

Introduction

IN 1988, IRELAND ISSUED A five-pound note depicting a balding man with bushy eyebrows and a stern gaze. He stands huddled in a fur—apparently the garb of a Dark Ages intellectual—with a page from a Latin manuscript as the background. A single word identifies him: *Scotus*, Irishman. Unfortunately this monetary tribute has been eclipsed by the Euro and its subject has, in turn, fallen out of currency. Though certainly a name to his countrymen and to historians of Western thought, the scope of John Scottus Eriugena’s genius remains little known.

Life

His origins remain veiled in shadow. His names indicate his native land—*Scottus* and *Eriugena* both mean “Irishman” in Latin and Greek—but it is impossible to offer anything more precise.¹ Even suggestions for his date of birth vary: scholars tend to estimate sometime between 800–815.² As for his status within the church, it is uncertain whether he was monk, priest, or one of the lay scholars who gave life to the remarkable intellectual flourishing of the age.³

There is no doubt, however, that Eriugena received an excellent intellectual and spiritual formation, both in his native Ireland and on the continent. This included a profound reading of the Scriptures and foundational texts in Latin, including: the logical works of Aristotle in Boethius’s translations; Virgil; Pliny; Martianus Capella, on whose work he wrote a surviving commentary; Macrobius; the pseudo-Augustinian *The Ten*

1. John gave himself the name “Eriugena” in the preface to his commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy*. On the names given to John see Cappuyns, *Erigène*, 3–7.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

3. See *ibid.*, 66–67; Edwards, *Christian Ireland*, 591.

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Categories; and Christian authors such as Origen (in Rufinus's translation), Marius Victorinus, Boethius, Ambrose, and, most of all, Augustine. What truly distinguished him from many of his contemporaries, however, was his knowledge of Greek, which gave him access to such Christian Neoplatonists as Gregory of Nyssa, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor.⁴ One also should not overlook the influence of his Irish roots on his unique manner of adapting his sources.⁵ His natural gifts and rich education produced a man who was a scholar, teacher, poet, and mystic—the ideal Carolingian Renaissance man.

“It would not be inappropriate to say that if the reign of Charlemagne was the springtime of the Carolingian renaissance, the reign of Charles the Bald was its glorious summer.”⁶ Every genius is in debt to the circumstances that allow him to flourish and undoubtedly Eriugena owed much to the remarkable environment that nourished him. Though internecine conflicts marred the lands ceded to the grandsons of Charlemagne (742–814)—Lothar (795–855), Pippin (797–838), Louis the German (806–76), and Charles the Bald (823–77)—the intellectual and cultural revival would continue to find patrons among them. Charles, in particular, fostered the talent that entered his fold—even when it came from shadowy lands in the West.

Charles was the son of Louis the Pious's (778–840) second wife, Judith, which made him an outsider from the beginning. Though he received an excellent education—he was most likely fluent in several languages, including Latin—and he acquired a superb formation for ruling, his half-brothers, at least at first, could not but perceive him as an intruder.⁷ In fact, it was Louis the Pious's desire to give Charles a portion of the kingdom in 832 that, in part, triggered years of fraternal conflict. A formal resolution was found in the treaty of Verdun in 843, which partitioned the kingdom

4. On Eriugena's formation and sources see Carabine, *Eriugena*, 20–22; Moran, “Origen and Eriugena”; Moran, *Philosophy*, 103–22; Sheldon-Williams, “Sources.” Willemien Otten notes, in particular, Eriugena's desire unify the Eastern and Western traditions of patristic thought: “He does so not only by assembling what are merely separate parts but by ambitiously suggesting if not proving that a continuous tradition must rationally have preceded its unfortunate fragmentation into scattered parts.” Otten, “Texture,” 43.

