

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Catherine Nixey: The Darkening Age (415)

Artemis Irvine: This week, we're off to ancient Alexandria for Episode 18, of Season 2, of *Travels Through Time*.

[Intro music]

Hello, I'm Artemis, one of the presenters on *Travels Through Time* and today, we're going back to the year 415 to find out about the dazzling life and brutal death of the only female scholar in antiquity, Hypatia of Alexandria.

Female scholars were few and far between in the ancient world. Women were rarely educated and even when they were, hardly any evidence survives about them. There is, however, one glittering exception; the astronomer and mathematician, Hypatia, whose brilliance was the cause of both her enormous success and her dramatic downfall. In the early 5th century, Alexandria was in turmoil. Its tensions within the various ethnic and religious populations began to boil over. Just a few years before, in 392, a Christian mob had destroyed the mighty Temple of Serapis and all of the books that were shelved in it. The ancient Pagan world was under attack and Hypatia, as a woman, Pagan and an intellectual, became the focal point with tragic results that have echoed down the centuries. Our guide on this journey to ancient Alexandria is the award-winning historian Catherine Nixey, whose fascinating book, *The Darkening Age*, looked at how the Christian faith struggled and eventually triumphed over classical culture. It is a compelling and, at times, shocking story that has been described as 'engaging and erudite', 'elegant and ferocious'. Violet Moller went along to Reading the other day to talk to Catherine. We hope you enjoy their conversation.

Violet Moller: Welcome to *Travels Through Time*, Catherine.

Catherine Nixey: Thank you for having me.

Violet Moller: It's a pleasure. Before we start, I thought it would be good to talk a little bit about Alexandria and really set the scene of what it would have been like, in the early 5th century, to live there.

Catherine Nixey: It would have been glorious. When you look back as a historical tourist and you think, 'Where would I like to go?' Of all of the places in the Roman Empire, Alexandria wins it. According to legend, it was set out by Alexander the Great himself; one of around 17 or 18 cities he founded in his own name. He was not a modest man but a great one. Apparently, he had nothing else to set the city out with and so he drizzled grain along the ground and saying where everything would be. One of the most interesting things about the city is that from the very beginning, there was a library there. It was one of the earliest and one of the most famous libraries in the ancient world. Before you even get to that, the city itself was beautiful. It was set on the edge of the Mediterranean, so it had this wonderful climate. Ancient geographers write about this 'beautiful, blue sky, only ever with a few scudding white clouds'. The city itself was built to make the most of it. It had its streets aligned with the sea breezes, so that every afternoon, a cooling breeze would go along these wonderful, dazzlingly white marble streets. It was just full of marbles. It had one of the Wonders of the Ancient World. It had the Great Lighthouse of Alexandria, which was built in the bay to guide ships in. You can see a replica of it if you go to Fleet Street today.

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Violet Moller: Oh really? I didn't know that.

Catherine Nixey: Yeah, the tower of Fleet Street church is built, supposedly, like one of the drawings of the Great Lighthouse of Alexandria and it's what wedding cakes were modelled on later. I'm sure most of it is entirely erroneous but so goes the story. Most famously, it also had this library inside the museum. We get the word 'museum' from this but it actually just meant a shrine to the Muses, who were the goddesses of creativity and intellectual endeavour.

Violet Moller: Wow! That sounds amazing but people often forget that we are talking about centuries later and so how similar do you think the city would have been to how it was just after it was founded by the 5th century? We're talking about 800 years later, aren't we, pretty much?

Catherine Nixey: Yeah, the classical period is a long time [*laughter*]. That's what you always need to remember. Yes, it almost a millennium later and it's taken a few knocks in that period. It's grown also. It's now perhaps a million people but it has also taken some pretty serious knocks. Chief among them, about 30 years before the year we're looking at of 415 AD, in 392 AD - one of the most striking landmarks in Alexandria, was this Temple of Serapis. It stood perched above the city at the top of a hundred steps. It was seen for miles around and famous across the empire. It had been knocked down and razed the ground by a mob of angry Christians. As well as that, lots of the statues that peopled the city had also been defaced by this mob of Christians who had rampaged through. It's hard for us to understand because people have completely forgotten about the Temple of Serapis today. It's hard to understand quite how serious this was. When ancient writers write about the beautiful temples in their empire, they don't write, as we would expect, about the Parthenon. They don't write about the Pantheon. What they write about is this single temple, standing above Alexandria, at the top of those famous hundred marble steps. The shock of it being torn down, as it was by Christians in 392 AD, resounds through the literature like nothing else of that period, except perhaps the Sack of Rome. It was a massive blow to intellectuals and everyone.

Violet Moller: Were the scrolls inside it all destroyed at that same time? How complete was the destruction?

