

2008

Hypatia of Alexandria 360(?) - 415 CE

John Thorp

The University of Western Ontario, jthorp@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/philosophypres>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Citation of this paper:

Thorp, John, "Hypatia of Alexandria 360(?) - 415 CE" (2008). *Philosophy Presentations*. 7.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/philosophypres/7>

Hypatia of Alexandria

360(?) - 415 CE

Who was she?

Hypatia is a figure who glimmers enticingly through the mists of time. We know that her reputation in late antiquity was huge; we know that she was renowned as a scholar, a mathematician, a teacher, and a public figure in her native Alexandria -- all of these accomplishments seem scarcely possible for a woman at this time. We know that, as a teacher, she gave public lectures to large audiences, but she also attracted many students from all over the Eastern Empire to work more closely with her -- and though she was herself a Pagan, these students came from both Christian and Pagan families. We know that she lived in the decades when Christianity in Egypt was sweeping away the grandeurs of pagan culture -- the temples, the Museum, the Library. We know that, in the year 415, she was attacked and *flayed alive* by a gang of Christian monks -- perhaps with the connivance of archbishop Cyril of Alexandria. We know this outline of her striking story -- but we know hardly any details.

Her death

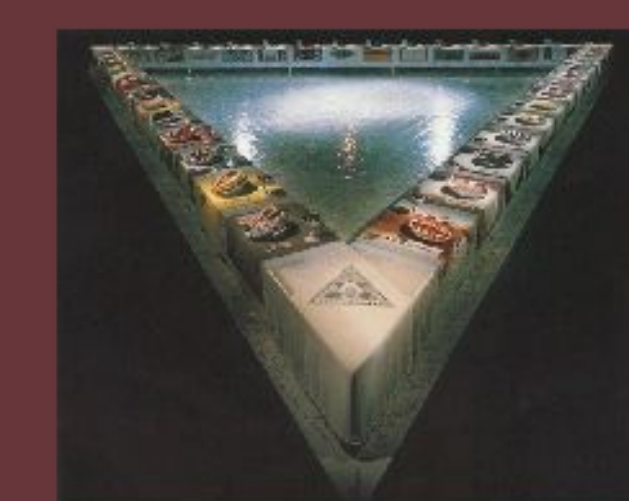
Here is the account of her assassination by the 5th c. church historian Socrates Scholasticus:

"[the monks] waylaid her returning home, and dragging her from her carriage, they took her to the church called Caesareum, where they completely stripped her, and then murdered her with sharp tiles. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them."