5. For instance, regarding the influence of Irish art on Eriugena's thought see Richardson, “Themes,” 280.

6. Jeaneau, “Pseudo-Dionysius,” 138.

7. On Charles's education and formation see Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, 85–89; “Reign,” 2.

among Louis, Lothar, and Charles. Thus the Western lands that make up modern France became the primary fields for Charles's reign.⁸

Peace did not bless Charles's rule for any length of time—he faced on-going tensions with his family and rebellion from the Bretons, among others; but he was resilient and would live to be crowned emperor by Pope John VIII in 875, two years before his death. During his reign he worked diligently to increase the prestige of the monarchy and promoted the union between church and state.⁹ This included the support of education and cultural initiatives, as well as the reception and absorption of learning from the Greek-speaking world.¹⁰ His merits would earn encomiums from his beneficiaries that, though unsurprisingly sycophantic, nonetheless reflect some genuine gratitude and esteem. Eriugena himself could sing—in Greek!—his praises:

O Charles, Orthodox king! Pious and renowned ruler!
The Christ-bearer! Prudent Lord!¹¹

Eriugena came to the continent perhaps out of necessity—the Viking raids were forcing numerous exiles to seek safer havens—perhaps out of the desire for support and inspiration in the celebrated intellectual milieu of the Carolingian world.¹² Though one may connect Eriugena with the Palace School of Charles the Bald, he appears to have also had associations with other centers, including Rheims, Soissons, and Laon.¹³ He would enter the fertile environment of the Carolingian revival that engaged scholars from throughout Europe—Irish, Italians, Franks, and others—in the editing of texts, the recovery of sources, and even theological discussions.¹⁴

8. Yet this hardly means that Charles can be called “the founder” of modern France. For a critique of idea see Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, 1–4.

9. On Charles's attempts to magnify his rule see Schieffer, “Regno,” 14–15. Charles himself became the Abbot of the prestigious monastery of San Denis in 867. See McKitterick, “Palace School,” 330.

10. Michael McCormick outlines some of the ways that Greek learning entered the West during this period, including contacts with Greek monasteries in Rome, the Frankish presence in Jerusalem, and movement through diplomatic channels. See McCormick, “Diplomacy.”

11. *Carm.* II, 66, 67–68.

12. A large number of Irish scholars became prominent figures in many ecclesiastical circles during the Carolingian rule. See Edwards, *Christian Ireland*, 591–92; Contreni, “The Irish ‘Colony.’”

13. See McKitterick, “Palace School,” 327; O'Meara, *Eriugena*, 13–14.

14. See Moran, *Philosophy*, 7–16.

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In fact, it was in the heat of theological debate that Eriugena first becomes known. The monk Gottschalk of Orbais (808–867) had sparked a long-running controversy surrounding his affirmation of “double predestination”—God predestines persons both to heaven and hell—that entangled some of the great luminaries of the day, including Hrabanus Maurus (780–856) and Hincmar (806–82), bishop of Rheims. Much of the debate involved interpretations of Augustine, the use of patristic florilegia, and even the application of syllogistic and dialectical reasoning.¹⁵ Hincmar himself would invite Eriugena to refute Gottschalk in 852, with mixed results (see below). Yet the Irishman would leave his mark through his attention to the sources and innovative use of dialectic.

From his first appearance, one must map out his life primarily through the signposts of his scholarship. He became a successful and respected teacher within the palace school, meriting a special charge from Charles himself: the translation of the Dionysian corpus housed in the monastery of San Denis (see below). He completed this project between 860–62 and went on to translate other church fathers into Latin. Thus began the period of his “Greek awakening” that would so profoundly shape his output in the years ahead.

In the remaining years of the decade he wrote his most significant work, *The Periphyseon*, which he apparently revised and annotated even into the 870s.¹⁶ His *Commentary to the Gospel of John*, *Homily on the Prologue on John* and his poetry were also written during this period. The poem *Aulae sidereae*, which most likely celebrates the consecration of the church of St. Mary in Compiègne in 877, is the latest work in the Eriugenian corpus.¹⁷ Most scholars, therefore, establish his death in the late 870s or early 880s.

Unverifiable legends contribute to the mystery of Eriugena, especially the story of his demise. It was said that his own students stabbed him to death with their styli in response to his unorthodox ideas. More likely a cautionary tale for radical professors than a historical account, it still holds

15. “The debate concerned the very nature of learning itself, fuelled by Gottschalk’s use of the syllogism, the result of inspiration during his reading of Jerome on Galatians, and polarized by Eriugena’s use of dialectic which drew on Augustine’s early dialogue.” Ganz, “Debate,” 284. Also see Marenbon, “John Scottus,” 305; d’Onofrio, *Fons scientiae*, 280–84.

