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*A Tale of Intrigue and Alliances:  
Cleopatra's Complex Relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony*

**ABSTRACT:** *This historiographical essay considers Cleopatra VII's complex relationships with two prominent Roman figures, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Drawing from an array of scholarly perspectives, including historical narratives and biographical accounts, it progresses chronologically to assess the evolving academic viewpoints on these relationships. Central to the discussion is the interplay of political alliances, romantic entanglements, and strategic motives, situated within the broader context of power dynamics, gender, and imperialism during the late Roman Republic. The author argues that the intricate connections between Cleopatra, Caesar, and Antony defy monolithic interpretations and demand a nuanced and multifocal examination.*

**KEYWORDS:** *ancient history; late Roman Republic; Egypt; Cleopatra VII; Julius Caesar; Mark Antony; political alliances; romantic entanglements; imperialism; historiography*

*Introduction*

The allure of Cleopatra VII (70/69–30 BCE), the last pharaoh of Egypt, has captivated historians, artists, and filmmakers alike for more than two millennia. Shrouded in mystery and romanticized by mythology, her life was a tableau of power, intelligence, and impassioned relationships. Chief among these relationships were her entanglements with two of Rome's most powerful men, Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) and Mark Antony (83–30 BCE), which bore significant implications for her reign and the fate of Ptolemaic Egypt (305–30 BCE). Cinema, a powerful storytelling medium, has played a crucial role in molding the public perception of Cleopatra's relationships with Caesar and Antony. An example of this is the 1963 epic *Cleopatra*, featuring Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Rex Harrison.<sup>1</sup> This film dramatized the account of Cleopatra's life and significantly influenced the respective narrative for subsequent generations.

Following the death of her father, Ptolemy XII, Cleopatra VII became queen of Egypt in 51 BCE. She initially served as co-ruler alongside her brother, Ptolemy XIII (62–47 BCE), which was in keeping with the Egyptian tradition of sibling marriage. However, their relationship was fraught with power struggles, and Cleopatra was driven into exile in 48 BCE.<sup>2</sup> Her alliance with Julius Caesar began in the same year, when she sought his support to regain the Egyptian throne. Charmed by her wit and intelligence, Caesar backed Cleopatra's claim, and they became lovers. Their relationship yielded a son, Caesarion (Ptolemy XV). In 47 BCE, Caesar defeated Ptolemy XIII's forces at the Battle of the Nile, and Cleopatra was reinstated as queen. Cleopatra and her other younger brother, Ptolemy XIV

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<sup>1</sup> *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, featuring Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Rex Harrison (20th Century Fox, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Grant, *Cleopatra* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011; originally published 1972), chap. 2, Kindle.

(59–44 BCE), were deemed joint rulers of Egypt from 47 until 44 BCE.<sup>3</sup> Cleopatra and Caesarion visited Rome in 46–44 BCE, where they were controversially housed in Caesar's villa, however, after Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE, Cleopatra returned to Egypt. Cleopatra then began a liaison with Mark Antony, Antony was a member of the Second Triumvirate, alongside Octavian (63 BCE–14 CE) and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (c. 89 BCE–c. 13/12 BCE), which had been established to maintain order in Rome after Caesar's murder. During this time, Ptolemy XIV was killed, and Cleopatra installed her son Caesarion as co-ruler. Antony spent the winter of 41–40 BCE with Cleopatra in Alexandria, and their relationship resulted in the birth of three children, namely, the twins Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, and another son, Ptolemy Philadelphus. Antony's alliance with Cleopatra was seen as a betrayal by his fellow Triumvir, Octavian (later known as Augustus), who was Caesar's adopted son and heir. In 31 BCE, Antony's and Cleopatra's combined forces fought against Octavian in the naval Battle of Actium but were decisively defeated; thereupon, Antony and Cleopatra retreated to Alexandria. In 30 BCE, following false reports of Cleopatra's suicide, Antony took his own life.<sup>4</sup> Cleopatra, grief-stricken and unwilling to be paraded in defeat through Rome, then famously committed suicide herself, allegedly by allowing an asp (an Egyptian cobra) to bite her. After her death, Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire, marking both the end of Ptolemaic rule and the end of the Hellenistic Period.

