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"Alexandria was no Longer Troubled by Philosophers": The End of Greek Philosophy in Egypt and the Life of Hypatia of Alexandria

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"Alexandria was no Longer Troubled by Philosophers":

-The End of Greek Philosophy in Egypt and the Life of Hypatia of Alexandria-

Alexandria was one of the most important cities in the Classical world; a great number of philosophers, physicians, mathematicians and astronomers made it a center of learning and higher education. The great Lighthouse was numbered as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and was among the tallest buildings ever constructed until the coming of gothic architecture. The city was a multiethnic and multicultural metropolis blending the best legacies of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

By the Fourth Century A.D, its prominence as a scholarly hub had declined after generations of direct rule by the emperors of Rome. Despite this, many in the city still clung to their Greek intellectual traditions. Among these figures was Hypatia, a renowned philosopher and mathematician. In many ways, her life encapsulated the spirit of the age; she taught students of different faiths and backgrounds while carrying on the ideas and traditions of the ancient Greeks.

But as Alexandria enjoyed the autumn of her glory, a great change was sweeping the empire. A new faith, Christianity, had begun to dominate the urban populations of Europe and the near-east. After the conversion of the emperor Constantine, a new class of elites came to power: the Bishops.

Alexandria stood at a crossroads. The Roman prefect and the Bishop clashed for political control of the city while mobs of Christians sought to root out the last remnants of heresy. And in the midst of this turmoil and change was Hypatia, standing precariously at the meeting point of two eras. Posterity

has immortalized her life as the last gasp of ancient Greek thinking and her death as the dark herald for a new age of faith.

How much truth is there to the legacy and tragedy of Hypatia's life and death? What really transformed Alexandria from an intellectual center of the world to the feeble city rediscovered (for Europeans, anyway) by Napoleon in 1798? The answers to these questions will take us through the life and times of Hypatia and beyond.

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A Journey Past the Pharos

For over a thousand years, a great lighthouse called the Pharos guided ships safely to port in the city of Alexandria. The scope of this lighthouse would have been greater than nearly any other structure in the ancient world; it stood as tall as 380 feet and its flames could be seen for miles. It was a beacon that welcomed and beckoned all travelers to enter the great harbor and visit the largest city in Egypt. Situated on the edge of the fertile Nile Delta and overlooking the Mediterranean sea, it is not hard to understand why Alexandria became one of the grandest urban centers of its age.

But even Alexandria had small beginnings. Starting as a small settlement on the Egyptian coast, the site was selected by Alexander the Great as the place where he would build a great city to bear his name. Alexander was determined to leave his mark on Egypt and decided to do so with the construction of a new capital to honor his recently acquired position of Pharaoh. Egyptian Pharaohs had typically built their capitals deeper inland along the Nile river as a way to better connect the separate regions of Upper and Lower Egypt.

But Alexander had a different idea. His capital would not just connect his various subjects in Egypt. Instead of being built inland, it would look out into the Mediterranean, towards his homeland of Greece as well as the industrious and populous cities of the Levant and Anatolia. The purpose of this new city was two-fold. Firstly, it would help bind the Mediterranean together, which eventually resulted in the Hellenistic era. Second, Alexander sought to build a *bibliothḗkē*, or library, within the new city. The housing of various scrolls containing the knowledge and wisdom of the great thinkers and poets was a fashionable activity for ancient rulers going back many centuries before Alexander.[1]

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[1] MacLeod, "The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World," 1

The choice of location for this new city was an important one. Plutarch writes that the site on which to build the city came to Alexander in a prophetic dream: "when during the night, as he [Alexander] was sleeping, he saw a remarkable vision. He thought he could see a man with white hair and of venerable appearance standing beside him and speaking these lines:

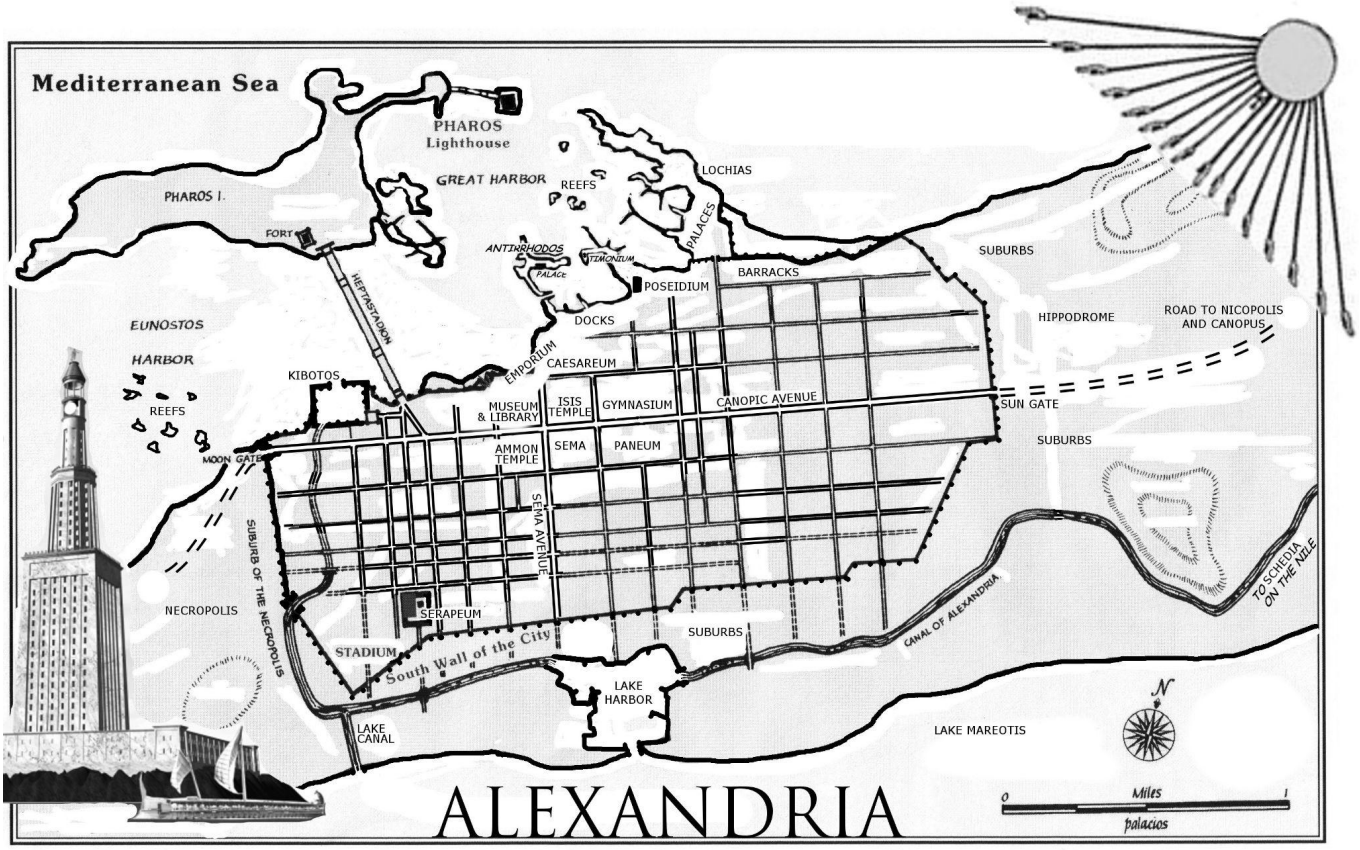
> Then there is an island in the stormy sea,
> In front of Egypt; they call it Pharos."[2]

When he awoke from his sleep, Alexander was convinced that the man who had spoken to him was the legendary Greek poet Homer. In 331 B.C, Alexander ordered the construction of the first of many cities that would bear his name.[3]

The island of Pharos rested just off the coast of Egypt, but Alexander knew that he had to somehow connect it to the mainland to create a harbor. The result was the Heptastadion, a massive man-made causeway or mole that turned Pharos and the nearby settlement into ground zero for what would become the greatest city in Egypt. And so it was that Alexandria rapidly grew into the capital that would later be used by the Ptolemaic Pharaohs of Egypt upon the death of Alexander. Under their rule, it would acquire a reputation as one of the leading intellectual centers of the time, complete with the massive library envisioned by Alexander but only finished by the Ptolemaic dynasty after his death. By the time Egypt came under the control of the Roman Empire, the status of the library had declined, but the city was still an industrial and mercantile powerhouse. The urban workshops produced some of the finest glass, textiles, papyri, and wine that could be purchased on the Mediterranean. People from across the empire would have traveled to this center of commerce in search of a better life. Like many cities from the Classical period, Alexandria was

[2] Plutarch "Life of Alexander," 26.5
[3] Fraser, "Ptolemaic Alexandria," 3

a multiethnic and multicultural hub of activity and exchange. Greeks, Egyptians, Italians, Arabs, Phoenicians, Persians, Ethiopians, Syrians, and Nubians all lived and worked in the shadow of the Great Lighthouse. Alexandria also played host to a large minority of Jews who, while in constant danger of persecution, often thrived as both merchants and workers.[4]



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The many people-groups living within Alexandria adopted Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) culture. Koine Greek had been the universal language of the eastern empire since the conquests of Alexander the Great. Such was the prominence of Alexandria that Koine Greek, a language spoken

[4] MacLeod, "The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World," 9
[5] Map of Ancient Alexandria by Michael Livingston, 2014

from Sicily to Syria, was often called "the Alexandrian dialect" (*Ἀλεξανδρέων διάλεκτος)*.[6] The city and its inhabitants survived and thrived regardless of the interference of the Romans and the end of the long line of Ptolemaic rulers.

Alexandria retained its Greek culture in more ways than just its language. The city thrived as an intellectual center well into the fourth century. Neoplatonic academies and schools of medicine attracted people from across the empire. It is no coincidence that Galen, the foremost medical scholar of his day and still a figure of great fame, left his home to study at the great medical schools of Alexandria. In the fields of mathematics and astronomy, few men held as much influence on the minds of scholars as Ptolemy of Alexandria. His geocentric (earth-centric) model of the solar system (he would have called it "the heavens") persisted in the minds of scholars and theologians for nearly one and a half thousand years after his death. Few cities could rival the industry, intellectual prestige, and sheer size of Alexandria.

And yet, by the year 400 A.D, there was a great uncertainty in the hearts of many within the city. Alexandria, the multicultural capital of the east, the intellectual hub of Egypt, the city founded by Alexander the Great himself, was undergoing a period of tumultuous change. It was the kind of intangible change that only comes when a great number of people are influenced by a new way of thinking. Throughout the closing years of the third century and the opening years of the fourth, Alexandria and the rest of the Roman world were radically changed by the growth of a new religion: Christianity. What began as a fringe group of stalwart believers in Judea had grown to become the dominant and official religion of the empire. By the beginning of the fifth century, about half of the entire Roman empire had converted to the new faith.[7]

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[6] Bagnall, "Egypt in Late Antiquity," 231
[7] Gottlieb, "Dream of Reason," 397

The effects of this paradigm shift are endless and widespread. When looked at broadly, one can point out how the adoption of Christianity by the Romans correlated with the empire's decline. It is also tempting to claim that it caused the end of classical philosophy as the western mind turned inward to matters spiritual and ignored the works of Plato and Aristotle in favor of Biblical studies.

But these are bold and sweeping claims that turn empires into sandboxes and centuries into hourglasses. They reached their peak of acceptance during the Enlightenment and still permeate the popular understanding of Late Antiquity. The proponents of that narrative tend to ignore the fact that the Roman Empire survived for another millennium after adopting Christianity and that the works of Plato and Aristotle could be just as spiritual and introspective as any Biblical text.

