

# “Sibyl of the Rhine”

*Hildegard's Life and Times*

BARBARA NEWMAN

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), mistress of St. Rupert's Monastery and “Sibyl of the Rhine,” would have been extraordinary in any age.<sup>1</sup> 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. For centuries she was ignored or forgotten, like so many accomplished women of the past. A skeptical historian in the nineteenth century tried to explain her away by casting doubt on the authenticity of her books, imagining a male ghostwriter behind her mask.<sup>2</sup> A fideist countered by reading her prophetic claims in a naively literal way, making God the ghostwriter who dictated every word she set down and Hildegard but a passive and uncomprehending tool.<sup>3</sup> Even now, despite enormous advances in scholarship on medieval women, she is still portrayed at times as an anomaly. Some books give the impression that she dropped into her world like a meteorite from a late-twentieth-century sky, proclaiming enlightened postmodern views on gender, ecology, ecumenism, and holistic health to an uncomprehending age.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this book is to set Hildegard in context, but this project will in no way diminish her exceptionality. Among the countless “firsts” and “onlies” to her credit, Hildegard was the only woman of her age to be accepted as an authoritative voice on Christian doctrine; the first woman who received express permission from a pope to write theological books; the only medieval woman who preached openly, before mixed audiences of clergy and laity, with the full approval of church authorities;<sup>5</sup> the author of the first known morality play<sup>6</sup> and the only twelfth-century playwright who is not anonymous; the only composer of her era (not to mention the only medieval woman) known both by name and by a large corpus of surviving music; the first scientific writer to discuss sexuality and gynecology from a female perspective;<sup>7</sup> and the first saint whose official biography includes a first-person memoir.<sup>8</sup>

Yet exceptionality is only half the picture, for to study Hildegard's complete oeuvre is also to study the entire sweep of twelfth-century culture and society. Her prophetic career and her vast correspondence contribute to but also need to be illumined by a knowledge of all the burning religious and political issues of her day: the conflict between empire and papacy, the territorial ambitions of Frederick Barbarossa, the ravages of schism and civil war, the careerism of contemporary prelates, the rising threat of the Cathar heresy, the Second Crusade, the invigorating developments and crises in monastic reform, the nascent evangelical poverty movement, the competition for lucrative endowments and relics, the struggle over clerical celibacy. To understand Hildegard's massive visionary trilogy, readers need to be aware of twelfth-century developments in sacramental theology, the emerging doctrine of purgatory, Christian-Jewish relations, biblical exegesis, and cosmology, to name only a few of the topics she covers. Her medical and scientific writings present a body of encyclopedic lore about animals, birds, fishes, herbs, trees, gemstones, metals, nutrition, sexuality, disease, and therapeutics. To hear or perform her music and drama is to enter the rich and, for most of us, exotic world of Benedictine liturgy. Beyond their remarkable beauty, Hildegard's chants can offer insight into matters ranging from the self-image of consecrated women to the nature of devotion directed toward Mary and the saints. Her illuminated manuscripts, unique in twelfth-century iconography, raise a host of questions about the work of women as artists, producers, and patrons of deluxe books. Even her *vita*, or saintly biography, sheds light on the politics of canonization and new trends in women's spirituality.

Given the scope of Hildegard's accomplishments, an introduction to *all* the dimensions of her life and creativity lies beyond the competence of any individual scholar. Hence this book is a collaborative effort by specialists in many fields, ranging from medieval theology to medicine to music. Attentive readers will note that in some areas Hildegard's teaching proves to be socially and religiously conservative, while in others she stood at the vanguard of twelfth-century thought or developed wholly original ideas. Only contextual study can distinguish what is typical or atypical, idiosyncratic or commonplace, in such a large and bewilderingly diverse oeuvre. It should be stated at the outset, however, that although Hildegard was in many ways "transgressive," breaking her society's gender taboos with impunity, she was in no sense heretical.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, she named and fiercely challenged the abuses of power that she saw around her, writing to archbishops and kings with a truly

prophetic, sometimes shocking candor. And she made enemies, among them the abbot who resented her bid for monastic independence, the unnamed detractors who felt sure she was deceived by demons, the reform-minded canoness who penned a withering critique of her elitism, and the prelates who slapped an interdict on her monastery when she was eighty years old and ailing. Yet her career as a whole testifies to the farthest limits of acceptable behavior in the twelfth century, including the degree and ferocity of criticism that powerful churchmen might be willing to tolerate. What Hildegard “got away with” must be finally explained not only by her energy and ability but also by her contemporaries’ genuine belief that she was inspired by God, no matter how uncomfortable she made them feel. But had she voiced any genuine heresy, that is, doctrinal error in matters pertaining to the faith, there is no question that she would have been promptly silenced, her books condemned, and her unusual activities brought to a swift and if need be violent end.<sup>10</sup> Doctrinal orthodoxy, in short, was not only a matter of deep-seated conviction for the seer but also a necessary condition for her survival.

