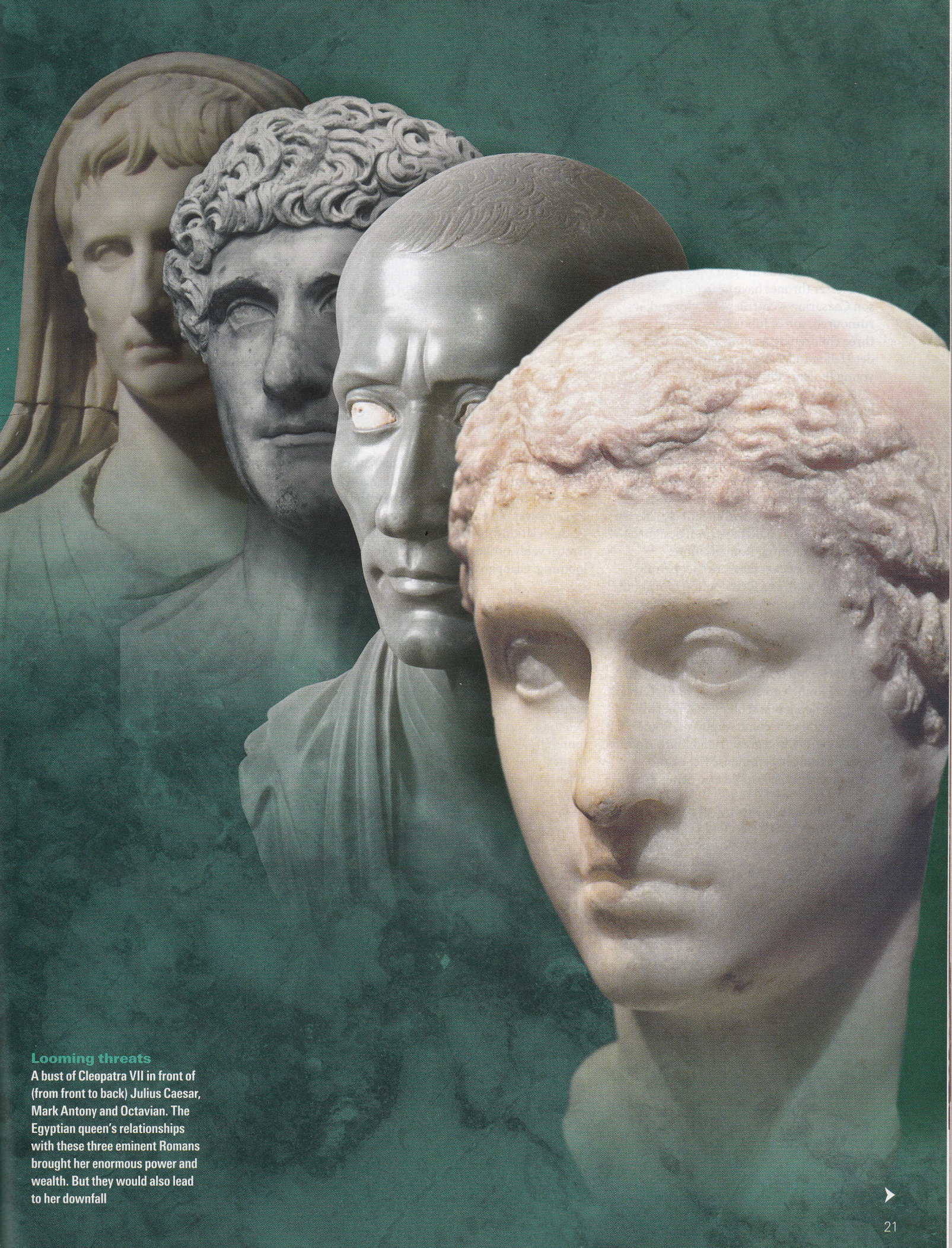


ROME GLORIED IN CLEOPATRA'S TALE OF DECADENCE, LUST AND DEATH

Joyce Tyldesley on an Egyptian queen's ill-fated entanglements with three Roman generals



Looming threats

A bust of Cleopatra VII in front of (from front to back) Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Octavian. The Egyptian queen's relationships with these three eminent Romans brought her enormous power and wealth. But they would also lead to her downfall



It is the autumn of 34 BC

and Cleopatra VII, queen of Egypt, is hosting a lavish celebration in her capital city, Alexandria. Seated on a golden throne, wearing flowing robes and an intricate crown decorated with a sun disk and cow horns, she is the living incarnation of the goddess Isis. Beside her sits her consort, the Roman general Mark Antony, dressed as the god Dionysus. Nearby, four lesser thrones have been provided for her son Caesarion – co-ruler of Egypt and, it is rumoured, son of Julius Caesar – and her three children by Antony: the twins Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene and the young Ptolemy Philadelphus.

