστέρας φαίνεσθαι’—‘The most learned Phlegon of Athens has written in his work about this darkness as follows: “In the 18th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar there was a great eclipse of the sun, greater than any that had been known before. Night prevailed at the sixth hour of the day so that even the stars appeared”’ (translation: Elizabeth Jeffreys).

²⁰ I use this term here and in the following for the sake of simplicity in its current sense today, which by no means implies that events to be grasped according to the present definition were also understood this way in Antiquity.

²¹ See Stepper, ‘Die Darstellung von Naturkatastrophen bei Herodot.’

²² See Meier, “Die größte Erschütterung für die Griechen”.

set of rituals (the *procuratio prodigiorum*).²³ In other words, disaster was primarily a central element of ancient *pagan* historiography, and thereby had a particular place in chronicle-like accounts as well:²⁴ Apollodorus, for example, expressly included the destruction of cities in his *Chronicle*;²⁵ the epigraphic account known as *Marmor Parium*, inscribed on the island of Paros in 264/63 B.C., deals routinely with natural phenomena and disasters.²⁶ The elder Cato set himself apart from the Roman priestly annals in his own historical work, noting ‘I do not want to write what is in the tablet at the Pontifex Maximus, how often grain prices went up, how often darkness or something else stood against the light of moon or sun’.²⁷ Solar and lunar eclipses and—as one can conclude from the mention made of them—other prodigious natural events and disasters were thus part of the regular content of the priestly tables.

In pre-Christian chronicle-type literature, natural disasters were regarded as signs or portents—at least as particularly remarkable events. They therefore possessed important—and completely different—areas of significance; they were read as commentaries of events and as pointers to future happenings. In order to heighten their impact historians or chroniclers frequently exaggerated them, placed them in quite different contexts or even invented them.²⁸ At any rate such subjects were by no means specific to Christian chronicle writing alone. However, in the Christian context, which should by no means be regarded as homogeneous—as will be shown—two key additional elements distinguished the treatment of natural disasters.

On the one hand, as indicated above, Christian authors regarded the course of history as unfolding in a providential setting, and thus events

²³ Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter*: 20–22, 25ff., 91ff., 197ff. Waldherr, *Erdbeben*: 140ff., 157ff., Waldherr, ‘Bittprozessionen, Säulenheilige und Wasserdampf’: 4–13, 79.

²⁴ This particularly applies to chronicles or chronicle-type works focused on individual communities; thereby they attributed a special meaning to the aspect of collective disaster management at the relevant places, see Croke, ‘City Chronicles of Late Antiquity’: 168f.

²⁵ Apollodorus FGrHist 244 T 2.

²⁶ *Marmor Parium* FGrHist 239 B 16, 24, 25, Croke, ‘Origins’: 119; Otto Lendle, *Einführung in die griechische Geschichtsschreibung*: 280f. See also: *Das Marmor Parium*.

²⁷ Cato *fr.* 77 Peter = FRH 3 F 4, 1 (= Hans Beck/Uwe Walter, *Die frühen römischen Historiker*, vol. I: Von Fabius Pictor bis Cn. Gellius, Darmstadt 2001): *Non lubet scribere, quod in tabula apud pontificem maximum est, quotiens annona cara, quotiens lunae aut solis lumine caligo aut quid obstiterit.*

²⁸ See Demandt, ‘Verformungstendenzen’.

were understood exclusively as expressions of divine will and action. Natural disasters functioned as mediators of this divine will²⁹—albeit not without ambiguity, since *what* God wanted to say to human beings with this or that event (usually called ‘disaster’ only from a *post facto* perspective of modern commentators) depended on the interpretative skills of contemporaries. On the other hand, natural disasters at least implicitly always pointed to the eschatological, salvation history framework of Christian historiography. On the event of Christ’s crucifixion itself the sun is supposed to have darkened and the earth trembled;³⁰ this anticipated sign that the end of the world was at hand as early as in the synoptic apocalypse.³¹ Natural disasters were a way of pointing to the Parousia and the imminent end of the world, particularly if they came thick and fast or in combination with other eschatological factors. The fifth century *Chronicle* of Hydatius, for example, expressed these components in particularly striking fashion.³²

Eusebius of Caesarea is regarded as the archegete of Christian chronicle writing. He took up the chronological experiments of his predecessors Julius Africanus and Hippolytus, modifying, supplementing and transferring them into a new, original form in his *Chronicle* (*Chronikóí kanónes*).³³ The first part of his opus contains a number of lists of rulers; the second

²⁹ This view is reflected particularly clearly in the historical work of Orosius (early fifth century). His understanding of (natural) disaster seems in many respects odd and calls for separate analysis, which I cannot undertake here but will do so at a later date.

³⁰ Mt 27, 45–52 (darkness and earthquake); Mk 15, 33; Lk 23, 44 (darkness). See Berger, ‘Hellenistisch-heidnische Prodigien’.

³¹ Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 21.

³² See Muhlberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers*: 260ff.; de Hartmann, *Philologische Studien*: 61ff., 124ff. In Hydatius’ *Chronicle* natural phenomena and disasters etc. serve as *signa* or *prodigia*, which are supposed to bring out the eschatological character of contemporary events characterised by heresies and, above all, by barbarian invasions. Edition by Theodor Mommsen (ed.), *Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, Vol. II, Berlin 1894, reprint Munich 1981: 13–36; a new edition with an English translation is provided by Burgess, *Chronicle of Hydatius*: 70–123.

³³ See Croke, ‘Byzantine Chronicle Writing’: 30f. On Eusebius’s *Chronicle* see, in particular, Mosshammer, the *Chronicle of Eusebius*; Burgess, *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography*; a successful survey with further literature is offered by Ulrich, ‘Eusebius von Caesarea’. On Julius Africanus see Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus*, although still awaiting revision; cf. now Wallraff, *Julius Africanus*. On Hippolytus and his calculations see Landes, ‘Lest the Millennium be Fulfilled’: 144ff.; also useful is van den Brincken, *Studien*: 50ff. (on Africanus und Hippolytus), and 60ff. (on Eusebius).

part is a tabular, chronologically synchronised list of events comprising all peoples and cultures whom the author considers relevant to world history, where he includes both Judeo-Christian as well as pagan traditions. Such an interest in lists of rulers and synchronisms clearly reveals the apologetic concern of the author to establish ‘proof of age’ mentioned earlier in this article, a concern which however was soon to become obsolete: Jerome no longer included the lists of the first part in his translation of the *Chronicle* of Eusebius around 378. By then Christianity had already made such headway that collections of material as those mentioned above were no longer necessary. Eusebius was not particularly interested in eschatological matters as related to imminent expectations: it is notable that his *Chronicle* begins not with Adam (i.e. not with Creation), but later, with Abraham, and—unlike Julius Africanus, Hippolytus and others—dates the birth of Christ to the year 5228, which pushed the Parousia several centuries into the future.³⁴ Nonetheless, Eusebius too pursued with his *Chronicle* the goal of tracing the providential course of history, in accordance with the divine plan; this aspect unfolds particularly clearly in his *Church History*, which he explicitly placed in close connection with the *Chronicle*.³⁵ In contrast to the broad-brush narrative of the *Church History*, the dry, tabular *Chronicle* has a narrative superstructure; its oscillation between narratives and lists was characteristic of the subsequent development of late antique chronicle writing.

