

## Who's Buried in Cleopatra's Tomb?

By STACY SCHIFF

WHAT becomes a legend most? If you're a woman, the formula is straightforward. Your best bets are the three D's: delusion (Joan of Arc), disability (Helen Keller), death (Sylvia Plath). You get extra points for the savage, sudden or surprising demise, as Evita, Amelia or Diana attests. At the head of the list of untimely self-destructors comes of course Cleopatra VII, for whose tomb a search begins shortly, on an Egyptian hilltop west of Alexandria.

Cleopatra died 2,039 years ago, at the age of 39. Before she was a slot machine, a video game, a cigarette, a condom, a caricature, a cliché or a synonym for Elizabeth Taylor, before she was reincarnated by Shakespeare, Dryden or Shaw, she was a nonfictional Egyptian queen. She ruled for 21 years, mostly alone, which is to say that she was essentially a female king, an incongruity that elicits the kind of double take once reserved for men in drag.

From her point of view there was nothing irregular about the arrangement. Cleopatra arguably had more powerful female role models than any other woman in history. They were not so much paragons of virtue as shrewd political operators. Her antecedents were the rancorous, meddlesome Macedonian queens who routinely poisoned brothers and sent armies against sons. Cleopatra's great-grandmother waged one civil war against her parents, another against her children. These women were raised to rule.

Cleopatra had a child with Julius Caesar. After his death, she had three more — two sons and a daughter — with his protégé, Marc Antony. Motherhood confirmed her hold on the throne. She was a little bit the reverse of Henry VIII; she too needed a male heir, though she was rather more successful in securing one. Almost certainly Marc Antony and Julius Caesar represent the extent of Cleopatra's sexual history. She was self-reliant, ingenious and plucky, and for her time and place remarkably well behaved. Having inherited a country in decline, she capably steered it through drought, famine, plague and war.

What good can be said of a woman who sleeps with two of the most powerful men of her age, however? The fathers of Cleopatra's children were men of voracious and celebrated sexual appetites. Cleopatra has gone down in history as a wanton seductress. She is the original bad girl, the Monica Lewinsky of the ancient world. And all because she turns up at one of the most dangerous intersections in history, that of women and power.

She presides eternally over the chasm between promiscuity and virility, the forest of connotations that separate "adventuress" from "adventurer." Women schemed while men strategized in the ancient world, too. And female power asserted itself regularly, if more covertly than it had on the Greek stage. In a first century B.C. marriage contract, a woman promises to be faithful and attentive — and to not add love potions to her husband's food. Clever women, Euripides had already warned, are dangerous women.

Granting that the double standard has outlived Cleopatra by at least 2,000 years, what are we doing today on that Egyptian hill, under the ruins of the temple of Taposiris Magna? "This could be the most important discovery of the 21st century," says Egypt's antiquities director, Zahi Hawass, of the dig. Certainly it would be a relief to cross Cleopatra off our list of objects we have lost, or believe we have lost: Atlantis, Jamestown, an entire tribe of Israel, good manners, Jimmy Hoffa.

If we find Cleopatra's tomb — and certainly we will find something relevant, as Dr. Hawass seems determined to make a discovery to rival the 1922 one of King Tut — we may well be able to solve the mystery of Cleopatra's death. Surely there will be no asp preserved at her mummified side. It was likely retrofitted to the tale. It's not difficult to figure out what someone is trying to say when he pairs a lady with a snake.

We may be able to determine if Cleopatra committed suicide or was in fact murdered, however. As a prisoner, she was an embarrassment to the Romans, unsure how to triumph resoundingly yet sympathetically over a woman. They may have beaten her to the punch.

To a great extent her enemies have insured our fascination with Cleopatra. It was the Roman civil war that secured her immortality. And it was Octavian, her nemesis and the future Augustus Caesar, who established her as a femme fatale. He may well have offered up the Classic Comics version of the debauched, duplicitous Egyptian queen and paved the way for Joseph L. Mankiewicz. But he magnified Cleopatra to hyperbolic proportions in the process — so as to do the same with his own victory. Cleopatra's story differs from most women's stories in that the men who wrote it, for their own reasons, enlarged rather than erased her role.

