

## The Death of Cleopatra: There Was No Asp

One of the most famous events of ancient history, firmly enshrined in popular culture, is the death of Cleopatra VII by the bite of an asp. Yet it is extremely doubtful that this happened. The sources are consistent in reporting that this was a variant tale, and that poison was the most likely method. Although authors such as Baldwin, Levi, and Tronson have briefly discussed the matter, the full ramifications of this have not been explored.

The primary account of the death of Cleopatra is that of her personal physician Olympos, as used by Plutarch (Antonius 85), which makes no mention of an asp. Plutarch only introduces the asp after diverging from Olympos' account, and as a variant tale full of reservations, suggesting that it was more probable that the queen took poison in a hollow implement called a knestis. The use of this rare word suggests that this was the term used in original accounts of the queen's death.. Dio (51.14) is equally dubious about the asp story. The earliest historical account, that of Strabo (17.1.10), who was in Alexandria at or shortly after the queen's death, emphasized that the asp was only one version, but also shows that the asp tale was known very shortly after Cleopatra's death. All other historical sources are similar. The one place there is certainty about the asp is in the Augustan poetic sources, which in the 20s BC seem to have consistently put forth the idea that the queen died from an asp bite, something that eventually entered history, but as an alternate version.

For the queen to have died by an asp is implausible. The asp is an Egyptian cobra, over two meters in length, whose bite is rarely fatal. Unlike the visual image popularized in art and the movies (which tend to confuse the Egyptian asp with the Mediterranean pit viper), using the snake as a weapon of suicide would be almost impossible logistically. The snake would not perform on demand, and could only eject its venom through the encouragement of an expert snake handler. Insuring that this venom reached a vital spot in the victim would be equally unlikely. Cleopatra, an expert on poisons, would have known all this and hardly would have chosen such an uncertain form of death. It is also strange that no one ever found the asp, astonishing given its size.

Yet Cleopatra might have wanted to give the impression of such a suicide, given the prevalence of snakes in Egyptian lore.. Death-by-asp had a certain vogue in Egypt of the first century BC, or at least the Romans believed, as Cicero referred to an earlier case (pro Rabirio Postumo 23). Those not familiar with the implausibility of the situation might have seen it as an Egyptian form of death. Just before Cleopatra died she wrote Octavian a letter, whose contents are unknown but which may have suggested that she was going to commit suicide using an asp. Puncture marks found on her body--certainly due to the injection of the poison--were interpreted as asp bites. Octavian helped popularize the tale by presenting the effigy of the queen in the triumph of 29 BC with an asp clinging to her: he was angry that the queen had killed herself, and

may have wanted her death to be properly dramatic. This helped validate the asp tale, and it was soon picked up by Horace, Vergil, and others.

It is thus clear that a suicide by asp, however unlikely and uncertain of success, was the version promulgated by Octavian and his poets, a suitably dramatic end to a tenacious foe, and demonstrates the power of articulate literature over historical reality.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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