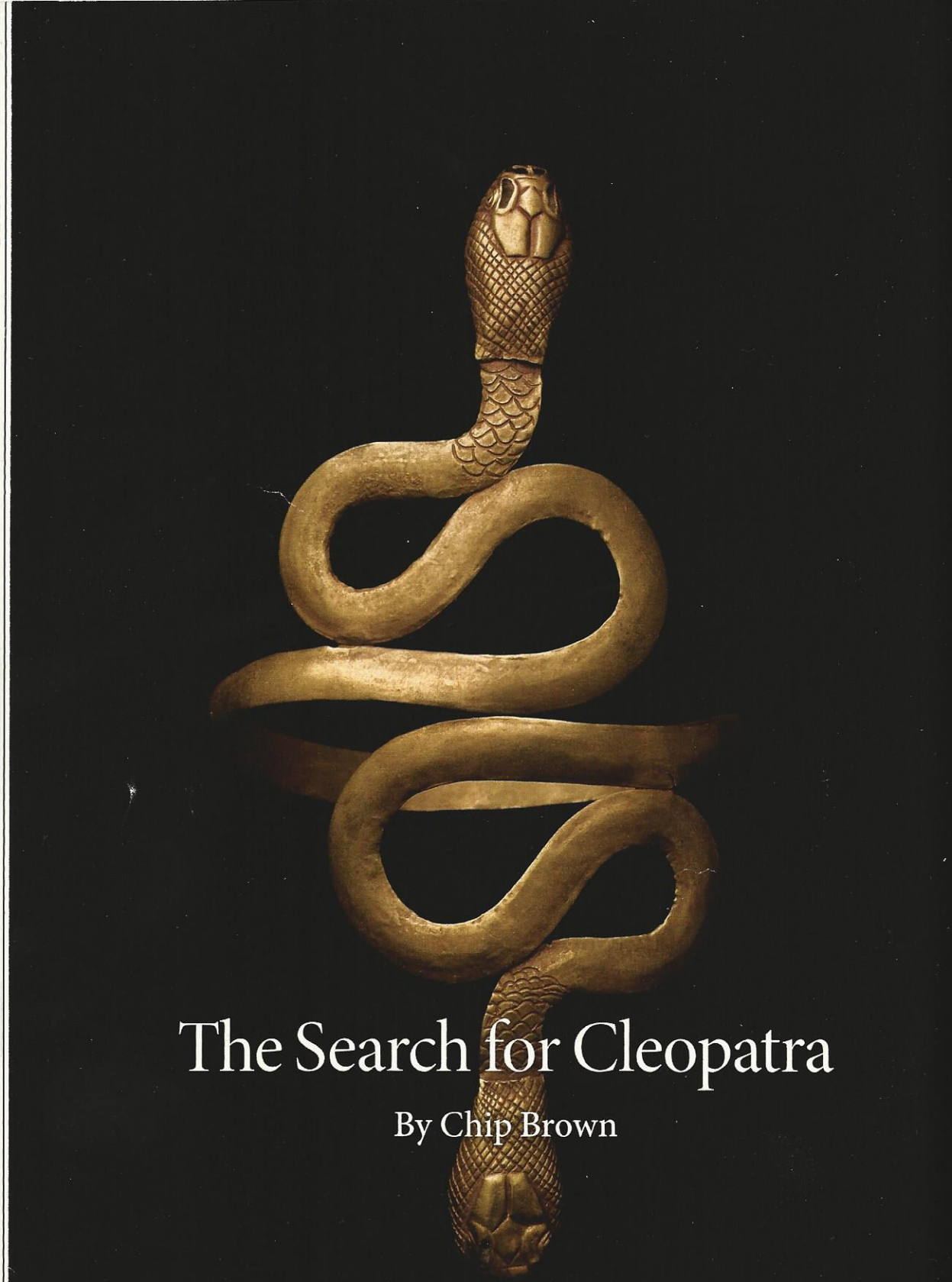


The Search for Cleopatra

By Chip Brown

An Egyptian gold bracelet from around the time of Cleopatra takes the shape of two coiled snakes, symbols of protection and regeneration.

KENNETH GARRETT, AT EGYPTIAN MUSEUM, CAIRO

Where, oh where is Cleopatra? She's everywhere, of course—her name immortalized by slot machines, board games, dry cleaners, exotic dancers, and even a Mediterranean pollution-monitoring project. She is orbiting the sun as the asteroid 216 Kleopatra. Her "bath rituals and decadent lifestyle" are credited with inspiring a perfume. Today the woman who ruled as the last pharaoh of Egypt and who is alleged to have tested toxic potions on prisoners is instead poisoning her subjects as the most popular brand of cigarettes in the Middle East. § In the memorable phrase of critic Harold Bloom, she was the "world's first celebrity." If history is a stage, no actress

patra

takes the shape
eration.

was ever so versatile: royal daughter, royal mother, royal sister from a family that makes the Sopranos look like the Waltons. When not serving as a Rorschach test of male fixations, Cleopatra is an inexhaustible muse. To a recent best-selling biography add—from 1540 to 1905—five ballets, 45 operas, and 77 plays. She starred in at least seven films; an upcoming version will feature Angelina Jolie.