Instead of looking at every institution and way of life altered by the arrival of Christianity, this work will only be concerned with the intellectual and political shift. And far from chronicling every city in the empire in such a short space, Alexandria will serve as a lens through which to perceive a small but important part of a larger story.

Why Alexandria especially? Because the city was also a center of intellectual activity and had retained its own philosophical tradition since its founding. Thousands of scrolls filled the great Library on every topic imaginable to a scholar of the hellenistic period: pieces on astronomy, mathematics, medicine, geometry, geography, and literature filled every shelf. The Neoplatonic school had a large presence within the city and dominated the intellectual scene during the late fourth century. Places of learning would have dotted the urban map, and the great majority of those teaching at the academies would have adhered to any number of polytheistic religions (the most popular of which were the local cults to the god Serapis and the goddess Isis)[8] or to the metaphysical "One" of Platonic philosophy. Either way, their beliefs and practices were

[8] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," 149

well-entrenched into the academic and spiritual makeup of Alexandria. Even if the Library had fallen into disuse by Hypatia's time, dislodging the pagans of the city would be no easy task.

And thus the stage was set by the late fourth century for a veritable war of ideas waged by letters, speeches, and riots. Many adherents to the Greco-Roman tradition clung valiantly to their beliefs even as the new religion won over hundreds of thousands of new converts. Members of the old aristocracy were made irrelevant and steadily replaced by the spiritual and secular authority of the Christian bishops. The quickly spreading Christian faith represented not just a threat to the old religions, but a threat to the old order which had been in place in Alexandria since the Roman conquest. By the middle of the sixth century, the results of this 'war' were decided: the academies were closed, the debate halls were filled with proselytizing, and those who chose to question the validity of the new faith or the leadership of the bishops were either shouted down or murdered.

At least, that is how the history of this period is often told. Historians and writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, usually with a good deal of literary zeal, cited the rise of the church as one of the principal causes for the end of classical civilization. The work of Edward Gibbon depicts the decline of Rome as a titanic tragedy and blames its eventual fall on the "triumph of barbarism and religion."[9]

Such a tragedy deserved a tragic heroine. Luckily for the writers of the nineteenth century, one such person lived in Alexandria during this time. Her name was Hypatia, a renowned mathematician and Neoplatonic philosopher. As a historical figure, she has little to say about herself; almost none of her work survives and few details about her life are known. Even the decade of her birth is a matter of some dispute.

What is known is that Hypatia was the daughter of Theon, a renowned mathematician in Alexandria. She eventually surpassed her father in her study of Platonic philosophy and instructed

[9] Gibbon, "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume 6," Chapter LXXI

students on how to best practice that philosophy. The lack of contemporary records makes it impossible to know exactly what she taught to her students, although there are several theories. One of the primary debates concerns how much of Hypatia's teaching was inspired by the mystical elements of Neoplatonism as established by Iamblichus, an earlier thinker. Whatever Hypatia taught, it clearly left an impact on her students.

These pupils didn't have to be members of any Platonic school to enjoy the lessons of Hypatia. She taught both Christian and pagan students. In fact, one of her pupils was Synesius of Cyrene, who became a bishop after studying under her. Incidentally, Synesius remains one of the most useful sources on the life of Hypatia, as the two carried on a correspondence until his death. While this intimacy among faiths may seem out of place in the fourth century, it was actually quite common for Christians to study in pagan schools. The oldest and most respected schools of the classical world all had origins in what a Christian would have called 'pagan-thought.' Aetius, a radical Arian Christian and contemporary of Hypatia, received training in Aristotelian logic from an Alexandrian philosopher.[10] Hypatia's pupils belonged to a wide range of different religions.

If nothing else, Hypatia was an exceptional and brilliant teacher who carried significant influence among her students, who usually came from privileged backgrounds. Those who studied under her (and whose opinions have been recorded) thought highly of Hypatia as a philosopher and a revealer of truth. Perhaps it is this legacy of brilliance, co-mingled with her sex, that has made the story of Hypatia irresistible for storytellers from previous centuries. Dozens of male writers have retold her story with more emphasis placed on her purity or beauty than on her primary practice as a teacher. The archetype of an innocent and beautiful woman suffering a great tragedy had the power to enthrall and entertain, after all. The story of Hypatia has been told and retold, each time with added embellishment, for the simple reason that it was and remains a good tragedy

[10] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," 155

that fits the wider narrative of a Classical world destroyed by rigid and violent Christians. This 'story of Hypatia' and its repeated use and reinvention by scholars and storytellers shall be one of the key themes throughout this work.

Great tragedy befall Hypatia in the year 415 as she was riding through the city streets in a chariot. The Church historian Socrates Scholasticus writes that the Christians blamed her for the falling out between the proud Patriarch of the Alexandrian Church Cyril and the Roman prefect Orestes. A group of monks called the parabalani used this charge as a pretext. They came upon Hypatia as she was riding home. She was dragged from her chariot, stripped naked, and hacked to death.[11] Her demise shocked contemporaries and has been a source of tragedy for dozens of writers and historians. The eighteenth century French writer Voltaire used the story of Hypatia as ammunition in his writings against the church. He cited her as a victim of dogmatism and an example of how "religious fanaticism [led] to the martyrdom of geniuses and to the enslavement of the spirit."[12] Edward Gibbon wrote about the death of Hypatia in his colossal *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* His description of the "Alexandrian Crime" fit into a larger narrative concerning how the rise of Christianity was a critical cause of the decline of Roman civilization.

Nineteenth century writers emphasized the beauty and purity of Hypatia. French novelist Maurice Barres lauds her as a martyr of philosophy and as the "last of the Hellenes." The most famous and enduring vision of Hypatia from the nineteenth century comes from Anglican priest and writer Charles Kingsley, whose 1853 novel about the philosopher bears the striking alternate title *New Foes with an Old Face.* This is because Kingsley wrote at a time of fervent anti-catholicism in England. Kingsley successfully tapped into a long standing hatred by portraying the church in Alexandria as a tyrannical organization made up of violent and destructive

[11] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 1
[12] Ibid, 2

mobs. Hypatia, by contrast, is made to seem like an idealized Greek woman. One character describes her as the "queen of Alexandria! In wit, Athene; Hera in majesty; in beauty, Aphrodite!"[13] Her youth and beauty is played up to the point of romanticism. The Christians who killed her, meanwhile, are characterized by their intolerance and their manipulation by the villainous Archbishop Cyril. As the mob marches through Alexandria seeking to kill Hypatia, they chant "down with all heathens! Root out all Arian Goths! Down with idolatrous wantons! Down with Pelagia Aphrodite!"[14] The contempt with which the ancient Christians are portrayed is matched only by the idolization with which Kingsley depicts Hypatia. Whatever she had accomplished during her life, it is the death of Hypatia that has endured in the memories of the generations.

The legend of Hypatia, martyr of philosophy, has become inextricably linked to the wider story of the decline of philosophy in the classical world. Her grizzly murder is like a narrative climax that ends with the victory of Christianity over paganism and of orthodox thinking over debate and discussion. Maria Dzielska describes her death as "a turning point in the history of Europe, which after the expulsion of the Greek gods and the Greek notion of harmonious cosmos had to adjust to new forms and structures imposed by the Christian church."[15] The story usually ends with that adjustment and the subsequent fall of Rome and the beginning of the Dark Ages. Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy,* concluded a section on Alexandria with the death of Hypatia and wittily claimed that "after this, Alexandria was no longer troubled by philosophers."[16]

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[13] Kingsley, "Hypatia," 64
[14] Ibid, 137
[15] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 102
[16] Russell, "The History of Western Philosophy," 368

Was he correct? Did the death of Hypatia truly conclude the history of Greek intellectualism in Alexandria? This work will analyze the life and times of Hypatia of Alexandria and attempt to determine whether or not her murder truly marked the end of six centuries of Alexandrian philosophy. It will also seek to balance competing interpretations of her death, namely whether it was more political or religious in nature. Both options must be weighed carefully, for just like the famous deaths of Socrates and Christ, politics and religion played a major role. Before embarking on this journey, all preconceptions must be checked at the door. The narratives of Voltaire, Gibbon, and Kinglsey were colored by their own prejudices against Catholicism or organized religion in general. This work does not aim to attack the early Christians, nor does it seek to idealize Hypatia as a paragon for the pagan cause. But by exploring the life and death of one of antiquity's last pagan philosophers, perhaps something of value can be revealed about the ancient world and its transition to the medieval.

With the aim of this work firmly fixed, we can begin to contemplate Alexandria, a city at the crossroads of two ages, divided by two competing faiths, and sundered by rival leaders. And at the eye of this hurricane: Hypatia, not as the divine martyr of historical memory, but as the acclaimed thinker and teacher that she was perceived to be by those who knew her. Let us begin.

The Rise of Christianity

-From Constantine to Julian-

The rise of Christianity during the early fourth century was one of the great phenomena of history. Within a single generation, the new religion transformed from a marginalized minority to the dominant social and political force within the Roman empire. The rise of Christianity should be recounted in this work, however briefly. The decline of philosophy in the city of Alexandria can be correlated with a triumph of Christianity. Whether or not that correlation also includes causation remains to be seen. Regardless, Christianity was a wildfire that touched the lives of nearly every inhabitant of the empire. Its teachers and followers were as important to the court of Constantine as they would one day be to the streets of Alexandria in the days of Hypatia. We would do well to look back on its startling and impressive rise.

On an October day in 312 A.D, the Roman emperor Constantine prepared for battle against his local rival for control of the western half of the empire. According to the Christian author Lacantius, Constantine heard a voice in a dream that told him *in hoc signo vinces* (in this sign thou shalt conquer). A vision of the Chi Rho symbol (☧) then came to him in this dream. The emperor ordered his army to paint the Chi Rho on their shields. Chi and Rho are the first two Greek letters in the word Christos, and the corresponding symbol was a popular representation of Christianity. Constantine then proceeded, whether by martial valor or by divine providence, to win the ensuing battle.

This event did not mark the moment of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, but it did begin the emperor's public association with the Christian faith. In the years that followed his victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine used Christian as well as pagan iconography to promote his imperial rule. The life of Constantine resists being a simple story of a man who

rejected the pagan gods of Rome in favor of a new religion; instead, he merely added the Christian God to his personal pantheon of belief. He clearly promoted the interests of Christianity; not only did he end a vicious cycle of persecutions against Christians, he defended them, gave them legal rights, empowered the bishops, and received baptism on his deathbed. Beyond any doubt, Constantine was a champion to the Christian faithful and did more than any emperor before him to promote their cause. But his own status as a Christian is an ambiguous topic that has garnered little consensus.

