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Reading Cleopatra VII: The Crafting of a Political Persona

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of Cleopatra VII, as well as how and why she wanted to be depicted in a certain manner with respect to visual art. As the last noble of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, her images communicate her political abilities, her religious fervor, her maternal obligations and obstinacy in perpetuating royal lineage, and her direct connection to ancient Egyptian gods. Additionally, by consummating relationships with two of the most powerful men in ancient Roman history (Julius Caesar and Mark Antony), she was able to cultivate her skills as an influential pharaoh, equal to that of her male counterparts, and solidify her status as pharaoh. In exploring the multicultural facets of her images, I argue that not only did they not function solely as objects of aesthetic pleasure, they also appealed to a broad audience so as to communicate her level of influence as recognized not only in Egypt, but throughout the Mediterranean world.

Keywords: Cleopatra VII, Ancient Egyptian Art History, Political Propaganda, Kingship, Iconographic Analysis, Formal Analysis

In the year 69 B.C.E, a daughter was born into the Ptolemaic dynasty, one who would be the last ruler of ancient Egypt, as it came under control of Rome.ⁱ She bore the name Cleopatra, "a royal Macedonian Greek name meaning 'father-honoring'".ⁱⁱ Although her ethnicity and location of birth continue to be disputed, she remains one of the most influential and politically savvy queens in ancient Egyptian history, due to her skill in navigating complex political territory. Unfortunately, after her suicide, Cleopatra's adversary Octavian (or Emperor Augustus of Rome) declared that images of her be defaced or destroyed. As a result, relatively few representations of her survive to this day. The few that have survived communicate strong messages of her beauty, fertility, abilities to rule and serve the people of Egypt, ability to perpetuate the family line, and her direct connection to ancient Egyptian divinities. During the course of her reign, which lasted up until her suicide in 30 B.C.E, many images in a variety of styles

were erected in her honor.ⁱⁱⁱ She is represented in relief sculptures and stelae, portrait busts, coinage, and other visual forms. In my examination of chosen images, this paper will investigate the assorted representational forms that Cleopatra promoted as bolstering the intricate political environment of her time. Artists depicted her in a wide assortment of styles, some of which intersected styles of different cultures to create a unique hybrid of sorts, perhaps as a way to appeal to as broad an audience as possible -- Egyptian, Ptolemaic, Greek, and Roman. To further understand the styles and iconographic preferences of the artists commissioned by her court, we must look into how and when she rose to the throne, what her contributions were as a mother, a queen, and vehicle of religion, as well as the events that led up to her death and more importantly, the end of her rule.

Following her father's (Ptolemy XII) death in 51 B.C.E, 18 year old Cleopatra and

her 13 year old brother Ptolemy the XIII rose to the throne.^{iv} Shortly after, Ptolemy's forces acted against Cleopatra, who faced no option but to leave Alexandria and escape to Syria. While she was away, Ptolemy had the Roman general Pompey put to death, and allowed the access of his rival, Julius Caesar, into Alexandria. Cleopatra had herself smuggled into Egypt secretly, and by means of her mysterious charm and power through words, Cleopatra created an alliance with Caesar and soon a battle took place between Ptolemy and Caesar, who was vastly outnumbered. When additional back up arrived to aid Caesar in the war, a victory was quick at hand and resulted in Ptolemy's death. Once these events passed, Caesar reinstated the throne to Cleopatra as queen and her younger brother Ptolemy the XIV as co-ruler of Egypt. In the year 47 B.C.E, Cleopatra gave birth to a son (thought to be Caesar's), who was named Caesarion, or "little Caesar". After Caesar was murdered in 44 B.C.E, Cleopatra and Caesarion ruled together in Egypt.^v

