The Influence of Context on the Leadership of Cleopatra

Lindsay Harold, Kerri Anton, Kristen Duca, Cate Henefin

Abstract

Many have heard of the great Cleopatra. Some people only know her as a queen of Egypt while others remember her as being a temptress and adulteress with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony. Many scholarly students have read the Shakespearean plays of her multiple affairs and dramatic suicide, but few people know Cleopatra the leader. Her leadership skills are debated to be better than any man’s, yet most people have no idea of the actions she had to take or the power those actions required in her leadership position. Who was the real Cleopatra, and how did her leadership style and decisions affect her people and Egypt? She was born in 69 B.C.E. in Alexandria, Egypt as part of the Ptolemaic Dynasty (Foss, 1999). She grew up and led in very turbulent times. Events such as war, famine, and the expansion of the Roman Empire affected Cleopatra in many ways. Her personal history and the historical context, contemporary context, and immediate context of this turbulent time in Egypt explain why she made the decisions she did and what kind of power she utilized as a leader. Her ideas, guiding principles, and public values are also influenced by these variables.
Introduction

When the subject of Cleopatra is brought up in conversation, most automatically know which Cleopatra is being referenced. However, almost every pharaoh-queen was named Cleopatra, the most famous of which was Cleopatra VII. What makes this Cleopatra stand out in the minds of most people? Contrary to how current standards, such as Hollywood, have portrayed her, she was not infamously beautiful. She was a strong female leader living in an ancient, male-dominated world, and yet she made her impact on history. Cleopatra's leadership distinguished her from the other Cleopatras of her day. The leadership theories and approaches that can best apply to Cleopatra and her use of power are Appendage Theory, Better Man Theory, Needs Theory, and Influence Tactics. She is an important leader in that she was one of the first influential female leaders in her time with more power than most female leaders could not acquire. She is important figure in history because her life in leadership influenced her people, Egypt, and the world.

Historical Context

In 331 BCE, Alexander the Great founded the port city of Alexandria which marked the beginning of Greek influence in Egypt (Foss, 1999). Upon his death, Alexander left Egypt in the hands of Ptolemy, thus beginning the Ptolemaic Dynasty that ended with Cleopatra (Foss, 1999). The installation of Greek rulers instead of Egyptian rules developed a rift between royalty and their subjects, which trickled down into a division between Greek and Egyptian subjects (Morgan, 2003). For the duration of the first three Ptolemaic Pharaohs, Egypt prospered (Morgan, 2003). This golden age was one of grand expansion (Morgan, 2003). However, upon Ptolemy III's death in 222 BCE, Egypt began to decline and continued to do so through Cleopatra's reign (Morgan, 2003). Future pharaohs "dreamed of recreating" this golden age, which was a mindset that likewise infected Cleopatra (Morgan, 2003).

Cleopatra VII of Egypt was born in Alexandria in the year 69 BCE (Foss, 1999). She was to be the last of Hellenistic rulers in the Ptolemaic dynasty, daughter of Ptolemy XII and Cleopatra V of Egypt. There is no record of Cleopatra's mother after her birth, leaving her father to be her primary influence (Foss, 1999). Her father's, Ptolemy Auletes's, reputation of debauchery, frivolity, extravagance, self-absorbency, cruelty, and sexual looseness was well-known (Foss, 1999). This played a huge part in Cleopatra's view of leadership. She saw the negative effects of her father's self-interest on the people and wanted to be different from him in that sense, however, she did learn to use some of her father's traits to her advantage.

