III

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF HYPATIA

Theon's Daughter and the Alexandrians

Hypatia spent her life in Alexandria. There is no evidence that she ever left the city—not even for a short time, to take up studies in Athens, as some scholars have suggested.[1] Alexandria was universally admired. It was the third largest city in the empire, the residence of the *praefectus Augustialis* (prefect of Egypt), the *dux Aegypti* (military commander of Egypt), and other imperial as well as city officials, and the seat of the Egyptian and Libyan churches.[2] It was a closed universe, fully shaped, finished, and framed, completely gratifying her spiritual needs. The Museion, the library, the waning pagan temples, the churches, the circles of theologians, philosophers, and rhetors, the mathematical and medical schools, a catechetical school and a rabbinical schul—all made up its framework and answered the intellectual and cultural wants of its inhabitants.

Here she lived with her father, Theon; here she gathered her students, who came from Alexandria, from other parts of Egypt, and from distant lands. She knew the vital problems of the city of which she was an esteemed resident. She moved in it freely in her chariot, showed herself in her characteristic tribon, called on influential officials, visited public and scientific institutions. A fixture of the city, as a scholar, a beautiful woman in her youth, a sovereign in her own right in the city, and witness to many of its events, she commanded respect and, in some circles, provoked controversy. Here, too, she would also become the object of anger, aggression, and degradation.[3]

In the sources the name of the Alexandrian Hypatia appears in two spellings, Hypatia and Hypateia, the former more often than the latter: it is the feminine form of Hypatios.[4] Hypatia was by no means a rare Hellenic name; it was used in pagan as well as in Christian families.[5] But as Nicephorus Gregoras, a Byzantine historian of the fourteenth century, reports, only the name of our woman philosopher eventually became synonymous with a wise and sagacious woman. It was he who called Eudocia, the wife of the emperor Constantine the Despot, son of Andronicus II Paleologus, a "second" Hypatia when describing her virtues, depth of education, and conversational skills.[6] His account suggests that in late Byzantine times women known for their love of the sciences and philosophy were proverbially referred to by this appellation.

In acknowledgment of Hypatia's intellectual attributes, after her death Michael Psellus bestowed on her the sobriquet "the Egyptian wise woman." Calling the roll of prominent women who applied themselves to literary and philosophical pursuits, he pointed to the Sybil, Sappho, Theano, and "the Egyptian woman philosopher."[7] He did not even have to mention her name, since every reader would know the person he had in mind.

Although we have no difficulties in determining Hypatia's city of birth, we face considerable obstacles in establishing her date of birth. It is widely thought that she was born around 370.[8] This dating rests on Hesychius' communication in *Suda* that the height of Hypatia's career came during the reign of the emperor Arcadius.[9] Birth in 370 would bring her to maturity in the year 400, in one sense the midpoint of the emperor's rule. But this date is neither certain nor satisfactory. Several indications from other sources prompt us to date her birth earlier.

John Malalas argues persuasively that at the time of her ghastly death Hypatia was an elderly woman[10]—not twenty-five years old (as Kingsley wants), nor even forty-five, as popularly assumed. Following Malalas, some scholars, including Wolf, correctly argue that Hypatia was born around 355 and was about sixty when she died.[11] Another interpretation of Hesychius' text might confirm Malalas' assertion. Its justification may be found in Penella's hypotheses about Hypatia's date of birth.[12] He points out that Arcadius was proclaimed Augustus in 383; consequently, his rule should be counted from that year and not from 395, the year his father, Theodosius I, died.

The biography of Synesius, Hypatia's favorite student, offers an additional argument in favor of the earlier date. Although the year of his birth, 370, is also a matter of conjecture, the period of his studies with Hypatia—the 390s—is a certainty.[13] Cameron likewise thinks that Synesius' year of birth falls somewhere from 368 to 370.[14] There can be no doubt that Synesius would have studied not with someone his own age but with a person his senior. The respectful manner in which he addresses his teacher does not accord with the picture of a twenty-year-old girl. It is hard to believe that at such an age she could have distinguished herself as singularly erudite in mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy.

According to *Suda* Hypatia's father, Theon, reached maturity during the reign of Theodosius I (379–395).[15] Malalas, however, maintains that his prime occurred in the time of Gratian, that is, between 367 and 383.[16] The early 360s seem more likely, since we know that in 364 Theon predicted eclipses of the sun and the moon, which he observed in Alexandria.[17] Such predictions would not have been recorded had they not issued from a mature scholar. Consequently, Hypatia's father must have been born around 335.[18]

The chronology of Theon's life is further obscured in *Suda,* where the astronomer and mathematician Pappus appears as Theon's contemporary.[19] The error rests on the premise that both mathematicians published Euclid's *Elements* and commented on Ptolemy's *Almagest,* whereas in fact Pappus did so

around 320, and Theon in the 360s and 370s.[20] Although we are ignorant of the date of Theon's death, we are certain that he did not live long enough to witness his daughter's death. It is my assumption that he died sometime in the first years of the fifth century.

Theon was a highly educated scholar, a mathematician and astronomer. Thanks to *Suda,* we know that he was a member of the Alexandrian Museion *(ho ek tou Mouseiou),* and the epithets *Aigyptios* and *Alexandreus* point to his Greek-Egyptian heritage and connections with and devotion to his native city and the multilingual Alexandrian tradition.[21]

Indeed, Theon, like his daughter, did not leave Alexandria; he nurtured himself on the spiritual wealth of this intellectually affluent city. He devoted his scholarship to the study of his eminent predecessors Euclid and Ptolemy; he was undoubtedly interested in philosophy, but more so in pagan religious literature and old Greek practices of divination. Unlike his daughter, he did not teach philosophy. Neoplatonic philosophy was only one ingredient of his education, but as a scholar-mathematician he is called a philosopher by Socrates Scholasticus, Hesychius, and Theophanes;[22] Malalas even refers to him as "the wisest philosopher."[23] In the entry on Theon in *Suda,* both Theon and Pappus are called philosophers. Because of his astronomical knowledge and studies of magic, astrological sources refer to him as "sage" and "philosopher."[24]

Several of Theon's mathematical and astronomical works have survived: Euclid's *Elements,* designed for students; *The Data;* and *The Optics.*[25] Known to and copied by Byzantines, they were used for modern editions of Euclid's texts.[26] Theon was also a superior commentator on Ptolemy's mathematical and astronomical works. He wrote commentaries on the thirteen books of *Almagest (Syntaxsis mathematica)* following the tracks—and in many fragments using the text—of his compatriot Pappus.[27] Theon also wrote two commentaries on Ptolemy's *Handy Tables: The Great Commentary,* in five books; and *The Little Commentary,* in one.[28]

Theon did not work alone; he had associates. It is likely that

Pappus, his senior, occasionally kept him company, since Theon made use of his commentaries on *Almagest*. Two other associates were mathematicians known only by their first names, Eulalius and Origenes, to whom he dedicated *The Great Commentary* on the *Handy Tables* of Ptolemy; they may also have been students of Theon's, since he refers to them as *hetairoi,* companions.[29] To another student, Epiphanius, he dedicated *The Little Commentary,* the fourth book of *The Great Commentary,* and an apostrophe in the introduction to the commentary on *Almagest*.[30] In these works Epiphanius is called *teknon,* child (in the dedication, *teknon Epiphanie*). These dedications have led some scholars to infer that he was Hypatia's brother.[31] But in late Hellenic scientific circles as well as in Hermetic and Gnostic communities, masters commonly addressed their students in this manner.[32] When Theon mentions his daughter as an associate, he calls her *thygater.*[33]

Among Theon's scientific associates, Hypatia was his closest collaborator. Given the evidence of Theon's dedications, his other students appear to have applied themselves assiduously to science, and especially to Ptolemy's works; but only the titles of Hypatia's mathematical studies are extant. As her father's child and associate, she is highly esteemed in the sources, which describe her as a mathematician who surpassed her father's talents. Philostorgius, for example, writes that having been introduced by her father to the arcana of mathematics, she eclipsed her teacher not only in mathematics but, above all, in astronomy. Hesychius, recalling Hypatia's sagacity and fame, stresses her own abilities in the context of her work with her father. Damascius in turn, as if summarizing his predecessors' opinions, remarks that she was "by nature more refined and talented than her father." As we remember, in another fragment Damascius disparages Hypatia's philosophical skills and presents her—in contrast to the philosopher Isidore—only as a mathematician. Finally, at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Nicephorus Callistus recalls the excellent education Hypatia received from her father, which she developed and cultivated.

