

Cavafy and Niketas Choniates: a possible source for ‘Waiting for the barbarians’

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This article suggests that a possible source of inspiration for Cavafy’s poem ‘Waiting for the barbarians’ can be identified in a passage of the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates concerning the arrival of German ambassadors at the court of Alexios III in Constantinople in 1196. The context of diplomacy, the city’s decadent atmosphere, the emperor’s self-humiliation and the unsuccessful ostentation of luxury and royal attire are prominent features linking both texts.

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‘Waiting for the barbarians’ (written December 1898, first published 1904), perhaps Cavafy’s most famous poem,¹ depicts what George Seferis would have called a ‘pseudo-historical’ scenario:² owing to the absence of any proper name, it gives the impression, perhaps more conspicuously than any other ‘ancient’ poem, of straddling the boundary between the historical and the symbolic;³ it has also been judged the earliest example of Cavafy’s mixture of ‘exterior representation, historical episode and interior monologue of the poet’.⁴ This state of affairs should drive exegetes away from *Quellenforschung* in the strict sense, and foster research into the identification of ‘sources’ in the looser sense of ‘background to the creation of the poem’.⁵

1 See N. Vagenas, *Συνομιλώντας με τον Καβάφη* (Athens 2000) 26. In this anthology I would point in particular to the insightful *Nachdichtungen* by L. A. de Villena (*op. cit.*, 183), which hints at the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, and Jovan Hristic (*op. cit.*, 323) on the arrival of the barbarians.

2 See G. Seferis, ‘Ακόμη λίγα για τον Αλεξανδρινό’, *Δοκιμές*, I (Athens 1974) 409. On the idea of the ‘historical consciousness’ in Cavafy’s poems see also G. Seferis, ‘Κ. Π. Καβάφης, Θ. Σ. Έλιοτ· παράλληλοι’ (1946), *op. cit.*, I, 324–63: 340 and 352–6); M. Pieris, ‘Καβάφης και ιστορία’ (1983), in M. Pieris (ed.), *Εισαγωγή στην ποίηση του Καβάφη* (Iraklio 2006) 397–411: 403; A. Hirst, ‘C. P. Cavafy: Byzantine historian?’, *Κάμπος* 8 (2000) 45–74; Ch. Milionis, ‘Κ. Π. Καβάφης: Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους’, in *Πρακτικά τρίτου συμποσίου ποίησης* (Athens 1984) 197–204: 203–4.

3 R. Beaton, ‘The history man’, *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10.1–2 (1983) 23–44: 25.

4 Seferis, *Δοκιμές*, I, 394.

5 As in G. Fatouros, ‘Some unknown sources of inspiration in the works of C. P. Cavafy’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 24 (2000) 211–27: 211–12.

According to one of Cavafy's own notes on 'Waiting for the barbarians', published by Savvidis in 1991, 'given that I took the barbarians as a symbol, it was natural to speak about consuls and praetors; the emperor, the senators and the orators are not necessarily Roman things'.⁶ As a matter of fact, while the references to the magistrates (ll. 3, 4, 8, 16) evidently conjure up a setting in Rome, no extant source relates a remotely comparable event in Roman history, not even during either of the two invasions that brought barbaric tribes to the capital of the empire: the Visigoths in 410 and the Vandals in 455 CE.⁷

To be sure, the attitude towards barbarians was sometimes ambivalent in Latin culture (indeed, through the centuries they were increasingly integrated into the military and the administration):⁸ but there is no evidence that any emperor ever openly surrendered to invading tribes, more or less implicitly regarded their leaders as liberators, or opened the city's gates to them. Therefore, while Michaletos' arguments in favour of a Roman location (the institutions, the allusion to the *toga picta*, the references to military triumph) are intrinsically sound, they prove inconclusive in pinning down any specific moment in the history of the Empire.⁹

Some scholars have noticed similarities with a famous scene during the Gallic sack of Rome in 390 BCE (Livy 5.40-41; Plutarch, *Life of Camillus* 21.4 and 22.5-6), when the elderly magistrates, dressed in their solemn garments and sitting on imposing chairs, waited for the barbarians' arrival in an empty town, as the rest of the population had sought refuge on the Capitol.¹⁰ Despite the further arguments brought by Stratis Tsirkas (who additionally detected a source of inspiration in Kleon Rangavis' play *Julian the*

6 K. P. Kavafis, *Τα ποιήματα (1897-1918)*, ed. G. P. Savvidis, 2nd edn (Athens 1991) 174.

7 In 410 emperor Honorius was not in Rome (he had moved to Ravenna), and in 455 emperor Petronius Maximus was killed by the mob while trying to flee the town. Accounts of the sack of Rome by Alaric and Genseric, as well as of Odoacer's coup in 476, were available in several Greek sources known to Cavafy, such as Zosimus, Sozomen and above all Procopius' *Wars* (see e.g. U. Roberto, *Roma capta* (Rome and Bari 2012)), and Cavafy was familiar with Alaric's descent into Greece in 396: D. Haas, 'Cavafy's reading notes on Gibbon's "Decline and Fall"', *Folia Neohellenica* 4 (1982) 25-96: 56-9; J. Anton, *Η ποίηση και η ποιητική του Κ.Π. Καβάφη* (Athens 2000) 250-2.