Although the Greek original of Eusebius’ *Chronicle* was apparently not widely disseminated and is not even extant—an Armenian version and the Latin edition by Jerome have been preserved—the work is one of the founding historiographic texts of Late Antiquity. Many subsequent historians or chroniclers referred to Eusebius (for example, Panodorus and Annianus in the early fifth century),³⁶ and through Jerome’s revision the work rapidly achieved popularity in the Latin West from the late

³⁴ Landes, ‘Millennium’: 149f.

³⁵ See Eusebius, *Church History* 1,1,6. Eusebius calls the *Chronicle* an extract (*epitomé*) from his *Church History*. On the close relationship between *Chronicle* and *Church History* see also Eusebius Werke II.3: Die Kirchengeschichte, hrsg. von Eduard Schwartz/Theodor Mommsen. Zweite, unveränderte Auflage von Friedhelm Winkelmann, Berlin 1999: CCXVff.; Timpe, *Römische Geschichte und Heilsgeschichte*: 105f.

³⁶ On the outstanding significance of the *Chronicle* of Eusebius for subsequent chronicle writing see Croke, ‘Byzantine Chronicle Writing’: 33; Croke, *Count Marcellinus*: 146ff.

fourth century onwards.³⁷ Jerome himself and subsequent chroniclers of the fifth and sixth centuries, such as Prosper of Aquitania, Hydatius or Marcellinus Comes, saw themselves as continuing the work of Eusebius in the sense of creating a *historia continua* within the mould of Christian salvation.³⁸

John Malalas, to whom I will now turn, referred to Eusebius too; his 'Eusebius' seems, however, to be either a revision with little resemblance to the original (multiple revisions, modifications and subsequent continuations of chronicles were usual in Late Antiquity anyway), or perhaps Malalas even used the name of Eusebius merely to provide an aura of authority, in order to strengthen the credibility and relevance of his own account.³⁹ In any event, Malalas positions himself deliberately in the tradition of both Christian chroniclers as well as pagan historians.⁴⁰ This is note-worthy to the extent that his handling of natural disasters differs markedly from that of his predecessors.

II

We know very little about John Malalas himself—the few indications we have about him as a person are almost exclusively gleaned from his work.⁴¹ He seems to have been born around A.D. 500 and probably stemmed from Antioch in Syria or from a neighbouring region. In all likelihood he went through the classical education usual at the time for members of local elites and was later involved in the imperial administration, perhaps as part of the staff of the *comes Orientis*; he reveals possession of a range of information pertaining to local matters which suggests special access to the relevant files and archives. His *Chronographia* in 18 books deals with the history of Adam up to—very probably—the death of Justinian

³⁷ See Croke, *Count Marcellinus*: 153ff.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 154ff.

³⁹ On the problem see, for example, Croke, 'Origins': 32, who maintains the existence of a Eusebian basis for Malalas, albeit greatly revised; Jeffreys, 'Malalas' Sources': 180 ('Pseudo-Eusebios'), with the passages in which Malalas explicitly refers to Eusebius.

⁴⁰ In detail see Jeffreys, 'Malalas' Sources': 173ff.

⁴¹ A short overview is given by Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae*: 1–4; for a more detailed account see Croke, 'Malalas, the Man and His Work'; Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography'.

in 565 (the end is not preserved, which has led to discussions about the cut-off point).⁴² The work manifests the author's special interest in Antioch and its history; only in Book 18, in the description of the early 530s, does the focus shift towards Constantinople—possibly due to a change of location of the author and/or the production of a second edition of the *Chronographia*.⁴³ Two main problems about current research on Malalas need to be mentioned, without further elaboration. First there is the important but unfortunately still largely unsettled question of Malalas' sources and his way of using them.⁴⁴ Second, there is the problem of manuscript tradition; the Greek Malalas text is available to us only as an incomplete manuscript, considerably abridged in the Middle Ages.⁴⁵ Since the *Chronographia* of Malalas must have had special status from the sixth century and it was also used in the Byzantine era,⁴⁶ the reference to later chronicles (*Chronicon Paschale*, Theophanes etc.) and also to the material based on the original Malalas give important insights into the question of the original text—although the complicated question of handing down written documents needs to be discussed separately for each case. Thus, working with the Malalas *Chronicle* is not without its difficulties.⁴⁷

⁴² The Greek manuscript breaks off with the description of the events of the year 563. Malalas most probably continued his *Chronographia* right up until the death of Justinian in 565. A Latin text from the seventh century containing material from Malalas' *Chronographia*—the '*Laterculus Malalianus*'—points to a nine-year reign of Justin II, from which it was concluded that Malalas had continued his *Chronographia* into the age of Justin II. This argument is untenable, however, as it would contradict the otherwise symmetrical structure of the *Chronographia*. In addition, nowhere does the *Chronographia* appear in the later Malalas tradition as a witness to the post-Justinian age. On the problem see, briefly, Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography': 498f., with footnote 5.

⁴³ See Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography': 505, 516. The break seems to lie between chapters 18, 76 and 18, 77, i.e. Malal. p. 401, 33 → p. 402, 34 Thurn.

⁴⁴ Here see, in particular, the overview of Jeffreys, 'Malalas' Sources': 167ff.; short summary in Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography': 516ff. The source problem is also the focus of the thinking in most of the articles in the collection by Beaucomp, *Recherches sur la chronique*.

⁴⁵ *Codex Bodleianus Baroccianus* 182, fol. 1–321 (11th/12th century). This manuscript constitutes the main witness to the Greek text of Books 2–18. A short description of the manuscript and further textual witnesses are in Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae*: 4–15.

⁴⁶ See Jeffreys, 'The Attitudes of Byzantine Chroniclers': 215: 'The chronicle [...] became the most influential example of the genre'; Scott, 'Byzantine Chronicle Writing 2'.

