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1

Tomorrow in the Battle

The Ambracian Gulf, on the coast of Epirus, in the eastern Ionian Sea. The early hours of September 2, in the year 31 BC (723 AUC).

1.

After battering the bay for days, the wind had finally died down.* The morrow would witness a naval battle. As Ernst Jünger would write two thousand years later, even making reference to Egypt (although other wars and other seas were probably at the forefront of his mind, likely Salamis or Midway), “When East and West collide, the conflict is often decided by a fight at sea.”*

Cleopatra was on land, not far from the shore, as was customary in that age for commanders on the eve of naval action. She was ready to board her ship, encamped with her retinue next to the Egyptian forces that had united with those of Mark Antony—her consort and her confederate. The fleet included at least sixty large vessels with several banks of oars—from six to nine or even ten, according to Florus and Cassius Dio, who both take their information from Livy. But this was almost

certainly an exaggeration, invented for the purpose of emphasizing the impressiveness and outsize tonnage of the ships, which were outfitted with powerful military architecture: looming towers and platforms, “so as to resemble castles or cities.”*

Cassius Dio says—in the dense recounting of the events of those months contained in the fiftieth book of his *Roman History*—that it was the queen herself, in the final war council of the preceding days, who had insisted on a battle at sea.* Others present advised relocating the principal encounter with the enemy to the mainland, but she overruled them. The scene is credible, and we find it in Plutarch as well.* Cleopatra was familiar with the sea and boats, and she had faith in the experience of her own sailors and officers. Egyptian watercraft had been a mainstay on the Mediterranean from time immemorial, and the craftsmen at work around the mouth of the Nile had been known for their trusty vessels since the days of Herodotus. On the other hand, the queen was mostly ignorant of the geography and potential dangers of the sites and general environment in which the fighting would have occurred had the land option prevailed. Furthermore, she may not have been entirely certain of how the opposing forces were arrayed or even of their precise composition. In the lead-up to the battle, there had been many defections from her own camp and Antony’s as well, and the situation must have been unmanageably fluid.*

According to Cassius Dio, once again likely following a denigratory account in Livy, Cleopatra’s idea was never to fight a decisive battle but rather only to forge a path of escape to the open sea and to Egypt.* Supposedly, she realized that their position was hopeless and saw flight as the only possible solution. But we must reject this interpretation.

In fact, we shall see that it is almost certainly false.* Cleopatra did not spend that night preparing to desert but rather to give

battle, although an impenetrable fog of uncertainty does hover over her deliberations. A similar haze obscures the tactical development of the encounter—if not the two fleets' order of battle—and the decisions made from hour to hour by the opposing commanders over the duration of the long day that was about to commence. What is more, the queen herself may have weighed several alternative courses of action. However, there is no indication, apart from a retrospective act of Roman calumny, that these included the possibility of withdrawing immediately (and perhaps even on her own) from the contest, and thus of abandoning Antony to his fate.

In reality, while the situation may not have appeared highly favorable from Cleopatra's point of view that night, it must have seemed a far cry from hopeless. During her vigil, nothing gave her the impression that the game was already played out. On the contrary, it seemed entirely up for grabs. A short time before, the queen herself had sought to put a cheerful mien on the course of events, probably to encourage her troops. When the enemy dug in on the promontory above the bay, the site on which Nicopolis would later rise, she disparaged the move with a turn of phrase redolent of the barracks, indicating that the position was untenable and there was therefore nothing to worry about.* Proof, incidentally, that Cleopatra was observing operations at close range and that her opinion—uttered so brutally, directly, and crudely—was respected and heeded.

Admittedly, the previous months had not been favorable.* The trouble began when she and Antony missed a precious, unique opportunity to deliver a (perhaps decisive) blow to Octavian at a moment when he was off his guard and hard pressed. The mishap had occurred in the late spring of the previous year, when everything seemed to be turning in their favor, as they were moving their headquarters to Patras (also in Epirus) at the

mouth of the Gulf of Corinth. It seemed to be the first step on an unstoppable march toward the heart of the Roman empire. From there, they could directly threaten the coast of southern Italy. It was poorly defended at the time, and they could have reached it with relative ease. Their army was intact, and they had at their disposal what would turn out to be the last grand Hellenistic fleet of antiquity. They had about twenty legions, some of which were highly experienced and well trained, including the VI Ferrata, the III Gallica, the III and XXII Cyrenaica, and the XVIII Lybica. Another ten legions had been left as garrisons in Egypt, Syria, and Macedonia. And they could rely on an impressive naval force, with more than four hundred vessels.

