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Reading John Scottus Eriugena's *Carmina* as Devotional Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates for a reading of John Scottus Eriugena's *Carmina* that situates his collection of poems within the genre of devotional poetry. Although the *Carmina* has recently benefited from scholarship on Eriugena's theology, typologies of his poems consistently overlook the significance of their theological themes. Most instead attribute more significance to their political themes, since Charles the Bald commissioned many of Eriugena's poems for special occasions at his royal court. This paper argues that a textual analysis which compares the significance of theological and political themes in the *Carmina* reveals several reasons why Eriugena's poems should be read as devotional poetry. First, it explains how typologies of Eriugena's poems overlook the significance of their theological themes by overstating the significance of Charles and his royal court. Then, it offers a close reading of three poems in the *Carmina* to show how Eriugena uses theological themes to frame political ones.

KEYWORDS

John Scottus Eriugena; Carolingian poetry; Christology; Christian mystical theology; apophatic theology; Carmina

Introduction

Only recently has John Scottus Eriugena's *Carmina*, his collection of twenty-five poems, received some of the attention that it deserves from Eriugenian scholars. Particularly, it has proved valuable for shedding light on the theological dimensions of Eriugena's thought, especially his Christology.[1] Despite this, there are no typologies of Eriugena's poems that recognize the genre of his poetry as devotional. Instead, most typologies focus exclusively on how Eriugena's poems offer insights into the political life of Charles the Bald and his royal court. For example, Paul Dutton says that 'Eriugena's poems almost exclusively speak to and about Charles the Bald. John's poetic function, one which was urged upon him by his patron, was to sing for the King.'[2] Additionally, John O'Meara claims that 'the focus of [Eriugena's] poetry is Charles the Bald himself. Almost every poem of Eriugena praises and prays for him.'[3]

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[1]For examples of this, see Gavin S.J., 'A Theological Itinerary,' 134–53; Guiu, 'Eriugena Reads Maximus Confessor,' 296–325; Gavin S.J., *A Celtic Christology*; Hawtree, 'Christ on the Cross in Eriugena's *Carmina* for Charles the Bald,' 125–40.
[2]Dutton, 'Eriugena, the Royal Poet,' 65.
[3]O'Meara, *Eriugena*, 178.

Against these readings of Eriugena's *Carmina*, this paper argues that his collection of poems should be read as devotional poetry. In other words, it claims that readings of Eriugena's poems ought to give primacy to their theological themes instead of their political ones. The first section of this paper begins by accounting for how typologies of Eriugena's poems consistently overlook the significance of their theological themes. In short, these typologies overstate the significance of Charles and his court and understate the significance of Christ and related theological themes. Although many of Eriugena's poems address Charles, all of them, without exception, mention and praise Christ more often than Charles. As I will explain, the significance of Christ as a central figure in the poems surpasses that of Charles, even though Eriugena's poems were commissioned by Charles and directly address him. Then, the second section of this paper offers a close reading of three poems in the *Carmina* to show how Eriugena uses theological themes, especially the passion of Christ, to frame political themes. It will also relate the main theological themes of these poems to those of Eriugena's magnum opus the *Periphyseon*, showing that they are consistent and complementary between these two works.

Ultimately, this paper argues that Eriugena's poems in the *Carmina* should be read as devotional poetry for four reasons. First, there are no typologies of Eriugena's poems that sufficiently account for the significance of their theological themes. Second, despite being composed for special occasions at the court of Charles the Bald, all of Eriugena's poems regard Christ as a transcendent and cosmic power to which Charles submits and serves. Third, Eriugena's use of theological themes to frame political ones clearly demonstrates that he intends for the emphasis of his poems to be on their theological themes. Fourth, the *Carmina* reinforces theological themes that are central to the *Periphyseon*, such as deification (*theosis*), the inaccessible mystery of the Incarnation, and a Christology grounded on Nicene Trinitarianism and Dionysian apophaticism.

Typologies of Eriugena's poems and Charles the Bald

The literary merit of Carolingian poetry, including Eriugena's *Carmina*, has often been doubted. The primary reason, as some scholars argue, is an apparent lack of originality and influence on later literary traditions.[4] Most studies of Carolingian poetry focus instead on the role of the poet in their patron's royal court. In his *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, Peter Godman argues that the function of royal poets in the courts of Carolingian kings was to compete for their patronage.[5] According to Godman, Eriugena was no different and his poetic function was a means of 'political statement' that aimed to curry favour with his own patron, Charles the Bald.[6] Typologies of Eriugena's poems take direction from these general assumptions about Carolingian poetry and focus almost exclusively on his role at Charles's court. On the contrary, this paper argues that Eriugena did not merely write poetry for Charles and occasions of his court but seized it as an opportunity to artfully express his own theological insights.

