Document E: Scholarly Journal

The excerpt below is from an article on Cleopatra’s death published in 2005 in Acta Theologica, a South African journal that publishes articles on religion and theology.

One scholar has argued convincingly that the snakebite theory is unlikely. Various North African snakes could have been used. However, in the case of each of these species the area surrounding the bite is characterized by severe pain, swelling and bleeding. Cleopatra had no significant bite marks. On the other hand, if the snake were a cobra, a small bite could swiftly lead to paralysis and death. However, in order to bring about the speedy deaths of three adults, the cobra would have had to be at least 5 to 6.5 feet in length. Another scholar thinks the snakebite theory could have originated as a result of popular misunderstanding at the time of Octavian’s victory parade through Rome. An image of Cleopatra was displayed in the procession, wearing the robes of Isis and with the goddess’s traditional armlet (a coiled snake) on her forearm. Roman spectators ignorant of Egyptian religious symbolism might have interpreted this as suggesting that her death had been caused by a snake. There is also a possibility that Cleopatra and her handmaidens could have died of poison hidden in a hollow hairpin. A very deadly poison, taken first by Cleopatra and then by Charmian and Iras, could then explain how they died so swiftly and without any wounds. In many ways this simpler explanation is more acceptable than the exotic theories concerning snakebite. The Egyptian royal house was probably well-informed about the effects of various poisons. Roman authors claimed that Cleopatra had a superior knowledge of poison and its effect on human victims.