8 See e.g. T. S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians* (Baltimore and London 2003).

9 G. Michaletos, *Καβαφικά θέματα* (Athens 1955) 6-23 and 43-6. More thoughts on the Roman setting in M. Gialourakis, *Ο Καβάφης του κεφαλαίου Τ: Συνομιλίες με τον Τίμο Μαλάνο* (Alexandria 1959) 130; F. M. Pontani (ed.), *Kavafis. Poesie* (Milan 1961) 485; K. P. Kavafis, *Ποιήματα*, ed. G. P. Savvidis (Athens 1963), I, 124; E. Keeley, *Cavafy's Alexandria* (London 1976) 30-1.

10 Michaletos, *Καβαφικά*, 18-19 and 64; S. Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης και η εποχή του* (Athens 1958) 332-3.

Apostate),¹¹ this analogy with the Gallic sack neglects the fact that this traumatic event was less the beginning of irreversible decline than the last setback of Roman power before centuries of grandeur.¹² The decision of the elderly Romans to remain in town, clad in their solemn togas or sitting on ivory thrones in the forum, far from being an act of resignation or a mere attempt to impress the enemy (an effect they nevertheless achieved, but through their unexpected bravery and *gravitas* rather than their attire or their luxury: Plutarch, *Camillus* 22.6 ἦν οὖν θαῦμα τοῖς Γαλάταις πρὸς τὴν ἀτοπίαν), has the distinctly heroic flavour of a sacral *devotio* and of a stern, symbolic resistance against a strong and dangerous enemy.

Seferis, one of Cavafy's most subtle readers, once claimed for 'Waiting for the barbarians' a Byzantine, strictly speaking 'Phanariot' tone;¹³ and according to one of his contemporaries, the poet claimed to be 'four-quarters Byzantine and three-quarters Alexandrian'.¹⁴ It seems to me that the backbone of Cavafy's poem shares some important features with a famous passage of the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates (†1217) describing how the emperor Alexios III Angelos received at court in Constantinople two ambassadors of the German emperor Henry VI Hohenstaufen, who had just asked for an enormous amount of money in exchange for his withdrawal from the vast region stretching from Epiros to Thrace, which he regarded as legitimately belonging to his own rather than to the Eastern Roman empire. It is Christmas Day, 1196.¹⁵

Because the emperor whose reign we are now recounting could not dismiss the envoys empty-handed, he consented to pay money in return for peace, something which had never been done up to this time. Alexios, intent on extolling the wealth of the Roman empire, undertook no task suited to the times but did that which was neither worthy of respect nor seemly and almost

11 S. Tsirkas, *Ο πολιτικός Καβάφης* (Athens 1971) 330–2. I share the scepticism of K. Dimaras, *Σύμμικτα Γ'* (Athens 1992) 141: the historical context is quite different (there is no reference to barbarians in the play, nor to the real threat of a collapse of the empire), and verbal parallels are limited to the rather conventional lines describing the emperor's grandeur (part I, sc. 9, in the words of the *meγas domestikos*: 'αν ο το στέμμα φέρων, αυτοκράτωρ σύ, / και ο κρατών το σκήπτρον, ειδωλον χρυσούν / των μαμμακούθων εκθαμβούν τα όμματά'). I shall not dwell on Tsirkas' attempt (328) to detect hidden references to the topography of Alexandria, nor on his unlikely proposal of interpreting the poem as an oblique reference to the 1899 war between Sudan and the British army commanded by Lord Kitchener (Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης*, 334–6; Tsirkas, *Ο πολιτικός*, 52–4), which has been vigorously countered both in recent and in less recent times (M. McKinsey, 'Αναζητώντας τους βαρβάρους', in *Η ποίηση του κράματος* (Athens 2000) 37–45; M. Gialourakis, *Καβάφης: από τον Πριάπο στον Καρλ Μαρξ* (Athens 1975) 156–8; Gialourakis, *Ο Καβάφης*, 134–6; see however L. Arampatzidou, 'The Empire awaits the barbarians: a new perspective', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 29.2 (2011) 171–90: 182–3).

12 See Gialourakis, *Ο Καβάφης*, 133 and Michaletos, *Καβαφικά*, 18.

13 Seferis, *Δοκιμές*, I, 395.

14 K. Ftyaras, 'Το 1928 ή '29 μ.Χ. στην Αλεξάνδρεια', *Χάρτης* 5–6 (1983) 545–7: 546. See P. Jeffreys, *Reframing Decadence: C. P. Cavafy's Imaginary Portraits* (Ithaca, NY 2015) 227.

15 Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J.-L. van Dieten (Berlin 1975), 15.10.4, pp. 477.66–478.1. See the translation, the *apparatus fontium* and the commentary on this elaborated passage in A. Pontani (ed.), *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, III (Milan 2014) 464–6.

ridiculed the Romans. On the feast of Christ's Nativity, he donned his imperial robe set with precious stones, and commanded the others to put on their garments with the broad purple stripe and interwoven with gold [τὰς χρυσοῦφεις περιθέσθαι καὶ πλατυσήμους ἐσθῆτας]. The Germans were so far from being astonished by what they saw [ἔκθαμβοι τοῖς ὀρωμένοις τούτοις φανῆναι] that their smouldering desire was kindled into a flame by the splendid attire of the Romans, and they wished the sooner to conquer the Greeks, whom they thought cowardly in warfare and devoted to servile luxuries. ... 'The Germans – they said – have neither need of such spectacles, nor do they wish to become worshippers of ornaments and garments secured by brooches suited only for women who like makeup, headdresses, glittering earrings, and being attractive to men'. To frighten the Romans they said, 'The time has now come to take off womanly brooches and to put on iron instead of gold.' Should the embassy fail in its purpose and the Romans not agree to the will of their lord and emperor, then they would have to stand in battle against men who are not adorned by precious stones like meadows in bloom, and who do not swell in pride because of pearls shimmering like moonlight; neither are they inebriated with amethysts [ταῖς ἀμεθύσοις μεθύουσι λίθαξιν], nor are they coloured in purple and gold like the proud Median bird [the peacock], but being the foster-sons of Ares, their eyes are inflamed by the fire of wrath like the glowing gemstones, and the clotted beads of sweat from their day-long toil outshine the pearls in the beauty of their adornment.¹⁶

