



**Female  
Monasticism in the  
Early and High  
Middle Ages: nuns  
and society (up to  
c. 1200)**

# Christianity and Womanhood

## Women in the Bible

- Women represent less than 10 percent of all characters in the Bible. The ancient Near East was an essentially patriarchal society, where the primary expectation for women was childrearing; the Bible reflects this: women are usually in the background, and usually firmly under the authority of men.
- The first woman mentioned is **Eve**, the wife of **Adam**. She is presented as having been made for Adam (from his rib) rather than being an equal. Moreover, it was Eve who tempted Adam into sin. In response God firmly subjugated women: "To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." [Gen 3:16]
- Nevertheless, the Bible does assign certain women more prominence in socially valuable (if still limiting) roles:
  - **Ruth** – the Old Testament’s most prominent symbol of selfless kindness (shown to Naomi and Boaz)
  - **Mary** – mother of Jesus an the most prominent woman in the bible: a symbol not only of kindness and tenderness like Ruth, but of particular moral purity, as symbolised by her virginity
- Only a few women break the mould to take on greater authority:
  - There are some notable prophetesses (e.g. **Deborah**)
  - And a few women who exceed the expectations of their positions to significantly influence their husbands (e.g. **Esther**)
- **Jesus** is seen as showing greater respect for women, treating them as equals in their potential for both virtue and sin:
  - E.g. intervening in the stoning of a woman accused of adultery ("Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her", [John 8:7])
  - Women (not only **Mary**, but also **Mary Magdalene**) were prominent and respected within his early circle



# Christianity and Womanhood

## Women in Early Christianity

- Continuing the more female-friendly atmosphere of the New Testament, recent scholars have argued that Early Christianity offered some latitude for female involvement/leadership
  - In the background, the increasingly Romanised society in which the early Church evolved offered – in legal terms at least – greater latitude to women in some areas (e.g. property rights) than they had known in Old Testament Judea.
  - Importantly, Christianity was still in its counter-cultural, dissident phase and provided a space where social norms and distinctions could be challenged: you thus find female clergy (albeit as deacons, a lower rank, rather than priests), even if they are less common than men
  - Theologically, there is also some grounding for this, since Christianity emphasises the idea that all souls are equal under God, lessening social distinctions: e.g. Saint Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” [Gal 3:28]
- Nevertheless we can see that some of its most influential leaders were keen to place more traditional limits on female leadership from an early stage:
  - Saint Paul: “I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent” [1 Tim 2:12]
  - The Church father Tertullian (155-240) argues against a woman’s right to baptise or assist in baptisms (suggesting it was previously common)
  - After the time of the legalisation of Christianity by the emperor Constantine I in 313, we find less and less evidence of women holding roles of authority within the non-monastic church (albeit it is not entirely absent)



# The Earliest Nuns

The rise of monasticism can partly be seen as the re-emergence of “counter-cultural” Christianity at a time when the wider religion was becoming increasingly socially integrated and respected (see lecture 1).

- The rejection of social norms that early monasticism offered created opportunities for women and a greater feeling of equality. E.g. the “desert mothers” **Sarah** and **Syncretica** (see lecture 1).
  - Value is found primarily in repenting for sins and approaching perfection through asceticism, rather than previous social position.
- But from an early stage, we can see that the rise of female monasticism caused concern for men in a male-dominated society
  - See the example of **Sarah** being insulted by male monks in the *Sayings of the Fathers* (Lecture 1 sources): this is a world that will ultimately not adapt very much to the idea of female religious authorities
  - Unrestrained female monasticism is also a challenge to women’s traditional societal role as child-bearers in marriage. This perhaps also influenced the degree of prominence that nuns could receive, since not all women could be allowed to follow this unmarried path.
  - Conversely, those who renounced marriage and became nuns were potential objects of Christian sexual suspicion.
  - The fear of women – and particularly those without a male guardian – as particular conduits of the sin of “lust” places a different spiritual framing on female monasticism. “Chastity”, while a virtue for monks as well, became the principle goal for these unmarried religious women, connecting them also with the biblical example of **Mary**.
  - From this time on, nuns are often simply referred to as “**virgins**”: female monasticism is thus always framed by rather misogynistic perceptions of the sexual role and characteristics of women.





