

Cleopatra VII

About Queen Cleopatra's family and life.

Queen Cleopatra VII - Ruler of Egypt



In the springtime of 51 BC, Ptolemy Auletes died and left his kingdom in his will to his eighteen year old daughter, Cleopatra, and her younger brother Ptolemy XIII who was twelve at the time. Cleopatra was born in 69 BC in Alexandria, Egypt. She had two older sisters, Cleopatra VI and Berenice IV as well as a younger sister, Arsinoe IV. There were two younger brothers as well, Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV. It is thought that Cleopatra VI may have died as a child and Auletes had Berenice beheaded. At Ptolemy Auletes' death, Pompey, a Roman leader, was left in charge of the children. During the two centuries that preceded Ptolemy Auletes death, the Ptolemies were allied with the Romans. The Ptolemies' strength was failing and the Roman Empire was rising. City after city was falling to the Roman power and the Ptolemies could do nothing but create a pact with them. During the later rule of the Ptolemies, the Romans gained more and more control over Egypt. Tributes had to be paid to the Romans to keep them away from Egypt. When Ptolemy Auletes died, the fall of the Dynasty appeared to be even closer.

According to Egyptian law, Cleopatra was forced to have a consort, who was either a brother or a son, no matter what age, throughout her reign. She was married to her younger brother Ptolemy XIII when he was twelve, however she soon dropped his name from any official documents

regardless of the Ptolemaic insistence that the male presence be first among co-rulers. She also had her own portrait and name on coins of that time, ignoring her brother's. When Cleopatra became co-regent, her world was crumbling down around her. Cyprus, Coele-Syria and Cyrenaica were gone. There was anarchy abroad and famine at home. Cleopatra was a strong-willed Macedonian queen who was brilliant and dreamed of a greater world empire. She almost achieved it. Whether her way of getting it done was for her own desires or for the pursuit of power will never be known for certain. However, like many Hellenistic queens, she was passionate but not promiscuous. As far as we know, she had no other lovers other than Caesar and Antony. Many believe that she did what she felt was necessary to try to save Alexandria, whatever the price.

By 48 BC, Cleopatra had alarmed the more powerful court officials of Alexandria by some of her actions. For instance, her mercenaries killed the Roman governor of Syria's sons when they came to ask for her assistance for their father against the Parthians. A group of men led by Theodotus, the eunuch Pothinus and a half-Greek general, Achillas, overthrew her in favor of her younger brother. They believed him to be much easier to influence and they became his council of regency. Cleopatra is thought to have fled to Thebaid. Between 51 and 49 BC, Egypt was suffering from bad harvests and famine because of a drought which stopped the much needed Nile flooding. Ptolemy XIII signed a decree on October 27, 50 BC which banned any shipments of grain to anywhere but Alexandria. It is thought that this was to deprive Cleopatra and her supporters who were not in Alexandria. Regardless, she started an army from the Arab tribes which were east of Pelusium. During this time, she and her sister Arsinoe moved to Syria. They returned by way of Ascalon which may have been Cleopatra's temporary base.

In the meantime, Pompey had been defeated at Pharsalus in August of 48 BC. He headed for Alexandria hoping to find refuge with Ptolemy XIII, of whom Pompey was a senate-appointed guardian. Pompey did not realize how much his reputation had been destroyed by Pharsalus until it was too late. He was murdered as he stepped ashore on September 28, 48 BC. The young Ptolemy XIII stood on the dock and watched the whole scene. Four days later, Caesar arrived in Alexandria. He brought with him thirty-two hundred legionaries and eight hundred cavalry. He also brought twelve other soldiers who bore the insignia of the Roman government who carried a bundle of rods with an ax with a blade that projected out. This was considered a badge of authority that gave a clear hint of his intentions. There were riots that followed in Alexandria. Ptolemy XIII was gone to Pelusium and Caesar placed himself in the royal palace and started giving out orders. The eunuch, Pothinus, brought Ptolemy back to Alexandria. Cleopatra had no intentions of being left out of any deals that were going to be made. She had herself smuggled in through enemy lines rolled in a carpet. She was delivered to Caesar. Both Cleopatra and Ptolemy were invited to appear before Caesar the next morning. By this time, she and Caesar were already lovers and Ptolemy realized this right away. He stormed out screaming that he had been betrayed, trying to arouse the Alexandrian mob. He was soon captured by Caesar's guards and brought back to the palace. It is thought that Caesar had planned to make Cleopatra the sole ruler of Alexandria. He thought she would be a puppet for Rome.

The Alexandrian War was started when Pothinus called for Ptolemy XIII's soldiers in November and surrounded Caesar in Alexandria with twenty thousand men. During the war, parts of the Alexandrian Library and some of the warehouses were burned. However, Caesar did manage to

capture the Pharos lighthouse, which kept his control of the harbor. Cleopatra's sister, Arsinoe, escaped from the palace and ran to Achilles. She was proclaimed the queen by the Macedonian mob and the army. Cleopatra never forgave her sister for this. During the fighting, Caesar executed Pothinus and Achilles was murdered by Ganymede. Ptolemy XIII drowned in the Nile while he was trying to flee.

