HILDEGARD OF BINGEN, 1098–1179
1 Hildegard of Bingen, 1098–1179. Statue of the Saint, parish church, Eibingen.
FOR MY MOTHER AND FATHER
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The relics of one of the most remarkable women of the Middle Ages now lie in Rüdesheim, a town on the picturesque middle reaches of the River Rhine, well known for its proximity to the Rock of the Lorelei and its extensive vineyards. Yet pilgrims do not continually flock to the parish church in Eibingerstrasse where the heart and tongue of St Hildegard of Bingen († 1179) are preserved in a golden reliquary. Unlike the patient and self-effacing St Bernadette of Lourdes, or the surpassingly meek and ordinary St Theresa of Lisieux, Hildegard has not attracted a large popular following. Her virtues were indeed of a different order. There were limits to her patience, and her humility, though real enough, was of the paradoxical kind which gives authority and assurance. ‘Meek’ and ‘ordinary’ are the last words to describe her, as even slight acquaintance with her story will show.

Hildegard was born into a noble family in Germany in 1098. Although destined from an early age to live a life of total enclosure, literally walled up in her cell, she left its shelter to found her own convents at Rupertsberg, on the Rhine near Bingen, and later at Eibingen on the opposite side of the river. From Rupertsberg she corresponded with secular and ecclesiastical leaders, as well as a vast range of people of lesser rank and standing, and went forth as monastic troubleshooter, consultant exorcist, and visiting preacher. Had Hildegard confined herself to these activities she would have been unusual enough among the women of her day. But Hildegard was even more remarkable in producing an extensive body of writings. At a time when few women wrote as much as the occasional letter, Hildegard’s written works not only surpassed those of most of her male contemporaries in the range of their subject matter (from natural history, medicine, and cosmology, to music, poetry, and theology), but also outshone them in visionary beauty and intellectual power.

Hildegard’s achievements are thrown into prominence by the fact that, as an author, she stood virtually alone among the women of her time. Why do we have almost no other writings by women from this period? Even allowing for the ravages of time, deliberate suppression, or mere negligence, it seems that women were responsible for only a tiny proportion of the entire twelfth-century literary output. What were the factors, internal or external, overt or covert, which militated against women writers? How did Hildegard overcome them, and if she could, what prevented her female contemporaries from doing likewise? I hope some answers to these questions will emerge in the course of this book.

My own interest in Hildegard was first kindled over a decade ago by reading Peter Dronke’s account of one of her poems. When I tried to find out more I discovered both that the field of her activities was much wider than I had imagined and that it had been only patchily cultivated. Although different aspects of her work had received varying amounts of attention there was nothing which gave a satisfactory overview of Hildegard’s life and work. I decided then that some day I should make a study of Hildegard for myself. Several years later I wrote a PhD thesis about some aspects of Hildegard’s prophetic persona. By the time this was complete, my own need for a general
introduction to Hildegard had passed. Nevertheless there still seems to be some need for such a work, especially for those who are making their first acquaintance with Hildegard.

While microfilm and jet aircraft have facilitated antipodean study of medieval history, I have often felt disadvantaged by my geographical remoteness, not only from the subject of my study, but from others engaged in the same field. If we add to this the chronological and cultural distances, not to mention the religious distance between Hildegard and myself, the whole undertaking seems somewhat presumptuous. Yet in seeking to describe and understand what Hildegard was doing, being so far removed from the scene may have had some benefits. At least it means that there are no easy explanations waiting to be assumed, such as came so readily to some of her nineteenth-century hagiographers. It may also make an overview easier to achieve, where those closer to the subject, in both senses of the word, may fail to see the wood for the trees.

A further objection to such an enterprise as mine might be raised—that Hildegard’s writings have not yet been studied in sufficient depth to make a proper assessment of her place in medieval life and thought possible. Indeed, most of her writings still lack modern critical editions, the prerequisite for any such detailed study. Some of these are expected to appear in the next few years, but others are still so far from publication that they have not been assigned even a tentative date. Yet to put off writing about Hildegard for another decade at least would disappoint those who, having come in contact with this remarkable figure through her music, poetry, theology, writings on women or the natural world, now wish to find out something more. My intention, then, is to provide a comprehensive introduction to Hildegard, in the light of current scholarship, from which readers may be inspired to read, or even to produce, more specialized studies.

