

**VESSELS OF DIVINITY: A CASE STUDY OF HILDEGARD, HERRAD, AND
ELISABETH AS A FEMALE SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY**

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

When compared to the classical realism of Greek and Roman antiquity, it is easy to disregard medieval European art as unskilled. Its characteristic issues with distorted proportion, abstracted figures, and spatial representation seem like a regression in artistic skill. This view echoes the popular conception of the middle ages as an era lacking intellectual growth and creative progress. However, monasteries and convents in this time acted as hubs of intellectual and scientific thought as well as outstanding creativity in the visual arts.¹ The lack of realistic representation comes from a deep desire to represent concepts and ideas too abstract and metaphysical for figural conception.² As those in the church grappled with issues of cosmology, virtue, and faith, they developed new ways to represent their ideas.

Convents especially suffered under prejudices against the visual arts of the medieval period. While nuns were more trained and educated than laywomen, they were often still deprived of visual and literary resources offered to men and thus their work did not advance at the same pace. Convents were left to acquire treasures, books, and art pieces on their own, often at the expense of their founding members. However, that is not to say that their learning and knowledge did not advance; medieval nuns' writing and art reflect a large knowledge base and a high level of skill. Comparison of the artistic talents of men and women is unhelpful though, as nuns operated within a different societal

¹ Seb Falk, *The Light Ages: The Surprising Story of Medieval Science* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

² Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

framework that necessitated a different visual language. Nuns explored in their works the same themes as the male clergy, but they operated in different directions dictated by what was allowed to their gender. For example, nuns' work inherently differs from the church's works at large in that it is so rich in images when male clergy pushed for pure, imageless devotion.³

Knowing now that nuns were philosophers, artists, and leaders in the church, it is prudent to re-examine the state of nuns, the places in which they worked, and the work they produced. An expanded view of women's work in the medieval period allows for a better appreciation of women's work within the art-historical narrative. As Linda Nochlin states, "...the white Western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as the viewpoint of the art historian, may--and does--prove to be inadequate."⁴ Medieval women, especially those acting as designers and artists, created emotionally moving and creatively intelligent pieces overlooked by all with the exception of a small number of specialists such as Jeffrey Hamburger and Barbara Newman. Women were thinking in their own circles, learning from each other, and co-creating a Christian faith intertwined with but paradoxically separate from the overarching clerical culture. Looking through a new lens that includes the extraordinary women working in this time showcases the immense amounts of learning, creativity, and enlightenment that happened in an era often thought to be stagnant.

³ Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 4.

⁴ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," Writing UPenn, accessed November 15, 2023, https://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Nochlin-Linda_Why-Have-There-Been-No-Great-Women-Artists.pdf.

The relationship between Hildegard of Bingen, Herrad of Hohenbourg, and Elisabeth of Schönau is just one example of the ways in which religious women developed their own circles of thought and a distinctly feminine spirituality that heretofore has been unacknowledged. In order to illustrate how the aforementioned women acted as a community of intellects and creators, this paper will first provide a background on nuns from 600-1200 C.E in Europe, with a later focus on Germany and the unique status religious women were provided. Hildegard of Bingen will be the focus of the next section, especially in terms of how she was able to attain enough fame and reputation to influence others. Hildegard is an incredibly well-known and well-documented figure, who produced a large body of written and illuminated works that many of her contemporaries cited in manuscripts of their own, especially those women previously listed. Hildegard's works will be examined for notable stylistic and thematic qualities, and compared to work by Herrad and Elisabeth. Through the comparison, it becomes obvious that Hildegard, Herrad, and Elisabeth acted as a female intellectual community in order to explore a separate understanding of faith that incorporates a positive view of womanhood not seen elsewhere.

FEMALE MONASTICISM IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The Rise of Female Monasticism from 600-1200

While this paper will focus on nuns in 12th century Germany, it is more helpful to take a broad European stance when discussing the early history of female monasticism. There is a lack of specifically German sources for this time, however, it can be assumed

Germany followed the general trends of other countries, as all of them were developing religious life contemporaneously. Religious women had always existed and acted as members of the church, however the removal of women from offices such as Deacon in the 7th century led to the creation of spaces specifically for women, who were disenfranchised by the sudden loss of participatory space.⁵ By creating female only convents and monasteries, the church offered women the ability to remain involved and take on new roles not previously available, such as abbess/canonesses- the leader of the convent.⁶

Kings, Queens, and the aristocracy took a vested interest in funding female monasteries as residences, retirement homes, and schools for their children. Radegunde (520-587), wife of King Clothar I, escaped her husband's murderous tendencies via retirement to the monastery of Sainte-Croix in Poitiers, where she appointed her daughter abbess.⁷ It was her royal connections that led to the convent's ownership of a precious relic of the cross.⁸ The women's abbey of Chelles (founded 658-659) acquired many treasures upon the death of Queen Bathilde, who retired there after falling from power in 665.⁹ The historical connection to royalty set multiple precedents for female convents. One was the right to free election of the abbess. Two was the allowance of the collection of property and land by female monasteries. Finally, was the allowance of considerable power to abbesses, such as presiding over their territories as justices, minting coins, and

⁵ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Susan Marti, and Dietlinde Hamburger, *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 14.

⁶ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 15.

⁷ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 33.

⁸ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 33.

⁹ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 33.

the rights to territorial estates.¹⁰ The freedom abbesses enjoyed throughout the early medieval period (500-1100) led to multiple displays of power; one notable example being abbess Sophia of Gandersheim and Essen starting an armed conflict over who had control of Gandersheim simply because she did not want to be veiled by the local bishop.¹¹

A period of unrest began in the church in the 10th century due to a rapidly growing number of priests, culminating in multiple reform movements through the 11th and 12th centuries. The Gregorian reforms from 1073-1085, where Pope Gregory argued for chastity and against simony, the practice of paying for ecclesiastical offices, generated multiple other new religious sects.¹² Groups like the Cathars, Cistercians, and Premonstratensians all advocated their own ways to reform flaws they saw in the church.¹³ With the appearance of these new religious sects came an explosion of monasteries and with them female monasteries, which had the ability to fund these new orders by garnering treasures and aristocratic support. From 1080- 1170, the number of female monasteries across Europe increased by a factor of four.¹⁴ By the times of Hildegard, Herrad, and Elisabeth, female monasteries were well established and plentiful.

Life Inside the Convents and its Benefits

In Arles, 503 CE, Bishop Ceasarius of Arles and his sister Ceasaria founded the monastery of Saint-Jean, where they wrote and utilized the first known rule specific to

¹⁰ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 33-34.

¹¹ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 20.

