

Religious Violence in 5th Century Alexandria: The Controversy between Bishop Cyril and Governor Orestes and the Murder of Hypatia

Spyridon P. Panagopoulos (Ph.D.)

Researcher in the Byzantine and Patristic Studies

Athens, Greece

spyrpan1@gmail.com

Abstract

This communication will deal with phenomena of religious violence that appears in Egypt during Late Antiquity. As religious violence is considered, always in the context of that time, actions such as murders, torture and persecution of heathens, destruction or confiscation of sacred buildings and religious objects, as well as the prohibition of worship. However, they also include the threat of violence. Violence was exercised both by the state and by individuals and groups of individuals.

Due to the wide scope of the specific research object, we will deal with the religious violence in Egypt at the beginning of the 5th century, which led to the assassination of the Neoplatonist philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician of Alexandria Hypatia. A special mention will be made to the relationship of bishop Cyril with the Christian and Jewish population of Alexandria, as well as with the governor of the city Orestes.

Keywords: Religious Violence, Byzantine Egypt, Hypatia, Bishop Cyril, Alexandria.

1. The election of Cyril as Patriarch of Alexandria

In 412, the bishop of Alexandria Theophilus died and there were two candidates for the episcopal see, his nephew, Cyril¹ and the archdeacon Timotheos.² Due to the confrontation of the supporters of the two sides, a standoff³ was caused. Then, according to the sources, the Count of Egypt,

¹ For Cyril's life and his writings, see Wessel, S., *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy. The Making of a Saint and of a Heretic*, New York 2004.

² *Socrates Scholasticus*, 352. 24-26 (7.7.2): «Ἐπιμάχου δὲ γενομένης καὶ ἐνταῦθα τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς οἱ μὲν ἐζήτουν ἐνθρονισθῆναι Τιμόθεον ἀρχιδιάκονον, οἱ δὲ Κύριλλον, ὃς ἦν ἀδελφιδοῦς Θεοφίλου».

³ Socrates mentions that there was a standoff among the people. See, *Socrates Scholasticus*, 352.26-353.1 (7.7.3): «στάσεως δὲ διατοῦτο μεταξὺ τοῦ λαοῦ κινήσεως». Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 21-22. According to some scholars, violent riots ensued between supporters of the two candidates, resulting in bloodshed. Haas, C., *Alexandria in Late Antiquity. Topography and Social*, Baltimore 1997, 298.

Abundatios, intervened in the dispute.⁴ On the third day, after Theophilus' death, Cyril was finally proclaimed bishop.⁵ Immediately after his enthronement, Cyril closed the churches of the schismatic Nabataeans or Novatians,⁶ appropriated all their cult objects and the possessions of their bishop.⁷

2. Cyril's confrontation with the Jews

Then, in 414, Cyril came into sharp conflict with the Jews of Alexandria, which, it has been argued, had deeper religious, political and economic causes, and involved the Christians and Jews of Alexandria in general.⁸ The reason for the confrontation between Cyril and the Jews was the riots in the theater of Alexandria, where the Jews, according to the church historian Socrates Scholasticus, preferred to spend Saturdays

⁴ The sources are not in agreement as to the candidate with whom Abundatius was drafted. See, *Socrates Scholasticus*, 353.1-2 (7.7.1): «συνελαμβάνετο τῷ μέρει Κυρίλλου ὁ τοῦ στρατιωτικοῦ τάγματος ἡγεμὼν Ἄβουνδάντιος». – On the contrary, Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos, 1100C: «τῷ μέρει Τιμοθέου οὐ μικρὰν ἐδίδουν ῥοπήν Ἄβουνδάντιος ὁ τηνικαῦτα τῶν στρατιωτικῶν ταγματῶν ἡγούμενος» Haas, *Alexandria*, 296-298. According to some scholars, the proclamation of Cyril as a bishop would also require the support and election of certain bishops and part of the people. Cf. Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 22

⁵ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 353.2-3 (7.7.4): «διὸ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ μετὰ τὴν τελευτὴν Θεοφίλου ὁ Κύριλλος ἐνθρονισθεὶς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐπισκοπὴν ἀρχικώτερον Θεοφίλου παρήλθεν».

⁶ The Nabataeans or Novatians were schismatics who refused to accept into the bosom of the Church those Christians who had sacrificed to idols during the persecution of Diocletian.

⁷ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 353.6-7 (7.7.5): «Εὐθέως οὖν Κύριλλος τὰς ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ Ναυατιανῶν ἐκκλησίας ἀποκλείσας πάντα μὲν αὐτῶν τὰ ἱερὰ κειμήλια ἔλαβεν, τὸν δὲ ἐπίσκοπον αὐτῶν Θεόπομπον πάντων ὧν εἶχεν ἀφείλετο». Haas, *Alexandria*, 298; Watts, E. J., *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2006, 197, 208. A reason for the persecution of the Novatians may have been that they might have supported Timothy. Cf. Haas, *Alexandria*, 299. Another reason could be that Cyril wanted to ensure the unity of the Church of Egypt, i.e., that there would be no schismatic churches. Cf. Haas, *Alexandria*, 299; Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 20. Indeed, his first speeches speak of the need for unity of the Church. Cf. Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 31.

