

Clodia and Cleopatra

Clodia Metelli did not suffer a “social disappearance” (Austin 1960³: viii) after the delivery of Cicero’s speech *pro Caelio*. In 45 BCE the orator was searching for property to be used as a site for a projected memorial to his daughter and a fitting retreat for himself. Writing to Atticus, his agent, he considers among other properties *horti*, gardens with attached residence, belonging to a woman now identified as our Clodia (Shackleton Bailey 1965–70: V.404–13). The figure of “Publius Clodius” in the *pro Caelio* specifies that they were situated on the Tiber where the young men came to swim (36). Scholars think they were located on the right bank directly across from the Campus Martius (Richardson 1992: 197). In his oration Cicero acknowledges Caelius’ presence there (27) and twice more connects the setting with Clodia’s dissolute way of life (38, 49). Evidently the grounds, although private property, were a locally known attraction.

Some interesting conclusions may be drawn from what is *not* said in the correspondence. At no time does Cicero ever express reservations about doing business with Clodia or concern himself with her potential hostility toward him. Some sort of reconciliation must have occurred in the interim (Skinner 1983: 283). He does not need to ask questions about the size of her gardens or their facilities—he seems to know them well (*Att.* 13.29.2). Lastly, he does not worry about whether she can secure her tutor’s permission to sell, technically necessary in the case of real estate. Clodia is regarded as completely independent, able to negotiate on her own behalf and make financial decisions without involving others.

While he never made her an offer, that is not the end of Cicero’s curiosity about Clodia. In April 44, one month after the Ides of March, he writes Atticus in Rome: “The Queen’s flight does not upset me. I would like you to tell me what Clodia has done” (*Att.* 14.8.1). “The Queen” is Cleopatra VII, who had been staying in Rome and left hurriedly after Caesar’s assassination. Scholars are baffled because there seems to be no connection between her departure and whatever action Clodia has taken. Shackleton Bailey suggests *ad loc.* “About her *horti*?” Yet Cicero has expressed no interest in them for almost a year.

In the autumn of 46 BCE Cleopatra VII had arrived in Rome at Caesar’s invitation, taking up residence in a house he owned (Suet. *Div. Iul.* 52.1, Dio 43.27.3). It was a formal state visit, for her purpose was to obtain the status of friend and ally of the Roman people. While all earlier historians have assumed that she then remained in Rome until Caesar’s death, Gruen (2003) argues convincingly that she went back to Egypt after receiving confirmation of her reign, undertaking a second visit early in 44. At that time the Senate was preparing to discuss the status of Cyprus, annexed as a province in 58 but restored to Egyptian rule by Caesar a decade later.

Cleopatra would have been anxious to retain control of the island and might have come in order to present a claim before the Senate. If she was planning to contest its possible re-annexation, it would have been awkward to take advantage of Caesar’s generosity again, as he had ceded the territory in the first place. Basing my argument on another passage in the correspondence where Cicero recalls a face-to-face meeting with the queen (*Att.* 15.15.2), I suggest that she stayed at Clodia’s garden estate. “What has Clodia done?” immediately following mention of Cleopatra’s departure would indicate that her hasty leavetaking had disrupted her hostess’ plans.

Several considerations make this notion plausible. Clodia was a widow of a certain age, an *univira*, and thus a proper companion for the young queen. She had a broad network of friends and would be in a position to assist Cleopatra with further introductions among the nobility.

(Perhaps that explains Cicero's visit.) Her membership in the *gens Claudia* endowed her with aristocratic dignity that put her almost on a par with royalty. If my suggestion is accepted, we find Clodia leaving the contemporary historical record as she entered it, a society leader by no means removed from the center of power.

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