

Cleopatra: Facts & Biography

By Owen Jarus, Live Science Contributor | March 13, 2014 01:10am ET

Cleopatra VII, often simply called “Cleopatra,” was the last of a series of rulers called the Ptolemies who ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years. She was also the last true pharaoh of Egypt. Cleopatra ruled an empire that included Egypt, Cyprus, part of modern-day Libya and other territories in the Middle East.

Modern-day depictions of her tend to depict a woman of great physical beauty and seductive skills — indeed, her romantic involvements with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony have been immortalized in art, music and literature for centuries. However, a number of ancient records, as well as recent historical research, tell a different story. Rather than some sort of sex kitten, they tell of an intelligent, multilingual, female ruler who affirmed her right to rule Egypt and other territories.

Her “own beauty, as they say, was not, in and of itself, completely incomparable, nor was it the sort that would astound those who saw her; but interaction with her was captivating, and her appearance, along with her persuasiveness in discussion and her character that accompanied every interchange, was stimulating,” wrote Plutarch, a philosopher who lived A.D. 46-120 (Translation by Prudence Jones).

“Cleopatra was no mere sexual predator, and certainly no plaything of Caesar,” writes Erich Gruen, a professor emeritus of history at University of California Berkeley, in an article in the book “Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited” (University of California Press, 2011).

“She was queen of Egypt, Cyrene and Cyprus, heir to the long and proud dynasty of the Ptolemies ... a passionate but also very astute woman who had maneuvered Rome – and would maneuver Rome again – into advancing the interests of the Ptolemaic legacy.”

A troubled dynasty

Cleopatra was born in 69 B.C. into a troubled royal dynasty. The Ptolemies were descended from a Macedonian general who had served under [Alexander the Great](#). Although they had ruled Egypt for nearly three centuries, their kingdom was eclipsed by the power of Rome and there was a great deal of internal dissension that eventually led to Cleopatra fighting against her own brother.

Cleopatra was the daughter of Ptolemy XII and a mother whose identity we do not know. Ptolemy XII (reign 80-58 B.C.) was under a great deal of pressure from the Romans and struggled to hold onto power.

“Ptolemy XII was heavily dependent upon the Romans and as their ‘friendship’ put an increased strain upon the Egyptian economy, his rule came under increasing scrutiny from the Egyptian elite,” writes Sally-Ann Ashton, a keeper at the University of Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam Museum, in her book “Cleopatra and Egypt” (Blackwell Publishing, 2008). In 58 B.C., Ptolemy XII was exiled and a woman named “Cleopatra Tryphaena” (a different Cleopatra) became ruler of Egypt, dying not long afterwards. She was succeeded by another woman named Berenice IV.

In 55 B.C., with the support of the Romans, Ptolemy XII was put back on the throne and took his 17-year-old daughter Cleopatra (VII) as his co-ruler. After the king died in 51 B.C., he said in his will that Cleopatra should share the throne with her brother (and husband) Ptolemy XIII.

Ptolemy XIII and his advisers refused to acknowledge this arrangement and fighting broke out between them, with Cleopatra being forced to flee the royal palace. It would be Julius Caesar who helped Cleopatra regain her throne.

Caesar and Cleopatra

Caesar was about 30 years older than Cleopatra, and his arrival in Egypt was something of an accident. He had been fighting a civil war against the Roman general Pompey.

After a series of defeats, Pompey fled to Egypt in 48 B.C., hoping to win support from Ptolemy XIII. The young pharaoh decided that Pompey was more trouble than he was worth and had him executed.

When Caesar landed with a small body of troops in Alexandria, he was presented with Pompey's head — something that he was said to be unhappy about. For reasons lost to history, Caesar decided to stay in Egypt and deal with the dispute between Ptolemy XIII and Cleopatra. It could be because Rome depended on Egypt for its grain supplies and a stable Egypt was seen by Caesar as being in Rome's interest.

Ptolemy XIII tried to convince Caesar to acknowledge him as sole ruler of Egypt and barred Cleopatra from seeing him. Cleopatra, however, managed to sneak into the palace in Alexandria and successfully plead her case to Caesar, something that surprised and enraged Ptolemy XIII.

“Ptolemy XIII had gone to bed that night a happy lad, secure in the knowledge that his sister, trapped at Pelusium, would be unable to plead her case before Caesar,” writes Egyptologist Joyce Tyldesley in her book “Cleopatra, Last Queen of Egypt” (Profile Books, 2008).

“He woke up the next morning to find that his sister had somehow arrived at the palace. She was already on the most intimate of terms with Caesar and had managed to persuade him to support her cause,” she writes.

“It was all too much for a thirteen-year-old boy to bear. Rushing from the palace he ripped off his diadem and, in a well-orchestrated public display of anger, the crowd surged forward, intent on mobbing the palace.” However, “Caesar would not be intimidated. Before a formal assembly he read out (Ptolemy XII's) will, making it clear that he expected the elder brother and sister to rule Egypt together.”

Caesar had saved Cleopatra and returned her to power. The two became intimate and had a son known as Caesarion (although Caesar was said to have been hesitant to acknowledge that the child was his). Ptolemy XIII later died in a failed rebellion and was replaced as co-ruler by his and Cleopatra's younger brother Ptolemy XIV, who Cleopatra would eventually have killed. Cleopatra also had [her sister Arsinoe IV killed](#).

Being the mother of Caesar's son gave Cleopatra greater power, and the child became Cleopatra's co-ruler.

“With a son by her side, Cleopatra VII could abandon any thought she might have had of adopting the role of a female king and could develop instead a powerful new identity as a semi-divine mother: an identity that had the huge advantage of being instantly recognisable to both her Egyptian and her Greek subjects,” writes Tyldesley.

