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Antony and Cleopatra are famous. With just a handful of others, including Caesar, Alexander the Great, Nero, Plato and Aristotle, they remain household names more than two thousand years after their spectacular suicides. Cleopatra is the only woman in the list, which in itself is interesting and a testament to her enduring fascination. Yet most often Antony and Cleopatra are remembered as a couple, and as lovers – perhaps the most famous lovers from history. Shakespeare’s play helped them to grow into fictional characters as well, and so their story can now be numbered alongside other tales of passionate, but doomed romance, as tragic as the finale of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is unsurprising that the tale has been reinvented time after time in print, on stage and, more recently, on screen. Since they both had strongly theatrical streaks, this enduring fame would no doubt have pleased them, although since neither was inclined to modesty it would probably not have surprised them or seemed less than their due.

The story is intensely dramatic, and I cannot remember a time when I had not heard of Antony and Cleopatra. As young boys, my brother and I discovered a small box containing coins collected by our grandfather, a man who had died long before either of us was born. A friend spotted one of them as Roman, and it proved to be a silver denarius, minted by Mark Antony to pay his soldiers in 31 BC for a campaign partly funded by Cleopatra – the same coin shown in the photograph section in this book. Already interested in the ancient world, the discovery added to my enthusiasm for all things Roman. It seemed a connection not only with a grandparent, but also with Marcus Antonius the Triumvir, whose name circles the face of the coin with its picture of a warship. We do not know

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where our grandfather acquired this and the other coins – an eclectic mixture, several of which are from the Middle East. He may have picked them up in Egypt, where he served with the Royal Field Artillery during the First World War. It is certainly nice to think that.

So in some ways, Antony and Cleopatra have always had a special place in my interest in the ancient past, and yet the desire to write about them is fairly recent. A lot has been written, most especially about the queen, and it seemed unlikely that there could be much more worth saying. Then, a few years ago, I fulfilled a long-held ambition by working on *Caesar: The Life of a Colossus*, which amongst other things involved looking in far more detail at his affair with Cleopatra, as well as Antony's political association with him. Some of what I found surprised me, and – though this was less unexpected – there were vast differences to the popular impression of the story. If it was valuable to look at Caesar's career with a straightforward chronology, and to emphasise the human element in his own behaviour and that of his associates and opponents, it soon became clear that most other aspects of the period would benefit from the same approach.

For all their fame, Antony and Cleopatra receive little attention in formal study of the first century BC. Engaged in a power struggle, they were beaten and so had little real impact on later events. Academic history has long since developed a deep aversion to focusing on individuals, no matter how charismatic their personalities, instead searching for 'more profound' underlying trends and explanations of events. As a student I took courses on the Fall of the Roman Republic and the creation of the Principate, and later on as a lecturer I would devise and teach similar courses myself. Teaching and studying time is always limited, and as a result it was natural to focus on Caesar and his dictatorship, before skipping ahead to look at Octavian/Augustus and the creation of the imperial system. The years from 44–31 BC, when Antony's power was at its greatest, rarely receive anything like such detailed treatment. Ptolemaic Egypt is usually a more specialised field, but, even when it is included in a course, the reign of its last queen – poorly documented and anyway in the last days of long decline – is seldom

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treated in any detail. The fame of Cleopatra may attract students to the subject, but courses are, quite reasonably and largely unconsciously, structured to stress more 'serious' topics, and shy away from personalities.

Antony and Cleopatra did not change the world in any profound way, unlike Caesar and to an even greater extent Augustus. One ancient writer claimed that Caesar's campaigns caused the death of one million people and the enslavement of as many more. Whatever the provocation, he led his army to seize Rome by force, winning supreme power through civil war, and supplanted the Republic's democratically elected leaders. Against this, Caesar was famous for his clemency. Throughout his career he championed social reform and aid to the poor in Rome, as well as trying to protect the rights of people in the provinces. Although he made himself dictator, his rule was generally benevolent, and his measures sensible, dealing with long-neglected problems. The path to power of his adopted son, Augustus, was considerably more vicious, replacing clemency with revenge. Augustus' power was won in civil war and maintained by force, and yet he also ruled well. The Senate's political freedom was virtually extinguished and popular elections rendered unimportant. At the same time he gave Rome a peace it had not known in almost a century of political violence and created a system of government that benefited a far wider section of society than the old Republic.¹

Antony and Cleopatra proved themselves just as capable of savagery and ruthlessness, but the losers in a civil war do not get the chance to shape the future directly. Apart from that, there is no real trace of any long-held beliefs or causes on Antony's part, no indication that he struggled for prominence for anything other than his own glory and profit. Some like to see Cleopatra as deeply committed to the prosperity and welfare of her subjects, but this is largely wishful thinking. There is no actual evidence to suggest that her concerns went any further than ensuring a steady flow of taxation into her own hands, to cement her hold on power. For only a small part of her reign was she secure on the throne, at the head of a kingdom utterly dependent on Roman goodwill, and it would probably be unreasonable to expect her to have done more than this.