At the climax of the ceremony Antony gives an astonishing speech that makes his ambitions clear. Cleopatra is recognised as queen of Egypt, Caesarion is both king of Egypt and the legitimate heir to Julius Caesar in Rome, and the younger children are destined to rule a vast expanse of lands. Antony, as patriarch, will effectively rule the world. Nothing could have been designed to annoy the watching Romans more.

Rome was never far from Cleopatra's thoughts. And, as a forthcoming film about the Egyptian queen (starring Gal Gadot of *Wonder Woman* fame) is likely to relate, Cleopatra's life was inextricably linked with the dominant power in the Mediterranean world. Her relationships and rivalries with three of Rome's greatest men – Julius Caesar, his great-nephew and heir Octavian (who would go on to become Augustus, Rome's first emperor), and great friend Mark Antony – would bring her immense riches and influence. But they would also bring about her downfall.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that

Cleopatra became entangled with Rome from an early age. A member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, a family of Macedonian heritage who had inherited Egypt following the death of Alexander the Great, she had seen her father, Ptolemy XII, plunge deep into debt as he bribed influential Romans to protect his crown. The danger was obvious. Egypt was fertile and ill-defended while Rome, ambitious and expanding, was ever-greedy for Egypt's plentiful grain.

When Ptolemy "died of disease" in 51 BC, he appointed the people of Rome guardians to his successors: the 18-year-old Cleopatra and her 10-year-old brother Ptolemy XIII. Ptolemaic tradition dictated that brothers and sisters ruled Egypt jointly, and sometimes married one another (though we're not sure if the latter was the case with Cleopatra and Ptolemy).

The joint reign started with Cleopatra as the dominant monarch and Ptolemy controlled by his advisors and tutors. By the time Ptolemy was old enough to assert his authority, the relationship between the siblings had irretrievably broken down. With civil war looming, Cleopatra raised an army in Syria.

Rome, too, was in crisis.

Julius Caesar had crossed the Rubicon, effectively declaring war on his former ally, the powerful senator and general, Pompey the Great. In August 48 BC, Caesar won the battle of Pharsalus and the defeated Pompey fled to the Egyptian port of Pelusium. Here he found Ptolemy's forces nervously awaiting the arrival of Cleopatra's mercenary army. Wishing to impress Caesar with his loyalty, Ptolemy ordered that Pompey be killed.

Four days later Caesar arrived in

Alexandria and Ptolemy's men presented him with Pompey's severed head. Feigning horror – how could a mere Egyptian presume to kill a noble Roman? – he marched into the city. By nightfall he had commandeered the palace; there had been rioting and deaths.

Determined to avert civil war, Caesar summoned Cleopatra and Ptolemy and made it clear that he expected them to rule together in harmony. The poet Lucan, writing c65 AD, tells us that Cleopatra threw a lavish banquet to celebrate this new beginning: "When Caesar had made an expensive peace between the pair, they celebrated with a banquet. With pomp the queen displayed her luxuries, as yet unknown to Roman fashions..."

But Lucan's account needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. In reality no one, Caesar excepted, was happy with the new power-sharing arrangement, and Alexandria was soon plunged into vicious fighting which ended with Ptolemy XIII dead and Cleopatra ruling Egypt alongside a second young brother, Ptolemy XIV. The queen and king were supported by four Roman legions. Egypt was, in all but name, a Roman protectorate.

