

POWER-MAD OR MADLY IN LOVE?

“ PLUTARCH

CLEOPATRA, QUEEN OF EGYPT

Ptolemy XII was pharaoh of Egypt, the wealthiest country in the Mediterranean world. Ptolemy loved to party—he was called “The Flute Player” because he was so fond of music. But Ptolemy was not just a playful fellow. He was also a troublesome one, so troublesome that his own people wanted him out. They booted him from power in 58 BCE and put his eldest daughter, Berenice, on the throne instead.

Ptolemy fought back. He traveled to Rome and bribed the general Pompey to support him against Berenice. Pompey took troops to Egypt, defeated Berenice’s supporters, and returned the playboy king to his throne. In gratitude, Ptolemy named Pompey as legal guardian to his eldest son. Ptolemy then gave orders for Berenice to be beheaded.

Who was this man who ordered his own daughter’s death?

Ptolemy XII was actually a Greek. His long-ago ancestor, the first Ptolemy, had served as a general under Alexander the Great, who, in 331 BCE, had conquered a huge empire—including Egypt. When Alexander died, his three top generals divided the empire among themselves. The one who chose Egypt made himself its king and called himself Ptolemy I. By the time Ptolemy XII came to the throne, his family had ruled Egypt for almost 250 years. But they still spoke Greek and considered themselves part of the Greek world.

Although Ptolemy had executed his eldest daughter, there was another whom he especially loved—a bright, lively girl named Cleopatra VII. The king seems to have found her the most interesting of all his children. He



Cleopatra may not have been drop-dead gorgeous, but her personality must have sizzled—she was loved by two of Rome’s most powerful men: Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.

proclaimed her a goddess when she was about four years old.

Cleopatra went to the palace school with the other royal princes and princesses. She became fluent in nine languages and was the first member of her family who could speak Egyptian. Cleopatra had tremendous appeal. Even the Greek biographer Plutarch, who disapproved of her behavior, describes her in glowing terms: “The charm of her presence was irresistible, but there was an attraction in her person and conversation, together with a force of character, which showed in her every word and action. Everyone who met her fell under her spell.”

When Ptolemy died in 51 BCE, he left his kingdom to the 18-year-old Cleopatra. Even though she was old enough to rule, according to Egyptian law, she couldn't rule alone. Ptolemy's will set up joint rule by Cleopatra and her 12-year-old brother, Ptolemy XIII.

According to Egyptian tradition, pharaohs married their siblings or children to keep power within the royal family. Cleopatra had to marry a brother or a son, and this **consort** would be her official husband. It would be a marriage of politics, not love. Cleopatra had no sons when she came to the throne, so her first co-ruler was Ptolemy XIII.

Cleopatra and Ptolemy ruled together for several years, but Cleopatra wasn't very good at sharing. She left her brother's name out of official documents—on purpose—and had her own picture and name stamped on Egyptian coins. This didn't go over very well with Ptolemy. Nor did it please the court officials of Alexandria, the capital city.

Alexandria's officials decided that Ptolemy would be easier to control than Cleopatra. So they plotted to overthrow the strong-willed queen. Knowing that her life was in danger, Cleopatra escaped to Syria, where she raised an army to help her regain power.

In 48 BCE, while Cleopatra was away, Pompey came back to Egypt, this time fleeing from Julius Caesar. Since Pompey was Ptolemy's legal guardian, the general thought that he could count on the young king of Egypt to protect

44 Plutarch, *Life of Antony*,
110 CE

Consors =
“partner” or “neighbor”
“Consort” can simply mean
“companion,” but it is often
used as the name of a ruler's
husband or wife. Great
Britain's Queen Victoria was
married to Prince Albert. He
was a prince and the royal
consort, but never a king.

him. Instead, Ptolemy allowed his advisors to murder and behead the Roman general.

Caesar arrived in Alexandria four days later with 3,200 foot soldiers and 800 cavalrymen. After having Pompey's murderers executed, Caesar took over the royal palace and immediately began giving orders. This news reached Cleopatra in Syria, and she realized that control of Egypt hung in the balance. If power was changing hands, she did not intend to miss out. She smuggled herself back into Alexandria, passing through enemy lines rolled up in a carpet. She was delivered—in the carpet—to Caesar. Imagine his surprise when the carpet was unrolled, and there, before him, was the beautiful young queen of Egypt!

Caesar had summoned both Ptolemy and Cleopatra to appear before him. The next morning, when Ptolemy arrived at the palace, he discovered that Cleopatra had gotten there first. It soon became clear to 15-year-old Ptolemy that Caesar and Cleopatra had formed a close alliance. They had, in fact, become lovers. Ptolemy could easily see that Caesar would support Cleopatra's claim to the throne, not his. Shouting that he had been betrayed, Ptolemy stormed out into the streets of Alexandria and started to organize a mob against his sister.

Ptolemy gathered an army of 20,000 men. His troops surrounded Caesar, but the great Roman overcame them with his own troops and executed their general. The boy-king drowned in the Nile River while trying to escape.