Our principal source for her biography is the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* (*Life of St. Hildegard*), a book whose title reveals its purpose: to secure her veneration as a saint and, if possible, her canonization by the church.<sup>11</sup> Like other hagiographic texts, therefore, it does not pretend to offer an “objective,” even-handed treatment of its subject. The *Vita* pursues its religious goal by ascribing as many events as possible to supernatural rather than natural causes, discerning the hand of God in all of Hildegard’s motivations and actions, and emphasizing her official validation as a prophet, which is attested not only by miracles but also by an ascending chain of authorities: her teacher, her abbot, the archbishop of Mainz, a synod of bishops at Trier, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and finally Pope Eugene III. Once these churchmen had certified Hildegard’s visionary gift as authentic and God-given, the path was cleared for two major undertakings: the completion and publication of her first book, called *Scivias* (an abridgment of *Scito vias Domini*, or know the ways of the Lord), and the founding of her new monastery on the desolate site of the Rupertsberg, or St. Rupert’s Mount. Given the importance of these initiatives, the *Vita* focuses intensely on the period between Hildegard’s “prophetic call,” which she experienced in 1141 at the age of forty-three, and the secession of the Rupertsberg from its motherhouse, the male monastery of St. Disibod, in 1155. The life has much less to say about Hildegard’s early years and her final decades.

A monk named Godfrey of St. Disibod, who served as provost at the Rupertsberg late in Hildegard's life (1174–1176), began to compose her *Vita* even before she died, anticipating that the community would want to promote her as a saint. Unfortunately Godfrey predeceased Hildegard, leaving his work unfinished. Several years after Hildegard's death in 1179, her friends commissioned another monk, Theoderic of Echter-nach, to finish the task. But Theoderic was apparently chosen more for his literary reputation than his personal interest in the saint; he seems to have had no direct acquaintance with Hildegard and little knowledge of her works.<sup>12</sup> So instead of resuming the narrative where Godfrey had left off, Theoderic made an extraordinary choice: he decided to fill book 2 of the *Vita* with memoirs that Hildegard herself had dictated to help her earlier biographer, interspersing his own awed if sometimes uncomprehending comments. Thus the *Vita* permits us to compare three diverse perspectives on Hildegard's life: her own, the perceptions of a monk who worked for her, and the imagination of a more distant admirer who, having only secondhand knowledge, tried to fit her life into the stereotyped pattern of female sanctity fashionable in his own age. Fortunately, however, the *Vita* is not our only source for Hildegard's life. We can supplement and, if necessary, correct it with the information provided by another fragmentary vita,<sup>13</sup> Hildegard's letters,<sup>14</sup> the autobiographical prefaces of her books, a series of charters and other official documents pertaining to her monasteries,<sup>15</sup> and (with greater caution) an account of miracles prepared for her canonization.<sup>16</sup>

All of these sources have been known since the nineteenth century. In 1992, however, surprising light was shed on Hildegard's early life by the discovery of another vita: that of her teacher, Jutta of Sponheim, who was herself considered a saint.<sup>17</sup> It is fitting, then, to begin the account of Hildegard's life with a look at these two women's intertwined destinies.<sup>18</sup> Born in 1098, Hildegard was the daughter of a Rhenish nobleman, Hildebert of Bermersheim, and his wife, Mechthild. Little is known of this couple except that they were wealthy and prolific: Hildegard was the youngest of ten children.<sup>19</sup> Jutta, six years older than Hildegard, was born in 1092 to Count Stephen of Sponheim and his Bavarian wife, Sophia. Although the Sponheim family was more exalted than that of Bermersheim, the two clans were affiliated and may have been distantly related. So when the teenaged Jutta made a precocious decision to enter the religious life, Hildegard's parents strengthened this advantageous alliance by offering their youngest child—their “tithe to God,” as one biographer put it—to be her companion.

Europe at the turn of the twelfth century was aglow with a revival of the eremitic life, a cherished ascetic ideal dating back to the desert fathers and mothers of the early Christian era. In growing numbers men and women alike were forsaking not only marriage but even the security of established monasteries to live an austere, solitary life as free-roaming hermits (the preferred option for men) or as enclosed recluses (the lifestyle recommended for women).<sup>20</sup> Young girls in particular might go to extraordinary lengths to adopt such a life, resisting parental demands with all the determination of martyrs. When the twelve-year-old Jutta became ill, she vowed to become a nun if she survived and thereafter refused all her suitors *viriliter* ("like a man"), much to her family's disgust. Her biographer says Jutta "endured great perils" to preserve her chastity, and although he does not elaborate, we might recall the trials of her English contemporary, Christina of Markyate. Forced into an arranged marriage, Christina steadfastly refused to sleep with her husband, although he and her parents tried everything from sorcery to attempted rape. At last she fled the family home, disguised as a man, and took refuge in a hermit's cell, where she remained in hiding for years, even though the enclosure was too small for her to stand in and she could only go out to answer nature's call under cover of night.<sup>21</sup>

Jutta seems to have been equally fierce and independent. From about 1106 she embarked on an un vowed religious life in the house of Lady Uda, a widow of Göllheim, possibly with the eight-year-old Hildegard already in tow.<sup>22</sup> After Uda died Jutta expressed a desire to go on pilgrimage, further indicating her spirit of adventure. But her brother Meinhard, later count of Sponheim, thwarted that plan and persuaded her, at age twenty, to settle at the monastery of St. Disibod. Thus on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1112, the young noblewoman was formally enclosed as a recluse and took her monastic vows, together with Hildegard (then fourteen) and one or two other girls who also bore the name of Jutta.<sup>23</sup> Since their ordinary prelate, Archbishop Adalbert I of Mainz, was at that time a political prisoner of the emperor Henry V, the girls' vows were received by Otto, bishop of Bamberg.<sup>24</sup>

Some accounts of Hildegard give the impression that when she and Jutta joined the community at St. Disibod it was already a well-established house. But this was not the case. Although the Disibodenberg was indeed an ancient religious site, allegedly founded by a wandering Irish hermit in the seventh century, the monastery had passed through many vicissitudes and stood vacant for several years during the political

exile of Archbishop Ruthard of Mainz (reigned 1089–1109). He returned in 1106 and refounded the community two years later, restoring the dilapidated site and staffing it with monks who may have been affiliated with the reformed Benedictine congregation of Hirsau.<sup>25</sup> When Jutta and Hildegard arrived, then, the existing monastery was quite new and still under construction. Thus the young Hildegard grew up surrounded by the noise and bustle of masons and carpenters, an experience reflected in the ubiquitous architectural metaphors of her *Scivias*.<sup>26</sup> We know little about the space occupied by the women; it is unclear, for example, whether they had their own chapel for singing the Divine Office or participated along with the men.<sup>27</sup> What is clear, however, is that the well-born and distinguished Jutta (unlike Hildegard) enjoyed an excellent relationship with the monks, who lost no time in promoting her sainthood when she died (22 December 1136).

Jutta's *Vita* describes her as an ascetic par excellence, using conventional terms borrowed from the life of the sixth-century St. Radegund of Poitiers.<sup>28</sup> We are told that Jutta devoted herself to prayer, fasting, vigils, nakedness, and cold; she tortured her body with a hairshirt and an iron chain, which she removed only on great festivals; and she refused meat for eight years in defiance of her abbot, who urged moderation. At least once a day she recited the entire Psalter, which in winter-time she often said barefoot. As *magistra*, mistress or teacher, of the girls under her tutelage, Jutta would certainly have taught Hildegard to chant the Psalter and thus to read Latin at an elementary level. It is interesting that Hildegard, in a laconic and somewhat backhanded reference to her foster mother, says that she herself had "scarcely any knowledge of letters, as an uneducated woman had taught" her.<sup>29</sup> Jutta's biographer, in contrast, praises her capable intellect and tenacious memory, describes her as a ready teacher who refused to play favorites, and casually alludes to her literacy when he remarks that she received many letters from devotees seeking her prayers. In addition, the *Life of Lady Jutta* repeatedly presents the recluse as a teacher and her companions as *discipulae*, or students, at one point referring to the women's hermitage as a *schola*, or school.<sup>30</sup> Although these references to learning need not be exaggerated, they should incline us to take Hildegard's lifelong protestations of ignorance with more than a grain of salt.