[4]Raby, *A History of Secular Latin Poetry in the Middle Ages*, 238; Sheldon-Williams, introduction to *Periphyseon*, *Liber Primus*, 4; Floss, *Patrologia Latina*, 122, xviii.; Traube, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini iii.2*, 523. For an account of how Eriugena's Greek poetry may have influenced later royal poets, see Lapidge, 'L'influence stylistique de la poésie de Jean Scot,' 441–42.
[5]Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, 10.
[6]Ibid., 60.

The first to provide a typology of Eriugena's poetry among Anglo-American scholars was Paul Dutton. He differentiates between two types of poems: personal poems and occasional poems.[7] Despite the classification of some poems as personal, these poems reveal little about Eriugena himself and the kind of life that he lived on the European continent. Instead, they contribute to the cloud of mystery that surrounds his life. According to Dutton, there are only five personal poems in total.[8] All are four lines or shorter and reasonable doubts surround their authenticity.[9] If authentic, the personal poems at the very least shed light on Eriugena's wit and sense of humour. Two of the personal poems reference an unknown Hincmar who is praised in one and sharply lambasted in the other. Another poem that strikes a humorous tone suggests a surgeon's hand must not tremble when cutting into veins.[10] The final two personal poems do not express Eriugena's wit and humour, but detail experiences he may have had. One speaks about the love of wine among the Irish who immigrated to the European continent and may have been written during a summer drought. The other was composed at the end of a letter to a certain Lord Winibert requesting to borrow and edit a copy of Martianus Capella's *De septum disciplinis*.

The occasional poems, of which there are twelve, are typically much longer than the personal poems, discuss a wider range of topics, and almost all are unquestionably genuine poems of Eriugena.[11] Dutton classifies some poems as 'occasional' because they address Charles the Bald and refer to important occasions of his royal court, such as a military victory or the celebration of a religious holiday (either Easter or Christmas). The occasional poems come to us from two surviving manuscripts which were likely part of a larger collection of Eriugena's poems that is now lost.[12] Most are titled '*Versus Iohannis ad Karolum Regem*' or a similar variation, and this may have been the original title of the collection. Regardless, all the occasional poems address Charles as if he were present. From this, Dutton concludes that Eriugena places Charles at the centre of his poems. Although Dutton notes that some of the occasional poems do attend to the fundamental mysteries of Christian theology, he considers that Eriugena's attention to Charles is the defining feature of his poetry. Thus, Dutton's typology of the poems in the *Carmina* relegates their theological themes to a secondary role that merely supports the goal of currying favour with Charles.

Generally, most Eriugenian scholars accept Dutton's typology of Eriugena's poems. Michael Herren offers a slightly different variation that divides the occasional poems into two separate types based on length and scope. According to him, there are three total types of Eriugena's poems: (1) long ambitious poems addressed to Charles that

[7]Dutton, 'Eriugena, the Royal Poet,' 55.

[8]According to Dutton, the personal poems include *Carmina* (hereafter *Carm.*), 12b, 18, 19, App. 7, and App. 9. All citations of Eriugena's *Carmina* are from Eriugena, *Carm*.

[9]For more on the doubts surrounding the authenticity of some of Eriugena's poems, see Dutton, 'Eriugena, the Royal Poet,' 55–9, and Herren, 'Johannes Scottus Poeta,' 94–7; Herren, introduction to *Carmina*, 27–41.

[10]This is not the only instance of Eriugena's association with medicinal practice. A charter from 845 references a 'Johannes medicus' leading some to speculate that Eriugena may have begun his career on the European continent as a physician. For more, see Contreni, 'The Study of and Practice of Medicine in Northern France during the Reign of Charles the Bald,' 43–54.

[11]Dutton, 'Eriugena, the Royal Poet,' 61. According to Dutton, the occasional poems include *Carm.* 1–10, 17, and 25.