# The Earliest Nuns

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Eventually, female monasticism finds a more restrictive niche within a male-dominated late Roman society

- It provides an environment in which to ensure the care of daughters for whom a marriage option is not easily available and of widows
- As such, it is not common for women to be able to choose religion over marriage – at least without significant resistance from male relatives; female monasticism soon becomes less of a break from the norms of the outside world in this sense.

But, once ‘contained’ within a monastery, the monastic life does offer women a path to:

- have authority over others (e.g. as an abbess). While nuns had to have the sacraments (e.g. communion) administered and mass said by an outside male priest, the abbess and female office-holders were in charge of the running of the monastery and administering its lands and possessions.
- express themselves religiously outside of the immediate grip of men: even if there was the potential for oversight from priests who administered the sacraments, the abbess was primary spiritual guide within the community.
- reach public prominence and respect (albeit usually less than male monks) for their religious lives: e.g. **Macrina the Younger (d. 379)**, a Near Eastern nun, became a celebrated saint alongside her two brothers, **Gregory of Nyssa** and **Basil the Great** (see lecture 3 on Basil’s rule)



# Caesarius of Arles and Enclosure

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Caesarius, bishop of Arles (468/470 – 27 August 542 AD) was one of the most important Church leaders in post-Roman Gaul.

- While he left the monastery of Lérins early in his career to become a secular cleric, he was always strong supporter and promoter of asceticism and ascetic values.
- He was also – as a bishop – someone who sought to integrate and order ascetic life within the Christian society of the region.
- It was with both these aims in mind that he wrote his *Rule for Virgins*: to encourage women of diverse backgrounds and different ages to enter religion – he wrote the rule for a female monastery that he himself founded – and to ensure that they caused no social scandal
- This latter aspect is very marked in the Caesarius's Rule in comparison to other medieval rules for men
  - Emphasis on virginity as the key goal for these unmarried women – even in the title of the rule.
  - Enclosure is the second most important concern. Once they enter the monastery they can never, ever leave its boundaries.
  - Lot of small stipulations and details about seemingly quite minor matters of appearance.

# Nuns in Irish society

Early Irish monasticism is arguably somewhat less restrictive for women than that promoted by Caesarius

- In the first generation of Irish monasticism, we find a number of respected female leaders, who occupy major roles:
  - **Saint Brigid of Kildare** (late 5<sup>th</sup> to early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries) – apparent founder of the monastery of Kildare and one of the patron saints of Ireland (see lecture 2, possibly semi-mythical)
  - **Saint Ita** ('the Brigid of Munster', d. c. 570) – founded a monastery in Munster for women; this also apparently contained a school for boys, and she is remembered as having educated Saint Brendan the Navigator (see lecture 2)
- The idea of “double monasteries” – separate male and female houses as on the same site, a concept first established by the Egyptian abbot **Pachomius** (see lecture 1) – perhaps found one of its first European expressions here, and with a twist: female leadership.
  - **Saint Brigid's** monastery of Kildare is said, by her first biographer, **Cogitosus**, to have been for both men and women, under her leadership. We know little of its organisation, but Cogitosus describes how the men and women entered into monastery's church separately, taking up separate sides of the church.
- The strong early connection between aristocratic families – in which women probably enjoyed greater latitude – and monastic houses in Ireland is of significance in the early success of female monasticism there: using a daughter or a widow of the family to run the family monastery perhaps represented a good use of family resources.

There are, however, similar restrictions and reactions to those we have already seen (see Bitel in bibliography)

- Female monastic foundations become rarer from the seventh century onward, and existing ones disappear. This seems related to similar societal concerns over women forgoing marriage and churchmen worrying about unmarried women as particular carriers of lust and objects of temptation.
- There are no known female monastic missionaries from Ireland: proving oneself through religious *peregrinatio* (pilgrimage) is an honour reserved only for male Irish monks.

