

Cleopatra: Heroine or Harlot?  
by Derek Shank

Cleopatra VII has captured the imaginations of people throughout the centuries, as she once captured the affections of Caesar and Antony in the first century BC. She has been portrayed as villainous, treacherous, and lecherous, but also as benevolent, intelligent, and elegant. The question remains: what was the historical Cleopatra really like? Sources on her are problematic, as no contemporary biography of her exists. The most detailed sources, Plutarch's *Life of Antony* and Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, were written much later, and often share the same pro-Augustan, anti-Cleopatran bias as other Roman literary sources. Coins, inscriptions, and papyri can only tell so much. Nonetheless, through a general survey of such sources as are available, it is possible to gain an understanding of Cleopatra's nature: throughout her life, she was an ambitious and intelligent woman with a firm grasp of politics.

Despite the scant quantity of evidence that exists regarding Cleopatra's early life, her ambition is evident even at this stage, through her struggle with her brother Ptolemy XIII over control of the Egyptian throne. However, to what extent Cleopatra actually ruled during this period is disputed. Near the end of the reign of Cleopatra's father Ptolemy XII Auletes in 51 BC, papyrus fragments refer to the date as the "the thirtieth year of Auletes which is the first year of Cleopatra."

However, regardless of whether or not Cleopatra obtained sole power in 51 BC, papyri from 50-49 BC refer to both Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy XIII as rulers, and then by September 49 BC refer to Ptolemy XIII as the sole ruler. Caesar reports that when he arrived in Egypt in June 48 BC, Cleopatra had been driven out of Egypt and she and Ptolemy were at war with one another (*Civil War* 3.103).

Later in Cleopatra's life, both her ambition and her political acuity were illustrated through her relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. She understood that her only viable political option was to pursue friendly diplomatic relations with the Roman Empire, which at this time was essentially ruled by powerful men, so she decided to attach herself to these men to advance herself politically.

Caesar's arrival in Egypt in 48 BC was the perfect opportunity for Cleopatra to pursue this policy. Although different sources vary with respect to the details, all agree that Cleopatra approached Caesar to attempt to win him over to her cause, and that the two became romantically involved (Cassius Dio 42.34-35; Florus 2.13.56-58; Lucan 95-127; Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 49.1-3). However, Caesar did not immediately favor Cleopatra in his decision regarding Egypt's rulership, but rather acted according to the will of Cleopatra's father Ptolemy XII Auletes, which said that Cleopatra and her younger brother Ptolemy XIII were to rule jointly. This decision was opposed by Ptolemy XIII's supporters, and war followed which pitted his Egyptian forces against Caesar's legions, in which Caesar was eventually victorious and Ptolemy XIII was killed. Upon victory, Caesar had effectively conquered Egypt, but rather than annexing it, he instead set in place Cleopatra and her youngest brother Ptolemy XIV as rulers, but due to the latter's

youth Cleopatra effectively wielded all the power. Later on, in 46 BC, Cleopatra went to Rome with Caesar and signed a treaty of friendship.

Throughout the course of her relationship with Caesar, Cleopatra secured her hold on the Ptolemaic throne and advanced her kingdom politically by keeping it in Rome's good graces. Caesar also planned, with Cleopatra's support, to invade the Parthian Empire to the East, had he not been assassinated in 44 BC. Caesar was more than a lover for Cleopatra; he, himself an ambitious man, was a way for her to fulfill her own ambitions. It is for this reason, as well as any personal emotional attachments she may have had to him, that Caesar's assassination must have been so devastating to Cleopatra.

Like Caesar, Antony was not merely a lover for Cleopatra, but a political ally and a route to achieving her ambitions. Antony greatly enlarged Cleopatra's kingdom with valuable territory, bestowing upon her Phoenicia, Coele Syria, Cyprus, and large parts of Cilicia, Judaea and Arabia Nabataea, despite the fact that this policy was not popular amongst the Romans (Plutarch, *Life of Antony* 36.2). However, even this huge expansion of her territory was not enough to satisfy Cleopatra's ambitions, as she continued to try to convince Antony to depose King Herod and give her the rest of Judaea, which had once been part of the Ptolemaic kingdom. Additionally, Cleopatra supported Antony in his unsuccessful invasion of the Parthian empire. The two of them had grand ambitions: together, they planned to conquer the world and rule it based on the harmonious union of East and West, but because of their defeat at the hands of Octavian and his admiral Agrippa, these momentous plans were never to be realized.

Cleopatra was capable of pursuing her ambitions on her own, as well. After Caesar's death, she seems to have made the best of the situation to advance her own interests, having her younger brother Ptolemy XIV killed and assuming joint rule with her son by Caesar, Caesarian, also known as Ptolemy XV. In addition to being seen as an ambitious act intended to solidify her own power by removing possible opposition, the murder can also be seen as a sound political move. The murdering of competing blood relations to secure one's political position was common practice at the time, and often played an important role in many successions. So, although this act of fratricide may seem deplorable today, to Cleopatra it must have seemed quite reasonable. By the standards of the time, Cleopatra was not more ruthless or wicked than any other ruler, and perhaps a great deal 'better' than many.

Cleopatra's intelligence manifested itself not only through her calculated political actions designed to fulfill her ambitions, but also in her demeanor when dealing with other people, as seen in a description of her in Plutarch's *Life of Antony*. Plutarch describes her as having a stimulating presence, charming conversation, a sweet tone of voice, and a facility in multiple languages. Despite his frequent condemnation of Cleopatra's morals and her effect on Antony, Plutarch paints a picture of Cleopatra as a cultured and educated woman with a quick wit and a sharp tongue, a valued romantic companion which often seems at odds with the manipulative seductress she is portrayed as elsewhere.

After reading Plutarch's descriptions, one has a better idea about exactly what kind of woman was so able to captivate two of the greatest Romans of her time, not merely throughout ephemeral flings but throughout extended relationships. For example, even after Antony had married Octavian's sister Octavia, he spent the winter of 37-36 BC with Cleopatra, four years after he had wintered with her at Alexandria. Such devotion surely must have had more to do with Cleopatra's intelligence and companionship than with her physical attractiveness, especially since Plutarch records that Cleopatra was not superior to Octavia in either youthfulness or beauty (*Life of Antony* 57.3)

An examination of the sources, imperfect as they are, has shed some light on Cleopatra's personality. By the standards of rulers of the time, she was neither particularly benevolent nor morally reprehensible. Throughout her life she strove for her ambitions with intense determination, using her considerable array of wits and her depth of political understanding in order to achieve them. Although she did not obtain her ultimate goals in her lifetime, she lives on as a figure of myth within the modern imagination.