In Rome, however, there was a battle brewing, and a group of three men in power -- Octavian, Mark Antony, and Lepidus -- sought the help of Cleopatra. She resolved to send troops to Rome and aid the triumvirate. After victory was won, the power was split between Octavian and Mark Antony. Using her influence with words, charm, and sexual allure, a tryst between Mark Antony and Cleopatra occurred. Their relationship appears to have been one of mutual give and take to further each other's political prestige by way of campaigns and wealth. Mark Antony vowed to secure Cleopatra's throne and she swore an alliance to help him gain power in Rome. Octavian, enraged, declared an all-out war on Cleopatra, claiming that she had overpowered Mark Antony and that he would in turn, desert the Roman people. After Octavian's victory in the Battle of

Actium, Cleopatra escaped back to Egypt. Antony, after having heard false news of Cleopatra's suicide, killed himself as well. In order to evade sure humiliation of defeat at the hands of Octavian, Cleopatra was said to have taken her life via a venomous snake known as the asp, a symbol connected with celestial nobility.^{vi}

Now that we have a clear understanding of Cleopatra's origin and her rise to the Egyptian throne, we can make better sense of the iconography communicated in her portraiture. While there is very little concrete evidence confirming what Cleopatra VII looked like, scholars have written about her physical attributes from both sides of the spectrum. The following description comes from Plutarch who attests to her unattractive physical traits, as well as her attractive personality:

"As far as they say, her beauty was not in and of itself incomparable, nor such to strike the person who was just looking at her; but her conversation had an irresistible charm; and from the one side her appearance, together with the seduction of her speech, from the other her character, which pervaded her actions in an inexplicable way when meeting people, was utterly spellbinding. The sound of her voice was sweet when she talked".^{vii}

Representations of Cleopatra VII are so stylistically diverse, one cannot state definitively what she truly looked like. With respect to her depictions, beauty seems less important than messages concerning kingship, power, and ability to perpetuate royal lineage.

Fig. 1 Black Basalt Sculpture of Cleopatra, 51-30 B.C.E., black basalt, H. 105 cm., State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, photo made by George Shuklin.

One such image of Cleopatra is a black basalt statue made ca. 51-30 B.C.E. (Fig. 1).^{viii} This statue can be viewed as a hybrid, due to its inclusion of various regional iconographic content that spans different cultures. Here, the queen is shown wearing a tripartite wig, which is adorned with the triple uraeus. The uraeus functions as a symbol of the royal family, but the "triple" feature has been officially accepted as a mark of Cleopatra the VII, and represents her rule over Upper and Lower Egypt and Greece. The ears are largely over-exaggerated, perhaps to show the queen's willingness to lend an ear to the Egyptian populace. The face is full, with narrow almond-shaped eyes and a down-turned mouth. She also wears the "sheath-style" dress, a popular fashion at the time, which fits closely to the body, and known as an Egyptian motif showcasing a feminine and

sensual individual. In her left hand, she wields the Greek double cornucopia, or "horn of plenty", and clutches the *ankh* symbol, the Egyptian hieroglyph for eternity. There are sleeves clearly visible on the wrists as well as the hemlines on the ankles, and a pubic triangle is also evident, perhaps to showcase her as a fertility figure. Moreover, Cleopatra is rendered with the left foot striding forward which gives the overall statue a feeling of movement. With respect to the triple uraeus, Joyce Tyldesley offers a few possibilities of iconographic significance as she explains,

"It may be that the triple uraeus is to be read as a *rebus* — a visual pun — that translates from Ptolemaic Egyptian as either 'queen of kings' or 'goddess of goddesses'. Alternatively, it could represent three individuals: Isis, Osiris, and Horus perhaps, or a queen's triple title of king's daughter, king's sister, and king's wife".^{ix}

Another important feature of the overall Egyptian style of the statue is the double cornucopia, which is a distinctly Greek symbol. It may be that this symbol was meant to signify Cleopatra's ability to maintain a prosperous Egyptian society as well as a fruitful dynastic line. The ankh symbol can be read as Cleopatra having qualities associated with the divine and that like the Egyptian gods, she was seen as immortal. Another important connection that can be made is the use of black basalt stone. This medium may have been a deliberate attempt to emphasize Cleopatra as a fertility figure. Following the annual inundation of the Nile River, there were vast remnants of black silt that cultivated the land, allowing for prosperous agriculture. It may very well be that the aim was to correlate the fertile qualities of the black silt with the queen herself. What one can hope to take away from this image is the distinct need to draw

attention to Cleopatra VII as a member of the final dynasty of ancient Egypt. As such, her representation in this image gives voice to her role within the Roman conflict for power between Julius Caesar and Pompey, as well as Mark Antony and Augustus Caesar in later years. By appealing to the masses, this image functions as a hybrid of multicultural elements that would in effect solidify her rule.

