

## The Serpent of the Nile

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A wealth of slides illustrated Helen's lecture on the celebrated and beautiful Cleopatra, last pharaoh of ancient Egypt. Her short life lasted from 69 to 30 BC. She belonged to the Ptolemaic dynasty, members of which ruled Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great and throughout the Hellenistic period. Her legendary beauty was matched by her intelligence; she was proficient in nine languages and was a skilled mathematician.

When Cleopatra's father, Ptolemy XII, died he left Egypt jointly to his daughter, then aged only 18, and his young son, Ptolemy. Cleopatra married her younger brother and co-ruler, but civil war soon broke out between them.

The Roman emperor Julius Caesar came to Egypt intending to annex it. He seized Alexandria from Ptolemy, who was currently in the ascendance. Cleopatra, spotting a chance of claiming Roman protection, found her way into Caesar's palace, famously wrapped in a carpet. Caesar, perhaps predictably, fell in love with her. They went to Rome together and produced a son, Caesarion. Her liaison with Caesar lasted until his assassination in 44BC when she returned to Egypt.

One of the leaders to appear in Rome after Caesar's death was Mark Antony. In 41 BC he summoned Cleopatra to Tarsus in Anatolia, to answer charges she had aided his enemies. When Cleopatra arrived in Tarsus, dressed as the goddess of love on a magnificent river barge, he too fell helplessly in love with her. They married in 36 BC and went on to have twins. Together they formed a formidable military alliance against Octavian, the great-nephew of Julius Caesar and Mark Antony's rival. There followed more years of tension, fighting and intrigue but at the battle of Actium in 31 BC Antony and Cleopatra suffered a massive defeat. Cleopatra, seeing the battle going against her, retreated with her ships to Alexandria and Antony followed her.

Soon both she and Mark Antony were dead. It is said that Antony received false news that Cleopatra had committed suicide. He took his own life out of grief for her loss and also to avoid imprisonment by the victorious Octavian who became the first Roman Emperor, Augustus. Cleopatra's death is well known. Overwhelmed by grief at Antony's death she allowed an asp, a poisonous snake and symbol of divine royalty, to bite her.

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