

Hildegard of Bingen and Creation as Food*

▼ **ABSTRACT** The *Liber subtilitatum* of Hildegard of Bingen, structured as a nature encyclopaedia, describes every component of creation – every member of the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms – and teaches how it can be used to cure illnesses and feed humankind.

This article presents the work in general and explores this latter aspect – creation as food – in detail. As Hildegard herself explains, the backdrop to her writing is a divine design that enables human beings to cure and take care of their neighbours, be they ill or healthy. It is possible to assume that, at least in part, Hildegard owed the originality of her conception of nature precisely to the fact of her being a woman. Ultimately, curing illnesses and caring are often perceived as female prerogatives, and the perception still persists in the twenty-first century, in which Hildegard's herbs and tips are enjoying new or renewed popularity.

▼ **RÉSUMÉ** Le *Liber subtilitatum* d'Hildegarde de Bingen, structuré comme une encyclopédie de la nature, décrit chaque composante de la création – chaque membre des royaumes animal, végétal et minéral – et enseigne comment l'utiliser pour soigner et pour nourrir.

Cet article présente son œuvre en général et explore en détail ce dernier aspect : la création comme nourriture. Comme Hildegarde l'explique elle-même, à la base de ses écrits il y a un dessein divin, qui permet aux êtres humains de soigner et de prendre soin de leurs prochains, qu'ils

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soient malades ou sains. Cette conception originale de la nature pourrait provenir (au moins en partie) du fait qu'elle était une femme : la guérison des maladies et, plus encore, les soins, sont souvent perçus comme des prérogatives essentiellement féminines, et cette perception persiste encore au XXI^e siècle, où les herbes et les conseils d'Hildegarde jouissent d'une popularité nouvelle ou retrouvée.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Hildegard of Bingen, Natural medicine, Food history, Conception of creation, Animal kingdom, Plant kingdom, Use of nature, Curing diseases, Food as medicine, Gender history

▼ **MOTS-CLÉS** Hildegarde de Bingen, Médecine naturelle, Histoire de l'alimentation, Conception de la création, Règne animal, Règne végétal, Utilisation de la nature, Soins des maladies, Nourriture comme médecine, Histoire du genre

On 7 October 2012, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed Saint Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a German nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Church. From the very first lines of his Apostolic Letter, the Pope emphasized how, “In Saint Hildegard of Bingen there is a wonderful harmony between teaching and daily life”,¹ which he cited as one of the fundamental reasons why he elevated her to such a high honour. The same quality is to be found in Hildegard’s vision of humankind and creation. Benedict XVI went on to say that, “Human beings are seen as a unity of body and soul. The German mystic shows a positive appreciation of corporeity and providential value is given even to the body’s weaknesses.”² Following in the same direction are the studies of numerous other authors, especially those of Michela Pereira, who identifies the common denominator of Hildegard’s different works in the fact that “the salvation of humanity implies, to her eyes, a reintegration of the bodily dimensions as being as fundamental as that of the spiritual and theological-ecclesiastical ones [...] Caring for bodies may be interpreted

¹ BENEDICTUS PP XVI, *Apostolic Letter. Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church* (Vatican City, 2012), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

as a translation into everyday language of the theological perspective of the reintegration of original harmony.³

These observations are closely bound up with corporeity – by no means to be taken as given in an author of such visionary philosophical works – which leads us, in turn, to Hildegard’s scientific oeuvre. The latter, especially *Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum*, is highly distinctive from both the point of view of its structure and from that of its ends, seeking as it does to express a highly original vision and conception of creation.

One reason for Hildegard’s enduring success may be the way in which she breaks away from precedents, but there are others too. Today, centuries on, many of the movements inspired by what we might define generically as “natural medicine” still make as much use of her as they can, and not simply as a brand to catalyse the attention of consumers. In a system that places human beings at the centre of attention, everything around them is part of a providential divine design that serves to take care of them. Insofar as a human being is one and the same body and spirit, Hildegard teaches how to care for both. The body has to be healed if it falls ill and kept healthy if it does not, but health and illness also affect the spirit. As a consequence, if we take care of the body, the spirit benefits too.

Moreover, Hildegard was a woman and this helps to explain, at least in part, the originality of her works, which saw the light just before the advent of universities which, de facto, excluded women from scientific knowledge, denying them the freedom to write about these subjects.⁴ Hildegard, however, arrived in time to leave lasting traces: she was one of the first women to do so but, inevitably, for several centuries also one of the last.

How is it possible to use “creatures” – meaning all the world’s animals, plants and minerals, thus defined in the title of the work and throughout the text – to take care of humankind? It is necessary, first of all, to be well acquainted with them, with their characteristics and their peculiarities: this is the prime aim of Hildegard’s teaching. Once it has acquired this knowledge, humankind can use it above all to obtain ingredients for pharmacological preparations. If this is the preponderant use made of creatures, the second most important is as food. There is nothing surprising about this since, in general, medicine and food were closely connected in medical works of the time, not to mention before and after. Food itself was used for healing purposes in accordance with the Hippocratic-Galenic idea and, at the same time, so was cooking. The two aspects – helping to heal the sick and using appropriate food to ensure health to the healthy – are closely related. One might add that most

³ Michela PEREIRA, *Ildegarda di Bingen. Maestra di sapienza nel suo tempo e oggi* (Verona, 2017), p. 132.

The subject is addressed in greater detail in Michela PEREIRA, “Cibo e misura, salute e salvezza in Ildegarda di Bingen”, in Chiara CRISCIANI, Onorato GRASSI (eds), *Nutrire il corpo, nutrire l'anima nel Medioevo* (Pisa, 2017), pp. 153-79, esp. pp. 154-55. See also the rich bibliography.

⁴ Maria Giuseppina MUZZARELLI, *Nelle mani delle donne. Nutrire, guarire, avvelenare dal Medioevo a oggi* (Rome/Bari, 2013), pp. 104-105.

of the operations for preparing appetizing food and efficacious medicines were carried out in a very precise space, the kitchen, using the same objects and the same utensils. Hildegard appears to have been aware of all this.