Although the sources praise Hypatia's mathematical talent, historians of mathematics have treated Theon better than his daughter.[34] The incongruity reflects Hypatia's greater versatility as a scholar interested not just in mathematics but in "all philosophy." In addition, beginning with Socrates and Philostorgius, historians writing about her achievements as a mathematician have praised her accomplishments as a humanist. Moreover, Theon's mathematical fame has been fostered by the survival of his editions of Greek mathematicians' writings, whereas we have not had Hypatia's works (although this, as we shall see, is beginning to change).

Hesychius' list of Hypatia's mathematical titles suggests that she occupied herself with the works of native Alexandrian mathematicians; she wrote commentaries on Apollonius of Perge, who lived in the third century B.C.; on Diophantus, who lived around the middle of the third century A.D.; and on a piece titled *The Astronomical Canon*.[35] Apollonius' work, *The Conic Sections,* was in trigonometry; Perl has attempted to reconstruct Hypatia's commentary on it.[36] Diophantus was and continues to be considered the most difficult mathematician of antiquity. Several scholars believe that the survival of the bulk of his *Arithmetica* is due to the quality of Hypatia's elucidations.[37] Out of thirteen books of the original we have six in Greek and four translated into Arabic in the ninth century. They contain notes, remarks, and interpolations that may come from Hypatia's commentary. If this is the case, the nature and content of her commentaries on the Alexandrian mathematicians were exegetical, intended for students.[38]

If some of Hypatia's commentary on Diophantus could survive, then another thesis of Cameron's seems even more likely to be valid. It deals with the question of Hypatia's commentary on the writings of Ptolemy. Until recently scholars thought that Hypatia revised Theon's commentary on *Almagest*. The view was based on the title of the commentary on the third book of *Almagest,* which read as follows: "Commentary by Theon of Alexandria on Book III of Ptolemy's *Almagest,* edition revised

by my daughter Hypatia, the philosopher."[39] Cameron, who has analyzed Theon's titles for other books of *Almagest* and for other scholarly texts of late antiquity, concludes that Hypatia corrected not her father's commentary but the text of *Almagest* itself. Thus, the extant text of *Almagest* could have been prepared, at least partly, by Hypatia.[40]

Moreover, Hypatia may have also prepared a new edition of Ptolemy's *Handy Tables,* which in Hesychius appears under the title *The Astronomical Canon.* She was probably busy with it when Theon was writing both commentaries (the "large" and the "small") to Ptolemy's work.[41] Therefore, Cameron's observation that there is no reason to lament the complete loss of Hypatia's writings seems justified. The extant texts of Ptolemy's *Almagest* and *Handy Tables* were probably prepared for publication by Hypatia.

Hypatia's opinion about astronomy as a venerable science and Philostorgius' claim that her astronomical competence exceeded her father's lend credence to Cameron's concrete arguments.[42] There is a possibility that scholars like Cameron, Toomer, and Knorr, working on the texts of Greek mathematicians, will in time effect a change in the views on the question of Hypatia's intellectual legacy. It may be already taken for granted that Hypatia will be admitted into the history of mathematics and astronomy as a scholar known not only by the titles of her works but also by their contents.

As long as Theon was alive, he worked on his mathematical predecessors with a group of close associates under his guidance. After his death Hypatia appears to have continued the project independently, as a mature scholar in her own right. Those of her students whose names we know do not seem to have operated as her associates; our sources, and especially Synesius' letters, indicate that she lectured to them on mathematical and astronomical matters but did not involve them in editing or commenting on the texts of Alexandrian mathematicians and astronomers.

Instead, we learn that Hypatia initiated her students (as did,

perhaps, her father) into the more practical business of studying the mathematical-astronomical secret mysteries. We may recall here that as a result of her teaching Synesius was able to construct an astrolabe (*De dono* 4). For this purpose, of course, he had to be familiar with the principles of trigonometry that he mastered attending her lectures on the theory of Apollonius of Perge. The instrument, which measures the position of stars and planets, is called *organon* in *De dono* (5). It was intended as a gift for his friend Paeonius, a high-ranking state official in Constantinople.

There is no doubt that Hypatia learned the construction of the planisphere from her father. Consequently, both may have advised Synesius on the project. For we know that Theon wrote a treatise on the construction of such an instrument; *Suda* tells us it was titled *On the Small Astrolabe.*[43] The original version of the treatise has not survived, but its content has been restored on the basis of the works of later authors, beginning with Arab writers of the seventh century.[44] In his *Address to Paeonius (Ad Paeonium de dono)* Synesius does not mention Theon's little treatise; he alludes to Ptolemy as his predecessor in the construction of the astrolabe. Hence Neugebauer convincingly suggests that Synesius sent his gift and the enclosed letter describing the *organon* before Theon wrote *On the Small Astrolabe.*[45] The vague, indeed opaque, description of the appearance and operation of the device is additional proof that Synesius was ignorant of Theon's exposition, which we know from later quotations was lucid.

Neugebauer's hypothesis that Theon was still living when Synesius experimented with astronomical instruments permits us to speculate further on the date of Theon's death. The letter to Paeonius was written, and the gift presented, during Synesius' mission to Constantinople (although a copy of the letter was sent to Hypatia only in 404; *Ep.* 154). It is therefore possible that Theon was still alive during Synesius' mission and only then writing his treatise. He may then have died, as I suggested earlier, in the first years of the fifth century.[46]

We have already called attention to the differences in the in-

tellectual interests of father and daughter. Theon was not attracted to theoretical philosophy. But he too had nonscientific tastes. Like Hypatia, he loved "Hellenism," although his affection for things Greek was, above all, religious in nature. Endowed with a literary talent, he expressed his devotion in poetic form. Malalas observes: "The most learned scholar and philosopher taught and interpreted astronomical writings and wrote commentaries on the books of Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus."[47]

We thus learn that Theon not only commented on and wrote purely scientific works but also explicated treatises (most likely astrological ones) and the Orphics' texts—probably their hymns, which were highly admired by the Neoplatonists. In *Suda* we find titles or descriptions of other short writings of Theon's that confirm Malalas' statements about his interests in pagan religious practices and the movements of heavenly bodies: *On Signs and the Examination of Birds and the Croaking of Ravens,* and two essays on the function of the star Syrius and the influence of planetary spheres on the Nile.[48]

From this meager information we may at least tentatively conclude that Hypatia's father, apart from working on specific scientific projects, was also studying the secrets of the physical world and investigating the truths revealed by Hermes and Orpheus. The titles of these esoteric little pieces show a man attracted to numbers as well as to the voices of nature. For him reality was filled with signs from the planets and living creatures. The "magic of the world" impressed him more than the philosophers' arguments. His way of seeing and studying reality was different from that of his daughter. The interpretation of omens attracted him more than philosophical inquiry. The mysterious "adhesive" of the world was more accessible to him in astrological prophesies, in the cry of the birds proclaiming god's will, and in Hermes' revelation than in the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle.

