

## Anchoring traumas of the present in the distant past:

### The use of prophecies in John of Lydia and John Malalas

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#### Introduction

In different late antique antiquarian texts, we can discern a serious preoccupation with prophecies. In this paper, I will use the theoretical framework of LaCapra to explain this preoccupation. Prophecy is essential for the antiquarian as it allows him to couple specific tragedies and disasters to a general historiographical framework. As such, prophecy is an empowering tool which is used to come to terms with cultural unease in a period of transition, such as late antiquity. I will apply the framework of LaCapra to a case of antiquarian prophecies from the distant past, namely the antiquarian explanations of John Malalas (c. 490 – c. 570) and John of Lydia (c. 490 – c. 565 AD) surrounding the calamities which befell Antioch in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Antiquarianism, cultural unease and LaCapra.

Late antiquity was a crucial transition period from antiquity to the middle ages. This period witnessed several transformations in society, politics and culture, which threatened to alienate the residents of the former Roman empire from their Roman culture and heritage. The Roman empire was turning into something unrecognizable by classical standards. In order to cope with these changes and the alienation they effected, the late antique Romans reverted to the scholarly study of their past, which is also called antiquarianism. Late antiquity is not the only period during which antiquarianism was used to come to terms with transformations in the present; the same antiquarian interest in the distant past appeared in periods of crisis and cultural unease in Egypt during the third intermediate period, in the neo-Babylonian period and in the last years of the tottering Roman republic.<sup>1</sup>

As the repeated appearance of antiquarianism in periods of crisis suggests, antiquarianism apparently offered a proven method to come to terms with crisis in the present through the study of the distant past. In order to trace the mechanisms behind this coming to terms, I

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<sup>1</sup> In Egypt, for instance, antiquarian activity flourished in the 25th and 26th dynasties of the third intermediate period, the last dynasties of autonomous Egyptian reign (Wendrich 2013: 140-141, 151-152). The same threats to cultural phenomena in a general climate of cultural decline fosters antiquarian research in Babylonia: '(...) we can pinpoint various manifestations of a curiosity about the past, but antiquarianism as a discourse and practice is largely a later phenomenon, characteristic of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods of the first millennium BC. One possible reason is cultural exhaustion, the growing realisation of Mesopotamian decline in spite of the hegemonic reach of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires at that time. Such feelings may have been enhanced by the spread of vernacular Aramaic in Babylonia, which threatened the traditional language, religion and culture of both Assyria and Babylonia; antiquarianism may have evolved as a strategy of cultural defence, a last gasp of identity politics, as we might now say.' (Beaulieu 2013: 133). Note here also the factor of linguistic decline. The transition of the Roman city-state into a world empire was accompanied by a redefinition of the Roman identity in antiquarian works of, for instance, Marcus Terentius Varro (Rawson 1972, 1985), (Edwards 1996: 4-6), (Moatti: 1997). Also in the late mediaeval west, antiquarianism was born in a context of existential crisis of political, and, mainly, ecclesiastical, institutions (Meier 2013: 256).

use the framework of Dominick LaCapra. In his key publication: 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', published in 1999, LaCapra distinguishes between two levels of historical trauma; namely the level of absence and the level of loss.

The level of absence places historical trauma on a general, metaphysical plane. It is part of a generalized discourse on the loss of a metaphysical foundation, as for instance, the story of the Fall of Adam (LaCapra 1999: 700), or, in the case of late antique antiquarianism, the elusive decline and fall of the Roman empire and of classical culture. The level of loss comprises the specific aspect of historical trauma. Losses are specific historical events, such as acts of war, genocides, natural disasters etc.

In his analysis of historical traumas such as the Holocaust and the Apartheid, LaCapra describes the effects of conflating the two levels of trauma. These effects are detrimental to the process of coming to terms with historical trauma:

“When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (...) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.”<sup>2</sup>

Although LaCapra constructed his theoretical frame with 20<sup>th</sup>-century disruptive traumas such as the Holocaust in mind, I do believe his framework can also account for the more gradually working sense of unease which was caused by the alienating transformations in late antiquity. On the one hand, the antiquarians ascribe the present distancing to the past heritage to general, metaphysical processes, which can be interpreted as 'absence'. On the other hand, the antiquarian singles out specific moments in time and specific persons who are responsible for the decline of the Roman empire. These specific causes of the antiquarian decline can be interpreted as 'losses' in the framework of LaCapra. The result is a very convincing yet ultimately sterile antiquarian rhetoric of nostalgia in John of Lydia and John Malalas.