Yet they stayed put, as if waiting—for what, it is difficult to say. And once that opportunity had been missed, as often happens in such situations, they also lost the strategic initiative that they had managed to maintain up to that point. The upshot: they allowed Octavian to cross the Adriatic with men and ships instead of doing it themselves. They could have made a surprise attack on Italy from Greece the year before, or right after the winter, but they did not.

It has also been hypothesized that Antony had a different plan: to lure Octavian across the sea, to let him disembark on the Greek coast, and then to isolate him, cutting him off from the mother country and surrounding him with his own superior army and fleet.* Yet as we shall see, this hypothesis does not hold water. Simply put, Antony and Cleopatra did not want to enter Italy, nor did Antony decide to go without her. And we can even grasp the reasons for this hesitation, for it was not so simple as all that. Their expedition could indeed have been seen—as Octavian's propaganda incessantly repeated—not as a victorious general's return home (perhaps with his ally at his side), but rather as a hostile invasion from the East. Octavian had cleverly

exploited this vulnerability. The last civil war increasingly risked being seen as a struggle against or in defense of Rome—a conflict that, like the final phase of Hannibal's invasion, would have been fought between Puglia and the capital. This was not what Antony could have wanted. Playing into a scenario of that kind could have ended up paralyzing him; there was a real danger of falling into a masterful trap. He would have had to take a risk and stay a step or two ahead. He decided against it.

Cleopatra herself may have been the one to dissuade him, or at least to fuel his doubts. The queen must have feared finding herself in Italy—and not for the first time—less secure and more at the mercy of events beyond her control. A Ptolemy, she had always felt rather at home between Greece and Macedonia. Accordingly, she would have been justified in considering it preferable to await the moment of truth there, in a place that was friendly or at least familiar. Better a Greek sea than the Italian mainland. And, therefore, better for Octavian to venture into a country not his own than for them to venture into Rome's own treacherous peninsula.

The fact is that they stayed put. Nor, as far as we can tell, did they devote the intervening time to strategic action. If the initial plan had been to draw Octavian to Epirus and surround him there, no attempt was actually made to put it into practice. Instead, they allowed the enemy forces to gain ever greater strength and to take complete control of the Ionian Sea, essential for maintaining supply lines and communication with Rome and Italy. The credit was due in part to the organizational talent and tactical genius of Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, the nonpareil figure among Octavian's generals. The victor over Sextus Pompey at the Battle of Naulochus in September of 36, he may perhaps be ranked with Gaius Duilius as the only true naval commander in Roman history. In the final analysis, it is

this void—a black hole that gobbled up the months between the summers of 32 and 31—that is the real enigma in the entire course of the war. As we shall see later, the interval proved fatal to Cleopatra and Antony.*

The result was a rather rapid turning of the tables, both on the field of battle and in the mood of the combatants. Instead of being surrounded, it was Octavian who drove the troops and ships of his opponents into a tighter and tighter corner. The sense of imminent victory that had attended the couple in their advance toward Italy gradually dissolved. Defections increased, a constant drip that depleted the ranks of their Eastern allies, their leading Roman supporters, and Roman military officers. Cleopatra had been conditioned by her fraught position at the court in Alexandria to pay constant attention to what happened around her, and she was in the habit of surrounding herself with informants and snitches. She could not have been ignorant of the shifting winds of fortune. Did she discuss the situation with Antony? We cannot say, but they would certainly have shared the sense that something important was changing around them.

In the calm of that night when the wind had finally relented, even if nothing yet seemed truly lost, Cleopatra and Antony knew that they were now on the razor's edge.

2.

The queen was not strictly a woman of arms—an Amazon or a Joan of Arc—but she knew well from a very early age what it meant to go into battle. She had listened to and learned from her generals and admirals. She was acquainted with weapons, ships, marches, and encampments. This was not the first vigil she had kept in expectation of a clash of armies. War was not

her calling, but she had long realized it was inevitable if she wanted to achieve her goals.

Above all, while still a girl (a girl in our eyes, but in the culture of her day already a woman), she had met a man who had made war his prime imperative, and whose victories had made him seem able to direct the affairs of the world: from the Nile to the Rhine, from Britain to Judea. She had known Julius Caesar. She had had an affair with him, and she had borne him a son. And it had all happened while the Roman commander was at the apex of his extraordinary success, when the young queen had managed to inject herself into his life, his thoughts, and his designs—and to stay put there until the very end.