Catherine Nixey: This is one of those great questions that you never quite know in history. The remains of the Great Library of Alexandria, which really had been great - people say maybe 700,000 scrolls by the 3rd century AD - and if you compare that to later monastic libraries, which are the famous ones as people write a lot about these monastic libraries, they had maybe 500 texts. This had 700,000. It wouldn't be until the 14th century that the library in the Sorbonne in Paris only had 1,200 and it had managed to lose most of them.

Violet Moller: Yeah, it's a shocking comparison.

Catherine Nixey: I mean it's extraordinary. Not for a millennium did anything approach this library. The library had had very knocks and it had been put for safe-keeping inside the Serapeum, this wonderful temple, and they vanished. Nobody knows what happened to them. Gibbon, who was no friend of the Christians, said that 'they were scattered to the wind'. You can see the fury in his writing about them. Nobody knows. They went. They were never refound.

Violet Moller: Goodness! So Alexandria was obviously a place of quite a lot of unrest and social problems during this period. Can you go into a bit more detail about the Christians and

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the Pagan communities? I believe there was also a big Jewish community. Can you just go into a bit of detail about what was going on exactly during this period in the lead-up to 415?

Catherine Nixey: Of course. We're putting a pin in the fabric of the Roman Empire at this particular place in this particular time. It is a hundred years after Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, has seen his famous vision of the cross. From that moment, when Constantine saw the cross in the sky, that whole path of the Roman Empire turned. That path is sort of reaching its culmination now. Christian writers are daring to claim that there are no non-Christians left but then they undermine their own claim by quickly saying, 'And if there are, we have to stop them.' The empire has gone, within a century, from being the vast majority of people being what we would call Pagan to the vast majority of people being what we would call Christian. That hasn't happened without some awkwardness. The Serapeum is one example of that awkwardness. Fights in the streets are another example of that awkwardness and a generalised feeling of rancour between those who've remained Pagan, who are largely the upper classes it seems and those who have turned Christian, which is largely everyone else.

At this time in Alexandria, what you have is almost two Roman Empires sitting side by side. The new Christian Roman Empire is coming into being but pushing back against it is the old Pagan Roman Empire and those Pagan aristocrats, who have a totally different way of doing things, who don't believe in the Christian way and who don't like these new bishops who keep turning up everywhere and flexing their muscles. Frankly, many of them are furious at what they see as the desecration and the destruction that has been done.

Violet Moller: That takes us quite neatly on to your first scene, which I believe involves the bishop.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, a new bishop has just arrived in Alexandria. He's a new Patriarch and he's called Cyril. He sounds a bit like a baddie and he is. It turns out he's quite an unpleasant character. He is, in fact, the nephew of the Patriarch Theophilus who, among his credits, counts tearing down the Serapeum. It seems there is something of a family resemblance because this man, even Christians, had serious doubts about. He's a saint now in the Eastern Orthodox Church but he is described by one Council of Bishops - a fantastic phrase - as 'a monster born and educated for the destruction of the Church'.

Violet Moller: Goodness me! That's quite an epitaph.

Catherine Nixey: I know, isn't it? It proves to be so. He turns up in Alexandria in this city, which is a melting pot of various cultures. Sorry, that's a terrible cliché but it's taking in trade ships from all over the empire, and people from all over the empire, and religions from all over the empire. They simmer and they are simmering at this moment when Cyril arrives... and he tips it all over the edge. He dislikes the Jewish population there. There is a huge Jewish population in Alexandria and, like everything in Alexandria, it has a legend to it. They say that there were 100,000 Jews who were there. They were prisoners of war. One of the Ptolemies wanted to translate the Jewish texts but he couldn't get any of his Greek scholars to do it. They didn't know. This was hundreds of years before. So Ptolemy wants to translate the Jewish texts and he doesn't know how to do it and so he applies to the Jewish elders. He says, 'Will you translate it?' and they say, 'Okay, we will translate it if...' - and there is a big 'if' - '...you set free these 100,000 prisoners of war.' Such is the zest and the zeal of Ptolemies for getting every book translated, they say, 'Fine, we will do it. Have your 100,000 prisoners of war.' They get their 70 scholars and the first translation into Greek of the Old Testament is made, the Septuagint. It's called the Septuagint because of those 70 scholars that they get.

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Violet Moller: So from that moment on which was, of course, a long time before when we're talking about...

Catherine Nixey: Yeah, centuries before.

Violet Moller: ...there was a big, established Jewish community.

Catherine Nixey: Yeah, an established Jewish population and this annoys Cyril. There is a large Jewish population and one of the reasons you think it probably does annoy Cyril is that the Jews and the Pagans both have these ample places of worship. They have grand temples and they have synagogues. The Christians are still, at this moment, in cramped little house churches. They have nothing to compare. There are various scuffles and toings and froings. There's then an edict passed that says a certain celebration has to stop now. This doesn't sound like much but it enrages the Jews, who then have a fight with the Christians.

