

# WHO WAS THE REAL CLEOPATRA?

CLEOPATRA WAS, FOR A TIME, THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN THE ROMAN WORLD. HOWEVER, HER REPUTATION WAS CONTROVERSIAL THEN AND IS STILL DEBATED TODAY.

Alexander the Great of Macedon invaded Egypt and established his rule there in 332 B.C. When he died, Alexander's generals divided up his vast conquests. Ptolemy (pronounced "TAH-leh-me") became the Macedonian king of Egypt.

During his rule, Ptolemy I created an eastern Mediterranean empire from North Africa to Syria. He also made his capital, Alexandria in Egypt, the richest city in the Mediterranean world.

The Macedonians from north of Greece carried with them the Greek language and culture into Ptolemy I's empire. Alexandria soon became the center of Greek civilization with a famous library that claimed to hold books (scrolls) that contained all the knowledge of the known world.

Ptolemy I established a dynasty that ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years. The Greek-speaking Ptolemies were foreigners, however, reigning over the Egyptian people who were often burdened by taxes. The wealth of Egypt was based on the labor of Nile River Valley farmers who produced wheat for export to Rome and other cities.

In 197 B.C., a neighboring king defeated the army of Ptolemy V, taking much of the empire that the first Ptolemy had created. To secure peace, Ptolemy V married the conquering king's daughter, Cleopatra. She was the first of numerous Cleopatra queens.

The Ptolemies constantly fought

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THIS SYRIAN TETRADRACHM, or silver coin, dates from the first century B.C. and depicts Cleopatra.

one another for the Egyptian throne. Hardly a few years passed without one family member murdering another, usually by poison.

In 80 B.C., Ptolemy XII started his long reign. He became a client king of Rome, which meant he submitted to Roman authority to avoid being conquered and to remain king of Egypt. He was also the father of the most famous Cleopatra of them all.

## Cleopatra VII

Cleopatra was one of three daughters along with two younger sons of Ptolemy XII. She was born in 69 B.C., but little is known of her mother, who died when Cleopatra was 12.

With the fabulous Library of Alexandria as her classroom and top Greek scholars as her teachers, Cleopatra received the best educa-

tion possible in the ancient world. She studied Greek literature, geography, history, mythology, mathematics, philosophy, science, and rhetoric (persuasive speech). In addition to Greek, she spoke eight other languages. She was the first of the Ptolemies to bother to learn the language of the Egyptian people.

Cleopatra learned from her father, who taught her to carefully choose her allies as he had done with the powerful Romans. She also learned from his example how he ruled. When Ptolemy XII returned to Egypt after a three-year absence in Rome, he discovered his oldest daughter had usurped (taken) the throne. Ptolemy immediately had her murdered.

In 51 B.C., Ptolemy XII died, leaving Cleopatra VII, age 18, and her brother Ptolemy XIII, age 10, as co-monarchs. Cleopatra became the dominant ruler, but the advisers of the young Ptolemy maneuvered to gain the support of the army and the people of Alexandria. Cleopatra was forced to flee to Syria where she raised an army to fight her way back to the throne.

## Cleopatra and Caesar

In 48 B.C., Julius Caesar defeated his Roman rival, Pompey. Caesar then went on to Egypt and occupied the royal palace in Alexandria.

Meanwhile, Pompey had escaped and sought refuge with Ptolemy, now age 13, and his army. But, the young king's advisers had Pompey beheaded, hoping this would win Caesar to their side of the conflict with Cleopatra. Instead, this only angered Caesar.

Cleopatra decided to return secretly to Alexandria to persuade Caesar to support her. She had herself smuggled into the palace in a sack carried by a loyal servant. We do not know what exactly happened next,

but afterward Cleopatra, 21, and Caesar, 52, became allies against her brother. She also soon discovered that she was pregnant.

The young Ptolemy was enraged at this turn of events. His advisers ordered his army to Alexandria to besiege the palace. Caesar's men were hugely outnumbered. In the confusion, Cleopatra's younger sister, Arsinoe, fled the palace and joined her brother's army.