[12]These two manuscripts are Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. lat. 1587 and 1625. The only one of Eriugena's occasional poems not included in these two manuscripts is 'Aulae sidereae' which comes to us from Corpus Christi College MS. 223. We know that there are poems of Eriugena which are lost because Martin of Laon, who was also of Irish descent, preserved a gloss of Greek terms used in these poems in Laon MS. 44.

skillfully interweave significant events at his court with major Christian mysteries, such as the death and resurrection of Christ; (2) shorter poems that address and praise Charles as Eriugena's patron who supports his scholarly endeavours (many of these poems serve as colophons, tituli, and metrical prefaces to Eriugena's translations and original works); and (3) short epigrams that concern some of Eriugena's personal affairs.[13] Herren's typology of Eriugena's poems is similar to Dutton's in two fundamental respects. First, both consider that Charles is the central figure of the *Carmina,* since most of the poems are addressed to him and were likely commissioned by him. Second, both note that Eriugena's poems invoke pertinent theological themes, but they fail to sufficiently account for this in their typologies. In short, their typologies of Eriugena's poems assume that the political themes take primacy over the theological ones. Neither fully explain how the poems included in the *Carmina* may be understood as works of devotional poetry.

Although the distinction between Eriugena's personal and occasional poems is helpful to distinguish which were likely composed for events at Charles's court, it overlooks and understates the significance of the *Carmina*'s attention to theological themes. Previous typologies of Eriugena's poems therefore do not allow for a recognition of his poetic genre as devotional. Instead, these typologies take Charles to be the most central figure of the poems and focus on how they provide insights into the political life of his royal court. Moreover, these typologies do not account for those of Eriugena's poems which barely mention Charles and focus almost exclusively on theological themes, especially the symbol of the cross and Christ's harrowing of hell.[14]

This paper does not argue for an alternative typology of Eriugena's poems but rather that any typology must account for the predominancy of their theological themes. A textual analysis of the so-called occasional poems reveals that Christ, not Charles, is the central figure. All of the occasional poems, without exception, address Christ more often than Charles. In fact, most mention Christ twice as often as Charles. While Charles is portrayed as wielding an earthly authority conferred by Christ, Christ is depicted as a divine power who makes possible human salvation. Eriugena's poetry does not merely discuss human affairs in the court of Charles but also divine affairs beyond the political life of his kingdom. As Herren briefly mentions, it is possible to understand Eriugena's poems as having 'a top-down structure' in which human events are narrated from the bird's eye view of God.[15]

Eriugena's depiction of Charles and his authority in the *Carmina* is standard of Carolingian poetry. As his patron, Eriugena often praises Charles as a wise and fair king who cares for those loyal to him. He consistently addresses Charles as *rex*[16] in his Latin poems but will often address Charles by various titles in his Greek poems, such as king (ΑΝΑΞ),[17] ruler (ΒΑCΙΛΕΥC),[18] lord (ΚΥΡΡΙΟC),[19] and the highest of all monarchs (ΑΚΡΟC ΤΕ ΜΟΝΑΡΧΟC).[20] Greek poetry was fashionable among royal poets in the

[13]Herren, 'Johannes Scottus Poeta,' 94, and Herren, introduction to *Carmina*, 25.
[14]These poems include *Carm.* 2–9, 13, and 14.
[15]Herren, 'Johannes Scottus Poeta,' 105.
[16]*Carm.* 1.47, 2.71, 4.4, 4.29, 6.38, 10.9, 10.11 11.1, 22.3, 25.98, and App. 10.1.
[17]Ibid., 2.67, 4.26, and 17.2.
[18]Ibid., 7.0, 11.1, 11.3, 14.1, and 17.1.
[19]Ibid., 2.68, 11.0, 17.0, 22.1, and App. 8.4.
[20]Ibid., 17.3.

Carolingian Empire, and Eriugena's proficiency in Greek was evidently greater than that of his contemporaries. Writing Greek poetry for Charles not only showcased Eriugena's scholarly acumen but also was likely encouraged and enjoyed by Charles whose imperial ambitions were inspired in part by his contact with the Byzantine Empire.[21] To depict Charles's royal authority, Eriugena often uses the symbols of the royal crown[22] and scepter[23] which were common symbols for depicting Carolingian royalty in poetry and in art. Both are often described as gold, compared to celestial objects, and connected to his royal lineage.

The occasional poems consistently emphasize that the source of Charles's authority is not only his royal bloodline but also the dispensation of Christ. On multiple occasions, Eriugena describes Charles as descending from a line of kings (*stemmate regum*) who have greatly benefited the people of Frankia.[24] For example, he says that Charles is the 'hope of the fatherland' who wears 'the laurels of his fathers' and is 'worthy of eternal life.'[25] Crucially, however, the divine authority of Christ gifts Charles and his forefathers with the authority and wisdom to rule their kingdoms. According to Eriugena, Christ established the Carolingian dynasty and sustained its continuity.[26] He often expresses this view when praying for Christ to protect Charles and his subjects. For example, in Carmen 10, Eriugena says 'Protect your people who always celebrate your feasts, for whom your wisdom, disposing realms throughout the world, established Charles as king and pious servant.'[27] Notably, Eriugena describes Charles as a servant of Christ. As a pious servant (*pium ministrum*), Charles is an extension of divine authority only insofar as his temporal authority is conferred by Christ.