Consequently, we should not be surprised to discover Theon as the author of poems on astrological themes included in the

collections of the *Greek Anthology*. There are two poems, one of which appears now in *Corpus Hermeticum,* ascribed to Hermes himself.[49] In older editions of the *Greek Anthology* this poem figures under the name of either Theon or Hermes.[50] Titled *Peri heimarmenes,* it contains a monostich supposedly composed by Theon.[51] The poem enumerates in the "cosmic chaos" the sparkling bodies of the seven spheres of the universe: Jove, Mars, Venus, the Moon, Saturn, the Sun, Mercury. They embed the germs of the inflexible resolutions of Destiny *(moira).* The internal intelligence and power of the stars determine our condition from birth on. They predispose our psychic states and temperaments. This astronomical determinism, says Hermes/Theon, cannot be overcome, and the operation of particular planets is strictly circumscribed (for instance, Mars gives to people a violent and angry temperament). The powers of Destiny, the planetary spheres, are sustained by the lord of the immutable laws of the universe, the god of eternal time—Aion.[52]

The other poem, ascribed exclusively to Theon, manifests even more explicitly his devotion to the starry skies, the perfect world of the gods beyond the sphere of the moon. Dedicated to Ptolemy, it eulogizes the creator of the new model of the universe. Thus it seems that this commentator on Ptolemy's erudition and discoveries wrote a poem in praise of his talents.[53] The poem portrays Ptolemy as the gods' elect. His genius carried him high and transported him to the region of heavenly creatures, for his mind penetrated the laws governing the planetary spheres, and he beheld the immutable principles of Destiny ruling the cosmos. Destiny's reason belongs to the world of "ether" and not to the polluted world of earthly matter.

Both of these poems elaborate upon the distinction between "heaven" and "nature," between the sphere filled with ether and the reality of earthly existence. Yet splinters of a higher, divine substance reside in our hearts and minds; they can be activated and enhanced through effort and will. That is what Ptolemy achieved: through superhuman effort he tore himself away from the mundane region of "dismal muddiness" (as

Theon says in the language of the Orphics)[54] and was accorded the luminous perfection of divine beings.

Two other poems preserved under the name Theon differ from these in both tone and substance.[55] They contain no raptures over cosmic space, no planetolatria; rather, they are epigrams in the classic style suggestive of the epigrams of the lyric poets Archilochus and Mimnermus. Both include reminiscences of the sea. One tells about a mother's despair over the death of her son, a young sailor. His "grave" is the abysmal, cold sea, which swallowed up his body; the only commemoration of him is the circling of sea birds over the place of his "burial." In the other epigram, the poet animates and anthropomorphizes a shield, which turns itself into a faithful and dedicated servant to its master. During a dire sea battle it saves his life by carrying him from the wrecked ship to a safe haven, while all the other sailors perish.

For his poetry Theon earned no special praise from fellow poets. They admired him only for his mathematical achievements and for his passion for astronomy. Thus, Pallas recollected with reverence his erudition;[56] Leon the Philosopher (around 900) considered Theon an adornment to Alexandria and—next to Proclus—the wisest of men: one (Theon) measured the skies and penetrated their secrets; the other (Proclus) calculated the size of the earth.[57] And as an authority on astrological secrets Theon was celebrated by authors of magic-astrological pseudo-epigraphs. A casual look at the indexes of some volumes of the *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* reveals that the name of Theon the Alexandrian appears in numerous works of that type, composed in various periods.[58]

For scholars of Alexandria of late antiquity, such as G. Fowden and J. C. Haas, Theon's tastes are unexceptional.[59] Virtually all Alexandrian mathematicians were interested in the occult sciences. Theon's down-to-earth knowledge went hand in hand with interests in divination, astrology, and Hermeticism. In this milieu, it was rather his daughter, with her more rational attitude toward the world and the Hellenic tradition, who raised her

compatriots' eyebrows. For Alexandria in the fourth century was notorious for its fortune-tellers; after all, astrology was taught in its schools. Sundry astrologers operated in the city; the names of some of them have survived to our day. To the best of our knowledge, they were simultaneously regarded as mathematicians. Among them was Paulus of Alexandria, noted for his handbook on astronomy and astrology.[60] There was also an anonymous expert on the mysteries of the skies, named "the astrologer of the year 379," whose work is unknown by title but three chapters of which are extant; they deal with the origin and the principles of astrology.[61] Yet another was Hephaistion of Thebes, the last representative of fourth-century astrology; extracts from his astronomical handbook were titled *Apotelesmatica* or *Astronomica*.[62] These astronomers may have been acquaintances of Theon and the young Hypatia.

Thus we have some notion of the atmosphere in which Hypatia grew up, and of the pursuits—besides philosophical studies—to which her students were drawn. Our assumptions (discussed in Chapter II) about the literature read in their circle have recently been substantiated by analyses of the sources treating Theon. Steeped in tradition, the family was surely reading Hermes' revelation, the Orphics' theological writings, texts on Greek divination, handbooks on astrology.

These subjects left a mark on Synesius' writings. After returning home from another visit in Alexandria around 405, "inspired by god himself" he composed a treatise overnight and sent it immediately to Hypatia for criticism (*Ep.* 154). This work, titled *On Dreams,* deals with prediction of the future through the interpretation of dreams as refined by Neoplatonic philosophy. It expresses great appreciation for the capacity of the human soul for divination: "The superiority of God over man, and man over beast, is due to knowledge—a gift which the Deity possesses by nature, but which man can gain, to any full extent, only through divination."[63]

The same dispatch to Hypatia included another work, the treatise *Dion,* reflecting the influence of Hermetic writings read

at Theon's home. In it Synesius lists the most saintly and the wisest men in history: Amous (Ammon), Zoroaster, Antony, and Hermes.[64] He also refers to Hermes' wisdom in *On Kingship, On Providence,* and other writings (such as the *Hymns*).[65]

To the end of his life Synesius sustained his interest, developed in Alexandria, in astronomy, the construction of scientific instruments, and the literature of the occult and religion, including prediction of the future. In 413, the year of his death, he sent four letters to Hypatia (*Epp.* 10, 15, 16, and 81). They are filled with sorrow and resignation, reflecting both the great burdens of his office and grief at the death of all his children, three sons. He feels lonely and deserted, and he complains about the absence of letters from the beloved teacher; he craves her words of consolation. In *Epistle* 15 he asks Hypatia to "forge" for him an instrument called a hydroscope, used for measuring the weight of liquids.[66] He describes what the instrument should look like and asserts that it will give him joy and uplift his heart: "I am in such evil fortune that I need a hydroscope." The words are intriguing. It is difficult to understand why a man oppressed by personal, ecclesiastical, and political adversity, desolate and lonely, would need a hydrometric instrument designed for chemical experiments.

The hydroscope, however, was probably used for more than strictly scientific purposes. In contrast to Lacombrade, I believe that Synesius wanted to use the instrument for divination.[67] A contemporary source provides confirmation: in an astrological work Hephaistion of Thebes states that the hydroscope, like the astrolabe, may be utilized in astrology, for the preparation of horoscopes, for the divination of future events. Synesius, crushed by despair, forsaken by his closest kin, was seeking consolation and deliverance in hydromancy. He wanted to consult with the gods of water about his future.[68] To save himself, to deliver his soul, he needed to hear the voice of Destiny, to decipher the will of the gods concerning his future, hoping it would be better than the present.

