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Yale University Press

Adrian Goldsworthy was awarded a doctorate in ancient history by Oxford University and has taught at a number of universities. His many published works, which have been translated into more than a dozen languages, include the critically acclaimed *Caesar: The Life of a Colossus* and most recently *The Fall of the West: The Death of the Roman Superpower.* A full-time author, he has also written the novel *True Soldier Gentlemen*, the first in a series following the fortunes of a group of British soldiers in the fight against Napoleon. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the University of Newcastle. Visit his website at www.adriangoldsworthy.com

By Adrian Goldsworthy

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Antony and Cleopatra

Fiction

True Soldier Gentlemen
Beat the Drums Slowly

Antony and Cleopatra

Adrian Goldsworthy

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Contents

	Acknowledgements	vii
	Map List	ix
	Introduction	1
I	The Two Lands	17
II	The 'She-Wolf': Rome's Republic	29
III	The Ptolemies	41
IV	The Orator, the Spendthrift and the Pirates	58
V	The Oboe Player	74
VI	Adolescent	91
VII	The Return of the King	109
VIII	Candidate	119
IX	'The New Sibling-Loving Gods'	132
X	Tribune	148
XI	Queen	163
XII	Civil War	174
XIII	Caesar	191
XIV	Master of Horse	208
XV	Not King, But Caesar	220
XVI	Consul	234
XVII	'One of Three'	250
XVIII	Goddess	269

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMMPR01 Unit $$PR Page 6

XIX	Vengeance	282
XX	Dionysus and Aphrodite	300
XXI	Crisis	313
XXII	Invasion	325
XXIII	'Lover of Her Fatherland'	338
XXIV	'India and Asia Tremble': The Grand Expedition	350
XXV	Queen of Kings	369
XXVI	'Is She My Wife?'	385
XXVII	War	401
XXVIII	Actium	409
XXIX	'A Fine Deed'	425
	Conclusion: History and the Great Romance	444
	Family Trees	457
	Chronology	461
	Glossary	472
	Abbreviations	481
	Bibliography	483
	Notes	492
	Index	531

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Map List

The Hellenistic world in 185 BC 49
The Roman Empire in the first century BC 64
Ptolemaic Egypt 81
The centre of Rome 95
Judaea 115
Alexandria 136
The Italian campaign, 49 BC 159
The Battle of Pharsalus 188, 190
Italy 255
The Battle of Forum Gallorum 259
Greece and Macedonia, and the Battles of Philippi 294
Antony's Parthian expedition 357
The Donations of Alexandria 382
The Battle of Actium 420

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 1

Introduction

Antony and Cleopatra are famous. With just a handful of others, including Caesar, Alexander the Great, Nero, Plato and Aristotle, they remain household names more than two thousand years after their spectacular suicides. Cleopatra is the only woman in the list, which in itself is interesting and a testament to her enduring fascination. Yet most often Antony and Cleopatra are remembered as a couple, and as lovers – perhaps the most famous lovers from history. Shakespeare's play helped them to grow into fictional characters as well, and so their story can now be numbered alongside other tales of passionate, but doomed romance, as tragic as the finale of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is unsurprising that the tale has been reinvented time after time in print, on stage and, more recently, on screen. Since they both had strongly theatrical streaks, this enduring fame would no doubt have pleased them, although since neither was inclined to modesty it would probably not have surprised them or seemed less than their due.

The story is intensely dramatic, and I cannot remember a time when I had not heard of Antony and Cleopatra. As young boys, my brother and I discovered a small box containing coins collected by our grandfather, a man who had died long before either of us was born. A friend spotted one of them as Roman, and it proved to be a silver denarius, minted by Mark Antony to pay his soldiers in 31 BC for a campaign partly funded by Cleopatra – the same coin shown in the photograph section in this book. Already interested in the ancient world, the discovery

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added to my enthusiasm for all things Roman. It seemed a connection not only with a grandparent, but also with Marcus Antonius the Triumvir, whose name circles the face of the coin with its picture of a warship. We do not know where our grandfather acquired this and the other coins – an eclectic mixture, several of which are from the Middle East. He may have picked them up in Egypt, where he served with the Royal Field Artillery during the First World War. It is certainly nice to think that.

So in some ways, Antony and Cleopatra have always had a special place in my interest in the ancient past, and yet the desire to write about them is fairly recent. A lot has been written, most especially about the queen, and it seemed unlikely that there could be much more worth saying. Then, a few years ago, I fulfilled a long-held ambition by working on *Caesar: The Life of a Colossus*, which amongst other things involved looking in far more detail at his affair with Cleopatra, as well as Antony's political association with him. Some of what I found surprised me, and – though this was less unexpected – there were vast differences with the popular impression of the story. If it was valuable to look at Caesar's career with a straightforward chronology, and to emphasise the human element in his own behaviour and that of his associates and opponents, it soon became clear that most other aspects of the period would benefit from the same approach.

For all their fame, Antony and Cleopatra receive little attention in formal study of the first century BC. Engaged in a power struggle, they were beaten and so had little real impact on later events. Academic history has long since developed a deep aversion to focusing on individuals, no matter how charismatic their personalities, instead searching for 'more profound' underlying trends and explanations of events. As a student I took courses on the Fall of the Roman Republic and the creation of the Principate, and later on as a lecturer I would

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devise and teach similar courses myself. Teaching and studying time is always limited, and as a result it was natural to focus on Caesar and his dictatorship, before skipping ahead to look at Octavian/Augustus and the creation of the imperial system. The years from 44–31 BC, when Antony's power was at its greatest, rarely receive anything like such detailed treatment. Ptolemaic Egypt is usually a more specialised field, but, even when it is included in a course, the reign of its last queen – poorly documented and anyway in the last days of long decline – is seldom treated in any detail. The fame of Cleopatra may attract students to the subject, but courses are, quite reasonably and largely unconsciously, structured to stress more 'serious' topics, and shy away from personalities.

Antony and Cleopatra did not change the world in any profound way, unlike Caesar and to an even greater extent Augustus. One ancient writer claimed that Caesar's campaigns caused the death of one million people and the enslavement of as many more. Whatever the provocation, he led his army to seize Rome by force, winning supreme power through civil war, and supplanted the Republic's democratically elected leaders. Against this, Caesar was famous for his clemency. Throughout his career he championed social reform and aid to the poor in Rome, as well as trying to protect the rights of people in the provinces. Although he made himself dictator, his rule was generally benevolent, and his measures sensible, dealing with long-neglected problems. The path to power of his adopted son, Augustus, was considerably more vicious, replacing clemency with revenge. Augustus' power was won in civil war and maintained by force, and yet he also ruled well. The Senate's political freedom was virtually extinguished and popular elections rendered unimportant. At the same time he gave Rome a peace it had not known in almost a century of political violence and created a system of government that benefited a far wider section of society than the old Republic.[1]

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Antony and Cleopatra proved themselves just as capable of savagery and ruthlessness, but the losers in a civil war do not get the chance to shape the future directly. Apart from that, there is no real trace of any long-held beliefs or causes on Antony's part, no indication that he struggled for prominence for anything other than his own glory and profit. Some like to see Cleopatra as deeply committed to the prosperity and welfare of her subjects, but this is largely wishful thinking. There is no actual evidence to suggest that her concerns went any further than ensuring a steady flow of taxation into her own hands, to cement her hold on power. For only a small part of her reign was she secure on the throne, at the head of a kingdom utterly dependent on Roman goodwill, and it would probably be unreasonable to expect her to have done more than this.