Cleopatra's experience of growing up in the Ptolemaic court allowed her to live the life of luxury (Foss, 1999). There, she received a thorough education from a myriad of tutors coming from Alexandria's famed Museum and Library (Foss, 1999). Her father could read Egyptian symbols (Foss, 1999), and this may have sparked Cleopatra's desire to master the Egyptian language, which had not been accomplished by any previous pharaoh in the Ptolemaic dynasty (Kleiner, 2005). The previous pharaohs of Egypt were Greek and did not speak common Egyptian. They never felt the need to speak the language of their subjects, but Cleopatra felt her subjects were of great importance; therefore, she learned the language (Kleiner, 2005). When Cleopatra was fourteen, her father was exiled due to political matters, leaving Cleopatra with an unstable Egypt of which she would co-rule alongside her younger brother (Foss, 1999). Knowing Egyptian proved to be a great source of referent power among her subjects, because it was such a unique connection she shared with them. This earned her the title the “People’s Princess” because Cleopatra was the first to learn Egyptian instead of only speaking Greek, the language of the royal family since 332 BCE (Morgan, 2003). Thus, she won the hearts of many of her followers by using her intelligence to connect with her subjects and build her referent power.

Because of the fatalistic and polythesitic culture, Pharaohs were likened to the status of the gods. From the beginning of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, the Greek pharaohs had adopted and capitalized on the Egyptian god-king tradition (Kleiner, 2005). The pharaohs were considered to be the "intermediaries between the Egyptian gods and the Egyptian people" (Kleiner, 2005). From birth, the Egyptian priests instilled in Cleopatra that she was a "genuine goddess" of the Egyptian pantheon (Kleiner, 2005). Her royal and divine title thus gave Cleopatra referent power among her followers.
Born of royalty, Cleopatra had confidence in her status and her sexuality. Her royal title gave her equal reverence to the Egyptian gods. The people of Egypt held very strong belief in the gods and their control over every situation on earth. With pharaohs being compared to gods, the people worshiped pharaohs and held them in equally high esteem as the gods (Griffiths, 1961). She believed that she was a re-incarnation of Isis, goddess of motherhood and fertility (Griffiths, 1961). This idea shaped how Cleopatra defined herself as a person and most definitely as a leader.

Her divine status in Egypt gave her confidence. An example of how this belief shaped her public actions is confidence with men in high positions of authority. Her confidence in her godliness gave her an extreme sex-appeal to these powerful men. This made her unique and increased her ability to ensnare men like Julius Caesar in order to help Egypt as a whole. She certainly demonstrated her goddess-like status when she orchestrated the ritual burial of the Buchis bull shortly after her father died and she was new to the throne (Jones, 2006). According to Cleopatra: The Last Pharaoh by Prudence J. Jones:

The Buchis bull was a manifestation of the Egyptian war god Mentu...When a Buchis bull died... a new one was chosen based on its markings and consecrated to the gods. Cleopatra, as Pharaoh, would have been part of the retinue accompanying of the new bull as it traveled by boat up the Nile to the sacred precinct of Hermonthis...The trip not only represented a religious duty, but also afforded her the opportunity to introduce herself to her subjects and to communicate to them her power. (2006)

Her smart manipulation of this cultural value as one of her first moves in office after her father's death successfully won her the title of "the goddess who loves her father" (Jones, 2006a).

Egyptians believed in the practice of brother-and-sister loving gods. Thus, the Greek Pharaohs adopted the practice of sibling-ruler marriages to solidify their legitimate power, which was certainly the case for Cleopatra and her brother (Foss, 1999). Taking after the tradition of the marriage of the sibling-gods Isis and Osiris, the royal siblings were married to encourage loyalty (Kleiner, 2005). This uniquely gave the Ptolemaic princesses more authority and respect. They were educated like their brothers because they too might become pharaohs one day (Kleiner, 2005; Jones, 2006).

However, this practice did not deter competitions for power between the sibling pharaohs. Often times, pharaohs would be driven out of Alexandria by their counterparts. Although the marriage gave Cleopatra great legitimate power, this meant that Cleopatra had to be in constant concern for her own personal and political safety in competition with her brother for sole control of the throne. She was left to make whatever decisions she felt would ensure her survival.

