

Cleopatra Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Did Cleopatra die by snakebite?

Materials:

- Cleopatra Timeline (optional)
- Cleopatra PowerPoint
- Documents A – E
- Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: Students should have some knowledge of Cleopatra VII coming into this lesson. At the very least, they should know that she was the last Pharaoh of Ancient Egypt and that she came from a Greek Dynasty. They should probably know that she had relationships with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.

We have included a timeline of Cleopatra's life. You may choose to hand this out to students as a way of reviewing the key events in her life. This particular lesson deals with the myth and legend surrounding Cleopatra's death.

Say to students: *Cleopatra's death inspired a Shakespeare play and numerous works of art. One of the most enduring stories is that she was killed by snakebite. Today we're going to investigate whether that actually happened.*

Project Cleopatra PPT and hand out Documents A and B and Graphic Organizer.

2. Discuss slide one together as a class. Source with students:
 - Who painted this and when? Is this a reliable source for answering our question?

Students should note that the painting was made in the 16th century and is therefore not necessarily a reliable source about whether Cleopatra died from snakebite in 31 BCE. However, they will note that according to the painting, she did die from a snakebite.

3. Have student complete the Graphic Organizer for Documents A and B. Students may work in pairs.
4. Discuss student answers to Round One of the Graphic Organizer. *In both documents, Cleopatra does in fact die from snakebites, however neither is reliable because they were both created long after the event AND because neither paintings nor plays are expected to be historically accurate.*

5. Hand out Documents C, D, and E. Read Document C with students and complete Graphic Organizer together.

Students should note that Plutarch wrote the Life of Antony over a hundred years after Cleopatra died. In that sense, it is not an accurate source. On the other hand, he was a historian who likely wrote what was known about Cleopatra's death. He does not say that she died definitively from a snakebite.

6. Have students read Documents D and E and complete Round Two of the Graphic Organizer in pairs.

7. Discuss student answers.

Cassius Dio wrote his history even later than Plutarch and likely got much of his information from Plutarch. Like Plutarch, he does not conclude definitively that Cleopatra died from a snakebite.

Document E, by contrast, is a contemporary article that is based on scholarly analysis of evidence. It is more reliable than any other document in the lesson, and it says that the snakebite theory is unlikely.

8. Questions for discussion:

- Why might we give more weight to Documents C and D than to Documents A and B? *(Although all of the documents were written long after Cleopatra's death, Documents C and D are histories, and therefore aspire to some degree of accuracy.)*
- Do students think Cleopatra was killed by a snakebite?
- Why has the snake been such a lasting image surrounding Cleopatra's death?
- Why else do we learn about Cleopatra from these stories?
- Victors write history. What can we learn about Octavian from these stories?

Citations:

Timeline:

The timeline of the life of Cleopatra. San José University.

<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/cleopatra.htm>

Document A

Reginald Arthur (Painter). (1896). The death of Cleopatra [Painting], Retrieved September 26, 2012 from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Death_of_Cleopatra_arthur.jpg

Document B

Shakespeare, W. (1623). *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Document C

Plutarch: Plutarch. *The Parallel Lives*, p. 328. Retrieved from
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Antony*.html

Document D

Cassius Dio: Dio, C. *Roman History*, p. 39. Retrieved from
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/51*.html

Document E

Scholarly journal: Francois Retief and Louise P. Cilliers, "The Death of Cleopatra," *Acta Theologica*, Vol.26:2 (2006). <http://historyoftheancientworld.com/2010/10/the-death-of-cleopatra/>