Cleopatra had already become a goddess toward the end of her father's reign. “But now she was to be specifically identified with Egypt's most famous single mother, the goddess Isis.”

Antony and Cleopatra

With the [assassination of Julius Caesar](#) in 44 B.C. on the Ides of March, Cleopatra found herself in an awkward position. Ancient writers say that she was in Rome when the assassination occurred and she quickly returned to Egypt.

A civil war broke out between forces led by Antony and Octavian against those who had organized Caesar's assassination. After they prevailed, Octavian, renamed Augustus Caesar, ruled the western half of the empire while Antony controlled the east.

After Antony took power in the east, he summoned Cleopatra to Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to question why she had not given support to his troops while they were fighting Caesar's assassins.

Cleopatra said that she had assembled a fleet to attack the assassins but it could not reach the battlefield in time.

“Antony, struck by her intelligence as well as her appearance, was captivated by her as if he were a young lad, although he was forty years old,” wrote Appian, who lived in the second century A.D. (translation by Prudence Jones). “The acute interest Antony had once shown in all things suddenly dulled; whatever Cleopatra dictated was done, without regard for the laws of man or nature.”

Battle of Actium

In the years leading up to the [Battle of Actium](#), Antony and Cleopatra forged a close bond and had three children together, including the twins Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene in 40 B.C.

Meanwhile, relations between Antony and Octavian frayed and the two gradually slid into a civil war. In 32 B.C., the two officially went to war, with Octavian putting much of the blame, rightly or wrongly, on Cleopatra.

The leaders in Rome “voted to pardon and praise his (Antony's) supporters if they would desert him, and they unequivocally declared war on Cleopatra,” wrote Cassius Dio who lived A.D. 155-235. (Translation by Prudence Jones)

At “the temple of Bellona, they performed all the rites for declaring war according to custom, with Octavian acting as priest. In word, war was declared on Cleopatra, but in fact the declaration was aimed at Antony.”

Although Antony held a numerical advantage on land, the war was decided on the sea and ultimately by an engagement fought near Actium in 31 B.C. on the Ionian Sea. What happened during the battle is a mystery. Ancient sources claim that Octavian and Antony were at a standstill when Cleopatra, for some reason, fled the battle, leading to Antony's forces being routed. Whether this is true or not is unknown.

Ancient writers say that while Antony's ships were heavier and could hold more troops, Octavian's ships could maneuver better and had more experienced crews.

Death of Cleopatra

The battle sealed Antony and Cleopatra's fate. With Octavian in control of the sea, he landed troops in Egypt and marched on Alexandria, the capital of Egypt. Although Antony managed to win a minor battle on land, he and Cleopatra were essentially trapped.

Antony, hearing falsely that Cleopatra had killed herself, decided to kill himself. According to Plutarch, Antony said of Cleopatra that “I am not pained to be bereft of you, for at once I will be where you are, but it does pain

me that I, as a commander, am revealed to be inferior to a woman in courage.” He stabbed himself but he did not die right away. Instead, he was found wounded and taken to Cleopatra, where he would die with her.

“When she received him into the mausoleum and laid him on a couch, she tore her clothing over him, beat her breast and scratched it with her hands, covered her face with his blood, called him her husband and master, and almost forgot her own misfortunes as she pitied his,” wrote Plutarch.

When Octavian entered the city, Cleopatra tried to reason with him; however, it became apparent that she would be taken to Rome and paraded as a sort of war trophy, a fate she found intolerable.

After two failed attempts to commit suicide “she dressed herself in her richest attire, as was her custom, and settled herself next to her Antony in a sarcophagus filled with aromatic perfumes. She then put snakes to her veins and slipped into death as if into sleep,” wrote Florus in the second century A.D. (Translation by Prudence Jones).

The tomb and bodies of Cleopatra and Antony have never been found. Even if Antony and Cleopatra were allowed a proper burial it was common for tombs to be plundered in antiquity.

Her children's fates

Octavian had Caesarion killed but spared the lives of the three children Cleopatra had with Antony. They were sent to live with Octavia, the sister of Octavian, who at one point was married to Antony.

While two of them died in childhood, a third, Cleopatra Selene, survived and was married to Juba II, a protégé of Octavian who became ruler of Numidia, a client kingdom of Rome in northwest Africa in what is now Algeria. She brought Egyptian art as well as Greek language and culture to that kingdom.

The last pharaoh?

Although Cleopatra is often considered to be the last of the Egyptian pharaohs, we know from ancient inscriptions and art that the priests of Egypt did not believe this.

In 2010, researchers reported that a stele erected at the Temple of Isis at Philae in 29 B.C. has Octavian’s name written in a cartouche, an honor reserved for a pharaoh. Future Roman emperors (such as Claudius) would also be depicted as pharaohs in Egypt.

Although Cleopatra was dead, and her dynasty was at an end, Egyptian priests refused to let go of the idea that Egypt had a pharaoh as ruler, even though the country was being incorporated into the Roman Empire as a province.

“(The priests) had to have an acting pharaoh, and the only acting pharaoh (possible) under Octavian was Octavian,” said Martina Minas-Nerpel, a reader at Swansea University, in an interview that was [published](#) in The Independent newspaper. “The priests needed to see him as a pharaoh; otherwise, their understanding of the world would have collapsed.”

Was Cleopatra black?

Scholars are not certain of Cleopatra's appearance, and the question of whether she was black is an open one. The identity of Cleopatra's mother and paternal grandmother is uncertain.

"Cleopatra was of course part Greek, but it must also be noted that the suggestion she was part African is not based on wishful fantasy alone but on the fact that we do not know the identity of the mother of Ptolemy XII (Cleopatra's father)." writes Sally-Ann Ashton in her book.

— [Owen Jarus](#)