Eriugena often compares Charles to heavenly bodies, namely the stars and planets, but he never describes Charles as Christlike. In Carmen 17, Eriugena says that Charles is 'like Mercury in the heavens, a star of the diadem; he is like the flashing sun, like the evening sun, like the white goddess.'[28] The closest that Eriugena ever comes to describing Charles as Christlike is the end of Carmen 2 which names him as the 'bearer of Christ' (ΧΡΙΣΤΟΦΟΡΟC).[29] The only other use of this term in the *Carmina* occurs earlier in the same poem and refers to the cross. Given that Eriugena does not describe Charles as Christlike throughout the rest of his poems, there is no evidence to suggest that his reference to Charles as 'bearer of Christ' intends to do so. Instead, Eriugena's reference to Charles as the 'bearer of Christ' more than likely intends to signify how Christ endows him with authority to rule over his kingdom. Although Charles does not imitate Christ in the *Carmina*, he is the vassal of divine authority within his own kingdom.

Compared to Charles, Christ enjoys a special status throughout Eriugena's poems as a transcendent and cosmic power to which Charles submits and serves. To signify his special status, Eriugena names Christ in several ways that pertain exclusively to his

[21]For more on this, see Paul E. Dutton, 'Eriugena, the Royal Poet,' 70.
[22]*Carm*, 8.19, 17.5, and 25.95.
[23]Ibid., 2.61, 4.29, 6.36, 8.83, 17.6, 25.78, 25.100, and App. 10.10.
[24]Ibid., 1.68, 17.5, 20.3, 22.2, and App. 10.11.
[25]Ibid., 17.4–5. All English translations of *Carm.* are from Eriugena, *Carmina*.
[26]Ibid., 1.47–48, 10.6, 11.3, 17.7.
[27]Ibid., 10.6–8.
[28]Ibid., 17.11–12.
[29]Ibid., 2.67.

divine nature. He most often calls Christ Lord (*dominus*)[30] and the Word of God (*Dei Verbum*).[31] He also consistently refers to Christ as the Power and Wisdom of the Father (*uitus et sapienta patris*)[32] and occasionally as the first state (*Primirtiae Christus*) or the first principle of all things (*rerum principium primum*).[33] On one occasion, Eriugena even calls Christ a brave warrior (ΟΠΛΙCΤΗC).[34] While Eriugena portrays Charles as merely a mortal king, he regards Christ as the ordering principle of the cosmos and as an epic hero who redeems human nature by suffering on the cross. For this reason, Christ enjoys a special status in the *Carmina* as a transcendent and cosmic power. The special status of Christ in Eriugena's poems explains why Eriugena devotes more attention to Christ than Charles. Ultimately, Eriugena intends for Christ, not Charles, to be regarded as the central figure throughout the *Carmina*.

By assuming that Charles is the central figure of Eriugena's poems, Dutton's and Herren's typologies take Christ to simply be a divine figurehead who endows Charles with his worldly authority. This, however, overlooks the special status of Christ in Eriugena's poems and understates the significance of theological themes throughout the *Carmina*. The so-called occasional poems include a wealth of insights into Eriugena's theology, especially his Christology. Two of the most discussed theological themes in these poems, and many of the other poems for that matter, are the passion of Christ and his harrowing of hell. As I will explain, Eriugena's intention for writing poetry is much more than pleasing his King and patron, but expressing his own theological insights concerning the mysteries of Christ. What follows is a reading of three poems in the *Carmina* that furthers this point and closely examines the theological merit of Eriugena's poetry.

Reading Eriugena's Carmina as devotional poetry

This paper's reading of three poems in the *Carmina* is two-fold in its aims. First, it shows how Eriugena uses theological themes to frame political ones. Second, it explores how the *Carmina* reinforces theological themes central to the *Periphyseon*, such as such as deification (*theosis*), the inaccessible mystery of the Incarnation, and a Christology grounded on Nicene Trinitarianism and Dionysian apophaticism. All three are longer occasional poems and unquestionably genuine poems of Eriugena. The first is Carmen 1 and is referred to, like many of Eriugena's poems, by its first lines 'Hellinas Troasque Suos.' It was likely composed in early 859 to commemorate Charles's return to power after the defeat of his half-brother, Louis the German, in November of 858. This is the earliest known poem of Eriugena and sets the tone for his treatment of Charles and Christ throughout the rest of the *Carmina*. Although Carmen 1 addresses Charles and celebrates one of his most important military victories, Eriugena consistently draws far more attention to the mystery of Christ, especially his passion on the cross. Thus, in spite of celebrating a victory of Charles, the primary focus of Carmen 1 is on Christ and the mystery of his saving power.

