

Cleopatra Seduces Antony, 41 BC

The romance between Antony and Cleopatra might have changed the world. If Antony had succeeded in winning sole control of Rome with Cleopatra as his queen, he could have changed the course of the Roman Empire, making the world we live in today a different place. However, their relationship ended in mutual suicide in 30 BC, eleven years after it started, when Roman troops engulfed the Egyptian city of Alexandria and threatened their capture.

The seed that spawned their relationship was sown with the murder of Julius Caesar in March 44 BC ([see The Assassination of Julius Caesar](#)). Rome descended into anarchy and civil war. By 41 BC Antony and Octavian (who would later change his name to Augustus) shared the leadership of Rome and had divided the state into two regions - the western portion including Spain and Gaul ruled by Octavian, the eastern region including Greece and the Middle East ruled by Antony.

The Parthian Empire located in modern-day Iraq posed a threat to Antony's eastern territory and he planned a military campaign to subdue them. But Antony needed money to put his plan into action and he looked to Cleopatra - ruler of Egypt and the richest woman in the world - to supply it. In 41 BC he summoned Cleopatra to meet him in the city of Tarsus in modern-day Turkey.

Cleopatra was a seductive woman and she used her talents to maintain and expand her power. Her first conquest was Julius Caesar in 48 BC. He was 52, she was 22. Their relationship produced a son and was ended only by Caesar's assassination.

Her initial response to Antony's summons was to delay her journey - possibly to send the message to the Roman leader that as a queen in her own right, she was not at his beck and call. Eventually surrendering to the inevitable, Cleopatra sailed from Egypt to the city of Tarsus. As she made the final leg of her journey up the river Cydnus she traveled in a magnificent barge filled with flowers and scented with exotic perfumes while she reclined on deck surrounded by her servants and trappings of gold. Antony enjoyed women and once he saw her, he fell under her spell.

[Antony was] "...carried away by her to Alexandria, there to keep holiday, like a boy, in play and diversion, squandering and fooling away in enjoyment that most costly of all valuables, time."

Plutarch was a Greek historian who wrote a history of the life of Antony in the first century AD. We join his story as Cleopatra receives Antony's summons to join him:

"She had faith in her own attractions, which, having formerly recommended her to Caesar and the young Pompey, she did not doubt might prove yet more successful with Antony. Their acquaintance was with her when a girl, young, and ignorant of the world, but she was to meet Antony in the time of

life when women's beauty is most splendid, and their intellects are in full maturity. She made great preparations for her journey, of money, gifts, and ornaments of value, such as so wealthy a kingdom might afford, but she brought with her her surest hopes in her own magic arts and charms.

...she came sailing up the river Cydnus in a barge with gilded stern and outspread sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps. She herself lay all along, under a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and beautiful young boys, like painted Cupids, stood on each side to fan her. Her maids were dressed like Sea Nymphs and Graces, some steering at the rudder, some working at the ropes.

...perfumes diffused themselves from the vessel to the shore, which was covered with multitudes, part following the galley up the river on either bank, part running out of the city to see the sight. The market place was quite emptied, and Antony at last was left alone sitting upon the tribunal; while the word went through all the multitude, that Venus was come to feast with Bacchus for the common good of Asia.

On her arrival, Antony sent to invite her to supper. She thought it fitter he should come to her; so, willing to show his good humor and courtesy, he complied, and went. He found the preparations to receive him magnificent beyond expression, but nothing so admirable as the great number of lights; for on a sudden there was let down altogether so great a number of branches with lights in them so ingeniously disposed, some in squares, and some in circles, that the whole thing was a spectacle that has seldom been equaled for beauty.

The next day, Antony invited her to supper, and was very desirous to outdo her as well in magnificence as contrivance; but he found he was altogether beaten in both, and was so well convinced of it, that he was himself the first to jest and mock at his poverty of wit, and his rustic awkwardness. She, perceiving that his raillery was broad and gross, and savored more of the soldier than the courtier, rejoined in the same taste, and fell into it at once, without any sort of reluctance or reserve.

For her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her, was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching. It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice, with which, like an instrument of many strings, she could pass from one language to another; so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter.

Antony was so captivated by her, that while Fulvia his wife maintained his quarrels in Rome against Caesar by actual force of arms, and the Parthian troops...were assembled in Mesopotamia, and ready to enter Syria, he could yet suffer himself to be carried away by her to Alexandria, there to keep holiday, like a boy, in play and diversion, squandering and fooling away in enjoyment that most costly, as Antiphon says, of all valuables, time.

Were Antony serious or disposed to mirth, she had at any moment some new delight or charm to meet his wishes; at every turn she was upon him, and let him escape her neither by day nor by night. She played at dice with

him, drank with him, hunted with him; and when he exercised in arms, she was there to see.

At night she would go rambling with him to disturb and torment people at their doors and windows, dressed like a servant woman for Antony also went in servant's disguise, and from these expeditions he often came home very scurvily answered, and sometimes even beaten severely, though most people guessed who it was. However, the Alexandrians in general liked it all well enough, and joined good humouredly and kindly in his frolic and play, saying they were much obliged to Antony for acting his tragic parts at Rome, and keeping his comedy for them."

References:

References: Plutarch's account appears in: Davis, William Stearns, Readings in Ancient History vol. 1 (1912); Grant, Michael, Cleopatra (1973).

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