
A Woman of Influence in 12th Century Christendom: the Case of St. Hildegard of Bingen

Rene N. Tovar

Rene Tovar is a graduate student in the EIU History Department focusing on Europe with an emphasis on the Middle Ages. She is from Downers Grove, Illinois.

O you who are wretched earth and, as a woman, untaught in all learning of earthly teachers and unable to read literature with philosophical understanding, you are nonetheless touched by My light, which kindles in you an inner fire like a burning sun; cry out and relate and write these My mysteries that you see and hear in mystical visions.¹

In a path breaking essay published in 1926, Eileen Powers argued that while males dominated voices of both the church and the aristocracy during the Middle Ages, and typically drowned out the voices, choices, and rights of most women, they could not wholly submerge all together the freedoms of women, especially for the few women with influence and power.² This is noticeably true during the High Middle Ages (the eleventh and twelfth centuries). However, there was still an obvious lack of freedoms for women at the time, even for those who wielded power. Social historian Georges Duby notes, “early medieval aristocratic families had been relatively egalitarian, but this changed from the eleventh century onwards, when women’s options narrowed, thanks to the growing importance of patrimonial property, primogeniture, and public office.”³ Duby attributes this growth in patrimonial property rights and primogeniture to men fearing women, or more specifically, the evil nature of women. Women were compared to the Virgin Mary, someone who was dainty, pure, obedient, and a model women, or Eve, who was supposedly wretched, lustful, evil, weak, and snake-like. Men were convinced that most women shared the characteristics of Eve, and thus were deceitful and weak, and carried within them sin and death.⁴ The church highly influenced this outlook, stifling the amount of power a woman could have by devaluing and stereotyping her as Eve-like, and as something lesser than men. However, as Powers noted, some women happened to stick out, and were not considered a part of the norm. In scholarly research, these women of power have often been labeled as rare, extraordinary, exceptional, or elite. Such terms refer to women who not only exercised a high amount of influence and power, but were also women who maintained their power using large and dominant social networks which supported them and their many visions and goals.⁵ In this way, during such a time, “women began imperceptibly to extricate themselves from the heaviest of the shackles in which they were bound by masculine power.”⁶ A particular woman who showed such considerable traits and went against the

¹ Hildegard, *Scivias*, trans., Sister Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 51.

² Eileen Powers, *Medieval People* (London: Methuen and Co., 1926), 1.

³ Georges Duby, *Women of the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 104.

⁴ *Ibid*, 102.

⁵ Judith M. Bennet and Ruth Mazo Karras, *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68.

⁶ Duby, 104.

male dominated norm was St. Hildegard of Bingen. However, her significance as a leading female figure in the twelfth century left her virtually alone among women of her time.

As someone who played various roles such as an abbess, scientist, poet, musician, healer, and theologian – seemingly, the quintessential Renaissance woman – Hildegard attracted much more attention than many women of power. Medievalist Maud Burnett McInerney remarks: “Hildegard of Bingen was aware of her social and political position in the world of the twelfth century but also knew how to manipulate her language and her self-representation to further her influence and thereby achieve her aims.” McInerney further notes, “her understanding of her position in a male-dominated world is made manifest through her letters to other women [in which she is] not needing to resort to the mechanisms she adopts in dealing with men.”⁷ McInerney is one of many who has written on the power, influence, and life of Hildegard before and after her death. Medieval historian Sabina Flanagan is another, who published an authoritative biographical study on Hildegard in 1989, which was re-issued in 1998 and is essential reading on Hildegard. Despite this, scholarship on Hildegard’s life, significance, and influence remains limited. This brief exploration offers: a summary of her life, and a discussion of her contributions and her growing influence over time as a religious—and female—figure of power.

