

Women, Philosophy, and Violence

St. Catherine and Hypatia from Alexandria or Being Women Philosophers in Alexandrian Late Antiquity

ANA OCOLEANU

University of Craiova
E-mail: anapetras@yahoo.de

Abstract: What does it mean to be a female philosopher in late antiquity? This is the question that concerns us in this study and which I try to solve by referring to two personalities from Alexandria (IV-V century): St. Catherine and Hypatia. Although they are very well known, both in the Christian environment and in the world of profane sciences and the arts, the two philosophers from Alexandria share a common destiny: their works have not been preserved, although their fame has reached today; they were rather seen as exceptions of the female gender, with implicit misogyny, and had a violent end. Being a female philosopher, even in the emancipated Alexandria of late antiquity, was a risky undertaking.

Keywords: women philosopher, St. Catherine, Hypatia from Alexandria, Christianity, Hellenism, Platonism, martyrdom, violence.

Hypatia from Alexandria (335-415). Being a Pagan Female Philosopher in Alexandria in Late Antiquity

THE PRESENT STUDY AIMS TO lean on two exemplary female figures from the Late Antiquity period, two educated women from Alexandria, one Christian and one pagan: the Holy Great Martyr Catherine and the pagan philosopher Hypatia.

The city of Alexandria in late antiquity was the place where, in addition to men, a few women also had the opportunity to enjoy learning. Some of them even taught philosophy, such as the famous Hypatia (335-415)¹, who,

¹ See Vasile Adrian Carabă, "Hypatia of Alexandria (c. 370–415) or the Twilight of a Pagan Tradition: The Museion" [in Romanian], *Studii Teologice*, no. 4 (2008): 101–148; see

wearing the simple cloak of a philosopher², initiated the students gathered around her, pagans or Christians.

Hypatia of Alexandria was the daughter of a mathematician named Theon, who was the head of Alexandria's prestigious university, the *Mouseion*. From the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates the Scholastic we learn that Hypatia „reached such a high level of erudition that she surpassed all the philosophers of her time”³.

As far as is known, no philosophical or scientific writing signed by Hypatia has survived, and whether Saint Catherine wrote or not is completely unknown to us. If there are testimonies about Saint Catherine only from the 8th-9th centuries, some of the sources that have been preserved for us about Hypatia are even contemporary with her, such as the letters of her former student, Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 370-after 412). In an extensive study on Hypatia, the Romanian theologian Vasile-Adrian Carabă refers to three other important sources from which we learn details about Hypatia: the *Ecclesiastical History* by Socrates the Scholastic (ca. 380-439), contemporary with her, the chronicle of the Coptic bishop John of Nikiou, who lived in the 7th century and, the last important source, the *Suida* (*Suda*) Lexicon from the 10th century.

From the writings of Socrates the Scholastic we find out that „all those who wanted to study philosophy came from all over the world”⁴ to study with the Alexandrian woman philosopher. But more about the circle of brilliant young people in Hypatia's entourage and how Hypatia's courses were conducted, as well as about the nature of her teachings, emerges from the correspondence of Synesius of Cyrene that he had both with his former teacher, whom he called „my august teacher” and also „mother and sister and teacher, and thereby, benefactor”⁵, as well as with other colleagues. Unfortunately, Hypatia's letters sent to her former Christian student, who became later bishop of Cyrene, have not been preserved.

As Henri-Irénée Marrou shows, the education Synesius received from Hypatia was based on two main disciplines: Aristotelian logic, as it had been articulated by Porphyrios in his famous *Isagoge* on the Aristotelian *Categories*, and mathematics, in which Hypatia continued the tradition inaugurated by her father, Theon, the commentator on Aratos, Euclid, and Ptolemy⁶.

also Maria Dzileska, *Hypatia of Alexandria. Historical figure and modern legend* [in Romanian], translated by Ana-Lorina Iacob, edition by Dragoş Mîrşanu (Iaşi: Doxologia, 2021).

² Damascius, *Vita Isidori* 102 (*Suda* IV 644, 1-645, 19, s.v. Hypathi), *apud* Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, 147.

³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* [in Romanian], trans. Metropolitan Iosif Gheorghian, revised and edited by Fr. Lecturer Dr. Petru Pantiş. Sibiu: Ecclesiast, 2016, §7: 14-15, 254.

⁴ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, §7:14-15, 254.

⁵ Synesius of Cyrene, Ep. XVI (to Hypatia), *apud* Maria Dzileska, *Hypatia*, 151.