Egypt had a long history of queens named Cleopatra (Foss, 1999). These women had modeled, “courage and spirit, [and] had proved their ability to foment trouble, to raise armies, and to march back to the city in triumph” when their co-ruler had tried to exile them (Foss, 1999). Because she was raised in the tradition of these independent queens, of which she fell seventh, Cleopatra was limited by her own high standards to exude the kind of leadership these women had shown. Because of this, she was left with the one option, which was to fight for her throne in whatever way she could. However, upon the death of her first brother/husband and her reinstatement post-exile, the societal expectations of the time were still that brother-and-sister loving gods would rule Egypt (Foss, 1999). Thus she was forced to remarry her youngest brother (Horton & Simmons, 2007). This did not, however, inhibit Cleopatra's ability to win over the people of Egypt. Her passion for learning and concern for her people still made her the more prominent, and more well liked leader leaving her brother and co-ruler in her shadows.

Above all else, Cleopatra valued her independence and her power as a woman and a leader. When she first became co-ruler of Egypt with her brother, it was evident that Cleopatra was the dominant ruler (Foss, 1999). In a strategic move for power, he brother had her banished for being too powerful. A queen with too much power was unacceptable in the eyes of her brother because he, as the male ruler, was supposed to be dominant. Her brother’s advisors were sabotaging him against her in an attempt to gain control of the kingdom (Jones, 2006). They convinced her brother to banish Cleopatra for gaining too much power
independently. Even though Cleopatra was basically ruling by herself, her younger brother was still the male. Therefore, he had more legitimate power than she did, and he had the ultimate authority to exile his older sister.

Cleopatra held the belief that she was the most qualified leader for Egypt though her younger brother, as a male, had rights to the throne before Cleopatra. The age and maturity difference between Cleopatra and her husband/brother Ptolemy XIII made ruling together difficult (Kleiner, 2005). Cleopatra realized that both of her brothers had neither the influence nor intelligence to compete with the politics of the time, and that she was going to have to network with men of power on her own to make any difference (Kleiner, 2005).

Cleopatra did not give up what she believed was her rightful position. Although exiled, she was still revered as a goddess-like powerful ruler. Her followers still had a referent awe for her; she was still considered divine in her kingdom and they still marveled at how she, unlike previous Pharaohs, acknowledged her subjects’ existence by taking the time to converse with the locals (Kleiner, 2005). The history of distant Pharaoh leadership made her seem superhuman, but her efforts to be relatable portrayed her as a benevolent Queen. So she went to Thebaid, “where the old pharaonic traditions were still strong,” in order to manipulate what referent power she had left there without her legitimate power to use to her advantage. Her plan was to muster her own military forces and prepare to wage a civil war for control of her kingdom (Foss, 1999). However, when Cleopatra saw an alternative to military tactics, she seized the opportunity. Caesar’s victory marked a significant political shift in Rome. Recognizing that Caesar’s new unrivaled Roman power was a great advantage, Cleopatra snuck back into Alexandria to negotiate being reinstated as ruler of Egypt (Horton, 2007).

She understood that Caesar liked women, especially “bold scheming females whose intelligence challenged his own and whose wit struck sparks from his own brilliance” (Foss, 1999). Capitalizing on this, she allegedly had herself smuggled into Caesar’s chamber wrapped up in a carpet (Foss, 1999). This infamous first impression coupled with her “irresistible spirit” and impressive intelligence eventually lured Caesar into siding with her in the civil war against her brother (Foss, 1999; Jones, 2006). Even though Plutarch records Cleopatra as not actually being a woman of “remarkable attractiveness,” her cunning gave her a brand of high sex-appeal that won Caesar over (Foss, 1999).

Caesar soon restored her to the throne (Horton, 2007). Ptolemy was upset to find his sister back at his side, and Caesar had to do a lot of damage control in order to convince them to cooperate (Jones, 2006b). Despite Caesar’s efforts, conflict still arose, and he had to defend himself against Ptolemy who was still vying for sole control (Jones, 2006). Ptolemy’s forces were no match for Rome’s military power and he ended up drowning trying to escape from one of the battles, which ultimately left the throne to Cleopatra (Jones, 2006).