Fig. 2. Rear Wall Relief of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera, ca.47 B.C.E. , Egypt, Author: Olaf Tausch

Another image to consider is the rear wall relief of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera (Fig. 2). It corresponds to the importance of religious fervor among the ancient Egyptians, as well as the stylized rendering of the figures (i.e., the composite stance of the figures and their rigidity, as well as the lack of facial expression). However, there appears to be a shift in the way Cleopatra is rendered, due to her placement in the relief itself (standing behind her son). While the exact date is unknown, the relief must have been made

after 47 B.C.E, the year in which Caesarion's birth took place, because he is depicted giving offerings to the gods and appears to be a strong focal point. During the period when Cleopatra VII was Pharaoh and Caesarion co-ruler, scholars have observed that Cleopatra looks to have stepped aside to a certain extent to further her son's dynastic succession. Tyldesley corroborates, "Cleopatra exploited her motherhood with ruthless efficiency. Simultaneously, she allowed herself to be celebrated as the mortal mother of the king of Egypt, the divine mother of the young god Horus and the regal mother of her people".^x Therefore, it is not a surprise that Caesarion is revealed striding in front of his mother. On both the left and the right sides of the wall, Cleopatra and Caesarion are portrayed presenting offerings to Hathor, her son, and the three main gods of the Osirian myth: Osiris, Isis, and Seth.^{xi}

All the individuals represented are shown as composite figures. Caesarion is rendered wearing the double crown of Egypt, a kilt, and an *usekh* (broad-collared necklace). His stance is in the famous composite style and his physical features are in keeping with the idealized traits of kings during this period, such as the narrow waist, broad shoulders, muscular knees and calves. Cleopatra dons a headdress decorated with imagery corresponding to three gods: the double plumes, which are representative of *Min*, the creator-god, the two horns of Hathor, and the solar disk of *Ra*, the sun god in between the horns. The figure of Hathor is distinguished by her crown, which is adorned with horns (she is often depicted as a cow) and a solar disk in the center. Her son Ihy, stands before her, and is much smaller in proportion to the other figures. Scholars have agreed upon the absence of Cleopatra's romantic consort at the time (Julius Caesar) as associated with the

absence of Horus in relation to Hathor. The idea was to make a striking resemblance between divine Egyptian gods and Egyptian royalty, and further suggest their commonalities. Moreover, the overall image implies the importance of Egyptian elites such as Cleopatra VII and Caesarion to make ritualistic offerings to the gods to perpetuate their success in the land of the living as well as the world beyond the grave. Susan Walker agrees: "The pharaoh was the only intermediary between the world of the gods and that of men, and as such he (or occasionally she) was necessary to perform the daily rituals of the temple".^{xii} Essentially what we see in this relief is Cleopatra stepping away from the spotlight of kingship and allowing her son the opportunity to rise up as a king.

Fig. 3. *Marble Head of Cleopatra VII*, 50-30 B.C.E., Marble, H. 39 cm, Found in 1784 near the Villa dei Quintili in Rome. Musei Vaticani, Vatican City. Photograph: Musei Vaticani.