⁶ Henri-Irénée Marrou, “Synesius of Cyrene and Alexandrian Neoplatonism,” in *Patris-*

But above all, Synesius learned from Hypatia to love the contemplative life, pursuing

the ideal of the philosophical life, a life in which he was his own master, free to devote himself to study – study of course directed to the highest knowledge, contemplation, which in the end must lead to God – his study, his own search for truth and personal perfection⁷.

Another testimony about Hypatia comes from the pagan philosopher Damascius⁸, who shows that Hypatia also had great influence in the political world of Alexandria at that time, because the archon officials sought her out and asked for her advice, as was also the case with the Athenian philosophers of the classical period of philosophy. Damascius also asserted that Hypatia, being familiar with Aristotle's philosophy, reached the first, ethical or practical level of the moral virtues, embodying both the two virtues *dikayosyne* (temperance) and *sophrosyne* (temperance)⁹.

St. Catherine from Alexandria (the end of the century III – the beginning of the century IV). Being a Christian Female Philosopher in Alexandria in Late Antiquity

Long before the period of late antiquity, since the time of Pythagoras, there were women initiated into philosophy¹⁰, Plato himself being heard by two women, Axiothea and Lastheneia, whom Diogenes Laertius mentions in his work *On the Lives and Doctrines of the Philosophers*¹¹.

And the circle of the neoplatonic pagan philosopher Plotinera frequented by several women such as Gemina and her daughter, Marcella, wife of Porphyry, and his daughter-in-law, Amphiclea, daughter of Plutarch;

tics and Humanism: A Collection of Studies, trans. Cristina and Costin Popescu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1996), 381.

⁷ Henri-Irénée Marrou, “Synesius din Cirene...”, 383.

⁸ Damascius, *Vita Isidori* 102 (*Suda* IV 644, 1-645, 19, s.v. Hypathi), *apud* Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandrien*, 147-148.

⁹ Damascius: *Vita Isidori* 102 (*Suda* IV 644, 1-645, 19, s.v. Hypathi), *apud* Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandrien*, 147-148.

¹⁰ See Ana Ocoleanu, “Measure as Number, Harmony, and Moderation: Pythagorean Feminine Philosophy – Specificity, Representation, and Periodization” [in Romanian], *Mitropolia Olteniei* 76, no. 1–4 (2024): 151–161.

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *On the Lives and Doctrines of Philosophers* [in Romanian], trans. C.I. Balmuş, comments by Aram M. Frenkian, edition by Ion Acsan and Adelina Piatkowski (Bucharest: Minerva, 1997). See also Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* [in Romanian], trans. George Bondor and Claudiu Tipuriță, foreword by Cristian Bădiliță (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 1999), 88.

philosophers were also Areta, Asclepigenia or another well-known philosopher, named Sosipatra¹².

Not only pagan women had access to education in Antiquity, but also Christian women. There are thus testimonies regarding the wisdom of the ascetic Theodora, the martyr Eugenia, Saint Mary of Egypt or Saint Macrina the Younger, sister of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa. As Father Professor I. G. Coman said in his work *The Christian Miracle*, the Christian principle of the equality of all people generated the possibility for many women to broaden their spiritual and cultural horizons: "A Macrina, an Emilia, an Anthuza, a Monica, a Gorgonia, the correspondents of a Blessed Hieronymus were not only pious women and with the care of their sons or of the places of worship, but also with a great spiritual formation"¹³.

One of the learned saints from the period of late antiquity is the Holy Great Martyr Catherine, venerated both in the East and in the West. Saint Catherine probably lived at the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century, but we do not find the first testimonies about her life before the 7th century.

The first to spread the story of the saint's life and martyrdom are the monks from Mount Sinai, later it was also received in the West, probably through the Eastern monks who took refuge here in the context of iconoclasm. For their part, the crusader knights would later show devotion to the Saint, calling her „Invittissima Heroina“ as thanks for the help and protection they enjoyed from her. In her doctoral thesis in which she researches the spread of the cult of Saint Catherine in early medieval Europe, Christine Walsch¹⁴ mentions that the earliest reference to Saint Catherine she found in a Syriac litany written after 620 and published alongside a Latin translation by A. Baumstark in 1906. Here the name of Saint Catherine appears alongside other names of saints such as Tecla, Barbara, Juliana, Eupraxia, Melania, Maria, Samunith. In the Byzantine world, around the year 1000, Saint Simeon Metaphrastus compiled a collection of saints' lives that also included that of Saint Catherine.