The conversion of Constantine has been debated and discussed for centuries by scholars both secular and religious. It will never be known how sincere the conversion was or whether or not the emperor truly saw a vision before the Battle of Milvian Bridge. If one wishes to trace Constantine's experience to the beginning, then his mother, Helena, could be considered the most important Christian influence on his life. She was a devout believer in the faith, and even made a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands. But the best evidence one has in assessing the conversion is the character of Constantine himself. In this regard, he fails to distinguish himself from his predecessors. Instead of breaking the mold of imperialistic rule and replacing it with a Christian emphasis on theology or charity, Constantine proved to be every inch an emperor. Whatever his innermost beliefs were, he was always a statesman first and foremost. After witnessing several failed attempts to persecute the Christians under the previous regime, any continuation of violence against them would have seemed pointless. Perhaps Constantine understood before most people that it was impossible to remove Christianity entirely. It would be far easier and more useful to integrate the Christians into the empire. To Constantine, Christianity was a means, not an end.[17]

[17] Freeman, "The Closing of the Western Mind," 155

The Edict of Milan, signed in February of 313, can be cited as the beginning of a gradual shift that would transform the Roman Empire into a Christian state. The Edict itself has been lost, but it is quoted extensively by contemporary authors. The following excerpt comes from a letter of toleration issued by Constantine and his future rival and fellow emperor Licinius:

> "We decided ... to grant to Christians and to everybody the free power to follow the religion of their choice, in order that all that is divine in the heavens may be favorable and propitious towards all who are placed under our authority."[18]

Here is a political philosophy summarized in a few lines! A careful reader may spot the clever omission of any mention of either Jesus or Jupiter. Instead, Constantine used the term 'all that is divine.' This would prove to be commonplace in the emperor's diction as he strove to use neutral religious language that would appeal to both his Christian and pagan subjects.

There is a distinct blending of religions and traditions in the reign of Constantine that deserves praise for its subtlety. Many of the Roman coins from the era depict *Sol Invictus* (unconquered or invincible sun) and Constantine used the sun god as a tool of propaganda and a pagan alternative to the Christian monotheistic god. It would have been quite easy for an illiterate but devotedly Christian citizen of the Roman empire to mistake an image of Sol Invictus for that of God. To make the comparison even more sound, the festival day of Sol Invictus was celebrated on December 25th before the Christians eventually chose the same day as the birthday of Jesus.[19] In short, Constantine successfully endeared himself to both Pagans and Christians. He had made himself obeyed and beloved by two faiths. Armed with his incredible statesmanship and legions of soldiers, the emperor eventually made himself sole master of the Roman world.

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[18] Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*
[19] Freeman, "The Closing of the Western Mind," 161

Having won the entire empire by his military prowess, Constantine prepared to further consolidate his rule by all the means at his disposal. His recent acceptance of Christianity opened a new way by which to obtain support for himself: the bishops and the rest of the Christian clergy. This growing class of men would grow in power and influence under the protection and patronage of Constantine, and in return, the emperor expected the bishops to support him and his successors as God's chosen rulers on earth. Constantine went so far as to exempt all Christian clergy from taxation so that they "shall not be drawn away by any deviation and sacrifice from the worship that is due to the divinity… for it seems that, rendering the greatest possible service to the deity, they most benefit the state."[20] Far from separating church and state, Constantine depended on his new churchmen to uphold the empire.

Was this endeavor successful? Only partly. On the positive side, Christians ceased to be detached believers praying for the inevitable destruction of the tyrannical and pagan Roman Empire and instead made up a large portion of the bureaucracy. Bishoprics stretched from Spain to Egypt and began to form a new elite class in Roman society. Unfortunately, Constantine had not foreseen how factional and divided the new religion was. Even the most powerful bishops in the eastern empire bickered and engaged in rivalries. Doctrinal debates on the exact nature of Christ's divinity and humanity as well as his relationship with mankind split Christians into different sects. A priest from Cyrenaica named Arius was among the first to cause such a split. He taught that Jesus had been created by God and was thus subordinate to him. Other members of the Church, particularly Athanasius of Alexandria, vehemently opposed Arius and his followers and argued that Jesus was coeternal and consubstantial with the father. These arguments dominated not only the elite bishops, but also the common person on the streets of Constantinople. Gregory of Nyssa humorously captured the prevailing mood of the city in the decades following Constantine's death:

[20] Ibid 161

> Everywhere, in the public squares, at crossroads, on the streets and lanes, people would stop you and discourse at random about the Trinity. If you asked something of a moneychanger, he would begin discussing the question of the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you questioned a baker about the price of bread, he would answer that the Father is greater and the Son is subordinate to Him. If you went to take a bath, the Anomoean bath attendant would tell you that in his opinion the Son simply comes from nothing.[21]

Imagine the frustration of the emperor who believed that the monotheism of Christianity would help unify the entire Mediterranean world behind him! He expressed his disappointment in the squabbles of the bishops most clearly in an address to several of them: "Even barbarians now through me, the true servant of God, know God and have learned to reverence him while you [the bishops] do nothing but that which encourages discord and hatred and, to speak frankly, which leads to the destruction of the human race."[22]

It was in the context of this factionalism and the threat of so-called 'heresy' that Constantine convened a grand council of bishops at the imperial palace at Nicaea in the year 325. As many as 318 bishops were present to establish some kind of Christian orthodoxy for the benefit of the faithful. From Constantine's point of view, however, the Council of Nicaea was much more practical; he wanted to create an intellectual and political consensus that would consolidate the power of the still-forming Church and unify it under his rule. It would be much more reasonable for him to be called God's chosen emperor if the institution that supported him was the only Christian institution, not simply one authority out of many. The Council of Nicaea may not have

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[21] Gregory of Nyssa *Oratio de deitate Filii et Spiriti Sancti*
[22] Ibid, 163

consolidated all of Christianity into one compact doctrine, but it did construct an established orthodoxy by which all believers could be judged. It also firmly placed the emperor as the head of the church and the ultimate agent of God on earth. Constantine made this status well-known to the clergy of Alexandria in a letter addressed to them: "We have received from Divine Providence the supreme favor of being relieved from all error." [23] When Constantine finally died in 337, there could be no doubt that Christianity had bowed to him, not the other way around.

There are few figures in the whole of western history as successful as Constantine the Great. He transformed the Roman Empire from a divided patchwork of rival claimants and warlords into a state answerable only to the person of the *Dominus,* or master. Likewise, he used Christianity as a means of rallying a previously hostile population to his side and took the clergy out of the underground catacombs and turned them into a new elite class who led the growing Christian population in support of the imperial regime. He was far from being the exemplar of Christian virtue that tradition sometimes paints him as. Instead, he was a man who, through strength of arms and adept statesmanship, steadied the sinking ship of Rome and gave to her a new religion that would help her survive for another 1,150 years.

But the arrival of Christianity had far-reaching consequences that even Constantine could not have accounted for. Could he have predicted the corrosive impact the rise of Christianism would have on his pagan subjects and their livelihood? Perhaps he was oblivious or perhaps he did not care. Either way, Constantine had taken the first steps on a journey that will eventually lead us back to Alexandria, where the effects of his conversion will manifest in ways more savage than the emperor could have ever expected.

The story of the rise of Christianity often ends with the conversion of Constantine. The period between the emperor's supposed conversion and the ultimate triumph of the new faith is

[23] Ibid 154

usually glossed over by historians and students alike. It is not hard to see why; the life of Constantine falls between two major periods of human history. The story of his rise to power and his acceptance of Christianity as one of many legal religions within his empire is easy enough to understand and digest. The following decades, however, are a weaving tapestry of characters and competing faiths. The Council of Nicaea had attempted to establish an orthodoxy so as to eliminate any possibility of heresy within Christianity, but upon the death of Constantine, numerous variations began to emerge within the church. The teachings of Arius are what prompted the Council of Nicaea to convene in the first place. Eventually, there were dozens of variations that deviated from the established Nicene Orthodoxy. Luckily for the church and the state, the orthodox bishops were afforded vast wealth and power with which to combat heresy.

For the years following the death of Constantine, the emperors and the bishops enjoyed a powerful partnership that helped both institutions dominate the Roman world. The arrangement of the many bishoprics around the empire had the same skeletal structure of the Roman provinces, with the bishops standing in for the governors. Charles Freeman winningly explains just how tied the Christian church was to the old political regime in his book *The Closing of the Western Mind*. Not only were bishops expected to care for and build churches, but they were also given equal status to praetorian prefects and expected to sit in judgment on court cases. Beginning in the late fourth century A.D, bishops were given special authority to combat heresy wherever it should emerge.[24] Jews, pagans, and Christian heretics became the targets of closures and attacks. In a city as religiously and culturally diverse as Alexandria, it would prove to be a recipe for violence.

It is difficult to think of such a widespread religion in such a precarious position, but the fact remains that the future of Christianity was uncertain. The bishops were essential in preserving orthodoxy and order, but even their authority was tested in 361 A.D, when a new Emperor came to

[24] Freeman, “The Closing of the Western Mind,” 205

power in Constantinople. His name was Julian, a young and successful member of the Constantinian dynasty. But the new ruler represented a marked departure from his predecessors. He wore plain clothes and a beard in the style of the Greek philosophers. Even more startling than his appearance was his utter distaste for Christianity. Julian purged Christians from government office and forbade them from teaching Classical texts.[25] His primary goal as emperor seemed to be the complete revitalization of the traditional Greco-Roman religion.

This was no easy task, as much of the urban population of the Roman empire had converted to the new faith. An interesting letter written by Julian to the citizens of Alexandria survives. He addresses the concerningly large minority of Alexandrians who have become Christians (he refers to them as "Galileans," in reference to the region of Israel where Jesus was from). He accuses Alexandrians of "not emulating the healthy part of the city; but the part that is diseased [the Christian community] has the audacity to arrogate to itself the name of the whole. I am overwhelmed with shame, I affirm it by the gods, O men of Alexandria, to think that even a single Alexandrian can admit that he is a Galilaean."[26] He then called upon the denizens of the city to recall the glories of their founder, Alexander, and their patron god, Serapis.

Julian wrote and spoke out against the Galileans, but it did little good in Alexandria. The Christian population grew there as it continued to grow in the other urban centers of the empire. When Julian was slain while on campaign in Persia in 363, his reforms were rolled back and the Christians who had been relieved of duty found themselves back in positions of power. The dead emperor was affixed with the moniker "apostate." He was the last non-Christian Roman emperor.

There was a slow decline in Imperial authority within Alexandria after the death of Julian. The Patriarchate of Alexandria became the most important position in the region, both ecclesial

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[25] Potter, David (2009). *Rome in the Ancient World - From Romulus to Justinian*. Thames & Hudson. p. 288.
[26] Letters of Julian, Letter 47 "To the Alexandrians"
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Letters_of_Julian/Letter_47#cite_note-3

and political. The office came with the title of papas, or Πάπας, and was comparable in terms of authority and importance to the Pope in Rome today. The decades that followed the death of Julian were ones of great change for Alexandria. They witnessed a political showdown between the Imperial government in Constantinople and the local Church government led by the Patriarch of Alexandria. They witnessed a religious and political struggle between the city's Christian, pagan, and Jewish populations. They also witnessed the life and career of one of the most extraordinary philosophers of the age: the astronomer and mathematician Hypatia. It is from her perspective that we will see this period and deduce whether or not it coincided with the end of Greek intellectualism in Alexandria.

The Life of Hypatia

-A Story in Fragments-

For the purpose of this essay, it is imperative to know the life of Hypatia. If one were to argue that her death heralded the end of Greek intellectualism, then it ought to be known what she stood for, what she taught, and to whom. Hypatia's death must also be scrutinized, as it was the direct result of many societal, political, and religious tensions that were flaring at the time. The character of Hypatia and the events that surrounded her are the material that must be studied in order to draw any conclusions about Greek thought in Alexandria and its fate.

The story of Hypatia has grown and changed in the telling of it. The events surrounding her murder were so climactic and violent that her death has nearly overshadowed her life. Perhaps that is because there is little known about Hypatia's life. Her story is a difficult one to begin; there is no consensus on what year she was born. Some historians have argued that she was born around 370 A.D as to coincide with the claim of an ancient Greek chronicler named Hesychius of Miletus. He claimed that the height of Hypatia's career coincided with the reign of the emperor Arcadius.[27] This date, while serviceable, is not satisfactory when other primary sources are looked at.