believe we are looking at the same individual we saw in the Egyptian style portraits. Nevertheless, the marble portrait of Cleopatra VII, housed in the Vatican and made ca. 50-30 B.C.E. shows a striking beauty, not at all matching up with Plutarch's unforgiving description previously stated (Fig. 3). Here, Cleopatra's features are rendered as very youthful and flawless. The face is a perfect oval shape, with almond-shaped eyes. The ears appear to be either unfinished or inadequately completed. The mouth with a fleshy bottom lip is just slightly upturned. The nose unfortunately has not survived, although efforts had been made to restore it to its former condition. The queen is rendered sporting the "melon" hairstyle, a popular coiffure of Royal Hellenistic individuals. Joyce Tyldesley offers a more detailed description of this popular mode describing it as, "sectioned and braided hair drawn back into a low bun; the name reflects the supposed resemblance to a melon segmented lengthways, worn by many upper-class Hellenistic women".^{xiii} She is also revealed wearing the diadem headband, another popular accouterment added to the "melon" hairstyle. There is only a small band of hair that appears before the diadem, shown in a wavy fashion.

When we move to the Hellenistic style portraits of Cleopatra VII, it is hard to

Fig. 4. *Marble Bust of Cleopatra*, 50-30 B.C.E., Marble, Berlin Museum, Berlin, Germany, Author: Louis le Grand

A similar image is the Berlin marble bust of Cleopatra VII, also made between 50-30 B.C.E. (Fig. 4). Like that of the Vatican portrait, this bust showcases a young and gorgeous queen with ageless features that are typical of Classical Greek art forms. The simple fact that she is rendered in a classically Greek style is appropriate, in the knowledge that she was the last Hellenistic, Greek speaking royal of the Ptolemaic Dynasty following the subjugation of Alexander the Great during the Hellenistic period. The face is more heart-shaped, and the ears are more successfully carved in comparison to the Vatican bust. The nose is a bit elongated and has an upturned tip. The upturn of the mouth rests somewhat lower on the left side of the face than the right, giving the faintest hint of a smile. Also similar to the Vatican bust is the melon hairstyle, but here the royal diadem is shown resting farther back on the head. Moreover, the Berlin bust has a wider band of hair protruding from in front of the diadem, perhaps two inches. Along the hairline are snail shell curls that frame the

face. This difference when compared to the Vatican bust may have been a choice on the part of the sculptor or may have been made to look like baby hair, and further suggesting Cleopatra's unwavering youth. The overall look of both these portraits derives from Hellenistic Greek culture and ideals. This style also could have functioned to create a positive image of Cleopatra VII to the public during her stay with Caesar in Rome. Susan Walker also notes, "Cleopatra represented herself as might reasonably be expected, as a Hellenistic Greek queen... the evidence of sculptures shows that Cleopatra was seen in Greek style at Rome... They might even have been occasioned by Cleopatra's extended stay in Rome as Caesar's guest from 46-44 B.C.E."^{xiv} The imagery of Cleopatra that was seen in Rome may have also been a way for Caesar to keep his end of the negotiation when he vowed to ensure the safety of Cleopatra's throne by painting her as a positive image: an Egyptian queen with traits also of a Hellenistic Greek royal.

Fig. 5. *Bronze coin of Cleopatra nursing the infant Caesarion*, 51-30 B.C.E., Bronze, minted on Cyprus, Egypt, From: Joyce Tyldesley. Profile Books, 2011.

Coinage was another form of representation in which Cleopatra could craft an image of herself that would be seen daily by the Egyptian public. Tyldesley observes that, "These are generally taken to be her most lifelike portraits, purely because they are the least obviously flattering".^{xv} One such image is the bronze coin of

Cleopatra VII minted on Cyprus between 51-30 B.C.E. (Fig. 5).^{xvi} This depiction of Cleopatra has Greek as well as Egyptian subject matter in that the obverse shows Cleopatra with a full, well-rounded face and prominent nose, wearing the royal diadem and "melon" hairstyle. Her facial features appear a bit disagreeable, and not at all flattering. Just beneath the chin, we see a small head and can understand this as the baby Casarion, which Tyldesley states, "represents Cleopatra as the mother goddess Isis".^{xvii} The reverse is an image of the double cornucopia, a markedly Greek emblem which can be interpreted as Cleopatra's achievement of a flourishing Egyptian society. It remains apparent that the desired effect Cleopatra wanted in issuing these coins was a form of propaganda associated with kingship that could be seen through daily commerce within the ancient Egyptian populace.