Yet if she is everywhere, Cleopatra is also nowhere, obscured in what biographer Michael Grant called the "fog of fiction and vituperation which has surrounded her personality from her own lifetime onwards." Despite her reputed powers of seduction, there is no reliable depiction of her face. What images do exist are based on unflattering silhouettes on coins. There is an unrevealing 20-foot-tall relief on a temple at Dendera, and museums display a few marble busts, most of which may not even be of Cleopatra.

Ancient historians praised her allure, not her looks. Certainly she possessed the ability to roil passions in two powerful Roman men: Julius Caesar, with whom she had one son; and Mark Antony, who would be her lover for more than a decade and the father of three more children. But her beauty, said Greek historian Plutarch, was not "the sort that would astound those who saw her; interaction with her was captivating, and her appearance, along with her persuasiveness in discussion and her character that accompanied every interchange, was stimulating. Pleasure also came with the tone of her voice, and her tongue was like a many-stringed instrument."

People have been puzzling over the whereabouts of Cleopatra's tomb since she was last seen in her mausoleum in the legendary deathbed tableau, adorned with diadem and royal finery and reposed on what Plutarch described as a golden couch. After Caesar's assassination, his heir Octavian battled Antony for control of the Roman Empire for more than a decade; following Antony and Cleopatra's defeat at Actium, Octavian's forces entered Alexandria in the summer of 30 B.C. Cleopatra barricaded herself behind her mausoleum's massive doors, amid stores of gold, silver, pearls, art, and other treasures that she vowed to torch lest they fall into Roman hands.

It was to the mausoleum that Antony, dying of self-inflicted sword wounds, was brought on the first of August so he might take a last sip of wine and perish in Cleopatra's arms. And it may have been in the mausoleum where, ten days or so after Antony's death, Cleopatra herself escaped the humiliation of defeat and captivity by committing suicide at the age of 39, reputedly with the venom of an asp. The Roman historian Dio Cassius reported that Cleopatra's body was embalmed as Antony's had been, and Plutarch noted that on the orders of Octavian, the last queen of Egypt was buried beside her defeated Roman consort. Sixteen centuries later Shakespeare proclaimed: "No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / a pair so famous."

And yet we have no idea where that grave might be. The wealth of attention paid to Cleopatra by artists seems inversely proportional to the poverty of material generated about her by archaeologists. Alexandria and its environs attracted less attention than the more ancient sites along the Nile, such as the Pyramids at Giza or the monuments at Luxor. And no wonder: Earthquakes, tidal waves, rising seas, subsiding ground, civil conflicts, and the unsentimental recycling of building stones have destroyed the ancient quarter where for three centuries Cleopatra and her ancestors lived. Most of the glory

Experts believe that this marble bust with a royal headband may represent Cleopatra and was perhaps made while she was in Rome. Some features, such as the curve of her nose, match her official portraits on coins. Ancient authors say she captivated people with her intelligence, quick wit, and charisma. Two of the world's most powerful men fell for her—Julius Caesar and Roman general Mark Antony.

"MARBLE PORTRAIT OF CLEOPATRA VII," CA 50-30 B.C.; CHRISTOPH GERIGK, AT ALTES MUSEUM, BERLIN

that was ancient Alexandria now lies about 20 feet underwater.

In the past few decades archaeologists have finally taken up the mystery of Cleopatra's whereabouts and are searching for her burial place in earnest. Underwater excavations begun in 1992 by French explorer Franck Goddio and his European Institute of Underwater Archaeology have allowed researchers to map out the drowned portions of ancient Alexandria, its piers and esplanades, the sunken ground once occupied by royal palaces. The barnacled discoveries brought to the sea's surface—massive stone sphinxes, giant limestone paving blocks, granite columns and capitals—whet the appetite for a better understanding of Cleopatra's world.

"My dream is to find a statue of Cleopatra—with a cartouche," says Goddio. So far, however, the underwater work has failed to yield a tomb. The only signs of Cleopatra the divers have encountered are the empty cigarette packs that bear her name, drifting in the water as they work.

More recently, a desert temple outside Alexandria has become the focus of another search, one that asks whether a monarch of Cleopatra's calculation and foresight might have provided a tomb for herself in a place more spiritually significant than downtown Alexandria—some sacred spot where her mummified remains could rest undisturbed beside her beloved Antony.

