

Accidental death of a professor. On a recent book on Hypatia

E.J. Watts, *Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. i-xii, 1-205.

Edward Watts' book on Hypatia<sup>1</sup> is a brief essay (205 pp.) commissioned by the Oxford University Press, with the probable aim of bringing clarity to a figure to whom the literature of all periods, but especially that of the most recent decades, has dedicated such ample and fantastical treatments that the non-specialist or simply less shrewd reader risks losing sight of the historical reality.<sup>2</sup>

Watts, professor at the University of California San Diego, scholar of the history and culture of Late Antiquity, of the history of the teaching of the Alexandrian and Athenian schools<sup>3</sup>, of the so-called last generation of paganism<sup>4</sup>, and in particular of the so-called last Platonists<sup>5</sup>, as well as of the first generation of the Christian ruling class in Alexandria and the violent social impact produced by its seizure of power<sup>6</sup>, took up specifically, if tangentially, the assassination of Hypatia in a 2006 article.<sup>7</sup> The network of his expertise and interests thus made him more than qualified for the strenuous task of disentangling the many layers of transformation and deformation collected around the figure of Hypatia, whether by propaganda, legend, or simply an incorrect exegesis of the historiographical sources, inserting, on the one hand, Hypatia's works, philosophical direction and teaching activity, and on the other hand her civic and political role in the context of the well-supported data known to scholars, and thus framing, with sobriety and realism, the great scandal of her murder against the background of the social, cultural and confessional conflicts of Alexandria in the early 5th century.

---

<sup>1</sup> E.J. Watts, *Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*, Oxford 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Consider, in addition to some more noted and/or authoritative works that have appeared in the last half-century, M. Luzi, *Libro di Ipazia*, introduced by G. Pampaloni, with a note by G. Quiriconi, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 1980<sup>2</sup>; U. Molinaro, *A Christian Martyr in Reverse: Hypatia: 370-415 A.D.: A Vivid Portrait of the Life and Death of Hypatia as Seen through the Eyes of a Feminist Poet and Novelist*, "Hypatia" 4/1 (1989); Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* (2000), Hugh Pratt's *Favola di Venezia* (2009<sup>2</sup>), or the film *Agora* of Alejandro Amenabár (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See in particular: E. J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, University of California Press, 2006; also Id., "Speaking, Thinking, and Socializing: Education in Late Antiquity", in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Johnson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> E. J. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2015; Id., *Athens between East and West: Athenian Elite Self-Presentation and the Durability of Traditional Cult in Late Antiquity*, "Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies" 57 (2017), pp. 191–213.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. E. J. Watts, *Doctrine, Anecdote, and Action: Reconsidering the Social History of the Last Platonists (c. 430 – c. 550 CE)*, "Classical Philology" 106 (2011), pp. 226-244; Id., *Damascius' Isidore: Collective Biography and a Perfectly Imperfect Philosophical Exemplar*, in M. Dzielska-K. Twardowska (edd.), *Divine Men and Women in the History and Society of Late Hellenism*, Cracow 2013, pp. 159-168.

<sup>6</sup> E. J. Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> E. Watts, *The murder of Hypatia. Acceptable or unacceptable violence?*, in H. A. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perception and Practices*. Aldershot, England / Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 333-342.

What emerges is a book that might itself be regarded as designed for school teaching. The exposition often seems almost explicitly directed at classes of young students more than at a scholarly public: designed to render, in a captivating and sometimes deliberately anachronistic way, the cultural reality of the late antique world so as to make it closer to that of the contemporary world, and sometimes almost to anticipate, one could say, the questions and curiosity of the young. One cannot otherwise explain, for example, the need to point out that despite the undoubted existence of women of culture in the highest strata of late antique society, “we hear nothing about late antique female lawyers and sophists” (p. 26); or the use of the form “he or she”, certainly politically correct but decidedly forced, for authors like Suidas (p. 129).

The composite urban and social reality of 4th and 5th century Alexandria, to which the first chapter is dedicated (1. *Alexandria*, pp. 7-19)--accompanied by a schematic map of the late antique megalopolis prepared by the author himself (pp. 10-11)--is from the beginning likened, in its urban complexity, first to San Diego (“The city of San Diego, for example, includes areas that are very different from one another, such as the suburbs of Rancho Bernardo, the beach houses of La Jolla Shores, the Chicano Park area in Barrio Logan, and Naval Base San Diego”, p. 7), then to Shanghai (“Alexandria is often thought of as an ancient version of the port of Shanghai”, p. 9) and later, passing through Babylon (p. 15), to New York and to Singapore (“As in modern New York or Singapore, one of the greatest markers of one’s status was ownership of some of the city’s rare open spaces”, that is, the Gamma district, p. 17).

It is an engaging form of exposition but, it must be said, culturally risky and potentially pernicious when the attempt to render the urban reality of Alexandria is extended to the teaching done at the Late Antique and Proto-Byzantine Platonic academies, of which the author is an expert, but which, perhaps through the conditioned reflex of a university professor, he jovially compares to English colleges several times. If in chapter 4 (*Middle Age*) the “cultural pedigree” secured through a Platonic education in fourth-century Athens is juxtaposed with a “degree from Oxbridge or the Ivy League”, and the hostility towards the teachers at Athens from students, like Synesius, educated at Alexandria is compared to that of Berkeley graduates towards Harvard professors<sup>8</sup>, in chapter 3 (*The School of Hypatia*) Watts speaks of the Mouseion nonchalantly as a “campus” (p. 38) and defines the supposed retirement of Theon from teaching in the early 80s as “a sort of emeritus professorship” (ibidem). The celebrated expression of Damascius, reported by Suidas and much debated by scholars, according to which Hypatia taught philosophy “in public and to whomever wanted to listen” suggests to Watts the absence of a “screening process” (p. 65). And if Proclus’s commentary on the *Phaedo* is defined as “the late antique equivalent of a doctoral dissertation” (p. 29), it makes perplexing the evaluation of what Watts calls the “projects” of Hypatia, that is, her few attested or possible works, which he associates definitively with her youth in the two chapters dedicated to the reconstruction of her *cursus studiorum* (ch. 2: *Childhood and education*) and “university career” (ch. 3: *The School of Hypatia*).

The work which the sources call the *Astronomical Canon*, with which Hypatia’s name is associated, that is, perhaps an edition of Ptolemy’s *Handy Tables*, on which Theon’s commentary could be based, according to Watts “may represent one of her earliest projects” (p. 30), whence her first “editorial project” would be the well-known “revision” (*paragnosis*) of the third book of the *Almagest*, of which, as suggested by the famous *inscriptio* (“Revised edition by my daughter, the philosopher Hypatia”) handed down to us in the primary textual witness of the manuscript tradition, Hypatia had to establish the text (perhaps, as suggested by Alan Cameron, a sort of critical proto-edition, based on the collation of more manuscripts) so that her father could base his commentary on it. It seems, however, careless to infer from this with certainty, as Watts does, that the text of the following ten books (4-13) was also established by Hypatia: a hypothesis that, initially

---

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the irony of Synesius on the Athenian Platonists: “As one would expect, people who had not attended schools in Athens tended to push back against this in much the same way that a Berkeley graduate pushes against the conceit of Harvard” (p. 53).

mentioned with caution (p. 30), then ends up presented as a certainty (“Hypatia’s edition of Books 3-13 of the *Almagest* was no simple project [...] Her work brought readers closer to truth. This meant that Hypatia and her contemporaries would have understood her edition to be a quite significant scholarly contribution”, p. 31).

In reality, if we keep the data from both the manuscript tradition and secondary sources, we do not have evidence that Hypatia extended her project on the *Almagest* further than is attested in the *scriptio* cited above. It would also be risky to see in the *Astronomical Canon* mentioned by the sources an original work, just as there is no reason to believe that the commentaries on Diophantus’s *Arithmetic* or Apollonius’s *Conics*, only mentioned by Suidas and not surviving the wear and tear of time, were scientifically important works and not just basic textbooks.

The intent here is not, of course, to belittle Hypatia’s level of teaching; but this should suggest that the “summit of wisdom” Hypatia reached, unanimously praised by ancient sources like Socrates Scholasticus and highlighted in the letters of her student Synesius, is not deposited in the occasional surviving writings, but in the kind of knowledge transmitted in that elite way, oral and esoteric, proper to Platonic schools of every era—as Watts knows well, and also sometimes explains explicitly in his book.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, at least since the 17th century, scholarship has included Hypatia’s teaching in a female charismatic tradition, traceable throughout the ancient world<sup>10</sup>, whose Platonic *lignée*, starting from the legendary Diotima, extends, even just considering Hypatia’s era, to those who Watts defines as *Hypatia’s Sisters* (Ch. 7): Pandrosion of Alexandria, Sosipatra of Pergamum, the unnamed wife of Maximus of Ephesus, and Asclepigenia of Athens.