¹² Uta-Renate Blumenthal, "Gregorian Reform," *Britannica*, last modified September 23, 2011, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Gregorian-Reform>.

¹³ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 23.

¹⁴ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 23.

female monasteries.¹⁵ The rule, known as the *Regula sanctorum virginum* (Rule For Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles), had four major components: admittance for life, obedience to the abbess, renunciation of private property, and strict enclosure.¹⁶ While elaborated on later by Benedictine and Augustinian rule (both having the most to do with what “enclosure” meant), these four key components stay relatively consistent in female convents across time and space. Despite these seeming restrictions, nuns and especially abbesses had the capacity for comparatively fuller and healthier lives than their peers.

Nuns, like their male counterparts, needed to be educated in order to perform daily functions such as prayer services and meditating on important religious texts. Thus, a nun could not reach full standing without understanding Latin.¹⁷ They learned to read Latin and the vernacular together by working through different books of the Bible as well as the prayers they would later be asked to perform.¹⁸ With the ability to read, they were able to extend their education to tangential subjects, such as commentaries and doctrinal texts. Canonesses (interchangeable with abbesses) also had access to political works to aid them when they had to interfere with matters of the state.¹⁹ Nuns who lived in double monasteries were further aided by access to the libraries given to male clergy, who were known to translate some of their works into the vernacular language, making them easier to read.²⁰ However, German nuns did not necessarily need this translation, as nuns from German speaking countries boast the highest numbers of substantial Latin texts.²¹ The

¹⁵ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 15.

¹⁶ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 15.

¹⁷ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 29.

¹⁸ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 29.

¹⁹ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 80.

²⁰ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 23.

²¹ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 153.

presence of Latin fluency attests to the high level of education German nuns specifically received.

Education was not the only benefit of living in a convent, especially in Germanic regions. The presence of royalty entrenched the right to private property and freedom of movement into the nuns' minds, despite the idealized view of enclosure presented to them. Nuns were meant to surrender their worldly ties in terms of possessions and relationships upon entry to the convents. However, abbesses frequently made personal income from private land holdings.²² For example, Clara zu Rhein leased out 9 richly furnished rooms. Her leasing ventures combined with her selling of painted panels is one example of how nuns bent the rules to make a personal income despite their vows of poverty.²³ The personal as well as institutional access to money, along with the lack of pressures of motherhood and working life also meant that nuns were generally healthier and lived longer than their lay counterparts.²⁴

HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

The Rise of Hildegard von Bingen

It is impossible to continue to discuss medieval German nuns without also considering Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), the most illustrious of them all. Later known as the “Sibyl of the Rhein,” she was a visionary and abbess, serving the

²² Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and Visionary Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1998), 40.

²³ Hamburger, *The Visual*, 40.

²⁴ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 23.

Disibodenberg and Rupertsberg monasteries from 1136 until her death. She was a prolific writer who produced volumes of letters, books, and even composed music that modern scholars continue to analyze for its merit and wisdom. More fascinating yet is that this body of work comes from a time period in which religious women began to struggle to be recognized. Despite movements to suppress the power and education of religious women, male clergy from across the German empire, including the pope, validated and supported her work. Most importantly, Hildegard von Bingen used her position as a respected and educated woman to act as a religious leader, intellect, and artistic designer/patron.

Two key factors led to the creation of Hildegard von Bingen as an historical figure: the exponential growth of female convents, and the church's efforts to suppress the women inside of those convents. As mentioned previously, during the Gregorian reforms from 1073-1085,²⁵ the church experienced multiple movements that split its populus into religious sects. Each of these sects, in order to spread influence and gain funding, started monasteries, and with them female convents. As established, abbesses within Germanic convents had access to an exceptional education, personal income, and high levels of power over their territories.

However, at the same time, reformers were pushing against the extent of abbesses' power. Male interference in previously independent female spaces became common in the tenth century onward with increased celebrations of private Mass that necessitated male clergy to be present.²⁶ Men in the church began to accuse canonesses of being immoral and undisciplined.²⁷ Peter Abelard (1079-1142) exemplifies the

²⁵ Blumenthal, "Gregorian Reform," *Britannica*.

²⁶ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 23.

²⁷ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 23.

church's attitude in his writings. In one letter he expresses his appreciation for religious women, but in another he bans them from touching sacramental vessels or altar cloths.²⁸ In this new context, though religious women were still tolerated, they were considered unclean, and generally unable to hold spiritual offices except in extraordinary cases and even then only within female specific spaces.²⁹ It is within the world of these two opposing forces that Hildegard von Bingen operated. On one hand, she was one of many abbesses and canonesses who had commanded respect with the freedoms allowed to them beginning in the 600s. On the other hand, she was still acting within a patriarchal society that was increasingly becoming frustrated with the actions of the nuns who preceded her.

Childhood

The tenth child of a knight and his wife, Hildegard was tithed to the church from birth.³⁰ She officially entered the church at the age of eight, when she was entrusted to Jutta of Sponheim, a noblewoman living in present day Mainz in an offshoot of the Benedictine Convent of Disibodenberg, which Hildegard eventually became a member of.³¹ Hildegard received her veil at age fourteen, officially becoming a nun.³²

²⁸ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 13-14.

²⁹ Hamburger, Marti, and Hamburger, *Crown and Veil*, 13-14.

³⁰ Jean T. Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen," *World Philosophers and Their Works*, February 2000, accessed November 16, 2023, file:///home/chronos/u-c018a2f16ca440196b6981230a7f6ad2037034fb/MyFiles/Downloads/EBSCO-FullText-2023-10-30.html.

³¹ Gale Cengage Learning, "Saint Hildegard of Bingen," in *Gale Biographies: Popular People* (Farmington, MI, USA: Gale, 2020) <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGJjbGU6ODUyMjM4?aid=98549>.

³² Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen."

Perhaps due to the volatile nature of Hildegard's time period, there are somewhat conflicting accounts of her time prior to becoming abbess at Disibodenberg upon the death of Jutta in 1136, when Hildegard took over in a unanimous vote.³³ The facts agreed upon are that Jutta was originally responsible for Hildegard's education, but the responsibility was later passed to the monk Volmar, who became Hildegard's friend and secretary.³⁴ What is contested is the amount of education Hildegard received. Hildegard herself, and some biographical accounts state that due to her sickly nature which had been persistent since childhood, Hildegard's education was mediocre at best, and she was not fully instructed in Latin or science.³⁵ However, other accounts of her life and some of her own writings reveal her to be quite erudite. Hildegard studied scripture, theology, science, and philosophy in the time before taking over the convent.³⁶ Her later writings manifest her broad knowledge in a variety of fields by referencing figures like Saint Augustine and Aristotle.³⁷ Her medico-scientific works lean heavily on the four humors central to the work of Hippocrates, providing more evidence of her studies.³⁸ An incredibly learned woman, it appears that Hildegard was quite clever academically as well as socially, and thus knew when to downplay her own ability.