⁸ According to Socrates Scholasticus, the Jews of the city always and in every case, were hostile to the Christians. See, *Socrates Scholasticus*, 358.1-2 (7.13.5): «ἀεὶ μὲν πολέμοι πανταχοῦ τοῖς Χριστιανοῖς καθεστῶτες». Cyril's opposition to the Jews has been argued to be due to the Christianity-Judaism religious rivalry and especially because Cyril had been concerned with matters of interpretation of the Old Testament and the attitude of the Jews after the birth of Jesus. Cf. Haas, *Alexandria*, 300, 308. By contrasting one religion with another in his speeches, Cyril attempted to ensure that his flock would avoid adopting Jewish liturgical formalities and Jewish theological interpretations of the Scriptures. Cf. Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 41.

in the theaters watching spectacles with dancers.⁹ The presence of the crowd led to riots.¹⁰ In fact, the confrontation between the Jews and the Christians became more intense, because the two religious communities supported different actors in the theater.¹¹ The prefect of Alexandria, Orestes,¹² had tried and succeeded to some extent in stopping the unrest, but the Jews opposed his restrictive measures.¹³ So, when Orestes was about to announce some new measures in the theater, some people close to Cyril were there in order to be informed about the content of the measures.¹⁴ Among them there was a certain Hierax, a philologist and a very ardent supporter of Cyril. The Jews protested to Orestes that Hierax had come to the theater with the intention of causing a disturbance.¹⁵ Orestes ordered the immediate arrest and public torture of Hierax, because Cyril wanted to know his announcements.¹⁶

Cyril, enraged by the fact that the Jews had denounced Hierax to Orestes, summoned the leaders of the Jewish community and threatened them with punishment if they did not cease their enmity towards the

⁹ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 357.27-29 (7.13.4): «ἐν ἡμέρα σαββάτου <ὁ> ὄρχούμενος πλείονας ὄχλους συνήθροισεν τῷ Ἰουδαίους ἀργούντας ἐν αὐτῇ μὴ τῇ ἀκροάσει τοῦ νόμου, ἀλλὰ τοῖς θεάτροις σχολάζειν». Haas, *Alexandria*, 302-303.

¹⁰ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 57.26-27 (7.13.4) καὶ 358.2 (7.13.5): «τὸ σπουδάζειν περὶ τοῦς ὀρχηστάς [...] ἔτι διὰ τοῦς ὀρχηστάς». Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 34.

¹¹ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 358.1-3 (7.13.5): «ἔτι δὲ πλέον διὰ τοῦς ὀρχηστάς ἐκπεπολέμωντο κατ' αὐτῶν [Χριστιανῶν]».

¹² For praefectus augustalis Orestes, cf. *PLRE*, vol. 2, 810, Orestes 1.

¹³ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 357.30-358.1 (7.13.5): «καὶ τούτου τρόπον τινὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ ὑπάρχου τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας ἐν τάξει καταστάντος οὐδὲν ἦττον ἔμειναν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι τοῖς τοῦ ἐτέρου μέρους ἀντιπαθούντες».

¹⁴ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 358.3-6 (7.13.6): «καὶ δὴ πότε Ὁρέστου τοῦ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας ἐπάρχου πολιτείαν ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ ποιοῦντος (οὕτω δὲ ὀνομάζειν εἰώθασιν τὰς δημοτικὰς διατυπώσεις) παρήσαν καὶ τοῦ ἐπισκόπου Κυρίλλου οἱ σπουδασταί, τὰς γινόμενας παρὰ τοῦ ἐπάρχου διατυπώσεις γνῶναι βουλόμενοι».

¹⁵ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 358.7-12 (7.13.7-8): «ἦν δὲ ἐν αὐτοῖς τις ἀνὴρ ὀνόματι Ἰέραξ, ὃς γραμματῶν μὲν τῶν παιδικῶν διδάσκαλος ἦν, διάπυρος δὲ ἀκροατῆς τοῦ ἐπισκόπου Κυρίλλου κατεστὼς καὶ περὶ τὸ κρότους ἐν ταῖς διδασκαλίαις αὐτοῦ ἐγείρειν ἦν σπουδαιότατος. τοῦτον τοίνυν <τότε> τὸν Ἰέρακα τὸ πλῆθος τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ θεασάμενοι κατεβόων εὐθύς, ὡς δι' οὐδὲν ἄλλο παραβάλλει τῷ θεάτρῳ ἢ ἵνα στάσιν τῷ δήμῳ ἐμβάλῃ». The plausibility of the description must be great, as in the theater of Alexandria, already during the Roman era, the various ethno-religious groups (Greeks and Jews) accused each other of treason. Cf. Haas, *Alexandria*, 65-66.

¹⁶ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 358.14-16 (7.13.9): «μάλιστα δὲ ὅτι καὶ ἐποπτεύειν αὐτοῦ τὰς διατυπώσεις ἐβούλετο Κύριλλος. ἀρπάσας οὖν τὸν Ἰέρακα δημοσίᾳ ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ <δεναιῖς> βασάνοις ὑπέβαλλεν». Haas, *Alexandria*, 303. - Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 34.

