

CHAPTER
6

HISTORYMAKERS

Cleopatra

Wily Queen of Egypt

Section 2

"To know her was to be touched with an irresistible charm. Her form, . . . the persuasiveness of her conversation, and her delightful . . . behavior—all these produced a blend of magic."—Plutarch, a Roman historian

Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, has gone down in history as a conniving leader who used tricks to gain influence within the Roman Empire. She was actually an intelligent ruler who used an iron will in an effort to keep Egypt free of Roman control. Ironically, the queen who tried to preserve Egypt was not even Egyptian. Cleopatra belonged to the family of the Ptolemies. This family from Macedon had ruled Egypt for several hundred years after the death of Alexander the Great. Though they had ruled Egypt for a long time, none of the family had ever bothered to learn Egyptian—until Cleopatra. Plutarch wrote that she learned so many languages she could speak to "Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Jews, Arabs, Syrians, Medes, and Parthians" in their own tongues.

In the first century B.C., the family's fortunes and its hold on Egypt declined. Cleopatra's father was a weak king. He showed more interest in music than in running his kingdom, leading the people to nickname him "the Flute Player." He feared that Rome would seize Egypt, an attractive place because of its abundance of farmland. To buy safety, he sent huge amounts of money as bribes to various Roman leaders, including Julius Caesar. He eventually died in 51 B.C. At the time, Cleopatra was 18.

She became queen, ruling along with her brother Ptolemy XIII, who was only ten. Powerful insiders in the Egyptian court hoped to run the country by controlling the young king. They forced Cleopatra to flee Egypt three years later.

However, she raised an army and prepared to retake her crown, ready to fight her brother for control. Meanwhile, Julius Caesar had defeated his rivals and become the powerful leader of Rome. When Caesar came to Egypt to settle the issue of the throne, Cleopatra seized her chance to argue her case. She had herself wrapped in a rug and carried to Caesar so she could speak to him directly. Impressed by her clever and bold act, Caesar agreed to back her rather than her brother. Caesar and Cleopatra also began a relationship. They may have loved one another, but one historian cautioned,

"it must always be borne in mind that both of them were ruthless and devious politicians." Later, she had a son that was Caesar's. He was named Caesarion. Cleopatra's brother died fighting Caesar's army, and in 47 B.C. she was back on the throne. She and Caesar may have planned to marry and become king and queen of Rome with Caesarion to follow them. In 44 B.C., however, those hopes were destroyed. Caesar was assassinated by senators who wished to restore the Roman Republic. Cleopatra, in Rome at the time, decided it was wise to return to Egypt. Caesar's heir, Octavian, and his friend Mark Antony began to rule Rome together. The two leaders had an uneasy alliance, however, and each tried to outfox the other in order to gain control of the Roman government. Cleopatra enchanted Antony as she had Caesar. By 37 B.C., Antony had dismissed his wife, married Cleopatra, and recognized her two children as his own. He also gave large amounts of land to her, restoring Cyprus and Lebanon to Egypt. The wife that Antony rejected, however, was the sister of Octavian. This drove a wedge between the former allies. With Cleopatra's wealth Antony rebuilt his army and navy. In 31 B.C., his forces met Octavian's in battle to decide who would control Rome—and thus the Mediterranean. Octavian won, and Cleopatra and Antony escaped back to Egypt. Octavian, though, brought his armies there the following year. Trapped and unable to win, Antony committed suicide. Cleopatra pleaded with Octavian to allow her to retire and make Caesarion king of Egypt. Octavian refused, and she too committed suicide. Soon after, Octavian had Caesarion killed.

Questions

1. **Contrasting** How was Cleopatra different from the other members of the Ptolemaic Dynasty?
2. **Making Inferences** Why was Rome so important to the fate of Cleopatra's Egypt?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did Octavian have Caesarion killed?