The civilians of Alexandria sided with Ptolemy and tried to seize Caesar's ships in the harbor. Caesar then ordered them burned. However, the fires spread to the docks and the great library was at least partly destroyed.

Finally, Roman reinforcements arrived, forcing Ptolemy's army to retreat. A battle then took place in the desert. Caesar outsmarted Ptolemy's generals and defeated the Egyptian army. Ptolemy was killed, possibly drowning in the Nile. The Romans captured Arsinoe. Cleopatra had won her first political test by siding with the Romans against her own people.

Caesar lingered in Egypt. He put Cleopatra on the throne along with her 12 year-old brother, Ptolemy XIV, whom she officially married, an ancient Egyptian practice. Caesar's purpose was to assure the stability of Egypt and the continued flow of wheat to Rome, thus preventing bread riots in the empire's capital.

Apparently, Caesar trusted Cleopatra to rule Egypt well. They celebrated their pact on a luxurious royal barge cruise up the Nile. Cleopatra presented herself to the Egyptian people dressed as Isis, the popular Egyptian goddess of motherhood and agriculture.

Caesar finally left Alexandria, taking Arsinoe as a prisoner of war. A few months later, Cleopatra gave birth to a boy whom the people called Caesarion, "Little Caesar."

## Queen of Egypt

Cleopatra had two long-term strategic goals. First, she wanted to restore the territories of the Ptolemy Dynasty's empire that had been lost over 150 years earlier. Second, she wanted to secure for herself and her descendants the independence of Egypt but with the protection of Rome. Before pursuing these goals, however, she had to restore order to her country and prove that she was a capable ruler.

Cleopatra was a "hands-on" ruler. She listened to people's grievances, acted as the chief judge, and punished greedy government officials. She supervised the sowing and harvesting of wheat, and managed royal textile factories and monopolies, like papyrus-making (paper). She commanded the army and navy, and carried on diplomacy with foreign kings.

*Cleopatra was, for a time, the most powerful woman in the Roman world.*

Within a year, Cleopatra stabilized the economy. She appeared often as the goddess Isis, draped in pearls, in religious rituals important to the common people. She also became the richest person in the Mediterranean world.

In 46 B.C., Cleopatra took her teenage co-ruler and infant Caesarion to Rome. Caesar acknowledged Caesarion as his natural son. Cleopatra lived in Caesar's villa outside Rome where they continued their romance while Caesar's wife lived nearby in the city. Caesar built a golden statue of her in the Temple of Venus.

During Cleopatra's stay in Rome, Caesar produced his "triumph," the

traditional self-celebration by a Roman general of his foreign victories. Caesar's triumph included a parade, displaying the treasure he seized along with his captives in chains. Among them was Cleopatra's sister, Arsinoe. Cleopatra did not witness the event.

In 44 B.C., Cleopatra was still living in Rome when Caesar was assassinated by senators led by Cassius and Brutus. They feared Caesar wanted to destroy the Roman Republic and make himself king.

Cleopatra was shocked at the death of her lover and protector. Moreover, in his will Caesar made his 18-year-old adopted nephew, Octavian, his heir. The will made no mention of Caesarion. Cleopatra quickly returned to Egypt.

Cleopatra's hold on the throne was weakened by Caesar's death. Her teenage co-ruler, Ptolemy XIV, was a threat. Like her father had done, Cleopatra had her brother murdered by poison. Her sister, Arsinoe, was living in exile and had declared herself queen of Egypt. She, too, was a threat.

Cleopatra replaced Ptolemy XIV with three-year-old Caesarion as her new co-ruler. During a famine, she distributed free wheat to the people from the royal granaries. She embarked on building projects dedicated to Isis, Caesar, and the Ptolemy dynasty. She also began construction of her own tomb in Alexandria.

The queen revived the city's reputation as the center of Greek culture and scholarship. Works on medicine were especially notable at this time. Cleopatra herself probably wrote a number of books on this subject.

