

2008

Political Agendas in the Letters of Hildegard of Bingen

Anna Sweeney
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sweeney, Anna (2008) "Political Agendas in the Letters of Hildegard of Bingen," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 8, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56816/2378-6949.1084>

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol8/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Political Agendas in the Letters of Hildegard of Bingen

Anne Sweeney

English Literature
Cecilia Pick-Modern Languages
May 15, 2008

Hildegard of Bingen was one of few prolific female writers from early German history. She lived in the twelfth century during a time of enormous social upheaval, and saw Frederick I crowned the King of Germany. With the protection of the Papacy, Hildegard produced a vast number of scholastic works ranging in practice from theoretical medicine to musical composition. She is considered by some a polymath, who arose from her lack of education as a master in several scholastic fields. Her early education is attributed to Jutta of Sponheim and considered to have been continued by Volmar, her secretary until his death. It is considered unusual for her to have achieved so much because of her gender. Indeed, in her letters beseeching aid from upper echelons of the Catholic Church, Hildegard degrades her gender in a fashion that women writers who throughout recent history have taken up to bridge the gender gap and attain space in society for themselves. Peter Munz barely discusses her several hundred letters throughout this schismatic time in his work *Frederick Barbarossa*. He wrote that “Hildegard of Bingen had cautiously refrained from committing herself and had advised people [to] obey their superiors” (Munz 289). This first and brief mention of Bingen in his account of the life of Frederick Barbarossa does not do justice to the political presence she exhibits in her letters to bishops, popes, and kings. She changes from being a wretched woman and afraid of being found heretical—which was likely a death sentence—to being a trumpeting voice chastising the powerful secular offices of local kings throughout the Holy Roman Empire. Her tonal shift between these people is no accident, and is telling of the control of the Catholic Church. However, her manipulation of politics—though indirectly through her advice and the men she wrote—shows her rejection of imposed feminine roles and must be taken into consideration when examining her role in history. In a time when women were forbidden from learning, let alone writing dissertations on eschatology or medicine, Hildegard pushed the limits of what

society would allow her to do.

In this study, I analyze the content four of Hildegard of Bingen's letters using two biographical works written about two of the men to whom she wrote. I chose letter 1 and 2 written to Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius, respectively, from volume 1 of Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman's recent translation in order to isolate her character in her communications to upper-ranking clergy members. I then worked with letters 312 and 317, from volume three, to Frederick I and Henry II, respectively, in order to isolate her character in her communications to upper-ranking secular authorities. By comparing and contrasting the opposing character approaches that she chose to present to clergy and non-clergy men of power, I intend to take a look at the political power structure prevalent in the early middle ages and analyze her role in that structure as a political contender among a largely patriarchal system. Her character in her letters when communicating with clerical powers takes a tone of humility and subservience, while her approach towards secular powers takes on a commanding and chastising tone. Baird and Ehrman's work has been very recently published and this allows for a new look into the roles of powerful woman in politics in the twelfth century.

In the introduction to their multi-volume translation, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman discuss how her letters reveal a different person besides an ecstatic visionary, particularly by revealing her humanity, her continuous oscillations of tone in her letters, and the role her limited education played in her career. There are 400 surviving letters associated with Hildegard of Bingen, and they reveal a human and pragmatic abbess beyond “the near-unapproachable seer of the Scivias,” one of her three major visionary works (Baird Ehrman 1: 4). In these letters Hildegard demonstrates an oscillation of character between “almost abject humility” and “the commanding authority of the voice of the Living Light” (Baird Ehrman 1: 4).

