

Image analysis of cleopatra



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This paper analyses non-literary sources in terms of what information they can provide about Cleopatra, including visual images, analyses of numismatic evidence, and analysis of inscriptions. The paper relies on six main sources: Austin's *The Hellenistic world: from Alexander to the Roman conquest. A selection of ancient sources in translation*; Goudchaux's 2001 essay entitled *Cleopatra's subtle religious strategy*, found in Higgs' and Walker's *Cleopatra of Egypt: from history to myth*, which is also a source; Holbl's *History of the Ptolemaic Empire*; Howgego's *Ancient history from coins (approaching the ancient world)* and Pollitt's *Art in the Hellenistic Age*. From these sources, images of Cleopatra, from sculptures, pottery, mosaics and coinage, amongst others, are discussed, and their relevance to Cleopatra's image are analysed and discussed.

As Howgego (1995) argues, coins have far more than monetary value, they can be important in defining power and power structures, in terms of politics and in terms of imperialism, recognising, however, that is difficult to describe ancient political and power structures in modern terms, as they were so very different from the structures that are around at the moment, and, as such, describing such structures in terms of modern definitions can often itself lead to misunderstandings and flaws in research undertaken. The vast majority of coins that are known, for example, show Cleopatra as a Hellenic ruler, although she was, of course, the last Queen of Egypt. This attests to the fact that Cleopatra was a great manipulator, and that, indeed, she manipulated her image whilst alive in order to retain power, in politics, and over people. Portraying herself in Hellenistic images allowed Cleopatra to

show to her people that she was not only ruler of Egypt, but, through her control of Alexandria, ruler of all of the Hellenistic world.

As Goudchaux points out in his 2001 essay *Cleopatra's subtle religious strategy*, Cleopatra was a Ptolemy who spoke Egyptian. She had claim to Egyptian territory, through her family, and also to Hellenistic lands, as contemporary coinage suggest. Cleopatra therefore had political and territorial control of many lands, and also moved freely between many cultures, accepted as she was in Egypt and across the Hellenistic world. Goudchaux (2001) argues that she was an innovative ruler, and most definitely a product of her family's power and history.

In this essay, Goudchaux (2001) makes the point strongly that Cleopatra wanted to understand Egyptian concepts of religion as she realised that religion was one of the bonds which united the Egyptian people and which created a bond with the land, in terms of people having a focal point in the temples, all of which were dedicated to Egyptian gods. As such, Cleopatra was aware that, in some respects, by controlling religion, she would control the Egyptian people. Priests, Cleopatra realised, were the highest peak of Egyptian society, with priests commanding great respect and holding society together. Cleopatra realised this, realised the power of religion in Egyptian society, and it is known that Cleopatra herself held great respect for Egyptian priests and did everything she could to understand Egyptian religion, in terms of keeping priests close to her and ensuring that they followed her rule. This she then used to form bonds with Roman generals, for example, Caesar, and, indeed, Cleopatra built a temple in Rome when she visited Caesar. Romans found Egyptian style to be in vogue at some point in

their history, but as Cleopatra would later realise, this was a fleeting fashion, which soon fell out of favour with the majority of Roman rulers. Cleopatra, therefore, as Goudchaux (2001) makes clear, was a shrewd politician, who knew what needed to be done, and when, in order to keep abreast of shifting power struggles, and to keep hold of her territory, which many people wanted (including the Roman generals).

Cleopatra's highly political character, in which she used her connections with many cultures (Ptolemaic to Egyptian to Roman to Hellenistic) to achieve her political aims, according to the needs of her kingdom as she saw them, itself led to many images of Cleopatra being produced. We have images of Cleopatra looking Egyptian, and images of Cleopatra looking Egyptian but with some Greek features, for example. All of these images are useful in that they allow pieces to be dated accurately, according to Cleopatra's known movements and interactions with other rulers.

As Goudchaux (2001) argues, as we have seen, Cleopatra was well aware of the power of imagery, and she used imagery as a political tool, in terms of ensuring her self-presentation was faultless in order to achieve her political aims. As Walker (2001) argues, in his essay in Higgs and Walker (2001), Cleopatra was a master manipulator, allowing images of herself to be created as the need arose, such that we have images of Cleopatra that are Egyptian in origin, such as Egyptian reliefs, which show Cleopatra as regal, and all powerful. We also have Roman images of Cleopatra, which, whilst on the face of it seem not to be flattering, as they show Cleopatra as womanly and in almost pornographic positions, but, understood in the context of Roman society at that time, are actually a compliment to her womanliness,

and a way of presenting Cleopatra to the Romans in a way which would be appreciated by this society. Other images of Cleopatra, from coins, for example, show Cleopatra with very strong features, not at all beautiful as is normally supposed, and are thought to be a reflection, a re-take on the portraiture of her father, Ptolemy XII, as a way of recalling her lineage to her people. Imagery of Cleopatra is thus both complex and complicated, and in order to understand Cleopatrian imagery, one needs to read this imagery in the context of the time at which it was made, and what political happenings were occurring at the time of the image being made.

