Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. September 2, 31 BCE. I’m Sally Helm.

These Roman sailors know the wind. They have to. Even in times of peace, the direction and the strength of the wind are important for farming and for trading. And in times of war, wind can be the difference between life and death.

For the past four days, in the Ambracian Gulf, the wind has been strong. Here, off the west coast of Greece and across the sea from the foot of Italy, the wind has been churning the water and moving it every which way. Conditions that make it impossible for warships to maneuver with precision. But today, finally, the wind has calmed. Which means it’s time for a battle. One that will determine the future of Rome.

In two opposing camps, the men have been awake since well before dawn. Preparing to fight. In the highlands overlooking the bay is one leader: the young Octavian. And down in the sandy, swampy flatlands of Actium is his former ally: Marc Antony. Each of them hopes that by the end of this war, he’ll be the leader of Rome. And the other man will be dead.

But…technically…Octavian is not actually at war with Antony. He’s at war with Antony’s lover. The famous Egyptian queen, Cleopatra.

Cleopatra is at Actium, too, camped with Antony in that sandy swamp. Some sources say she’s the one who came up with the battle plan. This morning, at first light, the ships get into formation…and wait for the right wind.

Around noon, it picks up. Antony’s lumbering warships begin to advance toward Octavian’s fleet. The ships try to ram each other. Soldiers shoot arrows and javelins or try to leap aboard the enemy’s deck to fight at closer quarters. And then about two hours later, the wind changes again. It gets stronger. The waves get bigger. And Cleopatra’s ship responds with a fateful move. She raises her purple sails. And, followed by the squadron of ships under her command, moves towards the open sea.

This maneuver will transform the battle. And not just the battle.

Barry Strauss: The whole future of Western civilization and for that matter, Eastern civilization depended on it. I know that's a big claim, it’s a really big claim—

Sally Helm: No, I love it. I’m so glad that it's the future of civilization at stake here. Tell me more.

Barry Strauss: You know, to use a hackneyed phrase, it is a hinge of history.

Sally Helm: Today: that hinge of history. The battle of Actium. How did Cleopatra wind up in the middle of a Roman game of tug of war? And how, by raising those purple sails, did she help determine the course of her world…and our world, too?
Sally Helm: You may recognize the voice of Barry Strauss.

Barry Strauss: Professor of history and classics at Cornell University.

Sally Helm: I know who you are. This is your third time on the show. I think it's a History This Week record.

Barry Strauss: Wow!

Sally Helm: I know!

Barry Strauss: I’m honored.

Sally Helm: Strauss is the author of a new book, *The War That Made the Roman Empire: Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian at Actium*. And the story starts on a famous date: the ides of March.

Barry Strauss: March 15th, 44, BC

Sally Helm: The leader of Rome, Julius Caesar, is assassinated. Stabbed to death. He leaves behind a huge power vacuum. Everyone in Rome knows it. And one person on the scene at the time is the queen of Egypt: Cleopatra.

Barry Strauss: She was right there, practically in the center of the action on that terrible day. And where is she living? She's living in the estate that Caesar owns, in the hills opposite room across the Tiber and she was there, ensconced there as Caesar's guest, as his mistress. She might have had her child.

Sally Helm: Cleopatra says that this child is Caesar’s son—and though Caesar had never officially recognized him, he did allow Cleopatra to give the boy the name Ptolemy Caesar.

Barry Strauss: Which kind of suggests he knew it was his son and she was also pregnant by Caesar, expecting another child.

Sally Helm: Cleopatra is just 25 years old, but she's already one of the major power players of her time.

Barry Strauss: Cleopatra is one of the great states’ women of history. You know, she's able to speak seven languages at least. She is an absolutely brilliant person, and cunning, and versed in the arts of survival and the arts of power.

Sally Helm: She knows, as all Egyptian rulers do, that Egypt needs to be close to Rome. The Roman Empire dominates the region politically. But Egypt has a lot going for it, too.
Barry Strauss: Egypt at this period is the wealthiest place in the Mediterranean. No other single places, anything like the wealth that the Egyptians have, and the Romans want it, of course. So why don't they just grab it as they do with every place else?

Sally Helm: Because it’s politically tricky. Rome is ruled by a collection of oligarchs. And if one of them made the move to annex Egypt, he’d have particular sway there.