# The Impact of Columbanus

While limited, the degree of extra latitude offered to women in Early Irish monasticism proved exportable – and in fact expandable - within the Germanic-influenced culture of Frankish Gaul

The ancestral Germanic culture of the Franks – while still essentially patriarchal – allowed room for powerful women, at least within the aristocracy.

- Importantly, married aristocratic women owned their own dowry land and had greater inheritance rights: they could thus distribute financial patronage themselves.
- Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* (late 6<sup>th</sup> century) provides many examples of powerful queens and of aristocratic women being very forthright with their husbands!

The mingling of originally pagan Frankish culture with Christian culture would eventually result in greater restrictions on women, even among the aristocracy.

But when the Irish **Columbanus** and his followers (see lecture 2) arrived in Gaul in c. 590, double monasteries that were closely associated with the aristocracy and that allowed greater equality between men and women became very successful (even if Columbanus did not himself found houses that included women)

- Important examples found at Faremoutiers-en-Brie, Remiremont, Jouarre, Nivelles, Chelles, Poitiers, Mauberge, and Marchiennes.
- While double monasteries were certainly not the most numerous type of Irish-influenced foundation, they were some of the richest: supporting both communities of men and women required significant wealth!

This model of monastery helps to push aside some of the caution around female monasticism prescribed by **Caesarius of Arles**.

- At double monastery, a woman – the abbess, almost always from the highest aristocratic background – was usually usually in charge. Double monasteries provided the female element of the ruling class something to rule!
- Aided by the high social status of the women (especially the abbess) at both these Frankish double monasteries and Frankish female-only houses, enclosure was much less strict.
- At double monasteries, men and women lived in separate quarters but often mixed in the communal parts of the monastery.
- The Rule of **Donatus of Besancon** (a mixture of the rules of Benedict and Columbanus with original material, written for female-only monasteries) states: “And though holy Caesarius dedicated his own rule to virgins of Christ like yourselves, **their level of enclosure is not at all suitable to your circumstances.**”



# Double Monasteries and influential abbesses in Anglo-Saxon England

The 'Hiberno-Frankish' (i.e. Irish + Frankish) model of female monasticism that the followers of Columbanus popularised proved influential elsewhere too.

Double monasteries – again usually presided over by a woman of high-rank – were almost as popular for the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, despite this culture not producing as many independently powerful women. Double monasteries thus arguably serve to elevate the power of certain aristocratic women in England to unprecedented levels.

**Saint Hild** (614-680) is a good example of this.

- The second daughter of a nephew of King Edwin of Northumbria
- Her elder sister, **Hereswith**, became a nun at the Irish-influenced double monastery of Chelles in Gaul after she was widowed.
- Hild, still unmarried, planned to join Chelles, but with the help of **Saint Aidan** (see lecture 2), she returned to Northumbria in 647 to become a nun. With Aidan's support she became second abbess of the double monastery of Hartlepool, then the first abbess of the new double monastery of Whitby in 657.
- Hild's strong leadership allows Whitby to grow rapidly flourish: five men from the house who she promoted were chosen to become bishops
- The monastery of Whitby is chosen by King Oswu, the King of Northumbria, to be the site of the Synod of Whitby (664), a key moment in English church history. This is a marker of the esteem her monastery and her leadership were held in.
- She also acted as a promoter of the important Anglo-Saxon poet **Caedmon**, originally a servant of the house; her support catapulted him to great fame.



# 'Dark Age' Nunneries

From c. 800-1000, it has been common to speak of woman's monasticism entering a period of 'decline': certainly there are fewer houses founded (see Schulenburg in the bibliography), and figures like Saint Hild – i.e. monastic women who had significant influence over powerful men – become rarer.

There were certainly greater social restrictions that are coming into place:

- The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 technically bans double monasteries (although in reality they persist for far longer)
- More importantly, the rising political pressure within the Carolingian Empire for monasteries to take up the Rule of Benedict (or become a community of simple canons or canonesses) helped to change these institutions, gradually forcing most monasteries to become single-gendered.
- The Carolingian reforms thus reduced the possibility of female nuns having any authority over male monks; simultaneously, they also led to an emphasis on tighter enclosure for women than for men (returning, in a sense, to the recommendations of Caesarius).

