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### Sally-Ann Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt*

Norman C. Rothman

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Sally-Ann Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

As the author acknowledges in the introduction to this book, her strengths and weaknesses stem from her professional training in art history and archaeology. Accordingly, her strengths are in the recreation of the arts and artifacts of Egypt during the lifetime of Cleopatra. The weaknesses arise from the lack of an extensive examination of the social, economic and political background of Egypt during the period.

Nonetheless, within the self-described limitations of this study, the work sheds light on its subject, but it is on Cleopatra rather than Egypt. This is reflected in the larger font of “Cleopatra” as opposed to “Egypt” in the title. The “Cleopatra” section is quite enlightening in terms of the life of Cleopatra for the layman who is not an Egyptologist.

Along with Marie Antoinette, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth I, and Catherine the Great, Cleopatra has been a subject of endless fascination for over two millennia. She has been immortalized in plays by Shaw and Shakespeare among others and in countless dramatic productions on stage, television, and film—most famously by Claudette Colbert in 1934, Vivien Leigh in 1946 and Elizabeth Taylor in 1963.

The outline of her life is well-known. As a young queen, she struggled for control of the crown against her younger brother. Upon the arrival of Julius Caesar, she gained power through a professional and personal alliance with him which produced a son. After the assassination of Caesar, she seduced Mark Antony and became his paramour and perhaps his wife. Upon the defeat of their joint forces by Octavian/Augustus at Actium, she committed suicide rather than being displayed as a war trophy in Rome.

As is usually the case, the disparity between myth and reality is quite extensive, with the latter being much more complex. Her dynasty, the Ptolemies, was Macedonian in origin, and had seized power after the death of Alexander the Great. This

dynasty had ruled for close to three centuries. It was similar to earlier dynasties in Egypt which had promoted brother-sister marriage, as did the Incas in the Americas, and uncle/niece marriage, as was the case in some European dynasties. Cleopatra herself was the product of a brother-sister marriage.

It was not a particularly loving marriage (from the modern point of view) as both husband and wife conspired against each other. After the death of her mother, her father Ptolemy XII put her eldest sister to death for conspiring against him. One year before his death, he named Cleopatra (the fifth child) as his co-ruler at 17. Showing her political astuteness, she did not conspire against him. However, she was forced to share power initially with her two successive younger brothers (not one) whose supporters plotted against her. Ultimately, with the support of her successive Roman partners, she was able to dispose of these two brothers and a female sibling and ruled alone. The rule of a female was not unprecedented in Ptolemaic Egypt.

Except for picking the wrong side in the Roman civil wars, as the book shows by including her diplomatic correspondence with other rulers, she was reasonably sagacious in international affairs. At the very least, she prolonged Egyptian independence for two decades.

Although popular legend just covers her one child by Caesar, Ptolemy XV Caesar, who was murdered by Octavian/Augustus not because of his royal Egyptian lineage but because he was a Caesar, Cleopatra had three other children by Mark Antony. In contrast to Caesar's son, these children apparently were well-treated since they did not pose a threat to the Roman succession. The fate of the two sons is unknown, but the daughter eventually married the King of Mauritania in Northwest Africa.

The weakness of the book in terms of analysis is exhibited in the somewhat gratuitous first chapter, "Cleopatra – Black and

Beautiful.” She discusses the debate as to whether Cleopatra could be considered Black and whether she was beautiful. As the author comes to no conclusion, the dedication of a separate chapter to this subject is somewhat pointless.

The author is on firmer ground in succeeding chapters. She examines in an exhaustive and impressive fashion various ancient and modern sources on Cleopatra and her times. It is a definitive effort. It is significant as she covers artistic, archaeological, and literary sources on her subject.

The most impressive aspects of this book are the illustrations and pictures which recreate the artifacts and archaeological records of the period. There are over forty pictorial reproductions of assorted sculptures, buildings, and related artifacts. These include stelae (seals), coinage, tombs, chapels, temples, shrines, statues, and jewelry. The bibliography and index are quite helpful to the reader. Overall, in terms of Egyptology rather than historical analysis, this is a valuable contribution to learning especially for those in the general audience who think erroneously that they know all about Cleopatra.

Norman C. Rothman