

Preparing for A105: Evaluating Historical Evidence

From Book 1, *Reputations*, Chapter 1 Cleopatra, p. 6.

As a stepping stone to our exploration of how Cleopatra was depicted by the Romans, first let us think about the nature of ancient history and our relationship to the distant past.

Activity

We have just considered the problems associated with the relationship between film and the past, how the conventions of certain types of film tend to present the past in their own terms, and how contemporary concerns can colour our perceptions. Now pause for a minute to think about some general obstacles we might face in studying the events of over two thousand years ago. What sort of evidence are we likely to have about a society long past, and what are going to be the difficulties in evaluating it? Jot down your thoughts and then read the discussion below.

Discussion

In the DVD material we have spoken about film as though it places obstacles between us and what really happened. The situation, however, is rather more complicated than this. It is true that the conventions of film-making do tend to put their own spin on the past, but what we can't assume is that there is an easy corrective to this problem. The past is never available to us as a simple set of undisputed facts, and this is particularly true of ancient history.

A frequent problem with ancient history is that we really don't know a lot of it with any precision. Trying to draw a picture of what actually went on in Rome and Egypt at the time of Cleopatra is like trying to fit together an enormous jigsaw where most of the pieces are missing. Or, to use a different analogy, we might think of ancient history as being like a string vest; it has an outline and shape, but it is made up of more holes than substance. This is what our view of the ancient world is essentially like. It is fragmentary and puzzling, and piecing it together takes a lot of patience and a certain degree of imaginative creativity.

The material that we do have – poems, biographies, histories, statues and coins – needs careful interpretation. We need to scrutinise the motivations of its authors and their assumptions about the world. We also need to bear in mind that we ourselves are not ancient Romans or Egyptians, and that we bring along our own sets of values, derived from our own cultures, education and upbringing, to our study of this material. It is easy to think of the past as a set of plain facts to be memorised, but history is a lot trickier than this: it is a maze of opinion, contradiction and hearsay. In studying the past, we must be detectives, and we must also suspect our own motives.