

EMERALD TABLET

A Publication of San Marcos Masonic Lodge 342 AF&AM



The Winding Stairs

Brother John Brengle

originally a presentation based largely on Brother Albert Mackey's perspective on the same subject

From the First Book of Kings, Chapter 6, v 8, we read: "*The door for the Middle Chamber was in*

the right side of the house; and they went up with winding stairs into the Middle Chamber..." From this passage the Freemasons of the eighteenth century adopted the symbol of the Winding Stairs, and introduced it into the Fellow Craft's Degree, where it has ever since remained, in the American Rite.

The Legend of the Winding Stairs

In every investigation of the true meaning of every Masonic symbol and allegory, we must be governed by the single principle that the whole design of Freemasonry as a speculative science is the investigation of divine truth. The Mason is, from the first moment of his initiation as an EA, to the time he has reached the full fruition of his own Masonic light, an investigator—a laborer in the quarry of his own temple—and whose wages shall be Truth.

In talking of the Winding Stairs, a discussion into their origin is prudent, along with their number, the objects which they recall, and their termination, but above all, take into consideration the great design which an ascent upon them was intended to accomplish. We are told that the steps of this winding staircase commenced at the entrance of the Temple; the porch. But nothing is more undoubted in the science of Masonic symbolism than that the Temple was the representative of the world purified by the Divine Presence. The world of the profane is without

the Temple; the world of the initiated is within its sacred walls. Hence to enter the Temple, to pass within the porch, to be made a Freemason, and to be born into the world of Masonic light are all synonymous and convertible terms. Don't ever forget that part of that divine light is that, symbolically, we, ourselves, are that temple. Here then, the symbolism of the Winding Stairs begins.

The Apprentice, having entered within the porch of the Temple, has begun his Masonic life. But the First Degree in Freemasonry, like the lesser mysteries of the ancient systems of initiation, is only a preparation and purification for something higher. The Entered Apprentice is the child in Freemasonry. The lessons which he receives are simply intended to cleanse the heart and prepare the recipient for that mental illumination which is to be given in the succeeding Degrees. As a Fellow Craft, he has advanced another step, and as the Degree is emblematical of youth, so it is here that the intellectual education of the candidate begins.

It is also here, at the very spot which separates the porch from the sanctuary, where childhood ends and manhood begins, that he finds stretching out before him a Winding Stair which invites him to ascend it. The winding stairway is the symbol of discipline and instruction, teaching the candidate that here must commence his Masonic labor—here he must enter upon those glorious though difficult researches, the end of which he cannot know, he cannot see, yet he takes it upon himself because he has learned already that Masonic pursuits are laudable, and the curious researcher will be rewarded.

The Winding Stairs begin after the candidate has passed within the porch and between the pillars of strength and establishment, as a significant

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emerald tablet

Emerald Tablet is published periodically by San Marcos Masonic Lodge 342, A.F. & A.M.

Opinions expressed in Emerald Tablet do not necessarily reflect those of San Marcos Masonic Lodge 342, the Grand Lodge of Texas or its respective officers.

Lodge Contact Information:

3024 Hwy 123 South
San Marcos, TX 78666

(512) 392-2737

<http://sanmarcoslodge342.org/>

Contributing Authors:

Paul Bullock

John Brengle

Al Matthews

John Tolbert

Photography:

Joshua Brake

Paul Bullock

John Tolbert

Article submissions:

Please send all submissions to:

Paul Bullock

pbullock@austin.rr.com

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symbol to teach him that as soon as he has passed beyond the years of irrational childhood, and commenced his entrance upon manly life, the laborious task of self-improvement is the first duty that is placed before him. He cannot stand still; his journey requires him to ascend, step by step, until he has reached the summit, where the treasures of knowledge await him.

The number of these steps in all the systems has been odd. Ancient knowledge has told us that the reason for having odd numbers of steps was that the candidate for the mysteries of any system would start and end the journey upon the same foot, which was deemed a fortunate omen.