Her letters demonstrate an enormous amount of visionary language offset by her questionable mastering of Latin. Her education was limited; begun by Jutta of Sponheim and continued by Volmar, Bingen's secretary. According to Baird and Ehrman, Hildegard denied the “mere earthly learning” and claimed to be uneducated and unlearned; she emphasized instead her divinely inspired knowledge (Baird Ehrman 1: 6). Her lack of formal education supports her case of divine inspiration because “how could one lacking the very basic instruments of grammar speak with such authority, such great confidence, unless inspired by the Divine” (Baird Ehrman 1: 6). In their introduction, Baird and Ehrman claim that Volmar never doubted that Bingen was inspired from a non-human source, but that his only concern was whether or not she was inspired by Satan or by God (Baird Ehrman 1: 7). Baird and Ehrman focus in their statements on what Hildegard's letters reveal about her, her messages to others, and problems often associated with her informal use of Latin.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098 as the tenth child of a noble family in Bermersheim.¹ She began having visions of luminous objects at the age of three, and at the age of eight was tithed to the Catholic Church by her family. Despite claims that this was done because of economic strain, it is likely she was given up because she was a strange, other-worldly child. She was given over to an anchoress named Jutta of Sponheim and joined her in her cell attached to the Benedictine Monastery at Mount St. Disibod. She remained there for thirty years in relative obscurity as more and more upper class female students arrived. Upon the death of Jutta, Bingen was elected to the head of her community. According to Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, Bingen received a rudimentary education from her mentor Jutta and was presumably taught Latin. A few years after Jutta's death, Bingen founded the cloister Rupertsburg at Bingen

1 Fig. 1

in Germany, for which she is named. She founded two cloisters and took four preaching tours throughout the Rhineland area.² It was through Jutta that she had been introduced to Volmar, a monk, who continued Hildegard's education and remained her confidant and secretary for the rest of his life after Jutta's death (Baird Ehrman 1: 5-6). Volmar played a crucial role in her writing career by acting as an agent on her behalf to Kuno, the abbot of St. Disibod, who then brought her to the attention of Heinrich, the archbishop of Mainz. Heinrich played a large role in bringing her visions, divine knowledge, and resulting literary works to the attention of Pope Eugenius (Baird Ehrman 1: 5).

It is extremely important to take into account the public nature of her correspondences. “The medieval letter was a far more public document than our modern predilections lead us to expect” as it was passed through several people in production, in transmission, and in many cases collection and publication (Baird Ehrman 1: 9). Her tone and attitude towards the recipient of her correspondences change dramatically when she addresses secular powers. Her letters to Frederick I in conjunction with Henry II, King of England, compared to her letters to Bernard, archbishop of Clairvaux, and Pope Eugenius offer a perfect picture of her tonal changes. Her letters to clergy share four characteristics: an exaltation of their divine office, a self-deprecating description of her lowly gender, several references to her divine inspiration, and pleas for political protection and permission. Her approach to addressing the clergy is ingenious and its success can be seen because of all of her scholastic accomplishments that are remembered today.

The character Hildegard chooses to represent to the clergy is humble, self-deprecating, and extremely courteous to their offices. She writes to Bernard of Clairvaux and addresses him as “venerable father Bernard” (Baird Ehrman 1: 27). When addressing Pope Eugenius, Bingen uses similar rhetoric in order to show humble respect for their offices. Her next action is to

2 Fig. 2

present herself “poor little woman though [she] is” to both powerful men to convey that she understands that she is breaking social norms in her personal communication with them and in her creation of her works (Baird Ehrman 1: 32). She emphasizes in these letters more so than her other letters the “burning flames” and “Living Light” of her visions (Baird Ehrman 1: 28, 32). Here is where she must claim her ignorance and lack of formal training to plead the case of divine inspiration. Without God's direct intercession in her life and existence forcing her to act, she has absolutely justification for her actions whatsoever. Her letters to secular powers also share four characteristics that neatly oppose her character towards clergy: a belittlement of their earthly position, warnings against evil or evil influences they face in their surrounding aristocracy, her advice on how to handle those matters, and her blessings and prayers for their return to the correct path.