Christians. However, the Jews did not heed the warnings but intensified the confrontation, when they set a trap for the Christians of Alexandria, and shouted in the night that a church was on fire. Those unsuspecting Christians who came out of their homes to put out the fire were murdered by armed Jews who had ambushed them in the dark.¹⁷ The Coptic bishop and historian John of Nikiu attributes this action to the fact that they enjoyed the support of Orestes, while Socrates to their reaction to Cyril's threats.¹⁸ The next day, and while the plan of the Jews became known, the Christians advanced under the leadership of Cyril against the synagogues, which they captured. They expelled the Jews who had participated in the murders and looted their property.¹⁹ From then on, the Jews of Alexandria were no longer a significant political factor,²⁰ due to the loss of their property, while some were baptized Christians.²¹ Of course, in Alexandria it is witnessed that Jews continued to live throughout the following centuries, and therefore their expulsion was not complete as Socrates claims.²²

¹⁷ *Socrates, Scholasticus*, 358.17-359.1 (7.13.10-14): [...] *Τὸ δὲ πλῆθος τῶν Ἰουδαίων τῆς ἀπειλῆς αἰσθόμενον φιλονεικότερον γέγονε, καὶ μηχανὰς ἐπενόουν ἐπὶ βλάβῃ τῶν Χριστιανῶν. [...] Σύνθημα δόντες ἑαυτοῖς δακτυλίου φόρεμα ἐκ φοίνικος γερονὸς φλοιοῦ θαλλοῦ νυκτομαχίαν κατὰ τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐπενόησαν. Καὶ ἐν μιᾷ τῶν νυκτῶν κηρύσσειν κατὰ τὰ κλίματα τῆς πόλεός τινος παρεσκεύασαν βοῶντας, ὡς ἡ ἐπόνυμος Ἀλεξάνδρου ἐκκλησία πᾶσα πυρὶ καίετο. Τοῦτο ἀκούσαντες Χριστιανοὶ ἄλλος ἀλλαχόθεν συνέτρεχον ὡς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν περισώσοντες. Οἱ δὲ Ἰουδαῖοι εὐθὺς ἐπετίθεντο καὶ ἀπέσφατον <***>, ἀλλήλων μὲν ἀπεχόμενοι δεικνύντες τοὺς δακτυλίους, τοὺς δὲ προσπίπτοντας τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀναιροῦντες». Haas, *Alexandria*, 303; Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 35.*

¹⁸ Cf. *John of Nikiu*, 345; *Socrates Scholasticus*, 358.19-20 (7.13.11): «τὸ δὲ πλῆθος τῶν Ἰουδαίων τῆς ἀπειλῆς αἰσθόμενον φιλονεικότερον γέγονε, καὶ μηχανὰς ἐπενόουν ἐπὶ βλάβῃ τῶν Χριστιανῶν». Haas, *Alexandria*, 303; Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 35.

¹⁹ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 359.1-9 (7.13.15-16): «γενομένης δὲ ἡμέρας οὐκ ἐλάνθανον οἱ τὸ ἄγος ἐργασάμενοι. Ἐφ' ᾧ κινηθεὶς ὁ Κύριλλος σὺν πολλῷ πλήθει ἐπὶ τὰς συναγωγὰς τῶν Ἰουδαίων παραγενόμενος (οὕτως γὰρ τοὺς εὐκτηρίους αὐτῶν ὀνομάζουσι τόπους) τὰς μὲν ἀφαιρεῖται, τοὺς δὲ ἐξελαύνει τῆς πόλεως, καὶ τὰς οὐσίας αὐτῶν διαρπαγῆναι ὑπὸ τοῦ πλήθους ἀφεί. Οἱ μὲν Ἰουδαῖοι, ἐκ τῶν Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Μακεδόνοιο χρόνων τὴν πόλιν οἰκήσαντες, τότε αὐτῆς γυμνοὶ ἅπαντες ἀπανέστησαν καὶ ἄλλοι ἀλλαχοῦ διεσπάρησαν». Haas, *Alexandria*, 303-304; Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 35-36.

²⁰ Haas, *Alexandria*, 304.

²¹ *Socrates Scholasticus* 359.9-12 (7.13.17): «Ἀδαμάντιος δὲ <τις αὐτῶν> ἱατρικῶν λόγων σοφιστὴς ἐπὶ τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν ὀρμήσας καὶ τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ προσφυγῶν Ἀττικῷ, ἐπαγγεῖλάμενός τε χριστιανίζεῖν αὐτὸς ὑστέρῳ χρόνῳ τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν ὄκησεν». Haas, *Alexandria*, 125.

²² There are testimonies about the living of Jews in Alexandria from the middle of the 5th and during the 6th century. In the middle of the 5th c. Jews of Alexandria request

Orestes sent a report of the above events to Constantinople. Cyril did the same, presenting his own version of events.²³ Constantinople's response was that Jewish and Christian disputes should be addressed to the governor of the province.²⁴ At the same time, Cyril, at the urging of the Alexandrians, sent his men to Orestes to mediate in order for the two men to reconcile, but Orestes refused.²⁵ The prefect did the same when Cyril, probably during the Divine Liturgy, held out the Gospel to him to kiss it.²⁶ According to the scholars, this action was perhaps taken by Orestes as an act of submission of political power to the bishop and not a plea for reconciliation. In this way, however, and because the denial was made public, it created suspicions among some Christians about the religious identity of Orestes, specifically that he was a crypto-pagan.²⁷

3. The sharpening of Cyril's confrontation with Orestes.

Perhaps because of these suspicions against Orestes, five hundred monks from the monasteries of Nitria went to Alexandria to fight on the side of the bishop against Orestes.²⁸ The monks met Orestes in the city,

the rebuilding of the city's synagogues, while in the 6th c. Jewish teachers are mentioned. Cf. C. Haas, *Alexandria*, 127.

