

**Julius Caesar,
Cleopatra
and
Mark Antony**

**describing the end of the Republic of Rome,
the founding of the Roman Empire,
and the end of the Egyptian Pharaohs**

excerpted from

**“Understanding the Universe, from antiquity to the
present day, with an Australian perspective”**

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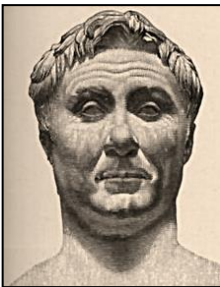
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The **Republic of Rome** ♦ had defeated the Greek armies at the Battle of Corinth in 146 BCE, and mainland Greece was now under Roman control. Conquering other nations and construction of impressive engineering works such as monumental buildings and temples, great arenas, paved roads, stone bridges and huge aqueducts were their main concerns. They had little interest in abstract thoughts such as those to do with philosophy or cosmology. Around 60 BCE, the Republic was wracked by internal unrest and civil war. In that year it was taken over by the **First Triumvirate**, a military dictatorship of three commanders, **Julius Caesar** (100-44 BCE), **Marcus Licinius Crassus** (115-53 BCE) and **Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey)**, 106-48 BCE). Crassus and Pompey were rich but hated each other. Caesar was in debt, but hoped that he could act as a stabilising influence on the other two. He had his daughter Julia marry Pompey to cement this arrangement. Crassus, a vile individual from whom our word 'crass' derives, was the man who put down the slaves' revolt led by Spartacus in the Third Servile War (73-71 BCE). He had Spartacus and 6000 followers crucified, their crosses lining the Appian Way from Rome to Capua.

Caesar wished to rule alone as an Emperor, but knew that he needed military fame and a loyal army to gain power and the support of the people against conservative politicians in the Roman Senate or civil government. Spoils of war would also improve his financial situation. He therefore assembled an army of 80000 and left to conquer new lands. He made a full-scale invasion of France (Gaul), and the Gallic Wars lasted from 58 to 51 BCE. During this time he made an exploratory raid into Britannia in 55 BCE, and invaded it on a larger scale in 54 BCE. Several raids were also made into Germania. Pompey and Crassus envied the public celebrations and rejoicing for the absent Caesar's conquests, so Crassus assembled an army and travelled east in an attempt to surpass him by conquering the Parthian Empire – today's Iraq and Iran. In the spring of 53 BCE Crassus crossed the Euphrates but was captured by Parthian soldiers in a desert battle. They sent his head to their King Orodes II, where the mouth was filled with molten gold because of his thirst for wealth.



When Pompey's wife Julia died in 54 BCE, Pompey (*left*) decided to break with Caesar completely, and formed an alliance with Senate conservatives. This left Pompey in control of Rome. He tracked down Alexander the Great's 280-year-old cloak and wore it as a sign of greatness, this action giving us our word '*pompous*', meaning self-important or pretentious.

After the Gallic Wars, Caesar marched his army homewards and camped at the Rubicon, a shallow river in northern Italy near the town of Cesena. The river formed the boundary between the Roman province of Cisalpine Gaul and the Roman Republic proper, and it was unlawful for any Roman general to lead his troops into the Republic. The Senate, who were afraid of Caesar's growing power and popularity, told him to disband his army and come on alone, but he refused. Pompey accused him of insubordination and said that if his army crossed the Rubicon, it would be an act of treason. When warned about the might of Caesar's battle-hardened troops, Pompey boasted that he could raise a greater army simply by "stamping my foot on the soil of Italy." Caesar could see that a showdown between himself and the conservatives in Rome was now unavoidable, and said, "The die is cast." In 49 BCE he and his army of 5000 men crossed the Rubicon, and headed towards Rome. 'Crossing the Rubicon' today means 'taking an action from which there is no turning back'.

Pompey raised his army and a civil war began, but, as Caesar marched towards Rome, he met little resistance. Rather than fight, Pompey abandoned the city and his army retreated south-east for 550 kilometres along the Appian Way to the port of Brundisium (today's Brindisi, in the heel of Italy's "boot"). He commandeered all the available ships and escaped with his Legions across the Ionian Sea to Macedonia. Caesar would have followed him, but there were no ships left in the harbour. Caesar appointed himself Imperator (Emperor) of Rome and within three months was the master of Italy. Having consolidated his position politically, he then resumed the chase to defeat Pompey.

