

Golden Mummies of Egypt

Audio guide

6. Coin of Cleopatra

00:00:00 Dr Campbell Price

This is a bronze coin showing Queen Cleopatra VII in profile, facing right. The face of Cleopatra has been cast in raised relief. She has a prominent nose. Her hair is braided and encircled with a band or crown.

00:00:16 Greg Jenner

So, Cleopatra.

00:00:18 Campbell

Comin' Atcha.

00:00:19 Greg

Comin' Atcha. I think she's the most famous woman in ancient history, I reckon.

00:00:25 Campbell

I would agree with you. I know you know lots about Cleopatra. I think she's pretty singular in the ancient world. We know of other queens of Egypt, who rule not just as the wife of a king, but in their own right, and I'm thinking, of course, of my absolute favourite, Queen Hatshepsut. But Hatshepsut is almost one and a half thousand years before Cleopatra. Who knows? Maybe Cleopatra knew about Hatshepsut. But you're right, yeah, in terms of fame, she's pretty unrivalled.

00:01:04 Greg

Well, yes, because obviously she is glamorous and beautiful and famous. Also, she's the last ever pharaoh of Egypt. She has a relationship with Julius Caesar, the most famous man in the ancient world, and that's, I mean, the power couple, right? They are the kind of celebrity super couple. Then she has another relationship with Mark Antony, another very famous Roman soldier. And then, of course, dies tragically when it all goes wrong, when Octavian invades Egypt and he becomes the first Emperor. So, you've got all these sort of superstar characters all in the same story. And this coin here, depicts her side on.

Now, the first thing I want to ask, actually Campbell, is Egyptians didn't usually have coins, right? It's not an Egyptian thing, money. So, when did coins come into Egyptian daily life? Is it with the Greeks, the Macedonians? Is it Alexander the Great who brings them in? Is it a bit earlier?

00:02:01 Campbell

It's maybe a bit earlier. But you're right to think, of course, we think of coinage, although it's kind of going out of fashion a little bit now in the Modern world, but coinage is quite an important thing to our whole concept of society. At this time, coins, in the grand scheme of things, are still quite new. We have evidence of gold coins, you know, coins actually stamped with the hieroglyph for gold in Egypt, just before Alexander shows up. So, 300 years before this. But it's a way of showing, you know, the face of the ruler. In the case of the Ptolemies, in an overtly Greek way. So, you might see Cleopatra in the form of an Egyptian statue, as a form of the goddess Isis, looking very ancient Egyptian. But when you were reaching into your pocket to pay for your onions or your cow, or whatever you were doing, you would bring out this very Greek-looking image of her. So, by the time Cleopatra is on the throne, yeah, coinage is fairly normal among the kind of trading people of Egypt.

00:03:16 Greg

Yeah, but you're right. She is in this coin, we see her side on, so she's facing to the right, and she's got that very distinctive Greek hairstyle. It looks braided almost. It's kind of, you can see like rows of hair. So, it's very fancily done. But it's quite different to how the goddess Isis would normally look in art. So, she's playing up to her Greekness, here, because she's from a Greek family, isn't she? She's *Cleo-patra*, which is a Greek name. It means 'famous, like her father' or 'respectful of her father'. So, she's from that Greek dynasty who came across with Alexander the Great. But we think she speaks Egyptian as well. So, she sort of crosses both worlds. She's got a foot in either camp. She's a bit Greek, a bit Egyptian, pharaoh of Egypt, speaks Greek, trades with the Greek world, dates Roman men, she's...

00:04:16 Campbell

Tries to resist Rome, by dating Roman men.

00:04:20 Greg

Yeah, I mean, that's her. I mean, she struggles, right? I mean, her life is incredible. If you don't know the story of Cleopatra, it's tragic, but it's amazing. She has to marry her brother, her half-brother, twice, who are who are kids. Then she kills them. She kills her sister, Arsinoë. Then she ends up with Julius Caesar. He gets killed so she ends up with Mark Antony. They then die. It's an absolute, I mean, murderfest. It's so violent.

00:04:48 Campbell

It's a soap opera. Yeah, you're right.

00:04:50 Greg

And that's why Shakespeare did an amazing play about it. But, her story is complicated because of course, she's a very powerful queen in some ways, but really not powerful in others, because she's desperately trying to fight off her brother, who's trying to steal the throne. And then also the Romans are kind of lurking in the shadows waiting to swoop in and take Egypt. So, Cleopatra is caught between a civil war with her own family and a foreign superpower.

00:05:17 Campbell

Yeah, not an easy position to be in. And it's funny, in a way, quite sad that she's been short-changed by a kind of Western-style history, in the sense that, you know, we think a lot of people nowadays think of that very famous 1960s movie with Elizabeth Taylor. And, you know, she's this *femme fatale* and she's, like a beautiful lady. But in Arabic writing, in Arabic tradition, Cleopatra is a scientist, she's a diplomat, she's a linguist. As you said, you know, she can speak Greek, her family are Greek, but she has, you know, diplomatic relations with Rome, which are absolutely critical, and she can speak Egyptian, the native language of the land. So, she is multicultural in a special way and she really, really tries to keep Egypt independent. And with her death, as you said, she's the last pharaoh, pharaonic Egypt dies. Of course, Egypt just becomes a slightly different thing. Egyptians are still Egyptians, but the political landscape totally changes. So, she's kind of this, stopgap against this major change. And what a life.

I have to say at this point, Greg has imagined the diary of Cleopatra in a wonderful book, *Totally Chaotic History: Ancient Egypt Gets Unruly*, which gives some flavour of, my goodness, from a really young age she is really involved in politics. And I think this object is so small you would miss it on display. So, this is why I think we're talking about it. It is addressed to an audience. If you have a statue in a temple to an Egyptian god, yes, you appear like Isis, the goddess Isis. If you are wanting to impress people who are quite well to do, Greek merchants, Roman merchants, Egyptian merchants, you appear this way on a coin. And it's funny to think, you know, this was passed around between people, like you and me, when she was still alive and it was used for trade, given she's such a famous name in the ancient world.

00:07:36 Greg

Yeah, that's it. I mean coins are handed between... You know, a statue you put in your house, a beautiful piece of jewellery you wear, but a coin you give away. You know, the whole point of having them is to buy stuff with them. Yeah, you know, obviously it's good to have lots of money, great, lovely, but actually, really the point of having money is to then be able to buy things with it. So, these things are moving through society. They're changing hands all the time. You're always looking down and there's the queen's face, hello! There's Cleopatra staring up at you, or rather

staring away from you. But she is out there amongst her people, because every time they buy something, they're holding her face.