²³ *Socrates Scholasticus* 359.12-17 (7.13.18-19): «Ὁ τοίνυν τῆς Ἀλεξανδρέων ἑπαρχος Ὀρέστης σφόδρα ἐπὶ τῷ γενομένῳ ἐχάλεπαινε, καὶ πέθνος μέγα εἰτίθετο τηλικαύτην πόλιν οὕτως ἄρδην τοσοῦτων ἐκκενωθῆναι ἀνθρώπων· διὸ καὶ τὰ γεγόμενα ἀνεφέρει βασιλεῖ. Κύριλλος δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς τὰς Ἰουδαίων πλημμελείας γνωρίμους καθιστῶν βασιλεῖ».

²⁴ Haas, *Alexandria*, 304.

²⁵ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 359.16-19 (7.13.19-20): «περὶ φιλίας πρὸς Ὀρέστην διαπρεσβεύετο· τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ λαὸς τῶν Ἀλεξανδρέων αὐτὸν ποιεῖν προσηνάγκαζεν. Ἐπεὶ δὲ τοὺς περὶ φιλίας λόγους ὁ Ὀρέστης οὐ προσεδέχετο»

²⁶ *Socrates Scholasticus* 59.19-22 (7.13.20-21): «τὴν βίβλον τῶν εὐαγγελίων ὁ Κύριλλος προΐσχετο, διὰ ταύτης γοῦν καταιδέσειν τὸν Ὀρέστην ἡγούμενος. Ὡς δὲ οὐδὲ τούτῳ τῷ τρόπῳ ὁ Ὀρέστης ἐμαλάσσετο, ἀλλ' ἔμεινε μεταξὺ αὐτῶν ἄσπονδος πόλεμος» Haas, *Alexandria*, 305; Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 36.

²⁷ Haas, *Alexandria*, 305-306.

²⁸ *Socrates Scholasticus* 359.23-27 (7.14.1-2): «Τῶν ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι τῆς Νιτρίας μοναχῶν τινες ἐνθερμον ἔχοντες φρόνημα ἀπὸ Θεοφίλου ἀρξάμενοι [...] ζῆλόν τε τότε κτησάμενοι προθύμως καὶ ὑπὲρ Κυρίλλου μάχεσθαι προηροῦντο. ἀφεμένοι οὖν τῶν μοναστηρίων ἄνδρες περὶ τοὺς πεντακοσίους καὶ καταλαβόντες τὴν πόλιν [...]» Haas, *Alexandria*, 305. Socrates does not mention that the monks were invited by Cyril. According to some scholars, Cyril was aware of the uncontrollable violence of the monks as well as their indiscipline towards Theophilus, and therefore he probably would not have invited them to Alexandria himself. On the contrary, cf. Watts, E. J., *Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*, New York, 2017, 110, who thinks that the monks were invited by Cyril.

on his chariot. They began to insult him and call him a Paganist.²⁹ Orestes suspected that the accusation was a trick of Cyril and answered that he was baptized, but the monks did not accept the answer.³⁰ Finally, one of them named Ammonios threw a stone at him, which hit him on the head. Almost all of Orestes' guards scattered in terror into the crowd.³¹ However, the Alexandrians ran to help Orestes and they expelled the monks.³² Ammonios was arrested, interrogated by the prefect and tortured to death for the attack on him. Orestes sent a new report to the emperor. Cyril did the same, who declared Ammonios a martyr of the Christian faith. However, the Christians of the city did not share the energy of Cyril, who eventually let the memory of the events fade.³³

²⁹ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 359.27-29 (7.14.2-3): «ἐπιτηροῦσιν ἐπὶ τοῦ ὀχήματος προϊόντα τὸν ἐπαρχον, καὶ προσελθόντες ἀπεκάλουν θύτην καὶ Ἑλληνα καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ περιῦβρίζον».

³⁰ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 359.29-32 (7.14.4-5): «Ὁ δὲ ὑποτοπήσας σκευωρίαν αὐτῷ παρὰ Κυρίλλου γενέσθαι ἐβόα Χριστιανός τε εἶναι καὶ ὑπὸ Ἀττικῆς ἐπισκόπου ἐν τῇ Κωνσταντινουπόλει βεβαπτίσθαι. Ὡς δὲ οὐ προσεῖχον τοῖς λεγομένοις οἱ μοναχοὶ [...]».

³¹ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 359.32-360.2 (7.14.5-6): «εἷς ἐξ αὐτῶν Ἀμμώνιος ὄνομα λίθῳ βάλλει τὸν Ὀρέστην κατὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς. Καὶ πληροῦται μὲν αἵματι ὄλος ἐκ τοῦ τραύματος, ὑποχωροῦσι δὲ οἱ ταξεῶται πλὴν ὀλίγων, ἄλλος ἀλλαχού ἐν τῷ πλήθει διαδύναντες, τὸν ἐκ τῆς βολῆς τῶν λίθων θάνατον φυλαττόμενον» Haas, *Alexandria*, 305. The reason the monks did not accept Orestes' answer that he had been baptized was that they knew that some former monks were only baptized to secure a good career in government office. Therefore, the monks believed that Orestes was also baptized out of political interest. Orestes' response that he was baptized by a bishop from Constantinople would further irritate the monks of a city that was in conflict (politically, etc.) with Constantinople. Cf. Ronchey, S., "Hypatia the Intellectual" in: A. Fraschetti (ed.), *Roman Women*, Chicago 2001, 165.

