

God's Wrath over Antioch, 525–540 CE: Beginning of the End?

ABSTRACT Ancient Antioch (modern Antakya) is well known as a city prone to disasters. However, the calamitous events that hit the city between 525 and 540 CE have attracted particular attention. Within a time span of fifteen years, Antioch suffered major destructions by two massive earthquakes, several conflagrations, and a Persian sack. These events are reported in highly dramatic accounts by John Malalas and Procopius. Based on such reports, scholars since the nineteenth century have often interpreted these disasters as the starting point for a general decline of the city beginning in the sixth century. More recent reassessments, in contrast, have highlighted continuities on a variety of levels, emphasizing that over the long term, Antioch displayed high resilience on structural and institutional levels. This article picks up on these more recent findings but strives to approach the subject from a different angle. It focuses on Malalas's and Procopius's influential disaster narratives and seeks to further contextualize them. It traces how modern scholarly reception of the literary sources has fostered the traditional picture of "decline," and it analyzes the narrative strategies of the texts, considering the literary traditions from which they originate and the cultural setting of which they form a part. The article seeks to show that the late ancient reports aim not to establish a picture of decline but rather to present Antioch as a purified, freshly Christianized city emerging from the ashes. It further argues that while it is important to critically reflect upon the rhetorical character of the double narrative of heavenly destruction and recreation, exploring the question of Antioch's urban development in the sixth century through the lens of contemporary discourse on the Christian city not only increases our sensitivity to the methodological problems connected to these texts but may also lead to a better understanding of our evidence on Antioch's post-Roman development. **KEYWORDS** Antioch, urban disasters, Procopius of Caesarea, John Malalas, narratives of decline, narratives of resilience

Studies in Late Antiquity, Vol. 7, Number 2, pp. 201–241. electronic ISSN 2470-2048 © 2023 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://sla.ucpress.edu/content/permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/sla.2023.7.2.201>

1. INTRODUCTION

The capture of the city by the Persians, coming soon after the fire of A.D. 525 and the earthquakes of A.D. 526 and 528, marked the beginning of the end of the prosperity and importance of ancient Antioch, and the history of the city as a Graeco-Roman metropolis comes to an end not long after, with the invasion of Syria in the seventh century first by the Persians and then by the Moslems.

—Glanville Downey¹

With this compact description, Glanville Downey, in what is arguably the most influential work on Antioch-on-the-Orontes to date, summarizes his view of the city's history during the reigns of Justin I (518–27 CE), Justinian I (527–65 CE), and beyond. Downey refers to a series of events taking place at Antioch within a time span of one and a half decades, from a major fire in 525 to the capture of the city by the Persian army under Chosroes I in 540. These events, described in the famous contemporary literary accounts of Procopius (ca. 560) and John Malalas (whose work breaks off around 563), have attracted the attention of scholars for a long time.² Downey was only the most prominent commentator to see the fires and earthquakes of the 520s and the Persian sack as the starting point for the final chapter of Antioch's Roman history—a chapter he saw as marked by continuous decline. According to this narrative, the fate of the city was determined, from Justin's time until the Persian and Islamic conquests in the first half of the

I would like to thank Shane Bjornlie, Peter Zeller, the anonymous reviewers of this article, and the editors of *Studies in Late Antiquity* for their many helpful comments and suggestions. Any remaining errors are my own.

1. Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 515.

2. John Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.14 (fire of 525), 17.16 (earthquake and fire of 526), 18.27 (earthquake of 528); Procopius, *De bellis* 2.6.9–2.9 (Persian sack of 540). These descriptions are already featured in the earliest comprehensive histories of the city: Karl Otfried Müller, *Antiquitates Antiochena: Commentationes duae* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1839), 13–17, 125–26; Richard Förster, "Antiochia am Orontes," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 12 (1897): 103–49 at 130–31; Edmund S. Bouchier, *A Short History of Antioch, 300 B.C.–A.D. 1268* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1921), 181–92. See also Downey, *History of Antioch*, 519–46; Mischa Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians: Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 345–56; Fabio Guidetti, "Urban Continuity and Change in Late Roman Antioch," *Acta Byzantina Fennica* 3 (2010): 81–104; Jonas Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt: Soziale Bewältigung von Erdbeben im östlichen Mittelmeerraum der Antike* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 248–57, 264–71; Lee Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century: Resilience or Vulnerability?" in *Environment and Society in the Long Late Antiquity*, ed. Adam Izdebski and Michael Mulryan, *Late Antique Archaeology* 12 (Leiden: Brill 2018), 25–41.

seventh century, by a seemingly never-ending succession of disasters, depriving the former *apex* and κεφαλή και μήτηρ of the east, as it had been called by Ammianus and John Chrysostom,³ of its economic and demographic wealth as well as of its political esteem.⁴ At the end of this development stood the conquest of the city by the Arabs in 638, which, as has been argued, evoked no more than brief and dispassionate mentions by Byzantine commentators.⁵

Disasters, which are understood here as damaging events (or events perceived as damaging) that affect a given community in such a way that their consequences threaten to exceed the community's coping capacities, are indeed attested in large numbers for Antioch during the period in question. Lying within a region of high seismic activity,⁶ the city's history had been marked by disasters almost since its foundation.⁷ Nevertheless, our records for the time between the second quarter of the sixth and the first half of the

3. *Apex orientis*: Ammianus, *Res gestae* 22.9.14; κεφαλή και μήτηρ: Iohannes Chrysostomus, *Homiliae de statu* 3.1, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 49 (1862), 47–49. Cf. Ausonius's ranking of cities (*ordo urbium nobilium*), where Antioch appears as number three behind Rome and Constantinople (1.15.126, Di Salvo).

4. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 515–59, with further unambiguous statements at 520, 527, 534, 559. Already Immanuel Benzinger, "Antiochia I," *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* I, no. 2 (1894): 2442–45 at 2444, knew that "von da an [sc. the 520s] ging es abwärts"; a similar view can be found in Bouchier, *Short History*, 179.

5. Bouchier, *Short History*, 199; Downey, *History of Antioch*, 577–78; Hugh Kennedy, "The Last Century of Syria: A Reinterpretation," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 10 (1985): 141–83 at 151; Kennedy, "Antioch: From Byzantium to Islam and Back Again," in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. John Rich (London: Routledge, 1992), 181–98 at 183. See for example Theophanes, *Chronographia*, A.M. 6129. For further Byzantine and Arabic sources, cf. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 578n58.

6. Hatem M. El Sayed, Hussam E. Zaineh, Draji Dojcinovski, and Vladimir Mihailov, "Re-Evaluations of Seismic Hazard of Syria," *International Journal of Geosciences* 3 (2012): 847–55. The sixth century is considered to have been a phase of elevated seismic activity: See Kamal Khair, George F. Karakaisis, and Eleftheria E. Papadimitriou, "Seismic Zonation of the Dead Sea Transform Fault Area," *Annals of Geophysics* 43 (2000): 61–79 at 64 and 70 (table 2).

7. For the multitude of earthquakes attested between the second century BCE and the fifth century CE, Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 225–48, with a detailed discussion of sources. Further disastrous events: Diodorus, *Bibliotheca historica* 33.4 (145 BCE): Demetrios II burns down large parts of the city; Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 48.25 (40 BCE): The Parthians capture the city; *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, Antoninus Pius 43.2: major conflagration; Ammianus, *Res gestae* 23.5 and *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, Tyranni triginta 2 (253 CE): city captured and burned down by Parthians; Malalas, *Chronographia* 12.49 (ca. 313): Licinius orders his bowmen to slaughter two thousand Antiocheans; Libanius, *Orationes* 1.96.103 (351): famine; Libanius, *Orationes* 1.205–210 (382): famine; Libanius, *Orationes* 26–29 and 1.225–230 (384): famine; *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 1.1.5 (431): famine and heavy rainfall. For the numerous sources to the shortage of 362/63, which is particularly well known because of the presence of Julian's army, see Klaus-Peter Todt and Andreas Vest, *Tabula imperii Byzantini 15: Syria* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014), 551n104.

seventh century are denser and more detailed than for any previous period.⁸ Malalas's and Procopius's dramatic reports on large-scale destructions and major losses in population, combined with news on recurring earthquakes, plague waves, raids, and riots throughout the following decades, paint a picture of repeated blows, which in the eyes of many scholars were too much for the city to recover from. In the archaeological campaigns of the 1930s, the French and American excavators believed that they had found the material record to confirm this case.

However, throughout the last decades and years, the direct correlation between the disaster record in the sixth century and an assumed decline of the city has increasingly been challenged. Several recent studies on Antioch highlight elements of urban continuity. According to these studies, some of which are based on a reevaluation of the archaeological record, the most important infrastructure was rebuilt and the city maintained its function as a supra-regional center at least until the political shifts of the early and mid-seventh century. The city thus proved resilient.⁹

As has been upheld in the more recent contributions to the debate, one of the major problems with the long-prevailing narratives of decline is a biased approach influenced by an overarching theoretical framework of decline.¹⁰ However, no approach to history is free of bias, and unquestionably the recent trend toward Antioch's urban continuity has been influenced by larger scholarly developments. This reassessment corresponds, of course, to the framework of the "transformation" of the late ancient world—a term that was coined as an antithesis to the pejorative "decline" to evaluate the culture of Late Antiquity according to its own standards rather than from a perspective that idealized the classical world. The implicit focus of this approach on slow evolutions rather than radical changes brings with it a tendency to emphasize rebuilding over destruction, functioning infrastructures over dissolving street grids, and continuing and new forms of urban life over those that ceased to exist. In the case of a city that, according to contemporary sources, was hit by multiple major disasters over a short period, such an

8. See Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 25–26, table 1. It must be stated, however, that the written documentation for the history of the city is particularly good at least for the reigns of Justin and Justinian (Downey, *History of Antioch*, 515).

9. For a discussion of this term in the given context, see Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 26–28. The scholarly discussion over decline and continuity is treated at length in section 3 of this article.

10. Gunnar Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike: Prolegomena zu einer archäologischen Stadtgeschichte* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 55–56; Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 32.

approach will not only have to be defended against the impression of being cynical.¹¹ It will also face the problem that the literary evidence—that is, the experience expressed by the only contemporary witnesses who explicitly speak to us—seemingly points into the opposite direction.

In that context, the following article discusses the question of Antioch's development in the sixth century by looking into the narratives provided both by modern scholars and by contemporary witnesses. On a methodological level, it asks how we can integrate contemporary disaster experiences, as conveyed to us through the literary material, into an assessment of the late antique period that neither simply takes them at face value nor sets them aside as artificial products. To do so, we first need to look into the way the written sources have been integrated into the debate so far. As shown in the next section, individual evaluations of the most prominent disaster accounts—i.e., considerations of their trustworthiness, their dependence upon literary *topoi*, etc.—have had a strong influence on how modern scholars have dealt with the topic. These evaluations, however, have often been more implicit than explicit. Against this background, sections three to five offer an analysis of the most important accounts of Antioch's history in the sixth century, those of John Malalas and Procopius, and their narrative contexts. It is argued that even though these texts are rhetorical in nature, they should be taken seriously as documents of their time. This does not imply taking them at face value, but employing them to comprehend how the developments taking place in sixth-century Antioch were understood by contemporaries. The story they tell us is a double one—one of total destruction as well as of complete resurrection. As I seek to show, contemporaries like Malalas and Procopius while experiencing the disasters of the 520s and 540s as horrible events, did not frame them as signs of decline, but rather as the beginning of something new. Section six discusses how far these observations can be integrated into an overall assessment of the urban history of Antioch in the sixth century.

2. ANCIENT SOURCES AND MODERN NARRATIVES

Sources on sixth-century Antioch document a series of destructive events, but the most well-known among them clearly are the two major earthquakes of

11. See the subordinate clause of Mordechai's conclusion (Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 39): "Without underestimating individuals' suffering or loss, which must have been great, the city as an institution proved to be remarkably resilient."

526 and 528 and the Persian destruction of 540. The reason for this is their prominent appearance in Malalas and Procopius, who treat them in lengthy and dramatic reports. These testimonies have shaped assessments of Antioch's sixth-century fate from very early on. The pioneering studies by Karl Otfried Müller and Richard Förster, written long before the first excavations, put Malalas's and Procopius's reports at the center of their accounts on the late ancient history of the city, which accordingly placed some emphasis on destruction.¹² Other works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mirror their views.¹³ Edmund Bouchier's 1921 popular book gives a representative summary: "The record of the sixth century is almost entirely one of disaster—fires, earthquakes, and invasions—as a result of which Antioch ceases to be a place of much importance."¹⁴ This picture derives from a reading of the sources that took the destructions as given but qualified the rebuilding accounts as panegyric.¹⁵ The commentators knew well, however, that this picture would remain incomplete before any larger archaeological investigation had been carried out. These investigations, as Förster openly stated, would hopefully corroborate their findings.¹⁶

It is against this background that we must consider the history of the first—and only—excavations. The excavations were carried out during the 1930s by American and French archaeologists. The undertaking faced several problems that complicated a systematic topographic survey: while many of the ancient remains had been overbuilt by modern Antakya, even where excavations were possible, the ancient layers could lie at a depth of 7 to 12 meters,

12. Müller, *Antiquitates Antiochenae*, 118–26, on the destructions and imperial measures between 525 and the sack of 540 (which he dates to 538), 126–31, on Justinian's rebuilding, as described by Procopius; see also a more compact version in an article in German originally published in 1839, reprinted in Karl Otfried Müller, "De antiquitatibus Antiochenis commentatio altera," in *Karl Otfried Müller's kleine deutsche Schriften*, ed. Eduard Müller, vol. 1 (Breslau: Josef Mar, 1847), 110–29 at 125–26, 126–28; cf. Förster, "Antiochia," 130–40.