Watts is amazed that Pandrosion “left no significant imprint on the historical record” (p. 94) and that “no texts by Pandrosion currently survive” (pp. 96-97)—just as happened in the case of Sosipatria, Asclepigenia, and the wife of Maximus of Ephesus, despite the abundance of ancient narrative material about them. While knowing and explaining at length the main historical and biographical data offered by the sources, Watts does not dwell on the unwritten character of the esoteric teaching transmitted by this succession of female “teachers”, repositories of those “secrets” of Platonism through the oral tradition, which Synesius also mentions in the *Dio*, referring to the relationship between Socrates and Aspasia, perhaps with an autobiographical touch. In many of the cases reported by modern catalogers with their rather naïve rationalism, esoteric wisdom is joined to a strictly technical “exoteric” competence such as the “geometric”, i.e. astronomical-mathematical, like two sides of a coin.

Traits like this have more to do with the figure of Hypatia than Watts appears to suggest, at least if we consider Synesius’s testimony, which not only confers upon her the ritual epithets of “μητηρ καὶ ἀδελφῆ καὶ διδάσκαλε” (Ep. 16, 2-3), typical of the Platonic schools yet, for that, no less suggestive of a “sacral”<sup>11</sup> implication, but also, at the beginning

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. in part. pp. 65-66 and p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> Let us think of Gilles Ménage, who “alone” discovered the existence of 75 female philosophers and wrote his *Historia mulierum philosopharum*, with an entire chapter on Hypatia, dedicating it to Anne Dacier, the Huguenot philologist whom, ironically, Voltaire would come to compare to Hypatia (cited by Watts on p. 178, n. 1); or, in the following century, of Johann Christian Wolf, who published a catalogue of these female philosophers with the fragments of the ancient works concerning them: J. C. Wolf, *Mulierum Graecarum, quae oratione prosa usae sunt, fragmenta et elogia Graece et Latine [...], accedit Catalogus foeminarum sapientia artibus scriptisve apud Graecos Romanos aliasque gentes olim illustrium*, Hamburgi, apud Vandenhoeck, 1735.

<sup>11</sup> On the “conventional” use of these epithets throughout the history of the Platonic academies, Watts focuses in part. at pp. 69-70. Yet the apostrophe to Hypatia as μητηρ καὶ ἀδελφῆ καὶ διδάσκαλε, contained in Ep. 16, 2-3, approaches, in the work of Synesius himself, the analogous formula of *Hymns* 2 [4], vv. 104-105, p. 765 Garzya, in which the epithets

of his letter to Herculian, the well-known description “priestess of the mysteries and the orgies of philosophy.” That Hypatia doled out to her most mature students “an esoteric doctrine outside the official program” and that “Hypatia’s technical-astronomical teaching was no more than a deceptive facade from the other side of which an esoteric revelation was dispensed, a truly original one” has been made evident by Lacombrade, among others.<sup>12</sup> That Hypatia was the “high priestess” of Alexandrian Neoplatonism is directly affirmed by Bregman<sup>13</sup>, to mention two of the most well-known biographers of Synesius. The terms in which the student addresses her in the letter can only be explained supposing a “sacred” link, as in fact Synesius defines it. This helps us understand why, as explained again in the letter to Herculian, Hypatia’s students took care to keep the doctrines Hypatia imparted to them secret, not to be revealed to the uninitiated (*Ep.* 143, 1-2), the ἀβέβηλα of which Synesius speaks in the *Dio*.<sup>14</sup>

In the longest and most complex part of his book, using his meticulous knowledge of Late Antique Platonism, its exponents and academies<sup>15</sup>, Watts tries to reconstruct, on the one hand, Hypatia’s *cursus studiorum* and teaching *iter*, and on the other the doctrinal *facies* of the philosophy that she taught and for which she was unanimously acclaimed by her contemporaries—even though the sources are almost completely silent about both, and it is thus very much conjecture. The affirmations at the core of Watts’ argument are hypothetical, based on parallels with the careers of other philosophers, which would be risky even if Hypatia were not widely considered in the ancient sources an *unicum*, an extraordinary case, a disconcerting exception.

The fact is that in Watts’ pages the various conjectures about Hypatia’s education<sup>16</sup> and the beginnings of her teaching activity are initially introduced with an insistent hypothetical syntax (“It is possible...”, “Hypatia may...”, “She likely...”) that nevertheless, as the argument proceeds, fades and then vanishes, becoming certainty instead. Her chronology is no exception to this *modus arguendi*.

---

"mother, daughter and sister" are attributed to the divine generating Will of the Neoplatonists.

<sup>12</sup> C. Lacombrade, *Synésios de Cyrène hellène et chrétien*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1951, pp. 49 sgg.; cf. also p. 64, on the “underground activities” of Synesius’s and Hypatia’s Platonism; viz. moreover *Ibid.*, *Hypatie, Synésios de Cyrène et le patriarcat alexandrin*, ed. posthumous ed. by N. Aujoulat, “Byzantion” 71 (2001), pp. 408-409 (on the “mysteries” and the vow of silence that the students were bound by) and above all pp. 419-421, where is considered to be reference to the teaching of Hypatia the *Ep.* 105’s reference to the anti-Christian dogmata, which Synesius declares not to have conceived of alone but learned “for scientific demonstration” (τὰ δι' ἐπιστήμης εἰς ἀπόδειξιν ἐλθόντα δόγματα): from whom, Lacombrade comments, if not from his mother-sister-teacher Hypatia?

<sup>13</sup> J. Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene: Philosopher-Bishop*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 1982, University of California Press, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Synes., *Dion*, 5, p. 154 Lamoureux – Aujoulat.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. above, nn. 2-5.

<sup>16</sup> According to Watts, Hypatia “could have done her grammatical training in a classroom with boys (and perhaps other girls), probably under the supervision of one of Theon’s teaching assistants” and “she likely began” her philosophical and mathematical training “under her father’s direction when she was in her late teens or early twenties” (p. 27). Here and elsewhere Watts’ syntax is prudently that of hypotheses. None of the many things Watts writes about Hypatia’s education is attested by a specific source: Watts bases it on his knowledge of Late Antique schools and, from there, deduces parallelisms that are still, we repeat, aleatory.

Watts places the birth of Hypatia in 355, following Dzielska<sup>17</sup> and Penella<sup>18</sup> (cf. p. 161, n. 2), who base this date on the affirmation of Malalas according to which Hypatia was *παλαιά*, old, at the time of her death.<sup>19</sup> But the perception of women's age among the ancients was notoriously different from ours, and it seems more likely, as hypothesized by previous scholars, that Hypatia was instead born around 370 and at the time of her death, in 415, was about forty-five years old—an age that at the time was considered, for a woman, elderly. Hypatia's episode of *'αἰσχρουργία* could confirm a dating of at least 15 years less than that accepted by Watts, upon which he lays the foundation of his reconstruction Hypatia's biography.

According to the noted fragment of the *Vita Isidori* of Damascius, reported in the article of Suidas, in a scandalous gesture, Hypatia, to fend off the courtship of one of her students, cast in front of him a cloth soaked in her own menstrual blood—dramatically breaking one of the deepest-rooted taboos around the female figure in the ancient world. This episode suggests that Hypatia was still of childbearing age during her teaching years. Whether it is real or legendary or something in between, an exaggeration of the truth in the vein of the anecdotal and paradoxical tales of the eccentricities of philosophers, it is nonetheless, if we mean to rely on ancient sources, an explicit chronological clue more specific than the generic definition of *παλαιά* that Malalas furnishes.

Watts, whose initially conjectural hypotheses, as we have noted, tend to turn into certainties as his argument goes on, reconstructs Hypatia's development relying on the retrodating of her birth to 355, affirming that Hypatia “had grown up during a period that might be called ‘the little peace of the temples’” that “took over the school in the 380s” (p. 38), that is, “by the time she reached her thirtieth birthday” (p. 37), that “Theon turned the role of primary instruction over to Hypatia sometime in the early or mid-380s”<sup>20</sup> and that, despite remaining “around the campus,” Theon “had no regular instructional responsibilities.” (ibidem) This in spite of the fact that Synesius, in at least two of his letters, mentions Theon's presence in the mid-90s<sup>21</sup>; that, according to Suidas's testimony<sup>22</sup>, the peak of Hypatia's father's scientific career is to be placed between 379 and 395; and that, in the still-open discussion among scholars on the figure of Theon and the limits on his dates of birth and death, it is likely, as Neugebauer argues, that he was still alive in the beginning of the 5th century.<sup>23</sup>

Watts' interpretation of Theon's intellectual personality, presented as a direct successor to Pappus and as a “pure” mathematician, is also debatable. Certainly, Theon, like Hypatia, was a mathematician and an astronomer. But we know from ancient and Byzantine sources that his works also included a study of the birth of Sirius, another of “omens, the observation of birds and the cries of crows”; that he had composed religious hymns that celebrated the stars; that others of his writings, according to the testimony of Malalas drawn from an otherwise lost vein of ancient sources, considered the texts “of Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus.”<sup>24</sup> It is no accident that Theon is defined as a “philosopher” in

---

<sup>17</sup> M. Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> R. Penella, *When was Hypatia Born*, “Historia” 33 (1984), pp. 126-128.