³³ Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen."

³⁴ Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen."

³⁵ Gale Cengage Learning, "Saint Hildegard."

³⁶ Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen."

³⁷ Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen."

³⁸ Francesco Brigo et al., "Epilepsy in Hildegard of Bingen's Writings: A Comprehensive Overview," *Epilepsy and Behavior* 80 (March 2018), accessed November 16, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yebeh.2017.10.002>.

HILDEGARD'S VISIONARY EXPERIENCES AND WORKS

Hildegard's Visions

In 1141, God commanded Hildegard to share her visions, which were the key to her renown and success. She had experienced visions since age three, describing them as dazzling lights in which forms moved around.³⁹ In her teenage years, she stopped sharing her visions with anyone except Jutta, realizing that no one else could see them.⁴⁰ Her visions were consistently accompanied by this dazzling light, as well as violent headaches and sickness. Hildegard stated that after receiving a vision, she suddenly knew things that she couldn't possibly have known before. Due to this interplay of health issues and visionary experience, there are two general theories on what Hildegard's visions stemmed from.

The first hypothesis is that the visions were merely a byproduct of Hildegard's struggles with migraines and/or seizures. Beginning with Charles Singer in 1913, various historians have attempted to medically diagnose Hildegard and explain her experiences.⁴¹ Singer proposed that Hildegard suffered from scintillating scotoma, a condition in which those afflicted experience intense pain, and may see flashes of light and jagged shapes.⁴² Hildegard herself frequently described her person as sickly, starting the path to her

³⁹ Barbara Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation," *Church History* 54, no. 2 (1985): 165, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3167233>.

⁴⁰ Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen," 165.

⁴¹ Katherine Foxhall, "Making Modern Migraine Medieval: Men of Science, Hildegard of Bingen and the Life of a Retrospective Diagnosis," *Medical History* 58, no. 3 (2014): 355, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mdh.2014.28>.

⁴² Nathaniel M. Campbell, "'Imago Expandit Splendorem Suum'. Hildegard of Bingen's Visio-Theological Designs in the Rupertsberg Scivias Manuscript," last modified November 13, 2023, PDF.

retroactive diagnosis. The pain she described as well as the light with forms in it resonated with many migraine sufferers, including Singer, who saw their own experiences in that description.⁴³ Madeline Caviness used her own experiences with scintillating scotoma to support this claim as well.⁴⁴ Following the logic of this hypothesis, Hildegard was just a sick woman living in a time period where women were able to be honored as visionaries and prophets.

However, the convenience of the power her visionary experiences lent her has led more jaded scholars to believe her visions may have been calculated. By proposing that Hildegard was more prophet than mystic, Sabrina Flanagan implies that Hildegard was simply very aware of her positionality.⁴⁵ Women were not allowed to preach and frequently struggled to be taken seriously by upper members of the church hierarchy. However, women were respected as mystics, and having visionary experience could frequently be used to bypass restrictions to power that would otherwise be in place.⁴⁶ Flanagan argues that Hildegard used her obvious sickness to create the persona of a prophetess, which then allowed Hildegard to write in an unrestricted manner under the cover of God's commands.

Regardless of the underlying cause or motivation, Hildegard strongly asserted that her visions were heaven sent, and the church accepted them as such. She began writing in 1141, but only after receiving encouragement from the Archbishop of Mainz who confirmed her visions as divinely inspired.⁴⁷ Her credibility grew with the support of

⁴³ Foxhall, "Making Modern," 362.

⁴⁴ Campbell, "Imago Expandit."

⁴⁵ Foxhall, "Making Modern," 370.

⁴⁶ Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen," 170.

⁴⁷ Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen."

Pope Eugenius III, which she received in 1147.⁴⁸ Despite the support of such powerful figures, she still had to vouch for herself in 1175, when the monk Guibert wrote to her, demanding an explanation of her visionary experiences.⁴⁹ The ultimate outcome however, was his support as well.⁵⁰

Hildegard's work

Overall, Hildegard clearly benefited from the advantages of being a religious woman in Germany during the 12th century. Her access to education, visions, and ability to win over male clergy quite literally allowed her to create, as without them she would not have been permitted to write at all. The rules against women preaching were strict, and as some of her writings could be considered sermon-like, Hildegard was an anomaly in what she was allowed to express in her multitude of works. Her oeuvre consists of five books, as well as letters, music, and even a drama. There are three books of visions, *Liber Scivias* (know the ways of God), *Liber vitae meritorum* (the book of the rewards of life), and *Liber Divinorum Operum* (book of divine works).⁵¹ The other two books are scientific- *Physica* and *Causae et Curae*.⁵² The throughline of all of this work is a penchant for asserting female agency.

Hildegard in her letters frequently quoted scripture that supported her right to preach what she believed God commanded her to. As part of her rhetoric around her

⁴⁸ Strandness, "Hildegard Von Bingen."

⁴⁹ Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen," 1.

⁵⁰ Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen," 1.

⁵¹ "Liber Divinorum Operum," International Society of Hildegard Von Bingen Studies, last modified 2014, accessed November 16, 2023, <http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/links.html>.

⁵² Brigo et al., "Epilepsy in Hildegard."

visions as expanded on in her letters, she claimed that God gave visions to her as a result of men's "failure to obey," and chose her, a "frail and despicable vessel" to prove his power and ability to work miracles through anyone.⁵³ While not the feminist take a modern audience would hope to see, Hildegard was arguing for agency in her own way. She had the God-given right to share her visions and criticisms of the church, and it could not be taken away. *Causae et Curae* also provides a salient example of Hildegard promoting female agency. In it, she explains the woman's role in reproduction, as active, and likens women's role in reproduction to God's power of creation.⁵⁴ Hildegard also provides one of the first descriptions of the female orgasm in *Causae et Curae*, presented frankly as a key part of the reproductive process.⁵⁵ Hildegard consistently promoted women as active players across her different writings, and argues for their right to express themselves within the church. It follows then, that when looking at the images in the books of her visions, that they can be understood through a somewhat feminist lens. The book focused on in this section will be *Scivias*, as it is the most richly illustrated.

The Creation of Hildegard's Books of Visions

Before moving on, it is important to understand how the books of visions were made, as they were not fully written or illuminated by Hildegard personally. There are many arguments over the degree to which Hildegard was involved in their creation and

⁵³ Maria F. Benevento, "'Wretched in My Condition': Rhetoric and the Letters of Hildegard of Bingen," last modified October 30, 2023, PDF.

