

# WHO WAS THE REAL CLEOPATRA?

CLEOPATRA WAS, FOR A TIME, THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN THE ROMAN WORLD. HOWEVER, HER REPUTATION WAS CONTROVERSIAL THEN AND IS STILL DEBATED TODAY.

Alexander the Great of Macedon invaded Egypt and established his rule there in 332 B.C. When he died, Alexander's generals divided up his vast conquests. Ptolemy (pronounced "TAH-leh-me") became the Macedonian king of Egypt.

During his rule, Ptolemy I created an eastern Mediterranean empire from North Africa to Syria. He also made his capital, Alexandria in Egypt, the richest city in the Mediterranean world.

The Macedonians from north of Greece carried with them the Greek language and culture into Ptolemy I's empire. Alexandria soon became the center of Greek civilization with a famous library that claimed to hold books (scrolls) that contained all the knowledge of the known world.

Ptolemy I established a dynasty that ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years. The Greek-speaking Ptolemies were foreigners, however, reigning over the Egyptian people who were often burdened by taxes. The wealth of Egypt was based on the labor of Nile River Valley farmers who produced wheat for export to Rome and other cities.

In 197 B.C., a neighboring king defeated the army of Ptolemy V, taking much of the empire that the first Ptolemy had created. To secure peace, Ptolemy V married the conquering king's daughter, Cleopatra. She was the first of numerous Cleopatra queens.

The Ptolemies constantly fought



THIS SYRIAN TETRADRACHM, or silver coin, dates from the first century B.C. and depicts Cleopatra.

one another for the Egyptian throne. Hardly a few years passed without one family member murdering another, usually by poison.

In 80 B.C., Ptolemy XII started his long reign. He became a client king of Rome, which meant he submitted to Roman authority to avoid being conquered and to remain king of Egypt. He was also the father of the most famous Cleopatra of them all.

## Cleopatra VII

Cleopatra was one of three daughters along with two younger sons of Ptolemy XII. She was born in 69 B.C., but little is known of her mother, who died when Cleopatra was 12.

With the fabulous Library of Alexandria as her classroom and top Greek scholars as her teachers, Cleopatra received the best educa-

tion possible in the ancient world. She studied Greek literature, geography, history, mythology, mathematics, philosophy, science, and rhetoric (persuasive speech). In addition to Greek, she spoke eight other languages. She was the first of the Ptolemies to bother to learn the language of the Egyptian people.

Cleopatra learned from her father, who taught her to carefully choose her allies as he had done with the powerful Romans. She also learned from his example how he ruled. When Ptolemy XII returned to Egypt after a three-year absence in Rome, he discovered his oldest daughter had usurped (taken) the throne. Ptolemy immediately had her murdered.

In 51 B.C., Ptolemy XII died, leaving Cleopatra VII, age 18, and her brother Ptolemy XIII, age 10, as co-monarchs. Cleopatra became the dominant ruler, but the advisers of the young Ptolemy maneuvered to gain the support of the army and the people of Alexandria. Cleopatra was forced to flee to Syria where she raised an army to fight her way back to the throne.

## Cleopatra and Caesar

In 48 B.C., Julius Caesar defeated his Roman rival, Pompey. Caesar then went on to Egypt and occupied the royal palace in Alexandria.

Meanwhile, Pompey had escaped and sought refuge with Ptolemy, now age 13, and his army. But, the young king's advisers had Pompey beheaded, hoping this would win Caesar to their side of the conflict with Cleopatra. Instead, this only angered Caesar.

Cleopatra decided to return secretly to Alexandria to persuade Caesar to support her. She had herself smuggled into the palace in a sack carried by a loyal servant. We do not know what exactly happened next,

but afterward Cleopatra, 21, and Caesar, 52, became allies against her brother. She also soon discovered that she was pregnant.

The young Ptolemy was enraged at this turn of events. His advisers ordered his army to Alexandria to besiege the palace. Caesar's men were hugely outnumbered. In the confusion, Cleopatra's younger sister, Arsinoe, fled the palace and joined her brother's army.

The civilians of Alexandria sided with Ptolemy and tried to seize Caesar's ships in the harbor. Caesar then ordered them burned. However, the fires spread to the docks and the great library was at least partly destroyed.

