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Cleopatra and Egypt

Sally-Ann Ashton



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For my parents, Jacqui and Robin Ashton

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

My aim for this project was to try to find the “real” Cleopatra. What I have subsequently realized and accepted is that by “real” I meant “my” Cleopatra. My presentation of the queen will inevitably reveal my own strengths and weaknesses as a writer and a scholar. Nevertheless, I hope that this book will present a different way of investigating a figure with whom many readers will feel a sense of familiarity. I consider my strengths to be as a Classical art historian/archaeologist and Egyptologist and as such I have relied heavily on the interpretation of these sources in order to attempt to understand how Cleopatra was presented. When I started writing I was determined not to rely upon the Roman written records as my main source of evidence, as others had done in the past, in order to provide a tidy historical narrative of Cleopatra’s life. I soon realized that making reference to these sources was essential in order to fill in many gaps that the archaeology and scant documentary evidence from Egypt during her reign provided. I have tried to be mindful of the fact that these sources are biased and that their accuracy is, in many cases, questionable. I have also attempted to use the Egyptian sources as a framework on which to build and embellish rather than attempting to make the archaeological evidence match the Roman texts.

The order of the book has changed a number of times on account of the complexity of the archaeological sources and the different personas that Cleopatra adopted in Egypt, which changed according to her consort, the different aspects of her role as an Egyptian ruler, and the target audiences in the wider ancient

world. I have worked on Cleopatra for almost ten years and find that the more I delve into her history, the more complex a character I find. My Cleopatra is by no means a straightforward or definable figure, but remains, I hope, a person of inspirational character.

Sally-Ann Ashton
Cambridge, 2007

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Finally, I would like to thank Al Bertrand of Blackwell for his patience and encouragement throughout this project.

CLEOPATRA – BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL?

1.1 A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY VIEW?

Anyone working on Cleopatra will frequently be asked two questions on the subject, namely “was Cleopatra beautiful?” and “was Cleopatra Black?”, the latter most commonly expressed in the Eurocentric form of “Cleopatra wasn’t really Black was she?” Although these questions are bound by modern expectations they are relevant to Cleopatra as a historical figure and deserve further consideration in the context of this book.

The simple answer to both questions with regard to Cleopatra is that we do not know whether she was beautiful and Black, unattractive and White or a combination of any of these modern concepts. We do not have the body to indicate her race through testing DNA; however, this missing link should not prevent the queen being seen as an African icon, and in fact the surviving archaeological evidence supports the idea that Cleopatra presented herself as an Egyptian. Cleopatra was of course descended from Macedonian Greeks, but by the time she first came to power in 51 BCE her family had lived in Egypt for 272 years. In addition to this fact we do not know the identity of Cleopatra’s grandmother, who may have been a concubine rather than an official wife, and more recently the identity of Cleopatra’s mother has been questioned (Huß 1990).

The aim of the present book is to place Cleopatra within an Egyptian context and to consider her as a ruler of Egypt, not as a Greek monarch. Re-adjusting to this way of thinking, beyond the Roman written sources on which people usually rely, poses

similar issues to the question of Cleopatra as an African queen. The aim of this chapter is to challenge conventional European perspectives of Cleopatra.

Cleopatra's identity as an Egyptian rather than a Greek was clearly established during her lifetime. Immediately after her death Strabo describes the queen as "the Egyptian woman," as implied by the feminine form of the adjective Egyptian (*Geography* 13.1.30). Here Strabo describes how Antony raided temples for statues of a Greek hero and gods to gratify "the Egyptian." The second-century Roman Lucius Annaeus Florus described her as "That Egyptian woman" (*Wars* 2.21.1–3; Jones 2006: 106).

1.2 AFRICAN ICON

Cleopatra's ethnicity is a contentious subject and one that is often dismissed in academic circles. By chance I witnessed an example of such a discussion by visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in the summer of 2006. One of the museum's most imposing displays is of the small temple from Dendur. This temple is inscribed with texts and images that relate to the Roman emperor Augustus. I had studied the temple many times during previous visits to the museum, but was paying particular attention to the carved inscriptions in light of the preparation for this book. Whilst I was looking at the outside of the temple a father and his children stopped close to where I was standing. The man, who from his accent was American and from the conversation that ensued I assume was of Greek descent, said to his sons that in school they would be told that the Egyptians were the forefathers of African-Americans and that this was wrong. He asked his children if they thought the figures looked like African-Americans. The children shook their heads in agreement with their father, who said that they should remember that Cleopatra was queen of Egypt and that she was a Greek, as indeed were his sons' ancestors. The man was misinformed on two accounts. Firstly, the temple dates to the early Roman

period, so why should the figures look African? Secondly, Cleopatra was not exclusively Greek.