In a letter dated 1154-70, Hildegard of Bingen addresses Henry the II, King of England, as a “certain man holding a certain office” (Baird Ehrman, 3: 116). The letter taken superficially reveals very little about its intent, and can seem to simply be instructions to govern justly. Hildegard addresses Henry's office as an officiate of the church, and subsequently tells him that “the Lord says: Gifts are yours for the giving: by governing and defending, by protecting and providing, you may gain heaven,” and she warns him not to be “influenced by the squalid morals of the people who surround [him]” (Baird Ehrman, 3: 116). This is not unusual among Hildegard's letters; she wrote to many people in regards to their behavior especially after the Lateran Councils when the Catholic Church was having trouble enforcing the new carnal guidelines of priesthood. L.F. Salzman documents in detail the events occurring throughout the reign of Henry the II. Henry the II was born of Maud, Henry I's daughter, and did not rise to power until the death of Stephen of Blois. Maud had married the Count of Anjou, who was 14

years old to her 25, by Henry I in order to ensure that the heir to the throne of England would also gain control of Anjou and Maine. This would make England one of the most powerful feudal states of France.³ Due to the time it took for the heiress of Henry I to produce a male heir, her cousin, Stephen of Blois, managed to get himself crowned King with the help of his brother. Maud gives birth to a boy in 1133 and names him Henry. To gain the throne from Stephen, Henry II goes to Normandy and gets the help of King Louis. A short military expedition later, Henry is crowned King after the death of Stephen (Salzman 1-13).

A few lines of Hildegard's letter to Henry II include some interesting images, which could have a political meaning when contextualized. She explains that his duty is “governing and defending” and “protecting and providing,” and that through these actions he “may gain heaven” (Baird Ehrman, 3: 116). She follows with a personification of a “black bird” who “comes to [him] from the North, and says: ‘You have the power to do whatever you like. Therefore do this and do that, take up this matter and that’” (Baird Ehrman, 3: 116). What is striking is her personification of justice in the next few lines when she implies that the “black bird” is telling him that he doesn't need to “look to justice, because if [he] is always looking to her, [he] is not the master but the slave” (Baird Ehrman, 3: 116). The exact source of inspiration for these lines is unknown; however, shortly into his international career as a campaigning monarch he got involved in family politics in Northern Wales. He did so under the pretense of restoring deposed Cadwalader, whose brother, Owain Gwynedd had seized his possessions and exiled him (Salzman 26). Owain Gwynedd was the King of North Wales. At this time in history, anything in the British isles not under Norman rule was fought over by local lords. Families are being divided, and brothers pitted against each other. It was no small thing to simply conquer Wales at this time; Welshmen were known for fierce guerrilla tactics that involve surprise and rushing.

3 Fig. 3

Thus simply marching in and taking control was not a possibility, and Henry II spent a number of years manipulating Welsh politics in order to turn a profit. Eventually Prince Rhys of South Wales, Owain, and Cadwalader all united against Henry II. The Welsh wars in Henry's time lasted nearly a decade and ended in his mutilation of Owain's and Rhys's sons as well as other hostages (Salzman 37). Hildegard's letters range sixteen years in date from 1154 to 1170, and three years into this date range Henry II began his Welsh campaign and it continued until 1171. Given the fairly public nature of official communication in the twelfth century, it would not be surprising if Hildegard was alluding to specific circumstances in a language that would hide its content to the people whose hands the letter passed through on its way to the king and his advisors.

In the first of several letters to Frederick I, Hildegard of Bingen begins her communication with “It is remarkable that mankind has a need for that gentle office which you hold, O King” and her unabashed language continues as this “poor little woman” from a letter to Pope Eugenius proceeds to give Frederick instructions regarding the aristocracy in his country (Baird Ehrman 3: 112,1: 32). Frederick I, infamously Frederick Barbarossa, and faced many challenges getting into power. Frederick lacked the necessary lineage to directly ascend to the throne of Germany at this time; he followed the reign of his uncle, Conrad III (Munz 45). According to Peter Munz, he did so with the help of several bishops who were negotiating a feud between the powerful aristocratic Welf and Staufen families (Munz 34-35). What made Frederick stand out as a candidate to be elected as heir was his familial connections to both families. Therefore, he would be a king who would impartially divide land and favor evenly among these families. After gaining the throne in 1152, Frederick began appointing advisors. He valued a divergence of opinion, even from his own, and chose Eberhard, Bishop of Bamberg, and Abbot

Wibald as his closest advisors (Munz 48). Frederick enlisted their help in writing a message to send in an embassy to Pope Eugenius to inform him that he had been elected the King of Germany. After the initial draft composed by Wibald in 1152, which sought papal permission to rule, Eberhard redrafted the message to omit that information as well as the promise of military support against the city of Rome if Frederick was crowned Holy Roman Emperor (Munz 52). Munz also describes Eberhard as being more secular minded and an old rival of Heinrich of Mainz, who supported Hildegard of Bingen in her career immensely. Her first letter to Frederick is dated the year of his coronation and his first diplomatic message, which asserts his strength as a ruler rather than giving a papal tribute.