Violet Moller: But it's not a religious celebration?

Catherine Nixey: No, it's what they call mime or mimetic, which means nothing to us today. Basically, it was a festival which involves dancing.

Violet Moller: Would that festival have been something that all religions and everyone in Alexandria would have enjoyed?

Catherine Nixey: Yes, apart from the more pious Christians.

Violet Moller: Of course, yeah.

Catherine Nixey: But definitely some Christians did enjoy it. It was outlawed and the reasons are murky. The texts that you have for this period are pretty threadbare but what is clear is that this annoys some Christians but it really annoys some Jews. They then set a trap for some Christians, there's a massive fight, some Christians are killed and, at that moment, Cyril takes his chance and goes for his revenge.

Violet Moller: That's scene two, isn't it?

Catherine Nixey: Yes, this is scene two.

Violet Moller: Okay, so just staying with scene one for a second, I'd like to discover more about who appoints Cyril. Where does he come from? How does he interact with the other people who are running Alexandria at that time? What's the kind of Church/state situation because, as you say, the Church is still quite new, small and not enormously established yet? How does that work?

Catherine Nixey: That's such an interesting question and this is one of the great things of this period that you have two massive and ambitious bureaucracies that start grinding against each other. You get amazing descriptions of where the old, Greco-Roman hierarchy of governors, judges and all the bureaucracy that Rome had put in place to run an empire starts bumping into the new, Christian bureaucracy of bishops and all of the clerics, who are ruling in a certain area. They clash. They clash time and time again. What you see is one side pushing and trying to gain supremacy over the other side. There's an amazing scene in Antioch and it really puts it into a

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vivid picture, almost. You can see just how distressing this was for people who were witnessing it. A judge sits down in a church in Antioch and then he hears the chanting of monks appearing outside. He is involved in a case which involves a Christian and he knows that if he doesn't rule right, the monks are going to use force against him. So he jumps out of his seat and runs away and says, 'No justice can be exercised when they have appeared.' This is almost precisely what you see in Alexandria. You have a governor in place, Orestes, who is a Greek aristocrat. He is, in fact, a baptized Christian but he is very much in the old Greco-Roman mold. He does things by the book. He does things the Roman way. You then have this bishop, Cyril, and they clearly and quite obviously dislike each other. So Orestes continues trying to do things in his way and he has the power of a Roman governor but he has no power that compares to the bishops because, at this period, the bishops are not just standing in front of their congregations and saying nice words. They are beginning to command militias and in Alexandria, they have 800 men, who are known as the Parabalani, which means 'the reckless ones'. They are, effectively, his soldiers. They make his will happen on the ground.

Violet Moller: I heard that the Parabalani had a job. Wasn't it their job to remove dead bodies?

Catherine Nixey: Yes, they were called 'reckless'. Initially, there was no medical infrastructure, in the way that we would imagine, in the ancient world. If somebody died on the street, they were just left there to rot. If somebody was sick, they were just left in the street being ill. Now, you can't really run a city like that. Well, you can and the Romans did but it can go wrong quite fast. One of the things that the Christians were extremely good at were looking after the sick and the dying. The main job of the Parabalani was as stretcher-bearers. They would pick up these bodies, take them to hospitals - not hospitals as we would understand but take them to places where they would be cared for and they would take away dead bodies.

Violet Moller: So these young men were obviously extremely fervent in their beliefs.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, strong Christians and literally, strong Christians. They were muscular, young men doing God's work. They were completely illiterate as well, so they had a fairly elastic idea of what God's work was and mainly, they were directed by the bishop. If they knew that there was a trial going on in a law court and the Christian Patriarch wanted it to go one way, you would find the Parabalani would mass outside the law court.

Violet Moller: Terrifying.

Catherine Nixey: Completely terrifying. They wouldn't necessarily do anything but they were there.

Violet Moller: But just their presence would probably be enough.

Catherine Nixey: Their presence was enough and you were a brave judge if you ruled against them.

Violet Moller: Goodness. So they played quite an important role, I believe, in your second scene, didn't they?

Catherine Nixey: Yes, in the attack on Orestes. At this moment in Alexandria, those simmering tensions have got even worse and Cyril has decided to take his revenge on the Jews for the murder of the Christians.

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Violet Moller: Tell us more about Orestes.

Catherine Nixey: Well, the sources are slightly scant on him but I always think he must have been terribly attractive. There are no physical descriptions of him, sadly, but he was such an interesting man. He was a Christian and this comes up later. He says, 'I am a baptized Christian.' Yet, he is friends with Hypatia, who is this hugely charismatic woman who everybody wants a piece of. When visiting nobles come to Alexandria, they don't go to Cyril and this must rankle with him. They turn up at Hypatia's house and pay homage to her, in effect. They greet her. People come to her lectures from miles around, like from Syria and Rome. Everyone wants to be educated by her. She was just quite brilliant.

