

Cleopatra and Julius Caesar: Strategical use of romance for a political agenda

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ABSTRACT

Irrespective of the time gender relationships are used and manipulated by the political personalities expecting to strengthen, continue, and expand political ties of both internal and external political ties in countries. Cleopatra can be recognised as an all-time popular female politician whose political personality is underrated but beauty and seductiveness are still highlighted. During her life time Cleopatra had the opportunity to maintain relationships with two important Roman politicians, namely, Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony. The relationship between the renowned Roman politician Julius Caesar and the popular Egyptian Queen Cleopatra is romanticized by the novelists, film directors, and the playwrights, portraying a rather different idea on the nature of their intimacy. Nevertheless, when analysing the historical evidence, both archaeological and literary, it is doubtful whether their relationship was romantic in reality or whether both were the victims of manipulation of their relationship. Apparently, the majority of evidence on the relationship between the two politicians are from Rome. Thus, these partial literary sources have to be examined in order trace the nature of their relationship and to determine how far they have used romance as a strategical way to manipulate and continue political ties favouring both parties. Quotes from historical literary evidence will be analysed in order to highlight the fact how both Cleopatra and Caesar used their romantic relationship for continuation and stabilization of each other's political outlines.

KEYWORDS: *Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Politics, Romance, Manipulation*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Cleopatra (69 – 31 BCE) the last Pharaoh Queen of Egypt, was a descendent of Ptolemy I who served as a general in the army of Alexander the Great. After the death of Ptolemy XII, Cleopatra ascended to the Egyptian throne as the co-ruler of her brother and husband, Ptolemy XIII. This marks the beginning of unexpected changes in both Roman and Egyptian history alike. The only surviving sources of the early career of Cleopatra are foreign and one of the descriptive records is given by the historian Appian. Appian converses about the sibling rivalries and Cleopatra's desire for political power which leads her up to the point where she does not hesitate to get rid of any obstacle coming her way to supremacy. When ascending to the throne she committed crimes like assassinating her husband-brother with the aid of Caesar and committing adultery with him who was much older than her. This further supports the fact that Cleopatra used her relationship to achieve her political motives.

Gaius Julius Caesar (102-44 BCE) was popular as a Roman statesman from contemporary time to the present. He served well the common people though he was a descendent of the aristocratic class of Rome and had a distinguished military career. According to the autobiographical details provided by Suetonius "Caesar first saw military service in Asia"¹. He is mostly known for the relationship he had with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra than his other Roman wives and mistresses. Further, as Kebric mentions "Caesar found the ambitious twenty-one-year a pleasant change from her Roman female counterparts."² Cleopatra was different from the contemporary Roman women who did not openly fight for power. Caesar's interest towards Cleopatra was heightened by the political position she held as the Queen of Egypt, one of the destinations, the Romans aimed for several decades. Nevertheless, in history and in modern time, Caesar is mostly known as the illegal lover of Cleopatra than the legal husband of above Roman women. Vice versa, both were victims of each other's political agendas.

¹ Suetonius, Julius Caesar 2

² Rober B. Kebric, Roman People, 90

II. METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier only surviving literary evidence on their relationship is from Rome. Few archaeological evidence support the political character of Cleopatra like the numismatic evidence and papyrus documents. Yet, many information has to be gathered from partial accounts of Roman authors and this information has been analysed accordingly to examine the nature of the romantic relationship prevailed between Cleopatra and Julius Caesar.

III. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

According to the view of early authors Cleopatra was a mere 'whore queen' who committed dual crimes for the sake of power. Not only the authors from antiquity but modern critics like Giovanni Boccaccio criticizes her deeds as,

"Nevertheless, she gained her kingdom through crime. She was truly notable for almost nothing, except her ancestry and her beauty; rather, she was known throughout the world for her greed, cruelty, and excess."³

Except for a few critics, many authors built up an extremely negative character of Cleopatra. Even her ascending to the throne is considered to be an act through unconstitutional means. The Egyptian Royal women had rights to be a co-ruler along with their brothers, by marrying them according to the tradition of Egyptian culture. This does not deny the crime she committed by assassinating her brother to get hold of the supreme power, but even that demonstrates the ambitious nature of her character. This ambition was something uncommon in a woman at that time. She went to the extreme of manipulating a reputed Roman politician to gain stability in power. It also should be noted that Rome also underwent a period of internal strife, political chaos, and political assassinations. Amidst all, Cleopatra began to expand and perpetuate her power with aid of Roman leaders who came as governors to Egypt.

