

Margaret M. Miles, *Cleopatra. A Sphinx Revisited*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles. 2011. ISBN 9780520243675. PP. xii + 238. \$49.95.

“She was so lustful that she often prostituted herself, and so beautiful that many men paid with their lives for a night with her”, wrote Sextus Aurelius, a fourth century AD Latin historian, about Cleopatra. Aurelius’ image of the Ptolemaic queen was heavily influenced by his (Augustan) Roman predecessors who invented the eroticising stereotype of Cleopatra VII as a sensuous and unbalanced Oriental woman, amongst quite a number of others. The problem of all studies on Cleopatra is that these very unbalanced Roman sources are almost all that we have at our disposal to understand the historical Cleopatra. And it seems that they already were more image than reality. How strong this image was (and still is) becomes clear from the enormous fascination this Roman (mis)understanding of Cleopatra has exerted on many antique and post-antique historical contexts—and on scholarly understanding of this key figure in ancient history. As we learn from the book under review, Françoise de Fox, mistress to the French King Francis I, demanded the first modern translation from Plutarch’s *Life of Antony* in 1519 “hoping to learn from an unsurpassed model in Françoise’s line of business”, as Giuseppe Pucci writes (p. 195) in his article aptly titled “Every Man’s Cleopatra”. Apparently Cleopatra was (and still is) a very potent symbol to make meaning with; a process that already started during her lifetime and seems to have been capitalised upon by Cleopatra herself as well. Almost all studies on “Cleopatra” are, therefore, reception studies in one way or the other, and this collection of essays takes that seriously by devoting five out of nine essays to appropriations of Cleopatra from the Renaissance onwards and putting processes of “symbolic construction” central to the other four dealing with the historical context. This is what one could call the first important line of Cleopatra studies: one could characterise it with the term *imagology*, and it deals with the various understandings and appropriations of “Cleopatra” throughout time. The second important line does not so much deal with the image but with the deconstruction of the image in order to better understand historical reality. This line of research has, over the last decade or so, generated important results. Putting the Roman sources in their (Orientalist) context and deconstructing them; looking for Egyptian perspectives to balance their picture and trying to understand Cleopatra in her late Hellenistic context—and thus not as Egyptian *or* Greek *or* Roman but as (simultaneously) Egyptian *and* Greek *and* Roman—has quite dramatically altered our understanding. To put the (emerging) new paradigm that also this Cleopatra book adheres to in one sentence: what Cleopatra did, in fact, made a lot of sense. (An excellent illustration of the importance of this perspective is the recent article by R. Strootman, ‘Queen of Kings: Kleopatra VII and the Donations of Alexandria’, in T. Kaizer and M. Facella, eds., *Kingdoms and principalities in the Roman Near East* (2010) 139–158).

A sphinx revisited adds to both debates and is a worthwhile and interesting collection of essays. Based on a 1999 conference, the book apparently encountered a huge delay in publication, which is a pity as important post-1999 publications like the exhibition catalogues *Cleopatra of Egypt. From history to myth* from 2001 and *Kleopatra und die Caesaren* from 2006 are not (really) included in the various discussions. In

discussing the individual articles below, I will focus on what the book has to say about Cleopatra's historical context.