But most now believe, that the symbolism of numbers was borrowed by the Freemasons from Pythagoras, in whose system of philosophy it plays an important part, and in which odd numbers were considered as more perfect than even ones. Hence, throughout the Masonic system we find a predominance of odd numbers; and while three, five, seven, nine, fifteen, and twenty-seven, are all-important symbols, we seldom find a reference to two, four, six, eight, or ten. You can find references to them in *Pikes Morals and Dogma*, however. The odd number of the stairs was therefore intended to symbolize the idea of perfection, and it was the object of the candidate to attain perfection.

As to the particular number of the stairs, this has varied at different periods. The early English Freemasons gave the whole number as thirty-six, dividing them into series of one, three, five, seven, nine and eleven.

The error of making an even number, which was a violation of the Pythagorean principle of odd numbers as the symbol of perfection, was corrected in the Hemming lectures, adopted at the Union of the two Grand Lodges of England in about 1842. In the United States the number was still further reduced to fifteen, divided into three series of three, five, and seven steps.

The candidate, then, in the Second Degree of Freemasonry, represents a man starting forth on the journey of life, with the great task before him of self improvement. For the faithful performance of this task, a reward is promised, which reward consists in the development of all his intellectual faculties, the moral and spiritual elevation of his character, and the acquisition of Truth and knowledge.

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Now, the attainment of this moral and intellectual condition supposes an elevation of character, an ascent from a lower to a higher life, and a passage of toil and difficulty, through rudimentary instruction, to the full fruition of wisdom.

This is therefore beautifully symbolized by the Winding Stairs, at whose foot the aspirant stands ready to climb the toilsome steep, even though, because of the winding nature of the stairs, he cannot see the end and therefore cannot know the results of his climb. And hence a distinguished writer (whose name I cannot recall) has said that "these steps, like all the Masonic symbols, are illustrative of discipline and doctrine, as well as of natural, mathematical, and metaphysical science and open to us an extensive range of moral and speculative inquiry."

At the first pause which he makes he is instructed in the peculiar organization of the order of which he has become a disciple. But the information here given, if taken in its naked, literal sense, is barren, and unworthy of his labor. The rank of the officers who govern, and the names of the degrees which constitute the institution, can give him no knowledge which he has not before possessed. We must look therefore to the symbolic meaning of these allusions for any value which may be attached to this part of Masonry.

The reference to the organization of the Masonic institution is intended to remind the aspirant of the union of men in society, and the development of the social state out of the state of nature. He is thus reminded, in the very outset of his journey, of the blessings which arise from civilization, and of the fruits of virtue and knowledge which are derived from that condition. Masonry itself came about as a result of civilization; while, in grateful return, it has been and will remain, I believe, one of the most important means of extending that condition of mankind.

All the monuments of antiquity that the ravages of time have left, combine to prove that man had no sooner emerged from the savage into the social state, than he commenced to organizing religious mysteries and separating the sacred from the profane. Then came the evolution of architecture as a means of providing convenient dwellings and necessary shelter from the ravages of the seasons, with all the mechanical arts connected with it; and lastly, geometry, as a necessary science to enable the cultivators of land to measure and designate the limits of their possessions. All these are claimed as peculiar characteristics of Speculative Masonry, which may be considered as the type of civilization. Hence we at once see the fitness of the symbolism which commences the aspirant's upward progress in the cultivation of knowledge and the search after truth, by recalling to his mind the condition of civilization and the social union of mankind as necessary preparations for the attainment of his goal. In the allusions to the officers of a lodge, and the degrees of Masonry as explanatory of the organization of our own society, we clothe in our own Masonic symbolic language, the history of the organization of society.

Advancing in his progress, the candidate is invited to hesitate again and to contemplate another series of instructions. The human senses, through which we receive all our ideas of perception, and which, therefore, constitute the most important sources of our knowledge, are here referred to as symbols of intellectual cultivation. Architecture, as the most important of the arts which conduce to the comfort of mankind, is also alluded to here. In his second pause, in the ascent of the Winding Stairs, the aspirant is therefore reminded of the necessity of cultivating practical knowledge.

So far, then, the instructions he has received relate to his own condition in society as a member of the great social compact, and to his means of becoming, by a knowledge of the arts of practical life, a necessary and useful member of that society.

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Still must he go onward and forward. The stair is still before him; its summit is not yet reached, and still further treasures of wisdom are to be sought for, or the reward will not be gained, nor the middle chamber, the abiding place of truth, be reached.