Cleopatra was not a power hungry politician but she cared about her country and the citizens. She becomes the first Ptolemaic ruler to learn the native language of the Egyptians (Plutarch, *Life of Anthony*, 25.4-5). From Ptolemy I onwards none of the rulers regarded the importance of learning the language of Egypt as they were Greek in origin. Unlike the Ptolemies, Cleopatra's interest towards learning the language shows her concern towards her people. Being an active politician, she had her own political propaganda in each and every action. She had aims to be fulfilled. However, she has truly cared about the people to the extent she learnt their native language and began a struggle for power with the leading power of Rome.

The beauty of Cleopatra is a debatable question in scholarship. The surviving numismatic evidence and few busts from archaeology help to build up an assumption on the appearance of Cleopatra. However, according to Plutarch, Cleopatra was an attractive woman. Cassius Dio highlights the seductiveness in her appearance (*Roman history*, 42.34.4). Nevertheless, the surviving portraits of Cleopatra⁴ resemble a manly looking woman who seems to be more determined than beautiful and attractive. But it is widely believed in Roman history that the beauty of Cleopatra was the main reason which attracted men. She seems to have encouraged those leaders to establish intimate relationships which made her a seductress and enchantress in the eyes of Roman historians. Caesar and Anthony were victims of her charm. Thus, the personal relationships of Cleopatra should be carefully analysed in order to identify the true motive behind the appearance.

By the particular period, Julius Caesar had gained a considerable popularity among the common Roman citizens and held several offices in the Republican government. As evident in the illustrations by historians such as Suetonius and Plutarch and the records of Caesar himself, Caesar was a successful statesman as well as a commander in battlefield. Further Julius Caesar can be recognized as the first unofficial Emperor of Rome. His contribution, for the transition of Roman Republic in to an Empire, was fruitful during the reign of Augustus Caesar, the official heir to the position left by Julius Caesar.

Julius Caesar was an acquaintance of Ptolemy VII Auletes, father of Cleopatra, before he met Cleopatra.

"He (Julius Caesar) sold alliances and thrones for cash, making King Ptolemy XII of Egypt give him and Pompey nearly 1,500,000 gold pieces; and later paid his Civil War army, and the expenses of his triumphs and entertainments, by open extortion and sacrilege."⁵

Accordingly in 59 B.C.E. Julius Caesar took measures to authorize his power and influence in Egyptian territory by receiving a large sum as a bribe from Ptolemy XII Auletes. In addition the introduction of *lex de rege Alexandrino* which gave the title to the Ptolemaic king as an *amicus et socius populi Romani*, donated the term a friendly ally of Rome. On the other hand, as the above extract illustrates, Ptolemy repaid him by financially supporting the army of Julius Caesar during the Civil Wars. According to Kebric 'Auletes owed his

³ Boccaccio, 1362, Preface

⁵ Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 54

throne to Rome, specifically to Caesar and Pompey, through whose good graces he had ruled.⁶ Nevertheless, it was a political propaganda of Caesar to invade the Egyptian territory without conquering it by force. It is evident that Julius Caesar was aiming high to consolidate power in Egyptian territory. Accordingly, Cleopatra becomes a fine target for the political expectations of Julius Caesar in Egypt. This further strengthens the fact their relationship was politically effective for each party.

After replacing Ptolemy VII to the throne, he ruled Egypt until his death and his third daughter and the first son ascended to the throne in 51 BCE, as King and Queen of Egypt. But soon they involved in a power struggle which again gave an opportunity to Caesar to get involved in administrative matters of Egypt. Caesar has recorded about the crisis which prevailed between Cleopatra and her brother-husband Ptolemy III as follows.

