

Cleopatra Transcript Season 4, Episode 9

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Cleopatra, made famous by Elizabeth Taylor and the story of suicide by snake.

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Cleopatra, or to give her her full name, Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator ("Cleopatra the Father-Loving Goddess"), was born in 69Bc to the Pharaoh Ptolemy XII, in Macedonia. Her mother is unknown, but was probably the king's wife, also Cleopatra.

The first Ptolemy was a general for Alexander the Great, and went on to found the dynasty. All kings were called Ptolemy, and queens were either Cleopatra, Berenice or Arsinoe. The Ptolemians were also keen on incest, and our Cleopatra is believed to have been married to both of her younger brothers at different times (well, being a polygamist would clearly have been a step too far!)

She was highly intelligent, charming and well educated – she spoke a dozen languages and was educated in mathematics, philosophy, oratory and astronomy, and a shrewd political strategist. She learned how to speak Egyptian, and styled herself as the living embodiment of the goddess Isis.

Cleopatra soon decided she wanted to rule Macedonia on her own, rather than as co-regent with her husband/brother, as was the custom. She was 18 and 10 years older than her brother at the time of their father's death, so it's understandable that she wanted to be in charge.

Her initial attempts at seizing power failed, and Ptolemy XIII had her thrown out of the palace. She regarded this as a minor setback, and fled to Syria, where she put together a mercenary army.

At around this time – 48 BC – Julius Caesar arrived in Alexandria, hot on the heels of an errant general. Egypt at the time was a lowly ally to Rome, and Caesar decided to get involved in the siblings' squabble for power.

Cleopatra saw the advantage of aligning herself with the Emperor, and according to legend, had herself smuggled in to his rooms at the palace, either wrapped in a carpet or in a sack. They soon became lovers and had a son together.

This trick also allowed her to gain entry into the palace, as her brother had refused to engage in peace talks with her. Caesar supported Cleopatra in the civil war against Ptolemy XIII, who drowned in the Nile during a battle.

As Caesar was already married, he couldn't wed Cleopatra, who promptly found herself the bride to her surviving brother, now Ptolemy XIV, as per the custom. That didn't stop her following Caesar back to Rome, however, where her presence caused quite a scandal. She was in the city when he was assassinated in 44 BC, and was obliged to return to Egypt.

Rather than settle back to married life with her new husband, though, Cleopatra had him bumped off, and also her annoying sister Arsinoe too. By dispatching her siblings, she was able to guarantee the succession of her son with the deceased Roman Emperor, the young Caesarion.

In 43 BC, in the aftermath of the uproar of Julius Caesar's death, his adopted heir, Octavian, formed the Second Triumvirate with Caesar's friend Mark Antony and statesman and general Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, with the hope of restoring calm to the Empire.

The men set out to visit as much of Rome's lands and allies as they could, and within a year Octavian had control over most of the West of the Republic, Mark Antony the East and the unfortunate Lepidus out on the cold.

When Mark Antony met Cleopatra for the first time in 41 BC in Tarsus (now part of Turkey), he was smitten. She had made a bit of an effort – her barge was gold with silver oars, her attendants were dressed as cupids and she herself was decked out to look like Aphrodite – the goddess of love. Perhaps she was aware that Mark Antony identified with Greek god Dionysus and would spot the reference.

They lived an allegedly debauched life in Egypt, founding their own drinking club with the name of the "Inimitable Livers." They met nightly for alcohol-fuelled feasts and enjoyed playing games, including playing pranks of the citizens of Alexandria while in disguise.

Cleopatra bore Mark Antony twins, and it's believed that they married even though he has a wife at home at the time. Their happiness was short-lived, however, as he had to return to an Italy divided by political upheaval.

The Second Triumvirate had fallen apart, with Antony and Octavian each accusing the other of betrayals, unlawful detainments of kings and illicit relationships – including with Cleopatra. Octavian was also annoyed that Antony appeared to be promoting Caesarion as heir over himself, despite the fact that Julius Caesar had never officially acknowledged the boy.

In an attempt to call a truce with Octavian, Antony had agreed to marry his sister, Octavia. Antony and Cleopatra didn't see each other again for three years, but after

that they ruled Alexandria together for two years, and Antony proclaimed her older son legitimately fathered by Julius Caesar.

Octavian didn't like this, and promptly declared war on Cleopatra. Antony took her side, and she supplied him with a number of naval ships, although she was barred from participating in any skirmishes herself, despite having participated in them in the past.

Mark Antony was ultimately defeated in battle by Marcus Agrippa, losing his lover's lands. In true Roman fashion, he fell on sword, and Octavian told Cleopatra she would be paraded through the streets of Rome, a humiliation too much to bear for a proud queen.

As the story goes, she arranged for an asp to be delivered to her hidden in a basket of figs, and died from its venom. However, modern historians point to the fact that she was known to carry hair combs containing concealed vials of poison, and rather than a bite, she pricked herself with a poison-tipped pin.

Thanks for listening! Please tune in next time, and let me know what you think of today's episode too.