Julius Caesar was highly successful. He was also highly talented across a remarkable range of activities. Even those who dislike the man and what he did can readily admire his gifts. Augustus is an even harder figure to like, especially as a youth, and yet no one would fail to acknowledge his truly remarkable political skill. Caesar and his adopted son were both very clever, even if their characters were different. Mark Antony had none of their subtlety, and little trace of profound intelligence. He tends to be liked in direct proportion to how much someone dislikes Octavian/Augustus, but there is little about him to admire. Instead, fictional portrayals have reinforced the propaganda of the 30s BC, contrasting Antony, the bluff, passionate and simple soldier, with Octavian, seen as a cold-blooded, cowardly and scheming political operator. Neither portrait is true, but they continue to shape even scholarly accounts of these years.

Cleopatra was clever and well-educated, but unlike Caesar and Augustus the nature of her intelligence remains elusive, and it is very hard to see how her mind worked or fairly assess her intellect. It is the nature of biography that the author comes

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to develop a strong, and largely emotional, attitude towards his or her subject after spending several years studying them. Almost every modern author to come to the subject wants to admire, and often to like, Cleopatra. Some of this is a healthy reaction to the rabid hostility of Augustan sources. Much has to do with her sex, for as we noted at the start, it is a rare thing to be able to study in detail any woman from the Greco-Roman world. Novelty alone encourages sympathy – often reinforced by the same distaste for Augustus that fuels affection for Antony. In itself sympathy need not matter, as long as it does not encourage a distortion of the evidence to idealise the queen. There is much we simply do not know about both Antony and Cleopatra – and indeed most other figures from this period. The gaps should not be filled by confident assertions drawn from the author's own mental picture of Cleopatra as she ought to have been.

By the time I had finished *Caesar*, I knew that I wanted to take a break from the first century BC and look at the decline of the Roman Empire and its collapse in the West. As much as anything this was because none of the books on that period seemed to explain events in a way I found satisfactory. The same sense that there was nothing that really did justice to the story of Antony and Cleopatra made me just as convinced that this book must come next.

To have real value, the study of history must be a quest for the truth. The whole truth is no doubt unobtainable even for comparatively recent events. For the ancient past, there will inevitably be many more gaps in our evidence as well as all the problems of understanding the actions of people from very different cultures to our own. That absolute success is impossible does not make the attempt to achieve it any less worthwhile. Similarly, although no historian can hope to be wholly objective, it still remains of fundamental importance to strive for this. If we always seek for the truth in history, whether or

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not it fits with our preconceptions or what we would like to believe, then we are far better placed to look for the truth in our own day and age.

This, then, is an attempt to tell the story of Antony and Cleopatra as objectively and dispassionately as possible, for there is passion enough in it without the author adding too much of his own personality. My aims are also to reveal as much of the true events as is possible, while making plain what we do not know, and bring the couple and their contemporaries alive as flesh-and-blood human beings. Getting to the facts is a lot less easy than it might seem, for even serious scholars so often want to see something else when they look at these two extraordinary lives.

THE PROBLEM

It begins with the question of just what Cleopatra was. Cleopatra was the queen of Egypt, and for the last few centuries Ancient Egypt has fascinated the modern world. At first interest came mainly from a desire to understand the Old Testament better, but rapidly moved far beyond that. Egypt is perceived as the most ancient of civilisations and its monuments are amongst the most spectacular. Some, such as the pyramids, sphinx and the great temples, are awe-inspiringly massive. Others are more intimate, such as the mummified animals and people, and the models of everyday things left in the tombs of the dead. Tutankhamen's lavish death mask is immediately recognisable and conjures up images of ancient mystery and massive wealth. Hieroglyphics, with their mixture of symbols and pictures, or the flattened figures of people walking in the strange posture of wall paintings and reliefs are again both instantly recognisable as Egyptian. They are dramatic and at the same time alien.

Such imagery has time and again proven itself irresistible to

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film-makers depicting Cleopatra. Her palace, court and indeed her own clothes are invariably inspired more by a caricatured version of New Kingdom Egypt than the reality of the first century BC. This is the chronological equivalent of presenting Elizabeth I as Queen Boudicca of the Iceni, yet it has the dramatic virtue of making Cleopatra and Egypt utterly different and visually distinct from the Romans who form such a major part of her story. The Cleopatra of stories has to be exotic, and the images of an Egypt that was ancient even to her are a powerful part of this.

The exotic is almost always reinforced by the intensely erotic. Cleopatra has become one of the ultimate femmes fatales, the woman who seduced the two most powerful men of her day. Beautiful, sensual, almost irresistible and utterly unscrupulous, she distracted Julius Caesar, and perhaps filled his head with dreams of eastern monarchy. She then dominated Antony and brought him low. This Cleopatra can be seen as a danger – the last great danger – to the *Pax Romana* Augustus would bring to the Roman world. Fashions change, so that empires are no longer seen as admirable, and the Augustan system viewed with a more sceptical eye. These days many want to tell the story differently, turning the sinister seductress into a strong and independent woman struggling as best she could to protect her country.

For all that the title of Shakespeare's play makes it natural to speak of Antony and Cleopatra, the glamour associated with the queen readily overshadows her lover. She had anyway already had an affair with Caesar – the scene where she is delivered to him hidden in a rolled carpet is one of the best-known images of the queen, even if it does not quite fit the ancient source. Caesar was first, and history has on the whole relegated Mark Antony to the second place and the role of Caesar's lieutenant. A 'good second-in-command' or a 'follower rather than a leader' have been common verdicts on

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 8

Antony, both politically and militarily. He is also seen as the man who ought to have won, but failed, and this again feeds an impression of a flawed character – talent without genius. Some would blame Cleopatra for unmanning the tough Roman soldier, a tradition encouraged by his ancient biographer, Plutarch. Others would prefer to see Antony as simply not good enough to match her ambitions. For one historian, Cleopatra was 'a charismatic personality of the first order, a born leader and vaultingly ambitious monarch, who deserved better than suicide with that *louche* lump of a self-indulgent Roman, with his bull neck, Herculean vulgarities, and fits of mindless introspection'.[2]

Cleopatra readily provokes an emotional response. In addition, myth and romance surround Antony and Cleopatra and make the truth elusive. Both of them consciously worked to shape their public images during their lifetime – as strong rulers, as godlike, as lovers of life and luxury. Simultaneously, political opponents sought to damn them. The orator Cicero directed his *Philippics* against Antony, producing some of the most effective character assassination of all time. Far more thoroughly, Caesar's adopted son Octavian – the man who would become Rome's first emperor and take the name Augustus – defeated Antony and Cleopatra. They died and he survived, holding supreme power for more than forty years. It gave him plenty of time to shape the historical record to best suit his new regime. His strongly hostile view of both Antony and Cleopatra influenced our fullest sources for their lives, all of which were written under the rule of Augustus' successors.

