Epistemic Shielding And Visionary Authority In The 12th Century: The Case Of Hildegard Of Bingen

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of epistemic shielding and applies it to the case of Hildegard of Bingen, 12th century, to explain how the authority of knowledge is constructed and stabilized under structurally adverse conditions. It is argued that epistemic shielding designates an articulated set of discursive strategies and social infrastructures that protect a knowledge claim from foreseeable objections, redistributing the burden of justification toward sources recognized as superior within an epistemic community. Based on primary sources in academic translations (Scivias, correspondence, and hagiographic material), three main mechanisms are identified: (1) humble and selfweakened self-presentation ("earthen vessel," "poor feminine form") that reduces suspicion and predisposes the reception; (2) displacement of the epistemic foundation, where the visionary voice explicitly declares that it speaks not according to rational demonstration but by received mandate; (3) Institutionalization and the social ecology of validation, comprised of scribes, monastic communities, epistolary networks, manuscript circulation, and papal authorization. The discussion shows that the case does not simply pit revelation against reason, but rather a historical rationality where testimony, authority, mediation, and orthodox control co-produce credibility. The article concludes with implications for the history of rationality and for contemporary debates on epistemic authority, testimony, and economies of credibility.

Keywords: Epistemic shielding, philosophy, epistemic authority.

Introduction

The question that serves as the starting point for this article is philosophical and historical/epistemic, and it is: How does knowledge become credible if its bearer lacks, due to social structure, the titles and social licenses that distribute authority? This question is situated in the Latin 12th century, when the circulation of theological and moral knowledge was strongly stratified, such that "normal" legitimacies were based on the teaching of schools, the clerical hierarchy, monastic prestige, or the authority of consecrated texts (Haskins, 1927).

In this context, the case of Hildegard of Bingen is particularly illuminating because it exhibits, in a single trajectory, three features that are difficult to reconcile using simplistic modern categories: first, she claimed access to knowledge received in mystical vision; second, she transformed it into written work, preaching, and public advice; and third, she

did so within an institutional ecology that, although it limited the authoritative word of women, could exceptionally recognize a prophetic voice as an instrument of reform and orthodoxy (Bingen & Atherton, 2001).

The hypothesis being defended is that this success is not explained by a kind of isolated individual genius nor by a head-on opposition between faith and reason, but by an "epistemic shielding"; that is, an assembly of rhetorical and social mechanisms that anticipates foreseeable objections based on gender issues, lack of studies, or suspicion of illusion; and shifts the basis of validity to an epistemically superior source: the "Living Light"/mandate, while ensuring sufficient institutional validations to avoid disqualification for heterodoxy (Fraboschi, 2004).

Conceptual framework Epistemic shielding: operational definition

In this work, epistemic shielding refers to the set of discursive, performative, and institutional mechanisms that protect a knowledge claim from foreseeable objections, ensuring, first, conditions of audibility; second, conditions of credibility; third, conditions of circulation; and fourth, conditions of orthodoxy/legitimacy within a situated epistemic community. The metaphor of shielding does not indicate infallibility, but rather a process of strengthening that anticipates attacks such as suspicion, discrediting, and accusations of illusion/deception; and redistributes the burden of justification toward authorized sources and mediators (Moreno, 2008).

This concept is based on three theoretical families:

First, the social epistemology of testimony, which states that much of human knowledge depends on what others say; and the question then becomes how that dependence is justified, when it is rational to trust, and what institutions shape that trust (Moreno, 2008). From this perspective, epistemic shielding can be read as a historically specific way of producing public trust; a kind of credibility engineering in an ecosystem where testimony is not evaluated solely by evidence, but also by status, orthodoxy, and mediation. According to Broncano, when someone is recognized as an expert, "their word" can be enough to accept something even if the listener does not possess the evidence (Broncano, 2008, p. 16).

Second, Weber's theory of charismatic authority understands charisma as a form of legitimate domination based on personal trust in a "revealed," heroic, or exemplary leader. Its stability requires processes of institutionalization to sustain it beyond its original exceptionality. Weber understands this charismatic domination as a relationship founded on personal devotion and obedience to the charismatic person "personally because of their exceptional qualities." Its validity depends on the continued attribution of that charisma, but if it is to stabilize, "its character must essentially change," either by becoming rationalized, that is, legalized, or by becoming traditionalized, that is, routinized into patrimonial or bureaucratic forms (Weber, 2014, pp. 323, 1280). In this case, epistemic shielding names with greater epistemic precision how a visionary charism

translates into cognitive authority and is stabilized by monastic and ecclesial mediations (Fraboschi, 2004).