⁴⁷ Short summaries of the problem situation in Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae*: 4*ff. and Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography': 508ff.; the complexity of the textual problem

John Malalas too follows the approach of salvation history, manifest, for example, in the significant circumstance that at the beginning of Book 10—in the middle of the work—the synchronism of the reign of Augustus and the birth of Christ is referred to, which for Christian contemporaries was a central event in the history of God's grace.⁴⁸ Frequent notes and digressions into the chronology of the divinely determined world time 'since Adam' (i.e. since the Creation) are intertwined through the account, and time and again point to the providential framework within which the chronicle proceeds.⁴⁹ It may be noted in passing that the mention of natural disasters and questions of chronology are closely related in the work of Malalas. Earthquakes, in particular, prompt him to detail the history of different cities, notably that of Antioch, which suffered six severe quakes up to 528.⁵⁰ It was very likely that Malalas had taken the numbers from local lists—an indication of his dependence on city archives and chronicles.⁵¹ Such a procedure is not unusual in late antique chronicle writing. The Syrian *Chronicon Edessenum* of c. 540 structures the history of Edessa

has now been demonstrated by Flusin, 'Les *Excerpta* constantiniens et la *Chronographie* de Malalas'.

⁴⁸ Malal. p. 173, 4–11 Thurn.

⁴⁹ This is clearly shown by Jeffreys, 'Chronological Structures', on the calculation system 'since Adam; and 'Malalas' evidence, see *ibid.*: 111–20.

⁵⁰ See Jeffreys, 'Chronological Structures': 155ff. On the first earthquake (possibly in 148 or 130 B.C.—the chronology followed by Malalas is unclear—cf. Downey, *A History of Antioch*: 120f., note. 9 and p. 126, note. 32) see Malal. p. 157, 29–37 Thurn; there follow no. 2 (Malal. p. 184, 22–31 Thurn [A.D. 37]), no. 3 (Malal. p. 207, 21–208, 27 Thurn [A.D. 115]), no. 4 (Malal. p. 291, 70–74 Thurn [A.D. 459]), no. 5 (Malal. p. 346, 92–350, 18 Thurn [A.D. 526]), no. 6 (Malal. p. 369, 78–370, 88 Thurn [A.D. 528]). The disasters are numbered for other cities as well, for example, Rhodes (earthquake no. 2: Malal. p. 208, 28–30 Thurn; Nr. 3: Malal. p. 333, 9–11 Thurn), Nicomedeia (earthquake no. 3: Malal. p. 218, 18–22 Thurn; Nr. 4: Malal. p. 230, 21–23 Thurn; Nr. 5: Malal. p. 283, 50–284, 54 Thurn; Nr. 6: Malal. p. 308, 63–309, 69 Thurn), Maximianoupolis (earthquake no. 2: Malal. p. 248, 47–55 Thurn), Constantinople (earthquake no. 1: Malal. p. 284, 60–285, 64 Thurn; no. 2: Malal. p. 308, 63–309, 69 Thurn), Anazarbos (earthquake no. 4: Malal. p. 345, 69–71 Thurn), Edessa (flood no. 1: Malal. p. 345, 87–88 Thurn), Laodiceia (earthquake no. 1: 370, 89–371, 95 Thurn).

⁵¹ At least this is assumed by Jeffreys, 'Chronological Structures': 159. On the existence and dissemination of relevant city chronicles in Late Antiquity see Croke, 'City Chronicles of Late Antiquity': 184ff.; earthquakes (and other natural disasters) were apparently some of the most important events recorded in such texts, see *ibid.*: 192.

consistently according to the chronology of recurrent cases of disastrous flooding.⁵² It is, however, striking that Malalas—as will be shown ahead—avoids any linking of the disaster described with eschatology.

In Books 10–18, which deal with the age of the Roman emperors, natural disasters are mentioned with increasing frequency—at least according to the text material contained in the *Codex Baroccianus*. This becomes all the more noticeable the closer Malalas gets to his own period.⁵³ Book 10, covering the age of Augustus († A.D. 14) to Nerva (96–98), includes nine entries on events which we would classify nowadays as ‘natural disasters’;⁵⁴ the short Book 11 on the phase from Trajan (98–117) to Marcus Aurelius (161–80) reports three such events;⁵⁵ it is hard to say anything certain about Book 12 from Commodus (180–92) to Constantine (306–37) due to a lengthy gap in the text;⁵⁶ Book 13 deals with the rule of the emperors from Constantine to Theodosius I and his sons (all Christian except emperor Julian), i.e. roughly the fourth century, with only two entries on disasters;⁵⁷ Book 14 stretches from Theodosius II (408–50) to Leo II (474) with as many as seven disasters;⁵⁸ Book 15 describes the age of Zeno (474–91) with two disasters;⁵⁹ Book 16 the reign of Anastasius (491–518) also with two disasters;⁶⁰ Book 17 covers the short reign of Justin I (518–27), which is said to have seen seven disasters;⁶¹ and finally

⁵² Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 387.

⁵³ Owing to the problematic state of preservation of the *Chronographia* and the indefiniteness of the modern concept of disaster in relation to antique ideas, such ‘statistics’ can obviously only be approximate and reflect trends.

⁵⁴ Malal. p. 174, 43–45 Thurn; p. 179, 69–76 Thurn; p. 182, 60–72 Thurn (crucifixion of Christ with eclipse and earthquake); p. 184, 22–31 Thurn; p. 186, 84–91 Thurn; p. 189, 59–68 Thurn; p. 196, 60–64 Thurn; p. 198, 19–21 Thurn; p. 202, 32–203, 52 Thurn.

⁵⁵ Malal. p. 207, 21–208, 27 Thurn; p. 208, 28–30 Thurn; p. 210, 6–13 Thurn.

⁵⁶ See, however, Malal. p. 218, 18–22 Thurn; p. 230, 21–23 Thurn; p. 233, 92 Thurn; p. 236, 79–80 Thurn; p. 240, 26–241, 32 Thurn.

⁵⁷ Malal. p. 248, 47–52 Thurn; p. 265, 29–30 Thurn.

⁵⁸ Malal. p. 280, 70–81 Thurn; p. 283, 50–284, 54 Thurn; p. 284, 60–285, 64 Thurn; p. 289, 40–45 Thurn; p. 291, 70–74 Thurn; p. 295, 35–38 Thurn; p. 296, 39–44 Thurn.

⁵⁹ Malal. p. 302, 27–30 Thurn; p. 308, 63–309, 69 Thurn.

⁶⁰ Malal. p. 333, 9–11 Thurn; p. 335, 64–66 Thurn.

⁶¹ Malal. p. 338, 27–29 Thurn; p. 344, 52–61 Thurn; p. 344, 62–345, 67 Thurn; p. 345, 67–69 Thurn; p. 345, 69–71 Thurn; p. 345, 71–91 Thurn; p. 346, 92–350, 18 Thurn.