Pompey's army (which was larger than Caesar's) was pursued through Macedonia and Greece towards Egypt, with numerous battles and sieges. In Alexandria, Pompey thought he would find an ally, as the Egyptian throne was the richest in the world, although its army was weak. He had supported the Macedonian-Greek King of Egypt **Ptolemy XII Auletes** when that King had journeyed to Rome seeking help some years before. That King had died three years previously, and Egypt in

48 BCE was jointly ruled by his children, the 21-year-old **Queen Cleopatra VII Philopator** and her half-brother and husband, the 14-year-old **King Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator**. Both were Egyptians of Greek parentage, but they had had different mothers. The boy was jealous of his older half-sister/wife, as the country's coins bore her image, not his, and she was the person who signed official documents. His guardians forced Cleopatra out of Alexandria and into exile in Syria, but she organised an army of her own and returned to Egypt. A civil war started between her forces and her husband/brother's. In the middle of this, Pompey's ships arrived off Alexandria, and he sent an emissary to King Ptolemy XIII and his Regent, the Grand Eunuch **Pothinus**, requesting a military alliance against Caesar, whose fleet was approaching. They responded positively, and invited him to leave his ship and meet with them. Pompey came ashore with a few men in a small boat, but, as he rose to disembark, he was stabbed to death. He was decapitated on the beach, and his body burned.



The young King Ptolemy XIII and Pothinus had known that Caesar was on his way and had plotted to ingratiate themselves with him by killing his enemy. They hoped that, in return, Caesar would offer them support against Cleopatra's claim to rule Egypt alone. When Caesar (*right*) arrived they presented him with Pompey's head in a bag. Caesar was horrified and angry at this disrespect shown a high-ranking Roman (and his former son-in-law), and ordered that whatever remained of Pompey's body be located and given an honoured military leader's Roman funeral. When he was handed Pompey's ring, which showed a lion with a sword held between its paws, he recognised it and burst into tears. Caesar had Pothinus executed. Cleopatra had herself smuggled back into Alexandria and sent a rug to Caesar at the palace as an anonymous gift. When the rug was unrolled before him, there she was. She captivated Caesar, and soon they both realised that, rather than their countries being adversaries, they should forge an alliance for the mutual benefit of both.

Caesar allied his army with hers, to force Ptolemy XIII from the throne of Egypt. With the Roman army now involved, the civil war did not last long. Ptolemy XIII's forces were routed in the Battle of the Nile and the boy King, wearing his heavy golden armour, was drowned in the river. Although the battle zone included Alexandria, the Great Library suffered little damage. Caesar installed Cleopatra VII as sole Pharaoh, and they celebrated their victory with a triumphal flotilla up the Nile to the former capital of Thebes – their royal barge was accompanied by 400 ships. They became lovers, and this consolidated Cleopatra's position as sole ruler of Egypt. Whilst in Alexandria, Caesar visited the tomb of Alexander. Cleopatra offered him Alexander's sword, but he respectfully refused it.

Whilst in Egypt in 46 BCE, Caesar commissioned **Sosigenes of Alexandria** to reform the Roman calendar, which was now over two months ahead of the seasons. Sosigenes suggested that they adopt **King Ptolemy III's** 190-year-old idea (which had not gained popular support at the time), that, every four years, an extra day should be added to the year – a **leap day, 29 February** – giving a **leap year**. With the backing of Julius Caesar, this concept was accepted and became known as the **Julian Calendar**. It remained in use for over 1600 years.