“There by chance was king Ptolemaeus, a boy in years, waging war with large forces against his sister Cleopatra whom a few months before he had expelled from the throne by the help of his relations and his friends. The camp of Cleopatra was not distant from his.”⁷

Likewise, one could conclude that there was an internal strife in Egypt during the time when Caesar arrived in Egypt in 48 B.C.E. When Cleopatra was driven out of the throne, she turned towards Caesar and appealed to him to help her to regain the throne. Julius Caesar would have seen the capability and power exercised by the young Queen Cleopatra. He had immediately taken her side in the battle of Alexandria. After a series of events, the faction of Cleopatra won.⁸ Nevertheless, the analysis given by Plutarch highly focuses on the beauty of Cleopatra. Further Cassius Dio is in utter belief that Caesar is captivated by her charms.

“She was a particularly beautiful woman and, at the time, being in her prime, she was conspicuously lovely. She also had an elegant voice and she knew how to use her charms to be attractive to everyone. Since she was beautiful to look at and to listen to, she was able to captivate everyone, even a man tired of love and past his prime. Thus, she thought it appropriate for her to meet with Caesar and she rested all her hopes of a successful outcome on her beauty... When Caesar saw her and heard her speak, he was immediately so captivated...”⁹

As mentioned, Cleopatra got rid of her brother and husband using the help of Julius Caesar and finally ascended to the throne as the sole ruler of Egypt. According to the records of Plutarch Julius Caesar ‘left Egypt to be ruled by Cleopatra, who shortly thereafter bore him a son called Caesarion by the Alexandrians, he hastened to Syria.’¹⁰

Thus irrespective of the manner in which their relationship is presented in Roman history, Julius Caesar, the shrewd and genius politician, was targeting to capture Egypt without any struggle; by merely becoming the partner of the female ruler of Egypt. He believed that by this he could arrive at position of handling and influencing Cleopatra. In that manner, the encounter of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar had elevated both of their political lives. The romantic intimacy would have helped to a lesser extent when compared to the impact of their political gain.

There is evidence from historical records to prove that, Caesar was aiming at the territory of Egypt for a considerable period of time. The wealth and richness of the Egyptian land attracted many leaders including a Julius Caesar himself.

Eg. 1. The manner in which he tried to involve in internal matters of Egypt

2. The way he took bribes from the Egyptian king and made Egypt indebted to Rome
3. The way he started a relationship with Cleopatra

Above are fine instances to support the political necessity of Julius Caesar in his relationship with Cleopatra. Thus, this is an example of how gender relationships were manipulated as a political strategy from early time onwards.

Roman leaders had seen Egypt as an opportunity to promote their political career. For example, Julius Caesar had first laid the foundation to invade Egypt by trying to become the governor of Egypt.

“After thus securing the good will of the commons and their tribunes, Caesar tried to get himself elected Governor-General of Egypt by popular vote. His excuse for demanding so unusual an appointment was an outcry against the Alexandrians who had just disposed King Ptolemy, although the Senate had recognized him as an ally and friend of Rome.”¹¹

⁶ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 87

⁷ Caesar, *Civil Wars* 3.103

⁸ A descriptive analysis on the dispute is given by Cassius Dio in *Roman History* 42.34.3-35, Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 49

⁹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 34

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*.

¹¹ Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 11

According to the records of Suetonius, Caesar was ‘obliged to abandon his ambition of governing Egypt.’¹² First the strategic location of Egypt and then the wealth and resources of Egypt fascinated most of the Roman leaders from early times. As mentioned by Kebric, many invaders, like Caesar, saw Egypt as a land of treasure for their military funds. Further, as the above phrase suggests, though the Romans are known to be war-like people, diplomats like Caesar has used strategies like political alliances and debt bondages to interfere and to establish their power in foreign nations. This is evident in Caesar’s diplomatic conduct in Egypt. Like the earlier Roman leaders, he also attempted to intervene in the internal matters of Egypt by making alliances of friendship and political agreements which gave him an opportunity to make legal appearances in the internal matters of Egypt. Based on the above argument, it cannot be assumed that Julius Caesar was attracted only to the beauty of Cleopatra. The position she held and the resources she owned by being the Queen of Egypt would have been of extreme attention to him.

