Contents

INTRODUCTION: Playing to Win ........................................ 1
CHAPTER 1: Birth of a Queen ......................................... 2
CHAPTER 2: Power and Exile .......................................... 11
CHAPTER 3: Appealing to Caesar .................................... 19
CHAPTER 4: Fighting for Control .................................... 25
CHAPTER 5: Devotion and Disaster ................................. 32
CHAPTER 6: Growing Conspiracies ............................... 42
CHAPTER 7: Passion and Politics .................................. 48
CHAPTER 8: Carefree and Careless ............................... 55
CHAPTER 9: Republican Unrest ..................................... 61
CHAPTER 10: Reunion and Renewal ............................... 67
CHAPTER 11: The Parthian Campaign ............................ 75
CHAPTER 12: Triumphs, Titles, and Tensions ................... 82
CHAPTER 13: Gathering Forces .................................... 90
CHAPTER 14: The Battle of Actium ............................... 98
CHAPTER 15: Death in Alexandria ............................... 109
GLOSSARY .................................................................. 118
BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................ 119
SOURCE NOTES ........................................................... 120
IMAGE CREDITS .......................................................... 122
ABOUT THE AUTHOR .................................................. 122
INDEX .................................................................... 123
Events in the Life of Cleopatra

Winter 69 BCE
Cleopatra VII is born in Alexandria to Ptolemy XII and Cleopatra V. Cleopatra VI and Berenice are her older sisters; Arsinoë is her younger sister and is born about three years later.

61 BCE
Cleopatra's brother Ptolemy XIII is born.

59 BCE
Cleopatra's youngest brother, Ptolemy XIV, is born.

Spring 55 BCE
Ptolemy XII is restored to power; Berenice dies.

58 BCE
Ptolemy XII is forced to flee Alexandria. Cleopatra VI and Berenice seize control, but Cleopatra VI dies.

51 BCE
Ptolemy XII dies. Cleopatra VII and her brother-husband Ptolemy XIII are named co-regents. Cleopatra travels on the Nile to install the Buchis bull.

49 BCE
Cleopatra is forced into exile.

48 BCE
Julius Caesar arrives in Egypt; his rival, Pompey, is murdered. Cleopatra returns to Alexandria. The Alexandrian War begins.

47 BCE
Cleopatra gives birth to her first son, Ptolemy XV Caesar, who is called Caesarion.

44 BCE
Caesar is murdered at the Senate in Rome on March 15. Cleopatra, Ptolemy XIV, and Caesarion return to Alexandria. The Alexandrian War ends. Caesar names Cleopatra and her brother-husband, Ptolemy XIV, co-regents. Cleopatra and Caesar travel on the Nile.

October 40 BCE
Mark Antony marries Octavia in Rome. The Ptolemaic dynasty, founded in 305 BCE, comes to an end.

September 46 BCE
Caesar's triumph is held in Rome; Cleopatra, Ptolemy XIV, and Caesarion join him there.

41 BCE
Mark Antony and Cleopatra meet in Tarsus and spend the winter in Alexandria.

Fall 37 BCE
Mark Antony and Cleopatra are reunited and spend the winter of 37-36 in Antioch.

32 BCE
Mark Antony divorces Octavia. Octavian declares war on Cleopatra on behalf of Rome.

Spring 30 BCE
Octavian attacks Egypt.

August 1, 30 BCE
Mark Antony is defeated by Octavian. Mark Antony commits suicide.

August 12, 30 BCE
Cleopatra dies. The Ptolemaic dynasty, founded in 305 BCE, comes to an end.
Playing to Win

Whatever Cleopatra dictated was done, without regard for the laws of man or nature.

—Appian

According to legend, Mark Antony hosted a magnificent feast for Cleopatra and waited for praise from Egypt’s powerful queen. After all, had the Roman general not met her superior standards of luxury and extravagance? In the candlelight, Cleopatra’s jewels sparkled. Her dark eyes flashed. Mark Antony may have spared no expense, but Cleopatra could not be outdone. She dismissed his efforts, saying that she could spend an amount equal to 60,000 pounds of gold on a single meal. Mark Antony challenged her to prove it.

The next night Cleopatra hosted a superb banquet, but Mark Antony must have felt confident. Nothing gracing the table or passing their lips came close to meeting her impressive claim. However, the meal was not yet finished.

Cleopatra’s servant brought her a goblet of vinegar. The queen removed an earring. The pearl dangling from the gold clasp—one of the two largest pearls in the world—was worth an astronomical sum. Cleopatra dropped the earring into the drink and swirled it until the pearl dissolved. Without hesitation, she drank the mixture and then flashed Mark Antony a victorious smile.

At that moment, Mark Antony learned a valuable lesson. Cleopatra—daring, clever, smart, rich, determined, and rash—intended to win at any cost.
CHAPTER 1

Birth of a Queen

Egypt has three hundred cities, plus three thousand, plus three times ten thousand, plus two times three, plus three times nine, and king Ptolemy rules them all.