Finally, Roman reinforcements arrived, forcing Ptolemy's army to retreat. A battle then took place in the desert. Caesar outsmarted Ptolemy's generals and defeated the Egyptian army. Ptolemy was killed, possibly drowning in the Nile. The Romans captured Arsinoe. Cleopatra had won her first political test by siding with the Romans against her own people.

Caesar lingered in Egypt. He put Cleopatra on the throne along with her 12-year-old brother, Ptolemy XIV, whom she officially married, an ancient Egyptian practice. Caesar's purpose was to assure the stability of Egypt and the continued flow of wheat to Rome, thus preventing bread riots in the empire's capital.

Apparently, Caesar trusted Cleopatra to rule Egypt well. They celebrated their pact on a luxurious royal barge cruise up the Nile. Cleopatra presented herself to the Egyptian people dressed as Isis, the popular Egyptian goddess of motherhood and agriculture.

Caesar finally left Alexandria, taking Arsinoe as a prisoner of war. A few months later, Cleopatra gave birth to a boy whom the people called Caesarion, "Little Caesar."

## Queen of Egypt

Cleopatra had two long-term strategic goals. First, she wanted to restore the territories of the Ptolemy Dynasty's empire that had been lost over 150 years earlier. Second, she wanted to secure for herself and her descendants the independence of Egypt but with the protection of Rome. Before pursuing these goals, however, she had to restore order to her country and prove that she was a capable ruler.

Cleopatra was a "hands-on" ruler. She listened to people's grievances, acted as the chief judge, and punished greedy government officials. She supervised the sowing and harvesting of wheat, and managed royal textile factories and monopolies, like papyrus-making (paper). She commanded the army and navy, and carried on diplomacy with foreign kings.

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Within a year, Cleopatra stabilized the economy. She appeared often as the goddess Isis, draped in pearls, in religious rituals important to the common people. She also became the richest person in the Mediterranean world.

In 46 B.C., Cleopatra took her teenage co-ruler and infant Caesarion to Rome. Caesar acknowledged Caesarion as his natural son. Cleopatra lived in Caesar's villa outside Rome where they continued their romance while Caesar's wife lived nearby in the city. Caesar built a golden statue of her in the Temple of Venus.

During Cleopatra's stay in Rome, Caesar produced his "triumph," the

traditional self-celebration by a Roman general of his foreign victories. Caesar's triumph included a parade, displaying the treasure he seized along with his captives in chains. Among them was Cleopatra's sister, Arsinoe. Cleopatra did not witness the event.

In 44 B.C., Cleopatra was still living in Rome when Caesar was assassinated by senators led by Cassius and Brutus. They feared Caesar wanted to destroy the Roman Republic and make himself king.

Cleopatra was shocked at the death of her lover and protector. Moreover, in his will Caesar made his 18-year-old adopted nephew, Octavian, his heir. The will made no mention of Caesarion. Cleopatra quickly returned to Egypt.

Cleopatra's hold on the throne was weakened by Caesar's death. Her teenage co-ruler, Ptolemy XIV, was a threat. Like her father had done, Cleopatra had her brother murdered by poison. Her sister, Arsinoe, was living in exile and had declared herself queen of Egypt. She, too, was a threat.

Cleopatra replaced Ptolemy XIV with three-year-old Caesarion as her new co-ruler. During a famine, she distributed free wheat to the people from the royal granaries. She embarked on building projects dedicated to Isis, Caesar, and the Ptolemy dynasty. She also began construction of her own tomb in Alexandria.

The queen revived the city's reputation as the center of Greek culture and scholarship. Works on medicine were especially notable at this time. Cleopatra herself probably wrote a number of books on this subject.

## Cleopatra and Antony

Mark Antony was a Roman general and loyal friend of Caesar. After Caesar's assassination, Antony believed he rightfully should inherit the unique status of Rome's greatest

leader. Antony formed an alliance with Caesar's young and sickly heir, Octavian, and then took the lead in pursuing Cassius, Brutus, and the other assassins.