Ptolemy's death left Cleopatra alone on the throne, but only for a little while. She had to marry another brother in order to pacify the priests and government officials of Alexandria. This brother, her second consort, was also named Ptolemy—Ptolemy XIV.

Most historians agree that Caesar planned to place Cleopatra on the throne of Egypt. But scholars disagree about why. Was he in love with her? Or did he just believe that he could control her . . . that she would be a useful puppet-queen for Rome? No one knows.

When Caesar returned to Rome in 46 BCE, Cleopatra followed him. Even though he already had a wife, the dictator kept Cleopatra and their infant son, Caesarion, in another

THE GODDESS ISIS

Cleopatra often presented herself as the goddess Isis, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and harvest. On ceremonial occasions, she often wore black robes, imitating the traditional image of the goddess.





Mark Antony was Julius Caesar's chief deputy when he first met the ruler's mistress, Cleopatra. Eight years later, in 36 BCE, Caesar was dead and Antony married the Egyptian queen.

home. There, she lived in great luxury and, one way or another, managed to offend almost everyone in Rome.

The assassination of Caesar two years later left Cleopatra in danger. She knew that no one in Rome would defend her, so she sailed back to Alexandria, taking Caesarion with her. Once there, she arranged for her brother, Ptolemy XIV, to be assassinated. She made young Caesarion her new co-ruler.

Cleopatra found Egypt in a bad state, weakened by drought and years of poor harvests. The people were hungry, but the royal treasury was nearly empty. Cleopatra knew that she must connect herself to a source of power. And power, in 41 BCE, meant Rome. So when Mark Antony invited her to meet him in Tarsus (an ancient city in what is now Turkey), she accepted. Even though her country was teetering on the edge of financial collapse, she put on an extravagant show to impress and woo him. Plutarch describes how she

sailed up the . . . river in a flat-bottomed boat . . . with its purple sails outstretched, pulled by silver oars. . . . She herself reclined under a gold-embroidered awning, dressed like Venus. . . . Her slaves, dressed as cupids, fanned her on each side.

Antony was married, but he fell for Cleopatra like a fish taking the bait. He spent the winter with her in Alexandria. It seemed that she could get anything she wanted from him. He even began to wear Eastern clothes instead of the traditional Roman toga. Sometimes, for fun, Antony and Cleopatra dressed as slaves or servants and roamed the streets playing pranks on anyone they met. According to Plutarch, the people of Alexandria were charmed at the sight of a Roman general behaving in such a silly way. "The Alexandrians . . . enjoyed taking part in these amusements. . . . They liked Antony personally and used to say that he put on his tragic mask for the Romans, but kept the comic one for them."

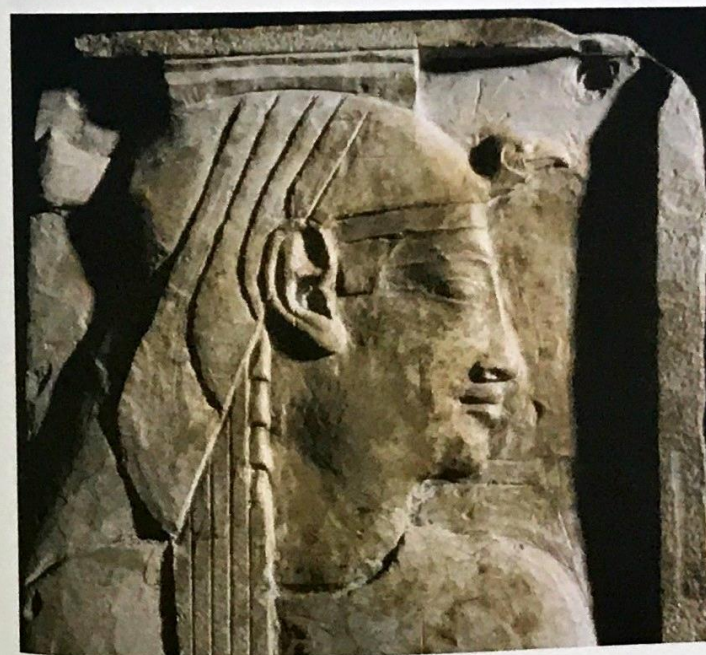
66 Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 110 CE

66 Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 110 CE

Meanwhile, Caesar's heir, Octavian was still in Rome. He and Antony had been partners. They had defeated and killed Caesar's assassins and were now supposedly ruling the empire together. But when Antony's wife became involved in a civil war against Octavian, Antony had to leave Cleopatra and return to Rome to deal with the crisis. His wife became ill and died, leaving Antony free to marry again. He could have chosen Cleopatra, but he made a political marriage instead. He married Octavian's sister, Octavia—a beautiful, intelligent widow. She and Antony had a daughter. Back in Egypt, though, Cleopatra had already given birth to Antony's children, a twin boy and girl.