The main analogy between this account and Cavafy's poem is that both are tales of passive humiliation and ridicule. The central stanzas of 'Waiting for the barbarians' (ll. 8–21) are virtually the only lines to describe real, ongoing action in the poem: while we find elsewhere negative traces of immobility and emptiness (no orators in the forum, no legislators in the Senate, empty streets, a waiting emperor), this section describes the initiative taken by the imperial entourage in the face of imminent danger. And this is not a political (let alone military) response: for one thing, we are not told in the poem whether the barbarians will arrive to ravage and plunder the town, or – as seems likelier – in view of a preliminary diplomatic meeting (ll. 12–13 'the emperor is waiting to receive their leader'). In any case, it is clear that the members of the ruling elite are ready to surrender to the newcomers, and that they have decided to wear their solemn official garments and to put on their most precious jewels, for 'such things impress the barbarians' – a last,

16 Translation adapted from H. J. Magoulias, *O City of Byzantium. Annals of Niketas Choniates* (Detroit 1984) 262. Two flaws in Magoulias' notoriously unreliable translation concern crucial sentences: instead of 'that... almost ridiculed the Romans' (ῥὺν μικροῦ πρὸς Ῥωμαίων κατάγειλον, i.e. it turned to the *ludibrium* of the Romans), Magoulias wrongly translates 'which appeared almost ridiculous in the eyes of the Romans'. More importantly, instead of 'the Germans were so far from being astonished by what they saw' (τοσοῦτον ἀπείχον ἔκθαμβοι τοῖς ὀρωμένοις τούτοις φανῆναι), Magoulias misunderstands the verb ἀπείχον and has 'so astonished were the Germans by what they saw'. Magoulias' mistakes are unfortunately inherited by recent scholars: A. Simpson, *Niketas Choniates. A Historiographical Study* (Oxford 2013) 261; A. Simpson and S. Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates. A Historian and a Writer* (Geneva 2009) 23.

formal defence of their pristine dignity through the ostentation of wealth and luxury, a final, pointless reaffirmation of their alleged superiority in terms of nobility and prestige (the scrolls, the titles).

This artifice is obviously a trick, a vile self-deception that sheds discredit on the very insignia of royalty (πρὸς Ῥωμαίων κατὰ γελων, as Niketas would put it): those symbols, as well as the togas, the jewels and the crowns, were actually meant to represent – as had been the case during the Gallic sack of 390 BCE – the real dignity and the real values of Rome; in the present situation, however, they serve as the tools of a sad masquerade intended to dazzle an enemy who is threatening to subvert the empire, its laws and its customs without facing any resistance on the part of the locals.

The peculiar role of clothing deserves special mention here. This is the earliest poem in which Cavafy gives a special contextual and political function to garments:¹⁷ later ones include ‘King Demetrios’ (1906), with Demetrios Poliorketes changing his clothes ‘like an actor’ after his defeat, ‘Alexandrian Kings’ (1912), with the emphasis on Caesarian’s outward appearance, and the ‘Seleucid’s Displeasure’ (1915), where king Demetrios provides Ptolemy with the appropriate regal attributes (gold, purple, diamonds). Perhaps the best-known text of this category is ‘Manuel Komnenos’ (1905, published 1915), where the decision of the Byzantine emperor Manuel I (†1180) to dress as a monk shortly before his death appears less as a sincere religious conversion than a nervous reaction to the premonition of death, an awkward and pathetic denial of his real ethos and of his worldly grandeur,¹⁸ as well as of his *gravitas*, his coherence and his dignity;¹⁹ not surprisingly, Cavafy’s source for this poem is another famous passage of Niketas Choniates.²⁰

17 Savvidis, *Μικρά*, 227–31. See also D. Haas, *Le problème religieux dans l’oeuvre de Cavafy* (Paris 1996) 428–30. That the poems listed here belong to the vast Cavafian topic of the πτώσεις από την εξουσία is also maintained by G. Dallas, *Καβάφης και ιστορία* (Athens 1974) 147–8.

18 On the meaning of this poem (and the ‘falsity of its perspective’) see A. Hirst, ‘Two cheers for Byzantium: equivocal attitudes in the poetry of Palamas and Cavafy’, in D. Ricks and P. Magdalino (eds), *Byzantium and the Modern Greek Identity* (Aldershot 1998) 105–17: 111 (followed by S. Ekdawi, ‘Cavafy’s Byzantium’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 20 (1996) 17–34: 28), and particularly A. Hirst, ‘C. P. Cavafy: Byzantine historian?’, *Κάμπος* 8 (2000) 45–74: 48–53; but already F. M. Pontani, ‘Saggio sulla poesia di Costantino Cavafis’, *Επιθεώρησις ελληνοϊταλικῆς πνευματικῆς κοινωνίας* 4 (1940) 521–40 and 590–604: 526; G. Savvidis, *Βασικά θέματα της ποίησης του Καβάφη* (Athens 1993) 63. A meticulous analysis, albeit leading to a different conclusion, is provided by Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 413–41 (esp. 435–41); see also P. A. Agapitos, ‘Byzantium in the poetry of Kostis Palamas and C. P. Cavafy’, *Kampos* 2 (1994) 1–20; and Jeffreys, *Reframing*, 146–48.

