

## SUMMARY

# EGYPTIAN POPQUEEN: THE IMAGE OF CLEOPATRA VII, QUEEN OF EGYPT: HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND POPULAR CULTURE

This publication aims to test the hypothesis that the current image of Cleopatra is the result of the clash between what we know from history and what has been promoted by the creators of popular culture. The Queen has been exceptionally and consistently represented in art throughout history, contrary to less frequent and sustained scholarly inquiry into the Egyptian ruler.

The author confirmed the view that the present-day image of Cleopatra VII echoes the figure of the Queen created by ancient Roman sources, which was later represented in art (especially by painters and playwrights) and constituted the basis for the myth conceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (according to R. Barthes) of an ancient *femme fatale*. Cleopatra became a cliché, a “symbol” in the European understanding of Egypt and, next to Tutankhamen and Nefertiti, one of the principal characters popularly associated with the Pharaohs of Egypt. However, compared to thousands of years of Egyptian history, their reigns were mere episodes. Unlike other figures of Antiquity, e.g., Plato, Alexander the Great, and Julius Cesar, whose achievements and biographies are universally known to the general public, the Egyptian Queen was redacted to an archetype of a beautiful, young, and ambitious ruler, who *in extremis* committed suicide using the venom of a viper. The author demonstrates that Cleopatra was included in European history and then appropriated by artists of the Old Continent and its former colonies. For these reasons, the approach to Cleopatra VII adopted in this book is thoroughly European in its perspective. The author also highlights chronological coincidences between the development of a specific image of Cleopatra in popular culture and political and social transformations of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, such as the birth of popular culture, colonisation of Africa, Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt and the phenomenon of Egyptomania, the first archaeological excavations in Pompeii, Herculaneum, Mycenae, Troy, and the evolution of history into a modern discipline.

The image of the ruler is approached as a paraphrase incorporated in the Ancient literary sources and works of art, and later, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when through intertextuality it migrated to various manifestations of popular

culture. In the course of history, this ancient representation of the Queen was distorted and is currently seen in many aspects of popular culture. The features of the historical figure have been redacted to a symbol of a beautiful ruler from ancient times, with a characteristic hair-do and make-up. It generated a new commercial product, a pop queen, whose purpose is to appeal to target customers. The ubiquity of Cleopatra-related imagery in our surroundings makes it possible to study the phenomena of pop-culture as they are manifested through her figure. She is one of the few historical personages to be exploited in cultural products (in paintings, novels, films, and services of various kinds) as a symbol of the East, an ancient vamp or a spoiled, power-hungry female. The analysis is conducted on selected examples from paintings, cinematography, television, the Internet, to commercial products and services (advertising, cosmetics, “Monster High” merchandise, and others). It allows the author to accomplish another scholarly objective: providing an answer to the question, how one of the ancient rulers became a product of popular culture. Some relevant surviving works were selected because they belong to a set representative of its type and period, and are available to an average contemporary consumer (e.g., online, in publications and studies). The author did not intend to create a catalogue of all existing representations of Cleopatra, an unrealistic goal, given the number of available products in popular culture. Cinematography and merchandise manufacturers, just as art and literature earlier, show the ruler just as the recipient-consumers want to see her: a beautiful (played by film stars such as Vivien Leigh, Elizabeth Taylor, Monica Bellucci or Sophia Loren), tempting and captivating young woman entangled in an almost fairy-tale romance. There is furniture named after Cleopatra or cosmetic products which, through resemblance to a milk bath are supposed to make one feel like a queen, or a make-up imitating the one worn by Elizabeth Taylor in the 1963 film. People are also encouraged to go on a trip called “Mission Cleopatra” or have a meal at a restaurant named after her.

By adopting the perspective of *Visual Culture Studies* and combining methodologies of two disciplines, i.e., cultural studies and history, underpinned by visual sociology, intertextuality, and the use of the concept of transmedia narrative, the author develops a new analytical method of exploring the formation of contemporary images of historical figures. This method facilitates a comprehensive and original study of the process which produces a contemporary image of an ancient ruler. Cleopatra proved to be significant enough to remain present throughout almost 2,000 years in significant works of historiography, literature, fine arts, and film, as well as in a vast range of commercial products and services. No wonder she became one of the clichés of the European understanding of Egypt and a symbol of all her qualities. This methodology opens the way to further research on the issue of historical reconstruction, or rather the construction of the image of people known from history who have also become an important part of popular culture.