13. Cf. Benzinger, "Antiocheia"; Bouchier, *Short History*, 179–94.

14. Bouchier, 179; cf. Benzinger, "Antiocheia," 2444.

15. See Müller, *Antiquitates Antiochenae* 131 on Procopius's account in *De aedificiis*: "Adulandi magis quam veritatis studio imputabimus"; cf. Förster, "Antiochia," 134–40, for a longer critical assessment of the passage. Both Müller and Förster treat the destructions themselves rather briefly and refrain from critically discussing the sources here (Müller, *Antiquitates Antiochenae*, 119, 125); Förster, 130, 140.

16. Förster, 105: "Ob ich aber das Richtige getroffen habe, das kann, wenigstens zum Teil, erst die Zukunft lehren, wenn man zur Messstange und zum Spaten gegriffen haben wird." Similarly Müller, "De antiquitatibus Antiochenis," 129, who furthermore, at 114, classifies his own research on Antioch as a preliminary work for a history of ancient architecture.

which made the work extremely difficult.¹⁷ Simultaneously, the many unforeseen and spectacular mosaic findings tied up resources originally intended for topographical surveys.¹⁸ The focus of the topographical investigations, therefore, lay on the Orontes island, which had undergone less modern overbuilding, allowing for large-scale excavation projects. The excavations carried out in the ancient urban area east of the Orontes, by contrast, consisted mostly of sondages, with the most important test areas located in the central colonnaded street and its surroundings.¹⁹ There is a strong imbalance, thus, between our archaeological knowledge about the palace area in the “new city” on the Orontes island and that of the city center east of the river.

In 1939, the outbreak of World War II brought an end to all campaigns, and the incompleteness and problematic character of the documentation has been lamented ever since.²⁰ Considering the representation of the late ancient developments in the five volumes bringing together the findings,²¹ the short duration and fragmentary nature of the excavations were compounded by the circumstance that the excavators, informed by Malalas, Procopius, and their modern interpreters, may have been all too happy to link their findings to the absolute dates that appear in the ancient disaster reports.²² This is especially true for the Orontes island, but also, for example, for the excavations along

17. Jean Lassus, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes V: Les portiques d'Antioche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 6, for the enormous practical difficulties caused by this setting.

18. Richard Stillwell, “Outline of the Campaigns,” in Stillwell, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes III*, 1.

19. For an overview, see Richard Stillwell, ed., *Antioch-on-the-Orontes II: The Excavations 1933–1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938), 215, plan I, nos. 23, 26, 27, 36, 37; full publication by Lassus, *Antioch V*.

20. See Kennedy, “Antioch,” 185; Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 6. The problems in reconstructing the relationships between ceramic or numismatic findings and stratigraphy for the publications are described in some detail by Lassus, *Antioch V*, 6–7.

21. George W. Elderkin, ed., *Antioch-on-the-Orontes I: The Excavations of 1932* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1934); Stillwell, *Antioch II*; Richard Stillwell, ed., *Antioch-on-the-Orontes III: The Excavations 1937–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941); Frederick O. Waagé, ed., *Antioch-on-the-Orontes IV*, part 1, *Ceramics and Islamic Coins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948); Dorothy B. Waage, ed., *Antioch-on-the-Orontes IV*, part 2, *Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Crusader's Coins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); Lassus, *Antioch V*.

22. This was a problem that Jean Lassus, at least when he recapitulated his own findings in his publication on the porticoes in 1972, was well aware of (and yet did not bypass completely): Lassus, *Antioch V*, 10–11; see also Kennedy, “Last Century of Syria,” 150; Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 55–56. For examples, see Elderkin, *Antioch I*, 33 (Byzantine Stadium); Stillwell, *Antioch III*, 8–9 (Bath F) with Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 52n229; Stillwell, *Antioch III*, 9–12; Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 66 (“House of Iphigenia”), 195–98 (“House of Aion”); Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 55.

the colonnaded street, where missing evidence for pre-Justinianic paving could be interpreted as a sign of heavy destruction.²³

Downey's 1961 monograph has exerted a greater influence on subsequent historical research on Antioch than the excavation publications themselves, however. Although Downey had participated in the archaeological campaigns, the analysis of written sources plays a more prominent role in his work than the incorporation of archaeological material.²⁴ Since the 1930s, Downey had published a series of preliminary studies concerned with the problems posed by the written sources. Two critical examinations specifically addressed Procopius and his account of Antioch's rebuilding after 540. Downey argued that Procopius's aim was not to give an accurate description of the reconstruction work but to highlight Justinian's achievements, rendering most of his descriptions topical and interchangeable with those of other cities.²⁵ This argument is recapitulated with slight revisions in his monograph.²⁶ In the case of Malalas, Downey's analysis points in a different direction. On the one hand, Downey criticized Malalas's "poor knowledge of history," his problematic usage of sources, and his ambiguous language. On the other, he highlighted that Malalas—who is one of his most important sources not only for Justinianic times—had been able to draw on local sources of official character and thus was thoroughly trustworthy "concerning events and monuments in the city."²⁷ For the disasters of the 520s, Downey's description follows quite closely the account given by Malalas, whom he

23. Lassus, *Antioch V*, 8, 14–15, 148–49.

24. This is also due to the sparse additional topographical information that could be derived from the excavations. See Glen W. Bowersock, "The Search for Antioch: Karl Otfried Müller's *Antiquitates Antiochenae*," in *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire*, ed. Bowersock, *Bibliotheca eruditorum* 9 (Goldbach: Keip Verlag, 1994), 411–27 at 424 ("Much of Downey's great history of Antioch, written and published long after the excavations were terminated, could have been written before they began"); Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 6.

25. Glanville Downey, "Procopius on Antioch: A Study of Method in the *De aedificiis*," *Byzantion* 14 (1939): 361–78; "The Composition of Procopius, *De aedificiis*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 78 (1949): 171–83.

26. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 546–53, see particularly the assessment of the panegyric character of the work at 547.

27. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 38–40 (quotes at 38 and 39). Downey is again drawing from his own preliminary work: "Imperial Building Records in Malalas," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 38 (1938): 1–16, 299–311. For a more critical assessment of Malalas (specifically his use of inscriptions) see Downey, "References to Inscriptions in the Chronicle of Malalas," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 66 (1935): 55–72.

considers likely to have been an eyewitness.²⁸ The potential biases and narrative distortions of Malalas's dramatic account are not addressed. Downey's resulting evaluation of events is clear-cut: the disasters of the 520s "marked the beginning of the physical decline of Antioch," and the Persian conquest of 540 "brought the real greatness of Antioch to a close."²⁹ The measures taken by Justinian to rebuild the city, he argued, had been exaggerated by Procopius and thus were not sufficient to restore the city to its former glory. For Downey, the archaeological evidence confirmed this perception.³⁰ However, his considerations of the findings do not go into much depth, and the excavator Jean Lassus, about a decade later, criticized Downey for inaccurately interpreting his archaeological plans.³¹

Later authors have dealt more extensively with the material record, particularly after Lassus published his volume on the main colonnaded street in 1972. Hugh Kennedy, in a series of studies on Syria between Late Roman and Early Islamic times, used Antioch as a case study for his argument that the transformation of the Syrian cityscape from the classical model, characterized by monumental public buildings and open spaces, into a dense, irregular and barely hierarchically structured settlement had already taken place in the sixth century.³² The disasters of the 520s and 540s play a key role in Kennedy's account. In his analysis of the city's urbanism, Kennedy followed the excavation reports and their dating, which, however, he occasionally reinterpreted.³³ His articles have had a great deal of resonance over the following

28. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 519–26; on the possible personal presence of Malalas: 521n79, 522n88.

29. Downey, 519, 527.

30. Downey, 548.

31. Lassus, *Antioch V*, 149n46.

32. Hugh Kennedy, "From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria," *Past & Present* 106 (1985): 3–27, with references to Antioch at 5–6, 9, 10–11; e.g., Kennedy, "Last Century of Syria" with a comprehensive discussion of Antioch at 150–54; Kennedy, "Antioch." See also Hugh Kennedy and Wolf G. Liebeschuetz, "Antioch and the Villages of Northern Syria in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D.: Trends and Problems," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 32 (1988): 65–90.

33. Most notably by tentatively dating the irregular buildings above the Justinianic street to the Roman rather than the Islamic period: Kennedy, "From Polis to Madina," 11; Kennedy, "Last Century of Syria," 153; Kennedy, "Antioch," 193. Clive Foss, in a more recent article, follows a similar, if slightly more reserved, line of argument: "Syria in Transition, A. D. 550–750: An Archaeological Approach," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997): 189–269. Foss strongly highlights the impact of the sixth-century disasters. However, he also refers to the limitations of the material several times: see 192–93, 194, and 195 for the digs; 196–97 (for the coins) is, for example, rather reserved about the impact of the Justinianic plague (see my note 38), 260.

decades,³⁴ even though (or precisely because) some of his findings were soon relativized or contested. The debate emerging since the 1980s went far beyond the question of urban development at Antioch alone: it considered the larger region, with some emphasis placed upon the countryside, for which (at least in some areas) ongoing prosperity has been diagnosed—an element highlighted in several of the more recent takes on the topic.³⁵

Over the past few years, research has also increasingly integrated environmental factors into the picture. Relevant studies thereby offer results that point in opposing directions: on a larger scale, a cooling of temperatures in several regions around the globe has been diagnosed for circa 535/36 to 545/50 (probably caused by a major volcanic eruption) that affected harvests in the Byzantine empire.³⁶ On a more regional scale, proxies from the Levant and Anatolia show a phase of high precipitation between roughly the sixth and the mid-seventh century, implying more favorable conditions for agriculture.³⁷ A further relevant factor in this context is the “Justinianic plague,” which struck large parts of Eurasia in recurring waves from the 540s until the mid-eighth century. This pandemic certainly had significant demographic consequences in the eastern Mediterranean, and we know for sure that it affected Antioch, even though there is no specific evidence as to the extent of

34. Kennedy’s and Foss’s views are reflected, for example, in the catalogue to the exhibition on Antioch shown in several US museums in 2000/2001: Christine Kondoleon, “The City of Antioch: An Introduction,” in *Antioch: The Lost Ancient City*, ed. Christine Kondoleon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3–11 at 4–5: “A series of calamities in the first half of the sixth century . . . shattered the prosperity of the city.” See also Clive Foss’s article in the same volume. A similar stance is taken in the recent work on urbanism by Greg Woolf, *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). In the context of a discussion on urban resilience in Late Antiquity (415–18), Antioch is cited as an example of a city unable to recover from disaster.

35. See for example the influential study of Christopher Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 443–49. See also J. Magness, *The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Settlement in Palestine* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 195–214, with a discussion of Antioch and its surroundings at 206–9 aimed directly at Kennedy; A. Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria: An Archaeological Assessment* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 31–47, on Antioch 34–35 and 37–38.

36. For a recent survey, see Timothy B. Newfield, “The Climate Downturn of 536–50,” *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*, ed. Sam White, Christian Pfister, and Franz Mauelshagen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 447–93.

37. Adam Izdebski, Jordan Pickett, Neil Roberts, and Tomasz Waliszewski, “The Environmental, Archaeological and Historical Evidence for Regional Climatic Changes and Their Societal Impacts in the Eastern Mediterranean in Late Antiquity,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 136 (2016): 189–208.

its impact there.³⁸ It has therefore repeatedly been integrated into the debate.³⁹

Generally, many of the contributions on Antioch in the sixth century published over the last decades have tended to use material evidence to confirm or correct the contents of the written sources. Both Jean Lassus and Michael Whitby, for example, used the archaeological record to argue against dismissal of Procopius's account of rebuilding. While Lassus's rather casual observations were based on the results of his excavations in the city center, Whitby's more systematic assessment of the question, which was also a critical examination of Downey's theses, had been preceded by a field study at the so-called Iron Gate.⁴⁰ According to Whitby, the information given by Procopius is not entirely accurate, but "where an error can be detected . . . , it is an accidental misrepresentation of something that Justinian did, not a case of deliberate panegyric distortion."⁴¹ A recent survey by German archaeologists has partially corrected Whitby's results but reaches similar conclusions.⁴²

38. That the plague hit Antioch is mentioned by the Antiochean Evagrius (*Historia ecclesiastica* 4.29), who speaks about fatalities in his personal surroundings caused by four waves of plague (between 542 and the 590s). Unlike Procopius in his famous description of the plague in Constantinople (*De bellis* 2.22–23), however, he does not quantify the overall losses. Debate on the Justinianic plague and its impact on Roman society has gained new momentum in recent years (a development strongly fostered by the rapidly increasing availability of ancient DNA findings). Some of the most prominent recent contributions to the debate have taken extreme positions: Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), sees plague and environmental stress as the main reasons for "the failure of the eastern empire" (235), whereas Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg, "Rejecting Catastrophe: The Case of the Justinianic Plague," *Past and Present* 244 (2019): 3–50, deny that the pandemic had any major consequences at all. These views have both raised serious objections, and the challenge of the coming years will lie in developing methods that take research beyond these binaries—as discussed, for example, in Kristina Sessa, "The New Environmental Fall of Rome: A Methodological Consideration," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 12 (2019): 211–55, and Peter Sarris, "New Approaches to the Plague of Justinian," *Past and Present* 254 (2022): 315–46 (with differing but not incompatible results).