In the Greek *Menologie* of Emperor Basil II (976-1025), written in Constantinople around the year 1000, whose manuscript is in the Vatican, the oldest representation of the Saint can be found. In Asia Minor, the cult of Saint Catherine spread through Saint Paul the New of Latros (955-956),

¹² In detail about women philosophers from antiquity, see: Gilles Ménage, *Historia mulierum philosopharum*, 1st ed. (Lyon, 1690); 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1692); 3rd ed. (London/Leipzig, 1833). See also: Mary Anne Waith (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers, Vol. I: Ancient Women Philosophers, 600 B.C.–500 A.D.* (Dordrecht-Boston-Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987); Maria Nühlen, *Philosophinnen der griechischen Antike: Eine Spurensuche (Frauen in Philosophie und Wissenschaft: Women Philosophers and Scientists)* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2021).

¹³ Ioan G. Coman, *The Classical Miracle* [in Romanian] (Sibiu: Ecclesiast, 2011), 276.

¹⁴ Christine Walsch, *The Cult of St. Katharine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe* (Altershot, 2007).

who spent a long time on Mount Latros, located between the cities of Ephesus and Miletus in present-day Turkey, where a monastery was probably located. From a work on his life, compiled after his death, we learn that the memorials of the other saints were also reasons for joy for St. Pavel, but the memory of the Holy Martyr Catherine filled the pious man with joy.

The great popularity enjoyed by St. Catherine in the West throughout the medieval period is largely due to the collection of lives of saints entitled *Legenda aurea*, compiled by the Dominican monk Jacques de Voragine starting in 1263. In chapter 160 of this work it is found the text of the life of the Saint Catherine. Her fame would spread so much in art and popular culture that even if the authenticity of the saint's existence was questioned in the 15th century, and she was subsequently excluded from the Roman synaxar, the honor of her name did not suffer. There were still churches and parishes under the saint's patronage, dramatizations of her martyrdom, numerous sculptures, paintings and icons depicting the saint, individually or with other saints. Therefore, we will find Saint Catherine represented in painting, from Giotto to Simone Martini and Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the 14th century and then in the painting of the 16th and 17th centuries, to Van Dyck, Caravaggio, or Artemisia Gentileschi.

Starting with the end of the 19th century, several monographic writings appeared or by some authors who tried to shed light on the life and martyrdom of Saint Catherine. We remember first of all J. Viteau, who in 1897 in the work „Passions de Saints Ecaterine et Pierre d'Alexandrie, Barbara et Anysia”, collected three of the oldest manuscripts of the Martyrdom of Saint Catherine, grouping them according to their contents: some did not include the actual speech of Saint Catherine, while others contained her speeches and her dispute with the pagan philosophers. In PG 116 there is another manuscript, the one written by St Simeon Metaphrastus, which was edited in 1864.

In the German space, professor Hermann Knust published in Halle in 1890 a work entitled „Geschichte der Legende der Heiligen Katharina von Alexandrien und der heiligen Maria Aegyptiaca” in which he also addresses the complex yet unsolved problem of the true name of the saint, which presents numerous changes. Although in the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Eusebius of Caesarea the name of the saint does not appear when he talks about the exile of a young woman taught by the emperor Maxentius, Rufus is of the opinion that her name would have been Dorothea¹⁵. Hermann Knust also believes that a very important version of the martyrdom of Saint Catherine would be that of „Athanasius, the slave and scribe of the saint”, who was apparently an eyewitness of the martyrdom. Some researchers believe that

¹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* [in Romanian]. In *Writings*, Part I [PSB 13], translation, study, notes, and commentary by Fr. Prof. T. Bodgeae, Bucharest: IBMBOR, 1987, VIII;14, 334.

this could be Saint Athanasius the Great himself, who wrote a treatise entitled „On Virginity”.

Another German professor, Hermann Varnhagen, publishes in Erlangen in 1881 a work with the title „Zur Geschichte der Legende der Katarina von Alexandrien”. He claims at the beginning of his book that since ancient times, two poems in Latin were circulating in the German space that recounted the life of the saint.

In the English space, the author A. B. Jameson wrote a work entitled „Sacred and Legendary Art” (1848) in which she claims that the tradition of Saint Catherine merged with that of Hypatia of Alexandria, bringing as arguments the similarity between their lives, Alexandrian provenance, erudition, chastity, as well as their violent deaths. Also in the English space, Einkenel wrote in 1884 a work entitled „The life of Saint Catherine”, which also identifies Saint Catherine with the philosopher Hypatia, arguing that in the transition from paganism to Christianity the two traditions could be easily identified.