A NOTE ON READING THE BOOK

While Hildegard’s writings are remarkable in themselves, the question of how she came to produce her works and have them accepted by her contemporaries is almost more intriguing. I have tried in this book to give an account of both what she wrote and how she did it. Since even Hildegard’s major works are not well known or readily accessible, I have described them at some length. These descriptions form the central chapters of the book (chs 4–7). Here I have been more concerned to indicate the interrelations of her ideas and theories within the total body of her work, than to identify their possible sources or compare them with those of her contemporaries. To provide a general account of twelfth-century natural history, cosmology, or theology is beyond the scope of my book. The chapters on Hildegard’s writings are contained within an argument about how Hildegard was able to enter domains generally seen as the preserve of men, such literary activity being the major one. Those readers wishing to follow the sociological argument may thus go from chapter 4 to chapter 8 and then turn back to complete the picture with the account of Hildegard’s later writings. Those wanting to get an idea of the nature and range of Hildegard’s work could start with the central chapters. On the other hand, since the descriptions and the argument proceed more or less chronologically, the book can be read with profit straight through.

Sabina Flanagan
Adelaide, 1988
PREFACE

Over the last nine years there has been an amazing outpouring of scholarly activity on the life and work of Hildegard of Bingen. Yet, despite this, or perhaps for this very reason, there is still clearly a place for an introductory book on Hildegard which presents her life and writings in the context of her times.

I have taken the opportunity offered by this second edition—published in the year of the 900th anniversary of Hildegard’s birth—to correct some errors of fact or emphasis, detected partly by myself and partly by vigilant reviewers. I have also reconsidered some aspects of the story in the light of the discovery of new information, and the appearance of critical editions of Hildegard’s works, though some of these are still wanting—notably the medico-scientific writings and the correspondence. I have also updated the citations of primary sources from the older, often inadequate, texts to the new critical editions where they exist, and have in addition, included references to important secondary studies on particular aspects of Hildegard’s thought which have subsequently appeared. To this end I have replaced a section, ‘The Works of Hildegard’, which nine years ago had perforce to refer to a number of unpublished manuscripts, with a select bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. A discography, distinguishing the recordings which seek to reproduce the style of Hildegard’s time from more modern departures using Hildegard as a starting point for what are essentially new compositions, is also provided. Such material may be consulted by those interested in further exploring this fascinating subject for themselves. Some may even be inspired to produce more specialized studies—a hope which I expressed in the Preface to the first edition of this book, and which has already been amply realized.

Proper acknowledgment of the intellectual and personal debts I have incurred over the last decade would require several pages. Suffice it to say that these studies have brought me into contact with an international circle of students of Hildegard whose generosity, intellectual liveliness and mutual support have made my investigations not only a challenge but a delight.

Sabina Flanagan
Adelaide, 1997
Many people have helped me in the writing of this book. I owe special thanks to Peter Dronke, both for his work, which has been an inspiration to me for many years, and his hospitality and advice in Cambridge in 1985; to Henry Mayr-Harting, who encouraged me to write about Hildegard, although this might not be quite the book he expected; to Barbara Newman and Werner Lauter, who generously sent me their publications; to the family von Racknitz of Disibodenberg who helped me with an elusive photograph; to my colleagues at the University of Adelaide; to Greta Mary Hair, who shared her musicological expertise with me; and finally to Alison, Cassie, and Chris for their enthusiasm and to my husband, Wilf Prest, for his critical support and supportive criticism.

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Map of Germany showing places mentioned in the text.
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LIFE AND DEATH

When Henry, fourth of that name, ruled the Holy Roman Empire, there lived in hither Gaul a virgin famed equally for the nobility of her birth and her sanctity. Her name was Hildegard. Her parents, Hildebert and Mechthilde, although wealthy and engaged in worldly affairs, were not unmindful of the gifts of the Creator and dedicated their daughter to the service of God. For when she was yet a child she seemed far removed from worldly concerns, distanced by a precocious purity. (*Vita*, Bk 1)

This is how Godfrey, a monk from Disibodenberg who acted as Hildegard’s secretary and provost to the nuns at Rupertsberg, introduces his subject in the first book of his *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* (*Life of St Hildegard*). When he died in 1176 he left the work unfinished and it was not until a decade later, when Hildegard herself had been dead for some years, that Theodoric of Echternach, a famous monastery in the diocese of Trier, wrote the second and third books and added the prefaces.