Violet Moller: That's something that Orestes celebrates, even though he is a Christian and she is a Pagan.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, even though he is a Christian and even though he is a man in the terribly hierarchical, male-dominated world, he is friends with Hypatia. They seem to be quite close because there's enough rumours in the city, which we'll come on to that later, that they are close in a way that many find difficult and sinister.

Violet Moller: Having an affair?

Catherine Nixey: Not having an affair, no. More of a Satanic kind of closeness [*laughter*] and that she is beguiling him by Satan.

Violet Moller: Yes, that's always the charge levelled at powerful women over times.

Catherine Nixey: Powerful women, yes. It begins here.

Violet Moller: We've got this situation with Orestes and the Parabalani.

Catherine Nixey: You have this scene where you have Cyril with 800 Parabalani behind him and Alexandria is very uncomfortable about these people because they pop up in the Legal Code. They are mentioned and the word 'terror' (which is exactly the same in Latin) is used against them because they are spreading terror among the city and their numbers have to be limited. Cyril is already a dubious man and he tells the Parabalani to go and purify (the word he uses which basically always means steal) the Jews of their synagogues. They sweep through the city, kick out the Jews into the desert and they 'purify them' of their synagogues which then, of course, are put over to Christian use as churches. They then also 'purify them' of their possessions, which means their houses. You have Jews left destitute in the desert, Christians taking up their homes and their synagogues and turning them into churches and Orestes can do nothing about this. Essentially, Roman governors rule, like most rulers, on trust and on the assumption that everyone will obey the state and the Christians aren't obeying the state. There's basically nothing he can do. He has no militia to match the militia that the bishop is wielding and so he writes to the Emperor. This enrages Cyril because Cyril thinks he's done exactly the right thing. He has got rid of the Jews and he has cleansed their synagogues. At this time, you start to get lots of anti-Jewish writings in Christian texts. John Chrysostom starts to write about how synagogues are 'the dwelling place of demons and houses of robbers'. Chrysostom is an odious man and his sermons are then reprinted in Nazi Germany.

Violet Moller: Of course, yeah. You can see that totally. Antisemitism.

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Catherine Nixey: Yes, you're beginning to get the start of a very virulent and unpleasant antisemitism.

Violet Moller: That must have been a huge moment in the city for everyone, even if you weren't Jewish or Christian. It must have caused a lot of violence and noticeable change within the city.

Catherine Nixey: It does and you're starting to get what you hadn't before; a hardening of religious lines. Previously, you'd had Pagans who could go to Jewish ceremonies and Jews would come to Christian ceremonies.

Violet Moller: They'd lived harmoniously for several decades.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, previously, they'd lived harmoniously and everyone would worship one god and then another god and there was nothing to match the monotheism that Christianity brought in. There was no idea that you could not worship this god and that god. That is what you're starting to get. You're starting to get hardening sectarian lines appearing and vicious fights breaking out in between them. Pagans found this astonishing. They found it amazing that they believed in a multiplicity of gods and got on fine. Christians seemed to believe in one god and spent their entire time fighting with each other.

Violet Moller: Quite often, within Christianity. Didn't Cyril punish a whole load of Christians who he felt weren't worshipping in the correct manner when he first arrived?

Catherine Nixey: Yes, because heresy is starting to appear and you're getting the idea that there's not just one god and one way of worshipping one god.

Violet Moller: Yes, and that carries on.

Catherine Nixey: Again, that's the start of something that will continue for a millennium. What is written and what is copied out changes and what is noticed by scholars is that what disappears is a sense of fun. The classical world had been massively irreverent and, to modern eyes, rude.

Violet Moller: With lots of humour and lots of comedies.

Catherine Nixey: Lots of humour, satire and poking fun at everyone from the emperor...

Violet Moller: Plays, novels...

Catherine Nixey: Yes, exactly - to the gods. The gods are mocked. Philosophers are mocked. Everything is mocked. One emperor is said to have turned into a god and somebody writes a satire called *The Pumpkinification of...* to imply that he's a ridiculous creature. There's also lots of bawdy writing, which becomes very troublesome to later Christians.

Violet Moller: And love poetry.

Catherine Nixey: Love poetry, yes. Wonderful love poetry and vivid poetry. No part of the body is off-limits and no sexual act is off-limits. Everything is written about. Christianity then comes and this sense of fun, more than anything else, goes and you get sermons, often hectoring. This is one of the striking things about the writing in this period is just that sense of irreverent joy disappears.