Third, the notion of the "economy of credibility" in contemporary debates on epistemic injustice argues that credibility is not distributed neutrally, because biases and structures assign deficits or excesses of credibility. Miranda Fricker states that these forms of epistemic injustice "consist of causing harm to someone in their specific condition as a subject of knowledge," and distinguishes two main modalities: testimonial injustice, when biases lead to granting "a diminished degree of credibility" to the speaker, and hermeneutic injustice, when "a gap in collective interpretive resources" places someone at an unfair disadvantage in understanding their social experience. In its canonical formulation, the central case of testimonial injustice is the "identity-based biased credibility deficit" (Fricker, 2017, p. 22). Epistemic shielding, without identifying with a contemporary normative theory, allows for describing a medieval case as a management of structural distrust, since in the face of a probable deficit of credibility due to gender and the absence of scholastic license, procedures are deployed that compensate and reframe.

The notion of epistemic shielding, understood here as the set of discursive, institutional, and performative resources that seek to protect a knowledge claim from suspicion, refutation, or the social devaluation of testimony, can be illuminated with particular clarity by a paradigmatic medieval case: that of Hildegard of Bingen. Barbara Newman has shown that Hildegard's prophetic activity is incomprehensible if her public mission is separated from the economy of legitimation that makes her visions possible, since these visions not only provide content but also authority, an audience, and a regime of validation. Indeed, Newman emphasizes that, although Hildegard's public career grew from the visions, it is also true that these visions ensured her a listening ear that a "poor little female" would not have obtained otherwise (Newman, 1985, p. 164).

In this sense, Newman proposes distinguishing three interrelated benefits that the visionary gift confers, first, a direct experience of God; second, an unmediated source of truth; and third, a form of public validation (Newman, 1985, p. 164). This triad is crucial to the concept of epistemic shielding because it shows that the visionary claim operates as a device that transforms the epistemic status of discourse. Thus, what is communicated is not presented as opinion or human inference, but as privileged access to a truth guaranteed by its source. Consequently, the dispute is not played out solely on the grounds of evidence, but rather on the origin and type of access to truth. If the source is divine and the means is revelatory, the scope for objection is reduced, and criticism can be reconfigured as irreverence, culpable unbelief, or even a challenge to God himself.

Newman points out that Hildegard goes so far as to issue severe threats in the name of God against anyone who alters, adds to, or subtracts anything from her writings, in a rhetorical strategy that forces the reader to accept everything or nothing. In Newman's reading, these confrontations do not express arrogance, but rather a combination of

assertion and vulnerability; these texts, interwoven with references to her simplicity, fragility, and femininity, insist on her authority with a "defiance" proportionate to the fear that her works would be hidden, altered, abridged, ridiculed, or ignored (Newman, 1985, p. 171). Here, the epistemic shielding becomes explicit because the discourse does not merely demand credibility but constructs a moral framework where critical intervention becomes a culpable act.

Finally, Newman formulates a crucial point for the argument of the authors of this research: only absolute certainty that Hildegard transcribed the exact dictation from the "Living Light" could suffice for both herself and her readers (Newman, 1985, p. 172). This outlines epistemic shielding in its most robust form because the guarantee rests not on replicable public evidence, but on the authority structure of the testimony: transcendent source + visionary medium + ecclesial/social validation. Therefore, the case of Hildegard of Bingen allows for proposing that epistemic shielding should not be reduced to self-deception or propaganda, but rather analyzed as a cultural technology for legitimizing knowledge in contexts where credibility is stratified by gender, status, and institution.

Typology of medieval sources of authority

Instead of assuming a single form of medieval authority, for a person (usually male) to be listened to in the middle of the 12th century as an intellectual or spiritual authority, there were several models of legitimizing knowledge:

a) The scholastic magister: the master of theology or philosophy in cathedral schools or nascent universities. His authority stemmed from his erudition, mastery of the ars dialectica, and institutional backing; it was further legitimized by academic degrees and his knowledge of Scripture and the Church Fathers, articulated through logical reasoning (Haskins, 2002).

b) The monastic exegete: the monk or abbot recognized for his holiness of life and knowledge of the Bible, whose wisdom was legitimized by ecclesiastical tradition and contemplative experience, rather than by academic debate. He had the spiritual authority to interpret Scripture within the community, following the line of the Fathers; examples of this include, in a certain way, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux or the monastic commentators. (Leclercq, 2024).

c) The contemplative wisdom of the saint or hermit: male figures, or in rare cases female, who achieved renown for their intense ascetic life, visions, or miraculous gifts. Their authority was charismatic, but depended on popular and ecclesiastical recognition of their holiness, and they sometimes acted as local advisors or prophets, although they could be viewed with suspicion without official approval (Leclercq, 2024).

d) The charismatic visionary prophetess: a category to which Hildegard belongs. Similar to the previous case, her legitimacy stems from a direct charismatic experience with the divine (prophetic visions), but in this role, the person transmits a divine message to the

community. This model had biblical precedents (prophetesses such as Deborah, Anna, etc.) and some legendary saints, but in the High Middle Ages, it was unusual for someone to write theology based on their own visions (Newman, 1989).

Table 1 summarizes this minimum typology for the 12th century, useful as context for the case, adapted from ongoing doctoral research.

Table 1. Typology for the 12th century

Source/type of authority	Support for legitimacy	Typical vehicles	Typical epistemic risk
Scholastic magister	School institution, grades, ars dialectica	Questions, commentaries, disputes	Accusation of sophistry or rationalism
Monastic Exegete	Holiness, monastic tradition, lectio	Glosses, homilies, compilations	Accusation of literalism or antiintellectualism
Clerical Hierarchy	Ordination/license, sacramental chain	Decrees, synods, authorized preaching	Politicization, institutional capture
Prophecy/Charismatic Vision	Extraordinary gift and recognition	Visions, prophetic letters, hagiography	Suspicion of illusion, deception, heterodoxy
Textual Authority	Canon and Fathers	Quotations, florilegia, chains of authority	Fetishization of the text, interpretive block

Source: Own elaboration

This plurality matters because epistemic shielding consists of connecting, and not just invoking, these sources in an architecture of validation; thus, the charismatic voice relies on textual authority (Bible/Fathers), is fixed in writing (monastic art), and obtains hierarchical validation (pontifical license) (Fraboschi, 2004).

Historical/epistemic context of the 12th century

The 12th century is often described as a period of intellectual and organizational renewal, with a significant expansion of schools, a restructuring of law, an intensification of written circulation, and the consolidation of procedures for detecting orthodoxy and managing conflict (Haskins, 1927). Crucial in this context is the role of canon law, as exemplified by Gratian's Decretum, completed around 1140, which served as a compilation of canons and a support for legal teaching, shaping institutional practices in universities and dioceses (Ferreira & Sawicki, 1977).

At the same time, different modes of knowledge production coexisted and clashed, including monastic practices such as lectio, exegesis, and discipline; school practices, dialectics, the method of authorities, and disputation; and prophetic/visionary practices such as experience, testimony, and theological interpretation. This coexistence, rather than a linear transition, explains why a visionary voice could be both suspect and useful as an instrument of reform and control of deviations (Noratto Gutiérrez, 2009).

In the plane of gender and public discourse, the relevant point, rather than a monolithic prohibition such as "women do not speak", is a set of regulations, glosses, and institutional customs that make authorized speech a closely monitored exception. The empirical fact is that an abbess preaching outside the cloister is a highly unusual occurrence, even in a modern, widely circulated editorial biography (Bingen & Atherton, 2001). But what is decisive for this article is not the fine legal detail, which varies by region and time, but rather the epistemic problem that lies in the fact that the credibility of visionary testimony depends on filters of orthodoxy, mediation, and reputation (Fricker, 2017).

In this context, the production of knowledge "by vision" poses a twofold challenge: on the one hand, an epistemic one, or what justifies belief, and on the other, an ecclesial/political one, or what risks it entails for doctrinal unity. The typical medieval solution combines examination, rumor, reputation, monastic networks, and, in singular cases, authorization from a high-ranking authority as a public sign of validation (Fraboschi, 2004).

Hildegard of Bingen and epistemic shielding

The analysis is based on four core documents derived from the work of Hildegard of Bingen:

1) Scivias: Primary Source. Latin edition with extensive German prologue (Bingen, 1978).

2) Liber Divinorum Operum: academic translation and contextualization in Spanish (Bingen, 2009; Fraboschi, 2002)

3) Epistolary material: Letters translated into Spanish (Bingen et al., 2017).

4) Hagiographic and academic validation material (Fraboschi, 2004).

Self-presentation

The first mechanism of epistemic shielding is self-presentation, that is, a rhetoric of humility and fragility which, far from diminishing authority, serves a pre-validating function; although the beginning of the Declaration in Scivias is paradigmatic when a celestial voice addresses the author as "fragile," "ashes," "rotting," and emphasizes her timidity and lack of formal education (Bingen, 1978). This self-weakening is functional in two ways. First, it acts as a preemptive objection, anticipating what a third party would say: "she has no formal education," "she is a woman," "she is weak", and it is

incorporated within the authorized framework, but transformed into a sign of choice. Second, it establishes a principle of interpretation, conveying the idea that credibility will not rest on academic competence but on faithful transmission (Bingen, 1978).

