

Cleopatra vii: the goddess on earth

Business



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Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Stacy Schiff beautifully depicts the life of Cleopatra VII – the most influential female of the Hellenistic Age, viewed as a goddess on earth by the people of Alexandria, and the richest of all inhabitants of the Mediterranean – in her book; Cleopatra.

Cleopatra VII lived from 69BC – 30BC. She was a descendent of Alexander the Great and claimed to be associated with Isis, but was actually Macedonian Greek; not Egyptian. A highly accomplished female for her time, she came into power at the age of 18, had a child with Julius Caesar and three more with Mark Antony, and restored her kingdom to its 2nd century BC size. She was also the only female of the ancient world to rule alone or to have a role in Western affairs. Her father, Ptolemy, had raised her to rule. Schiff reminds us that “ As always, an educated woman is a dangerous woman.

” (35) At a young age, Cleopatra was educated at the library of Alexandria by the finest scholars. She became fluent in nine languages, learned to read and write in Greek, and became one of the most talented orators of her time. She finished her studies just as her father died of an illness at the age of 51. Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII, her oldest brother, became the Queen and King of Egypt and also married when they were 18 and 10-years-old, and were meant to rule jointly. Cleopatra ignored her brother, and in retaliation, her brother exiled her from their kingdom in 48BC. She spent a year camped in a desert, while the Roman Civil War – being fought by Pompey and Caesar – was advancing towards Egyptian borders.

Pompey, upon requesting assistance from Egypt, was beheaded by Ptolemy XIII, hoping to gain Julius Caesar as an ally. After hearing of Pompey's death, Caesar traveled to Egypt, where he was presented with the head of his enemy. Cleopatra made an 8-day journey from the Syrian Desert, to the palace; sneaking through her brother's defenses to Caesar's quarters. Ptolemy XIII was outraged to find Cleopatra, but Caesar - seeing a stable Egypt as beneficial to Rome - calms him and convinces him to rule with Cleopatra. Caesar may have settled the siblings' feud, but he was unaware of the rebellion he had caused among the Alexandrians.

The riots and violence quickly became a full-blown war that would later be recognized as the Alexandrian War. Pothinus, Achillas, and Arsinoe, Cleopatra's older sister, planned for the murder of Caesar and Cleopatra. Cleopatra realized in November of 48BC she was pregnant with Caesar's child. The Alexandrians requested the release of Ptolemy XIII so they could discuss a truce. The Alexandrian army fought Caesar's army between Alexandria and present-day Cairo.

There were great losses on both sides - including Ptolemy XIII - but Caesar emerged victorious and the Alexandrians surrendered to him on March 27, 47BC. Caesar rewards Cleopatra with the throne and stays with Cleopatra in Egypt until June 10th. He also makes Egypt a protectorate of Rome.

Cleopatra married her youngest brother, Ptolemy XIV, in the spring of 47BC. Cleopatra gave birth to Caesarion in late June, and in 46BC Cleopatra sailed to Rome with her son and brother.

The Romans celebrated Caesar's victories; including Alexandria. Caesar left for Spain in early November and Cleopatra left in April of 45BC. "...To broaden her base of support abroad was to secure the throne at home." (115) Cleopatra and Caesar returned to Rome in the fall of 45BC. Caesar was named dictator for life in February of 44BC.

He announced that he would depart on March 18th for Parthia, which he planned to conquer. At 11 o'clock on the day of the Ides of March he was surrounded by his friends and colleagues at the Senate. They stabbed him to death. In his will he left most of his belongings to his assassins and named Gaius Octavian as his heir. Cleopatra secured Egypt as a friend and ally of Rome and left in April. The grieving Cleopatra returned to Egypt in late-spring.

She had Ptolemy XIV poisoned over the summer of 44BC and named Caesarion as co-regent. Egypt struggled with plague and famine brought on by the Nile's low water level and the Roman civil war returned to Egypt's borders. Octavian and Antony defeated Cassius and Brutus in Eastern Macedonia in October 42BC. They declared themselves dictators and divided the Mediterranean. Antony requested that Cleopatra come to meet with him in Tarsus.

The young queen made a show of Egypt's vast riches by inviting him to dinners and allowing her guests to keep everything. She left for Egypt after three weeks leaving behind a list of requests. Egypt remained an ally and her sister Arsinoe was killed. Antony joined Cleopatra in the fall, but returned to Greece after hearing of war between Octavian and the Parthians. Antony

married Octavian's sister, Octavia, in December 40BC. Also in December, Cleopatra gave birth to Antony's son and daughter.

Antony sent for Cleopatra and headed for Syria to fight the Parthians, but is forced to retreat. For the rest of their lives Cleopatra and Antony were inseparable. After she had her fourth child, Antony asked Cleopatra to bring supplies for his troops in Beirut. Antony gave territories to his children to rule in the future. Octavian went against Antony at the Senate and declared war on Cleopatra at the end of October 32BC. Antony was stripped of his powers.

“ Antony could not win a war without her. Octavian could not wage one.”

(244) After many of Antony's troops abandoned him for Octavian he only wished to die an honorable death. When Octavian's troops invaded Alexandria Cleopatra locked herself in her mausoleum, which also contained all of Egypt's treasure. A messenger told Antony that she was dead and he stabbed himself.

He was carried to Cleopatra where he died at the age of 53. Octavian took all of Egypt's treasure and kept Cleopatra from killing herself. Servants brought Cleopatra a basket of figs and had a letter delivered to Octavian asking that she be buried next to Antony. She was found dead with her two servants beside her on August 10th and was buried next to Antony. She was 39. Octavian annexed Egypt on August 31, 30BC.

Egypt would not recover until the 20th century. Seen as a threat, Caesarion was tortured and murdered. Her other three children returned to Rome with Octavian to be raised by Octavia. Octavian died at 76, after ruling for 44

years. Cleopatra VII was the most accomplished and influential female of her day.

She has been written about by famous authors and playwrights for centuries. “ It is not difficult to understand why Caesar became history, Cleopatra is a legend.” (5) Cleopatra stabilized and ruled Egypt for 22 years, made several allies abroad, raised four children, and “ for a fleeting moment she held the fate of the Western world in her hands.” That is why she remains a legend today. Stacy Schiff’s book beautifully describes the life and achievements of this legend, while separating the myths from her fascinating history.

This book, while challenging, is a wonderful read and is perfectly acceptable for a ninth grader. ? Bibliography Schiff, Stacy. Cleopatra. New York: Little Brown & Company, 2010. Print.