Deciphering her relationship with Caesar, and the decisive significance it had for what happened later, is the sole key to understanding what would become the dominant motivation in Cleopatra's life, and the font of all her most important decisions. Indeed, it was owing to her relationship with Caesar that the queen became fully herself—or, at least, became what we understand Cleopatra to have been in light of her behavior. The liaison was also the source of what emerged with increasing clarity as the overarching ambition of her existence: to project the Egyptian form of rule onto the imperial horizon that had once been Alexander's and that now belonged to the Romans. In this way, she hoped to achieve the dream of the first Ptolemies, joining the autocracy of the pharaohs with Alexander's imperial design. And the project could now truly be completed, as Cleopatra—and she alone—had at her side not some Hellenistic general but a second Alexander. For that is how Caesar appeared to her: as the Roman reincarnation of Alexander the Great.

And it was precisely as a new Alexander that Caesar had sought to portray himself when at the height of his victorious career. He knew every detail of the Macedonian king's life and

exploits, and—according to an anecdote related by Plutarch and (in greater detail) by Suetonius*—had long measured his own accomplishments by them. The episode that proposed the theme of the *imitatio Alexandri*, or imitation of Alexander, as a dominant motif in the career of the Roman commander is said to have occurred in the year 69 in Cádiz, in Spain, where Caesar was serving as quaestor, before a statue of Alexander not far from the temple of Hercules.* The scene may be a mere invention fabricated in view of what would happen much later, but it doubtless seemed entirely plausible for illuminating the deep-seated, naked aspiration exhibited by the winner of the civil war. Caesar's identification with Alexander was then reaffirmed and reinforced in the gaze of his lover. She was the one person able to authenticate the resemblance he had so resolutely strived for, and the look in her eyes lent him the imprimatur of genealogy and history. A Ptolemy who could also boast Seleucid ancestry, she reigned in the palaces of Alexandria. The recognition he received from her, acting like a guarantor of his genuineness, must have captivated and charmed the Roman commander more than historians have thought.* Cleopatra provided him with a missing piece: the queen's presence, and even more so her pursuit of a common project with him (as we shall see), was the true culmination of his *imitatio*. By way of her, Caesar was truly able to become Alexander.

The two of them—both Caesar and Cleopatra—were perfect in the roles they assigned to one another. The queen was, so to speak, the final link in an unbreakable chain, the ultimate dazzling connection to a past that had truly been magnificent. Caesar, for his part, was an absolute military genius. He was the equal of Alexander and perhaps even superior to Napoleon, if one wished to compare the three greatest masters of warfare in Western history (who incidentally are linked by a thread of

mutual emulation—for Caesar sought to excel Alexander no less than Napoleon would one day try to outdo Caesar*). Caesar certainly portrayed himself as a “ruler of the world” (as a Roman emperor would style himself, in Greek, two centuries later: *egō men tou kosmou kyrios**), just like Alexander the Great had been, albeit for only a very short time. It is no accident that Plutarch paired the biographies of Caesar and Alexander in his *Parallel Lives*, or that Appian concluded the second book of his *Civil Wars* with a comparison of the two.* The connection between them was solidified by Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen standing as evidence of the distant but fateful link between the two military commanders.

Caesar, however, was an Alexander with the power of Rome at his back—not just that of tiny Macedonia—and he could rely on a military and administrative machine without equal, built one piece at a time by Rome over centuries of history and hard-won supremacy. And it was with this man, who held such immense power in his hands, that Cleopatra succeeded in reaching an understanding. It was a clearly unequal yet strong and tenacious partnership, powerful enough despite its hopelessly asymmetric nature to reach the heights where the imperatives of politics, personal interest, and cold calculation commingle with headiness, imagination, emotions, and mutual fascination—probably even (who can say for sure?) with flashes of real passion.