Hildegard writes to Frederick I that he must “see to it, therefore, that [he] is not accused of misusing [his] office” (Baird Ehrman 3: 112). She warns him of the “prelates wallowing in lasciviousness” in his country whose morals are “very black” and “sluggish” (Baird Ehrman 3: 112). Her discussion of those prelates, high ranking members of clergy, is most interesting when the early actions Frederick took towards the Church under the guidance of the fairly secular and way-ward Eberhard of Bamberg. Eberhard's rivalry with Heinrich of Mainz and his attitude towards the Church makes it likely that he is one of those prelates that Hildegard references in her letters. She ends her message by telling Frederick to “flee these things” and to “be a knight in armor bravely fighting the devil” and sets it next to threats of damnation, “eternal perdition,” and shame upon his earthly kingdom if he doesn't fix his ways (Baird Ehrman 3:112). Her message to him is clearly that he has made grievances against the Catholic Church and he must mend his ways. Her letters to Henry II and Frederick I are veiled threats against their authority should they lose the support of the church.

There is an intensely public nature associated with written correspondence during the

early middle ages. Hildegard of Bingen's letters clearly demonstrate this with their ambiguity and complex nature. There is a mixture of visions and biblical references surrounding her intentions. Hildegard seeks the aid of upper ranking Catholic clergy in her letters to Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius. However, her letters to secular authorities are demeaning in nature, and address a number of locally governmental concerns. These letters, only recently translated to English in full, reveal Hildegard's complex relationship with existing institutions. Beyond being a polymath, visionary, and medical expert, Hildegard of Bingen was a feminine voice in a sea of male political contenders.