Octavian hardly needed to inflate the tale: Here is a royal woman who could be said to have died, after all, for love. Romantic tragedies don't get any better, which explains why Shakespeare had a difficult time improving on Plutarch. And Cleopatra puts a vintage label on something we have always known existed: mind-altering female sexuality. It's that love potion again.

She does not so much bump up against a glass ceiling as tumble through a trapdoor, the one that dismisses women by sexualizing them. As Margaret Atwood has written of Jezebel, "The amount of sexual baggage that has accumulated around this figure is astounding, since she doesn't do anything remotely sexual in the original story, except put on makeup." In Cleopatra's case, the sheer absence of truth has guaranteed the legend. Where facts are few, myth rushes in, the kudzu of history.

It would be a relief to settle once and for all the burning question of whether or not Cleopatra was beautiful, though the answer affects next to nothing. Even if she had every aesthetic weapon in her arsenal, we know already the ones she so expertly deployed. "It was impossible to converse with her without being immediately captivated by her," asserts one of our two best sources. Her voice was velvety; her conversation stimulating; her powers of persuasion matchless; her presence an event, reports the other. None of those commodities is likely to be extracted from Egyptian limestone, to travel on an international tour.

Cleopatra served most effectively as a weapon with which Octavian could club Marc Antony, in a particularly virulent civil war. It was his weakness for a foreign seductress that debased and undid Antony. Will he turn out to have shared a tomb with Cleopatra, as ancient accounts claim? After all it was his request — either real or concocted by Octavian — that he be buried alongside her that cost Antony Rome. Cleopatra is said to have buried him with her own hands, lavishly, royally and feverishly. (She was attempting to starve herself to death at the time.) The quest for his tomb is not the stuff of headlines however. Antony is a bit player in someone else's story.

The search is, too, a topical one. The Cambridge classicist Mary Beard points out that for many years archaeologists' Holy Grail was the (still undiscovered) tomb of Alexander the Great. We find ourselves no longer in the market for an imperialistic white male. While this dig will resolve none of the great questions, it could, notes Professor Beard, conceivably offer clues to Cleopatra's ethnicity. Was she pure Macedonian, or all or part African? (My guess is Macedonian with, possibly, a bit of Persian blood.) Indeed the mixed ancestry question appears to be the issue of the day: A month ago British scientists suggested that they had answered it definitively, producing computer simulations of Cleopatra's sister, based on a skull found in Turkey.

Here we engage in a familiar exercise: Cleopatra too spent her life trying to reconcile East and West, with as little success as we do today. A Roman could not get past the idea of a civilized, virtuous West and a decadent, opulent East. He could not pry apart the exotic and the erotic. The East was by definition beguiling and voluptuous — like a woman, as it happens. Think of Coffee, that second-act marvel in

Balanchine's "Nutcracker." She is a sultry, intoxicating presence, too potent for any partner, by no means critical to the story, really there, I have always suspected, to wake up the fathers in the audience.

Of course we mean to resolve the unresolved. We clamor for the black box of history. In some essential way we want confirmation too that we live on the same planet as did the legend that inspired two millennia of overheated prose, that what feels like myth was really history. We thirst for exactitudes. We want to see and fondle the myth in all its scintillating splendor, forgetting that as we do so it turns back — the reverse Midas touch — into the dross of history. If and when we find Cleopatra, if and when a face can be fitted to her, do we promise to give up Elizabeth Taylor once and for all? Will we opt for the lady or the legend? Is something lost when she is found? Octavian had his agenda, and we have ours.

No matter what the tombs of Taposiris yield, they are unlikely to offer up an answer to the vexed question of women and power. For that we have to dig elsewhere. It may take a little longer.

Stacy Schiff, the author of "A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France and the Birth of America," is working on a book about Cleopatra.