39. E.g., Foss, "Syria in Transition," 202, 204; Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 30–31.

40. L. Michael Whitby, "Procopius and Antioch," in *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire: Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at Ankara in September 1988*, ed. David H. French and Christopher S. Lightfoot (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1989), 537–53.

41. Whitby, "Procopius and Antioch," 546.

42. Gunnar Brands, "Prokop und das Eiserne Tor: Ein Beitrag zur Topographie von Antiochia am Orontes," in *Syrien und seine Nachbarn von der Spätantike bis in die islamische Zeit*, ed. Ina Eichner and Vasiliki Tsamakda, *Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz* 25 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2009), 9–20; on Whitby's article: 10n9; identification of the last phase (4) as medieval: 14; possible identification of phases 2 (city walls) and 3 (dam wall) as Justinianic: 15–16. The results of a survey of the city walls undertaken in the course of the same project point in a similar direction:

The most recent contributions approach the problem from a more general perspective. Gunnar Brands, in his “prolegomena to an archaeological history” of late ancient Antioch (based on the German archaeological surveys), reviews the archaeological findings from a diachronic perspective.⁴³ Regarding the sixth century, he provides a differentiated topographic overview that tackles both destruction and subsequent rebuilding.⁴⁴ Lee Mordechai’s study of Antioch in the sixth century argues that the city was able to preserve its preeminent status in the East.⁴⁵ His discussion of the written sources on the destructive events is rather abbreviated, primarily emphasizing the problematic character of some of the details given.⁴⁶ There is a clear focus on the material evidence: some of Mordechai’s central arguments are based on reassessments of the seismological and archaeological *status quaestionis* and on reviews of the numismatic and pottery findings.⁴⁷

To sum up: if, in earlier scholarship, the dramatic disaster accounts in the late Roman sources predetermined scholarly perception of late antique Antioch, today the emphasis has perceptibly shifted toward a “corrective” assessment of the material sources. This approach is certainly helpful for a critical counterbalance. However, as Gunnar Brands points out in a recent publication, it would be “methodological fiction” to think that “independent” archaeological material necessarily provides a more secure base for objectivity

Christiane Brasse, “Von der Stadtmauer zur Stadtgeschichte: Das Befestigungssystem von Antiochia am Orontes,” in *Aktuelle Forschungen zur Konstruktion, Funktion und Semantik antiker Stadtbefestigungen: Kolloquium 9./10. Februar 2007 in Istanbul (Byzas 10)*, ed. Janet Lorentzen, Felix Pirson, Peter I. Schneider, and Ulrike Wulf-Rheidt (Istanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2010), 261–82 at 279; Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 41–44.

43. Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*. The recent monograph by Andrea de Giorgi, *Ancient Antioch: From the Seleucid Era to the Islamic Conquest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) relies heavily upon the material sources, too. Applying a systematic instead of a chronological approach, however, the book’s focus lies on the development of the city since Seleucid times and on its relations to its surrounding territory rather than on its final Roman phase.

44. Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 37–58.

45. Mordechai, “Antioch in the Sixth Century.” A similar stance, but on a different basis, is taken by Guidetti, “Urban Continuity and Change.” This article provides a diachronic overview of the most important written material, basing its main conclusion—that continuity prevailed—on the written evidence for civic activities such as circus races (on the phenomenon, see my section 6). See the comprehensive study on medieval Antioch by Asa Eger, “(Re)Mapping Medieval Antioch: Urban Transformations from the Early Islamic to the Middle Byzantine Periods,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 67 (2013): 95–134, with remarks on the debates at issue here at 95–97, 109–11, 133–34. A short assessment of the question is also offered in Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 264–71.

46. Mordechai, “Antioch in the Sixth Century,” 30, 34.

47. Mordechai, 29, 31–33, 35–37.

than the written sources do.⁴⁸ Against this background, this article aims at something that has been somewhat sidelined in the discussions of recent years: it analyzes the narrative strategies applied in these texts and explores the literary traditions that they originate from and the cultural setting that they form a part of. The narrative aspect seems of particular importance when discussing a normative term such as *decline*.⁴⁹ While the written sources on disasters often focus strongly on the moment of destruction, in the case of the disasters of 525 to 540 at Antioch, they do provide some ideas about how the story goes on. Assessing and contextualizing their narratives can therefore provide a glimpse into the specific—and, as I would argue, changing—ideas of urbanity and the city in the sixth century.

3. MALALAS AND THE DISASTERS OF 525 TO 528

The natural disasters of the 520s are most vividly described in John Malalas's *Chronographia*, a chronicle (or *breviarium*) comprising a history from Adam to the author's lifetime—that is, up to the reigns of Justin I (518–27) and Justinian (527–65). It was likely published in at least two redactions, one of which only reached until about the 530s.⁵⁰ Malalas himself very probably lived in Antioch, since his work shows a particularly high degree of information about disastrous events in this city.⁵¹

48. Brands, "Prokop und das Eiserne Tor," 16: "Allerdings wäre es wohl eine methodische Fiktion anderer Art anzunehmen, dass von den Schriftquellen ‚unabhängige‘, archäologische Beobachtungen zwangsläufig zu objektiveren Resultaten führen."

49. On the normativity of this term, see Mark Humphries, *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 84–86.

50. The text preserved in the Greek *codex unicus* reaches the year 563; it is probable, but not beyond every doubt, that the original incorporated Justinian's death. The work has a thoroughly complicated textual transmission since the *codex unicus*, the Oxford Codex Baroccianus 182, only contains a shortened version and has to be supplemented with a series of secondary text witnesses, including texts in Syriac and several medieval translations in Church Slavonic: For Malalas's *Chronographia*, see the seminal volume edited by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Brian Croke, and Roger Scott, *Studies in John Malalas* (Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1990). Currently, a historical and philological commentary is being prepared in the course of a project of the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, located at Tübingen University. So far, the commentaries on Books 15 to 18 have been completed (<https://malalas.hadw-bw.de/kommentar>, accessed 5 May 2022, cited as *Malkom* in the following). For the question of genre, see Richard Burgess and Michael Kulikowski, "The Historiographical Position of John Malalas: Genre in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Middle Ages," in *Die Weltchronik des Johannes Malalas: Autor – Werk – Überlieferung*, ed. Mischa Meier, Christine Radtke, and Fabian Schulz (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2016), 93–117.

51. On this phenomenon, see Mischa Meier, "Natural Disasters in the Chronographia of John Malalas: Reflections on Their Function—an Initial Sketch," *Medieval History Journal* 10 (2006): 237–66; Jonas Borsch, "Stabilization through Memory: Early Imperial Rome in John Malalas," in

Earthquakes at Antioch are reported numerous times and even given numbers.⁵²

Malalas's account of the disasters of the 520s starts with a short report of a destructive fire hitting the city in 525.⁵³ This event is framed as a harbinger of further evil to come.⁵⁴ What the author implies by this becomes clear a few lines later. In what is one of the most colorful accounts in his work, Malalas provides us with a painfully detailed description of a big earthquake and the subsequent conflagration in May 526, which, as he claims, destroyed the whole city, except for some regions on the mountain slopes, and took 250,000 lives.⁵⁵ For 528, about a year after the accession of Justinian, Malalas describes a second devastating earthquake, which is said to have killed another 5000 and destroyed everything that had been left standing or rebuilt.⁵⁶ It has been pointed out that all these disasters are treated by Malalas as an interconnected cluster of events, a form of presentation that may be understood as part of the author's attempt to make sense of the catastrophic experience.⁵⁷

Within this narrative, the fire of 525 appears as an ominous prelude. Even though Malalas gives some details concerning the extent of the conflagration (a feature not unusual for his depictions of such events), the buildings mentioned can only be located hypothetically.⁵⁸ He furthermore stated in a general manner that other districts were affected too and that "many houses

Roman Cultural Memory, ed. Martin Dinter and Marcos Martinho dos Santos, part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

52. Malalas, *Chronographia* 8.24, 10.18, 10.23, 11.8, 12.38, 14.36, 17.16, 18.29, 18.79. See Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 219–72. For the counting of earthquakes in Malalas, see E. Jeffreys, "Chronological Structures in Malalas," in Jeffreys et al., *Studies in John Malalas*, 111–66 at 159.

53. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.14, ed. J. Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).

54. See Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.14 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, 344.1.54–55): ὅστις ἐμπρησμός προεμήνυσε τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ μέλλουσαν ἔσεσθαι ἀγανάκτησιν; cf. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, in *Theophanis chronographia*; Carolus de Boor, ed., *Recensuit Carolus de Boor*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1883), 172.1.1–2: τὰ προοίμια τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ὀργῆς (the beginnings of God's anger).

55. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 346–50); for the extent of destruction, see p. 346, 1.14–16 (supplemented by Thurn on the basis of a text version in Slavonic—on this phenomenon, see my note 62); for the number of victims, 347, 1.38–40.

56. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.27.

57. Meier, "Natural Disasters," 253; cf. Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 37. Evagrius Scholasticus, drawing from Malalas, presents all three events in a row: Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.5–6. For Malalas's specific method of making sense of the disaster in light of chronological calculations, see Meier, "Natural Disasters," 254–55.

58. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.14, 1.55–56, states that the fire extended from the Martyrium of St. Stephanos to the *praetorium* of a στρατηλάτης (presumably of the *magister militum*): see *MalKom*, 17.14.1.4–5/2, <https://malalas.hadw-bw.de/kommentar/17/14> (J. Borsch, accessed 25 May 2022).

were burnt and many lives lost.”⁵⁹ For the disaster of 526, by contrast, Malalas (as preserved in the Codex Baroccianus 182 and supplemented by the Slavonic version) offers extremely rich details. As mentioned, he characterizes the destruction brought by this event, the fifth in Antioch’s history according to Malalas,⁶⁰ as total:

The surface of the earth boiled and foundations of buildings were struck by thunderbolts thrown up by the earthquakes and were burned to ashes by fire, so that even those who fled were met by flames [like those who remained in their houses] . . . It was a tremendous and incredible marvel with fire belching out rain, rain falling from tremendous furnaces, flame dissolving into showers, and showers kindling like flames consumed even those in the earth who were crying out. As a result [the Christ-loving] Antioch became desolate (ἄρηστος). [From the spring called Olympias to the gates known as those of Draduon, one could see but crumbling walls that threatened death; many of them fell the next day,⁶¹ killing those who lived in them and burying passers-by. Not one single dwelling, house or stall in the city remained undestroyed.] For nothing remained apart from some buildings beside the mountain. No holy chapel nor monastery nor any other holy place remained which had not been torn apart [and collapsed to its foundations through the wrath of God]. Everything had been utterly destroyed [in the fire].⁶²

59. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.14.344, 1.57–58: καὶ ἐκαύθησαν πολλοὶ οἴκοι καὶ ἀπόλωντο πολλαὶ ψυχαί (translation from *The Chronicle of John Malalas: A Translation*, trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael J. Jeffreys, and Roger Scott, *Byzantina Australiensia* 4 (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986), 236.

60. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 346.1.93–94).

61. The last three words, taken from John of Ephesus, are not included in Thurn’s text but may well have been part of the original Malalas: See Jeffreys et al., *Chronicle of John Malalas*, 238; Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 346, app. ad 14–347.19.

62. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 346.1.6–347.1.23: καὶ ἐκεραυνούντο οἱ θεμέλιοι, κουφίζόμενοι ὑπὸ τῶν σεισμῶν καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρὸς τεφρούμενοι, ὥστε καὶ τοῖς φεύγουσιν ὑπήντα τὸ πῦρ. [καὶ ὁμοίως τοῖς ἐμμένουσιν ἐν ταῖς οἰκίαις . . . καὶ ἦν ἰδεῖν θαῦμα φοβερόν καὶ παράδοξον, πῦρ ἐρευγόμενον ὄμβρον, ὄμβρος καμίνων φοβερῶν, φλόξ εἰς ὑέτον λυομένη, καὶ ὑετός ὡς φλόξ ἐξαπτόμενος καὶ τοὺς βοῶντας ἐν τῇ γῆ κατανήλισκεν. καὶ ἐκ τούτου [ἡ χριστοφιλής] Ἀντιόχεια ἄρηστος ἐγένετο. [ἀπὸ τῆς λεγομένης Ὀλυμπιάδος πηγῆς μέχρι τῶν πυλῶν τῶν λεγομένων †Δραδούων μόνον ἦν ἰδεῖν τεῖχη κατεστραμμένα θάνατον ἀπειλούντα. πολλὰ γὰρ αὐτῶν κατέπιπτον ἀναίρουντα τοὺς ἐνοικοῦντας καὶ καταχνύοντα τοὺς παριόντας. οὐδὲν δὲ κτίσμα οὐδὲ οἰκία οὐδὲ στάβλος περιεγένετο μὴ κατεστραμμένος.] οὐκ ἔμεινε γὰρ, εἰ μὴ τὰ πρὸς τὸ ὄρος μόνον παροικουμένα οἰκήματα. οὐκ ἔμεινε δὲ οὔτε ἅγιος οἶκος εὐκτρίου ἢ μοναστηρίου ἢ ἄλλου ἁγίου τόπου ἀδιάρρηκτος, [ἀλλὰ κατέπεσεν μέχρις ἐδάφους διὰ τὴν θεομηνίαν]. τὰ γὰρ ἄλλα συντελέσθησαν εἰς τὸ παντελές [τῷ ἔμπρησῳ]. The parts of the text printed in in square brackets reflect additions made by Thurn from the Slavonic version (retranslated into Greek). My translations for these parts follow those given in the footnotes of Jeffreys et al., *Chronicle of John Malalas*, 238–39, as far as available and with minor adjustments. The Slavonic version was first edited by Vasilij M. Istrin in a series

Of the two specific buildings mentioned, the “spring called Olympias” has been localized at the foot of the Silpius inside the city walls, while the location of the “Draduon/Draguon gate” is unclear, if it existed at all.⁶³ Apart from this, while we learn that the quarters facing the mountain slope were partly spared from destruction and that “many” buildings collapsed with some delay, the central point clearly remains the totality of destruction.⁶⁴ Only one particular building, as Malalas elaborates, survived at least temporarily: the central church of the city stood for several days before being consumed by the flames and collapsing.⁶⁵ The Slavonic text version (cited in brackets) gives further information on specific buildings destroyed, all of which are churches.⁶⁶ Finally, details are provided for those who died in the quake. The extraordinarily high number of 250,000 victims is explained by the fact that the city was filled with visitors due to the Ascension festival.⁶⁷ Malalas’s explanation, however, does not necessarily make the number more trustworthy, as discussed shortly.⁶⁸

The specific tone of passages such as the one cited, which seems unusually emotional for a chronicle or a *breviarium*, has been explained from a biographical and psychological angle: Malalas, the Antiochene, had experienced the disaster himself and therefore not only was able to provide firsthand knowledge but also could not help but describe the event in the most emotional way.⁶⁹ Since the geographical focus of the work shifts from Antioch to

of publications from 1897 to 1914; for the first English translation, see Matthew Spinka, *Chronicle of John Malalas*, books 8–13, translation from the Church Slavonic by Matthew Spinka in collaboration with Glanville Downey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940).

63. For the spring, see Downey, *History of Antioch*, 182; for a discussion of locations, see also *MalKom*, 17.16, 1.18–20/9, <https://malalas.hadw-bw.de/kommentar/17/16>. The name “Draduon Gate” is quite possibly a misreading of one of the medieval translators: Spinka, *Chronicle of John Malalas*, 127n62.

64. A valuable amendment can be derived from Marcellinus Comes, who specifies that the fire particularly affected the western part of the city: Comes, *Chronicon ad annum 526*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, *Chronica minora II* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1894).

65. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 347.1.25–30).

66. The churches of Archangel Michael, Virgin Mary, Holy Prophets, and Holy Zacharias: Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 347.1.30–36). The first two are also mentioned in Malalas’s and Procopius’s reports on rebuilding: Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.18; Procopius, *De aedificiis*, 2.10.24–25.

67. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 347.1.38–40). Procopius had even heard of 300,000 victims: Procopius, *De bellis*, 2.14.6.

68. See my section 6.

69. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 52n79; 522n83. Cf. B. Croke, “Malalas, the Man and His Work,” in Jeffreys et al., *Studies in John Malalas*, 1–25 at 8–9, and M. Jeffreys, “The Language of Malalas: Formulaic Phraseology,” in *Studies in John Malalas*, 225–31 at 228.

Constantinople around the 530s, some have speculated that Malalas himself had permanently fled the city in the aftermath of the disasters of the mid-sixth century.⁷⁰ His flight is not suggested explicitly anywhere in our sources but has gained considerable traction since it was picked up and further elaborated in the seminal volume edited by Elizabeth Jeffreys and others in 1990.⁷¹ For the text, this leaves us with the diagnosis of an eyewitness account, an assignment that seemingly implies somewhat higher trustworthiness.

The account of the earthquake of 528 in the main codex is much shorter than that of the 526 event, but it might be possible to supplement the account with John of Ephesus (as preserved in the so-called *Chronicle of Zuqnin*) and Theophanes.⁷² According to these authors, the earthquake destroyed not only (as also stated in the Codex Baroccianus) all buildings that had previously been reconstructed, but every single edifice of the city, including the great church (John) and the city walls (Theophanes and John). Theophanes gives the exact number of 4870 victims, which seems to fit the “up to” (ἄχρι) 5000 mentioned in the Codex Baroccianus. As has been pointed out, the fact that the city was destroyed three times within such a short interval seems to have had a particularly devastating effect on the contemporaries.⁷³

Scholars have long since recognized the unusual structure of the earthquake account of 526. Already in 1986, the editors of the English translation drew attention to its “rhetorical structures.”⁷⁴ Only recently, however, Laura Carrara was able to show that Malalas must actually have used a specific rhetorical source—a text inspired by the style of earlier rhetors such as Aelius

70. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 39, 528nIII.

71. Croke, “Malalas, the Man,” 9, 21–22.

72. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.27 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 369.1.78–370.1.88, with the Latin translation of John of Ephesus provided in the apparatus. Cf. Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 6021 (De Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, 177.1.22–178.1.5). Fragments from the second part of the *Historia ecclesiastica* of John of Ephesus are preserved in an eighth century Syriac text known as *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre* or, according to its place of discovery, the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*: see Witold Witakowski, trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre: Chronicle (Known also as the Chronicle of Zuqnin)*, part 3 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996). At pp. 67–69, this text includes the longest description of the earthquake of 528 (even though falsely dated to 539/40, the event can clearly be identified with the one described in the Codex Baroccianus and Theophanes).

73. See Meier, “Natural Disasters,” 253.

74. Jeffreys et al., *Chronicle of John Malalas*, xxiv.

Aristides and Libanius.⁷⁵ In its structure and the pictures evoked, the description of the earthquake of 526 offers parallels to what Carrara calls “earthquake monodies.” The central feature of this genre consists in the sharp contrast of an eminent past and a desolate present, typically presented from the perspective of a personal viewer who had seen the affected city both before and after its destruction, and garnished with pathetic exclamations about the loss of the former beauty. All these elements recur in Malalas.⁷⁶ Carrara hypothetically identified Malalas’s source with a fragmentarily preserved monody on Antioch composed by Procopius of Gaza.⁷⁷

While the style of the text, therefore, was inspired by a long tradition of earthquake prose, many of its contents are clearly colored by Christian ideas. The whole narrative is styled to show God’s complete control over the situation. That God is held responsible is already evident from the term that is used to describe the earthquake: *θεομηνία*, “wrath of God.” This term, which follows rhetorical precepts for brevity and condenses the theological interpretation into one word, corresponds well with widespread contemporary thought.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Malalas emphasizes that earthquake and fire hit the city simultaneously, which made it impossible to escape: danger threatened not only from the earth but also from above through descending flames. Malalas repeats several times that those who fled, no matter where they turned, were annihilated indiscriminately.⁷⁹ The totality of the event appears as a central motif in every respect: *no* buildings remained except for peripheral areas, and *no* single church was left standing. On the other hand, when some people started robbing those who fled from the city, *every single one of them* was punished with terrible illnesses or sudden, inexplicable death.⁸⁰ In the continuous aftershocks, *no* further buildings were destroyed, as if, states Malalas, God wanted to show his compassion.⁸¹ This language of absolutes

75. Laura Carrara, “Johannes „der Rhetor“: Eine rhetorische Quelle für die Chronik des Malalas (zu Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16),” in *Die Weltchronik des Johannes Malalas: Quellenfragen*, ed. L. Carrara, C. Radtke-Jansen, and M. Meier (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017), 273–328.

76. For these and further features: Carrara, “Johannes der Rhetor,” 283–92.

77. Carrara, “Johannes „der Rhetor,” 294–97.

78. Meier, “Natural Disasters,” 255–56.

79. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16, (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 346.1.97–13). The Slavonic version is even clearer in its interpretation: “the fire surrounded everything in the city, as if it had received a command from God that every living thing should be burned” (Spinka, *Chronicle of John Malalas*, 126).

80. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 348.1.59–79).

81. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 349.1.96–98 [Slavonic]).

recurs in the account of the earthquake of 528, where it is stressed that *all* buildings recently repaired as well as *all* other buildings were destroyed.⁸² Such a stylization has implications for our assessment of this text as a source for the urban consequences of these disasters. Malalas's rhetorically structured account is directed at showing not only that the disasters were a result of God's wrath but also that they were ultimately controlled by God's will. Many of the details reported, particularly all those evoking the totality of death and destruction, clearly aim at proving this point and thus cannot be taken literally.

The unambiguous attribution of the disaster to God indicates that a deeper meaning is ascribed to the events. Assigning contingent events to the wrath of God is a well-known Christian motif, of course, with particularly close connections to Old Testamentary thought.⁸³ What exactly God was angry about is left unexplained in the preserved text. However, in the description of the outbreak of the plague of 542, a similar cause is explained more explicitly. In this case, God's anger had been evoked, ὅτι ἐπληθύνθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, because the lawless conducts of humans had multiplied.⁸⁴ This explanation was most probably directed at the inhabitants of Antioch.⁸⁵ Malalas thus seems to have viewed societal moral failings, rather than the failings of individuals (for example, imperial representatives or the emperor himself), at the roots of disaster. Only with the later reference to the punishment of robbers does God's judgment against individuals enter the narrative, which simultaneously introduces a thoroughly positive idea of God's righteous action. This rhetoric increasingly gains weight through its repetition. It is emphasized in several versions of the account that men, women, and children were miraculously rescued from the ruins after twenty, thirty, or even forty days.⁸⁶ Furthermore, Malalas highlights that a vision of the holy

82. This motif is not preserved in the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae, but it is in both John of Ephesus and Theophanes, which makes it very likely that it appeared in the original Malalas.

83. See Gen 11:1–9, 19:24 (NIV); Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter*, 346; Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 251.

84. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.92 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 407.1.12–13).

85. The reason for God's wrath is made explicit in the "Slavonic Malalas": "The wondrous God in his marvelous providence became so angry with the Antiochenes that he rose up against them" (Spinka, *Chronicle of John Malalas*, 126). Thurn has not added this passage to his edition, probably because this interpretation was too common and he could not exclude that it is a later addition; but even if it does not go back to Malalas, it at least shows that a medieval commentator would understand Malalas's text in this way.

86. Malalas, *Chronographia* (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 348.1.79–349.1.89) (twenty or thirty days); see the Slavonic version in Spinka, *Chronicle of John Malalas*, 30: twenty-one days; Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 46: thirty or forty days.

cross had been seen in the sky above the city, inciting the survivors to weep and pray in repentance.⁸⁷ Immediately after this, the text explains that God had held his hand over the city during the continuous aftershocks, offering his protection.

For the earthquake of 528, the idea that God protected the city is elaborated further (even though most of this is preserved only in the parallel tradition). Thus, God's grace becomes evident in that the city does not go up in flames this time. While in the days after the earthquake of 526, people had sung the *Kyrie eleison*, then in 528, after the repeated blows, repentance reached a new high: people went barefoot in processions outside the city and threw themselves into the snow in supplications for God's mercy. Again, God showed his compassion, this time by sending a pious man who told the citizens to paint an apotropaic phrase over their doors: "Christ is with us. Stand." (Χριστὸς μεθ' ἡμῶν· στήτε). After the citizens had followed this advice, "God's anger stopped" (ἔσθη).⁸⁸ The repeated emphasis not only on the wrath but also on the grace shown by God quite plainly illuminates the general idea of the narrative. The text attempts to frame a horrible event positively: everything that happens follows a heavenly plan designed for specific reasons (the sins of Antioch's inhabitants). Such an interpretation leaves repentance as an option, offering consolation for the survivors. In the process of multiple disasters followed by intensifying repentance, the city is purified. How far this perception went is best illuminated by the famous renaming of the city: it was in the wake of these repeated purifications through horrible disasters that the city was called Theoupolis, the city of God.⁸⁹

87. Malalas, *Chronographia* (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 349.189–93); cf. Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 46, where a different order of events is given: the miraculous savings is presented as a result of the vision (respectively the prayers incited by it).

88. Theophanes, *Chronographia* (De Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, 178.1.4–5); cf. Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 68.

89. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.29; Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.6; Theophanes, *Chronographia* (De Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, 178.1.5–7). On the renaming see Downey, *History of Antioch*, 529–30; Evangelos Chrysos, "Eine Konjektur zu Johannes Malalas," *Jahrbuch der österreichischen byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 15 (1966): 147–52, who shows that the attribution of the renaming to a stimulus by St. Symeon Thaumaturgus is an interpolation and that the original text, in accordance with Evagrius and Theophanes, must have stated that the renaming was ordered by Justinian. The new name was adopted in the official coinage (Warwick Wroth, *Catalogue of the Imperial Byzantine Coins in the British Museum*, vol. 1 [London: British Museum, 1908], 53–61) and seems to have survived at least until Arabic times: *MalKom*, 18.29.1.1–2/9, <https://malalas.hadw-bw.de/kommentar/18/29>.