<sup>19</sup> Malalas, *Chronogr.* XIV 12, 68-70 p. 280 Thurn.

<sup>20</sup> “The shift appears to have been a gradual one”, Watts adds, “as Theon slowly stepped back into a sort of emeritus professorship. Theon was around the campus, but he had no regular instructional responsibilities” (pp. 37-38).

<sup>21</sup> As argued, regarding *Ep.* 16, by D. Roques, *La famille d'Hypatie*, “Révue des Etudes Grècques” 108 (1995), pp. 128-149

<sup>22</sup> Suid. II, p. 702, 10-16 Adler

<sup>23</sup> O. Neugebauer, *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy*, II, Springer, Berlin-Heidelberg-New York 1975, p. 873

<sup>24</sup> Suid. II, p. 702, 10-16 Adler; Malalas, *Chronogr.* XIII 35, 38-40, p. 265 Thurn. On Theon's interests in magic and divination and his “esoteric little pieces” cf. Dzielska, *Hypatia of*

the Byzantine tradition: a definition that, Watts blandly challenges, “Theon may have disputed as inaccurate” (p. 34). Overinterpreting the testimony of Damascius about Hypatia handed down by Suidas (“Being by nature more gifted than her father, she did not stop at the technical-mathematical teachings that her father practiced, but courageously gave herself over to true philosophy itself”)<sup>25</sup>, contradicted, however, by the testimony of Philostorgius (“Hypatia became much better than her teacher, particularly in astronomy, and end up herself teaching many students in the mathematical sciences”)<sup>26</sup>, Watts sees the evolution of the *Bildung* of Hypatia as a liberation from the purely mathematical approach of her father in an autonomous and original conversion from mathematics to “pure” philosophy that “allowed her to push beyond the intellectual limits of her mathematician father” (p. 35). Certainly Hypatia “went further.” But not in the sense of a transition from “pure” mathematics to philosophy, for the simple reason that Theon was far from being what, in any era, can or could have been considered a “pure” mathematician.

All this provides a rather unstable foundation for the first, most important, and, in the end, partially correct theory on which Watts’ interpretation of Hypatia’s teaching depends. Her “distinctive brand of philosophical teaching” was a combination of the “mathematical rigor characteristic of the teaching of the fourth century mathematicians like Pappus and Theon with the philosophical system of the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Porphyry” (p. 37) and sharply contrasted with the “Iamblichan way”, that is, with that combination of Neopythagoreanism and the “innovative philosophical approaches of the Alexandrian-trained philosopher Plotinus and ritualistic elements inspired by the third-century Chaldean oracles” (p. 32), that, according to Watts, had had a distinct expression at Alexandria in Antoninus’s circle — who, however, it must be mentioned, “ἔπεδείκνυτο [...] οὐδὲν θεουργόν”, according to the testimony of Eunapius<sup>27</sup>— and in that of Olympus, who, as attested in Damascius’s *Vita Isidori*, taught at the very site of the Serapeum “the rules of divine worship, the ancient traditions, and the happiness that accompanied them” (p. 55).

Watts attributes to this radical wing of Platonism derived from Iamblichus the violent disruptions that in 392 led to the destruction and sacking of the Serapeum by the “monks” led by the bishop Theophilus, whose quest for political hegemony and whose violent methods of governing the church would be transmitted to his nephew and successor Cyril. Perhaps it is to this that the exceptional indulgence that Watts shows for the Christian leadership is due, an indulgence which even leads him to charge the destruction of the Serapeum, described with precision by ecclesiastical historians such as Sozomenus and Theodoretus of Cyrus and lamented with horror and scandal by Eunapius — who compares Theophilus to Eurymedon and his militias to the Giants of ancient myth<sup>28</sup> — not so much to the intolerance of the new Alexandrian ecclesiastical politics inaugurated by Theophilus in conjunction with the Theodosian decrees—which were, moreover, according to Socrates

---

*Alexandria* cit., pp. 69, 74-77 and bibliography in the nn. ad loc.t

<sup>25</sup> Suid. IV, p. 644, 13-15 Adler

<sup>26</sup> Philostorg. 8, 9, p. 111 Bidez.

<sup>27</sup> *Vita Aedesii* VI 10, 7, in Eunapii *Vitae sophistarum*, rec. Io. Giangrande, (Scriptores Graeci et Latini, 4), Typis Publicae Officinae Polygraphicae, Romae 1956, p. 37, 16-17.

<sup>28</sup> “Everything happened like in the myths of the poets, when the Giants had dominion over the earth: the religion of the temples in Alexandria and in the sanctuary of Serapis was cast to the winds, and not only the ceremonies, but the buildings themselves, under the reign of Theodosius [...] Theophilus “Towered over those abominable beings as a kind of Eurymedon over the other Giants [...] and these beings, furiously raging against our sacred places like masons against rough stone [...], demolished the temple of Serapis [...] and they waged war against its treasures and statues, robbing them as adversaries who could not resist”: *Vita Eustathii* VI 11, 3-, in Eunapii, *Vitae sophistarum*, rec. Io. Giangrande, (Scriptores Graeci et Latini, 4), Typis Publicae Officinae Polygraphicae, Romae 1956, pp. 38-39.

the Scholastic, personally requested by Theophilus himself<sup>29</sup>— but to the cult resistance of Iamblichus’s followers: “The fervor and enthusiasm of the Iamblichans had done real, serious, and irreversible damage to the religious infrastructure of Alexandria” (p. 61).<sup>30</sup>

This is a rather disconcerting charge, considering that Theophilus’s militia was already made up of the extremist, intolerant rabble of Egyptian “monasticism” whom Cyril would later use. “They let them enter the holy places, they called them monks,” writes Eunapius, “but they were not even men, except in appearance, because they lived like pigs and openly assisted in and themselves committed countless and unmentionable crimes.”<sup>31</sup>

Even more brashly, the author suggests that the “rival” moderate branch of Platonism, led by Hypatia, who was “in the middle of her career” at the time of the destruction of the Serapeum (supposing that the chronology Watts postulates is correct), had good relations with Theophilus (p. 8)<sup>32</sup> and, in any case, benefitted from the “elimination of her Alexandrian Iamblichan competitors”, brought about by the destruction of the Serapeum, that would have allowed her “to draw some of the former students of Olympus into her classes” (p. 61). But he then observes that “she was unlikely to keep these radicalized pagan students even if they enrolled initially”, given that “she did not share the Iamblichan idea [...] and she did not teach the rituals.” Thus her teaching, starting in the mid-90s, would turn out to be “a welcome antidote to the violence and division that had gripped Alexandria in the early 390s” (p. 62).

Only the last of this sequence of hypotheses and deductions seems supportable, but even so, Watts’ idea that the philosophy developed by Hypatia, unlike the intransigent Iamblichan paganism of the followers of Antoninus and Olympus<sup>33</sup>, was a neutral philosophy uninfluenced by paganism is not convincing (p. 56). The affirmation that “Christian students of Hypatia could then practice Platonic philosophy in a way that was philosophically sound and not radically inconsistent with Christian theology” is correct (p. 47); and it is true that exactly this allows us to understand Hypatia’s “broad appeal to both pagan and Christian students in the 380s and early 390s” (p. 49). But that is not enough to allow us to speak of a true “confessional neutrality” in Hypatia’s school of Platonism. To tolerate does not mean to endorse, let alone to believe. It is necessary to distinguish between tolerance—of popular beliefs, which included, for Hypatia’s students, the main tenets of the Christian religion they had officially converted to, and in general of a plurality of cults—and intellectual agreement; between the ancient Platonic art of the “noble lie”, practiced by the wise in consideration of the utility of *superstitiones*, as much Christian as pagan, for simple souls<sup>34</sup>, and doctrinal ambiguity, incoherence, or interference in their

---

<sup>29</sup> As reported in the account of the destruction of the Serapeum provided in his *Ecclesiastical History*: Socr. Schol., V 16, 1, p. 289 Hansen. Neither of Theophilus’s political-ecclesiastical strategy nor of that of Cyril, Watts proposes, however, a political-ideological analysis or a properly historical evaluation, as we will see later.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. also what the author writes in the concluding chapter (*Reconsidering a Legend*), p. 151.

<sup>31</sup> Eunap., *Vita Eustathii*, VI 11, 35, pp. 38-39 Giangrande.

