

Hypatia the Highest: Analyzing the Life, Legacy, and Liberties of Hypatia of Alexandria

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In loving memory of my own father, Jon Newton. Thank you for teaching me to follow my passions and convictions, and believing I could do anything.

Abstract

This paper outlines the structures which allowed Hypatia of Alexandria to succeed as a female scholar in the highly paternalistic world of Greco-Roman academia. Despite the excessive focus surrounding her death, the circumstances of Hypatia's life are equally fascinating and merit more discussion than they are often given. To begin, Hypatia's unusually close relationship with her father allowed her to pursue academic interests which were typically inaccessible to Greco-Roman girls during the fifth century. In wider society, although accounts of Hypatia's adult life are mostly posthumous, we can infer that she was generally well-regarded despite taking up space in a typically male environment. Finally, by contextualizing Hypatia's murder within the greater socio-political context of fifth-century Alexandria, we can lessen much of the sensationalism surrounding her death. In conclusion, Hypatia stands out as an example of how the complex dynamics of Alexandrian social and legal frameworks could—in some cases—allow for greater freedoms than were typically thought to exist for Hellenistic women.

Author's Note:

There is a huge amount of complex scholarship relating to Hypatia. However, due to the constraints of an undergraduate paper, there are several details that I have omitted for the sake of including what I believe to be the most salient points relating to Hypatia's life. I would like to acknowledge the sparseness of my discussion in some areas, particularly regarding religion, politics, and the relationships between Hypatia and her circle.

Introduction

Hypatia of Alexandria was a strikingly complex figure: she has been described varyingly as both a martyr and a sinner, a wife and a virgin, a respected intellectual, and a corrupt temptress.²¹¹ While some sources—such as Damascius²¹² and Socrates Scholasticus—describe Hypatia's life and works with considerable respect, extolling both her intelligence and her virtue²¹³, others such as John of Nikiu were openly hostile towards her.²¹⁴ Indeed, the manner of her death in the year 415 AD, and its aftereffects, also point to the fact that Hypatia's public image was difficult for her fifth-century audience to come to terms with. Regardless of public perception, be it positive or negative, Hypatia was afforded a relatively privileged position within the fiercely patriarchal sphere of Hellenistic intellectual life. This is evidenced by the fact that she is one of very few female philosophers whose name is still known to us. In order to reconcile the hugely disparate accounts of Hypatia's life and form a better understanding of her legacy, it is crucial to take a step back from the woman herself and examine the factors that contributed to her relative freedoms. By discerning how she was able to occupy such a respected space in Alexandrian scholarship, it is easier to understand Hypatia as an individual. In addition, an analysis of the more persistent anecdotes that surround Hypatia can help to not only provide further insight into many of the values and societal practices that existed during her lifetime, but also how her contemporaries attempted to understand her image. By collating contemporary information alongside the advantage of modern hindsight, this paper will provide a holistic understanding of the social, political, and individual factors that allowed Hypatia to hold such a high position in Alexandrian intellectual circles despite the typical limitations on women in the Hellenistic world.

Early Life and Background

²¹¹ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII.15 J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series graeca) in Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook in Translation*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) 415.

²¹² Damascius Fr. 163-4 in C. Zintzen, ed., Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 415.

²¹³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII.15 J.P. Migne, 415.

²¹⁴ John of Nikiu, "The Life of Hypatia" in *Chronicle* 84, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160303171858/http://cosmopolis.com/alexandria/hypatia-Bio-john.html>, 87-103.

To begin, it is necessary to provide a brief introduction regarding some of the principles of Neoplatonism, the school of philosophy that Hypatia devoted herself to. Given the complexity and breadth of Neoplatonic thought, as well as its numerous highly nuanced subsections, this discussion will primarily focus on the basic structure of Neoplatonic principle, especially as it pertains to gender and intellect. This overview provides us with a framework to understand the environment that Hypatia was educated within. Neoplatonism was concerned with the study of the One, an immaterial entity that is responsible for ultimate enlightenment and the governance of world order; in tandem with the One is Intellect, which is tasked with the organization of the material world; finally, the Soul operates as the lowest level of the three, directly interacting with the material world on behalf of the One and Intellect.²¹⁵ From the Soul, human souls have fragmented and found their way into human bodies, but can rejoin the One through the acquisition and development of Intellect.²¹⁶ Most crucially, Neoplatonist doctrine considered the human soul to be genderless, meaning that Neoplatonists similarly believed sex did not preclude intelligence or dictate what subjects children should learn in order to achieve Intellect.²¹⁷ Because of this, Hypatia's father Theon, a Neoplatonist himself, was likely far more supportive than the average Hellenistic patriarch.