[**Present Day Note regarding Julian Days:** The Julian Period and Julian Days have nothing to do with Julius Caesar or the Julian Calendar. They were devised in early 1583 by the French-Italian scholar **Joseph Justice Scaliger**, to simply number all the days since the beginning of civilisation without reference to weeks, months or even years. Scaliger proposed to make 1 January 4713 BCE the Julian Day 0, as his studies of historical records showed that the Metonic, Solar and Roman Indiction cycles all had converged on that particular day and had a common starting date. He could find no historical records prior to that time. Although it is said that he named his system after his father Julius Caesar Scaliger, Joseph wrote that he called it 'Julian' "merely because it accommodated the Julian year." His proposals were accepted a few months after the **Gregorian Calendar** (see pages 168-169), but were not implemented. They were finally put into astronomical practice as the 'Julian Date System' using '**Julian Days**' (**JD**) in the late 19th century, after Sir John Herschel had recommended such a move in his 1849 book **Outlines of Astronomy** (see page 403).]

Cleopatra was intelligent, ambitious and politically astute. She hoped to maintain the power of the Ptolemies over Egypt, and thus prevent her country from becoming a province of Rome and losing its independence. On the other hand, Caesar wanted Egypt to be a Roman province under control of a

Roman Governor, with Cleopatra the Queen in name only. It was Egyptian law that a queen could not rule without a king so, soon after the drowning of Ptolemy XIII, Cleopatra married her youngest half-brother (a boy of 13) and he joined her on the throne as **King Ptolemy XIV**. Although she was married to him, she remained the lover of Caesar. Cleopatra had a baby, a little boy born in 47 BCE, and it was openly believed then and now that Caesar was the father. He was not afraid of being accused in Rome of adultery as Cleopatra, not being a Roman citizen, had no status at all in Roman law. Cleopatra built a huge temple to cement the royal status of the baby, with statues of Caesar depicted as the god Horus, and herself as the goddess Isis. The temple still exists and a bas-relief of Cleopatra with her son as a young man decorates an exterior wall (see page 49). Caesar returned to his wife Calpurnia in Rome soon after, and resumed control of the Roman government. The following year, Cleopatra took the baby to Rome, and they spent two years in the Eternal City, living as Caesar's guests in his second house, across the River Tiber from his main residence.

She and Julius both hoped that, when the baby came of age, he would succeed his father, becoming the head of the Roman Republic as well as Egypt. The boy was accepted by the Roman people and became popularly known by a nickname, **Caesarion** (Little Caesar). Cleopatra and Caesar maintained their love affair until in 44 BCE, when Caesarion was three years old, Julius was assassinated in the Senate building by a gang of rival Senators jealous of his power (below).



In fear of their lives, Cleopatra and her little boy fled back to Egypt at once, and, four months later, Cleopatra's youngest half-brother and husband King Ptolemy XIV conveniently died aged 16. It is generally assumed that Cleopatra's advisers had him poisoned. She replaced him as co-ruler with little Caesarion, who became **King Ptolemy XV Philopator Philometor Caesar**.

In Rome, the dead Caesar's place was taken in 43 BCE by the **Second Triumvirate** composed of **Octavius Caesar (Octavian)**, Julius' grand-nephew, suspected rent-boy and then adopted son aged 20), his rival **Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony)**, a relation of Julius and his right-hand man as Master of the Horse – chariot commander – aged 40) and **Marcus Lepidus** (Caesar's loyal cavalry commander aged 45). They divided their responsibilities so that Octavian governed Rome, Antony the eastern Mediterranean, and Lepidus north Africa and Hispania. In 41 BCE Mark Antony summoned Cleopatra to Tarsus near the border of Turkey and Syria, and they formed a military alliance. The historian **Cicero** recorded that Antony plundered the second largest library in the world (that at Pergamon in Ionia ♦) and presented the collection to Cleopatra as a gift for the Great Library of Alexandria, to replace the books lost to fire when Caesar was fighting Ptolemy XIII six years before.

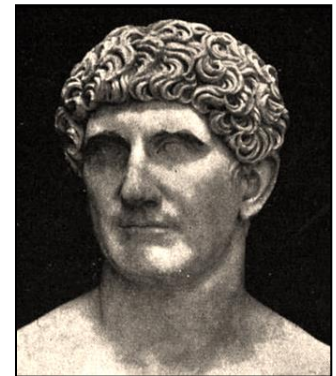
This is now known to be a fabrication to discredit Antony in Rome – there had been no fire and no need for replacement. Antony became infatuated with Cleopatra and followed her when she went back to Alexandria. They became lovers, after which he returned to Rome to find that Octavian had exiled his third wife Fulvia to Athens where she had died, leaving their two young sons motherless. The Roman Senate decreed that, to stem the growing power struggle and animosity between Antony and Octavian, Antony should marry Octavian's sister, Octavia. This he did in September 40 BCE and she bore him two daughters, but his relationship with Octavian went from bad to worse.