When the adult Hildegard described herself as *indocta* ("uneducated"),<sup>31</sup> she was in one sense telling the truth. Unlike boys of her vocation and status, she did not have the opportunity to attend a cathe-

dral school or to follow itinerant masters as a wandering scholar.<sup>32</sup> Nor had she studied at a convent with a splendid library, as did her contemporary Heloise, who received an outstanding classical education at Argenteuil,<sup>33</sup> or Abbess Herrad of Hohenbourg, who was to compile an encyclopedia of patristic learning from the rich store of books at her disposal.<sup>34</sup> Since Hildegard never had occasion to study the trivium, or literary arts, her command of Latin grammar would always remain shaky, and she developed a style that could be awkward and idiosyncratic rather than urbane and polished.<sup>35</sup> But if her early education paled by comparison with others', Hildegard was to amass prodigious learning by the end of her life.<sup>36</sup> By midcentury, too, St. Disibod had acquired a substantial library of its own, though its destruction during the Reformation era makes it difficult to know for certain what books Hildegard might have read there. The main purpose of her apparent self-deprecation, however, was not to belittle herself or comment on the faults of her early training but to emphasize that the source of her revelations was divine, not human. Without this indispensable claim to prophecy, her career as a writer and preacher would have been unthinkable.<sup>37</sup>

Other indications in Jutta's life suggest a degree of continuity between the two holy women. We learn that Jutta herself was endowed with prophetic powers: when an abbot died, God showed her who his successor would be. Like Hildegard, too, she earned a reputation as a healer and made St. Disibod into a mecca for pilgrims, who are said to have revered her "as a heavenly oracle."<sup>38</sup> It appears, then, that Hildegard learned considerably more than the Psalter from Jutta. She also saw firsthand what an unusually gifted and energetic nun might make of her vocation. Yet the delicate girl's temperament was very different from the recluse's. A savage ascetic, Jutta died at forty-four, worn out by her austerities, while Hildegard, though of fragile health, prized the classic Benedictine virtue of moderation and lived to be eighty-one. In addition, her visionary bent was all her own. From Hildegard's *Vita* we learn that as a tiny child she beheld "a light so dazzling that [her] soul trembled," but she had no words to speak of it.<sup>39</sup> Another source recounts a story of childhood clairvoyance: seeing a pregnant cow, the girl accurately predicted the color and markings of her calf.<sup>40</sup> As both women's biographies confirm, Hildegard continued to have visions under Jutta's tutelage, culminating in a hair-raising account of the soul's journey after death. Then thirty-eight, she watched as her teacher's spirit in the hands of angels passed close by the flames of purgatory and

endured false accusations from the devil before being received by St. John the Evangelist and led into paradise.<sup>41</sup> This, Hildegard's earliest recorded vision, anticipates certain passages from her *Scivias* and especially her book on purgatory, the *Liber vite meritorum* (*Book of Life's Merits*).

Jutta at the time of her death had ten disciples, of whom Hildegard was said to be the "first and most intimate . . . flourishing in a holy way of life, the acme of all virtues."<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, she was soon elected *magistra* in her teacher's stead. As the *Life of Jutta* states, "After her passing [Hildegard] took over the administration of her school."<sup>43</sup> It is odd, though, that the seer's own memoirs say nothing of her election to leadership but skip ahead to the "great pressure of pains" she experienced in her early forties, when God first commanded her to "cry out and write" what she saw in her visions.<sup>44</sup> This moment, rather than Jutta's death or her election as mistress, represented the first major crisis in Hildegard's life. As the now famous story runs, she initially confided only in the monk Volmar, who had been her teacher and would become her lifelong friend, secretary, and confidant. In all likelihood he was her confessor as well. Despite Volmar's support, however, Hildegard felt so daunted by the prospect of writing and the concomitant fear of ridicule that she became severely ill. This would become a recurrent pattern both in her own life and in the narratives of countless female visionaries in the later Middle Ages. A vision or divine command to write so terrifies the woman that it brings on a sickness, at once punitive and motivating, which will in turn become a catalyst for action: the would-be prophetess cannot be cured until she obeys the heavenly voice.<sup>45</sup> In Hildegard's case, Volmar's encouragement and the cautious support of Kuno, abbot of St. Disibod, enabled her eventually to surmount her fears and embark on the task. The famous author-portraits of Hildegard present an idealized picture of her at work in her scriptorium. Her face uplifted toward heaven, she receives streams of fire from on high, signifying divine inspiration, as she writes with her own hand on wax tablets—or perhaps, as the art historian Madeline Caviness suggests, sketches the visionary forms unfolding before her eyes. Separated by a partition, Volmar makes a fair copy of her text on parchment, and one of Hildegard's nuns—perhaps her favorite, Richardis of Stade—stands by to assist her (see figure 16).<sup>46</sup>

