

POWER AND PRESENCE: CLEOPATRA'S IMAGE IN
FORM AND CONTEXT

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of

Texas State University-San Marcos

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements

For Graduation in the Mitte Honors Program

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San Marcos, Texas

May 2007

There are few women in history as famous as Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt. Her political cunning and sexual allure made her an enduring figure in both fact and fiction for centuries. Separating the fact from the fiction in Cleopatra's¹ life is a difficult, if not impossible, task.

Cleopatra is poignantly referred to as queen without a face in contrast to Nefertiti who is referred to as a face without a queen.² Much is known about the events of Cleopatra's life and politics thanks to ancient writers who were well versed in the Hellenistic interest in biography, but the visual record of her life is considerably smaller. Most of what we know about Cleopatra is based on the characteristics of this genre, which includes more of the dramatic aspects of her life since those are more interesting. Knowing what she physically looked like cannot be determined from these images or biographies. However, more importantly, knowing what she wanted to look like can be.

Cleopatra carefully controlled her public image, which included more than just physical appearance. Royal imagery of the Hellenistic age was devoted to the development of effective, persuasive portraits.³ Cleopatra's royal portraits were created with a variety of means and strategies. The first and most effective of these was the process of Hellenistic syncretism, a recognized blending of different cultural ideas by the cosmopolitan Hellenistic Greeks. Along with the process of syncretism, Cleopatra employed a religious strategy in her attempt to gain a larger following and

¹ Queen Cleopatra VII will now be referred to as Cleopatra

² Andre Mamalraux, Walker and Higgs, 210

³ Pollitt, 20

establish her own legitimacy as a Diadochoi.⁴ Her political alliances with two powerful Romans are the most well known of her strategies. Cleopatra's main goal as ruler was to restore the former glory of her empire and ensure its survival. The only way to accomplish this goal was with the recognition of the increasing power of Rome, a view she inherited from her father Auletes.

A Brief History of Cleopatra's Egypt

Cleopatra was the last member of the Ptolemaic dynasty to rule Egypt and, in fact, the last Hellenistic ruler left. Ptolemy I, the founding member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, was one of Alexander the Great's generals and took over part of Alexander's empire after his death in 323 BCE, which marks the beginning of the Hellenistic Age. Alexander the Great's kingdom was divided up among his four most trusted generals, because he had no will and his son by a Persian princess mysteriously died soon after his death. As Alexander's number one general, Ptolemy had the first choice among the different parts of the empire. He chose North Africa which included the much sought after Egypt and the Ptolemaic Empire was born.

Cleopatra's father Ptolemy XII, known as Auteles (the flute player), had an enormous influence on her. She even called her herself Cleopatra Thea Philprator meaning Goddess who loves her father. In 58 BCE, Auteles left Alexandria hastily and traveled to Rhodes, then Athens, and then Rome. According to a contemporary Greek inscription, interpreted by Wilhelm, the King stayed there with one of his

⁴ "Successors," members of the Hellenistic ruler cult, Green, XV

daughters. This daughter was very probably Cleopatra.⁵ This trip exposed the future queen to life in other parts of the empire and influenced the development of some of her most successful and persuasive techniques.

Cleopatra took the throne in 51 BCE, after her father Auletes died he left control of his empire to his eldest son Ptolemy XIII, who was only ten years old, and his seventeen year-old daughter Cleopatra VII. In his will Auletes also made open recognition of the overriding power of Rome to control the future of Egypt, meaning that any succession to the Egyptian throne now took place under Roman protection.

Cleopatra was primarily an Egyptian queen. She was Greek Macedonian by descent and did not have a drop of Egyptian blood in her veins. She knew, however, that it was important to appeal to the Egyptian population. She knew that it was important to gain the support of her Egyptian followers, because they made up the majority of the diverse population of her empire. Once the Egyptian masses supported her, the smaller upper class would have to follow suit. She was the first of her dynasty to learn the Egyptian language among the many languages she knew.⁶ In the early years of her reign, she also participated in important religious ceremonies and other things pertaining to the Egyptian people in order to gain their support.