Although one of her biographers had been in daily contact with Hildegard and in a position to ask about her early life, much information which might be considered important or even essential by a modern reader is missing from the *Vita*. The date and place of Hildegard’s birth, for instance, are not given. Such omissions arose because the authors were more interested in Hildegard’s spiritual credentials than her secular ones. Even here much of the description is stereotyped. On the other hand, selections from Hildegard’s correspondence are included in the *Vita*. Even more valuable is Theodoric’s incorporation, in the second and third books, of lengthy autobiographical passages from an otherwise unknown work by Hildegard.

Other major sources of biographical information are Hildegard’s letters, and the prefaces to her works which describe when and how they came to be written. Additional information of more questionable reliability is to be found in the *Acta Inquisitionis*, a document drawn up for submission to Rome in the early thirteenth century when the nuns at Rupertsberg were seeking Hildegard’s canonization. The recently discovered *Vita* of Hildegard’s mentor, the anchoress Jutta of Sponheim, while useful for suggesting the background to Hildegard’s early life, further complicates the picture by providing a chronology which seems incompatible with most of the other sources.¹ There is also an incomplete *Vita* written by the Walloon monk, Guibert of Gembloux, Hildegard’s last secretary. Various archival evidence, in the form of charters and records of gifts to her monasteries, provide further details. For reasons which will become obvious, there is more information about the second half of Hildegard’s life than about her early years.
Hildegard began her earthly pilgrimage not far from where her mortal remains rest today. She was born in Bermersheim, near Alzey (about 20 km south-west of the important cathedral city of Mainz), in the summer of the year 1098. Nothing more is known of her parents than their names and that they belonged to the nobility.

The sources tell us little of Hildegard’s childhood. Godfrey’s assertion that she displayed a precocious spirituality sounds like a pious stereotype. Lives of the saints are full of impossibly well-behaved children who either never played at all, or if they did, built mud churches rather than castles. On the other hand, according to Hildegard’s own account, included in the second book of the *Vita*, she had her first visionary experience before she was 5 years old. Indeed, it may well have been this unusual event, coupled with her apparently precarious health, which suggested to her parents that their daughter should be dedicated to the religious life. So, as Godfrey wrote:

when she was about eight years old she was enclosed at Disibodenberg—buried with Christ that she might arise with him to immortal glory. Here Jutta, a pious woman dedicated to God, introduced her to the habit of humility and innocence. (*Vita, Bk 1*)

Rather than choosing to enter their daughter formally as a child in a convent where she would be brought up to become a nun, Hildegard’s parents had taken the more radical step of enclosing their daughter, apparently for life, in the cell of an anchoress, attached to the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg. Jutta, it should be said, was not merely a pious woman, but the young and beautiful daughter of a local count. She undertook to instruct Hildegard in the recitation of the psalter, the major part of the anchoress’s day, and no doubt in other womanly occupations in the time left over from their programme of prayer.

But as with other religious movements and institutions, such as the Egyptian hermits and the Cistercians, extraordinary spirituality soon attracted a large following of would-be disciples, with the result that the original institution was forced to diversify. So it was at Disibodenberg, where the daughters of the local nobility were sent by their parents, and the cell which had sufficed for Jutta, Hildegard, and one or two others now had to accommodate a much larger number of people than at first intended. Thus by the time Hildegard had reached the age of thirteen or fourteen (c. 1112), the recluse’s cell had become, to all intents and purposes, a small Benedictine convent, attached to and dependent on the monastery at Disibodenberg.

Between that time and the death of Jutta in 1136, when Hildegard was about 38 years old, the sources provide no information about her life except for the blandest of platitudes. Thus, according to Godfrey, she ‘went from virtue to virtue’ and ‘the tranquillity of her heart was demonstrated in modest silence and economical speech’. Hildegard, when recounting the history of her visionary experiences, says that during this time she ceased talking about what she saw by supernatural means, as such openness had only caused her embarrassment when younger. Now she confided only in Jutta, who in turn informed ‘a certain monk’, presumably Volmar of Disibodenberg, who was to become Hildegard’s teacher, trusted assistant, and friend until his death some thirty years later. In view of Hildegard’s later talent for organization, it would not be surprising if she
had some part in the administration of the convent. At any rate, when Jutta died in 1136 Hildegard became head of the establishment, the unanimous choice of the sisters, according to Guibert.