19 As opposed to the ideal strategy described in ‘The god abandons Anthony’ (1910). We should thus probably refrain from ranging ‘Manuel Komnenos’ together with the poems concerning αξιοπρέπεια, as Dallas, *Καβάφης*, 147 does (following e.g. A. Gialouris, ‘Ο Καβάφης και το Βυζάντιο’, *Πνευματική Ζωή* 2, 25–6 (1938) 153–7: 154).

20 Niketas Choniates, *Historia* 8.7.4, pp. 221–22 van Dieten. See Gialouris, ‘Ο Καβάφης’, 154; F. M. Pontani, *Επτά δοκίμια και μελετήματα για τον Καβάφη (1936–1974)* (Athens 1991) 59 (= Id., ‘Fonti della poesia di Kavafis’, *Rivista di cultura greco-italiana* 3 (1940) 657–69: 662); Malanos, *Ο ποιητής*, 316–17; Fatouros, ‘Some unknown’, 224–5.

In his account of the diplomatic meeting between Alexios III and the ambassadors of Henry VI, Niketas is not describing the siege of a city, nor – at least openly – the decline of a civilization. Yet, having renounced any form of resistance, Alexios and his court follow precisely the same strategy as Cavafy’s emperor, namely they try to impress the enemies (note the term *θάμβος*, which occurs in both contexts)²¹ through a solemn ritual that has sometimes been connected with *prokypsis*.²² This ritual culminates in a magniloquent ostentation of luxury and wealth, including long official robes (the *laticlavica*, to be compared with Cavafy’s purple, embroidered togas) and expensive jewels (note in particular the amethyst appearing in both texts).²³ In exactly the same terms defined by Theophylact of Ochrid a century earlier,²⁴ if Alexios’ strategy was intended to mitigate the sanctions imposed on the Byzantines, then the outcome is embarrassing, for the emperor and his court end up being ridiculed by the Germans,²⁵ who disdainfully argue that they are a virile nation, utterly alien to this kind of luxury or effeminate attitude and – one might extrapolate – to scrolls and empty titles as well.²⁶

21 The first published version of the poem (1904) had ‘καὶ πάντα οἱ βάρβαροι μὲν αὐτὰ θαμπώνονται’ (see Tsirkas, *Ὁ Καβάφης*, 327), which is even closer to Niketas’ wording ‘ἐκθαμβοῦ... φανῆναι’.

22 See G. Dagron, ‘Trônes pour un empereur’, in A. Avramea et al. (eds), *Byzantium: State and Society* (Athens 2003) 179–203: 184–5, insisting on the symbolism of this ritual, and on its ‘théatralisation’ starting precisely with the 1196 episode. Scepticism on the definition of this ritual as *πρόκυψις* is expressed by R. Macrides, J. A. Munitiz and D. Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan Court: Offices and Ceremonies* (Farnham 2013) 404–5.

23 As for jewels (coupled with the empty imperial titles), we find a similar hint in ‘Alexandrian kings’ (see Milionis, ‘Κ.Π. Καβάφης’, 199–203), but elements of luxury, variously declined, are quite frequent in Cavafy’s poems: see Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 263–85. It should be remarked that in Niketas’ text the word *ἀμεθύσοις*, accepted by editors against the manuscript’s *ἐν θαύσοις*, occurs in the apparatus of Bekker’s 1835 edition, and is guaranteed by the paronymic link with the immediately following *μεθύουσι*.

24 Theophyl. Achrid. *Opera* I, p. 193.21–27 Gautier (a speech for Constantine Doukas): ‘don’t believe that your golden and “purple mantle” [Diod. Sic. 5.40.1] will subjugate the “servants of Ares” [Il. 2.110 al.], men with the “terrible gaze” [Il. 3.342] of a lion, if they do not see you dressed in a “bronze armour” [Il. 4.448 al.] and ready to fight in person: for no barbarian is startled when he sees the emperor in the garments of a bridegroom, but he rather pokes fun at him and his gold as if he were a child, and mocks him as effeminate and cowardly, believing he can be killed without even a punch’: this passage (for which no ancient source is detected by K. Praechter, ‘Antike Quellen des Theophylaktos von Bulgarien’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 1 (1892) 399–414) was spotted by Simpson, *Niketas*, 261. On a possible link between Cavafy and Theophylact see M. Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid* (London 1997) 282–3.

25 On this ‘humiliating deconstruction’ of the court’s rhetoric and *taxis* see A. Kaldellis, ‘Paradox, reversal, and the meaning of history’, in Simpson and Efthymiadis, *Niketas Choniates*, 75–110: 92–3. Shortly after this episode, a similar, embarrassing outcome characterized the Sicilian embassy of Eumathios Philokalos, who was granted permission by Alexios to appear at Henry’s court in his official solemn attire, and was then ridiculed by the Germans (Nik. Chon. 15.10.5, p. 478.3–11 van Dieten).