From this, it might seem inevitable that female monasteries would simply become places to shut away who women who might otherwise have been a burden on their families, thus serving a social purpose of sorts but becoming less socially impactful.

Recently, however, this impression has been challenged by Steven Vanderputten and others.

- In this view, despite the loss of double monasteries, female monasteries (like many male houses) were able to maintain some flexibility in their institutional identity: the standardisation of the Carolingian era did not eliminate variation, individual customs, and the ability to engage in society in a variety of ways to match the needs of communities: e.g. through education, healthcare etc.
- Female houses were also competitive as centres of local religious cults in the ninth and tenth centuries; they were able to promote the cults of their founding saints successfully in order to compete with male monasteries for benefaction.



# High Medieval Monastic Reform and Women

- The high medieval monastic reform movements (c. 900-1200) we discussed in the last two lectures has so far appeared to be very male dominated affairs: this is also the way these movements have often been described by quite a few historians.
- Gregorian reform also only enhances the importance of men as intercessors for society, due to its emphasis on promoting the status and essential role of a hierarchy of priests. Female monastic houses face further pressure towards enclosure and subjugation to male ecclesiastical authority as a result. (see McNamara in bibliography)
- BUT the reality of monastic reform at ground-level – with religious people breaking away from the constraints of existing communities to form new ones – does create some new scenarios for women and female religious expression.
  - The Cistercian order was traditionally viewed as a male movement in its early stages, the congregation only formally accepting nunneries in the late twelfth century.
  - But Constance Berman has shown this to be misleading: the early sources in fact show a number of women's communities (e.g. Tart and Jully) were associated with the instigators of Cistercian reform when it first arose as an insurgent monastic movement. The institution of lay brotherhood / sisterhood also opened monastic religion to people of a lower social status, including women as much as men.
  - As discussed last week briefly, the combination of Augustinian and Cistercian influences also bought about a revival of the double monastery model in the twelfth century: e.g. congregation of Fontevraud and the Gilbertines in England.
  - While both models owed their origin to men (**Robert of Arbrissel** and **Gilbert of Semperingham** respectively), both felt real fellowship with their female supporters and left their foundations under the rule of abbesses.

# Hildegard of Bingen

**Hildegard of Bingen** (1098-1179): perhaps the most remarkable female monastic figure to emerge from high medieval monastic reform culture

- From a minor noble family in the service of the counts of Sponheim (modern day Western Germany) within the Empire. Perhaps the youngest daughter of her family, her parents sent her to live a religious life from her childhood.
- In her teenage years, she was placed under the tutelage of Jutta, a daughter of the Count of Sponheim who became a hermit dwelling in a small house attached to the male Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg in the Palatinate Forest, and under the authority of the abbey.
- This house was influenced by the German Benedictine reformer, **William of Hirsau** (d. 1091), who was himself influenced by the liturgical reform of Cluny (see **lecture 4**) and the monastic school of Saint Anselm of Bec (see **lecture 5**). Jutta's own semi-eremitic style, meanwhile, was not dissimilar to that of Peter Damian (see **lecture 4**): e.g. very harsh ascetic practices, including self-flagellation.
- Jutta taught Hildegard to read and write, but was not educated enough to provide her with a more advanced education. Nevertheless Hildegard would gradually manage to teach herself many things concerning both religion and science. Other women gathered around Jutta and Hildegard, forming a small community of nuns. When Jutta dies, these nuns picked Hildegard as *magistra* ("mistress" / "teacher").
- Since numbers had grown larger, in 1150 Hildegard gained the support of Hermann, dean of Mainz, and Count Bernhard of Hildesheim to found a female Benedictine monastery at nearby Rupertsberg. The growth of this monastery led to her establishing another one at nearby Eibingen. She acted as abbess of both until her death, and attracted significant aristocratic support and patronage.
- Hildegard's own preference for monastic reform was not nearly as tough in terms of physical ascetic practices (i.e. clothes, food) as Jutta's style – a point that attracted some criticism from male reformers –, but, like Cluny/Hirsau, emphasised enhanced liturgy and prayer (see McNamara in bibliography).
- She would also become a correspondent of other leading monastic figures, not least the Cistercian **Bernard of Clairvaux** (see **lecture 5**).