The main sources for the life and career of Hypatia are the letters of Synesius, one of her favorite students. He was born between 368 and 370 near Cyrene, a Roman city in Libya, to wealthy parents who could afford to send their child abroad to study. Synesius thus journeyed to the two great intellectual centers of the Mediterranean world as a young man: Alexandria and Athens. He spent the early 390s under the tutelage of one of the most famous and esteemed philosophers of the age: Hypatia. In her excellent biography of the philosopher, Maria Dzielska points out how odd it would be for a young adult like Synesius to be studying under a teacher his

[27] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 67

own age. His letters clearly show a respect and admiration for Hypatia that conforms more with the way one addresses an elder teacher, not a twenty year old girl. By this logic, Hypatia couldn't have been born in 370. A revised perspective places her birth somewhere between 350 and 355, making her an elderly woman by the time of her death. I can hear the groans and lamentations of Charles Kingsley and the other artists who portrayed her as a mere youth in their artistic depictions.

Even if the time of Hypatia's birth will always be something of a mystery, the fact that she was born in Alexandria is a near certainty. In fact, there is no evidence that she ever left the city. And why would she want to? Alexandria provided her with a small world of earthly delights and interests. It is also quite unlikely that she ever experienced much in the way of poverty, for she was the only known child of Theon, a successful scholar and mathematician. Unlike his daughter's work, the commentaries of Theon have survived and were used by the Greeks well into the Middle Ages for the study of the great mathematicians Ptolemy and Euclid. Despite Theon's reputation as a philosopher (he is called such by Socrates Scholasticus), he never studied natural philosophy or Neoplatonism. His love was for mathematics first and foremost, and he shared that love with his daughter.

Theon was a member of the Alexandrian Museum. In this context, a museum, or *mouseion,* would not have been a place to store antiquities but rather a place of learning and study. The original site of the *mouseion* contained the Great Library and about 500,000 papyrus scrolls at its peak. Unfortunately, the Library had already fallen into disuse by the time of Theon's life, as it had suffered damages during Julius Caesar's invasion of Egypt in 47 B.C and complete destruction during emperor Aurelian's campaign against Zenobia of Palmyra in 272 A.D.[28] It is likely that Theon was a member of the *mouseion* and owned a school on its grounds. If true, then that school is the most likely candidate for the place of Hypatia's education and academic upbringing.

[28] Watts, *Hypatia,* pg 15

Hypatia began as a student of her father but quickly became his closest associate. She equaled him in nearly all subjects and surpassed him in astronomy. As she matured into an academic, however, Hypatia branched out into other fields of study and became well-versed in philosophy. This put her in contrast to her father, who was a mathematician first and foremost. The sixth century writer Damascius implies that Hypatia synthesized her father's mathematical expertise with her own interests in philosophy. Despite the tendency of modern academia to completely separate those two fields, using math and philosophy in tandem was common in antiquity. To quote Edward J. Watts' essential biography on Hypatia, she "learned enough philosophy to come to the conclusion that math served philosophy."[29] By the time his daughter was entering adulthood, Theon may have understood that Hypatia had exceeded him in both fields.

It is impossible to know when exactly Hypatia became the preeminent philosopher within the city, if indeed she ever did. What is known, however, is that she achieved a significant level of academic and public success that matched or surpassed her father. Not only was she a gifted teacher, but Socrates Scholasticus described in his *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἱστορία* (*Church History)* how Hypatia "maintained a dignified intercourse with the chief people of the city, for all esteemed her highly, and admired her for her sophrosyne" (temperance).[30] It is important to scrutinize Socrates' claim. He made a point to mention Hypatia's intercourse with 'chief people,' by which he meant social elites. Watts makes a point to distinguish between the Alexandria experienced by Hypatia and the Alexandria experienced by common people. The city, as Hypatia knew it, was "dominated by wealthy, well-educated, Greek-speaking city councilors who owned luxurious townhouses and enjoyed urban gardens." By contrast, the urban population that made up a majority of the city's

[29] Watts, *Hypatia,* pg 35
[30] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 41

Christians lived in a "dirty, dangerous, and often disgusting city that offered none of the space or security that Hypatia enjoyed."[31]

In the early or mid-380s, Theon of Alexandria entered something of a retirement. The role of primary instructor of his school within the *mouseion* was handed over to his daughter and colleague Hypatia. The records become a bit difficult to understand, as Theon was still nominally in charge of the school. The transition may have been gradual or it may have been an attempt by Theon to continue his professorial exemption from paying his financial obligations as a member of the *mouseion's* council service. Since Hypatia was a woman, she was not eligible for council service.[32] Nevertheless, she fit very well into the role of head instructor. By the 390s, she was nominally in charge of a small but well-respected school within the Alexandrian intellectual community. The curriculum would have changed a great deal to factor in Hypatia's fascination with Neoplatonic philosophy. Only with historical hindsight can we attempt to label Hypatia's school as a Plotinian Neoplatonic academy, in contrast to the Iamblichean Neoplatonists who taught at the Serapeum, the largest pagan temple in Alexandria.

The wisdom and charisma of Hypatia must have contributed to her success as a teacher and academic. Even as early as 380 she attracted students from far away places to study under her. Some of them even went on to hold public office, both secular and ecclesiastical. One of these lucky pupils was the aforementioned Synesius, who studied under Hypatia in his youth before going on to become the Bishop of Ptolemais, in modern Libya.

Looking at the life of Hypatia with hindsight, it may seem odd or ironic that some of her students were devoted Christians, let alone future Bishops. And yet this would not have seemed strange to either Hypatia or her students. There were many Christians (especially wealthy ones)

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[31] Watts, *Hypatia,* pg 7
[32] Ibid, 39

that sought out various forms of learning and Hypatia did not define herself or her pupils by religious belief. It is also good to keep in mind that Christianity, as we have already seen, was not monolithic. Many different sects existed and some, like Gnosticism, de-emphasized the importance of religious texts in favor of spiritual knowledge (*gnosis).* When one looks at the full spectrum of religious belief within Alexandria, there appears to have been a decent amount of overlap between pagan and Christian philosophy.

At such a great distance of time, it is difficult to know the intricacies of the relationship between Hypatia and her students, but what is evidently clear from the sources is that Synesius' eventual career in the Church was not negatively affected by his relationship with his teacher nor was his faith ever called into question due to his fascination with Neoplatonism or any other field that we may call science or philosophy. Similarly, Hypatia never showed any contempt for Synesius' beliefs. The two experienced a fruitful relationship during Synesius' time in Alexandria and carried on a written correspondence until his death in 413.[33]

This cross-pollination between differing faiths hints at the larger picture of Neoplatonic philosophy. It is tempting to see Hypatia from the point of view of a modern academic or even of an enlightenment era thinker. Her eventual conflict with the Bishop of Alexandria can easily make her seem like a rationalist philosopher carrying on the scientific traditions of the ancient Greeks that were only rekindled in Europe during the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. This picture excludes Hypatia's own faith and philosophy, which was influenced primarily by Plotinus and Plato. Through the letters of Synesius to Hypatia, we can begin to construct this fragmented personal philosophy. Perhaps the easiest element to notice in those letters is the way Synesius addresses his former teacher. He calls her a "genuine guide in the mysteries of

[33] Ibid 46

philosophy" (*gnesia kathegemon ton philosophies orgion).*[34] Hypatia acted as a guide to higher truths concerning the nature of reality. Her mathematical and scientific teachings were a means to a higher end: the awakening of the mind and the opening of "the eye buried within us," as Synesius calls it.[35]

In the Neoplatonic tradition, this "eye" was the ability to reason, with reason itself being something of a divine activity. The ability to reason opened up higher truths and allowed one to "raise up the divine within you to the first-born divine."[36] This was, put simply, the purpose of philosophy. Reasoning allowed one to tap into their divine self and interact with the transcendental world and leave the material world behind. A Platonist perspective held that the immaterial was superior to the material and that the contemplation of reality was superior to empirical study of material things. Reasoning allowed for the contemplation of ideas that were eternally good or eternally beautiful. The contemplation of things that were earthly and material was secondary, for nothing in the material world could be eternally good or eternally beautiful. The world is constantly shifting and changing, its inhabitants constantly aging and dying. The transcendental world of forms allowed people to interact with eternity and the "first-born divine." Within that interaction is the path that leads not just to goodness, but towards immortality. The closest Christian equivalent would be eternal life in heaven, but the Bible also includes the eventual rebirth of the physical world at the end of time. No such rebirth is mentioned in Platonic teaching; the focus is always on the world of forms.

This worldview preached and practiced by Hypatia was not unique to her. For one thing, there were many other contemporary Neoplatonists. For another, there were many Christians who saw in this Greek tradition a philosophy and method that allowed them to pursue a closer

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[34] *Epistulae 137*
[35] Ibid
[36] *Epistulae 139*

relationship with God. Synesius was just one of these Christians. Hypatia's teachings did not conflict with his belief; if anything they reaffirmed it. Synesius would continue his religious career well after his days in Alexandria, but he never fully replaced the lessons he was taught there. He professed in a letter that "contemplation is the end and aim of the priesthood,"[37] a sentiment that I think Hypatia would have very much appreciated.

What were the methods by which Hypatia guided her students to these hidden truths? Unfortunately, little is known in this regard. The means of Hypatia's philosophy are much more shrouded in mystery than the ends. But even this lack of knowledge has a basis in Greek tradition. Mystery cults had existed in Greece long before the birth of Plato and used the existing canon of Greek myth to contemplate and reveal mysteries about the nature of reality, the soul, and the gods. There is some evidence to suggest that Hypatia, or at least her students, thought of the lessons they received as something akin to a divine revelation to be kept secret. Synesius once wrote to Herculianus, a fellow student, and cautioned him to be "a more careful guard over the mysteries of philosophy. That these things are fitted for Herculianus, I know well, but if you have approached philosophy itself sincerely, you ought to avoid the society of those who are not faithful to it, and who by their pretense adulterate its great sanctity."[38] There can be no doubt that the Neoplatonist students thought they were being taught something divine, or at least spiritual in nature.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Synesius wrote to Hypatia herself as one writes to a figure of spiritual importance. He makes mention of her divine spirit and even calls her hands "sacred" as they receive his letter.[39] In these harmless letters between teacher and student, we already begin to see cracks in the traditional story of Hypatia as the secular philosopher standing in opposition to the dogmatic Christians. This is not to say that her teachings were strictly religious,

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[37] *Epistulae 41*
[38] Epistulae 143
[39] *Epistulae 133*

only that they were more spiritual in nature than one might expect from our modern definitions of 'scientist,' or 'mathematician.'

It is through the lens of Neoplatonism that one of the more outlandish stories about Hypatia begins to make more sense. A philosopher named Damascius related a fragment from one of Hypatia's many lectures. According to him, one of Hypatia's male students fell in love with her and, unable to restrain his emotions, professed his feelings to his teacher. Hypatia scorned this advance, not only on the basis of any lack of romantic feeling, but based on her personal beliefs as a Neoplatonist. She showed him her menstrual pad as an example of female physicality and is reported to have said: "This is what you really love, my young man, but you do not love beauty for its own sake."[40] If this story is true, then it is perhaps the most clear demonstration of Hypatia's character (and the only instance of a direct quotation from her). She was every inch a Platonist. By dismissing her own body and sexuality in such a way, she sought to turn the student towards a deeper understanding of love and beauty. True beauty has nothing to do with physicality and everything to do with contemplation of things divine. When one understands this aspect of Hypatia's character, it makes her common depiction in art and literature as a beautiful young woman even more problematic.