Synesius' action was not unusual; in this period people commonly resorted to hydroscopic instruments and other means of divining the future. And Synesius' study of the physical sciences and occult literature had begun in his youth, at least as early as his studies with Hypatia. His request to her was, therefore, not a momentary impulse, but a reflection of a long-standing activity rooted in his Alexandrian days. It is not surprising that this disciple of Hypatia (and perhaps of Theon), engrossed in dream interpretation, astrology, and physical experiments, came to be recognized as one of the earliest adepts in the secrets of alchemy.[69]

While Hypatia's students were examining philosophical questions, studying mathematical sciences, reading diverse religious literature, and conducting astronomical experiments, momentous events were taking place in Alexandria in connection with the patriarch Theophilus' activities. From the beginning of his pontificate, in 385, he had conducted a campaign against paganism in the city, expunging through various methods the religious cults still in existence.[70] With the outbreak of riots sparked by the church's appropriation of pagan temples, Theophilus seized the opportunity to strike a blow at the Serapeum, once the cult center in Alexandria.[71] The action against the shrine took place in either 391 or 392.[72] It must have occurred however, after the emperor Theodosius I's edict of June 391, which, by prohibiting cult practices, opened the way for the destruction of pagan cult places.[73]

A body of Alexandrian pagans, whose numbers were still substantial,[74] barricaded themselves in the temple, making sallies on the besieging Christians. This gave Theophilus a pretext to turn to the civil and military authorities for help. The matter was terminated by an edict from the emperor ordering the pagans to leave the temple, proclaiming the killed Christians martyrs, and handing the Serapeum over to the church. The magnificent statue of the god Serapis, the work of Bryaxis, was shattered into pieces by a soldier's ax.[75]

The historical sources state that Alexandrian luminaries as-

sisted the pagans in their defense of the holy objects and cult symbols. One of them, the Neoplatonic philosopher Olympius, assumed leadership in the resistance in the Serapeum; the pagans were joined by Ammonius and Helladius, teachers of Greek language and literature; and by the poet Palladas and probably by the poet Claudian.

Even earlier, another Neoplatonic philosopher, Antoninus, Sosipatra's son and a disciple of Aedesius (a student of Iamblichus), had foretold the fall and ruin of the Serapeum. Although he did not live to see his prophecy fulfilled, for much of his life he was overcome with fear and anxiety about the future of religion and culture once the old gods were removed and their chief cult center in Alexandria ruined.

Given the support of the Alexandrian intellectual elite for the defenders of the old faith, the question inevitably arises how Hypatia stood on the issue. After all, in the early 390s she was already a famed and esteemed philosopher. Why did she not join Olympius in defending the threatened sacred objects of the Serapeum? Why did she not, along with her students, give moral aid to the defenders? We can understand her silence by looking more closely at the traits of the philosophers mentioned above.

Antoninus, who died before these events, was strongly tied to the cult of Serapis through his prophetic and religious activity. Hypatia's junior—he was born around 320—he moved from Pergamon to the Canopus district, near Alexandria at the mouth of the Nile. He died shortly before the destruction of the temples of the god Serapis in Alexandria and in Canopus (also ordered by Theophilus).[76]

In Canopus—probably in a temple district—Antoninus gathered students and taught them Platonic philosophy, which he combined with religious practices and secret ceremonies. He led a profoundly ascetic life, which included abstinence, and was devoted to the contemplation of divine creation. From his mother he inherited the gift of clairvoyance. All these attributes rendered him "divine," although he looked like an ordinary mortal and did not shun human company. His spiritual singularity, his internal radiance, attracted young men and old to Canopus by all available means of transportation. As a result the temple there was always crowded to capacity, with young people performing sacerdotal duties. Although Eunapius claims that Antoninus did not demonstrate any inclinations toward theurgic practices "because he kept a wary eye on the imperial views and policy, which were opposed to these practices,"[77] we know that Antoninus was a typical practitioner of Neoplatonic theurgy. As a philosopher-priest he remained in direct contact with the gods. If someone turned to him with a question about things divine, he silently raised his eyes toward heaven as if looking for an answer there. But he responded to questions connected with philosophy and Platonic logic. Exercising his religious and prophetic gift, Antoninus foretold the fall of the cult of the old gods and the destruction of the temples in Alexandria and Canopus. He recognized the implications of the legislation under Theodosius I, he saw through the schemes of the bishops seated on the throne of St. Mark, and he trembled with anxiety about the future of the old cultural values.[78]

The philosopher who actively participated in the defense of the Serapeum was the Neoplatonist Olympius. Church historians (Rufinus, Sozomenos) and Damascius in his *Life of Isidore* relate how, clad in the philosophical mantle, he placed himself at the head of the defenders.[79] He affirmed the sense of their struggle so powerfully that nobody could resist the words that "flowed out of his holy mouth" as he called for total sacrifice in defense of the sacred symbols of their ancestors' religion.[80] Like Antoninus, Olympius seemed an immortal being, and the deed accomplished through him of divine rather than human measure. When the defenders' morale flagged as they watched the destruction of the statues of the gods, he repeatedly assured them that the spirit dwelling in the statues departed to heaven; only their earthly manifestation was destroyed. Under his leadership the pagans made forays among the Christians, capturing, torturing, and crucifying them. Among those killed was the renowned rhetor Gessius.

Even before the outbreak of the conflict in 391/392, Olympius was known among Alexandrians as a servant and faithful confessor of Serapis. Tall, handsome, well-proportioned, and attractive, he had come from his native Cilicia to Alexandria to serve the god.[81] He was a master of all the cult rites, and he taught people how to conduct traditional ceremonies. Recalling the old creeds, he demonstrated their beauty and asserted that serving the gods brought bliss. He frequently admonished his listeners to safeguard the ancestral faith as their most precious treasure. Accordingly, the young and the old called him *hierodidaskalos;* Olympius' spirituality, moral authority, knowledge of the gods, and appearance led people to believe that this public teacher of religion was filled with god *(pleres tou theou).* Like Antoninus, he was endowed with the gift of prophesying on the future of the pagan religion. He too predicted to his disciples the fall of the temple of Serapis. When it came to pass, Damascius concluded that Olympius' visionary disposition was indeed deeply connected with the divine powers ruling the world.[82]

We know far less about the two Alexandrian grammarians who participated in the defense of the Serapeum, and what scraps of information we have come from Socrates Scholasticus.[83] Ammonius was a priest of Thoth (Hermes) and Helladius-Ammon (Zeus). In Constantinople, where they fled after the unrest of 391/392, both looked back on the events in Alexandria with pain and lamented the defeat dealt to Hellenic religion. Ammonius in particular despaired over the destruction of the statues of the gods and the ridicule to which they were subjected; on Theophilus' order the statute of the god Thoth (with the head of a baboon) had been exhibited to the mob, who had mocked its sacredness. Helladius, for his part, took pride in having killed nine Christians in the street skirmishes.