## Cleopatra and Antony

Mark Antony was a Roman general and loyal friend of Caesar. After Caesar's assassination, Antony believed he rightfully should inherit the unique status of Rome's greatest

leader. Antony formed an alliance with Caesar's young and sickly heir, Octavian, and then took the lead in pursuing Cassius, Brutus, and the other assassins.

Finally, in 42 B.C., Antony and Octavian defeated Cassius and Brutus, who then took their own lives. Antony and Octavian agreed to divide the Roman Empire between them: Antony got the lands in the eastern Mediterranean, and Octavian took the lands in the west.

When things settled down, Antony, 43, summoned Cleopatra, 28, to his headquarters at Tarsus (a city now in southeast Turkey) to account for her lack of support for avenging Caesar's assassination. Cleopatra took her time, but her royal galley and support ships were loaded with gifts. She made a spectacular entrance up a river to Tarsus, as recorded by the ancient Greek historian and biographer, Plutarch:

She sailed up the Kydnos River in a boat with a golden stern, purple sails spread, the rowers pulling the silver oars to the sound of flutes, pipes, and strings. She herself reclined under a canopy adorned with gold. . . . Marvelous scents from innumerable incense offerings spread along the river banks.

Cleopatra wined and dined Antony and his guests in a series of elaborate banquets. Each night, the guests took home as gifts the decorations made of precious metals and jewels. Antony, who was married, was love-struck.

Finally, Antony and Cleopatra talked business. She explained that she had sent a fleet of ships to aid him, but that a storm tore the fleet apart. Antony wanted money and a fleet to help his invasion of Parthia (now part of Iran). Cleopatra wanted Antony to order the death of her rival sister, Arsinoe. They made a deal. Antony postponed his Parthian



RELIEFS OF CLEOPATRA and her son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion on the wall of the Dendera Temple in Egypt.

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campaign, however, and followed Cleopatra back to Alexandria.

Several months later, Antony headed to Rome to renew his alliance with Octavian. On the way, he abandoned his dying wife, living in Greece. Antony then married Octavian's sister, Octavia, to seal the alliance with his rival, Octavian. Meanwhile, Cleopatra gave birth to twins: Alexander Helios (The Sun) and Cleopatra Selene (The Moon).

### Queen of Kings

Three years later, Antony was at the Syrian port of Antioch, again preparing to conquer Parthia. He summoned Cleopatra from Alexandria. This time, she brought her toddler twins whom Antony accepted as his children.

She was also pregnant again, and in 36 B.C. gave birth to her fourth child and the third by Antony, Ptolemy Philadelphos.

Antony suffered a disastrous defeat by the Parthians. He grew depressed and drank heavily. Cleopatra revived his spirits. In 34 B.C., he was on the march to Armenia, where he was victorious. He brought the king and his family back to Alexandria in golden chains.

In a breathtaking public ceremony, Cleopatra dressed as Isis, and Antony dressed as the Greek god Dionysus. They sat on golden thrones with the four children occupying smaller thrones below. Antony proclaimed Cleopatra "Queen of Kings" along with similar honors to the children.

In exchange for ships and money she had given him, Antony gave Roman territories to Cleopatra that included the island of Cyprus, Phoenicia, Syria, and North Africa. Cleopatra was well on her way to recovering the lands that had been lost by the Ptolemies.

He then made each of their children monarchs of kingdoms from North Africa to Parthia (which Antony had not yet conquered).

Cleopatra at age 35 seemingly had achieved her strategic goals of restoring the old Ptolemy dynasty's empire with herself and her children as rulers backed by Antony. Antony's "donation" of Roman territories to Egypt, however, did not go over well with Octavian back in Rome.

### Downfall and Death

Octavian, envisioning himself as the sole head of the Roman Empire, needed to get rid of Antony. There was also the problem of

Caesarion, Caesar's natural son, who might someday claim to be Rome's true leader.