It is highly unlikely that Hypatia ever married or had children. Indeed, the only instance known where her sex informs her character is the anecdote from Damascius mentioned above. It is much more likely that some students initially felt a romantic attachment towards their teacher. However, Synesius makes no mention of any romantic feelings held by him, Hypatia, or any of the other students. It can be assumed that Hypatia instilled in her students the Neoplatonic idea of the inferiority of the material world. This idea could be extended to include romantic attachment and

[40] Dzielska, pg 50

sexual experiences. By this logic, it is safe to assume that Hypatia led a celibate lifestyle, not out of devotion but out of a distaste for and disinterest in sexuality and child-rearing.

One might assume that Hypatia's fervent disinterest in the material world would mean that she had no real interests at all. What can one contemplate that does not involve the material world in any way? Hypatia would have answered with two of her most treasured interests: geometry and astronomy. It is easy to forget how important mathematics was to the ancient Greeks extending as far back as Pythagoras. To Hypatia and her students, geometry was more than a simple study of shapes, it was a way to measure and reveal the metaphysical. For example, many circles exist in our material world, but there has never been a physical example of a 'perfect circle', geometrically speaking. Such a thing only exists conceptually (that is, it belongs to the divine or transcendental world). The same idea can be applied to various other geometrical shapes and proofs.

Geometry also informed Neoplatonists in the study of celestial objects, better known as the field of astronomy. In the Platonic worldview, the stars and planets were considered physically and metaphysically above the material world (hence the term 'heavenly bodies' which was used by academics well into the Renaissance).

In his writings, Damascius claimed that Hypatia taught publically *(exegeito demosia)*.[41] This has naturally led to some speculation as to what this particular phrasing meant. Would Hypatia proselytize in the streets to anyone who would listen? Or did she demonstrate her philosophy by her actions in a public setting, like a latter-day Diogenes? It is difficult to tell, but if one takes the thoughts and attitudes of Hypatia's students as her own, then it becomes clear that the great teacher did not bother to teach to those who were not listening. Maria Dzielska put forward the theory that Damascius was referring to lectures that were open to the public that Hypatia would

[41] Ibid 56

host in her home to those that were willing to listen.[42] In any case, she primarily worked as a teacher, not a public philosopher. If the opinions of Synesius and Herculianus reflect those of their teacher, then Hypatia believed that only the well-qualified and noble could partake in the time and thought required to understand philosophy. Synesius pondered in a letter to Herculianus: "What can there be in common between the ordinary man and philosophy? Divine truth should remain hidden, but the vulgar need a different system."[43]

This aristocratic aloofness may have extended to Hypatia. There are no records of her using her knowledge or influential position in local politics to advocate for the lower classes. All of her known students came from privileged backgrounds. The sources that report her murder all include a mention of her riding through the town on a chariot or a similar vehicle. For all of the problems with Charles Kingsley's depiction of Hypatia in his novel, his emphasis on her pride is not misplaced.

But other historians point out that Hypatia must have been a public figure, even if she tended to identify more with the elites of society. In his biography on the philosopher, Watts points out that Hypatia would have regular meetings with imperial governors and frequent audiences with her fellow citizens.[44] How can one reconcile these two competing visions of Hypatia? One seems concerned only with her philosophy, a philosophy that deemphasizes the importance of the material world. The other seems to be proactively seeking to make a difference within Alexandria.

No clear answer exists for this dualistic dilemma. My explanation is just one of many and is largely drawn from Edward J. Watts' emphasis on the almost philanthropic role of philosophers. They were expected to help better society. What good was all that knowledge and wisdom if it couldn't be used to help people? Hypatia may not have considered this while she was still under

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[42] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 57
[43] *Epistulae 139*
[44] Watts, *Hypatia* 85

the tutelage of her father or when she was a young teacher trying to hone her craft. But as the relationship between pagan and Christian began to decline in the 390s, Hypatia would, hesitantly or not, become a more public figure intent on helping her city through whatever means were at her disposal.

Between 391 and 392, the tense relationship between the adherents of the two faiths boiled over into riots and violence in the streets of the city. The spark that lit the fire came not from within, but from an Imperial decree passed by the Emperor: Theodosius had banned all Pagan cult practices throughout the empire. The taking of the auspices was prohibited, the Vestal Virgins were disbanded, and the Eternal Fire in the Roman forum was snuffed out. Even before the decree was passed, the Altar of the Roman goddess Victory had been removed from the Senate House.[45] When Symmachus, the senatorial prefect of the city, complained of the removal of the Altar and the destruction of everything it symbolized, the powerful Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, replied "What you are ignorant of, we know from the word of God. And what you try to infer, we have established as truth from the very wisdom of God."[46] Theodosius made attempts to reconcile both the pagan senators and the clique around the Bishops by appointing Symmachus as consul of Rome in 391, but the Altar of Victory would not be allowed to return to Rome. Paganism had been dealt a fatal blow.

The decrees of Theodosius emboldened the Patriarch of Alexandria, Theophilus, to begin a similar program in his own city. The year 391 saw a reiteration of an earlier imperial decree that banned public sacrifice and entry into pagan temples for religious purposes.[47] Theophilus was intent on pursuing that policy to the letter, and he began by targeting the Serapeum.

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[45] Freeman, 230
[46] Socrates, "Historia Ecclesiastica," 32
[47] Watts, "Hypatia," 57

The Serapeum was, perhaps, the greatest pagan temple in Alexandria. Located on a high hill, it is likely that the building would have been visible from nearly everywhere in the city. It also contained a library and several schools of pagan thought. The Serapeum was more than just a temple, it was a place of learning and a source of great pride for the pagans of the city. Its closure by Patriarch Theophilus would have been seen as a great insult and a threat to all who worshiped in the temple.

A Neoplatonic philosopher named Olympius certainly took it that way. It is unknown if he began the violence in defense of the Serapeum, but he and his followers took advantage of the disorder and barricaded themselves within the temple with Christian prisoners.[48] It looked as if a siege was imminent, as the pagans refused to abandon the site. It took a letter of amnesty from the emperor himself to convince many pagans to abandon the defense of the temple. When the majority of defenders had fled, a Christian crowd sacked the temple and destroyed its contents.The desperate last stand of Olympius and the other pagans failed to avert the fall of the temple, but it did result in the deaths of several Christians in the early stages of the event. Emperor Theodosius was quick to name the Christians who died during the siege of the Serapeum martyrs.

Theophilus had won a great victory in the cultural war against the pagans. The Serapeaum had been something of a hub of pagan life and thought. Its closure effectively crippled one of the most popular Alexandrian cults. Not only did Theophilus end these pagan sites and traditions, he made a point to mock them. Socrates Scholasticus reports that the Patriarch "caused the Mithraeum to be cleaned out, and exhibited to public view the tokens of its bloody mysteries. Then he destroyed the Serapeum, and the bloody rights of the Mithraeum he publicly caricatured; the

[48] Watts, "Hypatia," 58

Serapeum also he showed full of extravagant superstitions, and he had the phalli of Priapus carried through the midst of the forum."[49]

The riots that occurred in 391 (the exact date is debated) around the Serapeum dramatically escalated the conflict between Christians and pagans. And yet, throughout the tumultuous weeks that followed the destruction of the temple Hypatia did nothing to assist either side. Her students also ignored the violence. Not one of Synesius' letters mentions the events at the Serapeum despite their historical importance to both Christian and Hellenic history. Why was Hypatia, one of the most well-known and successful philosophers of her day, so indifferent to the storm clouds gathering around her city?

The question can never be answered with certainty, but Maria Dzielska provides a few illuminating insights into the figures that, unlike Hypatia, actually stood and fought the Christians at the Serapeum. Although Olympius was a Neoplatonic thinker like Hypatia, he actively participated in the rites and traditions of the pagan god Serapis. He even taught the traditions to any that would listen.[50] He was as much a public teacher as Hypatia was a private one. Like her, Olympius was well respected and often referred to in divine or spiritual terms, but his knowledge and authority came from his association with the temple of Serapis. He had a personal interest in defending the Serapeum. It was a place that represented and practiced the traditions that had shaped his life and given him his career. Is it any wonder that he was willing to fight for it?

Whatever his motivations were, Olympius was eventually forced out of the temple and fled to Italy. His fate then becomes a mystery. Hypatia, meanwhile, continued on as if nothing had happened. The Imperial edict may have banned Pagan rites and rituals, but no such rituals ever took place within her school. While Hellenic thinkers and teachers who were associated with the

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[49] Socrates, "Historia Ecclesiastica," 234
[50] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 82

temples lost their lives, property, or income (or lost all three at once), Hypatia's career and success remained undimmed. She had no need to associate her philosophy with the pagan pantheon, just as she felt no urge to comply with the Christian authorities. In an age of division and violence based upon religious belief, Hypatia was a true individual. Her aloofness may have saved her in the early 390s. While Olympius spread the stories and traditions of Serapis to the lower classes and Christians proselytized in the streets, Hypatia continued teaching to her small, close-knit community of students. Whatever her flaws may have been, Hypatia taught to both Christian and Pagan students. While intellectual leaders on both sides of the religious divide busied themselves with bloodshed, her hands remained clean.

Cyril

-The Triumph of Faith-

On October 15th, 412 A.D, Patriarch Theophilus died. The question of his succession dominated Alexandrian politics for the next several days. The partisans split into two camps, one favoring the former Patriarch's archdeacon named Timothy, and another favoring his nephew, named Cyril. Civil discourse should have settled the matter, but it eventually devolved into three days of street-fighting, after which Cyril's group emerged victorious. The new Patriarch sought to emulate his uncle in all things, including the further persecution of paganism and the spreading of Orthodoxy. Cyril probably never forgot the violent and unsteady path he took to become Patriarch; it would inform the remainder of his rule and the rest of his life.[51]

Much can be said of Theophilus' tenure as Patriarch. He was often lambasted by his contemporaries in Constantinople as something of a hothead, but his time in charge of Egypt was a period of relative stability wherein the Christian community steadily gained more followers.[52] His nephew and successor was determined to continue the legacy, but would go about it in a much more direct and violent way. Cyril's main goal as Patriarch was the establishment of a dominant Christian orthodoxy. To that end, he sought to persecute heretical Christian sects and Pagans alike. The destruction of the Serapeum had not been the total victory that many Christians had hoped it would be. Alexandria, being the most prominent urban center in the region, was the first to respond to Theodosius' Imperial edict and shut down its temples. Despite this, many Alexandrians retained their beliefs in the old gods and practiced the rites secretly. Not to mention there were several pagans (or at least non-Christians) in high society that the Patriarchate found difficult to dislodge.[53]

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[51] Watts, "Riot in Alexandria," 207
[52] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," 296
[53] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," 169

Hypatia was one of these non-Christians. It cannot be known for certain, but Cyril probably saw the philosopher as a challenge, if not a threat. Not only was Hypatia a well-respected public figure of a different religion, but she would eventually make her way into the political scene in opposition to the Patriarch.

A feminist perspective on the story would further highlight Hypatia's identity as a woman, and a woman in a position of considerable power, no less. Certainly, Hypatia's career was far-more precarious due to her sex; her status as a female philosopher and mathematician was quite rare (indeed, she was the first female mathematician whose life is well-recorded).[54] Hypatia's womanhood made her easier to persecute, but it was by no means the catalyst for that persecution. Regardless of her sex, Hypatia's success and influence coupled with her paganism made her a target for Cyril. If she would not comply with the new regime, then she would have to be removed from the political and social scene all together.