Cleopatra continues to attract plenty of biographers. A few of these books also study Antony's life in detail, but biographies devoted exclusively to him remain rare. He now tends to be an accessory to the life of his lover. Anyone looking at the period will be quick to point out the problems caused by Augustan propaganda; often it is difficult to know whether an incident

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happened, and it would be tempting to reject any negative story. Unfortunately, however, there are well-attested incidents in which both Antony and Cleopatra behaved in ways that seem irrational or at best politically unwise.[3]

The young Octavian is difficult to like. He was unscrupulous, could be vicious and at times was a physical coward. The Principate, the system by which Rome was ruled by emperors for the next two and a half centuries, was his creation and attitudes to this often do much to shape views of Antony and Cleopatra. Admirers of the Augustan system will pardon the brutality of his path to power and see his enemies as delaying – even endangering – Rome's great legacy to the world. Critics will praise them for resisting an extremely unpleasant tyrant, and some will claim that the pair offered a far better alternative, although they cannot usually be too specific about what this was.[4]

Cleopatra was a strong and independent woman in an ancient world that was dominated by men. She had power in her own right as queen, unlike Roman women who were more likely to have influence as the wives or mothers of great men. For most modern authors this is extremely attractive and encourages a generous treatment. Serious accounts of Cleopatra's life never let this mood slip into eulogy, but sympathy for the queen all too readily combines with the glamour of her fictional portrayals to distort our view of her times. There are two very basic truths about her, which conflict so strongly with the legend that it takes a conscious and determined effort to maintain them.

The first of these is at least usually noted. All recent biographers will begin by pointing out that Cleopatra was Greek and not Egyptian. Greek was her first language, and it was in Greek literature and culture that she was educated. Although represented on Egyptian temples and in some statuary clad in the traditional headgear and robes of the pharaohs' wives, it is unlikely that she actually dressed this way save perhaps

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occasionally to perform certain rites. Instead, she wore the headband and robes of a Greek monarch. Cleopatra proclaimed herself the 'New Isis', and yet her worship of the goddess betrayed a strongly Hellenised version of the cult. She was no more Egyptian culturally or ethnically than most residents of modern-day Arizona are Apaches.

Noting the essential Greek-ness of Cleopatra is one thing. It is much harder to resist the lure of truly ancient Egypt – both the popular imagery and the actual reality. Egypt is exotic, and it is also to Westerners decidedly eastern. In the past, a sensual Egyptian Cleopatra could be an alluring, almost irresistible threat to stern Roman virtue and the advance of Rome's empire and civilisation. Even if she was Greek, then she was a representative of Hellenic culture, which had decayed through contact with eastern decadence. Such views have not been fashionable for a long time, and often the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. Empires are now automatically bad things, imperialists brutal and exploitative, and European culture itself is often seen by many Westerners today in a negative light. Thus it is common to emphasise the savagery of Rome's rise to empire, and Cleopatra is admired for resisting the onslaught. Occasionally this is as a Greek, but the attraction of the orient is strong, and usually she once again becomes a representative of the east.

This is not really helped by the tradition of separating the period following the rise of Philip II and his son Alexander the Great from earlier Greek history. In the nineteenth century this later period was dubbed Hellenistic – not Greek or Hellenic, but 'Greek-like'. Classical Greece had been dominated by city states, of which the greatest were Athens and Sparta. Athens produced art, literature and philosophy, which have profoundly influenced the world to this day; Sparta became famous for the formidable prowess of its soldiers at the cost of creating a particularly repellent society. Athens took the idea of

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democracy further than any other ancient state, and was exceptionally aggressive and ruthless in its foreign policy.[5]

Eventually, the promise of this democracy faded, as did Athens' power. Kings appeared again and so did tyrants, while those cities who retained any vestige of democracy reduced the electorate to ever smaller sections of society. By the later fourth century BC the kings of Macedonia dominated all of Greece. In this different political climate the cultural spark appeared to fade. To modern eyes – and indeed to many people at the time – no more drama or literature was being created to match the heights reached in the past.

Scholarly attitudes have changed somewhat and many would now dispute any inherent inferiority of the Hellenistic Age – at least in terms of government and society. They still employ the term, for convenience if nothing else. The tradition also remains of dating the end of this period to the death of Cleopatra. That makes her the end of an era beginning with Alexander and his conquests. This connection is there in the best modern biographies, but it often struggles to compete with the romance of the much older Egyptian past. That several recent biographers have been Egyptologists has only made it harder for them to maintain an essentially Greek Cleopatra. Yet that was the reality, whether we like it or not. Her world was not the same as the fifth century BC and the height of Athenian achievement, but it was thoroughly Greek none the less. So if there was a great struggle in Cleopatra's lifetime it was not between east and west, but Greek and Roman.[6]

The second uncomfortable fact about Cleopatra is universally ignored by her modern biographers. These routinely lament that our sources focus almost exclusively on Cleopatra's affairs with Caesar and Antony. The rest of her life, including the years she spent ruling Egypt on her own, receive scant mention. Unfortunately, documents on papyrus that give details of official decrees, the workings of government, and private business and

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affairs are rare for the first century BC in general and Cleopatra's reign in particular. The vast bulk of these texts date to much earlier in the rule of Egypt by her family. A papyrus discovered relatively recently consisted of a decree issued by the queen and may well end with a single Greek word written in her own hand. This is exciting, but scarcely sufficient to do more than give us the slightest glimpse of her government in action. Significantly, it also grants a concession to a prominent Roman.[7]

The literary sources were all written either by Romans or by Greeks writing under the Roman Empire at least a century after Cleopatra's death. A good deal of information and personal anecdote comes from Plutarch's *Life of Mark Antony*. This is the only biography of him to survive from the ancient world. There is no surviving ancient biography of Cleopatra. A familiar complaint is that the story is not simply told by the victors, but always from the Roman viewpoint – in some cases that this is a male Roman viewpoint may be emphasised even more.[8]

There is a reason why this is so. Whether we like it or not, Cleopatra was not really that important. Her world was one utterly dominated by Rome, in which her kingdom had at best a precarious independence. She was a queen, and controlled an Egypt that was wealthy and by ancient standards densely populated. Yet it was a Roman client kingdom and never fully independent. Egypt was the largest, and in many ways the most important, of Rome's subordinate allies, but it was always subordinate, and its power was dwarfed by that of the Roman Republic. Cleopatra only became queen because her father was placed back in power by a Roman army. Even after that, she would have been dead or exiled by her early twenties were it not for Caesar's intervention.

Cleopatra only had importance in the wider world through her Roman lovers. Television documentaries and popular books often repeat the claim that the Romans only ever feared two people – Hannibal and Cleopatra, but people usually ignore

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the fact that this sweeping statement was made in the 1930s. It rests on no ancient evidence, and does not make any real sense. Much as Augustan propaganda demonised the queen, no one could seriously have believed that she had the power to overthrow Rome. It was simply far more convenient to hate a foreign, female enemy, than to face the fact that Octavian's great war and subsequent triumph was over a distinguished Roman. For all her glamour, Antony was of far greater power and significance than Cleopatra.[9]

None of this means that Cleopatra is any less fascinating. We need to understand the reality of the first century BC if we are to understand her. In many ways this makes her career all the more spectacular because it was unexpected. Her achievements were remarkable: she not only survived in power for almost two decades, but also for a while expanded her realm almost to the extent of her most successful ancestors. That she did this through harnessing Roman power to her own benefit does not detract from the scale of her success. It is vital to step beyond the myth and the wishful thinking and seek the reality of Cleopatra and her place in the world.

Just as importantly, we need to understand Antony as a Roman senator, not simply relegate him to the supporting role of Caesar's subordinate and Cleopatra's lover. On closer inspection, many of the familiar assumptions about him prove to be mistaken. Plutarch and others painted him as very much the military man, a bluff and coarse soldier brought low by a woman. It is debatable how far Antony ever let Cleopatra determine his policy. What is clear is that he actually had very little military service by Roman standards, and most of his experience came in civil wars. He was not an especially good general, although at times he was a popular leader. There was much that was traditional about Antony and this goes a long way to explaining his importance and his ambitions. It was certainly not inevitable that he was defeated by Octavian. If the

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latter's rise to power was spectacular for such a young man, Antony's own career also owed a great deal to good fortune and the unusual opportunities presented by a Roman Republic rent by civil wars.