Barry Strauss: They'd be in his hip pocket as it were. Of course, Romans don't have pockets. So, in his purse, if you will—

Sally Helm: Romans didn’t have pockets? We won't go down that rabbit hole, but, huh, there are no pockets then?

Barry Strauss: No, no, no pockets. They don’t wear pants.

Sally Helm: Right, where are your pockets gonna be?

Barry Strauss: Yeah exactly, so the Romans are competing with each other and saying you can't take it. No, you can't take it. No, you can't take it. So, Egypt manages to hold on.

Sally Helm: It’s one of the few independent kingdoms in the region. But the power balance is very delicate. Egypt wants to avoid being annexed by Rome but stay close enough for safety. And Cleopatra has gotten very close to Rome’s leader, Julius Caesar. As the story goes, she engineered their first meeting by having herself smuggled into a palace wrapped in bed linens. Quite the impression to unroll those and find a future queen hiding inside. They began a sultry affair. One that made political sense for both of them. But it also seems to have been a true meeting of minds.

Barry Strauss: These two brilliant people, they might have been the two most brilliant people of their age and, the thought of the two of them together, it's absolutely explosive. Dynamite.

Sally Helm: But now, on the Ides of March… Julius Caesar is gone.

Barry Strauss: Her lover and her patron were dead. Suddenly, she was in a dangerous position in Rome.

Sally Helm: She’s presumably shocked. Grieving. She may have suffered a miscarriage soon after Caesar’s funeral. And, along with everyone else in Rome, she’s wondering: who is going to succeed Caesar, and take over this empire?

Barry Strauss: She had to hang around for a bit to see what was going to happen, who was gonna be the new power in Rome and who she as queen would want to negotiate with and to work with.

Sally Helm: When she's at that moment looking out, like, who does she see? Who are the possible people who she might need to align with now?
Barry Strauss: Yeah. So, there's Brutus and Cassius, who've assassinated Caesar. And then there is the surviving console, one of the most powerful men in Rome. One of Caesar's military lieutenants, Mark Antony.

Sally Helm: So, there’s the pro-Caesar lieutenant, Marc Antony. The anti-Caesar forces, the assassins. And then a few days after Caesar’s death: a new player. Caesar’s Will is read aloud. And:

Barry Strauss: It turns out that he has adopted his grandnephew, his sister's sister's son, Gaius Octavius. He offers him posthumous adoption, which by the way is completely illegal in Rome, there's no such thing, but Caesar's Caesar. He can do what he wants.

Sally Helm: We know Caesar’s newly named, 18-year-old adoptee as Octavian. But at the time, he’s going around calling himself Caesar. Asserting himself as Caesar’s rightful heir. Which is a threat to Cleopatra. Remember, she has a son named after Caesar.

Barry Strauss: She has to worry, ‘well, what's my relationship gonna be with this new guy who calls himself Caesar's son?’

Sally Helm: Is she worried for her son's life? Is she worried? Someone's gonna try to kill him?

Barry Strauss: Oh, I'm sure she was.

Sally Helm: Less than a month after Caesar’s murder, Cleopatra leaves Rome.

Barry Strauss: She has to leave Rome because she's the queen of Egypt and she doesn't dare leave her country, uh, without her present there for long

Sally Helm: She’s co-ruling Egypt with her brother. Even though she runs the show. Egypt has comparatively modern gender norms. Women can inherit property, file lawsuits, own ships. In Rome, meanwhile, men have authority over their wives, and all legal rights to their children. But Cleopatra still has to deal with prejudice. Though she’s sometimes able to use it to her advantage.

Barry Strauss: She makes a virtue of being underestimated and that allows her to fly under the radar again and again and again.

Sally Helm: Still, she needs to get back to her kingdom to defend her position. Politics in Egypt are just as brutal as those in Rome.

Barry Strauss: The dynastic politics of her family were a blood sport and to survive, she would have to oppose her brothers and her sister and ultimately in fact, have a hand in their deaths.

Sally Helm: So. Cleopatra returns home to the city of Alexandria. Where Egypt’s famous wealth is on full display.
Barry Strauss: To quote a famous phrase, Cleopatra leaves a city of brick and comes to a city of marble. This splendid gleaming marble city with probably the greatest harbor in the world. It's on the Mediterranean. It's blue. It's beautiful. It's open to the seas. It's got Greek buildings, temples the palace, the museum, the lighthouse, the library. Rome is an absolute hick town compared to Alexandria. There's really no comparison.