In November 2006 at his office in Cairo, Zahi Hawass, then secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, pulled out a sheet of Nile Hilton stationery. On it he had sketched the highlights of an archaeological site where he and a team of scientists and excavators had been digging over the previous year. "We are searching for the tomb of Cleopatra," he said, excitedly. "Never before has anyone systematically looked for the last queen of Egypt." This particular quest had begun when a woman from the Dominican Republic named Kathleen Martinez contacted Hawass in 2004 and came to share a theory she'd developed: that Cleopatra might be buried in a tumbledown temple near the coastal desert town of Taposiris Magna (present-day Abu Sir), 28 miles west of Alexandria.

Located between the Mediterranean and Lake Mareotis, the ancient city of Taposiris Magna had been a prominent port town during Cleopatra's time. Its vineyards were famous for their wine. The geographer Strabo, who was in Egypt in 25 B.C., mentioned that Taposiris staged a great public festival, most likely in honor of the god Osiris. Nearby was a rocky seaside beach, he said, "where crowds of people in the prime of life assemble during every season of the year."

"I thought before we started digging that Cleopatra would be buried facing the palace in Alexandria, in the royal tombs area," said Hawass. But in time, Martinez's reasoning persuaded him another theory might be worth exploring: that Cleopatra had been clever enough to make sure she and Antony were secretly buried where no one would disturb their eternal life together.

A child prodigy who'd earned her law degree at the age of 19, Kathleen Martinez was teaching archaeology at the University of Santo Domingo, but it was an avocation; she'd never been to Egypt or handled a trowel. She traced her obsession with Cleopatra to an argument she'd had with her father in 1990, when she was 24 years old. She wandered into his library one day looking for a copy of Shakespeare's *Antony and*

Chip Brown reported in April 2009 on the identification of a mummy believed to be Hatshepsut, an Egyptian queen who ruled as a king.

THE LAST OF THE PHARAOHS

Cleopatra was a Macedonian Greek and a descendant of Ptolemy, the general of Alexander the Great who founded a dynasty that ruled Egypt for three centuries. She committed suicide as Rome seized control of Egypt, ending 3,000 years of pharaonic rule.

332 B.C. Alexander the Great conquers Egypt.

323 B.C. Alexander dies; control of Egypt passes to Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals.

304 B.C. Ptolemy I assumes the Egyptian throne as pharaoh.

69 B.C. Cleopatra VII is born.

Cleopatra. Her father, Fausto Martínez, a professor and legal scholar normally quite careful in his judgments, disparaged the famous queen as a trollop. "How can you say that!" she protested. After an hours-long debate in which Kathleen argued that Roman propaganda and centuries of bias against women had distorted Cleopatra's character, Professor Martínez conceded that his opinion of Cleopatra might have been unfair.

From that moment Martinez resolved to learn everything she could about the queen. She pored over the canonical texts, particularly Plutarch's account of Mark Antony's alliance with Cleopatra. It seemed clear that the Romans had been intent on depicting her (at worst) as a decadent and lustful despot and (at best) as a manipulative politician who'd played the bitter factions of the emerging Roman superpower against each other in a desperate bid to preserve Egypt's autonomy. It was also possible that modern-day researchers might have missed important clues about where Cleopatra was buried.

"You cannot find anything in any ancient writing about where Cleopatra is buried," Martinez said. "But I believe she prepared everything, from the way she lived to the way she died to the way she wanted to be found."

In 2004 she emailed Hawass. She did not receive a reply. Unable to have herself smuggled into Hawass's office inside a sack—the famous stratagem by which the 21-year-old Cleopatra is supposed to have acquainted herself with Julius Caesar in 48 B.C.—Martinez assailed him with emails, upwards of a hundred by her estimate. Again, no reply. She headed for Cairo and eventually wangled an audience with Hawass through a guide who had worked for the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Hawass asked when Martinez arrived in his office in the fall of 2004. She did not explain that she was searching for Cleopatra, worried that he would lump her in with the nuts who believe aliens built the pyramids. "I want to visit places that aren't open to the public," Martinez explained. Hawass granted her permission to visit sites in Alexandria, Giza, and Cairo.

Martinez returned to Egypt in March 2005, calling on Hawass with the news that she had been appointed an ambassador of culture by the Dominican Republic. He laughed and said she was too young to be an ambassador. She told him she'd visited Taposiris Magna the previous year and wanted to go back. There were remnants of a Coptic church on the site, and Dominicans were interested in the history of Christianity. Hawass again said yes.