Both Antony and Cleopatra need to be understood within the context of their culture and times. Yet this book cannot hope to cover this turbulent era in every detail. Its concern is always with them, on where they were and what they were doing. Events elsewhere will be treated briefly, and only as far as is necessary to understand their story. Therefore, Caesar's career is treated very quickly, and only in greater depth when it also involved Antony and Cleopatra. Similarly, the rise of Octavian is both remarkable and fascinating, but cannot be dealt with at any length. Other important figures, notably Cicero, Pompey and his son Sextus, are treated even more briefly. This is not a reflection of their importance, but a question of focus.

Politics will be at the forefront of the story, because Antony and Cleopatra were first and foremost political animals. So was Caesar, the queen's first lover and father of her oldest child. None of them ever acted without at least a degree of political calculation. In spite of a few unconvincing accusations of debauchery, the evidence strongly suggests that Cleopatra only took two lovers and each was the most important man in the Roman Republic at that time. None of this need mean that there was not also strong and genuine attraction involved on both sides. Indeed, it is hard to understand this story in any other way. It is vital in studying any history to remember that the characters were flesh and blood human beings much like us, however different the times and their cultures may have been. The romance must be there because it was real. One of the reasons for the enduring appeal of Antony and Cleopatra's story is that all of us can understand the power of passion from our own lives.

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The story of Antony and Cleopatra is one of love, but also one of politics, war and ambition. The actual events were intensely dramatic – hence the appeal to novelists, dramatists and screenwriters. Looking at the facts as far as we know or can confidently guess them only reinforces the drama. So does the acknowledgement of what we do not know, for many of the mysteries remain fascinating in themselves. A closer look at the truth exposes an episode in human history more remarkable than any invention. It may not be the story we expect, or even perhaps would like to believe, but it is one of lives lived intensely at a time when the world was changing profoundly.

[1] The Two Lands

Egypt was already ancient long before Cleopatra was born in 69 BC. Almost four hundred years earlier Herodotus – the first man to write a prose history in any western language – assured his fellow Greeks that they must have learnt much of their own religion and knowledge from the Egyptians. Like much of his work, Herodotus' account of Egypt is a curious mixture of myth, fantasy and confusion, occasionally leavened with accurate information. Greeks tended to idealise Egypt as the home of ancient wisdom, while at the same time despising a people who worshipped sacred animals and practised circumcision. They were also awed by the sheer scale of the pyramids at Giza and included them amongst the Seven Wonders of the World.

It is sobering to remember that Cleopatra lived closer to us in time than she did to the builders of the great pyramids. The largest pyramid of all was built for the Pharaoh Khufu, who died in 2528 BC, some twenty-five centuries before the queen took her own life. That is the same distance of time separating us from Herodotus himself, from the Persian invasions of Greece and the early days of the Roman Republic.

Khufu was not the first pharaoh, but belonged to what is known as the Fourth Dynasty. The organisation of rulers into dynasties was done by a priest scholar working for Cleopatra's family, and the scheme he devised is still largely followed today. There were no fewer than thirty dynasties before her family came to power at the end of the fourth century BC. The first pharaoh ruled from around 2920 BC – it is difficult to be

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 18

precise at such an early period. That was not the beginning of civilisation in Egypt – there were organised communities farming on the banks of the Nile long before then, and in time two major kingdoms had emerged, which eventually combined. The pharaohs were the lords of 'two lands', Upper and Lower Egypt, and wore a crown symbolising this union. Upper Egypt lay to the south with its capital at Thebes. Lower Egypt was to the north, reaching to the Mediterranean coast and with Memphis as its centre. (This arrangement of upper and lower only seems strange to us because we are so accustomed to maps and globes showing north at the top.)[1]

The Nile made everything possible. Each summer it flooded its banks and then receded – a natural cycle only ended by the building of the Aswan Dam in the second half of the twentieth century. The annual inundation left behind a rich deposit of dark alluvial silt, and with it moisture to make the land wonderfully fertile. All of the earliest civilisations rested on the ability of farmers to produce a surplus. They grew because communities were better able to develop large-scale irrigation systems than individuals. In Egypt the problems of dealing with and exploiting the bounty offered by the inundation were greater, and did even more to encourage the growth of central authority.

People lived only where there was water. Egypt's population was very large by ancient standards, but was overwhelmingly concentrated in just two areas. In the north was the Delta, where the river split into many separate channels to flow into the Mediterranean, irrigating a wide stretch of land as it did so. South of this was the Nile Valley as far as the first cataract. The inundation did not spread far, producing a very densely populated strip of land some 500 miles long and never wider than a dozen miles. The lands beyond were desert. A few communities survived around the rare oases, but mainly there was nothing.[2]

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Egyptians saw themselves as the centre of the world and the one true civilisation. Outside there were chaos and hostile barbaric peoples. Even inside there were threats to order – the Nile inundation was unpredictable in its scale. Too much water could be as disastrous as too little, producing very poor harvests – the years of plenty and years of famine of pharaoh's dream in Genesis. There were supernatural threats to add to the natural ones and the human enemies, for the struggle between order and chaos was reflected in the divine world as well. The pharaohs stood between gods and men and communicated with both, ensuring that order and justice – embraced by the term 'Maat' – prevailed over chaos.[3]

They were also the heads of a rich and powerful nation, but there were other powers in the world and conflict was not uncommon. At times Egypt was strong, and pharaohs extended their rule further south along the Nile at the expense of the Kingdom of Meroe, or eastwards into Syria and Palestine. Sometimes the balance of power favoured their neighbours and they lost territory. In the second millennium BC a foreign people known as the Hyksos overran much of Egypt and ruled for nearly a century before they were expelled and the New Kingdom created. Nor was Egypt free from internal rebellion and civil war. At times the two kingdoms were divided and rival dynasties ruled simultaneously.

Egyptian culture was never entirely static or immune to change, but it was remarkably conservative. At its heart was the annual agricultural cycle centred around the inundation, and farming methods changed hardly at all in thousands of years. Surrounding this and all aspects of life were the rituals and beliefs that secured the order of seasons, the growth of crops and every aspect of life itself. Outside Egypt the power of the pharaohs stretched far afield or shrank as other empires rose and fell. In the last millennium BC the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians in turn dominated the middle east. For some

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 20

of this time Egypt was itself powerful, controlling substantial territories in Asia, but its strength declined and for over a century from 525 to 404 BC the Persians ruled Egypt. Finally, the Egyptians rebelled and expelled them, and for the next sixty-one years were ruled again by native pharaohs. Yet the Persian Empire remained strong and in 343 BC it again conquered Egypt. This occupation seems to have been especially brutal, and was certainly bitterly resented.

Less than a decade later, the world changed suddenly and drastically with the arrival of Alexander the Great. Persia fell, and all of its territories came under the control of the new conqueror.

THE KING OF MACEDON

It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of Alexander. Impact is the right word, for there was something intensely physical about his career, and we need to keep reminding ourselves of the speed and sheer scale of what he did. Alexander was not quite thirty-three when he died at Babylon on 10 June 323 BC and had been king for just twelve and a half years. He inherited from his father, Philip II, a Macedonia that was internally strong, possessed a superb army and already dominated Greece. The preparations had also already begun for an expedition against Persia, but although Alexander inherited the idea from his father, it was his own restless energy and insatiable lust to excel that drove the wars that followed.