This pattern is reinforced in the correspondence. In one of her letters, the author describes herself as a poor form and "earthen vessel", and affirms that she is not speaking of herself but "of the serene light", thus: "I, a poor little form and earthen vessel, say this, not of myself, but from the serene light: man is a vessel that God made for himself and imbued with his spirit, to perfect his work in him" (Echternach & Cirlot, 2009, p. 133). From the perspective of testimony theory, this has a clear effect: self-presentation redefines the testimonial scene, since it is not a matter of "I affirm p," of full individual epistemic responsibility, but rather of "I transmit p," with responsibility relocated to fidelity, not to authorship (Fricker, 2017). This shift prepares the way for the second mechanism.

Shift in the epistemic foundation

The second mechanism is the displacement of the epistemic foundation, that is, the knowledge claim is not based on rational demonstration or rhetorical rules, but on a mandate and a source that transcends the subject. The text is explicit when it is ordered to "say and write" what has been seen and heard, but "not according to human language nor according to rational demonstration," nor according to rules of rhetoric, but as the student transmits what he hears from the teacher (Bingen, 1978, pp. 3-4).

This passage fulfills a strong epistemic function, because it establishes a hierarchy of justification where ratio is not abolished, but subordinated in terms of source; and in terms of social epistemology, this is equivalent to declaring that the testimony comes from a basic source whose reliability should not be reduced to other sources such as perception, but be accepted according to the validation regime of the community (orthodoxy, sanctity, examination) (Fricker, 2017).

Displacement organizes textual production, so it is not only theoretical, thus, the figures of the scribe, the community that preserves, the illuminated manuscript form, and the anchoring in biblical authority converge in a device where the author appears as an interface; and in the aforementioned letter, this idea of instrumental mediation is reinforced with the metaphor of a trumpet that another blows: "They sing the mysteries of God like a trumpet that neither gives nor produces sound unless someone blows to make it return the sound. Let the tender, the meek, the poor, and those who live like wretches wear the armor of faith" (Echternach & Cirlot, 2009, p. 134).

Institutionalization and social ecology of validation

The third mechanism is the most decisive, and it consists of the fact that epistemic shielding requires a social ecology of validation that stabilizes charisma and gives it circulation. The key episode is that of the papal authorization at the synod of Trier (1147–1148), where "once he had heard the reports, the Pope ordered that the writings of the

blessed Hildegard, which had been brought to him from the aforementioned monastery and delivered, be presented to him again. And holding them in his own hands, he himself, acting as reader, read them publicly to the archbishop [Albero of Trier], to the cardinals, and to all the clergy present; and making known the response of the men he had sent to investigate these matters, he moved the hearts and voices of all to praise the Creator and to thanksgiving. [...] The Reverend Father of Fathers assented to these sayings of Saint Bernard with an attitude as benign as it was prudent, and visited the blessed Virgin with letters of greeting in which he granted her his authorization—in the name of Christ and of Saint Peter—to announce what she had learned by the Holy Spirit; and encouraged her to write". (Klaes, 1993, pp. 9-10).

From Weber's perspective, the passage describes a classic moment of routinization where charisma becomes durable when it is inscribed in authorization procedures and public signs of orthodoxy (Weber, 1947). From an epistemic point of view, it is a reordering of credibility in which the author ceases to depend exclusively on local recognition and relies on a high-level signal that functions as a social certificate of trustworthiness; a medieval way of receiving epistemic credentials (Fraboschi, 2004).

This ecology included concrete mediators, such as secretaries and collaborators, and the circulation of manuscripts; and a particularly powerful resource was the epistolary network built through letters to powerful figures, such as popes, archbishops, and the emperor himself, to support internal decisions within the monastery and defend its sphere of influence (Bingen et al., 2017). It also relied on a human infrastructure that enabled production and circulation, including assistants and secretaries such as Volmar, Richardis, Guibert, and others (Echternach & Cirlot, 2009; Fraboschi, 2018).

Contemporary academic publications also recognize that preaching and public intervention against heresy increase and reaffirm that authority; and this was a relevant ecclesiastical figure in campaigns against heresy and traveled outside the cloister to preach and advise in parallel, although not to the same extent, to Bernard of Clairvaux (Kienzle, 1996).

