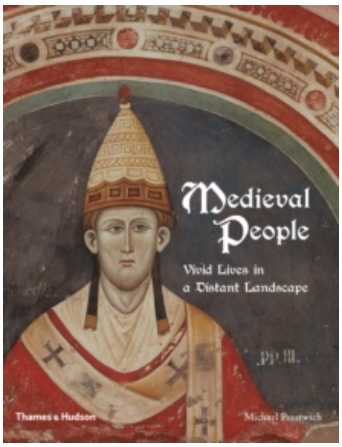

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Hildegard of Bingen

NOTABLE NUN

1098–1179

Although the medieval Church was male dominated, many female saints and martyrs were worshipped. In particular, the cult of the Virgin – identified as she was as the Queen of Heaven – developed apace in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Holiness, consequently, was not an exclusively male preserve; and while it was convenient in many cases for families to send some daughters off to adopt the religious life, this also provided career opportunities for some exceptionally able women. Hildegard of Bingen was one such individual: a visionary theologian, botanist, composer, creator of a secret language and correspondent of popes and emperors.

Hildegard was the tenth child of a well-to-do family. She began to have visions from an early age, and perhaps as a result was sent in 1106 to a monastery at Disibodenberg, not far from the Rhineland town of Bingen, to be raised under the care of an anchoress called Jutta. The small community Jutta led eventually became a convent, linked to the neighbouring Benedictine house. Hildegard claimed to have acquired no more than a basic education from Jutta. But in 1136, after Jutta's death, she became abbess, and in about 1150, so as to escape Benedictine supervision, she moved the convent some forty miles to a new site,

A depiction of one of Hildegard von Bingen's visions. She is shown in the small panel, dictating her work. Flames from her head show her inspiration.

at Rupertsberg. The sisters were all from wealthy, well-connected families, for Hildegard would not accept those of low birth. She did not take a severe view of how monastic discipline should be applied; she was, for example, ready to allow her nuns to wear underwear. This she considered useful as a means of reducing lustful feelings.

When she was forty-two, Hildegard claimed that she had a vision in which 'a light of extreme brilliance flowed through my brain'. This, she explained, gave her an instant understanding of the scriptures. She was commanded in the vision to write down and communicate all that she knew. However, Hildegard did not do this in a straightforward way. As Guibert of Gembloux, one of her secretaries, explained, 'Many turn away from, and abhor, the books of Hildegard, because they are written in an obscure and unaccustomed style, not understanding that this is the characteristic of a true prophetess.' She wrote three mystical theological works, of which the first, *Scivias*, is the most celebrated. Part of it was shown to Pope Eugenius III, at the Synod of Trier in 1147–48, who approved it. In her text, Hildegard explained Christian doctrine in terms of visions:

> Then I saw a great round tower, of white stone, standing all complete. It had three windows at the top, from which such brightness shone that the roof of the tower, built like a cone, could be seen clearly in the light.

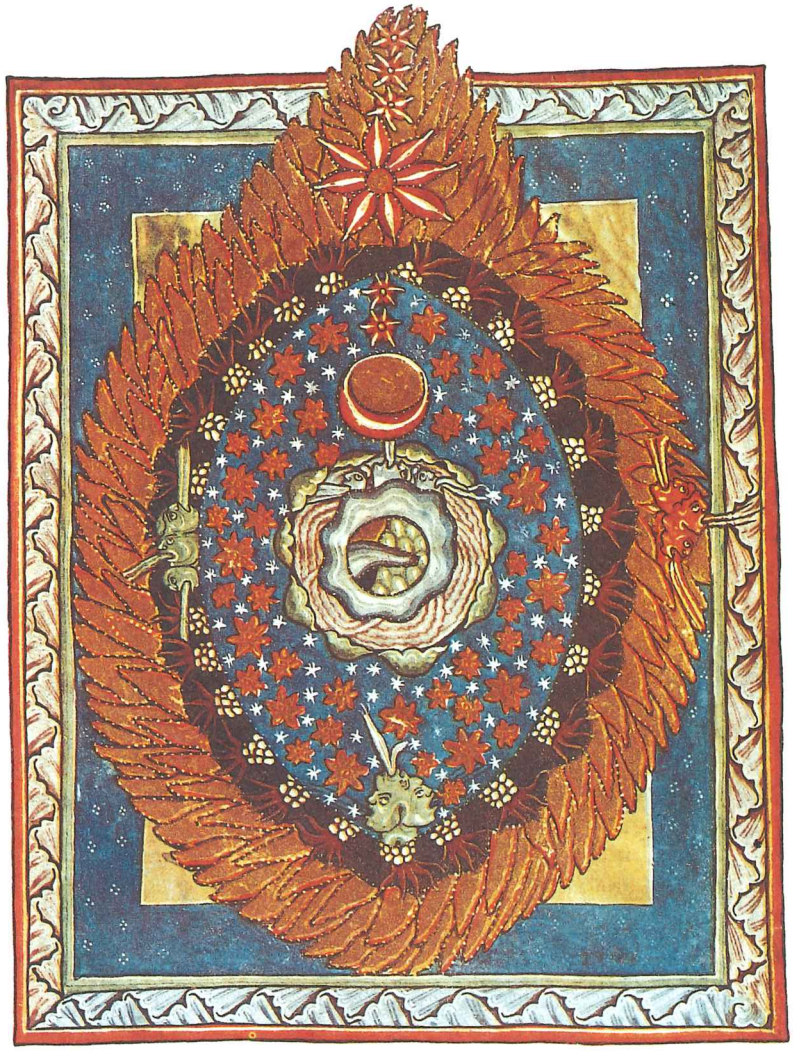
One explanation of Hildegard's visions is that she was a migraine sufferer. It was perhaps from personal experience that she wrote that if a migraine spread right across the head, it was quite unbearable, and almost impossible to cure. Yet no number of migraines could possibly explain the quantity and complexity of Hildegard's visions.

