



THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

CLEOPATRA THE GREAT

The Woman Behind the Legend

By Joann Fletcher

From world-renowned Egyptologist, Joann Fletcher, comes an extraordinary look at one of Egypt's most intriguing leaders—Cleopatra—and the real woman behind the myth.

When the greatest rulers needed to know their allies from their enemies and keep ahead of both, Cleopatra was the ultimate player of the political game. . . . Bringing the ancient world to life, *Cleopatra the Great* is full of tantalizing details about the Pharaoh's infamous banquets and massive library, her reputation as a magician, her relationships with both Julius Caesar and Marc Antony, and her skillful use of goddess costumes, beauty regimens, hairstyling, and face veiling.

TELL US ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF *CLEOPATRA THE GREAT*.

Ever since my days as an undergraduate when I first studied Cleopatra almost 25 years ago, it amazed me that the most famous woman in ancient history could be so often misrepresented in western sources. I also found it intriguing that “Cleopatra of Egypt” was actually European by descent, and like her illustrious predecessor Alexander the Great could trace her origins back to Macedonia in northern Greece. She spoke Greek, her name was Greek and her life was bound up in the fate of the Greek world as it struggled against the expansion of Rome.

I've always had an abiding interest in those individuals in history who made their mark, especially if they have had a ‘mixed press’, or indeed negative public image. Cleopatra's close connections with Alexander only increased my curiosity. I read all I could about both of them, visited the places they visited and tried to understand their special relationships with ancient Egypt.

Cleopatra is still an icon in modern Egypt, although some Egyptologists remain unconvinced. In a recent US exhibition it was claimed that “Cleopatra may be the most famous woman of ancient Egypt, but far more significant was Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh who reigned for nearly twenty years in the 15th century BC.” Yet significant for whom? Cleopatra transformed Egypt from a petty client kingdom within Rome's grasp to a power so great she almost defeated them to take over much of the ancient world. Whilst Hatshepsut was indeed a phenomenal character, her significance both to Egypt and the world at large was far less than that of Cleopatra whose impact was felt across three continents.

Certainly Cleopatra's impact has become increasingly apparent during my own research at the University of York. For television, one of our first projects looked at Egypt's links across North Africa to the Canary Islands, our route following the career of Cleopatra's daughter. Subsequent projects then took us to southern Arabia, a land famous for its own female rulers whose long-term trade with Egypt almost certainly inspired their own mummification practices. In Rome,

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where Cleopatra lived for several years, mummified burials from the C.1st AD provided further evidence for Egypt's influence in Europe. And even the long-running search for Nefertiti has thrown up significant clues. As we continue to discover ever more about this earlier female pharaoh, evidence from the Valley of the Kings suggests such women were long remembered and indeed venerated by their female successors down to Cleopatra's time. And although my research into Nefertiti began with an unidentified body rather than any particular interest in her as an individual, my fascination with Cleopatra lies firmly with her achievements and abilities.

Although many biographies begin with Cleopatra then examine her portrayal by successive generations from Plutarch via Shakespeare to Hollywood, this can often reveal more about these cultures than hers. The historical Cleopatra is best sought out amongst contemporary, historical evidence, although even then it is always a struggle to root out the "real" personality, especially in the case of a woman who was even in her own lifetime so many different things to so many different people. This determined leader, brilliant politician, erudite scholar, and mother of four was a multi-faceted character who could really be all things to all people: to many Romans she was a drunken whore; for the Greeks and Middle Eastern peoples a beneficent liberator; to the Egyptians their living goddess and monarch, and in her own mind Alexander's true successor. Clearly only a saga covering several millennia, three continents and a whole range of diverse evidence could ever hope to begin making sense of this incredibly complex yet endlessly fascinating woman, a woman who was - for once - accurately described by Shakespeare as truly "a lass unparallel'd".

WHAT WERE BEHIND THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF WHO CLEOPATRA WAS?

Although Cleopatra's intimate association with Egypt was one which she herself promoted and manipulated to great effect as she expanded Egypt's empire at Rome's expense, her astonishing achievements were almost entirely erased in Rome's 'official version' of events. And having done all they could to destroy the woman herself, they recreated their version of Cleopatra with a blend of lies and misogyny so powerful she passed into western consciousness as little more than a femme fatale, clinging to power until a dramatic snake-bite suicide elevated her to the status of ultimate tragic heroine.

With a name now synonymous with tragedy and excess, the popular image of Cleopatra is nevertheless based on little more than Roman propaganda, Elizabethan drama, and Elizabeth Taylor, while the real woman was largely obscured. Classical scholars seemed unwilling to venture into the "exotic" world of ancient Egypt, and Egyptologists were largely dismissive of this "un-Egyptian" era, attitudes which shifted significantly in the 1980s with the major US exhibition "Cleopatra's Egypt" in 1988-1989, followed by a more recent European version in 2001.

HAS ANY NEW EVIDENCE BEEN DISCOVERED THAT CAN ADD TO THE STORY OF WHO CLEOPATRA WAS?

There has been astonishing new evidence that has come to light—the standard commemorative texts, epitaphs, and eulogies could now be set against tax records, astrological charts and personal correspondence, with Cleopatra's very own handwriting identified only a few years ago.

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And with Roman sources increasingly balanced with Greek and Egyptian evidence, vital clues from sites now lost are combining with sites which are only now coming to light, including Cleopatra's own palace quarters rediscovered beneath the Mediterranean, not to mention the ongoing search for her fabled tomb. And as her coins, statuary and architecture continue to contribute to the overall picture, the minutiae of life as it was lived in the C.1st BC – the jewelry, clothing, cosmetics, food, furnishings – can all add a layer of extra detail to what is known about the woman herself.

By recreating life within her seaside palace in Alexandria, in her villa by the Tiber or on board her golden cruise ship, details of Cleopatra's famous banquets, vast libraries, beauty regimes and even hairstyles can be used to explore and indeed explode a number of long-standing myths, from her first appearance on the world stage emerging from a rolled-up carpet to her legendary death by snakebite.

HOW DID CLEOPATRA'S ROOTS INFLUENCE HER REIGN?

Although born and raised in the Greek city of Alexandria on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, Cleopatra was a frequent traveler who spent months at a time in Athens, Ephesus, Antioch and Tarsus, even living in Rome for a couple of years. Her regular sea journeys reflect her upbringing in the ancient world's busiest and wealthiest port, the city of Alexandria created by Alexander the Great to transform Egypt from an inward-looking backwater into a vibrant cosmopolitan center. At the heart of world affairs, the city's greatest asset was Alexander himself, whose mummified body housed within the palace quarter was a constant symbol to Cleopatra of her own potential greatness as she began to restore his vast empire and withstood Rome.

HOW DID CLEOPATRA USE HER APPEARANCE TO MAKE A STATEMENT?

In her ambitious foreign policies, Cleopatra used her coins as valuable propaganda, her stern, masculine-looking profile purposefully manufactured to control regions traditionally ruled by men. Yet taken by the modern world as proof Cleopatra was “no great beauty”, a misguided belief that there are no surviving sculpted portraits led to the statement that while ‘Nefertiti is a face without a queen, Cleopatra is a queen without a face’ (Malraux 1969). While I believe this to be no longer true of Nefertiti (as discussed in my last book, *The Search for Nefertiti*) the same can now be said of Cleopatra, whose stunning marble portrait busts easily compare with contemporary images of women considered leading beauties of the ancient world.

WHAT MAKE THE BOOK RELEVANT FOR MODERN AMERICAN READERS?

I think the book attempts to portray Cleopatra in a relatively “fresh” light, not only by drawing on Egyptian and Greek sources to counterbalance Roman propaganda, but by using a wealth of small details to gain an impression of Cleopatra's actual day-to-day life, from her daily beauty routine to the practicalities surrounding pregnancy and childbirth.

It also allows us to see her as she would have appeared to her various audiences: from a red-headed woman veiled in black drapery or a bewigged and bejeweled goddess-figure; a woman of great learning amidst the academic institutions of Alexandria; to a devoted mother of four children. These various roles and guises designed to appeal to a widely varied audience across

the ancient world may also have some resonance with the task of modern politicians struggling to make their mark on an increasingly international stage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. **Joann Fletcher** teaches Egyptian archaeology at the University of York and as part of the University's Mummy Research Group has examined human remains around the world, including Egypt's Valley of the Kings, Yemen, Italy and Ireland. She is also Egyptologist for Harrogate Museums and Arts, and as a consultant to the media makes regular television appearances, most recently as lead investigator in the History Channel series *Mummy Forensics*. Her publications include *The Search for Nefertiti*; *Alexander the Great: Son of the Gods*; *Egypt's Sun King: Amenhotep III*; and *Oils and Perfumes of Ancient Egypt*, along with journal articles, contributions to several guide books and the BBC's History website.