

Hypatia of Alexandria: Using Textual Evidence to Support Source Analysis

Duration

One class session of approximately 45 minutes

Resources

1. Teacher Commentary



2. Student Handout



3. Homework



Objectives of Lesson

- To understand the difference between primary and secondary sources
- To understand how to contextualize textual evidence based on its source
- To practice citing specific textual evidence in support of source analysis

Common Core Standard

- **9-10.1:** "Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information."

Student Activities

- Class discussion of the difference between primary and secondary sources
- Class discussion of background information, key people, and vocabulary related to the passages to be analyzed
- Practice reading both primary and secondary source texts and using specific textual citations to support textual analysis
- Practice making inferences and drawing conclusions from textual sources

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is designed to give students an opportunity to learn about and practice using textual evidence to support analysis of historical text sources. The passages students will analyze relate to the ancient Alexandrian philosopher Hypatia, about whom there is much debate among historians. The lesson includes several different components that are designed to spark conversation and help students to think about the variety

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of ways in which historical-thinking skills rely on a robust use of sources and evidence. In keeping with the Common Core standard, students are also encouraged to pay attention to how factors such as the date of a text and the bias of an author can influence the ways in which historians use textual evidence.

The student handout/worksheet contains some background information, a list of key people and terms, and three passages. The passages are followed by a series of review questions. The short homework assignment, which contains an additional passage and two review questions, is designed to give students further practice and to build upon their classwork. By the end of the lesson, students should have a stronger understanding of the importance of supporting historical argumentation or reasoning with evidence as well as an awareness of how the situation, origin, intended audience, etc. can influence the point of view expressed in written sources.

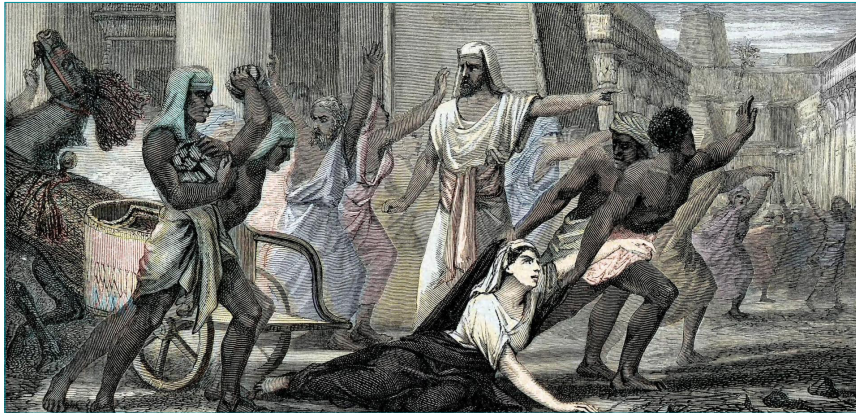


Julius Kronberg, *Hypatia*, 1889

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Hypatia of Alexandria: Using Textual Evidence to Support Source Analysis



Unknown Artist, *Death of the Philosopher Hypatia at Alexandria*, 1865

Background Information

This lesson is centered around one of the most famous female intellectuals from ancient history, the Egyptian philosopher **Hypatia of Alexandria**. Historians don't know the exact details of her life, but it is thought that she was born sometime around 370 C.E. and was murdered in 415 C.E. There is a lot of debate about why she was murdered (and by whom), but regardless of the precise historical facts, Hypatia has become legendary and an inspiration to many around the world. There is even a highly-fictionalized movie about her (*Agora*, 2009).

Hypatia was an extremely popular teacher and an influential scholar; some even say that she was the leading mathematician and astronomer of her time—a rarity for a woman in the largely male-dominated ancient world. At the time of Hypatia's murder, Egypt (and the Roman world more generally) was in the process of converting from a "pagan," pre-Christian society into one that was largely Christian until the rise of Islam in the 7th century C.E. Hypatia herself was a **Neo-Platonist** following the teachings of the philosopher **Plotinus**. Some historians speculate that the Christian religious authorities of Alexandria may have been directly or indirectly responsible for Hypatia's death, since there was a lot of conflict between the city's church leaders and non-Christians at the end of the 4th and into the early 5th centuries.

Directions: Review the key people and terms on the following page. When you are done, read the passages and answer the questions that follow.