Three years later, Mark Antony deserted Octavia and returned to Egypt. He married Cleopatra in 37 BCE, and they had three children, including a set of twins. He strongly supported Cleopatra's claim that her first son King Ptolemy XV Caesar (Caesarion) should be the true ruler of Rome as well as Egypt, as Julius Caesar was his biological father. In fact, the people of Egypt had been happy for the 10-year-old being a joint Pharaoh with his mother.

In 34 BCE, Cleopatra (*left*) pressured Antony to grant various eastern lands and titles (including Greece, Turkey, Armenia, Crete, Cyprus, Syria and Palestine) to Caesarion and to his own three children with Cleopatra (the twins Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene II aged six, and Ptolemy XVI Philadelphus aged two), the four children to be heads-of-state. These proclamations were called the 'Donations of Alexandria', and included the claim that Caesarion was the true Caesar, and Octavian a usurper. It stated that Caesarion (now 13 years old) was the 'King of Kings'. These 'Donations of Alexandria' greatly upset the Roman people, as they ceded about one-third of the conquered foreign lands hard-won by Roman armies to Egyptian control. The lands were not Antony's to give away, and the claim concerning Caesarion deeply insulted Octavian.

He was especially displeased and threatened by the claim that Caesarion should be Leader of the Roman Republic instead of himself. Octavian dissolved the Second Triumvirate in 33 BCE, told Marcus Lepidus never to return to Rome on pain of death, and denounced Antony (*right*) as a drunkard who had fallen under Cleopatra's spell. In 31 BCE he declared war on Antony and Cleopatra and their forces.



This conflict has been called in history the **War that ended the Roman Republic**. Octavian's forces headed towards Egypt in fighting galleys. The combined fleets of Mark Antony and Cleopatra's Egyptian navy sailed north-west from Alexandria across the Mediterranean to intercept them. The ships met in the waters off Actium, a town near the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth on the western coast of Greece. Armies on both sides assembled on the coastal plain.

A traitor, General Quintus Dellius, revealed Antony's battle plans to Octavian. Antony's 500 ships, weighing up to 300 tons each and built to ram, were undermanned due to a severe outbreak of malaria among the crews. Octavian's smaller ships were more manoeuvrable, and he blockaded the Egyptian fleet in a bay, where they ran short of supplies. At the Battle of Actium, the smaller Roman force of 250 ships was victorious. Antony lost almost his entire fleet, only 60 ships surviving. He and Cleopatra both escaped, but on different ships, leaving their land forces leaderless. Antony's army (which was as large as Octavian's) refused to fight fellow Romans, nineteen Legions (about 80 000 men) and 12 000 cavalry either running away or surrendering.

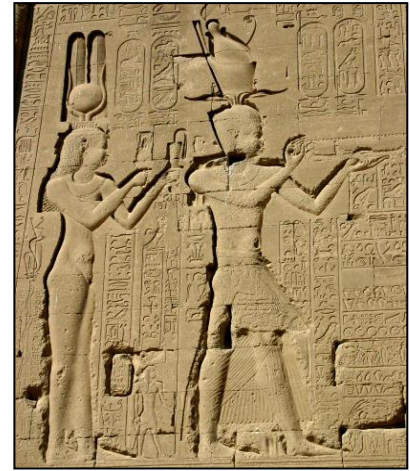
To save her life, Cleopatra sent Octavian gifts of a golden crown and sceptre, and offered to abdicate in favour of her children, thereby handing over to him the kingdom and treasure of Egypt. Antony, feeling deserted, sent his 17-year-old Roman son Antonius to Octavian with a tribute of money and a message that Antony would go to Athens and reside there quietly as a private citizen if Octavian would let him live. Octavian had the son beheaded. Octavian let Cleopatra think she was off the hook, but decided to relentlessly pursue Antony to the death.

