

Mask of Cleopatra

Description: a half-face 'mask' made up of delicate golden wires supporting a clear blue crystal. Despite its appearance, the Mask is incredibly durable; it also does not particularly obscure the face. Oddly, most people seem to forget fairly quickly that the bearer of the Mask *is* actually wearing it, as it more or less just seems to fit the face. Only women may wear the Mask of Cleopatra; well, men can wear it, but they get no benefit from doing so.

And you're thinking of the wrong Cleopatra, actually. Maybe. The nature of the Mask obscures the issue. The Mask of Cleopatra was originally owned by Cleopatra Eurydice (henceforth to be known as 'Cleopatra-Prime'), one of the many wives of Philip II of Macedon, and -- according to some fragmentary and frankly dubious records -- supposedly destined to produce a child who would conquer the world. Which is why Philip's wife Olympias had Cleopatra-Prime's kids' murdered; if anybody was going to conquer the world, it would be Olympias's child Alexander. Cleopatra-Prime committed suicide, the board was cleared, Alexander still failed to conquer the planet, drop curtain.

However! It turns out that Cleopatra-Prime was also an alchemist. One of the greats, in fact; she had already discovered the Philosopher's Stone when most of her peers were still working out that breathing quicksilver fumes was not particularly wise, and when it became clear that her days were numbered it was a relatively trivial exercise for her to craft a mystic crystalline structure that could absorb the peculiar vibrations of her life essence. Which means, essentially: magic soul-holding jewel.

The Mask that said jewel was attached to ended up in Egypt, in the court of Ptolemy I, and ended up being worn more or less constantly by various Eurydices, Bernices, and Cleopatras for the next three centuries. It's not, strictly speaking, a cursed item. The women who wore it retained their own wills. But they also tended to be influenced by the Mask, taking on some of its accumulated assumptions and attitudes in the process (and adding their own to its core personality). It's unclear whether the Mask encouraged the Ptolemaic dynasty's habit of reusing names and marrying siblings, or whether that habit happened to effectively hide the Mask's existence. Either way, it worked fairly effectively; aside from a certain willingness to treat various Cleopatras as if they were mystical beings, most of Egypt seemed to largely overlook the existence of the Mask of Cleopatra.

Ironically, Cleopatra VII -- who *is* the Cleopatra that you're thinking of -- did not like to wear the Mask, as by then it rather pointedly reminded her of her ancestors. Which is a particular burden when you're the heir to a royal dynasty whose three principal amusements were either to marry close relatives, poison them, or do both. The advice the Mask gave Cleopatra VII was useful enough, but the Mask could never get a feel for the relative simplicity of Rome, and eventually Cleopatra got rid of it -- which is probably why the Mask survived, ironically. Augustus Caesar was a thorough sort of fellow, when it came to eliminating real threats to his rule.

Honestly, the loss of the Mask probably did not make much difference to Cleopatra VII's fate, either way. But still, being owned by *that* Cleopatra imbued the Mask with a perceived esoteric significance that was no less accurate for being essentially given by mistake. It's only rarely shown up since the days of Caesar (there's a Saint Cleopatra from the Fourth Century AD who showed signs of having some sort of power), and has sometimes spent decades in various museums or collections. However, once someone did decide to steal it, she invariably found that it was easy to purloin. Guards really do not notice

when somebody walks off with the Mask on her face; it's a flat-out supernatural event, and that's that.

So what's the Mask of Cleopatra like today? Largely, it likes peace and quiet. It's got an impressive amount of casual scholarship locked up inside its 'brain,' which can make it and its wearer a very useful font of information (and nonsense, and trivia, and superstition, and pseudo-science). Modern wearers of the Mask thus tend towards academia, when they're not actually occultists. Those are fields where having a mystical device that can give you a bunch of helpful hints about the past can do a lot for your career.

One other note, though; the Mask has been an alchemical artifact since the beginning, and even non-chemists who wear it soon pick up the basics. Which includes a working knowledge of how to make a remarkable number of poisons, with a widely useful range of effects. As noted before, the Ptolemaic dynasty was not exactly the nicest family in the world to be born into.

- © Moe Lane. All rights reserved.
- <http://www.moelane.com>
- <https://www.patreon.com/MoeLane?ty=h>