

Cleopatra's Tongues

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‘An host of tongues’
(Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*)

Cleopatra was not only a woman, and the last of her family to rule; she is also said to have been a prodigious polyglot.¹ Plutarch is our source, telling us that:²

It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice, with which, like an instrument of many strings, she could pass from one language to another; so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter; to most of them she spoke herself, as to the Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabians, Syrians, Medes, Parthians, and many others, whose language she had learnt; which was all the more surprising because most of the kings, her predecessors, scarcely gave themselves the trouble to acquire the Egyptian tongue, and several of them quite abandoned the Macedonian.

This is very impressive. But when we hear that this last member of the Ptolemaic dynasty spoke more than seven languages, we should not accept this uncritically. Cleopatra was a queen, and a queen with a romantic history and a sad end. Queens, especially ones like Cleopatra, attract good stories (this same Plutarch, among others, gives us a series of entertaining and, in some cases, possibly even true anecdotes about her and her life) and knowledge of many languages and the willingness and ability to

¹ Hannah Cotton and I were fellow-students of my father in 1969. By inviting me to join her as an editor of *SCI* when I moved to Tel Aviv University in 1990, she helped me to retain an active interest in classical themes. It is a pleasure to offer her now a small piece on a large subject.

² Plut. *Ant.* 27:

[3] ἡδονὴ δὲ καὶ φθεγγομένης ἐπὶν τῷ ἤχῳ: καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν, ὥσπερ ὄργανόν τι πολύχορδον, εὐπετῶς τρέπουσα καθ' ἣν βούλοιο διάλεκτον ὀλίγοις παντάπασι δι' ἑρμηνέως ἐνετύγγανε βαρβάρους, τοῖς δὲ πλείστοις αὐτὴ δι' αὐτῆς ἀπεδίδου τὰς ἀποκρίσεις, οἷον Αἰθίοψι, Τρωγλοδύταις, Ἑβραίοις, Ἄρασι, Σύροις, Μήδοις, Παρθυαίοις.
[4] πολλῶν δὲ λέγεται καὶ ἄλλων ἐκμαθεῖν γλώττας, τῶν πρὸ αὐτῆς βασιλέων οὐδὲ τὴν Αἰγυπτίαν ἀνασχομένων παραλαβεῖν διάλεκτον, ἐνίων δὲ καὶ τὸ μακεδονίζειν ἐκλιπόντων.

use them with visitors constitute the elements of a good story.³ What Plutarch tells us of her linguistic ability is regularly seized upon by her biographers down to the present.⁴

Duane W. Roller, writing in 2010, is perhaps the only biographer to have devoted much attention to the question, as distinct from simply reproducing more or less faithfully and at greater or lesser length what Plutarch tells us.⁵ But even he is content to accept Plutarch's report, merely giving it a pragmatic political gloss that sees the languages in question as reflecting some of the neighbours with whom Cleopatra as ruler will have had to deal. Nevertheless, a good story is not therefore a true story. Plutarch's list includes the languages of the Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabs, Syrians, Medes and Parthians. Intended as praise for whatever linguistic skills the queen possessed, it is not simply the calque that some have seen in it of the praise showered on Mithridates VI of Pontus, a generation before her, as recorded by the elder Pliny and others. That monarch could apparently speak all the languages of the peoples under his rule, some twenty-two in number.⁶ But there are differences between the two cases. We hear that Mithridates spoke more than three times as many languages as Plutarch gives the queen. Cleopatra's languages are almost explicitly ('so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter') not those of peoples under her rule, quite unlike the case with Mithridates. And in the case of Mithridates we find no list. Twenty-two (Gell. *NA* 25) languages are perhaps too many to list. Or perhaps twenty-two (or twenty-five) is a good number by itself, one difficult to argue with. Seven languages, or their speakers, on the other hand, can be listed quite easily. And the aims of the stories, even if they are not true, clearly differ too. If there is a link,

³ Among the good stories is that relating how she dissolved a massive pearl in a cup of vinegar in order to be able to claim that she had spent an unimaginably large sum on a dinner. For the story see Roller (n. 5 below), 132, and the discussion of M. B. Flory, 'Pearls for Venus', *Historia*, 37, 1988, 498-504, both of whom note similar accounts of such episodes from about the same time, which tend to suggest that the story is a fiction.