³² Cf. *Socrates Scholasticus*, 360.2-4 (7.14.7): «Ἐν τοσοῦτῳ δὲ συνέρρεον οἱ τῶν Ἀλεξανδρέων δῆμοι, ἀμύνασθαι τοὺς μοναχοὺς ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἐπάρχου προθυμοῦμενοι. Καὶ τοὺς μὲν ἄλλους πάντας εἰς φυγὴν ἔτρεψαν». Cf. Tahopoulos, I., *Ὀψεις θρησκευτικῆς βίας στην πρωτοβυζαντινὴ Αἴγυπτο. Εθνικοί, Χριστιανοί, Ιουδαίοι, Μανιχαίοι*, Athens 2021, 201, f. 1190.

³³ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 360.4-16 (7.14.7-11): «Τὸν Ἀμμώνιον δὲ συλλαβόντες παρὰ τὸν ἐπαρχον ἄγουσιν· ὃς δημοσίᾳ κατὰ τοὺς νόμους ἐξετάσει αὐτὸν ὑποβαλὼν ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἐβασάνισεν, ὡς ἀποκτείνειν. Οὐκ εἰς μακρὰν δὲ καὶ τὰ γενόμενα γνώριμα τοῖς κρατοῦσιν κατέστησεν. Οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ Κύριλλος τὰ ἐναντία ἐγνώριζεν βασιλεῖ, τοῦ δὲ Ἀμμωνίου τὸ σῶμα ἀναλαβὼν καὶ ἐν μιᾷ τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν ἀποθέμενος, ὄνομα ἕτερον αὐτῷ ἐπιθεῖς Θαυμάσιον ἐπεκάλεσεν καὶ μάρτυρα χρηματίζειν ἐκέλευσεν, ἐγκομιάζων αὐτοῦ ἐπ' ἐκκλησίας τὸ φρόνημα ὡς ἀγῶνα ὑπὲρ εὐσεβίας ἀνελομένου. Ἄλλ' οἱ εὐφρονούντες, καίπερ Χριστιανοὶ ὄντες, οὐκ ἀπεδέχοντο τὴν περὶ τούτου Κυρίλλου σπουδὴν· ἠπίσταντο γὰρ προπετείας δίκην δεδωκέναι τὸν Ἀμμώνιον, οὐ μὴν ἀνάγκη ἀρνήσεως Χριστοῦ ἐναποθανεῖν ταῖς βασάνοις. Διὸ καὶ Κύριλλος κατὰ βραχὺ τῷ ἡσυχάζειν λήθην τοῦ γενομένου εἰργάσατο». Haas, *Alexandria*, 306-307. According to some scholars, Ammonios was tortured in order to confess that Cyril

4. Hypatia's involvement in the conflict and her murder

The rivalry between Cyril and Orestes, however, did not stop, and at the center of it was the philosopher Hypatia. The opinion spread among Christians that the reason for Orestes' reluctance to reconcile with Cyril was Hypatia.³⁴ According to the sources, Hypatia had frequent contacts both with Orestes³⁵ and with the members of the ruling class.³⁶ A later source considers the alleged magical abilities as the reason why Hypatia negatively influenced Orestes over Cyril.³⁷ Various scholars have hypothesized that Hypatia was Orestes' link to the Alexandrian ruling class, which gave him the necessary social power to oppose Cyril.³⁸ Other scholars considered that those who spread the rumor could neither denounce the monks as the cause of the non-reconciliation, nor the attitude of the Prefect, so Hypatia remained.³⁹ Finally, some consider that Hypatia frequently visiting the prefect did not help Orestes in his confrontation with Cyril, but using her influence she asked him for favors for the benefit of her various students. In related letters to her, Synesios asks for her mediation to the rulers of the city in favor of his classmates.⁴⁰

ordered him to attack the Prefect. Cf. Tahopoulos, *Οψεις θρησκευτικής βίας*, 202, f. 1192.

³⁴ *Socrates Scholasticus*, 360-28-361.1 (7.15.4): «ἐπεὶ γὰρ συνετύγχανεν συχνότερον τῷ Ὀρέστῃ, διαβολὴν τοῦτ' ἐκίνησε κατ' αὐτῆς παρὰ τῷ τῆς ἐκκλησίας λαῶ, ὡς ἄρα εἶη ἢ μὴ συγχωροῦσα τὸν Ὀρέστην εἰς φιλίαν τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ συμβῆναι». Socrates uses the word *διαβολή* for this view, but does not use it anywhere else in his History. The word *διαβολή* that Socrates uses does not only mean slander but also, in general, an accusation without expressing an opinion about the justice or injustice of this accusation. According to Lampe's *Lexicon*, 344, *διαβολή*: 1. censure 2. blameworthiness. Socrates neither rejects the accusations against Hypatia nor agrees with them. In two other cases (78.17 and 293.21) he uses the verb *κατηγορ*, in the first in the sense of slander and in the second in the sense of an accusation that is true. Furthermore, Damascius mentions that the rulers of the city valued and sought her opinion.

³⁵ *Socrates Scholasticus* 360.28-29 (7.15.4): «συνετύγχανεν συχνότερον τῷ Ὀρέστῃ».

³⁶ Cf. Dzielska, M., *Υπατία η Αλεξανδρινή*, Athens 1997, 164, 167.

