

Cleopatra, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony: how the last pharaoh's love affairs shaped Ancient Egypt's fate

Cleopatra's relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony had fundamental consequences for both Egypt and Rome...



Cleopatra was a daughter of Egypt – part of the Macedonian-Greek-Ptolemaic Dynasty that had ruled since the death of [Alexander the Great](#) in 323 BC. Queen of Egypt, Cyrene and Cyprus, she was renowned for her passionate nature, beauty, intellect and determination to advance the interests of the Ptolemaic legacy.

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They were masters of [ancient Rome](#) – powerful, ruthless military generals who had expanded the sphere of Roman influence, seizing power for themselves and seeking to add the vast Egyptian empire to Rome's ever-expanding list of conquests.

The relationships between [Cleopatra VII](#), [Julius Caesar](#) and [Mark Antony](#) were love affairs, and power struggles, that would change the course of Egyptian and Roman history, forever.

Cleopatra and Caesar: how did their love affairs begin?

It was Cleopatra's father, [Ptolemy XII](#), who had effectively opened the door to the Romans. When Ptolemy XI was killed in 80 BC, his only male heirs were Ptolemy XII and his younger brother – the illegitimate sons of Ptolemy IX.

Ptolemy XII was crowned in 76 BC but, soon after, the question of his legitimacy was raised in Rome, where anti-Senate politicians claimed to be in possession of a will, written by Ptolemy XI, that bequeathed Egypt to the Romans.

Fearing the loss of the throne and an end to his dynasty, Ptolemy took a huge risk: he struck a deal with Rome.

Desperate to retain his kingship, Ptolemy asked Caesar and Pompey to recognise him as Egypt's legal ruler and a comrade and ally of Rome. This they did, for the price of 6,000 talents – an enormous amount, of which some was borrowed from Roman moneylenders.

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When Rome moved in on the Egyptian territory of Cyprus the following year, Ptolemy did nothing. The Egyptian people were outraged, and banished their Pharaoh, leaving his wife and eldest daughter to rule in his stead.

[Ptolemy XII: Cleopatra's father from hell](#)

The tragic fate of Cleopatra has long overshadowed her predecessor, Ptolemy XII. But, as Diana T Nikolova explains, it's impossible to understand the daughter's downfall without exploring the father's hapless reign...



Although Ptolemy was eventually restored to the throne, again with the help of the [Roman Senate](#), the damage had been done.

Egypt was weak, and Rome had its sights firmly set on conquest. To further compound matters, Ptolemy XII made the Roman Senate executor of his will (which proclaimed his eldest surviving daughter, Cleopatra, and eldest son co-regents), and his extensive

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bribery had left the realm in financial straits: Rome's foothold in Egypt looked sure to extend.

In 51 BC, 18-year-old Cleopatra emerged onto the political scene as co-regent of Egypt with her younger brother and (in true Egyptian royal tradition) husband, ten-year-old Ptolemy XIII.

Like her father before her, Cleopatra sought absolute power in Egypt, and soon set about dropping her brother's name from official documents. But, with Egypt facing economic failures, famine and crippling debt, Cleopatra realised she, too, needed the help of mighty Rome to lead Egypt back to peace and prosperity once more.

Only this time, it would be on her terms. Cleopatra was not the only one harbouring a desire for sole control of Egypt. In 48 BC, encouraged by his court advisors, Ptolemy XIII banished Cleopatra from Alexandria and proclaimed himself sole ruler.



An 18th-century depiction of Caesar meeting Cleopatra, by artist Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo. (Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images)

The battle lines had been drawn between the sibling spouses and Cleopatra, alone and powerless, hatched a plan to gain the ear of Caesar, who was merrily celebrating victory over his one-time comrade Pompey, at the [battle of Pharsalus](#).

As luck would have it, Caesar and his troops were already in Alexandria (he was in pursuit of his adversary Pompey who, having been defeated, was hoping for assistance from Ptolemy XIII). All Cleopatra had to do was enter Alexandria unseen and talk to Caesar before he reached his own agreement with her brother. It was an idea easier said than done.

