

2 February 2025: Essex Egyptology Group: The Cleopatras: The Forgotten Queens of Egypt - Female Power in the Ptolemaic & Seleucid Kingdoms: Prof. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

In February, Professor Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones gave the group a clearly set out and well-illustrated talk via Zoom on The Cleopatras. He began his talk by stating that history had not recognised the importance of the seven Ptolemaic queens named Cleopatra. Even the last and most famous one - **Cleopatra VII** - is mostly known from popular culture through Shakespeare's 'Antony & Cleopatra' or film portrayals by Elizabeth Taylor or Colette Colbert, and has been characterised inaccurately and sensationally by historians, which consequently have dominated our perception of their queenship.

Misrepresented by generations of history, variously claimed as a femme fatale, a feminist icon, appropriated by black historians (her mother cast as black woman in a recent Netflix drama), Cleopatra VII (c69-30BCE) was an intelligent, learned, astute and charismatic woman who lived an extraordinary life. She surely must have known her family history - a complex genealogical maze - and learned some political acumen from some of her remarkable ancestors.

Cleopatra VII would have known that the name Cleopatra means 'the glory of the fatherland or dynasty' from ('cleos' = glory, renown or fame; & 'patros' = fatherland, ancestry). More intimately, in other words: 'daddy's girl'. There were 15 pharaohs named Ptolemy and 10+ called Cleopatra. Other common names were Arsinoë and Berenice. Their family names resonated back to the dynasty of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great.

Following the 1976 acclaimed drama series 'I, Claudius', a 1984 series 'The Cleopatras' proved less successful as the public were generally unfamiliar with Ptolemaic history. The columnist Peter Ackroyd, in a crushingly dismissive review, wrote of the soap opera quality surrounding the lives of the conniving Ptolemies and their families.

Prof. Llewellyn-Jones then introduced each Cleopatra chronologically and plotted them on a complex and rather entangled family tree chart that included inter-generational, incestuous marriages. These were regarded as pragmatic - 'keeping it in the family', as well as following the precedent set by the gods (Osiris & Isis; Zeus & Hera) for pharaohs regarded as semi-divine. The Ptolemies promoted their own divine cults - their queens were considered to be living goddesses. Over 250 years, incestuous, physical relationships resulted in a restricted gene pool that produced physical defects (and possibly mental abnormalities).

A character outline of each of the Cleopatras followed:

Cleopatra I Syra (c.204-176 BCE) was the daughter of the Seleucid king Antiochus III and the wife of Ptolemy V. She had been brought to Egypt as Ptolemy IV and Arsinoë III had had no daughters. Cleopatra I ruled as regent after her husband died. Her sons became Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VIII (known as 'Potbelly'). Her daughter, Cleopatra II was married to both these sons.

Cleopatra I's name is recorded on the Rosetta Stone and she is mentioned on the obelisk now at Kingston Lacey. On a bust she wears an uraeus and 'Isis locks' in her hair - an Egyptian fashion then adopted by Greek women. She also appears on a gold coin bearing the epithets she used.



Cleopatra I (c.168-175 BCE) (BM London)

Cleopatra II (c.185-116 BCE) (aka: the sister) gave herself lofty titles drawn from Greek gods. She was titled Philometer ('mother-loving [goddess]') as spouse of her brother and co-ruler Ptolemy VI Philometer, in 175-164 and 163-145 BCE; She was titled Euergetis ('benefactor [goddess]') as spouse of her brother and co-ruler Ptolemy VIII Euergetes Physcon (Potbelly) in 145-132 and 124-116 BCE; Lastly, she was titled Philometer Soteira ('mother-loving saviour' [goddess]) during her sole reign in 132-127 BCE and as senior monarch in 116/5 BCE.



Cleopatra III, Louvre, Paris

Edfu Temple was a cult centre of the Ptolemies. On its walls there is a relief of Ptolemy VIII, Cleopatra II and their son, Ptolemy Memphites in the presence of Thoth. On Cleopatra III's 50th birthday the dismembered body of Memphites was presented to her.