Book 18 describes the long reign of Justinian (527–65) with the proud figure of 30 disasters.⁶²

The particular incidence of natural disasters in the description of Justinian's reign will first have to be attributed to different factors: first, Book 18 is by far the most extensive section of the *Chronographia* and was possibly further expanded in the context of preparing a second edition.⁶³ Second, it deals with contemporary history and is thereby a subject that was always given particular attention in antique historiography anyway. Third, in view of widespread expectations of the end of the world, that in the Byzantine Empire concentrated around the year 500 and in the west around the year 600—I will come back to that—there was a special contemporary sensitivity to events that could be interpreted as portents. And, finally, the frequency of natural disasters in the sixth century had indeed noticeably increased—that can be confirmed today.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, John Malalas naturally continued to exercise considerable latitude in selecting and weighing up relevant events. The frequency of natural disasters in the 18th book of his *Chronicle* is therefore largely due to the narrative aims and intentions of the author. For John Malalas, Justinian's reign was an *age of disasters*, and thus we may well ask what Malalas wished to transmit through this particular interpretation of his own age.

⁶² Malal. p. 365, 54–59 Thurn; p. 369, 78–370, 88 Thurn; p. 370, 89–371, 95 Thurn; p. 376, 91–93 Thurn; p. 376, 10–12 Thurn; p. 382, 26–30 Thurn; p. 384, 79–80 Thurn; p. 390, 9–391, 11 Thurn; p. 401, 16–18 Thurn; p. 402, 34–36 Thurn; p. 403, 41–42 Thurn; p. 406, 87–407, 8 Thurn; p. 407, 12–19 Thurn; p. 408, 20–21 Thurn; p. 410, 49 Thurn; p. 410, 50–53 Thurn; p. 413, 76–414, 89 Thurn; p. 416, 16–24 Thurn; p. 418, 41–42 Thurn; p. 418, 43–50 Thurn; p. 418, 51–52 Thurn; p. 419, 53–54 Thurn; p. 419, 55–66 Thurn; p. 420, 71–74 Thurn; p. 422, 39–42 Thurn (gap in Malalas' text, completed from Theophanes); p. 422, 46–48 Thurn (gap in Malalas' text, completed from Theophanes); p. 424, 4–5 Thurn; p. 425, 24–28 Thurn; p. 430, 23–24 Thurn (gap in Malalas' text, completed from Theophanes); p. 431, 30–35 Thurn (gap in Malalas' text, completed from Theophanes).

⁶³ By way of comparison: in Thurn's edition, Book 1 covers 14 pages; Book 2 follows with 24 pages; Book 3 with 7 pages; Book 4 with 19 pages; Book 5 with 50 pages; Book 6 with 15 pages; Book 7 with 14 pages; Book 8 with 15 pages; Book 9 with 12 pages; Book 10 with 31 pages; Book 11 with 11 pages; Book 12 with 28 pages (gap!); Book 13 with 29 pages; Book 14 with 29 pages; Book 15 with 18 pages; Book 16 with 17 pages; Book 17 with 18 pages; Book 18 with 78 pages.

⁶⁴ See in detail Meier *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians: passim*, particularly 27ff.; 656ff.

At this juncture a few short comments are called for pertaining to the specific eschatological expectations that bothered large parts of the Byzantine population, in particular around 500. Without going into detail it may be noted that the chronological models developed in the tradition of chronographers Julius Africanus and Hippolytus (both around 220) all pointed to the years around A.D. 500 as the date of the Parousia, starting as they did with the birth of Jesus around the year 5500 after Creation, against the background of a world era of 6,000 years. Such calculations were substantiated by a series of extreme natural disasters starting around that time. Further, the name of the then reigning emperor Anastasius evoked the Greek word *anástasis* ('resurrection'). Last but not least, it was becoming increasingly clear that the West of the *Imperium Romanum* with the city of Rome had lost its influence and thereby possibly also the *katéchon*, that according to Paul would hold back the end of the world and which, from the time of Tertullian (around 200), had been mainly identified with the Roman Empire.⁶⁵

In other writings I have already attempted to show that John Malalas tried to counter this widespread mood of impending doom—this is indeed one of the main concerns of his *Chronographia*.⁶⁶ In order to allay the anxieties of his contemporaries he primarily tried to refute the view that the 6,000 years of a divinely planned World Era were about to lapse; he did so by propounding a strange chronological system—likewise traceable outside his *Chronographia*⁶⁷—according to which Christ was born in 5,967 and crucified in 6,000. Consequently the ominous 6,000-year mark had long passed and people were not likely to be suddenly surprised by Doomsday.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ I have discussed these problems at length elsewhere, see Meier, 'Zur Neukonzeption'; Meier, 'Zur Wahrnehmung'; Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 11ff.; 45ff.; see also Magdalino, 'The History of the Future and its Uses'; Brandes, 'Anastasios'; on the phenomenon of differing forms of apocalyptic expectations in the East c. 500 and the West c. 600, see Meier, 'Eschatologie und Kommunikation'.

⁶⁶ Meier, 'Zur Neukonzeption': 167; Meier *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 444ff. Cf. Croke, 'Byzantine Chronicle Writing': 36: 'one of the central features of the chronicle of Malalas'; Jeffreys, 'Malalas' World View': 66; Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography': 518 ('one of the main purposes of the chronicle').

⁶⁷ On further witnesses to this 'Antiochian' system see Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 457ff.

⁶⁸ Jeffreys, 'Chronological Structures': 111ff.; Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography': 500; 514; Meier, 'Zur Neukonzeption': 159ff.; Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 444ff.

Why, then, were there so many references to disasters in Book 18 of the *Chronicle*? After all, if the author was so evidently concerned to allay his contemporaries' anxiety about an imminent Day of Judgement why—particularly in a Christian chronicle—did he then scare them again by listing so many events in the guise of portents, including even earthquakes that did no damage and thus could easily have been passed over?⁶⁹ And why did he emphasise the anxiety factor far more clearly in conjunction with disasters than he had done in his books about the previous centuries?