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Julius Caesar was highly successful. He was also highly talented across a remarkable range of activities. Even those who dislike the man and what he did can readily admire his gifts. Augustus is an even harder figure to like, especially as a youth, and yet no one would fail to acknowledge his truly remarkable political skill. Caesar and his adopted son were both very clever, even if their characters were different. Mark Antony had none of their subtlety, and little trace of profound intelligence. He tends to be liked in direct proportion to how much someone dislikes Octavian/Augustus, but there is little about him to admire. Instead, fictional portrayals have reinforced the propaganda of the 30s BC, contrasting Antony, the bluff, passionate and simple soldier, with Octavian, seen as a cold-blooded, cowardly and scheming political operator. Neither portrait is true, but they continue to shape even scholarly accounts of these years.

Cleopatra was clever and well-educated, but unlike Caesar and Augustus the nature of her intelligence remains elusive, and it is very hard to see how her mind worked or fairly assess her intellect. It is the nature of biography that the author comes to develop a strong, and largely emotional, attitude towards his or her subject after spending several years studying them. Almost every modern author to come to the subject wants to admire, and often to like, Cleopatra. Some of this is a healthy reaction to the rabid hostility of Augustan sources. Much has to do with her sex, for as we noted at the start, it is a rare thing to be able to study in detail any woman from the Greco-Roman world. Novelty alone encourages sympathy – often reinforced by the same distaste for Augustus that fuels affection for Antony. In itself sympathy need not matter, as long as it does not encourage a distortion of the evidence to idealise the queen. There is much we simply do not know about both Antony and Cleopatra – and indeed most other figures from this period. The gaps should not be filled by confident assertions drawn from the author's own mental picture of Cleopatra as she ought to have been.

By the time I had finished *Caesar*, I knew that I wanted to take a break from the first century BC and look at the decline of the Roman Empire and its collapse in the West. As much as anything this was because none of the books on that period seemed to explain events

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in a way I found satisfactory. The same sense that there was nothing that really did justice to the story of Antony and Cleopatra made me just as convinced that this book must come next.

To have real value, the study of history must be a quest for the truth. The whole truth is no doubt unobtainable even for comparatively recent events. For the ancient past, there will inevitably be many more gaps in our evidence as well as all the problems of understanding the actions of people from very different cultures to our own. That absolute success is impossible does not make the attempt to achieve it any less worthwhile. Similarly, although no historian can hope to be wholly objective, it still remains of fundamental importance to strive for this. If we always seek for the truth in history, whether or not it fits with our preconceptions or what we would like to believe, then we are far better placed to look for the truth in our own day and age.

This, then, is an attempt to tell the story of Antony and Cleopatra as objectively and dispassionately as possible, for there is passion enough in it without the author adding too much of his own personality. My aims are also to reveal as much of the true events as is possible, while making plain what we do not know, and bring the couple and their contemporaries alive as flesh-and-blood human beings. Getting to the facts is a lot less easy than it might seem, for even serious scholars so often want to see something else when they look at these two extraordinary lives.

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It begins with the question of just what Cleopatra was. Cleopatra was the queen of Egypt, and for the last few centuries Ancient Egypt has fascinated the modern world. At first interest came mainly from a desire to understand the Old Testament better, but rapidly moved far beyond that. Egypt is perceived as the most ancient of civilisations and its monuments are amongst the most spectacular. Some, such as the pyramids, sphinx and the great temples, are awe-inspiringly massive. Others are more intimate, such as the mummified animals and people, and the models of everyday things left in the tombs of

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the dead. Tutankhamen's lavish death mask is immediately recognisable and conjures up images of ancient mystery and massive wealth. Hieroglyphics, with their mixture of symbols and pictures, or the flattened figures of people walking in the strange posture of wall paintings and reliefs are again both instantly recognisable as Egyptian. They are dramatic and at the same time alien.

