Cleopatra VII
MANFRED CLAuss

Cleopatra VII was born at the end of 69 BCE, as daughter to King Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos Auletes. We know nothing about her youth, not even the customary anecdotes and prodigies – which is unusual for a person of this rank: the Roman damnatio memoriae was effective in her case. The identity of her mother is not known.

An upheaval in Alexandria forced Ptolemy XII to flee to Rome, in the hope of being reinstalled by Roman troops. After paying enormous bribes to Caesar and Pompey (see Julius Caesar, Pompey), he received recognition as “friend and socius of the Roman people” in 59. In the meantime, his eldest daughter Berenike was enthroned in Alexandria. Only in 55 did the Syrian governor Gabinius occupy Alexandria and reinstall Ptolemy XII; Berenike was executed.

When Ptolemy XII died in February/March 51, four of his children were alive: Cleopatra VII, aged 18; Arsinoe IV, aged about 15; Ptolemy XIII, aged 10; and Ptolemy XIV, aged 8. The king’s will divided the power between his eldest daughter and his eldest son – Cleopatra VII und Ptolemy XIII. The two were married, as was usual in their dynasty. Cleopatra seems to have succeeded in keeping her brother away from the government; this situation ended in 49, when, due to the efforts of Ptolemy XII’s advisors, there was a short span of co-regency of the two children. Shortly afterwards, in late summer 49, Cleopatra was excluded from the government.

In these times Cleopatra’s fate, as well as that of the whole of Egypt, depended on Rome. At Pharsalos Caesar defeated Pompey, who fled to Egypt and was immediately killed there (see Pharsalos, Battle of). Three days later, on October 1, 48, Caesar arrived in Alexandria, where he would stay for half a year. From Roman civil war he slipped into Egyptian civil war (see Alexandrian War (Bellum Alexandrinum)). Caesar was trapped in Alexandria, and it was not until March 47, with his army outside the city, that he was able to overcome Ptolemy XIII. Cleopatra, who had become Caesar’s mistress during these months, was now married to her youngest brother Ptolemy XIV and once again enthroned.

At the beginning of April Caesar left Egypt, and in September Cleopatra gave birth to a son, Ptolemy XV Caesar. A little later Caesar invited her to Rome, officially to sign a treaty between Rome and Egypt. Only a few days after Caesar’s assassination in 44, Cleopatra left Rome and returned to the Nile. In the same year Ptolemy XIV died. According to Egyptian tradition, Cleopatra secured the regency of a king at her side by installing on the throne Ptolemy Caesar, the son she had with Caesar; and she guided him throughout this regency.

In Egypt, Cleopatra watched the civil war that followed Caesar’s assassination and tried to support his heirs, Mark Antony and Octavian (the future Emperor Augustus; see Marcus Antonius, Augustus). Her help gained her recognition for the reign of Ptolemy XV and for herself. When Octavian and Antony divided the Mediterranean world, Antony chose the Greek east and

Figure 1 Limestone relief of Cleopatra VII, 51–30 BCE, from the temple of Hathor. Dendera, Egypt. © The Art Archive.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah09077
he ordered Cleopatra to go to the town of TARSOS, in CILICIA. During that period she was able to seduce Antony; there were good political reasons for cooperation too. For Cleopatra it was important that the most powerful man became her lover. She had Antony kill her sister Arsinoe. During the winter 41/40 Antony stayed in Egypt. He needed Cleopatra's support for his war against the PARTHIANS, who, coming through Syria and Cilicia, had advanced further into western Asia Minor than ever before. Antony had already left Cleopatra in 40, when she gave birth to twins—a boy and a girl. Seen as "Sun" and "Moon," these were named Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene.

In the meantime Octavian and Antony clarified their positions in the Treaty of BRUNDISIUM, in autumn 40. The renewed alliance was confirmed by Antony’s marriage to Octavian’s sister. But, as Antony admitted that he had been cheated by Octavian and that everything pointed towards a military confrontation, from 37 on he began to rely increasingly on Egypt’s resources. Cleopatra’s domain was therefore enlarged, and she gained control over regions of importance for shipbuilding. This rise in power caused the queen to make the year 37 the starting point of a new era. Thus her coins showed the legend: the 16th year, which is also year 1.

Following a military success in ARMENIA, a victory celebration for Antony was held as a Dionysiac procession in Alexandria, 34. During the festivities Cleopatra received the title “queen of kings,” and Ptolemy XV, whose ancestry from Caesar was now publicly proclaimed, received the title “king of kings.” The 6-year-old Alexander Helios was proclaimed “great king” of Armenia, Media, and the region east of the Euphrates, while Cleopatra Selene, his twin sister, became queen of CYRENE. The 2-year-old PTOLEMY PHILADELPHOS, also a son of Antony, became king of Syria and Asia Minor. This whole ceremony, with its bestowal of territories, came to be known as “the Donations of Alexandria.”

With regard to the war against Octavian, Antony and Cleopatra had ordered all friendly kings to support their troops and to ferry them across the Aegean Sea to the western coast of the Peloponnese. On 2 September 31, at Actium, the Egyptian fleet succeeded in escaping Octavian’s and Agrippa’s stranglehold, but the naval battle that followed was a disastrous defeat (see ACTIUM, BATTLE OF). It heralded Antony and Cleopatra’s nemesis. The bulk of the fleet was lost and the army increasingly defected to the victor.

After her return to Alexandria, Cleopatra began confiscating fortunes from temples, in order to gain further funds for a resistance against Octavian. She built a fleet on the ARABIAN GULF that was to bring her security, but the ships were destroyed by Octavian. On August 1, 30 Octavian conquered Alexandria; Antony died on the same day. Cleopatra herself committed suicide, supposedly through an injection of snake venom. Ptolemy XV, the ruling king of Egypt, was executed by Octavian. The Romans judged their victory to be very important. This is shown by the fact that the month Sextilis, in which Octavian (the later Augustus) defeated Cleopatra, was renamed August.

SEE ALSO: Actium, battle of; Alexandria (Egypt); Antonius, Marcus (Mark Antony); Asia Minor, Hellenistic; Augustus; Julius Caesar; Parthians, rulers; Pompey.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS