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Sarah L. Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Translation, and Discussion*

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RÉFÉRENCE

Sarah L. Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Translation, and Discussion*, New York : Palgrave Macmillan (The New Middle Ages), 2007, 264p
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- 1 Few books can so convincingly demonstrate that there is a real continuity between the Middle Ages and our times, and that a diachronic examination of a medieval work can prove to be fruitful. Sarah Higley's monograph contains a contextualization, edition and translation of the famous *Lingua ignota* of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). It is a genuinely medievalist study and text edition, however, when explaining the motivation behind the construction of such invented languages, the author persuasively shows that studying the circumstances of modern language inventions proves to be fruitful when we try to understand this mediaeval source. Neither Hildegard's project nor these modern enterprises aim to create a useful and functional auxiliary language (such as Esperanto, Volapük, and Novial, for example), their motivations lay elsewhere.
- 2 The book contains a historical analysis of the manifold interests of Hildegard, the birth of the *Lingua ignota*, a description on its phonology and structure, an overview on the later history of invented languages (many of which having their own alphabet), extensive discussions on the nature and function of language inventions, including the role of aesthetic values in the given invented language, and recurrent discussions on female inventors and on the significance and consequences of the fact that the *Lingua ignota* was invented by a woman.

- 3 Finally, and most importantly we have a text edition of the *Lingua ignota* (that is basically a dictionary of invented words) edited on the basis of two manuscripts (where it can be found in nearly complete versions). This list of words – starting with God, *Aigonz*, and going on with human beings, parts of the body, skin disorders, offices of a church, and parts of the natural world, arriving finally to the trees, medicinal plants and flying creatures – is edited first in the order it was written by Hildegard, and second in alphabetical order. A precious part of the book is the English translation of the word list, the result of a seemingly easy task, but in fact – as the extensive notes to the translation testify – the fruit of considerable work. A reproduction of Hildegard's secret alphabet is also provided.
- 4 A major conclusion of the volume is that language invention is neither a peripheral nor a ridiculous activity, but a passion shared by many very different, but in one aspect : like-minded persons let them be ministers or clerks, teachers or housewives. Whereas in the past, these inventors worked privately and in isolation, today they contribute several most lively discussion groups on the Internet (CONLANG, Zompist Bulletin Board, Conlanger Bulletin Boar).
- 5 This book is useful for those who are interested particularly in Hildegard of Bingen, but it is just as well helpful for those possible readers, whose interests do not lay in the Middle Ages, but who want to understand why people put considerable amounts of energy in constructing languages that no one, or just a few people will use. Those who read this book will grasp something of the beauty of such enterprises.