It is quite possible to read the *Scivias* simply as a work of Christian theology, including material on ethics, biblical commentary, sacred history, and cosmology as well as thorough discussions of the Trinity and



redemption through Christ. To understand the power and distinctiveness of this book, however, we must look more closely at its genesis in what Hildegard called her *visio* ("vision," in the singular, rather than "visions"). In many so-called visionary writings from the Middle Ages, visual description plays only a minor role, while the bulk of the text is given over to conversations between the seer and a heavenly figure like Christ, Mary, or an angel.<sup>47</sup> But Hildegard was a visionary in the strictest sense. Not in ecstasy or trance or dream but wide awake, she retained the full use of her senses and yet "saw things" in living color—mountains, cosmic eggs, spheres of shimmering light, colossal figures, towering walls and pillars—sometimes in static tableaux and sometimes in dynamic motion. Late in her life a distant admirer asked Hildegard to explain how she received her revelations, and she enlightened him in a now famous letter.<sup>48</sup>

"I have always seen this vision in my soul," she wrote, and in it "my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples, although they are far away." The light that illumined her, she added, was "not spatial, but far, far brighter than a cloud that carries the sun . . . And as the sun, the moon, and the stars appear in water, so writings, sermons, virtues, and certain human actions take form for me and gleam within it." Hildegard insisted that this "shadow of the Living Light" was never absent from her field of vision, and when she received revelations within it, the words that came to her were "not like words uttered by the mouth of man, but like a shimmering flame, or a cloud floating in a clear sky." Moreover, on rare occasions she saw within this "shadow" or "reflection" another light, "the Living Light" itself, by which she seems to have meant a direct experience of God. "I cannot describe when and how I see it, but while I see it all sorrow and anguish leave me, so that then I feel like a simple girl instead of an old woman."

What are we to make of this account? Certainly it is not conventional. Twelfth-century authors were familiar with several theories of visionary experience, including those of St. Augustine, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Hildegard's contemporary Richard of St.-Victor. These theorists distinguished among several kinds of vision—such as imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual—and established hierarchies among them, always representing pure, imageless contemplation as higher than the more "corporeal" types of vision.<sup>49</sup> But none of their descriptions closely match Hildegard's, and her insistence that she remained awake and lucid during her visions is virtually unique. Her correspondent, the

monk Guibert of Gembloux, had asked whether the visions appeared to her in ecstasy or in dreams, as these were the only possibilities he could imagine; but she replied, in effect, “none of the above.” Nor can modern theories fully account for her experience. David Baumgardt, a scholar of mysticism, noticed the synaesthetic quality of Hildegard’s visions and described her inspiration as a kind of “intellectual downpour,” comparable to that experienced by her countryman and kindred spirit Jakob Boehme (1575–1624).<sup>50</sup> At the height of the psychedelic era, Kent Kraft compared the seer’s visions with reports of mescaline hallucinations, using the theories of Timothy Leary to account for what he took to be parallel psychosomatic processes.<sup>51</sup> But this hypothesis has won few adherents.

