

Cleopatra; Last Queen of Egypt. Joyce Tyldesley

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290 pages including notes and Who's Who. 16 pages of Plates.

On the cover of the book the Sunday Telegraph is quoted as saying "Tyldesley's strength has always been her storytelling" and this is something that she definitely cannot be faulted on. However this was not her strongest biography to date. At the beginning of the volume, Tyldesley claims she will tell the story of Cleopatra VII, from the Egyptian, rather than the Roman viewpoint but it is clear there is very little Egyptian evidence and it is impossible to present her life in any other way than through the Roman sources. I felt the volume was a great introduction to the time of Cleopatra, and the Ptolemy's who preceded her, but did not offer much information that was new about the queen herself.

The first couple of chapters described the lives of royal women and the freedom the Egyptian women enjoyed compared to those of the Roman and Greek cultures. There is also a chapter on the city of Alexandria, which gives an interesting history of the city from its founding by Alexander the Great, emphasising its importance to Egypt and the Roman world, as well as its remoteness from the rest of Egypt. One particularly interesting point was how the Museion at Alexandria had been used by scholars before the time of Cleopatra, for dissection and vivisection on condemned criminals in order to understand more about the human anatomy, showing the Ptolemy's were great scholars with an interest in knowledge.

The chapter entitled "Queen of Egypt" raises the poignant point that today we are very concerned with the appearance of those in the past, whereas the ancient cultures were not that concerned with this issue. This explains why there are no contemporary records which tell us what this queen looked like other than in very general terms, and Tyldesley attempts to present all of the descriptions providing an answer to this frequently asked question. The chapter also adds some interesting nuggets of information which will enable the reader to potentially recognise statues of the queen based on appearance and costume.

Two chapters were dedicated to the love affairs between Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, and then later with Marc Antony. These both seemed somewhat abbreviated and focused on the Roman politics rather than the relationships, but did discuss some of the inconsistencies and controversies of the time; for example whether Caesar was the father of Ptolemy Caesarion or not, as well as a discussion of the true nature of the relationship with Antony. The chapter entitled "New Isis" was a real disappointment as rather than describe the importance and relevance of the title "Neo Isis" and Cleopatra's self-deification it was instead a rather basic introduction to the Egyptian religion from the pre-dynastic period onwards with minimal reference to Cleopatra VII at all. At the end of the chapter I felt none the wiser regarding her new adopted title and the impact her deification held and I was left with the feeling that this chapter was padding.

Later chapters however offered tantalising glances into the petitions to Cleopatra from 40-30 BCE which included a document bearing her handwriting, stating "let it be so". Only one example was given, whereas it would have been very interesting to see what other things she dealt with as Queen although examples were given of earlier kings and their petitions. The aftermath of Cleopatra's suicide and the annexing of Egypt are described in detail, explaining the distribution of her wealth as well as the fate of her children, who she so wanted to protect. The final chapter investigates the mythology of Cleopatra emphasising how our version of her is coloured by Shakespeare who is often quoted as historical fact, whereas there are other 'versions' and images available from all periods; some of these are presented. The volume ends with a detailed "Who's Who" of the Ptolemaic period which is very informative and adds further context to the period.

Joyce Tyldesley cannot be faulted on her writing style, research or presentation, but this book was not as engaging as her other biographies. However, this would be a great read for someone who wants to learn a little more about the time of Cleopatra rather than the woman herself, and wants a straightforward book which gives the facts in the simplest way making history come alive.