After the fall of the Serapeum, Ammonius, Helladius, Claudian, and other unnamed pagans left Alexandria, as did Olympius. When the emperor's edict ordering the destruction of the temple was proclaimed and soldiers and Christians began their occupation of the Serapeum, he escaped to Italy by sea and was

not heard of again.[84] Claudian eventually settled in Rome, where he devoted himself to creative and political activity.[85] Palladas remained in Alexandria but was deprived of the salary allotted him by the city for teaching Greek literature.[86]

Hypatia's philosophical activity was not constrained, and her students did not have to look for a new teacher. She was not seen at any sites of the battles between pagans and Christians. Despite apparent affinities with Antoninus and Olympius, suggested by their common philosophical language, she felt no attraction to Greek polytheism or the local cults. For her, pagan beliefs were only beautiful embellishments to the spiritual Hellenic tradition that she so valued and cultivated. She felt no compulsion to support her Platonism with theurgy and ritual practices, divination, or magic; neither did service to a god with the head of a baboon have a place in the transcendentalism she professed. Moreover, philosophers like Antoninus and Olympius were not of her "company"; they did not fit into her spiritual environment. In her opinion, Olympius was probably a typical *demodidaskolos,* a public teacher of wisdom preaching the truths of "holy philosophy" to the lower classes. The aristocratic lady of Alexandrian philosophy did not direct her teachings to such audiences; she did not seek to stimulate love of god in them. To judge from the silence of the sources, she found no satisfaction in popular polytheism and did not participate in pagan cult practices. Her students came from the social elite; they were wealthy and influential. Furthermore, their circle included sympathizers with Christianity. Hypatia could not boast of having killed Christians. She and her students could not have been at the Serapeum.

The Circumstances of Hypatia's Death

It was under such social and religious circumstances, in a scientific environment created by her father, in a circle of students engaged in sophisticated philosophic discourse, that Hypatia's

life was spent, until October 15, 412, the day Theophilus died. Referred to frequently as the "church's pharaoh," like his successor Cyril his harsh and authoritarian conduct provoked resentment among Alexandrian pagans and also complaints from monks of the desert Nitria (some of them, the so-called Origenists, left Egypt); from the bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, whom he harassed; and from various ecclesiastical groups in the East.[87]

But Hypatia and her circle had no reason to complain about Bishop Theophilus. Those attending her Neoplatonic courses were not threatened with any persecution (which the philosopher Olympius so feared); they were able to pursue their studies. Hypatia herself, not needing to conceal her non-Christian religiosity, enjoyed full intellectual independence and the tolerance of the ecclesiastical authorities.

These circumstances began to change when Theophilus' nephew Cyril was elected to the bishopric of St. Mark's. It soon became clear that Hypatia would enjoy no accord with the patriarch. Church historians today express great respect for Cyril as a theologian and dogmatist,[88] but his contemporaries perceived him differently. The sources describe him as an impetuous, power-hungry man more relentless in pursuit of authority than his predecessor and uncle; he aroused strong opposition in Egypt.

Cyril's very election as Theophilus' successor caused unrest in Alexandria and provoked contention between two ecclesiastical parties. One party wanted Timothy, Theophilus' archdeacon, as successor to the bishopric; the other supported Cyril. Timothy's followers had the backing of the military chief commander Abundantius *(comes rei militaris per Aegyptum),* the representative of the imperial authority.[89] It is not clear whether he acted on instructions from the emperor. Rougé doubts it; he thinks Abundantius acted from personal motives.[90] Besides, Rougé believes he commanded only a detachment stationed in Alexandria. After three days of fighting Cyril, the victor in the contest, was installed as bishop, on October 17, 412.

Socrates, to whom we owe our knowledge about these events, remarks that Cyril's election brought a gradual but significant extension of episcopal authority to public, municipal affairs.[91] He began with a battle for the purity of the faith by moving against groups that did not hold orthodox beliefs. He expelled the Novatians from the city, closing their churches, confiscating their liturgical objects, and depriving their bishop of all rights.[92]

Next he turned against the Jews. Socrates relates that in his action against them, Cyril took advantage of events initiated by the Jews themselves.[93] Instead of celebrating the sabbath—says Socrates—and reading the Law, they attended the theater on Saturdays to watch dance performances, and they engaged in brawls with Christians. One Saturday, as the prefect Orestes was in the theater announcing an ordinance on pantomimic performances, a brawl broke out between believers of the two religions. During Orestes' speech the Jews cried out that there were agents of Cyril among the audience, agents who had come to sow disorder and to dog the activity of the emperor's envoy in the city. The prefect, who had just managed to bring calm and order to Alexandria, was upset by the disturbance and decided to listen to the Jewish spectators' grievances. Shouting, they demanded, above all, the dismissal of Hierax, an Alexandrian teacher and Cyril's sycophant. They accused him of being an informer and of fomenting disorder. Orestes, who already resented the bishop's appropriation of many prerogatives that had formerly belonged to the emperor's officials, ordered Hierax arrested and tortured.

The prefect's action provoked Cyril's anger; Hierax was indeed one of his confidants. Cyril summoned the leaders of the Jewish community and threatened them with serious consequences if they continued to taunt and antagonize Christians. This interview increased the Jews' rancor, and they began to carry out ambushes against Christians. One night some of them raised an alarm that the church of St. Alexander was on fire. When the Christians ran to save their church, the Jews attacked

them, killing many. In response Cyril rushed with a large crowd to the Jewish district, surrounded the synagogue, permitted the plunder of Jewish property, and started chasing the Jews out of the city. Socrates claims that every one of the Jews, who had lived in Alexandria since Alexander the Great, was driven out. Although he surely exaggerated, undoubtedly a great many Jews did leave, and their expulsion must have adversely affected the city's economy.[94] Clearly, Cyril took advantage of the event to get rid of the greatest possible number of Jews, for doing so would weaken the traditional animosity between the confessions and reduce the number of adversaries against the policy of the church in Alexandria.[95]

Enraged by Cyril's measures, Orestes reported the incidents to the emperor; Cyril did likewise. Socrates remains silent on the emperor's reaction, saying only that Cyril attempted a reconciliation, sending a delegation to Orestes. Socrates stresses that a group of Alexandrians compelled Cyril to try to come to terms with Orestes. These people must have been members of the Christian community for Socrates uses the same term *(laos)* elsewhere to identify the people connected with the church. It is therefore obvious that some Christians wanted the patriarch to cooperate with the secular authorities. Cyril is said to have shown Orestes the New Testament, asking him to accept its truths and to exercise magnanimity. Orestes, however, refused to cooperate with the patriarch. Cyril felt powerless, and people from various religious groups associated with him began to contemplate other methods of applying pressure on the prefect.

Among the first to come openly to his aid (and surely with his encouragement) were 500 monks who left their hermetic lairs in Nitria and entered the city in force. Theophilus had already used them in fights against pagans as well as in doctrinal conflicts.[96] One day they confronted Orestes as he was riding through the city, insulted him, and accused him of paganism. The prefect's protestations that he was a Christian baptized by the bishop of Constantinople had no effect.[97] One of the monks—Ammonius—hit him in the head with a stone. The

prefect began to bleed profusely, and his horror-stricken guard scattered, but a group of Alexandrians (probably Christians) rushed to his defense. Ammonius was caught and brought before Orestes while the crowd dispersed the monks. Orestes sentenced Ammonius to tortures that resulted in his death. The prefect then dispatched a report on the affair to the imperial chancellery. Cyril did likewise, characterizing the matter as a religious struggle and claiming Ammonius as a martyr. Socrates' text, however, makes it clear that moderate Christians, aware of the monk's crime, criticized Cyril on his stand. Yielding, the bishop stopped propagandizing the affair.

But the head of the church and the representative of imperial power remained at odds; of the two, Orestes was the more obdurate. The bloody conflict between the Christians and the Jews, the expulsion of the latter from the city, the monks' attempt on his life, and Cyril's other religious demonstrations fed his obstinacy. The question then arises, on what did this obstinacy rest? After all, he was a recent arrival in Alexandria, little known, and from the beginning of his tenure an object of attacks by the church and the groups associated with it.