16. On the manuscripts and the questions surrounding the annotations see Moran, *Philosophy*, 60–64.

17. *Carm.* XXV, 116–21.

allegorical merit: in the history of thought, councils have condemned him¹⁸ and students have too long ignored him. It is time to resurrect his voice and spirit through the treasures that he left behind.

Works

Translations

Eriugena's translations alone, despite their limitations, earn him an important place in Western intellectual history. These works also proved most formative for the translator, since they introduced him to the Proclean strand of Neoplatonism and to the rich ideas of the patristic East.¹⁹ Furthermore, Eriugena developed a new vocabulary in order to convey the foreign concepts to his Western readers.²⁰

At the behest of Charles the Bald, he prepared a Latin version of the Dionysian Corpus, a collection of works by a mysterious fifth-century Christian Neoplatonist.²¹ The Greek manuscript of the corpus had arrived in the monastery of San Denis in 827 as a gift to Louis the Pious from the Byzantine Emperor, Michael II (770–829), and was greatly valued by the Carolingians, since many claimed that its purported author—St. Paul's convert, Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17:34)—was the founding Bishop of Paris.²² The Abbot Hilduin had already attempted a translation, but its inadequacies prompted Charles to seek a better version. Eriugena's translation would have great success, despite the backhanded compliment by the esteemed Anastasius the Librarian (810–78) in Rome, who marveled that a “barbarian from the ends of the world” could accomplish such a task.²³

Anastasius was gracious enough to send corrections to the manuscript that also included excerpts from the commentary attributed to the

18. For instance, *The Periphyseon* was condemned for its connection with the Amalrician heresy at the beginning of the thirteenth century. See Cappuyns, *Erigène*, 247–48.

19. See Meyendorff, “Remarks,” 53–58; Cappuyns, *Erigène*, 146–79.

20. See Moran, *Philosophy*, 54.

21. These works include *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesial Hierarchy*, and *The Mystical Theology*, as well as a collection of letters. For excellent overviews of the corpus, its origins, and its content see Lilla, *Dionigi l'Areopagita*, 159–97; Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*.

22. On the importance of Dionysius in Carolingian culture see Riché, “Charles le Chauve,” 41–42.

23. Arnaldi, “Anastasio Bibliotecario,” 519.

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seventh-century monk, Maximus the Confessor. These annotations would inspire Eriugena to seek out the works of the great theologian-martyr and to translate them into Latin. He would follow with translations of Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Making of Man*, a work that would have a profound impact upon Eriugena's anthropology, and the *Ancoratus* of Epiphanius of Salamis.²⁴

Original Works

As already noted, Eriugena burst onto the scene during the controversy surrounding the question of predestination. The charges against Gottschalk had already been laid out by Hincmar of Reims, Hrabanus Maurus, and others: Gottschalk's "double-predestination" made God responsible for evil, denied human free will, and turned God into an unjust judge.²⁵ Hincmar would call Eriugena in for reinforcement—and would live to regret it. The Irishman's *De praedestinatione* fell prey to criticism from both parties in the debate. In a controversy that raged around the interpretation of biblical texts, the writings of St. Augustine, and compilations of patristic florilegia, Eriugena's use of dialectic and non-Christian sources shocked his contemporaries.²⁶ Furthermore, certain positions—such as the idea that God does not punish, but rather that sinners will punish themselves through the perverse direction of their wills—seemed to deviate from certain teachings of Augustine. The work would receive its own condemnation in the council of Valence in 855.

The influence of his encounters with Greek learning, however, would bear greater fruit in the production of his masterpiece, the *Periphyseon*, or *The Division of Nature*, composed between 860–66. It is a dazzling achievement, an original synthesis of Western—particularly Augustinian—and Eastern learning that has defied scholarly categorization.²⁷ Its very exis-

24. For a reconstruction of Eriugena's pursuit of manuscripts and Greek learning see Jeaneau, "Pseudo-Dionysius," 140–43; O'Meara, *Eriugena*, 51–79.

