

SILVIA RONCHEY, *Hypatia. The True Story*. English translation by Nicolò Sassi, with the collaboration of Giulia Maria Paoletti. Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2021. XV, 268 pp. – ISBN 978-3-11-071757-0 (€ 79.95)

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SILVIA RONCHEY’s original study of Hypatia, which came out over twenty years ago, set a new standard for the biography and impact of this famous philosopher and mathematician, and launched what the author calls “an explosion of interest” (21). This new expanded edition in English, with updated bibliography, is therefore a particularly welcome addition to the growing number of books on Alexandria and its leading schools in the fourth and fifth centuries. The publisher, de Gruyter, is to be congratulated on producing the work in English, which will make it more widely accessible than the Italian original or a German translation, although the proof reading leaves far too many crass errors.

This fully powered study of Hypatia, murdered in 415, is presented in three main parts: Setting out the Facts; Betraying the Facts; and Interpreting the Facts. Forty short chapters form a clear narrative, lightly footnoted, each followed by an Appendix with greater detail. It is in these appendices that the breadth, ambitious inclusivity and intellectual curiosity of the author shines: RONCHEY provides a judicious evaluation of the sources that relate to Hypatia’s life, as well as many later, often distorted, interpretations. Readers familiar with the Gibbon’s account in his *Decline and Fall* will find extensive exploration of the abuse and misuse of her history through the centuries. This includes an analysis of the impact of Alejandro Amenábar’s movie, *Agora*, especially in the Spanish speaking world (134).

The first part discusses the surviving sources written closest to the events of Hypatia’s life. There are pagan and Christian versions and between the Christian authors there is a distinct difference – the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates representing a Constantinopolitan perspective, while the *Chronicle* of John, bishop of Nikiu, originally composed in Coptic but preserved only in an Ethiopic translation, is more favourable to the leader of the Alexandrian church, patriarch Cyril. Pagan accounts are generally antagonistic to the Christian ones, and fragmentary texts composed by Damascius and Hesychius, summarized in the tenth century Byzantine historical

encyclopaedia that goes under the name Suidas/Souda, blame Cyril for encouraging the murder. Philostorgius, a fifth century Arian Christian, also states that “the party of consubstantiality”, was responsible for the outrage (142), a reference to the Alexandrian church’s insistence on the shared substance and nature of God the Father and the Son. This Trinitarian problem would separate the Arian Christians from the main body of the church for centuries. Similarly, the Coptic church would sustain a Miaphysite belief in the one nature of Christ despite its condemnation at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

One of the great strengths of this book lies in the emphasis placed on the context of Hypatia’s life, the different groups living in Alexandria, a great cosmopolitan centre of pagan scholarship as well as one of the most powerful bishoprics in Christendom. Patriarch Cyril’s uncle and predecessor, Theophilus, had already displayed this authority in his destruction of the Serapeum, of which Ammianus Marcellinus said “there is nothing on Earth more sumptuous except for the Capitol”, praising its “magnificent colonnades ... statues that seem to be alive and works of art of every kind”. The involvement of monks from their seclusion in the Wadi el-Natrun desert in this act of intolerance is analysed as a clear precedent for the murder of Hypatia twenty years later. It is also connected to Patriarch Cyril’s attacks on the Jewish community, a pogrom executed by the monastic *parabalani*, to protest Jewish traders’ control of the annual grain fleet that fed the population of Constantinople. These riots in 414–5 were reported to the emperor by the Prefect, Orestes, while Cyril provided his own explanation. The civilian administration, the pagan teacher Hypatia, the Christian leader who directed a mass of hungry monks (the attacks occurred during Lent, when they were fasting) and the Jewish community, one of the richest and longest established in the city, are brought into an integrated analysis.

Part 2 documents how the Enlightenment appreciation of Hypatia, championed by Diderot and Voltaire, was preceded by the German scholar Johann Christoph Kiesewetter, who produced the first scholarly biography in his 1689 dissertation. In 1720 John Toland, an English free thinker, published his defence of Hypatia, which immediately sparked a denunciation by Thomas Lewis, setting up the confrontations that would pit pagan sympathisers against Christians solidly loyal to Cyril of Alexandria. At most times these battles reflect eighteenth and nineteenth century contexts more than serious evaluation of Hypatia; they also provide fascinating details of how her career as a philosopher was interpreted.

Part 3 dissects the ideological distortions and interpretations of Hypatia's fate, comparing the pagan and Christian accounts. Those of contemporaries Damascius and Hesychius, only preserved in the tenth century Suidas, affirm the responsibility of the Christian authority, confirmed by Philostorgius, and elaborated by the sixth century Antiochene author, Malalas. He may represent an anti-Alexandrian commentary but records that Hypatia was burned on a pyre of dried wood, possibly as a witch. The more accurate accounts in Socrates and other ecclesiastical historians note that she was dragged from her carriage, taken to the Caesareum, a pagan temple converted into a church, where the *parabalani* tore off her skin using sharp ostraca, fragments of pottery, and decapitated her.

RONCHEY suggests that the ruling elite of fourth and early fifth century Alexandria had assimilated the intellectual higher learning and philosophy of teachers like Theon, Hypatia's father, together with a neutral attitude to the church. She identifies this as a type of Freemasonry *avant la lettre*, a mark of the civilized and relatively tolerant character of the great city, before its patriarchs asserted stricter Christian control. In setting the murder of Hypatia within the context of the material function of the province of Egypt – to provide bread for the growing population of Constantinople – she poses the issue as one of rivalry over control of the grain fleet. In that specific battle the Jewish traders formerly authorized to arrange the annual transport of wheat to the imperial capital were defeated by the church, which continued this service until the Persian occupation of Alexandria in the early seventh century.

RONCHEY also illuminates the theological differences that set the church of Alexandria apart from both Antioch and Constantinople and reinforced its Miaphysite beliefs, so clearly preserved in the Chronicle of Bishop John of Nikiu. The chronicler not only exonerates Patriarch Cyril of responsibility for the murder, but also claims that he 'rid the city of the last dregs of idolatry'.

Unfortunately, the English text is presented in a sentence structure based on the Italian original, with numerous errors of spelling that should have been corrected, for instance, *intelligencija* (108), *vastity* (4, 27) and *provocatorially extremising* (115). And the title of the book becomes a little misleading when the author admits that no reconstruction of her death can be truly accurate. However, RONCHEY's great achievement of analyzing all the evidence, as well as its later reuse in many different settings, establishes a deeper, new understanding of Hypatia, which will surely inspire further

studies of women who philosophized, patriarchs who recruited *parabalani* for their own reasons, civil administrators who were unable to control riots and many other aspects of Alexandria's complex history.

**Keywords**

Alexandria; Hypatia; Late Antiquity