In his third pause, he therefore arrives at that point in which the whole circle of human science and art is to be explained. Symbols, we know, are in themselves arbitrary and of conventional signification, and the complete circle of human science might have been as well symbolized by any other sign or series of doctrines as by the seven liberal arts and sciences. But Masonry is an institution of antiquity, we believe; and this selection of the liberal arts and sciences as a symbol of the completion of human learning is one of the most vibrant evidences that we have of its antiquity.

In the seventh century, and for a long time afterwards, the circle of instruction to which all the learning of the most eminent schools and most distinguished philosophers was confined, was limited to what were then called the liberal arts and sciences, and consisted of two branches, the trivium and the quadrivium. The trivium included grammar, rhetoric, and logic; the quadrivium comprehended arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

In ancient times, these seven arts and sciences were supposed to include universal knowledge. He who was master of these was thought to have no need of a preceptor to explain any books or to solve any questions which lay within the compass of human reason, the knowledge of the trivium having furnished him with the key to all language, and that of the quadrivium having opened to him the secret laws of nature.

At a period when few were instructed in the trivium, and very few studied the quadrivium, to be master of both was sufficient to complete the character of a philosopher. The propriety, therefore, of adopting the seven liberal arts and sciences as a symbol of the completion of human learning is apparent. The candidate, having reached this point, is now supposed to have accomplished the task upon which he had entered--he has reached the last step, and is now ready to receive the full fruition of human learning.

So far, then, we are able to comprehend the true symbolism of the Winding Stairs. They represent the progress of an inquiring mind with the toils and labors of intellectual cultivation and study, and the preparatory acquisition of all human science, as a preliminary step to the attainment of divine truth.

Here again we allude to the symbolism of numbers, which is for the first time presented to the consideration of the Masonic student in the legend of the Winding Stairs. The theory of numbers as the symbols of certain qualities was originally borrowed by the Masons from the school of Pythagoras. It will be impossible, however, to develop this doctrine, in its entire extent, on the present occasion, for the numeral symbolism of Masonry would itself constitute materials for an ample essay. It will be sufficient to advert to the fact that the total number of the steps, amounting in all to fifteen, in the American system, is a significant symbol. For fifteen was a sacred number among the Orientals, because the letters of the holy name JAH were, in their numerical value, equivalent to fifteen; and hence a figure in which the nine digits were so disposed as to make fifteen either way when added together perpendicularly, horizontally, or diagonally, constituted one of their most sacred talismans. The fifteen steps in the Winding Stairs are therefore symbolic of the name of God.

But we are not yet done. Remember that a reward was promised for all this toilsome ascent of the Winding Stairs. Now, what are the wages of a Speculative Mason? Not money, nor corn, nor wine, nor oil. All these are all simply symbols. His wages are TRUTH, or that approximation to it which will be most appropriate to the degree into which he has been initiated.

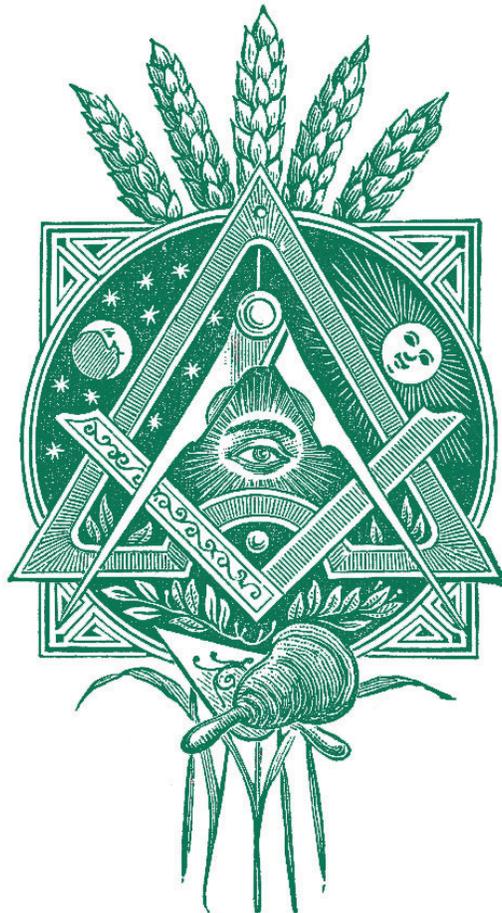
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The Winding Stairs