³⁷ John of Nikiu, 344 : “*Le préfet de la province l’honorait particulièrement, car elle l’avait séduit par son art magique : il cessait de fréquenter l’église, comme il en avait l’habitude; il y venait à peine une fois par hasard*”.

³⁸ Haas, *Alexandria*, 313.

³⁹ Watts, *Hypatia*, 113-114.

⁴⁰ Synesios, *Letters* 147.7-11 (Letter 81): «Σὺ μὲν οὖν αἰεὶ καὶ δύνη καὶ δύναιο κάλλιστα χρωμένη τῷ δύνασθαι, Νίκαιος δὲ καὶ Φιλόλαος οἱ καλοὶ κάγαθοὶ νεανία καὶ συγγενεῖς, ὅπως ἐπανεέλθοιεν τῶν ἰδίων γενόμενοι κύριοι, πᾶσι μελέτω τοῖς τὰ σὰ τιμῶσι καὶ ιδιώταις σὲ μετὰ τῆς ἀρετῆς καὶ ἄρχουσι».

In any case, in March 415, a mob of ferocious Christians who counted on nothing and no one, led by a reader or ruler named Peter, attacked Hypatia.⁴¹ They then took her to Caesareum, where, after stripping her,⁴² they murdered her with fragments of vessels and dismembered her body⁴³ or, according to other sources, dragged her through the streets of the city until she died.⁴⁴ According to other sources, while Hypatia was cooling off, her eyes were gouged out.⁴⁵ Then they carried her body outside the city to a place called Kinnaron, where they burned it.⁴⁶

Hypatia's murder was reported to the emperor, who seems to have been outraged by the events. Despite this, there was bribery of those responsible for solving the murder, and the case was closed without punishment of the guilty. As for Orestes, there is no other information about him from the sources. Some scholars have speculated that he resigned or was recalled or simply his term of office expired,⁴⁷ although there is no evidence of this in the sources.

⁴¹ The sources give different location and time of the attack. Socrates, 361.2-3 (7.15.5), states that the attack took place when Hypatia was returning home: «ἐπιτηροῦσιν τὴν ἄνθρωπον ἐπανιοῦσαν ἐπὶ οἰκίαν ποθέν».

⁴² Socrates, 361.4-5 (7.15.5): «ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, ἢ ἐπόνυμον Καισάριον, συνέλκουσιν, ἀποδύσαντές τε τὴν ἐσθήτα».

⁴³ Socrates, 361.5 (7.15.5): «ὀστράκοις ἀνεῖλον, καὶ μεληδὸν διασπάσαντες».

⁴⁴ John of Nikiou, 346.

⁴⁵ Damascius, 81.5-6: «καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῆς μικρὸν ὑποσπαιρούσης ἔτι ἐκκόπτουσιν».

⁴⁶ Socrates, 361.5-6 (7.15.5): «ἐπὶ τὸν καλούμενον Κινναρὸνα τὰ μέλη συνάραντες πυρὶ κατανήλωσαν». John of Nikiou, 346. Burning the corpses of people considered criminals who had been brutally killed was a practice known in Alexandria as early as the Ptolemaic era. The location of Kinnaron is unknown.

⁴⁷ The length of the term of office of the governors of Egypt on average term was less than two years. Watts, *Hypatia*, 112, 121.

Conclusions

Regarding the identity of the murderers, Socrates Scholasticus writes that they were Christians, «ἄνδρες τὸ φρόνημα ἔνθερμοι».⁴⁸ No source mentions the *parabalani*. A law of 416, which removes the authority over the *parabalani* from the bishop and assigns it to the Prefect, specifies as the reason for this decision the terror caused by the *parabalani* in the meetings of the municipal council of Alexandria, and their interference in the matters of its competence, while it does not mention the commission of murders on their behalf.⁴⁹ It has been suggested by modern scholars either that the murderers were generally residents of Alexandria,⁵⁰ or that they belonged to the *parabalani* corps,⁵¹ or that possibly the *parabalani* collaborated with the Christian mob, because the others would-be killers, the monks, had fled into the desert earlier, after the attack on Orestes.⁵² Finally, according to an interesting case by E. J. Watts, at the time of the assassination, in March, there was a crowd of periodically unemployed internal migrants from Egypt who roamed Alexandria and depended – during their idleness – on the bishop's charity. This crowd may have followed Peter the reader, and had the conditions (natural muscularity, fanaticism) for such an act.⁵³

Regarding the motives of the perpetrators and whether the murder was an expression of Christian-Pagan rivalry, some sources ascribe political motives to the murder and claim that the killers saw Hypatia as an obstacle to the reconciliation of the Bishop with the Prefect.⁵⁴ Others cite

⁴⁸ Socrates, 361.1-2 (7.15.5)

⁴⁹ C. Th. 16.2.42: “[...] *quod quidem terrore eorum, qui parabalani nuncupantur, legationi insertum est...ut nihil commune clerici cum publicis actibus vel ad curiam pertinentibus habeant. [...] Quibus neque ad quodlibet publicum spectaculum neque ad curiae locum neque ad iudicium adcedend*”. The above law prohibits the presence of *parabalani* in theaters, courts, and parliament, while Hypatia was not allegedly murdered or abducted in any of these places, so it does not appear that the law was enacted because of her murder. As mentions Haas, *Alexandria*, 314 observes, the involvement of the *parabalani* in the murder would not only cause the “disgrace”, but the accusation of homicide against the bishop by Cyril's enemies in Alexandria to Theodosius II.