Further the manner in which Caesar got involved in the lives of Ptolemy VII and Cleopatra depicts his strategies to interfere in their lives. Though Cleopatra ascended to the throne as the Queen, Caesar’s influence over her allowed him to remain as the Roman representative in Egyptian territory. Kebric is in the view that Caesar was ‘in need of funds for his war chest, he planned to exploit the riches of Egypt.’¹³ This suggests that Caesar had more political expectations than a romantic relationship with the Egyptian beauty as depicted by historians from antiquity. Further, his power and influence over the Egyptian administrative matters are implied in the manner in which he directly involves himself in the crisis of the Egyptian government. Though he was a foreigner the impact which Rome had upon Egypt has given him power to interfere in state matters of Egypt. According to Kabric, Caesar’s excuse was that ‘he meant to see that the will of his “old friend” Ptolemy Auletes was carried out to the letter.’¹⁴ After that he summoned both Ptolemy and Cleopatra ‘in his official capacity’ where he first saw her and sensed the personality of this ambitious woman who is fairly different to the Roman women he has associated with. Thus as many scholars claim, the romantic element which would have occurred at the meeting is undeniable. Cleopatra would have seen Caesar as a ladder to secure her throne. On the other hand, 51 year old Julius Caesar who also had several women in his life would have been attracted by the charms, wit, courage, and intelligence of Cleopatra.

Parthia, situated towards East of Roman frontier, had an influential impact in Rome for a considerable period of time. Julius Caesar began to show interest in rich Parthenon civilization during his campaigns against Greece and Asia Minor. On the reverse, Parthia had access to certain ‘lands viewed by the Romans as ‘beyond’ the Euphrates River’¹⁵. Thus they became rivals and the enmity was enhanced by the fact the Parthians were successful in military engagement which would have threatened the war-like Romans. Julius Caesar planned for military campaigns against Parthia and the scholars like Kebric is in the view that ‘to ensure success against Parthia, Caesar planned to utilize Egypt’s wealth and strategic location. Cleopatra was prepared to provide whatever he needed.’¹⁶ Cleopatra was politically indebted to Caesar and was willing to help him as she was aware that her future depended on the good will of Caesar. On the other hand, Caesar used the resources of Egypt considering himself as the unofficial dictator of Egypt, politically more powerful than official rulers of Egypt. Further, as illustrated by Kebric, ‘because of the key role Cleopatra would play in Parthia’s defeat, Rome would willingly come to accept her and Egypt as true “friends” and “allies”.’¹⁷ By this acceptance, Julius Caesar expected to unite the powers of Rome and Egypt due to the political and economic values of Egypt for his personal powers as well as Rome. Not only Julius Caesar but Mark Anthony also followed the same tradition by using the Egyptian resources to fulfil the Roman dream of capturing Parthia. Nevertheless, he failed in the campaign against Parthia as even before he was leaving Rome to Parthia, he was assassinated. However, the military expectations of Caesar also witness the political propaganda that lay underneath the romantic relationship which some try to emphasize.

A question arises as to how far this relationship can be depicted as romantic intimacy like the historians’ claims that they have had. Thus both the historical figures of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar should be examined as political strategists rather than naive lovers by the present society.