<sup>32</sup> The fact that Theophilus officiated at Synesius’s wedding is not a sufficient indication to prove, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Serapeum, that “peaceful coexistence and cooperation” between “the bishop, the civic elites, and philosophers”, that Watts presupposes (p. 107; cf. also p. 153: “Synesius close ties to Theophilus suggest that Hypatia may also have at least a working relationship with the bishop”).

<sup>33</sup> Even though, as we have seen, Eunapius testifies that abstention from theurgical practices was also characteristic of Antoninus.

<sup>34</sup> For the useful notion of “noble lie” cf. the clear synthesis offered by John Thorp in his talk *In Search of Hypatia*, given at the Canadian Philosophical Association in 2004: “She helped her students with the great tension of the age by applying to certain Christian teachings the typical Platonic doctrine of the noble lie – as she would also have done with many pagan teachings [...] Consider again Hypatia’s students. In one way or another they were all schizophrenic. As Hellenes they will all or most have had a Greek classical education, with the

vision of the world. As Watts himself relates, Synesius “found things like the story of the Resurrection to be absurd” and openly declared that “the philosophical mind admits the use of falsehood as a teaching tool for lower minds” (p. 88). Moreover, if the teaching imparted at Hypatia’s school was truly neutral, why such malevolence and hostility on the Christians’ part toward the “astronomical wisdom” of Hypatia, as Hesychius writes, quoted by Suidas?<sup>35</sup>

That Hypatia’s teaching was “a sort of retro-Neoplatonism based on the ideas of Plotinus and Porphyry that emphasized contemplation over ritual” (p. 50) is probable, even if it is not provable. However, it is risky to base this claim, as Watts does, on the fact that “her surviving editorial work betrays no Iamblichian influence” (p. 45): how could it have? Or to base it on what Watts calls the “reading list of her students”, that is, we think, on the reading of Synesius, whose familiarity with the *Chaldean Oracles* is shown by his *De insomniis*.<sup>36</sup> Or on the well-known statement by Socrates Scholasticus that Hypatia “had inherited (διαδέξασθαι) the teaching of the Platonic school deriving from Plotinus.”<sup>37</sup> This statement is overinterpreted as follows: “He says, in essence, that Hypatia was a Plotinian Platonist and not an Iamblichian Platonist, a Themistian Aristotelian, or any other breed of philosopher” (p. 45). In reality, Socrates says much less.

According to Watts, in the 90s—why not—Hypatia could have been tempted to “incorporate the most cutting-edge, Iamblichian readings into her courses”, except that “professors can be hesitant to embrace new textual approaches” (p. 45); and in any case, in those years — and here the author returns, slightly disconcertingly, to his alluring modernizations of the ancient world — “Hypatia faced many of the same professional and personal challenges encountered by mid-career professionals in the modern world” (p. 51).

We can certainly agree that Hypatia’s philosophical teachings put her “firmly within the Plotinian and Porphyrian interpretative traditions but outside that of Iamblichus” (p. 43). To exclude from consideration, however, the presence of ritual elements, even if not strictly theurgical, in the practices of the innermost circle, at least, of Hypatia’s school, that is, in the esoteric part of her teaching, would prevent us from making sense not only of the allusions “to magic, astrolabes and musical instruments” made in the only (and therefore crucial) source that gives us the Christian-Coptic version of the assassination of Hypatia,

---

whole view of the world that that entailed. But they were living in a society – and were set to become important players in a society – in which Christianity was clearly gaining ground; indeed it had recently become pretty much obligatory. They cannot have been immune to these tensions. And Hypatia was able to resolve them, or seemed able to do so. She offered them a way of reconciling their pagan culture with the requirement to be Christian by pointing to a common philosophical truth behind them both. [...] Many of the doctrines of Christianity are ‘noble lies’ which it is good for the populace to believe; the truth, however, is attained by philosophy. Must this not have been the secret teaching of Hypatia, the balm for the worried souls of her students, and the ultimate source of their undying loyalty to her? Hypatia had found the way to make being Christian acceptable to a philosopher, by *the utterly Platonic device of the noble lie.*”

<sup>35</sup>“She was torn to shreds by the [Christian] Alexandrians, and the pieces of her brutalized body were scattered throughout the city, and this she suffered because of envy (φθόνος) of her extraordinary wisdom, but above all for hostility against her astronomical wisdom”: Suid. IV, p. 644, 5-8 Adler.

<sup>36</sup> To justify this important fact, Watts reassures us that Hypatia “continued to approach the Chaldean texts in a Porphyrian manner”, p. 45; which is certainly probable: on the Chaldean echoes in Synesius’s *De insomniis* and in his *Hymns* cf. the very recent S. Toulouse, “Synésios de Cyrène”, in R. Goulet, *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, vol. VI, CNRS, Parigi 2016, pp. 639-676

<sup>37</sup> Socr. Schol. VII 15, 1, p. 360 Hansen.

namely the chronicle of John of Nikiu<sup>38</sup>, but also of our best source about the school of Hypatia, Synesius.

Watts' treatment of the relationship between Synesius and Hypatia which he deduces from the letters of the former (ch. 5, *A Philosophical Mother and Her Children*, pp. 66-74) is intended to devalue the "sacral" aspects of the teacher-student relationship, to dismiss them as superficial clichés. He is also dismissive of the authenticity of the personal understanding between the two, reacting, perhaps, to the excessively literary transformation, if not complete romantic fantasy, applied to their relationship.<sup>39</sup> Watts, however, takes it to the other extreme, highlighting almost exclusively the conventional and rhetorical elements of Synesius's letters to Hypatia and their more utilitarian goals. If, for example, letter 10, which has moved generations of learned readers perhaps excessively, is defined "a performance piece [...] designed to impress a later audience" (p. 68) and "an artful but gentle chastisement of Hypatia" (p. 69), letter 16 is even considered "a miniature masterpiece of literary passive-aggressiveness" (p. 69).

Conversely, Hypatia's public role, presented in chapter 6 (*The Public Intellectual*), seems to be romanticized, idealized, or at least oversimplified in the book. Watts seems to discount, in his conclusions, the concretely *Realpolitik* aspects of the role of "high-profile advisor to imperial and local Alexandrian officials" that Hypatia played according to the sources. He comes to affirm, without supporting it with any evidence, that "undoubtedly, Hypatia would rather have lived a simple life of teaching and philosophical contemplation" than to have become "deeply engaged in the life of her city" (p. 91).

And yet: "You have always had power (*δυναστεία*). May you have it for a long time, and may you make good use of this power," reads Synesius's letter of recommendation (letter 81), datable to 413, for his two young friends Nicaeus and Philolaus, involved in a legal controversy over their family property, in which Synesius asks Hypatia to intervene in their favor, exercising her influence over the magistrates.<sup>40</sup> In Watts' opinion, Hypatia "undertook these activities solely as part of her practice of philosophy" (p. 84).

This is a rather naive portrait of a personality defined by Suidas (here to be identified with Hesychius) as "eloquent and dialectic (*διαλεκτική*) in speaking, thoughtful and political (*πολιτική*) in action"<sup>41</sup>, such that, again according to Hesychius, "the leaders who came to administer the *polis* were the first to go to listen to her at home"<sup>42</sup>. Her sessions, which gathered "a great crowd in front of her doors, *together with men and horses*<sup>43</sup>, some entering, others coming out, others still waiting there", as again reported by Suidas (here to be identified with Damascius)<sup>44</sup>, would arouse Cyril's furious envy. Pierre Chuvin first noted that the term used by Damascius/Suidas for Hypatia's private (*ἰδιώτα*) receptions, which are

---

<sup>38</sup> In his evident partiality and in his ethnic-religious patriotism, the narration of the authoritarian bishop, based most likely on a more ancient source, always in Coptic context, well-informed and close to the facts, presents Hypatia as "a philosophical woman, a pagan" who "dedicated all her time to magic, astrolabes, and musical instruments, and took in many people with her Satanic tricks." And he adds, in accordance with the other sources in our possession, that "the governor of the city", that is, the augustal prefect Orestes, "honored her overmuch; because she had seduced him too with her magic. And thus he had stopped going to church, as used to be his habit. And not only that, but he had also brought many believers over to her side. And he himself received the unbelievers in his home."

<sup>39</sup>Cf. *supra*, n. 1.

<sup>40</sup> This letter of recommendation is also mentioned by Watts, pp. 68 and 86, who does not ignore its value but tries to justify it.

<sup>41</sup>Suid. IV, pp. 644, 31-645, 4 Adler.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> Hom., *Il.* XXI, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Suid. IV, pp. 644, 32 - 645, 1-12 Adler.

precisely the gatherings in front of her house that enrage Cyril, is the technical term for the audiences that patrons grant their *clientes*<sup>45</sup>.

