Cleopatra VII
(Looking For) The Woman Behind the Myth

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In This Talk I Will Be...

• Placing Cleopatra in her correct historical environment, with reference to earlier Ptolemaic queens.

• Telling (briefly) the story of her life and death.

• Assessing what we know (or what we think we know) about the “real” Cleopatra.
Alexander III
“The Great”
332 – 323 BCE
Ptolemy I
304-284 BCE

• Alexander’s general.
• Kidnaps the body of Alexander.
• Develops Alexandria as a capital city.
Kom el-Dikka
(Eastern) Great Harbour
Serapis
A New God for a New City
Ptolemy II
285-246 BCE

• Married and divorced Arsinoe I of Thrace, mother of Ptolemy III.

• Consanguineous marriage to Arsinoe II, stepmother of Arsinoe I.
Arsinoe II

- Married Lysimachus of Thrace (and masterminded the death of his heir).

- Married half-brother Ptolemy Ceraunus of Macedon (who murdered her sons by Lysimachus).

- Fled to Egypt and married her brother Ptolemy II.

- Part of royal cult in life.

- Personal divinity after death.
Cleopatra II

- Husband/brother: Ptolemy VI (180-164, 163-145 BCE)
- Sons: Ptolemy Eupator, Ptolemy VII
- Daughters: Cleopatra III and Cleopatra Thea

- Husband/brother: Ptolemy VIII (170-163, 145-116 BCE)
- Son: Ptolemy Memphites

- Ptolemy VII and Ptolemy Memphites murdered by Ptolemy VIII.
The Two Wives of Ptolemy VIII:
“Cleopatra the Sister” and “Cleopatra the Wife”.
Cleopatra III

• Married uncle-stepfather: Ptolemy VIII.
• Mother of and regent for: Ptolemy IX and Ptolemy X.
• Strongly associated with the cult of Isis.
• Murdered by younger son.
Ptolemy XII
80-58, 55-51 BCE

- Husband of:
  - Cleopatra V Tryphaena

- Father of:
  - Berenice IV 58-55 BCE
  - Cleopatra VI ?
  - Cleopatra VII 51-30 BCE
  - Arsinoe IV 47 BCE
  - Ptolemy XIII 51-47 BCE
  - Ptolemy XIV 47-44 BCE
Ptolemy XII Auletes

“The Flute Player”
“The Bastard”
Cleopatra VII: The Evidence

- Little archaeological information.
- Few contemporary Egyptian texts.
- Coins.
- Later Classical writings: biased towards Octavian.
- Later Arabic

- Lack of actual information leads to much modern speculation.
• 70 BCE: birth.

• 51 BCE: rules with brother Ptolemy XIII.

• Relationship between brother and sister breaks down.

• 48 BCE : 28 September Ptolemy kills Pompey.

• Julius Caesar arrives in Alexandria.
• 48 BCE: Civil war ends. Cleopatra rules with brother Ptolemy XIV, protected by Julius Caesar.

• 47 BCE? Birth of son Ptolemy Caesar (Caesarion).

• 44 BCE: Caesar assassinated in Rome; Cleopatra returns to Egypt.

• Ptolemy XIV dies; Cleopatra rules with son Caesarian.
Cleopatra becomes the living embodiment of Isis, consort of:
- Osiris
- Seraphis
- Dionysus

Both ruled on behalf of fatherless sons.

Links Cleopatra VII to Cleopatra III.
• Sister-wife of Osiris, King of the Dead.

• Mother of Horus.

• Mother and protector of living Horus kings.
Isis: Development

- Absorbs mythology and regalia of other goddesses
- Carries *sistrum* and *menyt* and wears the sun disk and cow horns of Hathor
- Egypt’s dominant female deity
Isis and Horus come to symbolise all that was good and powerful about Egyptian motherhood.
Ptolemaic Isis

- Assimilates Classical goddesses:
  - Demeter
  - Athena
  - Hera
  - Artemis
  - Aphrodite
Isis in Alexandria

- Queen of heaven and mistress of the sea.

- Isis Pelagia protected the harbour.

- Isis Medica healed in temple-hospitals outside the city walls.

- Consort of Dionysos and Serapis (and Osiris).
Isis: Outside Egypt

- Temple to Isis built on the Capitoline Hill c. 80 BCE.
- Temple of Isis at Pompeii.
- Roman temple of Isis in London.
• 41 BCE: Teams up with Mark Antony.

• 34 BCE: Antony plans an eastern empire ruled by his Egyptian family.

• 32 BCE: Octavian declares war on Cleopatra.
He [Antony] posed with her [Cleopatra] for portrait paintings and statues, he representing Osiris or Dionysos and she Selene or Isis. This more than all else made him seem to have been bewitched by her through some enchantment.

For she so charmed and enthralled not only him but also the rest who had any influence with him, that she conceived the hope of ruling even the Romans; and whenever she used an oath her strongest phrase in swearing was by her purpose to dispense justice on the Capitol.

Cassius Dio, Roman History 50: 5.
31 BCE
Battle of Actium

• A “great victory” for Octavian.

• Beginning of the end for Cleopatra, Antony and Egypt.
Death

12 August 30 BCE
It is said that the asp was brought with figs and leaves and lay hidden beneath them, for thus Cleopatra had given orders, that the reptile might fasten itself upon her body without her being aware of it. But when she took away some of the figs and saw it, she said: "There it is, you see," and baring her arm she held it out for the bite...

But the truth of the matter no one knows; for it was also said that she carried about poison in a hollow comb and kept the comb hidden in her hair...

Plutarch: Life of Antony
Her story survives as part of his.

A frightening stereotype: an unnatural female.

A useful enemy: Octavian prefers to be remembered fighting foreigners rather than Romans.
Cleopatra: The Roman Version

- Plutarch 46-120 CE
- Cassius Dio 155-229 CE

[Cleopatra]... was of insatiable passion and avarice... By love she gained the title “queen of the Egyptians”, and when she hoped by the same means to win also that of “queen of the Romans”, she failed of this, and lost the other besides. She captivated the two greatest Romans of her day, and because of the third she destroyed herself.

Cassius Dio
...She was a sage, a philosopher, who elevated the ranks of scholars and enjoyed their company. She also wrote books on medicine, charms and cosmetics in addition to many other books ascribed to her which are known to those who practice medicine.

Al-Masudi (died c. 956)
Western Tradition

- Evolves, reflecting contemporary images and ideals of femininity.

- Beauty equated with goodness: her story becomes that of an unconventional life redeemed by loyalty to a man.

- Association with snake led to a link with Eve.

- 1380: Chaucer included “Cleopatra the martyr” in his *Legend of Good Women*.

- Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* inspired Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (c. 1600), *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606).
Images of Cleopatra

- Octavian ordered the destruction of all her images.
- Few contemporary Egyptian images.
- Few contemporary Classical images.
- Many modern images which go hand-in-hand with contemporary ideas of Cleopatra.
15th Century Cleopatra and Mark Antony
17th Century Cleopatra and her pearl

Jacob Jordaens
Late 18th century
Cleopatra and her snake

Jean-Baptiste Regnault
Late 18th century
The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra

Alma-Tadema (1885)
19th Century Cleopatras

Sarah Bernhardt

Lillie Langtry
Cleopatra VII
Cleopatra VII
Berlin Museum
Louvre Museum
British Museum
Isis or Cleopatra?
... the face wants for neither individuality nor beauty. Cover the mouth and you have an almost faultless profile. The chin and the throat are also quite lovely; while the whole face, suggestive of cruelty, subtlety and voluptuousness, carries with it an indefinable impression not only of portraiture, but of likeness.
Thank you