# Hildegard of Bingen: visionary

Hildegard's career thus far looks like that of a successful monastic reformer: this she undoubtedly was. But it is not what she is most famous for.

- From a young age Hildegard experienced visions; at the age of 41, while still at Disibodenberg, she claimed to receive a vision that instructed her to record them.
- Her visions concerned matters of theology but also future events and ages leading up to the coming of the antichrist and the end of the world: these prophecies were heavily concerned with monastic, church and lay reform.
- In order to be able to write and distribute such unusual things, she sought licence from church authorities, writing in a humble tones to Saint Bernard to prepare the ground for her to seek papal approval from his former student Eugenius III.
- Having successfully gained papal approval in 1147 at the Synod of Trier, she now occupied a very privileged position. It not only paved the way for her to break free of the male monastery of Disibodenberg to found her own and become an abbess, it gave her a new type of spiritual authority: while she could never administer the sacraments – women could not be ordained at priests – **she administered another divine gift to mankind: that of visionary revelation.** She was seen as being able to speak with the *vox dei*, the voice of God.

# Hildegard of Bingen: legacy and limits

- Hildegard became famous and influential through her visions: she was a sought-after correspondent for churchmen and women of all types as well as the highest lay authorities: not only emperors in Germany, but even Henry II, king of England, and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine.
- As we will see, a number of other religious women in the late Middle Ages would follow in her footsteps to find a degree of influence through expressing the *vox dei*.
- Nevertheless, the visionary role she carved out did not mean independence.
  - Dependence on the approval of a male dominated society was constant, and as later visionaries would sometimes find out, backlashes were possible.
  - Men were always the filter through which the teachings of visionaries would pass: Hildegard sought approval for her writings from Church authorities, and even after that her visions would be best known in an abridged compilation – the *Pentachronon* – made by a male monk.
- The emphasis on the visionary role as a female path to power could also serve to delimit or obscure other possibilities.
  - On the one hand, Hildegard could be seen as breaking free from male monastic authority after she made her visions public, by leaving Disibodenburg with her female followers to found her own house. On the other, this departure perhaps put a halt to another possibility: that Hildegard's growing visionary fame might elevate her to public recognition as the 'mother' of Disibodenberg, with the appearance of authority over men.
  - Hildegard composed music, and wrote treatises on medicine and natural science. And yet even today these works – as well as her achievements as a monastic reformer – tend to receive far less attention.

# Nuns and society

A number of themes emerge across these centuries, often repeating in different contexts:

- On the one hand, a number of social pressures served, at various points, to more strictly confine women's monasticism away from society and to limit the possibilities for female agency within it: above all, most medieval women did not get to choose whether they become nuns or not. In this sense, female monasticism might be seen as restricting the overall freedom of medieval women.
- On the other hand, monastic women often did find an opportunity to carve out positions of authority and influence that they would have struggled to find outside the monastery: whether as celebrated monastic founders, abbesses, or visionaries. The counter-cultural, socially-levelling aspects of Christianity that monastic tradition and monastic reform brought to the fore made the monastery a fitting environment in which to forge new paths.

# Sources – *Rule for Virgins*, by Caesarius of Arles (512)

**Caesarius of Arles** (468/470 – 27 August 542 AD)

- From a mixed Roman and Burgundian (Germanic) background
- Begins his career as a young man at the monastery of Lérins founded by Saint Honoratus of Arles. His commitment to asceticism was apparently so great he became ill.
- This forced him to leave the monastery to recover in Arles. He would never return, since the Christian community made him bishop by popular acclaim.
- A learned man, he was very influenced by the writing of Saint Augustine (who also founded a women's monastic community).
- Becomes one of the most influential Church leaders in post-Roman Gaul (Western Roman Empire collapses in 476 AD) and continues to promote asceticism and ascetic values and to integrate these into wider Christian society

*Rule for Virgins* (512)

- Caesarius founded a monastery in Arles so that women of all social backgrounds and ages could experience religious life: Arles had no female monasteries at the time. He made his sister, Caesaria, the first abbess.
- He wrote his Rule in 512 in order to guide the life of the nuns there. It became influential and well copied, even if very few monasteries followed it entirely; Benedict of Aniane quoted from it in his "Concord of the Rules" (see lecture 3).