But, perhaps, not alone. Explaining, in the previous and already-mentioned chapter *Hypatia's Sisters*, what he considers the difference between Hypatia and Sosipatra<sup>46</sup> to be, Watts heavily stresses the difference between the two philosophers, where it is perhaps exactly those traits that, according to the author, distinguish Sosipatra from Hypatia that can help us fully understand the nature of the latter's teaching. We speak not only of the "priestly" elements which, as we have just mentioned, are not out of character for Hypatia, at least according to her personality as described in Synesius's letters<sup>47</sup>, nor of elements that could be considered topical, like her "ability to resist the charms of male suitors", but of the fact that Sosipatra "did not teach publicly and her teaching was not open to every student", but rather, she "'philosophized in her own home' and opened the space only to those who were members of the inner circle" (p. 98).

Now, this custom, as attested by Damascius, has a parallel in Hypatia, who had "public" (δημοσίᾳ)<sup>48</sup> lessons, held in an official town hall (though perhaps not, like her father had, at the Mouseion<sup>49</sup>), of a strictly curricular nature and open to "whoever wanted

---

<sup>45</sup> P. Chuvin, *Chronique des derniers païens. La disparition du paganisme dans l'Empire romain, du regne de Constantin à celui de Justinien*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres / Fayard, 2009<sup>3</sup>, pp. 366-367. Damascius/Suidas's use of the verb προσαγορεύειν is particularly significant: P. Chuvin - M. Tardieu, *Le «cynisme» d'Hypatie, Historiographie et source anciennes*, in *Aléxandrie médiévale*, edited by J.-Y. Empereur -C. Décobert, III, Cairo 2008, p. 65; on the technical meaning of προσαγόρευσις as "the client's greeting of the patron" viz. C. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity. Topography and Social Conflict*, Baltimore-London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 311-312. Watts himself points it out in a note, without, however, citing Chuvin: "The word Damascius uses is *prosaoreuoito*, which here has the sense of a patroness receiving her clients, granting favors, and offering assistance", p. 177, n. 39.

<sup>46</sup> On which "more ancient narrative material survives than about any other late antique female philosopher, including Hypatia" (p. 97).

<sup>47</sup> As well as, one would say, in the allusions of John of Nikiu (according to whom, as we have seen, Hypatia "dedicated all her time to magic, astrolabes, and musical instruments" and "took in many people with her Satanic tricks" among whom was "the governor of the city"). Watts considers this "rumor" (p. 113) a misunderstanding artfully instilled, at the moment of the exacerbation of the conflict between Cyril and the augustal prefect Orestes, in "most ordinary Christians" of Alexandria, incapable of grasping the "nuances separating Hypatia's Platonism" from that of Iamblichan tendency (p. 114).

<sup>48</sup> Suid. IV, p. 644, 17 Adler = *Vita Isidori* 43a, fr. 102 Zintzen. "Public", but not necessarily "itinerant", as those of a street philosopher of the Cynic kind, as the mention of the *tribon* she wore has made some think, on the basis of textual parallels like the oration of Julian the Apostate *Eis tous apaideutos kynas*, in *Oeuvres complètes de l'empereur Julien*, t. II, p. 1, edited by G. Rochefort, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1963, *Contre les cyniques ignorants*, 18, 1-17, in which are mentioned the three *gnorismata* or "signs of recognition" of the cynic's uniform: the rough cape (the *tribon*), the beggar's sack, and the cane; cf. also Ps.-Cratete, 33, 2, in *Epistolographi Graeci*, ed. R. Hercher, Didot, Paris 1873 (Hakkert, Amsterdam 1965). Moreover Watts, almost equally curiously, writes that "when Hypatia wore a *tribon*, the traditional cloak of a philosopher, she advertised her philosophical achievements".

<sup>49</sup> According to Watts, Hypatia "probably did not belong to the Museum" (p. 64), even though the adverb δημοσίᾳ used by Suidas, that he takes from Damascius, does not seem to exclude this possibility as much as Watts believes, on the authority of Dzielska; cf. also Watts, *City and School* cit., pp. 194-195.

to listen”, alongside, as we have seen, private (ιδίᾳ)<sup>50</sup> receptions for select visitors, of the sort which provoked Cyril’s rabid envy. It is true that Damascius uses, here, the technical term proper to the *patronus’s* audience with his *clientes*. But it is also true, as noted by Chuvin, that the term ὄθισμός, with which the fragment of the *Life of Isidore* indicates the “gathering” at the entrance of Hypatia’s private home awaiting her “apparition” (mentioned just above, referring to her lessons δημοσίᾳ, with the technical term πρόδος, with its well-attested ceremonial connotation<sup>51</sup>), is connected to awaiting a solemn audience and also has a sacral valence<sup>52</sup>.

Why not assume that during the receptions held ιδίᾳ in her home Hypatia also dispensed that “esoteric doctrine at the margin of the official programs” (Lacombrade), according to the custom of the ancient Platonic schools (and later, the Byzantine ones), to a “hetairia”, as Synesius already defines it, more varied in age, status and social function than we can imagine a university class being today?

Scholars debate whether Orestes was among Hypatia’s disciples or not. The question is perhaps ill-posed, if we admit that the circle of initiates that huddled around Hypatia included not only “students”, of the type we can easily imagine today, but also—as Watts himself points out—members of the “city’s political establishment” (p. 61) affiliated with the philosophical offering of a “set of principles according to which all Alexandrians could better organize their lives and their city” (p. 62). If, in the esoteric sessions designed for the most mature and select acolytes of Hypatia’s Platonism, confessional membership went beyond the common philosophical profession (as Watts writes, Hypatia imparted a philosophy that offered “a contemplative path to union with the divine without explicitly specifying the [...] character of that highest divine power”, p. 56), they had to confront issues in which philosophy and politics, especially regarding religious matters, could not be distinguished; thus, when the local aristocracy met with notables and officials sent from Constantinople, strategies and alignments were also determined in city affairs.

This would explain why Cyril, when he discovers, noticing the gathering of carriages outside Hypatia’s residence, the existence of this circle, and moreover, that its head is a woman, is caught by the furious spasm of φθόνος considered by the sources the trigger for the *klimax* that will lead to her assassination: an “envy” that blends, as we have seen, with a suspicion of “magic”. According to Pierre Chuvin, Hypatia’s private residence was not in the center of the city, where, rather, the philosopher used to go by carriage to hold her public lessons, but “en banlieu”<sup>53</sup>. From this, we can add, came the lateness of Cyril’s discovery, not only of the private address, but also of the eminent role of the philosopher, and the sudden emergence of his attack of φθόνος.

Watts, while admitting the existence of an esoteric teaching imparted by Hypatia, in the purest Platonic tradition, to the “inner circle” of her school (p. 66)<sup>54</sup>, does not take into

---

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Chuvin-Tardieu 2008, pp. 63-65, which confirms the public and official nature of Hypatia’s teaching, probably “au frais (ou: à l’initiative, ou: au service) de l’Etat”, supporting this interpretation with probable parallels and underlining, as we have seen, that Hypatia carried out the lessons related to her public chair, to where she went solemnly in a carriage, while she had the private (*idia*) meetings of her circle in her private residence, situated at some distance from the center (ibid., p. 65).

<sup>51</sup> With this term Damascius indicates Hypatia’s appearances at the lessons held in public (δημοσίᾳ) in the city center: καὶ διὰ μέσου τοῦ ἄστεος ποιουμένη τὰς προόδους ἐξηγεῖτο δημοσίᾳ τοῖς ἀκροᾶσθαι βουλομένοις.

<sup>52</sup> Chuvin – Tardieu 2008, pp. 61-62.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pg. 65

<sup>54</sup> Watts recognizes, in the already-mentioned ch. 5 (*A Philosophical Mother and Her Children*), that not “all parts of Hypatia’s school and its teachings were open to the general public”, and recalls the existence of such dual teaching in the Platonic schools since antiquity: “Plato supervised public demonstrations of the school’s method of inquiry that were open to anyone

consideration the idea of two locations, seeing that he decrees *tout court* that Hypatia “taught in a school that was open to all who wanted to come” (p. 99) and, speaking of Sosipatra, writes that “*unlike Hypatia* her teaching was done in her own home”.

The interpretation that Watts provides of the evidence of Damascius and the other sources concerning the “private” meetings in Hypatia’s house is radically different. First of all, he considers them to have begun only after the attack on Orestes and the death by torture of Ammonius and attributes them to the brief segment of time between this death and that of Hypatia. Secondly, he interprets them as a sort of momentary *think-tank* Orestes wanted in order to form a “coalition” with “the Alexandrian councilors and other members of the civic elite”, the organizations and leadership of which he entrusts to Hypatia as “the ultimate neutral arbiter”, since “she had no pre-existing conflict with Cyril” (pp. 112-113). It is to this specific, limited moment, Watts explains, that Damascius refers when he writes that “the name of philosophy seemed most esteemed and worthy of honor to those who ran the affairs of the city” (p. 113). And it is only at this point, namely “following Ammonius’s attack”, that the “private” meetings start: according to Watts, first Orestes and Hypatia confer only amongst themselves, and then “a religiously mixed group of Alexandrian elites” joins them (*ibidem*). Watts, therefore, does not connect these meetings with the sessions of Hypatia’s esoteric circle in any way: it is just “of the influence she appeared to wield in the city” that “Cyril grew jealous”.