After her brother Ptolemy XIII died, Cleopatra was re-established as queen by Caesar, with her even younger brother Ptolemy XIV as her husband in March of 47. Once again largely ignoring that her brothers even existed as her co-rulers, Cleopatra

⁵ Guy Weill Goudchaux in Walker and Higgs, 131

⁶Thompson, 321

began ensuring that the Egypt she knew and loved would remain intact even after her death. To ensure success she implemented a series of strategies, which included religious offerings and alliances with two of Rome's most powerful leaders, Julius Caesar and Marc Antony. The alliance with Julius Caesar lasted until his murder, after which Cleopatra and her son by Caesar returned to Egypt. Cleopatra's alliance with Marc Antony lasted until the two were defeated at the Battle of Actium by Octavian.

The Campaign Against Cleopatra

After defeating Cleopatra and Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Octavian wanted to erase her from the minds of his newly conquered subjects. His distaste for the queen stemmed from what he saw as a threat to both his authority and Rome's place in the world in general. He did not approve of her relationships with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony. There was also the fact that she and Caesar had a child together who, a stronger claim to power after Caesar's assassination than anyone else including the ambitious Octavian. Octavian portrayed Cleopatra as a dangerous outsider from the East who had bewitched Marc Antony in an attempt on Octavian's part to gain support in Rome. There was also the issue that Cleopatra effectively ended Antony's marriage to Octavian's sister Octavia.

Although Cleopatra, not Antony, was Octavian's declared foe, all of statues of Antony in Alexandria were smashed while hers were allowed to stand. One of her

friends gave Octavian a large sum of money to save the statues.⁷ Octavian wanted to erase her image completely, he knew that doing so would be political suicide in Egypt where her visual strategies were successful in gaining the devotion of the people.

Hellenistic Syncretism

The vast, sprawling empires and the plurality of cultures within those borders, called for a new kind of thinking. During the Hellenistic Age the historically xenophobic Greeks conquered most of the known world and needed to find a way to rule the different people in it. One of the most effective ways of gaining the confidence of the people was to mix their traditions with those of the new rulers. The example of Ptolemaic Egypt, especially with regard to the images of Cleopatra VII, is one of the best examples of Hellenistic syncretism. Portraits of Cleopatra can be divided into three distinct types: purely Egyptian, Ptolemaic Egyptian, and Ptolemaic Greek.

The purely Egyptian type is defined by the use of traditional Egyptian themes that promote stability. Stability was important to the Egyptians because they had little control the Nile River which controlled almost every aspect of their lives. Keeping things like pharaonic portraits and religious practices predictable helped ease their worries.

The tripartite wig, which looks like thick curls or dreadlocks, is the most obvious of the Egyptian features. Another feature of Egyptian royal sculpture is the headdress or crown with uraeus, the sacred serpent found on headdresses of Egyptian rulers. The triple uraeus is unique to Cleopatra's image and is used as one of the main

⁷ Grant, 233

arguments in identifying portraits of the queen in Egypt. (fig 1-3) Portraits of previous rulers like her predecessor Arsinoe II are shown with only two uraei. The triple uraeus represents the triple rule of Ptolemy VI, Ptolemy VII, and Cleopatra II who joined together to strengthen the throne and prevent internal rivalry.⁸

Another type of Egyptian conventional imagery Cleopatra used was that of serdab statues, which were placed in their tombs to serve as a place for the *ka* or soul to reside in the event that the physical body was destroyed. (fig 4) These statues used a hard and durable stone called diorite to prevent them from breaking. In addition to using the same material, Cleopatra's statue has the stiff stance with arms at her side and one foot forward as Menkaure's royal serdab statue from the Old Kingdom two thousand years earlier. (fig. 5) The general static and impersonal feel of these Egyptian style statues was also part of the traditional visual vocabulary.

The Ptolemaic Egyptian style blends Egyptian and Ptolemaic Greek traditions in a truly Hellenistic way. The stiff pose, triple uraeus headdress, and tripartite wig are derived from Egyptian traditions. The dress and cornucopia are Ptolemaic Greek in origin. (fig. 6-9) These images were most likely designed for Greeks living in Egypt. During Cleopatra's reign, Egypt was a cosmopolitan place. The city of Alexandria, for example, is considered the New York of the ancient world. The Greek population was one of the larger minority groups living in Egypt at the time, so gaining their support was an important part of the Cleopatra's strategy. Because they identified with both Cleopatra's ethnically Greek lineage and Egyptian location, the images combine conventions from both Greek and Egyptian tradition.

⁸ Sally Ann Ashton in Walker and Higgs, 154

The most reliable source for identification of Cleopatra's image is in coins. A ruler's name appears on coin along with their portrait ensuring correct identification of the individual. Coins minted in Alexandria during Cleopatra's reign fall under the Ptolemaic Egyptian category. They continue many of the traditions established by previous Ptolemaic rulers continuing the Egyptian tradition of stability.