Egypt had always been a coveted region by the Roman Empire. The Nile’s regular flooding which replenished nutrients in the soil made Egypt “the most significant grain producer in the Mediterranean” while the port’s strategic trade location brought even more prosperity, evidenced by Alexandria’s impressive lighthouse, library, and educational center (Kleiner, 2005). These assets proved to be extremely attractive to foreign powers, like that of Rome which was expanding its power rapidly throughout the Mediterranean at the time.

Egypt was a valuable source of grain, and the expanding Roman Empire had a growing number of mouths to feed (Morgan, 2003). However, recent drought led to a grain shortage (Horton, 2007). Thus when Cleopatra came to power, she was faced with a famished nation and a growing Roman shadow. Because of Egypt's fragile state, she was forced to be extremely resourceful in ensuring Egypt's survival. She had to find a balance between giving Rome some control over Egypt, and keeping the Romans at bay so as to prevent a complete acquisition of Egypt. This was the time when she turned to marrying her brother so as to have a legitimate position of power and to have the ability to use her brother’s good connections with Rome to her advantage.

For years there had been a "natural mistrust between Greeks and Romans" which carried over to the Greek Ptolemaic pharaohs (Morgan, 2003). Nevertheless, Rome captured Greece in 146 BCE adding to their collection of lands surrounding Italy. The Romans forcing themselves upon Egypt encouraged Egypt to be on good terms with them so that Egypt was not next in line to be taken over (Morgan, 2003). Rome had made the statement that they were indeed the stronger power. According to Julian Morgan's book Cleopatra, among the
Roman triumvirate (comprised of the three most powerful men in Rome: Caesar, Pompey, and Marcus Licinius Crassus) there were "arguments for and against adding Egypt to Rome's growing empire, but for the time being it seemed advantageous to leave Egypt under its own control, especially if the local Egyptian rulers were pro-Roman" (Morgan, 2003). Rome wanted control of Egypt, but the Empire was biding its time (Morgan, 2003).

The Egyptians bought off a Roman invasion for as long as they could. They had allied with the Romans for the past two hundred years (Horton, 2007). However, as Rome was surpassing Egypt in power and wealth, the need to remain in Rome’s good graces was likewise growing. To appease Rome, Egypt slowly gave the Empire increasing control over the country in the forms of tributes and territories such as Cyprus, Syria, and Cyrenaica (Horton, 2007).

The pharaohs also had a long history of turning to Rome to help get a grip on the unstable political situation (Jones, 2006). In 162 BCE, Ptolemy VIII gave Rome land as payment for quelling a rebellion (Jones, 2006). Nearly a century later, this struggle to maintain power continued into Cleopatra’s day. Ptolemy Auletes was even bribing Rome in order to keep a hand in the control of Egypt (Foss, 1999), but Alexandria “always detested signs of subservience to Rome,” therefore continuing to put stress on the country’s political stability (Foss, 1999).

Historically, one of the Ptolemaic strategies to protect and keep control over Egypt was to side with the most powerful Mediterranean powers to ensure “protection in exchange for political and financial support” (Jones, 2006). When Caesar defeated Pompey (the last contender for sole control of Rome since Crassus's death) at Pharsalus, Egypt strategically declared its allegiance with Caesar (Foss, 1999). After the battle, Pompey headed to Egypt to regroup and call on some favors (Foss, 1999). However, Ptolemy XIII (ruling alone after exiling his sister and under the influence of his scheming advisers) lured Pompey into a trap and had him executed as a declaration of loyalty to Caesar (Foss, 1999). Even though Caesar was allegedly disappointed with the under-handed death of his worthy opponent, he was left unrivaled and holding the power of Rome (Foss, 1999).