Alexander and his soldiers marched or rode more than 20,000 miles. By the fifth year the Persian king was dead and his royal city reduced to ashes. Alexander was now head of the largest empire in the known world, but saw no reason to stop. He kept on eastwards, until he controlled all the lands from the Balkans to what is now Pakistan. When Julius

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 21

Caesar was thirty he saw a bust of Alexander and is supposed to have wept because his own life seemed so paltry by comparison.[4]

Alexander left Macedon in 334 BC and never returned. The same was true of many Macedonians and Greeks who accompanied him. What Alexander hoped ultimately to achieve is now impossible to say. It may well be that he had not yet made up his own mind how he wanted his new empire to function. Alexander was clever, subtle, ruthless, suspicious, at times appallingly savage, and at others merciful and generous. His army was powerful, but far too small to have held down the empire by force. He founded cities populated by settlers – often veteran soldiers – in many places, but these remained a tiny minority of the overall population. Greek language and culture was spread far more widely as a result of Alexander's conquests, but it was also spread thinly.

Alexander's empire was too vast to be ruled simply as a collection of provinces of Macedonia. As the years went on he made more and more use of Persian noblemen as governors and administrators, as well as Persian soldiers. There were not enough Macedonians and Greeks with the linguistic skills and experience to fulfil every role. It was far more practical to enlist local men, and this had the important benefit of giving his new subjects a stake in his empire. Aspects of court ceremony and the king's role changed from a traditional Macedonian pattern to a hybrid monarchy including Persian elements as well as new innovations. Alexander took honours and symbols that were at least semi-divine, and may even have wanted to go further and be worshipped as a living god. Yet once again we must remember the time factor. In little more than a decade there was very little chance for any aspect of the new regime to bed itself in.[5]

All of the various territories were tied directly to Alexander, with nothing else to unite them. This might not have mattered

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 22

if there had been a clear and viable heir when Alexander died. He had a half-brother, Arrhidaeus, who had only been allowed to live because he was considered to be a half-wit. In spite of this, he was now named as king. Alexander's latest wife Roxanne, the daughter of a Bactrian chieftain (and thus from what is now Afghanistan), was pregnant when he died. Some months later in 322 BC she gave birth to a boy who was named Alexander IV and promptly made joint king. The empire now had two monarchs ruling jointly, but one was an infant and the other incapable. Real power was exercised by a group of senior officers and officials, most of whom were in Babylon during these months.

A general named Perdiccas was appointed as regent – Alexander was supposed to have handed him his signet ring in his last moments. The dying conqueror was also supposed to have replied that his empire should go 'to the strongest', and that 'his foremost friends would hold a great funeral contest over him'. If he actually uttered these words, it may have reflected a yearning for the heroic age of a man who slept with a copy of Homer's epic, the *Iliad*, under his pillow, or a realistic understanding of the inevitable. It is doubtful that even if he had chosen an adult heir at this late date his empire would have held together.[6]

At first the others co-operated with Perdiccas, as they sought to build up personal power bases amidst a climate of growing suspicion and fear. The most important men were appointed as satraps, regional governors who were in theory loyal to and controlled by the monarchs and the regent. Ptolemy, a distant relative of Alexander and now in his early forties, was made satrap of Egypt at his own request. Soon it became apparent that Perdiccas could only control the satraps by force and he and his army could not be everywhere at the same time. In 321 BC he marched against Ptolemy, but the campaign ended in disaster with a botched attempt to cross the Nile. Perdiccas'

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 23

senior officers murdered their leader. They offered command to Ptolemy, but when he cautiously refused the bulk of the army marched away.

That was just one episode in a long and convoluted series of wars fought between Alexander's generals as they tore his empire apart in a struggle for personal power. Ptolemy was one of the more cautious players, determined not to risk losing what he already controlled. The 'funeral games' lasted for almost fifty years, and almost all of the main protagonists died violently. Arrhidaeus was murdered in 317 BC, and Alexander IV and his mother in 311 BC. They were not replaced, and at no point did any of the rival generals have a realistic chance of reuniting the whole empire under his own control. The prospect of any one man gaining supremacy invariably prompted the others to forget their differences for the moment and combine in opposition. Yet for years the satraps continued to style themselves as governors serving monarchs who no longer existed. In Babylon and Egypt official documents were even dated according to fictional years in the reign of the murdered boy king Alexander IV.[7]

It was not until 305–304 BC that Ptolemy and the other satraps threw off the pretence and declared themselves to be kings. He was Cleopatra's ancestor and for nine generations his family would rule the empire he created during the struggle with Alexander's other former generals. Ptolemy was a Macedonian, and Cleopatra herself was the first of the family able to speak the Egyptian language – only one of nine languages in which she was said to be fluent. The Ptolemies spoke Greek, and for centuries it was a mark of prestige at their court to be able to speak the peculiar Macedonian dialect of the language. As we shall see, they were kings who controlled Egypt, but they were not primarily kings of Egypt. Yet it was always the wealthiest of their possessions, and the last one to fall.[8]

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 24

THE HOUSE OF LAGUS

There were Greeks in Egypt long before Alexander arrived. Some came as merchants and many more as mercenaries. In the last centuries of an independent Egypt the pharaohs relied heavily on foreign professional soldiers, who were used against both foreign and domestic opponents. These soldiers with their alien religions were not always popular with the Egyptians. Alexander himself came to Egypt late in 332 BC. Although he had won two battles against the Persians, and taken Tyre and Gaza, the struggle with the Persian King Darius was still far from over. The Persians did not defend Egypt, and the Egyptians, who had no love for the Persians, seem to have welcomed Alexander as a liberator. They were anyway in no position to resist him, but there may have been genuine enthusiasm when he was named as pharaoh. Alexander spent several months in Egypt, and some have seen this as longer than the strategic situation warranted, giving time for Darius to regroup.

Mystery surrounds the long march he made into the western desert to reach the oasis at Siwah with its temple of the god Ammon, equated by the Greeks with Zeus. The shrine was famous for its oracle, and it was widely believed that the priest who acted as the god's mouthpiece welcomed the conqueror as Ammon's son. One tradition claimed this was a slip of the tongue. Less controversially, Alexander laid out and began the construction of Alexandria. It was not the only city founded by him and bearing his own name, but it would prove by far the most important. A man named Cleomenes, who came from the Greek community in Egypt, was appointed to govern when Alexander left in the spring of 331 BC. He never returned to Egypt during his lifetime.[9]

Soon after Ptolemy came to Egypt in 323 BC as satrap he had Cleomenes dismissed and executed. In 321 BC his men intercepted Alexander the Great's funeral cortège on its way to

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 25

Macedonia, and instead brought his mummified body to Egypt. It was eventually installed in a specially built tomb in Alexandria. Ptolemy himself wrote a detailed history of Alexander's campaigns, helping to shape the myth of the conqueror in a way favourable to his own ambitions.

