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The Exceptional Brilliance of Hildegard of Bingen

by Jessica LaPlante

(Art 2211)

In the solemnity of the 12th century ascetic Christian life, there was a singular woman whose rich, inner world produced haunting music and directed visually stunning art. Inspired by visions such that she has referred to as “exceptional brilliance”, it has since been speculated that, aside from or in addition to the hand of God, Hildegard of Bingen could have been afflicted by intense migraines which she understood to be the visions which inspired her so. In this essay, I intend to investigate the life of Hildegard of Bingen in light of speculations regarding the real inspiration behind her contributions.

Born in 1098 CE and hailing from the German Rhineland, Hildegard’s life took a path from the aristocracy of her birth through her upbringing in a Benedictine monastery to her ultimate ascension to the role of Abbess in a convent built for her (Gardner and Kleiner 326). As the tenth child, it was customary to be forsworn to the service of God, yet it was not until she was eight years old, sickly and frail, that she was turned over to the tutelage of the anchoress Jutta (Lerman) and began her formal education.

Hildegard had recounted that she began to experience visions at the young age of five (Woodstra, et al 603). Being afflicted at such a young age, it is interesting to note that Hildegard was hesitant to relate her experiences. Afflicted by ill health throughout her childhood, Hildegard herself recounted:

“Up to my fifteenth year I saw much, and related some of the things seen to others, who would inquire with astonishment whence such things might come. I also wondered, and during my sickness I asked one of my nurses whether she saw similar things. When she answered no, a great fear befell me. Frequently in my conversation, I would relate future things, which I saw as if present, but noting the amazement of my listeners, I became more reticent (Leibell and Leibell 119)”.

From what modern science has now come to term as a migraine with aura, it seems reasonable to equate the self-described symptoms of Hildegard with such a condition. Migraine with aura is distinguished from typical migraines as they are accompanied by visual disturbances such as described by the Mayo Health Clinic: “flashes of light, zigzagging patterns or even blind spots... migraine with aura may also be accompanied by other sensations, such as numbness or tingling in parts of your body and speech problems (Mayo Clinic)”. In addition to visual disturbances, migraines can be accompanied by acute symptoms of illness, which can then be followed by euphoric feelings. Hildegard described her own experiences of points of intense light and “extinguished stars,” which were then followed by paralysis, sickness and blindness preceded by a sense of euphoria (Lerman).

Regardless of true nature of her visions, what proceeded from them can be understood as nothing less than inspired. Hildegard’s prolific works crossed the genres of art, music, science, herbalism, medicine and mysticism. She directed the creation of elaborate and stunning folios depicting the contents of her visions. Although she never received formal training in music, she composed 77 chants and illuminated spiritual truths through music over 300 times in her writings (Fierro). She composed *Natural Sciences*, a catalog of the natural world and its properties with over 250 plants and 170 animals (Reed-Jones 30). In *Causes and Cures* she discusses not only medicine

and herbal cures, but also addresses the place of man in existence:

“Just as everything casts its shadow, in the same way, man is the shadow of God, and the shadow is the visible sign of his creation. Man is the clear pointer toward almighty God in all his wonders. He himself is a shadow because he has a beginning; God, however, has neither beginning nor end. For that reason, the harmony of the heavens is a mirror of the divinity, and man reflects all the wonders of God (Reed-Jones 30)”.

Whether or not she could have known that interest in her work would persist for over a millennium beyond her death, Hildegard achieved a remarkable number of accomplishments throughout the duration of her long life. Her contributions to spirituality, the arts, music and the sciences resulted in an impressive resume, particularly coming from the mind of a woman who was self-deprecating over her apparent lack of education. Whether the cause of her inspired and prolific work can be reduced to aural migraines or exalted to the hand of God, the legacy of Hildegard of Bingen remains as a topic of wonder and consideration.

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