III

When a severe earthquake shook Malalas' hometown of Antioch on 29 November 528,⁷⁰ many contemporaries evidently believed that the end of the world was at hand. The quake formed the disastrous conclusion to a long series of disasters that had afflicted Antioch from 525. At the time, large portions of the city had been destroyed by fire.⁷¹ A subsequent earthquake in 526 reportedly caused a death toll of 250,000 because it took place at a time when many country people had streamed into the city to join in celebrating Ascension Day.⁷² By contrast, the quake in 528 is claimed to have cost 'only' 4,870 lives,⁷³ which was relatively few but this disaster was merely seen as a further climax in the series of disasters prevailing from 525, particularly as the major seismic event of 526 was followed up by months of tremors.⁷⁴

In this situation, which moreover occurred during an extraordinarily severe winter,⁷⁵ the traditional means of disaster management failed:⁷⁶

⁶⁹ See, for example, Malal. p. 402, 34–36 Thurn (with *Chronicon Paschale* p. I 629, 11 Dindorf [= *Chronicon Paschale ad Exemplar Vaticanum* recensuit Ludovicus Dindorf, Vol. I, Bonn 1832]); Malal. p. 403, 41–42 Thurn (ἀβλαβής); p. 419, 53–54 Thurn (ἀβλαβής).

⁷⁰ Malal. p. 369, 78–370, 88 Thurn; Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 660 (with the remaining proofs).

⁷¹ Malal. p. 344, 52–61 Thurn; Downey, *A History of Antioch*: 519ff.

⁷² Malal. p. 346, 92–350, 34 Thurn; Downey, *A History of Antioch*: 521ff.; Meier *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 659 (with the remaining proofs).

⁷³ Malal. p. 370, 83–84 Thurn: τελευτῶσι δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ σεισμῷ ἄχρι ψυχῶν πεντακισχιλίων; Theoph. a.m. 6021 p. I 177, 31–32 de Boor (= *Theophanis Chronographia*, Vol. I, ed. Carolus de Boor, Leipzig 1883, reprint Hildesheim 1963): ἀπέθανον δὲ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ πτώσει χιλιάδες τέσσαρες καὶ ὀκτακόσιοι ἑβδομήκοντα.

⁷⁴ Malal. p. 349, 93–96 Thurn.

⁷⁵ Theoph. a.m. 6021 p. I 177, 33–34 de Boor.

⁷⁶ On that what follows see also Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 353ff.

people resorted to unusual gestures of self-castigation and penance, intensifying their ordinary petition processions by walking barefoot through the icy landscape. Some pleaded for divine mercy while diving again and again into banks of snow.⁷⁷ Things were ultimately prevented from going from bad to worse by the vision a pious citizen of Antioch saw in a dream, following which he convinced his fellow citizens to write the apotropaic slogan ‘Christ is with us. Stand up!’ on the doors of the remaining houses—and the earth regained its calm.⁷⁸

According to Malalas, however, all this had nothing to do with an imminent Doomsday and the chronicler devoted great effort to proving his view. In 528/29 of all years, the year of the Antioch earthquake, he added an interesting digression to the chronology:⁷⁹

The whole period from the accession of Augustus Octavian Emperor to the completion of the second consulship of the emperor Justinian (528) in the 7th indiction is 559 years, so that the total of years from Adam, the first-formed, to this indiction is 6497; according to the Antiochenes, the people from Theoupolis at the Orontes, the Syrians, the amount is 577 years, beginning with Julius Caesar; according to the Egyptians from Alexandria, who are living near the Nile, the amount is 245 years from Diocletian, according to the so called Syrian Macedonians from Apameia †40† years since Seleucus Nicator—which is the number of years I found in the works of Clement, Theophilus and Timotheus, the very wise chroniclers who agree among themselves. In the chronology of Eusebius Pamphilou, I found the number of years from Adam to the consulship of the emperor Justinian in the 7th indiction to be 6,432. But the chroniclers Theophilus, Timotheus and Clement have calculated and recorded the years with greater accuracy. The writings of all therefore indicate that the sixth millennium had been passed [...].

The last sentence provides the key: whatever the different findings of the chroniclers and other scholars may have looked like—one thing at least

⁷⁷ Theoph. a.m. 6021 p. I 177, 34–178, 2 de Boor: καὶ ἐλίτανεον οἱ ἀπομείναντες πάντες ἀνυπόδητοι, κλαίοντες καὶ ῥίπτοντες ἑαυτοὺς πρηνεῖς εἰς τὰς χιόνας, κρᾶζοντες τὸ ‘Κύριε ἔλεησον’—“Those who remained went on processions in prayer, all of them barefoot, weeping, throwing themselves headlong into the snow and crying out ‘Lord, have mercy!’” (Translation: Cyril Mango/Roger Scott).

⁷⁸ Theoph. a.m. 6021 p. I 178, 2–5 de Boor.

⁷⁹ Malal. p 357, 64–80 Thurn. Translation from Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott (with modifications).

was clear, that the 6,000-year limit had passed. The present disaster therefore did not mean that the end of the world was at hand.⁸⁰ But what then did it stand for?

Like his pagan predecessors and many of his Christian contemporaries, Malalas did evidently interpret natural disasters (as we understand them) as portents. Not without reason, his preferred term for ‘earthquake’ was thus not *seismós*—the usual term in Greek—but *theomênía* (‘God’s wrath’),⁸¹ a term documented for the first time in Sozomenus’ *Church History*, which was written in the 440s.⁸² Thus every earthquake becomes a manifestation of divine wrath while other events can point to the ultimate grace of the currently punishing Lord; thus Malalas, for example, terms the devastating plague of 541/42 an *eusplanchnía tou theoú* (‘mercy of God’),⁸³ after introducing it with the warning: ‘The Lord God saw that man’s transgressions had multiplied and he caused the overthrow of man on earth, leading to his destruction in all cities and lands’.⁸⁴ God thus inflicts punishment through the disaster and thereby also indicates his angry attitude—a completely normal form of disaster perception in Antiquity. In the case of the Antioch disasters of the 520s this was no different, as Malalas never tired of emphasising. The city fire in 525 was due, in his judgement, to ‘divine wrath’ (ὕπὸ θεικῆς ὀργῆς) and had announced the Lord’s growing displeasure;⁸⁵ the subsequent description then evokes associations with the building of the Tower of Babel and the subsequent

⁸⁰ Jeffreys, ‘Chronological Structures’: 118f.; Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 356.

⁸¹ This seems to change somewhat in the middle of Book 18, where Malalas seems to prefer the classical term *seismós* to *theomênía* in part 2. Jeffreys, ‘Chronological Structures’: 159 attributes this to the author’s removal from Antioch to Constantinople and the production of a second edition of the *Chronographia*; in Constantinople Malalas had access to other lists of earthquakes than in Antioch. Such an explanation would make the author’s choice of words strongly dependent on external factors and suggest that this was not a deliberate choice. A more exact analysis of the use of the word in the Greek Malalas text of *Baroccianus* shows, in fact, that the change was by no means as abrupt as postulated by Jeffreys.

⁸² Sozomenus, *Church History* 2, 4, 4.

⁸³ Malal. p. 407, 18 Thurn.