Because of his death, Cleopatra was now the sole ruler of Egypt. Caesar had restored her position, but she now had to marry her younger brother Ptolemy XIV, who was eleven years old. This was to please the Alexandrians and the Egyptian priests. Surely Caesar went through all of this trouble for more than his infatuation with the queen of Egypt. It must have been out of arrogance and his desire to get his hands on Egypt's vast resources. However, Cleopatra's intelligence and inheritance did have some influence as well. In what must have been very calculated on his part, she became pregnant rather quickly. For him to have a son to carry the throne was very appealing to him. Caesar and Cleopatra took an extended trip up the Nile for about two months. They stopped in Dendara where Cleopatra was worshipped as a Pharaoh. Caesar would never have this honor. Caesar only left the boat to attend important business in Syria just a few weeks before the birth of their son, Caesarion (Ptolemy Caesar) who was born on June 23, 47 BC.

During July of the year 46 BC, Caesar returned to Rome. He was given many honors and a ten-year dictatorship. These celebrations lasted from September to October and he brought Cleopatra over, along with her entourage. The conservative Republicans were very offended when he established Cleopatra in his home. Her social manners did not make the situation any better. She upset many. Cleopatra had started calling herself the New Isis and was the subject of much gossip. She lived in luxury and had a statue made of gold placed by Caesar, in the temple of Venus Genetrix. Caesar also openly claimed Caesarion as his son. Many were upset that he was planning to marry Cleopatra regardless of the laws against bigamy and marriages to foreigners.

However, on the Ides of March of 44 BC, all of that came to an end. Caesar was assassinated outside the Senate Building in Rome. He was killed in a conspiracy by his Senators. Many of the Senators thought he was a threat to the republic's well-being. It was thought that Caesar was making plans to have himself declared king. After Caesar's murder, Cleopatra fled Rome and returned home to Alexandria. Caesar had not mentioned Cleopatra or Caesarion in his will. She felt her life, as well as that of her child, was in great danger.

Upon returning to Alexandria, she had her consort, Ptolemy XIV, assassinated and established Caesarion as her co-regent at the age of four. She found Egypt suffering from plagues and famine. The Nile canals had been neglected during her absence which caused the harvests to be bad and the inundations low. The bad harvests continued from 43 until 41 BC. Trying to help secure recognition for Caesarion with Caesar's former lieutenant Dolabella, Cleopatra sent Dolabella the four legions that Caesar had left in Egypt. Cassius captured the legions which caused Dolabella to commit suicide at Laodicea during the summer of 43 BC. She was planning to join Mark Antony and Octavian (who became Augustus) with a large fleet of ships after Dolabella's death, but was stopped by a violent storm.

Cleopatra watched in the time that followed, who would be the next power in Rome. After Brutus and Cassius had been killed and Antony, Octavian and Lepidus were triumphant, Cleopatra knew which one she would have to deal with. Octavian went back to Italy very ill, so Antony was the one to watch. Her son gained his right to become king when Caesar was officially divinized in Rome on January 1, 42 BC. The main object was the promotion of Octavian, but the triumvirs knew of Cleopatra's aid to Dolabella.

Cleopatra was invited by Mark Antony to Tarsus in 41 BC. She already knew enough about him to know how to get to him. She knew about his limited strategic and tactical abilities, his blue blood, the drinking, his womanizing, his vulgarity and his ambition. Even though Egypt was on the verge of economic collapse, Cleopatra put on a show for Mark Antony that even Ptolemy Philadelphos couldn't have done better. She sailed with silver oars, purple sails with her Erotes fanning her and the Nereid handmaids steering and she was dressed as Aphrodite, the goddess of love. This was a very calculated entrance; considered vulgar by many. It was a vulgar display to attract the attention of a vulgar man. Mark Antony loved the idea of having a blue-blooded Ptolemy woman. His former mistress as well as his current wife, Fulvia, were merely middle class.

Cleopatra and Antony spent the winter of 41 to 40 in Alexandria. According to some sources, Cleopatra could get out of him whatever she wanted, including the assassination of her sister, Arsinoe. Cleopatra may not have had so much influence over him later on. He took control of Cyprus from her. Actually it may have been Cleopatra who was the exploited one. Antony needed money and Cleopatra could be generous when it benefited her as well.

In the spring of 40 BC, Mark Antony left Cleopatra and returned home. He did not see her for four years. Antony's wife, Fulvia had gotten into a serious movement against Octavian over veterans' allotments of land. She fled to Greece and had a bitter confrontation with Antony. She became ill and died there. Antony patched things up with Octavian that same autumn by marrying Octavian's sister, Octavia. She was a beautiful and intelligent woman who had been recently widowed. She had three children from her first marriage. In the meantime, Cleopatra had given birth to twins, one boy and one girl, in Alexandria. Antony's first child by Octavia was a girl. Had Octavia given him a son, things might have turned out different. Antony kept the idea of the treasures of the Ptolemies and how much he wanted it. When he finally did get the treasures, the standard interest rate in Rome fell from 12 percent to 4.