26 This reciprocal attitude of contempt is far from isolated in the context of the Byzantine-Western relationship during the centuries of the Crusades: see A. Pontani, *Niceta Coniata* III, 464–5; P. Schreiner, ‘Byzanz und der Westen: Die gegenseitige Betrachtungsweise in der Literatur des 12. Jahrhunderts’, in A. Haverkamp (ed.), *Friedrich Barbarossa* (Sigmaringen 1992) 551–80 (with further bibliography).

In fact, Niketas' Germans do not match the image of Cavafy's expected barbarians, for they present themselves as the genuine defenders of the good old values long lost in Constantinople's decadent atmosphere:²⁷ far from fulfilling the barbarian stereotype of illiteracy and rudeness ('they are bored by rhetoric and public speaking', l. 27 of Cavafy's poem), they display high rhetorical skills, proving even more persuasive than the Greeks themselves.²⁸ Historically, this is not surprising, for among the ambassadors there was such a learned scholar as Heinrich von Kalden; but it must be stressed that the depiction of the Northern peoples as βάρβαροι is frequent both in Niketas' history (especially in the account of the sack of Constantinople in 1204) and in other Byzantine authors; indeed, it belongs to a very typical Byzantine attitude (and a very institutional one: at court there was a minister ἐπὶ τῶν βαρβάρων, and emperors were often judged on the basis of their military deeds against the βάρβαροι) vis-à-vis the shaved Westerners, who do not speak their language, and whose armies ravage their land with no sense of piety or respect for holy shrines or masterpieces of art.²⁹ Technically speaking, Alexios III in Niketas' scene is indeed 'waiting for the barbarians', who then come and humiliate him and his nation.

Still, for all his disdain towards foreign invaders, Niketas proves the most implacable critic of the declining Byzantine state, vexed by corruption at the court, inadequate emperors, adulation and envy. In his sophisticated style, Niketas pays peculiar attention to the ethos and the moral flaws of his characters.³⁰ In his view, the moral decay of the ruling elite justified the fall of Byzantium in 1204, during which the Latins simply played the role of the providential punishers (κολασταί) of an immoral and vicious empire.³¹

27 The stress laid on imperial garments is particularly ironic, for precisely after this embassy Alexios was obliged – in order to be able to pay the Western emperor – to strip the tombs of his predecessors of their apparel and paraments, leaving the emperors naked, with their 'ultimate coat', ἔσχατος χιτῶν: see Nik. Chon. 15.10.6, with A. Pontani, *Niceta Coniata* III, 467.

28 See Nik. Chon. 15.10.3, p. 476 van Dieten.

29 On the general issue see K. Lechner, 'Hellenen und Barbaren im Weltbild der Byzantiner', Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Munich 1954, 74-95, and 105-6 on the Latins being labelled as 'barbarians'. Specifically on Niketas see esp. Nik. Chon. 10.6.7-8, p. 301.9ff. van Dieten (also 299.50), the famous passage where Niketas states the irreconcilable 'χάσμα διαφορᾶς' between Byzantines and Latins. See also 17.6.2 (p. 560.21); 18.8.3 (p. 581); 19.3.6 (p. 590.2); *de stat.* 2.8 (p. 649.24). On the barbarians' greed as a topos in Byzantine literature see A. Pontani, *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, II (Milan 1999) 751-2 note 129; on the general issue of Niketas' attitude towards the Latins see C. Asdracha, 'L'immagine de l'homme occidental à Byzance', *Byzantinoslavica* 44 (1983) 31-40; O. J. Schmitt, 'Das Normannenbild im Geschichtswerk des Niketas Choniates', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 47 (1997) 157-77, esp. 168-9; Harris, 'Distortion', esp. 19-21.

30 An overview on these topics in A. Kazhdan, *Introduzione*, in A. Kazhdan, A. Pontani and R. Maisano (eds), *Grandezza e catastrofe di Bisanzio*, I (Milano 1994), xxi-xxix; Simpson, *Niketas Choniates*. Compare the attitude of Cavafy's Byzantine poems (see below), which 'present, mainly in dramatic form, and sometimes through fictional characters, the realities of Byzantine politics... Byzantium as a state divided against itself' (Hirst, 'Two cheers', 112).

31 See e.g. Nik. Chon. 19.2.1 (p. 586.67-69 van Dieten): 'ἡ γὰρ ὑπτιότης καὶ οἰκουρότης τῶν τὰ Ῥωμαίων χειρίζοντων πράγματα δικαστὰς ἡμῶν καὶ κολαστὰς τοὺς ληστὰς ἐπεισήνεγκεν', 'the negligence and the inaction of those who were governing the state of the Romans brought to us these plunderers as judges and chastisers' (note the pun in the Greek). See also J. Harris, 'Distortion, divine providence and genre in Nicetas Choniates' account of the collapse of Byzantium 1180-1204', *Journal of Medieval History* 26 (2000) 19-31: 27-31.