The arrival of Hildegard into the world of religion during the Middle Ages strongly changed the direction of contemporary thought, not only about visionaries in general, but also about women visionaries and mystics who were involved in the Church. So, it is not surprising for one to find that over the last couple decades, there has been a multitude of published texts and articles which deal with Hildegard—her life and works fascinating historians and feminists alike. However, as noted, much of the scholarship done on Hildegard is not as in-depth as might be ideal considering the vast amount of research that has been done on her. Caroline Bynum Walker, an historian who is especially important in the study of gender in medieval Christianity, stated this:

It is time for renewed scholarly attention to Hildegard of Bingen and the group of female visionaries of which she is the most complex and intelligent representative. Hildegard has fascinating things to say about many topics in which students of twelfth-century spirituality have recently been much interested: the nature of woman, the priesthood, Eucharistic devotion, the place of the laity in the church, virginity, etc. And the emergence in twelfth and thirteenth century Germany of a number of prophetic women, whose spirituality is rather different from that of French and Netherlandish nuns and beguines, is a phenomenon which has not yet been explored or explained. It is also hoped that this fine edition... will stimulate study of Hildegard from new perspectives.⁸

While Bynum made this argument over thirty years ago, her words still ring rather true, as much of the work on Hildegard still cries out for renewed scholarly attention and stimulation. There is never too much to learn, as Bynum suggests, and Hildegard is of no exception to this concept. To do so, let us finally begin to turn to the history of Hildegard and her mystical works.

Historians who have studied the High Middle Ages categorize it as a time of strong emotion, intense longing, fierce passion, and ardent desire. Hildegard is a prime example of such emotions and more. That said, she “would have been extraordinary in any age. But for a woman of the twelfth century, hedged by the constraints of a misogynist world, her achievements baffle thought, marking her as a figure so exceptional that posterity has found it hard to take her measure.”⁹ Born the

⁷ Maud Burnett McInerney, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publications, 1998), 22.

⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Scivias. Hildegard, Adelgundis Führkötter, Angela Carlevaris,” *Speculum* 55, no. 4 (1980): 794-95.

⁹ Barbara Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

youngest of ten children in 1098 to the noble Mechthilde and Hildebert von Bermesheim, Hildegard spent most of her life in the Rhineland area of Germany. She was a precocious child and allegedly began to see visions at a very young age. However, instead of being taken to a convent in which she would be brought up as a nun, Hildegard was taken to a much more enclosed and serious religious space—that of the home of the anchoress Jutta, which led to her being sent to the Benedictine monastery of St. Disibodenberg.¹⁰ Once there, she took monastic vows and later was elected later abbess of a growing monastery. It was beginning to become more and more common to see noble families place their daughters in religious convents.

Information on Hildegard's adulthood can be found in her biographies, often penned by monks, who had been in daily contact with Hildegard while she resided within the monastery. Godfrey, who was a monk from Disibodenberg and who was one of Hildegard's many secretaries at the time, noted, "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 fits 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."¹¹ Such writings later became the subject of the first book on the life of Hildegard known as the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, which secured her veneration as a saint and her later canonization by the Church. The text ascribed as many events in Hildegard's life as possible to supernatural rather than natural causes, and it emphasized her official validation as a prophet.¹² However, while useful, there is an obvious lack in specifics, such as dates, times or places. Such omissions arose, presumably, because many authors at the time and shortly after Hildegard's death were more interested in Hildegard's spiritual credentials rather than her secular ones. This is certainly supported by the increase of scholarship on such topics, and the lack of more in-depth histories. However, it does leave room for new scholarship on her literary output, which was both prolific and diverse.

After Hildegard's visionary gifts had been certified by churchmen as authentic and God-given, the path was cleared for many major literary undertakings that would not have been possible for even the most respected religious women at the time. The first was that of Hildegard's visionary theological trilogy, which began with *Scivias*, a work that was completed in 1151. The text took its title from the Latin exhortation, "Know the ways of the Lord."¹³ Her second volume was entitled *The Book of Life's Merits* and focused on religious ethics, while her third text, *On the Activity of God*, was more scientific and focused on the development of an early theory of evolution.¹⁴ Indeed, these three volumes of writing were considered important, as they were very diverse and indicative of an eloquent and educated woman. Hildegard did not stop there, though. She also wrote about nature in her text *A Study of Nature*. The text is composed of nine books in which Hildegard discusses the treatment of plants, trees, stones, animals and reptiles. While her writings were extensive and well-known, she also composed liturgical poetry and music for use in her monastery. These songs were later compiled under the title *Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*,¹⁵ and were included as part of her visionary writing. In such writings, she expressed her conviction that humans had the capacity to be more perfect, and she developed her belief that the soul has both male and female aspects, and that men and women, while possessing different characteristics from one another,

¹⁰ Elizabeth Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality* (London: Paulist Press, 2005), 77.

¹¹ Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1.

¹² Newman, 3.

¹³ Dreyer, 77.

