Hildegard of Bingen rarely displays any debts to existing movements of religious renewal in Germany. At the beginning of *Scivias*, she describes how she experienced a moment of illumination in the 43rd year of her life, but gives no indication that the monastery where she had been raised as a child was itself the product of any movement in religious reform.¹ In reflections preserved by her biographer, she recalls simply that she was offered up to religious life by her parents in the 8th year of her life (namely, 1105), and that she spoke frequently about visionary experiences until her 15th year (1112), when she became fearful of what others might say. She implies that she was born into an age of spiritual decline, when Christian fervor had grown slack, and that her early life had lacked a clear sense of direction and commitment.² Yet we cannot understand the particular direction of her life—both in its early phase at Disibodenberg, and then after she started to assert her spiritual identity in 1141—without reference to a movement of religious renewal that had been evolving within German monasticism since the 11th century, in particular that associated with the abbey of Hirsau.

Because Hildegard was technically Benedictine in her observance (not a term she would have known), it is often assumed that she belonged to an “unreformed” monasticism, more traditional in character than that of the Cistercian Order, which based itself around strict observance of the Rule of Benedict. This assumption—that 12th-century monasticism can itself be divided into two primary groupings, one traditional and Benedictine, the other innovative and Cistercian—is itself shaped by the polemical literature generated by the Cistercian reform, in particular by its preeminent publicist, Bernard of Clairvaux. His *Apologia* for the Cistercian way of life, addressed to William of St Thierry in the mid-1120s, has had great influence in creating the impression that prior to the establishment of Cîteaux and the Cistercian way of life in 1098, monasticism—at

¹ *Scivias*, “Protestificatio,” p. 3.
² V. Hild., 2.2, p. 23.
least as practiced at Cluny and its daughter houses—had become lax and worldly in its observance, no longer committed to its founding principles. Bernard’s rhetoric—coupled with the loss of so many written records from the monasteries in the Rhineland and southwestern Germany influenced by Hirsau—has tended to nurture the misleading impression that France (above all Clairvaux) was a seedbed of monastic renewal in that period, and that only gradually did Cistercian monasticism expand into Germany.3 This creates an artificial perception of Hildegard of Bingen as a lone voice, emanating from an unreformed monasticism untouched by earlier currents of religious renewal. The reality was very different.

At Disibodenberg, Hildegard was profoundly shaped by memories of the cause of religious renewal, in particular as inspired by the abbey of Hirsau, in Swabia. In Germany, monastic reform was never shaped by explicit adherence to the authority of any single abbey, like that of Cluny or Cîteaux. Instead, monasteries that came under the influence of an abbey became part of a brotherhood, defined through sharing common liturgical practices and agreeing to pray for each other. Hirsau was particularly influential in creating such a sense of a brotherhood.4 As Phyllis Jestice has argued, one of the distinguishing features of reforming monks in 11th-century Germany was their engagement in the public life of the Church, often incurring much hostility from both clerical and monastic figures who were loyal to imperial authority.5 Hildegard’s debt to Hirsau was fully evident to one of her greatest admirers in the late 15th century, Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516), abbot of Sponheim. Trithemius integrated the story of Hildegard into his Chronicon Hirsaugiense, a richly

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3 Constance Berman has argued that the notion of a Cistercian ordo was only invented after the death of St Bernard; see The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe (Philadelphia, 2000). Yet there is strong evidence for a sense of a common ordo already in existence at 1125, the time during which a crisis confronted Morimond. Morimond was founded on the same day as Clairvaux, but with a view toward expanding the Order into Germany. See Michael Casey, “Bernard and the Crisis at Morimond. Did the Order Exist in 1124?” Cistercian Studies Quarterly 38 (2003): 119–75.  