Suetonius tells us that Caesar was smitten by Cleopatra. "He often feasted with her until daybreak, and they would have sailed together in her barge nearly to Ethiopia had his soldiers agreed to follow him." Some time between 47 and 44 BC Cleopatra gave birth to a son whom she named Ptolemy Caesar (Caesarion). In Rome, opinion was divided over the boy's paternity. In Egypt, no one really cared, although Ptolemy XIV must have started to wonder about his own life expectancy. With Caesarion and Cleopatra ruling Egypt, and Caesar dictator of Rome, Egypt would receive Roman protection, Rome would benefit from Egypt's generosity,

TIMELINE The rise and fall of Egypt's last pharaoh

70 or 69 BC

The birth of Cleopatra VII is unrecorded, but Plutarch tells us that at the time of her death (12 August 30 BC) she was 39 years old. Her father is Ptolemy XII; her mother unknown.



A sculpture thought to depict Cleopatra, whose exact date of birth is unknown

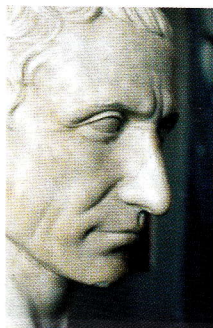
51 BC

Ptolemy XII is succeeded by Cleopatra and her brother (and perhaps husband) Ptolemy XIII.

Julius Caesar established Rome as the dominant force in Egypt in 47 BC

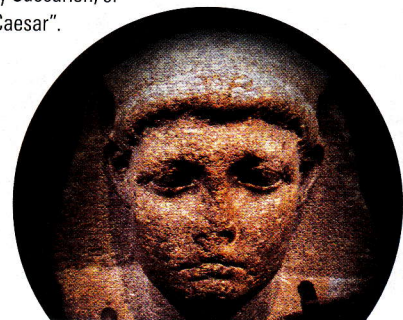
47 BC

The siege of Alexandria ends with Caesar victorious, Ptolemy XIII dead, and Cleopatra restored to her throne alongside a new co-ruler, the young Ptolemy XIV.