Although this paper is working under the most common assumption, that Theon was Hypatia's biological father, it should be noted that recent scholarship has called into question whether Theon's references to Hypatia as his daughter should be taken literally. As Dr. Cara Minardi points out:

[. . .] clear identification of Hypatia's teacher is [complicated by] the Neoplatonist practice of using familial terms to describe teacher student relationships. Most assume that daughters of philosophers tended to be educated in philosophy most often, but [. . .] Neoplatonists often referred to their teachers by using family terms and confusing biological relationships; these terms should not be taken literally. Whether Theon was Hypatia's biological, adopted, or ideological [father], he probably educated Hypatia, at least in part.²¹⁸

However, assuming that Hypatia was born to Theon and his wife, it certainly seems that they were hoping to raise Hypatia as an intellectual—after all, her very name translates as “the highest.”²¹⁹ Although credit should be given to Hypatia for her own

²¹⁵ Edward Jay Watts, *Hypatia: The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

²¹⁷ Cara Minardi, “Re-Membering Ancient Women: Hypatia of Alexandria and her Communities,” PhD dissertation, (Georgia State University, 2011), 89-94.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

wisdom, her reported closeness with her father was, without a doubt, one of the most impactful factors that allowed her to indulge in academic pursuits. By all accounts, Theon held great respect for his daughter, teaching and nurturing her study of mathematics and astronomy to such an extent that contemporaries commented on how she reportedly surpassed him in both areas, before turning to philosophy to fulfill her need for continued educational enrichment.²²⁰ During their frequent collaborations, Theon is noted to have drawn specific attention to their familial relationship—affectionately referring to her not as associate or student, but as daughter.²²¹

Along with the support he provided to her, Theon's own position in society was also a boon to Hypatia; he was a well-respected scholar in his own right, who held the title of director at the Museum at Alexandria.²²² Based on this, it stands to reason that Hypatia likely had access to the information he acquired at the museum, or perhaps the museum itself, which was at the center of Alexandrian intellectual life. While it should be noted that Hypatia's upper-class background provided her with some degree of education regardless of her paternal relationship, this would have been relatively provisionary so as to both prepare her to raise capable children, and to mark her status as a member of elite society.²²³ Instead, Hypatia's individual intelligence, as well as her father's willingness to nurture this intelligence, were both crucial to her upwards trajectory in the Alexandrian academic world.²²⁴ Moreover, this path was enabled not only by Hypatia's brilliance, but also the very place where she grew up.

Along with her economic position in society, Hypatia's situation within Alexandria—as opposed to Rome or Athens, two other major seats of Hellenistic power—is significant, as is her ethnic and cultural identity, and the time period she was born into. By the late-Roman period—roughly 250-450 AD, with Hypatia generally cited as being born sometime between 355 or 370²²⁵—Alexandria was a bustling, multiethnic seat of culture, boasting the second largest population in the Mediterranean.²²⁶ This cultural melting pot espoused a mix of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian laws and morals that were comparatively far more lenient than those within Greece or Rome proper.²²⁷ By contrast, had Hypatia been born in fifth-century Classical (or, to some extent, post-Classical) Athens, she would have been legally

²²⁰ Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, trans. F. Lyra, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 70-72.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

²²² Kathleen Wider, "Women Philosophers in the Ancient Greek World: Donning the Mantle." *Hypatia* 1, no. 1 (1986), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810062>, 52.

²²³ Watts, *Hypatia: The Life and Legend*, 21-22.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-21.

²²⁶ Wider, "Women Philosophers," 52.

²²⁷ Minardi, "Re-Membering Ancient Women," 82.

disenfranchised, socially inferior and, most importantly, prevented from achieving education beyond the most fundamental levels expected of female children.²²⁸

Regarding Hypatia's ethnicity, although her mother is sadly absent from historical record, it can be deduced that Hypatia inherited Theon's Egyptian/Greco-Roman ethnic background.²²⁹ Owing to her heritage, as well as her social and geographical position within Alexandria, Hypatia was afforded considerably more freedoms than her Roman or Athenian counterparts. Given that Alexandrian legal practices were an amalgam that assimilated laws and virtues from across the Mediterranean world, as a biracial woman, Hypatia was uniquely empowered to follow whichever laws or practices best fit her needs in accordance with both her own multiethnic background and the multiethnic nature of the city she lived in.²³⁰

Clearly, Hypatia's unique set of circumstances—her economic position, geographic location and time period, and ethnicity—positioned her to enjoy liberties beyond those experienced by many women in the Hellenistic world. However, this is not to say that Hypatia did not face hardship. Despite the privileges she had access to, her life and legacy were still greatly complicated by matters of social morality and sensationalism.