—Theocritus

In the winter of 69 BCE, Egypt’s ruler welcomed a third baby girl into the royal family. King Ptolemy XII named his daughter Cleopatra, which in Greek means “her father’s glory.” She joined a dynasty that had ruled Egypt for more than 250 years.

The Ptolemy Family

The Ptolemy family came originally from Macedonia, a kingdom located in the northern region of ancient Greece. They rose to power after the death of Alexander the Great, a brilliant military leader who had established an empire that extended eastward from Greece to India. He conquered Egypt in

This seventeenth-century copper medallion shows Cleopatra’s father, Ptolemy Auletes, holding Poseidon’s trident and wearing Helios’s crown—symbols that link him to Greek gods.
331 BCE and mapped out the plan for a new capital city that would bear his name. When Alexander died in 323 BCE, his close circle of advisors divided the empire into three regions—Macedon, Syria, and Egypt. In the division, Alexander's trusted general and childhood friend, Ptolemy, claimed Egypt for himself. He knew about Alexander's dream to build the most remarkable city in the world and saw to it that this dream was fulfilled.

The kingdoms that had been part of Alexander's empire maintained strong cultural ties to Greece. However, from the beginning of their reign, the Ptolemies combined their Greek heritage with Egyptian customs that could be traced back thousands of years. King Ptolemy I called himself the pharaoh, in keeping with the Egyptian kings and queens who ruled before him.

Using the Egyptian title of pharaoh linked Ptolemy to Egyptian history and to the power of the Egyptian gods. Nevertheless, Ptolemy did not entirely give up his Greek ways. He still dressed in the woolen robes that citizens of Athens wore. He spoke Greek. He worshipped the Greek gods. Ptolemy passed this legacy down through the ages. Generations later, Cleopatra inherited the Ptolemaic traits and traditions. She was an Egyptian citizen, but Greek blood flowed in her veins.

Cleopatra's father, Ptolemy XII, was called Auletes, which means “the flute player.” He was known far and wide for hosting huge parties and fancy banquets. The identity of her mother is uncertain, but it is likely that she was Ptolemy XII's sister, Cleopatra V. The pharaohs had long practiced brother-sister marriage. In doing so, they copied the lives of the gods and goddesses they worshipped. The Greek myths favored by the Ptolemies featured similar relationships. For example, the Greek god Zeus was
Rulers and Gods

The word *pharaoh* comes from the Egyptian phrase *per-ao*, meaning “great house.” Over time, it came to refer to the king or queen living in the great house, a divine ruler who was considered a god.

In Egypt, government and religion were two parts of a whole. The strength of Egypt as a nation and its endurance as a society can be traced to the key role the pharaoh played as a direct link to the gods. In dynasty after dynasty, the people may have objected to the policies of one ruler or another. Nevertheless, the pharaoh commanded great respect and support due to his or her close relationship to the gods.

This mural, created c. 1200–1085 BCE, depicts the pharaoh, Ramses III, and his son making offerings in the underworld to Apis, the sacred bull that stood for the god Osiris.

married to his sister, Hera. Together they ruled over the rest of the Greek gods and goddesses. It is therefore not so surprising that the Ptolemies chose to continue this ancient marriage custom between members of the Egyptian royal family.
Cleopatra—historically known as Cleopatra VII—grew up with five sisters and brothers at the palace in Alexandria. Two sisters—Cleopatra VI and Berenice—were older. Another sister, Arsinoë, was born about three years after Cleopatra. Later came two boys. Ptolemy XIII was born in 61 BCE, and Ptolemy XIV was born in 59 BCE. All of the children were raised to carry on the dynasty. According to the Egyptian law that the Ptolemies followed, women were allowed to take the throne and rule in their own right or as equal partners alongside the men. Cleopatra and her sisters received the same education as their brothers to prepare them for the responsibilities of ruling an empire.

Alexandria

When Alexander laid out the grid for the port city of Alexandria, the site he chose was a quiet coastal village west of the Nile Delta. By the time Cleopatra was born, Alexandria had become the largest and grandest city in the world. Its population had grown to 300,000 citizens made up of different groups. The powerful Greek community, which was the ruling class, lived in the center of the city. The Jewish community, mostly scholars and tradesmen, lived on the east side. The Egyptians, who were considered second-class citizens, lived in the old part of the city.
on the west side. Cleopatra herself lived in the royal district called
the Bruchion, a cluster of palaces overlooking the Mediterranean
Sea on the northeast side of the city.

The city proper swarmed with people from all walks of life. Merchants, sailors, artisans, government workers, and soldiers lived crowded together. Even so, city life was comfortable and pleasant, thanks to the wide streets, parks, gardens, and extensive system of canals. The river and nearby Lake Mareotis, located south of the city, provided a steady supply of fresh water; and sea breezes kept the air circulating.