¹⁴ Jennifer Lawler, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2007), 76.

¹⁵ Dreyer, 78.

should attempt to develop the characteristics of the opposite gender.¹⁶ She used Gen. 1:27-28 as a source for this concept: “God created man in his own image, male and female he created them.”¹⁷ Because her works were so revered, she was widely acknowledged in her own lifetime, receiving commendations and praise from Pope Eugene III and Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as a multitude of accolades from laity and clergy.¹⁸ In fact, there have been so many that have celebrated and applauded her that over time, such communications have been collected and recorded to show just how significant and loved Hildegard was during her lifetime.

In *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen* as translated by Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, an entire corpus of such laudatory correspondences was recorded, which allow historians an even clearer idea of how respected and treasured Hildegard was, even though she was a woman. One example of such a correspondence between a community of Cistercians and Hildegard is provided below:

To Hildegard, worthy of all honor, lady to be embraced with the arms of sincere love, mistress of the sisters of St. Rupert in Bingen, N., prior, although unworthy, and the entire community of Cistercians, poor and humble, with their prayer that she, amid the chorus of virgins, may “follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth” Separated from you by a great distance and thus unable to enjoy your beloved presence in person, we rejoice to be able to greet you in a letter, for, in Christ, we venerate you as spiritually superior to us, and we hope that you will be our mediator with Christ like a beloved mother. Because we have heard of the good reputation of your holy calling and your faithful administration of your convent in God, we offer the obedience of prayer for your steadfastness and our service to God for your salvation.¹⁹

At that time, such a letter of praise was not something typically produced for a woman, especially one considered a part of the church. While the letter speaks for itself, the Cistercians blatantly viewed Hildegard superior to them—a woman who was superior to a group of men. It is important to look at such sources, as it helps to further develop scholarship on Hildegard and why she was so different than most women during her time. Yet another letter is provided below, from the priest Baldemar to Hildegard:

To his most beloved and sorely missed lady and mother, Hildegard, Baldemar, a sinner, with his prayer that she will rejoice forever with Christ the Lord after this fragile and fallen state of life. I will count myself blessed if I deserve to be consoled by a letter from you, saintly lady. But because it is the duty of a wise doctor to visit a wounded man frequently and to cautiously and competently cut away any superfluous or putrefying flesh lest the infection become worse later, I beg you by the love of the blessed Redeemer to inspect my wound frequently so that, through the mercy of God, and your counsel, no vestige or corruption remains in them.²⁰

In this next letter, this priest expressed an almost desperate desire to see Hildegard, or, at least, to receive a letter from her. While it is a bit different than the first letter considered, it provides a similar image. Few women mystics received such praise and attention. In fact, often they were

¹⁶ Lawler, 77.

¹⁷ Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz, *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 40.

¹⁸ Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200 -1500* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 156.

¹⁹ A Community of Cistercians to Hildegard, before 1153, in *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen: Volume III* eds., Hildegard Bingen, Joseph Baird and Radd Ehrman eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 71.

²⁰ The Priest Baldemar to Hildegard, before 1173, in *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 94-95.

considered liars. Hildegard's status and connections with the Church were positive, which further allowed her to actively write, speak and preach to the world; a position that was typically closed to women, even well after the death of Hildegard. Certainly, medieval religious identity was strongly gendered and sexualized. While most women in general had few rights, Hildegard of Bingen was certainly able to exercise significant rights and was able to educate both girls and women who served as protectors and patrons of culture and literature during and after her death due to her strong influence.²¹ In the end though, her formidable intellect and her mystical writings made her a prophet and advisor to secular and religious leaders.

Although Hildegard suffered ill health, it did not prevent her from becoming involved in political and diplomatic dealings, which caused her fame to spread throughout Germany as well as to Flanders, France, England, Italy, and even Greece.²² This made her one of the most well-known religious women of the Middle Ages, and one of the first of her kind in a society and community that was dominated by men. There is still much for historians to study when it comes to the subject of medieval women in the High Middle Ages. More research is needed about women of power in the religious sect, such as that of Hildegard. While the position she gained, her background, and the power and influence she held as a woman during her time is commonly known among scholars and researchers who study Hildegard and similar women, there is not much research that extends beyond the basics. It is hoped that short writings such as this can attract more interest and encourage detailed research regarding this important and fascinating person.

²¹ Lawler, 9.

²² Ibid, 77.