⁴ E.g., H. Volkmann, *Cleopatra, A Study in Politics and Propaganda*, London 1958 (trans. from the German ed., 1953), 67; L. Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions*, London 1990, 23, 73; M. Foss, *The Search for Cleopatra*, London 1997, 50; E.E. Rice, *Cleopatra*, Stroud, 1999, 105-106; E. Bradford, *Cleopatra*, Harmondsworth 2000, 11, 13; M. Grant, *Cleopatra*, London 2000, 20, 34, 42-43, 63, 76, 141, 146; S.M. Burstein, *The Reign of Cleopatra*, Westport, Conn. and London 2004, 11; S. Schiff, *Cleopatra, A Life*, New York et al. 2010, 33-35. This list could easily be lengthened from the extensive biographical literature on Cleopatra. P.J. Jones, *Cleopatra, A Sourcebook*, Norman 2006, 33-34, merely reproduces Plutarch.

⁵ D.W. Roller, *Cleopatra, A Biography*, Oxford 2010, 46-49. Schiff (n. 4 above), devotes as much space to the question as Roller, but her account belongs more to the breathless admiring than to the coolly analytical strand in the tradition.

⁶ Th. Reinach, *Mithridate Eupator, roi de Pont*, Paris 1890, 282, with references at n. 1. Val. Max. (8.7 ext. 16) tells us that Mithridates shared this willingness to learn languages with Themistocles, who had learned Persian. Another of the virtues of Themistocles, his ability to remember people's (especially his fellow-citizens') names, he shared with Cyrus. At Quint. *Inst.* 11.2.50, we hear about all three of these individuals, but along with others, and without the characteristic of Themistocles having both virtues.

Cleopatra's languages might be at most a variation on a pre-existing story about Mithridates.

But is the story true? And if so, what kind of truth does it represent for us? Mithridates' twenty-two languages, used for speaking to his subjects and his soldiers, recall the handful of sentences in Irish or in Spanish that politicians in Ireland and the USA arm themselves with come election time. The achievement is meant to impress, and the sentences sound good. But we learn little about any genuine linguistic skills. Cleopatra's languages call to mind rather the serious attainments of Elizabeth I of England, or Queen Christina of Sweden.

What linguistic skills did the queen possess? The list of her languages contains seven items. Seven in Plutarch as elsewhere is the kind of number that invites skepticism (We think at once of his account of the dinner of the seven sages).⁷ And the specific languages themselves invite closer examination. Overall, identifying peoples rather than actual languages, they appear to give us a list of some of the peoples surrounding Egypt. Thus the Ethiopians live to the south. The Trog(l)odytes belong to the Eastern Desert of southern Egypt and north Sudan.⁸ The Hebrews are of course in parts of what is now Israel. Arabians refers to the Arabs of the peninsula, while Syrians refers to the inhabitants of the Levant. And Medes and Parthians should be taken as referring indifferently to Persians. In giving us this list, Plutarch (or his source — Plutarch was writing well over a century after Cleopatra's death) is thus allowing us to understand that Cleopatra had taken the trouble to learn all these languages. Her intention, we gather, in doing so was to enable herself to converse directly with representatives of her neighbors to the south, the east, the north-east, and further east still, without the need for the interposition of official interpreters.⁹ (It is clear from Plutarch's words that we need not imagine her going out by night, a precursor to Harun al-Rashid, to mingle incognito with her subjects — these were not her subjects and this is not the world of the *1001 Nights*). But was this really a quality that a ruler wanted or needed or could permit himself? And was speaking the language of the other really something that contributed to the image of a powerful ruler? To address a visiting ambassador in his own language might offer a compliment, but it is not the job of a ruler to pay compliments to an envoy from elsewhere — and there is always the risk of making a mistake. Speaking in a language other than one's own could be seen as detracting from the necessary dignity of a great ruler at home among her subjects. We are reminded of Cato, whose use of Latin among Greek-speakers had meaning, not because of any ignorance of Greek that he may

⁷ Though it should be recognized that, while Plutarch lists seven languages here, he does not mention the number seven explicitly.