Ptolemy feared the detrimental impact of a Roman war in Egypt because the country was already suffering from the civil war between Ptolemy and Cleopatra in addition to fierce drought, (Jones, 2006). Ptolemy believed that eliminating Caesar’s enemy for him would expedite his business in Egypt and would therefore hurry Caesar’s departure (Jones, 2006). However, Caesar “was determined not to be driven out until he had made arrangements that were favourable to his own security and to Roman needs” (Foss, 1999).

Therefore, with Caesar's eminent take-over of Egypt, Cleopatra faced a delicate political situation. She did not have the resources to hold Rome off. Roman policy of letting pro-Roman Pharaohs keep control of Egypt, was no longer applicable to Cleopatra's situation. Once Caesar gained entry to Egypt, it was much more difficult to deter Roman influence. Cleopatra was left to find a balance between using Roman support to strengthen Egypt and keeping Rome from gaining too much control. Utilizing her limited resources even while in exile, she saw her brother's new-found allegiance with the Romans as the most advantageous means of getting back into power. Thus her options were limited to utilizing her power to infiltrate and manipulate Roman leadership.

Cleopatra’s power came from many different sources, but first and foremost from her heritage (Grant, 1982). By being born into the Ptolemaic line, Cleopatra had legitimate power. However, her goddess-like status gave her a strong referent power among her fatalistic subjects. Because she was competent in several different languages, including Egyptian, she had an expert power that enabled her to deal effectively with other ancient world powers (Kleiner, 2005). Her royal position most likely gave her reward and coercive power, however there are no specific examples of this.

Because Cleopatra was a co-leader of Egypt with her brother, her use of power was limited (Foss, 1999). She did however, use her legitimate power (Grant, 1982). Cleopatra also used the power of history and information for her self-motivation. She knew that she had to build her army and gain allies in Rome. Prior Ptolemaic Cleopatras had persevered and pushed through their issues, so she used her knowledge of the past to model after these queens, and she succeeded (Foss, 1999).

Personal power was clearly one of the main motivators for Cleopatra's actions. When the Ptolemaic leadership was strong, Egypt had power. In order to maintain a strong and successful Egypt, she needed to
make sure that she, as an individual ruler, was powerful. This explains her strategic relationships with men of power. Cleopatra's relationship with Julius Caesar was a power play on her part. In allying herself with Caesar, Cleopatra effectively allied Egypt with Rome, therefore preserving/enhancing her own power as well as the power of Egypt.

**Leadership Theories**

**Influence Tactics**

Cleopatra greatly influenced the fate of Egypt by manipulating her many power sources. By playing off several influence tactics outlined by Yukl, she was able to utilize these power sources. She enacted her referent power with Caesar by using personal appeals, which is asking for a favor based on relationships (Yukl, 2006). By appealing to his sexual relationship with her, she was able to keep her position and influence in Egyptian leadership, which had mostly positive effects for Egypt. Her use of exchange influence tactics are also seen in this example. Exchange tactics are basically trading a favor for a favor (Yukl, 2006). She would exchange relational benefits for power and protection from Caesar. Another influence tactic she used was legitimate tactics. Legitimate tactics are a use of a position of authority in order to get something accomplished (Yukl, 2006). Since she was pharaoh of Egypt and sometimes considered a goddess, she did have a position of authority to make people do what she wanted. An example of this is when she was exiled out of Egypt. She went to a place where she was still considered the highest authority and was able to use legitimate tactics to organize an army to wage civil war on her brother who exiled her (Foss, 1999).

**Needs Theory**

Cleopatra’s leadership can also be described using McClelland’s Need Theory, which is categorized into three needs. The first need is the need for power which can be defined as a satisfaction of influencing people and events. A person with a high need for power will seek positions of authority (Yukl, 2006). The second need is the need for achievement which is a desire to excel and succeed, a willingness to take on responsibility, and a concern for task objectives (Yukl, 2006). The third need is the need for affiliation. A leader with a high need for affiliation likes to have relationships with others in order to be accepted and liked (Yukl, 2006). Cleopatra had a high need for power. She wanted sole control of Egypt (Foss, 1992). She did have a moderate need for achievement in that her focus was Egypt's survival of Roman expansion. There was limited time and resources to focus on extra achievement above and beyond that, although she did want the satisfaction of being the woman of the Ptolemy family to rebuild Egypt (Kleiner, 2005). She had a low need for affiliation because she did not need relationships to give her an identity. She was confident in her leadership and who she was as a person. As mentioned earlier, she only developed relationships for power. Even concerning how relatable she was to her subject, she still maintained and emphasized her independence as a leader. She used her affiliations to fuel her power.