After she had photographed and walked the site, she again called on Hawass. "You have two minutes," he said. *(Continued on page 56)*

Cleopatra's kingdom at greatest extent, 34-31 B.C.

To stabilize the eastern Mediterranean, Mark Antony gave lands beyond the Nile to Cleopatra, the strongest local ruler. This restored some, but not all, of the territory Egypt had once controlled.

Cleopatra's rule

Kingdom at greatest extent, 34-31 B.C.

69 B.C. Cleopatra VII is born.

51 B.C. Cleopatra ascends to the throne.

47 B.C. Son with Julius Caesar is born.

44 B.C. Julius Caesar is killed in Rome.

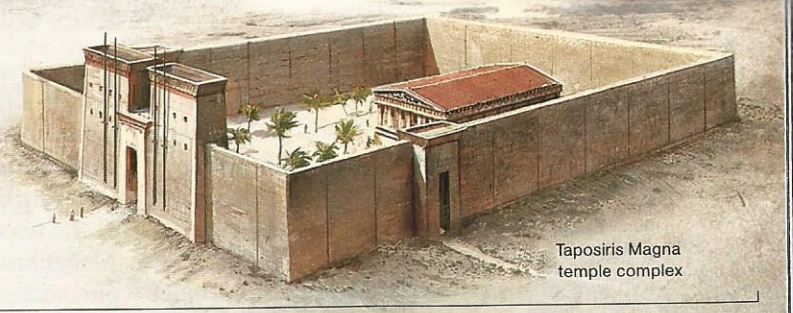
40 B.C. Twins with Mark Antony are born. Another son is born in 36 B.C.

31 B.C. Cleopatra and Antony are defeated by Octavian at the Battle of Actium.

30 B.C. Cleopatra and Antony die; Egypt falls under Roman rule.

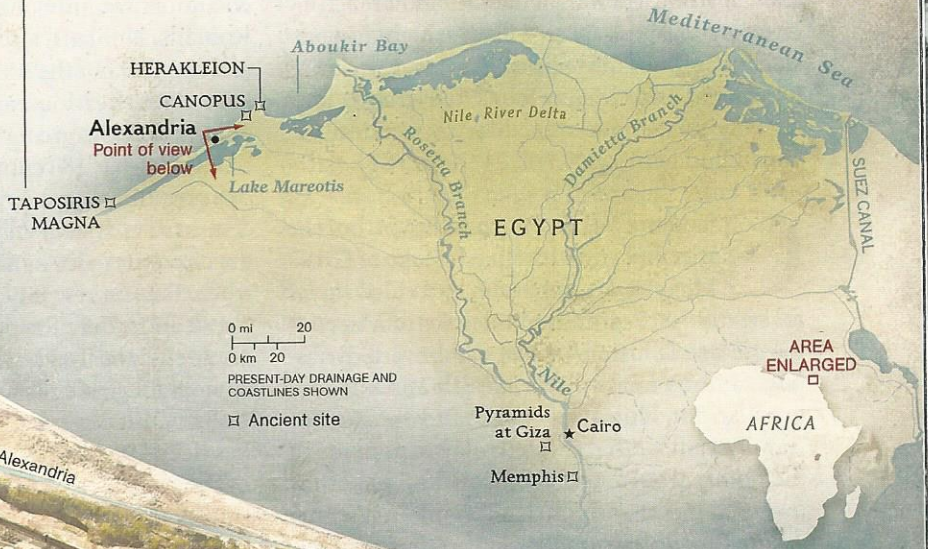
Taposiris Magna
The search for the tomb of Cleopatra and Mark Antony extends to the temple ruins of this town connected to gods Isis and Osiris.