Watts does not give much weight to Cyril’s **φθόνος**, which he mentions only once, incidentally (“A pagan source tells us that Cyril soon grew jealous of the crowds who flocked to Hypatia’s house and the influence she appeared to wield in the city”, p. 113), referring only to the testimony of Damascius reported by Suidas, not mentioning the recurrence of the theme in the main Christian narration of the assassination of Hypatia, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates (“Phthonos personified arose against her”) or in Hesychius (quoted by Suidas: “and this she suffered for **φθόνος**”) and declining to interpret the other possible evidence of what has been far too easily considered, in the literature on Hypatia, the bishop’s personal and perhaps genuinely misogynistic aversion towards her<sup>55</sup>.

So far, the textual exegesis provided by Watts and the reconstruction that he derives from it of the relationship between Orestes, the city elite and Hypatia, and the character of the private meetings (**ἰδιώματα**) that took place in her home, is not shared by this writer, but can nevertheless be considered legitimate, and one can, despite everything, equanimously believe that it does not force any more out of the sources than any historian has been and still is constrained to do, given their laconicity and scarcity<sup>56</sup>. The real element of weakness in the book is the treatment of the killing of Hypatia (chapter 8, *A Murder in the Street*), which Watts considers not a political murder, but a casual incident.

---

who happened upon them, but he also ran nightly discussion sections in his home devoted to deeper and more complicated philosophical ideas that were restricted to his disciples”, p. 65.

<sup>55</sup> Among other things, the derogatory mention of the “Egyptian woman” (Αἴγυπτία) in the passage of the *Easter Homilies* of Cyril mentioned by G. Beretta, *Ipazia d’Alessandria*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1993, p. 278, n. 135 has been read as a reference to Hypatia (“The Egyptian woman has been made to be silent”, σεσίγηται ἡ Αἴγυπτία).

<sup>56</sup> That is to say, in spite of the fact that the verbal forms used by both Socrates and Damascius to describe the habit of the members of the city and government elite of visiting Hypatia, for whose authority and venerable frankness they harbored admiration and respect, express the idea of a continuity and of a role of Hypatia’s already stated previously. Cf. the words of Socrates (Socr. Schol. VII 15, 2, p. 360 Hansen): Διὰ <δὲ> τὴν προσοῦσαν αὐτῇ ἐκ τῆς παιδεύσεως σεμνὴν παρρησίαν καὶ τοῖς ἄρχουσιν σωφρόνως εἰς πρόσωπον ἤρχετο, καὶ οὐκ ἦν τις αἰσχύνῃ ἐν μέσῳ ἀνδρῶν παρεῖναι αὐτήν. Πάντες γὰρ δι’ὑπερβάλλουσιν σωφροσύνην πλέον αὐτήν ἠδοῦντο καὶ κατεπλήττοντο. Κατὰ δὲ ταύτης τότε ὁ φθόνος ὠπλίσατο. But also those of Damascius (Suid. IV, pp. 644, 31-645, 1 Adler): ἢ τε ἄλλη πόλις εἰκότως ἡσπάζετό τε καὶ προσεκύνει διαφερόντως, οἱ τε ἄρχοντες αἰεὶ προχειριζόμενοι τῆς πόλεως ἐφοίτων πρῶτοι πρὸς αὐτήν.

Zealots, “beings of incandescent spirit”, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus defines the Nitrian monks recruited by Cyril<sup>57</sup>: gangs of violent men, often illiterate, who wandered from city to city, full of social hatred not only against the pagans, but against the civil world in general and in particular against the inhabitants of the metropolises<sup>58</sup>. Curiously, Watts presents them in much more indulgent terms: “A group of devoted followers of the Alexandrian bishop [...] intensely loyal to their patriarch on many occasions”, except that “their zealousness also meant that their actions were often difficult to predict” (p. 111). Despite having called them into the city with the clear intention of intimidating the prefect and with the foreseeable effect of an escalation of violence, the bishop, according to Watts, “did not intend for the incident to become violent” and “certainly neither planned nor sanctioned a physical attack on the prefect” like the one Ammonius is guilty of, who “acted on his own”<sup>59</sup>. The reaction to the arrest and death by torture of the attacker, that is, the solemn celebration of his funeral, his proclamation as a martyr of the church, the transformation of his name from Ammonius to Thaumasius, “the Admirable”, and the elevation of his gesture to a present and future example for the Christians of Alexandria, was not, according to Watts, calculated and provocative, but “instead a gesture of profound appreciation to the Nitrian monks” (p. 112).

Still less did the Christian bishop, according to Watts, want Hypatia killed (“No source claims that Cyril ordered the attack on Hypatia”), nor even, apparently, did Peter the Reader, who guides the *parabalani* to her massacre: “It is unlikely that Peter and his band set out with the intention to kill Hypatia [...] Peter and his band of supporters probably set out to frighten Hypatia [...] Perhaps they intended to have a noisy demonstration outside of the walls of her townhouse. Maybe they were even angry enough that they wanted to burn her house down. It is hard to imagine, however, that they went out intending to kill” (p. 115).

A position, in this case, truly difficult to sustain, and it is not clear where it comes from, since it fits poorly with the precise narrative inlay that the Christian and pagan sources, in particular Socrates and Damascius, compose on the dynamics of the murder. Which is the following: Peter the Reader and his men (monks and *parabalani*) conceived a “secret plan” together (Socrates Scholasticus)<sup>60</sup>; (2) “a multitude of angry men suddenly falls upon Hypatia one day when, as usual, she was returning home from one of her public appearances”, that is, we suppose, from one of her lessons held *δημοσίᾳ* in the city center (Damascius)<sup>61</sup>; (3) Hypatia is thrown down from her carriage<sup>62</sup> and dragged “to the church

---

<sup>57</sup> Socr. Schol., VII, 14, p. 359 Hansen. Let us remember Eunapius, *Vita Eustathii*, VI 11, 35, pp. 38-39, Giangrande, on the occasion of the destruction of the Serapeum, had already defined them “not monks [...] but not even men, except in appearance, because they lived like pigs and openly assisted in and themselves committed countless and unmentionable crimes.”

<sup>58</sup> Dzielska, cit., p. 88 speaks, curiously, of “harmonious cooperation between civil and military authorities” in repressing the defense of the Serapeum; she rightly, however, believes, at p. 83, that she can exclude the possibility that Hypatia and her students took part in the resistance; followed by P. Chuvin - M. Tardieu, *Le «cynisme» d’Hypatie, Historiographie et source anciennes*, in *Aléxandrie médiévale*, edited by J.-Y. Empereur - C. Décobert, III, Cairo 2008, p. 66.

<sup>59</sup> Still in the concluding chapter (*Reconsidering a Legend*) the author inexplicably insists: “Cyril certainly did not want a conflict with Orestes”, p. 153, and even accuses Hypatia and Orestes of “forcing Cyril to unleash the [...] often incontrollable power of his ascetic and lay [...] supporters in the city”, pp. 153-154.

<sup>60</sup> Socr. Schol. VII 15, 5, p. 361 Hansen.

<sup>61</sup> Suid. IV, p. 645, 12-13 Adler.

<sup>62</sup> That she was, instead, thrown down “from the *cathedra*”, as John Nesteutes reports (LXXXIV 101 Charles), is an emblematic distortion, consistent with the presentation of the physical elimination of Hypatia not only as an understandable retaliation for the murder of

that takes its name from the emperor Caesar” that is, the Caesarean (Socrates)<sup>63</sup>; (4) here “heedless of revenge and of the gods and of mankind these true unfortunates massacred the philosopher [...] and while she still breathed a little they took out her eyes” (Damascius)<sup>64</sup>; (5) “They stripped her of her clothes, they slaughtered her using sharp shards (δοστροακα), they shredded her. And these remains having been transported to the so-called Cinaron, they set them on fire (Socrates)<sup>65</sup>.

The direction of the murder, as reported by both pagan and Christian sources, corresponds to specific ritual demands. The death of Hypatia has the well-established methods of capital punishment, certainly not the randomness of lynching: in fact, Damascius calls her killers **οι σφαγεῖς**, “the butchers”, “the immolators”, and the Christians Socrates, as we have seen, and Philostorgius<sup>66</sup> use the verb **διασπάω**, “to tear up”, a technical term to indicate the ritual dismemberment of the victim, that is, the punishment imposed on both those accused of witchcraft and magic and on prostitutes<sup>67</sup>. It is possible that Hypatia was literally torn to pieces, if not also “dismembered” in the manner of a sacrifice, that is, that she was also eviscerated and her heart torn out<sup>68</sup>. And it is possible, considering also a further mention by John of Nikiu, that the exemplary punishment described by the sources echoes that inflicted on the statue of Serapis at the time of the destruction of the Serapeum by Theophilus: as Watts himself remarks, “the statue was dismembered, the pieces dragged throughout the city, and the remains burned”<sup>69</sup>.

