

Kings, Gods, Lovers, and Loyalty: The Public Image of Antony and Cleopatra

Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII have come down to the modern age as the most infamous couple of Roman history. The Augustan tradition would have us believe that Cleopatra, in her desire to add the Roman Republic to her empire, seduced Antony with promises of power at her side and thereby turned him traitor to Rome. The idea that Antony and Cleopatra joined forces to either rule Ptolemaic Egypt together or even turn Rome into a Hellenistic monarchy under their rule has persisted in historical accounts. One scholar has written that Antony viewed himself “as consort of the New Isis, as successor to the pharaohs,” (Frederick Brenk, 1992) with the implication that Antony was inserting himself into the Ptolemaic dynasty. Another has stated that Cleopatra, having won Antony to her side, “saw herself within measurable distance of becoming Empress of the world.” (E. R. Bevan, 1968). Others have been more hesitant to subscribe to this theory, but have not argued against it either. Ronald Syme, for example, gave his opinion that Egypt could never have been a threat to Rome, but that Antony’s “dual role as Roman proconsul and Hellenistic dynast was ambiguous, disquieting and vulnerable. Credence might be given to the most alarming accounts of his ulterior ambitions,” (Ronald Syme, 2002). More recently, Diana Kleiner has stated that Antony “had embraced a form of autocratic rule,” (Dianna E. E. Kleiner, 2005).

Despite all of this, little has been done to seriously examine the motives of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Adrian Goldsworthy has challenged some of these long-held assumptions (Adrian Goldsworthy, 2010), but he gives little evidence for his challenges. Sheila Ager has successfully tackled the issue of the couple’s marriage (Sheila Ager, 2013), but there is still much left to be done in other areas. Given the prevalence of the opinion of Antony’s and Cleopatra’s desires to

rule together, which is found not only in academic works, but also common in public belief, it is high time to examine the evidence thoroughly to sort out their motives and desires.

A close examination of the public image campaign of Antony and Cleopatra shows a lack of interest, from both individuals, in trying to insert Antony into the Ptolemaic dynasty or in trying to take over Rome. On the contrary, the evidence demonstrates Antony's continued loyalty to Rome and Cleopatra's political independence from him beyond his status as Roman proconsul in the East. The problem with coming to this conclusion is twofold: first, the two did closely associate themselves in their propaganda—a fact that must be dealt with—and second, because of the thick layer of Augustan bias that pervades much of the evidence.

The evidence for Antony's and Cleopatra's public image comes in two forms: material remains and textual sources. The material remains do not suffer the issue of Augustan bias, and so give us a clearer window into Antony's and Cleopatra's intentions. The coins they minted are especially relevant, as they demonstrate the public image the two worked to create. These show not co-rulers, nor even husband and wife, but political allies. Surviving artwork intimates that Cleopatra viewed her son Caesarion as the only co-ruler necessary for the legitimacy of her rule over Ptolemaic Egypt. These, however, are insufficient to piece together the whole story, so we must turn to textual sources as well. These, including Cassius Dio, Plutarch, and Suetonius, when read critically, give support to Antony's loyalty to Rome, as his actions, even if negatively represented in Rome, certainly had precedents in other Roman leaders, and were even mimicked by Octavian himself.

All the evidence taken together forces us to challenge the assumptions that have been handed down for the past two millennia and admit that Mark Antony acted with the interests of

Rome constantly on his mind, even if he was not always aware of the political climate back in Rome, which ultimately gave Octavian the opportunity to brand him as a traitor.

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Classical Philology 108, no. 2 (2013): 139-155.

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