⁸⁴ Malal. p. 407, 12–14 Thurn: Ἰδὼν δὲ κύριος ὁ θεός, ὅτι ἐπληθύνθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἐπήγαγε πτώσιν ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἰς ἐξάλειψιν ἐν πάσαις ταῖς πόλεσι καὶ ἐν ταῖς χώραις.

⁸⁵ Malal. p. 344, 53–55 Thurn.

divine judgement, which is surely no accident (Gen 11).⁸⁶ The earthquake of 526 was in Malalas' view one of God's *mystéria*⁸⁷ although he did not forbear to stress its retributive character.⁸⁸ God had wanted to show people through the calamity how populous, splendid, affluent, and lavish their city had been;⁸⁹ the Antiochians had apparently forgotten this all too easily and were now being painfully reminded of it. Greedy rascals and plunderers, who had particularly wanted to enrich themselves through the general calamity, had been terribly punished and thereby experienced God's benign nature (*philanthropía*).⁹⁰ All had thereupon given praise to God, the just judge.⁹¹ Malalas' report climaxed in the description of an apparition of the cross: on the third day of the misfortune, a Sunday, a cross was reported to have hung in the sky over the northern part of the city for one and a half hours, causing the people to lament and pray.⁹² The Lord had directed attention of the previously arrogant Antiochians to the symbol of the Saviour, the source of their prosperity and well-being—he had purified them.

IV

It is a characteristic of Malalas' *Chronographia* that disaster descriptions call forth repeated reference to the reaction of the respective emperor, which was pretty similar in each case, even downright stereotyped:⁹³ time and again the emperors gave a helping hand to the afflicted people and supplied financial and moral support. It is noteworthy that absolutely no distinction is made between the pre-Christian and the Christian rulers nor between those generally labelled good or bad in historiography; even figures like Caligula or Commodus are no exception.⁹⁴ By contrast, Malalas

⁸⁶ Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 346.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*: 347.

⁸⁸ Details in *ibid.*: 346ff.

⁸⁹ Malal. p. 347, 44–348, 51 Thurn.

⁹⁰ Malal. p. 348, 52–75 Thurn. *Philanthropia*: Malal. p. 348, 63 Thurn; p. 349, 80 Thurn.

⁹¹ Malal. p. 348, 75–76 Thurn.

⁹² Malal. p. 349, 89–93 Thurn.

⁹³ The stereotyped character of such news is stressed by Jeffrey, 'The Language of Malalas. 2': 228.

⁹⁴ Malal. p. 174, 43–45 Thurn (Augustus); p. 184, 22–31 Thurn (Caligula); p. 189, 59–69 Thurn (Claudius); p. 196, 58–64 Thurn (Vitellius); p. 198, 19–21 Thurn (Vespasian); p. 202, 32–203, 52 Thurn (Nerva); p. 210, 6–13 Thurn (Hadrian); p. 211, 16–21 Thurn (Hadrian);

showed scant interest in the fate of the actual victims of a disaster (apart from the tribulations of his home city of Antioch, to which he was evidently very emotionally attached).⁹⁵ Instead, the disaster entries are notable for their close ties with imperial action. The author certainly does not intend to highlight the benevolent philanthropy of individual rulers, which was naturally expected from all sides and ranked foremost among kingly virtues.⁹⁶ Had this been the case, Malalas would have had to distinguish more clearly among the individual emperors in order to be able to make it possible in the first place to judge them in the light of their good deeds. In his account they all react to disaster in the same way, or at least similarly. It seems to me that the author was more concerned with describing a mechanism he viewed as a timeless and constant feature in an empire that was, following the Incarnation of Christ, being progressively Christianised. It is for this reason that even the pre-Christian emperors anticipated through their actions the patterns of behaviour of their Christian successors: God punishes, and his vicar on earth—the emperor—manifests humble and generous kindness. Following the earthquake in Antioch in 526, Justin I was reported to have taken off his diadem and crimson robe, the emblems of his rank, and publicly demonstrated his sympathy and grief. On a feast-day he entered the church without his diadem and chlamys, and lamented the fate of the city in the presence of the senators and citizens. And ambassadors were equipped with plentiful funds and sent to Antioch to provide emergency relief and launch the reconstruction of the city.⁹⁷

p. 213, 73–76 Thurn (Marcus Aurelius); p. 218, 18–22 Thurn (Commodus); p. 230, 21–23 Thurn (Claudius II Gothicus); p. 240, 26–241, 32 Thurn (Constantius I Chlorus); p. 248, 47–55 Thurn (Constantine); p. 280, 70–81 Thurn (Theodosius II); p. 283, 50–284, 54 Thurn (Theodosius II); p. 302, 27–30 Thurn (Basiliscus); p. 308, 63–309, 69 Thurn (Zeno); p. 333, 9–11 Thurn (Anastasius); p. 344, 52–61 Thurn (Justin I.); p. 344, 62–345, 67 Thurn (Justin I.); p. 345, 67–69 Thurn (Justin I.); p. 345, 69–71 Thurn (Justin I.); p. 345, 71–91 Thurn (Justin I.), p. 346, 92–350, 18 Thurn (Justin I.); p. 352, 65–79 Thurn (Justin I.); p. 365, 54–59 Thurn (Justinian); p. 370, 89–371, 95 Thurn (Justinian); p. 371, 7–10 Thurn (Justinian); p. 376, 91–93 Thurn (Justinian); p. 376, 10–12 Thurn (Justinian); p. 413, 76–414, 89 Thurn (Justinian).

⁹⁵ This is also underlined by Jeffreys, ‘Language of Malalas’: 228.

⁹⁶ On philanthropy as a central imperial virtue in Late Antiquity see Leppin, *Von Constantin*: 163 (‘in der Herrscherideologie der Spätantike von größter Bedeutung’). See also Hunger, *Prooimion*: 143ff.

⁹⁷ Malal. p. 349, 6–350, 18 Thurn.