# Sources – Rule for Virgins, by Caesarius of Arles

To the holy and most venerable sisters in Christ, placed in the monastery which we built with God's inspiration and help, greetings from Bishop Caesarius

Since the Lord has deemed fit, according to his inspiring mercy, to help us in building a monastery for you, we have composed some spiritual and holy advice for you, which with God's help you can keep, concerning how you should live in this monastery according to the statutes of the ancient Fathers. Always staying within the cells of the monastery, you must call for the coming of the Son of God through continuous prayers, so that afterwards, you can say with confidence: "I found the one my heart loves" [Song of Songs, 3:4].

Therefore I ask you, holy virgins and souls consecrated to God - ready, with the lamps lit and a secure conscience, for the coming of the Lord - to ask with your holy prayers that I too can accompany you on your journey, since you know the work I did to found your monastery. Thus, when you happily enter the Kingdom[of heaven] alongside other holy and wise virgins, your intercession will ensure that I do not remain outside with the foolish.

Since we observe that in women's monasteries many norms are different from those of monks, we have chosen a few things from among many by which the common life of both the more senior and the more junior [women] can be regulated, and by which they can try to profit spiritually in the most suitable way for their sex. These are the most important things for your holy souls:

I. If any woman, having left her relatives, wants to renounce the world and enter the holy sheepfold – in order to be able to escape the jaws of the spiritual wolves with God's help –, she must not depart from the monastery until her death.

# Sources – *Letter to Saint Boniface* (719-22), by Abbess Eangyth

## **Abbess Eangyth** (7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries)

- Eangyth was the abbess of an unknown double monastery, probably in Kent.
- Her correspondence shows that she was well acquainted with the Kentist monarchy and almost certainly from a high aristocratic background. It is likely that her monastery was a royal monastery.

## *Letter to Saint Boniface* (719-22)

- Boniface was an Irish-influenced Anglo-Saxon monk, who conducted missionary work in Frisia and Germany. His life and martyrdom was discussed in lecture 2. He enjoyed close links with both Anglo-Saxon and Frankish aristocratic circles.
- Eangyth's letter survives because Boniface's letters were frequently copied and read.

# Sources – Letter of Abbess Eangyth to Saint Boniface (719-22)

To the venerable Winfred, called Boniface, blessed by God in faith and love, endowed with the title of priest, crowned with the blossoms of chastity like a garland of lilies, and learned in doctrine, Eangyth, unworthy handmaid of the handmaids of God, serving without merit under the name of abbess, along with her only daughter Heaburg, called Bugga, sends her greeting in name of the Holy Trinity.

We have no words to express our thanks for the abundant affection you have shown to us in the letter brought by your messenger from across the sea. [...]

Beloved brother in spirit, not in the flesh, renowned for his abundance of spiritual gifts: to you alone, we want to describe [...] by this tear-stained letter, how we are weighed down by much misery and by a crushing burden of worldly distractions. [...]

And first of all and above all, there are those external worldly affairs, which have kept us in turmoil, as I mentioned above, and the chain of innumerable sins that follow, and the lack of full and perfect confidence that what we do is good. We are worried not only when we think of our own souls, but — more importantly and more troublesomely — when we think of the souls of all those who are entrusted to us, both male and female, of various ages and characters, whom we have to serve [...] Then we have the added difficulty of our internal administration, the disputes that come from various sources of discord which the enemy of all good [i.e. the devil] creates, infecting the hearts of all humans with bitter malice but especially monks, knowing, as he does, that "mighty men shall be mightily tormented."