This historiographical essay analyzes scholarly accounts chronologically, investigating the intricate and evolving academic viewpoints on Cleopatra's relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Through a temporal exploration, it illuminates the changing interpretations of these relationships as political alliances, romantic entanglements, and strategic maneuvers, thereby drawing attention to the wider interplay of power, gender, and imperialism during the late Roman Republic.

### *I. Primary Sources*

Academic scholarship on Cleopatra's relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony draws from a rich array of surviving primary sources. These sources, which include biographical accounts, historical narratives, and original documents, provide a multifaceted perspective on these historical figures and the era in which they lived. Among the most significant primary sources for this topic are *Plutarch's Lives*,<sup>5</sup> specifically his biographies of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra. As one of the most influential biographers of antiquity, Plutarch (c. 46–119 CE) offers detailed accounts of the lives of these individuals, their

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<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives: The Translation Called Dryden's*, ed. A. H. Clough, trans. John Dryden (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906), vol. 4, "Caesar," [online](#).

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 5, "Antony," [online](#).

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 4, "Caesar;" Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 5, "Antony."

relationships, and their roles in Roman history. Although his writing is often shaped by moral and philosophical considerations, Plutarch's accounts provide invaluable insights into the personal dynamics, political alliances, and power struggles that characterized Cleopatra's relationships with both Caesar and Antony. Cassius Dio's *Roman History*<sup>6</sup> is another crucial, albeit later, source for the study of this period. As a senator and historian of Rome, Dio (c. 165–c. 235 CE) presents a comprehensive account of Roman history, with particular emphasis on political and military events. His narrative provides a context for understanding Cleopatra, Caesar, and Antony's relationships as part of the broader canvas of Roman and Mediterranean politics. Dio's account is invaluable for its detail and scope. As for the Egyptian perspective, Cleopatra's own "Royal Decree"<sup>7</sup> from 33 BCE, preserved in the Berliner Papyrusdatenbank, offers a rare glimpse into Cleopatra's self-presentation and political agenda. As one of the few surviving documents issued by Cleopatra herself, the decree constitutes direct evidence of her political acumen and strategies. However, like all official documents, it reflects the image that the queen wished to project and should be interpreted in its political and rhetorical context. Scholars utilize primary sources such as these to form their assessment of Cleopatra's relationship with two of the most powerful men in Rome.

## II. Historiographical Perspectives

Michael Grant's monograph *Cleopatra*, originally published in 1972, is a fine example of this primary-source-based approach, as it gives a detailed biography of Cleopatra's life, including her interaction with both Caesar and Antony.<sup>8</sup> Grant (1914–2004), a classicist, appears to tackle the topic in a somewhat non-traditional manner: while utilizing well-known primary sources such as the works of Plutarch, Cicero, and Suetonius, as many scholars had done before, he remains mindful of their particular biases. This is not to say that these primary sources are not dependable, because without them we would have next to nothing on Cleopatra. Grant attempts a "true" biography, and he seems to question why Caesar chose to align himself with Cleopatra instead of her younger brother, Ptolemy XIII. Siding with Cleopatra caused more hassle for Caesar, as she did not have the backing of the Egyptian army or the support of Alexandria's political leadership that her brother had. Grant suggests that Caesar chose to support Cleopatra not just for her beauty but also for her intellect, diplomatic skill, and overall ability to lead. Caesar was so infatuated with her that he even erected a statue of her in Rome – not a popular thing to do in the Eternal City at that time.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, vol. 5 (Books 46–50) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), [online](#); Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, vol. 6 (Books 51–55) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), [online](#).

<sup>7</sup> Cleopatra VII, "Royal Decree," [33 BCE], P. 25239, *Berliner Papyrusdatenbank*, [online](#).

<sup>8</sup> Grant, *Cleopatra*, "Contents."

<sup>9</sup> Grant, *Cleopatra*, chaps. 3–4.

Grant then highlights that, after Caesar's death, Cleopatra swayed another important man of Rome, Mark Antony, who, alongside Octavian, was controlling Rome. Antony, just like Caesar, fell for Cleopatra despite being married to Octavia, Octavian's younger sister. Grant states that Antony essentially put his life, career, and all of Rome on the line for Cleopatra.<sup>10</sup> So how and why did two of Rome's most powerful men fall for Cleopatra? Grant explains that Cleopatra was incredibly smart and resourceful. Despite her young age, she knew how to play the game of politics and was willing to do whatever it took for her kingdom to prosper.