Ptolemy began with relatively few soldiers. He and his successors encouraged immigrants from Greece and Macedonia to settle in Egypt. From the beginning Alexandria was to be an overtly Greek city, with its own laws inspired by those of Athens. Mercenaries serving only for pay were not fully reliable and inclined to change sides if the campaign went against them. Therefore the Ptolemies granted their soldiers plots of land known as cleruchies to give them a stake in the new regime. It was not a new idea, but was done quickly and on a generous scale. Officers received more than ordinary soldiers, cavalry more than infantry. The produce of these farms was taxed, but the main obligation of the settlers or cleruchs was to serve in the king's army. On at least one occasion when some of Ptolemy's soldiers were captured by a rival leader, they preferred to remain as prisoners in the hope of eventually returning to Egypt rather than defect. This was extremely unusual.[10]

In the third century BC Egypt may have had a population as big as 7 million. Probably half a million lived in Alexandria. A few other cities, such as Memphis, may have had populations a tenth of that size, but most were smaller. The Ptolemies were less enthusiastic about founding cities than others of the Successors, and most people lived in villages, better suited to housing an agricultural workforce. The Delta and the Nile Valley continued to be densely occupied. The Ptolemies also developed the Fayum to the west, creating irrigation systems around Lake Moeris and elsewhere to make farming possible. Many cleruchies were established here, as were large estates leased to prominent and wealthy Greeks. It added a third highly populated area to the country. The development of this area

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had the advantage of increasing the scale of the harvest, which the king could tax. At the same time he rewarded his soldiers and followers without having to evict large numbers of Egyptians from their land.[11]

Egypt's population remained overwhelmingly rural under the Ptolemies; it was also overwhelmingly Egyptian. Even in the cleruchies, the bulk of the actual labouring was done by Egyptians; there were very few slaves outside Alexandria. In many cases the cleruchs leased some or all of their land to tenant farmers. Military duty took the cleruchs themselves away, but over time many became absentee landlords living off rents.

Greeks remained a small minority throughout the rule of the Ptolemies. It was clearly impossible for the two communities to live in complete isolation. Yet scarcely any Egyptian words passed into Greek and it is striking how separate the two cultures remained over the course of the centuries. There were separate Greek and Egyptian law codes with their own judges and courts. At times individuals from one group chose to have particular aspects of their life regulated under the other law code if this seemed advantageous. Egyptian law granted considerably more rights to women and was often employed by Greek families wishing daughters to inherit property. One papyrus surviving from the early first century BC (and so more than two hundred years after Ptolemy I took control of Egypt) is the will of an Egyptian soldier in the service of the Ptolemies. It is written in Demotic – the form of the Egyptian language written in an alphabet rather than hieroglyphics – but the layout and style are Greek in every respect. In most cases Greek law was dominant, and there was never any attempt to merge the two legal systems.[12]

There were many wealthy and influential Egyptians. Just as Alexander had done, the Ptolemies assumed the religious role of the pharaohs. In name – and sometimes even in person –

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 27

they performed the rites necessary to ensure that order prevailed over chaos and the natural cycle continued. The family spent heavily on temple building, and many of the most spectacular temple sites visible in Egypt today were either heavily restored or constructed by the Ptolemies. Large estates were granted to particular temples to support the cults. Priests were men of considerable importance, and acted as judges in cases involving Egyptian law.

Other Egyptians served in the royal bureaucracy. This was large and complex, and had as its principal role the collection of taxation: there were levies of a share of the harvest and taxes paid in money. Even the produce taken from land dedicated to one of the temple cults passed through the hands of the royal bureaucracy. There were never enough Greeks to have provided all the necessary clerks and officials and, in particular, there were never enough of them capable of speaking the native language. As a result there were always large numbers of Egyptians at all levels of the administration and over time in the army as well. Many could read and write in Greek as well as their own language and they often adopted Greek names for certain aspects of their life, while retaining their own names in other contexts.

An example of this is Menches or Asklepiades, a village clerk at the end of the second century BC. An official at this level of the administration needed to be fluent in both languages. In his official capacity he is always called Menches, perhaps because most of the time he dealt with Egyptians. However, he proudly styled himself a 'Greek born in this land' in one text. Ethnically, he seems to have been predominantly – perhaps wholly – Egyptian, but knowledge of Greek gave him and his family a distinct status. It was in many respects a question of class as much as race.[13]

There were some poor Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt and considerably more well-off Egyptians. Most of the latter

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 28

adopted some aspects of Greek culture and certainly employed the language, at least when performing their public roles. The majority of Egyptians, however, were not especially wealthy and worked on the land. Some owned or leased fields, but most were labourers paid in kind. This had been true throughout Egypt's history. There is no great indication that the Ptolemies exploited the workforce more brutally than earlier governments. At first they may have done it more efficiently, and certainly significantly expanded the area under cultivation.

Some individuals moved in both communities and over the years there was some intermarriage. Yet in spite of this the separateness of the Greek and Egyptian communities endured. The Greeks were dominant, but they could not have governed or profited from Egypt without the compliance and assistance of large numbers of Egyptians, who themselves benefited from the regime. The Egyptian religion required a pharaoh to help preserve Maat. The Persian kings had nominally fulfilled this role during the years of occupation and now the Ptolemies took over. They supported the temples, whose priests performed all the necessary rituals to hold back the forces of chaos. Yet the Ptolemies were first and foremost Greek kings, who always had ambitions for territory outside Egypt from the old empire of Alexander. There is no indication that they ever thought of themselves as anything other than Greek, and specifically Macedonian. Three centuries of ruling Egypt did not change this.

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[II]
The 'She-Wolf': Rome's Republic

In 273 BC King Ptolemy II sent ambassadors to Rome. It was the first formal contact between the two states. The Romans had recently defeated the Greek city of Tarentum in southern Italy and now controlled all of Italy south of the River Po. Tarentum had been aided by King Pyrrhus of Epirus, one of the ablest military commanders to emerge during the wars fought by Alexander's Successors. He had beaten the Romans in a series of battles, but in the process suffered such heavy losses that that he could not continue the struggle – the origin of the expression 'a pyrrhic victory'. Pyrrhus had at one time been a protégé of Ptolemy I, but alliances were apt to change quickly during Alexander's 'funeral games'. It was satisfying for the king to see a potential rival beaten, especially by such a distant people as the Romans.

The ambassadors were welcomed and friendly relations established. Trade was also encouraged. The Romans had not as yet made any attempt to expand beyond Italy. From the perspective of the eastern Mediterranean, they were a distant and rather minor power, but successful enough to warrant notice. The Ptolemies were usually on good terms with Syracuse, the most powerful Greek city in Sicily, and also with Carthage, the wealthy trading power whose fleets dominated the western Mediterranean.[1]

Rome had been founded in the eighth century BC – according to myth this was done by Romulus in 753 BC. The Romans did not start to write history until the late third century BC and

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had little certain knowledge of the distant past. Greek writers showed little interest in them until gradually the Romans forced their way onto the world stage. In 264 BC the Romans sent an army to Sicily. It was the first time the legions had gone outside the Italian Peninsula. The Carthaginians resented this intervention in an area they considered wholly within their own sphere of influence. The result was the First Punic War, fought for more than two decades and at massive cost to both sides. The Romans proved consistently more aggressive and more stubborn in prosecuting the war, and finally the Carthaginians gave in.

Roman arrogance left many Carthaginians feeling deeply bitter and in 218 BC a second war was fought. This time Hannibal led an army from Spain, over the Alps and into Italy itself, where he proceeded to inflict a series of staggering defeats on the Romans. In three years almost a quarter of Rome's adult male population and more than a third of her aristocracy were killed. Alexander conquered Persia in three major battles and a couple of sieges, and yet Rome refused even to negotiate with Hannibal after this string of appalling defeats. The Roman Republic had huge resources and again proved willing to devote them to waging war with truly remarkable stubbornness and determination. The Carthaginians were defeated in Sicily and Spain, and eventually a Roman invasion of North Africa forced the recall of Hannibal from Italy. When he was defeated at Zama in 202 BC, Carthage once again capitulated.