⁵⁴ Minji Lee, "The Womb in Labour: Representing the Woman's Body as an Active Vessel in Hildegard of Bingen's Cause Et Cure," *Social History of Medicine* 35, no. 4 (2022): 1, PDF.

⁵⁵ Kristina Lerman, "The Life and Works of Hildegard Von Bingen (1098-1179)," Internet Medieval Sourcebook, last modified October 6, 2023, accessed November 15, 2023, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/med/hildegarde.asp>.

the ways in which they were meant to be read and understood. This section is only a brief summary of a large field of scholarship.

Most of the arguments surround the Rupertsberg *Scivias* manuscript, the most vividly illuminated and well known of Hildegard's books. This copy was created at the Rupertsberg convent Hildegard moved to shortly after taking over Disibodenberg.

Unfortunately, a lack of primary sources and the destruction of the original work leaves scholars mostly guessing as to when and how the manuscript was created.⁵⁶ Nathaniel M. Campbell summarizes this research quite succinctly:

The consensus in Anglo-American scholarship dates the manuscript to some point within the last two decades of Hildegard's life and attributes to her some kind of role in the production of the images, even if it is not widely believed that she herself executed them... Significant recent German scholarship, however, has dated the manuscript's production after Hildegard's death in 1179, based on stylistic comparisons to firmly dateable contemporary manuscripts or on the many places where the images in the manuscript diverge from or even contradict the text of the visions, thus minimizing, if not completely negating, her role in their design.⁵⁷

Both views agree to some degree that Hildegard generated the text of the *Scivias* herself, whether by dictating to Volmar, or writing it herself and then having him edit it. The main difference is in reference to when and how the manuscript was illuminated.

Campbell advocates the Anglo-American position, which considers Hildegard a creative director of sorts for the *Scivias*. In this view, Hildegard oversaw the creation of the images closely and edited them as she saw fit to represent her visions more clearly.⁵⁸ Her direct contributions are also supported in the work of Madeline Caviness, who posited

⁵⁶ Campbell, "Imago Expandit."

⁵⁷ Campbell, "Imago Expandit."

⁵⁸ Campbell, "Imago Expandit."

that Hildegard drew the image onto wax tablets as she described it to Volmar.⁵⁹ This method of production explains why many of the illuminations in *Scivias* are tall but narrow in design, with the frame holding the wax being the determining factors of the dimensions.⁶⁰

Understanding Hildegard's Imagery

Hildegard's use of imagery to uphold female agency can best be understood through the distinctly feminine spirituality seen in her depictions of Mary. Mary in the *Scivias* is not represented as a character, but rather by abstract visual symbology. Hildegard's mariology employs the virtues, the church, and the concept of purity to represent Mary, rather than a consistent figural form. She becomes cold, distant, and divine in this way. For example, despite her image being absent, Campbell argues that Mary is represented all over *The Six Days of Creation* (fig. 1).⁶¹ The illumination covers a full page and is split into three registers, each of which represent one aspect of the story of Adam, according to Rebecca Garber.⁶² The top band contains a large, golden circle filled with concentric rings, as well as a man smelling white flowers. The middle band is a starry night, in the center of which are six circles representing the six stages of creation, accompanied by another man lost in the darkness. The bottom band is a half circle, out of which springs a third man.

⁵⁹ Campbell, "Imago Expandit."

⁶⁰ Campbell, "Imago Expandit."

⁶¹ Nathaniel M. Campbell, 2023. "'O Jewel Resplendent': The Virgin Mary and Her Analogues in Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias*" *Religions* 14, no. 3: 342. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030342>

⁶² Rebecca L. R Garber, *Medieval History and Culture*, vol. 10, *Feminine Figurae: Representations of Gender in Religious Texts by Medieval German Women Writers, 1100-1475* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 40-41, digital file.

Campbell argues that in this image, the white flowers Adam is smelling in the upper right corner represent Mary and Christ's purity, associating Mary with divinity and positioning her as a savior of Adam from the fall.⁶³ This is not far off from other interpretations of the image, in which the flowers represent obedience, something Adam approaches, but ultimately ignores.⁶⁴ Mary also exists at the bottom center of the page as the golden half circle propelling Christ into the world, once again creating an association between her and Christ.⁶⁵ Gold, Silver and blue, especially in the circular forms, are frequently used in the *Scivias* to represent the Trinity, thus, the large circle at the top can be assumed to be a representation of the father, the son, and the holy spirit.⁶⁶ However, the half circle at the bottom propels Christ into the world to save Adam, drawing on bible verses that describe Mary as emerging "like the rising dawn."⁶⁷ The gold circle echoes the rise of the sun over the horizon, indicating Mary's presence. Most interesting is this overlap in the representation of Mary and the representation of the Trinity. Mary is not just the mother of Christ, she is a savior, and she is divine. While more traditional clergy members focused on her human aspects in their art, especially pieces intended for nuns use (her love of her son),⁶⁸ Hildegard was asserting Mary as a divine feminine by denying her a human body and representing her in the same abstraction she used to represent an incomprehensible God.

⁶³ Campbell, "'O Jewel Resplendent'"

⁶⁴ Garber, *Medieval History*, 40.

⁶⁵ Campbell, "'O Jewel Resplendent'"

⁶⁶ Campbell, "'O Jewel Resplendent'"

⁶⁷ Campbell, "'O Jewel Resplendent'"

⁶⁸ Campbell, "'O Jewel Resplendent'"

This is a very extreme departure from the precedents set for images of Mary, such as that seen in the Hitda Codex, an illuminated manuscript from the convent in Cologne, 1025 (fig. 2). The detail of the illumination *Abbess Hitda von Meschede Gospels: Cod. 1640: Nativity: det.: Virgin* shows Mary traditionally, emphasizing her pious and humble character. Mary is seated in a reclined position, with her eyes averted from her viewer, and her hair covered. She takes over the bottom third of this Nativity scene, overshadowed by the christ-child. This, in effect, ties her worth to Christ, and emphasizes her role as a mother. The humility in her position and averted gaze establishes her character, and her intended use as a model for the nuns' lives. Mary's deferential nature and pious life was presented to nuns by the clerical culture as the ideal form of womanhood, and seen as the only way to atone for women's position as daughters of Eve- those responsible for the fall of creation from the garden of Eden.⁶⁹

Hildegard also frequently represents institutions as women by drawing on Mary, like in *Heavenly Zion Destroyed* (fig. 3). Here, Mary and the church become one as *Mater Ecclesia*.⁷⁰ Another full page image, the viewer is immediately overwhelmed by the hues of red, silver and gold that cover the illumination. A woman (*Ecclesia*) stands holding multiple women dressed in red, understood to be virgins based on Hildegard's color associations, who seem to dance across her arms. While it is not uncommon to see Mary and the church linked, it is the way she is represented that differentiates Hildegard's image. The clerical culture at the time emphasized the humanity of Mary,

⁶⁹ Benevento, "Wretched in My Condition."