Alexander the Great established many conventions for coins. The royal diadem, royal headband, is the mark of a Greek ruler. The small horns under her ears recall the horns of Zeus Ammon seen on Alexander's coins. These horns establish the ruler as a living god.⁹ On one of the coins minted in Alexandria, Cleopatra closely resembles Ptolemy I connecting her with the ruler cult he developed during his reign. (fig. 10-11) Money was used by everyone in the empire, which made coins one of the most effective forms of propaganda.

The purely Ptolemaic Greek images have an almost entirely different set of features because they were primarily made for a Western audience. These features include a hooked nose, big eyes, the so-called melon hair style and bun, and often a royal diadem. The hooked nose and large eyes found on coins is also seen on statues and busts. The melon hair style, named *melonenfrisur* by German scholars, refers to the lines of hair leading back to a bun.¹⁰ (fig 12-13)

Ptolemaic Greek style portraits were also often much less severe and more personal than the Egyptian styles. (fig. 14) This is a result of both the Roman

⁹ Pollitt, 26

¹⁰ Walker and Higgs, 142

Republican style and the Hellenistic interest in personal biography. The Roman Republic was brought to end by Julius Caesar, one of Cleopatra's allies, so many of its ideas were still common. The Roman Republican idea of verism, a harsh realism in portraiture, explains why Cleopatra is depicted with the somewhat unflattering hooked nose. Another explanation for the hooked nose is that it was a convention established by Ptolemy I, who was depicted with similar features on many of his coins. Keeping this convention established a stable bloodline that helped grant legitimacy to Cleopatra's reign.

The interest in personal biographies, especially dramatic ones like Cleopatra's, began in the Hellenistic Age. These stories placed an emphasis on individual character and personalities, a theme illustrated by the less conventional images produced during this time.

Religious Strategy

In order gain support of the largest number of people Cleopatra employed a religious strategy that incorporated religions from several different belief systems. This strategy was not unusual in the Hellenistic Age and aligns perfectly with the idea of Hellenistic syncretism.

The ancient historian Herodotus describes the Egyptians as a most religious people in his *Histories*. During the early years of her reign Cleopatra made every effort to befriend Egyptian priests. She knew that in many traditional cities the priests were in charge because religion played a large in the lives of the Egyptians.

The attendance the installation of the Buchis bull upriver in Hermonthis just one month after her accession made her popularity grow significantly.¹¹ In third year of her reign when Apis died, she took on some of the cult expenses herself, endowing a table of offerings and providing daily rations for those involved in the rites of burial.

The earliest image of Cleopatra shows her making an offering to a god. (fig. 15) The only strange thing about this image is that Cleopatra is depicted as a man. However, she is not taking on male pharaonic iconography to assert power as Hatshepsut had centuries earlier. Cleopatra's face was simply carved on top of a previous male pharaoh's face, which was common practice in ancient Egypt since little was changed in the images of different pharaohs as a result of convention of stability.

Another important aspect of Cleopatra's religious strategy was the establishment of her cult. She enlisted the help of Julius Caesar to help establish her cult so that it would appeal to people in Rome as well as in her own empire. While Cleopatra was in Rome, Caesar dedicated the new Temple of Venus the Mother (Genetrix), the goddess from whom the Julian Family claimed descent. There was, of course, a grand statue of Venus in the temple and beside it Caesar placed a gilt-bronze statue of Cleopatra herself which was still standing there in the third century CE.¹² This statue and temple dedication helped make the connection between Cleopatra and Venus/Aphrodite, who was worshipped in the West.

¹¹ Thompson, 321

¹² Grant, 87

¹³ U of Chicago, Cleopatra page

At one of her first meetings with Anthony, Cleopatra decided to adorn herself and her servants as mythical beings on a barge in the River Cydnus. The ancient biographer Plutarch describes Cleopatra's appearance at the river: "she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture."¹³ It was common in the Hellenistic Age, especially in Egypt, for rulers to claim that they are the living embodiment of a particular god or goddess. Later Marc Antony took on the guise of Dionysus the supreme Hellenistic god and counterpart of Venus.