Niketas views the moment of Alexios III's self-ridiculing in front of the Germans, of his (vain) loss of σεμνόν,³² of this unprecedented acquiescence to foreign requests,³³ as an important step towards the catastrophe of 1204: this is made clear by the immediately following lament over the fate of Constantinople, and by Niketas' recurrent apocalyptic tone.³⁴

A similar view of the moral and political decay of the Byzantine empire was held by two great modern historians who knew Niketas very well and who were in turn both well known to Cavafy. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* devotes few but significant pages to Isaac Angelos (who 'slept on the throne, and was awakened only by the sound of pleasure') and to his brother and successor Alexios III (in whose unworthy hands 'the remains of the Greek empire crumbled into dust').³⁵ More importantly, the 19th-century Greek historian Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos insisted that under Alexios' kingdom 'the internal paralysis reached its peak, and the external dangers became more fearful than ever',³⁶ indeed 'medieval Hellenism faded out and prepared to surrender'.³⁷

Between 1888 and 1892, Gibbon and Paparrigopoulos had been Cavafy's chief sources of inspiration for a set of eleven historical poems called 'Byzantine Days'.³⁸ Most of these texts are lost, and only their title is known to us today; the only one Cavafy chose to revise and revamp in later years is 'Theophilos Palaiologos', whose original title ran 'I prefer to die rather than to live'³⁹ – the iconic and lapidary words of despair uttered, according to the chronicle of Georgios Sphrantzes, by Theophilos, the cousin of

32 The same term *semnon* is used by Cavafy for Manuel Komnenos: see Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 432-5 and – more pointedly – Hirst, 'C. P. Cavafy', 52-4.

33 See Nik. Chon. 15.10.4 (p. 477.68 van Dieten), with A. Pontani, *Niceta Coniata* III, 464 n. 136. For Niketas' harsh verdict on Alexios' cowardice and stupidity see R. Macrides, '1204: the Greek sources', in A. Laiou (ed.), *Urbs Capta* (Paris 2005) 141-50: 146-9. It should be stressed that the passage on the embassy was added by Niketas in the final version (van Dieten's 'a') of his *Chronike diegesis*, written after the end of Alexios III's reign in 1203, and containing many elements of *Kaiserkritik* unknown to the earlier version (van Dieten's 'b').

34 See esp. Nik. Chon. 15.13.4 (pp. 483-58 - 484.75 van Dieten) on the general corruption of the Roman state (παντάπασι τὰ Ῥωμαίων διέφθαρται πράγματα).

35 E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London 1969) ch. 60 (V, 141-42, and particularly 144 on Alexios).

36 K. Paparrigopoulos, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους*, IV (Athens 1963) 200. On Paparrigopoulos' reception of Niketas, see C. Maltezou, 'The Greek version of the Fourth Crusade: from Nicetas Choniates to the *History of the Greek Nation*', in Laiou, *Urbs Capta*, 151-9: 153-4.

37 Paparrigopoulos, *Ιστορία* IV, 206. In Paparrigopoulos' view, the new start, at least on the cultural and intellectual level, was brought about by the new interest in Classical antiquity represented by Niketas' brother Michael Choniates – a man to whom Cavafy paid homage in the 1892 article on the Byzantine poets: K. Kavafis, *Πεζά*, ed. G. Papoutsakis (Athens 1963) 47.

38 See Haas, 'Cavafy's reading notes'; Anton, *Η ποίηση*, 247. These poems were then followed in 1892 by a newspaper article on the Byzantine poets: Kavafis, *Πεζά*, 43-50.

39 'Θέλω θανεῖν μᾶλλον ἢ ζῆν': see Ekdawi, 'Cavafy's Byzantium', 26 and 32.

emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos, at the end of the ultimate resistance against the Ottomans on 29 May 1453.⁴⁰

Cavafy's approach to Byzantium, recently reappraised by Peter Jeffreys,⁴¹ steered progressively clear of both European decadentism and Paparrigopoulos' nationalistic stance.⁴² In the early period that concerns us here, we can detect a special focus on the Crusades, probably prompted by an early reading of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*;⁴³ this interest was to accompany Cavafy throughout his life (E. M. Forster once wrote that one of the poet's favourite conversation topics in Alexandria was 'the tricky behaviour of the Emperor Alexius Comnenus in 1096')⁴⁴ and was to resurface much later in his creative writing, i.e. in the Byzantine poems of the years 1914–27, which cluster mostly around the twelfth century, drawing on passages of the most important historians of the Comnenian age.⁴⁵

If Gibbon was one of Cavafy's early sources for Late Antiquity and Byzantium, the autograph marginal notes on his copy of *Decline and Fall* show a lively interest in two interrelated topics that are pivotal to the understanding of 'Waiting for the barbarians':⁴⁶ the decline of human society, and the image of the barbarian itself. In his own *autoscholia*, Cavafy insisted that the poem was in fact about the relationship between civilization and happiness (πολιτισμός and ευτυχία) in an ideal city whose inhabitants

40 See Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 66; Savvidis, *Μικρά*, I, 354 on the historical context; and particularly Jeffreys, *Reframing*, 154: 'What we ultimately encounter in this poem is another version of the decadent dilemma articulated in "Waiting for the Barbarians", in which the only real "solution" is utter annihilation'.

41 Jeffreys, *Reframing*, esp. 128–33 (in an attempt to reconcile different readings of Cavafy's 'Byzantinism'). See already Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης*, 333–4. Savvidis, *Μικρά*, I, 91–9. Hirst, 'Two cheers'; R. Lavagnini, 'Sette nuove poesie bizantine di Costantino Cavafis', *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* n.s. 25 (1988) 217–81: 219–20; Agapitos, 'Byzantium'; Pieris, 'C. P. Cavafy'.

42 On this development see Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 422; Hirst, 'Two cheers', 117, *contra* V. F. Christidis, *Ο Καβάφης και το Βυζάντιο* (Athens 1958).

43 See Ekdawi, 'Cavafy's Byzantium', 19–24; Haas, 'Cavafy's reading notes', 83 and 91 and particularly Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 67–8.