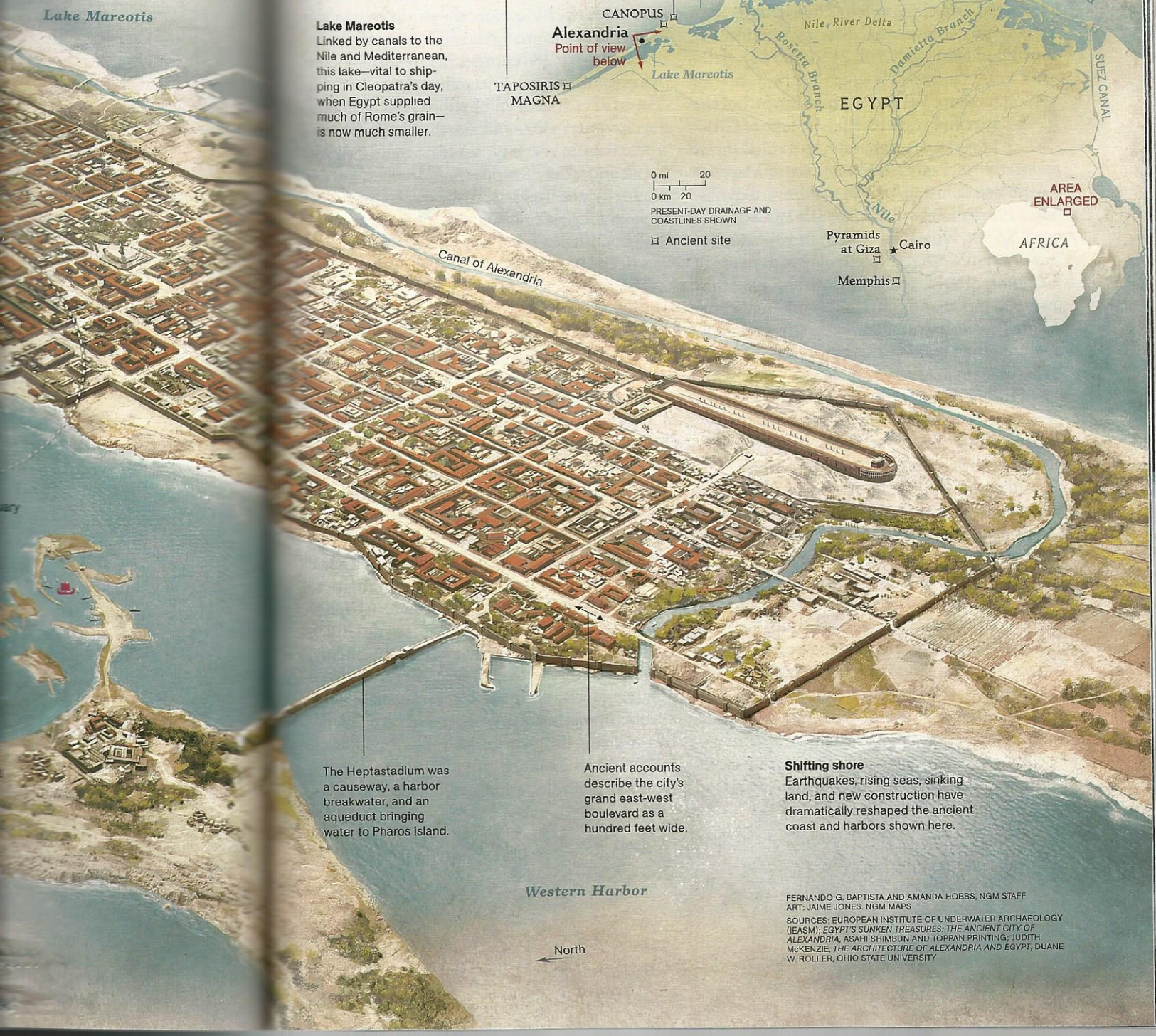
Isis sculpture from Taposiris Magna



Taposiris Magna temple complex

Lake Mareotis
Linked by canals to the Nile and Mediterranean, this lake—vital to shipping in Cleopatra's day, when Egypt supplied much of Rome's grain—is now much smaller.





The Heptastadium was a causeway, a harbor breakwater, and an aqueduct bringing water to Pharos Island.

Ancient accounts describe the city's grand east-west boulevard as a hundred feet wide.

Shifting shore
Earthquakes, rising seas, sinking land, and new construction have dramatically reshaped the ancient coast and harbors shown here.

FERNANDO G. BAPTISTA AND AMANDA HOBBS, NGM STAFF
ART: JAIME JONES. NGM MAPS

SOURCES: EUROPEAN INSTITUTE OF UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY (IEASM); *EGYPT'S SUNKEN TREASURES: THE ANCIENT CITY OF ALEXANDRIA*, ASAHI SHIMBUN AND TOPPAN PRINTING; JUDITH McKENZIE, *THE ARCHITECTURE OF ALEXANDRIA AND EGYPT*; DUANE W. ROLLER, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Cleopatra's Alexandria

Founded by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., this Mediterranean city became the world's most magnificent center of trade, culture, and learning under the Ptolemies. Ruins of the ancient buildings now lie under the sea and beneath modern construction. This re-creation shows what the city may have looked like during Cleopatra's reign, when a multicultural mix of perhaps 325,000 people made it their home.

(Continued from page 47) The time had come to drop the veil. Martinez explained to him that she wanted to excavate at Taposiris. "I have a theory," she said, and finally confided that she thought Taposiris Magna was where Cleopatra was buried.

"What?" said Hawass, grabbing his chair. A group of Hungarian archaeologists had just concluded excavations at the site, and French archaeologists had excavated Roman baths just outside the walls of the temple. Plans were pending to turn Taposiris Magna into a tourist attraction.

