



Antony and Cleopatra

Adrian Goldsworthy

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The love affair between Antony and Cleopatra is one of the most famous stories from the ancient world, and has been depicted in countless novels, plays and films. As one of the three men in control of the Roman Empire, Antony was perhaps the most powerful man of his day; while Cleopatra, who had already been Julius Caesar's lover, was the beautiful queen of Egypt, Rome's most important province. The clash of cultures, the power politics, and the personal passion have proven irresistible to storytellers.

But in the course of this storytelling dozens of myths have grown up. The popular image of Cleopatra in ancient Egyptian costume is a fallacy; she was actually Greek, and far better versed in Roman culture than most storytellers give her credit for. Despite her local dominance in Egypt, her real power came from her ability to forge strong personal allegiances with the most important men in Rome. Likewise, Mark Antony was not the bluff soldier of legend, brought low by his love for an exotic woman - actually he was first and foremost a politician, and never allowed Cleopatra to dictate policy to him.

In this history, based exclusively on ancient sources and archaeological evidence, Adrian Goldsworthy gives us the facts behind this famous couple. It may not be the story we expect or even wish for, but it is every bit as fascinating as the myth.

Antony and Cleopatra Details

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From Reader Review Antony and Cleopatra for online ebook

Johanne says

A hefty debunking of the Antony & Cleopatra myth. This book goes painstakingly through the lives of both of them and considers what real detail we have about them, their actions and their motivations. Where we don't have detail he discusses the theories and possible explanations making it clear that these are just possibilities. What he does do is to put both of them firmly in the political and social world of the late Roman republic and uses this information to explain why they operated as they did. Far from being a great love story this is a great political story about attempts to get & retain power in the turbulent end of the Republic. In between this story is also the tale of one of Antony's wives Fulvia - a woman who would make a good story in her own right having been deeply involved in many key events at the fall of the republic.

Goldsworthy is firmly in the Cleopatra as Macedonian / Greek rather than Egyptian / African camp for reasons which he details and which seem most likely to me too. It uses good scholarship to do down the Cleopatra as murderer theory that Neil Oliver did a TV documentary on too. Although it should be said that Ptolemaic family relations are complex to say the least. All the good stories are here and discussed; Cleopatra's arrival to meet Julius Caesar, the snacking on the pearl earring and of course the asp. Highly recommended

Jim Coughenour says

I picked up this book for two "literary" reasons – as background for reading Shakespeare's play, and (more distantly) because of Cavafy's haunting poem (which Leonard Cohen transformed into an equally haunting song). Goldsworthy definitely enriched my understanding – and although he's writing history, not literature, it's history of a high order. Antony comes off as even more of a lunk than I'd imagined (Shakespeare, Cavafy and Richard Burton all did him a favor), but it's impossible not to sympathize with Cleopatra, who was "more intelligent, and certainly far better educated, than Antony." She was the end of the Ptolemies, and personified the end of an era as Rome finally consolidated its empire under Octavian. She did what she had to do, brilliantly for the most part, and failed spectacularly. Goldsworthy's book is satisfying from beginning to end.

Derek Weese says

Adrian Goldsworthy is, possibly, the best classical historian out there. Being British his writing style is superb and he refuses to write in an elitist manner without losing sight of the fact that he is a Ph.D and so is also expected to know what he's talking about and to analyze it thoroughly without losing sight of the fact that history is a story. And this book: 'Antony and Cleopatra' is no exception.

Rather than a book which focuses on the military exploits of the period, though those are good too, or a book that focuses on the cut-throat nature of ancient politics (CNN would have had a field day) this book rather focuses on the lives of two of the more interesting characters in the time period of the fall of the Roman Republic and the Birth of Empire.

Marc Antony was a man born into the Antonian noble family in Rome, hence he became eligible to run for senatorial offices which he did. He is a fun figure, on the surface, to read about. Brash, direct, vulgar, lacking in refined intellect but full of ambition and aggression as well as one hell of a ladies man Antony would have