Figure 1: Portrait of Hildegard taken from Scivias

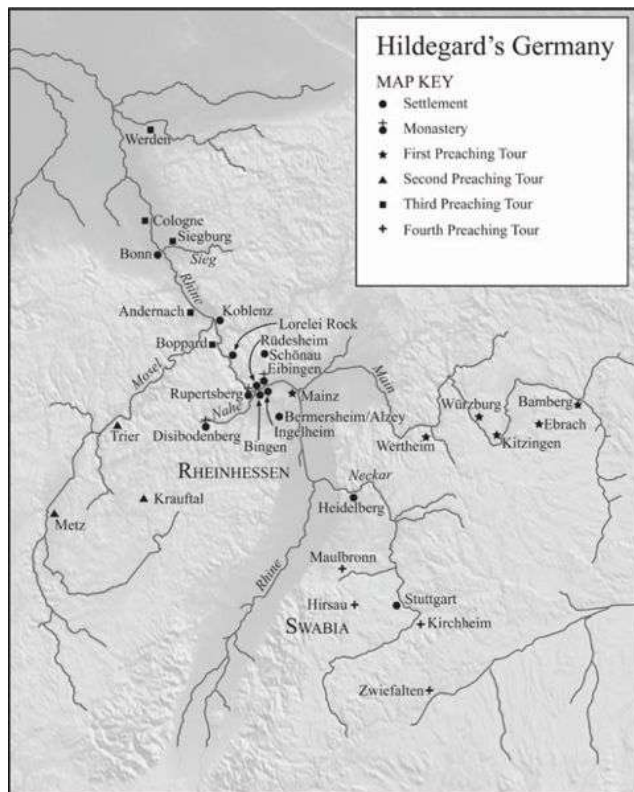


Figure 2: Hildegard of Bingen's preaching tours

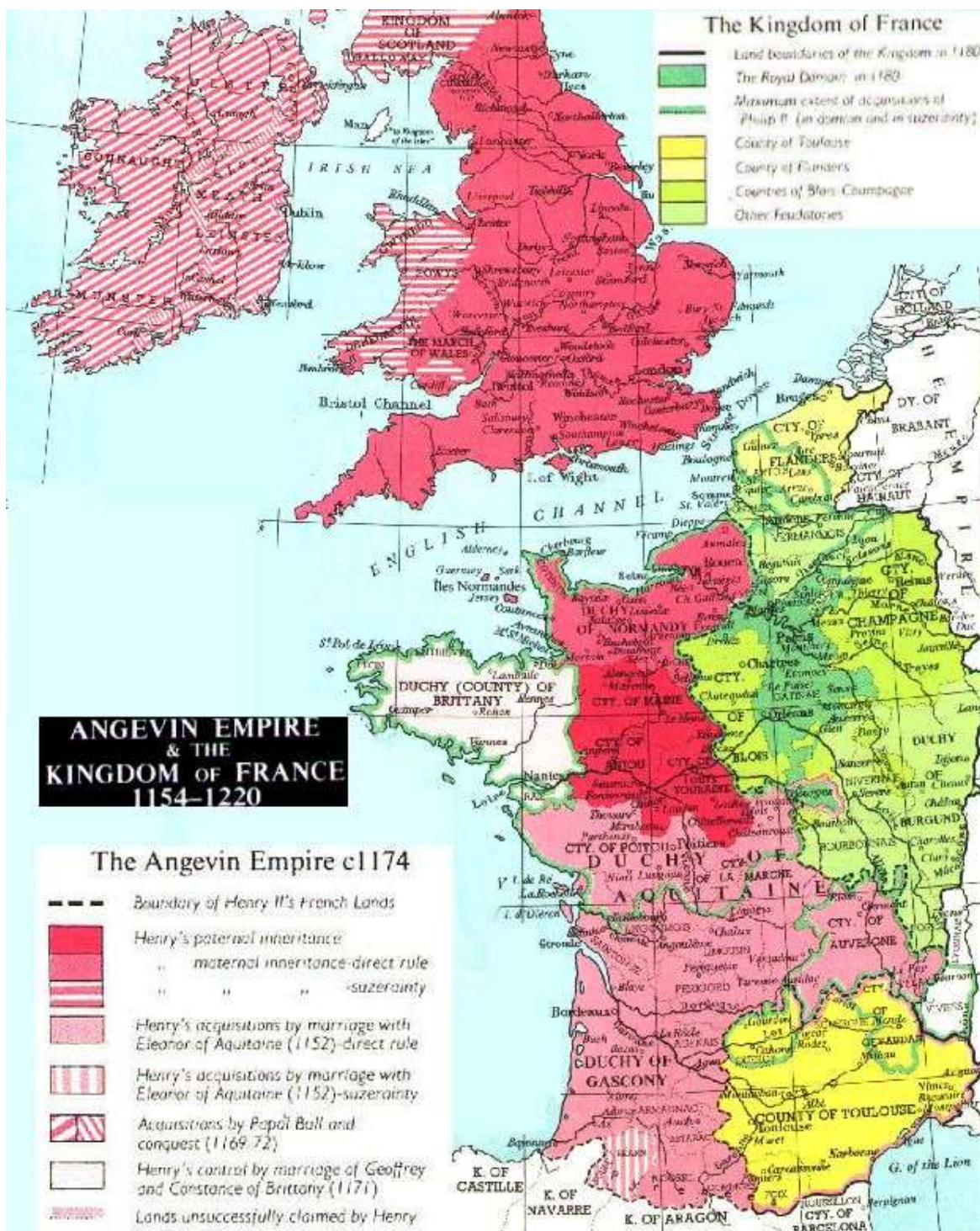


Figure 3: A map of Henry II's domain

Works Cited

- Baird, Joseph L., and Radd K. Ehrman, trans. The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen. Vol 1. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 3 vols.
- Baird, Joseph L., and Radd K. Ehrman, trans. The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen. Vol 3. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 3 vols.
- Munz, Peter. Frederick Barbarossa: A Study in Medieval Politics. New York: Cornell University Press, 1969.
- Salzman, L.F., Henry II. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914.