The analytical conclusion is that epistemic authority does not originate from the subject as property, but from the interaction between visionary discourse, social mediation, institutional authorization, and forms of circulation; and it is precisely this assembly that the concept of epistemic shielding seeks to capture (Finlay, 2002).

Discussion Implications for the history of rationality

Read from the perspective of the history of rationality, the case challenges a narrative that might be called "modern" and excessively linear, since there is not simply a conflict between reason and revelation. The prologue to Scivias itself does not eliminate rationality; it reorganizes hierarchies of justification, not according to rational demonstration, but according to mandate (Bingen, 1978). Medieval rationality thus appears as a plural system where what is reasonable includes textual authority,

institutional examination, epistemic virtue understood as humility and obedience, and criteria of orthodoxy (Noratto Gutiérrez, 2009, p. 286).

In Weber's terms, it could be argued that the "routinization" of charisma could be described not as an external sociological appendix, but as an internal epistemic condition. This is because, without institutionalization, visionary testimony would be vulnerable to legitimacy disputes and to the difficulty to withstand the demands of daily life, as it would be exposed to accusations of fantasy or deviance (Weber, 2014). Therefore, this epistemic shielding does not describe cynical manipulation, but rather a historically situated way of co-producing knowledge and credibility (Finlay, 2002).

In contemporary debates, epistemic authority is often framed in terms of expertise, trust, and dependence (Hardwig) or in terms of epistemic injustice (Fricker); (Hardwig, 1985). The medieval case allows for a comparative contribution because it reveals a type of epistemic authority that cannot be reduced to technical expertise, but rather to a mixture of testimony, moral reputation, and institution.

Epistemic shielding functions as a bridging concept because it allows for describing how, in the face of structural deficits in credibility, practices that redistribute trust are organized. In Fricker, the "economy of credibility" can produce deficits due to prejudice; here, the medieval economy produces deficits due to gender and position, and shielding operates as a structured response (humility, displacement of source, institutional validation) (Fricker, 2017).

This does not imply idealizing the mechanism, because epistemic shielding can also generate ambivalent effects: by shifting the foundation toward a suprapersonal authority, it reduces the subject's epistemic agency as author in the modern sense, and can reinforce institutional dependencies. In light of Fricker, it can be spoken of a historical form of "epistemology of survival"; the set of strategies by which a subject attempts to make themselves intelligible and credible when the social structure does not fully grant them the right to speak as a subject of knowledge. (Fricker, 2017).

Conclusion This

article defended three linked theses:

First, it was argued that the concept of epistemic shielding allows for a more precise philosophical description of a crucial historical phenomenon: the construction and stabilization of cognitive authority under structurally adverse conditions. The concept's usefulness lies in the fact that it does not reduce credibility to an internal property of the subject nor to the mere propositional truth of what is said, but rather allows for grasping the set of discursive, social, and institutional operations through which a knowledge claim becomes audible, credible, circulatable, and legitimate within a given historical community. In this sense, epistemic shielding does not signify infallibility or absolute immunity from criticism, but rather a form of strengthening of discourse in the face of foreseeable objections.

Second, the case of Hildegard of Bingen showed that this shielding takes on a recognizable and analytically distinguishable configuration. The article identified three main mechanisms: first, a humble and self-weakened self-presentation, in which fragility, lack of education, and female status are not eliminated but rather reinscribed as signs of choice; second, a shift in the epistemic foundation toward the Living Light and the received mandate, whereby the authority of the discourse no longer rests primarily on rational demonstration or scholarly license, but on the fidelity of transmission; and third, a social ecology of validation composed of scribes, monastic community, manuscript circulation, epistolary network, and ecclesiastical authorization, without which the visionary charisma could hardly have stabilized as public authority. Taken together, the case suggests that epistemic authority does not spring from the subject as an isolated property, but from the assemblage of discourse, mediation, recognition, and institution (Bingen, 1978).

Third, this framework allows for re-examining the problem within a broader historical and philosophical perspective. From the history of rationality, the analysis challenges an overly linear opposition between reason and revelation, since the studied case does not involve an annulment of rationality but rather a reorganization of the hierarchies of justification. What is reasonable, in this context, is not defined exclusively by logical demonstration, but also by institutional examination, textual authority, moral reputation, orthodoxy control, and socially regulated forms of testimony. From contemporary epistemology, the case engages in dialogue with debates on trust, testimonial authority, and the unequal distribution of credibility, revealing a historical modality of knowledge legitimation that does not coincide with modern technical expertise, but which also cannot be dismissed as mere irrationality. At this point, epistemic shielding functions as a bridging concept between intellectual history, social epistemology, and the analysis of the social conditions of credibility (Moreno, 2008).

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