We are further oppressed by poverty and lack of worldly goods, by the small amount of crops produced by our fields, and by the taxes levied by the king, based upon the accusations of those who envy us [...] Similarly, we are also burdened by our other obligations to the king and queen, the bishop, the prefect, the barons and the counts. To list all these problems would make a long story, much easier to imagine than to put into words.

# Sources – *The Life of St. Liutberga* (anonymous, late 9<sup>th</sup> century)

*The Life of St. Liutberga* (late 9<sup>th</sup> century)

- **Saint Liutberga** (d.c. 870) was a servant of Gisla, daughter of a nobleman, Hesse, in Saxony who paid homage to Emperor Charlemagne and became a follower.
- After Gisla died, she eventually became an anchoress (a type of hermit who was tied to a small cell for life – see lecture 4) attached to the women's monastery of Windeshausen
- She became respected for her training of young women (often aristocratic) at the monastery as well as her sewing and textile works.
- Her vita was written by a male monk from a nearby monastery: her model of sanctity he describes was one of tireless domestic service at the monastery. The work does not appear to have enjoyed much distribution: it only survives in a single incomplete copy.
- The section here does not concern her time at Windeshausen, however: rather it concerns her early life and the atmosphere of Carolingian female monasticism.

# Sources - *The Life of St. Liutberga* (anonymous, late 9<sup>th</sup> century)

In his time, the emperor Charles the Great [Charlemagne], first to bear the title of “Caesar” in German lands, subjugated many nations to the kingdom of the Franks. One of the first and most noble [lords to submit] was named Hesse with whom he [Charlemagne] spent more time than others. Charlemagne gave Hesse great honours because he remained faithful to him in everything. Hesse lacked male children, for his only son died in his youth, leaving his rich possessions to his daughters. When he grew very old he distributed the inheritance among his daughters and entered the Lord's service at Fulda and died happily in the monastic habit [i.e. monastic clothes]. One of his daughters, Gisla, the firstborn, took a husband named Unwan by whom she had a son, Bernhart, and two daughters, one called Bilihild and the other Hruothild. Both daughters founded monastic houses after the death of their husbands and took the monastic habit: one in Winithohus (*Windenhausen*) in Saxony, in the country called Harthagewi (*Harz*) which separated Saxony and Thuringia; the other in Franconia in Salugewe, in the neighbourhood of Bochohia in the place called Karolsbach (east of Gemundae at Moenum). Each of the girls ruled their own convents [i.e. monastic communities] of virgins respectively (Bilihild at Windenhausen and Hruothild at Karolsbach). Gisla herself in widowhood led a religious life [but not in a monastery], building many churches and giving alms and caring for pilgrims. [...]

When [Gisla] was travelling on business, because she had to care for possessions in many different places, she arrived at a certain place where the time of day forced her to request hospitality. The monastery of virgins there had a guesthouse nearby and the proper buildings they had prepared seemed comfortable enough. One of the maidens serving her caught her eye, a young girl who seemed to excel above the others of her age in form and intelligence. With a servant's diligence and with a clever mind, this one directed all the others. [Gisla] silently observed this young girl's consideration and her way of acting and began to make enquiries about who she was and what family she came from, her birth and what she did. The girl answered all these questions in a prudent and orderly fashion, saying that she came from decent parents in Salzburg, explaining their ancestry and condition and describing her whole way of life, and that she would willingly have taken the vow [i.e. formally joined the monastery] already if not for her young age.

# Sources: *The First Life of Saint Bernard*, by William of Saint Thierry (1147)

## William of Saint Thierry

- William began his career as a normal Benedictine monk, becoming abbot of the monastery of Saint Thierry. He had probably been educated prior to this at the cathedral school of Reims.
- He was inspired by the Cistercians, however, and befriended Saint Bernard (see lecture 5) in 1118.
- William wanted to join the Cistercians, but Bernard reminded him of his duties as an abbot. Nevertheless, he would eventually resign his abbacy and join the Cistercian house of Signy in 1135.

## *The First Life of Saint Bernard*

- Begun by William while Bernard was still alive. William in fact died in 1148, a few years before Bernard (d. 1153), leaving others to finish the text. It became a very frequently copied text in both Cistercian and other monastic circles throughout the Middle Ages.
- A valuable source for understanding early Cistercian culture at a time when the congregation was perhaps still finding its institutional form.