The Roman empire—which had recently grown even larger and more powerful thanks to Caesar’s conquests—was a world empire, at least according to the Greek and Roman conception of the world.* The queen learned early on what that meant, especially for those still outside its confines: any individual at the head of a city or a people, regardless of whether their territory

was located in Asia, in Africa, or in Europe, wherever they looked or went, and no matter what their intentions, sooner or later encountered the unstoppable power of Rome. And it had been that way for at least a century, particularly in the East, after the destruction of Carthage and Corinth—and even more so after the defeat of Mithridates and his kingdom. Originally, Rome had been a small community in constant danger, surrounded by neighbors perennially perceived as warlike and hostile. The republic's political and strategic decisions were thus initially guided by the need for security. Over time, however, its leading factions developed a foreign policy that was driven insatiably toward the acquisition of new territory and the subjection of new peoples. It was as if, in order to feel safe, they needed not only to eliminate every threat near and distant but also to subdue every other stable and independent political entity as far as their eye could see, no matter how broadly it might range. Rome would not rest until the confines of its own power coincided with what it believed to be those of the entire earth. In this way, it brought about an extreme condition in human history—when the shape of the world maps directly onto the shape of a single empire—a situation with which we moderns have also had occasion to experiment (albeit in incomparably different circumstances). “A deep-seated desire for dominion and for riches”^{*}—that is how Rome's behavior is described by Mithridates, in words realistically invented for him by the historian Sallust. This impulse was satisfied by the constant conquest of fresh territory, until Rome eventually took on the indelible features of unchecked supremacy (“by joining war to war,” *bella ex bellis*^{*}—again a phrase put into Mithridates's mouth by Sallust, who drew the words not from the historical record but from the depths of his own restless conscience). And that is why Polybius, in the latter half of the second century, was

able to describe Rome as capable of uniting the histories of Italy, Greece, Africa, and Asia in a single tableau. Whereas they had previously run their own separate courses, after Rome's rise they flowed together into a single channel, "all leading up to one end."* Cleopatra may have been exposed to this idea, as she was no stranger to books and reading, and Polybius was a rather popular author in her day.

3.

The imperial impulse so strongly (and justly) emphasized by the ancient Greek historian had been felt during the entire second century and even more strongly in the first. It was focused to the west along a west-northwest axis in the direction of Gaul and Spain, and to the east and the south toward Greece, the African coast, and the Levant. These conquests brought the victors face to face with highly disparate realities, as they themselves immediately realized. In a long letter written in early (perhaps January) 59 to his brother Quintus, whose term as propraetor of Asia had just been renewed, Cicero gave clear voice to the Romans' awareness of this radical difference. He portrayed it as an established fact that required the governing elites of the republic to judiciously adopt different approaches depending on who they were dealing with. "If the luck of the draw had sent you to govern savage, barbarous tribes in Africa or Spain or Gaul," he wrote,

you would still . . . be bound to think of their interests and devote yourself to their needs and welfare. But we are governing a civilized race, in fact the race from which civilization is believed to have passed to others, and assuredly we ought to give its benefits above all to those from whom we have

received it. Yes, I say it without shame . . . : everything that I have attained I owe to those pursuits and disciplines which have been handed down to us in the literature and teachings of Greece. Therefore, we may well be thought to owe a special duty to this people . . . ; schooled by their precepts, we must wish to exhibit what we have learned before the eyes of our instructors.*

This passage presents us with a crystal-clear image, a snapshot of the Roman empire as it appeared to the eyes of its masters shortly after its formation. And the vision it presents is structurally asymmetric: backward barbarism to the West, shining civilization to the East. In the opinion of the Roman and Italic elite, the effects of Romanization—ethnic integration and sociocultural osmosis—would over time lessen the initial disparity, giving rise to the complete success in the West of the “conquest–submission–civilization”* model, which later, over the course of the Principate, would become the trademark of the system of imperial rule. But in the time of Cicero and Cleopatra, only a few years after Caesar’s conquest of all of Gaul, when the Roman presence in the West had only recently achieved critical mass, the weight of that difference continued to be felt like an undeniable reality.

If the West was still a civilizational black hole, in the East there was Greece—the abode of Homer, Pericles, and Plato, where the light of Athens had shone forth—along with its ancient colonies in southern Italy, Sicily, and Ionia. Plus, there was the area infused with Greek culture that would come to be called Hellenistic—in the Mediterranean world and beyond, stretching from Egypt to Persia—born of Alexander’s conquests.* It was the world with which Cleopatra was acquainted, and in which she herself had become somewhat of a player.