4. PROCOPIUS'S *DE BELLIS* AND THE SACK OF ANTIOCH

Procopius's well-known writings, with their classicizing touch, show the sixth century from a somewhat different viewpoint.⁹⁰ Written and at least partly published throughout the 540s and 550s, they offer an oscillating picture of the reign of Justinian. Procopius's three works—*De bellis*, *Historia arcana*, and *De aedificiis*—have caused some irritation among modern scholars due to their highly divergent judgments about Justinianic rule.⁹¹ In this context, the *Historia arcana*, with its strong critical stance, has sometimes been seen as providing the key to understanding Procopius's political opinions.⁹² However, all three works do share several common features, and it seems important to keep the factor of genre in mind when assessing the differing expressions of opinion.⁹³

One thing that all three works have in common is that they comment on the disasters at Antioch under Justinian. The *Historia arcana* features such events only briefly, but all the more prominently: in a paradigmatic passage slandering the emperor as a “demon in human form,” Procopius accumulates a whole series of disasters that had happened during Justinian's reign, including earthquakes at Antioch and other cities, which, according to the author, cost countless lives.⁹⁴ Given the invective character of the passage, the testimony not only remains superficial but also needs to be viewed with particular

90. This observation should not, however, obscure the circumstance that Malalas's and Procopius's writings, which are the two major contemporary sources for the reign of Justinian, have in common: For comparative approaches see Roger Scott, “Malalas and His Contemporaries,” in Jeffreys, *Studies in John Malalas*, 67–85; Elizabeth Jeffreys, “Malalas, Procopius and Justinian's Buildings,” *Antiquité Tardive* 8 (2000): 73–79; Geoffrey Greatrex, “Malalas and Procopius,” in Meier et al., *Die Weltchronik des Johannes Malalas*, 169–85; Ian Colvin, “Comparing Procopius and Malalas,” in *Procopius of Caesarea: Literary and Historical Interpretations*, ed. Christopher Lillington-Martin and Elodie Turquois (New York: Routledge, 2018), 201–14; Jonas Borsch and Christine Radtki-Jansen, “Diplomaten und Anekdoten: Mündliche Quellen bei Malalas?” in Carrara et al., *Die Weltchronik des Johannes Malalas*, 235–59 at 240–49.

91. Edition: J. Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vols. 1–4 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1962–1964).

92. See especially Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

93. See Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1985). For an overview of more recent scholarship on Procopius see Geoffrey Greatrex, “Perceptions of Procopius in Recent Scholarship,” *Histos* 8 (2014): 76–121, addenda 121a–c.

94. Procopius, *Historia Arcana* 18.36–45. See the commentary ad loc. in Mischa Meier and Hartmut Leppin, eds., *Prokop Anekdoten: Geheimgeschichte des Kaisers von Byzanz. Übersetzt und herausgegeben von Otto Veh* (Düsseldorf and Zürich: Artemis, 2005), 316, 322, on the centrality of chapter 18 and this particular passage to Procopius's narrative. For the diagnosis of phases of unrest in the natural world as a literary motif, see Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 285–300.

caution considering its source value. A much more detailed description is to be found in *De bellis* considering the sack of Antioch in 540. Procopius describes the circumstances under which the Persian army under Chosroes could capture the city but also provides some information on the previous urban features of the city as well as on the destruction caused by the Persians.⁹⁵

The passage on the sack of 540 belongs to the context of Procopius's account of a larger series of events. The Persian capture of Antioch forms the dramatic peak of a narrative describing the Great King Chosroes's unimpaired raid in Rome's eastern provinces, which fills about half of the long second book of *De bellis*.⁹⁶ Chosroes invaded Syria in the spring of 540. Since the Roman forces were concentrated in the West, his army encountered no significant resistance and was able, in fast succession, to capture or extort ransom from most of the major cities of the region, among which Antioch undoubtedly was the most eminent.⁹⁷ Already Procopius's report about Chosroes's advance is accompanied by news about Antioch that foreshadows the fate of this city. Thus, during the inspection of Antioch's city wall, a rock near the section of the wall running in the hills is identified as a risk, but the faulty construction cannot be corrected in time.⁹⁸ Megas, the bishop of Beroia, begins negotiations with Chosroes early on, but despite initial successes, these attempts eventually fail.⁹⁹ Upon Chosroes's arrival at the city gates, the inhabitants of Antioch, "always engaged in disorderly jesting," provoke the Persian army unnecessarily, which arouses the anger of the Great King to such an extent that he decides to attack without further negotiations.¹⁰⁰

95. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.6.9–2.9.

96. The constellations that led to the raid are described in Procopius, *De bellis* 2.1–4; Chosroes's campaign at 2.5–14, with Antioch's capture and destruction at 2.8–10 and the relocation of its inhabitants at 2.14.1–7.

97. On these events, see Downey, *History of Antioch*, 533–46; for an analysis of the symbolical dimension of Chosroes's campaign, see Henning Börm, "Der Perserkönig im Imperium Romanum: Chosroes I. und der sasanidische Einfall in das Oströmische Reich 540 n. Chr.," *Chiron* 36 (2006): 299–328.

98. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.6.10–5.

99. For the negotiations between Megas and Chosroes, which are woven into reports of the siege, starvation, and plundering of neighboring cities, see Procopius, *De bellis* 2.6.16–25. The Roman envoy Julianus refuses to allow payments to the Great King: 2.7.14–16.

100. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.8.6–7, quotation at paragraph 6: γελίοις τε καὶ ἀταξία ἰκανῶς ἔχονται; Jakob Haury, ed., *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, 1:184.124–185.11; Henry B. Dewing, trans., *Procopius: The Wars of Justinian*, revised and modernized with an introduction and notes by Anthony Kaldellis (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014), 89.

The Persians carried out their offensive via the weak spot in the mountains. Procopius emphasizes that a better tactic (occupying the aforementioned rock with three hundred men) could have prohibited the Persian success, but fate did not allow this to happen, and the hard-fought battle was finally lost. With the Roman soldiers fleeing and only some Antiochene men resisting, Chosroes was finally able to take the city.¹⁰¹ Enraged once more, as Procopius states, by the resistance of the Antiochenes and incited by one of his generals, he decided to plunder and burn the city and enslave its inhabitants.¹⁰²

The account of this destruction remains short: Procopius insists that the Persians set fire to all parts of the city, with only a few exceptions. The cathedral was saved through the pleas of the envoys, the Kerateion district survived due to its location on the outskirts of the city, and the church of Julian and its surroundings were spared because the envoys lived there. The city wall was left untouched—most probably because it would have required too much effort to destroy it.¹⁰³

For an author like Procopius, who had been personally involved in Roman military affairs as part of the retinue of Justinian's most important general, Belisarius (he had, inter alia, accompanied Belisarius in the East before 540 and perhaps also later), the uncontested triumph of the Persian king posed a major explanatory problem. Averil Cameron has suggested that the *De bellis* deal with this problem by evasion: Procopius centers his account around the figure of Chosroes, who is portrayed using the well-known topoi of the eastern despot.¹⁰⁴ In this context, the Persian treatment of Antioch serves as a paradigmatic case highlighting the Great King's fallacies. The mere fact of Antiochene resistance suffices for him to wreak havoc across the city. Throughout the whole narrative, Procopius insists on describing Chosroes in terms that emphasize his vengefulness, cruelty, greed, deceitfulness, and hypocrisy.¹⁰⁵ This preoccupation with the Persian ruler is interpreted by Cameron as a means of distracting the reader from the inadequate Roman

101. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.8.8–19, a better tactic being prohibited by fate: 2.8.13–4.

102. Procopius, *De bellis*, 2.9.14, 2.9.17; the king being upset by the Antiochene resistance: 2.9.1–6; influence of the general Zabergan: 2.8.30–32.

103. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.9.15–18, 2.10.6–9; on the wall, see Downey, *History of Antioch*, 545.

104. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 164–65; cf. Whitby, "Procopius and Antioch," 539–40.

105. See for example Procopius, *De bellis* 2.6.20, 2.7.11, 2.7.19–33, 2.10.10–15. Chosroes's bad character traits are summarized most explicitly in the negotiations after his capture of Antioch: 2.9.7–11.

military response to the attack.¹⁰⁶ She points out that the reasons for the Persian success are openly addressed only in a supernatural context. Rather than discussing the obvious Roman defensive weaknesses, Procopius indulged himself in “musings on the mysterious working of God and fortune.”¹⁰⁷

While these observations seem apt to me, it should be stressed that Procopius’s thoughts on the power of fortune mirror a mode of coping with contingency that was widespread by the time he was writing. The second half of the sixth century is marked by a noticeable intensification of thought on contingency, as can abundantly be shown in contemporary literature.¹⁰⁸ Disastrous events, which are recorded in high numbers throughout the sixth century (not only for Antioch but for the whole empire), have certainly contributed to this phenomenon.¹⁰⁹

Procopius is not the only sixth-century author who was troubled by the question of how God could inflict such terrible disasters on mankind.¹¹⁰ In fact, in their involvement with this question, the two contemporaries Procopius and Malalas reveal certain parallels. Malalas represents the traditional answer of Jewish-Christian thought: God’s anger is inflicted on those who have sinned. He tries to show this by highlighting stories of robbers being righteously punished through sudden death. Procopius explicitly leaves the question open: “I cannot understand why it should be the will of God to exalt the fortunes of a man or a place, and then to cast them down and to destroy

106. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 164: “by casting the narrative in the shape of a drama in which Chosroes is the main character, Procopius avoids the need for an explanation of the poor state of Byzantine defence.”

107. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 165, citing Procopius, *De bellis* 2.10, see also 2.8.14 (mixed with criticism about the lack of initiative shown by the defenders), 2.9.1–3 (from Chosroes’s perspective).

108. Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter*, is the central study on this topic. A survey of contemporary thought on disasters and contingency is offered at 45–100.

109. For a list of disasters between 500 and 565, see Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter*, 656–70. One may discuss whether the prevalence of catastrophes in the sixth century was factual, as Meier holds, or a discursive feature of the specific predispositions of the time, e.g., an increasing importance of apocalyptic thought recognizable since the late fifth century. See Wolfram Brandes, “Anastasios ó dikopoc: Endzeiterwartung und Kaiserkritik in Byzanz um 500 n. Chr.,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 90 (1997): 24–63, may have fostered a particularly high attention to ominous events.

110. See Agathias, *Historiarum libri quinque* 5.4.3, 5.4.6, who is worried by the question of how God could punish all people for the sins of a few. From a personal perspective, Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.23, asks himself why his own children had died of the plague while those of the heathens still lived. It is the Christian coloring of this discourse that makes me think of the multiple references to *Tyche* in this context as a phenomenon of stylistic classicism rather than as an expression of pagan tendencies. See on this discussion Greatrex, “Perceptions of Procopius,” 92n62.

them for no cause that is apparent to us.”¹¹¹ As we have seen, Procopius does explain how the terrible fate of Antioch came to be: a morally depraved Persian ruler had launched an invasion in breach of a treaty. The Roman defense had proven ineffective, and bad decisions had been made in the negotiations. The inhabitants of Antioch had shown themselves reckless and arrogant in the moment of utmost danger. Procopius’s point, however, is that all of this had been unavoidable because the fate of the city had already been decided from the start. In the fights at the city walls, a better strategy was not found, since “it was fated for Antioch to be destroyed by this army of the Medes.”¹¹² The disaster itself had been announced by numerous signs long since.¹¹³ The Great King had been brought to the throne by God’s will, despite all his moral failings.¹¹⁴

Procopius’s idea that Antioch was dealing with a long-awaited fate also emerges from his account on Chosroes’s treatment of neighboring cities that he had captured. While Chosroes remains equally deceitful throughout the whole narrative, a better fate awaited the other cities. The most significant case is Edessa, which was supernaturally protected by the famous Abgar letter, a letter allegedly written from the hand of Jesus. Due to heavenly protection, Chosroes and his army became lost twice on the way to the city; when they finally arrived, the Great King was struck by a sudden illness and therefore refrained from launching an attack. Procopius gives a depiction of this incident in which no doubt about the apparent miracle is made explicit. Furthermore, he gives a detailed account of the so-called Abgar legend comprising a reference to the incarnation of Christ.¹¹⁵ What emerges is

111. Dewing and Kaldellis, *Prokopios*, 93.

112. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.8.14 (Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, 1:186.18–9): ἔδει Αντιοχείας τούτῳ τῷ Μήδων στρατῷ ἀπολέσθαι (Dewing and Kaldellis, *Prokopios*, 90).

113. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.10.1–3, 2.14.5–7 (with one of the signs being the earthquake of 526). The idea that misfortunes are announced by divine signs is of course a motif well known from classical pagan historiography. However, it was also popular in contemporary Christian culture, and pagan divination could be incorporated into Christian teleology: see for example the alleged announcement of future earthquakes to Antioch by the first century pagan philosopher Apollonius of Tyana in Malalas, *Chronographia* 10.51.

114. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.9.12–13. Procopius speaks of *Tyche* but closes with an address to God: “But as for these matters, let them be as God wishes” (ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ὅπῃ τῷ θεῷ φίλον ἐχέτω) (Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, 1:192.117–18; Dewing and Kaldellis, *Prokopios*, 92).

115. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.12.8–30, on the incarnation 2.12.22; see also 2.26.1–4 for a second rescue of the city in 544. Anthony Kaldellis, “Procopius’ Persian War: A Thematic and Literary Analysis,” in *History as Literature in Byzantium*, ed. R. Macridis (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 253–73 at 271–73, argues that Procopius’s account cannot be taken at face value; but see Dariusz Brodka, “Prokopios von Kaisareia und die Abgarlegende,” *Eos* 100 (2013): 349–60, particularly at 356–59.

a narrative that has some cities being saved from God's hand,¹¹⁶ while Antioch is firmly destined to fall. Human agency advances this heavenly plan.