After a brief introduction placing Hildegard's scientific oeuvre in its historical context, this study lays the stress on the use of creatures as food, to date an aspect less explored than others. Among other things, not only "her" medicine but also "her" food has been decontextualized and distorted to the point that in bookshops today we can find whole volumes of culinary as well as herbalist recipes⁵ named after and sometimes inspired by Hildegard. The Hildegard of today has her roots in the works of the Abbess of Bingen, but if she beats her in terms of popularity and communication, she also loses a number of the aspects that in *Liber subtilitatum* were central. First and foremost, the fact that all creatures – none excluded, least of all humankind – belong to an almost perfect mechanism that God has entrusted to humankind itself, reserving the power to decide its ultimate destiny but otherwise – thanks to the knowledge provided by Hildegard – virtually granting it *carte blanche*. The theological apparatus disappears but the recipes, be they medical or culinary, survive.

Hildegard today

In his "Preliminary Remarks", Michael Embach offers a precise outline of a fundamental phenomenon: "Hildegard of Bingen is currently considered to be the best-known woman from the Middle Ages, and possibly even the most important one. However, this modern evaluation cannot simply be transferred onto the medieval or early modern periods."⁶ On the contrary, he argues, to find an explanation, it is necessary to follow the lasting history of her reception without overlooking the numerous mentions of her and her works down the centuries in literature and the arts. He also observes that, "In particular, the accentuation of Hildegard as a healer, doctor, and cook is a view (especially in its most extreme emphasis) that arose only in past decades."⁷

Indeed, viewed today, *Liber subtilitatum* is not a "mere" medieval text but was a work used as far as possible to prepare remedies for some illnesses and also for culinary recipes. A web search for *viriditas*, a key Latin word coined by Hildegard herself, leads to an impressive and unexpected number of sites that refer to her recipes (a debatable operation in itself), which in some cases generate misunderstanding. For example, some of them present cures against tumours according to Hildegard's recipe. The problem is that in her work the term *tumor* refers not to what we know as a "tumour", but generically to a

⁵ Michela PEREIRA, "Cibo e misura...", pp. 153-54, n. 2.

⁶ Michael EMBACH, "Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179): A History of Reception", in Beverly Mayne KIENZLE, Debra L. STOUT, George FERZOCO (eds), *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 273-304, esp. p. 273.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

swelling that may have different causes (bruising, for example). Even if we, in the twenty-first century, were to argue the efficacy of the recipes that she proposed in the twelfth, by no means is it possible to cure a tumour with her remedies against *tumor*, nor can we blame her if they do not work.

Many have tried and are still trying to exploit Hildegard's work as a way to make efficient use of all creatures for the benefit of humans – in other words, as if it were a modern medical treatise. The first to do so was probably the Austrian doctor Gottfried Hertzka, who in 1970 published *So heilt Gott. Die Medizin der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen als neues Naturheilverfahren*, a work that has since enjoyed considerable success both as a scientific study and as a guide to the production of natural medicinal remedies.⁸ In the 1990s or thereabouts, a number of studies were also published on Hildegard's scientific works, probably as a result of renewed interest in herbal and holistic medicine.⁹

And what of creatures used as food, the aspect that I have focused on here? *Liber subtilitatum* is as relevant as ever when it comes to culinary recipes. It is still possible to find books that include gastronomic tips based on Hildegard's observations, though they also attribute to her recipes that she never wrote. On supermarket shelves, especially in Northern Europe, it is possible to come across products recommended by her or food items made from her recipes – biscuits most of all, but also many more besides. It would appear that the fact that she was a nun, a woman, a mystic and a saint – and also lived in the Middle Ages – makes her name a seal of guarantee not only in medicine but also in food.

There is of course a strong marketing component in all of this, but the impression remains nonetheless that Hildegard has not been chosen by chance but for everything that her image embodies, and that her evocative power lives on. In the context of the current fight against food waste, her desire to *use* each creature as much as possible for the good of humans is also highly topical. Again “use” is the operative word, the guiding thread of Hildegard's scientific work down the centuries. Virtually everything is useful for the well-being and health of people, provided they are capable of using it (and God does not decide otherwise) and Hildegard has taught them how to use it.

Hildegard's scientific works

So far, I have spoken about Hildegard's scientific oeuvre in a general sense. More precisely, she appears to have been the author of two separate scientific works: *Cause et cure*,¹⁰ which deals almost exclusively with medicine, and *Liber*

8 Debra L. STOUT, “The Medical, the Magical, and the Miraculous in the Healing Arts of Hildegard of Bingen”, in Beverly Mayne KIENZLE, Debra L. STOUT, George FERZOCO (eds), *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 249-72, esp. p. 255.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 254-56 and the bibliography cited in the note.

10 Critical edition: Laurence MOULINIER (ed.), *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure* (Berlin, 2003).

subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum, better known as *Physica*. This latter title was to appear centuries later – in 1533, to be precise – when it was published in Strasburg by Johann Schott as *Physica S. Hildegardis*,¹¹ a veritable encyclopaedia whose nine volumes encompass the plant, animal and mineral worlds, and reveal an astonishing knowledge of nature. For the purposes of this brief study, I refer exclusively to *Liber subtilitatum*, but without losing sight of its close connection with *Cause et cure* in particular and all the rest of Hildegard’s oeuvre in general, of which it forms a consistent and integral part.¹²

A few centuries after the appearance of Schott’s edition, *Liber subtilitatum* was included in the 197th volume of *Patrologia latina*, published in Paris in 1855 and entirely dedicated to Hildegard. Until very recently, this was the only edition available.¹³ The publishers, Charles-Victor Daremberg and Friedrich Anton Reuss, only had one manuscript to draw on, that conserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which was probably copied in the first half of the fifteenth century since no other manuscripts were known of at the time. In order to collate it and produce a critical edition, the only possibility the nineteenth-century publishers had was to use Schott’s 1533 edition, which was not based on the manuscript in Paris but on another one that had subsequently been lost. This is what they did, basing their edition on the Parisian manuscript, supplementing it with the variants from the volume published in the sixteenth century, and adding annotations, among which the most evident was the introduction of Linnaeus’s binomial nomenclature to attempt to classify creatures, whose denominations are frequently problematic. Until very recently, the resulting text served as the benchmark for Hildegard’s oeuvre.