Although the election of Hildegard to head the convent suggests some recognition of her gifts and abilities by her immediate circle, at this stage of her life they were apparently not such as to distinguish her from hundreds, perhaps thousands, of her worthy but now forgotten contemporaries. The real turning point in her career came a few years later, in 1141, as she recalled in the preface to her first major visionary work, which she was to call *Scivias*, apparently a contraction of *Sci vias Domini*, ‘Know the Ways of the Lord’:

And it came to pass in the eleven hundred and forty-first year of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Son of God, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming…and suddenly I understood the meaning of the expositions of the books, that is to say of the psalter, the evangelists, and other catholic books of the Old and New Testaments.

This is how Hildegard described the sudden access of understanding by which she felt able to penetrate to the inner meaning of the texts of her religion. Of even greater importance for her subsequent career was the command she received at the same time: ‘O fragile one, ash of ash and corruption of corruption, say and write what you see and hear’. So there might be no mistaking the directive to write down and publicize what she understood from her visions, it was repeated three more times in similar terms.

Yet Hildegard hesitated to act, fearing she was unequal to the task. She described her predicament as follows:

But although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and a low opinion (of myself) and because of the diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time the call to write, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by the scourge of God, I fell onto a bed of sickness. (*Scivias*, Preface)

Interpreting her illness as a sign of God’s displeasure, Hildegard finally told Volmar about her difficulty. With his help, and the permission of Abbot Kuno of Disibodenberg, she was encouraged to begin writing down the visions which formed the basis of the *Scivias*. Immediately her illness lifted and as she subsequently wrote: ‘rising from my sickness with renewed strength I was just able to bring the work [*Scivias*] to a conclusion in the space of ten years’ (ibid.).

It may seem from the last quotation that Hildegard was able to devote herself to a career of writing as soon as she rose from her bed of pain. But both Godfrey and Hildegard in their respective portions of the *Vita*, indicate that her establishment as a writer was not quite so straightforward. At some stage Abbot Kuno informed Archbishop Henry of Mainz about Hildegard’s work and it was through him that Pope Eugenius (1145–53), a Cistercian *protégé* of St Bernard, came to hear about it at the synod held in Trier between November 1147 and February 1148.
A commission was sent to Disibodenberg to find out more about Hildegard and her writings (Godfrey names Albero, Bishop of Verdun and his deputy Adalbert as members). Satisfied that the visions were authentic they returned to Trier with a completed portion of the *Scivias*. Here the pope, ‘holding it in his own hands… read (it) aloud to the archbishop and cardinals’. It was subsequently resolved that Hildegard should be commanded to transcribe and make known whatever she received in this way from the Holy Spirit. A letter to this effect was sent to her and such papal approval no doubt served as a spur to her finishing the work, although it still took another three years.

We should not wonder at how long the *Scivias* took to write, since Hildegard, with her responsibilities as a nun and in the running of the convent could spend only a limited time on the task each day. Moreover, Hildegard’s increasing fame did nothing to lessen the numbers of candidates attracted to the establishment at Disibodenberg and a severe shortage of accommodation developed. Rebuilding was not a novelty at Disibodenberg (the monastery had been in an almost continual state of alteration during Hildegard’s time there), so plans for expanding and relocating the women’s quarters were already in the air. Then Hildegard suddenly announced that she had received a command from God to move her nuns to Rupertsberg, a hill overlooking the junction of the River Nahe with the Rhine at Bingen, some 30 km from Disibodenberg.

That her proposal was strenuously resisted by the monks at Disibodenberg is hardly surprising. Quite apart from a natural disinclination to recognize the independence of one whom they had nurtured (more or less) from infancy, there were more pressing reasons for opposition. The property (usually in the form of land) which the nuns brought with them when they entered the convent contributed to the wealth of the monastery as a whole, not to mention the gifts of the faithful attracted by Hildegard’s evident holiness. It must have seemed to the monks that they were about to lose their chief spiritual and material asset, for once the nuns were physically distant from Disibodenberg the exercise of spiritual and temporal authority over them would be difficult to maintain.