⁸ For the correction — from Troglodytes to Trogodytes — see *OCD*, 3rd ed., s.v. Trogodytae (by R.G. Morkot).

⁹ In contrast, e.g., to Ptolemy IV (regn. 221-205 B.C.E.), whom Polybius (5.83) describes as using an interpreter and translators when addressing his armies; see S. Torallas Tovar, 'Linguistic identity in Graeco-Roman Egypt', in A. Papaconstantinou (ed.), *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the 'Abbāsids*, Farnham, Surrey (U.K.) and Burlington, Vermont (U.S.A.) 2010, 21. But in both cases, it is worth taking into account the socio-linguistic context. The use of translators does not in itself necessarily indicate ignorance of a particular language.

(well) have suffered from but because of what it said about the status of the Latin language in the Roman empire and the meaning of the use of that language among those whom he was addressing.¹⁰ The language of power is a tool and also a very visible and potent symbol of power. Many similar situations, then and now, can easily be imagined.¹¹ What of the languages themselves? What we know of the Ethiopians and the Trog(l)odytes at this time does not suffice to let us know what languages their presence here might imply. We might assume an early form of Ge'ez, or of other Ethiopian languages. But this would not therefore mean that Plutarch or his source knew of such a language or had it in mind. For the Hebrews, this testimony might proffer precious evidence of knowledge of Hebrew in Ptolemaic Egypt, but as we shall see, that is not without problems. As to the Arabs, we have to ask what language is intended: Arabic? Or possibly Nabataean? The linguistic habits of the Arabs at this time remain complex and opaque, and what an Egyptian, ruler or not, might know (or be said to know) of them more opaque still.¹² Syrians possibly, even probably, indicate various forms (or one form from among the variety of forms?) of Aramaic.¹³ Parthian sounds real and plausible – Parthia was a Persian empire, at the time, Parthian its official language, and it presumably had relations of some sort with Egypt. But it lies very far away. And in any case Parthian is little more, in this context, than another form of Persian. Lastly, Median: what does Plutarch mean by this? The word can hardly refer to any language known to people in the Mediterranean basin, far less to a queen of Egypt, in the first century. Should we understand it to refer, as in Herodotus, for example, simply to Persian? But in that case, it is strange to see it next to Parthian in this same list. In the following century, we find Damis of Ninus offering himself as a disciple to Apollonius of Tyana with the recommendation that

I may not know anything else, but I have been to Babylon; and, having returned from there recently, I know all the cities there are and the villages, in which there are many good things, and moreover, I know every one of the barbarian languages. The Armenians

¹⁰ Val. Max. 2.2.2. For the larger point see W. Eck, 'The presence, role and significance of Latin in the epigraphy and culture of the Roman Near East' (15-42), and B. Isaac, 'Latin in cities of the Roman Near East' (43-72), in H.M. Cotton, R.G. Hoyland, J.J. Price and D.J. Wasserstein (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam, Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, Cambridge 2009.

¹¹ So, too, the deliberate choice not to use the language of power. Among the best examples of this are the use by President Kennedy of German ('Ich bin ein Berliner') in Berlin in 1963, and by President Clinton of Hebrew ('Shalom, Haver') at the end of his eulogy for Yitzhak Rabin in 1995.

¹² For one aspect of this complex of problems, see M.A.C. Macdonald, 'Arabs, Arabias and Arabic before Late Antiquity', *Topoi*, 6, 2009, 277-332, where the sub-title of the first section, 'The need for imprecision', tells a valuable tale.