fit in well in modern American society. (Perhaps why the many Europeans like to point at us and call us the new Rome...) He serves, albeit without distinction, under both Gaibinus and Julius Caesar as a subordinate commander though Caesar does reward richly for his service rendered. Despite the story told in the Elizabeth Taylor movie 'Cleopatra' Antony spent more time as a politician and a rabid fornicator than he does as a soldier. And as a soldier Goldsworthy points out that Antony was at best a mediocre commander of men. Cleopatra is the last in a long line of Macedonian Pharaohs who have ruled Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Ptolemy was one of Alexander's finest subordinate generals and upon Alexander's death his Empire is split into several large pieces known as the Successor States who then pick up the past time of beating each other's brains in for the next two centuries until both Persian (Parthian) and Roman power destroys or envelopes them. The Ptolemy's, however, are survivors. And when Rome conquers Greece itself in 149 BC and then smashes the armies of the Seleucids in battles in Turkey and Lebanon and Palestine (which allows the Persians to take out the rest soon thereafter) the Ptolemy's are still there. Albeit they only control Egypt, parts of modern day Lebanon and Israel as well as the Gaza Strip and the Island of Cyprus. Cleopatra is therefore Macedonian in her ethnicity as is her entire ruling family who had the nasty habit of being largely inbred... Cleopatra herself is a well educated, attractive and ambitious young woman. Her own story is actually more interesting than Marc Antony's seeing as how Antony was, largely, a subordinate of someone far more intelligent than he was. Eventually the two find each other and either form a relationship based upon mutual benefit or there really was love involved... hard to say with certainty.

Regardless it's a story for the ages and it ends spectacularly tragically. All in all a great book and one I recommend. Then again, anything Goldsworthy writes is darn good.

Mujerlechuga says

Excelente, como todo lo de Adrian Goldsworthy. Muy ameno y bien documentado.

Fern says

Rather stodgy history with occasional flashes of male condescension in the depiction of Cleopatra.

Rob Atkinson says

A great dual biography by one of today's leading Classicists, appropriately focusing on the internecine struggle for dominance over the Roman state which led to the collapse of the Republic, and Antony and Cleopatra's role in that struggle. I read this work immediately after Stacey Schiff's much lauded biography of Cleopatra (both were released in 2010) and ultimately found Goldsworthy's a much more satisfying work. Schiff tried to focus exclusively on Cleopatra as her subject, giving the complex terrain of Roman politics a very abbreviated treatment; but the fact is that understanding Cleopatra as the political animal she essentially was requires an in-depth understanding of how dependent the rulers of Ptolemaic Egypt were on Roman patronage, and how that required much fancy footwork on Cleopatra's part to remain sympathetic to whomever was dominant in that ongoing struggle. Both she and her father Ptolemy Auletes owed their thrones to Roman interventions, and their hold on power was backed up by Roman legions; and as the client-queen ruler of the East's richest and most fertile realm, she had constant demands placed on her by the conflicting sides in the ongoing Roman Civil Wars (Pompey vs. Caesar, Octavian and Antony vs. Caesar's murderers Cassius and Brutus, and finally Octavian (the future Emperor Augustus) vs. Antony. After

successfully navigating these dangerous waters, she was brought down by her close association -- now rendered largely irrevocable by their three children -- with Antony, which proved a losing gamble. Even so, Goldsworthy sees a more machiavellian Cleopatra trying to play both sides as Antony's fortunes plummeted after his defeat at Actium, and he makes a compelling argument. While popular with his men, Antony appears to have been rather hapless as a General, and Cleopatra was inevitably more an accessory than a deciding factor in both the fate of Rome, and the fate of Egypt itself. Goldsworthy's astute analysis makes this clear, and while it may disappoint romantics who wish to rehabilitate Cleopatra's role in history, is likely much closer to the truth.

Giekes says

Wat mij betreft het minst goede boek dat ik al las van Goldsworthy. Het lijkt op een essay over de mythe van Cleopatra en Marcus Antonius dat enorm is aangevuld met fragmenten die de auteur al eerder gebruikte. 'Marcus Antonius en Cleopatra' geeft mij een beetje een kunstmatige indruk in vergelijking met andere boeken van de auteur.

Waar bij 'Caesar' het plezier van het schrijven, vertellen en onderzoeken duidelijk bleek, vind ik dit hier minder terug. Het blijft natuurlijk een erg goed gedocumenteerd, geschiedkundig verantwoord en beredeneerd geschreven werk dat bijvoorbeeld de lezer steeds duidelijk maakt hoe weinig we eigenlijk weten van de historische Cleopatra (een veelgebruikte Macedonische/Hellenistische naam trouwens).

Ik heb dit boek wel met plezier gelezen, maar geef 'slechts' drie sterren, vooral wegens de overlapping met 'Caesar', wat ik een beter boek vond en 'Augustus' van dezelfde auteur - dit is een persoonlijke keuze. En misschien ben ik ook wel beïnvloed door het feit dat de historische figuur Caesar veel intrigerender en interessanter was dan Marcus Antonius. Ik heb de indruk dat dit boek er vooral gekomen is op aandringen van de uitgeverij... Wie nog niets anders van Goldsworthy las, kan gerust een ster 'bijtellen' bij mijn rating.