In the remainder of this paper, I will apply the framework of LaCapra to one of the peculiarities of late antique antiquarianism, namely its stress on prophecies.

### John Malalas and the destruction of Antioch.

John Malalas<sup>3</sup> was a proud resident of the city of Antioch, which features prominently in his chronicle. The destruction of the city by earthquakes, fires and ultimately, Sassanian assaults in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century must have been a personal shock to Malalas, who exchanged his beloved city for the city of Constantinople.

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<sup>2</sup> LaCapra (1999: 698).

<sup>3</sup> Croke (1990), Jeffreys (2003: 501-508).

One of the conspicuous features of Malalas' historical method is his antiquarian focus on material evidence.<sup>4</sup> He repeatedly mentions inscriptions from the distant past with some kind of prophesy of the future. In most cases, Malalas also emphasizes the fact that these inscriptions exist 'until this day', and are therefore accessible to the historian.<sup>5</sup>

Malalas' *recherché* obsession with material evidence of prophesies plays a major role in his explanation of contemporary catastrophes. For instance, in Chron. XVII.15, Malalas recounts how the city of Edessa was struck by natural disaster:

"In that year Edessa, a great city in the province of Osrhoene, was engulfed one evening by the wrath of God in the form of river-water, from the river known as Skirtos (...) After the anger had ceased, there was found by the buildings near the river, when they were having their foundations cleaned out, a large stone tablet, on which was carved the following inscription, "The river Skirtos (Leaper) will leap terrible leaping for the citizens"."

The account couples the metaphysical level of divine anger to the specific event of the flooding of the city through the prophesy on a stone inscription. At the end of the description of the second earthquake at the city of Antioch, in 528 AD, a prophesy similar to the one found in Edessa is mentioned (Chron. XVIII.29):

"In that year Antioch was renamed Theoupolis by order of the emperor. Also a written oracle was discovered at Antioch, which read as follows, 'And you, unhappy city, shall not be called the city of Antiochos". Likewise it was found in the papers of those who record the acclamations in the city, that they had provided an omen when they had chanted for the city's name to be changed. This too was reported to the emperor Justinian (...)"

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<sup>4</sup> Malalas frequently mentions how accounts of poets and writers derive from materially preserved writings by mythological figures. In Chron. V.59 the diaries of Sisyphus and Dictys are presented as sources to the poems of Homer and Vergil. Chron. V.68 has the accounts of Themis, Minos and Auleas informing Euripides. In Chron. X.28 a tin casket is found next to head of Dictys with an account of Trojan wars.

Malalas also uses material evidence in support of his euhemerizing interpretations of mythology; Chron. I.13 mentions the tomb of the mortal Zeus on the island of Crete together with its inscription. The same account on Dionysus can be found in Chron. II.28. The relics of Endymion are buried 'until today' in Caria (Chron. III.7). Chron. IV.15 records an inscription on the tomb of Ganymedes in the temple of Zeus.

Material sources also upholster his salvation history of Christianity; according to Chron. I.4, remains of the ark of Noah lie until today on the slopes of Mount Ararat. Chron. VIII.16 mentions evidence of giants punished by God at the city of Antioch. In Chron. X.12 statue of Jesus is erected by Veronica at the city of Paneas and is extant until today. The remains of Simon Magus are preserved until today in the Simonium at the city of Rome (Chron. X.34). Chron. XI.10 has an account of statues of martyred Christians extant in Antioch until today.

<sup>5</sup> Chron. I.5 records how Seth transmitted his knowledge on astronomy via stone tablet which is extant on mount Siris until today. According to Chron. I.11, the Persians preserved the ashes of Zoroaster until today. A prophesy has it that the Persian empire will endure as long as these remains of Zoroaster are in the hands of the Persians. The Christian destination of the temple of Cyzicus is preserved on an inscription (Chron. IV.12). Chron. X.5 describes an altar to the first-born God on the capitol, which was erected by Augustus after an oracle and which is extant until today.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffreys et al. (1986: 237).

<sup>7</sup> Jeffreys et al. (1986: 258).

In this case, the divine wrath is mitigated by dedicating the city to God and renaming the city 'Theoupolis'. This act of popularly endorsed piety of the emperor is sanctioned by the discovery of an oracle.