It is one of the most beautiful, but at the same time most abstruse, doctrines of the science of Masonic symbolism, that the Mason is ever to be in search of truth, but is never to find it. In other words, we must constantly strive for perfection in our lives, but be satisfied when we attain proficiency. We know, when we think about it that only in the Divinity is perfection attained. It is to teach the humiliating but necessary lesson that the knowledge of the nature of God and of man's relation to him, which knowledge constitutes divine truth, can never be acquired in this life. It is only when the portals of the grave open to us, and give us an entrance into a more perfect life, that this knowledge is to be attained.

The Middle Chamber is therefore symbolic of this life, where the truth is to be reached by approximation only, and yet where we are to learn that that truth will consist in a perfect knowledge of the G.A.O.T.U. This is the reward of the inquiring Mason; in this consist the wages of a Fellow Craft; he is directed to the truth, but must travel farther and ascend still higher to attain it.

It is, then, as a symbol, and a symbol only, that we must study this beautiful legend of the Winding Stairs. But to believe that all this pictorial representation of an ascent by a Winding Staircase to the place where the wages of labor were to be received, was an allegory to teach us the ascent of the mind from ignorance, through all the toils of study and the difficulties of obtaining knowledge, receiving here a little and there a little, adding something to the stock of our ideas at each step, until, in the middle chamber of life,--in the full fruition of manhood,--the reward is attained, and the purified and elevated intellect is invested with the reward in the direction how to seek God and God's truth,--to believe this is to believe and to know the true design of Speculative Masonry, the only design which makes it worthy of a good or a wise man's study.



Next issue of Emerald Tablet

Feature article:

Early 21st Century America and Freemasonry by Brother Al Matthews.

Recommended Reading—more books for your consideration

Support Emerald Tablet

Emerald Tablet needs article submissions. Feature articles should have a minimum length of 1500 words or more. If you have graphics to support your article, such as, photos, drawings or portraits, please include them. Graphics help readers visualize your writing. We are interested in articles about Masonry or articles related to Masonry. Emerald Tablet is dedicated to furthering Masonic education and as such we do not want articles of a political nature, i.e., inflammatory articles containing unsubstantiated bias or emotionally charged content. Please keep your topics limited to those which will further the enlightenment of the craft.

We are also interested in publishing dates of upcoming events which may be of interest to our readership. Masonic activities such as education forums, research lodge meetings and important lodge dates are always welcome.

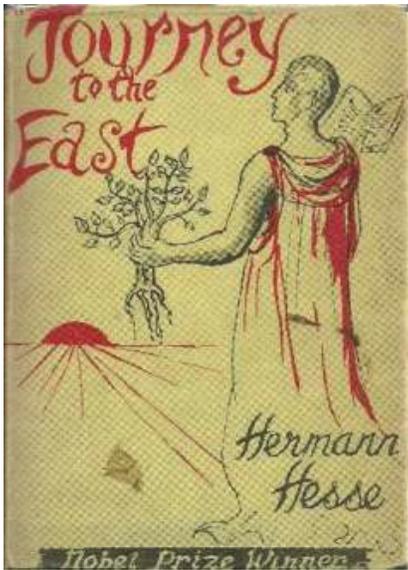
Photos from recent Masonic activities accompanied with descriptions of the photos are welcome as well.

With this issue, we have changed our scope to one feature article per issue. This article will start on page one and flow into as many pages as are required. We will only provide copy and syntax editing—we will not alter your content any more than absolutely necessary.

Please send all submissions to Paul Bullock at pbullock@austin.rr.com.

Thank you.

Recommended Reading



Journey to the East-Hermann Hesse

Journey to the East is written from the point of view of a man—in the book called "H.H."—who becomes a member of "The League", a timeless religious sect whose members include famous fictional and real characters, such as Plato, Mozart, Pythagoras, Paul Klee, Don Quixote, Puss in Boots, Tristram Shandy, Baudelaire, and the ferryman Vasudeva, a character from one of Hesse's earlier works, Siddhartha. A branch of the group goes on a pilgrimage to "the East" in search of the "ultimate Truth". The narrator speaks of traveling through both time and space, across geography imaginary and real.