[30]Ibid., 1.20, 1.82, 2.54, 3.27, 3.53, 9.29, 9.71, 14.4, 21.4, 25.34, and App. 2.10. Remarkably, Eriugena never refers to Charles as *dominus*.
[31]Ibid., 1.21, 2.57, 6.21, 8.26, 8.47, 8.49, 9.19, 9.21, 16.2, 25.22, 25.69, and App. 2.11.
[32]Ibid., 2.57, 8.28, 8.47, 25.67.
[33]Ibid., 3.59, 8.25, 8.36, and 8.41
[34]Ibid., 1.39.

Carmen 1, like many of Eriugena's poems, interweaves references to pagan mythology with Christian themes. While Eriugena supposes that Christianity supersedes the paganism of less civilized peoples, he does express deference to Greco-Roman mythology. In Carmen 1, he uses the Greeks' victory over the Trojans as a foil for Charles's victory over Louis. Crucially, however, these victories are incomparable to Christ's defeat of death which he achieved by suffering on the cross. He is the true hero of the poem and reigns as supreme:

> Homer sung of the Greeks and the Trojans.
> Vergil himself told the tale of Romulus's child.
> As for us, let us sing the good deeds of the king of angels,
> Whom the rejoicing world lauds in continuous course.
> It was play for the ancients to recite the flames of Troy,
> Sudden destruction and battles of heroes;
> But to us it sounds sweet to change a hymn about Christ.
> Covered in blood as he conquered the Prince of the World.
> They were taught to deceive in Arcadian verses.
> And tell lies in the guise of truth;
> But 'tis given to us to hymn with deft praise.
> The Father's true wisdom and power.[35]

As Eriugena continues, he sharpens his discussion of Christ's passion through a vivid description of the cross:

> Now let us see the high triumphs of Christ.
> and the stars shining bright in our mind.
> See the wood of the cross that embraces the four-cornered world:
> Of his own accord did our Lord hang upon it.
> And the Word of the Father deigned to receive the flesh,
> In which for our sake he became a victim who pleased,
> Behold the pierced palms, the shoulders and feet,
> The temples girt with the cruel wreath of thorns.
> From the midst of his side, the unlocked fount of salvation.
> Flow living draughts of water and blood.
> The water washes the whole world clean of its sin of old;
> The blood makes us mortals *divine*.[36]

Eriugena often invokes blood as a motif in his poems to symbolize how Christ's passion, which offers the gift of salvation, amounts to the deification (*theosis*) of human nature. Drawing from Maximus the Confessor, Eriugena defines deification in the *Periphyseon* as the condescension of the Divine Word of God, i.e. Christ, to human nature and a simultaneously exaltation of human nature to God through love.[37] In short, deification is the human becoming divine. Christ, who is the Word made flesh, is the ultimate exemplar of deification and the source of all other deifications. As Eriugena says, Christ is 'every good and the giver of all goods.'[38] To become deified, any creature – human or angel – must be a follower of Christ. In this way, a creature who becomes deified participates in the Incarnation. Like the Greek patristic theologians from whom he draws, Eriugena considers

[35]Ibid., 1.1–12.
[36]Ibid., 1.17–28.
[37]Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 449A-B.
[38]Ibid., 904D.

that the totality of the cosmos in its exit from (*exitus*) and return to (*reditus*) God becomes deified through Christ. In short, the Incarnation is the central point between God's relation to creation. At any rate, the point here is to show how the significance of Eriugena's attention to the concept of deification places Christ at the centre of Carmen 1 and frames the narration of worldly events.

It is not until more than halfway through Carmen 1 (line 37) that Eriugena mentions Charles. His preceeding discussion of Christ frames the following discussion of Charles by articulating that there is no temporal power equal or superior to Christ due to his passion on the cross which offers the gift of salvation and redeems human nature. As a temporal authority, Charles is granted the right to rule so long as he is a pious follower of Christ and yields to his divine authority:

> Now Christ rejoicing repairs alone to the world below,
> Entrusting his body for burial in a new tomb.
> The brave warrior unlocked the bars of the bottomless deep;
> Striking the foe he made off with his vessels recaptured.
> As he did not desire that mankind perish in death,
> He snatched the whole race from the jaws of Hell.
> We worship you, Christ, who have power on heaven and earth:
> For to you alone every knee is bent.
> You who see fit to grant as much as is rightfully asked.
> And are wont to deny that which is wrongfully sought,
> Vouchsafe that Charles our king retain his kingdom,
> Which you gave to his bountiful fathers.
> From your fount flow rich kingdoms of the world.[39]