**Appendage and Better Man Theory**

The Appendage Syndrome of leadership can also be applied to Cleopatra. The Appendage Syndrome is defined as a woman’s rise to a leadership position because of her relationship to a male leader (Frasier, 1990). Even though ancient Egyptian culture allowed female pharaohs, male pharaohs still had supreme power. Cleopatra was only co-ruler to her brother, who had the power to exile her out of Egypt. She was well aware of the significance of her relationships with male leaders, hence her relationships with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony. As a female leader in Egypt, she was only as strong as the males associated with her. However, she held herself in high esteem even around the leading men of the world who were not as inclined to initially respect a woman in her leadership position (Kleiner, 2005). Her ambition and determination sustained her during the turbulent political state of Egypt. She always acted to further her vision of a strong Egypt equal in respect and stature to Rome (Kleiner, 2005). Thus it appears that instead of
passively rising to power due to her relationships with men, Cleopatra actively manipulated men in leadership to maneuver herself into power.

The Better-Man leadership theory is likewise applicable to Cleopatra. The Better-Man theory is described as the woman being as similar as she can be to a man in a leadership position (Frasier, 1990). Contemporary context for Cleopatra included a pharaoh-dominated society in which the man was the ultimate power. Cleopatra knew she had to overcome this barrier and use her relationships with men in order to gain power for herself. Cleopatra acknowledged that her brothers were weak, and she would have to become the strong “man” of the family, if she wanted her empire to prosper as it did in the times of Alexander the Great (Kleiner, 2005). She had to know war strategies, including battle tactics and the raising of an army, which were normally associated with male leadership traits rather than female. For example, raising an army to challenge her brother, even after exile, shows her determination to regain the throne and her self-confidence in that she was the rightful, more mature leader capable of making Egypt great again (Kleiner, 2005). Cleopatra had to become as strong as or stronger than other male leaders during her time and assume male leadership traits.

**Conclusion**

Cleopatra had limitations as a female leader in patriarchal world. If she had not seduced Julius Caesar, it is not likely he would have discussed foreign policy with her? She knew this would not be the case due to her second class status as a female leader, so she used her appeal to seduce Caesar in order to accomplish a goal that would be beneficial for the whole of Egypt. This was her response to the cultural norm that, in this case, served as a hindrance to her leadership ability and reach.

Based on the historical context of Roman influence, Egyptian unrest, and disjointed brother-sister rule, Cleopatra used the resources available to her (those that were brought about by history) and did what she had to do to remain in power. She used Rome to regain control, just like her predecessors. To maintain her referent power, she tried to depict herself as a solid, capable, and relatable leader for her followers who had been frustrated with Greek elitism and self-interested rulers. Finally to regain her legitimate power, she seduced Caesar and defeated her brother to establish herself as a stable ruler and eliminate the lack of unity in Egyptian leadership.

However, Cleopatra did have a need for power that was borderline lustful and ultimately lead to demise. When Cleopatra eventually faced Rome's complete conquest of Egypt, instead of losing her power and facing humiliation, she decided to die a more culturally honorable death (Horton, 2007). She committed suicide by being bit by an asp, which was considered godly, and therefore helped to further elevate her in the eyes of her people (Horton, 2007). Even after her death, she was still a revered leader of her time, demonstrating her success as a leader, even though she was not the most ethical leader. She gained power even after death. This shows that power can overwhelm a leader to the point of being willing to do anything rather than lose that position.
References