For quite some time, the Romans had had a complex relationship with this heterogeneous region. The very birth of the Roman republic and its early history (in the sixth and fifth centuries) had been partly connected to the democratic wave that had traveled from the Aegean Sea and Attica to lap at the shores of Italy, and which constituted the most significant political fruit of that culture. It was no accident that the legislative monument that stood as the enduring foundation of Roman institutions throughout their existence, the touchstone of the *res publica* itself—the Twelve Tables—was immediately tied to the memory (probably not entirely invented) of a Roman mission to Athens in the mid-fifth century.*

And while it may be an exaggeration to call Rome itself “a Greek city,”* as has been done with a kernel of justification, we know that Greek workers, goods, and customs were present in the Roman world starting in the early sixth century, corresponding to the imposition of Etruscan hegemony over the city. Furthermore, it is likely that a Roman delegation figured among the embassies received by Alexander at Babylon shortly before his death, toward the end of the 320s, although it was certainly not one of the most important. For at that point, Rome was still a relatively small community, and it had not yet emerged from its peripheral, mid-Italic shell—nor from the period of its greatest trials, continually fighting to survive and maintain its independence. Yet only a couple of decades later, the first true historian Rome produced, Fabius Pictor, wrote his opus in Greek—a language learned early on by all the members of the gens Fabia, one of the leading families of the patrician aristocracy.

The second half of the third century—corresponding more or less to the period of the First and Second Punic Wars—witnessed an important step in this direction. It was then that

Greek literary culture, in all its most important manifestations, planted itself definitively in Roman intellectual life, conditioning its development. For instance, in the realm of comedy—one of the most ancient forms of artistic expression in the city—the majority of plays were either adaptations or straight translations of Greek models.

But when Rome began to turn its own arms against Greece and the Hellenistic world at the turn of the second century (no later than the Second Macedonian War), its attitude toward all things Greek started to change. Their presence, once a powerful but distant echo of a world that was remote and relatively inaccessible, now took on a proximity that was captivating and, in the minds of some, potentially dangerous. One part of the aristocratic elite—tethered to a conservative vision of the republic and its institutions—began to nourish strong doubts about the appropriateness of such strong ties. To its mind, the Greek world was home to a culture and a civic and moral life that was hopelessly more complex and sophisticated than that of Rome, marked by innumerable debates, polemics, and forms of radicalism as well as an extreme theoretical inclination that was enervating from the Roman point of view. A fear thus grew in the capital that increased integration might rend the city's ancient, tightly woven social fabric and explode its small but dense core of moral ideas, eroding the virtuous ethical and intellectual sobriety of its forefathers.

Early on, then, philhellenism became a major ideological fault line in the political struggle that was already starting to divide the leading senatorial families, themselves increasingly challenged by the new merchant classes, which were focused on consolidating and expanding their vast overseas commercial networks. As a result, a welcoming attitude toward Greek contamination ended up, over time, mapping ever more perfectly

onto Rome's imperial tendency, eventually becoming its clearest and dearest cultural characteristic. What is more, it made no small contribution to the transformation of Rome's initial obsession with security at home into a deliberate and unstoppable determination for conquest and dominion abroad. Philhellenism and imperialism (misleading as the latter term can be, tied as it is in its strictest sense exclusively to the modern West) became inextricably linked as two facets of the same historical development. For the Roman elite, opening up to the world—especially the Hellenistic part—with curiosity and self-confidence entailed nothing other than assuming the responsibility of *regere imperio populos*, as Vergil would say with exalted and arrogant candor in a revealing verse of the *Aeneid**. It meant “governing peoples”—all peoples—by means of “power,” that is, the power of its own magistrates (for there is this subtle “institutional” allusion in the semantic spectrum of the word *imperium*).

Therefore, the construction of a world empire coincided ever more perfectly with a dominion that absorbed Greek culture: its knowledge, its art, and its intellectual attitudes. In this way, Greek and Hellenistic thought—philosophy above all, but also rhetoric, poetry, history, the fine arts, and science (the little bit there was)—definitively and profoundly penetrated the education of the Roman elite, which from now on was perfectly bilingual. The father of the Gracchi brothers, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, who had married into the gens Cornelia—another major noble family—spoke Greek very well, as we learn from Cicero.* So did Publius Licinius Crassus Dives Mucianus, an illustrious and influential figure in the city and consul in 131. Likewise, a century earlier, Gaius Lutatius Catulus, victor at the Battle of the Aegates. Meanwhile, Rome filled up with books, almost all of them written in Greek. Building on

itself generation after generation, by the early first century this trend would end up having a massive impact on the ancient community.

