

Cleopatra's Exploits: The Short Version

Cleopatra is one of the most famous women in history, a favorite subject of movies, plays and more. She was the last independent Egyptian ruler, before the Romans took over. Cleopatra was known for her political and romantic exploits.

Ptolemaic Pharaoh

Ptolemy was one of Alexander the Great's generals and gained control of Egypt after his death. Ptolemy declared himself pharaoh (leader) of Egypt in 305 B.C.E. and established a capital at Alexandria, a city Alexander the Great had established after conquering Egypt. Alexandria became a center of learning, known for its great library, while leadership in Egypt followed a mixed Hellenic (Greek) and Egyptian culture. But, Cleopatra was the only Ptolemy who spoke Egyptian.

Cleopatra VII

Cleopatra was born 69 B.C.E. Her name means "glory of her father," who was Pharaoh Ptolemy XII. It is unclear who her mother was though some historians think she might have been of Black African descent. Cleopatra herself was raised Greek but in time learned multiple languages, including Egyptian and Latin, perhaps assisted by a trip she took to Rome with her father as a child.

Her father, who struggled with debts and dealing with threats from Romans seeking to control Egypt, died in 51 B.C.E. Cleopatra (as Cleopatra VII) at 18 and her brother, Ptolemy XIV (10) came into power as co-regents. The Egyptian tradition at the time was for royal siblings to marry, so they probably also married.

Julius Caesar

Cleopatra clashed with the forces that were behind her young brother, leading to a civil war that forced her flee to Syria.

She was helped by a famous Roman General, Julius Caesar, who himself was clashing with a Roman statesman, Pompey. Pompey fled to Egypt to get away from Caesar and was killed by the orders of Cleopatra's brother. Caesar went to Egypt to seek out Pompey. Cleopatra sought Caesar's assistance, sneaking into his

quarters in a carpet! Not only did Caesar help Cleopatra get sole control of Egypt, but the two had a love affair. Cleopatra went to Rome to live with Caesar.

Cleopatra had a son, who she named Caesarion, though Caesar himself did not recognize him as his legal offspring. Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C.E. and Cleopatra soon afterwards had her brother killed as well, reigning as Egyptian pharaoh now with her young son. (Try to keep up ... we are not done!)

Marc Anthony

Cleopatra was now around twenty-five and showed much skill at balancing multiple palace intrigues while keeping Egypt independent from Rome. She connected with the Egyptian people as well, not just by learning their language, but also by associating herself with the Egyptian goddess Isis, labeled the "new Isis."

She spoke as many as a dozen languages and the Roman historian Plutarch later spoke of her "irresistible charm." This helped as she formed an alliance with a Roman senator, Marc Antony, one of the leaders of Rome after the assassination of Julius Caesar. Called by Antony to Rome to defend herself, he fell in love with her. Cleopatra also formed a military alliance with Marc Antony.

Death

Marc Antony clashed with Julius Caesar's nephew, Octavian, particularly when Antony recognized Caesarion as Caesar's legal heir. Cleopatra and Marc Antony combined their armies to fight Octavian. Not only losing the Battle of Actium, Antony lost again a year later (30 B.C.E.). Antony committed suicide, thinking Cleopatra was dead; once she found out, Cleopatra did so as well. Octavian now ruled Egypt, soon declaring himself Augustus Caesar, leader of the Roman Empire.

If this sounds familiar you're right. The great love affair of Cleopatra and Marc Antony was the inspiration for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Cleopatra was only 39 years-old when she died, but she definitely fit several lifetimes of drama and intrigue into those years!