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Hypatia Of Alexandria (Revealing Antiquity)



Synopsis

Hypatia--brilliant mathematician, eloquent Neoplatonist, and a woman renowned for her beauty--was brutally murdered by a mob of Christians in Alexandria in 415. She has been a legend ever since. In this engrossing book, Maria Dzielska searches behind the legend to bring us the real story of Hypatia's life and death, and new insight into her colorful world. Historians and poets, Victorian novelists and contemporary feminists have seen Hypatia as a symbol--of the waning of classical culture and freedom of inquiry, of the rise of fanatical Christianity, or of sexual freedom. Dzielska shows us why versions of Hypatia's legend have served her champions' purposes, and how they have distorted the true story. She takes us back to the Alexandria of Hypatia's day, with its Library and Museion, pagan cults and the pontificate of Saint Cyril, thriving Jewish community and vibrant Greek culture, and circles of philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers, and militant Christians. Drawing on the letters of Hypatia's most prominent pupil, Synesius of Cyrene, Dzielska constructs a compelling picture of the young philosopher's disciples and her teaching. Finally she plumbs her sources for the facts surrounding Hypatia's cruel death, clarifying what the murder tells us about the tensions of this tumultuous era.

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Customer Reviews

Philosopher, mathematician, and teacher, Hypatia dominated the cultural life of Alexandria, Egypt, during the final decades of the fourth century. While she is regarded as one of the last

Neoplatonists, only fragments of her writings exist, and details of her life are sketchy. In attempting to add dimension to this legend, historian Dzielska (Jagiellonian Univ., Cracow, Poland) utilizes the few primary sources available, notably the letters of Hypatia's student Synesius. Though her scholarship is commendable, the author fails to substantiate generalized observations about Hypatia's personality with specific illustrations. Her conclusions—that Hypatia was nearly 60 at the time of her death, that she edited the extant works of other Alexandrian philosophers, and that her gruesome murder in 415 was a by-product of a power struggle among Christian factions in the city—do not significantly alter or add to general knowledge of this noble woman. This slight work is a marginal purchase for all but specialized libraries. Rose Cichy, Osterhout Free Lib., Wilkes-Barre, Pa. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This gem of academic detective work may be the last word on a subject that has fascinated for centuries. --Anthony Gottlieb (New York Times Book Review) Like Cleopatra, Mary Magdalene, Joan of Arc...Hypatia has been retailed to suit the psychic needs of anybody retrospecting her, rational, romantic, nostalgic, or loony. [In this book] Dzielska demystifies Hypatia, sifting patiently through the original sources, from the Sud lexicon to the correspondence of Synesius of Cyrene. --John Leonard (Nation) Through a subtle reading of the ancient sources, Dzielska reconstructs a powerful and persuasive account of Hypatia's life. She also addresses the difficult task of describing her philosophy...with engagement and finesse. --Wilbur Knorr (Science) [A] pithy and engaging attempt to state what we actually know about Hypatia. --Carlin Romano (Philadelphia Inquirer) Hypatia, an exceptional philosopher, mathematician and high profile public figure of late fourth and early fifth century Alexandria, ironically owes her fame in history to the violent and politically contentious nature of her death in 415 AD. From the moment she was brutally murdered by a mob of angry Christians, Hypatia became a legend, a figure who has ever since been used and manipulated by artists, writers, poets and feminists. Maria Dzielska in *Hypatia of Alexandria*, explores who Hypatia was, what she believed, why she was killed and what she has come to symbolize in the centuries since...Dzielska's discussion of Hypatia has contributed to the understanding of women in late antiquity. Hypatia was an exceptional woman and has been of particular benefit to those interested in Christian and Roman/Hellenic history. The ideas commonly held regarding Hypatia have been strongly influenced and shaped by a tradition which used Hypatia as a symbol for its own attitudes and beliefs. Such details have created a veil over the true figure of Hypatia. This has effectively been removed by Dzielska revealing the historical Hypatia, an extraordinary woman, without the benefit of legend. --P. Murphy (Ancient History) Dzielska...provides here an exemplary 'retrieval' of

the life and achievements of Hypatia of Alexandria (c. 335-415). Dzielska traces in detail the modern literary tradition of Hypatia--from the Enlightenment authors who claimed her as the last of the great pagan neoplatonists, through Victorian novelist Charles Kingsley, to today's feminists...The author portrays the close circle of her students and provides the context for her public lectures; she concludes with 35 sober pages on the 'life and death of Hypatia,' interpreting her death as a kind of witch-burning in the transition from pagan Empire to Christian state. Dzielska is meticulous in her pursuit of facts from the widely scattered sources...The book as a whole is a model of feminist scholarship in its sorting out of legend from facts. (Choice)Maria Dzielska has finally brought us definitive and sober research into who that grand historic figure really was, the circumstances of her life and scholarship, and the dynamics that led to her death. We shall be permanently indebted to Dzielska for her thorough research and for her highly readable book...If you are a historian, Greco-Roman scholar, Egyptologist, anthropologist, psychologist, theologian or a thoughtful person in any field who likes a good read...buy this book! --J. Harold Ellens (Biblical Archaeology Review)History fades to myth. Dzielska's aim in this book is to peel away those mythical images of Hypatia to examine the reality beneath. The result is a splendid example of demythologizing scholarship...[It] deserves to be read by anyone studying ancient gender or her time period [and] is a delight to read, in a translation which is light and natural. --Richard Hawley (Classical Review)Historians and patristic scholars as well as general readers should be grateful to Dzielska for this book which clarifies a dark and interesting spot in Church history. (Coptic Church Review)Hypatia of Alexandria is a clearly written, tightly focused book;In contrast to a number of earlier writers on Hypatia, Maria Dzielska is meticulous about disentangling fact from speculation; meticulous, too, about documenting her sources and leading her readers, via her footnotes, to a variety of interesting discussions about the various points at issue. --J.J. MacIntosh (ISIS)