Clearly, Orestes' unyielding position toward the patriarch's actions had strong backing from influential people, members of the ruling class in the city and its environs. One of the notables who supported him was Hypatia—a friend from the beginning of his term in office in Alexandria.

Hypatia's support of Orestes—a momentous move—is reported by Socrates in a short but significant sentence. He says that men "of the Christian population" started to spread a slanderous rumor that Hypatia was the lion in the path to a reconciliation between the bishop and the prefect.[98]

There was basis for the rumor. As a traditionalist embodying in word and deed the Aristotelian *aretai politikai,* "she was swift and ingenious in arguments; in action she was known for prudence and political virtue."[99] She had associated herself with the old structure of the *civitas* based on a secular civil government and on discourse, not violence, in politics. She undoubtedly

shared with Orestes the conviction that the authority of the bishops should not extend to areas meant for the imperial and municipal administration. She would have remembered that the late Theophilus, notwithstanding his lust for power and his campaign against paganism in Alexandria, had not acted dictatorially but had availed himself of help and support from representatives of the emperor.[100] She had witnessed the harmonious cooperation of civil and ecclesiastical authorities. How else are we to interpret Synesius' recourse on behalf of his protégés to both Hypatia and Theophilus? Though outside the church, she always conversed freely with city officials either when she met them as she passed through the city's streets *(dia mesou tou asteos)* or when she entertained them at home. No ecclesiastic harassed her on that account or commented on her way of life, which was known to everybody. Her political independence, which manifested itself openly in public places, was respected. People knew that her wisdom, erudition, and ethical authority induced rulers to seek her counsel.

Gradually her personal and intellectual qualities enhanced her political influence as she modified her former role as "a philosopher-observer" through more active participation in the city's affairs. Owing to her support, in the years 414–415 Orestes was able to forge a kind of political party.[101] In this effort he may also have been aided by the leaders of the Jewish community; at least Socrates suggests as much: he states clearly that Orestes supported the Jews' resistance against the patriarch.[102] We may therefore assume that Hypatia, too, encouraged him to defend the Jews. She would have seen them as a group long notable for its economic and cultural contribution to the life of the city.

These observations call for further interpretation of Damascius' account contrasting Hypatia with Cyril as "the bishop of the opposing party." It appears that Cyril's partisanship developed as a political response to increasing tension between the ecclesiastical and secular authorities. There is no doubt that the emergence of Orestes' faction aroused trepidation among Cyril's adherents and other clergy. John of Nikiu offers an account of

the tension and fever that seized the ecclesiastical community. Socrates also revealingly describes the mood, while Damascius, we remember, writes about Cyril's envy of Hypatia's success, with the Alexandrian elite flocking to her house. Members of Cyril's faction must have realized what a powerful ally Orestes had gained for his cause. They also knew that Hypatia was not Orestes' only supporter, that behind her stood influential acquaintances. Among them, in Alexandria at least, Cyril's party greatly feared the *archontes,* city officials, Hypatia's friends, most of whom were already Christians.[103] Hypatia's alliance with Orestes' faction may have exacerbated that fear and promoted the consolidation of Cyril's ecclesiastical party.

The fact that Orestes and Hypatia's allies were essentially a Christian group complicated the situation for Cyril and his clergy.[104] After all, Orestes was himself a Christian and the representative of a Christian state; he was backed by members of the city's Christian elite and a segment of the Christian populace who had defended him from the monks' assault—the same Alexandrians who, together with Abundantius, had favored Timothy for the bishopric.

There were additional reasons for apprehension. Cyril and his supporters realized that Hypatia enjoyed influence outside Alexandria. Not only were her disciples of high birth; they occupied high positions in the service of the empire and the church. Herculianus' brother Cyrus may by that time have gained an important post at the court of Theodosius II—at least he had become a high-ranking politician; Hesychius held the office of *dux et corrector Libyarum;* Synesius was no longer alive, but his brother Euoptius had probably already succeeded him as bishop of Ptolemais; Olympius was a wealthy landowner in Syria, on friendly terms with high-ranking politicians such as the *comes* known also to Herculianus who had become a prominent figure in Alexandria. Hypatia's influence, then, reached as far as Constantinople, Syria, and Cyrene. Her friendships and influence among imperial functionaries and hieratics of the church would surely have generated anxiety among Cyril's followers.

In the face of the social disturbances in Alexandria, Cyril could not even be sure of the conduct of Aurelian, the praetorian prefect of the years 414–416. He was, after all, Synesius' acquaintance from the times of the latter's mission to Constantinople, and the object of his literary compliments in *On Providence*.[105] Cyril and his associates might have presumed that Orestes was Aurelian's acquaintance and that he had heard about Hypatia's qualities from him or from other of Synesius' friends before coming to Alexandria. This might explain his formation of a strong friendship with Hypatia in so short a time after the beginning of his administration there.

Damascius, who knew much more about Hypatia's important position in Alexandria than we do, did not hesitate to elaborate on this point: he states briefly and unequivocally that the whole city "doted on her and worshiped her." She was also showered with civic honors.[106] Cyril could not even dream of such adulation; he was unwanted and disliked from the moment he ascended to the bishopric. He perceived his weakness, and he was afraid he might lose in the struggle against Orestes. But he also knew he had the backing of the clergy, the monks, some members of the intellectual elite (like Hierax), and, perhaps, the city council. Finally, he could count on the *pollon plethos* who had helped him in the destruction of the Jewish dwellings.

These were the men who supported the patriarch's cause, who would not hesitate to undertake action to save it. Hypatia was neither popular nor celebrated among the Alexandrian populace at large. Together with her students she separated herself from the *demos;* she did not direct her teachings to the masses, and she had no influence among them.[107] Nor were there any reasons for the pagan groups in the city to consider her an ally; they remembered her lack of interest in traditional beliefs during their most recent struggle to preserve the Hellenic religion.

Cyril's people found a way to exploit Hypatia's detachment from the common people: they devised a subtle scheme of negative propaganda among the urban mob. John of Nikiu relates that they portrayed her as a witch and imputed to her the worst

type of sorcery—black magic—which drew the severest punishment not only in the legal system of the Christian empire; it was as old as the Twelve Tables.[108] Rumors of the practice of black magic spawned devastating fear among ordinary people, who were accordingly ever ready to take violent and ruthless action against sorcerers.

Alexandrians thus learned that the famous woman philosopher was in reality an abominable messenger of hell, "devoted at all times to magic, astrolabes, and instruments of music." The ecclesiastical propagandists thus imbued one tendentious little story about a sorceress with information about Hypatia's mathematical and astronomical research, her philosophical and religious interests, and anecdotes circulating about her in the city. To authenticate the information about Hypatia's forbidden practices it sufficed to refer to her father's preoccupation with astrology and magic, his writings on the interpretation of dreams, and the Alexandrian astrologists' calls at their house. Hesychius, aware of what lay at the core of the people's agitation, states unequivocally that it was astronomy that sealed her fate—understood, of course, as astrology alloyed with black magic and divination.[109]

Through such manipulations Hypatia was presented as a dangerous witch casting satanic spells on many people of the city; "she beguiled many people through [her] satanic wiles." The first to fall victim to her was "the governor of the city," Orestes; as a result of Hypatia's spells he stopped attending church and started an active "atheization" of Christian believers. He encouraged them to visit Hypatia (John of Nikiu probably means her lectures), and "he himself received the unbelievers at his house."