However, further studies in the last century brought more complete manuscripts containing the complete text of *Liber subtilitatum* to light (there are now five in all), as well as some fragments, catalogued and analysed by Laurence Moulinier.¹⁴ In 2008, Irmgard Müller and Christian Schultze published the “new” manuscript they regarded as most important,¹⁵ juxtaposing

11 *Physica S. Hildegardis Elementorum, Fluminum aliquot Germaniae, Metallorum, Leguminum, Fructuum et Herbarum, Arborum et Arbustorum, Piscium denique, Volatilium et Animantium terrae naturas et operationes IV libris mirabili experientia posteritati tradens* (Strasbourg, 1533).

12 Michela PEREIRA, “Cibo e misura...”, pp. 154, 158-61, 174-79.

13 Charles-Victor DAREMBERG, Friedrich Anton REUSS (eds), *Subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum libri novem (Physica)*, in *Sanctae Hildegardis abbatissae opera omnia*, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 197 (Paris, 1855), coll. 1117-1352.

14 Laurence MOULINIER, *Le manuscrit perdu à Strasbourg. Enquête sur l’œuvre scientifique de Hildegarde* (Paris/Saint-Denis, 1995). See also the bibliography and, more in general, Laurence Moulinier’s copious scientific output on Hildegard in particular. The general catalogue that describes the 363 medieval and early modern manuscripts containing works by Hildegard present in the world’s libraries, was published in 2013: Michael EMBACH, Martina WALLNER (eds), *Conspectus der Handschriften Hildegards von Bingen* (Münster, 2013).

15 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, cod. Ashburnham 1323.

its transcription with the now “classic” *Patrologia*.¹⁶ A fusion between the old manuscripts and the new was the basis for the most recent critical edition, published in 2010 by Reiner Hildebrandt and Thomas Gloning, who based their work on the manuscript conserved in Paris (the one that had already provided the basis for *Patrologia latina*) and the one in the Vatican Library, both probably descending from the same tradition and dating from the fifteenth century, with dense notes that indicate variants from the other manuscripts.¹⁷

Liber subtilitatum is subdivided into nine books, each in turn divided into chapters on: I. Plants; II. Elements; III. Trees; IV. Stones; V. Fish; VI. Birds; VII. Animals; VIII. Reptiles; IX. Metals.¹⁸ Each chapter is split into two parts with descriptions of varying length of the creature in question – its characteristics and sometimes also the environment in which it lives and the way in which it feeds and reproduces – and is followed by a list of its possible uses. Utility is the key to Hildegard’s interpretation of creatures in her scientific works. “For in every creature that proceeds from God, there is some utility, however useless it may seem, though people may not know it”, she writes of the sapphire.¹⁹ As a consequence, one of the aims she sets herself is to tell people about creatures and how they may be of use to them. To do so, she had to catalogue, inventory, differentiate and organize nature, which in her time still had no fixed, precise, incontrovertible order.

Animals, plants and minerals are thus at the disposal of humans, who condense the whole universe within themselves. At the same time, the universe also leaves its mark on them. We might speak on the one hand of the human as a microcosm, but on the other of the cosmos as a macro-human.²⁰ The medical and dietary science of the time taught that everything is composed of four elements and pervaded by humours: what humans have in common with both animate and inanimate beings is that they are creatures and share matter and fluxes, not to mention an aspiration to balance (*temperamentum*) between warm and cold, dry and moist, which is very hard to achieve but a possible guarantee of health and life. As Hildegard’s sources, Debra Stoudt cites “the folk medicine tradition as well as the writings of scholars such as Pedanius

16 Irmgard MULLER, Christian SCHULTZE (eds), *Hildegard von Bingen, Physica. Edition der Florentiner Handschrift (Cod. Laur. Ashb. 1323, c. 1300) im Vergleich mit der Textkonstitution der Patrologia Latina (Migne)* (Hildesheim/Zurich/New York, 2008).

17 Reiner HILDEBRANDT, Thomas GLONING (eds), *Physica. Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum* (2 vols, Berlin, 2010) (hereinafter, *Liber subtilitatum*). All quotations from this work were translated into Italian by the author and into English by John Irving.

18 The manuscript conserved in Brussels, which should be regarded as the sole exemplar of a separate tradition, is an exception: organized into eight books, it differs also with regard to the order in which chapters are presented and to the presence of chapters that are missing elsewhere. Laurence MOULINIER, *Le manuscrit...*, p. 80.

19 “Nam in unaquaque creatura que a deo processit, quamvis inutilis videatur aliqua utilitas est, quamvis homo eam ignoret” (*Liber subtilitatum*, vol. 1, p. 238).

20 Antonella CAMPANINI, “Introduzione”, in ILDEGARDA DI BINGEN, *Libro delle creature. Differenze sottili delle nature diverse*, ed. Antonella CAMPANINI (Rome, 2011), pp. 13-35, esp. pp. 23-25.

Dioscorides (40-90), Galen of Pergamon (c. 130–c. 200), and Constantine the African (c. 1015–c. 1087),²¹ adding that:

Despite some unusual theories and occasional unique remedies, much of what is written in the *Physica* and the *Cause et cure* reflects norms and common beliefs from Hildegard's time regarding the causes of illnesses as well as recommended therapeutic measures: bloodletting, herbal remedies, the recitation of incantations, and the use of magic stones.²²

The chief protagonist of Hildegard's scientific oeuvre is thus the human being, along with creatures whose niceties she studies in order to be able to use their potential to the full. All creatures are useful to humans, who nonetheless need to have a precise knowledge of their characteristics if they are to use them in the best way possible, avoiding making mistakes that might compromise their effectiveness or even render them lethal.

