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### Hypatia of Alexandria, Review

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Michael A. B. Deakin, *Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician and Martyr* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007). 231 pp. Originally published as *Mathematician and Martyr: A Biography of Hypatia of Alexandria* (Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia: History of Mathematics Papers, 65a-65d, June 1996), 138 pp.

Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, translated from the Polish by F. Lyra (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995). 157 pp.

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The church historian Socrates Scholasticus, writing around 440, says that the achievements of Hypatia of Alexandria far surpassed other philosophers of her day. She lectured on philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. Although she was not Christian, two of her disciples became bishops, and she was influential with the prefect of Alexandria who was Christian. She never married and Socrates reports that she was conspicuous for her dignified modesty of deportment. The epigram of her contemporary, Palladus, captures the feeling of many of her admirers. (Ironically, it may not have been written about the Hypatia that is the subject of these books—see Dzielska, 22-23.):

Thee when I view, thyself and thy discourse  
I worship, for I see thy virgin-home  
is in the stars, thy converse is in heaven,  
Adorable Hypatia, Grace of speech,  
Unsullied Star of true philosophy.

Not all admired her. In March 415, she was dragged to a church by a mob of Christians, stripped, murdered with roofing tiles, and her body dismembered and burned.

Numerous works have been written about Hypatia, but none compare to those of Dzielska and Deakin for completeness, reliability, and clarity. A convincing portrait of Hypatia's turbulent times, her followers, her achievements, and the circumstances surrounding her murder, emerges from their collective effort. There is some overlap between the books but Deakin's work is particularly valuable to scholars because of its annotated bibliography with 72 entries (Dzielska included) and an appendix with translations of primary sources.

A distinctive feature of Dzielska's work is a nearly thorough summary of how playwrights, poets, and novelists contributed to the Hypatia legend. (With the release in 2009 of *Agora*, we may now add film as a vehicle for the Hypatia legend.) The only lacuna in Dzielska's literary review is overlooking Elbert Hubbard's widely circulated—and wildly fanciful and polemical—account of Hypatia in his *Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great* (Vol. 10). The quotations attributed to Hypatia that one finds scattered across internet websites are taken from this 1908 source. Given Dzielska's interests it is also puzzling that she did not include the artistic representations of Hypatia which often accompany the literary embellishments (cf. Deakin's remarks, 163).

Dzielska's book grew out of her study of Synesius of Cyrene, one of Hypatia's students who became a bishop. His letters to the one he called “mother, sister, and teacher” are the subject of Dzielska's detailed analysis. Dzielska extracts a list of some of the members of Hypatia's circle and provides an account of the tenor of her philosophical teaching. There can be no doubt that Hypatia's commitment to Hellenism was cultural rather than religious (63). She seems not to have been interested in astrology (74; cf. Deakin 64) and she was not associated with the Serapeum, the cult center of paganism in Alexandria (83). Dzielska argues that Hypatia shared Synesius' elitist attitude that *hoi polloi* could not share in the deepest mysteries of philosophy. This judgment, however, should be tempered by the report that Hypatia gave public lectures.

Deakin is well-organized without being pedantic and thorough but concise. His book is a much-expanded version of an article he published in *American Mathematical Monthly* (1994). While recognizing Hypatia's status as a philosopher, he emphasizes her contributions to mathematics, which other scholars are prone to shortchange. According to Deakin, this is like “writing of Goethe without analyzing *Faust*” (15). Although Hypatia lectured on Plato and Aristotle, there is no record that she wrote philosophical works. Her father, Theon, moreover, was a famous mathematician and the only examples of her writing that may survive are mathematical. Thus, Deakin devotes a chapter (and a technical appendix) to Hypatia's mathematics and to questions of which of the ancient commentaries on Ptolemy, Apollonius, and Diophantus may have been written by her.

Deakin's mathematical perspective is apparent in his discussions of the astrolabe and the hydroscope (102-105). For example, Synesius asked Hypatia to have a hydroscope made for him. With knowledge of Fermat's ideas on the hydroscope, Deakin makes the sensible suggestion that the instrument was used to test the drinking water or as a urinometer to calculate the required dose of a diuretic. Dzielska, less plausibly, speculates that Synesius desired the hydroscope for purposes of divination (78).

An ancient source says that Hypatia flourished during the reign of Arcadius (395-408). This has led some scholars to place her birth around 370. Dzielska (68) and Deakin (52) argue

for an earlier date, between 350 and 355. This would allow more time for Hypatia to achieve intellectual maturity and prominence. In addition, the level of respect expressed in Synesius' correspondence is consistent with the attitude towards an elder. On the other hand, both authors give credence to the story that Hypatia hurled a soiled sanitary napkin at a student to arrest his amorous advances and to shock him into philosophical awareness. Dzielska says (50) that this story may contain the only recorded words of the philosopher: "It is this you love, young man, not beauty" (Deakin, 62 and 141). If this episode is historical, then Hypatia began teaching when she was young, and something closer to the 370 date may be accurate after all.

The date and manner of Hypatia's death is not in dispute. However, scholars debate the complicity of Alexandria's bishop, Cyril—later *Saint Cyril*—in her death. It was rumored that Hypatia stood in the way of a reconciliation between Cyril and the prefect, Orestes. Dzielska claims that Cyril instigated the lie that Hypatia practiced black magic, thus contributing to an already volatile climate. In any event, we know that thugs loyal to Cyril, led by a lector named Peter, murdered Hypatia. The murderers were either the patriarch's guard called *parabolans* (Dzielska, 96) or monks from Nitria (Deakin identifies these groups, 74-75). Socrates understated the case when he said that Hypatia's death was contrary to the spirit of Christianity.

It is a fair question whether Hypatia would be remembered if she had not met such a dramatic end. The most educated guess on this question is risky since no one knows how old she was or what she might have achieved had she lived out her years. Deakin's assessment is that Hypatia was, like her father, more a preserver and refiner of knowledge than a creator of new theories. In the hostile atmosphere of early fifth century Alexandria, this was no small achievement.