



Cleopatra the Great

Joann Fletcher

Hodder & Stoughton 464pp. £25
ISBN 0 340 83155 3

'Cle – o – pat – ra'. The name beats out the rhythm of a long remembered fairy tale. We all know what follows; a fecund carpet, an asp, an empire almost lost to a pair of kohl-rimmed eyes. But Cleopatra

VII was not a seducing 'Fury'. She was a vibrant, significant historical figure and Joann Fletcher has the good grace and specialist knowledge to do away with Roman romances. This book's bedrock is Egyptology, its drama the shifting sands of the desert powers that flank the Nile.

Part One expands on the Greco-Egyptian back-story to Cleopatra's tenuous position – a pharaoh from the age of seventeen. We are reminded that dynasties here ordered the mutilation of rival siblings, their hands hacked off while clinging to religious statues. Rulers relied on the mob support of the Alexandrian '*plebs*' and the loyalty of religious hierarchies to survive. As Plato put it, 'in Egypt it is not possible for a king to rule without the help of the priests.'

Cleopatra flourished partly through conscious promotion of her position as the heir of Alexander the Great. Her *alma mater* was the manuscript-filled city he founded, her protruding eyes a genetic throw-back to his own. Within seven pages we read that Cleopatra was 'in her own mind Alexander's true successor'. One criticism: Fletcher is so secure in her research she doesn't need to present highly-informed speculation such as this as fact.

The high politics of the period are combined with charismatic detail: Caesar takes Pharos Island, 'purple cloak flapping in the wind and detailed notes in hand'. Each sentence is saturated with information; Fletcher gives three, sometimes four, facts per line. Her take on the carpet myth is that Cleopatra was

wearing her bed-linen, her *himation*, to meet Caesar – a living goddess's veiling-ropes unwrapped to reveal her god-head. Although the sexual overtones of Cleopatra's story can induce sniggers, this author carefully points out that a female ruler's sexuality tied her person to the fecundity of the landscape and to the body politic itself. In the Ptolemaia festivals, 80-foot-long penises tipped by stars reminded the people that the sexual politics of royal succession were a sublime affair. Cleopatra's story makes the pulse of history race for good reason.

Esteemed in her lifetime a living goddess; a scholar who spoke nine languages (a Troglodyte dialect amongst them) and commissioned works of medicine and philosophy; and a woman who bore four children, Cleopatra is still commonly remembered as a *femme fatale*. Fletcher's book reminds us that the metre of this queen's life was syncopated; with the hissing of priests and the ecstatic timbre of African pipes in her ears, with the vision of a unified Egypt before her, she succeeded in a region riven by operatic, chronic conflict. Cleopatra was, indeed not just a 'baleful beauty'; she was great.

Bettany Hughes