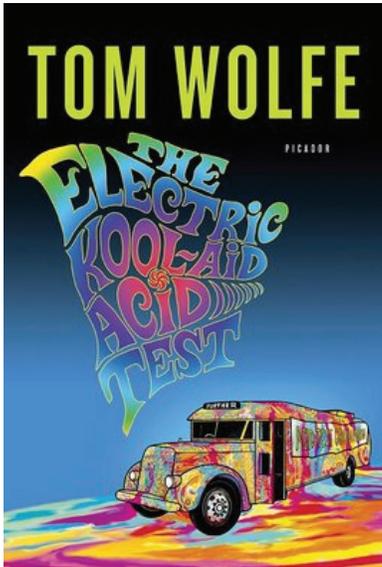
Although at first fun and enlightening, the Journey runs into a crisis in a deep mountain gorge called Morbio Inferiore when Leo, apparently a simple servant, disappears, causing the group to plummet into anxiety and argument. Leo is described as happy, pleasant, handsome, beloved by everyone, having a rapport with animals—to a discerning reader, he seems a great deal more than a simple servant, but nobody in the pilgrimage, including the narrator, seems to get this. Nor does anyone seem to wonder why the group dissolves in dissension and bickering after Leo disappears. Instead they accuse Leo of taking with him various objects which they seem to be missing—and which turn up later—and which they regard as very important and which later turn out not to be very important and they blame him for the eventual disintegration of the group and failure of the Journey.

Years later the narrator tries to write his story of the Journey, even though he has lost contact with the group and believes the League no longer exists. But he is unable to put together any coherent account of it; his whole life has sunk into despair and disillusionment since the failure of the one thing which was most important to him, and he has even sold the violin with which he once offered music to the group during the Journey. Finally, at the advice of a friend, he finds the servant Leo and, having failed in his attempt to re-establish communication with him or even be recognized by him when he meets him on a park bench, writes him a long, impassioned letter of "grievances, remorse and entreaty" and posts it to him that night.

The next morning Leo appears in the narrator's home and tells him he has to appear before the High Throne to be judged by the officials of the League. It turns out—to the narrator's surprise—that Leo, the simple servant, is actually President of League, and the crisis in Morbio Inferiore was a test of faith which the narrator and everyone else flunked rather dismally. H. H. discovers that his "aberration" and time spent adrift was part of his trial, and is allowed to return to the League if he can pass any new test of faith and obedience. What he chooses, and the final dénouement, is a stroke of Hesse's typical Eastern mysticism at its finest.—*Wikipedia* Beautiful, poetic allegory. Highly recommended.

Journey to the East, Hermann Hesse 1932

Recommended Reading



The Electric Koolaid Acid Test-Tom Wolfe

During the 1950s and 1960s, America's youth were invested in activism and the promotion of a progressive agenda. When society endorsed norms and attitudes that were contestable, a growing number of youths challenged norms and sought to promote change through participation in the political and social process. Historical events including the Civil Rights Movement and early anti-Vietnam opposition were fueled by youth participation. Groups like SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and Students for a Democratic Society were purveyors of change, and did so through active participation. Oftentimes historical periods and social movements are blurred together and realities forgotten. The typical presumption about youth in the turbulent decades of '50s, '60s, and '70s

is that they were the type of people Wolfe writes about in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. The reality however is that groups like the SDS and SNCC were actually college students and workers who sought to change America from the inside. Intellectual movements like Black Power and the New Left were formed during this time, but popular portrayals and lack of adherence to history lead to the muddying of these significant contributions.