Sally Helm: Cleopatra is keeping a close eye on the chaos in Rome. Where things quickly devolve into civil war. Caesar's assassins try to seize power. So, Antony and Octavian team up to take them down.

Barry Strauss: And it comes down to a showdown in Northern Greece. And Anthony and Octavian defeat Brutus and Cassius.

Sally Helm: Leaving Octavian and Antony as victors. Together.

Barry Strauss: They now basically have won all the marbles. They're the rulers of the Roman world.

Sally Helm: Another of Caesar's allies is also in play, but he's quickly shunted to the side. Antony and Octavian essentially divvy up the empire between them.

Barry Strauss: In broad strokes, Octavian has the west. And Anthony has the east.

Sally Helm: That means Octavian has control of Italy, of Rome. But Antony actually has the competitive advantage. The eastern part of the empire is much more desirable.

Barry Strauss: Why? Because that's where the money is. It's the population center of the empire. It's by far wealthier than the west.

Sally Helm: So, Antony goes off on a tour of this region. To raise some money and assert himself as leader. He also has designs on a military campaign in the Parthian empire in modern day Iran and Iraq. This is something Caesar had talked about, but never achieved. So, Antony is traveling through Cleopatra's region. And when he arrives in the city of Tarsus, in modern day Turkey, he sends her a message.

Cleopatra's met Mark Antony before. She knows his reputation.

Barry Strauss: He was a military man. He was dashing. He was handsome. He was proud and vain about his looks and very much a lady's man.

Sally Helm: He's married, but he gets around. He's in the prime of his life, in his early forties. He fought and bled for Caesar. And he's heard a rumor about Cleopatra’s role in the recent war.

Barry Strauss: He says, ‘Hey Cleo, I hear that you were supporting Caesar's assassins, what is the meaning of this?’ And she comes to Tarsus, and she makes one of the most famous entrances in history.
Barry Strauss: So, Tarsus is on a river inland. She sails up the river in a splendid barge, that is gilded. It's got purple sails. She's dressed like Aphrodite, the goddess of love. And she is attended by young boys who are supposed to be Cupid. It is just kind of stunning looking and the way Plutarch tells the story, Anthony's waiting for her on a dais, on a podium in the forum. And he is basically jilted. Everybody in town runs to the docks to see Cleopatra. And she invites Antony to dinner.

Sally Helm: So, wait, he called her there, but she invites him to dinner?

Barry Strauss: That's right. Yeah.

Sally Helm: Ok.

Barry Strauss: That's our Cleopatra.

Sally Helm: Cleopatra says to Antony, “let's team up.”

Barry Strauss: We'll be political allies. And we will be propaganda allies. And so, they join forces in the bedroom as well as in the political arena. And he goes back with her to Alexandria to spend the winter together.

Sally Helm: Cleopatra has made her choice between Antony and Octavian. For political reasons... or personal.

Barry Strauss: The default mode for historians is to say, love schmov. All that matters in history is power. And if you don't say that, you are in danger of being called naive by your colleagues, who all say, “hey, how could anyone fall for this love business?” But there might have been, there really might have been.

Their life together in Alexandria is famous for the sparks between the two of them. And there are all these wonderful anecdotes of how Cleopatra would do these games and tricks to amuse Antony and to one up Anthony. My favorite is the story of the most expensive dinner party in history. Cleopatra bets Antony, that she can give the most expensive dinner party in history. And he says, ‘I'd like to see you do that.’ And what she does is she takes this remarkable pearl that she has been given as a gift.

Sally Helm: According to Pliny the Elder, this was one of the largest pearls “in the whole of history.”

Barry Strauss: And she puts it into a glass of vinegar that dissolves the pearl. Now the story is that instantly, the pearl is dissolved, and she drinks it.

Sally Helm: On my God, that’s such a move. And she just drank it? She just like had it as her drink at dinner?

Barry Strauss: Apparently who, who knows if she drank the whole thing or if she just tasted it, who knows?
Sally Helm: Wow. That's amazing. I love that.

So, they may indeed have been in love. In the year 40 BCE, Cleopatra gives birth to twins. Antony’s son and daughter. But... let's not forget that Antony is already married. And that same year, his wife suddenly dies. And Octavian, back in Rome, sees an opportunity.

