

# HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA

*Valerie Dupont, SRC*

**I**n her book, *Feminin Actif, Feminin Solaire (Active Feminine, Solar Feminine)* Valerie Dupont, SRC, author and RCUI instructor for the French Grand Lodge, presents a brief biography of one of the most extraordinary women in history, the great Neoplatonist, Hypatia of Alexandria.



Hypatia (370 – 410 CE) was the daughter of the great Theon Alexandricus, who was one of the most eminent scholars of his time—a renowned mathematician and geometrician. According to some of her father's contemporaries, Hypatia who was taught by her father, surpassed him in mathematics by supporting and continuing his work. She also did extensive research in astronomy.

Even more, she did not settle for just these scientific studies, but very early on became interested in Neoplatonic mysticism, developed by Plotinus a century before. She was a disciple of Ammonios and so surpassed the thinkers of her time (and according to various accounts, even some of those who preceded her) in knowledge and wisdom that she obtained a chair in mathematics and philosophy at the Platonic school of Alexandria. There, she developed the ideas of her predecessors—Plotinus and Iamblichus—but by giving them a scientific and methodical dimension, she immediately earned a great reputation. Her courses had an unprecedented success.

For many, she is the true founder of the famous school of Alexandria, the most reputable institution of her time, which would have, because of its solid foundation



Ancient Fayum portrait of Hypatia.

and the quality of its teaching, a great future for many centuries.

Hypatia's disciples were numerous and enthusiastic. She instructed them in all the sciences, attracting many students not only because of her knowledge and the depth of her reflections, but also because of her exceptionally radiant personality. Very beautiful, she was known for a great purity in morality and an impressive authority, nevertheless mixed with modesty.

None of her writings remain; only a few titles of her great treatises and works. However, as with Pythagoras, we can capture some aspects of her character thanks to the accounts of those around her. In particular the letters of Synesius of Cyrene (her disciple, although they were the same age) are full of respect and affection for her.

However, Synesius was not easy to impress. We know that he was a man with renowned authority, who was not afraid to lecture the emperor on morality, and who was given the military organization of the borders, and we suspect that he was not enthusiastic about everyone. When in 410, even though he was not religious, he was offered a position as bishop (the most important social function of the time), he laid out his conditions: he wanted to remain married and not to renounce the doctrines of the pre-existence of the soul and the eternity of the world that he had learned from Hypatia, which were contrary to Christian dogmas.

In regards to these various elements, we can truly consider Synesius as a credible witness about Hypatia, and we can believe without any reservation the opinion he had of her. In one letter, he called her his mother, his daughter, his doctor, his benefactor, while saying that she deserved even more respectable titles, if any existed. Elsewhere, he wrote: "If it is true that the deceased lose the memories of one another, I will still preserve the memory of Hypatia, for whom I had so much friendship."

This is to say that he admitted having been intensely marked by the personality of this initiate, and in such a profound manner that her influence could surpass the limits of an incarnation, like something learned by the soul and transcending the cerebral plane.

In his other letters, he always referred to her as a philosopher, a word that at the

time had a much deeper significance than today: the philosopher was not in fact a simple intellectual or student; but a master renowned for wisdom and knowledge, and very few had a right to this title.

Synesius also tells us that Hypatia's abilities surpassed the framework of speculative knowledge. In fact one day he asked her in a letter to build a hydroscope (used to determine the purity of water) for him. In another letter he asked for an astrolabe, a sort of planisphere. These details prove that the talents of this uncommon woman applied at many levels, both in theories and pedagogy, technically and for scientific accomplishments. All of this presents before our wondering spirit the image of a sort of feminine Aristotle (for the longevity of the school she founded, but not for the contents of the theses, hers were much more mystical than Aristotle's), a Leonardo da Vinci before his time...

She therefore enjoyed widespread admiration and respect from all, pagans and Christians. There is no doubt that she exerted some political influence, which soon attracted the jealousy of a small group of mediocre spirits. Her end was very sad. A dissension arose between the archbishop

Cyril of Alexandria and the prefect of this city, who was Hypatia's friend. Hypatia was blamed for the dissension. One day a small group of fanatical Christians followed her while she was strolling and abducted her. She

was brought to a church, beaten to death, flayed, and burned.

Among the other women Platonists of this time, we can mention those who alas are no more. Only names without a face: Gemina, mother and daughter (disciples of Plotinus), Amphiclea (Iamblichus's daughter-in-law), or at a more remote time, Arria (to whom Diogenes Laertius dedicated his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*,



a reference work of the first order)... These women, often cited by the authors of their time, were probably all remarkable. However, lacking more precise elements, we must only imagine what they must have been like. Their existence allows us, however, to affirm that women played an important part in philosophy.

Thus, we realize, by searching persistently, that in antiquity many women distinguished themselves by their wisdom and brilliant culture. In actuality, they were no doubt more numerous than the few personalities mentioned here, but the sample is sufficient to understand their positive action.