Erasure

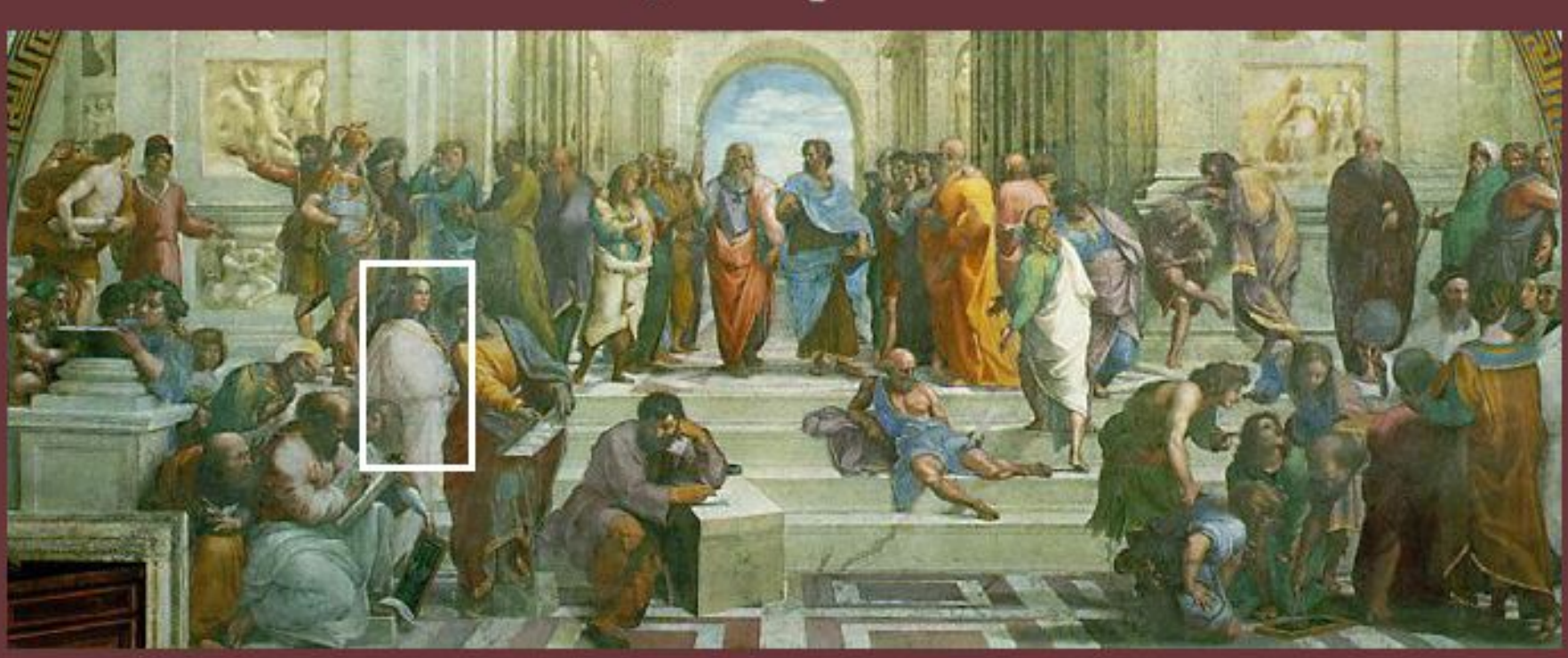
It is surprising that such a striking figure should have left so little imprint on our art and culture. There are some 17th c. tracts, some Victorian novels, the late 19th c. painting by C.W. Mitchell (previous pane), and a few modest engravings. More recently she has had a revival, finding a place at Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, and lending her name to a scholarly journal of feminist thought. Why, one wonders, has she had such a slight presence in our art? A story that is told about the painter Raphael suggests an answer...



Hypatia's plate at Judy Chicago's Dinner Party



... when Raphael brought his cartoon of the *School of Athens* to a Vatican prefect for approval, he was asked who the woman was on the lower left. Raphael answered that it was "Hypatia, the most famous student of the School of Athens". The prefect replied, "Remove her. Knowledge of her runs counter to the belief of the faithful! Otherwise, the work is acceptable". Raphael obeyed, but slyly kept the reference to Hypatia by placing the likeness of the pope's effeminate nephew, Francesco Maria della Rovere, in the picture.



The Sources

None of Hypatia's writings, it would seem, has survived. There are, essentially, four sources from Late Antiquity which give us information about Hypatia (in descending date):

- (i) John, Bishop of Nikiu, wrote a history of the Coptic Church in the 7th century, in which there is a brief but unflattering section on Hypatia. He notes that she made astrolabes and instruments of music, and he accuses her of practicing magic.
- (ii) A series of short but divergent accounts bearing the name of Damascus, a philosopher who lived within a century of Hypatia. The authenticity of these texts is highly suspect.
- (iii) A chapter of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus, who wrote in Constantinople within a couple of decades of Hypatia's death. He is broadly laudatory of her, and critical of Archbishop Cyril and the unruly Alexandrian Christians.

Synesius of Cyrene

iv) Synesius, Bishop of Cyrene, c. 370 - 414 CE is in many ways the most interesting and the most reliable source. He had been Hypatia's student, and his extant writings include a body of some 150 letters, some of them addressed to Hypatia herself. He is the only source to have had first-hand knowledge of Hypatia. Unhappily, since he died several years before her, he can tell us nothing of the turbulent events leading to her death. But for background, for a picture of the times, his testimony is unsurpassed.



Three questions

Entrancing though the subject is, it is likely that we shall never know the details behind Hypatia's cruel death. But her story presents a number of other questions of a more general kind with which we might perhaps be able to make some headway:

- i) What did she write? On what was her huge reputation as a scholar and philosopher based?
- ii) What was her "line" as a teacher: how did she manage to be such an inspiring figure to so many and such varied students?
- iii) In particular, how did she manage to attract both Christian and Pagan students -- at a time when the two systems were so much at loggerheads?

(i) Her writing

It was long thought that all of Hypatia's works were lost -- though some of their titles are known, and they are pretty terrifying: a commentary on Diophantus' *Arithmetica*, an edition of Ptolemy's *Enchiridion*, and a commentary on the *Conic Sections* of Apollonius of Perga: arcane works in mathematics and astronomy. Such a pity that they are lost!

In the last couple of decades this matter has been reassessed by scholars, who now think that Hypatia's commentaries were interwoven into the texts of these works by the vagaries of manuscript copying -- with the result that we in fact possess most of what she wrote, though it has to be extricated from these texts: it has to be *de-interpolated*.

And the critical judgment is negative: her contribution was expository and elementary, rather than original or profound. She was not a mathematician but a math teacher.

This is a pretty shocking discovery.

(ii) Her *line*

As one reads the letters of Synesius one begins to glimpse the nature of the studies through which her coterie of students were led: it was largely mathematical and physical. Synesius speaks of 'divine geometry'; he speaks of astronomy and astronomical implements. There is evidence of her interest in music, and music in antiquity was understood as a mathematical study. In a word, she taught the *quadrivium*: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. These are hard-edged subjects, in which progress is palpable, and which afford a rush of adrenalin as one completes a proof or solves a problem.

But it is likely that she set these studies within a broad platonic framework, suggesting that they are merely propaedeutic to a greater and more mystical study. Synesius writes that astronomy opens up the way to 'ineffable theology'. Her students knew the thrill of mathematics, they had a palpable sense of intellectual progress, and they understood themselves to be embarked on the greatest science of all: natural theology.

(iii) Reconciling Christians & Pagans

Synesius, too, helps us to understand how it could be that Hypatia attracted both Pagan and Christian students. In a letter to his brother as he is about to accept -- with great reluctance -- the call to be bishop of Ptolemais, he explains that he makes a distinction between the mythological part of Christianity and the real truth behind the mythology. He is willing to preach the mythology, but he regards it, in true Platonic tradition, as a *noble lie*: a falsehood which it is good for the people to believe.

Surely this is the key to understanding Hypatia's mysterious draw: she taught that the truths of Christianity and Paganism were the same; they differed only in their mythologies, the false parts! Those with esoteric philosophical knowledge are able to grasp this coincidence of truths; it is the ignorant and vulgar, those who have only a superficial religious understanding, who think that the two religions are in conflict.

Summary

Hypatia was arguably the first woman academic of the western tradition. Though there had been other women who were philosophers and intellectuals, she is the first in whom we can see the three elements of the life of the modern academic: teaching (both in large lectures and in more intimate work with "graduate" students), research and writing, and service -- she played a leading role in the life of the city.

Her writings, we now know, were elementary and expository rather than original and profound. Her teaching appears to have been essentially the *quadrivium*, enriched with Platonic notions of natural theology; moreover she will have appeared as a peacemaker in the great conflict of the age, that between Christianity and Paganism.

It was perhaps inevitable that she would fall victim to those religious forces that preferred war and conquest to peace and reconciliation.

A final twist



How, one might wonder, is it possible that such an unforgettable figure can have been so largely forgotten by western intellectual history? How can her memory have been so thoroughly erased?

It may not have been. It is now commonly thought that the popular Christian saint, Catherine of Alexandria -- the patron saint of philosophers -- was not a historical figure, but simply a Christian reworking of the popular memory of Hypatia. A Pagan martyred by Christians, she is remembered as a Christian martyred by Pagans.