Barry Strauss: When you think of Octavian, think of Machiavelli, think of just the most cunning politician you possibly can.

Sally Helm: Octavian thinks: Antony’s wife is dead. Cleopatra is just his lover, not his bride. What if he marries my sister? Who, confusingly, is named Octavia. Octavian thinks, a marriage between Antony and Octavia could make sense. Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

It makes sense for Antony, too. He’s in this hot and heavy affair with Cleopatra, sure. But he still has his eye on becoming ruler of the Roman empire. And aligning with Octavian through marriage could be good for him.

Barry Strauss: He could have sons, who could conceivably even be the heir of Octavian. And that could reconcile these two families.

Sally Helm: That November, Antony returns to Rome to marry Octavia. It must have been a lavish, traditional Roman ceremony. A joining of hands. A torch-lit parade. Animal guts examined for omens. Rome, remember, has been through years of civil war. And though Antony and Octavian have been sharing power in relative peace, there’s still been a sense that things might boil over into violence. But now…it seems that the fighting is over.

Barry Strauss: They make peace in the year 40 and there's celebrations all over Italy it's an era of good feelings. Everybody is smiling and shaking hands and I'm sure they have knives behind their backs that they're sharpening and keeping ready for when the time is right.

Sally Helm: It doesn’t take long. From the beginning, Octavia is likely spying for her brother. Reporting back on Antony’s moves. Because neither man is actually ready for peace.

But...they’re not ready for out-and-out battle, either. So, Octavian instead begins an information war against Antony. A smear campaign. And there’s an easy target. Antony is humiliating Octavian’s own sister by continuing his affair with Cleopatra.

Barry Strauss: So, for Octavian, Anthony is a once great Roman who has been corrupted by the evil Egyptian queen. He has been unmanned by Cleopatra. She's running the show and he's left the life of the Roman army camp for a life of decadence: of soft couches, of golden goblets, of lots of wine. And Octavia is quick to portray Anthony as a drunkard. One of the things that makes me laugh is he says, ‘Anthony even goes in for mosquito nets. Can you believe it? He's so soft that he's got to have mosquito nets.’
Sally Helm: Antony releases a pamphlet in his own defense, called "On His Drunkenness." The exact argument is lost to history, but presumably it was something along the lines of, “no drunkenness to see here!” And Antony also goes on the offensive against Octavian.

Barry Strauss: Antony says, my ancestors are important people. This guy might call himself Julius Caesar, but let's not forget that he was born Gaius Octavius. His father was a nobody, I Mark Antony and great in battle. This guy's run away from battle. He's a coward. And by the way, he's sickly. He keeps getting sick at convenient moments and opportune times and also ultimately what it comes down to is Anthony and Cleopatra saying we've got the only true heir of Julius Caesar. This imposter in Rome, he ain't no Caesar.

Sally Helm: In the summer of 32 BCE, Antony makes a fateful move. He sends Octavia a letter saying: I want a divorce.

For Octavian, this is the last straw. He wants to get rid of this guy, once and for all. But it's not so simple. After all, he had promised the Roman people, publicly, that the era of civil war was over.

So, Octavian…

Barry Strauss: He does something devilishly clever. He declares war on Cleopatra instead. And says, “she's the real enemy of Rome. She's the one (in effect) wearing the pants,” not an expression the Romans would've used.

Sally Helm: They didn't wear pants.

Barry Strauss: They didn't wear pants. She's the one wearing the toga, if you will. So, she is the one to declare war on.

Sally Helm: He convinces the Senate to go along. In fact, he theatrically leads a group of cloaked Senators to the temple of the war goddess Bellona, just outside Rome. There, he hurls down a spear, to symbolize an attack. Cleopatra and Antony, he’s saying, are enemies of Rome. He’s going to wage a noble war to remove them from power.

And the fighting begins.

Antony and Cleopatra, of course, don’t just sit by and take this. They gather support and resources in the East and fight back.

Barry Strauss: They see it as a righteous defensive war against Octavian, who's declared war and Cleopatra, an innocent Roman ally. Who's never done anything against Rome.

Sally Helm: At first, it seems that Antony has the upper hand. By the autumn of 32 BCE, he’s got troops stationed in strategic spots along the western coast of Greece—which gives him access to Italy, where Octavian is. But:
Barry Strauss: It's very risky to invade Italy. And it's very politically incorrect to invade Italy with a foreign queen in tow. He didn't have the option of sending Cleopatra back to Egypt. Why? Because she's got the money and she refuses to go back to Egypt.