Contemporary Opinion and Legacy

Having established some of the primary factors that contributed to Hypatia's place in Hellenistic academia, this paper will discuss three anecdotes and events that were particularly important in the construction of Hypatia's image: her purported virginity, the infamous menstrual rag incident, and her eventual murder. Before going further into this topic, it is important to note that not only are the best-known documents about Hypatia not written by the woman herself, but also, the three most influential primary accounts concerning Hypatia were all written posthumously by male authors.²³¹ Along with issues of historical reliability, such as bias and a lack of understanding towards the female experience, another problem that arises from the degree of separation between Hypatia and her biographers is the general lack of consensus shared amongst them. Consequently, this has resulted in a lack of consensus among modern scholars when interpreting opinions towards Hypatia.

Hypatia's chastity and modesty are especially fertile ground for discussion. Along with praising her intelligence, Socrates Scholasticus goes on to comment on how she "had no hesitation about being in the company of men, since they all respected her more because of her extraordinary chastity."²³² While this further speaks to the relative freedoms that Hypatia enjoyed, as it seemingly indicates that she was in the presence of men while unescorted, it also implies that her virtue was so widely discussed that her

²²⁸ Wider, "Women Philosophers," 24-26.

²²⁹ Minardi, "Re-Membering Ancient Women," 82.

²³⁰ Ibid., 82-83.

²³¹ Ibid., 70.

²³² Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 415.

“extraordinary chastity” was common knowledge. Socrates also stipulated that, although she was not afraid to speak directly to ruling men, she did so “with due modesty.”²³³ Likewise, Damascius’ *Life of Isidore*—reproduced in the *Suda*—repeatedly extolled Hypatia’s “distinguished nature” and celebrated her choice to remain a virgin.²³⁴ However, despite Damascius’ confident statements in regards to Hypatia’s virginity, he would later discuss the supposed marriage between Hypatia and the titular individual in his writings, Isidore (e.g. Isidorus).²³⁵

Conflicting narratives, such as Damascius’, are further proof of the problems that result from historical writings undertaken by someone other than the subject, particularly once that person has passed away. Despite Damascius’ claims,²³⁶ the purported marriage between Isidorus and Hypatia has since been debunked due to records of Isidorus’ existing marriage to a woman named Danna, as well as the fact that a marriage between Hypatia and Isidorus would have been logistically impossible since the former was dead long before the latter was even born.²³⁷ Furthermore, it is unlikely that she would have been able to continue her intellectual pursuits had she ever been married, for two reasons. First, the typical marital age for girls aligned with the age that rhetoric was normally taught, therefore precluding them from ever completing this portion of their education; second, the families of elite women were typically unwilling to finance this higher level of education anyway, since it provided limited potential in comparison to the comfort offered by a secure marriage.²³⁸

Despite Hypatia’s apparent rejection of married life, this was not for lack of options. Damascius provided a particularly vivid description of an incident that resulted from Hypatia’s admonishment of a potential suitor, saying:

[Hypatia] was so beautiful to look at that one of her pupils fell in love with her. When he was no longer able to control his passion, he let her know how he felt about her. The uneducated stories have it that Hypatia told him to cure his disease through the study of the arts. But the truth is that he had long since given up on culture; instead, she brought in one of those women’s rags and threw it at him, revealing her unclean nature, and said to him, ‘This is what you are in love with, young man, and not with the Beautiful’ [. . .]²³⁹

Although there are few contemporary responses to this event, aside from the *Suda*, modern scholars have had much to say about how this event should be interpreted. Some have asserted that Hypatia’s display of her menstrual napkin was a means of

²³³ Ibid., 415.

²³⁴ Damascius, *Damascii vitae*, 415.

²³⁵ Ibid., 415.

²³⁶ Ibid., 415.

²³⁷ Wider, “Women Philosophers,” 52.

²³⁸ Watts, *Hypatia: The Life and Legend*, 25-26.

²³⁹ Damascius, *Damascii vitae*, 415.

demonstrating her disgust towards the human body, or specifically the female body;²⁴⁰ others have interpreted it as an example of sexual impropriety and moral debasement;²⁴¹ one has even suggested that incidents like the bloody rag drew attention to her gender, and incited significant anger which could have contributed to her eventual murder.²⁴² It is difficult to ascertain which, if any, of these arguments is closest to the truth. However, they all point to the fact that Hypatia's death is a popular subject of discussion, with some scholars even claiming that "Hypatia's fame rests more on the manner of her death than on her stature as a philosopher."²⁴³

Hypatia's murder is perhaps the most thoroughly documented moment in her life, with scholars both ancient and modern repeatedly analyzing the possible motives, drawing conclusions ranging from jealousy towards her intelligence and authority, fear of her influence, or a wish to use her as an example to other female scholars.²⁴⁴ Furthermore, the set of political circumstances surrounding the murder is extremely complicated, involving conflict between pagans (such as Hypatia herself) and Christians,²⁴⁵ a power struggle between two of her former students—Orestes and Cyril—and general civil unrest caused by political and religious turbulence throughout the Mediterranean.²⁴⁶ Rather than focusing on Hypatia's murder as an isolated incident, it is helpful to contextualize it alongside similar events in order to highlight what the details can tell us about its intent.