"Give me two months," Martinez countered. "I will find her."

Cleopatra VII was born in Egypt, but she was descended from a lineage of Greek kings and queens who had ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years. The Ptolemies of Macedonia are one of history's most flamboyant dynasties, famous not only for wealth and wisdom but also for bloody rivalries and the sort of "family values" that modern-day exponents of the phrase would surely disavow, seeing as they included incest and fratricide.

The Ptolemies came to power after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, who in a caffeinated burst of activity beginning in 332 B.C. swept through Lower Egypt, displaced the hated Persian occupiers, and was hailed by the Egyptians as a divine liberator. He was recognized as pharaoh in the capital, Memphis. Along a strip of land between the Mediterranean and Lake Mareotis he laid out a blueprint for Alexandria, which would serve as Egypt's capital for nearly a thousand years.

After Alexander's death in 323 B.C., Egypt was given to Ptolemy, one of his trusted generals, who, in a brilliant bit of marketing, hijacked the hearse bearing Alexander's body back to Greece and enshrined it in a tomb in Alexandria. Ptolemy was crowned pharaoh in 304 B.C. on the anniversary of Alexander's death. He made offerings to the Egyptian gods, took an Egyptian throne name, and portrayed himself in pharaonic garb.

The dynasty's greatest legacy was Alexandria itself, with its hundred-foot-wide main avenue, its gleaming limestone colonnades, its harborside palaces and temples overseen by a towering lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, on the island of Pharos. Alexandria soon became the largest, most sophisticated city on the planet. It was a teeming cosmopolitan mix of Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, Romans, Nubians, and other peoples. The best and brightest of the Mediterranean world came to study at the Mouseion, the world's first academy, and at the great Alexandria library.

It was there, 18 centuries before the Copernican revolution, that Aristarchus posited a heliocentric solar system and Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the Earth. Alexandria was where the Hebrew Bible was first translated into Greek and where the poet Sotades the Obscene discovered the limits of artistic freedom when he unwisely scribbled some scurrilous verse about Ptolemy II's incestuous marriage to his sister. He was deep-sixed in a lead-lined chest.

The Ptolemies' talent for intrigue was exceeded only by their flair for pageantry. If descriptions of the first dynastic festival of the Ptolemies around 280 B.C. are accurate, the party would cost millions of dollars today. The parade was a phantasmagoria of music, incense, blizzards of doves, camels laden with cinnamon, elephants in golden slippers, bulls with gilded horns. Among the floats was a 15-foot Dionysus pouring a libation from a golden goblet.

Where could they go from there but down? By the time Cleopatra VII ascended the throne in 51 B.C. at age 18, the Ptolemaic empire was crumbling. The lands of Cyprus, Cyrene (eastern Libya), and parts of Syria had been lost; Roman troops were soon to be garrisoned in Alexandria itself. Still, despite drought and famine and the eventual outbreak of civil war, Alexandria was a glittering city compared to provincial Rome. Cleopatra was intent on reviving her empire, not by thwarting the growing power of the Romans but by making herself useful to them, supplying them with ships and grain, and sealing her

alliance with the Roman general Julius Caesar with a son, Caesarion.

Lest her subjects resent her Roman overtures, Cleopatra embraced Egypt's traditions. She is said to have been the first Ptolemaic pharaoh to bother to learn the Egyptian language. While it was politic for foreign overlords to adopt local deities and appease the powerful religious class, the Ptolemies were genuinely intrigued by the Egyptian idea of an afterlife. Out of that fascination emerged a hybrid Greek and Egyptian religion that found its ultimate expression in the cult of Serapis—a Greek gloss on the Egyptian legend of Osiris and Isis.

One of the foundational myths of Egyptian religion, the legend tells how Osiris, murdered by his brother Seth, was chopped into pieces and scattered all over Egypt. With power gained by tricking the sun god, Re, into revealing his secret name, Isis, wife and sister of Osiris, was able to resurrect her brother-husband long enough to conceive a son, Horus, who eventually avenged his father's death by slaughtering uncle Seth.

By Cleopatra's time a cult around the goddess Isis had been spreading across the Mediterranean for hundreds of years. To fortify her position, and like other queens before her, Cleopatra sought to link her identity with the great Isis (and Mark Antony's with Osiris), and to be venerated as a goddess. She had herself depicted in portraits and statues as the universal mother divinity.

Beginning in 37 B.C., Cleopatra began to revive her ambition to enlarge her empire when Antony restored several territories to Egypt and decreed Cleopatra's children their sovereigns. She appeared in the holy dress of Isis at a festival staged in Alexandria to celebrate Antony's victory over Armenia in 34 B.C., just four years before her suicide and the end of the Egyptian empire.

