

# John Malalas and his Use of Inscriptions

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The chronicle attributed to John Malalas, retracing the world history from the Creation to the reign of Justinian (527–565 AD) refers to inscriptions 25 times, citing 21 of them textually (Boularot 2006: 98). Previous investigations of Malalas' use of inscriptions by Downey (1935) and Boularot (2006) concluded that the majority, if not all the texts, were copied from literary sources and not directly from the monuments. A re-examination of the evidence through the frame of a systematic historical commentary of Malalas' *Chronicle* leads to a more nuanced conclusion and further to inspect these references to inscriptions in the broader context of historiographical rhetoric.

## Some statistics

References to literary texts and inscriptions are more numerous in the first eleven books of the *Chronicle* than in the last seven—which recount events starting with the reign of Commodus—and practically disappear after book XIV (Jeffreys *et al.* 1990: 168–169; Fig. 1). However, the references to inscriptions are mostly to be found in the books VIII–XIV corresponding to the period from Alexander the Great to the accession of Zenon to the throne of Byzantium (474 AD) (Boularot 2006: 13; Fig. 2). Given the disparity between the number of references to literary texts (212) and to inscriptions (25), it is fruitful to consider the ratio of references pro line and pro book in percent of the total of both categories for establishing a better comparison between them (Fig. 3). This method of calculation confirms the peak in references to inscriptions in books X–XIV and shows a striking parallelism of the curves for the books I–V, whereas the subsequent decrease in references to literary sources is not clearly seen for the inscriptions. However, even though the rough tendencies are clear, these statistics could be misleading due to the narrowness of the sample as well as categorisation issues: the exclusion or inclusion of just one reference could drastically modify the pattern, and the categories of “inscriptions” and “literary texts” are not as obviously circumscribed as it could at first seem. A better approach consists in the questioning of these categories by distinguishing information and narration, *i.e.* the sources of Malalas and the way he inserts textual references in his own text.

## Sources of information vs quotations

As usual in the study of pre-modern historiography, it is difficult to reconstruct the exact origin of Malalas' information and there is a real risk of over-interpreting the few pieces of evidence at our disposal (Carrara & Gengler 2017). For instance, it is usually thought that Malalas worked for the office of the *comes Orientis* in Antioch, where he had had access to first-hand information about the Persian War or the reforms of Justinian (Jeffreys *et al.* 1986). However, such an inference is not conclusive, as it is probable that enough information was publicly available for Malalas to be able to write a chronicle of his time.

In the last book of the *Chronicle*, dealing with the reign of Justinian (527–565 AD), during which the author lived and wrote, some legal texts are referred to. Important imperial constitutions were actually communicated throughout the empire through proclamation and/or posting (see for ex. Nov. 6 epilogue, 47 14–16 Krüger; cf. Mal. XVIII 78 and my com. *ad loc.*), and some were even inscribed on stone (Feissel 2010 with earlier ref.). Although he quotes such texts, Malalas never explicitly mentions how he knew them, probably because this was not an issue. It is indeed consistent with the framework he sets up in his preface, distinguishing the distant past known to him through the work of other authors and his own time, from the reign of Zeno (474–491) onward. That is not to say that Malalas used exclusively second-hand material for his books I–XIV and first-hand material for the books XV–XVIII, but rather that his historiographical rhetoric differs in the two sections: reference to sources are necessary to ascertain the authority of the narration in the first one, whereas his testimony plays this role in the second.

Although references to literary texts are far more common than to inscriptions in Malalas' *Chronicle*, word-for-word quotations of inscriptions are far more frequent than of literary texts. Naming famous authors seemingly gave enough authority to the narration. Inscriptions on the other hand were quoted for their content, which was also associated to an artefact. As such, they bridged the gap between past and present, and Malalas regularly (10/25) mentions that an inscription or its support still existed. This role is confirmed in the very first reference to an epigraphic monument in the *Chronicle* (I 5 p. 7–8, 3–17 Thurn): the descendants of Seth, foreseeing the destruction of the world, wrote down the names that Seth gave to the stars, inscribing them on a clay tablet and on a stone, so that the message for posterity could survive fire and flood. Malalas, who refers explicitly here to Jos. *Ant. Iud.* I 70–71, specifies that the inscribed stone was still to be seen. Malalas

probably never saw the inscription himself—which, if it even existed, was necessarily something other than what he and Josephus claimed—and referred to it as an object and not as a text.