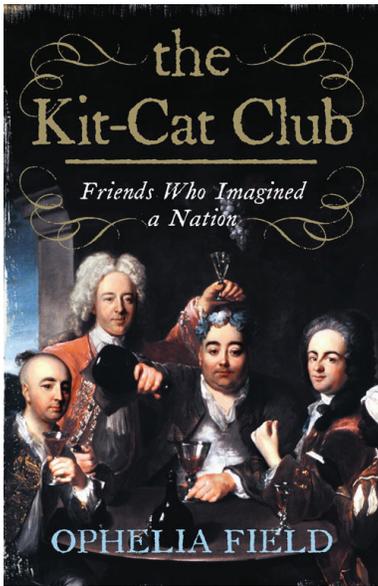
The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test was a significant literary contribution of its time because it led to the muddying of historically significant movements from only years before. By the time Wolfe was writing his book, a shift had already occurred in which intellectual movements were slowly fading and a new culture was growing amid America's youth. Wolfe's book universalized the newer sentiments of this generation, and forgetting the fervor of recent political movements, a self-involved generation with less globalized ideals emerged. This shift to the Beat Generation or "dropout generation" led to the eventual development the iconic hippie movement which became synonymous with American activism. Earlier movements also rejected societal norms and expectations, but they were willing to wade through society and cultivate change through representation and participation. The Beats and eventual hippies that Wolfe brought to the public eye sought isolation and exclusion. Rather than attempting to mold society in a way that fit their desires, they essentially left American society and culture behind, establishing what became known as the counterculture.

Works like *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* displayed Wolfe's tackling of modern day phenomena and his use of new journalism techniques that are considered to be the roots of New Journalism, a sort of renaissance in the field of journalism.—*Wikipedia*

Painfull and disturbing, *The Electric Koolaid Acid Test* encapsulates the story of an experiment gone mad, originating from a secret CIA project called MKUltra in the early 1960s. *The Electric Kookaid Acid Test* paints a terrifying portrait of counterculture during the period. Recommended.

The Electric Koolaid Acid Test, Tom Wolfe. 1968

Recommended Reading



The Kit-Cat Club-Ophelia Field

Ophelia Field's 'Kit-Cat Club' is a story of a changing time in 17th-century Britain, during the reigns of [William III & Mary II], Queen Anne and George I, when a group of men and their enterprising initiatives paved the way for new literary and political viewpoints, born out of the most unexpected circumstances.

The Kit-Cat Club was founded in the late 1690s when Jacob Tonson, a bookseller of lowly birth, forged a partnership with the pie-maker Christopher (Kit) Cat [more probably Catling]. What began as an eccentric publishing rights deal—Tonson paying to feed hungry young writers and so receiving first option on their works—developed into a unique gathering of intellectuals and interests, then into the unofficial centre of Whig power during the reigns of William & Mary, Anne and George I.

With consummate skill, Ophelia Field, author of the acclaimed biography of the first Duchess of Marlborough, 'The Favourite', portrays this formative period in British history through the club's intimate lens. She describes the vicious Tory-Whig 'paper wars', the mechanics of aristocratic patronage, the London theatre world and its battles over sexual morality, England's union with Scotland, Dublin society governed by a Kit-Cat and the hurly-burly of Westminster politics.

Field expertly unravels the deceit, rivalry, friendships and fortunes lost and found through the club, along with wonderful descriptions of how its alcohol-fuelled, all-male meetings were conducted. Tracing the Kit-Cat Club's far-reaching influence for the first time, this group biography illuminates a time when Britain was searching for its own identity.—*Amazon UK*

Educated at Christ Church, Oxford, Field is a brilliant historian and superb writer. This story will leave you tired in the morning from reading all night. Highly recommended.

The Kit-Cat Club, Friends who imagined a nation, Ophelia Field 2008

Parting Shot



Hypatia AD 350–370 Died 415 was an Alexandrine Neoplatonist philosopher in Egypt who was the first well-documented woman in mathematics. As head of the Platonist school at Alexandria, she also taught philosophy and astronomy. As a Neoplatonist philosopher, she belonged to the mathematic tradition of the Academy of Athens, as represented by Eudoxus of Cnidus; she was of the intellectual school of the 3rd century thinker Plotinus, which encouraged logic and mathematical study in place of empirical enquiry and strongly encouraged law in place of nature.

According to the only contemporary source, Hypatia was murdered by a Christian mob after being accused of exacerbating a conflict between two prominent figures in Alexandria: the governor Orestes and the Bishop of Alexandria. Kathleen Wider proposes that the murder of Hypatia marked the end of Classical antiquity, and Stephen Greenblatt observes that her murder “effectively marked the downfall of Alexandrian intellectual life”. On the other hand, Maria Dzielska and Christian Wildberg note that Hellenistic philosophy continued to flourish in the 5th and 6th centuries, and perhaps until the age of Justinian.—*Wikipedia*