John of Nikiu also blames Hypatia for the Christian-Jewish conflict. Hierax, whom the Jews in the theater pointed out to Orestes as Cyril's spy and informant, is depicted as "a Christian possessing understanding and intelligence, who used to mock the pagans but was a devoted adherent of the illustrious Father, the patriarch, and was obedient to his monitions." Orestes, who sentenced Hierax to torture and the good monk Ammonius to

death, was ill disposed toward "the children of the church." That is why he lent support to the Jews, who, assured of his help and assistance, refused to listen to the patriarch when he called upon them to cease their hostility toward the Christians. By means of insidious deceit they assaulted the Christians and massacred a large body of them. In revenge the Christians plundered the synagogues, turned them into churches, and expelled the Jews from the city. In the face of such decisive action, the prefect was unable to protect the Jews.

Only after settling matters with the Jews did the Christians turn against "the pagan woman," the cause of all the trouble in the city. Having related the pogrom of the Jews, John of Nikiu offers a description of Hypatia's murder. The account approximates that of Socrates in his *Ecclesiastical History,* but it differs in some particulars, including chronology: Socrates places the event some time after the disturbances in the Jewish community, while John of Nikiu presents them in direct continuity. But it is certain that the conflict with the Jews began in 414, if not in the preceding year, and that Orestes and Hypatia would have needed time to organize opposition against Cyril. Moreover, between the pogrom of the Jews and the events connected with Hypatia's death, there was the attack of the Nitrian monks on Orestes. Finally, in their accounts of the rumors circulating about Hypatia, both John of Nikiu and Socrates suggest that there must have been some interval during which the propaganda against Hypatia could take effect among the Alexandrians.

That *diabole,* the ominous and slanderous rumor about Hypatia's witchcraft and its divisive effect on the city, produced the results desired by the instigators. From that company emerged a group that resolved to kill the woman philosopher. Socrates says that they distinguished themselves by "hot-tempered disposition"; John of Nikiu calls them "a multitude of believers in God"; and Damascius refers to them as beasts rather than human beings.[110]

At the head of those who contrived the fearful plot stood—according to Socrates—a certain Peter, a church lector, perhaps

a clergyman of lower holy orders. In John of Nikiu he appears as "the magistrate." John of Nikiu's version seems plausible in the light of our considerations of Hypatia's social position and her city connections. Among the city officials, the *curiales* with whom Hypatia had political and intellectual ties, there could have been individuals unsympathetic toward her, Cyril's followers. They too could have reported to the patriarch what was going on and what decisions were made in the city council, in the prefect's *officium,* or among people connected with Hypatia and Orestes.

Led by Peter, a mob executed the deed on a day in March 415, in the tenth consulship of Honorius and the sixth consulship of Theodosius II, during Lent. Hypatia was returning home, through a street whose name is unknown to us, from her customary ride in the city. She was pulled out of the chariot and dragged to the church Caesarion, a former temple of the emperor cult. There they tore off her clothes and killed her with "broken bits of pottery" *(ostrakois aneilon).*[111] Then they hauled her body outside the city to a place called Kinaron, to burn it on a pyre of sticks.[112]

In John of Nikiu's perspective, the killing of a witch was but the fulfillment of the common will of the Christians and of God himself. A group of the faithful, led by Peter, a "perfect believer in all respects in Jesus Christ," went out into the city to look for the "pagan woman"; they found her sitting "on a (lofty) chair," and thus by all appearances conducting a lecture. From here she was dragged to the church and there disgraced and stripped of her robes. Then (in a slightly different version from Socrates') she was dragged through the streets until she died. Finally, her body was carted to a place called Kinaron, where it was burned.

Among other sources, Malalas confirms that after the murder the body was burned on a pyre;[113] Hesychius offers an account similar to that of John of Nikiu, that "she was torn to pieces by the Alexandrians and her body shamefully treated and parts of it scattered all over the city."[114] Others only mention Hypatia's death without providing any details.

Relying on the most important sources and their analysis, we may thus state unequivocally that the conflict between Orestes and Cyril was concluded in a manner and for a reason known and used for ages: murder for a political purpose. The problem, which to the patriarch and his associates appeared insoluble, could be eliminated only by a criminal act. They killed a person who was the mainstay of the opposition against him, who through her authority and political connections provided support for the representative of the state authority in Alexandria contending against Cyril.

The assassination had been well contrived. After the dreadful event, Orestes was probably recalled, or he may have requested his own recall. In any case we never hear anything more about him. Certainly there are grounds to assume that he felt disgust for the city and was fearful that Hypatia's lot might become his own. With the end of the turmoil, the city calmed down. Cyril achieved his desired position in Alexandria. The imperial officials must have begun to take him seriously, since we hear of no more conflicts for the rest of his pontificate.

Only the city councillors of Alexandria tried to intervene with the emperor against the bishop. As Damascius tells us somewhat darkly, the matter was hushed because there were people at court who favored Cyril.[115] A man named Aedesius even attempted to bribe the emperor's friends. Cyril undoubtedly presented the affair as a struggle against paganism (with such of its manifestations as magic and sorcery), as official church propaganda proclaimed after all. That he did the same when coping with the highest authorities we may infer from John of Nikiu, who at the end of his account announces that after the killing of Hypatia "all the people surrendered to the patriarch Cyril and named him 'the new Theophilus'; for he destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the city."

Cyril's preventive action and his method of vindicating Hypatia's murder fell on fertile soil. During the regency of Pulcheria and the second prefecture of Aurelian, the imperial court campaigned actively against pagans and Jews.[116] Aurelian, ap-

parently heedless of Synesius' homage in *On Providence,* made no response to the shocking death of his beloved teacher. He had become an ardent proponent of orthodoxy, a ruthless adversary of paganism, and an instigator of antipagan legislation.[117]

Synesius' letters to Hypatia in the last year of his life (*Epp.* 10, 15, 16, and 81) indicate that his relationship with her was waning. As we recall, they are filled with complaints about the lack of letters from her and about her indifference to his hard lot.[118] Hypatia apparently ceased to correspond with Synesius, possibly because she did not want to involve him in the antagonistic situation with the patriarch, whose subordinate he was. She would not have wanted to add pain to his personal and political worries.

Ultimately, of course, we can never know the reason for the weakening of relations between Hypatia and her erstwhile student. It is possible that once she had joined the struggle against the church, she turned away from her friend too hastily; for Synesius was not an admirer of Cyril, as his only letter to him (*Ep.* 12) reveals. In it he treats the youthful patriarch as an inexperienced and erring younger brother in Christ. In contrast, he refers to Theophilus with genuine deference and faithful devotion, calling him "our holy Father of holy memory," "sacred priest," "dear to God." He reminds Cyril that Theophilus, beloved by God, appointed him to be shepherd of the church notwithstanding his numerous grievances against him. This letter certainly provides no reason to suspect Synesius of being Cyril's ally.[119] But the loss of contact with Hypatia may have exacerbated Synesius' illness and contributed to his spiritual depression, the symptoms of which are observable in *Epistle* 15. Preoccupied with her political cause, Hypatia did not think about Synesius. The news of his death must have surprised her.

After repeated petitions to the court in Constantinople, the city council in Alexandria obtained some measure of punishment for Cyril. On October 5, 416, Aurelian's successor, the praetorian prefect Monaxius, issued an order that stripped Cyril of his authority over the so-called parabalanai or parabolans and de-

manded their reorganization.[120] The parabolans were a college of strong young men connected with the Alexandrian church whose task it was to collect the ill, disabled, and homeless in the city and place them in hospitals or church almshouses.[121] But the sources reveal that they also served as a sort of military arm of the Alexandrian patriarch, carrying out actions against his adversaries in various places and situations.