Mark Antony left Italy and went to deal with the Parthians. Octavia had just had another daughter and went with him just as far as Corcyra. He gave her the excuse that he did not want to expose her to the dangers of the battles and sent her home. He told her that she would be more use to him at home in Rome keeping peace with her brother, Octavian. However, the first thing that he did when he reached Antioch, was to send for Cleopatra. Their twin children were officially recognized by Antony and were given the names of Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene. Mark Antony gave her much land which was very essential to Egypt. He gave her Cyprus, the Cilician coast, Phoenicia, Coele-Syria, Judea and Arabia. This allowed Egypt to be able to build ships from the lumber from Cilician coast. Egypt then built a large fleet. Antony had planned a campaign against the Parthians. He obviously needed Cleopatra's support for this

and in 36 BC, he was defeated. He became more indebted to her than ever. They had just had a third child.

On their return to Syria, she met him and what was left of his army, with food, clothing and money. Early in 35 BC, he returned to Egypt with her. Antony's wife, Octavia was in Athens with supplies and reinforcements waiting for her husband. He sent her a letter telling her to not come any further. Her brother, Octavian, tried to provoke Antony into a fight. Octavian would release troops as well as ships to try to force Antony into a war, which, by this time was almost inevitable. Antony might have been able to patch things up with Octavia and her brother had he returned to Rome in 35 BC. Cleopatra probably did her best to keep him in Alexandria. Octavia remained completely loyal to Antony through all of this.

In 34 BC, Antony had a campaign into Armenia, which was successful and financially rewarding. He celebrated his triumph with a parade through Alexandria with Cleopatra presiding over as the New Isis. Antony presented himself as the New Dionysus as part of his dream of the Graeco-Roman rule. Within a few days, a more political ceremony took place in which the children were given their royal titles with Antony sitting on the throne as well. Ptolemy XV (Caesarion) was made the co-ruler with his mother and was called the King of Kings. Cleopatra was called the Queen of Kings, which was a higher position than that of Caesarion's. Alexander Helios, which meant the sun, was named Great King of the Seleucid empire when it was at its highest. Cleopatra Selene, which meant the moon, was called Queen of Cyrenaica and Crete. Cleopatra and Antony's son, Ptolemy Philadelphos was named King of Syria and Asia Minor at the age of two. Cleopatra had dreams of becoming the Empress of the world. She was very close to achieving these dreams and her favorite oath was, "As surely as I shall yet dispense justice on the Roman Capital."

In 32 to 31 BC, Antony finally divorced Octavia. This forced the Western part of the world to recognize his relationship with Cleopatra. He had already put her name and face on a Roman coin, the silver denarii. The denarii was widely circulated throughout the Mediterranean. By doing this, Antony's relationship with the Roman allegiance was ended and Octavian decided to publish Antony's will. Octavian then formally declared war against Cleopatra. Antony's name was nowhere mentioned in the official declaration. Many false accusations were made against Cleopatra saying that she was a harlot and a drunken Oriental. These accusations were most likely made out of fear of Cleopatra and Antony. Many probably thought that the New Isis would prevail and that Antony would start up a new wave of world conquest and rule in a co-partnership from Alexandria. However, Octavian's navy severely defeated Antony in Actium, which is in Greece, on September 2, 31 BC. Octavian's admiral, Agrippa, planned and carried out the defeat. In less than a year, Antony half-heartedly defended Alexandria against the advancing army of Octavian. After the defeat, Antony committed suicide by falling on his own sword in 30 BC.

After Antony's death, Cleopatra was taken to Octavian where her role in Octavian's triumph was carefully explained to her. He had no interest in any relationship, negotiation or reconciliation with the Queen of Egypt. She would be displayed as a slave in the cities she had ruled over. She must have had memories of her sister, Arsinoe, being humiliated in this way. She would not live this way, so she had an asp, which was an Egyptian cobra, brought to her hidden in a basket of

figs. She died on August 12, 30 BC at the age of 39. The Egyptian religion declared that death by snakebite would secure immortality. With this, she achieved her dying wish, to not be forgotten. The only other ruler to cast a shadow on the fascination with Cleopatra was Alexander who was another Macedonian. After Cleopatra's death, Caesarion was strangled and the other children of Cleopatra were raised by Antony's wife, Octavia.

Her death was the mark of the end of the Egyptian Monarchs. The Roman Emperors came into to rule in Egypt. The Ptolemies were Macedonian in decent, but ruled as Egyptians, as Pharaohs. Cleopatra was the last Pharaoh of Egypt.

What is often not associated with Cleopatra was her brilliance and her devotion to her country. She was a quick-witted woman who was fluent in nine languages, however, Latin was not one of them. She was a mathematician and a very good businesswoman. She had a genuine respect for Caesar, whose intelligence and wit matched her own. Antony on the other hand almost drove her insane with his lack of intelligence and his excesses. She dealt with him and made the most of what she had to do. She fought for her country. She had a charismatic personality, was a born leader and an ambitious monarch who deserved better than suicide.