Sally Helm: And they’re literally carrying the treasure? Like it’s there?

Barry Strauss: Yeah, it's there. Yeah. It's a lot of gold and precious metals.

Sally Helm: She’s got 60 ships full of riches. And she’s not taking them back to Alexandria.

Barry Strauss: Why doesn't she wanna go back to Egypt? Because she doesn't trust Antony. Because she knows that the minute she leaves, Octavian will try to make a deal with him and say, ‘Hey, Octavia's waiting for you.’

Sally Helm: So, Cleopatra and Antony stay put, with their soldiers, at the bay of Actium, on the west coast of Greece. Octavian’s troops are in Italy.

And here is where Antony makes a fateful move. Or, really, it’s the lack of any move that is fateful. Antony was a competent general, but not a brilliant one. Not like Caesar. And he decides…to do nothing.

Barry Strauss: Antony and Cleopatra sit on the west coast of Greece and say, the enemy will come to us, and we'll defeat him there. That's not a Caesar move. Caesar's not the kind of guy to sit around. It's Octavian who makes the Caesar move.

Sally Helm: Octavian brings his troops across the sea to Greece. They’re led by Agrippa, Octavian's right-hand man.

Barry Strauss: His best Admiral. And instead of taking the short crossing. They take the long crossing to the southernmost point in the Peloponnese about as far as they can go to a place called Methoni, never heard of it, but is a very strategic harbor in the Southwestern coast of Greece. Why is it so important? Because Anthony and Cleopatra who wintered, by the way, in a city, on the west coast of Greece, they can't feed their army and Navy—a huge group of men—on the resources of Greece. They have to have supply lines that go all the way back to Egypt and Syria and Judea.

Sally Helm: And those supply lines all connect through this port. A port that Octavian now controls.

Barry Strauss: This is a very important moment in this struggle and the initiative has now shifted suddenly.

Sally Helm: Octavian is strangling Antony and his forces. He’s cut off their food supply. Antony’s men are soon starving. They’re also weakened by the summer heat. More and more of them are defecting, going to join Octavian.

Barry Strauss: Some of them are getting sick from dysentery and malaria and Antony and Cleopatra realize the game is up. We have to leave Actium. We can't afford to stay here anymore.
Sally Helm: The best way out, they decide, is by sea. They think it'll give them the best chance of preserving their riches, which are housed on all those ships. So, they begin to plan their escape.

Sally Helm: What's their hope here? Like what do they think is gonna happen?

Barry Strauss: So, as near as we can reconstruct, they think the likeliest thing is they're gonna fight a breakout battle. There are many breakout battles in history. They are what the name suggests. Your hope is to be able to break through the enemy's fleet and save as many as your ships as you can so you can live to fight again another day.

Sally Helm: Octavian has more ships, in strategic positions in the water off the western coast of Greece. But Antony's ships are stronger. Good for ramming the enemy’s ships. Which can help turn a naval battle in your favor. So, he thinks, with the right plan of attack, he'll be able to get many of his ships out—particularly those ships carrying the treasure. But:

Barry Strauss: There are many people who turn on him and one turns on him at the 11th hour, just before the battle, he goes to Octavian, and he tells Octavian Antony's battle plan.

Sally Helm: Antony doesn't know it, but as he sails into battle on the morning of September 2nd, the deck is already stacked against him.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: September 2, 31 BCE. Antony is at Actium, in a sandy, swampy camp on the west coast of Greece. Octavian at his camp on the Greek mainland, in the hills to the north of Actium.

Barry Strauss: In the predawn hours the two sides leave their tents, and they prepare to board their ships. Dawn comes in that part of the world at that time of the year at just after 6:00 AM and the two fleets sail out around 10:00 AM. They are in line against each other.

Sally Helm: And then...they wait for the right wind. Antony's ships are about a half mile from shore.

Barry Strauss: It's around noon when the sea breeze begins to blow and it's around then that Antony begins his charge against the enemy.

Sally Helm: But Octavian knows exactly what is coming. He’s prepared. So, he’s stationed his fleet about a mile away from Antony and Cleopatra's. Meaning:

Barry Strauss: In order for Antony to ram the enemy ships, his men have to row a long distance and they are too tired after rowing that mile to be able to, to make a breakthrough.

