

Kleopatra VII and the Legacy of Ptolemaic Queenship

Modern audiences usually consider Kleopatra VII to be the most famous woman from the ancient world. Her relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony and the stories of her extravagance and violence have made her an intriguing character for movies, plays, books, and everything in between. However, in both modern reception and classical scholarship, Kleopatra is often viewed through the context of the men in her life or in her interactions with Rome. While there is much to be said about these, Kleopatra's own Hellenistic heritage gets less attention, despite her family's rich history. Indeed, this heritage is what her lady-in-waiting highlights at her death: "the descendant of so many kings" (Plut. *Vit. Ant.*, 85.3) Echoes of the Ptolemaic queens of the past are seen in many aspects of Kleopatra's whirlwind life, from her cult image to her military involvement and her political activities. It is impossible to separate Kleopatra's actions from her family's history—she certainly would have been well-informed on her ancestors' past—and she often followed in their footsteps, especially those of her more immediate namesakes (Whitehorne 1994). The Ptolemaic queens were, in their own right, active members of the political and religious institutions, setting a rich precedent for Kleopatra to incorporate into her own rule.

In some respects, Kleopatra was indeed an extraordinary queen—she engaged far more with the Egyptian past than many of her ancestors, not only participating in Egyptian religious ceremonies with the Apsis Bull, but also reportedly learning the Egyptian language, something no other Ptolemy did (Ashton 2008, Roller 2010). She was well-educated and knew multiple languages and may have even published scholarly works (Roller 2010). She was charming, intelligent, and ambitious, displaying characteristics and traits that were acceptable to a

Hellenistic audience, and completely unacceptable to the Romans. She was controversial, then and now, with much of the focus not on her accomplishments and intelligence, but rather the relationships she had with Caesar and Antony.

These things, to be sure, set her apart from some of her female ancestors. Many parts of her reign, however, are typical of what ancient sources tell us of Ptolemaic queens. Indeed, much of her supposed violence, military prowess, and scandalous claims of divinity are things that the Roman invective saw as evidence of her distastefulness and wickedness. However, these things, while decidedly un-Roman, were decidedly Ptolemaic and appear often throughout the historical, literary, and archaeological evidence of Ptolemaic queenship. Looking to Kleopatra's own familial history is perhaps more informative of the supposed egregiousness of her actions, and a closer examination reveals that Kleopatra was not so different from her own female ancestors.

Bibliography

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