What are creatures for? Mainly medicine

If the utility of creatures constitutes the foundation of Hildegard's work and, clearly, the main purpose of *Liber subtilitatum*, it is important to understand what exactly they are useful for. As I hinted above, the use of the term "creatures" belongs to Hildegard. Previous, contemporary and subsequent written texts would have defined them as *res*, things, but Hildegard frequently stresses the religious dimension of creation in her works: the system of God the Creator/creation, with the human being at the centre of creation itself, underpins each of her subsequent reflections. In her scientific works, Hildegard conceives her mission as sharing and writing down knowledge that is part of this framework, but is also, at the same time, useful and practical.

If the purpose of creatures is to nurture one another, it is inevitable that her works fall into the category of medicine and that she is the bearer of a certain type of pharmacopoeia. It would be wrong to rule out that the remedies she proposed were already known, as part of an oral tradition, or that women were already using this type of pharmacopoeia, even if in later centuries they would be accused of witchcraft for doing so. But there is no written evidence in either case.

It is also necessary to note the precision with which Hildegard writes her recipes – and they really are recipes in the modern sense of the term – complete with quantities of or at least proportions between ingredients, methods and times of preparation, and utensils. If she is recording common knowledge in writing, she does so as a scientist and scholar who knows how to choose, measure out and use creatures scientifically and rigorously. Nothing is

²¹ Debra L. STOUDET, "The Medical...", p. 257.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 258.

left to the discretion of the preparer of the remedy, and everything is codified and precise.²³

Hildegard's pharmacological preparations are many and various – from ointments to plain biscuits, to be eaten whole or crumbled, from eyedrops to lozenges, from soluble powders to powders for administering by hand, to compresses – seemingly of every type imaginable.²⁴ The utensils used to prepare them are by and large those of the kitchen, or at least not so different or specific as to suggest those of a laboratory. Frying pans, pots, jars, bowls, mortars, spoons and the like are shared by the “pharmacist” and the cook who, as I hinted above, are driven by the same purpose.

Though the use of creatures for medical purposes does bear a significant culinary aspect, for Hildegard, cookery was a byproduct, rather than the purpose, of her work.

Creatures in the kitchen

Though it is medical use that predominates, it would be wrong to underestimate culinary use, which depends likewise on the characteristics of each single creature. As Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli has written:

Our Benedictine nun was interested in all creatures, hence animals too, as a sign of God's creative activity and his salvific will, but also for their very existence. She was interested in them, above all, insofar as they were functional to the needs of men [...] Hence Hildegard's interest in food as necessary sustenance for man. Animals offer themselves as food and, with herbs, as a staple of the pharmacopoeia that Hildegard probably drew from popular medicine.²⁵

I dwell on this aspect in particular because – aside from Pereira's study, the two articles by Muzzarelli cited above, a recent work by Antonella Campanini²⁶ and the article specifically on the book on fish by Moulinier,²⁷ to which I return

23 This aspect is stressed by Maria Giuseppina MUZZARELLI, “Cibo e genere. Ildegarda e il libro delle piante”, in Cesarina CASANOVA, Vincenzo LAGIOIA (eds), *Genere e storia: percorsi* (Bologna, 2014), pp. 13-20, esp. pp. 14-15.

24 Ibid., p. 15.

25 Maria Giuseppina MUZZARELLI, “Si mangia o non si mangia? Il VII libro della *Physica* di Ildegarda di Bingen”, in Maria Giuseppina MUZZARELLI, Lucia RE (eds), *Il cibo e le donne nella cultura e nella storia. Prospettive interdisciplinari* (Bologna, 2005), pp. 43-65, esp. p. 63.

26 Michela PEREIRA, “Cibo e misura...”; Maria Giuseppina MUZZARELLI, “Cibo e genere...”; Maria Giuseppina MUZZARELLI, “Si mangia...”; Antonella CAMPANINI, “Il creato come cibo nell'opera scientifica di una Dottoressa della Chiesa”, in Federico CHIARA, *Il ventre e il monaco. Costruzione della gastromorale cristiana fra tarda Antichità e Medioevo* (Rome, 2020), pp. 131-43.

27 Laurence MOULINIER, “L'abbesse et les poissons: un aspect de la zoologie de Hildegarde de Bingen”, in Jean DESSE, Frédérique AUDOUIN-ROUZEAU (eds), *Exploitation des animaux sauvages à travers le temps. Actes des XIII^e Rencontres internationales d'archéologie et d'histoire d'Antibes, 15-16-17 octobre 1992* (Juan-les-Pins, 1993), pp. 461-72.

below – it has been relatively overlooked in recent studies. Yet this aspect, too, plays an important part in the structure of Hildegard’s work: in the case of cookery, Hildegard again feels the need to carefully classify creatures that are transformed into ingredients. Whether they are animals or vegetables, they can be divided into two broad categories: those that are good to eat and those that are bad to eat, by which Hildegard means good and bad above all for health, but not only that. Let us see, first of all, why the good ones are good and the bad ones bad. In the introduction to the book about animals, we read that

animals that devour other animals eat bad foods, and bear multiple offspring, as the wolf, the dog and the pig are, like weeds, harmful to the nature of a human being, since they do not do those things. However, animals that eat clean foods, like hay and similar fodder, and bear no more than one offspring at a time are – like good and useful plants – beneficial for people to eat.²⁸

Similarity with or, better still, behaviour analogous to that of man is thus the chief criterion for determining edibility, followed by the purity or otherwise of the food creatures feed on. The animal that eats pure plants is pure and vice versa. At this point, it is necessary to classify the purity of plants. The book on plants has this to say: certain plants “grow from air. These plants are gentle on man’s digestion and possess a happy nature, producing happiness in anyone who eats them. They are like a person’s hair in that they are light and airy.”²⁹ The plants-air-hair analogy established here brings man close to the best plants. Less close and not recommended, but nonetheless edible, are plants associated with human perspiration: “certain other herbs are windy, since they grow from the wind. These herbs are dry, and heavy on man’s digestion. They are of a sad nature, making the persons who eat them sad. They are comparable to human perspiration.”³⁰ The worst plants also display a certain analogy, but only with excrement: “They cannot be eaten, their juice is poisonous [...] and they are comparable to human excrement.”³¹

Man’s labour also influences the growth of good plants for eating:

28 “animalia que alia devorant, et que pravis cibis nutriuntur, et generando fetus multiplicant, ut lupus et canis et porcus, ut inutiles herbe ad comedendum, nature hominis contraria sunt, quia homo sic non facit. Pecora autem que mundis escis ut feno et simili pastu nutriuntur, et fetus generando non multiplicant, homini ad comedendum bona sunt ut bone et utiles herbe” (*Liber subtilitatum*, vol. 1, p. 326).