The proposal was also unwelcome to others besides the monks, most probably the parents of her nuns, as Hildegard’s comment from the *Vita* indicates:

But when my abbot and the brothers and people of the district understood what sort of change this was to be—that we wished to go from lush fields and vineyards and the comforts of home to a desert place, devoid of amenities—they were amazed and they conspired together to prevent and thwart us. They also said that I was deceived by some illusion. (*Vita*, Bk 2)

In the face of such opposition Hildegard took to her bed once more, withdrawing into utter immobility and silence. According to Godfrey, Hildegard finally prevailed when Abbot Kuno, entering her bedchamber in a sceptical frame of mind, found himself unable either ‘to lift her head up, or to turn her from side to side’. This convinced him that Hildegard was suffering from no ordinary illness but a visitation of ‘divine correction’. Nor was it only God who was at work behind the scenes for Hildegard. She had enlisted secular support in the person of the widowed marchioness Richardis of Stade (the mother of one of her nuns) who had intervened on her behalf with Archbishop Henry of Mainz. With his support Hildegard was able to purchase her chosen site at Rupertsberg from its owners, the canons of Mainz Cathedral and Count Bernard of Hildesheim and his brother.
When the arrangements had been completed (c. 1150), Hildegard, with some twenty of her nuns, made the day’s journey from Disibodenberg to Rupertsberg. The contrast in physical environment between the well-established, stone-built complex they had left and the temporary dwellings to which they came must have been striking. In Hildegard’s case this may have been offset by an improvement in the psychological environment which gave her increased control and autonomy. She had emerged from the shadow of the monastery of Disibodenberg into the sunlight of her own foundation. On the other hand there seems to have been some disaffection among the nuns and real financial hardship, which was made worse by the numbers of guests and pilgrims who became a charge on the convent. This is how Hildegard recalled the early days of Rupertsberg:

so they said ‘What is the point of this, that noble and wealthy nuns should move from a place where they wanted for nothing to such great poverty?’ But we were awaiting the grace of God, who showed us this place, to come to our aid. After the burden of these troubles God rained grace upon us. (Vita, Bk 2)

One such benefit, Hildegard went on to explain, was the granting of burial rights to laypeople in the convent cemetery. This was to prove something of a mixed blessing later on.

Apart from difficulties with her own flock, Hildegard had to reach an accommodation with the monks of Disibodenberg over their respective spheres of financial and spiritual influence. It appears from Hildegard’s account that she did not finally confront Abbot Kuno over the matter of the nuns’ dowries until shortly before his death in 1155. She pursued her case with his successor, Helenger, with results that were inscribed in a charter of 1158 issued by Archbishop Arnold of Mainz. Apart from regulating the distribution of assets between the two houses, Disibodenberg was given the task or privilege (depending on how you looked at it) of furnishing Rupertsberg with a provost of their choice to oversee the nuns’ spiritual welfare.

Despite the claims of her administrative duties, Hildegard continued to write during the early years at Rupertsberg, though she concentrated on shorter works rather than a sustained piece of visionary writing like the Scivias. To this period can be attributed many of the hymns and sequences, for which she also wrote the music, and her medico-scientific works which survive in fragmentary and otherwise dubious forms as the Physica (Natural History) and Causae et curae (Causes and Cures).

While such works can readily be seen as arising from the needs and interests of the new foundation—music to give a sense of corporate identity, medical jottings reflecting her work among pilgrims and visitors—it is harder to place some of Hildegard’s other compositions at this time. Her lingua ignota or unknown language, a series of invented words corresponding to an eclectic list of nouns, and her litterae ignotae, an alternative alphabet, may have found some place in the domestic economy as a secret code, if indeed they were anything more than an intellectual diversion on a level with crossword puzzles.²

In her autobiographical notes Hildegard was able to dismiss the initial dissatisfaction of some of her nuns following the move to Rupertsberg as a passing phase, by pointing to the support of her loyal followers. However, soon after she finished the Scivias in 1151,
Hildegard experienced the defection of her most favoured assistant, Richardis of Stade. In the *Vita*, Hildegard gives the following laconic account of the affair:

While I was writing the book *Scivias* I held a certain noble girl… in great affection, just as Paul loved Timothy. She allied herself to me in diligent friendship in everything and consoled me in all my trials until I completed the book. But after this, because of her noble connections, she turned aside to the honour of a higher position and was elected head of an important foundation…. Soon afterwards she left me, and in another place far from me, she gave up the present life and the dignity of her appointment. (*Vita*, Bk 2)

Hildegard’s letters, on the other hand, reveal a depth of feeling about the subject which might not be suspected from the passage just quoted from the *Vita*. The incident will be examined in more detail in a later chapter. I mention it here merely to complete the picture of the uneasy start to Rupertsberg, which Hildegard tended to attribute to human frailty, and, it must be remarked, that of others rather than of herself. Since this was the case, it does not seem fanciful to regard her next major work, the *Liber vitae meritorum* (*Book of Life’s Merits*), written between the years 1158 and 1163, a book about the vices and their countervailing virtues, as reflecting her direct recent experience of human nature.