The location of Alexandria on the Mediterranean made it a major trade center. Two harbors flanked a causeway connecting the island of Pharos to the mainland. The causeway extended for about three-quarters of a mile. The magnificent Pharos lighthouse guided ships into the Great Harbor on the east side
of the causeway and the Harbor of Good Return on the west. Each harbor was big enough to hold 1,200 vessels at one time. Goods from Africa, Asia, Greece, and Italy arrived by sea and by overland routes. The historian named Strabo declared the marketplace in Alexandria to be “the greatest emporium in the inhabited world.” Cleopatra would have been exposed to all sorts of tastes and treasures sold in the shops and stalls lining the streets.

The Pharos Lighthouse

The Pharos lighthouse was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. The marble structure was ordered by Ptolemy I and designed by Sostrates in 290 BCE. Built in three sections, it had a square base and an octagonal midsection. A giant statue of Zeus stood on the round chamber at the top. The tower rose to an overall height of 423 feet, making it the tallest building in the world at that time. While the other world wonders were purely decorative or ceremonial, the lighthouse was used to guide ships into port. In the top chamber, a huge curved mirror made of polished bronze reflected sunlight during the day. At night, it reflected light from a burning flame. The beacon could be seen from more than thirty miles out at sea.

Artists use historic descriptions to imagine what the Pharos lighthouse looked like. Johann Bernhard Fischer von Eriach created this etching in 1721.
Besides being a trading hub, Alexandria also had a long history as a center for culture and learning. Great thinkers, teachers, writers, dramatists, and artists shaped its colorful past. Ptolemy I founded the Museum, which became a center for scientific study. Ptolemy II established the Library and vowed to collect one copy of every manuscript in existence. Thanks to these patrons, Cleopatra had access to an enormous body of knowledge for reading and research.

**Learning to Rule**

The details of Cleopatra’s childhood are unknown, but there is no doubt that she was extremely well educated. The pharaohs of Egypt had a long-standing program to educate their daughters to prepare them to rule, and this was one of the traditions that the Ptolemys followed, too. They even extended education for girls to the daughters of wealthy Greeks who were part of the ruling class. Schools set up across Egypt trained the leaders and administrators of the future.

Records show that Cleopatra studied subjects based on Greek literature. Greek works considered the masterpieces of the day were collected into a set of textbooks for her. Cleopatra read Homer’s epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; poetry by Hesiod and
Pindar; and plays by Euripides and Menander. She studied history written by Herodotus and Thucydides, which included political and military events of the past, and memorized the speeches of Demosthenes to learn the fine points of public speaking and debate.

In addition to literature, Cleopatra studied science and math. Subjects included arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and medicine. To round out her education, Cleopatra studied art and music, and for recreation, she sailed and rode horses. In every aspect, her education prepared her morally, mentally, and physically to step into her role as queen.

Cleopatra seems to have been a curious and eager student. While it is certain that she was extremely bright, she was truly exceptional when it came to learning foreign languages. Reports that she knew as many as nine languages fluently and could move from one to another without effort may be exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is true that she was the only Ptolemy ever to learn to speak Egyptian, and she was one of the few members of her family able to converse with neighboring dignitaries in their own tongue. Her language skills made her useful in political discussions. It also earned her the respect and affection of the Egyptian people living outside the Greek influence of Alexandria.

**Support from Rome**

Although Egypt was isolated by the surrounding desert and maintained its political independence, the Ptolemies had come to rely on the vast power of the Roman Republic to provide support and to help keep order. The Ptolemies paid Rome to protect them from uprisings by native Egyptians and occasional threats from
The Roman Republic

In the centuries after Alexander’s death, marking the end of his empire, Rome rose to the level of a superpower. Roman generals used military might to extend their territory. In some cases the generals shared leadership of the annexed territories with local officials. In other cases they put Roman governors and representatives in place to rule newly acquired regions. Everyone answered to the Senate in Rome. By the time Cleopatra was born, the Roman Republic stretched across Europe, extended east to the Euphrates River, and included parts of North Africa.

tribes to the east. Cleopatra’s father continued this policy, making sure that Egypt stayed on Rome’s good side at any cost.

Ptolemy XII could be weak, harsh, and unpredictable. He thought nothing of bankrupting his own people to buy Rome’s protection. At the same time, he did anything he could to strengthen his own authority and granted favors to anyone who would assist in this effort. Cleopatra saw for herself the power plays, secret pacts, broken promises, bribes, and betrayals that marked her father’s rule.

On the other hand, Cleopatra could look all around her and see the glories of the Ptolemaic dynasty as well. Marble monuments graced the wide streets of Alexandria. Gilded temples, restored to their former grandeur, gleamed in the desert sun. Murals depicted her ancestors as powerful god-rulers who presided over a rich land. The tombs of the pharaohs and of Alexander the Great himself served as constant reminders of the heights she could hope to achieve.