

ADMISSION OF HILDEGARD *Disibodenberg, 1106*

Bishop Otto of Mainz celebrates the admission of Hildegard into her first monastery at Disibodenberg. As was the custom, sentences from the Funeral Service and Prayers for the Dead mark the postulant's passing from earthly existence into an eternal, spiritual life with God. Lower voices whisper the words of the Hymn, *Veni creator spiritus*, whilst the sopranos welcome her with the single word, *LIMIX* (Light).

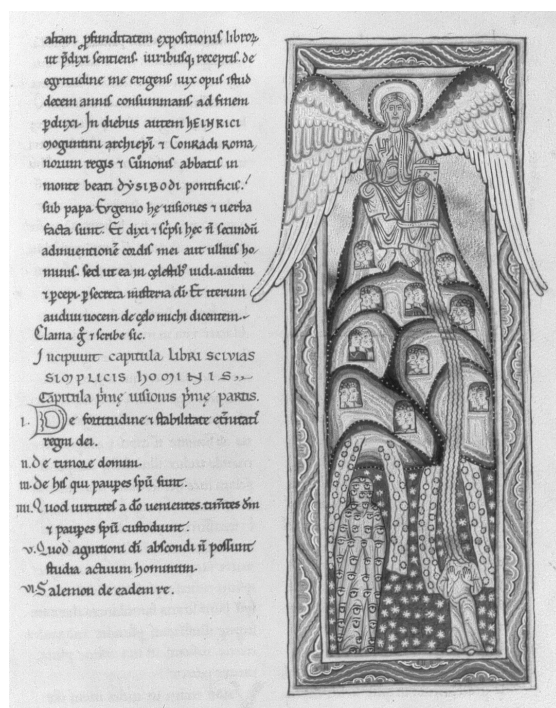
HILDEGARD CONTEMPLATES ALONE IN HER CELL

The young Hildegard is left alone in her cell for the first time. She starts to hear music – strains of music of the Virtues, which will later become her own *Ordo Virtutum*. Provoked by the sudden appearance of the Devil, the music in her mind becomes more and more intense – the struggle between the Devil and the Virtues has begun.

ADMISSION OF RICHARDIS AND HILTRUD
Disibodenberg, c. 1112

Bishop Otto now admits two other nuns into Disibodenberg, one of whom, Richardis von Stade, is to become a close friend, and an important part of Hildegard's life.

VISION: THE ONE ENTHRONED



I saw a great mountain the colour of iron, and enthroned on it One of such glory that it blinded my sight. On each side of him there extended a soft shadow (TONZIZ), like a wing of wondrous breadth and length. Before him, at the foot of the mountain, stood an image full of eyes (LUZEIA) on all sides, in which I could discern no human form. In front stood a child (ZAINZ, ZIMZIAL) wearing a tunic of subdued colour. From the One Enthroned many sparks sprang forth, which flew sweetly around the images.

The 'living sparks' (flashes of colour and stabs of pain) are represented by the ricochets of Korean cymbals at the opening, and later by fragments of birdsong. The music gradually intensifies into a climactic whirlwind (*FRENS*), as *The One Enthroned*

cries out in a strong loud voice, saying: O human, who are fragile dust of the earth and ashes of ashes! Arise therefore, cry out and tell what is shown to you by the strong power of God's help.

This vision is the first in Book One of *Scivias*, and is therefore the first vision Hildegard ever recorded. As with all her visions, it caused her both physical pain (she was a chronic migraine sufferer, and it has been suggested that this made her more susceptible to the kind of images and flashes of colour she described), and psychological anguish, because on the one hand the revelation was instructing her to write down all that she saw, and on the other she was bound by the strict Benedictine rules which forbade her from doing so.