29 “de aere crescunt, et hec etiam ad digestionem hominis leves sunt et lete nature ita quod hominem qui eas comederit letum faciunt, atque crinibus hominis assimilantur, quia ipsi leves sunt et aerei” (*ibid.*, p. 49).

30 “alie quedam herbe ventose sunt, ita quod de vento crescunt, et etiam sicce sunt et graves ad digestionem hominis, ac tristis nature, ita quod hominem qui eas manducat tristem faciunt, ac sudori hominis comparantur vel assimilantur” (*ibid.*, p. 49).

31 “Sucus autem inutilium herbarum que comedi non possunt venenosus est, [...] et egestioni hominis comparantur” (*ibid.*, p. 49).

Plants which are sown by human labour, and spring up and grow gradually, like domestic animals which are nourished with care in the home, by the labour with which they are planted and cultivated, throw off the acidity and bitterness of their juices. The moisture of these juices borders on the quality of that of a human and become good and beneficial for his food and drink.³²

With his labour – and, probably also with his very proximity – the farmer improves the characteristics of plants which, following his intervention and having been eaten or drunk and then digested, are in a certain sense worthy of becoming part of man himself.

So much for the good creatures to eat, but what about the bad ones? The introduction to the book on plants warns against wild plants that “grow from the falling of their own seed, without human labour and which, like wild beasts, spring up quickly and suddenly. These are harmful as human food, as a person is reared by sucking milk, eating and growing in a moderate time, which does not happen with these plants”.³³ Also bad to eat are overly feral animals such as the griffin³⁴ and, in general, all birds that clutch their prey in their claws. The tiger is bad “because of its strength and quickness”,³⁵ and non-ruminant animals are hard to digest: “the flesh of ruminant animals is tempered, as if it had been placed in a press; it can easily be eaten and digested. Flesh of non-ruminant animals is heavier and not easily digested”.³⁶ The flesh of the ass, finally, is “fetid” on account of the animal’s stupidity.³⁷ The list could go on and on.

If creatures can be good or bad to eat, the effects they provoke in the humans who eat them may vary. Naturally enough, Hildegard is concerned above all with health, of how food has the power to restore the balance of humours to the sick, but there are also foods that not only cure and nourish but also, quite simply, fill the people who eat them with joy. For example, “Oats are hot [...] and are a happy and healthy food for people who are well, furnishing

32 “Herbe que per laborem hominis seminantur, et paulatim surgunt et crescunt, velut domestica animalia que homo in domo sua cum sollicitudine enutrit, per laborem illum, quo ab homine exarantur et seminantur, acerbitem et amaritudinem suorum suorum amittunt, ita quod humiditas eorum suorum suorum qualitatem suci hominis aliquantulum tangit, et quod in modo cibis et potibus eius bone et utiles sunt” (ibid., p. 50).

33 “cadente suo semine absque labore hominum crescunt, et repente ac festinanter ut indomite bestie surgunt, contrarie sunt homini ad comedendum, quia homo lactando, comedendo et temperato tempore nutritur, quod herbis istis non fit” (ibid., p. 50).

34 Ibid., p. 290.

35 “propter fortitudinem et velocitatem eius” (ibid., p. 336).

36 “carnes animalium que ruminant ita temperantur, velut in torculari posite sint, scilicet quod facilius edi et digeri possunt; sed carnes illorum que non ruminant graviores sunt, et tam facile non digeruntur” (ibid., p. 338).

37 Ibid., p. 339.

them with a cheerful mind, and a pure and clear intellect, good colour and healthy flesh”.³⁸ Spelt,³⁹ nutmeg⁴⁰ and lemon balm⁴¹ work in the same way.

Just as creatures that are good to eat bring joy, so those that are bad to eat are harmful, not only for the health, and sometimes the psychological effects are worse than the physical ones. Ginger, for example, “is injurious as food for a healthy or fat person. It makes them stupid, ignorant, languid and lewd”,⁴² as is the fig.⁴³ Worse still is the flesh of the bear, which “is not good for a person to eat. If it is eaten, it will so fire up lust in a person, contrary to the way water extinguishes his thirst.”⁴⁴

The pure, the impure and the Rule of Saint Benedict

If proximity with man improves creatures by increasing their positive characteristics and neutralizing the negative ones, other factors exist that help define good and bad or, rather, pure and impure. They result mostly from certain characteristics of the figure of Hildegard that inevitably influenced her work. She was a Benedictine nun who lived in Germany: as a Benedictine, she had to reckon daily with the Rule, about which she even wrote a brief comment,⁴⁵ while as a woman who was born and lived near the Rhine, she was well acquainted with its waters and those of the tributaries that flow through the area. Both these characteristics, combined with notable scientific curiosity, laid the bases for the originality of part of her work, especially of the book on fish.⁴⁶ Fish are the first animals Hildegard deals with in her works, since, according to Genesis, they were the first to be created. Not that this is the only reason for their primacy over other animals: fish in fact were the “main dish” in the monastic diet, as well as the principal replacement for meat on days of abstinence at lay tables. Benedictine monks are called upon to abstain systematically from eating meat, especially that of quadrupeds, and the Rule tolerates exceptions only for invalids who need to build themselves up.