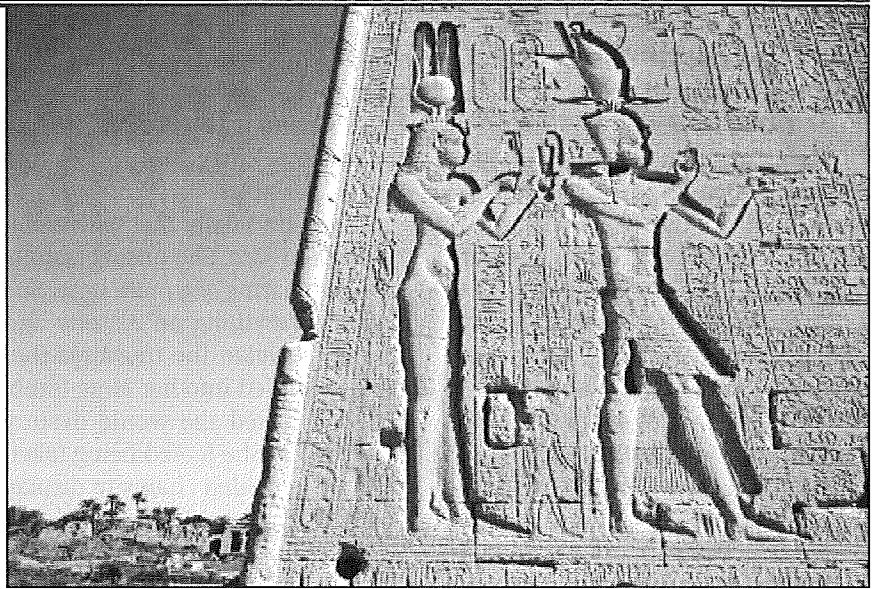
Finally, in 42 B.C., Antony and Octavian defeated Cassius and Brutus, who then took their own lives. Antony and Octavian agreed to divide the Roman Empire between them: Antony got the lands in the eastern Mediterranean, and Octavian took the lands in the west.

When things settled down, Antony, 43, summoned Cleopatra, 28, to his headquarters at Tarsus (a city now in southeast Turkey) to account for her lack of support for avenging Caesar's assassination. Cleopatra took her time, but her royal galley and support ships were loaded with gifts. She made a spectacular entrance up a river to Tarsus, as recorded by the ancient Greek historian and biographer, Plutarch:

She sailed up the Kydnos River in a boat with a golden stern, purple sails spread, the rowers pulling the silver oars to the sound of flutes, pipes, and strings. She herself reclined under a canopy adorned with gold. . . . Marvelous scents from innumerable incense offerings spread along the river banks.

Cleopatra wined and dined Antony and his guests in a series of elaborate banquets. Each night, the guests took home as gifts the decorations made of precious metals and jewels. Antony, who was married, was love-struck.

Finally, Antony and Cleopatra talked business. She explained that she had sent a fleet of ships to aid him, but that a storm tore the fleet apart: Antony wanted money and a fleet to help his invasion of Parthia (now part of Iran). Cleopatra wanted Antony to order the death of her rival sister, Arsinoe. They made a deal. Antony postponed his Parthian



RELIEFS OF CLEOPATRA and her son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion on the wall of the Dendera Temple in Egypt.

Wikimedia Commons

campaign, however, and followed Cleopatra back to Alexandria.

Several months later, Antony headed to Rome to renew his alliance with Octavian. On the way, he abandoned his dying wife, living in Greece. Antony then married Octavian's sister, Octavia, to seal the alliance with his rival, Octavian. Meanwhile, Cleopatra gave birth to twins: Alexander Helios (The Sun) and Cleopatra Selene (The Moon).

### Queen of Kings

Three years later, Antony was at the Syrian port of Antioch, again preparing to conquer Parthia. He summoned Cleopatra from Alexandria. This time, she brought her toddler twins whom Antony accepted as his children.

She was also pregnant again, and in 36 B.C. gave birth to her fourth child and the third by Antony, Ptolemy Philadelphos.

Antony suffered a disastrous defeat by the Parthians. He grew depressed and drank heavily. Cleopatra revived his spirits. In 34 B.C., he was on the march to Armenia, where he was victorious. He brought the king and his family back to Alexandria in golden chains.

In a breathtaking public ceremony, Cleopatra dressed as Isis, and Antony dressed as the Greek god Dionysus. They sat on golden thrones with the four children occupying smaller thrones below. Antony proclaimed Cleopatra "Queen of Kings" along with similar honors to the children.

In exchange for ships and money she had given him, Antony gave Roman territories to Cleopatra that included the island of Cyprus, Phoenicia, Syria, and North Africa. Cleopatra was well on her way to recovering the lands that had been lost by the Ptolemies.

He then made each of their children monarchs of kingdoms from North Africa to Parthia (which Antony had not yet conquered).