⁵⁰ Gaddis, M., *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2005, 222, f. 59.

⁵¹ Dzielska, *Υπατία*, 179-181; Haas, *Alexandria*, 237, 314-315.

⁵² Dzielska, *Υπατία*, 180-181.

⁵³ Watts, *Hypatia*, 114-115.

⁵⁴ Socrates Scholasticus, 360.30-361.1 (7.15.4): «αὐτὴ ἢ μὴ συγχωροῦσα τὸν Ὀρέστην εἰς φιλίαν τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ συμβῆναι». Theodore the Lector, 92.17-18: «ὑπονοήσαντες ὡς αὐτὴ πείθει Ὀρέστην τὸν ὑπαρχον Ἀλεξανδρείας <μὴ> ἐνωθῆναι πρὸς ἀγάπην Κυρίλλῳ». Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos, 1105CD: «διαβολὴν κατ’ αὐτῆς ἐκίνει

envy of Hypatia's fame and prestige as a motive.⁵⁵ Some sources cite the Alexandrians' innate tendency to riot as a cause.⁵⁶ Finally, there are sources that state that the perpetrators were motivated by the use of magic (which they associate with Paganism) on the part of Hypatia.⁵⁷ Thus, the opinions of the researchers, respectively, vary.⁵⁸

On the issue of Cyril's responsibility regarding Hypatia's murder, the sources give conflicting information, and they can be divided into the following groups. In the first group are placed those who associate Cyril with the murder, either directly or indirectly. To this group belong Socrates, Damascius, John of Nikiu and John Malalas.⁵⁹ The second group includes those who express ignorance about the moral author of the murder or attribute it to others, except of Cyril, the responsibility for planning and ordering the murder of Hypatia.⁶⁰ Corresponding to the sources, modern scholars either more or less incriminate Cyril, or acquit him due to doubts and consider that he did not order the murder. Regarding Cyril's participation in spreading the rumors against Hypatia as a witch, also the opinions of scholars differ.⁶¹

Based on the above, Cyril's moral authorship is not proven, without at the same time being ruled out. Those who assembled the mob that committed the assassination could have been Cyril's advisers having come to a pre-consultation with him, but they could also have been simply his enthusiastic followers who took the initiative entirely on their

τοῖς περὶ Κύριλλον κληρικοῖς, ὡς ἄρ' ἐκείνη εἶη μὴ συμβῆναι πρὸς καταλλαγὰς ἐῶσα Κυρίλλῳ τὸν ἑπαρχόν».

⁵⁵ According to Damascius, Cyril, learning of Hypatia's honors and fame, envied her and decided to kill her.

⁵⁶ *Suidae*, IV 644: «ὡς δε τινες διὰ τὸ ἔμφυτον τῶν Ἀλεξανδρέων θράσος καὶ στασιῶδες».

⁵⁷ *John of Nikiu*, 346 : “*se mit à la recherche de cette femme païenne qui, par ses artifices de magie, avait séduit les gens de la ville et le préfet*”.

⁵⁸ For the opinion that the murder was politically motivated and that the fact that Hypatia was a Hellene only increased her inability to defend herself, cf. Dzielska, *Υπατία*, 167-168, 170, 194. On the contrary, cf Haas, *Alexandria*, 308, who believes that the assassination was also religiously motivated.

⁵⁹ Cf. Tahopoulos, *Ὀψεις θρησκευτικῆς βίας*, 208, f. 1238.

⁶⁰ *Suidae*, IV 644: «ὡς μὲν τινες ὑπὸ Κυρίλλου, ὡς δε τινες διὰ τὸ ἔμφυτον τῶν Ἀλεξανδρέων θράσος καὶ στασιῶδες». Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos, 1105D: «*διαβολὴν κατ' αὐτῆς ἐκίνει τοῖς περὶ Κύριλλον κληρικοῖς, ὡς ἄρ' ἐκείνη εἶη μὴ συμβῆναι πρὸς καταλλαγὰς ἐῶσα Κυρίλλῳ τὸν ἑπαρχόν. Καὶ δὴ τίνες ἐκείνων [σημ: τῶν περὶ τὸν Κύριλλον κληρικῶν] ἐνθερμόν Κυρίλλῳ τρέφοντες ἔρωτα*».

⁶¹ According to Dzielska, *Υπατία*, 182, Cyril was the main instigator of the related smear campaign against Hypatia.

own from their own motives. Socrates' charge of *μῶμον* is general enough to constitute a charge of moral sleight of hand. Given the relative our ignorance of the existence and degree of moral authorship of the bishop, and based on the data so far, moral authorship can be traced with certainty at most to the reader Peter, who led the crowd against Hypatia, and according to one version he was a local lord.⁶² Our ignorance of the existence and degree of moral authorship of the bishop, and based on the data so far, moral authorship can be traced with certainty at most to the reader Peter, who led the crowd against Hypatia, and according to one version he was a local lord. It is also certain that the murderers were friendly with Cyril and his peers. It is not provable to attribute everything that the Christian community did to Cyril.