I am not of African descent. Consequently, I cannot really fully understand the importance of claiming Cleopatra as an African queen. I have been fortunate to work with substantial numbers of members of British African-Caribbean communities, who have shared their views on Cleopatra's connection with Africa and with African cultural heritage. There is no denying that Cleopatra was queen of an African nation. Egypt is in Africa and many Africans from elsewhere on the continent believe Egypt to be part of their cultural heritage (O'Connor and Reid 2003: 1–23).

Many Egyptians today do not consider themselves part of Africa; they do, however, think of Cleopatra as an Egyptian monarch and she is shown as an Egyptian on a variety of products from the national brand of cigarettes and wine, to local tram and train stations (Walker and Ashton 2006: 23–7).

Irrespective of the tone of her skin color, the evidence for Cleopatra in Egypt strongly suggests that Cleopatra wanted to be seen as an Egyptian in her home country and that her Greek heritage was neglected in favor of native (Egyptian) tradition. Scholars who have questioned Cleopatra's cultural affiliation with Greece and supported her Egyptian (and so African) heritage have met with at best contempt and at worse the accusation that their arguments are unscholarly because they are influenced by their own cultural identity. This is because few white scholars have bothered to consider the importance of Cleopatra as a Black role model and icon. One Black American classical scholar wrote the following: "She [Cleopatra] represents the contemporary Black woman's double history of oppression and survival" (Haley 1993: 29). Haley chronicles how, as a Black American, she questioned the African-American cultural oral tradition of considering Cleopatra to have been a Black woman (1993: 28–9 and n.4). The motives of Black academics who draw upon their own cultural identity are frequently questioned by those who have no such claim. It seems that there is a deep-rooted suspicion of those who are deemed to have minority agendas, with some critics

even attempting to find an explanation for what is perceived to be an individual's radical point of view (Bernal 2001: 206–8).

The very fact that it is necessary to defend even the possibility of Cleopatra's association with Africa demonstrates the extent to which both Classics and Egyptology have become Eurocentric in their core perceptions. I would, however, ask if we are, as Europeans, so keen to embrace the rulers of Dynasty 26, when Greeks settled at Naukratis, as part of Classical history? – Of course we are not; this would be preposterous. There is generally no need to defend Cleopatra's European heritage, even though the queen showed little interest in presenting herself as such (Ashton 2003d: 25–30).

Classical scholars have argued that Cleopatra's Greekness can be defined on the basis of her name; that she was of Macedonian ancestry; that her family had imposed itself on Egypt; and that her reported fluency in the Egyptian language did not make her Egyptian (Lefkowitz 1996: 4). Part of the problem seems to lie in the fact that few Classical scholars are able to understand or interpret Cleopatra's Egyptian persona. They cannot read the texts; all of the images appear to the standard Eurocentric training as the same and even when differences are explained to them, the Egyptian evidence is dismissed as Cleopatra paying lip service to the country that she ruled. This problem is not limited to Cleopatra. In fact for years classical scholars have ignored Egyptian aspects of Ptolemaic Egypt, presenting a wholly biased and false interpretation of this period in general. Many realize that they are at a disadvantage when working on a subject that is effectively split between two very different cultures and that there is a Hellenistic/Greek bias (for example Rowlandson 2003; Thompson 1988). Such scholars have contributed important scholarship to the subject and I am not for one moment suggesting that the Hellenic tradition should be forgotten, but rather that it is necessary to re-address the balance of scholarship. I do not blame my colleagues for this problem and feel wholly justified in raising the issue because of my own training, initially as a Classicist. This difficulty is wholly due to the way in which the subject is taught at university level. It is easy to fool oneself

that one's own way of thinking is correct. After three years of studying Egyptian material culture and languages, I was forced to re-write the first two chapters of my doctoral thesis. Initially I had only taken account of how the Greeks viewed material culture and interpreted the sculpture that I was studying through a Greek perspective. Added to the usual bias is the fact that everyone views culture through what they have been taught and their own experiences, no matter how hard they try to do otherwise.

And so, the Eurocentric view of Cleopatra also extends to the study of her by classical scholars, many of whom have denied her Egyptian character. Until recently Cleopatra's Greek image was seen by many to be dominant (Kleiner 2005: 138–9). It seems incongruous then that Royster (2003), who criticizes the Eurocentric view of Cleopatra, missed the point of the 2002 Chicago version of the British Museum's special exhibition *Cleopatra of Egypt: from history to myth*. A substantial part of this exhibition was dedicated to Cleopatra's Egyptian persona and offered a number of newly identified images showing the queen as an Egyptian rather than the hitherto only classical representations (Ashton 2001b). The identifications had been made by following stylistic and iconographic changes rather than by comparing the classical "portraits" that appear on the coinage. Royster complains that Cleopatra as an African-American icon was largely absent from the exhibition (207–10), and is right to do so. However, her grievance, that Egyptian-style representations are deemed to be stylistic and Greek naturalistic (203), reveals a lack of understanding of ancient artistic conventions. The Cleopatra of Shakespeare or modern film is not the real Cleopatra.