During the first decade at Rupertsberg Hildegard began to gain prominence in the world outside the convent. When Frederick Barbarossa was elected king of Germany in 1152 Hildegard wrote him a letter of congratulation and good advice. She seems to have maintained a close connection with him (in spite of the schism which began in 1159 with the disputed election of a successor to Pope Hadrian IV and continued for eighteen years) and accepted his charter of protection in 1163. It is true, however, that as the papal schism was prolonged, Hildegard’s letters became less cordial. That she was in correspondence with others at this time is indicated by her claim in the preface to the *Liber vitae meritorum* that she had written many letters of advice and correction. Hildegard describes the years 1158–61 as being one long illness, but in spite of her poor health and while apparently engaged on her second major work, she embarked on a series of preaching tours.

Some of these would have entailed visiting different monasteries and addressing the assembled monks or nuns in the chapter house, as for example at Siegberg or Zwiefalten. Sometimes, however, she took a more unusual step, as on her second tour in 1160 where she preached in public in Trier, as well as visiting Metz and Krauftal. It need hardly be said that public preaching—indeed preaching at all—was a rare privilege to be accorded a woman. In 1163 the places she is said to have visited include Cologne, Boppard, Andernach, Siegburg, Werden, and Liège. Although river transport would have been available for parts of these journeys, some overland travel could not have been avoided, and such travel, whether by foot, horse, or litter, must have taxed the strength of the 65-year-old nun. This is especially true of her last great journey to Swabia in 1170, where she is said to have visited a series of monasteries including Maulbronn, Hirsau, Kirchheim, Zwiefalten, and Hördt—an overland circuit of at least 400 km.

In 1163 Hildegard began her third and most ambitious theological work, *Liber divinorum operum* (*Book of the Divine Works*). This came to her in a vision, as a commentary on the opening of St John’s Gospel, taking up and refining several of the
cosmological themes first explored in the *Scivias*. The writing of this work suffered frequent interruptions and it was not finally completed until about 1174, only five years before Hildegard’s death. Not the least drain on her time and energy must have been the foundation in 1165 of a second convent, at Eibingen across the Rhine from Bingen, presumably to cater for nuns who could not be accommodated at Rupertsberg.³ Hildegard apparently maintained close contact with the daughter house, visiting it twice a week. Indeed, several of the healing miracles attributed to her, involving her curing the blind by the application of Rhine water, were said to have taken place when she was travelling by boat across the river between the two houses.

Hildegard’s health, although never robust, seems to have worsened at about this time. She refers to herself as ‘lying for almost three years on a bed of illness’ in her preface to the *Vita Sancti Disibodi* (*Life of St Disibod*), which she wrote in 1170 at the request of the abbot and monks of the parent house. Nevertheless, she also managed, during this period, to travel at least as far as Kirchheim and visited other places in Swabia where she dealt with monastic problems on the spot. The nature of Hildegard’s illnesses, which could confine her to bed for weeks and yet allow her to undertake the most gruelling journeys, will be examined further below.

Hildegard is seen in another unusual role at this period, that of exorcist, although she may well have performed such services at other times in her life. A disproportionate amount of the third book of the *Vita* is given over to an account of the freeing of a woman from Cologne who had been harassed by an evil spirit for eight years. The account is especially interesting because it incorporates part of the correspondence between Hildegard and the monks of Brauweiler, to whom the woman had unsuccessfully applied for relief, as well as a description of what happened in Hildegard’s own words. One of Hildegard’s letters contains the text of a fascinating rite of exorcism which she composed for the occasion and sent to the monks. The incident, which was something of a *cause célèbre* at the time, is treated in more detail in chapter 8.

During this time Hildegard continued to work on the *Liber divinorum operum*, sometimes laying it aside in favour of shorter commissioned works, such as lives of St Rupert and St Disibod or her commentary on the Benedictine Rule. A much more severe interruption, both in practical and psychological terms, was caused by the death of the monk Volmar, Hildegard’s original adviser, friend, and collaborator, who had been her secretary for over thirty years, as well as acting as provost for the nuns at Rupertsberg. From the time of his death until her own some five years later Hildegard expended much energy in finding a suitable replacement who might meet both her own needs for secretarial support, and those of the nuns for spiritual and material services. In the first instance she enlisted the help of Ludwig of St Eucharius at Trier, who was later to commission Theodoric to complete the *Vita*, and her own nephew Wezelin, at that time provost of St Andreas at Cologne.