Commentary

This lesson is designed to be highly interactive. While it would work as an individual assignment, we encourage you to assign it as small group or pair work to promote more engaged discussions. Briefly review the background information and key people/terms with students before having them read the passages.

- ① The focus of this lesson is the process of citing specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary source texts and thinking about a text's date/origin, so the background information here is merely informational to give students context for their readings (i.e., they are not expected to memorize these details or the details in the key people/terms list). Make sure that students understand the difference between primary and secondary sources. For an excellent primer, see <https://historyexplorer.si.edu/sites/default/files/PrimarySources.pdf>
- ② All bolded items are in the list of key people and terms below.
- ③ More background on Hypatia: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/hypatia-ancient-alexandrias-great-female-scholar-10942888/>
- ④ Make sure that students understand that while the term sounds pejorative to modern ears, "pagan" in the context of ancient history simply refers to any religious practices other than those of the major monotheistic world religions.

Key People and Terms

- **Alexandria** is a major port city on the north coast of Egypt, founded by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C.E. During the Greco-Roman period, Alexandria was known for its lighthouse and library; it was considered one of the primary centers of scholarship in the ancient world.
- **Aristotle** (384–322 B.C.E.) was, along with his teacher Plato, one of classical Greece's most important philosophers. He wrote as many as 200 works, most of which are lost to history, on topics as broad-ranging as logic, rhetoric, political theory, medicine, and animal behavior.
- **Cyril of Alexandria** (c. 376–444 C.E.) was the Christian Patriarch (bishop) of Alexandria from 412 C.E. until his death in 444 C.E. He was very involved in the theological controversies of his time and was known for his vigorous opposition to those he disagreed with.
- **Hypatia of Alexandria** (c. 370–415.C.E.) was a prominent Egyptian scholar and philosopher who lived in a time of great ideological and political conflict. While she was a popular speaker and lecturer, she was brutally murdered by a mob and none of her writings survived.
- **Orestes** was a government official who was appointed Roman governor of the province of Egypt, which was part of the Roman Empire from 30 B.C.E. to 672 C.E.
- **Peter the Lector** (dates unknown) was a church official in Alexandria at the time of Hypatia's murder. A "lector" is a person who reads religious texts out loud during services.
- **Plato** (c. 429–347 B.C.E.) was one of the ancient world's most prominent philosophers and the founder of the Academy of Athens, which was a model for education in the Western world. He wrote about many topics, ranging from the ideal society and the best form of government to the natural world and ethics.
- **Plotinus** (c. 204–270 C.E.) was an Egyptian intellectual and the founder of **Neoplatonism**, a philosophical movement similar to and influenced by the teachings of Plato, the famous Greek philosopher from classical Athens.
- **Sectarian** refers to political, cultural, or religious conflict between or among groups.
- **Theon of Alexandria** (335–405 C.E.) was an Egyptian scholar and mathematician who was also the father of female philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria.

Exercise: Source Analysis

Source 1: Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 439 C.E.)

There was a woman at **Alexandria** named **Hypatia**, daughter of the philosopher **Theon**, who made such attainments in literature and science as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time. Having succeeded to the school of **Plato** and **Plotinus**, she explained the principles of philosophy to her audience, many of whom came from a distance to receive her instructions.

On account of the self-possession and ease of manner, which she had acquired in consequence of the cultivation of her mind, she not unfrequently appeared in public in presence of the magistrates. Neither did she feel abashed in coming to an assembly of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more. Yet even she fell a victim to the political jealousy which at that time prevailed.

Source 2: Damascius, *Life of Isidore* (late 5th or early 6th century C.E.)

[**Hypatia**] was born and raised and educated in **Alexandria**. Having a nobler nature than her father's, she was not satisfied with his mathematical instruction, but she also embraced the rest of philosophy with diligence. Putting on the philosopher's cloak although a woman and advancing through the middle of the city, she explained publicly to those who wished to hear either **Plato** or **Aristotle** or any other of the philosophers. In addition to her teaching, [she attained] the height of practical virtue.... Such was **Hypatia**, both skillful and eloquent in words and prudent and civil in deeds. The rest of the city loved and honored her exceptionally, and those who were appointed at each time as rulers of the city at first attended her lectures.