Cleopatra at age 35 seemingly had achieved her strategic goals of restoring the old Ptolemy dynasty's empire with herself and her children as rulers backed by Antony. Antony's "donation" of Roman territories to Egypt, however, did not go over well with Octavian back in Rome.

### Downfall and Death

Octavian, envisioning himself as the sole head of the Roman Empire, needed to get rid of Antony. There was also the problem of

Caesarion, Caesar's natural son, who might someday claim to be Rome's true leader.

Going after Antony directly was difficult since many Roman soldiers would refuse to fight against him. Therefore, Octavian spread propaganda against Cleopatra that Antony had been "bewitched by that accursed woman." Octavian accused Cleopatra of "enslaving" Antony and that Rome itself was next. He accused Antony of betraying Rome. Antony made matters worse by divorcing Octavia.

Finally, Octavian got the Senate to declare war against Cleopatra. He calculated correctly that Antony would defend her. Then both of them could be destroyed.

Soon both sides were assembling ships and armies. Cleopatra paid for most of Antony's war fleet and commanded a fleet of her own. The showdown came in a naval battle off the west coast of Greece.

When the opposing fleets clashed in battle on September 2, 31 B.C., neither side gained an advantage. Suddenly Cleopatra in her treasure-laden ship broke through the battle and headed for Egypt. Antony quickly followed her.

Octavian claimed the two fled out of cowardice. But there is evidence that this was a planned escape. Cleopatra had seen a number of bad omens, and she feared a victory by Octavian would clear the way for him to attack a defenseless Egypt.

Antony and Cleopatra ended up in Alexandria. When Octavian arrived, hungering for Cleopatra's treasure, Antony attempted to fight him on sea and land but failed. Cleopatra tried to escape to India, but her ships in the Red Sea were burned by a hostile neighboring king. Cleopatra then tried to negotiate with Octavian to save herself, her children, and her kingdom.

One day Antony received word that his lover had killed herself. He

plunged his sword into himself but did not die right away. Then hearing Cleopatra was still alive, he had his servants carry him to her and died in her arms.

Cleopatra finally met with Octavian face-to-face. She unsuccessfully tried her charms one more time. She blamed everything on Antony and offered Octavian the treasures that she had stuffed into her large tomb. Octavian feared she would destroy the treasure. She feared being taken to Rome in golden chains to display in his triumph.

Ultimately, Cleopatra took her own life, probably with some painless poison. There is a famous story that she was bitten by a snake, but this is unlikely. Dead at age 39, she had been Queen of Egypt for over 20 years.

Octavian allowed Cleopatra and Antony to be buried together in her tomb. He took her treasure and annexed (took over) Egypt. But Cleopatra denied him the pleasure of marching her in golden chains at his triumph in Rome.

Caesarion, age 17, was captured and murdered by Octavian's men.

The nine-year-old twins, Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, along with five-year-old Ptolemy Philadelphos were taken in by Octavia to raise in Rome. The boys shortly disappeared from history, possibly the victims of Rome's many epidemics.

Cleopatra Selene married a favorite of Octavian, who sent them to rule a kingdom in North Africa. They had a son whom she naturally named Ptolemy. He inherited the kingdom, but displeased the Roman Emperor Caligula, who had him murdered in 40 A.D. His death brought an end to Cleopatra's Ptolemy Dynasty.

## DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. How did Cleopatra go about building her empire differently than the Roman men in her life?
2. What do you think was Cleopatra's biggest mistake? Why? What do you think was her greatest accomplishment? Why?
3. Were Cleopatra, Caesar, Antony, and Octavian all villains in this true story? Who was the worst? Why?

## ACTIVITY

### Who Was the Real Cleopatra?

The class will decide this question by debating three positions that historians have taken on Cleopatra over the centuries:

- A. Cleopatra was an immoral seducer and power-mad schemer.
  - B. Cleopatra was a smart ruler and skillful strategist.
  - C. Cleopatra used ruthless tactics to survive in a violent man's world.
1. Form four groups. Three of them will act as the debating groups. Each group will argue for one of the above positions on the question. Each debating group will need to review the article for facts and events that support its position.
  2. The fourth group will act as the debate judges. Judges have the responsibility of asking questions and challenging the arguments of the debating groups.
  3. After all the debating groups have finished, the judges will discuss and decide which position best answers the question: Who was the real Cleopatra?
  4. OPTIONAL — Finally, discuss as a whole class whether you agree that all three positions above are true.