Higgs and Walker (2001) analysed nearly four hundred artefacts relating to Cleopatra and her life, in an attempt to understand Cleopatra's iconography. The book, which is essentially a catalogue of the British Museum exhibition of the same name, includes many new images of Cleopatra, including some papyrus bearing her signature which was recently discovered, has caused as much sensation as the exhibition, with many ancient scholars arguing against the book, that it does not contain sufficiently in-depth research, and that the research it does contain is not high quality.

This caveat aside, the edited book contains many interesting essays, amongst them Higgs' *Searching for Cleopatra's image: classical portraits in stone* which makes it clear that it is, actually, extremely difficult to identify Cleopatra in ancient sculptures, in particular, because, as we have seen, Cleopatra was a master manipulator of her image, and as such, there are many different kinds of images of Cleopatra, and then, on top of this, because of the artistic licence that many artists took when defining Cleopatra in their work. Higgs picks out some of what he considers to be

essential features of any image of Cleopatra, including snakes, hairstyles and heads which are separated from the body (representing, bizarrely, power), and shows that these features can be used, generally, to identify images of Cleopatra.

Goudchaux's essay in this volume, as we have seen, is extremely useful in coming to some understanding of the imagery of Cleopatra, in terms of her religious beliefs and her use of religion to gain, and maintain, political power, but it is also useful in showing how subjective analyses of images of Cleopatra can be, and how malleable these images are, in that one person can look at an image of Cleopatra, on a coin for example, and find it beautiful, whereas another person can look at that very same image and find not beauty, but plain regality, for example. As Goudchaux states, the fact that many of Cleopatra's coins were made not from gold but from silver alloys, means that some of these coins have not survived well and that, because of this decay, they can provide distorted images of Cleopatra, simply by virtue of their damaged condition ^[1]. This degradation of imagery also needs to be taken into account, Goudchaux argues, when assessing the power and purpose of images of Cleopatra, and the information that can be gained from such images and imagery.

This analysis of the various images of Cleopatra and the way in which Cleopatra manipulated her image, and allowed her image to be manipulated, as a way of gaining and maintaining power over her people and over foreign rulers shows, ultimately, the necessity for Cleopatra to act in the way she did, in terms of ruling over a land that many people wanted to gain control of, from a city that the Romans wished to rule. Her manipulation of her

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image, on coins she minted, for example, was, as Howgego (1995) argues, a direct way for Cleopatra to portray the image of herself that she wanted to portray to her people, in order to gain the effect she wanted to gain from her people i. e., submission and support.

As Higgs and Walker (2001) show, through their choice, and cataloguing, of nearly 400 artefacts relating to Cleopatra, Cleopatra was not just a master manipulator of her own image: she used art and imagery as a political tool, in an attempt to gain influence abroad. Higgs and Walker (2001) argue, for example, that the Roman Palestrina Nile Mosaic, which, it is argued by Goudchaux (2001), is a dedication from Cleopatra to the Roman goddess Fortuna, was gifted to the Romans as a way of gaining an in-road in to Roman society. Such gifts, replete with political imagery and significance were a feature of ancient society, a way of gaining a presence in a foreign nation, for example, and so Cleopatra's usage of such imagery can, perhaps, be better understood in this context: that it was a routine way of attaining one's wishes, in political terms. As such, perhaps, Cleopatra, through manipulating her own image, was doing nothing more than repeating a routine occurrence.

As Pelling (2001) argues in his essay entitled *Anything truth can do, we can do better: the Cleopatra legend*, in Walker and Higgs (2001), that exaggerated portrayals of Cleopatra were common within Egypt and across the ancient world, and as Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra had a great role to play in this exaggeration; contemporary and more modern accounts of Cleopatra as the 'beauty' and even, for example, Cleopatra's adoption by the black rights movement in the United States is no more than a continuation of

Cleopatra's own manipulation, that the appropriation of Cleopatra's image, and the continuation of the 'myth' of Cleopatra's beauty and power is no more than a way in which to borrow power from her image and to lend power to contemporary arguments and causes.

This analysis of the various images of Cleopatra and the way in which Cleopatra manipulated her image, and allowed her image to be manipulated, as a way of gaining and maintaining power over her people and over foreign rulers has shown, ultimately, as we have seen, the necessity for Cleopatra to act in the way she did, in terms of ruling over a land that many people wanted to gain control of, from a city that the Romans wished to rule. The debates over Cleopatra's supposed beauty is rather peripheral to the life that Cleopatra led, as ruler of Egypt and as over-seer of the Hellenistic world. As this study has shown, images of Cleopatra were created not with the task of conveying her beauty ^[2], but with conveying her power and her abilities to rule, and her willingness to continue to rule.

References

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Footnotes

[1] Coins recently discovered in a bank vault in Newcastle, however, which are in mint condition show Cleopatra in a very bad light, not at all beautiful, with hooked nose and chin. See *The Guardian* 14th February 2007 article entitled *Antony and Cleopatra: coin find changes the face of history* by Martin Wainwright.

[2] Indeed, as argued by Hamer (2001) in her essay in Higgs and Walker (2001) entitled *The myth of Cleopatra since the Renaissance*, this obsession with Cleopatra's beauty is a modern obsession, that developed from the Renaissance onwards, and was not a defining feature of imagery of Cleopatra that was produced during her time.