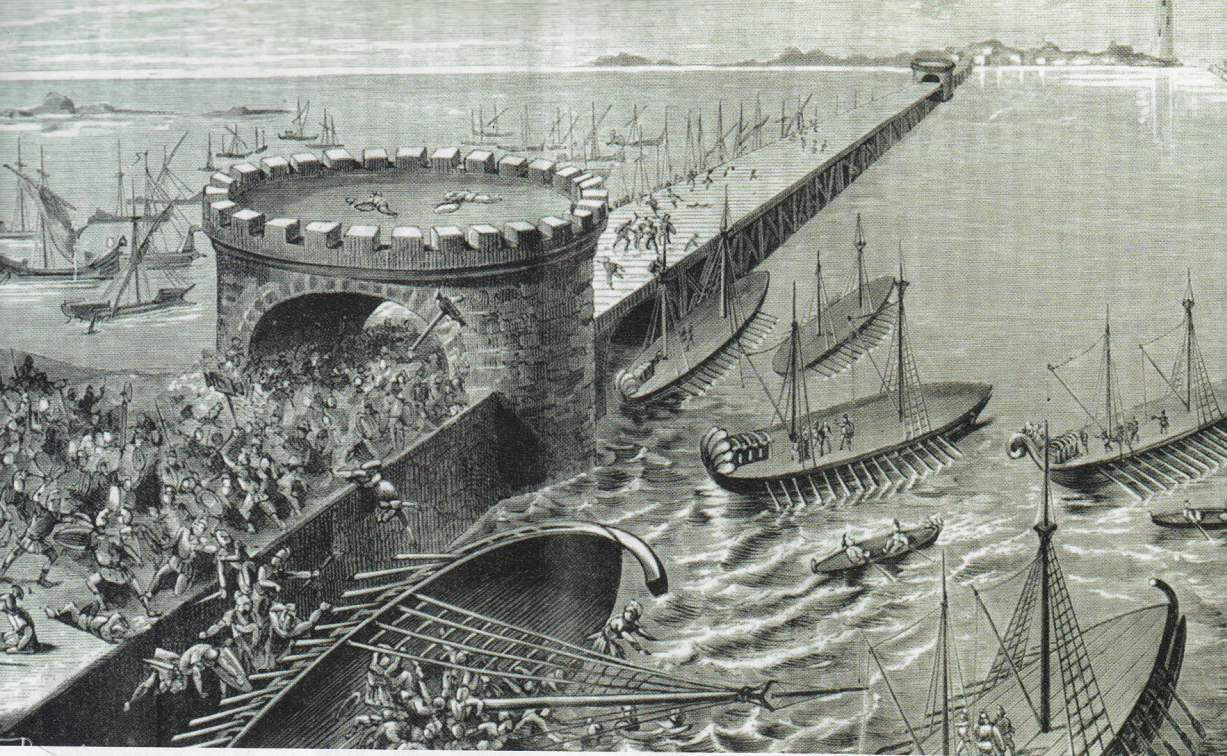
c47 BC

Cleopatra gives birth to a son (pictured below) whom she names Ptolemy Caesar. The people of Alexandria leap to the obvious conclusion and rename the baby Caesarion, or "Little Caesar".



44 BC

Caesar is assassinated on 15 March, and Cleopatra flees Rome for Alexandria. Soon after her return, Ptolemy XIV dies and Caesarion takes his place as king.



Escape to victory

A depiction of the 47 BC siege of Alexandria, which ended with Egypt becoming a Roman protectorate and Julius Caesar becoming Cleopatra's lover

MARK ANTONY GAVE AN ASTONISHING SPEECH THAT MADE HIS AMBITIONS CLEAR. AS PATRIARCH HE WOULD EFFECTIVELY RULE THE WORLD

Mark Antony depicted on a coin. The battle-hardened general, wrote Plutarch, fell instantly for Cleopatra's charms



and Caesar's family would be all powerful.

In the summer of 47 BC Caesar left Egypt. The couple next met in Rome, where Cleopatra stayed on Caesar's private estate until his assassination on the Ides of March (15 March) 44 BC. Cicero, a dedicated republican, met Cleopatra at this time and disliked her: "I hate the queen... I cannot recall her insolence, when she was living in Caesar's house in the gardens beyond the Tiber, without indignation."

Cicero confirms that Cleopatra left Rome within a month of Caesar's death: "I see nothing to object to in the flight of the queen." Back in Alexandria, Ptolemy XIV inexplicably died. With the three-year-old Ptolemy XV Caesarion beside her, Cleopatra ruled Egypt for three peaceful years.

Outside Egypt things were far from peaceful. A triumvirate of Mark Antony, Octavian and Lepidus (a general and ally of Caesar) had determined to capture Caesar's

41 BC

Responding to his fascination with the cult of Dionysus, **Cleopatra meets Mark Antony in Tarsus**, dressed as his consort, the Egyptian goddess Isis. The two soon begin a relationship that produces three children.

37 BC

Cleopatra negotiates with Antony for the return of the lost eastern empire of her ancestor Ptolemy II Philadelphus, becoming possibly the world's wealthiest monarch.

34 BC

Antony makes his ambitions for his Egyptian royal family clear by **distributing lands held by Rome and Parthia** among Cleopatra's children. The bond between **Antony and Julius Caesar's anointed heir, Octavian**, is irretrievably broken.

31 BC

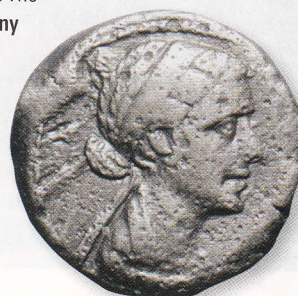
The combined fleets of Cleopatra and Antony are defeated at the **battle of Actium** and they flee to Alexandria.

30 BC

Cleopatra kills herself, possibly using snake venom. In Egypt, more than 3,000 years of dynastic rule ends. In Rome, imperial rule begins.



The meeting of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, depicted by the Romantic artist Lawrence Alma-Tadema in 1883



A coin depicting Cleopatra. Her death in 30 BC confirmed Rome's domination of Egypt



A mother's love

A c35 BC relief showing Cleopatra with her son Caesarion, who was probably the product of her relationship with Julius Caesar. Caesar's death in 44 BC would have dramatic consequences for both mother and son