Fig. 6. *Silver Denarius of Cleopatra and Mark Antony*, minted 32 B.C.E., Silver, British Museum, London, England, Available from: Margaret Melanie Miles, University of California Press, 2011, Photo by: The Trustees of the British Art Museum/Art Resource, NY.

Another important coin image is the silver denarius of Cleopatra VII minted in 32 B.C.E. during her allegiance with Mark Antony (Fig. 6).^{xviii} The obverse image displays a Romanized Cleopatra wearing the well-known "melon" style and diadem. The features of the face appear hard-bitten and look more masculine. She's shown with a

heavy brow, heavy-lidded eyes, and an almost hooked nose. She wears a pair of earrings and has a visibly prominent chin. It is evident that this image is giving us a much older version of Cleopatra with far more manly attributes. These elements mirror those of Mark Antony who is rendered in the reverse side. He's revealed with a short shaggy-styled hairdo and likewise has a heavy brow. His nose is elongated, and his head does not appear to match up with the thickness of the neck. He's also shown with distinct laugh lines, which hint at advanced age. Prudence Jones asserts the coin was made to "celebrate the union of Antony and Cleopatra".^{xix} Thinking of other representations of Cleopatra that were made in a masculine light, it makes sense that when these coins were minted, the image desired was that of a masculine, social male, as opposed to a gentle, subordinate female. The endgame was to speak to the potency of Egyptian kingship by means of masculine imagery.

Collectively, the various styles of Cleopatra VII's portraits, whether Egyptian, Hellenistic, or Roman, all had functions that worked beyond the effects of aesthetic pleasure. They all relayed the same message. Although Cleopatra was not strictly speaking a physical beauty, she possessed other qualities such as persuasion through words and a mysterious allure that worked in her favor. These qualities assured her achievement as an authoritative and influential pharaoh, via allegiances with Mark Antony and Julius Caesar. Her images communicated her responsibilities to the gods through ritual, her devotion to her son as her successor, the ability to maintain *maat* in Egyptian society, and her qualities connected with the divine. They also testify to Cleopatra VII's ability to navigate complex, ethnic, cultural, and political terrain as she maneuvered her way through

the current power centers of the Mediterranean world. Given the tragic circumstances of her death by means of suicide, Cleopatra VII lingers as one of the most notable of the 300 Egyptian pharaohs, and a permanent historic force to be reckoned with.^{xx}

Footnotes

ⁱSusan Walker and Sally Ashton, *Cleopatra* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2006).

ⁱⁱSusan Walker and Sally Ashton, *Cleopatra Reassessed* (London: British Museum :, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱPrudence J. Jones, *Cleopatra: a sourcebook* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

^{iv}"Cleopatra — History.com Articles, Video, Pictures and Facts." History.com — History Made Every Day — American & World History.
<http://www.history.com/topics/cleopatra> (accessed October 13, 2013).

^vIbid, 3.

^{vi}Ibid, 5.

^{vii}C. B. R. Pelling, *Life of Antony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

^{viii}Susan Walker and Peter Higgs, *Cleopatra of Egypt: from history to myth* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

^{ix}Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: last queen of Egypt* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

^xIbid, 15.

^{xi}Susan Walker and Sally Ashton. *Cleopatra reassessed* (London: British Museum :, 2003).

^{xii}Ibid, 119.

^{xiii}Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: last queen of Egypt* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

^{xiv}Susan Walker and Sally Ashton, *Cleopatra reassessed* (London: British Museum:, 2003).

^{xv}Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: last queen of Egypt* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

^{xvi}Susan Walker and Peter Higgs, *Cleopatra of Egypt: from history to myth* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

^{xvii}Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: last queen of Egypt* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

^{xviii}Prudence J. Jones, *Cleopatra: a sourcebook* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

^{xix}Ibid, 145.

^{xx}Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: last queen of Egypt*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008.

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Fig. 6. Artist unknown, *Silver Denarius of Cleopatra and Mark Antony*, minted 32 B.C.E., From: Margaret Melanie Miles, University of California Press, 2011.

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