As for the perception of the ancients regarding the intentionality of the murder and/or Cyril’s responsibility for it, this too is testified to by a range of sources of different ideological-religious orientations. In the epitome that Photius gives us of Philostorgius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, openly siding with Arianism and thus hostile to Cyril, but an ancient and privileged witness of the facts, we read that “the woman was torn to pieces by those who professed consubstantiality”<sup>70</sup>, with a precise allusion, therefore, to the bishop and his clergy, not to an amorphous “band” of fanatics. The chronicle of John of Nikiu, which, as already pointed out, has for historians the merit of presenting the story from the point of view of Cyril’s supporters, most likely relying on a more ancient source, always in a Coptic context, well-informed and close to the facts, declares triumphantly in its conclusion “All

---

Ammonius, as Socrates clearly describes it, but also as a legitimate execution, and as such a source of pride for “the people of the faith” who accomplished it.

<sup>63</sup> Socr. Schol. VII 15, 5, p. 361 Hansen.

<sup>64</sup> Suid. IV, p. 645, 12-13 Adler.

<sup>65</sup> Socr. Schol. VII 15, 5, p. 361 Hansen.

<sup>66</sup> Philostorg. 8, 9, p. 111 Bidez.

<sup>67</sup> That Hypatia’s death was by dismemberment in the literal sense, that, that is, she was torn to pieces (cf. either Socrates, **μεληδὸν διασπάσαντες**, or Hesychius in Suidas: **καὶ τὸ σῶμα [...] διέσπαρε**, IV, p. 644, 5-6 Adler), is understood, besides by A. Agabiti, *Ipazia. La prima martire della libertà di pensiero*, Roma, Enrico Voghera, 1914, rist. Ragusa 1979, p. 100, by an expert scholar of the 5th century in Egypt in general, and of the case of Hypatia in particular, Enrico Livrea, who considers the **διασπαραγμός** of Hypatia to be coupled with the analogous fate of the prostitute Laïs of Thessaly, narrated by Athenaeus and for which cf. E. Livrea (ed. by), *Studi cercidei (P. Oxy. 1082)*, Habelt, Bonn 1986, p. 92.

<sup>68</sup> To the modern mentality it has appeared, perhaps wrongly, more likely that they skinned her alive with the sharp shards that the Christian monks had at hand, reproducing the capital punishment reserved in antiquity for the great heretics, like Mani, the heresiarch *par excellence*.

<sup>69</sup> John of Nikiu, LXXXIV 103 Charles. While detecting the analogy made in his *Chronicle*, Watts (p. 116), however, declines to explain that which it probably presupposes, namely that the murder of Hypatia was not a casual lynching but a punishment conceived as capital from the beginning, and marked by a precise ritual.

<sup>70</sup> Philostorg. 8, 9, p. 111 Bidez.

the people surrounded the patriarch Cyril and acclaimed him the 'new Theophilus', because he had freed the city from the last remnants of idolatry"<sup>71</sup>.

That the ancients ascribe the responsibility to Cyril with one voice is also indicated by Malalas, who writes in his *Chronicle*: "Given license by their bishop, the Alexandrians attacked and burned Hypatia, the famous philosopher, on a pyre of firewood bundles (φύγανα)"<sup>72</sup>. According to the already-quoted passage of Hesychius, handed down by Suidas, "She was torn to shreds by the [Christian] Alexandrians, and the pieces of her brutalized body were scattered throughout the city, and this she suffered because of envy (φθόνος) of her extraordinary wisdom, but above all for hostility against her astronomical wisdom" (to corroborate the idea that Cyril's aversion and his attack of φθόνος also rests on at least a suspicion that Hypatia would gather her acolytes around esoteric practices, we have the evidence of John of Nikiu, who declares her guilty, as we have seen, "of hypnotizing her students with magic" and of practicing the "Satanic" science of the stars). Damascius calls the murder "a huge stain, an abomination for their city"<sup>73</sup>, but for Socrates too it was "not a small infamy, that attained by Cyril and the church of Alexandria. Because murderers and guerrillas and similar sorts are something totally alien to the spirit of Christ."<sup>74</sup>

According to the sources, therefore, not only the murder, in its bloody ritual and precise execution, appears anything but accidental, but it is also to Cyril, not to Peter the Reader, that it is imputed, to his discredit (or, in the case of John of Nikiu, his credit). This should not be surprising, since we cannot classify the murder of Hypatia as other than a political assassination, and Cyril being the undisputed strategist behind the Alexandrian ecclesiastical politics of the time. For Watts, however, the concordance of the sources indicates only that the bishop "was ultimately responsible for creating the climate that caused it". The interpretative leap is great.

Here, again, in our opinion, Watts' reading of the sources is reductive. If Socrates speaks of the "infamy attained" by Cyril, Malalas, who, as we have seen, draws from a different and probably more ancient, but lost, source, affirms that Peter and his men had been "given license by their bishop". And it is to Cyril, according to John of Nikiu, that the applause of that "popular" Christian element, in which Watts identifies "the supporters of Cyril", is given.

It would be a long and complex undertaking to address, here, the social composition of the Christian population of Alexandria, that is, the actual size of the fundamentalist element, which Watts considers a majority, and, in turn, the minority character of the moderate party. We limit ourselves to pointing out that Socrates Scholasticus (VII 14, 10) shows how Cyril, after the episode of Ammonius, finds himself against the more moderate wing (οἱ σωφρονοῦντες) of the ecclesiastical people (λαός), perhaps not more numerous, but in all probability more influential than the mass (πλήθος) of fundamentalists pushed into the square by Cyril. In other words, to us, it seems risky to assume, as Watts does, that "most Alexandrians" collided with "Hypatia's world of educated governors and civic elites" (page 114) and that the murder of Hypatia is the product of this social collision and not, as the ancient sources suggest and above all the Constantinopolitan Socrates, of the specific political conduct of a single leader.

The reconstruction of the *klimax* of events that culminates in the murder of Hypatia in chapter 8 appears almost as hasty, and lacking on the level of political analysis. Apart from its immediate antecedents, that is, the attack on Orestes and Ammonius's death by torture, for which the liquidation of Hypatia is evident retaliation, the broader political picture traced by Cyril's anti-Jewish pogrom and of the Jewish question in general is the real key to understanding the Hypatia affair, as already understood by historians, among

---

<sup>71</sup> John of Nikiu, LXXXIV 101 Charles.

<sup>72</sup> Malalas, *Chronogr.* XIV 12, 68-70 p. 280 Thurn.

<sup>73</sup> Suid. IV, p. 645, 15 Adler.

<sup>74</sup> Socr. Schol. VII 15, 6, p. 361 Hansen.

them Alan Cameron (“There can be no question that Hypatia’s death arose out of the anti-Jewish riots of 415 and the struggle for power between Cyril and Orestes”)<sup>75</sup>. Considering the facts through the eyes of a scholar of political and ecclesiastical history over and above the history of teaching, it is the anti-Jewish campaign, which immediately follows the persecution of the Novatians on the young bishop’s agenda, that is the undoubted trigger for the escalation of violence that precedes the assassination and the real reason for the break between Cyril and the augustal prefect.

Watts, however, devotes very little space to the question (pp. 108-110; a fleeting reference to the existence of the Jewish community is read on page 16, with regard to the topography of Alexandria), and seems to undervalue the sources’ testimony on the severity of the pogrom of 414 described above by Socrates Scholasticus<sup>76</sup> and John of Nikiu (“While some contemporary Christian sources speak of this event leading to the complete expulsion of all Jews from Alexandria, such a thing was plainly impossible”, p. 109). He does not dwell at all on its causes, namely on the weight of the competition, confessional but also economic, between the church led by Cyril and the ancient Alexandrian Jewish community. The rich, well-established and influential Jewish citizens whom Cyril’s attack looked to eliminate were the Christian community’s competitors not only in religious matters but also in business: in particular, in the procurement of maritime grain transport from Alexandria to Constantinople, as a decree of 390 attests in the *Codex Theodosianus*<sup>77</sup>--a strategically crucial activity, and as such, widely protected, for better or worse, by the state<sup>78</sup>.

Already in the past<sup>79</sup>, the decree of Theodosius I, which commissioned the Jewish shipowners of Alexandria to transport the *annona* to the capital<sup>80</sup>, was linked to Cyril’s anti-

---

<sup>75</sup> A. Cameron, *The Life, Work and Death of Hypatia*, in *Le voyage des légendes. Hommages à Pierre Chuvin*, eds. D. Lauritzen – M. Tardieu, Paris 2013, pp. 65-82, p. 81.