⁷⁰ Ann Storey, "A Theophany of the Feminine: Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Schonau, and Herrad of Landsberg," *Woman's Art Journal* 19, no. 1 (1998): 17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358649>.

depicting her constantly as a doting mother.⁷¹ *Ecclesia* encompasses the whole frame and is depicted frontally, dominating the image rather than comforting the viewer while holding and protecting all aspects of the church.⁷² This depiction is very different from the Hitda illumination, where Mary is deferential to the viewer and her son. Mary as the church becomes divine, depicted in gold, silver, and red. She is not a bystander, and her protection of the church body comes off not as passive nurturing but as active. The large figure also holds a group of virgins, about which Hildegard says, "...all these figures received a golden ray from that image of the most glorious Trinity."⁷³ Again, the feminine and the divine are linked, with virgins being protected and recognized by the Trinity, proving their integral nature to the church and Christian religion as a whole.

HILDEGARD'S INFLUENCE ON FEMALE CONCEPTIONS OF FAITH

Contemporaries of Hildegard

Hildegard's prolific works and renown provided strong inspiration for other contemporary abbesses who referenced Hildegard in their work, in effect creating an intellectual and creative women's community. Figures like Elisabeth of Schonau and Herrad of Hohenbourg also began writing about theology and science, including visual and literary allusions to Hildegard as well as to other well known writers in their own

⁷¹ Garber, *Medieval History*, 35.

⁷² Storey, "A Theophany," 17.

⁷³ *Hildegard of Bingen, Liber Scivias*, Fol. 66r. ca. 1151-79. Ill. MS. (missing). Wiesbaden: Lib, Nassauische Landesbibliothek; HS. 1 (formerly). <https://jstor.org/stable/community.11661617>.

books.⁷⁴ The professional interactions of these women led to illuminations and written passages that stand out as distinct from other theological works in that there is a theme of female agency that appears in them. No longer was Hildegard an anomaly, she was joined by other female visionaries and reformers. Hildegard, Herrad, and Elisabeth encapsulate the feminine intellectual community and shared spirituality among medieval nuns.

Herrad of Landstadt (or Hohenbourg) has few remaining records of her life, but scholars assume that she must have been of noble birth considering her eventual position as an abbess, as that role was not available to the average woman.⁷⁵ She lived from 1125 to 1195, and took over the convent at Hohenbourg in 1175.⁷⁶ Herrad is most known for her manuscript *Hortus Deliciarum* (Garden of Delights), completed during her time as abbess. The book contains verse, prose, dialogue, music, and, most impressively, 340 miniatures and full-page illustrations.⁷⁷ *Hortus* was made under Herrad's strict instruction and supervision, and she is the author listed. However, as in the case of Hildegard's *Scivias*, Herrad herself did not create every passage or image, but was deeply involved in the generative process.⁷⁸

In contrast, Elisabeth of Schönau (1129-1164) wrote her books directly, though they were heavily influenced and edited after.⁷⁹ Despite this interference, they are rich

⁷⁴ Joan Gibson, "Herrad of Hohenbourg," *A History of Women Philosophers*, 1989, 85-86, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-2551-9_4.

⁷⁵ Gibson, "Herrad of Hohenbourg," 85-86.

⁷⁶ Gibson, "Herrad of Hohenbourg," 85-86.

⁷⁷ Gibson, "Herrad of Hohenbourg," 85-86.

⁷⁸ Gibson, "Herrad of Hohenbourg," 85-86.

⁷⁹ Gale, "Elisabeth of Schönau (c. 1129-1165), an Introduction to," *Gale Literature Criticism*, last modified 2006, accessed November 16, 2023, https://go-gale-com.coloradocollege.idm.oclc.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=T002&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievalId=9dc1e995-1f0d-4cb0-b0f9-f8c706c29943&hitCount=1&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&atPosition=1&docId=GALE%7

and vividly descriptive, and the visions described within the pages come to life in every word. Much like Hildegard, she was admitted into religious life at a young age, and was known for being quite sickly. Elisabeth joined the double monastery of Schönau at age 12 and lived a strictly enclosed life, meaning that her contact with those outside of her convent was severely limited.⁸⁰ She began having visions in 1152 at age 23, one year after the release of *Scivias*. Her two manuscripts are *Liber Viarum Dei* (The Book of the Ways of God) and *Revelatio de Sacro Exercitu Virginium Coloniaesium* (The Book of Revelations About the Sacred Company of the Virgins of Cologne).⁸¹ The two books are compilations of her visions and semi-autobiographical accounts, though heavily edited by her brother Eckbert.⁸²

The different lives of these women also led them to have different relationships with each other. Hildegard and Herrad were not particularly close in a personal way, however Herrad was definitely familiar with Hildegard as an academic writer. For example, excerpts of Hildegard's work appear in the *Hortus*.⁸³ Elisabeth also referenced Hildegard's imagery in the accounts of her visions, but she was also a frequent correspondent of Hildegard's. Elisabeth admired Hildegard, possibly at the behest and encouragement of her brother, and the two interacted frequently.⁸⁴ Maria F. Benevento suggests that Elisabeth, a fellow reformational activist, was the intended audience for

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⁸⁰ Gale, "Elisabeth of Schönau," Gale Literature Criticism.

⁸¹ Gale, "Elisabeth of Schönau," Gale Literature Criticism.

⁸² Gale, "Elisabeth of Schönau," Gale Literature Criticism.

⁸³ Gibson, "Herrad of Hohenbourg," 85-86.

⁸⁴ Gale, "Elisabeth of Schönau," Gale Literature Criticism.

some of Hildegard's harsher tirades against the church.⁸⁵ Hildegard, knowing Elisabeth's practices of self-mutilation, wrote to her, urging her to be kinder to herself.⁸⁶ Elisabeth and Hildegard even met in the year of 1156.⁸⁷

THE WOMAN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The Woman of the Apocalypse in Revelations

Together, Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Herrad came to create by way of their writings what can only be described as a feminine spirituality. While male clergy chose to focus on the fall of Eve and the sinful nature of women, these three instead focused on a positive and affirming imagery of women's power in the bible. Furthermore, their works advocate for the holiness and divinity of the female, rather than casting womanhood aside as dirty and other. The Woman of the Apocalypse, a figure from Revelations 12:1-6 depicted in literary and visual form by Hildegard, Elisabeth, and Herrad, perfectly encapsulates their stance:

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. **2** She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. **3** Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. **4** Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. **5** She gave birth to a son, a male child, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter."^[a] And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. **6** The woman fled into the

⁸⁵ Benevento, "Wretched in My Condition."