According to the agreement concluded twenty years earlier, the abbot of Disibodenberg was bound to supply the nuns at Rupertsberg with the provost of their choice. Hildegard applied to Helenger, but a replacement was not forthcoming. Finally she took up the matter with Pope Alexander (1159–81), so that in the end, possibly after negotiations lasting as long as a year, the monk Godfrey was sent from Disibodenberg, late in 1174 or early 1175. While provost at Rupertsberg, Godfrey began to write the *Vita*, but died in 1176 before completing it.
It is at this point that we find Guibert, a monk from Gembloux, poised to make his brief but important appearance in Hildegard’s life. From their correspondence, wordy and opinionated as it is on Guibert’s side, much of the chronology of Hildegard’s later life and the details of her visionary experiences and methods of writing are drawn. He first began writing to her in 1175, and, fired with enthusiasm, paid a short visit to Rupertsberg. When Godfrey died in 1176, Hildegard’s brother Hugo was pressed into service as secretary, while a canon from St Stephen’s at Mainz attended to the spiritual needs of the nuns. Hildegard invited Guibert to Rupertsberg in 1177. Shortly after his arrival both the Mainz clergy were carried off by a fever and Guibert assumed both vacancies, as secretary to Hildegard and spiritual father to the nuns. He remained at Rupertsberg, not without some misgivings, until recalled to Gembloux in 1180.

The last year of Hildegard’s life was clouded by a dispute with the clergy of Mainz. It will be remembered that one of the benefits claimed by her monastery at Rupertsberg was that of the burial of the rich and noble inhabitants of the surrounding district. The problem arose when the clergy of Mainz claimed that because a certain man buried at Rupertsberg had died excommunicate, his body should be disinterred and cast out of the sacred ground. Hildegard replied that the man had been reconciled to the church at the time of his death and that to do as she had been ordered would be a grievous sin. The response from Mainz was an interdict, forbidding the celebration of mass and permitting the divine office to be performed only in an undertone and behind closed doors. The course of the dispute can be followed in a series of letters, including one from Hildegard on the place of music in the divine economy, which is described in chapter 9.

Finally, in March 1179, the interdict was lifted and Hildegard spent her last six months free from major conflict. She died peacefully on 17 September 1179, having forecast her approaching end to the nuns. It is a pity that Guibert of Gembloux, although resident at Rupertsberg at the time, has left no account of her death—his *Vita*, for reasons that are not altogether clear, only takes the story as far as the proposed move to Rupertsberg. The account we have from Theodoric, who had to depend on what the nuns told him, unfortunately has nothing of the moving intimacy of some of the descriptions of the passing of other monastic saints. He relies heavily on an account of the meteorological prodigies which accompanied her ‘joyful transition to the heavenly Bridegroom’.

III

Clearly, the recipient of such charismatic gifts in life must have been considered a candidate for sainthood after death. At the time of Hildegard’s death the process of canonization was becoming more systematized and bureaucratic. Pope Alexander III’s letter to King Canute (Knut) about the cult of his father, King Eric of Sweden (†1160), is generally held to be the first definitive statement of a policy which made all subsequent canonizations subject to the authority and approval of the Holy See. Henceforth canonical status was to be conferred by papal bull, rather than by popular veneration and diocesan approval. No such definitive statement of papal recognition exists for Hildegard. Instead we have, in the *Acta*, the documentation of some stages of the inquiry. Although this gives a fascinating insight into the process of inquisition, it proved ultimately inconclusive. The document we have arises from an approach made by the nuns of
Rupertsberg to the pope in the first third of the thirteenth century. If earlier attempts were made there is no evidence of them.

