

## **Hypatia of Alexandria and her Death**

by S. Parthasarathy - Saturday, April 09, 2016

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Hypatia of Alexandria, who is considered to be the first woman mathematician, was also the first woman to make substantial contribution to the development of mathematics. She was the daughter of the mathematician Theon, the last Professor at the University of Alexandria.

There is no evidence that Hypatia undertook original mathematical research. However she assisted her father Theon of Alexandria in writing his eleven part commentary on Ptolemy's Almagest. It is thought that she also assisted her father in producing a new version of Euclid's Elements which has become the basis for all later editions of Euclid.

All Hypatia's work is lost except for its titles and some references to it. However no purely philosophical work is known and we only know of her work in mathematics and astronomy. She was an excellent compiler, editor, and preserver of earlier mathematical works and is described by all commentators as a charismatic teacher.

Hypatia came to symbolize learning and science which the early Christians identified with paganism and it was enough for Christian fanatics of Alexandria to antagonize her. She was also seen as a 'stumbling block' to the acceptance the 'truth' of Christianity. She, with her knowledge, expertise, charisma and knack of making difficult mathematical and philosophical concepts understandable to her students, encouraged them to think and ask questions which contradicted the teachings of church.

She became victim of the crossfire between Orestes and Cyril who spearheaded conflicts between Christians and non-Christians of Alexandria. In 412 Cyril, (later St Cyril) became patriarch of Alexandria. However, the Roman prefect of Alexandria was Orestes (a pagan). Cyril and Orestes became bitter political rivals as the church and the state fought for control. Hypatia was a friend of Orestes and this, together with prejudice against her philosophical views which were seen by Christians to be pagan, led to Hypatia becoming the focal point of riots between Christians and non-Christians.

She was murdered in 415 CE by a Christian mob who attacked her on the streets of Alexandria. On her way home from delivering her daily lectures at the university, Hypatia was attacked by a mob of Christian monks, dragged from her chariot down the street into a church, and was there stripped naked, beaten to death, and burned. She was also severely tortured by scraping off her skin with clamshells (some say roofing tiles). Even those Christian writers who were hostile to her and claimed she was a witch, portray her as a woman who was widely known for her generosity, love of learning, and expertise in teaching in the subjects of Neo-Platonism, mathematics, science, and philosophy in general.

What certainly seems indisputable is that she was murdered by Christians who felt threatened by her scholarship, learning, and depth of scientific knowledge.

Whatever the precise motivation for the murder, the departure soon afterward of many scholars marked

the beginning of the decline of Alexandria as a major center of ancient learning.

MORAL OF THE STORY: If you teach math, do not get involved with religious fanatics.

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