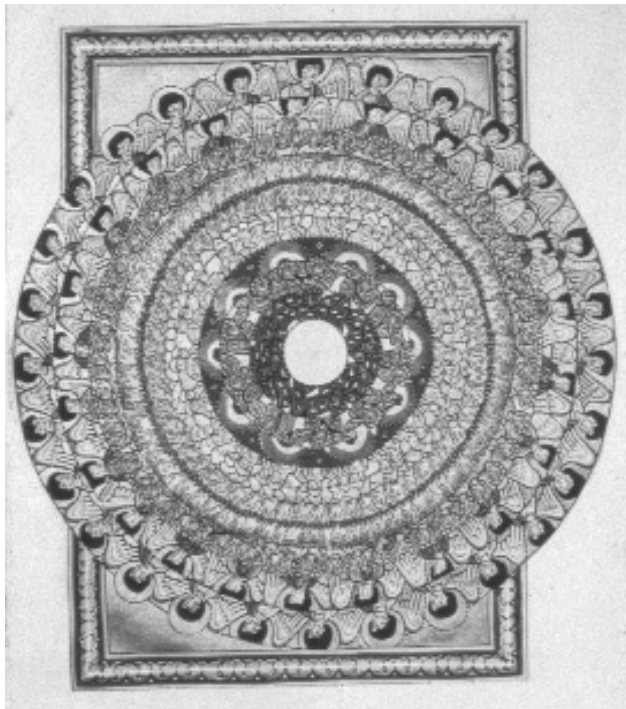
HILDEGARD SUFFERS ILLNESSES FROM FEAR
OF REVEALING VISIONS

Hildegard is distraught with anxiety. The Devil appears again as if to exploit her state of weakness. The ghostly voices of four Virtues are heard slowly circling overhead (*Spes* (Hope), *Timor Dei* (Fear of God), *Fides* (Trust), *Obedientia* (Obedience)), representing Hildegard's primary preoccupations as she tries to maintain the balance of her mind. Eventually she is reassured by the chorus of Virtues as they sing the words:

Oh fear . . . living life, consoling one, you overcome the deadly shafts of death and with your seeing eye lay heaven's gate open.

HILDEGARD SEEKS GUIDANCE 1146–48

Despite the Virtues' reassurance, Hildegard resolves to seek advice on how to respond to her spiritual instruction. After an inconsequential exchange of letters with Bernard of Clairvaux, she decides to write to the Pope himself, offering to send a sample of her writings, with the hope that he will grant her permission to continue recording her visions.



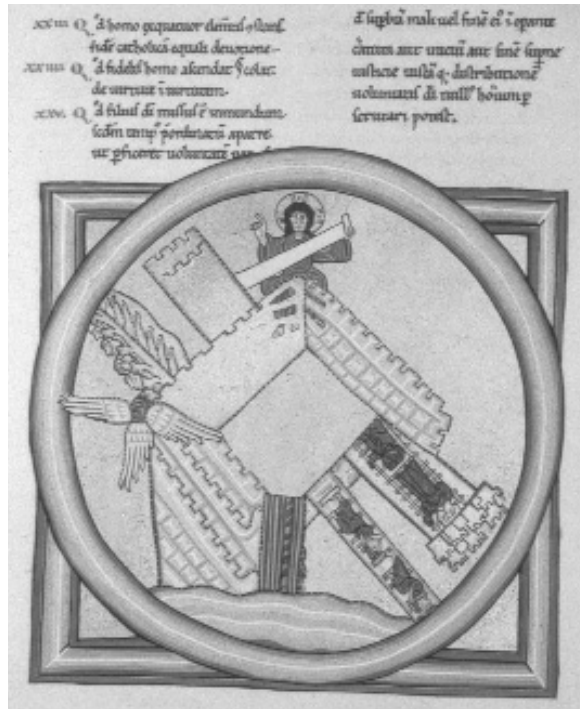
Pope Eugenius receives the delegates bearing Hildegard's manuscript, and reads passages of it to the assembled clergy. As he reads Hildegard's description of nine armies of angels arranged in the shape of a crown, the armies seem to come alive, as five surrounding groups of musicians in turn summon the armies to battle with bells and trumpet-like fanfares. The sounds of steel and fire are heard as the angels fly overhead chanting battle-cries such as *BURIZINDIZ*, *SCURINZ* (fire, flame), *GLOSINZ* (army), *AIGONZ* (God), and *AIEGANZ* (angel). In this distinctly Crusade-like scenario, Hildegard finally observes:

All these armies were singing with marvellous voices all kinds of music about the wonders that God works in blessed souls.

HILDEGARD DEFENDS HERSELF AGAINST ACCUSATIONS OF UNORTHODOX PRACTICES 1148

By now Hildegard has become widely revered, and is beginning to wield considerable power and influence. But she is not without her critics. Word reaches Abbess Tengswich from Andernach, that Hildegard has been allowing her nuns to dress immodestly, thereby disobeying Benedictine rules. With characteristically astute and precise argument, her reply reveals her astonishingly modern view of womanhood, and especially of virginity, a virtue she prized over all others. Tengswich also criticizes her for being exclusive – her defence of this accusation promotes a surprisingly reactionary attitude to society, arguing that

God distinguishes between people on earth just as he does in heaven between angels, archangels, thrones, dominations, cherubim and seraphim – all are loved by God, but they are not equal in rank.



Hildegard receives a vision in which she is instructed to move with her nuns to another place, and establish a new monastery there. The location is described in detail as

that place where the Nahe flows into the Rhine, namely the hill which earlier received its name from Blessed Confessor, Rupert [Rupertsberg] . . . And on that mountain stood a four-sided building, formed in the likeness of a four-walled city.