The imperial ordinance of 416 prohibited the parabolans from appearing in public places or entering the premises of the city council or its tribunals; their number was reduced from 800 to 500, and the recruitment of new members was handed over to the prefect; previously, the patriarch had appointed members of his choosing. Henceforth they were to be recruited from the class of "paupers"; those coming from the city *curiales,* from the class of *honorati,* were deprived of membership. In 418, however, the bishop regained the right to select the parabolans, and their number was increased to 600. Only the restrictions on their movements about the city remained in force.[122]

It was surely the parabolans, the patriarch's "guard," who committed the murder of Hypatia. They were the chief propagators of the falsehoods about her sorcery; it was they who appeared with the monks at Theophilus' side when he was destroying paganism in Alexandria, they who led the mob with which he attacked the Jewish quarters, and they who committed the violence at the Council of Ephesus.[123] Most of them were ignorant and uneducated, but they were obedient to their ecclesiastical leaders; hotheaded and prone to manipulation and provocation, they responded with violent actions to the popular moods of Alexandria in 414 and 415. It was they who made up the core of the ecclesiastical masses described by Socrates, manipulated the Alexandrian mob, and fanned the campaign against Hypatia. They knew nothing of the subjects she was teaching; they understood neither the principles she followed nor the values she served. Her independence and inscrutability, distance, and philosophical loftiness undoubtedly irritated them.

Contrary to the opinion of several scholars who hold that the

deed was committed by monks,[124] Socrates states that the monks, terrified by popular reaction to their aggression against the prefect Orestes, took flight.[125] They went back to the desert, to their lairs—unless we accept Rougé's view that Cyril ordered some of them to join the parabolans and thus detained them in Alexandria.[126] John of Nikiu also acquits the monks of the murder, pinning the blame instead on Alexandrians who distinguished themselves by their "profound religiosity." Hesychius likewise asserts: "She was torn to pieces by the Alexandrians." In the eighth century Theophanes observes that the deed was done by "certain" people, that is, a band of the city masses; he does not as much as mention the monks. Finally, Nicephorus Callistus repeats Socrates' version of the assassination.[127] Socrates, who describes in detail the monks' assault on Orestes, surely would not have failed to mention their aggression against Hypatia; and he would have mentioned their return to Alexandria. However, the matter was taken care of by local people coming from the city's masses, subordinated to the church and manipulated by the clergy.

Like everyone else who has studied Hypatia, we are bound to take a stand on Cyril's guilt. We cannot go so far as F. Schaefer, who absolves him completely and puts the blame on Orestes.[128] And as Rougé and others rightly assert, Cyril cannot be held legally responsible for planning the murder.[129]

But Cyril must be held to account for a great deal, even if we assume that the murder was contrived and executed by the parabolans, without his knowledge. For there is no doubt that he was a chief instigator of the campaign of defamation against Hypatia, fomenting prejudice and animosity against the woman philosopher, rousing fear about the consequences of her alleged black-magic spells on the prefect, the faithful of the Christian community, and indeed the whole city.

However directly or indirectly he was involved, Cyril violated the principles of the Christian moral order, which he was bound to nurture and uphold. He could not reconcile himself to the possible eclipse of his influence. Hypatia and, through her,

Orestes exercised leadership among the elite of Alexandria. Cyril, his ambition thwarted, consumed by frustration and envy, became a dangerous man. Socrates, Hesychius, and Damascius all point to Cyril's jealousy as the cause of Hypatia's death. Of the three, Damascius makes the gravest and most specific accusations against Cyril; as proof of jealousy, he offers the anecdote about Cyril passing by Hypatia's house and observing a crowd at her door awaiting her appearance. Our reconstruction of the background and the course of events resulting in her death divest this little story of the aura of a naive fable about an evil Cyril and a noble Hypatia. It becomes a metaphoric tale about the small-mindedness and destructive passions of the bishop. We lack, however, some proof from other sources to confirm the conclusions Damascius draws from the anecdote. For he establishes a strict relation between Cyril's evil passions and desire for murder and its fulfillment. Damascius is convinced that Cyril contrived Hypatia's assassination and executed it with the help of his men.

For Socrates, envy of Hypatia's good fortune and prestige among the ruling class was the decisive cause of the murder. From the context in which he speaks about the destructive feeling of jealousy of Hypatia's "earthly" honors, it follows that he has Cyril and his party in mind even though he does not name the patriarch. Hesychius, on the other hand, provides two versions of the killing, with two different causes: one cites envy of Hypatia's wisdom and astronomical knowledge, nourished by Cyril and his supporters; the other blames "the innate rashness and tendency toward sedition among the Alexandrians."[130] Malalas reiterates that Cyril understood the psychology of the Alexandrian masses, and especially of the groups associated with him. Aware of Cyril's envy of and animosity against Hypatia, Malalas accuses the bishop of inciting the people to the crime. He states that Cyril gave the "Alexandrians" (he probably means the parabolans) freedom for action against a famous and widely respected woman of advanced age.

Socrates, usually so careful in judging evidence and attributing causes, cannot, at the end of his story of the events, resist expressing indignation against Cyril and his church: "This affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church." But he also observes that the Alexandrians were far more inclined toward anarchy and disturbances than the people of any other city.[131] Similarly, as Hesychius reflects on the murder, he observes that it was not the first assassination committed by the people of Alexandria. They had slain two bishops: George, the Arian bishop of Alexandria, appointed by the emperor Constantius, who was killed in 361 during the reign of Julian the Apostate; and Proterius, also an imperial appointee, who was murdered in 457. Their bodies, like Hypatia's, were dragged all over the city and then burned.[132] Other ancient sources follow Socrates and Hesychius in confessing an inability to explain the Alexandrian propensity to violence and crime.[133]

But the murder of Hypatia, a sixty-year-old woman, widely esteemed for her wisdom and ethical virtue, was not only an act of hatred but also a criminal offense warranting a swift and severe response from those charged with upholding the law. As Damascius asserts, that response never came; those who committed the crime went unpunished and brought notable disgrace upon their city.[134]

It is not surprising that the sources on Hypatia are so few, and so sparing and generally oblique in their accounts. One reason is surely the esoteric nature of her teaching (cultivated by her disciples). But the most important reason is that as early as the fourth century Christian historians had achieved predominance, and most likely they were ashamed to write about her fate. Although Damascius, one of the few remaining pagan authors, expresses horror at the thought of her last moments and claims that the Alexandrians remembered the event long afterward,[135] others were not inclined to inform posterity about this painful event in the history of Alexandria and the Alexandrian church.

A cover-up campaign was orchestrated to protect the perpetrators, affiliated with the church, who murdered a person well disposed toward Christians. We contend against this silence when from the extant fragments we undertake to reconstruct the life and achievements of Hypatia.

CONCLUSION

With a view of Hypatia's life reclaimed from historical fragments we can see, more clearly than before, the common denominator of the literary constructs and portraits of Hypatia conceived over the last two centuries: all have used the figure of Hypatia to articulate their attitude toward Christianity, the church, its clergy, the patriarch Cyril, and so on. And, as we recall, this attitude was not purely negative. For Leconte de Lisle, Roero di Saluzzo, and Mario Luzi, Hypatia is a heroine and martyr, but her death at the hands of Christians (Saluzzo provides a variant) does not mark the end of antiquity. Her martyrdom offers a synthesis of the world of Greek values with the truths and the logos of emergent Christianity. In the last pages of Charles Kingsley's book, Hypatia even converts and becomes a confessor of the new religion. Her conversion, however, does not alter the author's view of the historical necessity of the fall of the old religions.

Kingsley's position is representative of the dominant trend in the legend, the Enlightenment or rational current, which presented Hypatia as an innocent victim of a fanatical and predatory

HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA

MARIA DZIELSKA

Translated by F. Lyra

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1995