It was Cleopatra's intense identification with Isis, and her royal role as the manifestation of the great goddess of motherhood, fertility, and magic, that ultimately led Kathleen Martinez to Taposiris Magna. Using Strabo's ancient descriptions of Egypt, Martinez sketched a map of candidate burial sites, zeroing in on 21 places associated with the legend of Isis and Osiris and visiting each one she could find.

"What brought me to the conclusion that Taposiris Magna was a possible place for Cleopatra's hidden tomb was the idea that her death was a ritual act of deep religious significance carried out in a very strict, spiritualized ceremony," Martinez says. "Cleopatra negotiated with Octavian to allow her to bury Mark Antony in Egypt. She wanted to be buried with him because she wanted to reenact the legend of Isis and Osiris. The true meaning of the cult of Osiris is that it grants immortality. After their deaths, the gods would allow Cleopatra to live with Antony in another form of existence, so they would have eternal life together."

After studying more than a dozen temples, Martinez headed west of Alexandria along the coastal road to explore the ruin she had begun to believe was the last, best hope for her theory. The temple at Taposiris Magna had been dated to the reign of Ptolemy II, though it may have been even older. The suffix Osiris in its name implied the site was a sacred spot, one of at least 14 throughout Egypt where legend holds that the body of Osiris (or a dismembered part of it) had been buried.

With the Mediterranean on her right and Lake Mareotis on the left, Martinez mused on the possibility that Cleopatra might have traveled a similar route, selecting this strategic location for her burial because it was inside the limits of ancient Alexandria and not yet under the control of the Romans during those last days before her death. "When I saw the place my heart beat very fast," she recalls. As she walked the site, she trailed her hands along the white and beige limestone blocks of the temple's enclosure. This is it! she thought. This is it!

In 1935 British traveler Anthony de Cosson had called Taposiris Magna "the finest ancient monument left to us north of the Pyramids." What was surprising was how little work had been done at the site. In 1905 Evaristo Breccia,

The time had come to drop the veil. "I have a theory," Martinez said, and confided she thought Taposiris Magna was where Cleopatra was buried. "What?" said Hawass, grabbing his chair.

the renowned Italian archaeologist, had excavated the foundation of a small fourth-century A.D. Coptic basilica in the otherwise vacant courtyard of the enclosure and discovered an area of Roman baths. In 1998 a Hungarian team led by Győző Vörös found evidence of a colonnaded structure inside the enclosure that they concluded (incorrectly, as it turned out) had been an Isis temple.

It was clear when Vörös's book, *Taposiris Magna,* was published in 2004 that the temple had had three incarnations—as a Ptolemaic sanctuary, a Roman fort, and a Coptic church. But was that the whole story? Zahi Hawass found himself pondering the possibility that a black granite bust of Isis that Vörös had coaxed from the dirt of Taposiris Magna might well be the face of Cleopatra herself. In October 2005 the dig got under way.

Today it's easy to imagine that the view from the pylon of Taposiris Magna looks much like it did in Cleopatra's day—if you can block out the unsightly band of condominiums and resort hotels between the coastal highway and the broad white sand beach and glimmering blue expanse of the Mediterranean. One hot, sun-washed morning at the temple in May 2010, Kathleen Martinez was bundled in a long-sleeve shirt, head scarf, and fingerless woolen gloves. "For some reason I am always cold when I am here," she said. The two months of excavation she had requested had turned into three months, and three months had become five years.

On the bedrock in the middle of the site an array of column fragments showed the ghostly outlines of what Hawass and Martinez have concluded was not a temple to Isis, but a temple to Osiris. It was oriented on the east-west axis. At an angle just north were the faint hints of an Isis chapel; to the south, an excavated rectangular pit: "That was the sacred lake," Martinez says.

It's a cliché that you can stick a shovel in the ground almost anywhere in Egypt and find something amazing from the long-gone past. When Martinez and a team of excavators began probing the ground in 2005, she was focused less on the ultimate prize of Cleopatra's tomb than on simply finding sufficient evidence to sustain her theory that Taposiris Magna might be the place to look. She hoped to demonstrate that the temple was among the most sacred of its day, that it was dedicated to the worship of Osiris and Isis, and that tunnels had been dug underneath the enclosure walls. Within the first year, she was rewarded by the discovery of a shaft and several underground chambers and tunnels. "One of our biggest questions is why did they dig tunnels of this magnitude," she says. "It had to be for a very significant reason."