One has to doubt the value of any time spent reading a saint or historical figure's story whose author plays freely between reality and creative fantasy. Maria Dzielska's HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA is thankfully at the opposite end of that spectrum -- a serious, readable look at what is actually known and what can be responsibly surmised about this Egyptian scholar/philosopher, her colleagues, friends and compatriots. Dzielska's studied account (with F. Lyra's translation) of the North African social and political climate around 400 CE supports the picture of Alexandria's settings, life and religious conflicts portrayed in the 2009 Spanish film AGORA - THE MISTS OF TIME. And it provides a context that can help us understand similar conflict underway at the same time around the Mediterranean -- such as farther west in Hippo,

where St. Augustine narrowly escaped death by a dedicated mob of religious zealots like the one that lynched Hypatia.

A very nice book. I, a humble person, appreciate the research and translations passed on to the general public.

Many years ago I experienced a vivid vision of a woman of what seemed like the period of early Greece. She was a spiritual teacher who had a large following, dressed plainly in the Greek philosopher's type garment. During this vision, the woman was addressing her followers in something like a town square. In a flash, she was dragged away and into a building by someone who was wearing chain mail armor. I knew that she was murdered, but my vision did not show me the murder scene. In the vision it seemed to me that the murderer felt jealousy because of her magnetic qualities that he could never have and because she was widely admired and he wanted to be. I never forgot that vision and to this day I can still see it clearly in my mind's eye. I was led to Hypatia recently while reading a book which mentioned her and told her story, briefly. I was stunned and felt a shudder of familiarity when I read this, which was just a paragraph. Was this the woman in my vision? I had not previously heard of Hypatia, but through subsequent research, I was led to Maria Dzielska's book. One reviewer who disliked the book said that it was boring because of the dialogues between people we don't even know; however, this was one of the reasons I enjoyed the book, given that there appears to be no extant writing by Hypatia. The letters were written between students who were part of Hypatia's inner spiritual circle. The letters reveal not only information about Hypatia, but share insights about the political/social/cultural milieu of the times and particularly its spiritual atmosphere. I found myself wishing I could be part of this circle, with the mystical experiences they shared, and the quenching of the thirst to, "...elevate oneself into another dimension of existence and to direct merging with the One." Here is a lovely quote from the book, as written between two of Hypatia's students, who travel from the city to take part in Hypatia's teachings: "In the picturesque countryside near Cyrene, the two friends find refuge from the hubbub of the city with its markets and financial operations, which they see as an outrage to the human spirit. They speak of avoiding the struggle for offices, honors, and political careers that gratify only superficial ambitions, and not genuine human values." Hmmmm, might not many of us today, in the frantic pace of our "modern" world be inclined to say something quite similar? The study of Hypatia is not about what some suggest as "marauding Christians" attempting to destroy pagans and their beliefs, nor is it about the prejudice of women, as attributed by some feminist writers of today. One

of the refreshing aspects of this book is that it does not appear to have an agenda, but only to extract historical truth among shards of scant documents on this interesting woman. Maria Dzielska's reasoned conclusion about Hypatia's ultimate demise comes at the end, in a bit of a surprise ending. Wonderful book!

This shows how wrong history can be. Great book

Perfect conditions. This book changed my way of thinking. Highly recommend it!

While the subject of this work is interesting, the methodology of the author is deemed convoluted, by this reader at least. Using extant texts produced by (some of) her students, the story line follows their commentary rather than focusing on Hypatia herself, for a good bit of the work. This results in a rather zig zag, "bent backwards" sort of text progression... and the work in parts almost seems to be more about the students than the Philosopher. The impression was received as well, knowing something about Hypatia's life and death, that the author drew a big circle around the "Gotterdaemmerung" at the end... rather than dealing with the events directly. This may be due to a philosophical or religious bias on the part of the author. The information relayed was "clinical" but perhaps a bit too much so, considering what happened to Hypatia. It would also be interesting to explore what sort of impact Hypatia's research into planetary orbits had in her future. According to the motion picture "Agora," she anticipated the emergence of the heliocentric theory of planetary rotation by almost 1500 years. I do not recall that being addressed in this work.

This book is somewhat dry reading of a fascinating subject. Scholarly. Conclusion is a welcome summation. Basic premise seems to be that important historical events are products of political intrigue and fighting, not fundamental ideas. Regardless, is good source for facts about personalities involved and the culture in Alexandria, c. 400. Very striking is the report on how deeply mystical pagan philosophy had become. Recommended!

Like most all legends, even Hypatia seemed to take on a life of her own. This book really puts things into perspective concerning Hypatia, and her life. I would highly recommend this book for all interested in the times of Alexandria.

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