The new Patriarch began his ecclesiastical career by flexing his political muscles. He confiscated the property and churches of the Novatians, a Christian sect that had supported his rival for the Patriarchate. Next, he targeted Alexandria's large Jewish population, which had lived in the city since its founding. The Roman prefect of Egypt, a man named Orestes, listened to the complaints of the Jewish leaders and had one of Cyril's chief allies arrested and tortured. This proved to be the spark that led to yet more street violence. Cyril was able to rally enough support among the Christians of Alexandria to confiscate the synagogues and, according to Socrates, expel every Jew from the city.[55] Although this is almost certainly an exaggeration, a great many Jews did leave Alexandria and Cyril's grip on the city grew even stronger.

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[54] Deakin, "Hypatia, mathematician and astronomer," https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hypatia
[55] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 86

It was in the aftermath of the expulsion of the Jews from Alexandria that two political parties of sorts began to grow. One was centered around Cyril and his bid to expand the authority of the Patriarchate. The other formed around the prefect Orestes, who was determined to maintain his secular authority over all the matters concerning Egypt. Perhaps the term 'political party' denotes an element of civility and calm that was not present in Alexandria at the time. The term 'faction' will do better.

One of the first groups to heed the call to support Cyril was a band of five hundred monks from Nitria, a large desert located south of Alexandria.[56] Far from being quiet and contemplative, these monks actively sought out Orestes and accused him of paganism. The prefect replied that he had been baptized, but that didn't stop one of the monks from hurling a stone at him. Orestes had the monk tortured to death and ceased any attempt to reconcile with Cyril.

It was into this tumult that Hypatia stepped at last. Indeed, her decision to intervene at this critical moment may be the main reason why she is still remembered by history, besides her rare status as an ancient female scholar. Her brief appearance in Socrates' *Church History* concerns her foray into the political scene. He writes that she became "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."[57] What is certain is that Hypatia began to have a correspondence with Orestes, although there is frustratingly little known about the relationship between these two. But did she truly wish to support him in his struggle against Cyril?

Certainty is impossible, but I believe it is likely that Hypatia supported Orestes as a better political alternative to the Patriarch. Firstly, Orestes was a newcomer to Alexandria, so there is no

[56] Ibid 86
[57] Socrates, "Historia Ecclesiastica," 293

reason for Hypatia to have enjoyed a previous rapport with him. Second, Hypatia's previous disinterest in politics probably changed when Cyril became Patriarch. She was able to witness first hand the degeneration of her beloved city into repeated instances of violence. She may have also disliked the attempts made by Cyril to seize secular control over Egypt. Theophilus may have been a powerful Patriarch, but even he respected the boundaries of his own power.[58] Those boundaries were precisely the reason Hypatia was left unharmed after the fall of the Serapeum. Cyril's quest to finish what in his mind was started by his predecessor threatened to completely unravel the fragile order in Alexandria and ruin the career of her most cherished philosopher.

Edward J. Watts provides a slightly different explanation for Hypatia's decision to step into the political arena, one that I find personally compelling. His biography on the philosopher cites the destruction of the Serapeum as the possible catalyst for Hypatia's move. Watts claims that Hypatia saw it as her duty as a philosopher to become a more public figure and save her city from tearing itself apart. He writes: "At the turn of the fifth century, Alexandria needed Hypatia to step forward to serve it…Hypatia's obligation as a philosopher was to move the city, its leaders, and its residents towards a more philosophical way of living."[59] This idea of 'stepping forward' did not include a formal change in position. Hypatia could not confront Cyril as a person of political authority, as civic offices were not open to women. The only powers Hypatia could muster were informal and had to be channeled through others. To that effect, she needed a political champion if she was to prove effective against Cyril. She chose Orestes.

Orestes' faction had grown to include Hypatia and many of the city officials, or *archontes*. The group was composed mostly of Christians (with Orestes himself being one) and most of them were relatively wealthy. Cyril's camp, meanwhile, was composed of groups of the urban poor and

[58] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 88
[59] Watts, *Hypatia,* pg 92

Christian monks. The Patriarch's group sought to undermine Hypatia and exploit her disregard for the common people by spreading stories of how she was a witch who had ensnared the mind of Orestes and was keeping the prefect from reconciliation with Cyril. The poor of Alexandria were shocked and delighted to discover that the most famous thinker within their city was secretly "devoted at all times to magic, astrolabes, and instruments of music."[60] Hypatia's elevated social rank, her gender, and her interest in philosophy were all being turned against her in a macabre image conjured by Cyril and his allies. This propaganda campaign wasn't merely an attempt to discredit Hypatia, but was very much a formal attempt to accuse her of the crime of using magic.

Nearly all of the sources from this period point to some form of rivalry between the Patriarch and the philosopher. Many of them cite Cyril's jealousy of Hypatia's popularity or his outrage at her interference in city politics. Few of them ever reference an actual meeting between the two, but one account from Damascius, writing in the early sixth century, tells of how:

> Cyril, the bishop of the opposing party, went by Hypatia's house and noticed a great throng at her door, "a jumble of steeds and men" (Iliad 21.26). Some came; some went; others remained standing. He asked what the gathering meant and why such a tumult was being made. He then heard from his retainers that the philosopher, Hypatia, was being greeted and that this was her house. This information so pierced his heart that he launched a murderous attack.[61]

Even if the meeting never actually happened, it is a near certainty that Cyril had begun plotting against Hypatia by the end of 414.

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[60] Ibid 91
[61] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," pg 311

In March of 415, during the Holy Season of Lent, a group of monks called the parabalani acted on the accusations of Hypatia's witchcraft. According to Socrates, they were led by a Church lector named Peter. The monks awaited the arrival of Hypatia on the city streets. She was returning home when she was set upon by the monks and pulled from her chariot. They then dragged her to the church of Caesarion, tore off her clothes and killed her with broken pieces of pottery *(ostrakois aneilon)*.[62]

It was interesting to contrast the different accounts of Hypatia's murder. Damascius, who was a fellow Neoplatonist, pulls no punches in his condemnation of the monks as beasts rather than human beings. Socrates offers a chillingly detailed description of their butchery. John of Nikiu, who was a seventh century Coptic bishop, wrote a slightly different account. In it, he praised Peter the lector as a "perfect believer in all respects in Jesus Christ," and depicted Hypatia as a proud pagan teacher sitting on a lofty throne (instead of the historical chariot) before being pulled down and killed.[63]

The death of Hypatia marked the beginning of the triumph of Patriarch Cyril. Orestes was either relieved of office or chose to resign shortly after her death. Either way, his tenure as prefect ended in disaster, but he was probably pleased to be able to leave Alexandria alive. Orestes was then forgotten by history and all government opposition to Cyril's rule vanished. He was virtually supreme in Egypt, complete with his own paramilitary band of six hundred bodyguards, the parabalani. The three decades following the death of Hypatia were a time of peace such that Alexandria had not known for a long while. When Cyril finally died in 444, he was a celebrated man and called "the new Theophilus; for he had destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the

[62] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 93
[63] John of Nikiû, "Chronicle" 84.87-103

city."[64] After all was done, Cyril had succeeded in carrying on the work of his uncle. He is still venerated today as a saint in several different Christian sects.

[64] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," 316

The Legend of Hypatia

-Interpretations of her Life and Death-

Was Cyril responsible? Some historians have played down his involvement in the affair by placing the blame on the riotous climate of Alexandria itself. It is difficult to ignore the frequency of events of civil unrest that escalated into full-scale violence during this period. But it is equally true that Cyril promoted and used violence as a means to further his ambitions and his career. His rise to the position of Patriarch was even marked by three full days of street-fighting. Cyril was also the man who stood to gain the most from Hypatia's removal, and he must take responsibility for the campaign of defamation that provided the pretext for her murder. If Cyril had not exacerbated the stories of Hypatia's supposed witchcraft, the public opinion of her would not have soured so dramatically. Socrates Scholasticus and Damascius both make note of how the success and popularity of the philosopher made the Patriarch jealous. Socrates went as far as to claim that Hypatia was a "victim of the political jealousy which at the time prevailed."[65]

In more recent years, scholars like Maria Dzielska have placed more emphasis on the political nature of Hypatia's demise in contrast to the anti-Christian narrative of Gibbon or, more specifically, the anti-Catholic themes of Voltaire and Kingsley. The aim of modern scholarship on Hypatia appears to be the removal of her life and death from the larger story of the decay of classical civilization. By looking at her as an individual, and not just a microcosm, one can see the rationale behind Dzielska's interpretation.

Like with most events in history, the death of Hypatia was caused by several independent factors, two of which stand out as distinct and contrasting interpretations of the event. Edward Gibbon helpfully outlined the dichotomy in a single sentence by saying that the Christian

[65] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," 308

population of the city were ready to stand behind Cyril as he prepared "the sacrifice of a virgin, who professed the religion of the Greeks, and cultivated the friendship of Orestes."[66] The question for both scholars and storytellers has been which angle to emphasize: the virgin heroine who was killed for her religion or the political figure who was seen as an obstacle that had to be removed.

Anthony Gottlieb claims in his book *The Dream of Reason* that Hypatia was not killed for her paganism but was, rather, "assassinated for political reasons… Hypatia was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong friends."[67] According to this interpretation, she was not a victim of a Christian mob attempting to purge the city of heresy; she was assassinated by a group of thugs who were under orders to purge Alexandria of Cyril's enemies. This narrative detracts from the status of Hypatia as a martyr to philosophy whose murder ought to be immortalized like a fifth-century version of the death of Socrates. The political version of her death makes Hypatia seem more human and less of a heroine concerned with the larger implications of the clash of faiths that she had spent her entire life refusing to partake in.

This interpretation does address some valid points. It places Hypatia's death in the context of increasing levels of violence in Alexandria's politics rather than decreasing levels of religious tolerance. Religion certainly exacerbated this rise in political violence; one could even claim that every facet of political life was touched by religion in some way. But there is still a distinction between the theological politics of Cyril and the earlier period of riots and mob violence. Much has been said in this work about the struggle between pagan and Christian, but the height of that conflict was in the early 390s with the fall of the Serapeum. If anything, Hypatia's death should have occured on that fateful day when pagans were slaughtered on the streets of Alexandria defending their temple. But instead, Hypatia's death occurred in 415, a time of organized violence

[66] Gibbon, "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Volume VI," 15
[67] Gottlieb, "Dream of Reason," 399

against the enemies of Cyril, political and religious. These included Christian heretics, Jews, and secular rivals, but not pagans. That front had largely been static since the fall of the Serapeum.

And yet, this more modern take on events is not infallible. The often quoted line from Socrates Scholasticus calling Hypatia a victim of political jealousy can be called biased. Socrates' account is blatantly anti-Cyril on account of Cyril's conflict with Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople. The schisms that began under Emperor Constantine never truly vanished, and competing archbishops would often take different doctrinal sides as to compete for power and influence. Cyril, to the surprise of no one, was one such combative bishop. He made many political enemies, including Socrates Scholasticus. Socrates thus had a vested interest in placing the blame of Hypatia's death fully on Cyril while remaining a devout Christian.

The consequence of the lack of contemporary sources and the scarcity of later ancient sources is the unfortunate truth that the reasons for the murder of Hypatia will remain a mystery. There was no legal proceeding to provide us with Cyril's or anyone else's motivation. No individual or group ever claimed responsibility for the act, and no known written account (with the exception of John of Nikiu, whose account is pro-Christian to a fault) has ever lauded the killing nor attacked the character of the woman herself. In fact, something of the opposite occured in the centuries following the murder of Hypatia.

