

Late Antiquity, not early Byzantium

As a Byzantinist, I want to make a minor intervention regarding historical periodization and its implications. Cavafy is often said to have engaged with Byzantium in his poems, but a word of caution is needed about how we use that label, for it can be misleading. Greater precision will improve the way we situate Cavafy within the different strands and periods of the Greek historical tradition. Most of his historical poems relate to what we call the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods, including the later Roman empire, or what we now call "late antiquity" (ca. 300-650 AD). There are not many poems about "deep" Byzantium (650-1453). There is a dramatic rupture that makes this division meaningful. Until the seventh century, the world of the eastern Mediterranean was a direct continuation of the Hellenistic and Roman imperial worlds, despite the advent of Christianity and the foundation of Constantinople. But with the advent of Islam, the empire shrank dramatically, lost Antioch and Alexandria (two of Cavafy's favorite settings), and its culture changed dramatically (becoming what we call "Byzantium"). Thus the term "late antiquity" for the period between Constantine and Islam has displaced "early Byzantium." I believe that there is something at stake here for the study of Cavafy.

Calling his Christian poems "Byzantine" distorts the contiguous nature of the corpus' chronological distribution and, by extension, what is going on in them. Cavafy's attraction to hybridity led him to the Hellenistic era, when Hellenism was dispersed throughout the Orient and its identities were shaped by fusions. To look voyeuristically into that world flouted dominant ideologies at the time, which saw precisely such developments as threatening. Historians still valued robust civic identities and viewed the period as one of decline. Cavafy was ahead of the curve here. Equally interesting is that he extended his hybrid world into the later empire ("late antiquity"), using the encounter between paganism and Christianity as his chief destabilizer: not as *either... or* but *both... and*. His subjects again vacillate, pick, and choose between beliefs and practices. Cavafy imagined a Christian sensuality, disregarding the sources for early Christianity and, again, scholarly opinion, which saw paganism and Christianity as exclusive forces locked in mortal combat. On this, scholars have again interestingly come around to his position: late antiquity is typically viewed now as a period of conflicted, fluctuating, and hybrid identities. This was not "early Byzantium," except on a technicality.

This seems to have been Cavafy's view too, for he mostly stayed away from what we might call "Byzantium proper." There are only three poems about later figures (e.g., Anna Komnene) but they say little about Byzantium as such. It is possible that Byzantine culture proper offered him few true alternatives, few shadows in which to problematize subjectivity. So long as paganism was around, he had his wedge. Perhaps for him the figure of Julian (ironically – or prudently – a pagan) stood for the coming zeal, or intolerance, that would split the world into yeses and nos. Starting in the seventh century, the Byzantines set up more rigid and systematic structures of exclusion and identity, which may have put him off. Consider his poem on "glorious Byzantinism" and how much "he loves the Church": He proceeds to dwell on its material and sensual apparatus, saying not a word about its doctrines or God, though that is how the Byzantines would have defined their love and their belonging. Cavafy left Orthodox Byzantium alone. He was not, and should not be considered to be, a poet of that tradition. Just because there are Christians in a poem does not make it "Byzantine." His Christian personae are still Hellenes experimenting with new things, not Romaioi set in their ways.

A pity, because behind and between the yeses and nos of Byzantium (Mt. 5:37) we now know that there was considerable ferment, dissent, sensuality, and deviance. It was a dissident Byzantine intellectual, Michael Psellos, who first hit upon the strategy of ironizing the Church by equating it with its sensory attractions.