Malalas concern, it seems to me, was to represent this mechanism as an event related to Salvation, and as his specific interpretation of contemporary history, which he expounded in Book 18 (but also before that): God spreads fear (*phóbos*) through the disasters;⁹⁸ this applies, as indicated, to the disasters that occurred during the time of Justinian, in particular, though on several occasions he even uses the Greek word *phóbos* to generally denote other occurrences.⁹⁹ The emperor, by contrast, is able to soften this misfortune at least partially and the result is a moral catharsis that time and again enabled new beginnings and held together a crisis-stricken society. One must have no illusions: in Malalas' eyes, the connecting element between divine and imperial action is the aspect of fear, which plays a strikingly prominent role in the late books of his *Chronographia*. There seems to be a tendency towards an Old Testament theology of retribution,¹⁰⁰ and this does not appear strange in the context of sixth-century Byzantine society. The entire description of the plague furnished by John of Ephesus is based on it, for example,¹⁰¹ and even the classicist

⁹⁸ This is clearly shown by the Antioch earthquake in 526 (see Malal. p. 346, 97; p. 346, 11–12; 347, 29 Thurn); but see also—on other events—Malal. p. 295, 35–38 Thurn; p. 338, 27–29 Thurn ('[...] a tremendous [*phoberós*] star in the East [...]; and they were afraid'); p. 382, 26–30 Thurn ('[...] there appeared a great and tremendous [*phoberós*] star [...]'); p. 403, 41–42 Thurn ('[...] a tremendous [*phoberós*] earthquake [...]'); p. 407, 7–8 Thurn ('[...] the crowds went away in alarm'); p. 410, 50–53 Thurn ('most tremendous [*phoberai pány*] thunder and lightning'); p. 413, 76–77 Thurn ('[...] a great and tremendous [*phoberós*] earthquake'); p. 416, 16–17 Thurn ('[...] a tremendous [*phoberós*] earthquake'); p. 419, 53–54 Thurn ('[...] a tremendous [*phoberós*] earthquake which caused no damages'); p. 419, 55–56 Thurn ('[...] most tremendous [*phoberós pány*] earthquake [...]'); p. 419, 63 Thurn ('[...] tremendous [*phoberá*] threat [...]'); p. 420, 73–74 Thurn ('[...] tremendous [*phoberá*] threat from God [...]').

⁹⁹ Malal. p. 410, 52 Thurn: *phóboi* as the generic term for terrifying thunder and lightning; p. 413, 79 Thurn: *phóbos* as the term for an earthquake destroying several cities; *phóbos* in the same meaning in Malal. 416, 18–21; 419, 62 Thurn; *phóbos* as denoting the plague: Malal. p. 420, 72 Thurn.

¹⁰⁰ See here also Scott, 'Malalas, The *Secret History*': 104.

¹⁰¹ Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel-Mahre. Chronicle, Part III, transl. by Witold Witakowski, Liverpool 1996, 74–98; The Chronicle of Zuqnîn, Parts III and IV A.D. 488–775, transl. by Amir Harrak, Toronto, 1999, 94–113. The *Chronik von Zuqnîn* contains the no longer fully extant description of the plague by John of Ephesus.

historian Agathias engages with the subject, as it was evidently widely recognised.¹⁰²

Some time ago the Byzantinist Roger Scott drew attention to the strikingly prominent role of fear in texts from the sixth century.¹⁰³ Indeed, fear appears to be omnipresent; it is particularly noticeable in Malalas' *Chronographia* and its later versions. But—and Scott picked this up—Malalas sees this fear as something positive, and expressly advocates retributive theological explanations for natural disasters.¹⁰⁴ One can go even further: my contention is that the chronicler deliberately 'exonerates' natural disasters in order to make fear the alternative course of action for the emperor—at least for Justinian. In other words, just as God spreads fear through sending natural disasters which have a pedagogical function, so his earthly representative, committed to the imitation of God (*mimesis theoulimitatio Christi*), acts similarly within the context of his own capacities. It is, in any case, striking that Malalas repeatedly classifies numerous actions taken by Justinian under the heading of spreading fear, such as the oppression of minorities and his suppression of popular uprisings. Immediately following his accession to the throne, Justinian began by intimidating the provinces through the severity of his edicts.¹⁰⁵ His persecution of homosexuals is also reported to have caused fear: 'From then on', so Malalas, 'there was fear amongst those afflicted with homosexual lust'.¹⁰⁶ Immediately after putting down the Nika uprising (532) the emperor caused reports to be spread across the whole empire, so as to ensure that everyone was aware of the bloody massacre that would follow any insubordination.¹⁰⁷ Great fear, but also calm in Constantinople is said to have been the consequence.¹⁰⁸ After Justinian's brutal attack on pederasts

¹⁰² Agathias 5, 4, 3; 5, 4, 6; Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 242f.; Meier, 'Prokop': 294ff.

¹⁰³ Scott, 'Malalas, The *Secret History*'; Scott, 'Writing the Reign of Justinian': 25.

¹⁰⁴ Scott, 'Malalas, The *Secret History*': 103: 'Malalas quite obviously sees a reign of terror as proper and right'.

¹⁰⁵ Malal. p. 351, 46 Thurn.

¹⁰⁶ Malal. p. 365, 52–53 Thurn: καὶ ἐγένετο ἕκτοτε φόβος κατὰ τῶν νοσοῦντων τὴν τῶν ἀρρένων ἐπιθυμίαν.

¹⁰⁷ Malal. p. 400, 6–7 Thurn.

¹⁰⁸ Theoph. a.m. 6024 p. I 186,1 de Boor: καὶ ἐγένετο φόβος μέγας, καὶ ἡσύχαζεν ἡ πόλις—'And there was much fear and the city was quiet'; see also Scott, 'Malalas, The *Secret History*': 103.

people were said to live in fear, but also in safety.¹⁰⁹ The repression of the second Samaritan uprising (556) ended in the conclusion: ‘There was great fear in the city of Caesarea and the eastern regions’.¹¹⁰ After the clement ending of the *Staurotheis* uprising (512), emperor Anastasius is also said to have wreaked bloodthirsty judgement, instilling fear in people’s hearts: ‘And after countless numbers had been executed, excellent order and no little fear prevailed in Constantinople and in every city of the Roman state’.¹¹¹ After an uprising in Antioch (507) Anastasius dispatched an official to restore order: ‘This man brought vengeance and fear upon the city’.¹¹² Just as the emperor, on the one hand, offered relief from the God-sent, fearsome natural disasters through his charitable works, at the same time he created permanent fear while seeking to build and control an orthodox Christian Roman empire, whose population had to respect his rule as a gift of God—while he, in turn, invoked his divine calling.¹¹³ On this subject too Malalas does not openly express disapproval, although there are indications of veiled criticism towards the end of Justinian’s rule. Julian, the city prefect instated in 565, shortly before Justinian’s death, had carried out a massive purge against trouble-makers in Constantinople. Malalas’ description of it is revealing: ‘So it was through the city prefect Julian that the city was restored to its former state, and everyone went about freely and *without fear* and were reconciled’.¹¹⁴ Julian’s term of office falls largely in the reign of Justin II. Malalas seems to be opening up a new perspective here: the oppressive regime of Justinian was drawing

¹⁰⁹ Theoph. a.m. 6021 p. I 177, 16–17 de Boor: καὶ ἐγένετο φόβος πολὺς καὶ ἀσφάλεια—‘And there was much fear and safety’; vgl. Scott, ‘Malalas, the *Secret History*’: 103.