Nevertheless, the conservatives were wrong to fear that the process of accelerating assimilation would compromise Rome's particular intellectual and moral identity. On the contrary, it ended up reinforcing it, providing it with tools for self-understanding and growth that it never could have developed on its own. This was the true miracle of Rome: the capacity to integrate and assimilate foreign elements without losing its sense of self. Such an outcome was only possible thanks to the extraordinary tenacity of the aboriginal characteristics of the city's deep culture—its sturdy mental framework, its intrinsic vocation for wielding power, and its precociously rational social order, instituted by means of law. In fact, the most spectacular and enduring results from the application of Greek knowledge to the further development of Roman tradition were felt in the field of *ius* (a term untranslatable in Greek), which from the very beginning had been the true *logos* of the republic. The Roman jurists' appropriation of Greek culture transformed what had in effect been a prescriptive practice—no doubt original but lacking any true intellectual complexity—into a grand body of specialist knowledge, complete with rigorous, nearly incorruptible protocols, that had the potential for universal application. In a nutshell, it transformed Roman law into a discipline that, without losing its pristine outlines or its eminently practical function, acquired a capacity for abstraction and regulation—for creating order by means of formal equality and the predictability of its prescriptions—that remains unparalleled even today. Not merely an indispensable tool for maintaining Roman rule, it endured beyond antiquity as a defining characteristic of Western history writ large.*

4.

Yet when Cicero wrote to his brother Quintus with advice for ruling the provinces, and even later, in the period of Cleopatra and the last civil war, Rome's relationship with the Greek and Hellenistic world had not yet taken definite shape. Similarly, the political framework for the grand process of cultural assimilation then underway was still being hammered out. The recent conquests in the East, where the most important Roman commanders—from Sulla and Lucullus to Pompey and, eventually, Caesar himself—had conducted their principal military campaigns since the early first century, posed complex problems of organization and alliance. That part of the world, of course, was also the wellspring of Rome's foremost enemies: Antiochus, Mithridates, even the Thracian Spartacus. In this still relatively unstable context, the political axis of the imperial system threatened to be thrown off kilter at any moment, sucked into the orbit of the East such that Rome itself risked being marginalized. Cultural integration could have led to political weakening and a power shift, entailing unimaginable consequences.

There was also the crucial problem of Rome's form of government—a major theme in our story, to which we shall have occasion to return shortly.* Republican institutions had been in crisis for some time. Having emerged from the need to govern cities of small dimension, such as Athens and the other Greek *poleis*, surrounded by a countryside that could be traversed in less than one day's march, they were not suited to ruling a republic with a territory that now extended to much of the Italic peninsula and an empire that spanned the Mediterranean. Their patent inadequacy created a void at the center of imperial power that no one knew how to fill—either conceptually or, more to the point, practically.

Within the confines of such a fluid situation, what Cicero outlined in his letter was a model founded on a kind of exchange that presupposed a difficult but neat separation: on the one hand, cultural Hellenization; on the other hand, power, Roman *imperium*—under the guise of good rule (albeit only in the mind of the victors). It would go on to be a successful world-view, the basis for the aristocratic compromise that would shape the empire for at least two centuries. There were already clear signs in that direction. One leading figure of the republic a few decades earlier, Quintus Mucius Scaevola, governor of Asia as *propraetor* (probably in 98, thus making him a predecessor in the office to Cicero's brother) and the greatest jurist of his time, stood as a perfect early example of this type of solution. It cannot be ruled out that Cicero had precisely him in mind when giving his brother advice. Quintus Mucius had in fact put the power of Rome—his own *imperium* as a magistrate—in the service of providing his province with good rule. A statue was even raised in his honor by his subjects. At the same time, as a jurist he had used the Greek philosophers, drawing on the force of their thought and their capacity for abstraction, to turn the ancient *ius civile*—the Roman invention of law—into a legal structure robust enough to serve as an indispensable paradigm for governing the peoples and provinces of the empire, including those in the Greek and Greek-influenced spheres.* It was a flawless way to integrate Hellenism, Roman tradition, and the imperial drive, a manner of uniting knowledge and power that was of benefit only to the Romans—and very different from the Greek approach. Indeed, the Greeks offered a nonpareil historical example of knowledge without power, a painfully tragic cleft that was briefly bridged only at the time of the Persian wars and later, for an instant, by Alexander's campaigns.