During the 2006-07 season the Egyptian-Dominican team found three small foundation deposits in the northwest corner of the Osiris temple, just inches from where the Hungarian expedition had stopped digging. The deposits conclusively linked the Osiris temple to the reign of Ptolemy IV, who ruled a century and a half before Cleopatra. In 2007, further supporting the view that the site was very important to the Greeks of ancient Egypt, the excavators found a skeleton of a pregnant woman who had died in childbirth. The tiny bones of the unborn baby lay between the skeleton's hips. Her jaw was distended, suggesting her agony, and her right hand was clutching a small white marble bust of Alexander the Great. "She is a mystery," said Martinez, who had a coffin built for the remains of the mother.

In six years Taposiris Magna has become one of Egypt's most active archaeology sites. More

The top half of a granite colossus is hoisted to the surface of Aboukir Bay, northeast of Alexandria. About 18 feet tall, the full sculpture represented Hapy, the god of the Nile's yearly flooding, which fertilized Egypt's fields. It likely stood outside the major temple in Herakleion. That long-lost city, now rediscovered underwater, was a center of trade and pilgrimage and a ritual site for Cleopatra and other Ptolemaic pharaohs.

CHRISTOPH GERIGK, FRANCK GODDIO/HILTI FOUNDATION

than a thousand objects have been recovered, 200 of them considered significant: pottery, coins, gold jewelry, the broken heads of statues (probably smashed by early Christians). An important discovery was a large cemetery outside the temple walls, suggesting that the subjects of a monarch wished to be buried near royal remains.

Yet the tomb of Cleopatra still hovers out of reach, like a tantalizing mirage, and the theory of who is buried at Taposiris Magna still rests more on educated speculation than on facts. Might not Cleopatra's reign have unraveled too quickly for her to build such a secret tomb? A fantastic story, like a horse with wings, flies in the face of the principle of parsimony. But it's a long hard haul from not-yet-proved to disproved.

Critics of Martinez's theory point out that it is rare in archaeology for someone to announce they are going to find something and then actually find it. "There is no evidence that Cleopatra tried to hide her grave, or would have wanted to," says Duane Roller, a respected Cleopatra scholar. "It would have been hard to hide it from Octavian, the very person who buried her. All the evidence is that she was buried with her ancestors. The material associated with her at Taposiris Magna is not meaningful because material associated with her can be found in many places in Egypt."

"I agree that Octavian knew and authorized the place where she was buried," Martinez says. "But what I believe—and it is only a theory—is that after the mummification process was complete, the priests at Taposiris Magna buried the bodies of Cleopatra and Mark Antony in a different place without the approval of the Romans, a hidden place beneath the courtyard of the temple."

If Cleopatra's tomb *is* ever found, the archaeological sensation would be rivaled only by Howard Carter's unearthing of the tomb of King Tut in 1922. But will finding her tomb, not to say her body itself, deepen our portrait of the last Egyptian pharaoh? On one hand, how could it not? In the last hundred years about the only new addition to the archaeological record is what scholars believe is a fragment of Cleopatra's handwriting: a scrap of papyrus granting a tax exemption to a Roman citizen in Egypt in 33 B.C.

If Cleopatra's tomb is found, the archaeological sensation would be rivaled only by Howard Carter's unearthing of King Tut in 1922. But will it deepen our understanding of Egypt's last pharaoh?

On the other hand, maybe finding her tomb would diminish what Shakespeare called "her infinite variety." Disembodied, at large in the realm of myth, more context than text, Cleopatra is free to be of different character to different times, which may be the very wellspring of her vitality. No other figure from antiquity seems so versatile in her ambiguities, so modern in her contradictions.

It was lunch hour at the dig site, and the workers had gone to eat in the shade. We were sitting on top of the temple pylon in the radiance of noon, staring out at the sea beyond. There was a feeling of stillness in the air, an inkling of eternity, as if the old Egyptian gods were about—Re, who ruled over the earth, sky, and the underworld, and Isis, who saved Osiris by tricking Re into revealing his secret name.

The search for Cleopatra has come at no small cost to Martinez. She gave up her thriving law practice in Santo Domingo and poured much of her savings into her quest. She moved to an apartment in Alexandria, where she has begun studying Arabic. But it's not an easy life, far from her family and friends. During the revolution earlier this year, she was confronted by a group of aggressive men as she worked at the excavation site. For now, work at the site is on hold. She hopes to return in the fall.

"I believe we are going to find what we are looking for," she says. "The difference is now we're digging in the ground, not in books." □

Slightly larger than life-size, a stone statue from Canopus in the third century B.C. wears a dress typical of Ptolemaic queens. Given the association of those women with Isis, the knot in the fabric is often called an Isis knot. For the Ptolemies, the relationship between Isis and her brother-husband, Osiris, was a model for royal marriages. Her cult endured for 500 years after the death of Cleopatra, one of her devoted followers.

"STATUE OF A QUEEN," THIRD CENTURY B.C.; KENNETH GARRETT