Source 3: Sarah Zielinski, Smithsonian science writer, "Hypatia, Ancient Alexandria's Great Female Scholar" (2010)

One day on the streets of Alexandria, Egypt, in the year 415 or 416, a mob of Christian zealots led by **Peter the Lector** accosted a woman's carriage and dragged her from it and into a church, where they stripped her and beat her to death with roofing tiles. They then tore her body apart and burned it. Who was this woman and what was her crime? **Hypatia** was one of the last great thinkers of ancient Alexandria and one of the first women to study and teach mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. Though she is remembered more for her violent death, her dramatic life is a fascinating lens through which we may view the plight of science in an era of religious and **sectarian** conflict...

...Her admirers included Alexandria's governor, **Orestes**. Her association with him would eventually lead to her death.... With [Archbishop] **Cyril**, the head of the main religious body of the city and Orestes in charge of the civil government, a fight began over who controlled Alexandria.... When **Orestes** refused **Cyril's** attempts at reconciliation, **Cyril's** monks tried unsuccessfully to assassinate him.

Hypatia, however, was an easier target. She was a pagan who publicly spoke about a non-Christian philosophy, **Neoplatonism**, and she was less likely to be protected by guards than the now-prepared **Orestes**. A rumor spread that she was preventing **Orestes** and **Cyril** from settling their differences. From there, **Peter the Lector** and his mob took action and **Hypatia** met her tragic end.

Questions

1. **Source 1** was written 20–25 years after Hypatia’s death, and **Source 2** was written as much as 100 years after her death. While these are still considered primary sources for historians studying the ancient world, how reliable do you think they are for trying to understand what Hypatia’s life was really like? Describe some potential historical problems that could arise from sources written by individuals who didn’t personally witness the events they describe. ⑤

Write or type your response in this area.

2. Suppose a historian made the following argument: *Despite being a female teacher in an era in which men dominated intellectual life, Hypatia was well-respected by her male peers in Alexandria.* Cite one or more specific sentences from **Source 1** that would support the historian’s claim.

Write or type your response in this area.

- ⑤ These questions could provide fruitful debate for small group or entire class discussions.

3. Suppose a historian made the following argument: *In addition to being well-regarded for her intellectual achievements, Hypatia was known among her peers to be a person of good moral character and strong ethics.* Cite one or more specific sentences from **Source 2** that would support the historian's claim.

Write or type your response in this area.

4. According to the author of **Source 3**, Hypatia was murdered only after a failed assassination attempt on Orestes, the Roman governor of Alexandria. In the author's view, what made Hypatia an "easier target?" Cite one or more specific sentences from the passage in your response.

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5. **Sources 1 and 2** were written much closer to the time during which Hypatia lived, while **Source 3** is a modern source. The authors of these three sources also had very different motivations for writing about Hypatia. In what ways can the life situation and perspective of an author influence that author's historical analysis?

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The ruins of ancient Alexandria, Egypt, with modern apartment buildings in the background

Hypatia of Alexandria: Using Textual Evidence to Support Source Analysis



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Write or type your response in this area.

3. Suppose a historian made the following argument: *In addition to being well-regarded for her intellectual achievements, Hypatia was known among her peers to be a person of good moral character and strong ethics.* Cite one or more specific sentences from **Source 2** that would support the historian's claim.

Write or type your response in this area.

4. According to the author of **Source 3**, Hypatia was murdered only after a failed assassination attempt on Orestes, the Roman governor of Alexandria. In the author's view, what made Hypatia an "easier target?" Cite one or more specific sentences from the passage in your response.

Write or type your response in this area.

5. **Sources 1 and 2** were written much closer to the time during which Hypatia lived, while **Source 3** is a modern source. The authors of these three sources also had very different motivations for writing about Hypatia. In what ways can the life situation and perspective of an author influence that author's historical analysis?

Write or type your response in this area.



The ruins of ancient Alexandria, Egypt, with modern apartment buildings in the background

Hypatia of Alexandria: Using Textual Evidence to Support Source Analysis

Directions: Familiarize yourself with the vocabulary items in the word bank before reading the passage and answering the questions below.

Word Bank

- **Astrolabes** were ancient astronomical devices used to track time and calculate the relative positions of stars and planets.
- **Beguiled** means enchanted or charmed, often through deception or trickery.
- **Idolatry** means to revere or worship something other than God as if it were God.
- **Prefect** refers to a type of military or civil official in the Roman world.