Such imagery has time and again proven itself irresistible to filmmakers depicting Cleopatra. Her palace, court and indeed her own clothes are invariably inspired more by a caricatured version of New Kingdom Egypt than the reality of the first century BC. This is the chronological equivalent of presenting Elizabeth I as Queen Boudica of the Iceni, yet it has the dramatic virtue of making Cleopatra and Egypt utterly different and visually distinct from the Romans who form such a major part of her story. The Cleopatra of stories has to be exotic, and the images of an Egypt that was ancient even to her are a powerful part of this.

The exotic is almost always reinforced by the intensely erotic. Cleopatra has become one of the ultimate femmes fatales, the woman who seduced the two most powerful men of her day. Beautiful, sensual, almost irresistible and utterly unscrupulous, she distracted Julius Caesar, and perhaps filled his head with dreams of eastern monarchy. She then dominated Antony and brought him low. This Cleopatra can be seen as a danger – the last great danger – to the *Pax Romana* Augustus would bring to the Roman world. Fashions change, so that empires are no longer seen as admirable, and the Augustan system viewed with a more sceptical eye. These days many want to tell the story differently, turning the sinister seductress into a strong and independent woman struggling as best she could to protect her country.

For all that the title of Shakespeare's play makes it natural to speak of Antony and Cleopatra, the glamour associated with the queen readily overshadows her lover. She had anyway already had an affair with Caesar – the scene where she is delivered to him hidden in a rolled carpet is one of the best-known images of the queen, even if it does not quite fit the ancient source. Caesar was first, and history has on the whole relegated Mark Antony to the second place and the role of Caesar's lieutenant. A 'good second-in-command' or a

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‘follower rather than a leader’ have been common verdicts on Antony, both politically and militarily. He is also seen as the man who ought to have won, but failed, and this again feeds an impression of a flawed character – talent without genius. Some would blame Cleopatra for unmanning the tough Roman soldier, a tradition encouraged by his ancient biographer, Plutarch. Others would prefer to see Antony as simply not good enough to match her ambitions. For one historian, Cleopatra was ‘a charismatic personality of the first order, a born leader and vaultingly ambitious monarch, who deserved better than suicide with that *louche* lump of a self-indulgent Roman, with his bull neck, Herculean vulgarities, and fits of mindless introspection’.²

Cleopatra readily provokes an emotional response. In addition, myth and romance surround Antony and Cleopatra and make the truth elusive. Both of them consciously worked to shape their public images during their lifetime – as strong rulers, as godlike, as lovers of life and luxury. Simultaneously, political opponents sought to damn them. The orator Cicero directed his *Philippics* against Antony, producing some of the most effective character assassination of all time. Far more thoroughly, Caesar’s adopted son Octavian – the man who would become Rome’s first emperor and take the name Augustus – defeated Antony and Cleopatra. They died and he survived, holding supreme power for more than forty years. It gave him plenty of time to shape the historical record to best suit his new regime. His strongly hostile view of both Antony and Cleopatra influenced our fullest sources for their lives, all of which were written under the rule of Augustus’ successors.

Cleopatra continues to attract plenty of biographers. A few of these books also study Antony’s life in detail, but biographies devoted exclusively to him remain rare. He now tends to be an accessory to the life of his lover. Anyone looking at the period will be quick to point out the problems caused by Augustan propaganda; often it is difficult to know whether an incident happened, and it would be tempting to reject any negative story. Unfortunately, however, there are well-attested incidents in which both Antony and Cleopatra behaved in ways that seem irrational or at best politically unwise.³

The young Octavian is difficult to like. He was unscrupulous,

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could be vicious and at times was a physical coward. The Principate, the system by which Rome was ruled by emperors for the next two and a half centuries, was his creation and attitudes to this often do much to shape views of Antony and Cleopatra. Admirers of the Augustan system will pardon the brutality of his path to power and see his enemies as delaying – even endangering – Rome’s great legacy to the world. Critics will praise them for resisting an extremely unpleasant tyrant, and some will claim that the pair offered a far better alternative, although they cannot usually be too specific about what this was.⁴

Cleopatra was a strong and independent woman in an ancient world that was dominated by men. She had power in her own right as queen, unlike Roman women who were more likely to have influence as the wives or mothers of great men. For most modern authors this is extremely attractive and encourages a generous treatment. Serious accounts of Cleopatra’s life never let this mood slip into eulogy, but sympathy for the queen all too readily combines with the glamour of her fictional portrayals to distort our view of her times. There are two very basic truths about her, which conflict so strongly with the legend that it takes a conscious and determined effort to maintain them.

