

Snake unlikely to have killed Cleopatra

October 21 2015, by Mike Addelman

Academics at The University of Manchester have dismissed the long-held argument that the ancient Egyptian queen Cleopatra was killed by a snake bite.

Andrew Gray, curator of herpetology at Manchester Museum, says [venomous snakes](#) in Egypt—cobras or vipers—would have been too large to get unseen into the queen's palace.

He was speaking to Egyptologist Dr Joyce Tyldesley in a new video which is part of a new online course introducing ancient Egyptian history, using six items from the Museum's collection.

According to Dr Tyldesley, the ancient accounts say a snake hid in a basket of figs brought in from the countryside, and was also used to kill one or two of her serving maids.

But according to Andrew Gray, cobras are typically five to six feet long but can grow up to eight feet—too big to hide very easily.

There would also be too little time to kill two or three people- because [snake venom](#) kills you slowly- with in any case only a 10 per cent chance of death.

He said: "Not only are cobras too big, but there's just a 10 percent chance you would die from a [snake bite](#): most bites are dry bites that don't inject venom.

"That's not to say they aren't dangerous: the venom causes necrosis and will certainly kill you, but quite slowly.

"So it would be impossible to use a snake to kill two or three people one after the other. Snakes use venom to protect themselves and for hunting – so they conserve their [venom](#) and use it in times of need."

Cleopatra is strongly associated with snakes, like many ancient Egyptian kings and queens of Egypt. In addition, Cleopatra also believed she was the embodiment of the Goddess Isis, who can take on the form of a snake.

Dr Tyldesley, whose book "Cleopatra: Egypt's Last Queen" was a BBC Radio 4 book of the week, says one aspect of the accounts has proved to be correct. The ancient Egyptians believed snakes were good mothers.

"Very few [snakes](#) have a maternal instinct. However, the cobra is an exception: They sit on the nest and protect them until they hatch. So in this case, it seems the Egyptians were right," agrees Dr Gray.

Provided by University of Manchester

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