38 “Avena calida est [...] et letus ac sanus cibus est sanis hominibus, et letam mentem ac purum et clarum intellectum eis parat, atque bonum colorem ac sanam carnem eis facit” (ibid., p. 62).

39 Ibid., p. 63.

40 Ibid., p. 72.

41 Ibid., p. 90.

42 “sano et pingui homini comestum obest, quia eum inscium et ignarum ac tepidum et lascivum facit” (ibid., p. 68).

43 Ibid., p. 199.

44 “caro ursi homini ad comedendum bona non est, quia si comeditur, hominem ita ad libidinem accendit, velut aqua sitim hominis e contrario extinguit” (ibid., p. 334).

45 *Regula s. Benedicti Explanatio*, in *Sanctae Hildegardis abbatissae opera omnia*, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 197 (Paris, 1855), coll. 1054-66.

46 Laurence MOULINIER, “L’abbesse et les poissons...”, p. 462. The problem of the sources used by Hildegard to produce her full oeuvre still has to be solved once and for all. For a thorough analysis of the possible sources of *Liber subtilitatum*, see Laurence MOULINIER, *Le manuscrit...*, pp. 205-43; Laurence MOULINIER, “Une encyclopédiste sans précédent ? Le cas de Hildegarde de Bingen”, in Michelangelo PICONE (ed.), *L’enciclopedia medievale* (Ravenna, 1994), pp. 119-34.

Benedict prescribed that everyone else should eat only fish, a pure animal par excellence and a symbol of Christ. Fish is pure insofar as it reproduces without the need for sexual intercourse,⁴⁷ but also because it lives in the purifying element, water. Fish swimming in pure water and eating pure food acquire the purity of the water itself:

The perch is from hot more than cold air. It likes the day, dwells freely in the sunshine, and lives happily in clear waters, seeking clean food there. It sometimes enters crags, rocks and caverns, seeking good and salubrious food to eat. This is why its flesh is sound and is good for healthy and sick people to eat.⁴⁸

Thanks to its purifying power, water makes the domestic duck edible,⁴⁹ though the wild duck “is more healthful for a person to eat [...] since it always lives in the water”.⁵⁰

The Church’s influence also makes itself felt in the classification of fish into more pure and less pure: their degree of purity depends not only on the water in which they live and the food they eat but is also affected by Jewish food prohibitions in Leviticus banning the consumption of fish without scales and fins. Hildegard does not mention it, but she attributes to the lamprey a nature that is half fish and half snake, which makes it poisonous.⁵¹ The eel instead has the same nature as worms and, despite its wide consumption, it is not to be recommended; indeed, even though it does not eat foul food, Hildegard compares its flesh to that of the pig.⁵² Both the lamprey and the eel, however, are classified as snakes by other authors such as Basil of Cesarea and, not long after Hildegard, by Alexander Neckam.⁵³ Fish aside, Hildegard’s advice to avoid eating the flesh of non-ruminant animals – which, as we have seen, she justifies with the fact that it is heavier to digest – is comparable to the prohibitions in Leviticus.

The classification of fish into pure and less pure owes a lot also to another aspect of Hildegard hinted at above, referred to by Laurence Moulinier as the “geographical factor”:⁵⁴ in the book on fish, and to a large extent in those on plants and the elements – in which she describes the rivers of Germany – Hildegard’s knowledge is due to experience much more than to her reading

47 *Liber subtilitatum*, vol. 1, p. 260.

48 “Bersa / Bersich / (Porca) magis de calido quam de frigido aere est, et diem diligit, atque in splendore solis libenter est, et etiam in puritate aquarum libenter moratur, et ibi munda pasqua querit. Et etiam in scopulis et in lapidibus et cavernulis interdum intrat, et in eis quasdam bonas et salubres herbas querit quibus pascitur, et ideo caro eius sana est, et tam infirmis quam sanis hominibus ad comedendum bona est” (ibid., p. 276).

49 Ibid., p. 299.

50 “silvestris salubrior est ad esum hominis [...], quia illa in aquis semper versatur” (ibid., p. 299).

51 Ibid., p. 285.

52 Ibid., p. 283.

53 Laurence MOULINIER, “L’abbesse et les poissons...”, p. 466.

54 Ibid., p. 462.

of treatises on the subject.⁵⁵ The descriptions are generally more detailed and have no correspondences elsewhere, and, above all, most of the fish, as well as several plants, are mentioned with their vernacular and not their Latin names.⁵⁶ Hildegard's proximity to the creatures described and their daily use is particularly evident in this case.

Creatures as ingredients

Hildegard lists creatures that are good or bad to eat but does not confine herself to their use on their own: they may also become ingredients in culinary recipes. Cooking and cooking techniques make it possible to improve the characteristics of certain creatures. At the start of her book on plants, Hildegard writes that, "Certain herbs, when cooked with particular foods, make a person eager to eat. They are easy to digest and are assimilated into their flesh without making them heavy."⁵⁷ She reasserts the point when she addresses such herbs individually. Some have to be cooked to be good to eat: for example, raw apples "are a bit harmful for sick people, because of their weakness. But stewed or baked apples are good for both sick and healthy people."⁵⁸ On principle, animals are only eaten after being cooked, whereas some plants, such as parsley,⁵⁹ are better raw.

There are different cooking methods: "for both the sick and the healthy, herring is better and healthier roasted than boiled".⁶⁰ Herring in particular has to undergo other treatments before being cooked and eaten.

When it is caught and still fresh, it is not good for a person. It easily causes him to swell up [...] When, afterwards, it is suffused with a great deal of salt, the putrid matter inside it is diminished by the salt, so that it is less harmful to the one eating it.⁶¹

Used in moderation, salt in general is believed to give strength and health: "all food ought to be salted in such a way that its flavour prevails over that of the salt".⁶² Wine vinegar may be used in the same way.⁶³ Condiments are often

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 466.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 465.