We can see that some of them truly enlightened their era, such as supernovas in often darkened skies. To this effect, Ahmose-Nefertari, Theano, Sappho, Ban Zhao, and Hypatia, figure among humanity's most eminent representatives.

With Hypatia, we can even say that we have met the Exception: there are, in fact, few beings, men or women, who have manifested so much intelligence, so much inventive genius, knowledge, and at the same time, such a degree of nobility. This is why she remains no doubt unequalled in her perfection.

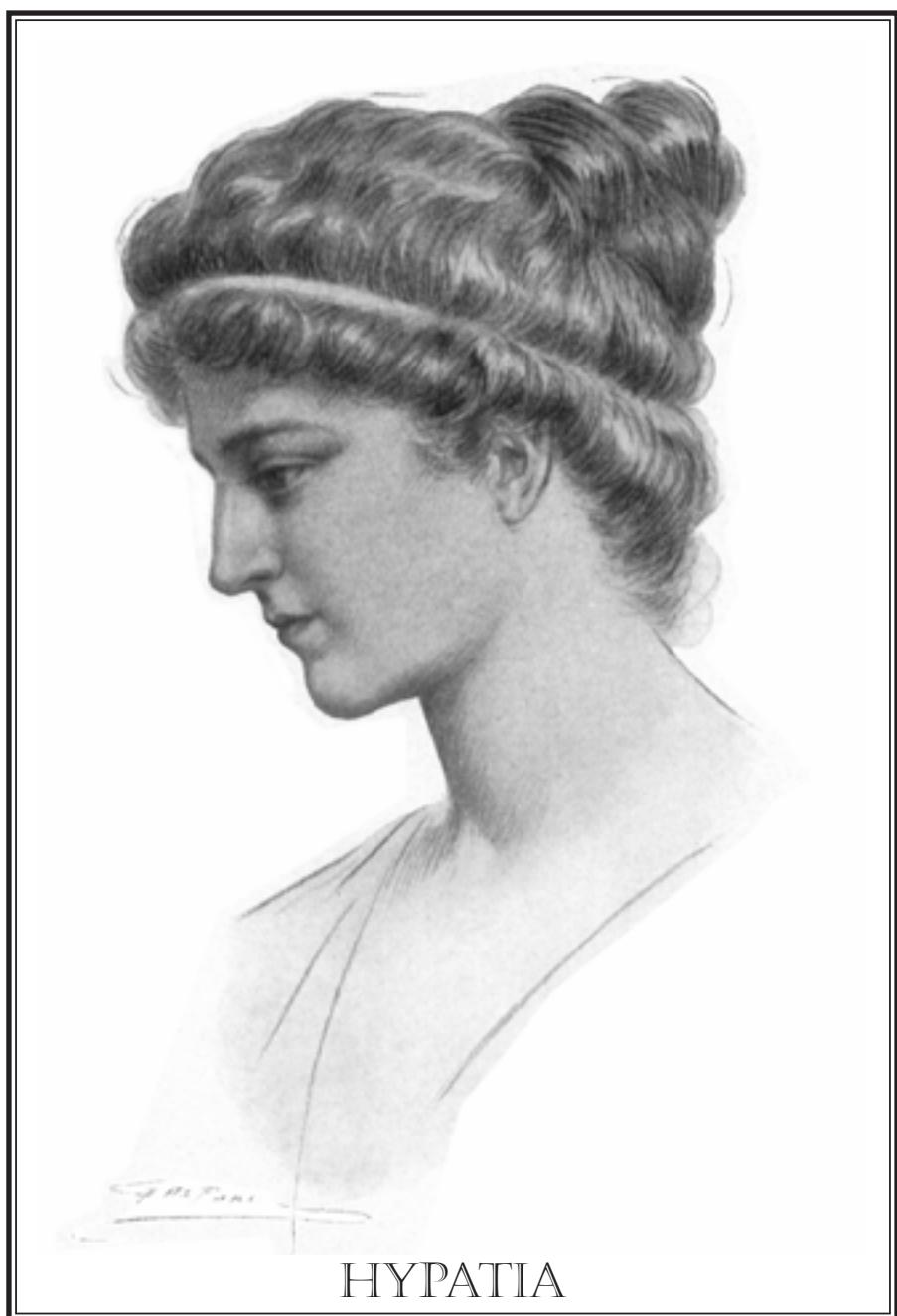
Yet, which history books even mention her?

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*There was a woman at Alexandria named Hypatia, daughter of the philosopher Theon, who made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time. Having succeeded to the school of Plato and Plotinus, she explained the principles of philosophy to her auditors, many of whom came from a distance to receive her instructions. On account of the self-possession and ease of manner, which she had acquired in consequence of the cultivation of her mind, she not infrequently appeared in public in the presence of the magistrates. Neither did she feel abashed in going to an assembly of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more.*

—By Socrates Scholasticus, from *Historia Ecclesiastica* (written ca. 439 CE)

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HYPATIA