Sally Helm: Remember, they’re already underfed, beset by disease. And now they have to row these heavy boats a long distance. By the time Antony’s ships are face-to-face with Octavian’s, his men are too weak to ram effectively. Instead, they use catapults and iron hooks. There’s also fighting on the decks.
And as the two sides come to blows…Antony and Cleopatra can see that they’re losing. There’s no way their forces have the strength to outlast Octavian’s. So around 3pm, when the wind picks up, Cleopatra makes a move. She leads her 60 ships of royal treasure in an escape.

**Barry Strauss:** If the sources are to be believed, she has a gilded ship with a purple sail and people see it.

**Sally Helm:** So, the sail goes up and they think, oh, a sail. That doesn't mean you're ramming these other ships right here in this channel, that means you’re out of here.

**Barry Strauss:** No, no you're out of it. This has been reported in the sources, which are quite hostile as, “Ah, just like a woman, just like an Egyptian, she lost her nerve. She betrayed her lover and she fled.” But that's not what happened. This was always the plan. If we don't win a smashing victory at first, when the wind blows up, we will leave with the treasure and as many of our ships as we possibly can.

**Sally Helm:** In fact, Antony and Cleopatra had loaded their masts and sails onto their warships before the battle. To leave their options open. Antony leaves his flagship and boards Cleopatra’s. And then… they sail away.

**Barry Strauss:** He is violating kind of the unwritten rules of Roman warfare, the general’s supposed to go down with his men. Most of Anthony ships are continuing to fight. They don't surrender. They probably don't even know that Anthony has left.

**Sally Helm:** The battle rages on, without its leaders. Troops are ramming their ships into the others. Shooting arrows, launching catapults. But once Octavian and Agrippa begin shooting fire arrows, setting the enemy ships aflame…Antony’s troops are forced to surrender.

**Barry Strauss:** There are a lot of casualties. Octavian in his official memoir says that 5,000 men died in Mark Antony's fleet. But there's another source that I like better that says that 12,000 men died in Mark Antony's fleet and 6,000 were wounded. Octavian doesn't want the Romans to know how bad things were, because this is a civil war. This is Romans killing Romans. It's not gonna go over well in Rome, but that's probably the ugly reality of this.

**Sally Helm:** When Cleopatra returns to Egypt, she sails in on a ship decked out with victory reeds.

**Barry Strauss:** So that everybody thinks she's won. And then as soon as she's there and she's safe, she has her supporters kill her enemies at home, to make sure that no one can rise up against her.

**Sally Helm:** Antony and Cleopatra haven’t given up yet. For the next few months, they try to figure out a new plan, fight or flight. But Octavian is making his way towards Egypt. Antony and Cleopatra are in a corner. And ultimately, they’re each out for themselves. Separately, they try to negotiate with the man who is, clearly, going to be the victor here.

**Barry Strauss:** Cleopatra and Antony each send separate ambassadors to Octavian saying, you know, we'll give up, if you give me X, Y, and Z, Antony wants to be able to retire outside of Rome
and be left alone. Cleopatra offers to give up Anthony, if she can be queen of Egypt, when that
doesn't work, she said, okay, I won't be queen, but spare my children and let one of them rule in my
stead. Octavian keeps his cards close to his chest. He's non-committal. They send him huge bribes.
He pockets the bribes, but he doesn't offer them anything.

Sally Helm: On July 31, Octavian’s troops are closing in on Alexandria. The following day, August 1,
Antony dons his armor and leads his men into battle. But within the day, his cavalry has deserted him. At
sea, his crews row out to meet Octavian’s and instead of ramming into them… they salute them. Antony
is defeated and alone.

When he returns to Alexandria, the city of marble, he hears a horrible rumor. He doesn’t know this, but it
was spread by his lover, Cleopatra herself.

Barry Strauss: She spreads the word that she's committed suicide. Why? To encourage him to
commit suicide.

Sally Helm: Wow. Okay. So, she at this point wants Antony outta the way.

Barry Strauss: Yeah. She wants him outta the way.

Sally Helm: So, he hears that she's dead. And then what does he do?