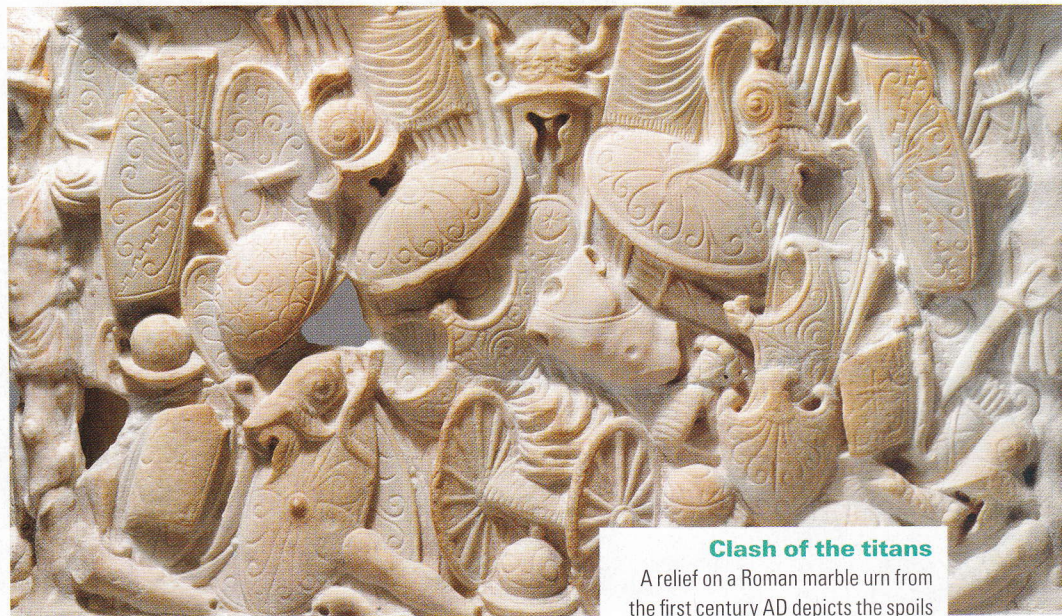
CLEOPATRA NEEDED A ROMAN PROTECTOR, AND ANTONY – MORE EXPERIENCED AND POPULAR THAN OCTAVIAN – SEEMED HER NATURAL ALLY

assassins Brutus and Cassius, and they expected Egypt to help. Meanwhile, Brutus and Cassius also expected Egyptian assistance. Cleopatra hesitated then, siding with the triumvirate, she returned the Roman legions stationed in Egypt. She raised a fleet and set sail to join Octavian and Antony in Greece, but a storm blew up, her ships were damaged and Cleopatra fell ill. While she waited for a second fleet to be made ready, Brutus and Cassius killed themselves. With Lepidus essentially ineffective, two men now held power: Octavian controlled Rome's western empire, and Antony the east.

Cleopatra knew that she needed a Roman protector and Antony – older, more experienced and certainly more popular than Octavian – seemed her natural ally. When Antony summoned her to Tarsus (now in Turkey), she seized her chance. Plutarch is clear that Cleopatra intended to seduce Antony and that he almost immediately succumbed to her charms. "...she was going to visit Antony at the very time when women have the most brilliant beauty and are at the acme of intellectual power... she went putting her greatest confidence in herself, and in the charms and sorceries of her own person."

Cleopatra sailed into Tarsus on a gilded boat fitted with silver oars and a purple sail. Flutes, pipes and lutes played on deck, and incense perfumed the air. The queen, dressed as Isis, reclined beneath a gold spangled canopy attended by boys dressed as cupids. When Antony sent an invitation to dinner she declared that she would rather entertain him. Cleopatra captivated Antony with splendid food and drink, and they sat together that evening surrounded by a multitude of twinkling lights.

Cleopatra feasted with Antony, but she bargained with him too. She would provide funds to part-finance a Parthian campaign but he, in return, must protect her position.



Clash of the titans

A relief on a Roman marble urn from the first century AD depicts the spoils of a battle. Caesar's death triggered a wave of bloodletting as the leading figures in the empire vied for power