⁸⁶ Benevento, "Wretched in My Condition."

⁸⁷ Kitty Datta, "Elisabeth of Schonau: A Case for a Distinctive Women's Spirituality," last modified November 8, 2023, PDF.

wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.⁸⁸

Hildegard's Image

Hildegard's image *Theophany of Divine Love*, an illumination located in *Liber Divinorum* (fig. 4) draws on these verses to create a female personification of *Caritas* (divine love). Details pertaining to the woman in Revelations, understood by her audience as either Mary or a personification of the Church, are combined with what an experienced reader of Hildegard would identify as markers of the Holy Spirit (the color red) in order to create this characterization. Hildegard's reader would recognize the beast under *Caritas'* feet as a reference to Revelations, and already be familiar with the Church personified as a woman, both in Hildegard's earlier images of *Ecclesia* in *Scivias*, and in the traditional image of Israel as a Bride that frequently is and was conflated with the church.⁸⁹ However, *Caritas* holds the lamb of God in her hands, protecting him from the monsters below her feet, rather than being a fearful captive needing to be saved, as would be expected in the representations of the Church as a bride.⁹⁰ In this image she used verses and visual language other church members would have been familiar with to once again insert a woman into the divine. Anne Storey views this as a Trinity image, in which the woman represents the holy spirit.⁹¹ As the lamb is the Christ-child and the male head bursting out of *Caritas* is God the father, she argues that the woman represents the third

⁸⁸ Revelations 12:1-6 NIV

⁸⁹ Constant J. Mews, "From Scivias to the Liber Divinorum Operum: Hildegard's Apocalyptic Imagination and the Call to Reform," *The Journal of Religious History* 24, no. 1 (2000): 47, PDF.

⁹⁰ Mews, "From Scivias," 47.

⁹¹ Storey, "A Theophany," 17.

aspect of the Trinity- the personification of love- the holy spirit.⁹² This connection between the figure and the Trinity is furthered by the red dress the woman wears, as Hildegard's visual language employs red as a sign of the Holy Spirit. Not only does Hildegard use the imagery of the Woman of the Apocalypse to create a divine feminine aspect of the Trinity, she also asserts her rights to do so. Hildegard is connected to her vision by tongues of flame reaching down into the bottom right corner of the image, where she sits describing it to Volmar. Similar to the image *Hildegard's Vision* (fig. 5) in *Scivias* in which tongues of flame reach down into her head while she dictates, Hildegard reminds her audience that she is the conduit for these God-given messages. By adding this piece to the image, she downplays herself as a creator, showing instead that she merely received this vision with a female holy ghost. However, that implies to her audience that they cannot argue with there being a feminine aspect to the Trinity without arguing with God.

Herrad's Image

Herrad also draws on the concept of the Woman of the Apocalypse in an illumination that similarly emphasizes female agency (fig. 6). It is interesting to first note the stylistic differences between her and Hildegard. Where Hildegard uses symbolism and abstraction to help communicate her ideas, Herrad (who was ultimately more of a pragmatist) stays very literal in her illuminations, all of which are contained in *Hortus*. She is quite detail oriented, and her image comes across more as a medical illustration similar to those of the healing plants found elsewhere in her manuscript than as a

⁹² Storey, "A Theophany," 17.

symbolic representation. Her image, *Hortus Deliciarum*, fol. 261v., is a one page illumination fully centered on the woman. It is clearly a reference to the Woman of the Apocalypse based on the crown she wears with seven stars, the moon under her feet, as well as the baby being carried away in the upper left of the image. With this in mind, it is important to note where she changes details from the verses in her representation of the Woman of the Apocalypse, as arguably they are purposeful edits.

Herrad's woman is fully frontal and massive; the implication being that she is the most important aspect of the page, rather than the angels and monsters surrounding her.⁹³ She stays faithful to Revelations verses 12:1-5, and the woman gives up the christ-child for safekeeping from the monsters below. However, instead of staying faithful to the order of the verses, Herrad forges ahead, supplying her woman with wings, which are not mentioned until verse 12:14.⁹⁴ This detail serves to remove the human aspects from the woman and make her more divine. Herrad and Hildegard's women both wear red. In Hildegard this color represents the Holy Spirit, but across both images, it could be interpreted as divine love in general. The illuminations draw on Christ's love for his church, and the love of the church for Christ as his intended bride. Herrad's accompanying inscription, which reads, "The woman seen in heaven is the Church whom Christ introduces into the celestial kingdom,"⁹⁵ also associates the woman more directly with divinity, again by removing her more human features and emphasizing her connection to Christ and the heavens. Much like Hildegard, Herrad combined traditionally accepted visual imagery with an alternative view of the subject matter. The

⁹³ Storey, "A Theophany," 18.

⁹⁴ Storey, "A Theophany," 18.

⁹⁵ Storey, "A Theophany," 19.

idea of this Woman, who represents the church, being introduced into the celestial kingdom is also reminiscent of the previous example of Hildegard's *Ecclesia*. Equally massive and protective, *Ecclesia*, like Herrad's Woman of the Apocalypse, is welcomed by the Trinity, denoted by rays of golden light. Is this not also an introduction to the celestial kingdom?

Elisabeth's Description

It should be noted that, despite the absence of illuminations in her book, Elisabeth also provides her readers with a Woman of the Apocalypse. She, like Hildegard, employed vivid abstraction to represent difficult theological ideas. Her woman, described verbally and then recorded in *Liber Viarum Dei*, appears in a vision, as summarized by Anne Storey, where "...a dark cloud repeatedly obscured this radiance. A visiting angel who became Elisabeth's celestial advisor explains the meaning of her revelation: The woman represents the humanity of Jesus, the sun, His divinity, and the cloud, the triumph of sin in the world."⁹⁶ Like Herrad and Hildegard, Elisabeth drew on imagery that would have been well-known and used it to insert femaleness into the divine. Her audience would have been able to identify a woman described as "clothed with the sun"⁹⁷ as a reference to Revelations, and may have already accepted her as a personification of the church. Elisabeth then expanded upon this accepted version a bit farther, by making her woman represent the humanity of Jesus (though his humanity is explicitly separate from his divinity, represented by the sun). Like Hildegard, Elisabeth uses her position as a

⁹⁶ Storey, "A Theophany," 19.