The four city walls are represented in sound by four choirs of trumpets and voices, who beckon Hildegard from all sides to come and help, lead and inspire the people of Rupertsberg. Meanwhile, Hildegard's proposal to leave Disibodenberg creates consternation among her community, and once again causes her considerable anxiety, stress and more illness. Monk Arnold tries to prevent her from leaving and is struck dumb. Hildegard collapses under the strain, but the will of God prevails, and she is escorted by her nuns to her new home in Rupertsberg.

ARRIVAL IN RUPERTSBERG c.1150

The community arrives in Rupertsberg to an enthusiastic welcome, but finds that the monastery itself is little more than a ruin, and in need of considerable renovation. The percussionists enter playing simandrons (traditionally played by monks in the Greek Orthodox Church for calling the faithful to worship), symbolizing the gathering of building materials from the surrounding forests; the crowds sing Hildegard's famous Sequence, *O Jerusalem* (in fact written for the consecration of Rupertsberg Monastery in 1152) which likens the newly rebuilt monastery to the eternal city of Jerusalem, 'destroyed on earth and rebuilt in Heaven'. In the final, intimate duet between Richardis and Hildegard, Richardis sings the Gradual for the Dedication of a Church, *Locus iste*.

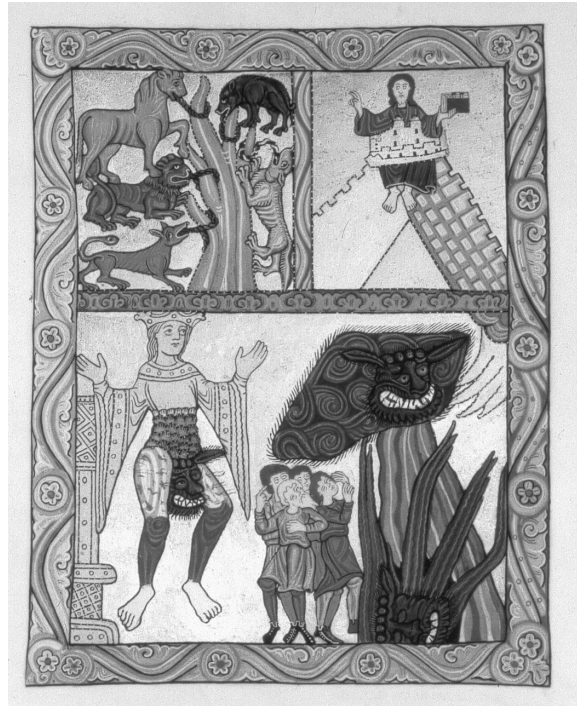


Soon after establishing the monastery in Rupertsberg, Hildegard's dearest friend, Richardis, was offered the post of Abbess at Bassum. The heartbreak Hildegard suffered as a result of this, the subsequent torrent of vitriol she unleashed against those who proposed the move and finally her passionate and loving letter to Richardis imploring her not to leave has led many commentators to wonder about the nature of their relationship.

Originally entitled *The Three Orders in the Church*, this vision describes

the image of a woman . . . glowing like the dawn from her throat to her breasts . . . and the voice from Heaven saying: This is the blossom of the Celestial Zion, the mother and flower of roses and lilies of the valley. O blossom, when in your time you are strengthened, you shall bring forth a most renowned posterity.

There seems every reason to suggest that this is a reference to Richardis, whom she audaciously compares to the Virgin Mary. The imagery is further strengthened by the interweaving of one of Hildegard's most sublimely sensuous poems, *Ave generosa*.



The Devil appears once again, this time rallying his supporters (tenors and basses) against the terrified faithful (sopranos and altos). Set as a kind of pagan, demonic ritual, the vision describes five beasts – a dog, fiery but not burning; a yellow lion; a pale horse; a black pig, and a grey wolf, along with numerous other images, shocking and horrific in their detail. This vision is used to symbolize what became a growing preoccupation of the last half of Hildegard's life, namely the rise in heretical movements, in particular the Cathars, as well as Papal Schism and growing rifts within the Church. Hildegard toured far and wide over many years preaching on these subjects, and gaining ever greater popularity as a result.

HILDEGARD ATTACKS POPE ANASTASIUS AND SPEAKS OUT AGAINST HERESY 1153–54

Hildegard's passionate sermons against heresy were not merely restricted to general instructions addressed to congregations, but also occasionally took the form of personal attacks against specific members of the clergy. In a torrent of vitriolic prose, Hildegard writes to the feeble 'Anti-Pope' Anastasius, accusing him of failing to stand up against *the arrogant pomposity among those placed in his care*, and accusing him of permitting corruption and injustice.

FINAL CRISIS AND VICTORY OVER THE DEVIL and

VISION: SYMPHONY OF THE BLESSED 1178

Towards the end of Hildegard's life, the members of the community at Rupertsberg were themselves reprimanded for burying an alleged former heretic. Accordingly, the prelates at Mainz issued an injunction against them, forbidding them from singing the Holy Offices or from taking Holy Communion. The bitter row that ensued provoked Hildegard, in a letter to the Prelates, to expound her philosophy of music in the most detailed and eloquent way anyone could have wished for.

