

Unwithered By Age, Maybe – But Was Cleopatra Really Beautiful? Sheila Ager

Cleopatra VII of Egypt is surely one of the most famous figures of antiquity, or indeed of any era. Her legendary love affairs with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony, her imprisonment by her mortal enemy Octavian, and her dramatic suicide by snakebite have captured the imaginations of poets, playwrights, artists, and musicians for the past two thousand years. At the heart of Cleopatra's legend lie her celebrated physical charms. "She was a woman of surpassing beauty," says the ancient writer Dio, explaining her hold over Julius Caesar, "and when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking."¹ Ever since her own time, Cleopatra has been viewed as an avatar of attractiveness: her name is synonymous with glamour, luxury, and sheer sexuality. As Shakespeare said, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety."² Today her name is exploited in the beauty and sex industries, selling everything from cosmetics and hair removal products to uncomfortable jewelry for various unlikely body parts.



The Meeting between Cleopatra and Antony,
by Lawrence Alma Tadema

But was Cleopatra actually "beautiful"? The question may ultimately be unanswerable, but we can at least explore some of its ramifications. First of all, we would have to ask, what do we mean by the term "beautiful"? "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is a common cliché, one that captures the essentially subjective nature of our responses to the physical appearance of another human being. Tastes vary, and one person's Adonis or Venus may well be another's Caliban or Medusa. And not only is it true that we each tend to bring our own particular perspective to the question of beauty, it is also the case that fashions change with time. The plump and sensual seventeenth-century nudes of Rubens would not have found modeling jobs in the latter part of the twentieth century. So while it's safe to say that Caesar and Antony clearly found Cleopatra physically appealing, we can't be so certain that others among her contemporaries were equally struck by her charms, or that a reincarnated Cleopatra would meet the modern standards of Hollywood's beauty cult.³

¹ Dio 42.34.4.

² *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 2, Scene 2, 245-46.

³ Some research that has been done on the question of perceptions of beauty suggests that there are certain characteristics – e.g., large eyes – which tend to be a fairly constant measure, irrespective of style or fashion. See M. Cunningham, "Measuring the physical in physical attractiveness: quasi-experiments on the sociobiology of

Nevertheless, we're fortunate in having what seems to be a reasonably dispassionate *ancient* assessment of Cleopatra's physical appearance – in other words, a judgement based on the standards of her own time. So while it may be subjective, at least it isn't viewing Cleopatra through a lens two thousand years thick. Unlike other ancient authors such as Dio (quoted above), the biographer Plutarch has the following to say about Cleopatra's physiognomy: "Her own beauty, so we are told, was not of that incomparable kind which instantly captivates the beholder."⁴ So it seems that Cleopatra's contemporaries did *not* in fact consider her beauty – in and of itself – to be of the legendary variety.

Now Plutarch does go on to say that "the charm of her presence was irresistible," and he explains that this charm sprang from Cleopatra's wit and intelligence. But he also implies, I think, that Cleopatra was indeed at least reasonably physically attractive, an attractiveness that was simply enhanced by the charm of her character. Nevertheless, if the question of what constituted a "beautiful" woman two millennia ago is a difficult one to determine, the question of "reasonably attractive" is even harder. Here we should perhaps turn to the material remains to see what story they tell.



The Berlin Cleopatra

There are numerous surviving coin portraits of Cleopatra and at least two sculpted heads that have been identified as the queen on the basis of their similarity to the coins. Perhaps the finest of the sculpted portraits is that known as the "Berlin Cleopatra" (it is part of the collection of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin). It portrays a young woman with strongly marked features, who does indeed appear to be attractive, but whose appearance does not strike us as exotic or glamorous. The distinctive hairstyle, the broad fillet around the head, and the strong profile (particularly the nose) are all features which appear on the Alexandrian coins of Cleopatra, and assist in identifying this head as a portrait of the queen.

The Alexandrian coins themselves – and the coins of a number of allied cities which copied the Alexandrian-style portrait – vary widely in quality, but always feature a Cleopatra whose features are strong, not delicate, not dainty, and not typically "feminine" or "beautiful", as judged by the artistic canons of her own time.

female facial beauty," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50 (1986): 925-35; and E. Bartman, *Portraits of Livia: Imaging the Imperial Woman in Augustan Rome*, Cambridge 1999: 25-28.

