

Cleopatra VII: Egypt's Last Pharaoh and Legendary Queen

The Brilliant Strategist Who Challenged Rome



"For her beauty, as we are told, was in itself not altogether incomparable, nor such as to strike those who saw her; but converse with her had an irresistible charm, and her presence, combined with the persuasiveness of her discourse and the character which was somehow diffused about her behaviour towards others, had something stimulating about it." — Plutarch on Cleopatra.

Early Life and Rise to Power

Born in 69 BCE in Alexandria, Egypt, Cleopatra VII Philopator was a member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, a Greek family that had ruled Egypt since the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. Though ethnically Greek, Cleopatra embraced Egyptian culture and was the first Ptolemaic ruler to learn the Egyptian language, in addition to her native Greek and reportedly at least six other languages.

Cleopatra ascended to the throne in 51 BCE at approximately 18 years of age, initially ruling alongside her younger brother Ptolemy XIII, as was Ptolemaic custom. Their father, Ptolemy XII, had left Egypt deeply in debt to Rome, creating a precarious political situation that would shape Cleopatra's reign.

The sibling co-rulers soon found themselves at odds. In 49 BCE, Ptolemy's advisors, led by the eunuch Pothinus, stripped Cleopatra of her power and forced her to flee Egypt, beginning a civil war between the siblings.

Caesar and the Carpet Legend

As the Ptolemaic siblings fought for control, Rome was experiencing its own civil conflict between Julius Caesar and Pompey. After his defeat at the Battle of Pharsalus, Pompey fled to Egypt seeking refuge but was murdered upon arrival by Ptolemy XIII's forces, who hoped to curry favour with Caesar.

When Caesar arrived in Alexandria in pursuit of Pompey, he was presented with his rival's head—a "gift" that reportedly disgusted rather than pleased him. Finding himself in the middle of the Egyptian succession dispute, Caesar established himself in the royal palace and summoned both Ptolemy and Cleopatra to appear before him.

Legend has it that Cleopatra, knowing she would be prevented from entering the palace by Ptolemy's supporters, had herself wrapped in a carpet (or possibly a linen sack) and smuggled into Caesar's quarters. Whether this dramatic entrance actually occurred remains debated by historians, but the story captures the bold resourcefulness for which Cleopatra became known.

Caesar was reportedly captivated by Cleopatra's intelligence and charm. He chose to support her claim to the throne, leading to the Alexandrian War against Ptolemy XIII, who drowned in the Nile while attempting to flee after his defeat in 47 BCE.

Cleopatra was reinstated as queen, now ruling alongside her younger brother Ptolemy XIV. She and Caesar also became lovers, and she gave birth to a son, Ptolemy XV Caesar, nicknamed Caesarion, meaning "little Caesar."

Strategic Alliances and Political Acumen

Cleopatra's relationship with Caesar was as much political as it was romantic. She visited Rome with Caesarion in 46 BCE, staying in Caesar's villa. Her presence caused quite a sensation among Romans, who were both fascinated and scandalised by the foreign queen.

When Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE, Cleopatra returned to Egypt. Soon after, her co-ruler and brother Ptolemy XIV died under mysterious circumstances, possibly poisoned at Cleopatra's command. She then made her son Caesarion co-regent as Ptolemy XV.

Mark Antony and the Battle for Empire

In the power vacuum following Caesar's death, Rome was again plunged into civil war. The Second Triumvirate of Octavian (Caesar's adopted son), Mark Antony, and Lepidus divided the Roman Republic between them, with Mark Antony taking charge of the eastern provinces, including Egypt.

In 41 BCE, Antony summoned Cleopatra to meet him in Tarsus (in modern Turkey) to answer charges that she had aided his enemies. Understanding the political implications, she turned this summons into an opportunity to forge a new Roman alliance. She arrived in spectacular fashion on a golden barge with purple sails, dressed as the goddess Aphrodite and surrounded by attendants dressed as Cupids and Nereids.

This theatrical entrance, described vividly by Plutarch, exemplified Cleopatra's understanding of power and presentation. Antony, known for his love of luxury and spectacle, was

entranced. Their political alliance quickly evolved into a romance, and Antony spent the winter of 41-40 BCE in Alexandria with Cleopatra.