To conclude 'Hellinas Troasque Suos,' Eriugena returns to the occasion for which he is writing. According to him, it was the impiety of Louis that led to his expulsion and Charles's return to power:

> Alas! How foul greed confuses the heart,
> Once Christ has been cast from his proper place.
> O Louis, would that peace were in your borders,
> Given to you by him who rules all things at once.
> Why this desire to vanquish a brother, to drive him from his realm?
> Were you not begotten from the same stock?
> Why do you strive to break God's laws in this way?
> … Hear with trembling what the highest wisdom proclaims.
> Which deceives no one but dispenses true doctrine;
> If you do not wish harm to come from another,
> Do not presume to injure anyone for your part.
> Christ, grant the rewards of heavenly life to your servants;
> Guard safely those of yours who make verses.
> The servant pays his debts at his master's behest,
> But the master should see to his servant's reward.[40]

The 'top down structure' that Herren briefly notes in Eriugena's poems is most evident at the end of Carmen 1. Here Eriugena acknowledges the hierarchy of authority that encompasses Charles's court. He first prays to Christ for protection and then appeals

[39] *Carm.*, 1.37–48.
[40] Ibid., 63–67 … 75–82.

to Charles. He also does not address Charles by name but skillfully alludes to how they are both servants of Christ and will be rewarded for their good service. While Eriugena will be rewarded with the heavenly life of contemplation, Charles will be rewarded with the right to rule his kingdom. Notably, Carmen 1 is not the only poem that Eriugena ends by invoking the divine authority of Christ in an attempt to further curry favour with Charles.[41] Ultimately, the theological themes of the *Carmina* frame not only the narration of worldly events but also how Eriugena views and appeals to his patron.

The second poem that this paper will examine is Carmen 2 which is shorter than Carmen 1 and takes the symbol of the cross as its main theme. This poem is also commonly referred to by its first lines 'Aspice praeclarum,' and Richard Hawtree identifies it as one of Eriugena's 'cross poems.'[42] There is no textual evidence to help us date this poem, but there is enough to make the case that Eriugena composed it for an Easter celebration in Charles's court, given that it details Christ's harrowing of hell.[43] Nonetheless, Carmen 2 is one of the best examples of how Eriugena's poetic genre is devotional. The poem begins with what appears to be the only reference in the *Carmina* to the 'high cross' which was associated with Celtic Christianity and first appeared on the British Isles around the eighth century:

> Behold the orb that shines with the rays of the sun,
> Which the Cross of Salvation spreads from its height,
> Embracing the earth, the sea, the winds and the sky.
> And everything else believed to exist far away.
> While it summons the wretched race from the depths of Hell,
> It pierces Tartarean Styx with its point.
> O fostering cross, past Seraphim and Cherubim you shine.
> All that is being, non-being, beyond being *worships* you.
> The 'lords of creation,' the Virtues and Powers,
> And the middle rank of the angels adore you;
> Angels, archangels, principalities, aye, the totality.
> Of the celestial band, seeking the heights, pays you homage.
> So, too, our Church sends you praise with a fitting hymn;
> For through you, O bearer of Christ (*Christifera*), it was redeemed.[44]

Here Eriugena reiterates the Logo-centric vision of his *Periphyseon*. As the Word of God, Christ is the first principle of all things and without beginning (*anarchos*). The cross, i.e. the Christ-bearer (*Christifera*), is the locus of God's presence and grace in the world. This is why Eriugena says 'All that is being, non-being, beyond being *worships* you.' His use of the term *colo* for worship is significant. *Colo* means worship in a figurative sense, but literally means to promote growth or cultivate land. In the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena often uses the metaphor of natural growth and decay to articulate the fundamental principle of his metaphysics that all existents, except for Christ and God, originate from and return to a state of non-being.[45] All that comes into being does so by the power of Christ who, as the

[41]For more examples of this, see Ibid., 2, 4, and 5–7.
[42]Hawtree, 'Christ on the Cross in Eriugena's *Carmina* for Charles the Bald,' 134.
[43]Notably, a number of Eriugena's poems focus on Christ's harrowing of hell which suggests that at least a few may have been written for an Easter celebration. For more on this, see *Carm.* 3, 5–9, and 13.
[44]Ibid., 2.1–14.
[45]Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 445B, 581A, 620C, 685C, 728B, 823B, 913B. It is also worth noting that the *Periphyseon* is a dialogue between a teacher (*Nutritor)* and a student (*Alumnus*), both which names are derived from terms that connote natural growth.

first principle of all things, is the beginning and end of all creation. Crucially, it is Christ's act of suffering on the cross that redeems humanity and makes possible the eventual return of creation to God.

