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HYPATIA OF ALEXANDIRA – THE END OF THE CLASSICAL WORLD



"Reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is better than not to think at all" – Hypatia

One day on the streets of Alexandria, Egypt, in the year 415 or 416 CE, a mob of Christian zealots led by Peter the Lector accosted a woman's carriage and dragged her from her seat. They took her to a church, where she was stripped and beaten to death with roofing tiles. Her body was then torn apart and burned. Who was this woman and what was her crime? Hypatia was one of the last great thinkers of ancient Alexandria and one of the first women to study and teach mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. Though she is remembered more for her violent death, her dramatic life is a fascinating lens through which we may view the plight of science in an era of religious and sectarian conflict.

Hypatia lived in Alexandria, Egypt, then part of the Eastern Roman Empire and was the head of the Neoplatonic School where she taught philosophy and astronomy. Hypatia was renowned as a great teacher and a wise counsellor. She was the daughter of the mathematician Theon, the last Professor at the University of Alexandria, who tutored her in math, astronomy, and the philosophy, which today would be considered science. There is little information about her life and as historian Michael Deakin writes, "The most detailed accounts we have of Hypatia's life are the records of her death". We learn more about her life by those who were hostile to her, the Christian writers, who claimed she was a witch but also stated that she was widely known for her generosity and her love of learning.

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At the time Alexandria was increasingly becoming religiously diverse. Hypatia was a close friend of the pagan prefect Orestes and was blamed by Cyril, the Christian Archbishop of Alexandria, for continuing to influence Orestes into accepting the 'true faith'. She was also seen as a 'stumbling block' to those who would have accepted the 'truth' of Christianity were it not for her charisma, charm, and excellence in making difficult mathematical and philosophical concepts understandable to her students; concepts which contradicted the teachings of the relatively new church. Alexandria was a high seat of learning in the early days of Christianity but, as the faith grew in adherents and power, it steadily became divided by fighting among religious factions. It is by no means an exaggeration to state that Alexandria was destroyed as a centre of culture and learning by religious intolerance and Hypatia has come to symbolise this tragedy to the extent that her death has been cited as the end of the classical world.

By all accounts, Hypatia was an extraordinary woman. Her father Theon refused to impose upon his daughter the traditional role assigned to women and raised her as a son in the Greek Tradition; by teaching her his trade. The historian Slatkin writes "Greek women of all classes were occupied with the same type of work, predominately centred on the domestic needs of the family. Women cared for children, nursed the sick, and prepared food". In steep contrast to this, Hypatia led the life of a respected academic at Alexandria's University; a position to which, as far as evidence suggests, was previously entitled only to men. She never married and remained celibate throughout her life, devoting herself to learning and teaching. Ancient scholars agree that she was a woman of enormous intellect.

Historian Michael Deakin writes "The breadth of her interests is most impressive. Within mathematics, she wrote or lectured on astronomy, geometry, and made an advance in computational technique - all this as well as engaging in religious philosophy and aspiring to a good writing style. Her writings were, as best we can judge, an outgrowth of her teaching in the technical areas of mathematics. In effect, she was continuing a program initiated by her father: a conscious effort to preserve and to elucidate the great mathematical works of the Alexandrian heritage". This heritage was so impressive that Alexandria rivalled Athens as a jewel of learning and culture. From the moment of its founding by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, Alexandria grew to epitomise the best aspects of civilised urban life. Early writers like Strabo describe the city as "magnificent", and the University was held in such high regard that scholars from all around the world would flock to it. The great library of Alexandria is said to have held 500,000 volumes of work on its shelves in the main hall. Being a Professor at the university, Hypatia would have had daily access to this monumental resource, and it seems clear that she took full advantage of it.

In 415 CE, on her way home from delivering her daily lectures a mob of Christian monks attacked Hypatia, dragged from her chariot down the street into a church, and was then stripped naked, beaten to death and burned. In the aftermath of Hypatia's gruesome death, the University of Alexandria was sacked and burned on orders from Cyril, the Christian Archbishop of Alexandria. Pagan temples were torn down, and there was a mass exodus of intellectuals and artists from the newly Christianised city of Alexandria. Cyril was later declared a saint by the church for his efforts in subduing paganism and fighting for the true faith, Christianity. Hypatia's death has long been characterised as a watershed mark in history in delineating the classical age of paganism from the age of Christianity.

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