⁴ Plutarch *Antony* 27.



The Alexandrian Image of Cleopatra



The Syrian-Roman Image of Cleopatra

Even more striking are the portraits of Cleopatra we find on the coinage of the last five or six years of her reign, coinage which was issued jointly with her political and personal partner, Marc Antony. The portraits on these coins are known as the “Syrian/Roman-style” portraits, because some of the coins are Greek tetradrachms, issued by various mints in the ancient region of Syria, and some are Roman denarii, issued by Antony’s mints.

They show a Cleopatra whose strong nose has become more hooked than ever, and who has, it seems, abandoned whatever claims she might have had to youthful beauty in favour of a stiff and matronly dignity. It is the queen’s image on these coins that offers the most startling corrective to the notion that Cleopatra was a knockout. As R.A. Hazzard says, in his work on Ptolemaic coins: “To those familiar with the legend of the beautiful Cleopatra, her image may come as a shock.”⁵

But contemplation of Cleopatra’s physical appearance cannot simply end with the superficial judgement that her coin portraits are hatchet-faced and that Plutarch must have been politely – and vastly – understating the case when he said that her beauty was “not incomparable”. In the modern world, we are perhaps too accustomed to the notion that portraits – whether photographic or in other media – are primarily intended to enhance as far as possible the physical attractiveness of the subject. Such a notion was not completely foreign to Cleopatra’s contemporaries – portraits of other Ptolemaic queens tend to idealize their appearance, and Julius Caesar himself was said to wear a laurel wreath in his portraits because he was sensitive about his advancing baldness – but official portraiture had many purposes other than the one with which we’re most familiar.

Most notably, Cleopatra would have wanted to portray herself as someone who was Antony’s equal partner – equal in strength, equal in wealth, and equal in political authority. Her portraits on the Syrian/Roman-style coins – coins which featured the bust of Antony on the flip side – therefore emphasize the strength rather than the softness of her features (a softness which we are able to detect in the Berlin head). Also emphasized is her wealth (a sign of power) – her bust is liberally draped in pearls. And on many of these coins, Cleopatra and Antony actually

⁵ R.A. Hazzard, *Ptolemaic Coins: an Introduction for Collectors*, Toronto 1995: 13.

bear a startling resemblance to one another. Was Cleopatra deliberately assimilating her appearance to Antony's in order to emphasize the political partnership? Was she adopting a more masculine physiognomy as a way of strengthening her legitimacy to rule in a world that was fundamentally patriarchal? These and other speculations remain points of current debate.⁶

I'd like to add one further speculation to the question of Cleopatra's purpose in sanctioning this style of portrait for hers and Antony's coinage. In the years when these coins were being circulated, Cleopatra and Antony were under increasing fire from Octavian, Antony's erstwhile colleague and soon to be their open enemy. The propaganda Octavian and his supporters spread about Cleopatra claimed that the queen was corrupting Antony through her sexual wiles, making him "a slave to his passion for her".⁷ It seems to me possible that in these portraits Cleopatra deliberately underplayed her own physical attractiveness (whatever it may have been) as a way of combating Octavian's insistent emphasis on her sexuality and on Antony's own besotted response to it.

In conclusion, we need to acknowledge what is perhaps the most obvious point so far left unstated. Does it really matter whether Cleopatra was "beautiful" or not? It does not seem to have mattered to her, and of course Plutarch attests that her attractions went far beyond the physical. Yet it remains a subject of fascination to us, brought up as we are with only the legend of Cleopatra. An examination of the question allows us to explore the mechanisms that go into the creation of such a legend, and perhaps also to get a little closer to the real woman behind the myth.⁸

⁶ See, among others, R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Royal Portraits*, Oxford 1988, and J. Williams, "Imperial style and the coins of Cleopatra and Mark Antony," 87-94 in S. Walker/S.-A. Ashton (eds.), *Cleopatra Reassessed*, London 2003.

⁷ L. Annaeus Florus, 2.21.1.

⁸ The images used in this article are either in the public domain or are usable under the GNU Free Documentation License; thanks to the Wikipedia editor PHGCOM for the two coin images and to Louis le Grand for the image of the Berlin Cleopatra.