The two great wars with Carthage set Rome on the path to world empire. In the First Punic War the Romans created a navy and managed to defeat Carthage, with its long maritime tradition. In the Second Punic War the Romans became used to massive levels of mobilisation, sending armies simultaneously to several distant theatres of operation and maintaining them there. In the process they acquired their first overseas prov-

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 31

inces – Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, Spain and Illyria – which needed to be governed and garrisoned.

The Ptolemies watched the struggle between Rome and Carthage, but carefully avoided being sucked in. During the First Punic War the Carthaginians asked them for a substantial loan to fund their war effort, but the request was denied because of the alliance with Rome. However, in 210 BC, during the height of the Second Punic War, the Romans sent an embassy to Alexandria asking to purchase grain and Ptolemy IV agreed to supply this. Neutrality was preserved, but there does seem to have been more sympathy for Rome, quite possibly because Carthage was seen as a greater potential threat.[2]

The Kingdom of Macedonia did not judge the situation so well. Concerned about the growing Roman presence on his western borders in Illyria, King Philip V of Macedon scented an opportunity when Hannibal overran Italy. He allied with the Carthaginians and declared war on Rome. The Romans were outraged at what they saw as an unprovoked stab in the back and sent an army to Macedonia. Eventually, having lost their local allies and needing all their resources to cope with Carthage, the Romans accepted a negotiated peace with Macedon, which the Ptolemies helped to arrange. The outrage remained, and almost as soon as the Second Punic War was won, the Romans declared war on Philip V. Macedonia was defeated in just a few years.[3]

Two major rivals to the Ptolemies had emerged from the wars between Alexander's Successors. Macedonia was one, and the other was the Seleucid Empire of Syria. The Seleucids intervened in Greece after the defeat of Philip V, but their expedition was savaged by the Romans. Not content with this, a Roman army was despatched to Asia Minor. Philip V supported the Romans' campaign, proving his loyalty to them and at the same time hurting a rival. The Seleucid army was smashed at Magnesia in 189 BC. Throughout these conflicts,

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 32

the Ptolemies maintained their close alliance with Rome and watched as their two rivals were successively hammered.

Philip V's son Perseus also fought against Rome and with no more success than his father. He was taken prisoner and the kingdom broken up. A later rebellion finally persuaded the Romans to turn Macedonia into a province. The Romans fought their third and final war with Carthage around the same time. In 146 BC Carthage was stormed by a Roman army and the city razed to the ground; it ceased to exist as a political entity. In the same year the Romans demonstrated their dominance of Greece when they sacked the famous city of Corinth. The Kingdom of Macedonia was gone and the Seleucid Empire greatly weakened, yet the Ptolemies had not come into conflict with Rome. Nevertheless, the minor Italian power they had allied with back in 273 BC had now become the overwhelmingly dominant force in the Mediterranean.

THE REPUBLIC

The rise of Rome surprised many Greeks and prompted the historian Polybius to write a *Universal History* explaining just how this had happened. Sent as a hostage to Rome, he had gone with the staff of the Roman commander who sacked Carthage. In the introduction to his work he wondered: 'who is so worthless and indolent as not to wish to know by what means and under what system of polity the Romans in less than fifty-three years have succeeded in subjecting nearly the whole inhabited world to their sole government'.[4]

Following a long-established tradition in Greek political thought, Polybius believed that Rome's political system gave it a stability and strength lacking in other states. Rome had originally been ruled by kings, but the last of these had been expelled at the end of the sixth century BC – the traditional date was 509 BC – and the city became a republic. It did not

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Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 33

have a formal constitution, but instead over the centuries a mixture of law, convention and precedent shaped its governance. The most important principle underlying this system was the refusal to let any one group or individual have permanent supreme power.

There were three elements to government. Executive authority lay with magistrates, all of whom were elected. In almost every case they served only for a single year and could not seek re-election to the same post until a decade had passed. In every case they served with one or more colleagues who had equal power. The most important magistrates were the two consuls. Civil and military power was not separated at Rome, and the consuls led Rome's armies in the most important campaigns and also framed law and carried out other peaceful tasks at Rome.

The magistrates had considerable power, but no permanence. Continuity was provided by the Senate, an advisory council consisting of former magistrates and other distinguished men. There were some three hundred senators, and all had to be freeborn and possess considerable wealth. The Senate could not pass law, but it issued decrees that were normally respected. Laws could only be passed by a vote of the Popular Assemblies. These also elected magistrates and approved the declaration of war or peace. The Assemblies could not introduce or debate an issue, or modify a bill in any way. They could only vote yes or no to a proposal, and in the case of elections choose candidates from a list.

Greek city states proved desperately prone to internal revolution, but in contrast Rome managed to avoid this for centuries. Where the rule of monarchs or tyrants became common in the Hellenic world from the fourth century BC onwards, this did not happen at Rome. The few Greek democracies to survive reduced the number of citizens eligible to vote, restricting this to the wealthy, while in contrast the Republic displayed a

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unique ability to expand and absorb others. Greek cities had always been extremely jealous of citizenship, especially at the height of Athens' democracy. At Rome, freed slaves gained citizenship, with only a few restrictions on their rights, something that would have been unimaginable in most Greek communities, and their children were full citizens in every respect. Defeated enemy communities throughout Italy over time received the franchise en masse. By Mark Antony's day the free inhabitants of all of Italy south of the Po had become Roman.

There were millions of Roman citizens, a number dwarfing the citizen body of even the largest Greek city states in their heyday. Roman manpower made possible the defeats of Pyrrhus and Hannibal. The legions were recruited from all those citizens wealthy enough to afford the necessary equipment. Therefore the richest, who could afford horses, served as cavalrymen. Those of more middling income – the vast majority of them farmers – fought as heavy infantrymen, while the poor and the young needed only the modest gear of skirmishers. Romans identified strongly with the Republic. They were willing to answer the state's call for military service, subjecting themselves to the army's harsh, even brutal discipline. No other state could have absorbed the appalling death toll inflicted by Hannibal and continued to muster new armies.

At the end of a conflict the legions were discharged and each man returned home. Military service was a duty to the Republic and not a career. During the Punic Wars some men found themselves serving with the army for a decade or more. As Rome expanded and acquired more and more overseas provinces, such long spells of military service became normal. Garrison duty in the Spanish provinces or on the borders of Macedonia offered little glory or plunder, with a good chance of death by disease or in some nameless skirmish. It was a considerable burden and meant that many discharged soldiers returned to find their families had been unable to maintain

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 35

their farms. During the second century BC many Romans believed the class of farmer soldiers who were the backbone of the legions was shrinking under the pressure of excessively long periods of service. Inevitably, this only made the problem worse, as a dwindling number of men found themselves more often called up by the state, and even more fell into ruin. Once a duty willingly – often enthusiastically – accepted, military service changed into a crushing burden.[5]

Overseas expansion brought massive profits, but the benefits were not evenly shared. Magistrates who led an army to victory grew fabulously rich on the spoils of war, especially if the enemy was one of the wealthy states from the Greek world. Apart from plunder, hundreds of thousands of people were taken prisoner and sold as slaves. The generals took the lion's share of the money, but there were also considerable opportunities for private companies who handled the sales. The Republic possessed almost no bureaucracy. Magistrates sent to govern a province did so with a tiny staff, supplemented by their private household. Taxes were collected by private companies who bid for the contract to perform the tax. They were called the *publicani* – hence the publicans of the Authorised Bible – because they undertook public contracts. Their interest was in making money and thus they had to collect more from the provincials than they passed on to the Republic. There were other business opportunities in the empire, and simply being Roman and connected with the new great power was a huge advantage.[6]