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Violet Moller: I think Stephen Greenblatt wrote about this in *The Swerve* that the big difference was that in the Pagan world, pain was awful and you just avoided pain as much as you possibly could and made your life as happy as you could on earth. Of course, then when Christianity comes in, particularly that early medieval period, it flips and it's all about the more pain you endure on earth, the better time you're going to have when you die and go to heaven.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, it's so interesting, isn't it? Those floor mosaics - I have a picture of a skeleton with a bottle of wine in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other, saying, 'Enjoy your life.' They disappear.

Violet Moller: That's a fascinating, huge societal change that takes place...

Catherine Nixey: It's a huge societal change.

Violet Moller: ... and John is very much part of that.

Catherine Nixey: So in this period, John Chrysostom is one of the most well-known. Chrysostom means, literally, 'Golden Mouth'. He was so charismatic that he wrote about how people would pack into his church to see his sermons, as if he was a rock star. His writing hasn't withstood the test of time. In one book, if you look in the index, you get a taste of what John Chrysostom's work is like and I have one here. In the index of a collection of his sermons, you can get a taste of what the whole thing is like. If you look under the word 'fear', you are offered: Needful to Holy Men - Page 334; A chastisement for carelessness - Page 347; Of the Lord's true riches - Page 351; A punishment - Page 355; Awakens conscience - Page 363; A good man of firm against - Page 369; Without the fear of hell, death, terrible - Page 374; Fear of hell is profitable - it goes on. You get 25 references on fear in John Chrysostom's work.

Violet Moller: How many on fun?

Catherine Nixey: Well, yes [*laughter*]. The final one in fear is: Purifies like a furnish.

Violet Moller: Oh my goodness.

Catherine Nixey: Lest you should be in any doubt. Under happiness, you would get merely 'In God alone - Page 460' and I think it says it all.

Violet Moller: That says it all. It really does. What happens to Orestes at this point?

Catherine Nixey: Orestes writes to the Emperor and you don't really hear much of a response but Cyril is enraged by this. He starts to call in supply troops, almost. Living in the hills around Alexandria are monks and they generally live lives of isolation. They pray at dawn and they pray at dusk but they often just live in places as simple as holes. They're not in monasteries so much. They're living their own life of personal aestheticism. Most of them are unwashed and unlettered but they somehow get the call and they start to mass in the city. As well as the 800 Parabalani, the sources say you get around 500 monks who come down from the hills around. You now have a huge presence of Christians in the city and it's very threatening. One day, after Orestes has complained to the emperor about what Cyril did to the Jews, he suddenly finds himself surrounded by not just the Parabalani but these monks.

Violet Moller: It must have been terrifying.

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Catherine Nixey: Completely terrifying. They are a sinister presence in and of themselves. They're outside the city which, in those times, says a lot. They're not behaving in the usual way of civilised men, literally men who are of the city. They are something else and they surround his chariot. His retinue, who completely rightly realise that they're utterly outnumbered, vanish. He is left on his own and one of the monks picks up a stone and throws it at Orestes. It hits him on the head and blood starts to pour down and covers his clothes. Now, at that moment, you get the faintest whiff of what the general feeling was. Texts in this period are not very good at describing what the common man thought but it's clear that the people of Alexandria are the ones who protect Orestes. There's some sort of movement among the locals and he escapes, the monks disperse and the feud between him and Cyril gets even deeper.

Violet Moller: Presumably, for the local people of Alexandria, this was the most appalling breakdown of the social order.

Catherine Nixey: Yes.

Violet Moller: Someone was throwing stones at their ruler. I mean that must have been a very frightening proposition because if that can happen, then there's no law and order. I don't know to what extent law and order existed at that time but I imagine, in a big city like Alexandria, people were able to go about their daily business without fear of a mob surrounding them.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, they had been. Certainly, you could always have mobs and you could always have riots but you weren't having them directed by one person in this way. You weren't getting an alternate state, which is what Christianity is bringing in.

Violet Moller: Yes, a state within a state.

Catherine Nixey: Yes.

Violet Moller: So this presages what happens next, which is your third scene. Tell us about that.

Catherine Nixey: This is one of the most famous scenes in all of the clashes between what we call the Pagans and the Christians and it's the murder of Hypatia of Alexandria. It's so famous that the Christians, in the end, take it over and they invent a saint called Catherine of Alexandria to whom they attribute various academic qualifications and then she gets murdered by the Romans in the Christian story but it's thought there was no Catherine of Alexandria. It's thought that this was Hypatia.

Violet Moller: Hypatia, as I said in my introduction, is really the only female scholar who we have any information about, which is a source of great personal sadness to me when I study the history of ideas. How did she become educated because, in those days, it was extremely unusual for women to be given any kind of education? Tell us a bit about her special upbringing.

Catherine Nixey: Wonderful. It was extremely unusual for anyone to become educated and then even more unusual for a woman. The Victorians loved Hypatia. They liked her as a perfect example of rational thought in the face of irrational forces. There is a wonderful Victorian painting of her.

