

Limestone Head of a Woman Resembling Cleopatra VII **The British Museum**

Roman, about 50-30 BC
Acquired in Italy



In July 46 BC Julius Caesar (died 44 BC) returned to Rome after his successful African campaign. During the triumphal celebrations he brought Cleopatra VII, the last Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt, to the city. Several significant Roman political figures were offended by the arrival of the queen and her entourage. But, despite this affront, her presence in Rome revived cults of certain Egyptian deities such as Isis, with whom Cleopatra was associated. The queen lived luxuriously in Rome and her stay may have influenced women's fashions and hairstyles, adding an exotic touch to the somewhat conservative life of the republican city. Caesar also made the controversial gesture of having a golden statue of Cleopatra erected in the Temple of Venus Genetrix in the forum, as well as admitting paternity of their son, Caesarion.

Cleopatra's image is well known from coins issued during her life-time, from several Egyptian-style statues, and from a handful of marble Greek-style portraits that can be compared with her coin portraits. This limestone head was formerly considered to be a portrait of the queen (it has a similar profile) but is now thought to be a woman who loosely modelled herself on Cleopatra, perhaps one of her entourage from Egypt. The head does not appear to be a queen because it lacks the diadem, a strip of material tied at the back of the head that was used to denote royalty. The hairstyle of this woman is similar to that of Cleopatra VII on her coins, but is more elaborately dressed in a series of twisted braids that are coiled up at the back.

S. Walker, *Greek and Roman portraits* (London, The British Museum Press, 1995)

G.M.A. Richter, *The portraits of the Greeks* (London, Phaidon, 1965)

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S. Walker and P. Higgs, *Cleopatra of Egypt: from histo*(London, The British Museum Press, 2001)

A.H. Smith, *A catalogue of sculpture in -1*, vol. 2 (London, British Museum, 1900)

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