¹³ See, for example, J. Barr, 'Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age', in W.D. Davies and L. Finkelstein (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, II, *The Hellenistic Age*, Cambridge 1989, 79-114; J. Greenfield, 'Aramaic in the Achaemenian Empire', in I. Gurevitch (ed.), *Cambridge History of Iran*, 2, *The Median and Achaemenian Periods*, Cambridge 1985, 698-713; id., 'The languages of Palestine, 200 B.C.E. - 200 C.E.', in H.H. Paper (ed.), *Jewish Languages, theme and variations*, Cambridge, Mass. 1978, 143-154.

have one, the Medes and Persians another, the Cadusians another, and I understand them all.¹⁴

Medes and Persians form a well-known collocation, but there is no *hendyadis* joining Medes and Parthians.¹⁵

Are we to believe that Cleopatra knew these languages? That she had learned them? That she could use them (and not just them – Plutarch again: ‘and many others’) to converse with visitors from the peoples named? Some of these may have been on the language radar of people in the ancient Mediterranean. But not all of them: Persian, as distinct from Median and from Parthian, does not actually occur in the list. And if Parthian is a possibility, Median, as we have seen, is at best an archaism. Aramaic? ‘Syrians’ occur, but we cannot be sure that this is intended to refer to Aramaic. Hebrew, of course, existed, but how important were the Hebrews to Egypt in the lifetime of this queen?¹⁶ And what language, for this period, is intended? Once again, we do well to recall that the Hebrew language is not mentioned here, but ‘the Hebrews’. Arabians, whatever their language, were possibly on that radar too. But the others were definitely not: we cannot imagine that ambassadors or other visitors from the regions of the Ethiopians and Trog(l)odytes will have found interlocutors in Egypt, let alone the sovereign, able and willing to speak to them in their own tongues. An Egyptian queen could not easily have found teachers even for the languages that were on the linguistic radar of her country. Quite apart from that suspicious number seven, some of the languages on the list deserve a second glance. The list, as noted above, does not actually name languages, but peoples whose languages the queen spoke. The result is that, as in the case of the Arabs, as we have seen, it is not always clear what language is being referred to — or indeed what language the original source for the story may be thought to have meant. The language of the Hebrews, however, stands out here, if only because of the presence of very many Jews in Alexandria in her time and because of the great enterprise of the Septuagint.

Does Plutarch mean to indicate Hebrew when he refers to the language of the Hebrews? If not, then presumably he will have meant Aramaic. But he mentions that language separately, under ‘the Syrians’. If, *per contra*, he means Hebrew, it is worth asking how much Hebrew was known in first-century Alexandria. The example of Philo suggests that there cannot have been very much. If, as is universally acknowledged, Philo did not know Hebrew, others cannot have known much more, and such knowledge as they may have had cannot have amounted to very much.

¹⁴ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, I.19.1 (in the new Loeb translation of C.P. Jones). Apollonius naturally tells Damis that he knows all languages, not merely those listed by him, although he goes on to accept him as a follower.

¹⁵ Cf. Daniel 5:28, 8:20. See also A. Wasserstein and D.J. Wasserstein, *The Legend of the Septuagint from Classical Antiquity to Today*, Cambridge 2006, 281.

¹⁶ Of course, Judea was a close neighbor, and there were links, sometimes close, between them.

The production of the Septuagint is a problem here: the Pentateuch is all that the *Letter of Aristeas* tells us about, and the *Letter* is certainly a fiction.¹⁷ But the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, came into being in Alexandria in the period following the life of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, in the two centuries between his time and that of Cleopatra. Hebrew, as a language of the Hebrews, in the first century BCE was scarcely a language that mattered outside Palestine.¹⁸ But the evidence of the Septuagint, to mention nothing else, hints emphatically at the possibility of more.