And I heard a voice from the Living Light speaking about the different kinds of praises, as David says in the Psalms: 'Praise him with the sound of the trumpet; praise him with the psalter and harp' . . . and so forth, until the words 'let every spirit praise the Lord'. From these words about material things we can learn about spiritual things, since clearly it is the very material fabric and quality of these worldly instruments that gives our innermost being the best chance to offer the very highest praises in our Offices. Indeed, the holy prophets were inspired not only to compose psalms and canticles (the singing of which would set alight the hearts of all that heard them) but also to construct instruments of different kinds, thus creating polyphony. Hence, through both the form and quality of the instruments and the meaning of the words they accompany, the listeners, so stirred up and excited by these outward things, would become enlightened within. In such a way, the holy prophets delighted the soul through their mastery of both celestial singing and earthly instrumental music, as they sang and played together, recalling the music of Adam before his Fall which, though conceived by the Holy Spirit, used all aspects of the art of music to achieve a sweet and harmonious resonance.

Her letter to the Prelates concludes with characteristic rhetoric:

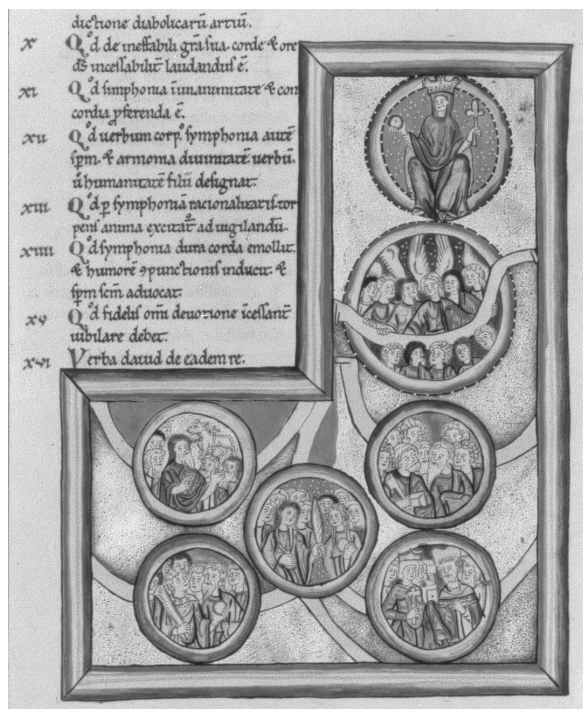
This time is a time for womankind, because the justice of God is weak. But the full strength of God's justice is now to be deployed, as this warrior woman rises up against injustice, so that it might fall defeated.

Whether or not as a result of these threatening words, the crisis was finally resolved when Christian, Archbishop of Mainz, lifted the injunction, on condition that evidence of the dead man's confession and absolution could be provided by suitably qualified men.

Hildegard's success is represented by the final victory over the Devil, as he is bound in chains. The explosion of joy which then follows is described in the final Vision of *Scivias* 'Symphony of the Blessed' which opens with Hildegard's apocalyptic words:

Then I saw the lucent sky, in which I heard the different kinds of music, marvellously embodying all the meanings I had heard before . . . again a song resounded, like the voice of a multitude, exhorting the virtues to help humanity and oppose the inimical arts of the Devil.

VICTORIA announces the final defeat and binding of the Devil, whereupon Hildegard's philosophy of music is put into practice with the jubilant singing of *Songs of Unity and Concord*, and *Words of David*.



DEATH OF HILDEGARD Rupertsberg, 1179

Despite being beset by constant ill-health throughout her life, Hildegard lived to the unusually great age of eighty-one. Her death was witnessed by Guibert of Gembloux, who had recently taken over from her life-long but recently departed scribe and secretary, Volmar. In the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* he describes the moment in detail:

At early twilight on that Sunday, two very bright arcs of various colours appeared in the heavens over the chamber in which the holy virgin returned her happy soul to God. These rainbows extended over a wide stretch of sky out to the four corners of the earth, one from the north to south, the other from the east to west. In the vertex where the two arcs crossed, a bright moon-shaped light radiated. It spread its light near and far and seemed to expel the nightly darkness from the death chamber. In this light, a glittering red cross could be seen that at first was small, but then grew to a huge size. This cross was surrounded by innumerable varicoloured circles in which individual crosses were formed, each with its own circle. However, the smaller ones were visible first. When they had spread out in the firmament, they expanded to the East and seemed to lean toward earth toward the house in which the holy virgin had gone home, and they enveloped the entire mount in brilliant light.

Thus the work ends as it began, with the chorus of Virtues perpetually intoning the immortal word, *LIMIX* (Light), as, together with Hildegard's soul, they are wafted into Paradise.

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