Cicero's advice for ruling the provinces thus anticipated what ended up being the main framework for stabilizing the empire, first and foremost in the East. The guiding principle was clear. The property-owning elites of the Hellenistic world received security and the certainty of maintaining their privileges, guaranteed by Roman order, and the concession of a certain degree of local self-governance. In exchange, they gave up their freedom, and they loyally—in some cases willingly—accepted the imposition of Roman power. This was the foundation on which the empire rested for centuries. It was the source of sentiments such as that enunciated more than a century later by Dio Chrysostom, who wrote with “bitterness” (to use Paul Veyne’s word*)—but also with a certain resigned faith—of a “condition of peace and servitude” (*eirēnē kai douleia*, per the text of his Rhodian Oration*). A little later, Aelius Aristides even described Roman rule as a felicitous, end-of-history state of universal peace: “the whole earth has been beautified like a garden.”* This uninterrupted splendor did cause him a certain amount of anxiety, though. It was the other side of the coin—the same fact observed from the opposite and overly condescending point of view—of Horace’s famous verse, *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*: “Greece, once captured, took captive her savage conqueror.”* The civilization of the empire absorbed Greek culture deep into its bones. Latium was Hellenized, as Horace continued (*et artes intulit agresti Latio*), and in time the entire West met the same fate. In the schools of Gaul, rhetoric and philosophy were taught as in Athens. The price, however, was that power over the world remained clearly in the hands of a small imperial elite whose foremost ranks were long Roman and Italic.

Horace’s essentially conciliatory interpretation—clearly encased in hypocrisy and imperial paternalism—of Rome’s

relationship with Hellenism was only possible after the grand stabilization brought about by Augustus in the wake of his victory in the civil war (the *Epistles* were published in the year 20). At that point, the exchange of (Greek) culture for (Roman) power, of philosophy for rule—Roman governors and Greek philosophers—could take place without truly challenging the centrality of Rome, and the language and the knowledge of the Greeks could calmly and quietly become the cultural patrimony of the entire empire.

Back when Octavian was clashing with Antony, however—the latter allied with a Greco-Eastern queen whom everyone considered shrewd, seductive, and addled with ambition—back when almost the entire Mediterranean East had taken the couple's side, the situation was much less peaceful and clear-cut. The civil war cast its shadow over the still unresolved issues of the new imperial society then taking full shape, injecting its poisons into the latter's social, political, and cultural life. All the while, the question of what institutional form should be given to the republic, indeed the issue of the republic's very survival, remained dangerously open and became increasingly urgent. The conflict at hand could thus assume the appearance of a dramatic final showdown—on the stage of ideas, politics, ruling groups, and the structures of power—not only between Hellenism and *Romanitas* but between the East (including its as-yet un-Hellenized aspects) and the West as a whole. And it was in this atmosphere of uncertainty that Cleopatra's ambition patiently found an opening and a very real chance of success: with Antony in the guise of a Roman ready to Orientalize Rome itself and the empire. Their affair crystallized an idea—a fear—that had long circulated in the capital (as we shall see) and that was exploited to great effect by Octavian's propaganda: the specter of an “Alexandrian menace” (following upon earlier

Punic and Gallic threats), the possibility that the center of power (or at least a significant degree of it) might definitively shift to the eastern part of the world—a dread that the East would ultimately devour Rome. And in that light, the Greek queen of Egypt could very much appear as a latter-day avenger of the East, battle-hardened by almost two centuries of conflict: from Hannibal to Antiochus to Mithridates.

How much of all this—of the complexity of this context—was going through Cleopatra's mind the night before the battle?

It is impossible to know. We can say one thing, though: that the queen never would have been in Epirus, among those men and those armed vessels, if she had not long been convinced that the stakes of the game she was playing were as high as possible, at least equal to the risk to her kingdom and to herself. She sensed that the imminent battle represented a clash of two worlds, or rather, the final attempt of one entire world—her own, the Macedonian-Greco-Oriental civilization invented by Alexander, which had a precise historical and geographical understanding of the Roman empire and its significance—to reverse the course that history had already taken.* And Cleopatra may have even thought—indeed, she had been presented with far too much evidence *not* to have grasped it—that unfortunately, in the moment of truth, she was destined to have Antony at her side, her beloved but unequal Antony, and not Caesar, who was smitten with her but always one step ahead. Caesar would not be the one to show her the path. If he had been, she certainly would not have spent the night before the battle as she did.

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