Even though Octavia was expecting their second child, Mark Antony suddenly went back to Alexandria . . . and Cleopatra, whom he married under Egyptian law. Octavian was furious. His sister had been rejected and shamed. He declared war against Antony and Cleopatra.

In 31 BCE, Octavian's navy defeated Mark Antony in Greece. Morale sank among Antony's troops. Many soldiers deserted and joined Octavian. Supplies of food and water



In this first century BCE portrait, Cleopatra resembles the goddess Isis. The queen's eyelids are lowered, and her smile is serene—she rules supreme in her capital city of Alexandria.

grew scarce for Antony's army. His forces suffered a fatal blow when Octavian crushed them in the Battle of Actium, a city on the western coast of Greece. Cleopatra, seeing the disaster from a distance, ordered her ships to return to Egypt. Antony saw her purple sails in retreat and ordered his sailors to follow. But Antony's ground forces continued to fight. They couldn't believe at first that their beloved leader had abandoned them. When they realized it was true, they simply laid down their weapons and surrendered.

The final battle between Antony and Octavian began near Alexandria on the first of August, 30 BCE. Antony ordered his fleet to attack, and his men obediently rowed toward the enemy ships. Then, instead of attacking, they saluted the enemy's leader: Octavian. Antony's cavalry

Cleopatra and her servants escape in a small boat, leaving her lover, Mark Antony, to fight on alone against the more powerful Romans in the fierce Battle of Actium.



deserted as well. Only the foot soldiers remained loyal to their general, but they were easily defeated.

Antony was infuriated that Cleopatra had ordered her troops to abandon the battle and return to Egypt. Plutarch writes that the defeated general “retreated into Alexandria, crying out in his rage that Cleopatra had betrayed him to the very men he had fought for her sake.” Cleopatra, fearing her lover's anger, hid in a huge, two-story tomb and sent a servant to tell Antony that she was dead.

When Antony heard the news, he was devastated. He said he had no reason to live. The war was lost and Cleopatra was dead. So he stabbed himself, by falling on his own sword. He was dying, but not yet dead, when Cleopatra's second messenger arrived, inviting Antony to come to her hiding place. The queen was alive after all. She had changed her mind and wanted to see Antony. But it was almost too late.

Antony commanded his slaves to lift him up. Plutarch says that they carried Antony to the tomb, but

even then, Cleopatra would not allow the doors to be opened, but she showed herself at a window and let down cords and ropes to the ground. The slaves fastened Antony to these and the queen pulled him up. . . . Cleopatra . . . laid him upon a bed . . . and smeared her face with his blood. She called him her lord and husband and commander.

Antony died in the arms of the queen.

With Antony dead and Cleopatra defeated, Octavian was the undisputed ruler of the known world. Cleopatra tried to make him fall in love with her. He could have been her third great Roman—but he wasn't interested. Instead, Octavian planned to take Cleopatra, the last Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt, to Rome as his slave.

Rather than be humiliated, Cleopatra chose death. She tried to kill herself, but Octavian's guards caught and stopped her. However, in the end she succeeded with a trick. The queen humbly asked the conqueror to allow her to mourn Antony's death and to give his body a proper farewell. Octavian agreed.

66 Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 110 CE

66 Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 110 CE

DEATH BY ASP

An asp is a small, Egyptian cobra. Because she had tested various poisons on condemned prisoners, Cleopatra knew that its poison worked quickly and didn't cause too much pain.

Cleopatra ordered a bath to be made ready and when she had bathed, she put on her royal robes and ate a fancy meal. Soon an Egyptian peasant arrived with a basket of figs. The guard inspected it but didn't see the asp, a poisonous snake, hidden beneath the fruit. Cleopatra sent away all of her servants except two women whom she especially trusted and loved. These servants locked the doors of the tomb, obeying the queen's command. Cleopatra had planned to let the asp come upon her when she wasn't looking. But according to one story by Plutarch, as soon as she saw the snake, she grabbed it and pressed it onto her bare arm, inviting a fatal bite.

When Octavian's messengers broke into the tomb, they found Cleopatra and one of her handmaidens already dead. The other servant was dying—like her mistress, poisoned by the asp. Octavian was angry to have lost his prize, but he admired the queen's courage and determination.

Plutarch writes that Octavian commanded that she be “buried with royal splendor and magnificence, and her body laid beside Antony's.” He then gave orders for Caesarion's execution. For Octavian, the great Julius Caesar could have only one heir—himself.

What gave Cleopatra such power? She wasn't the most beautiful woman the world has ever known, but she must have been fascinating. Poets and historians, both Greek and Roman, described her as a goddess. Her fame continues. Countless plays, operas, and movies have been produced about her. William Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* is still performed today all over the world. Cleopatra's dramatic death has been the subject of dozens of paintings. Yet no one knows what she really felt about her Roman lovers. Did she truly care about Caesar or was he just a tool of her ambition? Did she fall in love with the handsome Mark Antony or did she use him in a desperate attempt to save the throne of Egypt?

These mysteries surround the Cleopatra of history. We may never know the answers.

“ Plutarch, *Life of Antony*,
110 CE