Wealth flooded back to Italy and the gap between the rich and poor widened. Senators were not supposed to indulge in business ventures apart from landholding, although many covertly ignored this rule. Many of the fortunes made overseas were used to buy up grand rural estates, worked by a force of slave labourers. Slaves became cheap as the captives of frequent wars flooded the market. As importantly, they could not be called up for military service unlike labourers or tenants who

Input Data Services Ltd 05-03-2011 15:23:02

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 36

were citizens. There were good steady profits to be made from farming, and sometimes conditions created even greater opportunities. It was always easier for the owners of big estates to exploit such situations. During the late second and first centuries BC there was an almost insatiable demand for Italian wine from the communities in Gaul. It is estimated that some 40 million wine amphorae from Italy were sent north of the Alps in the first century BC alone.[7]

Times were good for the wealthy and the big landowners, but difficult for the small-scale farmer. In 133 BC an ambitious senator named Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus claimed that:

> The wild beasts that roam over Italy have their dens and holes to lurk in, but the men who fight and die for our country enjoy the common air and light and nothing else. . . . they fight and die to protect the luxury of others. They are called the masters of the world, but they do not possess a single clod of earth which is truly their own.[8]

Gracchus exaggerated – this speech was part of a successful electoral campaign, and men seeking office in any age rarely understate their case. Some farmers survived and even did well in the new conditions, but significant numbers failed. The minimum property qualification for military service had to be lowered several times in the course of the second century BC to find sufficient recruits. Ultimately, the tradition of men of property fighting in the army ended. By the first century BC the legions were recruited mainly from the poor, for whom military service provided a steady income and even a career.

FIRST AND BEST

Roman public life was fiercely competitive. There were more junior magistracies than senior posts, and so simple arithmetic

Input Data Services Ltd 05-03-2011 15:23:02

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 37

meant that it was harder to attain the consulship. Many senators never held any magistracy. Members of a small group of well-established families provided a disproportionately high number of consuls. These families had good reputations and voters tended to prefer names they recognised; they also had the wealth to advertise themselves.

Winning the consulship was a great achievement, bringing the chance to present legislation, and enhancing the reputation of the holder and his family. Former consuls were men of status, whose opinion would normally be sought in any meeting of the Senate. A consul's descendants were from then on counted as nobles (*nobiles*). The consulship might also bring the opportunity for a provincial command and control of an army in a major war – a successful military campaign could be highly profitable.

Even governing a province in peacetime offered plenty of opportunities for enrichment. The *publicani* and other Roman businessmen were likely to be generous to any governor who helped them. The locals themselves were also usually eager to buy the favour of the Roman governor with generous gifts. When Antony's contemporary, the poet Catullus, came back from serving on the staff of a provincial governor he claimed that the first thing a friend asked him was 'How much did you make?' Some governors were put on trial after they returned for extorting money and other misbehaviour in the provinces. One Roman governor was supposed to have said that three years were needed in a post: in the first year a man stole enough to pay off his debts; in the second he made himself wealthy; the third was reserved for making enough money to bribe the judge and jury for the inevitable trial when he returned.[9]

Yet in the end there was nothing to compare with the glory associated with fighting a successful war. Ideally, this was completed by the Senate voting the commander the right to celebrate a triumph. This ceremony celebrated the general's

Input Data Services Ltd 05-03-2011 15:23:02

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 38

achievements. It was the only occasion when formed and armed bodies of soldiers were allowed to march through the centre of Rome itself, along the Via Sacra ('Sacred Way') through the Forum and to the Capitoline Hill. Columns of prisoners and wagons carrying the spoils of war and pictures of scenes from the campaign processed with the troops. The general rode in a chariot, dressed up like the statues of Rome's most important god, Jupiter Optimus Maximus – 'Best' and 'Greatest'. His face was painted red, because the oldest statues of the god had been made of terracotta. For that day he was honoured almost as if he was a god. Tradition dictated that a slave stood behind him, holding the laurel wreath of the victor above his head and whispering reminders that he was only mortal.[10]

Men who had triumphed had laurel wreaths carved on the porches of their houses as a permanent reminder of their achievement. Each year there was a new batch of magistrates and new wars would be fought. The urge to win glory and make a fortune in the short term of office was a major factor in driving Roman imperialism. The Senate introduced a rule that at least five thousand enemies needed to be killed in battle before a general was eligible for a triumph. It is doubtful that they had any way of ensuring an accurate count. Plenty of men enjoyed triumphs, which meant that the competition was to have a bigger and more spectacular victory over a famous enemy.

Reputation mattered. If a senator was felt to be important, then people would come to him for favours and would respect his opinion. Reputation, past magistracies, victories won and other achievements all gave reputation. Wealth helped to advertise all this and could generate prestige on its own. The most important men lived physically closer to the heart of the city, in the grand and very ancient houses on the slopes of the Palatine Hill fronting onto the Via Sacra. Another sign of wealth was the possession of grand country estates worked by

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huge gangs of slave labourers. The splendour of houses, country villas and gardens offered more visible proof of importance. Art treasures from the Greek world were brought back as plunder or bought to decorate the homes of Rome's elite.

A man could stand for the consulship at forty-two. This meant that after he had held this supreme office he could reasonably expect to continue in public life for decades afterwards. A lucky few might win a second consulship ten years later, and a tiny handful might even manage a third consulship after another decade. Occasionally a man won a second triumph. Competition was always there. Men struggled to win office against other candidates who often also had wealth, reputation, ability and good family connections. If they managed to win, then they tried to ensure they got the most important and attractive duties and provincial commands. On their return, they competed to make best use of the glory and wealth they had won.

There were no political parties at Rome as we would understand them. Politics was an individual business because no one could share a magistracy or an honour. Families co-operated, and so at times did groups of friends, but such alliances were fluid and impermanent. Men seeking office rarely stood for any specific policies. Voters chose candidates on the basis of their character and ability rather than their ideals. Annual elections meant that the balance of power constantly shifted. Magistrates, especially consuls, were of huge importance in their year of office – the year was officially named after them. Afterwards they might have influence, but new consuls held actual power. All of this reinforced the constitutional ideal that no one should come to possess permanent power and so dominate the state.

Competition was always fierce, but until 133 BC it remained peaceful. In that year Tiberius Gracchus died during a political riot. His head was smashed in with a broken chair leg wielded by another senator, who was also his cousin. His opponents

Orion—Antony & Cleo mmp 198×129 —PKY ANTCMM0101 Unit $$$1 Page 40

accused Tiberius of wanting to stay permanently in power – even of wanting to be king. Just over a decade later Tiberius' younger brother Caius was killed in another bout of political violence, this time much more organised and larger in scale. In 100 BC another politician and his followers were massacred after large-scale and violent rioting in the Forum. Worse was to follow. In 88 BC a Roman consul turned his legions on Rome itself, seizing power and executing his opponents. Mark Antony was born while the civil war that followed this act still raged.

There were many reasons why Polybius' vision of a well-balanced and stable Roman constitution fell to pieces in the late second century BC, and we shall consider these later in more detail. For the moment it is worth simply emphasising that Mark Antony was born and lived in a Republic already fractured by mob violence, discord and civil war. He never knew a time when the Republic was stable in the way it had been in Polybius' day and before. Then, no one could have imagined senators killing each other or winning power through direct military force. For Mark Antony and his contemporaries, such things were ever-present threats, which quite often turned into reality.

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