The passage below was written by the Coptic Christian Bishop of a region in northern Egypt called Nikiu. It is a very small part of a much longer narrative covering the history of Christianity in Egypt from its beginning until 646 C.E., when Muslim armies conquered Egypt and ended the period of Roman rule that had begun in 30 B.C.E.

Source: John, Bishop of Nikiu, *The Chronicle*, c. 690 C.E.

And in those days there appeared in Alexandria a female philosopher, a pagan named Hypatia, and she was devoted at all times to magic, **astrolabes** and instruments of music, and she beguiled many people through (her) Satanic wiles. And the governor of the city¹ honored her exceedingly; for she had **beguiled** him through her magic. And he ceased attending church as had been his custom.... And thereafter a multitude of believers in God arose under the guidance of Peter the magistrate²—now this Peter was a perfect believer in all respects in Jesus Christ—and they proceeded to seek for the pagan woman who had beguiled the people of the city and the **prefect** through her enchantments...and they dragged her along till they brought her to the great church.... And they tore off her clothing and dragged her [till they brought her] through the streets of the city till she died...and they burned her body with fire.... [The patriarch] had destroyed the last remains of **idolatry** in the city.

¹ This is Orestes from the student handout.

² This is the same person as Peter the Lector from the student handout.

Questions

1. Cite at least one similarity and at least one difference in how Hypatia is described in the passage above compared to how she is described in **Sources 1 and 2** of the student handout.

Write or type your response in this area.

2. Most modern historians would be skeptical about using the passage above as an accurate account of Hypatia's life and death. Why do you think that is? Is there anything about the author's characterization of Hypatia that displays the author's own bias? Cite specifics from the passage in your response.

Write or type your response in this area.

3. Sources 1 and 2 were written much closer to the time during which Hypatia lived, while Source 3 is a modern source. The authors of these three sources also had very different motivations for writing about Hypatia. In what ways can the life situation and perspective of an author influence that author's historical analysis?

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WORKSHEET

1. Answers will vary. Historical documents written by non-eyewitnesses must always be viewed with caution. Information may be incomplete or inaccurate, possibly based on oral tradition that over time has a tendency to stray from the original details (think of the children's game Telephone).
2. Answers will vary. The author of Source 1 states that Hypatia did not "feel abashed in coming to an assembly of men," indicating that she was self-confident and respected in the city. The author further states "on account of [Hypatia's] extraordinary dignity and virtue," the men "admired her the more," indicating that despite the unusual presence of a female teacher in their midst, male Alexandrian scholars respected and admired Hypatia's character and intellect.
3. Answers will vary. The author of Source 2 states that "in addition to her teaching, [Hypatia attained] the height of practical virtue." The author further states that in addition to her skill in teaching, Hypatia was "prudent and civil in deeds," indicating that she was known for her moral character as well as her scholarship.
4. Answers will vary. The author of Source 3 states that Hypatia "was a pagan who publicly spoke about a non-Christian philosophy," which would have made her threatening to the Christian authorities of the city at a time when there was a lot of conflict between various religious groups in Egypt. The author further states that compared to Orestes, who had just survived an assassination attempt, Hypatia "was less likely to be protected by guards."
5. Answers will vary. The authors of Sources 1 and 2 were Christian leaders writing historical accounts and who were interested in portraying their subjects in a particular light. As an informative educational article, rather than a polemical work designed to support the church, Source 3 is the most unbiased or neutral in tone. That being said, no writing is truly subjective, and one must always consider how an author's personal beliefs might affect her work.

HOMEWORK

1. Answers will vary. As Christianity had become much more entrenched in Egypt in the centuries after her death, Hypatia became a symbol of the last vestiges of pre-Christian religion, and her murderers (at least in some quarters) became heroes of the Christian faith to those who had triumphed. It is interesting that the passages seem to get more emotional, detailed, and polemical as time goes by. The earlier passages (Sources 1 and 2 from the student handout) focus on Hypatia's scholarly and intellectual achievements and the respect given to her by her admirers, while the later passage from the homework assignment is very polemical, emphasizing the triumph of Christianity over pre-Christian, "pagan" belief systems.
2. Answers will vary. The most glaringly obvious instance of bias is the author's statement that Hypatia had seduced her followers "through her Satanic wiles." This comment, among others, clearly demonstrates that the author, a Christian bishop, is writing from the perspective of a triumphant religious leader rejoicing over the demise of an opposing belief system and quite literally demonizing Hypatia.