By attributing this disaster to a preconceived plan, the narrative of Procopius resembles that of Malalas. Here again, investigating the narrative has some implications for our understanding of the way the destruction itself is represented. Procopius unambiguously presents Antioch's destruction as the climax of his account of Chosroes's raid. Already some years before the raid, the Persians regarded this city as the ultimate trophy of their invasion.¹¹⁷ In a retrospective assessment, the capture of the city formed the dramatic peak of a series of disasters: under Anastasius, the sacred grove at Daphne (Antioch's suburban sanctuary) had been uprooted by a storm; under Justin I, an earthquake had killed 300,000 people; now, the city was destroyed completely.¹¹⁸ The totality of destruction here not only serves as a means of surpassing the preceding disaster (the urban impact of which is not considered at all), it also once again evokes the idea of the deep fall of Antioch from its status as the preeminent city of the East into a heap of rubble. While Procopius's preoccupation with the changing fates of the world, exemplified in the case of Antioch, should be taken seriously, we should be well aware that such a literary narrative, as in Malalas, builds on extremes. The glory of the city in the time before the disaster (as well as the haughtiness of its inhabitants) must be magnified, while its future fate needs to be painted as dark as possible. The fact that in *De bellis* Antioch fades from view after the Persian destruction corresponds with this view.¹¹⁹

with reasonable arguments against this. For a similar assessment, see Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 116. It is interesting that there should be a second version of Chosroes's decision not to attack the city, cited a little later: here, the Persian *magoi* keep the king from attacking because of a bad omen: Chosroes had stretched out his right hand toward the city on arrival; the *magoi* saw in this an indication of salvation. This may be seen as another parallel to Malalas, where even pagan kings and philosophers bear witness to God's miraculous workings (see my note 113).

116. Edessa is not the only example: For a miracle worked through the holy cross at Apameia saving the city from total destruction, see 2.11.14–27, with expressions of opinion at 2.11.25 and 2.11.28, and Brodka, "Prokopios," 350n4, arguing against Kaldellis, "Procopius' Persian Wars," 272, who detects a subtle irony in this episode, too.

117. In a speech held by the Sarazen leader Alamundaros to Kavhad I in 531: Procopius, *De bellis* 1.17.36.

118. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.14.5–7.

119. The only later mention of Antioch in the *De bellis* consists of a short back reference to the destruction in negotiations at Edessa: 2.26.18. Another reference to Antioch's destruction can be found in Procopius, *Bellum Gothicum* 4.7.11.

5. MALALAS, PROCOPIUS, AND THE CITY OF THEOUPOLIS

The picture that Downey and others reconstructed when taking together Malalas's and Procopius's accounts on the fate of Antioch in the first half of the sixth century is one of multiple destructions: only shortly after being painstakingly restored from the debris of the fires and earthquake of 525/26, the city was again razed to the ground in 528. And as if these trials had not been enough, only a decade later, the Persian army under Chosroes accomplished the work of destruction. We have already seen that the narrative strategies applied by our two main witnesses for these events make it necessary to exercise caution in the evaluation of their testimonies. It is even more important, however, that when looking at what the two authors tell us beyond the immediate destruction, a different narrative can be grasped. In Malalas, considerable space is dedicated to rebuilding measures, an approach quite typical for the author's general mode of displaying disasters. While Procopius's *De bellis* lose sight of Antioch after its destruction by the Persians, in the *De aedificiis*, with their strongly divergent outlook, Procopius dedicates quite some space to the reconstruction of the city. According to this account, the city was restored to a state that even surpassed that of former Antioch in splendor and strength (κόσμου τε καὶ ὀχυρώματος).¹²⁰

In Malalas's *Chronographia*, as mentioned before, depictions of disaster at Antioch and other cities are one of the most notorious elements. In the vast majority of these accounts, measures are reported that are undertaken by the emperor or by officials and aim at providing relief.¹²¹ Such depictions are part of an interpretative pattern underlying the complete second half of the work. Natural events not only visualize the admirable—and sometimes dreadful—workings of the Lord, but the corresponding reports also display the circumstance that God would regularly lift disaster-stricken societies through the helping hand of the emperor.¹²²

120. Procopius, *De aedificiis* 2.10.2 (Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, 1:76.l13–15).

121. For disasters followed by relief (from the beginning of imperial times until the beginning of Justinian's reign), see Malalas, *Chronographia* 10.3, 10.18, 10.23, 10.43, 10.46, 10.53, 11.8–9, 11.16, 12.11, 12.28, 12.38, 12.48, 13.12, 14.12, 14.20, 14.22, 14.29, 14.36, 14.43, 15.4, 15.11, 16.18, 17.14, 17.15, 17.16–19, 18.19, 18.27–29. Disasters without relief mentioned in the extant text version (which does not exclude that the original version offered such information): 10.10, 10.28, 12.33, 13.35. In the second part of book 18 (which may have been written by a different hand), the depiction of disasters changes, making comparison difficult. For lists of disasters in Malalas, see Jeffreys, "Chronological Structures in Malalas," 155–59; Meier, "Natural Disasters," 249n50.

122. See for this observation Meier, "Natural Disasters," 258–59; cf. Borsch, "Stabilization through Memory."

Accounts of the disasters of the 520s, while displaying in an unusually detailed form the heaven-born destruction, also offer numerous details that describe the imperial responses. These have several dimensions: on their initiative or via intermediaries, Justin and Justinian endow the city with enormous funds.¹²³ Justinian and his wife, Theodora, are associated with the donation of several specific buildings. The emperor himself is said to have built (κτίσας / ἔκτισεν) churches of the Theotokos and of Kosmas and Damian, a hospice, baths, and cisterns, while a church of the Archangel Michael and a basilica are attributed to his wife Theodora.¹²⁴ After the earthquake of 528, indirect relief measures, namely the exemption from taxes and the appointment of some of the land owners to the rank of *viri illustres* (which entailed fiscal privileges), are undertaken.¹²⁵ A last, and quite important, dimension of the narrative lies in the emperor's affectionate response: Justin dedicates himself to public rites of mourning over Antioch, which, as is explicitly stressed, he had personally known from a longer visit.¹²⁶ One of the very first actions ascribed to Justinian after his appointment as co-regent is to send money to Antioch; and in the following chapter, we hear about his and Theodora's building measures. The whole closing of Malalas's seventeenth book is dedicated to showing the two emperors' enormous interest in reconstructing the city.¹²⁷

After the fire of 525 and the earthquake of 528, references to the help received from the emperor are shorter, as are reports on the disasters themselves. However, both reports fit equally well in Malalas's general narrative. He does not offer a linear story of destruction and subsequent decline but rather a narrative of circular development where misfortune is followed by

123. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.14 (after the fire of 525): two *kentenaria* (= 200 pounds of gold); 17.16 (after the earthquake of 526): "many" (πολλά) *kentenaria*; 17.17: two *kentenaria*, then "much money" (χρήματα πολλά), then a promise of unlimited funds; 17.18 (Justinian): large sums (πολλά ἐχαρίσατο); 17.22 (both emperors): 30 *kentenaria* plus ten *kentenaria* a little later.

124. Donation (πολλά ἐχαρίσατο τῇ αὐτῇ τῶν Ἀντιοχείων πόλει): Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.18 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 351.1.40–41); buildings: Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.19; on the individual buildings, see *MalKom*, ad loc., <https://malalas.hadw-bw.de/kommentar/17/19>.

125. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.29. For the tax benefits, see Alexander Kazhdan, "s.v. *illustres*," *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 2, 1991.

126. Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.16 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 349–50.18–18) (taken from the Slavonic version) and 17.17 (Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 350.1.30–32). On the imperial tradition and the Christian context of such mourning, see Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 261–62.

127. This considers chapters 17.17 (first relief measures) to 17.22 (Antiochean envoys collect money at Constantinople). The last chapter, 17.23, briefly notes the death of Justin.

reconstruction and, in Christian times, can foster the purification of society. As mentioned, this kind of interpretation is prevalent throughout large parts of his work. For Antioch, as for other cities, the frequent occurrence of earthquakes and the fact that these events are counted remind the reader that the city had long been prone to disasters. This notion is also enforced by two notes on pagan *apotropaia* set up in the city.¹²⁸ The permanent threat nevertheless doesn't perceptibly affect the city's well-being in the long term. On the contrary, one of the disasters (the earliest one) is even said to have rendered the city "better" (βελτίων) than before.¹²⁹

That Malalas does not see the earthquakes as signs of decline seems to be mirrored elsewhere in the text. As has been well established in recent years, the intensification of interest in disasters, displayed by sixth-century texts like the *Chronographia*, goes back to millennial fears. The transitory phase between the sixth and the seventh millennium, the Millennium of God, had been calculated to arrive around 500 CE.¹³⁰ It was expected to be accompanied by disastrous events. At the beginning of Book 18, Malalas makes an explicit statement about this question by inserting one out of two chronological digressions (the first of which had been undertaken at the beginning of Book 10, that is, immediately following the birth of Christ).¹³¹ Malalas informs his readers that, according to well-established calculations, the sixth millennium had already ended. This implies that for him, the Kingdom of God was now present—an idea explicitly pronounced and framed positively in the Slavonic Malalas version.¹³² The overall outlook that can be derived

128. Malalas, *Chronographia* 10.51 (a column), 13.3 (a statue of Poseidon). Both are marked as being useless, but the important point is that Malalas imagined the former inhabitants of the city as being aware of seismic risks.

129. Malalas, *Chronographia* 8.24

130. B. Croke, "Byzantine Chronicle Writing I: The Early Development of Byzantine Chronicles," in Jeffreys et al., *Studies in John Malalas*, 27–38 at 35; Brandes, "Anastasios ó δικορος," 29–30; Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter*, 11–22. See also Jeffreys, "Chronological Structures in Malalas," 118–20, on Malalas's own calculations.

131. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.8.; for the earlier of these two digressions, see 10.2; see also 15.16 with a short calculation "from Adam" placed right before the beginning of the reign of Anastasius, whose reign according to some contemporaneous commentators included the ominous year 500. This calculation seems to have been longer originally: Jeffreys, "Chronological Structures in Malalas," 117–18.

132. "And in the seventh millennium and the seventh indiction grace entered the world through the Theotokos, with the true God" (Spinka, *Chronicle of John Malalas*, 136). The sentence is corrupt: Thurn (*Ioannis Malalae chronographia*, 357.1.79–81) has adapted the text in consideration of S. Franklin, "An obscure sentence in the Slavonic translation of the chronicle of John Malalas," *Byzantinoslavica* 47 (1986): 189–95. However, the positive framing seems clear: see the German

from this important passage is thus that according to the author, the joyful times of God's rule had begun. The sense of the manifold and continued disasters in this context is to be sought in the purification of the affected cities and their (surviving) inhabitants. Antioch, under its new name Theopolis, is transferred into the hands of God. The only following earthquake at Antioch mentioned in the *Chronographia*, datable to about 533, is described as φοβερός (fearful) but ἀβλαβής (not harming).¹³³

The emphatically positive outlook of the account in Procopius's *De aedificiis* has already been mentioned. According to Procopius, the destruction by the Persians allowed the emperor to enhance the city's qualities. Procopius describes the rebuilding as a direct answer to the sack (which is treated in a small digression at the beginning of the account). Justinian's measures not only rendered the city more beautiful but also gave her so much more strength (ἀσφαλείας) that barbarous attacks or ambushes (alluding to Chosroes's purported breach of contract) would not be able to harm the city anymore in the future. The measures that Procopius describes included the straightening of parts of the city wall, which implies that the area enclosed by the circuit walls was reduced in size. In this regard, Procopius points out that in its earlier form, the wall had "in some places uselessly [enclosed] the level ground and in others the summits of the mountain."¹³⁴ Regarding the mountains, he explicitly states that this meant uninhabited zones.¹³⁵ In the plains, says Procopius, Justinian had the river Orontes redirected to keep it close to the walls. For him, all these measures "relieved the city of the danger arising from its excessive size and recovered the protection afforded by the

translation in J. Thurn and M. Meier, eds., *Johannes Malalas, Weltchronik: Übersetzt von Johannes Thurn und Mischa Meier* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2009), 443: "dass das 7. Jahrtausend glücklich gegenwärtig ist." A positive interpretation of ominous events may not have been so unusual in Late Antiquity after all: see Armin F. Bergmaier, "Natural Disasters and Time: Non-Eschatological Perceptions of Earthquakes in Late Antiquity and Medieval History," *Millennium* 18 (2021): 155–74. Bergmaier's interpretation of Malalas as non-eschatological, however, misses the point: If Malalas states that the seventh millennium is present, he does accept the framework of eschatology but gives it a positive spin by applying a new dating.

133. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.79. This event may already be part of the second redaction; see Croke, "Malalas, the Man," 19. In contrast to the earlier cases, it is not counted among the πάθη that struck the city.

134. Procopius, *De aedificiis* 2.10.3 (Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, 4:76.117–18): πῆ μὲν τὰ πεδία περιβάλλον οὐδενὶ λόγῳ, πῆ δὲ τὰς τῶν σκοπέλων ὑπερβολάς; translation from *Procopius: On Buildings; General Index*, trans. H. B. Dewing and Glanville Downey, Loeb Classical Library 343 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 165.

