

Cleopatra's suicide



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As the reigning Egyptian queen who had captured the imagination of two famous Roman rulers, Julius Ceasar and Mark Antony, Cleopatra has held an endless fascination for people down the ages. She so captivated Mark that he married her despite being married to Octavia, and got several children by her. He left residence in Rome to live with her in Egypt, and legend has it that they were deeply in love.

When Mark Antony married Cleopatra, he incurred the wrath of Rome, not only because he was married already, but also because his new bride was an Egyptian. They naturally thought of Cleopatra as a manipulative seductress, because she had earlier seduced Julius Ceasar who was thirty years her senior, and her sexual exploits were well known. The Romans were led by Octavius, Octavia's brother who charged in to conquer Egypt and overcome Mark Anthony.

Overwhelmed by the Roman forces, Mark Antony chose death by suicide over being captured. After his death and facing the prospect of Roman invasion, Cleopatra chose death as well. As someone who has experimented with poisons on prisoners on different occasions, she knew that the venom of the asp was the least painful and a relatively quicker way of dying. Most privileged or political prisoners were executed in this way by the Egyptians and by the Greeks before them. At this point of time, all serpents were known as asps, and the snake Cleopatra used for her suicide was probably the Egyptian cobra Naja Haje.

The cobra was revered by the ancient Egyptians possibly because they lived in close proximity with it, because the rodents commonly associated with humans were their natural prey. Egyptians lost a lot of their own to this snake's potent venom. It was placed on the crown of the Egyptian pharaohs,

and was in fact the Royal symbol. It represented the "fiery eye of Re", in which there are two uraei which are placed on either side of a winged solar disk. It became a protective symbol against attacking enemies, also because it was the sacred animal of the Egyptian goddess Isis.

There are various versions of the description of Cleopatra's suicide. In one, she got her two handmaidens to conceal asps in a basket of figs so she would not know when she was stung, and then when the Romans barge in, they find her already dead along with her handmaidens. The snake, though a protective icon, is also the omen and harbinger of death, its murderous message secreted through its poison (Hillman 25). Because of its respected status in Egyptian iconography, to die by the bite of this cobra could be the most honorable option open to an Egyptian Queen.

Shakespeare's depiction of Cleopatra's suicide in *Antony and Cleopatra* depicts her with longings of immortality: "I have/Immortal longings in me" (Shakespeare 5. 2. 279-280). The snake here becomes a symbol of immortality because it was traditionally seen as deathless: it could shed skin and get a new one, thus renewing itself. For Cleopatra too, death was a renewal, she could shed her bodily skin and rejoin Mark Anthony in another life. Snakes were also an emblem of fertility as they were found near wells and springs, and Cleopatra is shown as the mother figure when she says to her maids, "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, that sucks the nurse asleep" (Shakespeare 5. 2. 308-309).

In other versions, Cleopatra is seen pressing the cobra to her breast in an almost copulative gesture, because the snake has long been known as a phallic symbol. Her death and final release are depicted almost as sexual ecstasy in DeMille's film *Cleopatra* starring Claudette Colbert in 1934.

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Cleopatra was seen as a lover and seductress above all and thus an element of sexuality is introduced even in her death. She becomes the immortal seductress, her appeal not diminished by death.

What for Cleopatra must have been an act of desperation has now entered the realms of myth. The various connotations of the snake, feminine seduction, fertility, a phallic symbol and immortality, have attached themselves to Cleopatra, elevating her to the level of an unfathomable enigma, a creature of legend herself along with the asp that caused her death.

Works Cited

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