⁹⁷ Storey, "A Theophany," 19.

vessel to protect her vision from argument, by reminding her audience that it is God-given.⁹⁸ Like Herrad, Elisabeth downplayed the humanness of the woman, and rather focused on her holy nature. A woman, albeit an idealized one, is the humanity of Christ!⁹⁹ Mary also receives an elevated status in the works of Elisabeth, in which Mary is described as a female priest at the altar (unheard of in a time and culture where women were not permitted to preach) as well as a heavenly Queen.¹⁰⁰ Considering the blatant disregard for gender roles exhibited in Elisabeth's visions, it is no surprise Storey posits that Elisabeth believed that, "...if Christ is divine as well as human it was logical that Christ's representation could be female as well as male,"¹⁰¹ an attitude incredibly different from that of the male clergy who demanded an explanation as to why Christ would be represented by a woman in any aspect.¹⁰²

Synthesis

Starting in Hildegard and fully embodied by Elisabeth is an assertion of the female's place in spirituality at a time when women were increasingly being removed from their roles in the church. Hildegard created a fulcrum point between the other two women, linking them together in their expressions of faith. Where Herrad was pragmatic, Elisabeth was expressive, but both can be understood through their links to Hildegard found in the employment of a visual language and symbology across their manuscripts. Yes, it is acknowledged that they drew on many familiar tropes of women coming from

⁹⁸ Storey, "A Theophany," 19.

⁹⁹ Datta, "Elisabeth of Schonau."

¹⁰⁰ Datta, "Elisabeth of Schonau."

¹⁰¹ Storey, "A Theophany," 18.

¹⁰² Storey, "A Theophany," 18.

traditionally referenced verses. However, the femininity of the Divine, the feminine aspects of the Trinity, and the femininity of Christ, are ideas co-created by these women. It makes the most logical sense that they were inspired by and expanded on each other, rather than each separately generating the same concepts.

CONCLUSION

Despite the lack of inclusion in the art historical narrative, the illuminations and writings of medieval religious women such as Hildegard, Herrad, and Elisabeth reveal a deeply interesting and skillful exploration of faith as experienced by women, and not seen outside of the intellectual circle created by the professional and personal interactions of nuns. This paper has established a long history of powerful women dominating the medieval world as thinkers and theologians when given the ability to lead. Beginning with the Queens who endowed their respective convents with the rights to elections, matters of state, and wealth, religious women in Germanic regions always had an exceptional capacity for rulership and freedom of expression. This capacity, combined with the education, personal income, and health benefits provided by convents, led to women like Hildegard, who were sickly and most likely would not have lived long in an unprotected environment, thriving and going on to write books of visions and medicine. The acceptance of visionary experiences as a God given gift gave Hildegard a license to initiate the expression of ideas of female agency both spiritually and scientifically, inspiring others like Herrad and Elisabeth to do the same. The product is a vivid, rich, and exceptional oeuvre from the three women that leaps ahead of their time, that can be

analyzed today for its assertions of a divine feminine in the drastically masculinized Christian faith. However, the merit of these images comes not just from its use to modern scholars. While absolutely products of their time, these images are an early yet powerful example of the way women in the 12th century were able to exert influence on each other with their own ideas. It shows the creation of community between women long before that kind of kinship was thought to exist. Through interpretations of Mary and personifications of the Church, women are represented in the works of these three nuns as strong protectors, imitators of Christ, and even saviors in their own right. Herrad, Elisabeth and Hildegard all took traditional teachings and co-conspired to turn them into something new, stretching norms to include women in the light of God.

Furthermore, womanhood was presented by these women as an aspect of God, not just a creation of his. Hildegard, Herrad, and Elisabeth establish femininity as part of Christ/God's nature in their illuminations. Hildegard's *Theophany of Divine Love* presents the audience with a female characterization of the Holy Spirit. This use of the trinity is exemplary of a female spirituality as it utilizes Trinity concepts in a groundbreaking way for the 12th century. The Trinity is a way of expressing one God as three aspects that are ultimately the same. By making the Holy Spirit female, Hildegard made God female. Elisabeth openly states that her Woman is the humanity of Christ, establishing a feminine disposition for Christ. Again though, with Christ being part of the Trinity, and the Trinity members all ultimately being the One God, this inherently makes a part of God's nature feminine. Herrad, while less extreme in her imagery, clearly draws inspiration from Hildegard and Elisabeth. Her image uses the red of Hildegard's image, creating a cross-manuscript association with divine love, an aspect of God. Her Woman,

being the Church, is introduced to the celestial kingdom by Christ using the bride archetype, but it is the archetype as expanded by Elisabeth. The Woman is no captive, but rather a heavenly Queen.

In the future, it would be interesting to compare the Germanic regions with the works produced in other regions of Europe. Future research could be done to compare the works created in Spanish, English, and Italian convents to the work produced by Germanic nuns. Mariology provides a link between nuns, as Mary was so prevalent and beloved by the nuns in convents across Europe. This concept could be used to compare expressions of agency through depictions of Mary in different places, as well as a starting point for cross-regional uses of Mary, the Church, and illuminations to present a feminine spirituality.

Research in this field expands our understanding of the medieval world, as well as women's place in it. There is a rich well of information hidden inside of overlooked resources such as manuscripts, especially those made by women. Continued exploration of medieval religious women may provide precedent for later works, as well as create links between figures seen as separate. Acknowledging the connections between women, power, and time benefits the art-historical narrative in enriching what it contains