Speaking of Octavian, J. H. C. Williams's 2001 chapter, "Spoiling the Egyptians: Octavian and Cleopatra," highlights Octavian's ability to sense that Cleopatra was politically astute.<sup>11</sup> Williams, a numismatist, approaches Cleopatra's relationships with Caesar and Antony through the eyes of Octavian after Caesar's death, utilizing the accounts left by Cicero, Suetonius, and Dio. Williams claims that Octavian viewed Cleopatra as a manipulator, as she had manipulated Antony to abandon Rome for Alexandria and transfer the seat of power to herself. Williams emphasizes that Octavian labeled Cleopatra – and not Antony – as the "enemy of Rome" due to her seductive "powers."<sup>12</sup>

While Williams chooses to step into a historical character's (i.e., Octavian's) shoes to compose his narrative, Hellenistic historian Stanley Mayer Burstein (b. 1941) employs a more traditional biographical approach in his twenty-first-century account of Cleopatra. Burstein's monograph *The Reign of Cleopatra* (2004) focuses on her reign as a whole, using a variety of primary sources while making sure to keep her at the center of attention regarding her relationships with Caesar and Antony.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Grant, Burstein tends to be taken in by the primary sources' Roman bias. Burstein briefly mentions Cleopatra's relationship with Caesar, stating that – during her visit to Rome while exiled by her brother/husband Ptolemy XIII – "Cleopatra had one of her followers smuggle her into the royal palace concealed in a role of bedsheets."<sup>14</sup> Whether this happened or not is up for scholarly debate, but Burstein notes that, if this were true, it would have been the moment Julius Caesar became captivated with her. No one but Cleopatra would make such a theatrical entrance to plead her case as the rightful heir to the Egyptian throne. Burstein then turns our attention to the start of Cleopatra's relationship with Mark Antony. In 41 BCE, Antony ordered Cleopatra to Tarsus (in today's southern Turkey) to clarify her allegiance after Caesar's assassination.

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<sup>10</sup> Grant, *Cleopatra*, chaps. 6 and 11.

<sup>11</sup> J. H. C. Williams, "Spoiling the Egyptians: Octavian and Cleopatra," in *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth*, ed. Susan Walker and Peter Higgs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 192.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, "Spoiling the Egyptians," 192–199.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Mayer Burstein, *The Reign of Cleopatra* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Burstein, *Reign of Cleopatra*, 18.

Burstein highlights that, on her way there, Cleopatra was working out a way to take advantage of Antony as she knew his weakness. The two had met before in a Roman palace during her previous visits to Rome, as Antony had been Caesar's legal counsel and chief aide. Here, Burstein uses Plutarch as a source for Cleopatra's awareness that Antony equated himself with the Greek god Dionysos and states, "Cleopatra made good use of her knowledge of Antony's personality. Instead of playing the part of a humble suppliant like other eastern rulers and dynasts, she boldly assumed the role of the Egyptian royal goddess Isis in the guise of the Greek goddess Aphrodite coming to visit her husband Osiris in his manifestation as Dionysos."<sup>15</sup>

Emily Haug's 2008 journal article, "Local Politics in the Late Republic: Antony and Cleopatra at Patras," takes a different approach to the topic and does not mention Cleopatra's relationship with Caesar.<sup>16</sup> Employing a political perspective, Haug focuses on why certain Greek city-states, such as Athens and Patras, minted coins with Cleopatra and Antony's faces on them and what this reveals about their relationship in general. Haug mentions that the unique coinage issued by Athens—with the imagery of Zeus, a bearded Dionysus, and an eagle on a thunderbolt—is believed to represent Antony and Cleopatra. Athens did this despite its love for Octavia (Antony's Roman wife) and Cleopatra's earlier lack of popularity. Haug suggests that Athens may have referred indirectly to the kingdom of Egypt and Cleopatra as the new Isis to avoid directly honoring Cleopatra until 32 BCE.<sup>17</sup> Haug then discusses the coins minted at Patras, which seem to honor Cleopatra specifically. She suggests that Antony, as a patron of Greek cities, was taking the initiative to spread his and Cleopatra's influence in Greece, and this is reflected in the coinage. The Patras coin, featuring Cleopatra, suggests that the family of Agias, a leading family in the East, had shifted their allegiance from Rome to Alexandria, where Cleopatra and Antony were residing at the time.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Antony's and Cleopatra's relationship was not just a personal romance; it was a political alliance between two powerful individuals. Their bond allowed them to present a united front against their enemies, most notably Rome. The coinage from different Greek cities bearing the likenesses of Dionysus (who was often associated with Antony) and Isis (with whom Cleopatra was identified) may symbolize this joint political influence.