135. Procopius, *De aedificiis* 2.10.11–12.

Orontes.”¹³⁶ This idea of an enhancement of the city’s protection through urban restructuring is also repeated in the next section of the report in which Procopius describes construction undertaken at the Iron Gate. In this case, the impending threat emanates not from possible future invaders but from a dangerous wild torrent flowing down from the neighboring mountains. According to Procopius, this torrent, which had brought terrible destruction over the city in past times, was completely tamed.¹³⁷ In this theme of attention to future protection, we find another common element with Malalas: heavenly protection is sought and found after the city had been destroyed through God’s will. In Procopius, the protection appears more profane but is directed against exterior threats (enemies, natural risks) as well. In both accounts, Justinian contributes to the development by mobilizing funds for reconstruction and, in Malalas’s case, by lending the city its new name, Theoupolis. It is telling that Procopius, on his part, associates the new name to the rebuilding after the Persian sack, since he first mentions it at precisely this point: “Antioch, which is now called Theoupolis.”¹³⁸

The last part of the report turns to the rebuilding of the inner city. Procopius emphasizes complete destruction and the necessity to implement a completely new design. This new design comprises several aspects: first, a new street layout is put up, since without the parcels of the city being clearly demarcated, no one dared to build. Second, within this new layout, Justinian equips the city with *fora*, water infrastructure, and with amenities like theaters and baths, all of which—and this seems to be implied—are reminiscent of the traditional furnishing of classical cities. The building of private houses, too, is supported. The third point, finally, considers the sacred features of the city: Justinian donates a new church for the Theotokos, which is supplied with generous funds, as well as a church dedicated to the Archangel Michael. He also provides buildings and amenities for the sick and poor as well as for strangers (τοῖς ξένοις), places where the underprivileged can be nursed and healed by pious people.¹³⁹

136. Procopius, *De aedificiis* 2.10.7 (Haury, *Procopii Opera*, 4:77.l. 4–6): τε καὶ τὸ σφαλερὸν τῆς ἀμετρίας ἀνῆκε τῇ πόλει καὶ τὴν ἐκ τοῦ Ὀρόντου ἀσφάλειαν ἀνεσώσατο (Dewing and Downy, *Procopius*, 165).

137. Procopius, *De aedificiis* 2.10.15–18.

138. Αντιόχειαν, ἢ νῦν Θεούπολις ἐπικέκληται: Procopius, *De aedificiis* 2.10.2 (Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, 4:76.l.13–14), translation from Dewing, *On Buildings*, 165. By contrast, Procopius never mentions this new name in *De bellis*, even though they were accomplished around 550, twenty years after the renaming. This of course corresponds to the classicist language used in this work.

139. Procopius, *De aedificiis* 2.10.24–25.

Both authors, therefore, offer a story with a happy ending. The city had been destroyed, yes; but it had also been lifted up again. After the terrible destructions, according to both authors, a need for protection was met in the new design of the city. The expression of this need aligns with larger developments of the sixth century. As has been argued by Cameron and others, the Eastern Roman Empire from the mid-sixth to the early-seventh century underwent a process of change that was associated with a sharp increase in the importance of urban rituals as well as in the cult of icons and the veneration of the Holy Virgin. This process fostered the religious and ideological integration of the empire and thereby contributed to its survival throughout the troubling times of the later seventh century.¹⁴⁰ The idea of supernatural protection for societies threatened by disasters is central in this development, and it is no coincidence that it culminates in the rescue of Constantinople from the Persians and Avars through the help of the Holy Virgin.¹⁴¹ If the authors were strongly occupied by the question of heavenly justice in the face of contemporary disasters, then answers were found, too. According to Malalas, when the inhabitants of Antioch turned to God in supplication, he showed them ways of protecting their homes and made the earthquakes cease. The emperor, as God's representative on earth, took care of reconstruction. The renaming of the city to Theoupolis displayed its future protection. Procopius's *De bellis* documents well the forms that such safeguards could take: Apameia and Edessa, in the eyes of many of their inhabitants, had been rescued through the relic of the holy cross and the Abgar letter. Two incidents mentioned by Malalas for the years preceding the earthquakes, the transfer of the holy relics of Marinus to the sanctuary of Julian and of a holy imperial robe to the church of Cassianus, may well

140. Averil Cameron, "Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium," *Past & Present* 84 (1979): 3–35, who concentrates on the late sixth century but envisages a long-term development. Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter*, 608–38, shows for one important aspect within this complex, the "sacralization" of the emperor, that its roots reach well back into Justinianic times. Cyril Mango, "Constantinople as Theotokoupolis," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milano: Skira, 2000), 17–25 at 21, with a more critical stance toward Cameron's considerations, argues that the development started even earlier. For the importance of the religious process of change for the Roman Empire's resilience in the century following the Arab invasions, see John F. Haldon, *The Empire That Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640–740* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 103 (who adopts Cameron's argument).

141. Cameron, "Images of Authority," 5–6, 18–24.

mirror hopes for similar forms of patronage.¹⁴² Patronage could also be provided by the bishops of cities, who, as we can see repeatedly, now typically led negotiations or supplicatory missions.¹⁴³ This development not only documents a new social significance but may also reflect the hope of attracting God's goodwill. With a view to Antioch's rebuilding, finally, both Malalas and Procopius agree in that they highlight the building of churches for patron saints such as the Virgin or Archangel Michael.

Despite—or even because of—these parallels, Malalas and Procopius actually differ perceptibly about what happened at different chronological points. In the last part of the *Chronographia* (which may, one should remember, have been written by a different author), the capture of Antioch by Chosroes is briefly evoked, but we hear nothing at all about the destruction of the city.¹⁴⁴ In turn, only the disaster of 526 is mentioned in Procopius's *De bellis*, who presents this event as one of high mortality, but nevertheless as a mere prelude to the disaster of 540. This discrepancy needs some explanation. It leads to the final question of this paper: What can these narratives tell us about the actual urban development of the city in the mid-sixth century and beyond?

6. DECLINE, CONTINUITY, RESILIENCE?

How can we integrate our findings on Malalas's and Procopius's disaster narratives into a more general picture? The preceding discussion has confirmed one important aspect that scholars who emphasize decline have highlighted: contemporaries of the earthquakes of the 520s and the Persian sack of 540 experienced these events as major catastrophes that threatened to exceed societal coping capacities. Our two main authors, however, also stress that in the long term, Antiochean society proved resilient in that it found

142. For the translation of Marinus's relics, see Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.49; for the transfer of the robe, 18.45. The sacral context of the latter donation can be derived quite well from a comparison with a story in *De aedificiis*, where the emperor's robe is miraculously turned into a secondary relic: Procopius, *De aedificiis* 1.7.14–16. According to Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.35, when the relics of a holy person called Thomas were transferred to Antioch during the time of the Justinianic plague, the epidemic ended; the Antiocheans still celebrated this man in Evagrius's times (i.e., around the end of the sixth century).

143. In Malalas, *Chronographia* 17.22, the *comes Orientis* Zacharias is joined in a delegation to Constantinople by the bishop of Amida. Several of the negotiations described by Procopius between the eastern cities and Chosroes are led by the local clergy: see Procopius, *De bellis* 2.5.13–24, 2.5.29–33, 2.6.16–25, 2.11.14–38.

144. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.87.

ways to successfully overcome the consequences of the disasters. Apart from this, we have also seen differences in their perceptions: Malalas and Procopius attribute different importance to the individual events.

For Antioch, of course, the occurrence of disasters was not new. Two particularly serious cases are reported by Iustinus, who knows about an earthquake that took 170,000 lives in the first century BCE, and Cassius Dio, who offers a long and extremely dramatic account of a major earthquake under Trajan.¹⁴⁵ It is curious that in Malalas, with his strong interest in the disaster at Antioch, the first of these is not mentioned at all and the second one is treated only briefly.¹⁴⁶ This shows how strongly the depiction of such events depends upon perspective, and certainly also upon the sources available to the commentators. Of course, Cassius Dio did not merely invent his assessment that the earthquake under Trajan was a particularly serious event, and neither did Malalas for his description of the quake of 526. In both cases, however, it is probable that a rhetorically colored source lies at the origin of the dramatic representation.¹⁴⁷ What is certain is that late antique, just like ancient, representations of disaster follow narrative patterns in which the steep decline of the respective city forms a central motif.¹⁴⁸ This should discourage us from concentrating our source criticism too one-sidedly on Procopius's *De aedificiis*. The fact that Malalas's work is annalistic in character doesn't make it less prone to distortion.

Apart from their different assessments of individual events, Malalas and Procopius also display some conspicuous similarities, which may, however, be seen as contradictory. They both report that several religious buildings—the church of the Theotokos, the church of Archangel Michael, and a hospice—were restored after the earthquake of 526 (Malalas) or after the Persian sack (Procopius). The similarity of the descriptions is striking. Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen considered that Procopius may have redated measures undertaken by Justinian in the wake of the earthquake to after 540. Their main arguments are the “suspicious” timing of Procopius's report and the

145. Iustinus, *Epitoma* 40.2.1; Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 68.24–25.

146. That the rebuilding of a Bouleuterion by Pompeius, described in Malalas, *Chronographia* 8.29, can be connected to the earthquake mentioned by Iustinus remains uncertain; see Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 228–29n28. The earthquake under Trajan is described in 11.8, with rebuilding measures that are likely to be related to the event at 11.9.

147. For Cassius Dio, see Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 237–38; for Malalas, see my section 3.

148. See my section 3; Borsch, *Erschütterte Welt*, 266.

panegyric character of his work.¹⁴⁹ However, Malalas's report on the rebuilding by Justinian and Theodora is not precisely dated but simply appears after the installation of Justinian as a co-regent. It is therefore possible that it refers to actions taken over a longer period of time.¹⁵⁰ Malalas did have an interest in showing that the city had been readily restored, as did Procopius. Furthermore, it can by no means be ruled out that the same buildings were destroyed and reerected several times.¹⁵¹ What is clear is that after the destruction of 526, the buildings were restored, and it seems likely that they still or again stood after the Persian sack. The Theotokos church, at least, is described as one of the defining monuments in the appearance of the city in later sources.¹⁵² The same is true for the two churches Malalas said were endowed with (secondary) relics in the late 520s. The church of Cassianus, in particular, is described as a prominent sanctuary, or even as the cathedral of the city in medieval Arabic and Syriac sources.¹⁵³

Regarding the further restoration of the city's interior, there are many uncertainties. Nevertheless, some observations can be made. After the earthquakes of 526 and 528, the Great Church was clearly rebuilt, since Procopius and Evagrius Scholasticus mention it later and we hear about its dedication ceremony.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, despite Procopius's obvious bias, a number of indicators suggest that considerable effort and money were indeed invested in the restoration of the city after the Persian sack. It can be deduced with some safety from the archaeological findings that the rectangular street grid

149. Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *The Churches of Syrian Antioch (300–638 CE)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 99, 108.

150. In the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 69), building measures that resemble those described by Procopius for after 540 are associated with the sixth earthquake at Antioch, i.e., the one in 528 (Whitby, "Procopius and Antioch," 541). However, the event itself is dated to after the Persian sack: the author (or his source, very probably the lost second part of John of Ephesus's *Historia ecclesiastica*; cf. Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, xxv) has obviously arranged information ultimately deriving from Malalas and Procopius in a new chronological order—no unusual phenomenon for Byzantine and Syriac chronicles.

151. This is the interpretation found in Downey, *History of Antioch*, 525–26, 552–53, and Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 54, cf. 53n273.

152. See Mayer and Allen, *Churches of Syrian Antioch*, 109.

153. For the church of Cassianus in the Middle Ages, see Mayer and Allen, *Churches of Syrian Antioch*, 53–54. The Martyrium of Julian, which lay outside the city walls and is most probably identical with the sanctuary spared by the Persians in 540 (Procopius, *De bellis* 2.10.8), seems to have been destroyed in a Persian raid in 573 but was counted among the most eminent churches of the place in the years before that: Mayer and Allen, *Churches of Syrian Antioch*, 84.

154. Procopius, *De bellis* 2.9.14–18; Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.8. On the dedication, see Downey, *History of Antioch*, 533.

was maintained and that public places were kept and even newly planned, and it seems probable that at least parts of the water supply were renewed.¹⁵⁵ Most skepticism has been raised by Procopius's description of the reinstallation of buildings associated with the classical city, like theaters and baths. Archaeology does not offer much reliable evidence with regard to this question. The circus on the Orontes island, at least, seems to have been abandoned after the disasters.¹⁵⁶ However, Malalas quite self-evidently mentions the existence of a theater in 531, and Evagrius knows of at least two baths in the city at the end of the century.¹⁵⁷ John of Ephesus, at about the same time, even speaks of funds provided by the emperor for a new circus and a theater; according to John, these funds had been solicited by the bishop of Antioch, Gregory.¹⁵⁸

The fortifications of the city, as already stated, have been investigated quite closely in recent years, particularly with regard to the question of Justinian's alleged works of reconstruction. Here, too, it is plausible that an elaborate attempt to fortify the city and to regulate its waterworks was actually undertaken. It should be noted that relocating the city wall required more effort than rebuilding it in the same place.¹⁵⁹ This effort cannot simply have been undertaken in order to exclude areas from the city that had been recently depopulated. For this reason, enhancements of the fortifications must be taken seriously. Unquestionably, still, the area enclosed by the city walls shrank as a result of the Justinianic measures. This contraction also included zones that had been inhabited at earlier times, as recent surveys on the plateau of Mount Staurin have shown.¹⁶⁰ In the north of the city, the

155. Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 50–51.