¹¹⁰ Malal. p. 418, 39–40 Thurn: καὶ ἐγένετο φόβος μέγας ἐν τῇ πόλει Καισαρείας καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀνατολικοῖς μέρεσιν.

¹¹¹ Malal. p. 334, 39–41 Thurn: καὶ πλήθους ἀπείρου φονευθέντος εὐταξία ἐγένετο καὶ φόβος οὐκ ὀλίγος ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει καὶ ἐν ἐκάστη πόλει τῆς Ῥωμανίας.

¹¹² Malal. p. 325, 25 Thurn.

¹¹³ That even applies to the pagan emperor Julian, who violently threatened the Antiochians (Malal. p. 251, 24–30 Thurn). Justinian’s appeal to the will of God is particularly clear in his Novel 77, where he also evokes the fear God is spreading!

¹¹⁴ *De insid.* 51 p. 176, 14–17 (= *Excerpta Historica iussu Imp. Constantini Porphyrogeniti confecta*, ed. U. Ph. Boissvain, C. de Boor, Th. Büttner-Wobst. Vol. III: *Excerpta de Insidiis*, ed. Carolus de Boor, Berlin 1905): καὶ οὕτως διὰ τοῦ Ἰουλιανοῦ ἐπάρχου <τῆς> πόλεως ἔλαβεν ἡ πόλις κατάστασιν, καὶ πάντες ἐλευθερίως καὶ ἀφόβως προήρχοντο καὶ ἐθεραπεύοντο.

to an end and there was ground for hope that the new emperor would be less severe in his punishments.¹¹⁵

Other contemporaries were less reserved: Procopius also perceived that Justinian was held to have sown fear and terror, and bitterly recorded this observation in his *Secret History*.¹¹⁶ In so doing he also drew a strong connection between natural disasters and the emperor.¹¹⁷ In his view, the numerous disasters of the sixth century were a sign of the fatal policy of an emperor aimed at the complete annihilation of the *Imperium Romanum*,¹¹⁸ and—quite unlike Malalas—he places the emperor in an eschatological context: as the prince of demons, as a second Domitian, as the anti-Christ, Justinian had sought to bring death and destruction upon humankind.¹¹⁹ John Malalas, a representative of the purportedly naive and unscholarly chronicle writing, was much more nuanced: in his view, the natural disasters of his age served to engender fear and then produce cathartic effects. After the divinely desired outcome, the role of the emperor was to begin to mitigate at least the worst consequences and to have an integrative effect through organising a kind of collective disaster management (for example, through participating in the petition processions).¹²⁰ At the same time, however, he also had to stir up fear in order to be able to achieve similar purging effects at other, lower levels. That way he could invoke the will of God for his own part. By contrast, Malalas categorically rejected the eschatological interpretation of contemporary circumstances that was actually most likely in his age. Instead, he instrumentalised the *a priori* eschatologically charged genre of the chronicle. This consistent de-eschatologisation of natural disasters omnipresent in the sixth century is a considerable achievement for a chronicler, in my view. The fact that Malalas placed his interpretation in the overall context of fear as the cohesive element of a crisis-ridden society, instead of propounding a purely retributive theology, is something that we have to admire.

¹¹⁵ Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 259f.

¹¹⁶ Scott, 'Malalas, The *Secret History*': 103.

¹¹⁷ Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 427ff.

¹¹⁸ Procopius, *Historia Arcana* 12; 18. Cf. Sonnabend, 'Hybris und Katastrophe': 38ff.

¹¹⁹ See here Rubin, 'Der Fürst der Dämonen'; Rubin, 'Zur Kaiserkritik Ostroms'; Rubin, 'Der Antichrist'.

¹²⁰ See, for example, Malal. p. 284, 60–285, 64 Thurn (Theodosius II); p. 369, 78–370, 88 Thurn (under Justinian); p. 384, 79–80 Thurn (under Justinian); p. 402, 34–36 Thurn (under Justinian).

Justinian was the first Roman emperor to consider his reign almost exclusively as legitimised by God, thus conspicuously devaluing other factors like appointment by the people that were still effective, at least in theory.¹²¹ From the 540s there was also a trend in Justinian's representation towards drawing a marked parallel between the emperor and Christ. In any event, God, or Christ, and his earthly vicars were moving closer together.¹²² If I am right in these admittedly still sketchy thoughts, then Malalas' *Chronographia* could be seen to reflect this development. For the chronicler, imperial action would then have approached the workings of God, since both—God and his earthly representative—sought, in their respective 'areas of competence', to educate people through spreading fear.¹²³ This leads to the question that is occasionally posed: can we consider Malalas as a kind of mouthpiece for Justinian's aspirations?¹²⁴ I would not go that far, even though the chronicler clearly used material stemming from the imperial representation.¹²⁵ In any case it should be noted that, in the point at issue here, Malalas described the emperor in the way he clearly wanted to be seen. The fact that, in addition, Malalas sometimes described other, earlier rulers in a similar way need not contradict this contention; after all, it is also one of the peculiarities of his *Chronographia* that the past is often only pictured as a projection of present circumstances.¹²⁶

From my line of argument it will have become apparent that John Malalas can by no means be treated as a naive, stupid writer of chronicles. His contribution to Christian chronicle writing shows that in this genre too he was capable of shaking off the straitjacket that seemed to have been prescribed through the history of its development, briefly outlined at the beginning of this article. Hence, it may be postulated that Malalas'

¹²¹ I have outlined this in more detail elsewhere: Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 118ff.

¹²² Meier, 'Göttlicher Kaiser': 152f.

¹²³ Such a parallel treatment of divine and imperial action had been undertaken a few years before by the spiritual poet Romanus Melodus, who related natural disasters to the putting down of the Nika uprising as punishments for human sins, see Romanus Melodus 54, in: Maas and Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica*; Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*: 632ff.

¹²⁴ This question is also discussed by Scott, 'Malalas, The *Secret History*'.

¹²⁵ Scott, 'Malalas and Justinian's Codification'; Scott, 'Malalas, The *Secret History*': 99ff.

¹²⁶ See also Jeffreys, 'The Beginning of Byzantine Chronography': 504f.

Chronographia marks an important stage within the history of the genre. The *Chronographia* of John Malalas offers more than a confused depiction of the past and an uninspired account of contemporary events: it gives an autonomous commentary on the perception of the author's own present and emancipates itself from central models like the *Chronicle* of Eusebius. This commentary is conveyed subtly and delicately, however, and is concealed under a manner of presenting the events that, at first sight, does not suggest any great surprises. However, it is in analysing the descriptions of natural disasters, for example, that we can ultimately decipher the comments of the author.

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