Julius Caesar was never blinded by the beauty of Cleopatra. Even before he had visually seen her, he has had several political ties to Egypt. Even after being charmed and distracted by the appearance and the strong will of Cleopatra, he did not blindly marry her or let her use him without his acknowledgement. As Kabric put his argument,

¹² Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 13

¹³ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 90

¹⁴ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 90

¹⁵ Ferguson, R. *Rome and Parthia: Power politics and diplomacy across cultural frontiers* 8

¹⁶ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 94

¹⁷ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 94

“He let Cleopatra use him only as far as he wished to be used. She was definitely a part of his future plans for Egypt. That there was an emotional attachment (despite the thirty-year difference in their ages) between the two is undeniable, although Caesar continued to be married and to have other mistresses.”¹⁸

Thus as Kabric discusses Julius Caesar was not blindly enchanted by the charms of Cleopatra like the historians from antiquity try to imply. The political ambitions of Julius Caesar had overpowered the attraction he had towards Cleopatra. Cleopatra also would have known her boundaries of taking advantage from the Roman consul. Modern Scholars have paid attention to the political necessities of Cleopatra to start a romantic relationship with an old man who was nearly 30 years older than her. On the contrary, most of the scholars have forgotten to examine the political propaganda in the aims of Julius Caesar who was trying for years to get hold of the Egyptian territory under his control. Thus, as above instances imply, on the side of Julius Caesar, emotional factor was over powered by the political aspect. Nevertheless, during the final battle of Alexandria, Cleopatra discovers that she is pregnant with a child of Caesar.

The first child and son of Cleopatra was Caesarion whose father is widely assumed to be Julius Caesar. According to history, Cleopatra names the son as Ptolemy Caesar who lately becomes Caesarion. The paternity of the child is still debatable subject in scholarship. Due to several reasons Caesarion can be regarded as the true son of Caesar and there are several other reasons not to believe so. Nevertheless, the birth of Caesarion was important not only to the life Cleopatra. His birth also affects the relationship Cleopatra and Anthony in a different manner and to the political life of Augustus¹⁹. None of the historical records support that Caesar acknowledged Caesarion as his son or heir. By that time, he had only one child, a daughter, Julia from his first wife Cornelia. Thus it is argued in scholarship that Caesarion was not the son of Caesar and if Caesarion was his son Caesar would have named him in his will or mention him in any of his records. On the other hand, it can be regarded as a political strategy. As it was evident, unlike Anthony, Julius Caesar never marries Cleopatra. He had a relationship with her only to fulfil both his personal and political needs. Further, being a dedicated Roman, Caesar would not have dreamt of appointing an Egyptian born child as heir to the position. Further, there is no information to prove that Caesar followed any of the Egyptian customs. On the other hand, he has always treated Egypt as a subservient ally under the command of Rome. Thus it is obvious that he purposely neglected to keep Caesarion and Cleopatra in a legal context.

Cleopatra would have expected political recognition in Rome as the mother of the only son of Julius Caesar. But Julius Caesar made certain not to mention about both Cleopatra and Caesarion in his will. Nevertheless, none can deny the fact that Cleopatra bore the child out of political necessities. Her aim had been to consolidate her power through Caesarion in future. This is confirmed through her decision to assassinate her brother-husband who shared the throne. She kept young Caesarion as her co-ruler. Basically, it was a measure taken by Cleopatra to consolidate her sole power in her territory as Caesarion had no practical role in the government. The ambitious nature of Cleopatra can be highly examined in her political decisions as such. But it is ironic how none of the Roman historians have highlighted the political value of her decision but depicted her as a woman who had several men.

The ancient site at the forum of Caesar at Rome has revealed certain monuments, in which, it is assumed that, a full statue of Cleopatra had been erected along with the statues of Venus and Caesar. Several literary sources like Appian²⁰, Dio²¹, Suetonius²², Pliny the Elder²³ mention about the particular temple which they have identified as the Temple of Venus Genetrix. Only Cassius Dio has referred to the particular statue of Cleopatra.

“The late Cleopatra herself, although defeated and captured by Rome, has been glorified: her ornaments are now dedicated in our temples, and a gold statue of the queen herself is on view in the Temple of Venus.”²⁴

According to Dio’s account, Cleopatra had been kept on a pedestal parallel to Venus, the patron goddess of Caesar’s family. Further, he mentions how she was venerated together with Venus and Julius Caesar at the Roman forum. This clearly denotes political and social recognition to Cleopatra as expected by her through the relationship she had with Caesar. According to Kabric’s argument ‘this was an unprecedented honor, one more Egyptian than Roman, and certainly it would have kept tongues wagging about the queen and Caesar.’²⁵ Erecting such a statue implies that Caesar has tried to give recognition to Cleopatra in Rome. Though

