

Cavafy the “Historian Poet”

A very interesting aspect of Cavafy’s poetry is the reference of many of his poems to history and historical events. These poems focus on a particular historical period: the confrontation between the Hellenistic kingdoms and the rising might of the Roman Republic. This was a confrontation that began in 200 BC, with the outbreak of the Macedonian War and ended in 30 BC with the annexation of Ptolemaic Egypt. Why is Cavafy so impassionate by history and what drove him to include it in his poetry? How this interest should be judged? These are questions which became the focus of academic research, but to which Cavafy himself asked, worked and re-worked and attempted to answer. Cavafy was no historian in the strict sense. He had little or no interest in the causes of historical events. He was not a crafter of master narratives. He cared deeply, albeit in his own fashion, about history. Edmund Keely offers a good answer to the question why Cavafy cared deeply about history. The poet used history in order to create his own very distinctive poetic voice.