Viewed from the perspective of Malalas' descriptions of contemporary disasters, his persisting focus on material evidence, that might otherwise seem rather far-fetched, becomes entirely logical. Malalas' prophecies appear throughout the whole of the chronicle, from the earliest mythological books to chapters describing contemporary events. The whole course of history is presented as a fixed, foretold trajectory, the scheme which God planned for mankind, a scheme which can be analysed by the historian. The antiquarian can access this metaphysical plan of things –the level of absence in the words of LaCapra – through his scientific activity, namely the study of these prophecies. Prophecies allow the antiquarian to come to grips with specific events –losses in the framework of LaCapra – which are otherwise frightfully unexplainable and unforeseeable.

Like Malalas, John of Lydia mentions a prediction, made by the Sibylla, on the destruction of the city of Antioch. In this passage the empowered role of the antiquarian, which is implicit in Malalas, is foregrounded by John of Lydia, as he recounts how he investigated personally into these disturbing matters (Mens. IV.47, Bandy IV.52):

“I read this Jewess *Sibylla's* book when I was in Cyprus, in which she predicted many things also about Greek history (...) She foretells also about The Christ and the events which had occurred after the Christ's advent, and, indeed, also about those which will occur up to the end of time, among which even ominous events about Cyprus and Antioch that the latter will fall in war and will no longer be built up again and that the island will become inundated”<sup>8</sup>

Also in this case, the personal, specific level of the author witnessing catastrophes in Cyprus is anchored into the metaphysical scheme of Christianity by prophecies of the Sibylla's. In this section, John of Lydia is specifically careful to anchor the appearance and chronology of the Sibylla's within the framework of biblical history.

As these examples show, the antiquarian prophecy anchors the specific losses of Antioch, Edessa and Cyprus in a metaphysical plane of divine providence –LaCapra's level of absence. According to LaCapra, however, the conflating of the levels of absence and loss results in the creation of endless melancholy and impossible mourning. This is also the case for the antiquarian prophecy. For prophecy is fundamentally ambivalent –and is perceived as such by the antiquarian. In all cases of Malalas, for example, prophecies on natural disasters are found after the occurrence of the events and therefore did not prove of any use to avert or mitigate disaster. In the same way, the account on the Sibylla's also gives John of Lydia the opportunity to muse nostalgically on the failure of human knowledge. For instance, in the same section, John of Lydia makes the following remark:

“That her lines are found to be unfinished and non-metrical is not the fault of the prophetess but of the speedwriters, who had not kept pace with the continuous

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<sup>8</sup> Bandy (2013: 235).

stream of the words being said, or even of the scribes, having been uneducated and inexperienced. For the remembrance of the words said by her along with her inspiration had ceased and for this reason unfinished lines and limping thought are found, or this has occurred by the dispensation of God that her oracles might not be understood by the many and unworthy.”<sup>9</sup>

John of Lydia closes this section with the famous anecdote on how Tarquinius Priscus allowed two books of prophesy to be burned before his eyes by the Cumean Sibylla; this anecdote pointedly captures the ambivalence of knowing and ignorance implied in prophesy. This tragic tension is a source of antiquarian nostalgia; the antiquarian works hard –he checks archives, consults material evidence and accumulates enormous amounts of learned lore. He goes through all this trouble in order to get a grips on the present through the past. Yet ultimately, he is unable to prevent disasters in the present from happening. A striking example of this antiquarian tragedy can be found in John’s learned treatise on the Roman calendar. John notes how he was unable, in spite of all his knowledge of predictions, to avert the inevitable death of his beloved wife (*Mens.* IV.89):

“The month of *Iunius* is unsuitable for marriages, as the books of the priests among the Romans say. Their statement is true and there is every inevitability for a young man to lose a marriage made at this point of time. I experienced also this outcome, having soon lost my wife, most dear to me.”<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In order to get a grip on discomfoting events and tendencies of their own times, the antiquarians anchored their present into a greater scheme which was foretold in the distant past. This metaphysical scheme can be a history of Christian salvation, in the case of Malalas, or a Christian scheme combined with pagan lore, in the case of John of Lydia. Prophesy functions as a platform to form a bridge between the specific and personal preoccupations of the antiquarian on the one hand, and the greater narrative on the other hand. Yet as a tool of empowerment prophesies are highly ambivalent and therefore do not only support, but also problematize the role of the historian. Antiquarian prophesy nostalgically confronts the historian with his own limits. Although we constantly try to know the events before they happen, we can only grasp them completely when they have become history.

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<sup>9</sup> Bandy (2013: 231).

<sup>10</sup> Bandy (2013 : 276).

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