The strange tale of Saint Catherine of Alexandria is the first piece of fictional storytelling that would one day make up the sizable tapestry of legends that surround Hypatia. According to Christian tradition, Catherine was an Alexandrian scholar and a Christian who had a gift for oratory. As a young woman, she routinely defeated pagan philosophers in debates until her success attracted the attention of the pagan emperor Maxentius (the same Maxentius whom Constantine defeated at the Milvian Bridge). Maxentius captured and tortured the woman. Catherine defiantly

endured the torture until she died. Even though this story does not appear in written form until the ninth century, it is clear that Catherine was a popular saint, revered for her wisdom and her purity. Another saintly virgin named Joan of Arc claimed to have heard the voice of Saint Catherine during her life.[68]

What are we to make of this story? It is obviously a recreation of the legend of Hypatia with the religious binary swapped. Catherine's story is set a century before Hypatia's life, which completely reverses the political situation as well. The Christian Catherine is portrayed as the philosopher, guided by divine truth, who is then challenged by the authority of the opposing faith. Perhaps the story was invented to remove the collective guilt of all Alexandrian Christians from the death of Hypatia by retelling her life as if she were a Christian instead of a pagan. Either way, it is interesting to see what the story of Saint Catherine tells us about how the medieval mind viewed Hypatia. In fact, Saint Catheirne may reveal more about the legacy of Hypatia than the life of Hypatia ever did.

The historicity of Saint Catherine is doubtful. No contemporary sources make any mention of her. She exists only as a story or legend. Within the confines of that legend, Catherine has been depicted in art and venerated as a paragon of piety, beauty, and purity (virginity). It is strange to me, then, that Hypatia has been afforded a similar legend. Within the confines of Hypatia's legend, which has been depicted in art, in the pages of Gibbon, Voltaire, and Charles Kingsley and in the minds of casual readers of history, Hypatia has been venerated as a paragon of philosophy, beauty, and purity. There is more to this, of course. Hypatia was used by Voltaire to attack the Catholic Church in eighteenth century France. In more recent times, two feminst academic journals have taken her name.[69] She also has the rare distinction of having a big-budget film made about her life.

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[68] Ibid, 398
[69] http://hypatiaphilosophy.org/

In 2009, the Spanish film *Agora* was released in theaters. Its depiction of such an underrepresented period in history is laudable, but its depiction of Hypatia echoes the same sentiments of novelists like Kinglsey and other romantic artists. The film makes Hypatia its primary heroine; she is consistently shown to be merciful even to those who mean her harm and her scientific pursuits are shown in detail. A large portion of the movie is dedicated to Hypatia's discovery of the heliocentric solar system, even though there is no evidence that she ever made this claim. Her eventual death is given a tragic inevitability as she continues to refuse conversion to Christianity based on her need to question the natural world. *Agora* is a film that admires and respects Hypatia as a champion of wisdom and a symbol of beauty tragically killed at its zenith.[70] But I think that, in many ways, the story present in the film is only another retelling of the legend of Saint Catherine with the religious dichotomy flipped.

Whenever Hypatia is depicted in art, be it painting, literature, or film, she is always presented to the viewer as a symbol instead of as a person. She could be a symbol of the feminist movement, of anti-clericalism, of pagan revival, or of rationalism. She is such a potent symbol and part of such a tragic legend that many seem to disregard her humanity. Her philosophy is often glossed over to make way for her martyrdom. Her interest in mathematics is summarized in favor of elaborating on her beauty and femininity. Her doomed attempts to save Alexandria are ignored in favor of lamenting the end of Greek philosophy, even though it continued for many decades past her death. In brief, Hypatia inspires in modern people the same admiration that Saint Catherine inspired in medieval people in what Anthony Gottlieb calls "a secular version of canonization."[71]

So much has been said in this work about the legacy of Hypatia. That legacy has little to do with her own life and everything to do with how her death has been interpreted by both

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[70] *Agora,* 1:57:00
[71] Gottlieb, "Dream of Reason," 398

contemporaries and modern writers. It is a difficult thing to get at the heart of who Hypatia was. This is due in no small part to the lack of writings that come from her own hand. Historically, only her commentaries on the work of other mathematicians survive. Only by reading in between the lines of these commentaries can one glean any insight into the character of Hypatia. For instance, take her work on Diophantus' mathematical text, *Arithmetica*. Diophantus is often called the most difficult of the ancient mathematicians, far more advanced than anything else Hypatia or her father, Theon, studied in the field. The surviving commentary that we possess on *Arithmetica* is thought to be from Hypatia herself, but some, like American historian of mathematics Wilbur Knorr, have said that the commentary must have come from "an essentially trivial mind."[72] But other scholars have challenged this criticism. Maria Dzielska pointed out that Hypatia was an instructor of mathematics before she was a mathematician herself. Her commentaries would have been exegetical and intended for students by their very design.[73] Alan Cameron, another classicist (criminally underrepresented in this work, given his contributions to the study of Hypatia) came to a similar conclusion as Dzielska while adding that Theon's style or writing was equally unoriginal, and yet he enjoyed great success in his day.[74]

Platonism was a philosophical theology with some connections to classical Greek paganism. It doesn't fall neatly into the binary perspective of this period of history, which is so often characterized as a conflict of ideas. Because of this discrepancy, Hypatia had no interest in taking sides between Christians and pagans. Hypatia, despite her identity as a non-Christian scholar, was not going to take up arms against the rising tide of Christianism until the tyranny of Cyril became clear. Neither she nor any of her students protested the conversion of the Serapeum into a church, for example. Perhaps the person who revealed the most about Hypatia's fate was

[72] Cameron, "Hypatia: Life, Death, and Works," 194
[73] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 71
[74] Cameron, "Hypatia: Life, Death, and Works," 194

Cyril. He never dared to denounce Hypatia as a pagan or a heretic, but as a witch who had practiced black magic. There is an argument to be made that 'magic' in this context simply refers to the wrong religion, or more specifically, an appeal to the wrong spiritual beings. But laws against magic had existed in the Roman world long before Roman citizens began accusing each other of heresy. The Twelve Tables, the oldest known law code in Rome, made mention of magic and its dangers. Magic had been prohibited by many ancient civilizations, even ones as religiously tolerant as the Romans.[75] I believe that Cyril was tapping into this more ancient fear of magic when persecuting Hypatia. He effectively used his position as Patriarch of the city to rally the people and take the law into his own hands

The typical narrative of Hypatia making a stand against the Christians is simply not present in any of the sources. Synesius, one of her favorite students, was a devoted Christian who became a bishop. Calling Hypatia the 'last of the Hellenes' drastically oversimplifies the woman herself and the times in which she lived.

For her to go down in history as a martyr to the cause of Hellenic paganism is strange, for she seemed to hold all forms of religion with equal disinterest. That did not stop her from teaching adherents to many faiths. In an age fueled by dogma, doctrine and intolerance, Hypatia maintained a reputation for prudence and fairness. Even if she hadn't been one of the most successful philosophers of her time, she would still have been a remarkable person.

[75] Pharr, "The Interdiction of Magic in Roman Law," 269

Hypatia: Last of the Hellenes?

"I have lost my children, my friends, and the goodwill of everyone. The greatest loss of all, however, is the absence of your divine spirit. I had hoped that this would always remain to me, to conquer both the caprices of fortune and the evil turns of fate."

-Synesius writing to Hypatia, Epistulae 10

Circa 413 A.D

"After this, Alexandria was no longer troubled by philosophers." So said Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy.* His book then proceeds to jump several leagues and several decades to Italy to talk about the life of Boethius, who is often considered the first major philosopher of the Middle Ages. Thus, one must conclude based on Russell's book that Greek philosophy died on the church floor with Hypatia. She was the last great ancient Greek to teach the wisdom of Plato, the last one to study the heavenly bodies without the bother of fitting her theories into existing Christian theology. In nearly every way, Hypatia's murder marks the end of the Ancient world and the beginning of the Medieval.

Or does it? Does the death of Hypatia truly mark the end of Alexandrian philosophy? What great thinkers could possibly endure under the tyranny of Cyril? While it is probably true that few philosophers would have been so bold as to openly teach Neoplatonism after the murder of Hypatia, things began to change once Cyril had died in 444. Ammonius Hermiae (c.435-520) was able to give public lectures on the works of Plato and Aristotle to several students who would go on to be great philosophers in their own right. He knew all too well that he was playing a dangerous game with the Christian authorities, and to that end he made concessions to limit his

teachings under the orders of Patriarch Peter Mogus.[76] His decision may have earned Ammonius a bit of ire from his fellow Neoplatonists, but compared to the fate of Hypatia, it was a happy ending indeed.

Another great Alexandrian philosopher has been among us throughout this entire journey: Damascius. As his name might suggest, he was born in Damascus but moved to Alexandria as a young boy to study under a philosopher named Theon (not the same Theon who fathered Hypatia). He then became a pupil of Ammonius before moving to study in Athens. He arrived just in time to see the Academy of Athens, the very same institution established by Plato himself, closed in 529 A.D on the order of the Emperor Justinian. Justinian himself should be considered the chief enemy of paganism and freethought by all who study Late Antiquity. Certainly Damacius thought ill of the emperor, for he and a few of his colleagues fled to the court of the Persian emperor, Khosrow I. The Persian empire mostly followed the Zoroastrian religion, which proved to be much more accommodating to the Platonic thinkers than the Christians. The exile would not last long, but it must have had a profound impact on the philosopher. Upon his return to Alexandria, Damascius committed himself to his writings on many matters relating to Neoplatonism. Perhaps his lamentative recounting of the life of Hypatia, which we have drawn from several times, reflected his own experience as a philosopher rejected by Greco-Roman society in the aftermath of Justinian's persecutions.

Damascius may have lived to see a great decline in the status of pagan philosophy, but Alexandria still managed to produce one of the most innovative and important thinkers of the sixth century. John Philoponus (c.490-c.530) was a Christian theologian and a commentator on several ancient Greek authors.[77] He disagreed vehemently with many conclusions drawn by Aristotle in his

[76] Watts,"Ammonius", *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*
[77] Gottlieb, "Dream of Reason," 399

On the Eternity of the World against Aristotle (*De Aeternitate Mundi contra Aristotelem),* and showed equal disapproval to the worldview of the Neoplatonists in *On the Eternity of the World against Proclus* (*De Aeternitate Mundi Contra Proclum)*. He argued against Aristotle's idea that the earth and the heavens had always existed. Philoponus was equal parts philosopher and theologian; he believed in the stories of the Book of Genesis but always attempted to use science to prove things such as the Creation. Despite these valiant efforts, Philoponus suffered from the same fault as another great Christian thinker, Thomas Aquinas. They both used reason from fixed, predetermined conclusions (usually the existence of God) and then proceeded to philosophize from there. But these thinkers should be forgiven for these oversights.

