



# HerbClip™

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**FILE: ■ Hildegard of Bingen  
■ Medieval Herbals**

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**RE: Hildegard of Bingen – Her Historical Impact**

Campbell-Atkinson F. Hildegard of Bingen 1098-1179 "The Sybil of the Rhine." *Eur J Herbal Med.* 2004;6(3):28-38.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in Germany in 1098. Being the 10<sup>th</sup> child, she was dedicated to the Church as a "tithe" at birth and went to live with the anchoress (hermit), Jutta, at the age of eight. As an adult, Hildegard became well-known for her visions, her religious writings, her musical works, and her herbal and medicinal knowledge. After living the life of a hermit for nearly 50 years, she left the convent and established a new monastic community on the Rhine River.

In the 12th century, monasteries cared for the sick and trained medical practitioners. Hildegard developed a reputation for being an effective exorcist, psychotherapist, and healer, and she wrote extensively on medicine and health. Her views were based on the ancient Greek cosmology of the four elements—fire, air, water, and earth. These elements corresponded to four "humors" in the body—choler (yellow bile), blood, phlegm, and melancholy (black bile). Physical and emotional diseases were believed to upset the delicate balance of humors in the body.

Hildegard believed that consuming the right plant, mineral, or animal could restore healthy balance. Her writings describe the qualities and medicinal uses of plants, trees, birds, animals, metals, and stones. Her text *Liber simplicis medicinae* (Book of Simple Medicine) contains accounts of more than 200 plants, and her text *Liber compositae medicinae* (Book of Compound Medicine) provides herbal remedies for a variety of illnesses. These herbs included aloe (*Aloe vera* syn. *A. barbadensis*), anise (*Pimpinella anisum*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), flax (*Linum usitatissimum*), high mallow (*Malva sylvestris*), milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*), nettles (*Urtica dioica*), sage (*Salvia officinalis*), wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), and yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*).

One of Hildegard's favorite herbs was galangal (*Alpinia galanga*). She recommended this herb for dizziness, exhaustion, and angina pain. Another favorite remedy was spelt (*Triticum spelta*). Hildegard recommended that the grain be mixed with fruit and eaten for breakfast. She believed spelt would combat black bile, a source of melancholy and depression, and could make a depressed person happier. Other "happiness" herbs included fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), oats (*Avena sativa*), summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*), licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), and hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*). She recommended a compress of primrose flowers bandaged across the heart overnight to raise the spirits.

Hildegard died in 1179 at the age of 81. She was awarded sainthood about 150 years later. Her recommendations of a balanced diet, sufficient rest, alleviation of stress, and a wholesome moral life were well ahead of her time. Her medical practices included fasting, detoxification, gem therapy, music therapy, and use of flower essences and herbal remedies. Most of her common sense advice is still applicable today, and interest in her works has grown enormously during the last 20 years.

—Heather S. Oliff, Ph.D.

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