<sup>76</sup> “The Jews that had lived in this city since the time of Alexander the Macedonian all had to emigrate, robbed of their possessions, and they dispersed here and there.”: *Socr. Schol.* VII 13, 16, p. 359 Hansen.

<sup>77</sup> *Cod. Theod.* 13, 5, 18 (February 18, 390), I.2, p. 752 Mommsen: IMPP. VAL(ENTINI)ANVS, THEOD(OSIVS) ET ARCAD(IVS) AAA. ALEXANDRO P(RAE)F(ECTO) AVGVSTALI; viz. today *Les lois religieuses des empereurs romains de Constantin à Théodose II (312-438)*, II. *Code Théodosien I-XV; Code Justinien; Constitutions sirmondiennes*, texte latin établi par T. Mommsen, P. Meyer, P. Krüger; traduction par J. Rougé et R. Delmaire, introduction et notes par R. Delmaire; avec la collaboration de O. Huck, F. Richard et L. Guichard, Paris 2009, pp. 355-356, with bibliography adjoined.

<sup>78</sup> On the protection of food supplies by the central state, on the meticulous organization of the transport of the *annona civica* from Alexandria to Constantinople and on its detailed legislation, as well as on the complex constraints on the *navicularii*, cf. J.-M. Carrié, *Les distributions alimentaires dans les cités de l’empire romain tardif*, “MEFRA”, 87/2 (1975), pp. 995-1101, pp. 1078-1080; A. J. B. Sirks, *Food for Rome: The Legal Structure of the Transportation and Processing of Supplies for the Imperial Distributions in Rome and Constantinople*, Amsterdam 1991., pp. 202-208, 213-216, 226-237; particularly eloquent, on the political interest in the transport of wheat from Alexandria, is the evidence from the imperial decrees that followed the famine that struck Constantinople in 408 and the consequent street protests, also reported in the *Codex Theodosianus: Cod. Theod.* 13, 5, 32 (January 19, 409), I.2, p. 755 Mommsen: IMPP. HONOR(IVS) ET THEOD(OSIVS) AA. ANTHEMIO P(RAE)F(ECTO) P(RAE)TORIO, *Cod. Theod.* 13, 16, 1 (April 26, 409), I.2, pp. 791-792 Mommsen: IMPP. HONOR(IVS) ET THEOD(OSIVS) AA. MONAXIO P(RAE)F(ECTO) V(RBI).

<sup>79</sup> Viz. e.g. L. Jullien, *Les juifs d’Alexandrie dans l’Antiquité*, Alexandrie 1944, pp. 19-21.

<sup>80</sup> “Les naviculaires alexandrins étaient chargés de conduire le grain jusqu’à Byzance. Ils étaient payés par l’Etat à raison d’un sou par cent artabas et étaient tenus, sur réquisition des autorités, de fournir leur vaisseaux”, Jullien synthesizes, *Les juifs d’Alexandrie* cit., p. 20. The text of the decree is the following: “Iudaeorum corpus ac Samaritanum ad naviculariam

Jewish policy, and in particular with the pogrom of 414.<sup>81</sup> More recently it was Sarolta Takács who recalled, in dealing with the events of 415, that the monopoly of maritime grain transport from Egypt to Constantinople had been extended to the Christian church of Alexandria<sup>82</sup>. And she cited a papyrus testimony where mention is made, in particular, of a Hierax (certainly casual homonymy with the philo-Cyrrillian agitator whose public provocations were the trigger for the conflict between the Jewish community and the followers of Cyril) and of his son Theon, ναυτῶν ἐκκλησίας<sup>83</sup>, with the reflection: "Considering that Egypt was still the empire's main grain supplier [...], the economic advantage Christians could reap after the expulsion of Jews becomes clear"<sup>84</sup>.

Cyril, in his violent ecclesiastical government, had a precise and in its own way rational strategy, inherited from his predecessor and uncle Theophilus, that looked toward not just confessional, but also economic and political hegemony over the megalopolis of which he was bishop and aimed, by unscrupulous and bloody means, but in their own way coherent, to "erode the power of those who exercised it on behalf of the emperor" and to "shape the power of the state beyond the limit allowed to the priestly sphere", as already Socrates Scholastic challenges him.<sup>85</sup> A project, that of centralizing political and

---

functionem non iure vocari cognoscitur; quidquid enim universo corpori videtur indici, nullam specialiter potest obligare personam. Unde sicut inopes vilibus que commerciis occupati naviculariae translationis munus obire non debent, ita idoneos facultatibus, qui ex his corporibus deligi poterunt ad praedictam functionem, haberi non oportet immunes". These Jewish *navicularii* "partageaient avec le duc augustal la responsabilité des accidents possibles et s'appliquaient à amener sans retard la flotte frumentaire à Constantinople", as Jullien specifies, *Les juifs d'Alexandrie* cit, *ibidem*, asking himself: "Les armateurs juifs, qui étaient nombreux, ne voulurent-ils pas se soumettre à la loi de réquisition, ou trouvèrent-ils que le prix payé était insuffisant? La chose est possible et c'est sans doute une raison de ce genre qui expliquerait la loi de Théodose les obligeant au transport de l'annone". But what matters is that "this law offers evidence that the authorities recognized the Jewish community in Egypt, or in Alexandria, as a 'corpus' (synonym to 'collegium')", as illustrated in A. Linder (ed.), *The Jews in Roman imperial legislation*, Detroit-Jerusalem 1987, p. 183; evidence confirmed also by other sources, including Synesius himself: *ibid.*, pp. 182-185 and notes.

<sup>81</sup> Jullien, *Les juifs d'Alexandrie* cit., pp. 20-21.

<sup>82</sup> S. A. Takács, *Hypatia's Murder. The Sacrifice of a Virgin and Its Implications*, in K. B. Free (ed.), *The Formulation of Christianity by Conflict Through the Ages*, New York 1995, pp. 47-62 (in G. Nagy [ed. by], *Greek Literature*, VIII, New York-London 2002, pp. 397-412). On the fleet of the Christian church of Alexandria viz. first E. Wipszycka, *Le nationalisme a-t-il existé dans l'Égypte byzantine?*, "JJP", 22 (1992), pp. 83-128 (repr. in E. Wipszycka, *Études sur le Christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'Antiquité tardive*, Rome 1996, pp. 9-61); cf. also Sirks, *Food for Rome* cit., p. 234.

<sup>83</sup> Takács, *Hypatia's Murder* cit., pp. 57-58 and nn. 31-33. The evidence is taken from P. Ross. Georg. III. 6, which Takács cites based on the edition of Zereteli. However, the papyrus discovery has recently been reunited with the fragment P. Hamb. IV 267 and is now published in *Griechische Papyri der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg*, hrsg. von B. Kramer – D. Hagedorn, IV, Stuttgart-Leipzig 1998, pp. 148-156. Based on this edition, the text is the following:

καὶ | νῦν κόμισσον διὰ Τιμοθέου  
καὶ Θεῶνος υἱοῦ | Ἰέρακος ναυτῶν ἐκκλησίας  
ἀργυρίου κνίδιον ἔχων τάλαντα ἑπτα-  
κόσια, γί(νεται) (τάλαντα) ψ, καὶ | ἐπιστολὴν διὰ τ[ου]ῶν αὐτῶν  
ναυτῶν

<sup>84</sup> Takács, *Hypatia's Murder* cit., p. 58.

<sup>85</sup> Socr. Schol. VII, 13, 9, p. 358 Hansen; VII, 7, p. 353 Hansen.

ecclesiastical power in the hands of the Christian *papas*, naturally unacceptable not only to Orestes, representative of the central Constantinopolitan government, but also to Hypatia and the students and followers who shared the principles and “secrets” of the philosophy that she imparted and gathered around her in a network of discrete affiliations and clientele.

Yet that goal—to acquire a temporal power for the Alexandrian church not unlike that at that time held by the Roman papacy, to undermine imperial control over the North African megalopolis, to spur Egyptian nationalism, and to free itself dogmatically from the central church in Constantinople—would, in the long run, be achieved. Christian Egypt, freed from Byzantine political subjection, and the Coptic Church, strong in its Cyrillian doctrinal separatism, would continue to act as a foil to the West in the political-ecclesiastical struggle between Constantinople and the Roman papacy for centuries.

This historical and political background is absent from Watts’ book, which, considering the competence of the author, the accessibility of the language in which it is written and the prestigious editorial house, is set to become one of the main reference books on the life of a “political” (πολιτική) intellectual deeply involved in the situation of her time, such as Hypatia was, and on her death, which must be considered not, as the author considers it, a casual incident, but an intentional and certainly political assassination.