Music was intensely important to Hildegard, who saw it as an expression of her theological ideas. Her ability to use musical notation was, she believed, a God-given gift. The words that went with her music did not fit any normal poetic structure; they were almost prose. Hildegard's melodies are characterized by an extraordinary range, difficult for many singers to achieve.

Hildegard also wrote a work on natural sciences, much of it devoted to plants, and a medical treatise. Her physiological ideas were conventional, based on the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, which were linked to the humours of black bile, blood, yellow bile and phlegm. Any imbalance of the humours would cause illness. Hildegard did, however, view health in practical as well as theoretical terms, and was much more interested in, and informed about, sex than might be expected from a nun. She followed the normal medieval view, which gave women a positive role in procreation, writing:

> When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings with it sensual delight, communicates the sense of that delight during the act, and summons forth the emission of the man's seed.

Elsewhere, she explained female sexual enjoyment in more detail:



One of Hildegard's visions from her Scivias, *showing a mysterious huge egg-shaped object that appeared to her, possibly representing her interpretation of the universe.*

> When the breeze of pleasure proceeds from the marrow of a woman it falls into her womb, which is near the navel, and moves the woman's blood to pleasure; and because it spreads out around the womb, and is therefore more mild, because of her moisture where she burns with pleasure, or from fear of shame, she is able to restrain herself from excessive pleasure more than a man.

The fire of pleasure, as she put it, burned more strongly in a man than a woman. But men, as she also pointed out, were not so potent after the age of fifty, and not up to it at all after eighty; for women, desire normally ceased at fifty. Alongside such questionable observations,

Hildegard had some strange ideas. She suggested that people conceived in damp and cloudy weather were likely to have bad breath. Ointment made from a mixture of fat from a dead sparrowhawk and herbs, and applied to the genitals, was an implausible remedy for excessive sexual urges. On the other hand, she sensibly advocated regular tooth cleaning.

Among all her activities, one of the most surprising is that Hildegard invented a new alphabet, of twenty-three letters, and a secret language of about a thousand words. It is not clear what it was for, though it probably related both to Hildegard's music and her scientific interests, with many of the words relating to the natural world. A wasp in this language was an *amzia*, a gnat an *arschia*.

Hildegard had a very considerable reputation and corresponded widely. Her fame was such that in 1148 Odo of Soissons, an academic in Paris, wrote to ask for her advice on the nature of the Trinity. She once sent a letter to Eleanor of Aquitaine (see pp. 94–97), telling her to keep calm. Quite exceptionally for a woman in the twelfth century, she preached, not just within the confining walls of her convent, but on four tours of Germany, in which she called for reform of the Church. Yet her legacy was limited. Her works did not receive wide circulation; there are only two main manuscripts. There was no large-scale miracle cult associated with her. Her fame has, however, burgeoned in modern times. She has been portrayed, with little justification, as a feminist, and as anticipating New Age thinking. Her use of herbs is viewed as a form of alternative medicine. Her popularity is such that, in 2012, the pope declared her to be the thirty-fifth Doctor of the Church. Hildegard, however, should be seen in the context of the twelfth century, not the twenty-first.