Cleopatra II's eldest daughter, **Cleopatra Thea** became the wife and mother to a succession of Seleucid kings, thus intertwining the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties.

Cleopatra III (c.160-101 BCE) (aka: the wife) was the youngest daughter of Cleopatra II and Ptolemy VI. She was married to her uncle/stepfather - Ptolemy VIII - while he was still married to Cleopatra II.

Cleopatra III saw her 3 daughters murdered during the Seleucid wars: Cleopatra IV, Cleopatra Tryphaena, and Cleopatra Selene. Ptolemaic queens took attributes of different deities - both Greek & Egyptian: Aphrodite / Isis. Arsinoë II was the first to be deified, and Cleopatra III was deified during her lifetime. Royal children also took the attributes of divine offspring such as Eros / Horus - assimilated to create a syncretism of Graeco-Egyptian thought. The fecundity of the Ptolemaic queens was symbolised on coins and statues by double cornucopias - symbols of abundance.



Cleopatra III (c160-101 BCE)

Egypt found itself caught up in civil war between Cleopatras II & III (wives of Ptolemies VI & VIII)

Ptolemy VIII was cruel & capricious - the most brutal of all the Ptolemies. After Ptolemy VIII died Cleopatra III was forced to choose her hated son Ptolemy IX as pharaoh alongside her, although a Theban relief shows Cleopatra III taking precedence over him. She has more reliefs than any other Cleopatra including a black schist statue bearing her name in hieroglyphs with the epithet 'Lady of the Two Lands, Mighty Bull'. Her titles claimed divine attributes. She developed trade routes and sent expeditions. According to Strabo, she was sometimes known as 'Kokke' ('cunt') when discussed in relation to her son Ptolemy X - who was termed 'ho kokke' (son of Kokke). Cleopatra III was a real mover and shaker, and some consider that it is she who should be known as 'Cleopatra the Great', thus providing a role model for Cleopatra VII.

Cleopatra IV (reigned 116-115 BCE) was the eldest daughter of Cleopatra III and Ptolemy VIII. She married her brother, Ptolemy IX, and later married a Seleucid prince and acted as a military leader during the Seleucid wars. She was killed by her sister, Cleopatra Thea.

Cleopatra Tryphaina / Thea was the second daughter of Cleopatra III and Ptolemy VIII. She also married a Seleucid king and ruled that kingdom with him.

Cleopatra Selene was the third and youngest daughter of Cleopatra III and Ptolemy VIII. She married her brother, Ptolemy IX after he had divorced her sister, Cleopatra IV. She then married another of her brothers, Ptolemy X. Later she left Egypt and married a succession of Seleucid kings.

Cleopatra V Berenice III (d.?c.69 BCE) was the daughter of Ptolemy X and Cleopatra IV. She married her uncle, Ptolemy X, then her father, Ptolemy IX. Following his death, she was sole monarch until she was forced to marry the short-lived Ptolemy XI - her nephew and stepson - who was murdered on her wedding night.

Cleopatra VI Tryphaina (c.95-c.57 BCE) was the daughter of Cleopatra V Berenice III and Ptolemy X. She is mentioned in Egyptian texts and married her half-brother, Ptolemy XII, the son of Ptolemy IX and Cleopatra IV. It is she who was featured in the recent Netflix documentary 'Queen Cleopatra' as a black woman and the mother of Cleopatra VII.



Bust of Cleopatra VI, (Altes Museum, Berlin)

Cleopatra VII (c.69-30 BCE) was the daughter of Ptolemy XII and Cleopatra Tryphaina. She married two of her brothers - Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV, and was the mother of Ptolemy XV Caesar, the son of Julius Caesar. She had three more children by Marc Antony. Cleopatra VII was the last Ptolemaic queen.