We have as yet no study of Hebrew in Hellenistic Egypt, sorely needed though such a work is. The most recent survey of the multilingual experience in Egypt at this time seems wholly to ignore Hebrew — is this because it does not figure in our sources or because the language was not known in Egypt?¹⁹ The decline of Hebrew at this time in the face of a rising Aramaic makes it less than likely that Hebrew would have been known, outside a Jewish context, outside Palestine, in Egypt. And, given that, it seems unlikely in the extreme that an Egyptian, let alone an Egyptian ruler, would have wished to acquire some knowledge of this language. If such a person did do so, it would hardly have been in order to converse with visiting delegations from Jerusalem. Yet this is the only language on the list of Cleopatra's linguistic skills which we can actually point to the possible existence of people with knowledge of in Egypt in her time.

It is worth looking not only at what is on the list but also at what is not. The peoples named by Plutarch represent the linguistic-political geography to the south, the east and the north-east of Egypt. The languages and peoples to the west and the north are largely ignored. We may not worry at the absence of Greek from the list — this was, presumably, Cleopatra's native language, and Plutarch, it could be urged, himself a Greek-speaker, simply took that for granted. But we may feel entitled to worry, just a little, in the biographical context (that is to say, in the context of the work in which the story appears), at the absence from it of Latin, which we may assume her, with or without the skills attested in the story, to have used in her encounters with Caesar and Antony. After all, if the queen knew many languages, why not list some of the obvious ones too, in order to put still more flesh on the list? And, despite the claims of some moderns who choose not to read their sources, it is noteworthy that the story does not tell us explicitly that Cleopatra spoke Egyptian, the language of the vast majority of her subjects. Did she know that language? It is not, as the French say, *évident*. We are reminded of Russian aristocrats in the nineteenth century, fluent in French, less so or not so in Russian. Or of that apocryphal, but not the less wonderful, story of Charles V: 'I speak Spanish to *God*, Italian to women, *French* to men, and *German* to my horse'. What language does one use to servants? And who were Cleopatra's servants? Should we too casually assume that they were Greek?

¹⁷ See Wasserstein and Wasserstein (n. 15 above), *Legend*; S. Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria, A Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas*, London 2003; M. Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria*, Cambridge 2011.

¹⁸ Cf. S.B. Schwartz, 'Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine', *P&P* 148, 1995, 3-47. How important was Hebrew there at that time? See J.A. Fitzmyer, 'The languages of Palestine in the first century A.D.', *CBQ* 32, 1970, 501-531.

¹⁹ Papaconstantinou (n. 9 above).

Lastly, but in no sense trivially, what of Macedonian? The Ptolemies were not in fact Greeks, but Macedonians, with a language, or a dialect, of their own. The last few words of Plutarch's remarks here demand attention too. Do they tell us that Cleopatra did, or that she did not, know Macedonian? Or do they tell us nothing at all either way? The latter does not impose itself, but it seems the most likely.²⁰

These four languages — Greek, Latin, Egyptian and Macedonian — belonged to, formed, the linguistic environment of a Ptolemy. This does not need to mean that every Ptolemy knew all of them, but all of them were part of the world of Ptolemaic rule in Egypt. Should we add these four to the list of languages that we are told Cleopatra knew? Should we consider these four languages, and not the other seven, to be the languages she really did know? These, after all, are the languages of her birth and background, her upbringing and surroundings at the court in Egypt. What is their relation, if any, to the other seven? Is Plutarch's story real? Or is it intended to burnish the reputation for political skill of a ruler in touch of necessity with political entities to her south, her east and her north-east, alongside the obvious ties to Rome? Or is it just a story, like so much else in what he reports of her, intended to contribute — very successfully, as subsequent historiography demonstrates — to the building up of an image of the queen as possessing a long series of what are in effect feminine skills and wiles?

However we answer such questions, the story is certainly *ben trovato* and, for a ruler who was a woman, skilled in using the arts of speech and in addition the last ruler of her house, not at all inappropriate. However, that does not mean that we need to believe that much in it is true. If a queen is said in her lifetime to know a language, no one is going to examine her for her case endings and vocabulary. And after her death, who is to know?

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²⁰ It is worthy of note that 'Macedonian' does not occur in the index of Papaconstantinou (n. 9 above).