

WHAT A REPUTATION CAN TELL US

For my first essay, I will be writing about reputations. What is a reputation? And what can it tell us about a person, or even about our way of perceiving history? Those are some of the questions I had to answer when diving deeper into reputations. They are important questions, because reputations really are not as simple and abstract as we often think.

WHAT IS A REPUTATION?

A reputation does not have to be as dramatic as most of us probably think. Your grandma's legendary apple cake is already a reputation. And even a reputation that small can have multiple points of view. You might think it is the best apple cake ever, but your mom might have hated it as a child, because grandma made it three times every week.

When I started the study, a similar statement was thrown at me, and as simple as it sounds, I had never thought about it that way. I am not ashamed to admit that, despite being a huge history nerd, I took most reputations I learned at face value.

I would say that a reputation is nothing more than the way someone or something is portrayed.

CLEOPATRA: SEDUCTRESS OR LEARNED QUEEN?

A very fascinating reputation to dive deeper into is that of Cleopatra VII. I specifically mention VII because people often overlook that, when we speak about Cleopatra, it is this specific Cleopatra we mean. I will go a bit deeper into why that matters.

You probably know Cleopatra as a seductress, a woman who used her charisma to get what she wanted. But as I have learned, that might not be true at all. If we look at where that reputation comes from, it becomes clear that propaganda played a big part.

If we look at the historians, we can see two very different reputations. On one hand, we have the Roman reputation, which has dominated Western civilisation. On the other hand, we have the Arabic reputation, which portrays her as a scholar and a very capable leader.

The Roman reputation finds its source in Octavian. When he and Mark Antony shared power over Rome, Antony fell in love with Cleopatra. During this time, he recognised her son Caesarion as the son of Julius Caesar. This threatened Octavian, who was Caesar's adopted son and named heir.

But since he could not declare war on a fellow Roman, he declared war on Cleopatra instead. This led him to portray her as the seductress we still widely know today.

That reputation cannot be credited to Octavian alone, though, because ancient historians kept it alive. You can read it in Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, written more than a century after Cleopatra died (Plutarch, 1972, section 49). Since his work is widely used as a principal source for ancient history, it matters what it says.

“Since there seemed to be no other way of getting unobserved, she stretched herself out at full length inside a sleeping bag... This little trick of Cleopatra's, which showed her provocative impudence, is said to have been the first thing about her which captivated Caesar.”

Plutarch (1972), *Life of Caesar*, section 49.

Yet the same Plutarch tells us in his *Life of Antony* that Cleopatra spoke so many languages that she rarely needed an interpreter when dealing with foreign peoples (Plutarch, 1965, section 27). Even the Roman sources, it seems, do not tell only one story.

When we look at the Arabic sources, we find something else. During medieval times, many sources tell us she was a scholar, with some even crediting her with medical research. The Egyptologist Okasha El Daly describes the medieval Arab image of her as “a strong and able monarch who was very protective of Egypt”. These sources, he notes, “make not one reference to sexuality or seductive power” and instead admire her scientific knowledge and her ability to govern (El Daly, 2005, p. 131). One medieval source even calls her “a sage, a philosopher who elevated the ranks of scholars and enjoyed their company” (quoted in El Daly, 2005, pp. 132–3).

But these sources are also hardly trustworthy, as they often mix up different Cleopatras. That is where the VII matters: there were several queens and other women named Cleopatra, and the sources do not always keep them apart. Still, they show us that we should not simply believe the one reputation we most often see.

WHAT IT TELLS US

My biggest takeaway from this first block of the study has been that reputations say as much about the people who built them as about the person they are about. It completely changes how we read, or should be reading, history. It is important to place the sources we find in the context in which we find them, and to never trust them blindly.

It is easy to think of the past as a simple set of objective facts to uncover, it is not quite that simple.

That sentence from the course material stayed with me, because it describes exactly what happened with Cleopatra. Almost everything we know about her was written by other people, and often long after her death. Here is the full passage:

“It is easy to think of the past as a simple set of objective facts to uncover, it is not quite that simple. For one thing, when you are looking at ancient history there are simply far fewer ‘facts’ around. Ancient history is made up of more holes than substance; far more has disappeared than remains.”

Fear (2026).

I have most of all learned to look at reputations with more scepticism, which is something I am not afraid to admit I did not do before.

This is the first Polymath Letters essay I am publishing, and I admit I am a little nervous to share it. I hope you liked reading it. If you have thoughts about Cleopatra, or about reputations in general, I would love to hear them, so feel free to start the discussion on my socials. See you next Sunday.

SOURCES

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