Violet Moller: Didn't Charles Kingsley write quite a salacious story about her?

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Catherine Nixey: Charles Kingsley wrote very lusciously about her and her 'grandest beauty of the old Greek kind' and 'curving nose and lips' and things like that. She was generally regarded as a great beauty - a bit of a hottie. There is a famous Victorian painting of her standing naked with tumbling blonde locks just about covering her modesty, not very much, next to an old altar. That's by a Victorian, Charles William Mitchell and that's the image that the Victorians had of her. Unfortunately, it's bunk. She didn't stand naked next to any alters. She almost certainly didn't have tumbling blonde locks. She dressed very chastely. She was a philosopher and she was devoted to the life of the mind. She wore the philosopher's cloak, which all philosophers wore. By the time we get to 415, when we meet her, she's not elderly but certainly past late middle-age. She is also extremely chaste and so she's certainly not going around pouting. There is an amazing anecdote about one of her students, who falls in love with her. He plucks up his courage and confesses his love and she turns up at their next lecture and throws her sanitary towel at him and says, 'You love this, young man, and there is nothing beautiful about it.' [*Laughter*].

Violet Moller: Goodness me! That's one way of...

Catherine Nixey: ...of turning down a suitor. It didn't go any further.

Violet Moller: What about her father? Wasn't her father a famous mathematician?

Catherine Nixey: The facts that we have of her, if you go away from this romantic hazy ideal, is that she was the daughter of Theon, who was himself a brilliant mathematician. Theon edited Euclid's maths and when you used that maths book, up until the 20th century, you were using the works of Theon because he'd annotated Euclid. He taught his daughter and she, by all accounts, was even more brilliant than he was. We call her a philosopher but actually, she would be better off being called a mathematician because that's what she was. She worked with mathematical symbols and she worked with astrolabes. How she worked is important because it would later become involved in the charges that were levelled against her by people who had no idea and couldn't even write, let alone do maths.

Violet Moller: And who were suspicious, therefore, about this incredible knowledge that she had.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, who were suspicious of her knowledge. At this point, heretical movements of the Church had promoted women and had allowed women to do things but the Christianity that we get, that is coming to the forefront at this point, is very male.

Violet Moller: Oh, that's interesting. So early on, there were actually movements within the Christian Church that promoted women?

Catherine Nixey: Yeah. Well, there are movements within the Church in which God has feminine forms.

Violet Moller: Wow!

Catherine Nixey: There are ones in which the Holy Spirit is female.

Violet Moller: Really? I never knew that.

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Catherine Nixey: Women officiate in ceremonies but the Christianity we get is male and aggressively male. For instance, there was a female apostle called Junia but her name is masculinised by later scribes who are unwilling to allow...

Violet Moller: A woman to have such a starring role.

Catherine Nixey: Yeah.

Violet Moller: Obviously, Hypatia is this very powerful, intelligent woman. I heard one description of her as the 'luminous child of reason' which was just beautiful.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, her pupils get very keen on her. She's teaching the most educated and privileged young men of the empire and they write letters to each other saying how wonderful - 'luminous child of reason' is one. Another one writes about how the whole city was beguiled by her. They adore her. People turn up at her house. Her house is always crowded. Her lectures are packed and Orestes is among those visiting her.

Violet Moller: So it's really as a teacher that she is extremely important because I think during this period of scientific progress, it wasn't so much a period of discovery and of new ideas, it was more a period where ideas were being digested, processed and communicated. Her and her father, Theon, played a hugely important role in the communication and passing on of this kind of knowledge. She's obviously a very powerful woman in Alexandria and very, very well-known. This is, of course, going to make people like Cyril notice her...

Catherine Nixey: Of course.

Violet Moller: ...and make her a focal point. This is what happens next, isn't it?

Catherine Nixey: Exactly, yeah. She's a celebrity. She is a local celebrity and you get the sense that this would be very galling to people who either didn't respect her or who wanted some of that power for themselves. What happens is rumours start to travel and it's not clear who is spreading them but rumours start to spread among the people of Alexandria. What they say is not that Hypatia is a scholar or that she's a mathematician. They say, instead, that she is 'an agent of Satan'; that 'she is beguiling Orestes through her wiles; that she's using 'satanic wiles' and 'satanic instruments'. The Christians look at her astrolabes and the symbols that she writes her maths in...

Violet Moller: Astrolabes, of course, are astronomical calculators which help you when you are studying the stars and the planets.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, and they look quite fantastic. They say that they are instruments of the devil; that she is doing this; that with her satanic power, she is taking Orestes over to her side. They use this word 'atheising' and say that she is taking him away from God. That's not atheist in the sense that we are but *atheos* in Greek means 'un' almost and *theos* means 'god'. She is ungodding him almost. She's de-godding him. She's also de-godding the rest of Alexandria as well. If there's anyone worshipping in Alexandria and they're not worshipping the God, that's probably her fault.