Andrew says

I have not gone wrong with Adrian Goldsworthy yet. A highly enjoyable read about two epic intertwining lives at a crucial moment in history ... minus the myth-making, propaganda, and romanticising.

Ivy says

5 stars

Nice to have a book written on Antony and Cleopatra. The author was very good at describing the information.

Can't wait to read more of his books!!

l. says

My dad bought this for me at a booksale. I guess it was fine. I really did know everything in it already though - there's a limited amount of information available about Antony and Cleopatra so what you get is a retelling of the fall of the Republic with a focus on those two, which seems a bit pointless. The wording of his personal analyses put me off a bit, i.e. at one point he said that Cleopatra used her body because that was all she had left? It is readable and detailed enough though that 3/5 seems fair.

Anyway, looking at the reviews of his Julius Caesar bio, and really? at people complaining that there's too much military history in it. Really? I mean, just... really? ... do you know who Julius Caesar was. Come on.

Come Musica says

Prima volta che leggo questa tragedia.

Toglie il fiato.

Shakespeare è un grande.

Tony says

As numerous other commentators have stated, "Antony & Cleopatra" is not principally about Antony or Cleopatra. For instance, these individuals do not even enter the narrative until roughly 20% into the book. Rather, this is a far more general history of the end of the Roman republic and the civil wars that followed. The book offers a few interesting insights on these events--e.g., explaining how Antony had far less military experience than is generally believed--but is generally unremarkable.

Ton says

This is Goldsworthy's most recent, most populist – note that the chapter about Lepidus being dropped from the Triumvirate is dubbed “and then there were two” – and (perhaps consequently) least interesting book to date. I’ve read all his works, aside from the shorter to-go editions, and I found this one lacking a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Perhaps it’s because the couple in the title evoke a certain passion, and Goldsworthy sets out explicitly to squash everything that has been invented about the couple. This shouldn’t surprise me, because his standard approach is to return to the sources and cut through the flights of fancy and invented traditions that generally come with ancient history, from the Punic Wars to Caesar to Antony and Cleopatra. Still, it felt as though his heart wasn’t really in it.

The narrative meanders a bit towards the end, almost as if Antony’s supposed lethargy had a sympathetic effect on the author. Goldsworthy wanted to make this book accessible to a larger audience, and this means that he doesn’t always have or take too much time to explain theories or backgrounds. This is traditionally one of his strengths, but this time he seems to have sacrificed it for pace. As anyone with any position of responsibility knows, you can’t please everyone, and I think that Goldsworthy tried to please too many

people, in the end definitely not pleasing me. Perhaps the sales-figures have justified this approach (or will), but I can't help but wonder.

As for the book itself, it's not a *bad* book. It faithfully tracks the lives of Antony and Cleopatra, starting with their ancestors (Antony's grandfather, and Ptolemy I for Cleopatra). This part of the book is still quite good, and I found the introduction to the Ptolemies and Ptolemaic Egypt particularly insightful.* It was also thoroughly confusing, considering their incestuous dynastic policy. Goldsworthy always takes pleasure from debunking invented traditions, and this book is no exception. He takes the time to point out that the Ptolemies were Greeks from a Greek tradition, and that we do not know what Cleopatra really looked like. Another point he repeatedly makes is that Cleopatra was utterly dependent upon Roman backing, which is why she attached herself to Caesar and Antony. Augustan propaganda has muddied the waters insofar as it served Octavian to paint a picture of Antony as held in thrall by an alien female monarch (three words to send any Roman aristocrat into apoplexy), and Antony himself did not help himself with his increasingly erratic behavior. Furthermore, Goldsworthy points out that luck and opportunity played a part in Antony's career (for instance he happened to be consul, i.e. in power, when Caesar was murdered) which helped to obscure the fact that he was not as capable as he would like to present himself. Antony seems to have dropped the ball after the disastrous campaign against Parthia, in a way that is hard to explain without giving the impression of lethargy.

In the end, this is a reasonable retelling of a famous episode from ancient history. Goldsworthy is definitely capable, and this book is not bad. However, I don't think it's particularly engaging either, which is a pity.

* If you who read this review know of a good book on this subject, feel free to let me know.

Elysium says

Book was well written and informative but strayed from the topic too often. It told about general political situation in Rome and stuff. I don't know much about Rome and all the names just got me confused.

Chris says

caleidoscopisch