In accordance with the new procedures a commission was appointed to take evidence from witnesses at Bingen about Hildegard’s ‘life, conversation, fame, merits and miracles, and in general about her circumstances’. The commissioners, all members of the Mainz clergy, reported back in a document dated 1233 (see P. Bruder, ‘Acta Inquisitionis...’ *Analecta Bollandiana*. 2, 1883, 119). This is largely a compilation of miracles, some remembered by witnesses as having been performed while Hildegard was alive, and others effected by her relics or at her tomb. For some reason (probably a lack of sufficient detail), this submission was rejected and the document returned to the commissioners who then made extensive alterations. The additions detail further miracles and give (where possible) the names of those involved in the earlier ones. However, the amended version does not seem to have reached the Curia, since there is a later letter, from Innocent IV in 1243, asking for the claim to be resubmitted. There is no evidence of further progress towards Hildegard’s canonization in the thirteenth century.

During the next century, however, Hildegard’s name and feast day begin to appear in the martyrologies. Further evidence of her formal canonization, or at least express permission for her ‘solemn and public cult’ is found in an indulgence from John XXII dated from Avignon in 1324. Here forty days’ indulgence is granted to the faithful who observe certain feast days, including that of St Hildegard, at the church at Rupertsberg. Finally, her inclusion by Baronius in the sixteenth-century *Roman Martyrology* ensured her status as a saint. Her cult flourishes—particularly in monastic contexts, but also publicly—to this day, as can be seen from the glittering shrine in her church at Rüdesheim/Eibingen which rests on an altar inscribed: ‘Heilige Hildegard Bitte für Uns’ (‘Saint Hildegard pray for us’).

**IV**

Even from a brief survey of Hildegard’s life, certain remarkable aspects emerge which stand in need of explanation. How are we to account for such prodigious activity in areas where women, if not actually forbidden to participate, were at least not actively encouraged? How many other women of the time do we find preaching with official approval, exorcizing, founding their own convents, and above all composing works which have given them a place among the ‘fathers, doctors and writers of the Church’? The answer is, very few indeed. Two other German nuns were among the few women of the twelfth century whose writings have survived, but their works are hardly comparable with Hildegard’s. Herrade of Landsberg compiled an illustrated encyclopedia, the *Hortus deliciarum* (Garden of Delights), for the edification of her nuns, while Elisabeth of Schönau, inspired by Hildegard’s example, related her visionary experiences to her brother, who set them down in Latin. How, then, was Hildegard able to overcome the obstacles which her female contemporaries seem to have found insurmountable? The answer to this question is complex since it involves, among other things, the effects of cultural conditioning on human behaviour. However, Hildegard possessed one overriding advantage which set her apart from other aspiring writers.
Ever since her experience of 1141, when she felt herself compelled by God to write down her visions, she believed that her life was set in a prophetic mould. Accordingly, she saw herself as the mouthpiece of the Lord, merely conveying his messages to her hearers and readers. Such messages were not concerned exclusively with the future, as the modern meaning of the word ‘prophecy’ might suggest. The medieval understanding of the term was much wider. To the people of the Middle Ages, as to the ancients, prophecy implied the revelation of divine secrets concerning the past, the present, and the future. Hildegard’s belief that she possessed such privileged knowledge would not have been enough to ensure her success if her superiors had not seen it the same way. As Hildegard wrote in the first autobiographical passage in the *Vita*:

> When these things were brought to the attention of the church of Mainz and discussed, all agreed that they came from God and from the gift of prophecy which the prophets spoke forth in former times. (*Vita*, Bk 2)

2 Hildegard reliquary. Parish church, Eibingen.
There were both biblical and early Christian precedents for the role of female prophet. Moreover, a woman could be a prophet without upsetting the perceived natural order, since no particular attributes of her own were required, except, possibly, humility. Indeed, there was some suggestion that God might specifically choose the weak and despised to confound the strong. Thus, to be a female prophet was to confirm women’s inferiority, rather than to deny it.

In this way Hildegard was able to participate in the field of theological writing by disclaiming any intention of operating on the same terms as those (men) who had appropriated it. But soon after this ground was conceded Hildegard began to adopt other apostolic prerogatives, usually, it should be noted, at the request of others. Thus we find her writing letters of advice, preaching, visiting monasteries, exorcizing, and healing. All these activities were justified on the same grounds: her privileged access to the ‘secreta Dei’—‘the secrets of God’. These secrets were both general, in that they covered the whole field of theology, and particular, when they had to do with courses of action to be taken in specific circumstances. Since ignorance and uncertainty about what to expect both of the natural and supernatural world were widespread, anyone who had a plausible claim to such privileged knowledge would be much in demand. What we must now consider is why Hildegard did not discover such a role for herself until relatively late in life, and to do so we need to re-examine the circumstances of her early years.
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**Other recommended recordings**


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