NOTES ON HILDEGARD’S “UNKNOWN” LANGUAGE AND WRITING

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Mysteries abound regarding Hildegard’s “unknown language” and “unknown alphabet.” One is that scholars have only begun to pay attention to this aspect of Hildegard’s personality comparatively recently; another is that many have doubted its authenticity, at least in part. A greater mystery still is that too many people have overlooked what was said about this matter by Hildegard herself. In a letter written in 1153 to Pope Anastasius, Hildegard specifically says that she has miraculously received an alphabet unknown to others, a language unknown to others, and much harmonious music.1

About five years later, in the preface to her Liber vite meritorum, one reads that among her previous publications, Hildegard had written many letters, created works on nature, composed the Symphonia, and made known an unknown language and alphabet.2

About a decade after the composition of the Liber, Hildegard’s secretary Volmar sent a letter to her, possibly occasioned by a serious illness affecting the magistra. In expressing his anguish at the thought of Hildegard’s eventual death, he wrote: “Where, then, will there be the voice of the unheard music, and the voice of the unheard language?”3 Here, Volmar expresses aspects of Hildegard’s persona that found resonance soon after her death, both in hagiographical literature and in the initial attempts to canonize her. In the vita composed c.1181, shortly after Hildegard’s death, a passage that is likely inspired by Volmar’s sentiments notes that Hildegard wrote a hitherto unseen alphabet and a hitherto unheard language.4 And

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1 “Sed ille qui sine defectione magnus est, modo paruum habitaculum tetigit ut illud miracula uidere, et ignotas litteras formaret, ac ignotam linguam sonaret, atque ut multo modam sed sibi consonantem melodiam sonaret,” in Epistolarium, I, 8, p. 21.

2 See Vite mer., p. 8. Hildegard proceeds to discuss in the Liber the famous episode narrated in 2 Cor. 12, where Paul presents the case of a man taken up into heaven, where he heard “unspeakable words”; for this, see Jeffrey Schnapp, “Virgin Words. Hildegard of Bingen’s Lingua Ignota and the Development of Imaginary Languages Ancient to Modern,” Exemplaria 3 (1991): 267–98.

3 “Ubi tunc uox inaudite melodie et uox inaudite lingue?” in Epistolarium, II, 195, p. 443.

4 “Quis uero non miretur, quod cantum dulcissime melodie mirabili protulit symphonia et litteras prius non uisas cum lingua edidit antea inaudita?” in Vita Sanctae Hildegardis:
in providing a list of Hildegard’s writings, the canonization process of 1233 includes among them “her unknown language with its own writing.”

Much attention has been given to Hildegard’s lingua and littera by linguists. Wilhelm Grimm is the first scholar of the modern period to have examined Hildegard’s writings in this regard; in his 1848 study, he was primarily interested in the German equivalents for the language’s vocabulary (and openly shocked that a nun would know and use words dealing with male genitalia). Practitioners and scholars of Esperanto and “ideal languages” have also shown interest in Hildegard’s language, as witnessed by the several studies conserved at Vienna’s Esperanto Museum; among these works is a study of Hildegard written in Esperanto. But over time not just philologists but also philosophers, cultural historians, and medievalists have studied Hildegard’s personal language, culminating in works published in the past decade by Michael Embach and Sarah L. Higley.

Of the tiny number of witnesses to the manuscript tradition of Hildegard’s language, the most important must be the manuscript Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek 2. With regard to textual matters, this is the most celebrated of all the Hildegardian codices. It is best known by its nickname, the Riesen Kodex, and it serves as the fundamental collection of Hildegard’s non-scientific works (and was likely organized by Hildegard herself).

It is important to note that, as presented in the Riesen Kodex, Hildegard’s language is not one that we would ordinarily recognize as such. It is completely lacking in anything that is not a noun. There are no verbs and

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5 “Linguam ignotam cum suis litteris,” in Vita Sanctae Hildegardis: Canonizatio Sanctae Hildegardis, p. 268, and also alluded to afterwards pp. 272, 274.


7 A branch of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, the Esperantomuseum is possibly the world’s greatest collection dealing with ideal or planned languages, ranging chronologically from Hildegard’s secret language to Klingon and more.


10 See Embach, Die Schriften Hildegards von Bingen, p. 36.