Although Antony returned to Rome and married Octavian's sister Octavia as a political alliance, he eventually returned to Egypt and Cleopatra. In 37 BCE, they began both a public relationship and a political partnership that would challenge Rome's control of the eastern Mediterranean.

The "Donations of Alexandria" and Propaganda War

In 34 BCE, Antony and Cleopatra held a ceremony in Alexandria that became known as the "Donations of Alexandria." Antony officially recognised Caesarion as Caesar's son and heir and divided various eastern territories among Cleopatra's children with him—Alexander Helios, Cleopatra Selene, and Ptolemy Philadelphus.

This act, perceived as transferring Roman territories to foreign rule, gave Octavian the perfect propaganda tool against Antony. In Rome, Octavian painted Antony as a man bewitched by a foreign queen, abandoning Roman values and interests for an exotic temptress. He publicly read what he claimed was Antony's will, which allegedly left Roman territories to Cleopatra's children and indicated his wish to be buried in Alexandria rather than Rome.

The Roman Senate, influenced by Octavian's propaganda, stripped Antony of his powers and declared war—not on Antony—but on Cleopatra, framing the conflict as Rome versus a foreign threat rather than a civil war.

Battle of Actium and Final Days

The conflict culminated in the naval Battle of Actium on September 2, 31 BCE. Antony and Cleopatra's combined fleet was defeated by Octavian's forces, led by Agrippa. The couple fled back to Egypt, their alliance of eastern kingdoms crumbling in the wake of their defeat.

As Octavian's forces advanced on Alexandria in 30 BCE, Antony, believing a false report that Cleopatra had died, attempted suicide by falling on his sword. He was brought to Cleopatra's mausoleum, where she had barricaded herself, and died in her arms.

Knowing she would be paraded through Rome as a captive if taken alive, Cleopatra chose suicide. According to ancient sources, she arranged for a venomous snake, an asp, to be smuggled into her quarters in a basket of figs. She died on August 12, 30 BCE, at the age of 39. Her handmaidens Iras and Charmion also died with her, creating a scene that reportedly moved even Octavian.

Octavian (later known as Augustus) had Caesarion killed but spared Cleopatra's children with Antony, who were taken to Rome and raised by Antony's wife, Octavia.

Legacy and Historical Impact

With Cleopatra's death, the Ptolemaic dynasty that had ruled Egypt for nearly three centuries came to an end. Egypt became a province of Rome, marking the end of the last remnant of the Hellenistic kingdoms that had succeeded Alexander the Great.

Cleopatra's life has been depicted countless times in art, literature, film, and television, often with varying degrees of historical accuracy. The Roman portrayal of her as a seductress who used her feminine wiles to manipulate powerful men has dominated popular perception for centuries.

Modern historians have worked to recover a more nuanced image of Cleopatra as an intelligent, educated ruler who spoke multiple languages, authored texts on weights and measures, and skillfully managed a complex kingdom during a period of immense political upheaval. Her political alliances with Caesar and Antony were strategic moves by a queen trying to preserve her country's independence in the face of Roman expansion.

Archaeological evidence suggests she promoted herself to her Egyptian subjects as a reincarnation of the goddess Isis, highlighting her political astuteness in embracing local religious customs despite her Greek heritage. Coins minted during her reign show a ruler who emphasised her reality rather than her beauty.

Historical Significance

Cleopatra stands as one of history's most influential female rulers. In a world dominated by men, she navigated the treacherous politics of her era with remarkable skill, maintaining Egypt's independence decades longer than might otherwise have been possible.

Her death marked a significant transition point in ancient history—the end of the Hellenistic Age and the beginning of Roman Egypt. The culture that had thrived along the Nile for millennia would continue under Roman rule, but never again would Egypt have the independence it had maintained, even as a Ptolemaic client kingdom.

More than two thousand years after her death, Cleopatra remains a powerful symbol of female leadership, political brilliance, and the complex interplay of gender and power. Beyond the myths and romantic legends lies the story of a remarkable queen who dared to challenge the greatest empire of her time.

"I will not be triumphed over." — Cleopatra's reported last words, according to Plutarch.

Written by Camilla Hillberg