Cleopatra Biography

Cleopatra VII Philopator (69 BC – August 12, 30 BC) was an Egyptian Queen and the last pharaoh of Ancient Egypt. Embroiled in the internal politics of the Roman Empire she was the lover of both Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony.

Cleopatra was born in around 69 BC. Her father Ptolemy XII died (in 51BC) when she was 18, leaving Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy XIII as co-regents. As was the custom of the time Cleopatra married her brother and together they ruled Egypt. However, Ptolemy soon had Cleopatra exiled, leaving him in charge.

In 48 BC, the Roman empire was embroiled in a civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey. When Pompey fled to Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, he was murdered on the orders of Ptolemy.

Soon after, Julius Caesar came to Egypt where he met and fell in love with Cleopatra. With Caesar’s military strength and support, Ptolemy was overthrown, killed and Cleopatra was reinstated as Queen. In 47BC, Cleopatra gave birth to Caesarion, though Caesar never publicly declared him to be his son.
For a time Cleopatra’s reign brought relatively stability to the region, bringing a degree of peace and prosperity to a country bankrupt by civil war. Although brought up to speak Greek like her family, she made an effort to learn Egyptian and later only spoke only in Egyptian. In 44BC, Julius Caesar was assassinated and the years following Caesar’s death led to a great power struggle between Mark Anthony and Caesar’s adopted son Octavian.

Despite being married to Octavian’s sister (Octavia), Mark Anthony began a relationship with Cleopatra, and together they had three children. Octavian was able to worry Romans that Mark Anthony would give away Rome to this Egyptian Queen, who seemed to have Mark Anthony under her spell. It was also seen as a family insult that Mark Anthony was married to his sister, but was having an affair with Cleopatra. Together Cleopatra and Mark Anthony had three children.

The antagonism grew into civil war, and in 31BC, Cleopatra joined her Egyptian forces with the Roman forces of Mark Anthony and fought Octavian’s forces on the west coast of Greece.

Cleopatra and Mark Anthony were decisively beaten in battle, and scarcely escaped back to Egypt. However, Octavian’s forces pursued the couple and captured Alexandria in 30BC. With no chance of escape, Mark Anthony and Cleopatra both took their own lives, committing suicide on 12 August 30BC. Octavian later had their son Caesarion strangled, ending the Cleopatra dynasty. Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire, and Cleopatra proved to be the last of the Egyptian Pharaohs.

The Mystique of Cleopatra

Cleopatra has been immortalised by William Shakespeare’s play ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, Jules Massenet’s opera Cléopâtre and the 1963 film Cleopatra.

Many contemporary sources spoke of the mystique of Cleopatra’s beauty and allure. It was also rare that a women appeared on a coin, that Cleopatra did. Plutarch writing in the Life of Mark Antony wrote:
“For (as they say) it was not because her [Cleopatra’s] beauty in itself was so striking that it stunned the onlooker, but the inescapable impression produced by daily contact with her: the attractiveness in the persuasiveness of her talk, and the character that surrounded her conversation was stimulating. It was a pleasure to hear the sound of her voice, and she tuned her tongue like a many-stringed instrument expertly to whatever language she chose….”

She was a member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, a family of Greek origin that ruled Egypt after Alexander the Great’s death during the Hellenistic period. The Ptolemies, throughout their dynasty, spoke Greek and refused to speak Egyptian, which is the reason that Greek as well as Egyptian languages were used on official court documents such as the Rosetta Stone. By contrast, Cleopatra did learn to speak Egyptian and represented herself as the reincarnation of an Egyptian goddess, Isis.