Quite apart from the proposal that Cleopatra was even partly of African descent and so can, in turn, be considered as part of Black culture and history, there is another layer that is often ignored by the Afrocentrics and which would, in my opinion, strengthen their case, particularly if we consider Egypt to be part of a wider African civilization. Cleopatra was shown as an Egyptian both in Egypt and, on at least one occasion, in Rome. As noted, Roman historians frequently refer to Cleopatra as an

Egyptian and she was by no means welcomed into the European tradition that was Rome; in fact the contrary is true.

In some respects African-centered scholars do themselves no favors by using weak arguments to support what is actually a strong case for Cleopatra's presentation as an Egyptian. One example of this is that Shakespeare described Cleopatra as "tawny" and so Black (Clarke 1984: 126–7). In fact it doesn't really matter how Shakespeare saw Cleopatra, because he was not her contemporary. A glance at the queen's representations and images, however, demonstrates that Greece did not play any real part in her presentation at home in Egypt.

Roman writers may not refer to the color of Cleopatra's skin — would they have even noticed if she was a quarter African? Possibly not. This fact does not, however, belittle her appeal to a modern Black audience, and nor should it. So strong is the idea that Cleopatra was white and wholly European in her outlook that another weak argument is frequently used to counter the Afrocentrics: that no authors mention Cleopatra was Black and so therefore she must have been white. For example, Lefkowitz (1996: 22 n.2) wrote: "Who was the mistress [of Ptolemy IX]? Since none of the sources tells us otherwise, the natural assumption was that she was Greek, like the Ptolemies. That of course does not prove she was not African, but there is no evidence at all that she was African."

That a Black Cleopatra is a valid concept has been attacked on account of its acceptance by the African-American oral tradition, once again raising the question of whether the Roman written tradition can be seen to be any more reliable or valid (Palter 1996: 352). Although many scholars cite the lack of written evidence that Cleopatra was Black as proof of her pure European descent, there are other aspects of her life and character that are equally nebulous but which are generally accepted. Cleopatra was of course part Greek but it must also be noted that the suggestion she was part African is not based on wishful fantasy alone but on the fact that we do not know the identity of the mother of Ptolemy XII and so Cleopatra's paternal grandmother.

Few historical figures have provoked such a struggle by others to claim them as an ancestor. Perhaps the most alluring point of Cleopatra is that she brings European and African cultures together. As a woman of Greek origin, possibly part Egyptian, who chose the latter culture with which to associate herself, we have a more remarkable role model for modern society.

1.3 EGYPT AND AFRICA

The question of Cleopatra's African identity is bound tightly within the question of Egypt as part of Africa. This exemplifies the contrast between Black history/identity and Classical/European identity and reflects the European appropriation of African culture. The question of Cleopatra's color and ethnic identity features in a number of publications on Egypt's influence on Greece and Egypt as part of African cultural heritage. Scholars tend to argue strongly for or against the idea that Egypt is African (for example Lefkowitz and Maclean Rogers eds. 1996). However, as many strive to deny this association in the case of Cleopatra, others use her mixed origins as proof that the contamination of the Macedonian bloodline led to the Dynasty's downfall (Bianchi 2003: 13).

In North America some people with a trace of African heritage consider themselves to be Black and there is the wider use of the term Black in contemporary Britain to include [South sic.] Asian communities (Bernal 2001: 209). A recent exhibition on Black Victorians (Marsh 2006) included images of people of Islamic origin. Bernal has pointed out that to modern Europeans Black means a "Stereotype of west Africans" when Africa, including North Africa, is very diverse. I labor this point in order to illustrate how we are dealing with semantics. It is however unfair of scholars to say that being African versus Classical (European) was not an issue in ancient times. When representing Amasis, the Egyptian attendant of Memnon, the fifth-century-BCE Athenian potter Exekias showed the figure as a Black African, with Afro hair and exaggerated "African" features. It has been suggested

that this was also a reference to a rival potter who was working in Athens at this time. Thus to the Greeks an Egyptian could be an African. In Greek literature Egyptians were often referred to as Ethiopians.