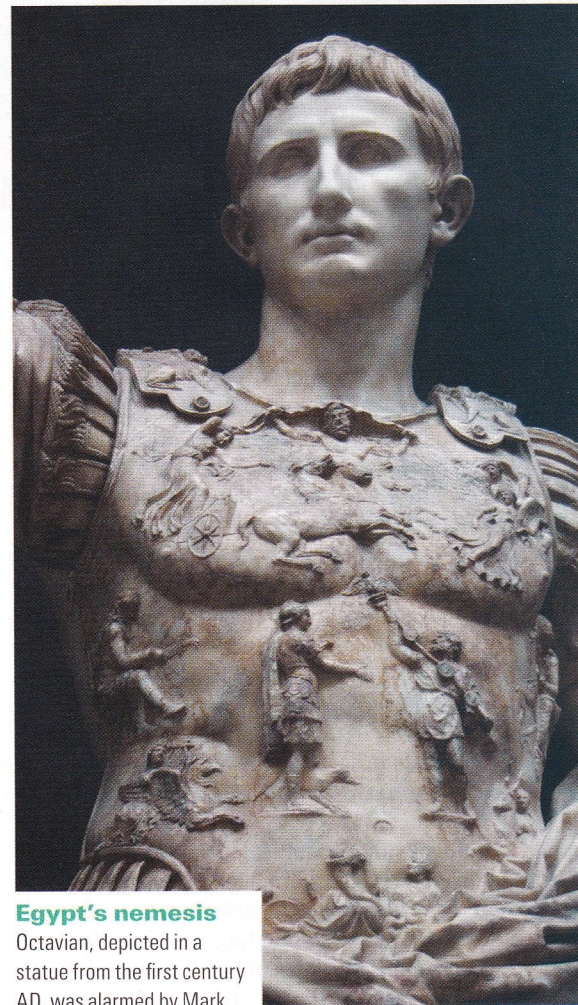
The couple spent the winter relaxing in Alexandria. But in 40 BC, when Cleopatra gave birth to twins, Antony had already gone. He would not see his Egyptian children for three and a half years.

In 37 BC the triumvirate

was renewed for a second term. Antony now agreed to supply Octavian with 120 warships to be used against the pirate ships that were disrupting Mediterranean trade. Octavian, in return, would provide Antony with four legions to use against the Parthians. Antony handed over his ships, but the promised troops never arrived. Belatedly, Antony realised that he could not rely on Octavian. He travelled to Antioch, and once again summoned Cleopatra. She would provide the fleet that he needed, but in exchange she demanded the return of the extensive eastern Mediterranean empire ruled and then lost by the early Ptolemies. When Antony agreed, Cleopatra became probably the world's wealthiest monarch. In late summer 36 BC she bore her third son.

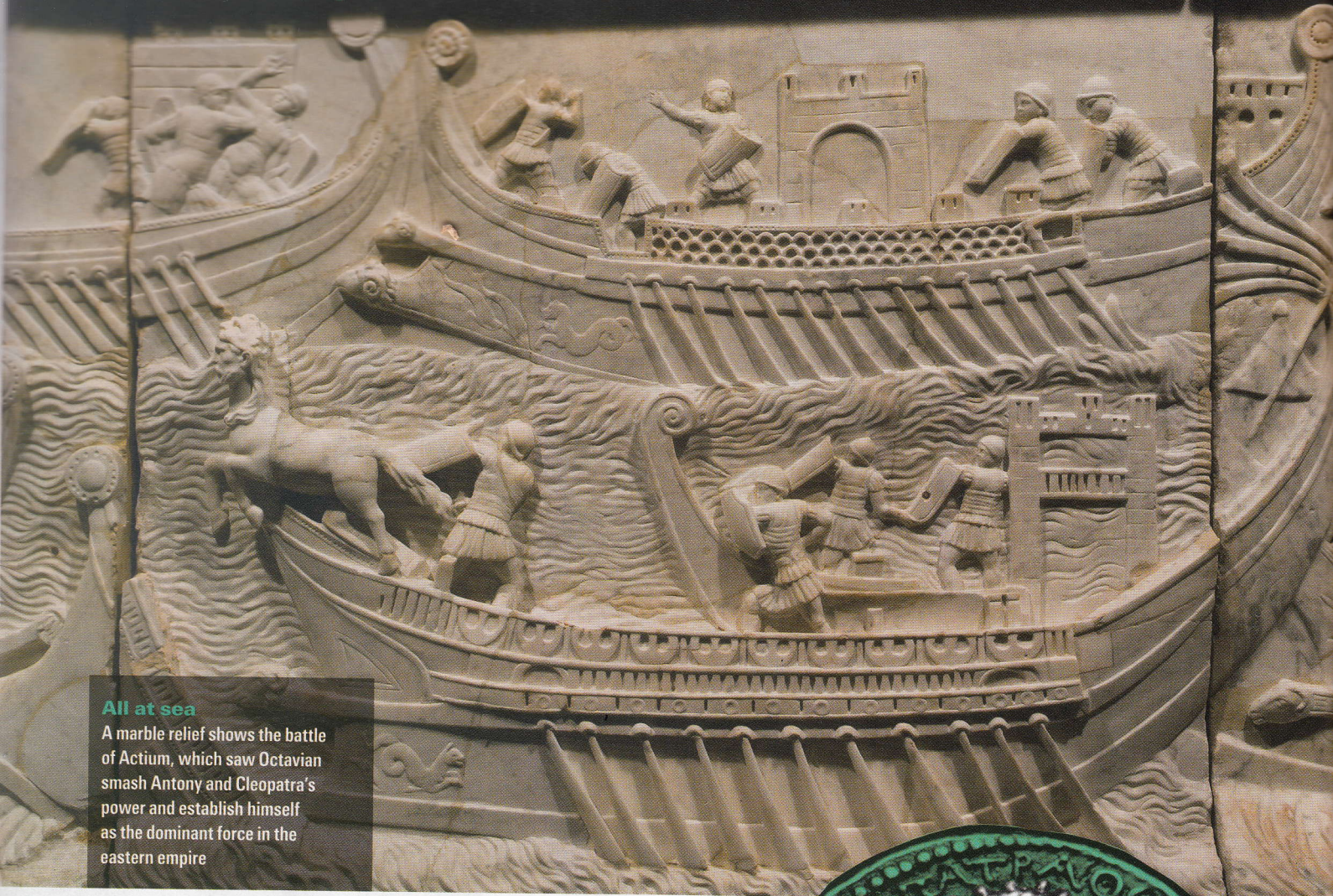
The Parthian campaign quickly turned into a humiliating disaster, and Antony was forced to retreat to Syria. It was not all bad news, however. In 34 BC Antony captured Artavasdes of Armenia. This was far from the major victory that he had anticipated. Nevertheless, Antony awarded himself the honour of entering Alexandria dressed in the golden robe of Dionysus, crowned with ivy leaves and carrying a wand symbolising prosperity, fertility and pleasure.

Octavian was not amused. Antony's celebration was akin to a triumph: a sacred Roman celebration. When this was followed by the elaborate public celebration known today as the "Donations of Alexandria", it seemed clear that Antony considered Alexandria a capital city to rival Rome.



Egypt's nemesis

Octavian, depicted in a statue from the first century AD, was alarmed by Mark Antony's military campaigns in Egypt and elsewhere, so set out to eliminate his erstwhile ally



All at sea

A marble relief shows the battle of Actium, which saw Octavian smash Antony and Cleopatra's power and establish himself as the dominant force in the eastern empire

Octavian and Antony could no longer rule together; one of them had to go. As a fierce propaganda war erupted, Octavian used Cleopatra – characterised as an unnatural, emasculating woman – to expose and explain Antony's inappropriate behaviour. Tales of Antony's unhealthy subservience spread like wildfire. Cleopatra had demanded and received the vast libraries of the Greek city of Pergamum in Asia Minor (modern Turkey); she had recruited Roman soldiers into her bodyguard; she had made Antony rub her feet like a slave at a banquet.

In late 32 BC, Octavian

donned ritual garments, hurled a wooden javelin against an invisible enemy and declared war on Cleopatra "for her acts". It is not obvious what these hostile acts might have been. Cleopatra had in fact been a loyal vassal, preparing a fleet for Antony and Octavian and responding to various Roman summonses to Alexandria, Tarsus and Antioch. All this was irrelevant. Octavian needed to promote Cleopatra as an enemy of Rome if he were to achieve his ambition of eliminating the still-popular Antony. His men would not fight Antony, but they would

fight Cleopatra – and Antony, he gambled, would stand by his queen.

The battle of Actium shattered Antony's dream of a glorious eastern empire. Plutarch tells us that Cleopatra and Antony had raised an army of not less than 500 warships, 100,000 legionaries and armed infantry, and 12,000 cavalry. Cleopatra supplied at least 60 Egyptian ships and commanded her own fleet. Octavian, with a mere 250 ships, 80,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry, was outnumbered, but his fleet was better armed and better prepared, and his admiral, Agrippa, was highly experienced.

