



Hypatia of Alexandria

Maria Dzielska , F. Lyra (Translator)

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Hypatia--brilliant mathematician, eloquent Neoplatonist, and a woman renowned for her beauty--was brutally murdered by a mob of Christians in Alexandria in 415. She has been a legend ever since. In this engrossing book, Maria Dzielska searches behind the legend to bring us the real story of Hypatia's life and death, and new insight into her colorful world.

Historians and poets, Victorian novelists and contemporary feminists have seen Hypatia as a symbol--of the waning of classical culture and freedom of inquiry, of the rise of fanatical Christianity, or of sexual freedom. Dzielska shows us why versions of Hypatia's legend have served her champions' purposes, and how they have distorted the true story. She takes us back to the Alexandria of Hypatia's day, with its Library and Museion, pagan cults and the pontificate of Saint Cyril, thriving Jewish community and vibrant Greek culture, and circles of philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers, and militant Christians. Drawing on the letters of Hypatia's most prominent pupil, Synesius of Cyrene, Dzielska constructs a compelling picture of the young philosopher's disciples and her teaching. Finally she plumbs her sources for the facts surrounding Hypatia's cruel death, clarifying what the murder tells us about the tensions of this tumultuous era.

Hypatia of Alexandria Details

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From Reader Review Hypatia of Alexandria for online ebook

Yanper says

?να βιβλ?ο που ε?χε πολ? λ?γα στοιχε?α για την Υπατ?α και με τ?ποτα δεν ανταποκρ?νεται στον τ?τλο. Το μ?νο που ?χει σε αφθον?α ε?ναι ον?ματα, και ε?ναι τ?σο πολλ? που μερικ?ς στιγμ?ς αισθ?νεσαι ?τι διαβ?ζεις τηλεφωνικ? κατ?λογο!

Madeline says

A really interesting and informative book about Hypatia. It discusses the mysteries that shroud her life, as well as the known facts. Highly recommend for those interested in antiquity and women in history.

Charles says

Hypatia, the woman philosopher/mathematician of the Fifth Century A.D., is a caricature with little or no grounding in reality. For example, in the 2009 film “Agora,” she is portrayed as the youthful originator of heliocentrism, killed by ignorant Christians opposed to science, who for good measure burn down the famous Library of Alexandria, of which Hypatia was Librarian. None of this is true in any way, of course, although it fits the modern liberal desire to contemptuously dismiss Christians and Christianity and to assign historical importance based on identity, rather than accomplishment.

As it happens, denigrating Christians by mischaracterizing Hypatia isn’t just a modern liberal desire. The use of a fictional Hypatia in this program began more than two hundred years ago, most notably with Gibbon’s “Decline And Fall,” where a fictional Hypatia is used in service of Gibbon’s theory that Christianity destroyed the strong and thriving Roman Empire. Since then, variations on this theme have been modestly common in Western writers, although the additional use of Hypatia as a pawn in the identity politics wars is new. (There were quite a few women intellectuals, philosophers and writers of some note in the Classical world, Christian and non-Christian, but that is usually ignored by those attempting to impute universal misogyny to our Christian ancestors in service of modern politics.)

Hypatia, though, unlike most exemplars used in identity politics, actually was very accomplished, and recognized as such in her time. Maria Dzielska’s “Hypatia Of Alexandria” is a short academic history, from 1995. It is not an entry in the identity politics wars; it is not a political book at all. It is a technical examination of what is really known about Hypatia, drawing on the handful of contemporaneous resources, and an attempt to harmonize the differences in those sources into a coherent picture of Hypatia’s time, life and death.

Dzielska’s book divides her treatment into three sections. She begins by outlining and rejecting the “literary Hypatia.” She finds no example of any literary treatment of Hypatia in the past two centuries that bears anything but a tenuous, if that, relationship to the truth, to the extent the truth is known. If “Agora” had come out before this book was published, Dzielska would doubtless have cast a jaundiced eye on it, as well. Such literary treatments include Gibbon, Voltaire, and numerous less famous writers, all of whom either created or embellished a story not based on history, revolving around a supposed beautiful young pagan philosopher,

the last line of defense of Greek philosophy and thought, hater of Christianity, opposed to Christian irrationality and obscurantism, and murdered by the Christians as a result. All of this is made up out of whole cloth, as Dzielska notes.

In the second section, Dzielska digs deep into the source material to understand the milieu in which Hypatia lived and worked. Alexandria was one of the chief cities of the Roman Empire, sufficient to itself, such that Hypatia (and her also-famous father, Theon) never once left it. Dzielska closely parses the letters of Synesius of Cyrene, a disciple of Hypatia (and later a bishop), with their numerous references to other disciples of Hypatia. She also analyzes and compares the other primary sources, all of whom were somewhat hostile to Hypatia: Damascius, the pagan Neoplatonist philosopher of Athens; Socrates Scholasticus, a Christian writer of a church history that discusses Hypatia; and John of Nikiu, a later Christian writer. The analysis turns on careful reading of each writer in context, made deeper by cross-referencing other known facts that illuminate what is said about Hypatia and her circle. Through this analysis, Dzielska examines and attempts to view as clearly as possible not only Hypatia's thought, acts and writings, but also the characteristics of her disciples.

Hypatia, and her circle of disciples, were upper-class elitists devoted to the life of the mind and the Platonic contemplation of knowledge. They were not populists and they occupied leading positions in city life. They were heavily involved in patronage networks to obtain advantage for other upper-class acquaintances and friends. They were not theurgists (i.e., interested in ritual magic), even though other philosophers and Hypatia's father were. (In Classical times, the lines blurred among philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers, astrologers, theurgists and so forth, but each individual tended to focus on one area.) They were not involved in any way in the debates among pagans and Christians; in fact, Hypatia's students included many Christians, including a deacon, and there does not appear to have been any concern about that. Finally, although Hypatia was heavily involved in mathematics and astronomy, sometimes in conjunction with her father, these were not her prime focus, which was pure philosophy and the attainment of Platonic enlightenment (to which end she and her circle were somewhat secretive of their learning, fearing that it might be sullied if exposed to the uninitiated). She therefore did not create any new advancements in philosophy, mathematics or any other area, but instead taught the teachings of and commented on earlier writers such as Plato, Ptolemy (whose earth-centered universe she wholly endorsed) and Diophantus (the founder of algebra, if there was one specific person who founded it).

Finally, Dzielska discusses the specifics of Hypatia's life and death. She concludes Hypatia was about 65 when she died, in 415 A.D. She was killed by a mob acting in the perceived interest of Cyril, the recently elected archbishop of Alexandria. Prior to that time, Hypatia had had an excellent relationship with the Church authorities, in the person of Theophilus, the previous archbishop. Cyril, a hard and power-hungry man (though a canonized saint in the Roman Catholic Church), was in a political conflict with Orestes, the recently appointed prefect of Alexandria (i.e., the representative of civilian Imperial power). Hypatia, well-connected to the upper classes throughout the city, was a supporter of Orestes and the upper classes generally in this struggle. Orestes had ostensibly more political power, but Cyril had plenty of allies, many among the lower classes, who saw Hypatia's alliance with Orestes as an obstacle to getting rid of him.

Therefore, Orestes's enemies spread rumors that Hypatia was an idolater and sorceress (not a pagan, which everybody knew and nobody cared). These rumors were aided by her (dead) father's known theurgical tendencies and her close relationship with her father. This whipped up the lower classes against Hypatia, who was already regarded as a member of the elite and no friend of the common people. Then a political assassination of Hypatia was planned and executed, involving a political riot (common in Alexandria) and the dismemberment and burning of Hypatia. The act was probably done by the hired young thugs of the cathedral guard (not by monks—although those had earlier attacked Orestes). The murder was well planned and had its desired political effect: Orestes left, never to be heard from again, and Cyril (who may not have

known of the plan at all, but, like Henry II in his struggle with Thomas Becket, probably desired the effect) acceded to the main political power in the city.

Such political assassinations are, of course, common throughout history, up to the present day (just ask Hugo Chavez, if you can find him among the plumes of sulfur, or Vladimir Putin). This was not at all a struggle between pagans and Christians. Both Cyril and Orestes were very much Christian, and Hypatia not only took no part or position in, but was not affected in any way by, Cyril's earlier suppression of the pagans and their cult center at the Serapeum (which was not the Library—that had likely been destroyed by Julius Caesar, with the destruction completed under Aurelian, both accidentally). In fact, Alexandrian mobs had earlier murdered two separate Christian bishops in a manner similar to how Hypatia was murdered, so there was actually nothing unique about her murder.

Dzielska shows that most accepted facts about Hypatia are wrong. She wasn't a pagan in the sense of polytheist; philosophers who were pagan in that sense joined the Alexandrian mini-civil war that ended in the sacking of Serapeum, and had already all been killed or exiled. Instead, she was a Platonist philosopher, attempting "to achieve religious experience as the ideal of philosophy," and not interested at all in religious struggles. Misogyny had little or nothing to do with her death; men also died in similar ways in similar political struggles. Nor did Hypatia's death mark in any way the passing of the Classical world, as Gibbon would have it. Neoplatonist philosophy continued thereafter, as did paganism. And, of course, Christianity in the Classical world, as later, was not at all opposed to science and philosophy—the vast majority of scientific advances prior to the Industrial Age were made by avowed Christians, in medieval times mostly under the aegis and financial support of the Church.

Hypatia's death didn't mean anything at all, really, any more than the death of Archimedes at the hands of Roman soldiers at Syracuse did. All people die; some accomplish more than others before it happens to them. And although it may not be kind to say so, Hypatia created nothing new and did not advance human knowledge, although she undoubtedly was an excellent teacher of the work of others, and her students were devoted to her. Her work was purely derivative of the work of others; she made no advances in any area in which she studied, nor did she invent any scientific instruments, despite laughable claims she invented the astrolabe and the hydrometer. Bluntly, nobody at all would remember her except as an obscure figure, any more than hundreds of other known people of similar accomplishments, had she not been a woman and her manner of death gruesome and endlessly fascinating to later writers. But whatever the reason, we do remember her, such that Hollywood makes major movies about her, and this book is an excellent summation of what we actually know about her, in contradiction to what is normally said about her.

Shaun says

Yet another instance of what happens when a 'hard-lining' ecclesiastical minority infringes upon the Rights of others - leading to an iconoclastic destruction of Libraries, Monuments and Religiously-fueled violence (including antisemitism) . . .

Hypatia of Alexandria (ca. 350-415 ce) was an innocent women who was caught in this turmoil and suffered mutilation at the hands of an angry mob - instigated by the Archbishop, Cyril.

It was Cyril who had started the accusations that Hypatia practiced "black magic" and used his Patriarch Guards (Parabolans) to disperse this slander among the Urban mob, with the aim of formenting prejudice and animosity against Hypatia.

Of course this "black magic" was just a libel -

In actuality, Hypatia was a mathematician and Astronomical researcher, teaching in public (and in private) to Christians, Pagans and Jews alike.

This slander, leading to Hypatia's murder was in actuality a Political act . . .

The new Archbishop Cyril was fomenting a power struggle with the Alexandrian Imperial Governor Orestes, who had supported the Rights of minorities (Jews, Pagans, Christians) against the divisive provocations and fear mongering of Archbishop Cyril.

Politically Ambitious and religiously zealous, the 'reactionary' Archbishop Cyril seemed to waste no time in developing a political response that would increase tensions between the ecclesiastical and secular authorities.

Prefect Orestes more 'secularized' faction (Civitas Terrena) aroused trepidation among Cyril's adherents and other clergy members.

Coincidentally, Prefect Orestes had Hypatia as a Confidant or advisor, offering observations or opinions in civic and municipal matters.

Cyril was most likely envious of Hypatia's prestige among the ruling class (including the christian aristocracy).

Hypatia had authority and political connections which provided support for the representative of the state authority in Alexandria, who actively contended against Cyril and his sectarian encroachment upon the sovereignty of the secular affairs of civic power in order to aid his fight against Paganism.

It was this affront that gave Cyril what he needed to add to his lies that Hypatia had overwhelmed Prefect Orestes with her "black magic" and was thus malevolently influencing the Alexandrian Government

I greatly appreciated Maria Dzielska's monograph due to her scholarly dissection of the period in history, comparing and contrasting the primary historical sources in order to come up with the most accurate account of Hypatia, her students, the political climate and the cultural backdrop in which this episode took place...

A "period of waning free thought, Natural Reason and Freedom of Inquiry".

Dschreiber says

I liked this book, but readers should be aware from the beginning that it is not a biography. You do not get a continuous narrative of the life of Hypatia. In fact, that kind of biography is simply not possible, given the dearth of source material, and all the accounts you've seen of that sort are semi-fiction. What this book does is review all the source material we have, picking out what seems established as true, comparing different versions of stories, speculating on the most likely interpretations, searching out what is said or implied in people's letters, and so on. So it is far from being a riveting read. However, you go away with a better sense of what we know and what we don't know about this extraordinary woman, and you are better armed against believing everything you see in fiction about her. However many gaps there are in our knowledge of her, she remains a truly impressive historical figure.

Robin Rivers says

While the research done for this book is remarkable, bringing to light details of Hypatia's life that few have

revealed before, I rate this book right in the middle of the pack for one reason - the glaring and continued lack of even simple acknowledgement that Hypatia's status as a female philosopher of incredible rank and influence was otherwise unattainable by women within the ancient world.

The other substantial omission, which I have yet to find a scholar willing to address, is the absence of any reference to her mother. Other than debating the year of her birth, her maternal origins aren't even mentioned, much less examined.

That said, I recognize that a lack of historical records can account for an unwillingness of scholars to speculate on her mother. But, her position as a woman functioning within a blatantly patriarchal social, political and religious structure must be addressed for us to fully understand the implications of her death as well as her contributions to the sciences.

As I said, a well-researched book, written with a very critical eye assessing the available sources vs. past interpretations that I appreciate. But, the glaring omissions of a critical treatment related to her out-of-place rise to importance and her origins leaves me wanting with many questions about why that part of the research was not addressed.

Jack says

I picked up *Hypatia of Alexandria* after hearing about *Agora*, a film which made some waves at Cannes this year and should be showing on U.S. screens soon. It'll be interesting seeing the movie after reading this book, as director Alejandro Amenábar's Hypatia is exactly the type of literary Hypatia that Dzielska spends the first chapter of her book debunking.

This is a rather boring book about a really interesting subject. Hypatia, noted Alexandrian philosopher and mathematician of the fourth and fifth centuries, has variously been characterized as atheist, pagan, and consummate Neoplatonist. The causes and circumstances of her death at the hands of a Christian mob have been similarly obfuscated by a long series of historians and artists, each with their own agendas.

Dzielska goes deep into primary and secondary sources looking for answers, and what she comes back with is satisfying, if not terribly gripping. At the same time, she does a convincing job of not putting too much of her own spin on the topic. Unfortunately, Dzielska is mostly intent on arguing with other writers. The structure of her argument works against spinning a good yarn, and she puts in few or no details of what daily life in fourth century Alexandria was like.

This year's film Hypatia is a sensuous freethinker played by Rachel Weisz, a far cry from the virginal, sexagenarian Christian of history. Weisz in a philosopher's tribon should prove pretty easy on the eyes, but I don't know... Judy Dench might've been a much better choice.

S'hi says

A scholarly paper turned to book form, this helpful review of documents and literary references to Hypatia goes a long way to clearing the view of this remarkable woman. While the referencing makes it difficult to follow at times, the arguments set up for seeking a clearer idea of the potential for Hypatia to have been a

Christian herself, or just a learned woman exploring the range of ideas of those around her, are compelling. The sense that there were other women of the same name around in circles of influence as well, makes the importance of finding these threads and weaving each into their own design and shape even more important. There is such a cast of characters introduced as “Her Circle” in the second chapter, that it would have been helpful to be introduced to the setting of the time and places from which they came together. Working out the speculations from contemporary letters without this ground to anchor all the new information to makes it very difficult for those new to this area of study to gain a grip of the huge amount of information this scholar has at her disposal.

A chart of times, people and places may need to be constructed by the reader to gain a better perspective of how the material has been twisted to the use of later writers. Going through those writers and then back to the earlier sources is enticing for those who need deconstruction first. Might it be possible to find Hypatia’s own voice by taking a more direct route?

I find it curious that the letters of Synesius, one of Hypatia’s students who became a bishop of Cyrene, are considered so reliable a source. How is it possible that the words of this character to a whole range of other students - along with Hypatia herself and a number of others in those circles who may not have directly studied under her – can be in existence, yet most of those people do not have their own replies to Synesius in the historical record? Did Synesius keep copies of all the letters he wrote, or are they possible reconstructions of some kind, possibly even by his own hand, for some other purpose than giving a true and accurate account of the conversations he took part in at that time?

Politicians memoires are becoming quite common these days, and they are often questioned for their accuracy by contemporaries. Surely a top scholar would feel an obligation to ground this material adequately at the beginning of her argument as well.

I find this a very important work, but I would suggest there is much more to be done in this area, and my questions only begin to hint at what may be involved. Certainly well begun here.

Ted says

I read this book several years ago. It's not a long read, about 100 pages of text. It has a serviceable index, and quite a few notes. But the notes will not be useful to readers unless they read French, since they refer mostly to original documents and secondary documents written in French. In this sense it almost strikes one as an academic treatise.

Maria Dzielska claims that her book has corrected some distortions of the Hypatia story, as it has grown up in the west over the last few centuries:

... the dominant trend in the legend, the Enlightenment or rational current, which presented Hypatia as an innocent victim of a fanatical and predatory new religion. From Toland and Voltaire to contemporary feminists, Hypatia has become a symbol both of sexual freedom and of the decline of paganism - and, with it, the waning of free thought, natural reason, freedom of inquiry ... The legend will continue to unfold along its own course, according to tastes and fashions, as we can observe in the latest historical novels on Hypatia (Zitelmann, Ferretti, Marcel). For those who choose to restrict their focus to the actual historical sources, it is possible to sketch out a clear profile of Hypatia, undistorted by ahistorical idealization. We have established that Hypatia was born around A.D. 355, and not, as customarily held, around 370. When she died in 415 she was of an advanced age, around sixty years old. Thus there appears to be no legitimate support for the picture of Hypatia, at the hour of her horrid death, as a young girl, endowed with a body worthy of Aphrodite, provoking the murderers' sadism and

lust.

Professor Dzielska has surely studied what primary material there is, as well as a host of secondary literature, some dating back to the few centuries immediately following Hypatia's death.

There are three sections in the book.

The Literary Legend of Hypatia

This is a review of the Hypatia tradition which began in the eighteenth century, starting with John Toland in 1720, continuing with an essay by Voltaire in 1736, and then branching and accumulating through the years down to the present day. The historical novels mentioned above are *Hypatia* by Arnulf Zitelmann (1989); *Renaissance en Paganie* by Andre Ferretti (1987); and *Hypatie ou la fin des dieux* by Jean Marcel (1989).

Dzielska also mentions (p. 16) Hypatia's appeal to feminists, and cites two feminist journals that have taken her name: *Hypatia: Feminist Studies*, published in Athens since 1984, and *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, published at Indiana University since 1986. The latter is described at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypatia>.... . The first journal mentioned may no longer exist, I can't find reference to it.

Hypatia and Her Circle

This is a very interesting study of the place (as far as can be determined) that Hypatia held in the late fourth century group of Neo-Platonic teachers and philosophers. This is probably the most interesting section of the book for anyone interested in the history of Neo-Platonism. Dzeilska has clearly researched the primary sources very thoroughly, and tells what I would assume to be, or at least to *have* been when her book was published, the most well-supported view of Hypatia ever put forth.

The Life and Death of Hypatia

This section would be of most interest to a general reader. Here Dzeilska presents a short biography of Hypatia, and covers (with a combination of facts from primary source material, and deductions and inferences that can be made from this material) the circumstances of her death.

These threes sections are followed by a Conclusion, from which the above quotation is taken.

There is a nine page section on Sources, which is a discussion (not just a list) of both primary and secondary material. This section concludes with an interesting three page essay titled *Other Learned Women of Late Antiquity*. The most well-known and influential of these was a woman philosopher named Sosipatra, who lived in the first half of the fourth century, and taught in Pergamon. Dzeilska admits that many women philosophers and teachers from this era have left behind little but their names (mentioned in various texts), but she provide's interesting, though limited, information about several of them.

Following this are the notes and index, mentioned at the top of this review.

There is a long (30 minute) lecture by Professor Dzeilska about Hypatia on YouTube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydWyuP...>

Mariam says

This book is one of my pet peeves. As a work of "scholarship" it leaves so much to be desired it's almost intolerable. And to think it's basically the one non-fiction book out there people depend on. Depressing. Poor Hypatia.

El says

Hypatia has become a symbol for poets and feminists since her brutal attack and murder in 415 AD. She was a mathematician and a pagan philosopher with a large following. Dzeilska uses the few primary sources available for her small biography, but does not shed much light on Hypatia herself. Little is known about her personal life outside of her philosophies, and there is plenty of speculation about Hypatia's role in the culture of Alexandria. While married to the philosopher Isidore, Hypatia would have relations with other men, particularly the prefect Orestes. Rumor has it she was murdered because of this relationship and the rift their company created between the prefect and the archbishop, Cyril.

Dzeilska tries to give body and flesh to Hypatia but has little to work with here. She concludes that Hypatia was in her sixties when she was murdered by a Christian mob wielding broken pottery, and not the young woman that is often portrayed in illustrations. She does attempt to detail her role in the civilization, and explains the role of religion in both her relationships and in her ultimate downfall, but the information is sparse and not particularly interesting.

Trevor says

When my youngest daughter started high school they had to do this thing for SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment – I think it was what I used to call Geography and History, but such names had to be replaced as they were a complete give-away) called The Night of the Notables. Basically, the kids had to pick someone from history that they would like to dress up as and to prepare a very brief talk about. Maddy asked for my advice as she wanted to do a woman that was really impressive – I suggested Hypatia.

Now, Hypatia of Alexandria was nothing if not impressive – she is the patron saint of Agnostics, Enlightenment Types, female mathematicians and anyone else annoyed with the Christian Dark Ages. What I didn't know was that like the stories of most other Saints she was somewhat different in 'reality'.

The Myth:

Take a beautiful woman, and I'm talking seriously beautiful (body of Aphrodite is the phrase that is constantly used to describe her) and give her one of the finest minds of all time (she gets compared to Plato).

Then, just for good measure, make her the embodiment of most of the virtues, but mostly and most impressively (as everyone that meets her agrees) was her sophrosyne. No, I didn't know what it meant either, and it wasn't in either the Concise Oxford nor the Shorter Oxford. Answers dot com defines it as: "(Greek, self-control, temperance, soundness of mind) One of the cardinal virtues, consisting in a harmonious state of rational control of one's desires."

She was so beautiful and so intelligent that an early Christian Saint (Saint Cyril – I kid you not) felt intimidated by her and decided to get his band of cronies to kidnap her, drag her to a church, strip her naked and cut her to pieces with sharpened sea shells before bringing the bits of her body to the outskirts of the city to burn.

What better symbol do you need for the death of rational thought that was brought about by the conversion of antiquity to Christianity? Here is a Neo-Platonist, a mathematician, a scientist, a virgin, a follower of the Greek Gods (and she is hot), being viciously murdered by a bunch of fundamentalist Christian thugs hell bent on bringing down the shutters on the best of Greek thought and replacing it with their band of narrow-minded, closed-minded nonsense. "Boo, Boo, Hiss", said Voltaire, Gibbon and me. A hero of Western Science and Feminism is born.

The Reality:

Have you ever noticed how reality is never half as much fun as the myth? There are some little adjustments that need to be made to the standard myth in this case and this book does a good job in presenting its case – even convincing me, who really did want to believe all of this myth, to be honest.

The first problem with this myth is that the original sources do show that some of Hypatia's strongest followers and allies were Christians. So, the simple division of the world into Christians on one said and good guys on the other is a little difficult to sustain. The next problem is that she is a Neo-Platonist and so having her as the poster girl for the scientific team is obviously going to be a bit of a stretch.

She was a virgin and she probably was also very pretty – the story of one of her students falling in love with her (this was one of the stories that struck my daughter the most at the time) and her presenting him with her used sanitary napkin and saying that this is what he loved, not her true self is rehearsed here. That is the sort of story that would have Nietzsche jumping up and down saying, "See, see, I told you so!" Plato believed this world of appearances was degenerate and that one should reject the worldly pleasures in favour of the contemplative life. And while I do think there is a place for the contemplative life (which is particularly fun after sex, I find), I still do have problems with people who utterly reject sex. I think such absolute convictions mess with one's mind. Plato was very keen on this sort of thing - hence the phrase Platonic Love.

The other bit of the myth torn down here is how old Hypatia was. In the myth she is around 30 and, as I said, HOT. In fact, it now seems she was probably in her 60s. While being in your 60s is no reason to be stripped and murdered, it probably does somewhat diminish the erotic undertone to the story.

The rest of the myth doesn't actually seem to be too much of a myth. It seems she was brilliantly clever. There is reason to believe that the annotated versions of Ptolemy's works that are extant may well have been annotated by Hypatia. She had a clever father who, since he was a Neo-Platonist, educated her (Plato having famously been in favour of educating daughters – an interesting fact to remember when reading later philosophers who are generally excused of their sexism with reference to the age they lived in).

Her students seemed to have adored her. Not just the guy who ended up with her sanitary napkin, but some

of the smartest people in the city at the time begged for her attention and advice.

The problem, as is often the case, was political. When Cyril became patriarch he was less than the most popular choice for the job. He did the standard things Christians of the age did to become popular – he persecuted the local Jews, eventually kicking them all (or possibly only most) out of the city. This had a bad effect on the city’s economy and made the smart people of the city even more opposed to his remaining patriarch. One of these smart people was probably Hypatia who was less ‘other-worldly’ than she is often made out. Cyril was mostly opposed by Orestes and Orestes seems to have had his courage and arguments strengthened by Hypatia – her making the bullets and Orestes firing them. Cyril, or perhaps just his supporters, decided that getting Hypatia out of the picture was what was called for.

Because she was so interested in plotting the courses of the planets they decided she was a witch (always a good first guess) and so they started to spread rumours about her. Although she was greatly loved by the ruling classes of the city, she was to become a victim of that other obnoxious bit of Plato’s philosophy – that the only people who really matter are the elite. So, while she had lots of friends among the educated, the great unwashed didn’t really think much of her at all, and were more than happy to believe she was a witch. This grew, commands were given and then all smiles stopped together. It seems she was stripped, was cut to pieces and killed and then was burned by a Christian mob. If this was not done under Cyril’s direction, it was done for his advantage.

This book is an academic text and could have done with being re-drafted to tell the story in a bit more lively fashion. If you are thinking of reading this, you might just want to read the conclusion (a mere 6 pages) – which tells the story in a much more readable way than the book itself did. I found the book was just a bit too concerned with sources to be truly readable.

So, although there are some differences between the myth and the reality she is still one of my heroes and still deserves to be remembered. My daughter once told me she will think about naming a daughter Hypatia. And that is a pretty cool idea, if you ask me.

Snail in Danger (Sid) Nicolaides says

Unfortunately there is not much in the way of source material to base a life of Hypatia on. This seems so speculative that I’ve decided to give it a pass.

Alice Poon says

Several years ago I saw on TV the movie “Agora”, and ever since, the image of Hypatia, the legendary 4th century female scholar and philosopher of Alexandria, has left an indelible mark on my memory. I’m glad that I’ve finally got round to reading Maria Dzielska’s myth-dispelling account of Hypatia’s intellectual life and the times she lived in.

Relying on two ancient historical tomes (*Historia Ecclesiastica* by Socrates Scholasticus and *Suda*), plus a collection of correspondence kept by Synesius of Cyrene, who was a well-known disciple of Hypatia’s, the

author goes about reconstructing the life and achievements of this influential intellectual, who died a most gruesome death during Lent in 415 after taking a stand behind Prefect Orestes in his political duel with power-hungry Bishop Cyril.

The author also dispels a widespread myth that Hypatia was a youthful woman at the time of her death, and contends that she was around 60 years old at her life's violent end.

These passages sum up Hypatia's social and political situation in Alexandria before Cyril became Bishop:

"Esteemed by the ruling elite, sympathetic toward Christians, indifferent to pagan cults, neutral in the religious fights and altercations, she lived in Alexandria for many years enjoying the city's rulers' respect and her disciples' love..... Besides teaching ontology and ethics, Hypatia lectured on mathematics and astronomy."

"Hypatia herself, not needing to conceal her non-Christian religiosity, enjoyed full intellectual independence and the tolerance of the ecclesiastical authorities."

In conclusion, Dzielska states:

"Relying on the most important sources and their analysis, we may thus state unequivocally that the conflict between Orestes and Cyril was concluded in a manner and for a reason known and used for ages: murder for a political purpose..... They killed a person who was the mainstay of the opposition against him."

"Cyril undoubtedly presented the affair as a struggle against paganism (with such of its manifestation as magic and sorcery), as official church propaganda proclaimed after all."

"A cover-up campaign was orchestrated to protect the perpetrators, affiliated with the church, who murdered a person well disposed toward Christians. We contend against this silence when from the extant fragments we undertake to reconstruct the life and achievements of Hypatia."

Faith Justice says

This is an abbreviated version of a post on my blog titled: *Hypatia of Alexandria: Two Books*

In March AD 415, a Christian mob murdered Hypatia, the renowned Lady Philosopher of Alexandria. The vicious act shocked the city and shamed the early Church. Socrates Scholasticus tells the story in his Historia Ecclesiastica:

"...Hypatia, daughter of the philosopher Theon, who made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time...For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more. Yet even she fell a victim to the political jealousy which at that time prevailed. For as she had frequent interviews with Orestes, it was calumniously reported among the Christian populace, that it was she who prevented Orestes from being reconciled to the bishop. Some of them therefore, hurried away by a fierce and bigoted zeal, whose ringleader was a reader named Peter, 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 tiles. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them. This affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church. And surely nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort. This happened in the month of March during Lent, in the fourth year of Cyril's episcopate, under the tenth consulate of Honorius, and the sixth of Theodosius."

Since that time, only fragments about her life have come down to us; allowing poets, novelists, playwrights, scientists, feminists and religionists (both pro and anti) to appropriate her story for themselves. Hypatia's story has resonated down through the years, touching many people. She's a major character in my novel *Selene of Alexandria*, the subject of the recent movie *Agora* directed by Alejandro Amenabar, and she rated a plate in Judy Chicago's massive art piece *The Dinner Party*. She's the subject of plays, poetry, propaganda and new age pagan polemics. Her life is represented in art and music. But what do we really know about her? Not much.

Two scholars have attempted to pull the pieces together in book form in the last two decades: Maria Dzielska, a Polish classics scholar, with *Hypatia of Alexandria*; and mathematics professor Michael A.B. Deakin with *Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician and Martyr*. I've read both, several times, in my research and wanted to share my thoughts on the anniversary of Hypatia's death.

When I first got *Hypatia of Alexandria* in 1995, it was a godsend. I finally had a book that cut through the literary myth and put Hypatia's life in context. Dzielska divides her book into three main sections. The first deals with the literary legend of Hypatia; the second with Hypatia's students; and the third covers her life and death. I felt she did a Herculean job of sorting through the myths and legends; and showing the political and artistic roots of some of the best known novels and plays. But it was in interpreting the primary sources, and critiquing their veracity and usefulness, that was most helpful to me. Dzielska carefully lays out her theses and backs them up. When she engages in speculation, she makes it clear.

Among the most controversial of her proposals is that Hypatia was older than generally believed. Dzielska puts Hypatia's birth year at about 355, making her 60 at death. Artists have a stake in her being a young beautiful martyr, but most scholars had put her age at death at about 45 (making her birth year around 370.) Dzielska argues that Hypatia would have been older than 20 or 22 when she was already teaching some of the land's most elite young men. In the early 390's Hypatia was a well-established philosopher and mathematician with many students from rich and powerful families. She might have been a math prodigy, but it's unlikely she had the time to personally study the arcane nature of various philosophies and establish herself as one of the foremost philosophy teachers, much before her late twenties, at the earliest. Put another way, would a rich powerful man in the late 4C send his adult son to study with a twenty-year-old female? Possibly, but unlikely. It made sense to me that she was born before 370. How much before? No one knows. All scholars can do is present their theories and sources. As a novelist, it suited me to have her older in my narrative, so I went with Dzielska's premise.

Since I've been following this stuff for over fifteen years, I also occasionally came across a criticism of Dzielska as a "Christian apologist." I assume, because she interprets Hypatia's death as a political act rather than an act of religious persecution. Hypatia wasn't a "pagan" in the sense that she worshiped multiple gods or engaged in cultic practices. She believed in one god, but wasn't a Christian. However, as the quote from Socrates Scholasticus above indicates, a possible motive for her murder, was her relationship with the governor of Egypt. Bishop Cyril fomented a whispering campaign against a political foe and his followers brutally killed her. Dzielska doesn't let Bishop Cyril or the Church off the hook for Hypatia's death:

"Cyril must be held to account for a great deal, even if we assume that the murder was contrived and executed by the parabolans, without his knowledge. For there is no doubt that he was a chief instigator of the campaign of defamation against Hypatia, fomenting prejudice and animosity against the woman philosopher, rousing fear about the consequences of her alleged black-magic spells on the prefect, the faithful of the Christian community, and indeed the whole city.

However directly or indirectly he was involved, Cyril violated the principles of the Christian moral order, which he was bound to nurture and uphold...It is not surprising that the sources on Hypatia are so few and so sparing and generally oblique in their accounts...as early as the fourth century Christian historians had achieved predominance and most likely they were ashamed to write about her fate...A cover-up campaign was orchestrated to protect the perpetrators, affiliated with the church, who murdered a person well-disposed toward Christians."

For those who want to see Hypatia's life in context, this is a great book. There are many myths about Hypatia. This book pulls back the curtain and lets us see (as clearly as possible with scant resources) the woman behind the legend, presented in lucid prose.