# Sources: *The First Life of Saint Bernard*, by William of Saint Thierry (1147)

In the year of the incarnation of the Lord 1113, the fifteenth year since the foundation of Citeaux, that man of God, Bernard, at about age twenty-three, entered the monastery of Citeaux with more than thirty companions, submitting himself to the yoke of Christ under Abbot Stephen. From that day forward, the Lord gave his blessing [to Bernard] and the vines of the Lord bore fruit [...]. Because some of his companions were already married, their wives took vows with along the husbands for this sacred transformation. Out of concern for those women Bernard built a monastery for holy nuns in the diocese of Langres called Jully, which with the aid of the Lord increased to great proportions. Jully has become extremely famous in the opinion of the religious and is now growing in both personnel and possessions so that it has expanded to other places and has not ceased up to now to produce even greater fruit.

# Sources: *Scivias* ('Know thy ways'), by Hildegard of Bingen (1142-1151)

## Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

- Heavily discussed in the lecture.

### *Scivias*

- The *Scivias* was Hildegard's first visionary work, written between 1142 and 1151.
- While she could read and write, she had the help of a more formally trained scribe in writing down her visions and prophecies
- The original version is a finely decorated manuscript, full of drawings of things that Hildegard claimed to have seen
- The *Scivias* was not widely copied: rather Hildegard's visions became much more widely distributed in the *Pentechronon*, a later compilation drawn from her works compiled by the monk Gebeno of Eberbach in c. 1220.



# Sources: *Scivias* ('Know thy ways'), by Hildegard of Bingen (1142-1151)

And behold! In the forty-third year of my stay on earth, as I was gazing with fear and trembling before a heavenly vision, I saw a great splendour in which I heard a voice from Heaven, saying to me:

"O fragile human, the ashes of the ashes, the filth of the filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in explaining things, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not [...] by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but just as you see and hear them in the high heavenly places, in the wonders of God. [...] Thus, O human, speak these things that you see and hear. And write them not influenced by yourself or by any other human being, but by the will of Him Who knows, sees, and orders all things in the secrets of His mysteries."

[...]

[The voice of God:] "So too those of female sex should not attain responsibility for My altar; for they are an infirm and weak kind, made to bear children and diligently nurture them. A woman conceives a child not by herself but through a man, just as the ground is ploughed not by itself, but by a farmer. Therefore, just as the earth cannot plough itself, a woman must not be a priest: she must not do the work of consecrating the body and blood of My Son; though she can sing the praises of her Creator, just as the earth can receive rain to water the seeds sown in it."

# Select Bibliography

Beyond the general reading, the following are very useful and easily available:

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A. Dolan, "A Revival of Female Spirituality: Adaptations of Nuns' Rules during the Hiberno-Frankish Monastic Movement", *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 46.1 (2010) <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1847&context=mff>

J.T. Schulenburg, "Women's Monastic Communities, 500-1100: Patterns of Expansion and Decline", *Signs* 14.2 (1989) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174551>

S. Vanderputten, *Dark Age Nunneries: The Ambiguous Identity of Female Monasticism, 800–1050* (Ithaca, 2018), pp.1-10 (introduction) – this part is available as a preview on Google Books: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=yFJUDwAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&dq=Dark%20Age%20Nunneries%3A%20The%20Ambiguous%20Identity%20of%20Female%20Monasticism%2C%20800%E2%80%931050&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

C.H. Berman, "Were There Twelfth-Century Cistercian Nuns?" *Church History*, vol. 68, no. 4, 1999, pp. 824–864. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3170206>

J.A. McNamara, "Forward to the Past: Hildegard of Bingen and Twelfth-Century Monastic Reform", in Hildegard of Bingen, *Explanation of the Rule of Benedict*, ed. and trans. H. Feiss and J.A. McNamara (Toronto : Peregrina Publishers, 2000). <https://monasticmatrix.osu.edu/commentaria/forward-past-hildegard-bingen-and-twelfth-century-monastic-reform>