Cleopatra was co-regent with her father, then, as sole ruler, she minted her own coins. After 18 months, she was ousted by her brother, Ptolemy XIII, and fled to Syria. With the arrival of Julius Caesar, she returned, and, according to Plutarch, was smuggled into the palace. Following the death of Ptolemy XIII, Caesar forced her to marry her youngest brother, Ptolemy XIV. In June 47 BCE, she gave birth to a son by Julius Caesar - Caesarion (Ptolemy XV Caesar). To promote religious/national symbolism, Cleopatra likened herself to Isis/Aproditte and her son to Horus/

Eros. In an unprecedented relief, the birth of Caesarion is watched by Amun, Nekhbet and Cleopatra VII herself. The following year, 46 BCE, Cleopatra took Caesarion to Rome, accompanied by Ptolemy XIV. A metal statue of the boy Caesarion survives, as does a marble statue of

Cleopatra as Venus Genetrix.

In 44BC following Julius Caesar's murder, Cleopatra returned to Egypt and had Ptolemy XIV murdered. She was now sole ruler of Egypt with Ptolemy Caesarion as her heir. Though still a boy, he appears with her as an adult on a relief at the rear of Dendera Temple and on a sandstone stela, he is depicted as Khonsu or Horus.



Cleopatra VII and Caesarion, Dendera Temple (image: Michael Twodtfa, 2016)

When Cleopatra aligned herself with Marc Antony, they were cast as the new Dionysus and Isis. Marc Antony also appeared as a pharaoh on a statue.

Cleopatra's 3rd coinage depicts her with Antony where hyperbole styles her as the 'queen of kings' and her son as 'king of kings'. At the Battle of Actium off the Greek coast in September 31 BCE, Antony and Cleopatra lost to Caesar Octavian.

In August 30 BCE Octavian entered Alexandria and both Cleopatra and Marc Antony killed themselves to avoid capture and public humiliation in Rome before probable execution. Plutarch, in his 'Life of Antony', described the scene of Cleopatra's death in detail. Popularly thought to be by means of an asp in a basket (according to literary works), Cleopatra's death was more likely to have been via a poisoned comb in her hair or stabbed into her arm.

The asp stories were most likely of Roman invention.



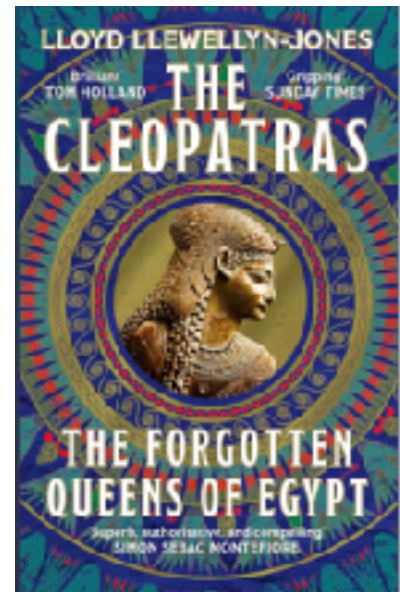
Coin of Cleopatra & Marc Antony

Cleopatra's sons by Marc Antony were probably murdered on Octavian's orders, as was Caesarion. Her daughter, Cleopatra Selene, reigned in Mauritania but her son was executed on orders of Caligula.

Prof. Llewellyn-Jones concluded his talk on the Cleopatras by saying that they were the victims of bad press, in that they were vindictive and power hungry. Their crime was one of gender as women; they would have been viewed differently had they been men.

For those interested into delving further into the lives and times of the Cleopatras, Lloyd recommended two recommended books:

1. 'Sister-Queens in the High Hellenistic Period: Kleopatra Thea and Kleopatra III' by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Alex McAuley. Routledge, 2024. (more academic).
2. 'The Cleopatras: The Forgotten Queens of Egypt' by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones. Headline Publishing, 2024. (more general readership).



Michael Tweddle 9/2/25, revised 23/2/25