

Women's History

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Female Pharaohs

In the millennium before the birth of Jesus, it was women who ran the most important temple in the nation, possibly in the world, the Karnak temple in Thebes. Cleopatra, as a strong and intelligent woman running a major country, was nothing new. She was simply the latest in a line of important Ptolemaic queens, i.e., Hatshepsut and Nefertiti.* Hatshepsut was quite dismissed in biased history books authored by 19th Century male scholars. Though written to be a pacifist who never did anything for the country, she expanded the empire, restored and built temples, led the Egyptian army into the Sudan, a land coveted for its gold, and oversaw at least three other military campaigns. Nefertiti ruled with her husband Amenhotep IV who decreed that Egyptians worship a single deity, the sun disk. Nefertiti was the high priestess of this new religion. The sun cult died with Amenhotep and Nefertiti dropped from historical sight.

Egypt was rich in gold, grain, and ships but had become a third-rate power by the time Cleopatra came to power in 55 BCE at age 18. The politically astute Cleopatra knew that, to make her mark in a Roman world, she needed to befriend rather than alienate Roman leaders. Under her rule, Egypt was the only Mediterranean nation independent of Romans. In her relations with Caesar, politics and love seem to have been interfused. Caesar almost always involved himself with women who could advance him politically. At 52, he realized Cleopatra, then 21, as his lover and confidant, would make him and Rome a valuable ally. To judge by extant portraits, Cleopatra was not really beautiful, yet she must have enthralled Caesar. Probably what enthralled him, was the politics of charm, which became the charm of politics.

Perhaps what drew Mark Antony to Cleopatra was the fact that she had many of the personal leadership qualities he sorely lacked. During the time they were allied, she administered Egypt alone, and evidence suggests she was a caring, capable, and efficient ruler who managed the economy well and treated her people justly. During her reign, in contrast to those of her predecessors, there were no rebellions and tax collection proceeded normally. She improved and expanded agriculture, producing large surpluses of grain, eliminating food shortages, and lowering food prices. She was a highly educated woman who became fluent in Demotic Egyptian, the local language of the people. Sources claim she spoke eight languages. After Antony died Octavian sent soldiers to take her into custody. His plans included marching this "treacherous creature" in chains through the streets of Rome showing what would happen to women who did not know their place in the Roman world. She decided to rob him of that satisfaction and took her own life.

In her thirty-nine years, twenty-one as Egypt's queen, Cleopatra demonstrated no less intelligence, political skills, sheer courage and audacity than the powerful male leaders with whom she had dealt. She used her wiles not so much for herself but to protect her beloved Egypt. In a propaganda speech against her, Octavian spoke of how the Romans viewed any woman who had the gall to think she could assume the "manly" role of ruling a country. In the end, they and their totally male-dominated system devoured her. Folklore emphasized how she lived and died for love, but Cleopatra was one of the major politicians in world history. She stood for and dreamed of a world in which men and women might meet on an even playing field.

References

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