By all accounts, the killing was not the act of one individual, but rather a large Christian crowd spurred on by political and/or religious discontent. In addition, the method by which the murder was carried out is especially notable. Damascius provides the most succinct summary of the murder, stating that "a group of bestial men attacked her, true ruffians, who had no respect for god and no concern for men's indignation; they killed [Hypatia] and brought the greatest pollution and disgrace on their fatherland."²⁴⁷ The accounts from both John of Nikiu and Socrates elaborated on this, detailing how the crowd was not content with merely killing Hypatia, but that they also burned her body afterwards. Moreover, although John of Nikiu asserts that Hypatia died as the mob dragged her through the street,²⁴⁸ most historians accept Socrates' statement that she was killed and dismembered using pottery shards—a further desecration of her body.²⁴⁹ Crucially, Hypatia's murder fits into a history of high-profile Alexandrian killings where the victims' bodies were brutally disfigured before

²⁴⁰ Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, 50-51.

²⁴¹ Wider, "Women Philosophers," 54-55.

²⁴² Minardi, "Re-Membering Ancient Women," 104.

²⁴³ Wider, "Women Philosophers," 57.

²⁴⁴ Minardi, "Re-Membering Ancient Women," 103-106.

²⁴⁵ Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, 88-91.

²⁴⁶ Wider, "Women Philosophers," 57.

²⁴⁷ Damascius, *Damascii vitae*, 415.

²⁴⁸ John of Nikiu, "The Life of Hypatia," 87-103.

²⁴⁹ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 415.

eventually being burned, as both a further insult and a means of preventing the person's soul from finding rest in the afterlife.²⁵⁰

Although this last point would suggest an atmosphere of vehement hatred towards Hypatia, this was not the case. Rather, her death seems to have come as a genuine shock to the Alexandrian people²⁵¹ who, for the most part, held her in genuine high regard.²⁵² This is evidenced by the fact that of the three best-known accounts of Hypatia which have been discussed, only John of Nikiu is openly critical of her.²⁵³ Considering this, I propose that by collating the most widely known stories of Hypatia's life along with notable details concerning the environment she lived in, it is possible to gain a robust understanding of Hypatia as an individual within the wider sphere of Hellenistic Alexandria.

Conclusions

Hypatia is an excellent example of the fact that, as Cara Minardi so eloquently stated, "Conditions for [Alexandrian] women were diverse, changing, and dependent on their ethnicity, their position in the social hierarchy, and the ideology of the family into which they were born."²⁵⁴ Hypatia's contemporaries struggled to understand her image, so it stands to reason that modern scholars, who are even farther removed, would as well. By situating the accounts provided within the larger society that Hypatia belonged to, three salient facts help to remind us of the reality in which she lived. First, she was fortunate to be born into a family and belief system that allowed her considerable freedoms, in comparison to many other Hellenistic women. Secondly, her rejection of marriage, while it was the topic of heavy speculation and fetishization, nonetheless provided her with even greater liberty. Finally, she was generally well-regarded even after her death, suggesting a level of respect and acceptance towards women in her position.

Hypatia's legacy is that of a woman who fully utilized the societal advantages available to her. Her intelligence is notable not only through her work, but also due to her obvious understanding of how best to navigate the social position she was in, and the liberties that she was fortunate enough to enjoy. Furthermore, I would hesitate to use Hypatia's murder as an overall example of how women—or, more specifically, female scholars—were viewed in antiquity, especially considering the posthumous reactions that generally mourned her murder. While it is true that there were some problematic facets to her overall contemporary reception, general consensus was unlikely to have been as negative as the manner of her death would suggest. Thereby, I would construct her legacy as follows: a woman who was able to reach the highest peaks of her intelligence, both due to social happenstance and individual shrewdness.

²⁵⁰ Minardi, "Re-Membering Ancient Women," 102.

²⁵¹ Watts, *Hypatia: The Life and Legend*, 3.

²⁵² Minardi, "Re-Membering Ancient Women," 105.

²⁵³ John of Nikiu, "The Life of Hypatia," 87-103.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

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