Barry Strauss: He tries to commit suicide. He gets his faithful slave to kill him, but his faithful
slaves says no way. I'll kill myself first. And he does. So now Antony has to fall on his sword.
Sounds better than it really is. Falling on your sword means basically opening up your gut, your
intestines spill out. He doesn't die. It's really painful.

Sally Helm: Meanwhile, Cleopatra’s not actually dead. Where is she?

Barry Strauss: No, no. She's gone to her mausoleum. So, she's built this fortress, a mausoleum come
fortress where she intends to hole up with her fortune and say to Octavian, give me what I want, or
I'll burn everything myself and everything. You'll get nothing.

Sally Helm: But for whatever reason, when Cleopatra hears what's happened to Antony, she tells him the
truth. And he comes to her.

Barry Strauss: And then there's this completely stunning scene where, the only way to get into the
mausoleum is to be hauled up on, well, kind of a construction apparatus. The mausoleum is being
built. It's not even completely built yet. So, her women supposedly haul him up to an upper
window. And Antony goes in, and he sees Cleopatra and he asks for some wine to deal with the pain
and he dies in his lover's arms.

Sally Helm: When Octavian enters Alexandria, he finds Antony dead, and Cleopatra mourning. He meets
with the great Egyptian queen, face to face. We'll never know quite what was said. But shortly after they
talk...Cleopatra, dressed in full royal regalia, is found dead.
Ancient sources say she dies by suicide. And that it involved a snake.

**Barry Strauss:** The story that everybody loves is that she smuggled in an asp to kill her in a basket of figs. Historians don't know what to do with this story. Do we believe it or not? I consulted a herpetologist who assured me that from the point of view of snakes, it's possible. Whether it really happened or not we don't know. There are even some historians who say ‘nonsense, none of it happened. Octavian killed her, and then he gives out this fairy story that she committed suicide,’ but I don't really believe that there's no evidence for that in the sources.

**Sally Helm:** If Cleopatra did take her own life, it might have been a matter of dignity. The queen herself said she didn't want to be trotted through Rome as a trophy. Or maybe she cut a deal with Octavian—I'll get out of the way if you take care of my children. And indeed, her children are brought to Rome and raised by, of all people…Mark Antony's widow. Octavia.

Octavia raises them, alongside five children of her own, and another of Antony’s kids. Meanwhile, her brother wastes no time in establishing his victory.

Before the month is over, Octavian has conquered Egypt. The Senate will soon give him a new title: "Augustus," or revered one.

**Sally Helm:** Remember, this was a war of east vs. west. And Antony's East loses. Which has far-reaching consequences.

**Barry Strauss:** If Antony and Cleopatra had won that day, the Roman empire would've looked eastward. Our culture would be a Greek speaking culture rather than a Latin speaking culture. Let us imagine that Christianity developed. We don't know if it would, but let's say it did. Latin Christianity wouldn't be the basis of Western Europe. It would be Orthodox. What if what is now Iraq had become part of the Roman empire? That would've been a very different world than the one we live in and our society, I think in many ways would be more Eastern than it is.

**Sally Helm:** It's possible too that the victory of a great queen might have changed things for the queens—and the other women—who came after.

**Barry Strauss:** If Antony and Cleopatra had won at Actium, the morays and culture of Egypt, which gave women more power certainly than Rome did, would've been more influential.

**Sally Helm:** And this certainly defined the way Cleopatra herself is remembered.

**Barry Strauss:** We don't have any friendly sources to Antony and Cleopatra. They lost; they didn't get to write the history. The other side got to write the history. So of course, they want to say Cleopatra was a coward and, just a, a flighty woman who couldn't stand and fight like a man. And she betrays her lover. Wouldn't you know it. In fact, she was a great queen in the mold of Elizabeth the first of England or Catherine the great of Russia. She's a stateswoman in the mold of Golda Meir or Margaret Thatcher or Indira Gandhi. That's the real Cleopatra. She's remembered in the east as a great administrator. And in the Muslim world, she's thought of as a virtuous scholar,
intellectual, a great Monarch. I think that's how Cleopatra would be remembered if she and Antony had won the battle.

[CREDITS]

Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guest today, Barry Strauss, author of *The War That Made the Roman Empire: Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian at Actium*.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O’Grady and Jimmy Gutierrez, and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our intern is Francesca Mevs. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

Don’t forget to subscribe, rate, and review HISTORY This Week wherever you get your podcasts, and we’ll see you next week!