On 2 September 31 BC, Antony's ships emerged in three divisions, protecting Cleopatra's fleet. Almost immediately things went badly wrong as Octavian's fleet kept out of range, drawing Antony's ships out to sea. While Antony commanded the right division, the ships from the central and left divisions inexplicably retreated.

Then – unaccountably – Cleopatra's ships



Heading for trouble

Cleopatra, portrayed on a coin minted in c32 BC. The Egyptian queen showed loyalty to Rome. In return, Octavian destroyed her armies and smeared her reputation

ROME PORTRAYED CLEOPATRA AS AN UNNATURAL WOMAN WHO DOMINATED MEN, SLEPT WITH HER BROTHERS AND GAVE BIRTH TO BASTARDS

hoisted their sails, broke through Octavian's line and sailed away. Antony transferred to a quinquireme (a galley with five banks of oars on each side) and chased after Cleopatra. The sea battle ended with 5,000 of Antony's men lost and 300 ships taken. Meanwhile, Antony's ground forces had been caught by Octavian's troops; most of his soldiers subsequently defected.

Cleopatra went straight to Alexandria. It still seemed reasonable to make extravagant plans. A plan to flee to Spain was dropped when it became obvious that Octavian's ships would make the sea crossing far too dangerous. A plan to flee to India via the Red Sea was abandoned when Cleopatra's boats were captured and burned by the Nabataean king Malchus. Antony arrived in Alexandria to find Cleopatra's partially completed mausoleum packed with treasure. If attacked, she intended to set fire to her fortune.

In the summer of 30 BC, Octavian invaded Egypt from the east, marching across the Nile Delta to set up camp just outside Alexandria. On the morning of 1 August, Antony led his troops through the city gate, while his fleet sailed to meet the Roman ships. To his horror his ships surrendered immediately, and his cavalry followed suit. His infantry remained loyal but it was a one-sided battle. Antony retreated and, hearing (incorrectly, in fact) that Cleopatra had already killed herself rather than be taken captive, stabbed himself in the stomach. Cleopatra's death on 12 August 30 BC brought 3,000 years of dynastic rule over Egypt to an end.

The Roman propaganda

machine continued to manipulate public opinion against Cleopatra long after the battle of Actium. As Cleopatra had allowed Octavian to eliminate Mark Antony without staining Octavian's reputation, her story had



Seductive image Cleopatra – shown in John William Waterhouse's c1887 painting – has “evolved into a semi-mythological figure more famous for her beauty than her brains”

to survive as an integral part of his. Caesar, the adoptive father who gave Octavian his right to rule, was to be remembered as an upright man who manipulated an immoral foreign woman for his own ends. Antony, Octavian's rival, was to be remembered as a fatally weak man hopelessly ensnared in the coils of an immoral foreign woman. Cleopatra was to be that immoral foreign woman: an unnatural female who dominated men, slept with her brothers and give birth to bastards. A woman foolish enough to think that she might one day rule the world.

The Roman story of decadence, lust and suicide – the contrast between the seductive, decaying power of Egypt and the virile, disciplined strength of Rome – has captured the imaginations of western artists and writers over the centuries, allowing Cleopatra to evolve into a semi-mythological figure more famous for her beauty than her brains. Plutarch is at pains to stress that Cleopatra was not actually a great beauty (“Her beauty, as we are told, was in itself not altogether incomparable”) but rather an intelligent woman with a flair for languages who could

“readily turn to whichever language she pleased, so that there were few foreigners she had to deal with through an interpreter”.

Plutarch, writing at the beginning of the second century AD, can hardly be considered an eyewitness. Nevertheless his recognition of Cleopatra's intelligence fits well with medieval Arab historians' view of Cleopatra as the “virtuous scholar”, a public benefactor who protects her people and is an accomplished philosopher, alchemist, mathematician and physician. It will be very interesting to see which version of Cleopatra the producers of the forthcoming film about her remarkable life choose to create. **II**

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Joyce Tyldesley is professor of Egyptology at the University of Manchester, and the author of *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt* (Profile, 2008)

LISTEN

Joyce Tyldesley contributed to the BBC Radio 4 documentary **The Forum: Who Was the Real Cleopatra?** To listen, go to bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswpsp