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Fully prepared to seduce Caesar in order to enlist his help, Cleopatra planned to smuggle herself into Alexandria and inside the royal palace, where Caesar was staying as her brother's honoured guest. Greek historian Plutarch, writing more than a century later, described how Cleopatra achieved her mission:

"[Cleopatra] embarked in a little skiff and landed at the palace when it was already getting dark; and as it was impossible to escape notice otherwise, she stretched herself at full length inside a bed-sack, while Apollodorus [her servant] tied the bed-sack up with a cord and carried it indoors to Caesar."

What did Cleopatra and Caesar think of each other?

Caesar – a man some 30 years her senior – seems to have been instantly captivated by the Egyptian Queen and, after "succumbing to the charm of further intercourse with her, he reconciled her to her brother on the basis of a joint share with him in the royal power".

Suetonius tells us that Caesar was smitten by Cleopatra. "He often feasted with her until daybreak, and they would have sailed together in her barge nearly to Ethiopia had his soldiers agreed to follow him."

Cleopatra finally had the military support she needed to rule Egypt.

Her brother-husband was livid. On finding his banished sister and Caesar together at the palace, having clearly spent the night together, he reputedly flung his diadem to the ground and stormed out of the room, declaring his sister a traitor to Egypt.

Chaos followed. Ptolemy besieged the palace in which Caesar was staying, and Cleopatra's younger sister, Arsinoe, also joined in the fight. She declared herself to be the true queen of Egypt and led rebel forces against her siblings.



Ptolemy XIV (depicted left), Cleopatra's brother-husband, was livid when he found his banished sister and Caesar together at the palace. (Photo by Archive Photos/Getty Images)

All must have seemed lost for Cleopatra and her Roman lover but, with the arrival of Caesar's troops from Syria, the tide turned once more. Ptolemy and Arsinoe were both defeated. Cleopatra's seat as Egyptian ruler now seemed secure – she was even pregnant with Caesar's child (some time between 47 and 44 BC Cleopatra gave birth to a son whom she named Ptolemy Caesar, or Caesarion).

But, instead, of declaring Cleopatra sole ruler of Egypt, the Roman general instead made her co-ruler with her remaining brother, and soon-to-be husband, 12-year-old Ptolemy XIV

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In June 47 BC, Cleopatra gave birth to a son, Ptolemy Caesar, known as Caesarion – ‘little Caesar’ – although the child was never formally acknowledged by his father. The pair followed Caesar to Rome, where they were officially welcomed as “friends and allies of the Roman people”.

Cleopatra and Caesar: how did Rome react?

Beneath the veneer of its friendly exterior, **Rome was furious**. Caesar had no sons from his Roman wife, Calpurnia, and none from his previous wives. The idea of Caesarion – the son of a foreigner from a land despised as a pleasure-loving and decadent society – growing up to claim rule over ‘civilised’ Rome as Caesar’s heir, was intolerable.

That situation never came to pass, however, as the Caesar named his grandnephew Octavian (who would later take the name [Augustus](#)) as his heir.

Caesar: Death of a Dictator

When did Cleopatra and Caesar's relationship end?

In 44 BC, when [Caesar was assassinated](#), Cleopatra – a much-disliked figure in Rome, whose gold-covered statue stood in the city’s temple of Venus Genetrix – fled from Rome with her son.

Just months later, the Egyptian Queen’s second brother-husband was also dead – likely on her orders – and Cleopatra was free to rule with her three-year-old son, and plan the infant’s succession as Emperor of Rome.

Cleopatra meets Mark Antony

Meanwhile, disputes had broken out over who would succeed Caesar, with both Octavian and the Roman general Mark Antony seeking power.

By 41 BC, the leadership had been split: Antony was governing the eastern region and Octavian, the west. Following Cleopatra's return, Rome had left Egypt in relative peace, but the Senate's eyes turned once more to the wealthy empire, when Antony decided he needed money to subdue his enemies in the Parthian Empire (now Iraq).

Conveniently, Cleopatra had befriended Mark Antony during her time in Rome, and supported him militarily during the ensuing civil war. She now agreed to meet him in Tarsus (modern-day Turkey) to discuss the prospect of Egyptian support in a war against the Parthians.

When did Cleopatra and Mark Antony become lovers?

In an echo of plans made seven years earlier with her former lover, **Cleopatra set out for Tarsus in 41 BC to charm and seduce her unsuspecting old friend**. This time, however, her entrance was somewhat grander.

In Plutarch's words: "[Cleopatra] came sailing up the River Cydnus in a barge with gilded stern and outspread sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps. She herself lay all along, under a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and beautiful young boys, like painted Cupids, stood on each side to fan her."



The soon-to-be lovers Antony and Cleopatra meet on the water in this 1885 painting. (Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images)

Like Caesar before him, Antony was captivated. “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,” Plutarch tells us. “It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice.”

Antony was so taken with the Pharaoh that he abandoned his original reasons for meeting at Tarsus. He left his wife Fulvia to manage his affairs in Rome and his troops waiting for orders, while he spent the winter of 41–40 BC in Alexandria with Cleopatra. They were inseparable.

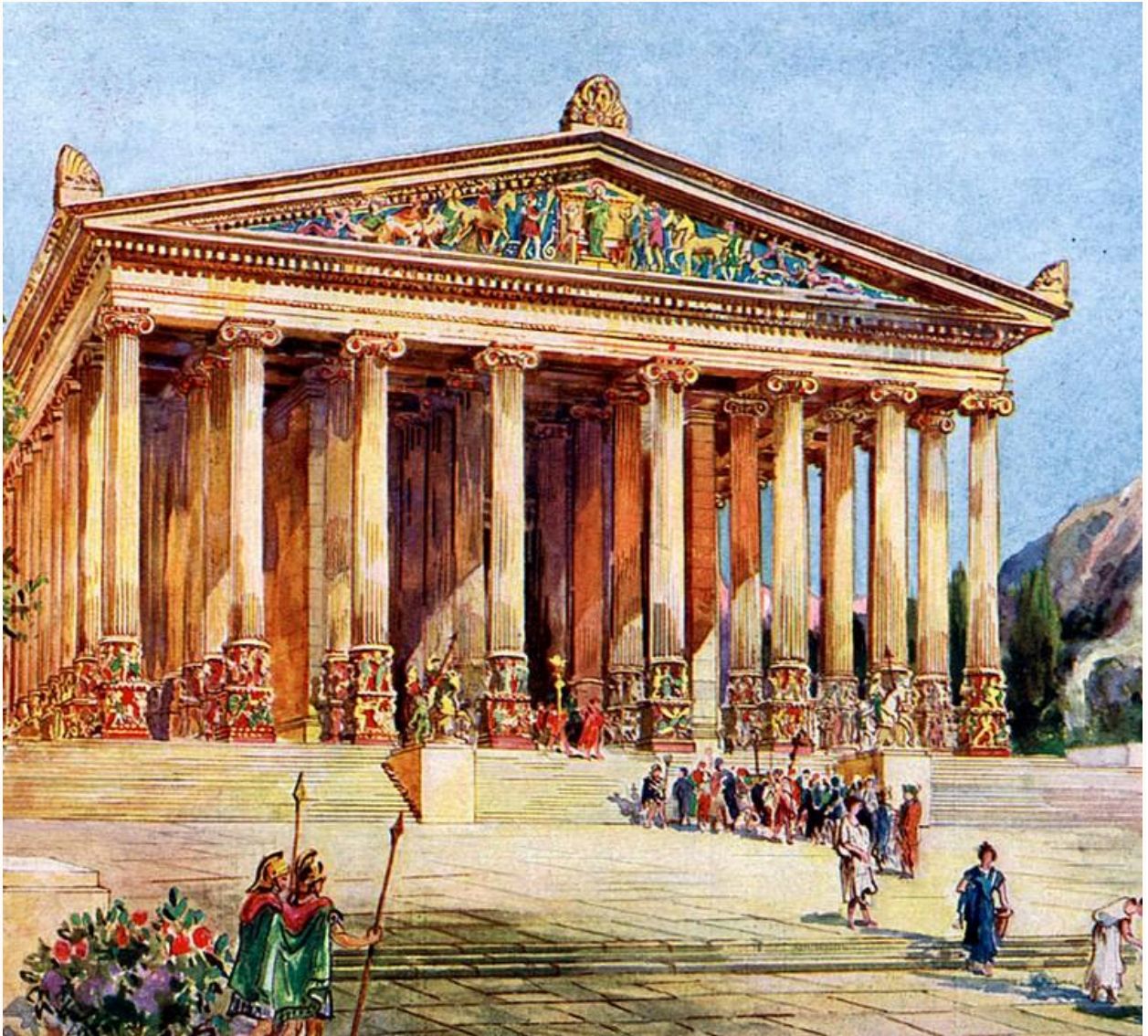
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During his stay, Cleopatra gained Antony's support in ridding her of the one person who had the power to disrupt her absolute rule in Egypt: Arsinoe. Defeated in battle, Arsinoe had been banished to the [Temple of Artemis](#) in Roman-controlled Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey. In 41 BC, on Antony's orders and in scandalous violation of the [?](#)

The following year Cleopatra gave birth to twins: Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene II. Antony, however, had finally been forced to return to Rome to deal with the aftermath of his failed rebellion against Octavian. A political alliance known as the Second Triumvirate was formed between the two generals and a dignitary named Marcus Aemilius Lepidus.

Recently widowed, Antony agreed to seal the peace deal with a marriage to Octavian's sister, Octavia Minor, in 40 BC. But Cleopatra was never far from Antony's mind and, in 37 BC, he returned to Alexandria where he fathered another son, Ptolemy Philadelphus,

"Despite only being a short-lived collection – the last to be completed, the Colossus of Rhodes, stood for less than 60 years – and one of them, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, possibly not existing at all, the Wonders continue to capture imaginations..."



What happened to Cleopatra and Mark Antony?

For a happy ending, the story should end there. But it doesn't. Ever greedy for power, Octavian continued to campaign for sole power in Rome, successfully eliminating Lepidus from the Triumvirate.

In 33 BC, allegedly in retaliation for Antony divorcing his sister, Octavian did the unthinkable: he declared war on the Egyptian queen. Two years later, in 31 BC, **the**

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combined armies of Antony and Cleopatra took on Octavian's forces in a great sea battle at [Actium](#), off Greece's west coast.

The battle was a disaster for the lovers. Victorious, Octavian invaded Egypt where he received the surrender of the defeated Roman forces. Antony's efforts to become sole ruler of the Roman world had ended and, first believing that his amour had forged an agreement with Octavian to ensure her own survival, and then that she had committed suicide, he attempted to fall on his sword in true Roman tradition.

But even in this he failed, and his wounded body was taken to Cleopatra who, still very much alive, was hiding in a mausoleum.

There, Antony succumbed to his wounds, reportedly dying in his lover's arms. Cleopatra realised that without her lover and his troops, she and her beloved country were now at the mercy of the triumphant Octavian.

Knowing she would be paraded around as his prisoner should she be captured, the proud [Egyptian Queen chose to take her own life](#), reputedly by allowing a poisonous Egyptian cobra, or aspis, to bite her. Rome had emerged victorious: the age of the Pharaohs was dead.

[Cleopatra: what is the real legacy of the last pharaoh?](#)

For more than 2,000 years Cleopatra VII, final ruler of Egypt's Ptolemaic dynasty, has been portrayed as a manipulative but tragic beauty. Yet, as Joann Fletcher reveals, such simplistic portrayals obscure her true legacy as a strong, politically astute monarch...



What happened to Cleopatra's son, Caesarion?

Following the deaths of Cleopatra and Mark Antony, the victorious Octavian changed his name to Augustus Caesar and assumed sole control of Rome as its emperor, administering to Egypt's people and controlling its treasury himself. But one last threat to his rule remained: Caesar and Cleopatra's son, Caesarion.

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Advised by his confidant and philosopher Arius Didymus that “too many Caesars is not good”, the new Emperor planned his rival’s murder, luring Caesarion to Alexandria with false promises of his safety.

Read more | [Searching for the pharaohs: where are the tombs of Ancient Egypt's missing kings and queens?](#)

The exact circumstances of Caesarion’s death are unknown, but it is thought that he may have been strangled, after which Augustus took absolute control of Egypt. The three children Cleopatra bore Mark Antony had different fates to their half brother.

Following their parents’ deaths, the three were paraded through the streets of Rome in heavy gold chains, walking behind an effigy of their mother: twins Cleopatra Selene and Alexander Helios were ten, while Ptolemy Philadelphus was just four.

The three children were given into the care of their former step-mother, Octavia. The two boys disappeared without trace a few years later, but the young Cleopatra later married King Juba II of Mauretania where we know she had at least one child, named Ptolemy Philadelphus, thought to have been named after her younger, missing brother.