⁵⁷ "Quedam enim herbe sunt que cum quibusdam cibis coquantur, et hec hominem velocem ad pastum faciunt, et leves sunt, quia hominem non multum gravem faciunt, et iste carni hominis assimilantur" (*Liber subtilitatum*, vol. 1, p. 49).

⁵⁸ "infirmos autem cruda aliquantum ledunt, quia ipsi debiles sunt; cocta autem et assa tam infirmis quam sanis bona sunt" (ibid., p. 186).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 97.

⁶⁰ "infirmo et sano melius et salubrius est allec assum quam coctum ad comedendum" (ibid., p. 278).

⁶¹ "Et cum capitur ita quod recens est, homini ita ad comedendum non valet, quia eum facilius intumescere facit [...]. Sed cum postea plurimo sale perfunditur, feditas et ether qui in eo sunt per salem minuuntur, ita quod tanto minus comedentem ledit" (ibid., p. 278).

⁶² "omnis cibus ita saliri debet, ut cibus saporem suum plus habeat quam sal in eo sentiatur" (ibid., p. 154).

⁶³ Ibid., p. 154.

used precisely to improve the characteristics of the creature to be eaten. For example:

Domestic lettuces which can be eaten are very cold. Eaten without condiment, their injurious juice makes a person's brain empty, and they fill their stomach with illness. Whence, one who wishes to eat them should first temper them with dill, vinegar, or garlic so that these suffuse it a short time before it is eaten. Tempered in this way, lettuce strengthens the brain and furnishes good digestion.⁶⁴

Hildegard, however, disapproves of the use of olive oil in the kitchen: "The oil of the fruit of this tree", she writes, "is not much good for eating. If eaten, it provokes nausea and makes some foods troublesome to eat."⁶⁵ It is fundamental, on the other hand, for the preparation of ointments and other medicines. All in all, Hildegard favours vinegar in the kitchen. For her, wine is also extremely healthy, in many cases crucial in restoring balance to creatures that do not possess it naturally.⁶⁶ Peaches, for example, may be prepared by peeling them, removing the stone, steeping the flesh in wine, then adding salt and a pinch of pepper.⁶⁷ Hildegard does not regard peaches as particularly tasty but, prepared in this way, they are at least not bad for the health.

The list could go on, but any further examples would be analogous to the ones already cited. Not that the uses for creatures end here: on the contrary, it is important not to overlook other uses since it is Hildegard herself who reminds us that nothing useful should be wasted.

Other uses for creatures

Hildegard does occasionally mention other uses for creatures. The most common is animal skin, with which it is possible to make belts and shoes, which help cure given illnesses or keep them at bay. When, in springtime, for example, the first shoots of the apple tree burst forth, a strap of deer hide drenched in the sap is a certain cure for gout.⁶⁸

Whale skin also has beneficial effects:

64 "Lactuce domestice que comedi possunt valde frigide sunt, et sine condimento comeste inutili succo suo cerebrum hominis inane faciunt, et stomachum infirmitatibus implent. Unde qui eas comedere vult, primum aut dille aut aceto aut allio gebeize / beyße, ita quod hiis perfusum sit brevi tempore antequam comedatur. Et si hoc modo temperate comeduntur, cerebrum confortant et bonam digestionem parant" (ibid., p. 105).

65 "Oleum autem de fructu arboris huius ad comedendum non multum valet, quia si comeditur, nauseam provocat et etiam alios cibos comedenti molestos facit" (ibid., p. 202).

66 As to the salubrity of wine, ancient and medieval treatises on dietetics are virtually unanimous. Yann GRAPPE, *Sulle tracce del gusto. Storia e cultura del vino nel Medioevo* (Rome/Bari, 2006), pp. 25-54.

67 *Liber subtilitatum*, vol. 1, p. 191.

68 Ibid., p. 185.

Make shoes from its skin and put them on. You will have healthy feet and legs. Also, make a belt from its skin. Gird yourself with it against your bare skin. Various infirmities will flee from you and it will make you strong.⁶⁹

Not all skins can be used to make clothing, however, and it is necessary to be knowledgeable about them to avoid the harmful ones, above all that of the lion: apart from skin from the lion's head, which may provide relief for headache sufferers if briefly applied, lion skin may prove harmful because of its strength, which corresponds to that of the animal.⁷⁰

Whales may be used to make other things besides: "also, make a knife handle with the bones of this fish. Hold that handle in your hand until it warms up. There is no pain in your hand or arm that will not cease."⁷¹ It may also be used for veterinary purposes: "if horses, cows, sheep and pigs are dying from a pestilence, pulverize the bones of this fish and toss this powder into water. Give this frequently to them to drink, and the sickness will go from them."⁷² Obviously thanks to man's intervention, creatures may in turn serve to cure other creatures.

Healers, sufferers, cooks, the great absentee and the role of God

In *Liber subtilitatum*, the man (or rather, in most cases, the woman) who uses creatures is a constant presence. Hildegard names and describes illnesses, and, albeit without stealing the scene from creatures, the sick and the healer are the co-protagonists of the work.

Whoever uses creatures and is thus destined to cure (or cook) must seek the remedies for the illness they are to treat by browsing through the descriptions of all the creatures in *Liber subtilitatum* – or, perhaps more simply, establish what is most easily available and check to see if it is fit for purpose. In cases of illnesses that are not excessively incapacitating, it is the sick themselves who take care of preparing the remedy, while in more serious cases Hildegard's explanations presuppose the presence of someone to take care of them.⁷³ With her simple language, Hildegard, however, intends to suggest that anyone can use the knowledge acquired from her work to prepare the

69 "Et de cute eius calceos fac et eos indue, et sanos pedes et sana crura habebis. Sed et de cute eius cingulum fac, et te ad nudam cutem tuam cum eo cingas, et diversas infirmitates a te fugabit, et te fortem faciet" (ibid., p. 267).

70 Ibid., p. 331.

71 "manubrium cultelli de osse eiusdem piscis fac, et manubrium illud in manu tua tene, ita ut in ea incalescat, et nullus dolor in manu tua aut in brachio tuo est, quin cesset" (ibid., p. 267).