After an introduction by the editor ("Cleopatra in Egypt, Europe and New York") four essays follow on the "historical Cleopatra". Focussing on iconography, Sally-Ann Ashton, whose work has been most important for the development of an "Egyptian perspective", considers Cleopatra alongside her predecessors, most notably Arsinoe II whom she took as a role model in several respects. For Ashton's views (also with regard to her hypothesis that the iconography of Cleopatra influenced Roman depictions of Isis) see now more extensively her 2008 book *Cleopatra and Egypt*. In an important piece already published in the 2003 *Festschrift* for T.P. Wiseman (*Myth, history and culture in Republican Rome*), Erich Gruen convincingly argues that Cleopatra did not stay in Rome from 46 to 44 BC (quickly returning to Egypt after Caesar had been murdered), as commonly assumed, but was there briefly in 46 BC (until Caesar left for campaigns in Spain) and then returned in 44 BC, when Caesar's plans for a reorganisation of the Empire were taking shape in a definitive form and her presence, in the interest of her kingdom, was required. Gruen rightly deconstructs the story of a statue of Cleopatra that Caesar would have placed in the temple of Venus Genetrix next to that of the goddess herself as a scholarly myth (as Jérôme Carcopino already did in 1958, see my review of *Kleopatra und die Caesaren* (BMCR 2008.09.52) for more detail). Focusing on literary testimonia, Robert A. Gurval studies the meaning of the asp in Antiquity to understand why the death of Cleopatra was related to that animal in particular. In the end we will never know, of course, whether the asp (or its venom) killed Cleopatra or not, but what Gurval makes perfectly clear is that through its richness and multiplicity in political, literary and cultural terms, the asp "served both the Roman victor and the foreign queen well" (p. 75). In her contribution entitled "Cleopatra, Isis, and the formation of Augustan Rome", Sarolta A. Takács takes an important point of departure: instead of seeing Cleopatra as foreign and exotic (and hence not very relevant to Roman cultural formation) she wants to understand "Cleopatra's Egypt as a potent influence on the formation of Augustan Rome" (p. 79). The essay itself, however, does not really live up to that important alternative perspective. Takács focuses on the impact of Isis in Augustan Rome and her relation to Cleopatra, repeating arguments from her thought-provoking 1995 monograph *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman world* but not nuancing or updating her views and bibliography. The article contains interesting suggestions, also on the Palatine complex, although, I think, it defines the relation between Cleopatra and Isis as too narrow (as does Ashton, see above). For the subject itself see now the overview provided by M. Malaise, 'Octavien et les cultes isiaques à Rome en 28', in L. Bricault and R. Veymiers, eds., *Bibliotheca Isiaca* II (2011) 185–199; for understanding Augustus' complex on the Palatine one profits from reading P.G.P. Meyboom, 'The creation of an imperial tradition. Ideological aspects of the house of Augustus', in K.A.E. Enenkel and I.L. Pfeijffer, eds., *The manipulative mode. Political propaganda in Antiquity. A collection of case studies* (2005) 219–274.

The set of five articles dealing with post-antique periods starts with a splendid essay by Brian Curran that discusses Cleopatra and Egypt in High Renaissance Rome

and focuses not on Alexander VI Borgia (who claimed descent from Osiris and commissioned the famous Borgia apartments) but on his successor Julius II (ruled 1492–1503), showing (*contra* Ernst Gombrich) how “Egypt” mattered greatly to this “second Julius Caesar” as well. For this subject see more extensively Curran’s books *The Egyptian Renaissance: the afterlife of ancient Egypt in early modern Italy* from 2007 and *Obelisk: a history* from 2009. Ingrid D. Rowland presents a fascinating seventeenth century forgery story regarding a manuscript entitled *Letters on the infamous libido of Cleopatra the queen*, allegedly comprising the correspondence between Marc Antony, the famous physician Quintus Sorranus of Ephesus and the queen herself. Margaret Mary DeMaria Smith (“HRH Cleopatra”) discusses the Egyptian paintings of Lawrence Alma-Tadema and his portraits of Cleopatra, demonstrating how “Antiquity”, for Alma-Tadema, consisted of Greece, Rome, Egypt and the world of the Bible alike. In their “Glamour girls. Cleomania in mass culture” Maria Wyke and the late Dominik Montserrat move into the 20th century with their overview of Cleopatra’s portrayal from Victorian England to Liz Taylor, also coining the interesting neologism Cleomania. Giuseppe Pucci, finally, takes a wider time perspective and therefore remains more impressionistic in showing how every period and context creates its own Cleopatra.

The editor is to be thanked for bringing these essays together and for adding the epilogue, a poem by Peter Green called *Cleopatra. The sphinx revisited* (published in *Arion* 14.1 from 2006) that probably few (Cleomania-interested) readers would otherwise have found.

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