In the process of Hellenistic syncretism, Venus/Aphrodite was worshipped in conjunction with the Egyptian goddess Isis. The image of a Ptolemaic woman wearing the crown of Isis has elements of both Egyptian and Hellenistic Greek traditions. This image is not of Cleopatra but represents the type of image that she used to convey her divine status and further her cult. (fig. 16) The tripartite wig and crown of Isis are the Egyptian elements. The Parian marble was part of the Hellenistic tradition. It was found near the Temple of Isis in Rome which along with the Parian marble illustrates that it was created for Roman context. The cult of Cleopatra Aphrodite remained alive into the fourth century CE.¹⁴

Political Alliances

Cleopatra's alliances with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony are the main cause for the modern conception of her as a temptress. These alliances also provide an

interesting insight into her political ambitions. By creating personal romantic relationships with these two powerful men, Cleopatra was able to influence important decisions from the inside.

Cleopatra's alliance with Julius Caesar most importantly produced a son who Cleopatra named Ptolemy Caesar, called Caesarion by Alexandrians. Cleopatra wanted to establish his connection to both Egypt and Rome through a vocabulary similar to the one she used for own images. He was the apparent heir to power in both Rome and Egypt securing Cleopatra's legacy. The only problem with this plan was that most people were not convinced that Caesar was the father, which was especially true of the Romans. In her attempt to legitimize her son, Cleopatra used many of the same techniques seen in her portraits. In one image Caesarion is depicted wearing a traditional Egyptian headdress with Greek style hair peaking out beneath it. (fig. 17)

Cleopatra's alliance with Marc Antony was even more controversial than the alliance with Caesar. The affair resulted in Antony leaving his wife Octavia, whose brother was none other than the powerful Octavian.

Cleopatra and Marc Antony were a team and planned to rule the empire together. To rule the empire successfully they had to gain the confidence of all of the people in the empire which meant appealing to different local traditions. They minted coins in Alexandria, which featured portraits of both of them in an attempt to show that they were united as rulers. Cleopatra was on one side and Antony was on the other. (fig. 18) Coins were an important part of political agendas and these were different. They served the purpose of uniting the two rulers in the eyes of people

¹⁴ Grant, 233

across the empire. Almost everyone used coins and would therefore be exposed to the images.

Cleopatra had twins Cleopatra Selene and Alexander Helios with Antony. They did not represent the same threat to Octavian as Caesarion. Few images of the twins exist today. This is because they did not play as important a role in the political goals of their mother and as a result there was not the same need for images of them as there was for Caesarion .

The alliance with Antony lasted until the Battle of Actium and the capture of Alexandria by Octavian on August 3, 31 CE. Soon after, a self-inflicted bite of an asp ended Cleopatra's life, which marks the end of the turbulent Hellenistic Age.

Cleopatra's Myth and Legacy

When studying the images of Cleopatra, the question of whether or not she was "beautiful" undoubtedly surfaces as a result of the stories surrounding her physical appearance. When considering whether or not she was beautiful, it is important to remember that beauty is subjective. Different cultures and times have different ideas of what is beautiful. Since Cleopatra existed in a world that was in both a different time and culture, the ideas of what make a woman beautiful may not be the same as those of modern, western culture.

The ancient biographer Plutarch, a near contemporary of Cleopatra, describes her appearance and demeanor in his *Life of Antony*:

For her actual beauty, it is said, was in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but

the contact of her presence, if you lived with her, was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching.¹⁵

Roman historian Dio Cassius agrees with Plutarch's description in his *Roman History*:

For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice and a knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one. Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate every one, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her rôle to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne. She asked therefore for admission to his presence, and on obtaining permission adorned and beautified herself so as to appear before him in the most majestic and at the same time pity-inspiring guise.¹⁶

During her life and immediately following her death, there was an interest in exotic eastern themes, especially Egyptian ones. Octavian tried to portray Cleopatra and the east as a dangerous 'other,' which only made people more interested in her.

There are many objects and paintings found in Roman houses depicting Egyptian themes. The most famous of these are the Nilotic mosaics. (figs. 19-21) These scenes are often set on the Nile and include exotic plants and animals, like hippopotami or alligators. Some aspects of Egypt are exaggerated to emphasize their strangeness and danger, like the teeth of a hippopotami. Exaggeration undoubtedly was used to make stories like Cleopatra's even more interesting. The interest in the exotic combined with the new Hellenistic interest in biography, gave Cleopatra an important place in the minds of the Romans. The stories written about her may be the slightly fictitious creations of biographers, but they are the basis for the modern myth

¹⁵ Plutarch, 354

¹⁶ U of Chicago Cleopatra page

surrounding Cleopatra.