## An oracle of Apollo

The connection of the past to the present is a recurring theme in Malalas' *Chronicle*, as demonstrates the quotation of eight pagan oracles announcing the coming of the Christ, one of which allegedly subsisted as an inscription. This oracle was already quoted in late 5<sup>th</sup> c. AD theological texts—notably in theosophic collections—and it seems probable that Malalas found it in one of them. But although he did not see the inscription himself, he considers it a direct link to the past, as he mentions that the oracle given to the Argonauts had been monumentally inscribed by them on a temple in Cyzicus which the Emperor Zeno turned into a church of the Theotokos as announced in the prophecy. Interestingly, a version of the text very similar to the one quoted by Malalas has been discovered inscribed on a slab from the church in Icaria (IG XII 6 1265, Fig. 4). Rather than the possibility that such an inscription really existed in Cyzicus (Boularot 2006: 105), this parallel rather demonstrates the popularity of the text—also connected with Athens in other sources of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> c.—and the general attitude towards ancient inscriptions which Malalas had in common with his contemporaries.

## Two Latin inscriptions

It is usually assumed that Malalas had a bad command of Latin (*e.g.* Jeffreys *et al.* 1990, 60; Boularot 2006, 132), an opinion to be nuanced though (Gengler in press) and which finds no support in the way Malalas reports the text of the two Latin inscriptions that he quoted (*contra* Boularot 2006, 134).

In the only existing manuscript of the *Chronicle*, both inscriptions are transliterated in Greek letters, which is certainly not due to ignorance of Latin. However, the text of the first one (X 45 p. 197, 8–12 Thurn: ἐξ παραίδα Ἰουδαία<ι> / *ex praeda Iudaeae*) was clearly written in Latin capital letters in the model from which the unique manuscript of the *Chronicon Paschale* derives, which's content depends here on Malalas. This first text belongs to a series of monumental inscriptions commemorating the Roman victories in the Jewish War under Vespasian and Titus, masterly analysed in Alföldy 1995 (esp. 217–221).

The second text (XIII 3 p. 244, 49 Thurn) is at first glance more puzzling. According to Malalas, the governor Ploutarchos, commissioned by Constantine to supervise the building of a church and a basilica in Antioch, erected a statue of the emperor using the bronze from a Poseidon statue discovered on the construction site; on its base, he had inscribed: Βόνῳ Κωνσταντίνῳ, *i.e.* *Bono Constantino*. The text having no parallel was considered faulty by Boularot, who suggested *maximus* instead of *bonus* as a possible epithet (2006: 127). However, the adjective *bonus* occurs in a praise often uttered in honorary inscriptions to Constantine, *bono reipublicae nato (vel sim.)*: “born for the prosperity of the state”. The inscription on the statue base erected by Ploutarchos was then probably similar to AE 1978, 814 = ICilicie 2, from Seleucia of the Calyadnos (306–310 AD; Fig. 5). The text given in the *Chronicle* is therefore neither faulty nor absurd but incomplete. It is impossible to say if the text on the monument, a possible copy thereof on which Malalas might have relied on, or Malalas' text itself was mutilated, but it is certain that the incompleteness of the quotation is no argument at all against the direct copying of the text by Malalas himself or his command of Latin.

## Conclusion

Our investigation shows the necessity of distinguishing the question of the sources from the quotation of texts in the narration and to revise their categorisation as “inscriptions” and “literary texts”, to be replaced by an analysis of their function in historiographical rhetoric. Generally, a comprehensive approach allows for a better understanding of the *Chronicle*, which's sophistication should not be underestimated.

Book	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII	XIV	XV	XVI	XVII	XVIII
Book length (in lines)	265	403	198	232	1237	107	483	124	261	919	274	698	1016	968	285	391	371	1084
References to literary sources	22	36	12	20	18	13	14	5	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5
References to inscriptions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Density of ref. to literary sources**	8.3	8.9	6.1	8.6	1.4	1.2	2.9	1.2	9.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.3	0	1.5
Density of ref. to inscriptions**	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Fig. 1: Distribution of the ref. to literary sources viz. to inscriptions in the *Chronicle* of John Malalas

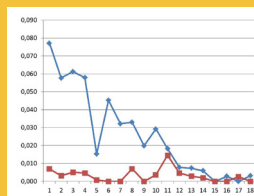


Fig. 2: Ref. to literary sources viz. inscriptions pro line\* and book

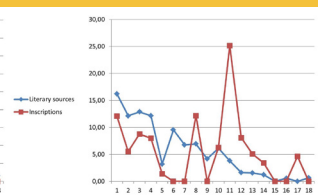


Fig. 3: Density\*\* of ref. to literary sources viz. inscriptions

\* Lines of Greek text in the edition of Thurn 2000

\*\* % of total ref. to literary sources viz. inscriptions pro line and book



Fig. 4: IG XII 6 1265b. (after IG XII 6 Pl. LVIII)

Fig. 5: AE 1978, 814 = ICilicie 2.   
Bono Romani imperii procreato domino nostro Flavio Valerio Constantino clementissimo et victoriosimo Caesari Lucilius Crispus (vir) p[er]fectissimus praeses provinciae Isauriae, d[iv]otus n[on] (umini) m[ag]ist[er] q[ui] (ue) eius.



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