Violet Moller: Also, I imagine that all these students she has, who are so overwhelmed by her greatness and her brilliant, are not likely to be converting to Christianity and so, in that way, she is a threat to the conversion process, isn't she?

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Catherine Nixey: Yes, it's interesting. She could be and you would think that. What the surprising thing about her is that some quite distinguished Christians come from her school. Somebody who later goes on to be a great bishop is one of her pupils.

Violet Moller: That is interesting. She's very open-minded.

Catherine Nixey: She's very open-minded and she's very hands-off. The impression we get is that she doesn't play a part. She actively seems to step back from the Christian and Pagan tensions that are simmering in the city. If you read it hoping that she's going to be an advocate for Pagan ways or an advocate against the Christians, you'll be disappointed because she never does. She doesn't seem to be at any of the main clashes. She never rejects anyone from her lectures.

Violet Moller: So she's always above that. She's doing the maths and the astronomy.

Catherine Nixey: It's almost that she's above it, yeah.

Violet Moller: But that, unfortunately, does not save her.

Catherine Nixey: Not above enough. No, it doesn't save her. In 415 AD, these rumours start to spread and they become fanned by the Parabalani. The Parabalani start this almost whispering campaign against her, according to the sources. One day, she goes out of her house on her chariot. She famously went around the city every day on her chariot. It's not clear whether she does this just to greet people or whether it's part of her daily routine of whatever she does. As she's going on her chariot, she looks up and she sees that she is surrounded by a mob of the Parabalani. At their head is a gentleman called Peter, who we hear is, in all respects, a perfect believer in Jesus Christ. They stop her and he is in charge. We don't know quite how it happens but she is pulled from her chariot. She must know, because she's friends with Orestes, that this is not good news. She knew what happened to Orestes. She knew he only escaped by the skin of his teeth and now the same has happened to her. She is pulled from her chariot and the descriptions of what happened to her next vary but... most probably, they took broken potsherds which were often used as a weapon in antiquity.

Violet Moller: What was the word?

Catherine Nixey: Ostrakon.

Violet Moller: Yes, because it could also be oyster shells, couldn't it?

Catherine Nixey: Yes, it could be oyster shells.

Violet Moller: Which is even more awful but beautiful at the same time.

Catherine Nixey: They took them, they took the sharp edges and they flayed her alive.

Violet Moller: You can't imagine. You can't imagine.

Catherine Nixey: No. There are no words. In broad daylight, on a spring day in March 415 AD, they flayed her alive. Some sources say that while she still gasped for breath, they gouged the eyes from her head.

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Violet Moller: Oh, stop, stop.

Catherine Nixey: Again, sources vary as to what happened to her. Some say she was dismembered and taken to a rubbish heap and her limbs thrown on it.

Violet Moller: What was the aftermath of this? Again, with the synagogues being taken over, that must have been a hugely shocking moment for the inhabitants of Alexandria but this murder must have really, really been the end of something and the beginning of something new; a moment of absolute change and horror, mustn't it?

Catherine Nixey: It feels like that when you read it. I think the most horrific thing that happened was that nothing happened. Nobody seems to have been particularly punished for this. Cyril continues.

Violet Moller: So Cyril continued?

Catherine Nixey: Cyril continues. Cyril can distance himself from this violence. He can wash his hands of it. He can move back from it and say, 'Oh, it's the Parabalani.' A few laws appear which try to limit the numbers of Parabalani but no one is punished for it.

Violet Moller: I admit that you can't date it to precisely that moment because it was a very gradual decline but Alexandria lost its position as the centre of the intellectual world pretty soon after that.

Catherine Nixey: In losing her, it lost the greatest mind in the empire at the time. She was just brilliant. If you talk to mathematicians who have studied her, she was superlative. So by virtue of her death, it's lost much of its preeminence.

Violet Moller: Wow! What a story. So sad and not surprising that it's one of the most famous moments in ancient history and in antiquity. It's one of those things which people have always retold.

Catherine Nixey: Because it feels, in so many ways, so unjust because she had done so much for the city and she, herself, had been so secular in the sense of never taking sides; that she should be punished and that she should be punished so unjustly; that this wonderful woman of letters is flayed alive, literally, by people who can't even read.

Violet Moller: It's incredibly symbolic, isn't it?

Catherine Nixey: Isn't it? Yeah.

Violet Moller: I think also the fact that she was a woman, she was educated and she was Pagan. She had all three of those huge things going against her, basically, when it came to the Christian Church establishing itself.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, and that's what the story is. It is of a rival empire; the state within the state, as you nicely put it, rising up. It's not so much a story of individuals, this period. It is the story of the crushing of the old way of life.