Going after Antony directly was difficult since many Roman soldiers would refuse to fight against him. Therefore, Octavian spread propaganda against Cleopatra that Antony had been "bewitched by that accursed woman." Octavian accused Cleopatra of "enslaving" Antony and that Rome itself was next. He accused Antony of betraying Rome. Antony made matters worse by divorcing Octavia.

Finally, Octavian got the Senate to declare war against Cleopatra. He calculated correctly that Antony would defend her. Then both of them could be destroyed.

Soon both sides were assembling ships and armies. Cleopatra paid for most of Antony's war fleet and commanded a fleet of her own. The showdown came in a naval battle off the west coast of Greece.

When the opposing fleets clashed in battle on September 2, 31 B.C., neither side gained an advantage. Suddenly Cleopatra in her treasure-laden ship broke through the battle and headed for Egypt. Antony quickly followed her.

Octavian claimed the two fled out of cowardice. But there is evidence that this was a planned escape. Cleopatra had seen a number of bad omens, and she feared a victory by Octavian would clear the way for him to attack a defenseless Egypt.

Antony and Cleopatra ended up in Alexandria. When Octavian arrived, hungry for Cleopatra's treasure, Antony attempted to fight him on sea and land but failed. Cleopatra tried to escape to India, but her ships in the Red Sea were burned by a hostile neighboring king. Cleopatra then tried to negotiate with Octavian to save herself, her children, and her kingdom.

One day Antony received word that his lover had killed herself. He

plunged his sword into himself but did not die right away. Then hearing Cleopatra was still alive, he had his servants carry him to her and died in her arms.

Cleopatra finally met with Octavian face-to-face. She unsuccessfully tried her charms one more time. She blamed everything on Antony and offered Octavian the treasures that she had stuffed into her large tomb. Octavian feared she would destroy the treasure. She feared being taken to Rome in golden chains to display in his triumph.

Ultimately, Cleopatra took her own life, probably with some painless poison. There is a famous story that she was bitten by a snake, but this is unlikely. Dead at age 39, she had been Queen of Egypt for over 20 years.

Octavian allowed Cleopatra and Antony to be buried together in her tomb. He took her treasure and annexed (took over) Egypt. But Cleopatra denied him the pleasure of marching her in golden chains at his triumph in Rome.

Caesarion, age 17, was captured and murdered by Octavian's men.

The nine-year-old twins, Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, along with five-year-old Ptolemy Philadelphos were taken in by Octavia to raise in Rome. The boys shortly disappeared from history, possibly the victims of Rome's many epidemics.

Cleopatra Selene married a favorite of Octavian, who sent them to rule a kingdom in North Africa. They had a son whom she naturally named Ptolemy. He inherited the kingdom, but displeased the Roman Emperor Caligula, who had him murdered in 40 A.D. His death brought an end to Cleopatra's Ptolemy Dynasty.

## DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. How did Cleopatra go about building her empire differently than the Roman men in her life?
2. What do you think was Cleopatra's biggest mistake? Why? What do you think was her greatest accomplishment? Why?
3. Were Cleopatra, Caesar, Antony, and Octavian all villains in this true story? Who was the worst? Why?

## ACTIVITY

### Who Was the Real Cleopatra?

The class will decide this question by debating three positions that historians have taken on Cleopatra over the centuries:

- A. Cleopatra was an immoral seducer and power-mad schemer.
  - B. Cleopatra was a smart ruler and skillful strategist.
  - C. Cleopatra used ruthless tactics to survive in a violent man's world.
1. Form four groups. Three of them will act as the debating groups. Each group will argue for one of the above positions on the question. Each debating group will need to review the article for facts and events that support its position.
  2. The fourth group will act as the debate judges. Judges have the responsibility of asking questions and challenging the arguments of the debating groups.
  3. After all the debating groups have finished, the judges will discuss and decide which position best answers the question: Who was the real Cleopatra?
  4. OPTIONAL — Finally, discuss as a whole class whether you agree that all three positions above are true.