It is also important to accept that ethnicity is not only about the degree of color or culture; it is also about choice. Thus children who are of mixed race often decide to follow a dominant culture; generally Black–White becomes Black, partly because in terms of a physical appearance (color of skin and hair type) people with Black/White parents are usually closer to their Black parent in appearance, and so are treated as such by society at large. Black culture also has a great appeal; many people in Britain today follow or imitate Black culture (music, film) but are not Black. Cleopatra had two very different images. The first and dominant was her Egyptian image and as ruler of Egypt Cleopatra embraced her native culture (her family, it must be remembered, had lived in Egypt for almost 300 years at the time of her accession to the throne). Cleopatra was only shown as a European when her audience necessitated it and yet Europe still appropriates her as one of its own, ignoring the African connection.

1.4 CLEOPATRA AS A ROLE MODEL

There are few women who can match Cleopatra's prominence, or who have wielded her power. As a consequence, many modern writers look to Cleopatra as a feminist icon, while others do their best to undermine this role.

Cleopatra as a role model for women is as problematic as Cleopatra as a Black icon. There is a simple explanation for this problem and, arguably, one that might offer insight into the need to comment on her physical appearance. The majority of Cleopatra's biographers and certainly the majority of ancient historians who include her in their work were men of European origin. Chapter 2 will evaluate this problem by comparing ancient North African writers with their European counterparts.

Modern historians who work on African history and identity or who are of African origin are more sympathetic to the idea of Cleopatra as a Black icon, perhaps because they are familiar with the African-American oral tradition. It is perhaps of no surprise that female historians deal more sympathetically with the queen and in particular those who specialize in the “myth” of Cleopatra, perhaps quite simply because they realize just how distorted her character has become over time (especially Hamer 1993 and 2003; Hughes-Hallet 1990).

Scholarship cannot question Cleopatra’s gender in the same way that it has questioned her cultural identity but some scholars have queried Cleopatra’s place as a role model for women. Cleopatra does not have to be infallible as a historical figure to fulfil this function, in the same way that her own or the modern perception of her color is not relevant to Cleopatra’s acceptance as a Black icon. If some members of two “minority” groups (and I include women here) can look to Cleopatra, an inspirational historical figure, as a role model why should this bother those who have no perceived claim upon her? I am not suggesting that Cleopatra was infallible, but it would be wrong to deny modern affinity to her, be it female, Black, or Egyptian.

1.5 ATTITUDES TO FEMALE RULERS

Some modern scholars, when considering Cleopatra VII’s track record as a ruler, cite natural disasters such as the low floods during the early part of her reign as examples of the queen’s poor management of Egypt. In a remarkable conclusion one (Hazzard 2000: 159) wrote: “The Ptolemaic queens provide no shining examples to feminists if they judge them by their own values, for the emergence of these queens hardly improved the quality of government or bettered the condition of their own sex. And this is particularly true of the last Cleopatra, now more of a legend than a historical figure. Ignoring her brother’s rights in 51 (to rule), serving her Roman patrons throughout her reign, killing 3 claimants to the throne and extracting large tribute from

her people, the last Cleopatra emerged greater than her male associates, but ruled with the cruelty equal to any king's."

Although some modern historians seem to struggle with the concept of a strong female figure-head, women had played a key role in Egypt from the time of the First Dynasty and clearly filled a specific role that was closely connected to influential goddesses. Egypt had been governed by female rulers but their status was far from the norm. In an essay on models of (female) authority in regard to the accession of Hatshepsut, Roth has considered the circumstances surrounding the promotion of women to the position of principal ruler (2005: 9–14). Many women came to power after an untimely death of their consort. Others held power, but not the title of King, as regents and King's mother (Roth 2005: 10–12). Egyptians clearly accepted and accommodated female rulers, and women were seen to be capable of protecting Egypt, and they might be buried with objects associated with military bravery (Roth 2005: 11). This is of little surprise when one considers goddesses such as Sekhmet, who had both protective and warring sides to her personality.

The Greeks had an equivalent to the lion-headed Sekhmet: Athena. In Classical Greece female warriors were limited to the realms of mythology. There was no Greek equivalent to the office held by Egyptian royal women. However, in Macedonia at the time of Alexander we see a very different type of woman emerging. As in Egypt women were used to cement political allegiances. Philip II of Macedon, Alexander's father, took a total of seven wives but divorced none. Philip's wives and his daughters were warriors who went into battle, arranged their own daughters' marriages and promoted their sons (Ashton 2003a: 14). Alexander had a particularly strong and powerful mother who, following his death, did all she could to preserve her own position, including placing her statue alongside that of her deified son in a family shrine at Olympia in Greece (Stewart 1993: 386–7). It was following this particular Macedonian model that the early Ptolemaic queens sought to increase their power. By the second century BCE they actively sought to promote their position, often at the expense of their consort.