44 See E. M. Forster, *Pharos and Pharillon* (Berkeley 1980; 1st edn 1923) 91–2; Pieris, 'C. P. Cavafy', 262.

45 See Hirst, 'Two cheers', 110; Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 68; Jeffreys, *Reframing*, 139–46. On Cavafy's appraisal of the Byzantine historians see the thought attributed to him by J. A. Saregiannis (trans. D. Haas), 'What was most precious – his form', *Grand Street* 2 (1983) 108–26: 113 'they are not appreciated as they should be. One day they will be discovered and will be admired for their originality. They cultivated a genre of historiography which was never written before and has not been written since. They wrote history dramatically.'

46 See Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης*, 329; Haas, 'Cavafy's reading notes', 95–6; Savvidis, *Μικρά*, I, 91–7: 96; Anton, *Η ποίηση*, 247–58.

consciously decide to step back from the civilized world.⁴⁷ It is a matter of debate whether this implies Cavafy's enthusiasm for the positivist paradigm according to which barbarism was disappearing from the earth to the advantage of civilization,⁴⁸ or whether conversely the poem should be read in the context of the feeling of apathy and lassitude dominating decadent poetry from Verlaine's 1885 'Langueur' (also often evoked as a possible source of Cavafy's poem)⁴⁹ down to O. V. de Lubicz-Milosz's 1899 'Coup de grâce' (ll. 34–5: 'Appelons, à grand cris, les Barbares libérateurs: / Les mains des patriciens sont trop belles pour les armes') and Valery Bryusov's 'Huns' (1904).⁵⁰

As M. Boletsi has recently shown, Cavafy does not really buy into the idea that a deliberate and almost resigned surrender to an external force might help a civilization to

47 See in particular Cavafy's text published by G. P. Savvidis, *Φύλλα φτερά* (Athens 1995) 112–14 (orig. *Τα Νέα*, 23 April 1983): 'The society reaches such a grade of affluence, civilisation and unease, that, in desperation over the situation it cannot solve in a way compatible with its usual life-style, it decides to introduce a radical change - to sacrifice, to change, to turn back, to simplify (these are the "barbarians"). Having made this decision, it rejoices and undertakes various preparations (the emperor, the luxuries of consuls and praetors) and takes preliminary measures (the interruption of the Senate's legislation). But as soon as the time of the action has come, it suddenly becomes clear that it had envisaged a utopia (the night falls without the barbarians' arrival)' (trans. D. Tziouvas, 'Cavafy's barbarians and their western genealogy', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 10 (1986) 161–78: 165–6, adapted). A similar interpretation emerges from the account by Pavlos Petridis ('Ένας Αλεξανδρινός ποιητής', *Νέα Ζωή* 55 (1909) 201–6: 204, now in Pieris, *Εισαγωγή*, 35–46: 43; see also Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης*, 323; Gialourakis, *Ο Καβάφης*, 127–8 and Tziouvas, 'Cavafy's Barbarians', 163–4); but on the concept of the 'ideal city' see Michaletos, *Καβαφικά*, 36–42 and 55–65.

48 This was Cavafy's poetic intention according to Malanos (*Ο ποιητής*, 300) and to Petridis' account (Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης*, 323; Gialourakis, *Ο Καβάφης*, 129; Anton, *Η ποίηση*, 260): the perspective, however, is less optimistic than in Gibbon's statement 'it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism' (Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ch. 38, IV, 111; see Haas, 'Cavafy's reading notes', 95–6). Anton, *Η ποίηση*, 253–7 sees in this poem a 'satire of Gibbon'; see also Tziouvas, 'Cavafy's barbarians', 166 and 174–77; and particularly M. Boletsi, 'On the threshold of the twentieth century: history, crisis, and intersecting figures of barbarians in C. P. Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians"', in M. Winkler, M. Boletsi and J. Herlth (eds), *Barbarian: Explorations of a Western Concept*, I (Stuttgart 2018) 16–17 (my thanks to the author for sending me this important article ahead of publication). I refer to the page numbers of the manuscript.

49 See T. Agras, *Κριτικά*, I (Athens 1980) 45–6 (article first published 1922); T. Malanos, *Ο ποιητής Κ. Καβάφης* (Athens 1957) 300–1; Gialourakis, *Ο Καβάφης*, 130. An overt reference to Verlaine's sonnet was later detected in Cavafy's notes on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*: see Haas, 'Cavafy's reading notes', 59–62, who nevertheless remains sceptical about the idea that it might have inspired 'Waiting for the barbarians' (see also Haas, *Le problème religieux*, 204).

50 M. Vassiliadi, *Les fastes de la décadence chez Constantin Cavafy* (Athens 2008) 99–111; R. Poggioli, "Qualis artifex pereo!" or barbarian and decadence', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 13 (1959) 135–59; S. Plinskaya, *Ο Κ.Π. Καβάφης και η ρωσική ποίηση του αργυρού αιώνα*, 2nd edn (Athens 2004) 36; Jeffreys, *Reframing*, 85–6 on the pictorial tradition; Boletsi, 'On the threshold', 37–54. I find less persuasive Dimaras' reference to Panagiotis Synodinos' poem 'Εις τας Αθήνας Τούρκοι' (first published in 1883, and taken up by Kostas Palamas in the newspaper *Ακρόπολις* of June 1897), where the Turks' entry into Athens as 'ελευθερωτάι' is prefigured: Dimaras, *Σύμμικτα Γ'*, 140–5.

overcome its own decline, an idea deeply rooted in Ernest Renan's philosophy of history.⁵¹ According to a newly discovered handwritten comment, Cavafy regarded his poem as a 'warning to avoid the danger of wanting barbarians, not finding them':⁵² the very concept of 'barbarian' thus becomes unstable and slippery, as is shown by Cavafy's final couplet, which ends on a note of regret and puzzlement, not only because the decay is thereby delayed.⁵³ Barbarians, indeed, 'were a kind of solution', but only as long as they were conceived and thought of from the viewpoint of the poem's answering voice, which represents an anonymous *communis opinio* and is not seriously describing any kind of reality.⁵⁴ In fact, 'barbarians' are vital parts of any society, and no society can ascribe its stability or its fall exclusively to the positive or negative input of external forces.⁵⁵

This is also what Niketas implies when he presents the dramatic encounter between the German 'barbarians' and the 'civilized' Romans. Our images (and expectations) of the 'other' do not correspond to the truth: the barbarians will not arrive, the Germans will not be impressed. Indeed, the very stigma of 'barbarian' is a matter of prejudice within the conventions of a given culture, as emerges from another Cavafy text, written in the same months of 1898: the (rejected) poem 'Οι Ταραντινοί διασκεδάζουν' (first published with the subtitle 'Αρχαία Ημέρα', a clear counterpart to the old 'Βυζαντινά Ημέρα'). The Roman senators, travelling to Tarentum on an embassy in 282 BCE, are ridiculed by the locals, and presented as 'barbarian togas':⁵⁶

51 Boletsi, 'On the threshold'. Some scholars have detected parallels with Nietzsche's thought, some even a prefiguration of Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes*. See Gialourakis, *Ο Καβάφης*, 132, quoting other Greek authors of the late 19th century on the same topic. Malanos, *Ο ποιητής*, 299 evokes Nietzsche's 'eternal return' (apparently called into question by the author himself in private conversations) and Tziouvas ('Cavafy's barbarians', 171-6) recalls the *Gay Science*.

52 Boletsi, 'On the threshold', 25.

53 Poggioli, "Qualis artifex", 135. Contrary to most interpreters, R. Liddell, *Cavafy: A Biography*, 2nd edn (London 2000), 86, maintains that the poem's finale does not give voice to a real regret, and that the absence of barbarians should in fact be read as a positive note of hope. Seferis, *Δοκίμεις*, I, 395 interprets the final line as 'the murmuring of a man who reads History, thinks about it, and concludes within himself'.

54 See Boletsi, 'On the threshold', 54-6; Anton, *Η ποίηση*, 254-5 (and 260-2, where he argues for a different reading of the city). On the broader issue see also M. Boletsi, *Barbarism and its Discontents* (Stanford 2013); H. Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism* (New York 2013). On the poem's dialogic form see Millionis, 'Κ.Π. Καβάφης', 197-200 and Pontani, *Επτά δοκίμια*, 223; N. Valaoritis, 'Κ. Π. Καβάφης και Ε. Α. Πίου', *Χάρτης* 5-6 (1983) 650-4; 652 identifies the source of this unusual structure in Poe's tale 'Four beasts in one'; a slightly different approach (evoking the detective story) in P. M. Minucci, *Η λυρική αφήγηση στον Καβάφη* (Athens 1987) 37-8. I disagree with Tziouvas, 'Cavafy's barbarians', 176, who describes this voice as 'a kind of spokesman for barbarians' intentions and habits': the poem is a dialogue that takes place *within* the Empire's capital, showing how inadequate the construction of the 'social myth' of the barbarian actually is.

55 Boletsi, 'On the threshold', 36-7.

56 See on this poem G. P. Savvidis, 'Η Μεγάλη Ελλάδα του Καβάφη', in his *Τράπεζα πνευματική* (Athens 1994) 233-46. The affinity with 'Waiting for the barbarians' was remarked by Seferis, *Δοκίμεις*, I, 394; see also Tziouvas, 'Cavafy's barbarians', 167.

Ἀλλ' ἀπ' αὐτὰ ἀπέρχοντ' οἱ Συγκλητικοὶ
καὶ σκυθρωποὶ πολλὰ ὀργίλα ὀμιλοῦν.
Κ' ἐκάστη τόγα φεύγουσα βαρβαρική
φαίνεται νέφος καταιγίδα ἀπειλοῦν.

Here, precisely as in our poem (see ll. 29–31 ‘How serious people’s faces have become... everyone going home so lost in thought’), the senators’ gaze is σκυθρωπόν, grim: a few years later, at the end of the war against Pyrrhus (272 BCE), those same Romans will overturn a rich, developed and luxurious civilization (the archetype of wealth and *tryphe*, Tarentum) – the same civilization whose last representatives had once looked down on them as ‘barbarians’ in order to conceal what was the gradual loss of their own identity, the plight of their decline.⁵⁷

57 Cavafy’s source has been identified by Savvidis (K. P. Kavafis, *Τα αποκηρυγμένα* (Athens 1983) 117–19) in a long passage of Paparrigopoulos’ *Ιστορία*, mentioning *inter alia* that the Tarentines, instead of discussing with the ambassadors, ‘poked fun at their Greek pronunciation and their manners, called them barbarians and finally sent them away from the theatre’. The ancient source behind Paparrigopoulos is Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 19.5.3, a fragment preserved among the excerpts of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus.