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The image of woman in philosophy



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**A Legacy of Philosophy, Science,
and Myth of Hypatia of Alexandria:
Synesius of Cyrene and the
Construction of Her Memory**

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Abstract

Hypatia of Alexandria, a prominent philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer of late antiquity, was murdered in 415 AD in an event that has been widely debated by historians. While some accounts depict her brutal killing as an attempt to erase her influence, Hypatia has remained a significant cultural and intellectual figure throughout history. Her legacy has been shaped by various narratives, from the Enlightenment ideal of science's struggle against religion to her portrayal as a martyr of knowledge. The study explores how Hypatia's contributions to mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy have been overshadowed by her tragic death and how literary and historical sources, including Synesius of Cyrene's letters, have influenced perceptions of her life. Additionally, it examines her role in the political and cultural conflicts of Alexandria, her association with Neoplatonism, and the erasure or survival of her written works. By analyzing ancient and modern interpretations, this paper highlights the evolving representation of Hypatia as both a historical figure and a symbolic construct in intellectual history.

Keywords: *Hypatia of Alexandria, Neoplatonism, Intellectual legacy, Historical reception, knowledge, religion*

Introduction

Hypatia of Alexandria died in 415 AD. Some accounts explain that she was attacked in the street by a group of monks, dragged to a public square and killed. Her body was cut into pieces, and according to some sources, it was burned and its ashes spread across the city. Her memory was thus radically erased. The details of this murder, however, have not found unanimous historical confirmation. Hesychios speaks simply of violence and an uncertain fragment of the History of Philosophy of Damaskios reports that his eyes were put out¹.

Hypatia survived the *damnatio memoriae*. She is one of the figures of Antiquity whose memory has remained alive throughout all the eras of Western culture. She has not only aroused the interest of scholars and learned people since she has inspired more than one literary work.

*The Library of Alexandria and the Serapeon, or house of relief, which was part of it, had been burned and destroyed in the fourth century by the Christians, – who, moreover, massacred in the streets the famous Hypatia, a Pythagorean philosopher². These are, no doubt, excesses that cannot be blamed on religion, – but it is good to clear the reproach of those unfortunate Arabs whose translations have preserved for us the wonders of Greek philosophy, medicine and science...*³

Les filles du feu by Gérard de Nerval (1854) is one of the many literary examples that willingly puts Hypatia on stage to evoke the fragile symbiosis of wisdom and power, or to hold a discourse on the attempts to control knowledge, or even to eliminate it. For G. de Nerval, or for other modern authors, it was not a question of knowing the person of Hypatia better or

¹ Harich-Schwarzbauer H., “Erinnerungen an Hypatia von Alexandria: Zur fragmentierten Philosophinnenbiographie des Synesios von Kyrene”, in: Feichtinger B. & Wöhrle G. (eds.), *Gender studies in den Altertumswissenschaften: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002, pp. 97-108

² Dendrinis M. & Griva A. “Neoplatonic and Gnostic Resonances in the Martyrdom of Cyprian of Athenais Eudocia”, *Dia-noesis*, 14, 2023, pp. 20-38.

³ Nerval G. de, *Les filles de feu — Les Chimères*, Gallimard, 2005 [1854]:32.

of discovering historical truths. G. de Nerval uses the figure of Hypatia in a discourse on the destruction of knowledge by the Christians and to praise the role of the Arabs in the transmission and preservation of the learned literature of Antiquity⁴. In the long history of the reception of knowledge, recognizing that the contribution of women scientists has always been difficult, although the Alexandrian philosopher was already a subject of literature during her lifetime, particularly of committed literature. Depending on the case, she was instrumentalized by historiographers, by historians of philosophy or by literary scholars⁵. Thus, Hypatia became a symbol of the annihilation of the wise, pure and immaculate woman or, on the contrary, of the demonic seductress⁶. In Byzantium, she represented the learned woman; in the Age of Enlightenment, she embodied the fight of Science to free itself from theology⁷. For theologians, she was a timeless figure of the demonic and magic. Today, she represents the successful symbiosis of science, wisdom and femininity. This complexity has embarrassed scholars. Thus, for Christian Lacombrade, whose opinion has long dominated research, Hypatia's cruel death gave her an importance that her philosophical knowledge would never have given her: "*Hypatia owes more to her horrible end than to her works for not having been forgotten, unlike her Athenian rival Asklepiogeneia*"⁸⁹. The sources of Antiquity bring another tone: they do not question Hypatia's remarkable works. Whether

⁴ Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Harvard University Press, 1995:1-17.

⁵ Hose M., "Der Bischof und die Philosophin: Inszenierung des Paares in den Briefen des Synesios an Hypatia", in: Heitmann A. et al. (eds.), *Bi-textualität: Inszenierungen des Paares: Ein Buch für Ina Schabert*, Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001, pp. 323-333.

⁶ Rougé J., "La politique de Cyrille et le meurtre d'Hypatie", *Cristianesimo nella storia: Ricerche storiche, esegetiche, teologiche*, 11, 1990, pp. 485-504.

⁷ Papaioikonomou A., "Christianity and Rationalism: Maximus the Confessor vs. Descartes", *Dia-noesis*, 14, 2023, pp. 39-52.

⁸ Mehr ihrem schmachvollen Tod als ihren Verdiensten verdankt es Hypatia wohl, heute nicht wie ihre athenische Rivalin Asklepiogeneia vergessen zu sein.

⁹ Lacombrade C., "Hypatia", *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 16, 1994, pp. 956-967.

opinions about her are positive or negative, Hypatia was recognized as a Platonic philosopher, in the ancient sense. Platonic philosophy included several sciences (such as Geometry, Stereometry and Astronomy) and these disciplines opened the way to sublime knowledge¹⁰. Depending on the case, the testimonies of Antiquity emphasized one or another aspect of her teaching. She was thus considered either as a mathematician, or as an astronomer, and then again as a philosopher.

In scholarly interpretations and literary quotations about Hypatia, the love of a student for his teacher is always at the center of the interest she arouses. In the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular, the legend of the virgin philosopher, the object of men's desire, crystallized in scientific treatises¹¹. These writings also reflect the imagination of the interpreters, who, attracted by the phenomenon of the "pure and untouchable" Platonist, projected their desires and wishes onto the person of Hypatia.

What has been transmitted to us about the Alexandrian philosopher is largely based on fragments and selective texts that favored the invention of legends¹². These are primarily literary texts that must be read in the context of a long tradition. Today, this aspect is most often ignored when researching the historical figure of Hypatia. In what follows, main focus of this paper is the ancient transmission regarding Hypatia, in order to explain why the evocation of her scientific work is so relegated to the background.

Resources of Hypatia's scientific work

Hypatia lived at a time of cultural upheaval. Her exact date of birth is not known. She taught and was influential from about 380/385 until her death in 415. Originally from

¹⁰ Knorr W. R., *Textual studies in ancient and medieval geometry*, Birkhäuser, 1989: 756-762.

¹¹ Cameron A. & Long J., *Barbarians and politics at the court of Arcadius*, University of California Press, 1993: 44-49.

¹² Harich-Schwarzbauer H., "Hypatia von Alexandria: Das Kleid der Philosophin", *Moderne Antike — Antike modern, Metis. Zeitschrift für historische Frauenforschung und feministische Praxis*, 7/14, 1998, pp. 31-38.

Alexandria, she was the daughter of the astronomer Theon. It is not known how she came to philosophy, or who her teachers were, apart from her father. Information about her is mostly fragmentary. While there are biographies of some Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proklos, written by one of their students, there is no such description of the philosopher's life. What is available, however, is the literary correspondence of Synesius of Cyrene, who presented himself as a student of Hypatia and thus sheds light on some aspects of her life. Synesius was a contemporary of hers who, as an author, used refined and subtle methods of description¹³. In his correspondence, which comprises a total of 156 letters, we find seven letters addressed to Hypatia and a few addressed to others in which he speaks of her, as he also does in his treatise *Peri dôrou* (*Speech to Paionios*)¹⁴. Older research concludes that this correspondence describes everyday life and, therefore, that it comes from the author's estate and testifies to a very real epistolary relationship. Against this thesis, we can think that it would rather be a well-organized corpus of letters, deliberately addressed to Hypatia, but which would constitute a sort of biography, simply written in an unusual form. In his letters, Synesios somehow makes Hypatia the central character of a philosophical and esoteric circle (of male listeners). He gives himself the role of a very close disciple of Hypatia who, little by little, loses his importance and finally feels ousted. In Synesius' literary fiction, Hypatia appears as a woman of great technical knowledge, who exercises political authority among the powerful of the city and who extends her influence beyond her region¹⁵.

The philosopher is probably the object of Synesius's exalted imagination when he compares his relationship with his teacher to that of Diotima and Socrates and when he expresses his ardent desire for a harmony of soul mates with this

¹³ Garzya A. (ed.), *Opere di Sinesio di Cirene: Epistole, operette, inni*, SAN, 1989:136.

¹⁴ Garzya A. & Roques D. (eds.), *Synésios de Cyrène*: Tomes II et III, correspondances, Les Belles Lettres, 2000, pp. 137.

¹⁵ Hose M., "Synesius und seine Briefe: Versuch einer Analyse eines literarischen Entwurfs", *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft*, 27, 2003, pp. 125-141.

extraordinary woman. Unfortunately, we have no clue as to whether the letters were really sent to Hypatia and whether the philosopher read them. There is no evidence of any replies from Hypatia. In letters 46 and 81, there is mention of an echo from the philosopher, but it does not directly refer to a letter¹⁶. No contemporary author and no testimony about Hypatia mention Synesius as having been her student. Being the only one to speak of his friendship with Hypatia, we are thus reduced to believing what he himself writes in his letters. No external element allows us to confirm the existence of the friendship staged between the two philosophers. Of course, a privileged relationship with Hypatia could have been invented out of whole cloth by Synesios in order to give himself importance and thus perpetuate his own memoria¹⁷.

Synesios' letters concern the years 395-413. If we consider that he died in 413 (the commonly accepted date), we cannot expect to find in his works any mention of the murder of Hypatia. In the middle of the 5th century, the historian of the Church, Socrates of Constantinople, on the contrary relates precisely the cruel death of the philosopher which he places in the year 415, thus making an indirect accusation on the instigator of the murder¹⁸.

The story of Hypatia's death is set in the context of the great rupture of the Roman Empire, at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th century, which materialized in different ways depending on the region. In Alexandria, it was accompanied by particularly violent events. It is impossible to find the exact dates of Hypatia's life, but her birth is placed between 350 and 370. Thus, in 392, in Alexandria, she had to witness the destruction of the Sarapieion. The sanctuary of Sarapis, a Greco-Egyptian deity with a mixed character, integrating both traditional Egyptian and Dionysian elements, was one of the symbols of Alexandrian culture. The pagan philosophers opposed this destruction with force and violence, which also

¹⁶ Hose 2003, p. 126.

¹⁷ Karlsson G., *Idéologie et cérémonial dans l'épistolographie byzantine*, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962, pp. 56-58.

¹⁸ Lacombrade C., *Synésios de Cyrène, Hellène et Chrétien*, Les Belles Lettres, 1951, p. 43.

harmed Greek knowledge: the sanctuary housed the "daughter library" as well as the statues of famous sages and poets of Greece (among them Pindar, Protagoras, Plato, probably Homer, Thales, Heraclitus, Demetrius of Phaleron). According to Christian sources, the philosopher priest Olympios boasted of having killed several Christians with his own hands. Hypatia is never mentioned in the history of this conflict¹⁹.

Hypatia is noted to be absent from the documents relating to the destruction of the Sarapieion. It is claimed that she had good relations with Bishop Theophilus who reigned over Alexandria at the time. This would be the reason why she would not have taken part in the defense of the Sarapieion against the Christians: there is no source to confirm this allegation.

Synesios presents Hypatia as an unapproachable and inaccessible being²⁰. This representation of the philosopher has always aroused the curiosity of scientists for the character, and no doubt it has also interested as an object of male desire (that of the author of the letters). Synesios uses in his letters to Hypatia the conventions of ancient epistolary writing in which the central motif is separation, which is at the origin of the correspondence itself. These letters are also defined as an expression of friendship. Through this literary convention, the recipient becomes the alter ego of the one who writes the letter.

Synesios addresses the philosopher with the highest titles: Mother, Sister and Mistress; Hypatia becomes for him a sort of leader of a divine circle and at the same time a coryphaeus²¹. His membership in this esoteric group appears repeatedly in his correspondence with other "disciples" of Hypatia. Thus, in letter 136, he recalls sentimentally the time spent with Hypatia. During his stay in Alexandria, he is said to have visited Kanabos in the Nile Delta with his co-disciples.

The letters addressed to Hypatia all evoke the distance that gradually grew between Synesios and his Mistress. A quick

¹⁹ Evieux P., Isidore de Péluse, *Beauchesne*, 1995, pp. 56-59.

²⁰ Hose M., "Der Bischof und die Philosophin: Inszenierung des Paares in den Briefen des Synesios an Hypatia", in: Heitmann A. et al. (eds.), *Bi-textualität: Inszenierungen des Paares: Ein Buch für Ina Schabert*, Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001, pp. 323-333.

²¹ Hose 2001, pp. 234-240.

inventory of the epistolary analyses shows the renewed complaint about the lack of response and the regret of not being able to be the friend (and the recipient of her letters). This motif is used effectively in the letters to Hypatia. It gives the impression that the “disciple” had, at the beginning, a flawless relationship with the philosopher, then, at the end, he no longer receives any news or even the slightest sign of life from the one who was his mistress. His desire for a union of soul-mates with the master remains his highest goal. The tension caused by this (unfulfilled) desire is felt in all the correspondence that Synesius sent to Hypatia.

Synesius’ letters aroused great interest among the Byzantines, as can be seen from the rich manuscript tradition²². This enthusiasm is attributed in particular to the cheerful nature of the future bishop of Ptolemais, a characteristic that manifested itself on all occasions, and especially in his correspondence where he expressed his desires and weaknesses. Since Hypatia was considered by the Byzantines as an exceptional being, Synesius’ letters must certainly have been read as a biography, in order to get an idea of her life. That is to say, it is very likely that they must have been understood as forming a coherent whole. If these letters were so successful, it is because they suggest more than they provide concrete elements, capable of destroying the illusion of the desire for symbiosis with this divine woman. This deconcretization is generally recognized as one of the characteristics of the epistolary writing of late Antiquity²³. Through the masculine Ego desiring letters to Hypatia, this deconcretization becomes a means of seducing and retaining the reader. It allows him to get closer to the highly unreal character of the philosopher, to understand the correspondence of Synesios and to be able to enter himself into this hermetic circle that he describes²⁴.

²² De Marnef H. & Cauellat G. (eds.), Nicephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Ecclesiasticae historiae*, Paris, 2000 [1576], pp. 12-18.

²³ Karlsson G., *Idéologie et cérémonial dans l'épistolographie byzantine*, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962. Also, Knorr W. R., *Textual studies in ancient and medieval geometry*, Birkhäuser, 1989, pp. 78-80.

²⁴ Lacombrade C., *Synésios de Cyrène, Hellène et Chrétien*, Les Belles Lettres, 1951, pp. 34-45.

It would be a mistake to believe that the letters describe who the historical Hypatia was, how she behaved as a philosopher and what impression she made. On the other hand, the letters show very well what characteristics were attributed to her and what projections she was the object of. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the use of the literary letter to speak of the philosopher is unique in its kind and differs from the tradition of biographies of philosophers. The *Letters to Hypatia* segment the biographical material in a strange way: they highlight the Hypatia's notable achievements, without however situating these specific moments of her literary life in time. Thus, it is recognized that Hypatia, beyond philosophy, carried out astronomical work (including in practice), that she had skills as a literary critic and that she was granted authority within the political elite of Alexandria²⁵.

The other sources say nothing about her private life, except that she was assassinated and that she did not marry²⁶. The same is not true of her scientific and philosophical achievements. Some sources, in particular Socrates of Constantinople, speak of her philosophical knowledge, remarkable and very extensive, other authors, among others Philostorgios in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, highlight her astronomical work. No source explicitly speaks of Hypatia's relationship with religious practices (such as manticism, theurgy, etc.), while her father Theon's interest in these matters is reported in Malalas' *Chronographia* and in the encyclopedic dictionary (*lexicon*) of *Suda*. If one admits that it was a family tradition, then it should not be excluded that Hypatia had practiced religious rites. The silence of the sources on this question can possibly be explained by the political upheaval in Alexandria at that time.

The destruction of the Sarapieion in 392, under the rule of Bishop Theophilus, was immediately followed by the exodus of the pagan cult leaders and philosophers, and then, in 413, under Bishop Cyril, by a pogrom against the Jews, two years

²⁵ Lacombrade C., "Hypatia", *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 16, 1994, pp. 956-967.

²⁶ Mogenet J. & Tihon A. (eds.), *Le "Grand Commentaire" de Théon d'Alexandrie aux tables faciles de Ptolémée: Livre I. Histoire du texte*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1985, p. 34.

before Hypatia's murder²⁷. If we assume that the pagan philosophers and the faithful of the cult did not wish to end up as martyrs, they must have, on the other hand, refrained from publicly and ostentatiously practicing their cult after 392. The historian of philosophy Damaskios notes that Hypatia did not free herself from discursive thought and therefore practiced a truncated form of philosophy²⁸. This judgment underlines the author's preference for hieratic philosophy; this seems questionable, however, if we accept that nothing transpired outside the religious practices of the philosophers, any more than from the esoteric domain. Hesychios of Miletus is the only one to cite Hypatia's writings, in a catalogue of pagan knowledge, the *Onomatologos*, which he wrote in the 6th century and which the patriarch Photios took up in the 9th century in his Library. Photios was later expurgated, and the story about Hypatia only appears in the 10th century in the Byzantine dictionary of the *Suda*. This series of transmissions, which starts with Hesychios, shows how important Hypatia was, for having "survived" the many censorships of the sources. Hesychios is also the only author who establishes a direct and categorical link between the philosopher's work in astronomy and her death: "*she was killed out of jealousy, because of her extraordinary superior wisdom, but especially for what related to astronomy*". The writings listed by Hesychios relate to the field of mathematics and astronomy. No philosophical writing is mentioned. But the fact that Hypatia was an author is, without a doubt, a documented fact. The commentary (probably on the *Arithmetica*) of Diophantus, who lived in the 3rd century AD in Alexandria, and that of Apollonius of Perge (3rd/2nd century BC) on the Conic Sections (Konika) are as much evidence in favor of Hypatia.

The third work, which appears in the *Suda* with the title *Astronomikos Kanon*, continues to pose a problem for scholars; the preposition *eis* (which means "about") is almost always affixed to the title, which would mean that it is a commentary by Ptolemaios (on the *Procheiroi Kanones*). Furthermore, Theon, Hypatia's father, in the preface to the third volume of

²⁷ Mogenet & Tihon 1985, pp. 90-91.

²⁸ Karlsson 1962, p. 5.

his commentaries on the *Mathematike Syntaxis* of the astronomer Ptolemaios, expressly notes that she is the author of this text: *Θέωνος Ἀλεξανδρέως εἰς τὸν τρίτον τῆς μαθηματικῆς Πτολεμαίου Συντάξεως ὑπόμνημα ἐκδόσεως παραναγνωσθείσης τε φιλοσόφῳ θυγατρὶ μου Ὑπατίᾳ*²⁹. Based on this testimony, some claim that Hypatia wrote the third volume (and probably all the other volumes). Others say, on the contrary, that Hypatia is only responsible for the commentaries on the text. This question remains open today. Current knowledge (of the published texts) does not allow us to decide. On the other hand, it is easy to see that, until today, the tendency has been to reduce Hypatia's participation in the writings.

Epilogue

Today, no one disputes the fact that Hypatia was an author. But her status as co-author of her father's works, which was attributed to her until the 19th century, still fuels fierce debate. It is surprising that, precisely at the end of the 19th century, Hypatia's written works were discussed and questioned: the text of the Suda was then changed and Hypatia was only granted commentaries and not a single treatise on astronomy. The fact that there are no philosophical works (in the strict sense) by Hypatia should not be used to minimize her importance, since in Antiquity, the highest knowledge was transmitted orally. The power of orality had long been advocated by the Pythagoreans and had become a foundation of the Platonic tradition. If we consider the persecution of pagan philosophers in Alexandria and, of course, the discourse on the golden rule of silence – a discourse that comes to light in Hypatia's contemporary, the epigram writer Palladas – the non-existence of Hypatia's philosophical works (in the strict sense) could be explained by the prudence of the philosopher who knew (thanks to the Platonic tradition) that the written word risked being abused and profaned by interpreters³⁰.

²⁹ Mogenet & Tihon 1985, p. 9.

³⁰ Hahn D., *Unter falschem Namen: Von der schwierigen Autorschaft der Frauen*, Suhrkamp, 1991.

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