Since the early twentieth century a growing number of scholars have ascribed Hildegard’s visions, or at least the physical aspect of them, to migraine. Charles Singer, a historian of science, long ago pointed out that the classical migraine aura can produce disturbances of the visual field (“scintillating scotomata”) much like what Hildegard experienced in her visions of shimmering lights, falling stars, and “fortification figures,” perceived by her as the crenellated walls and turrets common in Romanesque architecture.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, in describing her chronic illnesses, she mentions symptoms like temporary blindness and an oppressive, paralyzing sense of heaviness, which would be consistent with severe migraine attacks. Yet by no means all of her visions fit the model of migraine auras, nor would such a diagnosis account for the *constant* presence of the “shadow of the Living Light.” Whether or not Hildegard had migraine—and it seems plausible that she did—that condition no more “explains” her prophetic vocation than Dostoevsky’s epilepsy explains his literary genius (even if he wrote brilliantly about the disorder in *The Idiot*). We may come closest to Hildegard’s experience if we understand her discrete “visions” as incidental to her overarching “vision,” and in that respect, she recalls William Blake.<sup>53</sup> The eighteenth-century maverick had in common with Hildegard a powerful and distinctive sense of the divine, coupled with a prophetic outrage against evil (especially the evil in religious institutions). In addition, both had a penchant for constructing dense and difficult mythopoeic systems, and both conveyed their vision in a more accessible way through lyrics as well as brilliantly painted images that could not possibly be mistaken for the work of any other.

With the loyal assistance of Volmar, Hildegard continued to labor at her *Scivias* until 1146 or 1147. At that time the fiery St. Bernard, Cis-

tercian abbot of Clairvaux, undertook a preaching tour to promote the Second Crusade against Islam, and his travels eventually brought him to the Rhineland.<sup>54</sup> There his preaching was received with adulation as throngs gathered to witness miraculous cures. Among his many admirers was Hildegard, who not only endorsed the crusading effort but wistfully contrasted her own timidity (“wretched and more than wretched in the name of woman”) with the abbot’s bold courage (“like an eagle gazing straight into the sun”). In the first of several hundred letters ascribed to her, she confided to Bernard the whole story of her visions, seeking his consolation and advice. The abbot responded briefly but to the point, urging Hildegard to “rejoice in the grace of God” she had received, though with all humility, and to pray for his sinful self.<sup>55</sup> About a year later “the grace of God” brought Bernard along with his former disciple, Pope Eugene III, to the Rhineland city of Trier for a synod of bishops (November 1147–February 1148). It was this meeting that would set the apostolic seal of approval on Hildegard’s visions. In the intervening years the ambitious Henry, archbishop of Mainz, had learned of her revelations from Abbot Kuno, and—perhaps sensing a means to enhance the prestige of his diocese—saw fit to raise the matter with the assembled prelates.

Pope Eugene, guided by Bernard of Clairvaux, advanced the reforming agenda of the late-eleventh-century popes by doing all he could to centralize and consolidate papal authority. In particular, he responded to the perceived threat of heresy by undertaking to investigate and pass judgment on potentially controversial books of theology.<sup>56</sup> Informed of Hildegard’s revelations, therefore, he appointed a papal commission to visit her at the Disibodenberg and secure a manuscript of the still unfinished *Scivias*. Having attained the book, as the seer herself says, the pope “had it read before many and himself read from it,” whereupon he sent her a letter “commanding” her to continue recording her visions. Godfrey expands on this account: “The pope commanded the blessed Hildegard’s writings to be brought to him . . . and, taking them up with his own hands, he himself read publicly in lieu of a reciter before the archbishop, the cardinals, and all the clergy who were present . . . and stirred the minds and voices of all to rejoicing and praise of the Creator.” Bernard too is said to have spoken out in the seer’s favor.<sup>57</sup> No doubt the prelates were motivated in part by the staunch orthodoxy of the *Scivias*, in which Hildegard stresses precisely those doctrines, such as the divine origin of marriage, the sanctity of the Eucharist, and the dignity of the priesthood, that the Cathars most vehemently denied.

About sixty years later Cardinal Jacques de Vitry would similarly promote the cult of another holy woman, Marie of Oignies, because he saw her and the movement she represented as a bastion of orthodox fervor against the growing allure of heresy.<sup>58</sup>

For Hildegard's nuns at St. Disibod, the papal validation came as a mixed blessing. Word of the pope's decree traveled fast, making Hildegard a celebrity and spreading her fame throughout Europe. In the twelve years since Jutta's death the community had grown to include eighteen or twenty women, who had brought with them rich dowries and donations, and the number of pilgrims had multiplied. For Kuno and the monks the now celebrated visionary nun represented both a material and a spiritual asset, perhaps even rivaling the cult of the sainted Jutta. But for Hildegard herself, dependence on the men's community was beginning to rankle. The nuns' living conditions were increasingly crowded, while their wealth remained firmly under the abbot's control. Perhaps the visionary felt a need for spiritual as well as financial independence in order to grow into the fullness of her talents. In any case, sometime in 1148 she received a new revelation declaring that she and her "girls" must move to their own house, which she was called to establish on Mount St. Rupert. But this unexpected vision was hardly received with joy. Many of the nuns, their families, and their patrons objected to the hardship and poverty such a move would entail, while Kuno was livid at the prospect of the nuns' secession. In this spiritual emergency Hildegard took once again to her bed, this time with a paralyzing illness. According to her memoirs, she was unable to rise or work until the resistance to God's call had been overcome, while according to Godfrey the outcome was settled by a miracle. Kuno, says the *Vita*, physically tried to lift the ailing seer from her bed but, finding her "like a stony rock," acknowledged that she was suffering no human illness but a divine chastisement, and he grudgingly released her to depart.<sup>59</sup>

In the meantime, Hildegard had been busily negotiating to buy the Rupertsberg land, which she secured with the help of Henry of Mainz and her most important patron, the marchioness Richardis of Stade. This noblewoman, the scion of an exalted Saxon family, was a cousin of Jutta of Sponheim and mother of Hildegard's favorite nun, likewise named Richardis.<sup>60</sup> Only a few years after the move, however, Hildegard would pay the cost of such lofty patronage. For a time all had gone uncommonly well for her. Title to the land was gained, detractors were gradually won over, and in 1150 she and her nuns left St. Disibod

for their new home, making an epic journey that she would later compare to the exodus of Israel from Egypt. By 1151 the *Scivias* was at last complete, its decade-long composition delayed by the tumultuous move. But in the same year an unexpected blow fell as if from heaven. Archbishop Hartwig of Bremen, son of the marchioness and brother of Hildegard's protégée Richardis, invited his sister to accept the vacant post of abbess at the aristocratic nunnery of Bassum, far to the north. Humanly, spiritually, and politically, Hildegard felt crushed by the "defection" of her favorite. In a frantic letter-writing campaign that would extend all the way to Pope Eugene, she tried in vain to quash the election, charging with some plausibility that it was motivated by family politics rather than the will of God and even hinting darkly at simony.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps she also begrudged the younger but more highborn woman the title of "abbess," a dignity Hildegard herself coveted but could not attain, given the newness of her foundation.<sup>62</sup>

To Richardis herself, however, Hildegard wrote in an exceptionally candid and intimate mode, voicing all the passion of a bereft lover. "Woe is me, your mother, woe is me, daughter—why have you abandoned me like an orphan? I loved the nobility of your conduct, your wisdom and chastity, your soul and the whole of your life, so much that many said: What are you doing?" Her overpowering love for Richardis contrasts tellingly with the proper but much cooler sentiment she expressed in her commendation of Jutta. In thus revealing the depths of her soul, Hildegard shows for once the human face behind the "trumpet of the Living Light."<sup>63</sup> At the same time she affords an early glimpse into the kind of chaste but troubled, intensely erotic bond between nuns that later spiritual directors would call "particular friendship"—and sternly forbid.<sup>64</sup> In the event, the Richardis affair had a tragic dénouement. Hildegard's pleading persuaded the young abbess to return to Bingen, if only for a visit, but she was carried off by a sudden fever in 1152 before she could do so. The bereft Hildegard consoled herself with the thought that God, the true lover of virgins, had taken Richardis for himself before her beauty could be corrupted by the world. Not long afterward Hildegard paid her daughter a last memorable tribute in her play, the *Ordo virtutum* (play of virtues), where the character Chastity proclaims: "O Virginity, you stand in the royal bridal chamber. How tenderly you burn in the King's embraces when the sun shines through you, so that your noble flower shall never wilt!"<sup>65</sup>

The death of Richardis was the first of several losses Hildegard experienced around this time. In 1153 both Pope Eugene and St. Bernard

died, as did her patron Henry of Mainz, after being deposed for embezzling—despite her last-ditch attempts to intercede for clemency on his behalf.<sup>66</sup> Closer to home Hildegard was embroiled in a long struggle with the monks of St. Disibod over possession of the endowments, primarily land holdings, which had been donated on profession of her nuns. Visiting the Disibodenberg in 1155, she threatened a dying Kuno in God's name, announcing that if the monks continued to withhold the women's property they were "the worst of robbers," and if they recalled Volmar to his abbey—evidently another point of contention—they would be "sons of Belial."<sup>67</sup> Hildegard later reported this embassy to her daughters as a great success, but it should be noted that she did not get quite everything she wanted. Her declaration of independence required not only prophetic denunciations but also a substantial payment in cash,<sup>68</sup> and throughout her lifetime she remained officially subject to the abbot of St. Disibod. Not until the thirteenth century did the decline of that community enable her successors to claim the title of abbess.

In the meantime Hildegard had much work to do to establish the Rupertsberg on a firm monastic footing. On the practical side there was constant construction to supervise; on the spiritual, the nuns' liturgical life required care and nurture. Hildegard may have composed her *Ordo virtutum*, a drama of the pilgrim soul's progress from the buoyancy of a youthful conversion, through temptation and sin, to a sadder but wiser maturity and a final triumph over Satan, as a festival play for the profession of novices, of whom she had many.<sup>69</sup> By the end of her life her monastery housed up to fifty nuns. But since their patron was St. Rupert, an obscure ninth-century nobleman rather than some great apostle, Hildegard first needed to revive his long-forgotten cult, for a monastery required strong patrons both on earth and in heaven. She attended to this need by writing a hagiographic life of Rupert<sup>70</sup> as well as a stunning musical sequence and a series of antiphons for his feast day. These liturgical pieces were only a few of more than seventy that she eventually gathered in her song cycle under the title *Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*.<sup>71</sup>

While the arrangement of liturgical music in cycles was not altogether new, as a generic device it was gaining renewed popularity in Hildegard's lifetime. Abelard had assembled such a cycle for the use of Heloise's nuns at the Paraclete, and the canon Adam of St.-Victor composed another.<sup>72</sup> In a departure from common practice, however, Hildegard did not follow the procedure of *contrafactura*, setting new words

to existing melodies or composing tunes that could be sung with a variety of lyrics. Instead, all of her pieces combine words and melody to form inseparable wholes. They are exceptional in other ways as well. For instance, to consider only their formal properties, Hildegard wrote her lyrics in Latin “free verse” rather than in classical quantitative meters or the newly fashionable rhymed stanzas, and her melodies are considerably more rhapsodic and wide-ranging than traditional Gregorian chant.<sup>73</sup> She always maintained that her musical gift, like her visions and her understanding of Scripture, came to her “without any human instruction”: she recorded the songs and taught them to her nuns just as she had heard them sung by celestial voices.

Aside from praying the Divine Office, reading and copying books, and providing for their material needs, the Rupertsberg nuns would have maintained a hospice for their many guests and pilgrims, perhaps including an infirmary for the sick. Most ordinary health care in the twelfth century was provided by men's and women's monasteries, along with village healers and herbalists. Although some men acquired professional training at medical schools, like the famous one at Salerno, the treatment provided by such physicians was accessible only to the rich. Monasteries, however, not only offered hospitality to all but held out hope of both natural and supernatural healing. Pilgrims who came to venerate the tombs and relics of saints, praying for miraculous cures, might at the same time benefit from nursing care and treatment offered by the religious.<sup>74</sup> Monks and nuns dispensed remedies based on a core of medical knowledge handed down from Greco-Roman antiquity, augmented by centuries of practice but limited by the local availability of herbs. As mistress of the Rupertsberg, Hildegard took an ardent interest in healing. No doubt she was prompted by the suffering of pilgrims, as well as by her own chronic ill health, to investigate the wholesome and toxic properties of plants, animals, gemstones, foods and beverages, and other aspects of her environment. But while her scientific and medical writings are extensive, they differ from her other books in that they have probably not come down to us in the form she intended.<sup>75</sup>

Hildegard notes in the preface to her *Liber vite meritorum* (1158), where she lists her previous books, that she had recently completed one with the intriguing title of *Subtilitates diversarum naturarum creaturarum* (*Subtleties of the Different Natures of Creatures*). The *Vita* mentions a work with a similar title. Typically Hildegardian is this concentration on the intricacies and providential uses of God's creation. Yet what the surviving manuscripts transmit is not this book but two others,