

Π. Γκαλβεθ, *Υπατία: Η γυναίκα που αγάπησε την επιστήμη*
(*P. Galveth, Hypatia: The woman who loved science*)
(Athens: Metaixmio 2006). ISBN 960-455-030-6 Pp. 207 €16

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The transition from the Graeco–Roman world to the world of Christianity was a gradual process. It began with the official adoption of the new religion of Christianity by Constantine the Great and took various forms. The conversion of people’s hearts and minds that followed the weakening of the intellectual and religious centres of power curbed the spirit of free inquiry and changed the physiognomy of the cities of the Empire forever. These are the main developments described in P. Galveth’s present historical novel through the story of Hypatia, one of the least well-known great mathematicians of late antiquity. The story unfolds in a narrative of ten chapters.

The author describes in a vivid and exciting manner the life of Hypatia in the historic and geographical context of the city of Alexandria in which she lived and died (d. 415). Her life has been obscured by myth and prejudice and it was only in the mid-nineteenth century that she began to acquire the attention she deserves as a mathematician, which attention ha at last cemented

her place in the history of science.¹ Despite the dearth of historical evidence on Hypatia, she has been mentioned by the tenth-century Suda lexicon, in the letters of her pupil Synesios of Kyrenaia, (370–414 A.D.), in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates (380–450 A. D.), and by other early Christian authors.²

Galveth uses the first five chapters to put us in the historical context of the political, religious and intellectual climate of Alexandria at the time of the birth of Hypatia (370 A. D.). There is a compelling description of the fourth century Graeco– Roman city and its transformation into a Christian one, during the time in which Hypatia was brought up. A topographical and geographical tour of important institutional buildings such as the Serapeum — the great shrine of Serapis, one of the wonders of the ancient world — and its libraries, the Museum of Alexandria and various other places in the city is made through the eyes of Theon, Hypatia’s father, a great mathematician and astronomer and the director of the Museum. The author expresses the ‘psychismos’ of a pagan philosopher imbued with memories of a glorious civilisation vanishing rapidly before his eyes.

Under Theodosius I (379–95 A.D.) the official

¹ She is mentioned in P. Brown (1971), *The World of Late Antiquity AD 150–750*. (London: Thames & Hudson) 104; A. Cameron and J. Long (1993), *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley: UCP) 39–62.

² For a discussion of the sources, see M. A. B. Deakin (1994), “Hypatia and her Mathematics”, *The American Mathematical Monthly* 101:234–43.

toleration of the pagans diminished sharply. Hypatia found the new religion of Christianity confusing, and its influence was becoming more and more evident. Doctrinal divisions among the population erupted in sectarian violence. Hypatia's attempts to understand the heresies and dogmas of the period proved futile. She considered the constant strife in the city a tremendous waste of intellectual energy. In a world of change and anxiety it was *science* that inspired her with confidence (ch. 5). Galveth completes his portrait of Hypatia by drawing attention to her education and activities. She did not go to one of the public schools but instead received a private education and attended lessons at the Museum where later, in her early twenties, she taught philosophy, maths, astronomy, and physics. In 392 she witnessed the siege and destruction of the Serapeum and the libraries associated with the Museum, a dramatic event which exemplified the climate of intense hostility between the pagan philosophers and the representatives of government. The destruction was instigated by the patriarch Theophilus, and signalled the demise of intellectual life in the city. The world Hypatia lived in and had learned through her mother and father was slowly disappearing in this period of change and was brought home to her with the death of her parents (ch. 6). Galveth describes Theophilus as being an 'evil' person and cites a number of examples from an unexpected wave of terrorism he instigated in the city. After his death Hypatia was able to continue her

research—she published three mathematical treatises—and her interrupted teaching at the Museum. She now became highly regarded as a teacher and scholar in the city. She had connections with the governing class and important personalities such as Synesius, and the eparch of the city, Orestes, became her students (ch. 7). Contrary to ideas of Christian asceticism such as the submissiveness which ought to characterise women's public activities, Hypatia enjoyed walking and being driven along the streets of Alexandria and conversing with men on equal terms. Meanwhile, Cyril (412 A.D.), Theophilos' successor, began to enforce the edicts of Theodosius I against the pagans and his prejudice against Hypatia, whom he saw as a pagan influence, was strengthened by her active role in public life and the freedom of her ways. Cyril also wanted to encroach upon the jurisdiction which belonged to the civil authority, the eparch. Hypatia stood as an obstacle to Cyril's ambitions due to the influence she exercised over Orestes (ch. 8). In ch. 9 Galveth describes Hypatia's brutal murder: in 415 under the instigation of the patriarch, Egyptian monks led by Petrus the Reader seized, stripped and dismembered her before burning the pieces of her corpse. The author holds the view that Hypatia's murder was a political assassination and holds Cyril directly responsible for her death, his motivation arising from the obstacle she had become to his desire to acquire political authority over the eparch. With Hypatia's death, Cyril established

himself as the champion of the Egyptian church and having destroyed the last traces of idolatry in the city saw himself proclaimed ‘the new Theophilus’. Hypatia’s death has come to symbolise the death of ‘ancient civilisation’: the decline of maths and philosophy followed upon her death. She was the last great woman mathematician of the ancient world. In the last chapter Galveth explores Hypatia’s legacy and refers to her portrayal in secondary works. The subject of her tragic death gave rise to simplistic early views marred by myth and prejudice, followed by discussions in a broader context of Christianity *versus* Greco-Roman antiquity, and a revaluation of the patriarch Cyril’s role and position, a point stressed by Galveth. Hypatia has been mentioned in contexts such as the history of maths during late antiquity; the demise of civilised paganism; her identification with St. Catherine; the neoplatonic movement: feminism and Christian misogyny; and the triangle of her relationship with the eparch Orestes and the patriarch Cyril. At the end of the book the author provides a useful index of persons and places and a learned bibliography for Hypatia.

The author succeeds in complementing the existing scholarship on Hypatia. Through his well-presented evidence and his focus on issues which were previously neglected or exaggerated, Galveth puts the life of Hypatia into perspective. He makes a good portrayal of the spirit of the age of the fourth-fifth

century transformation of values and ideas in Alexandria by using historical information. In addition, the book contains an interesting depiction of everyday life and of the ethos of the pagan aristocracy of the late antique period. Galveth draws attention to the significance of the role of the patriarch of Alexandria Cyril in the death of Hypatia –an issue which in modern scholarship has been largely undermined – and attributes the reasons for her death on cultural grounds and the ‘Orthodox policies’ of Cyril. He argues for the patriarch’s denunciation of the classical higher learning and culture of which Hypatia was a representative and he stresses his brutal and immoral policies of the extermination of Jews and pagans, calling thus for a reevaluation of his role as zealous protector of Orthodoxy. Galveth holds him responsible for the decline of the classical culture in Alexandria which was accelerated by the assassination of Hypatia. Hypatia was one of many personalities who lived through the period of transition from the pagan world to the Christian and exemplifies the dynamics of the era. Her example points to similar cases which should be the subject of a continuing quest for truth and re-examination of evidence.