The most recent studies that have Saint Catherine as their theme are two dissertations, one in German by Peter Schill entitled „Ikonographie und Kult der heiligen Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter. Studien zu den szenischen Darstellungen aus der Katharinenlegende” held in 2005 at the University of Munich and another, in English by researcher Christine Walsch entitled „The Cult of Sainte Catherine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe” (2007).

It has generally been noted that the name by which Saint Catherine is generally known is an Arabic name meaning “the wise”¹⁶. It seems that before the Saint was called Dorothea or Damiana.

It was also noticed that we have information about the saint and her life starting from the 7th century¹⁷. There are many similarities between the life and profile of Saint Catherine and that of the late 4th century Alexandrian philosopher Hypatia. All this has prompted some researchers to be skeptical about the reality of Saint Catherine and to argue more or less that it was a kind of acculturation through which the story of Hypatia was assimilated. All this led the Roman Catholic hagiography at the Second Vatican Council to exclude the saint from the synaxar. However, subsequent research did not confirm such a conclusion, and in 2002 the saint’s name was reintroduced into these Western synaxars.

Without contesting the fact that the name by which the saint is known is an Arabic one and the fact that she becomes well known starting from the same century, newer exegesis has tended to identify the saint with some

¹⁶ Note 1, in *The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine the Great* [in Romanian], trans. Laura Enache (Iași: Doxologia, 2018), 7.

¹⁷ Tanguy Donnet, ed., *Katharina von Alexandrien: Verselegende VIII. Nach dem Codex Donaueschingen 116 der Badischen Landesbibliothek (Altdeutsche Textbibliothek 125)* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2022), IX.

personalities, especially with the martyr Dorothea, about whom reports Eusebius of Caesarea in *Church History*, although he does not name her. It is much more plausible that the name Ecaterina or Aikaterini meaning “wise” is a nickname, given by the Arab population that arrived later in Egypt, and that this nickname became better known than the name itself, ending up replacing it. Even if the similarity between the Holy Great Martyr Catherine and Hypatia are major, they are not of such a nature as to attest without a doubt the identity of the two historical persons. Rather, it is about two different people, one pagan and one Christian, both of great scientific and philosophical training, a fact that attests to the cultural importance of the city of Alexandria in the era and the emancipation of women in this cultural space.

St. Catherine and Hypatia from Alexandria. The Condition of the Woman Philosopher in Late Antiquity Alexandria

Both Saint Catherine and Hypatia are representatives of the cultural life of Alexandria. Both are inhabitants of the same city with a cultural dynamic unprecedented and unmatched in the ancient world that allows such female personalities not only to attend high schools and be educated at the highest level, but to become exponential personalities of Alexandrian culture. It is paradigmatic that 1600-1700 years after the period in which they lived, Saint Catherine and Hypatia are currently the best-known names, or at least among the best-known names of Alexandrian culture.

Secondly, both St. Catherine and Hypatia were great personalities of Alexandria, who noted the society in which they lived and in the collective imaginary until today, although their works have not been preserved. What is known about one and the other, much more about their doctrines is known through intermediaries. Their legendary personalities have overshadowed the work, which has not even been preserved. However, accounts have been preserved about the content of these women’s thoughts, which allow us to approximate their inner universe. However, both Saint Catherine and Hypatia are mute to us today, unable to speak to us directly, their direct address has been suspended. What mattered in their reception was rather their personality involving their wisdom as well as their physical beauty. Of course, we cannot attribute this fact exclusively to their femininity and the condition of women in antiquity, but it is still symptomatic that the more these women philosophers are admired, the more they are silenced.

Third, both Saint Catherine and Hypatia met a violent end. The Christian Dorothea/Catherine is martyred by the violent pagans; the pagan Hypatia is killed by Christians unworthy of their name. Being a female philosopher even in the emancipated Alexandria of late antiquity is a very risky fact. If

female beauty is accepted and tolerated without reserve, a woman's intelligence is even in this above-average context an unforgivable thing. It is paradigmatic that if these accounts of the martyrdom of women philosophers have been preserved, the same does not happen to the learned men of the time in this brilliant city.

Last but not least, both Saint Catherine and Hypatia of Alexandria, despite the fact that their right to address the readers was amputated, over time became symbols of faith and science, their mental and artistic representations being hyperbolized either in academic circles, either in ecclesiastical environments to this day.

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