Another aspect of Egyptian lore employed by the Greeks was the idea of fortune or luck demonstrated by their belief in the goddess *Fortuna*, also called *Tyche*, and in the idea of 'the luck of the Nile.' Egyptian prosperity depended on the Nile, because it provided water for crops in their harsh environment, so when the river flooded and provided them with enough water to grow crops they considered it a stroke of good luck. As a result of the turbulent, uncontrollable times traditional religions beginning to unravel and Hellenistic Greeks became obsessed with abstract concepts like fortune. This idea was then personified and merged with the Egyptian goddess Isis. The *Temple of Fortuna Primigenia* in Italy constructed during the first century BCE was an elaborate temple completely dedicated to the goddess Fortuna and included many Egyptian themes such lotus flowers on columns.

The first Hellenistic ruler Alexander the Great was the ultimate example of good fortune because he was able to successfully conquer the known world. Cleopatra, the last Hellenistic ruler, was the ultimate example of someone who had good luck but lost it all. Her dramatic rise and fall turned her into a kind of tragic beauty, which increased interest in her biography.

In addition to the Nilotic mosaics, portraits of women resembling Cleopatra were found in Roman houses. These portraits include a similar hairstyle and facial features, but a royal diadem. The lack of a royal diadem proves that these are portraits of women emulating Cleopatra rather than depictions of Cleopatra herself. These portraits show that Cleopatra was so popular that women wanted to emulate her

qualities in portraits of themselves in much the same that modern women copy the hairstyles of their favorite celebrities.

The discoveries of ancient artifacts were important and interesting events during the Renaissance. When a statue of a reclining figure with a snake armband was found, it was identified as a dying Cleopatra. (fig. 22) The statue met the people's expectation of what a statue of Cleopatra should look like. The figure was reclined with her clothes falling off which met their expectation of sensuality associated with Cleopatra. The snake armband represented the asp whose venomous bite killed the queen. This statue however later identified as *Sleeping Ariadne*. Ariadne was abandoned and left for dead until she was rescued by Dionysus. The snake armband was nothing more than an artistic decoration.¹⁷

The association with Dionysus, however presents an interesting similarity to Cleopatra's life. She was in a way rescued by Antony who often took on the guise of Dionysus. Cleopatra, however, was associated with Venus/Aphrodite, not Ariadne.

The myth surrounding Cleopatra was created and perpetuated by dramatizations of her life story, especially those with an emphasis on her love affairs. These dramatized stories are told in image and verse by numerous people from the Middle Ages to the present. One of the most notable is *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare.

There are several modern films about her as well. The two best examples of films are *Cleopatra* (1934) directed by Cecil B. DeMille starring Claudette Colbert and *Cleopatra* (1963) directed by Joseph Mankiewicz starring Elizabeth Taylor. (figs. 23-

24) After the release of the 1934 film, Claudette Colbert's hairstyle in the film called "Cleopatra Bangs" became very popular. Colbert's performance in the film also defined Cleopatra's sensual depictions in terms of the 1930s and it remains the same today. Cleopatra's personal sexuality was not a threat but an affirmation of the social order. This was because in the early twentieth century an active sexual appetite in women was identified with the achievement of maturity and the maintenance of health.¹⁸ The idea of Cleopatra as powerful sexy woman made an actress like Elizabeth Taylor, known for her legendary beauty, perfect for the role.

The modern conception of Cleopatra VII as women of seductive beauty and great power is not as exaggerated as it seems. Through the study of portraits and writings from her time along how her image evolved, the life and image of the famous queen become clearer. She was powerful and did have a number of political goals. Her main goal of restoring Egypt's glory was the driving force behind her image including both depictions and behavior.

Her ambition made her beloved by most and hated by a few. It was these few who eventually defeated her at the Battle of Actium ending her ambition but preserving her story. Her legacy itself serves to accomplish her goal of restoring glory to Egypt in a way. When people think of Egypt they think of the powerful Queen Cleopatra who would do whatever it took to save her empire. She has been an inspiration to many over the years as a result of her political cunning and uniquely crafted image.

17 Hamer in Walker and Higgs, 303-304

18 Hamer, 121

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Figures



Fig. 1



Fig. 2 (close-up of Fig. 1)



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13 (alternate view of 12)



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig 19



Fig. 20



Fig 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24