The first of these is at least usually noted. All recent biographers will begin by pointing out that Cleopatra was Greek and not Egyptian. Greek was her first language, and it was in Greek literature and culture that she was educated. Although represented on Egyptian temples and in some statuary clad in the traditional headgear and robes of the pharaohs’ wives, it is unlikely that she actually dressed this way save perhaps occasionally to perform certain rites. Instead, she wore the headband and robes of a Greek monarch. Cleopatra proclaimed herself the ‘New Isis’, and yet her worship of the goddess betrayed a strongly Hellenised version of the cult. She was no more Egyptian culturally or ethnically than most residents of modern-day Arizona are Apaches.

Noting the essential Greek-ness of Cleopatra is one thing. It is much harder to resist the lure of truly ancient Egypt – both the popular imagery and the actual reality. Egypt is exotic, and it is also to Westerners decidedly eastern. In the past, a sensual Egyptian

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Cleopatra could be an alluring, almost irresistible threat to stern Roman virtue and the advance of Rome's empire and civilisation. Even if she was Greek, then she was a representative of Hellenic culture, which had decayed through contact with eastern decadence. Such views have not been fashionable for a long time, and often the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. Empires are now automatically bad things, imperialists brutal and exploitative, and European culture itself is often seen by many Westerners today in a negative light. Thus it is common to emphasise the savagery of Rome's rise to empire, and Cleopatra is admired for resisting the onslaught. Occasionally this is as a Greek, but the attraction of the orient is strong, and usually she once again becomes a representative of the east.

This is not really helped by the tradition of separating the period following the rise of Philip II and his son Alexander the Great from earlier Greek history. In the nineteenth century this later period was dubbed Hellenistic – not Greek or Hellenic, but 'Greek-like'. Classical Greece had been dominated by city states, of which the greatest were Athens and Sparta. Athens produced art, literature and philosophy, which have profoundly influenced the world to this day; Sparta became famous for the formidable prowess of its soldiers at the cost of creating a particularly repellent society. Athens took the idea of democracy further than any other ancient state, and was exceptionally aggressive and ruthless in its foreign policy.⁵

Eventually, the promise of this democracy faded, as did Athens' power. Kings appeared again and so did tyrants, while those cities who retained any vestige of democracy reduced the electorate to ever smaller sections of society. By the later fourth century BC the kings of Macedonia dominated all of Greece. In this different political climate the cultural spark appeared to fade. To modern eyes – and indeed to many people at the time – no more drama or literature was being created to match the heights reached in the past.

Scholarly attitudes have changed somewhat and many would now dispute any inherent inferiority of the Hellenistic Age – at least in terms of government and society. They still employ the term, for convenience if nothing else. The tradition also remains of dating the

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end of this period to the death of Cleopatra. That makes her the end of an era beginning with Alexander and his conquests. This connection is there in the best modern biographies, but it often struggles to compete with the romance of the much older Egyptian past. That several recent biographers have been Egyptologists has only made it harder for them to maintain an essentially Greek Cleopatra. Yet that was the reality, whether we like it or not. Her world was not the same as the fifth century BC and the height of Athenian achievement, but it was thoroughly Greek none the less. So if there was a great struggle in Cleopatra's lifetime it was not between east and west, but Greek and Roman.⁶

The second uncomfortable fact about Cleopatra is universally ignored by her modern biographers. These routinely lament that our sources focus almost exclusively on Cleopatra's affairs with Caesar and Antony. The rest of her life, including the years she spent ruling Egypt on her own, receive scant mention. Unfortunately, documents on papyrus that give details of official decrees, the workings of government, and private business and affairs are rare for the first century BC in general and Cleopatra's reign in particular. The vast bulk of these texts date to much earlier in the rule of Egypt by her family. A papyrus discovered relatively recently consisted of a decree issued by the queen and may well end with a single Greek word written in her own hand. This is exciting, but scarcely sufficient to do more than give us the slightest glimpse of her government in action. Significantly, it also grants a concession to a prominent Roman.⁷

The literary sources were all written either by Romans or by Greeks writing under the Roman Empire at least a century after Cleopatra's death. A good deal of information and personal anecdote comes from Plutarch's *Life of Mark Antony*. This is the only biography of him to survive from the ancient world. There is no surviving ancient biography of Cleopatra. A familiar complaint is that the story is not simply told by the victors, but always from the Roman viewpoint – in some cases that this is a male Roman viewpoint may be emphasised even more.⁸