## Standards

### *Puritan Massachusetts: Theocracy or Democracy?*

**National High School U.S. History Standard 3:** Understands why the Americas attracted Europeans, why they brought enslaved Africans to their colonies and how Europeans struggled for control of North America and the Caribbean. Understands social and economic characteristics of European colonization in the 17th and 18th centuries (e.g., changing immigration and settlement patterns of Puritans...).

**National High School U.S. History Standard 4:** Understands how political, religious, and social institutions emerged in the English colonies. Understands characteristics of religious development in colonial America (e.g., the presence of diverse religious groups and their contributions to religious freedom...the major tenets of Puritanism and its legacy in American society... Puritan objections to their ideas and behavior). Understands the similarities and differences in colonial concepts of community (e.g., Puritan's covenant community...).

**Common Core Standard RH.11-12.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

**Common Core Standard RH.6-8.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

**Common Core Standard SL.11-12.4:** Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

**Common Core Standard SL.8.4:** Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

### *Who Was the Real Cleopatra?*

**National High School World History Standard 3:** Understands the major characteristics of civilization and the development of civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley. (3) Understands features of trading networks in Egypt.

**National High School World History Standard 8:** Understands how Aegean civilization emerged and how interrelations developed among peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean and Southwest Asia from 600 to 200 BCE. (7) Understands how Egyptian society saw itself in relation to its gods and how attitudes towards women are indicated in representations of its goddesses.

**National High School World History Standard 9:** Understand how major religious and large-scale empires arose in the Mediterranean Basin, China, and India from 500 BCE to 300 CE. (1) Understands shifts in the political framework of Roman society (e.g., major phases in the empire's expansion through the 1st century CE; how imperial rule over a vast area transformed Roman society, economy, and culture; the causes and consequences of the transition from Republic to Empire under Augustus in Rome; how Rome governed its provinces from the late Republic to the Empire...).

**Common Core Standard RH.6-8.8:** Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

**Common Core Standard RH.9-10.8:** Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

**Common Core Standard WHST.6-8.1:** Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*. (b) Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.

**Common Core Standard WHST.9-10.1:** Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*. (b) Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form and in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns.

**California History/Social Science Standard 6.2:** Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Kush. (3) Understand the relationship between religion and the social and political order in Mesopotamia and Egypt. (6) Describe the role of Egyptian trade in the eastern Mediterranean and Nile valley.

**California History/Social Science Standard 6.7:** Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures during the development of Rome.

(1) Identify the location and describe the rise of the Roman Republic, including the importance of such mythical and historical figures as...Julius Caesar....

(3) Identify the location of and the political and geographic reasons for the growth of Roman territories and expansion of the empire, including how the empire fostered economic growth through the use of currency and trade routes. (4) Discuss the influence of Julius Caesar and Augustus in Rome's transition from republic to empire.

### *How the First State Constitutions Helped Build The U. S. Constitution*

**National High School U.S. History Standard 7:** Understands the impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society. Understands the differences among several state constitutions (e.g., various applications of 18th-century republicanism, such as virtue in government, balancing the interests of different social groups, service to the common good, representation, separation of powers, judicial independence, and the legitimacy of slavery).

**National High School U.S. History Standard 8:** Understands the institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how these elements were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Understands influences on the ideas established by the Constitution (e.g., the ideas behind the distribution of powers and the system of checks and balances....

**Common Core Standard RH.11-12.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

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**Common Core Standard SL.8.4:** Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

**California History/Social Science Standard 8.3:** Students understand the foundation of the American political system and the ways in which citizens participate in it. (1) Analyze the principles and concepts codified in state constitutions between 1777 and 1781 that created the context out of which American political institutions and ideas developed.

**California History/Social Science Standard 8.9:** Students analyze the early and steady attempts to abolish slavery and to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. (2) Discuss the abolition of slavery in early state constitutions.

**California History/Social Science Standard 11.1:** Students analyze the significant events in the founding of the nation and its attempts to realize the philosophy of government described in the Declaration of Independence. (2) Analyze...the debates on the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, and the addition of the Bill of Rights.

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