Joyce Tyldesley's 2008 monograph, *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt*, offers a biographical account of Cleopatra based on primary sources by authors such as

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<sup>15</sup> Burstein, *Reign of Cleopatra*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Emily Haug, "Local Politics in the Late Republic: Antony and Cleopatra at Patras," *American Journal of Numismatics* 20 (2008): 405.

<sup>17</sup> Haug "Local Politics," 412–413.

<sup>18</sup> Haug "Local Politics," 413–414.

Appian, Lucan, and Virgil.<sup>19</sup> Tyldesley (b. 1960), a British archaeologist, turns her attention to the different views ancient scholars took concerning Cleopatra's and Caesar's son, Caesarion. Tyldesley states that there was disagreement among Caesar's contemporaries about Caesarion's paternity. While some believed Caesar to be the father, others, including the historian Dio, claimed that Cleopatra only pretended that Caesar was the father. Suetonius, another historian, was neutral on the matter. Tyldesley then goes on to claim that Julius Caesar never publicly acknowledged Caesarion as his son. This silence has been interpreted in various ways: some of the ancient scholars speculate that the relationship was insignificant to him; others believe that Caesarion was not his son; still others speculate that Caesar was protecting his son by not acknowledging him publicly due to the potential political fallout. Cleopatra, too, neither confirmed nor denied the rumors concerning Caesarion's paternity.<sup>20</sup> Tyldesley explains that, as far as the children of Cleopatra and Mark Antony are concerned, they were acknowledged by both Cleopatra and Mark Antony himself, and ancient scholars were in agreement on that.<sup>21</sup> Overall, Tyldesley concludes that whether Cleopatra's offspring (fathered by Caesar and Antony) was for political or romantic ambition is a topic of extensive debate among historians.

Erich S. Gruen's 2011 anthology chapter, "Cleopatra in Rome: Facts and Fantasies," is a departure from the previous biographical accounts.<sup>22</sup> Gruen (b. 1935), a scholar specializing in ancient history, sheds light on what transpired during Cleopatra's first stay in Rome, focusing on her meeting and relationship with Caesar. Gruen approaches this topic in a way that argues that Cleopatra's relationship with Caesar was purely political and not for romance. Gruen claims that Cleopatra's stay in Rome is presented as a diplomatic mission, in line with historical instances of other Hellenistic rulers visiting Rome to secure an acknowledgment of their legitimacy. Gruen suggests that Cleopatra's presence in Rome was more about political and diplomatic maneuvering than personal ties with Caesar. Gruen challenges the commonly held view that Cleopatra stayed in Rome for an extended period of eighteen months. He suggests that Cleopatra may have returned to Egypt shortly after securing the alliance and only reverted to Rome when it became necessary to reiterate her claims and discuss the fate of her kingdom amidst Caesar's plans for reorganizing the empire. Gruen concludes that

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<sup>19</sup> Joyce Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>20</sup> Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 101–105.

<sup>21</sup> Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 164.

<sup>22</sup> Erich S. Gruen, "Cleopatra in Rome: Facts and Fantasies," in *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*, ed. Margaret M. Miles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 37–53, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Cleopatra was not a mere “sexual predator” or “plaything of Caesar” but a shrewd ruler advancing her interests and those of her kingdom.<sup>23</sup>