¹⁸ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 90

²⁰ Civil Wars 2.102

²¹ Dio, History 43.22.1-2, Dio, History 51.22.3

²² Suetonius, Caesar 78.1

²³ Pliny the Elder, Encyclopedia 8.155, Pliny the Elder, Encyclopedia 35.26

²⁴ Dio, History 51.22.3

²⁵ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 93

he has not acknowledged her as his legal wife and Caesarion as the heir to him, the fact proves recognition parallel to Venus and him. This gave Cleopatra the identification as the mistress of Julius Caesar, the most powerful and influential leader of Rome during that time. But the assassination of Julius Caesar led her to return to her homeland amidst the accusations of the Romans. However, the above evidence proves that Cleopatra had to a certain extent, had fulfilled her aims in stabilizing her power in Roman territory. Cicero in one of his letters to Atticus records his personal opinion on Cleopatra during her stay in Rome.

“I dislike Her majesty...The arrogance of the Queen herself when she was living on the estate across Tiber makes my blood boil to recall. So I want nothing to do with them. They must think I have no spirit, or rather that I hardly have a spleen.”²⁶

The comment of Cicero indicates that the Romans did not like the queen though Caesar tried to introduce her as his mistress to the people. This is further implied in the manner how she had to leave Rome soon after the assassination of Caesar.

Likewise, by the end of their relationship, the dream of Cleopatra also came to an end. It is evident that both had realized their political expectations through their relationship. Julius Caesar had a long lasting dream to be the governor of the rich land of Egypt. The strategic location of Egypt ultimately attracted many Roman leaders from early Republican period onwards. As mentioned, Caesar followed the method of acquiring power of Egypt by making political alliances and friendly treaties with the Ptolemaic kings. Cleopatra became a different opponent where he kept her as his mistress while giving the political stability desired by Cleopatra, as the queen of Egypt and social recognition she needed from Roman territory. Though she tried to perpetuate that power by bearing a son in the name of Caesar, it became a failure as the political propaganda of Julius Caesar did not acknowledge the son he had from a foreign woman as his heir. Nevertheless, if he had recognised him as his heir, the history of Rome would have changed and an empire would never be born under the emperor named Augustus. However, on the other hand, Julius Caesar aimed at the treasury of Egypt. According to Kabric, ‘Egypt also provided an ideal refuge should he ever needs one’²⁷ and he retained in his personal relationship with Cleopatra ‘by having ready access to Egypt’s wealth.’²⁸

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it is evident that the relationship of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra was far more politically bound than what the historians from antiquity try to imply. Both were victims of each other’s strategy to manipulate the gender relationship as a political strategy for their own benefit and survival. Julius Caesar was not a fascinated lover of Cleopatra and Cleopatra had no power over the decisions of Caesar. It is evident in instances like his decisions over Caesarion who gained no recognition as the son of Caesar. If Cleopatra had an irresistible influence like an enchantress, she would have easily entrapped Caesar to declare her son as the heir of Caesar and effortlessly gain power in Rome through Caesarion. She won the rest of her political dreams by holding the throne of Egypt but she had to fight to protect it. Her strategy again was starting an intimate relationship with the next Roman governor of Egypt, Mark Anthony. If Cleopatra enchanted Julius Caesar as claimed by the primary sources (like Plutarch and Cassius Dio) she would not have to turn towards Anthony. This establishes the fact that the political element of the relationship of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar was more powerful and overruled the romantic element. The intimacy they had as lovers was the basic foundation where they ensured their political expectations. Further, to a considerable extent, both were successful. Julius Caesar had direct access to the administrative affairs and the treasury of Egypt while Cleopatra protected her political stability in Egypt and spread her name in Rome as well. In that manner, it is far more definite to regard the ‘romantic’ relationship of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra as another historical instance of strategic use of romance for a political agenda.

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²⁷ Rober B. Kebric, *Roman People*, 91

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