

**Sally-Ann Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden
MA, 2008.**

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This study by Sally-Ann Ashton is the latest contribution to a long tradition of scholarly interest in Cleopatra. The recent appearance of several monographs relating specifically to the Ptolemaic queen, namely *The Reign of Cleopatra*, *Cleopatra and Rome*, *Cleopatra Reassessed*, *Cleopatra: Beyond the Myth*, *Cleopatra and Egypt: from History to Myth*, and *Cleopatra*, greatly enhances the need to justify any addition to this field of study.¹ Ashton successfully does this, by offering a fresh approach to the examination of Cleopatra.

Ashton identifies several problems that occur regularly in previous studies of Cleopatra and she makes a determined effort to address these in this book. In general, scholars have focused on Cleopatra's role as a Greek monarch, apparently due to their background as classical scholars. Ashton, on the other hand, is trained as both a classicist and an Egyptologist, and it is this, she argues, that enables her to also consider Cleopatra as an Egyptian ruler. It is also this classical background that makes it possible for Ashton to be critical of the approaches of other scholars.

A further problem with studies by classical scholars is their use of the Roman textual sources. While these authors generally recognise the problems with using such material – due to the biases of the ancient authors and the fact that many of these sources are not contemporary with Cleopatra's reign – they nevertheless still use them as the primary evidence in their studies. Alternatively, Ashton chooses to focus on the archaeological material and to use the Roman textual material to confirm her conclusions. While several recent studies of Cleopatra have indeed drawn on archaeological material, particularly those based on exhibitions, these studies concentrate only on

¹ S. M. Burstein, *The Reign of Cleopatra*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2007; D.E.E. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA, 2005; S. Walker and S.-A. Ashton (eds), *Cleopatra Reassessed*, British Museum, London, 2003; M. Chauveau, *Cleopatra: Beyond the Myth*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2002; S. Walker and P. Higgs (eds), *Cleopatra and Egypt: from History to Myth*, British Museum, London, 2001; M. Grant, *Cleopatra*, Phoenix, London, 2000.

certain aspects of the queen's character. Ashton attributes this to the wide variety of evidence that requires knowledge from a range of disciplines, which her diverse background as a classicist, art historian, archaeologist and Egyptologist can potentially provide.

The book is separated into nine chapters, each of which broadly covers a different aspect of Cleopatra's life. There is inevitably some overlap between the discussions in each chapter, yet this division is useful as it emphasises the various roles that Cleopatra fulfilled, while at the same time making the information more accessible.

The chapters cover a range of themes such as the portrayal of Cleopatra by both modern and ancient writers; aspects of her reign, including marriages and significant events; her role as king; her relationship to Alexandria and the rest of Egypt; her role as a religious figure, including her association with Isis and the dynastic cults; her relationship with Antony; the myth surrounding her death; and finally her legacy to Egypt and Rome and the fate of her children.

This wide ranging examination of Cleopatra's life is directed at finding the 'real' Cleopatra. Ashton presents us with more than a queen of a Greek dynasty, and identifies the mother, the lover, the goddess and most importantly the Egyptian queen that is Cleopatra. Whether the 'real' Cleopatra can be discovered is debatable, and Ashton is aware that the Cleopatra described here is still one of her own making; however, we cannot deny that the character of Cleopatra, both historically and mythically, is a complex and multi-faceted one. It is refreshing to see Cleopatra as she ruled Egypt and not only as a Greek monarch or as she interacted with Rome. Significantly, Ashton does not ignore these other aspects of her character, and portrays her as an Egyptian ruler in addition to, and not instead of, her other roles.

Ashton is rather critical in her discussion of both ancient and modern portrayals of the queen and she attempts to identify the agenda of the authors and demonstrate how their particular background influences the way they see Cleopatra. Certainly, Ashton has her own agenda, but in acknowledging the

influence that this has on any study of Cleopatra, including her own, she is much closer to offering a more objective view.

The book is targeted at both an academic and lay audience. It is carefully balanced to appeal to readers with little or no knowledge of Cleopatra, as well as those who are familiar with the types of evidence discussed and the opinions presented in previous studies. In general, Ashton succeeds in maintaining this balance. There is little in the way of jargon to confuse the lay reader and the broad range of archaeological and textual material is presented in a simple and clear manner. On the other hand, there is enough detail for use in an academic context, with minimal repetition and a relatively original approach to the topic.

The book may have benefited from the inclusion of a map of the Mediterranean, or at least of Egypt. This would certainly be useful to all readers alike, particularly in trying to understand the position of Alexandria in relation to Egypt and Rome.

This is an interesting and useful addition to a field of study that continues to generate a great deal of interest. It is a testament to Ashton that she has succeeded in offering a new approach to the study of Cleopatra while also making it enjoyable to read. Undoubtedly, Cleopatra is a complex character and while one could argue that it is impossible to discover the 'real' Cleopatra, this study goes a long way in the right direction.

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