Cecilia M. Peek’s 2011 journal article, “The Queen Surveys Her Realm: The Nile Cruise of Cleopatra VII,” continues the focus on Cleopatra’s relationship with Caesar.<sup>24</sup> Peek, a historian and archaeologist, questions the authenticity of a supposed cruise Cleopatra and Caesar took in the spring of 47 BCE. Peek examines the accounts by Appian and Suetonius, which mention that the cruise happened, but highlights that there is no mention of the cruise in Julius Caesar’s own commentaries, particularly his *Bellum Alexandrinum*. Peek explains that some scholars view the cruise as unlikely, considering it an act of irresponsibility on Caesar’s part given the ongoing political and military tensions. Others, however, argue that the trip may have taken place, as there are plausible reasons why the author of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* might have chosen to omit it, such as protecting himself (i.e., Caesar) from criticism that he might have been neglecting his duties.<sup>25</sup> If the cruise did indeed happen, Peek suggests that it might have served multiple purposes for both Cleopatra and Caesar. For Caesar, it would have been a chance to relax after a series of battles and to strengthen his bond with Cleopatra, which was crucial to his influence over Egypt. For Cleopatra, it would have been an opportunity to reassert her power and secure her pro-Roman regime after her recent deposition and exile. Peek mentions that the archaeological discovery of a boat shrine at the Egyptian Temple of Geb in Koptat has been interpreted by some as a commemoration of this Nile journey, adding some weight to the argument in favor of the cruise.<sup>26</sup>

The final voice in this historiographical essay focuses on Cleopatra’s relationship with Mark Antony. Sheila L. Ager’s 2013 journal article, “Marriage or Mirage? The Phantom Wedding of Cleopatra and Antony,” continues to challenge the traditional historical narratives.<sup>27</sup> Ager (b. 1956), a Hellenistic historian, aims to determine whether Antony and Cleopatra got married in the winter of 37/36 BCE. The question of Antony and Cleopatra’s marriage is inherently complicated due to the different societal and legal understandings of marriage in Roman, Egyptian, and Hellenistic Graeco-Macedonian societies. Ager explains that, from a Roman legal standpoint, their relationship would not have been recognized as a lawful marriage (*iustum matrimonium*), especially considering that Antony remained married to Octavia until 32 BCE and that Roman law did not permit marriage to a foreigner. Cleopatra was a foreigner from the Roman perspective,

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<sup>23</sup> Gruen, “Cleopatra in Rome,” 50–53.

<sup>24</sup> Cecilia M. Peek, “The Queen Surveys Her Realm: The Nile Cruise of Cleopatra VII,” *The Classical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2011), 595–607.

<sup>25</sup> Peek, “Queen Surveys Her Realm,” 595–602.

<sup>26</sup> Peek, “Queen Surveys Her Realm,” 603–607.

<sup>27</sup> Sheila L. Ager, “Marriage or Mirage? The Phantom Wedding of Cleopatra and Antony,” *Classical Philology* 108, no. 2 (2013): 139–155.

which would have rendered any alleged marriage to a Roman legally problematic. On the other hand, from the perspective of Hellenistic royalty, a marriage between Cleopatra and Antony could have been considered legitimate. The Ptolemaic monarchs were accustomed to marrying within the family, but Cleopatra's brothers were dead by 44 BCE, which might have made her marriage to a powerful foreigner like Antony an acceptable option.<sup>28</sup> Ager concludes that the evidence for a formal marriage between Antony and Cleopatra is shaky at best, and there is no concrete evidence of a wedding ceremony. She argues that Antony's political interests in Rome would not have been served by a bigamous and unlawful marriage, and that Cleopatra, who was in control of her dynasty, would not have accepted a marriage without public rituals and ceremonies.<sup>29</sup> This suggests that, while Antony and Cleopatra may have had a deeply romantic and political relationship, they likely did not go through a formal marriage ceremony that would have been recognized by their respective societies.

### *Conclusion*

This historiographical essay has traced the rich tapestry of scholarship on Cleopatra's relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, highlighting the complexity of their entanglements and the evolving perspectives that have emerged over the last few decades. It becomes clear that interpretations have shifted from viewing these relationships as purely political alliances or pure romance to recognizing the multifaceted nature of their connections, encompassing romantic elements and strategic maneuvers. This temporal exploration provides an opportunity to appreciate the nuance and dynamism inherent in these relationships, as well as the broader implications they carry for understanding power, gender, and imperialism during the late Roman Republic.

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<sup>28</sup> Ager, "Marriage or Mirage," 139-145.

<sup>29</sup> Ager, "Marriage or Mirage," 149-153.