

Hypatia: The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher

Edward J. Watts, professor of history at California University (San Diego), draws a portrait of one of the most famous women of ancient times.

What a shock would it be if a woman appeared in your book of philosophy? There wasn't room for a female genius in ancient Greece. It is not a case if, except for Sappho, women at the time were only described on gravestones as good wives, good daughters and good mothers. The reason is very simple: women were denied access to the public world.

Hypatia is indeed an exception, but unfortunately very little direct evidence on her has survived. She was surely educated and influential, and she was brutally killed by Ciril of Alexandria's supporters because they thought she bewitched Orestes, the *praefectus augustalis* of Alexandria, in order to obstruct the bishop. That's what women do after all: they bewitch men. They're not able to do something good, especially when they reach power.

But what power could a female philosopher have in Alexandria?

A lot, actually. At the time being a philosopher was a real job: many of them believed they could improve the State. Hypatia perfectly fits in this picture: in a historical moment dominated by contrasts, primarily the struggle between Christians and Pagans, philosophy became a strong public voice, especially in the political context.

Hypatia in History

In the last 2000 years scholars, poets, writers and even movie makers worshipped and hated her, painting her as a witch, a feminist icon and a martyr as well. The last feature is very easy to understand thinking about her murder: a crowd of Christians assaulted her, ripped her clothes and hurt her with pottery fragments, tore her eyes out and dragged her body to the streets of Alexandria. Then they burned her corpse. In the end scholars were more interested in her terrible death than in her life.

Who was Hypatia? She was surely a woman who had the chance to step into a man's role.

Her school was well known and attended by both Christians and pagans. Platonism suggested by Hypatia was perfect for both of them thanks to the idea of merging philosophical study with divine. Her philosophy was pretty much contemplative and surpassed her father's teaching pretty soon.

In life Hypatia was a key figure in the struggles of her age: for this reason her voice had such a wide appeal in a megalopolis with very different souls like Alexandria.

In less than 200 pages we can outline more clearly a historical figure whose profile is very blurry in our minds. We can also retrace the life of a great woman without prejudices, understanding the historical background without falling asleep.

Watts' research is written in simple English and offers a punctual reconstruction. The book is published by Oxford University Press, one of the best publishers in the field of women's studies.

Let's hope to see an Italian version of it very soon.

Alessia Pizzi

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