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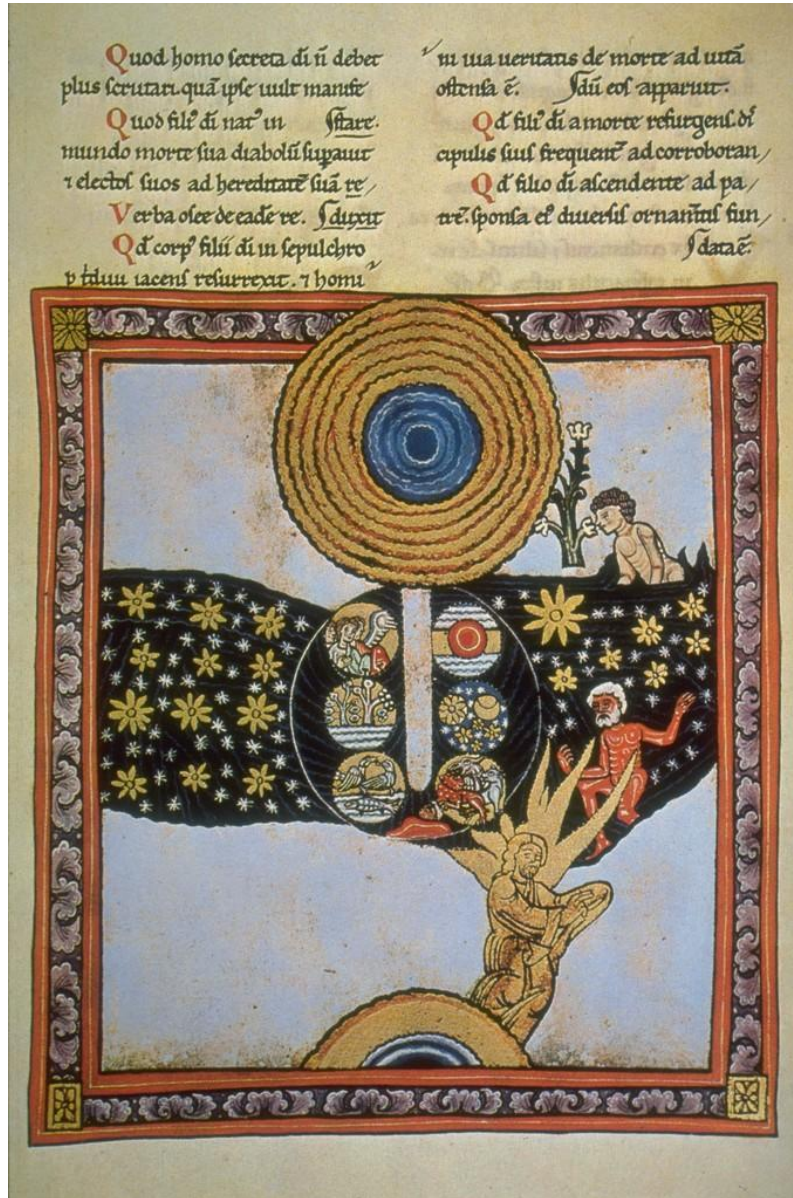


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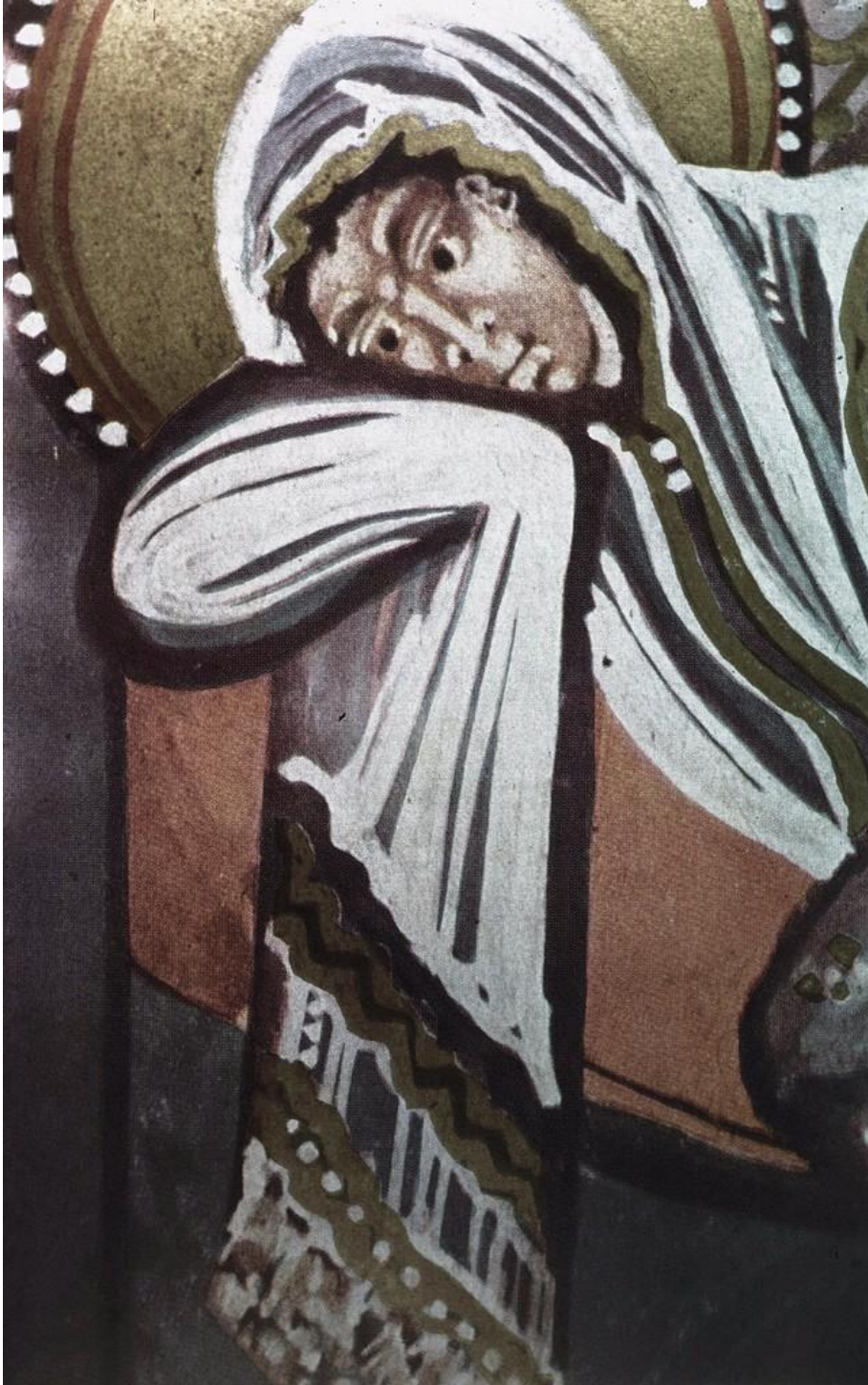


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c.1025. Darmstadt University and State Library, Germany.



fig. 3. Hildegard von Bingen. *Heavenly Zion destroyed*, Part II/Vision, from *Liber Scivias* (*Know the Way*). manuscript illumination. c.1150-1175. Abbey of St. Hildegard, Eibingen, Germany (copy of destroyed original).



fig. 4. Hildegard von Bingen. *Theophany of Divine Love*, Part I/Vision I, from *The Book of Divine Works*. manuscript illumination. c. 13th century. Biblioteca Statale, Lucca, Italy.



fig. 5. Hildegard von Bingen. *Hildegard's Vision*, frontispiece, from *Liber Scivias* (*Know the Way*). manuscript illumination. c.1150-1175. Abbey of St. Hildegard, Eibingen, Germany (copy of destroyed original).



fig. 6. Herrad of Hohenbourg. *Hortus Deliciarum*, Fol. 261v. Ill. MS. manuscript illumination. c. 1159-1205. Temple Neuf Library, Strasbourg, France (reconstruction of destroyed original).