156. The hippodrome seems to have been systematically dismantled: Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 47–48; see also Guidetti, "Urban Continuity and Change," 101, who thinks that this step was ordered by the central government.

157. Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.62; Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.8.

158. John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.17, in *Johannis Ephesini historiae ecclesiasticae*, part 3, ed. Ernest Walter Brooks, CSCO 106 / *Scriptores Syri* 55 (Latin translation, Leuven: Peeters, 1936), 202–3. This passage is not unproblematic since the Chalcedonian Gregory is accused of being a secret pagan in the same paragraph. Nevertheless, the role of late antique Christian clerics as zealous opponents of pagan plays and circus games was much less clearly defined than the Sunday speeches of the church fathers would have us think: On the many direct or indirect references to clerics participating in or even sponsoring theater and circus games from the fourth to the seventh centuries and even beyond, see Alexander Puk, *Das römische Spielewesen in der Spätantike*, Millenium-Studien 48 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 39–41. Thus, while John's statement is polemic, it is plausible that it refers to actions actually undertaken.

159. Whitby, "Procopius and Antioch," 541; cf. Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 41–45.

160. Brands, 41.

Orontes island seems to have been abandoned definitively at this time.¹⁶¹ As the excavations of the 1930s concentrated strongly on this area, the situation encountered in this zone has had particular influence on the perception of the city's history.¹⁶² However, the island, which included the ancient imperial palace, had already suffered a loss of importance since at least the mid-fifth century.¹⁶³ No emperor had resided at Antioch since the time of Theodosius I, and the administrative functions of the island had gradually been relocated to other places.¹⁶⁴

The extent to which the reduction in the size of the urban area corresponds to a demographic decline is difficult to determine. The numbers given by Malalas and Procopius for the fatalities in the earthquake of 526 are the only quantifiable indicators we possess. However, while it has been pointed out by some scholars that Malalas gives a reasonable explanation for the large number of victims (the city was full due to the feast of Ascension), the total numbers of 250,000 and 300,000—the highest, to my knowledge, given for any natural event affecting a single city throughout antiquity—are suspicious.¹⁶⁵ In the fourth century, the population of the city had been estimated to 150,000.¹⁶⁶ As we have seen, the accounts in which the victim numbers appear are rhetorical: Malalas used an actual speech as a template, and Procopius introduces the figure in a list of ominous events in which the earthquake is one of those recent cases that the Persian sack even exceeded in horror. Malalas's picture of a city crowded with foreigners has a direct parallel in Cassius Dio's description of the earthquake under Trajan; while Dio's account is certainly based on a real event, it also serves the rhetorical purpose of displaying the unprecedented extent of the disaster.¹⁶⁷ The number of 4870

161. Brands, 47–49.

162. See especially the emphasis on the island in Downey, *History of Antioch*, 548–49.

163. Whitby, "Procopius and Antioch," 541; Guidetti, "Urban Continuity and Change," 92–93; Brands, *Antiochia in der Spätantike*, 48.

164. Brands, 48.

165. Downey, *History of Antioch*, 521, considers the figures to be "by no means impossible" (cf. 529). Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter*, 347–48, is more careful in stating that they may have reached the six-digit range. The most skeptical position is taken by Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 30.

166. Libanius, *Orationes*, II.169, which may however only relate to the area *intra muros*: Todt and Vest, *Antiochia*, 552.

167. Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 68.24.1–2, who writes that the city was stuck with people because the emperor Trajan was present with his army. It is quite probable that this report was still known at least until the turn from the fourth to the fifth century: Ammianus, *Res gestae* 17.7.4–9 on the earthquake at Nicomedia 358 CE offers strong parallels.

victims given for the earthquake of 528 is both much lower and more precise.¹⁶⁸ This has been interpreted as hinting at major depopulation, but the more simple answer is that different sources were used for the two different accounts, one of rhetorical character and one documentary.¹⁶⁹ The demographic impact of both the Persian sack and the plague of 542 for Antioch is not quantifiable at all.¹⁷⁰ Even if, with the different events combined, there was a major loss in population in the short term, ancient cities, not unlike modern ones, were capable of recovering from such setbacks.¹⁷¹ That Evagrius Scholasticus states the earthquake of 588 claimed 60,000 lives speaks against strong depopulation in the preceding decades, although the figure itself, which he attributes to bread supply lists, may represent both the deceased and people who had fled the city.¹⁷² The distribution of coins and ceramics imports does not indicate a significant decrease in activity before the end of the century.¹⁷³

168. Mordechai, “Antioch in the Sixth Century,” 30 with n45, considers this figure implausible since it is only preserved in Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 6021 (De Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, 177.131–32). However, Theophanes has been proven at other points to be a reliable text witness for an early version of Malalas, and the “almost 5000” (ἄχρι πεντακισχιλίων) mentioned in the *codex unicus* quite clearly is a shortened form of the χιλιάδες τέσσαρες καὶ ὀκτακόσιοι ἑβδομήκοντα, preserved in Theophanes. The Syriac tradition has a similar figure (4770): cf. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, trans., *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 272n4.

169. For the idea of a decline in population, see Downey, *History of Antioch*, 529. It has long been suspected that a documentary source underlies many of Malalas’s earthquake descriptions: Croke, “Malalas,” 9; Jeffreys, “Chronological Structures in Malalas,” 159. Meanwhile, long before Carrara (see my note 75), scholars observed that the design of *Chronographia* 17.16 differs from that of other disaster accounts (cf. Jeffreys et al., *Chronicle of John Malalas*, xxiv). Downey, *Antioch*, 528n111, too, notices the difference in style between this account and the one of 528 but believes Malalas did not have good material at hand in the second case, since he “had evidently left Antioch and gone to live in Constantinople after the earthquake.” He overlooks that within Malalas’s countless disaster reports, the one on the earthquake in 528 resembles the norm much more than the highly stylized description of the disaster in 526.

170. Procopius informs us that all survivors of the sack were deported to Persia (Procopius, *De bellis*, 2.9.14, 2.14.1–4), but he also mentions that a part of the inhabitants had fled before the Persians arrived (2.8.2; cf. 2.7.17). On the plague at Antioch see Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.29, and my note 38.

171. This is elaborated by Mordechai, “Antioch in the Sixth Century,” 31: The comparative evidence from the Messina earthquake of 1908 shows that after a sharp drop in population in the immediate wake of the event, the population recovered within months to about a third, and almost completely until 1911. Direct comparisons of this kind undoubtedly harbor methodological risks, but the extremely quick pace of the recovery indicates that specifically modern factors, such as a higher life expectancy, do not play a decisive role here.

172. Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.8. See on this Michael Whitby, trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 299n33.

173. As discussed in section 3 of this article, continuities on the material level have been particularly emphasized in recent scholarship: Magness, *Archaeology*, 208–9; Mordechai, “Antioch in the Sixth Century,” 35–37.

The written sources, truly, provide less information on Antioch's history after 540 than before that date. However, the general paucity of sources for this later period needs to be taken into account in this context. The two most important contemporary historians of Justinian's reign, Procopius and Malalas, are not good witnesses for later years. It can hardly be a surprise that in Procopius's *De bellis*, Antioch disappears from the radar after the Persian sack, since the focus from Book III onward shifts to the West. *De aedificiis* offers no more than a snapshot of the city's urban development, with at best a partial view into the future. In Malalas's *Chronographia*, the geographical focus shifts radically from Antioch to Constantinople somewhere between 530 and 535, and the work completely loses its character as an Antiochene local chronicle from this point onward. This certainly implies that a change of sources took place, probably even a change of author. Therefore, the fact that the work does not offer a lot of information on Antioch after about 532 is not a meaningful indicator of decline at all. Malalas is the central source for Antioch for the entire imperial period. With his account breaking off, a decrease in available news should not be surprising. One might instead ask why it was precisely in the middle of the sixth century that a work was written that attempted to integrate the multifaceted history of the city into a teleological vision of the world, the end of which—as we saw—terminated with the kingdom of God.¹⁷⁴

For the second half of the sixth century, written historical narratives are generally scarce. One of the few exceptions is Evagrius. His church history, written in the 590s, displays a visible interest in Antioch, a city where the author had himself lived and worked as a rhetor.¹⁷⁵ While Evagrius does (as has occasionally been emphasized) mention further earthquakes that struck the city, he also offers a glimpse into ongoing life in the city.¹⁷⁶ Throughout

174. The specific outlook of the work is carved out by comparison with contemporary writers by Scott, "Malalas and His Contemporaries." For a broad contextualization of the work, see Jonas Borsch, Olivier Gengler, and Mischa Meier, eds., *Johannes Malalas im Kontext spätantiker Memorialkultur* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2019).

175. His career has a certain significance in itself, since it shows that Antioch continued to exert attraction on the elite: Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 30.

176. Downey, despite offering a narrative of decline, was aware of this: "[Evagrius's] account of the normal continuation of the city's life serves to remind us that the disastrous earthquakes of A.D. 526 and 528 and the sack by the Persians in A.D. did not bring the city's activities wholly to an end." (*History of Antioch*, 43). For the disaster series of the 520s, see Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.5–4.6: his report has clearly been inspired by Malalas. For an earthquake in 577, see 5.17; the major earthquake of 588, which has already been mentioned, is described at 6.8. Evagrius's disaster reports are almost as frequent as those in Malalas (who is used up until the 520s) and not confined to

the whole work, and not least in the disaster reports themselves, many buildings are mentioned that still stood by the time Evagrius wrote. This includes several public buildings as well as churches, among which the Theotokos church in particular stands out.¹⁷⁷ The Roman commander Maurice, who seems to have made his base at Antioch during the campaigns against the Persians (577–81), experienced a vision of his future emperorship in that church, which was also called, Evagrius states, the church of Justinian by the inhabitants of Theoupolis.¹⁷⁸ Evagrius's hero, the Antiochene bishop Gregory, is repeatedly shown interacting with the imperial government, and it becomes apparent that he had good relations at least with the "good" emperor Maurice.¹⁷⁹ It is conspicuous that when describing this relationship, Evagrius, much like Malalas earlier, emphasized the imperial care for the city. Thus, after the earthquake of 588, Maurice, like his earlier predecessors, offered money for the further restoration of the city.¹⁸⁰

The history of Antioch in the sixth century is indeed a history of disasters. As we can infer from a review of the ancient source material, however, urban disasters are not uncommon for ancient cities in the Mediterranean in general, and for Antioch in particular—and they do not necessarily lead the way to long-term decline. Certainly, such events can be agents or catalysts of change. The focus, however, should probably be whether we want not so much to opt for continuity rather than decline but rather to explain which

Antioch: For a major earthquake at Berytus, see 4.34; the plague appears in some detail at 4.29. Procopius has at least partly served as a model here, and it is obvious that what Evagrius describes is not an exclusively local event.

177. In Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.18, several buildings are either explicitly said to be still standing (respectively to have been rebuilt after a destruction) or described in the present form: This includes the so-called Psephium, the Basilica of Rufinus, a Stoa of Callistus in front of a lawcourt, and a nearby forum harboring the seat of a military magistrate (the *comes Orientis*?). See on this Mordechai, "Antioch in the Sixth Century," 34, with references to further buildings mentioned throughout the work. From Evagrius's report on the earthquake of 588 (6.8), it is evident, *inter alia*, that the Great Church, the Theotokos church, and the city wall were still standing on the eve of the disaster. While the Great Church partially collapsed, the Theotokos church seems to have survived (see my note 152), and the defenses are said to have suffered only minor damage.

178. Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.21. The event is told by Evagrius in the context of his campaigns as *magister militum per Orientem*, and that Maurice should visit an Antiochene church is presented as self-evident.

179. In Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.9, Gregory warns the emperor about the threats impeding from the Persian army approaching Nisibis. Gregory's stay at Constantinople in 588, both in the version of Evagrius (6.7) and in that of his enemy John of Ephesus (*Historia ecclesiastica* 5.17), testifies to his excellent personal networks at the capital.

180. Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.8.

levels this change took place on and how far it affected the character of a given city.

In the case of Antioch, three aspects stand out. First, there was a sustained effort by the central government to rebuild the city, which corresponds to its ongoing role as a political center. The classical aspect of the city, characterized by public buildings, still played a role in its image and seems to have survived at least in part. Second, there was a successive expansion and evolution of the sacred topography, with, for example, the church of the Theotokos replacing the Great Church as the most important sacral monument of the city. The disasters of the mid-sixth century were important steps in a new, official presentation of the city as Theoupolis, a city adorned with new churches, equipped with relics, and standing under the care of God. This process, which mirrors empirewide changes, highlights the new importance of communal resilience to the late ancient urban landscape—an aspect that contemporary commentators keep insisting about. Third, and connected to this last point, Antioch was reimagined as a city that needed and that, as a matter of fact, received protection, both by the central government and by God. It is in the new emphasis placed upon such necessities by the contemporaries, and not in a de facto decline of the city's urban features, that the consequences of the manifold disasters of the sixth century at Antioch become most apparent. ■