Like Carmen 1, Carmen 2 does not mention Charles until the end of the poem. Eriugena again frames his discussion of Charles by describing him as submissive and indebted to the divine authority of Christ. He also invokes the image of blood again in reference to how Christ's passion redeems humanity through the gift of human salvation:

> O Christ, Word of God, Power, Wisdom of the Father,
> The wave of your blood, in which the altar of the Cross is bathed,
> Purges, redeems, releases, leads us back to life.
> And shows to your elect that they are gods.
> Grant peace to your Charles, to whom you have given the sceptre;
> Let his fierce foes everywhere perish.
> Vouchsafe to scatter on your servant the seeds of the virtues.
> That he may please you all the years he may live.
> May their powers rise visibly in him and grow into deeds.
> That he may always and everywhere rule justly with you:
> Charles, our orthodox lord, reverent ruler renowned,
> Our moderate master, bearer of Christ.[46]

Eriugena's use of the title 'bearer of Christ' (ΧΡΙΣΤΟΦΟΡΟΣ) to address Charles here is particularly noteworthy. As mentioned above, there is no textual evidence to suggest that Eriugena intends to portray Charles as Christlike in the *Carmina*. Instead, Charles is the bearer of Christ insofar as he is appointed ruler by Christ and a vassal of divine authority. This is distinctly different from how the cross is the bearer of Christ. While the cross, as the Christ-bearer, symbolizes what Christ accomplished in his passion, Charles is the bearer of Christ insofar as he is a temporal administrator of Christ's divine authority. Thus, the meaning of the cross as Christ-bearer is superior to and thus frames how Charles is, in a particular sense, the bearer of Christ.

The final poem that this paper assesses is Carmen 8. It is the most philosophical of all Eriugena's poems and articulates the theological themes taken on in the *Periphyseon* more than any other poem. Its main theme is the mystery of the incarnation, and it refers to Charles only once. Although Dutton and Herren classify Carmen 8 as an occasional poem, there is no significant evidence to suggest that it was composed to commemorate a notable event at Charles's court. The poem begins with an account of a mystical ascent (likely inspired by Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*) in which the mind rises to contemplate the heights of heaven which are concealed by mist and fog. Then, Eriugena details the mysteries of Christ's nature that the mind will contemplate in its mystical ascent:

> Know that Christ is the first principle of the universe:
> He is the Word, born of the Father's bosom, creating all things;
> He is art, law, counsel, Life, wisdom, power,
> Lord Charles, may Christ grant you eternal Life forever,
> May you live many years revered as you are.
> The source, the middle, and the end, light begotten of light.
> He is, being, non-being, supra-being, he excels all things in respect of being.

[46]Ibid., 2.57–68.

Who rules and encompasses the whole which he established.
Himself being whole in wholeness, adhering to no divisions,
Whose deepest nature is remote from all things.
Although he is their simple and substantial essence:
He is the end and beginning of all that has being;
He is good and beautiful, beauty itself and the seal set upon forms.
He was made man, taking flesh from a virgin,
Summons wretched men from ever-lasting death.[47]

As recent scholarship has shown, Eriugena's Christology in the *Periphyseon* strictly adheres to Nicene trinitarianism and integrates Dionysian apophaticism.[48] For Eriugena, it is an essential truth that Christ is both fully human and fully divine. When Christ assumed the flesh through his virgin birth, he did not in any way abandon the characteristics of his divine nature. The hypostatic union of God and Christ, according to Eriugena, entails that they are consubstantial and share a superessential essence. Although what he calls 'Divine Essence' may be spoken of metaphorically through cataphasis as being, truth, wisdom, etc., it is less imperfectly spoken of through apophasis as greater than (*plus quam*) anything that may be predicated of it, e.g. God is beyond being (*hyperousios*).[49] Perhaps line 7 of Carmina 8 best articulates this point: 'He is, being, non-being, supra-being, he excels all things in respect of being.' Christ's essence is therefore always supra-being, but by taking on flesh he participates in the phenomenal world of being. As such, Christ is theophany par excellence, i.e. the ultimate self-manifestation of God in the world. To make this point Carmen 8, like Carmen 1, says that Christ is both the beginning and the end of all that is – he is the first principle of the universe whose enfleshment makes the return of creation to God possible.