Antony and Cleopatra returned to Alexandria with what was left of their navy, and raised up a new Egyptian army, for they knew that Octavian's army was coming. Worried for Caesarion's safety, Cleopatra sent him to the Red Sea port of Berenice for shelter, with possible plans of an escape to India. Octavian's forces arrived at Alexandria and the battle began. Most of Cleopatra's army surrendered and joined the Romans. Octavian captured the city on 1 August 30 BCE, that date marking the official annexation of Egypt into the Roman Republic.

Mark Antony thought that Cleopatra had betrayed him (or been killed), and stabbed himself. He was told too late that Cleopatra was alive and hiding in a temple-tomb that she had partially built for them both, and filled with gold and precious things. He asked to be carried to her and died in her arms.



Left :
La mort de Cléopâtre



Right: *Cleopatra and Caesarion*

Realising that she and her treasure were now in Octavian's power and he would probably parade her through Rome in his triumphal procession as a war trophy, Cleopatra made several attempts on her life in the coming days. Finally, on 12 August, legend has it that she dressed in her finest royal robes, crown and adornments (not half-naked as above), and asked for her final meal to be brought, a basket of figs. Seated on her throne, she ate a couple of figs before seeing the venomous asp (an Egyptian cobra) concealed beneath them. "Ah, there it is, then," she sighed, before picking it up and holding it to her breast (or arm). The Egyptian religion held that death by snakebite conferred immortality, so she therefore achieved her dying wish, that she would never be forgotten. Thus she escaped Octavian's wrath. She was 39 years old, Antony 53, and they were buried together.

After his mother's suicide, Caesarion was left as sole Pharaoh Ptolemy XV Caesar. His guardians, including his tutor, either were lured by false promises of mercy into returning the boy to Alexandria, or perhaps even betrayed him – the records are unclear – but the 17-year-old was captured by the Romans the same day that Cleopatra died. Octavian's advisers told him, "Two Caesars are one too many," so he had Caesarion strangled. Cleopatra's three younger children (twins aged ten and a boy of six) were paraded in Rome as she had feared, bound with gold chains that were so heavy that they could barely walk, and eliciting unexpected sympathy from onlookers. Octavian offered them to his elder sister (and Antony's former wife) Octavia, and they were raised in her household in Rome.

The date of 12 August 30 BCE therefore marks the last day of the 3000 year rule of the Pharaohs and the Macedonian-Greek Kings of Egypt, and the first day in subjugation as a Roman province, which lasted for 670 years, although for most of that time it was more like a Byzantine-Coptic Christian rule. It was the end of Egypt as an independent nation for nearly 2000 years. While in Egypt, Octavian (*right*) visited the tomb of Alexander the Great. The original golden sarcophagus had been removed and melted down by Ptolemy X to make coins, and Alexander's body now rested in a glass case. Octavian placed the golden crown that Cleopatra had sent him on the sarcophagus, and spent some time there in reverent silence. When asked if he would like to see the nearby sarcophagi of the Ptolemy Kings of Egypt as well, he refused, saying: "I came here to see a King, not corpses." Alexander's tomb and mummy disappeared some time in the third or fourth century AD.



Octavian returned to Italy and assumed absolute control of Egypt and the Roman Republic as a dictator. He abolished the Senate and proclaimed himself Imperator on 16 January 27 BCE, taking the name **Caesar Augustus**. Thus the Republic ended and the **Roman Empire** began, as the only nation that had competed with Rome for power in the Mediterranean was now defeated and absorbed. Egyptian treasure and artefacts were removed to Rome where they strengthened the Roman economy, weakened by years of warfare; but so much gold and silver was taken that the value of those metals in Rome plummeted. Many Egyptian obelisks went to Rome and were erected in the city where they can still be seen. The advanced Egyptian methods of agriculture made that country the new foodbowl of Rome. As Caesar Augustus, Octavian used Egyptian treasure to pay for many new buildings in Rome, to make it a city fit for an Emperor. He boasted, "I found Rome a city of brick, and left it a city of marble." He ruled the Empire for 46 years, until his death in AD 14.