72 "si equi et boves et oves ac porci de pestilentia moriuntur, de ossibus eiusdem piscis pulveriza, et pulverem istum in aquam proice, et illis ad bibendum sepe dabis, et schelmo ab eis cessabit" (ibid., p. 267).

73 Antonella CAMPANINI, "Introduzione...", pp. 31-33.

necessary remedy without recourse to other competences. As we have seen, the remedies proposed can be prepared in the kitchen simply by carefully reading Hildegard's instructions, which are probably as precise as they are because they are meant to be accessible to everyone. If all creatures are useful, so are all people, men and women alike, who can transform themselves into healers by elaborating the remedies in the kitchen by themselves. Hildegard herself, however, never appears in the first person: she never uses the first-person singular and only uses the first-person plural very rarely, in expressions such as *ut prediximus*, much preferring impersonal variations such as *ut supra dictum est* and *ut predictum est*. When she speaks about her visions, Hildegard often uses subjective forms – such as *et vidi* and *et iterum audivi* – but in her scientific works she changes tack, probably because she feels the need to use clear, objective language.⁷⁴ This is at odds with the idea that the book is another visionary work, as even she suggests. Perhaps the answer is that it should be seen as a scientific work in which knowledge and empirical learning and high and popular culture blend and interpenetrate to constitute something that has to be, above all, useful. Despite everything, as I have suggested above, in Hildegard's conception just as body and soul form a single whole, so scientific and visionary experiences cannot be separated.

All that is lacking at this point is the indisputable protagonist to whom we are indebted for the entire system: God. Hildegard mentions Him in different contexts. What is His role, if it is He who has made man to some extent autonomous by granting him the use of creatures and the knowledge needed to put it into practice?

Prayers are said to God when they are required to prompt a given reaction, or even the healing of the sick. Prayer supplements the power of creatures or functions, so to speak, and acts as a starter to set a virtuous healing mechanism into motion.

Yet the manifestation of God's power as invoked by prayer is by no means the main factor binding God to the system that Hildegard constructs for the healing of man, as a certain type of recurring locution reveals. The cinquefoil, for example, is very useful in healing as a cure for various illnesses, "unless God forbids it",⁷⁵ likewise chicory,⁷⁶ and a mixture of liquorice, cinnamon, hyssop and fennel.⁷⁷ A person who has recently caught leprosy may cure himself by preparing an ointment with walnut leaf juice and old fat, and anointing himself with it near the fire: "without a doubt he will be healed, unless God does not wish it".⁷⁸ And so on.

This prompts a further observation: in Hildegard's system, God is reserved a sort of "right of veto" which, if we consider the other side of the coin, has

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁵ "nisi deus prohibeat" (*Liber subtilitatum*, vol. 1, p. 88).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁷⁸ "sine dubio sanabitur, nisi deus nolit" (*ibid.*, p. 189).

a remarkable consequence. In divine logic, in fact, thanks to the knowledge Hildegard delivers, creatures provide people with everything they need to be sure of good health. Creatures are born of an act – creation – performed by God, and knowledge is “released” to Hildegard through visions that come from Him, but, from this point on, it is man, or woman, who becomes the maker of the health of his or her own body or that of others, unless God decides otherwise. This situation, which is in any case one of human autonomy – anything but automatic – constitutes another original feature of Hildegard’s work.

The universe Hildegard built with her writing – which constituted, as it were, her “vision” – tended to be independent from anything that had been written before and, as such, was to remain without a sequel. Certainly the same cannot be said of her remedies and recipes, which in the course of the centuries have transformed her into an *auctoritas*. If we add that she was a woman, a nun, a saint and is now a Doctor of the Church, it is probably easier to explain what we have seen develop around her figure between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Conclusion

Here I have focused on the “culinary” side of a figure, Hildegard, who was genuinely many-sided. We have seen how it fits into her medical and scientific works to the point that it is hard to separate it from the dietary side. In her general vision, food is, above all, medicine, a belief that was by no means original: from Hippocrates and Galen onwards, it had been consolidated for centuries and also enjoyed great favour after her.

From a strictly culinary point of view, what is somewhat unexpected is the inclusion of some parts of *Liber subtilitatum* in one of the first recipe books written by a cook, Meister Eberhardt,⁷⁹ who worked in the ducal court of Bavaria-Landshut in the first half of the fifteenth century. A miscellaneous manuscript now conserved at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich and studied in detail by Melitta Weiss-Amer,⁸⁰ shows how the Abbess of Bingen influenced the German cook. One of the peculiarities of the whole manuscript is its alternation of Latin and German, and the recipe collection attributed to Meister Eberhardt is no exception to this rule. A large number of the fragments by Hildegard, mostly in Latin, are perfectly integrated into the section containing Meister Eberhardt’s recipes. Eberhardt (or the copyist responsible for writing the manuscript) did not choose culinary notions from *Liber subtilitatum* at random: he drew from Hildegard everything that permitted him to

79 Bruno LAURIOUX, “I libri di cucina”, in *Et coquatur ponendo... Cultura della cucina e della tavola in Europa tra Medioevo ed Eta moderna* (Prato, 1996), pp. 249-50.

80 Melitta WEISS-AMER, “Die ‘Physica’ Hildegards von Bingen als Quelle für das ‘Kochbuch Meister Eberhards’”, *Sudhoffs Archiv*, vol. 76, no. 1 (1992), pp. 87-96.

add recipes that use and make the most of easily sourced ingredients; he shows a preference, for example, for the most widespread fish in Central Europe.⁸¹

Leaving aside the problem of the authorship of the manuscript (a topic examined by Weiss-Amer's study), it is important to point out that the "culinary" use of Hildegard's instructions, which have been adopted massively in recent decades, had already been hypothesized in the fifteenth century. As Michael Embach underlines, there is a widely felt need to study the reception of her work in general, and the culinary aspect to which I have offered a simple initial approach is by no means an exception.

81 Ibid., pp. 90-91.