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Violet Moller: Yeah, and it must have been devastating to witness that, as someone who wasn't convinced by the arguments of Christianity. I know that there are lots of sources elsewhere in your brilliant book, *The Darkening Age*. You talk about the philosophers leaving Athens and how that would have felt to them, just watching centuries of really, really fantastic intellectual tradition just being ground down.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, slowly ground down and it does feel that this is a moment from which Alexandria never recovers. What you see is you see in the writings of philosophers, a hundred years later, they are still appalled by this. They call them these 'truly bestial men'. Even Christian sources are embarrassed by this but they are not embarrassed enough and nobody is punished.

Violet Moller: When you described those people as monks, that's quite shocking because our modern perception of a monk is of someone who is very peaceful.

Catherine Nixey: It's the kind of Benedictine monk, isn't it?

Violet Moller: Yes, it is!

Catherine Nixey: A learned Benedictine monk.

Violet Moller: That obviously came in much later.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, the Benedictines had not yet got going.

Violet Moller: Yes, that's a hundred years later, isn't it?

Catherine Nixey: The Christian Church itself was aware of the threat of these strange, uncivilised monks outside the city who obeyed nothing and did nothing that normal other men did.

Violet Moller: I suppose for any new faith or regime that is trying to establish itself, it's almost impossible to do it without some kind of violence because you have to remove what has gone before. Especially, as you were saying earlier about Christianity being a monotheistic religion and absolutely no other gods allowed, that was what really made it so different from what had gone before. In Egypt, there are countless examples of gods. There was an Egyptian god and then the Romans arrived and they just squashed the two together and made another god. It was so open and amorphous, wasn't it?

Catherine Nixey: It takes a long time for the Christians to persuade them that their god will do everything. There is this wonderful sermon by Augustine. They arrive and they say, 'We have the great, all-powerful God,' and, to an extent, that's fine but what they found was that when they wanted to pray over matters of life and death, they would pray to the Christian god but if their knee was hurting, they would revert to praying to the Pagan god.

Violet Moller: Yeah, or they wanted the harvest to be good or something.

Catherine Nixey: Yeah, they felt that this great, all-powerful god wouldn't be worried about their knee or their bunions. There's a wonderful sermon by Augustine in which he says, 'Make no mistake, he even sees to the salvation of your hen.' [*Laughter*]

Violet Moller: And your bunion.

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Catherine Nixey: Your bunions and your knees, all of it. You don't have to go to your other gods, you can use ours. When we tell the story of faith, we see it as the story of hearts and minds being converted but as much as that, it was a physical, on-the-ground process of taking back each temple. Every time you see a church that has been converted from a temple into a church, like as not, there was somebody watching that and they were feeling...

Violet Moller: Who had been worshipping in that temple their whole life.

Catherine Nixey: You can argue and you can say that nobody minded. That's not what the sources appear to say and perhaps the majority of people...

Violet Moller: It would be weird if nobody minded. That makes no sense, does it?

Catherine Nixey: But it does feel strange, yes. They chained them shut. They chained the temples shut. They forbade sacrifice. They forbade sacrifice on pain of death. These laws are being made for somebody.

Violet Moller: Yeah, of course, of course. It makes complete sense. My last question that I have to ask you is what would like to bring back with you. If you can choose one object or item from 415 AD, what would you bring back to the present?

Catherine Nixey: I think it would have to be one of her astrolabes.

Violet Moller: Good choice. Yeah, they are so beautiful.

Catherine Nixey: Yes, so beautiful. Her hands would have been on it.

Violet Moller: Yes... and she might have even designed it because she was supposed to have been involved in the design and construction, wasn't she?

Catherine Nixey: Yes, yes, wasn't she?

Violet Moller: Of course, in those days, if you wanted an astrolabe, you couldn't just pop down to the shop *[laughter]* and buy one. You had to actually build it yourself and design it yourself.

Catherine Nixey: Yeah, and you imagine her doing it with her father and you imagine just all of that extraordinary Alexandria knowledge. It was in Alexandria that Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the Earth.

Violet Moller: To within a couple of hundred miles. Amazing!

Catherine Nixey: It was within 80 kilometres. Amazing!

Violet Moller: Yeah, really amazing. That's a good choice. Well, if you bring it back, I would like to have a look at it please *[laughter]*.

Catherine Nixey: You'd be welcome.

Violet Moller: Thank you so much, Catherine. I've really enjoyed our chat and I hope the listeners have too.

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Catherine Nixey: Thank you.

Artemis Irvine: *The Darkening Age* by Macmillan is available in hardback and paperback in all good bookshops.

For our next episode, we're talking to the mathematician, Marcus du Sautoy. Thanks so much for listening. Goodbye.

[Sound of ticking clock]

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