

Hypatia, Lady Philosopher of Alexandria

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The Legend

I first came across Hypatia's story in 1980 when I attended Judy Chicago's groundbreaking feminist art exhibit "The Dinner Party." Chicago and her team selected thirty-nine subjects for an elaborate dinner party, where each "guest" (including several goddesses) was honored for her contributions to womankind with a specially designed plate and table runner. In the accompanying book, Hypatia is described as "a Roman scholar and philosopher who lived in Alexandria...she stressed the importance of goddesses and the feminine aspects of culture." The article decries the pagan woman's death at the hands of a Christian mob.

I was hooked -- caught up in the romanticism and inherent drama of Hypatia's life. What I didn't realize was that many of the "facts" in this story were wrong. I embarked on a journey to learn as much as I could about this fascinating woman and found a bewildering array of fact and fiction. The primary historical record is sketchy. No letters from, or writing by, Hypatia exist. Socrates Scholasticus' 5th Century ecclesiastical history gives an account of her death. Most of what we know comes from the surviving letters of one of her former students, Synesius of Cyrene and later Bishop of Ptolemais.

These and a few other fragmentary sources became the basis of a fantastic body of literature developed during the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Many authors and historians resurrected Hypatia's story and began the legend of the beautiful young pagan scholar murdered by Christian monks in Alexandria. In 1720, John Toland, a zealous Protestant, wrote a historical essay with the unwieldy title of *Hypatia, or the History of a Most Beautiful, Most Virtuous, Most Learned and in Every Way Accomplished Lady; Who was Torn to Pieces by the Clergy of Alexandria, to Gratify the Pride, Emulation and Cruelty of the Archbishop, Commonly but Undeservedly Titled St. Cyril*. Voltaire, Fielding, and Gibbon also came to the defense of the "young lady of greatest beauty and merit," primarily as a way of castigating the Catholic Church. The Church fought back by publishing *The History of Hypatia, a Most Impudent School-Mistress. In Defense of Saint Cyril and the Alexandrian Clergy from the Aspersion of Mr. Toland*.

The nineteenth century saw the emphasis shift to Hypatia's death as a symbol of the passing of an age. She inspired French poets, Italian writers, and English historians to rhapsodize over her beauty, intelligence, and pureness of spirit. In their minds Hypatia's death marked the end of a golden age of Greek civility, culture, and learning to which the authors longed to return. In 1853, the British author Charles Kingsley published a highly romanticized version of Hypatia's life in a novel titled *Hypatia or the New Foes with an Old Face*. When I blew the dust off the copy in my local library I found he described Hypatia as having "the spirit of Plato and the body of Aphrodite." He claimed she died in her twenties and the Dark Ages immediately fell on Europe.

In the twentieth century, feminists laid claim to Hypatia's story, seeing her murder as a misogynist act -- Hypatia, who advised governors and taught future bishops, was silenced because she was a woman. Sorting through the hyperbole of Protestants, Catholic apologists, and modern feminists I had more questions than answers. Who was this woman who inspired poets, artists, and writers across the ages?

- Did she die in her twenties, forties, or later?
- Did she actively promote pagan goddesses, not participate in religion, or was she secretly a Christian?
- Was she a virgin, a "free spirit" or married to a fellow philosopher, as some claimed?
- Who killed her -- the ambitious Patriarch Cyril, rampaging monks, or a suspicious mob?
- Why did she die -- because she was a pagan, because she was a woman or for some other reason?
- Did her death in 415 end of the Age of Reason and herald the Dark Ages?

I despaired of piecing together the puzzle until 1995 when Harvard University Press published a slim translation of *Hypatia of Alexandria* by Maria Dzielska, a Polish classical scholar. She did a masterful job of marshalling the scant primary sources to give me a glimpse of the real woman behind the historical and literary myths. Christopher Haas in *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* filled in many of the blanks about the city and its politics during Hypatia's time.

A More Likely Truth

Dzielska believes Hypatia was born around 355 AD, though some put her birth year at 370. She bases her analysis on records concerning Hypatia's father Theon and the common sense assumption that she was probably older than her students for whom there are some firm dates regarding birth and when they studied with Hypatia. When she died in 415, she was probably about sixty years old. Hypatia was a resident of Alexandria, from a prominent Greek family and probably never left the city. Theon was a well-known scientist, a member of the Museum, a writer, and philosopher interested in Hermetic and Orphic texts. His scholarship and Hypatia's centered on important Alexandrine mathematicians and astronomers.

Although known as a mathematician and astronomer, Hypatia's first love was philosophy. The correspondence of her former student Bishop Synesius provides us with some insight into her passion. Students from wealthy and influential families in Egypt, Syria, Cyrene, and Constantinople came to Alexandria to study privately with Hypatia. Many of them later attained high posts in government and the Church. Hypatia and her students formed a community based on the Platonic system of thought and interpersonal ties. Synesius called the knowledge passed on to them by their "divine guide" mysteries. They refused to share these mysteries with people of lower social rank, whom they regarded as incapable of comprehending divine and cosmic matters. Hypatia's private classes and

public lectures took place either at her house (where they sometimes attracted large crowds of admirers) or in the city's lecture halls.

Hypatia participated in the activities of the city, advising both municipal and visiting imperial officials on current issues. The primary sources indicate she possessed great moral authority and that she was a model of ethical courage, righteousness, truthfulness, civic devotion, and intellectual prowess. This manifested in sexual abstinence, modest dress, moderate living, and a dignified attitude toward her students and men in power.

The last three years of her life were a highly charged time in the city. A new imperial Prefect named Orestes came to Alexandria and shortly afterwards the Patriarch Theophilus died leaving the church in the hands of his young and inexperienced nephew Cyril. Cyril wanted personal power and diligently pursued an agenda of ecclesiastical encroachment on secular prerogatives. Orestes resisted. Hypatia tried to mediate in this conflict between the new Patriarch and the Prefect but she was perceived as partisan by the ecclesiastical set. Hypatia came down on the side of traditional Greek values - discourse over violence, tolerance over bigotry, secular authority over religious authority. Cyril faced a Prefect backed by an experienced woman with considerable authority, extensive influence, and the courage of her convictions. In addition, through her influential disciples, she might win support for Orestes among people close to the emperor. This aroused fear and consternation among Cyril's supporters.

The conflict reached alarming proportions in 414-415. Orestes doggedly resisted Cyril's attempts to encroach upon civil power. He remained intransigent even when Cyril tried to make peace. Rebuffed by the Prefect, the Patriarch felt threatened, and people from various groups connected with the Church decided to aid him. Monks assaulted and badly injured Orestes and the Prefect had the leader tortured to death. Cyril tried to make the man into a martyr, but local leaders and ultimately the Emperor did not condone the monks' attack on the imperial representative and Cyril had to back off. His adherents blamed Hypatia for the Prefect's resistance and skillfully spread rumors that she studied magic and cast a satanic spell on the prefect and the entire city.

The struggle between the Patriarch and the Prefect over political power ended in Hypatia's death. Churchmen leading a superstitious mob grabbed Hypatia out of her chariot and brutally murdered her, hacking her body apart and burning the pieces outside the city walls. This political assassination eliminated a powerful supporter of the imperial Prefect. Orestes gave up his struggle against the Patriarch and left Alexandria. The city councilors attempted to curb Cyril's influence by petitioning the Emperor, but he remained eerily silent on the subject of Hypatia's death. No attempt was made to apprehend the murderers. The ecclesiastical faction effectively pacified the city and ruled with little or no interference from future imperial appointees.

In Conclusion

Dzielska's work put Hypatia's story in perspective for me. Rather than seeing her life and death as a feminist metaphor, it became real. Hypatia was a remarkable woman willingly

engaging in the politics of the time, who ran afoul of others' personal ambition and criminal intent. Her tragic flaw, in the literary sense, was her disengagement from the ordinary people of her city. She existed in an ivory tower and seemed to have little understanding of their violent possibilities as related to her own person. Hypatia was human, living in a milieu of very recognizable human emotions. Her story resonates with modern themes of raw power, political ambition, and the violent reactions of a disenfranchised population.

In my novel, I created a fictional protagonist (Selene, a young female student) because I needed characters that could move in all circles of Alexandrine life, which Hypatia did not. Selene, her family, friends, and servants have to live in the world Hypatia, Orestes, and Cyril make. They experience directly the affects of the decisions of those in power -- for good or ill. My fictional characters are the mirrors which reflect my vision of this history. But by their very nature, mirrors distort. I tried to be true to the facts as I know them, but like all authors, I have my own biases and baggage.

Bringing Hypatia's story to the written page was a fascinating experience. I wanted to do right by my subject and her life and was never satisfied with the sketchy facts that were generally available to non-classical readers. I am greatly in debt to Maria Dzielska for her fine book, which allowed me to write, what I believe to be, an essentially accurate story.

*Author's note: Portions of this essay appeared in "[My Hunt for Hypatia: Lady Philosopher of Alexandria](#)" in *Bygone Days*, 2002. You can access my research bibliography [here](#).*