



Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

by Jacqueline Jenkins

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A medieval depiction of Hildegard.

Hildegard of Bingen, mystic and poet, prophet and playwright, composer and scientist, lived all but the first few years of her life in the company of women.

Born in 1098 in the Rhineland, Hildegard, the tenth child of a noble family, was offered by her parents at the age of eight to the community of Benedictine nuns in Disibodenberg, where she became abbess in 1136.

Hildegard's spiritual gifts had manifested early in her life: at the age of three, as she reveals in her *Vita*, she saw a brightness so great it made her soul tremble. In fact, according to the documents prepared for the process of Hildegard's canonization (a process initiated but never completed, though she has been listed as a saint in the Roman martyrology since the Middle Ages), she had already perceived a vision of the "living Light" while still in her mother's womb.

In 1141, Hildegard experienced a remarkable series of visions, accompanied by a heavenly command to write what she was seeing. Although she initially refused the command, a devastating illness (sent, she believed, from God) persuaded her to begin writing her first visionary text, the *Scivias* (*Know the Ways of the Lord*). Her corpus eventually included two other visionary works, a song collection, a musical drama, and several scientific treatises.

In 1148, anxious to win spiritual and economic independence for her community from the monks of Disibodenberg, Hildegard entered into what was to be a difficult battle to relocate her nuns to the Rupertsberg, on the Rhine near Bingen.

It was about this time, as well, that Hildegard's most difficult personal struggle began. As a spiritual leader and writer, Hildegard necessarily supported the Church's teachings on same-sex desire; nevertheless, her *Vita* and her surviving letters demonstrate a remarkable emotional intensity for the women with whom she came into contact.

In particular, her affection for her disciple and assistant, Richardis von Stade, and the betrayal she felt when Richardis left her, threatened Hildegard's professional credibility and her inner calm.

In 1151, Richardis was offered a position as abbess in a distant convent. Although Hildegard refused permission for her to leave, Richardis did go, and the depth of Hildegard's feeling is revealed in the letters she wrote imploring her young friend to return: "I loved the nobility of your conduct, your wisdom and your chastity, your soul and the whole of your life, so much that many said: What are you doing?"

Hildegard's efforts to force Richardis to return to her included an intense and far-reaching letter campaign, but it was unsuccessful. However, after Richardis' sudden early death in 1152, her brother revealed in a letter to Hildegard his sister's tears at their separation. He told the abbess, "if death had not prevented her, she would have come to you."

Modern readers of Hildegard's works and her life have delighted in the images of female desire and the positive representations of female sexuality that survive in all aspects of her writing, from her medical texts to her letters. Particularly noteworthy is the homoeroticism of her liturgical cycle, the *Symphoniae*, which expresses physical and spiritual desire for the Virgin Mary.

Hildegard's visionary works are also remarkable for their attention to the feminine aspects of theology. With considerable justification, many contemporary scholars have claimed Hildegard as a pre-modern instance of a "woman-identified woman."

Since Hildegard's spiritual powers and pronouncements mostly met with approval from the ecclesiastical authorities, and since Hildegard rarely hesitated to exploit either her high social status or her spiritual position as the "Sibyl of the Rhine," she enjoyed a range of possibilities and freedoms unavailable to most medieval women.

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