There is a reason why this is so. Whether we like it or not, Cleopatra was not really that important. Her world was one utterly

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dominated by Rome, in which her kingdom had at best a precarious independence. She was a queen, and controlled an Egypt that was wealthy and by ancient standards densely populated. Yet it was a Roman client kingdom and never fully independent. Egypt was the largest, and in many ways the most important, of Rome's subordinate allies, but it was always subordinate, and its power was dwarfed by that of the Roman Republic. Cleopatra only became queen because her father was placed back in power by a Roman army. Even after that, she would have been dead or exiled by her early twenties were it not for Caesar's intervention.

Cleopatra only had importance in the wider world through her Roman lovers. Television documentaries and popular books often repeat the claim that the Romans only ever feared two people – Hannibal and Cleopatra, but people usually ignore the fact that this sweeping statement was made in the 1930s. It rests on no ancient evidence, and does not make any real sense. Much as Augustan propaganda demonised the queen, no one could seriously have believed that she had the power to overthrow Rome. It was simply far more convenient to hate a foreign, female enemy, than to face the fact that Octavian's great war and subsequent triumph was over a distinguished Roman. For all her glamour, Antony was of far greater power and significance than Cleopatra.⁹

None of this means that Cleopatra is any less fascinating. We need to understand the reality of the first century BC if we are to understand her. In many ways this makes her career all the more spectacular because it was unexpected. Her achievements were remarkable: she not only survived in power for almost two decades, but also for a while expanded her realm almost to the extent of her most successful ancestors. That she did this through harnessing Roman power to her own benefit does not detract from the scale of her success. It is vital to step beyond the myth and the wishful thinking and seek the reality of Cleopatra and her place in the world.

Just as importantly, we need to understand Antony as a Roman senator, not simply relegate him to the supporting role of Caesar's subordinate and Cleopatra's lover. On closer inspection, many of the familiar assumptions about him prove to be mistaken. Plutarch and others painted him as very much the military man, a bluff and

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coarse soldier brought low by a woman. It is debatable how far Antony ever let Cleopatra determine his policy. What is clear is that he actually had very little military service by Roman standards, and most of his experience came in civil wars. He was not an especially good general, although at times he was a popular leader. There was much that was traditional about Antony and this goes a long way to explaining his importance and his ambitions. It was certainly not inevitable that he was defeated by Octavian. If the latter's rise to power was spectacular for such a young man, Antony's own career also owed a great deal to good fortune and the unusual opportunities presented by a Roman Republic rent by civil wars.

Both Antony and Cleopatra need to be understood within the context of their culture and times. Yet this book cannot hope to cover this turbulent era in every detail. Its concern is always with them, on where they were and what they were doing. Events elsewhere will be treated briefly, and only as far as is necessary to understand their story. Therefore, Caesar's career is treated very quickly, and only in greater depth when it also involved Antony and Cleopatra. Similarly, the rise of Octavian is both remarkable and fascinating, but cannot be dealt with at any length. Other important figures, notably Cicero, Pompey and his son Sextus, are treated even more briefly. This is not a reflection of their importance, but a question of focus.

Politics will be at the forefront of the story, because Antony and Cleopatra were first and foremost political animals. So was Caesar, the queen's first lover and father of her oldest child. None of them ever acted without at least a degree of political calculation. In spite of a few unconvincing accusations of debauchery, the evidence strongly suggests that Cleopatra only took two lovers and each was the most important man in the Roman Republic at that time. None of this need mean that there was not also strong and genuine attraction involved on both sides. Indeed, it is hard to understand this story in any other way. It is vital in studying any history to remember that the characters were flesh and blood human beings much like us, however different the times and their cultures may have been. The romance must be there because it was real. One of the reasons for the enduring appeal of Antony and Cleopatra's story

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is that all of us can understand the power of passion from our own lives.

The story of Antony and Cleopatra is one of love, but also one of politics, war and ambition. The actual events were intensely dramatic – hence the appeal to novelists, dramatists and screen-writers. Looking at the facts as far as we know or can confidently guess them only reinforces the drama. So does the acknowledgement of what we do not know, for many of the mysteries remain fascinating in themselves. A closer look at the truth exposes an episode in human history more remarkable than any invention. It may not be the story we expect, or even perhaps would like to believe, but it is one of lives lived intensely at a time when the world was changing profoundly.