

Ptolemaic Religious Patronage: How Cleopatra Became "King"  
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The popular conception of a ruler depends not only on political acts but on the more general public sense of the ruler's character: how well he (or she) knows, loves, and serves the country. Central to Cleopatra's efforts to secure her hold on Egypt were her patronage of and involvement in the religious liturgies and symbols of the kingdom. In Egypt, the ancient and entrenched religion of the native population defined the pharaoh as a vital religious figure, not just seeking the sanction of deity, but being associated with it. One would expect the Ptolemies, descendants of a foreign invader, to acknowledge and foster the power of this ancient association, to officiate in the religious ritual that would guarantee their place as rulers of Egypt and the place of Egypt in the ordered universe, and indeed they did.

Undoubtedly taking their cue from the conduct of Alexander the Great, Cleopatra's Ptolemaic predecessors had, for generations, patronized and participated in the cults of Egypt, insinuating themselves aggressively and successfully into the religious and political functions of the pharaoh, functions that were intimately linked throughout Egyptian history. Cleopatra VII was clearly conscious of native religious tradition and its significance to the native population of Egypt. Like her Ptolemaic ancestors, she seems to have taken the earliest possible opportunity to perform an act of devotion to Egyptian deity. The first recorded act of Cleopatra's reign is her personal participation in the installation of a new Buchis bull, the sacred animal of Armant in Upper Egypt. The Buchis bull was one of many animals worshipped by the Egyptians as incarnate gods during their lifetimes and treated to lavish ritual at death. Cleopatra's involvement with this particular bull is memorialized on one of many stelae uncovered from the Bucheum.

Since the publication of the stela interpretations of Cleopatra's personal involvement in the ceremony have taken directions oddly dependent upon the assumption or denial of Ptolemaic precedents. A. H. M. Jones concludes that the queen's presence at the installation, because it was not unique, is "no evidence that Cleopatra took any particular interest in Egyptian cults." W. W. Tarn insists that her action is unprecedented — the stela makes special mention of her, because in her case, unlike the norm, "the monarch really was there"— and, therefore, proof of her interest in the native religion.

The possibility of earlier Ptolemaic interest in the cult of Buchis need not weaken the claim that Cleopatra herself took an active interest in Egyptian religion; her act need not be unique for it to have been significant, the apparent assumption underlying the conflicting views taken above. We do least violence to the language of the stelae, from which we may draw our evidence, if we assume that the kings had, as the records unanimously assert, been present at earlier installations and that particular mention is made of Cleopatra for a reason other than that presented by Tarn. Two points will be made. First of all, Cleopatra was a queen assuming the ritual role traditionally assigned to a king. Secondly, her participation seems to have taken a form *not* previously seen. Her gesture is notable because it fits within a tradition and yet diverges from it sufficiently to have earned her action a detailed description in the written record. She meant to make an impression, and she clearly did. What that impression was and why she felt compelled to make it will be the focus of this paper.