Regarding Cyril's attitude towards the Jews, and especially his raid on the synagogues and the expulsion of some Jews, according to some scholars, the laws provided for exile and the death penalty for those involved in the attempt to burn or damage foreign property, and churches. However, these laws did not give the bishop the right to apply the penalties against the guilty. Consequently, Cyril usurped the powers of the prefect and acted irregularly. Cyril probably felt that he had no choice but to defend his community himself from, once again, a recurrence of anti-Christian actions in Alexandria, and to enforce the laws himself, even though he knew full well that he had no jurisdiction to do so.⁶³

As for Orestes, Cyril's first actions seem to have been merely the occasion for the proconsul's later prejudiced reaction to the matter of Hierax.⁶⁴ By his inaction where his action as the highest local authority was required, Orestes strengthened the situation to which he opposed from the beginning, namely the taking of arbitrary political initiatives. It is true that because of the short tenure of the proconsuls, Orestes actually

⁶² Even Caesars, such as Julian, had received the office of reader. In fact, many bishops of Alexandria in the early stages of their careers were readers. Cf. Haas, *Alexandria*, 223.

⁶³ Cyril's reasoning must have been that since in the past (339, 374) the Jews had unnecessarily attacked Orthodox churches and participated with impunity in killing Christians, the bishop of Alexandria could not wait if and when the prefect would decide to implement the law, which was mobilized directly only in cases against Cyril.

⁶⁴ Orestes in general and before Cyril's episcopate was resentful of the fact that the political power of the bishops of Alexandria was increasing. Cf. *Socrates Scholasticus*, 358.12-14 (7.13.9): «Ὁρέστης δὲ καὶ πρότερον μὲν ἐμίσει τὴν δυναστείαν τῶν ἐπισκόπων <Ἀλεξανδρείας>, ὅτι παρηροῦντο πολὺ τῆς ἐξουσίας τῶν ἐκ βασιλέως ἄρχειν τεταγμένων».

had little potential for legal intervention. However, he either did not consider this reality or was not informed about it.⁶⁵

Finally, as far as Hypatia is concerned, some scholars argue that she really did not suggest to Orestes the reconciliation between Cyril and Orestes, guiding the latter in a negative way.⁶⁶ It is unknown; however, what degree of involvement she had in shaping Orestes' attitude towards the bishop, mainly because Orestes resented the growing influence of the Alexandrian bishops anyway. Hypatia may have considered it harmless and legitimate to socialize herself with Orestes just as she socialized with previous political rulers, for political favors and advice, while neither Cyril nor Orestes had concepts and politics similar to those of their predecessors. Without the support of the ancient religions, Hypatia chose to get involved or let herself – possibly without realizing it – be publicly seen to be involved, as a consultant of Orestes⁶⁷ in a conflict whose vehemence was beyond her strength. It is very likely that if the political dispute between the prefect and the bishop had not arisen, Hypatia would have lived undisturbed as under bishop Theophilus. Her murder, according to researchers, caused the creation of a pagan identity among the national philosophers of the city.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Orestes did not legally prosecute the arsonists. Thus, he allowed a power vacuum to be created or grow under irregular conditions in the city, which anyone could exploit to the detriment of social peace and the applicable legislation. On the contrary, if it implemented the law in the first place, it could tame the propensity for violence of various religious communities. The law ordered the prefect to act immediately and without the bishop's request in cases of attacks on church buildings, and provided for the dismissal of judges (the prefect was also a judge) who did not sentence to death those who had committed them.

⁶⁶ Haas, *Alexandria*, 469 (f. 73) who argues that no it is unlikely that Hypatia advised Orestes in favor of a pro-Jewish policy in order to counter Christianity.

⁶⁷ Watts, *City and School*, 198.

⁶⁸ While until then the association of Gentiles with Christians was blameless, then, after the murder of Hypatia, Gentiles such as Damascius accused those who had deals or collaborated with Christian clergy as impostors.

Bibliography

A. Primary Sources:

- *Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiu. Texte éthiopien*, H. Zotenberg (ed.), Paris, 1883.
- *Νικηφόρου Καλλίστου του Ξανθοπούλου Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία*, P.G. 146, Paris, 1865.
- *Σωκράτους Σχολαστικοῦ Ἐκκλησιαστικῆ Ἱστορία*, G. C. Hansen (ed.), *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte* [GCS Neue Folge 1], Berlin, 1995.
- A. Adler (ed.), *Suidae Lexicon*, vols. 2, 4 [Lexicographi Graeci 1], Lipsiae, 1931, 1935.

B. Modern References:

- Dzielska, M. *Υπατία η Αλεξανδρινή*, Athens, 1997.
- Gaddis, M. *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2005.
- Haas, C. *Alexandria in Late Antiquity. Topography and Social*, Baltimore 1997.
- Jones, H. M. – J. R. Martindale – J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the late Roman Empire*, vol. I (A.D. 260-395), Cambridge, 1971/ vol. II (395-527), Cambridge, 1995/ vol. IIIA & vol. IIIB (527-641), Cambridge, 1992.
- Ronchey, S. “Hypatia the Intellectual” in: A. Fraschetti (ed.), *Roman Women*, Chicago, 2001, 160-189.
- Tahopoulos, I. *Όψεις θρησκευτικής βίας στην πρωτοβυζαντινή Αίγυπτο. Εθνικοί, Χριστιανοί, Ιουδαίοι, Μανιχαίοι*, Athens, 2021.
- Watts, E. J. *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, 2006.
- ----- *Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*, New York, 2017.
- Wessel, S. *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy. The making of a Saint and of a Heretic*, New York, 2004.