One example of Philoponus' genius was his disagreement with Aristotle's assumption that matter falls at a speed proportional to its weight. Put simply, a heavy object would fall faster than a light object. Philoponus then pointed out that

> "if you let fall from the same height two weights of which one is many times as heavy as the other, you will see that the ratio of the times required for the motion does not depend on the ratio of the weights, but that the difference in time is a very small one."[78]

Here is the story of Galileo discovering mass and acceleration one thousand years before its time! Despite Philoponus' Christian beliefs, he was every inch a philosopher, Alexandria's very own Aquinas. Such innovativeness and devotion to Christianity did not save Philoponus from being condemned by the Church for holding heretical views on the Trinity years after his death.[79]

The life and career of John Philoponus proves that Greek intellectualism did not die in the fifth century. Following the murder of Hypatia and the triumph of Christianity, Alexandria enjoyed

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[78] Ibid, 399
[79] Wildberg, "John Philoponus," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

a new generation of philosophers of various schools and faiths. Within the space of a century, from 410 A.D to 510 A.D, Alexandria could, at one point or another, count among its philosophers Hypatia, Ammonius Hermiae, Damascius, Simplicius (a fellow Neoplatonist from the school of Ammonius), Asclepius of Tralles (a commentator of Aristotle and Nicomachus), Olympiodorus the Younger, and John Philoponus.[80] Despite the claims of Bertrand Russell, I believe it is fair to say that Alexandria was very much troubled by philosophers after 415.

And yet, one could argue that the work of these Alexandrian philosophers was in vain. Eventually, the last remnants of Christian tolerance for philosophical thought would be snuffed out. 529 A.D marks the closure of the Neoplatonic Academy in Athens by the emperor Justinian. An institution which had continued the Platonic tradition of rational thought for centuries was erased on the whim of a single man. The year 529 A.D has become somewhat synonymous with the decline of classical civilization. Some might argue that provides as good a date as any with which to end the classical age and begin the medieval one. While there might be some wisdom in that idea, I would argue that it should not be believed. The closure of the Academy was clearly an important event in the lives of all Neoplantonist philosophers (Damascius was willing to go into self-imposed exile over it), but it does not mark the end of Alexandrian philosophy.

When looked at holistically, the status of the city as an intellectual hub had certainly decreased. But it would also be fair to say that Alexandria had never reached the level of prosperity that it had under the Ptolemaic dynasty, when the Library was still the greatest depository and research center in the world. But the Library was a distant memory by the time Hypatia was born, and Alexandria was still a respected center of study. I believe that a similar transformation occurred in the space between Hypatia's death in 415 A.D and the Muslim conqiest of 641 A.D. It is true to say that learning declined in Alexandria, but that was a reality across the

[80] Dzielska, "Hypatia of Alexandria," 105

entire Roman world. Put simply, there was no room for learning of any kind when powerful men like John Chrysostom encouraged others to "Restrain our own reasoning, and empty our mind of secular learning, in order to provide a mind swept clear for the reception of divine words."[81]

Before we can prove that philosophy in Alexandria continued to survive past the death of Hypatia and the closure of the Academy, we will have to look briefly at the history of the city in the years following the triumph of Cyril. Alexandria enjoyed a respite from the near-constant civil strife it had endured for the past few decades. Cyril's rule was absolute, and there were no figures left to challenge him, at least at the local level of politics. After his death, however, disorder returned to the streets. By the 470s, violence against non-Christians was replaced by violence against schismatics as the Monophysite controversy spread across the empire.[82] Using monophysitism as a pretext, Egypt began the process of doctrinally and politically distancing itself from Constantinople.

No amount of religious or political distance from the rest of the empire could save Egypt from war. The Romans and the Sassanid Persians became engaged in a bloody conflict in the early seventh century. Throughout this tumult, events were happening deep within the distant Arabian desert that no Roman or Persian could have foreseen. The Prophet Muhammad had founded a new religion and united the Arab tribes. Upon his death, the adherents to the new faith, called Muslims, burst forth and assailed the two weary empires. In just under thirty years of conquest, the Muslims had created an empire that eclipsed both the Persian and the Roman. In 641, they arrived at the gates of Alexandria under the command of Amr ibn al-As, and the city would never be the same again. [83]

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[81] Gottlieb, "Dream of Reason," 316
[82] Haas, "Alexandria in Late Antiquity," 318
[83] Kennedy, "Egypt as a Province in the Islamic Caliphate," 62–85.

From Alexandria to Baghdad

The Arab Conquest constitutes the most incredible feat in military and administrative history. One century after the death of the Prophet, the caliph of Islam (who was at once the spiritual and temporal leader of the Muslim world) commanded an empire that streched from Spain to India. In a single lifetime, the Arab warriors had eclipsed the might of both Rome and Persia. But unlike similarly grand military conquests such as the Mongol or Hunnic invasions, the Muslim caliphate endured as a political entity for centuries and left a significant cultural mark on every territory that it incorporated.

As the Middle Ages took shape in the aftermath of the Muslim conquests, the Islamic world and the Christian world stood diametrically opposed. While there were instances in which the two cultures overlapped, as in Syria, Egypt, Sicily, and Spain, for the most part Christians living in Europe viewed Muslims as heretics while the Arab leaders of the caliphate saw the European princes as strategic threats.

Even though Alexandria was firmly in Muslim hands, the Patriarchate inhabited by Cyril still existed. It had since split into two branches, one Orthodox and the other Coptic. The power and influence of these two positions gradually waned as the city became predominantly Muslim and, eventually, majority Arab. A Greek minority continued to exist within the city until the 1950s when the rising tide of Arab nationalism prompted many Greeks to flee Egypt.

It is easy to claim that the Muslim conquest of Alexandria was a disaster for both Greeks and the Greek intellectual tradition. One source even claims that it was the Caliph Omar who ordered the final destruction of the Great Library. According to legend, he wrote:

> If the content of the books is in accordance with the book of Allah,

> we may do without them, for in that case, the book of Allah more than suffices. If, on the other hand, they contain matter not in accordance with the book of Allah there can be no need to preserve them. Proceed, then, and destroy them.[84]

The validity of this story has been called into question by several scholars. For one thing, the quotation comes from a thirteenth century Syriac Christian named Bar Hebraeus. Secondly, there are very few records that even mention the existence of the Library after the third century. If Omar ordered the destruction of the Library, it would have been far from the grand collection of knowledge often romanticized by the Western mind.

Whether or not there is any truth to the burning of the Great Library by the Arab conquerors is irrelevant; the Greek intellectual tradition was in decline. And yet, even as late as 650 A.D, there still existed some philosophical schools within the city. This is known due to the life and times of Jacob, Bishop of Edessa. Born in 633 in Syria, he studied Greek literature, both philosophical and Christian, first at the monastery of Qenneshre and then at Alexandria.[85] Jacob was one of the last students to study at Alexandria that is known to us, but he is one of many writers of the classical Syriac language who are credited with the translation of many works of ancient Greek writers. By the time Jacob died in 704, both Syria and Egypt had been absorbed into the growing caliphate. The Syriac translation movement had not been for nothing, however. Once the military expansion of the caliphate had ceased, many caliphs began promoting translations of ancient texts into Arabic. The movement began with the Syriac texts and soon encompassed works of Greek as well.

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[84] Macleod, "The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World," 10
[85] Fowden, "Before and After Muhammad," 147

But as the intellectual life of cities like Antioch, Baghdad, and Cordoba grew and thrived, Alexandria began a long and sad decline. Its importance as an intellectual as well as political and commercial entity had diminished as other cities rose to take its place. By the year 1000, Alexandria was eclipsed even within Egypt as the new city of Cairo rose to greatness in its strategic position in the heart of the province. For nearly the next millennium, Alexandria would be nothing more than a port city, a mere stop upon the maritime highway connecting the eastern Mediterranean with the west. The city would reenter the story of western civilization in 1798, with the arrival of an invasion force.

When Napoleon Bonaparte, general of the French army, arrived in Alexandria on the 1st of July, 1798, he would have considered the city to be an utter anticlimax. The city boasted a population of only fifteen thousand according to *Description de l'Égypte,* the French survey of the country.[86] The French army wasted little time in Alexandria before moving to take Cairo a few days later.

The story of Alexandria continues past this point, but anything beyond the early years of the Muslim conquests is far beyond the scope of this project. It would pain me deeply to end the story here, however, at the point in which Alexandria, once the world-leading capital of industry and knowledge, was revealed to the West to be a place of insignificance. That is why I will take the time I have left to explain how both Alexandria and Hypatia survived the slow decay of time.

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The Arabs never restored Alexandria to its place of intellectual or commercial prominence. The role that it once played as the center of Egyptian life, politics, and industry was slowly transferred to Cairo. The intellectual legacy of Alexandria, however, did not decay with the city itself. It migrated.

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[86] Reimer, “Colonial Bridgehead: Government and Society in Alexandria,” 30

The Alexandria to Baghdad narrative is an obscure story that was promoted by the Islamic scholars Al-Farabi and Al-Masudi in the 10th century. They wrote of how the teaching of medicine, mathematics, and logic had died out in Alexandria with the rise of Christiantiy. However, due to the translation movement of Greek texts into Arabic (Al-Farabi and Al-Masudi underplay the translation of Greek texts into Syriac), the intellectual traditions of Alexandria were successfully preserved and practiced again at Antioch under the Umayyad caliph Umar II.[87] The texts persisted there for a time, but the Umayyad caliphs were warriors at heart, and cared little for learning. Eventually, the students who used the Alexandrian texts left Antioch, "taking the books with them."[88] Greek scholarship wouldn't find a home again until the scholarly caliph Al-Ma'mun sought to gather every text within his *Bayt al-Hikmah,* his House of Wisdom.

The Baghdad House of Wisdom and, by extension, the translation of Greek texts into Arabic has become associated with the Islamic Golden Age. Many ancient Greek texts would have been lost had Al-Ma'mun not sought to consolidate the knowledge of the world under his roof. The knowledge held in Baghdad spread to other parts of the Muslim world and eventually became integral to the development of the European Renaissance.

Within this Alexandria to Baghdad narrative, however generalized it may be, is found a true victory for Greek intellectual thought. It may have experienced a slow death in Alexandria but it stood reborn in the House of Wisdom. Just as the Great Library marked the zenith of the Greek tradition, the House of Wisdom marked the zenith of Arab intellectualism, which was helped in no small part by the Greeks.

If you were to enter the House of Wisdom in the ninth century, you would have been greeted by innumerable scrolls and busy scribes working at their translations. Four of the scrolls

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[87] Fowden,"Before and After Muhammad," 150
[88] Ibid, 150

would have been part of the *Arithmetica,* written by Diophantus, the Greek mathematician. At the same time, there would have been six surviving Greek scrolls of the *Arithmetica.* But there is something unique about the Arabic scrolls: they contain an expanded version of Diophantus' writing.[89] The expanded sections are commentaries on the work and were designed to help students better understand the text. The most likely candidate for the author of these commentaries is Hypatia, Diophantus' only known ancient commentator.

Even if the survival of Hypatia's work is tangential to the history of philosophy, the woman herself has endured in the minds of many. We have already discussed the negative aspects of Hypatia's legend and how it can discount her actual person in favor of propping her up as a paragon of various modern causes (most egregiously by men like Kingsley and his anti-Catholic novel). But all legends spring from a grain of truth, and the life of Hypatia is no exception. This essay is a work of tribute and homage more than anything else. The end of classical civilization, even when zoomed in to only include the city of Alexandria, is an enormous field that spans many centuries. In putting the emphasis on Hypatia and Cyril, I had hoped to find a microcosm that explained why classical philosophy went away. Whether or not their stories epitomize the transition between the classical age and the medieval is still up for debate. But I can say with confidence that Hypatia led the most incredible life in one of the most extraordinary cities in one of the most fascinating times in human history.

Enough has been said about the death of Hypatia. More should be said about her life. This essay is my small way of contributing to that idea.

[89] Cameron, "Hypatia: Life, Death, and Works," 194

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