As Eriugena continues in Carmen 8, he deepens his Christology by emphasizing how the mystery of the Incarnation is inaccessible to the intellects of all creatures, both angelic and human. In the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena explains that the angelic intellect does not directly contemplate the superessential nature of God, but rather the theophanies produced by the primordial causes.[50] Angels and saints do contemplate the mystery of Christ in a more profound mystical sense than humans on earth, but this mystery is ultimately radically inaccessible in itself:

The Redeemer of the world and conqueror of death,
For the mysteries of Christ are present no less in heaven.
Than on earth—and rightly—since God is one and the same to all.
In heaven he illumined the angelic minds with light.
And entrusted to them the obscurities of his power.
Yet no power was able to clearly perceive.
Him whom the Father kept concealed in his dark breast.
But now the Word is made incarnate—and wonderful to tell—
Unfolds itself clearly to all as God and man.
Mind and reason now apprehend the one whom no one had seen before;

[47]Ibid., 8.1–15.
[48]Gavin, *A Celtic Christology*, 46–61.
[49]While a full discussion of Eriugena's interpretation of Dionysian apophaticism is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that Eriugena does not take negative theology to be a simple form of negation. Instead, negative theology brings forth what is at work in both cataphasis and apophasis in order to refer to the excessive or superabundant nature of the Divine Essence. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 462A-D; 521C-522C.
[50]Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 446C-D.

For a nature clothed in flesh tempers a divine radiance.
By being born he conferred life upon all men.
And ruined Death, which had devoured all the world.
O what strength he had to overcome that one o'erweening.
Who forced the human race in bondage to his cruel law.
Desiring to restore that which he who was formed of clay.
Was the first to lose, abusing the gift of life;
But when he, from Virgin made, took that which brought him death,
How well he used the death of his flesh, which he freely sought.
What method is there for the mind when it seeks to perceive such things.
Or what faculties can give them form in speech?[51]

Crucially, the mystery of Christ encompasses both his divine and human natures. For Eriugena, Christ is one substance (person) in two natures, the one superessential and the other human. The mystery of Christ's dual nature converges on how he, as the theophany of the Word taking on the flesh, offers humans the gift of salvation. How Christ redeems humanity through his passion on the cross according to the divine providence of God remains deeply mysterious and ineffable. Ultimately, the mystery of Christ, for Eriugena, is much more than some kind of intellectual or conceptual limit. As John Gavin explains, Eriugena's presentation of the historical Jesus in the *Periphyseon* aims to inspire mystical participation in the Incarnation.[52] Evidently, Eriugena's *Carmina* does the same but uniquely within the context of Charles court. His poems consistently use theological themes, especially Christ's passion and the mystery of the Incarnation, to frame the narration of events at Charles's court. Despite writing poetry at the behest of Charles, the predominant focus of Eriugena's poems is on how the cosmic power of Christ grounds the goings on of human affairs. As a final point, it is worth noting that while the *Periphyseon* does not discuss Christ's passion on the cross, this theme is at the heart of Eriugena's major poems. Thus, what the *Carmina* offers is a more visceral account of Christ as God enfleshed who suffers for the sake of human redemption.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return to the four reasons this paper proposed for why Eriugena's poems in the *Carmina* should be read as devotional poetry. The first two reasons were supported by a textual analysis that compared Eriugena's treatment and depiction of Charles and Christ as two central figures of the poems. First, typologies of Eriugena's poems, namely ones proposed by Dutton and Herren, do not sufficiently account for the significance of theological themes in the *Carmina* and instead overstate the significance of Charles and the political life of his court. Second, although many of Eriugena's poems address Charles and commemorate occasions of his court, Christ enjoys a special status as a transcendent and cosmic power to which Charles submits and serves. The third and fourth reasons were supported by a close reading of three poems in the *Carmina*. Third, Eriugena's use of theological themes to frame political ones demonstrates that he intends for the emphasis of his poems to be on their theological themes. Fourth, the *Carmina*

[51] *Carm.*, 8.43–62
[52] Gavin, *A Celtic Christology*, 105–38.

reinforces theological themes that are central to the *Periphyseon*, such as deification (*theosis*), the inaccessible mystery of the Incarnation, and a Christology grounded on Nicene Trinitarianism and Dionysian apophaticism.

Ultimately, Eriugena did not merely write poetry for the sake of currying Charles's favour but used it as an opportunity to artfully express his own theological insights. His collection of poems in the *Carmina*, therefore, deserves to be recognized as devotional poetry in its own right. The reading of Eriugena's *Carmina* that this paper proposes not only puts its theological merit on par with the *Periphyseon,* but also shows that it warrants further attention from Eriugenian scholars interested in explicating Eriugena's theology, especially his Christology.

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