25. Marenbon, "John Scottus," 305.

26. Prudentius of Troyes, for instance, noted that Jerome had been chastised for his love of Cicero and that, therefore, Eriugena should not have been so reliant upon fallible human reason. See Ganz, "The Debate," 293. Also see Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena*, 9–12; d'Onofrio, *Fons scientiae*, 283.

27. "Conflicting tendencies seem to underlie this work, as it displays not only an eclectic configuration of topics but also an unusual variety of genres. Such conflicting tendencies have complicated the analysis of the *Periphyseon* as an original and important

tence challenges the canard that the ninth-century West belonged to “the Dark Ages.”

The *Periphyseon* is a dialogue between a master (the *Nutritor*) and his pupil (the *Alumnus*), and Eriugena organizes the five books of the discussion around the four divisions of nature: a) that which creates and is not created (God source of all things); b) that which is created and creates (the primordial causes in the Word); c) that which is created and does not create (the created effects); d) that which neither creates nor is created (God as final cause—a topic that required the last two books for its treatment).²⁸ These divisions, Eriugena notes, should not deceive us into thinking that nature genuinely consists in such radical divides, since the distinctions in fact emerge from the limitations of fallen human cognition. In the end, he demonstrates that all of creation is God’s “self-creation”: a movement from God as non-being, that is, divine independence and incomprehensibility, to created theophanies (*exitus*); and a return of all things from diversity to unity in God (*reditus*). In creation there is a unity in diversity and a diversity in unity, in which God, as creator and end (divisions one and four), and creation, as causes and effects (divisions two and three), find a resolution in the eternal, divine desire that “all may be one.” As Willamien Otten notes, “From the fact that all things are meant to be reduced to the omnipotent source of their derivative existence, we can infer that the purpose of this fourfold division is clearly no other than to channel *natura* through the process of its unfolding into multiplicity towards its final rest in the indivisible God.”²⁹

What was startling for Eriugena’s contemporaries, and even for subsequent generations, was the radically new approach that he had acquired from his reading of Augustine and his Greek sources. Eduard Jeuneau points toward the significance of this accomplishment when he writes that, “while Augustine was indebted to the older form of Neoplatonism, that represented by Plotinus and Porphyry, Dionysius is indebted to a later form, represented by Proclus. For the first time in the history of human thought the two Neoplatonic streams converged. And they converged in a mind widely open, qualified to combine them harmoniously.”³⁰ Later

work in the history of Christian thought.” Otten, “Eriugena’s *Periphyseon*,” 69.

28. See *Peri*. I, 3–4, 19–26. On possible sources for the divisions see Carabine, *Eriugena*, 30–31.

29. Otten, *Anthropology*, 26.

30. Jeuneau, “Neoplatonic Themes,” 8. On the influence of both strands of

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charges of heresy on account of *Periphyseon's* seeming pantheism failed to understand some of the features of Eriugena's innovative synthesis, particularly the notion of God as non-being, which separated the divine from the category of dependent creature. As we shall see, the *Periphyseon* also offers an important framework for understanding the Incarnation, the descent of the Word into the fragmented state of created effects.

Other surviving works reveal further talents in the Irishman. He proved himself to be an adept scriptural commentator in his *Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of John* and the remaining portions of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, in which he made great use of the Greek text.³¹ Commentaries on pseudo-Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy* and Martianus Capella's *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury* established him as an important expositor of seminal thinkers.

Finally, his poetry—in both Latin and Greek—is at last finding a deserved audience among contemporary theologians and philosophers.³² The *Carmina* embrace a variety of themes: praise for Charles the Bald and Queen Irmintrudis, hymns for Easter and the Harrowing of Hell, even a complaint over the low quality of beverages for exiled Irishmen.³³ Its value for the study of Christology will be proven during the course of this study.

We are fortunate to have critical editions of Eriugena's major works and translations. Now it is up to scholars and readers to discover the many riches that they offer.³⁴

Neoplatonism and the question of direct contact with Neoplatonic authors see Moran, *Eriugena*, 105–7.

31. Ludwig Bieler offers some important reflections on Eriugena's use of Greek in interpreting the Latin version. See Bieler, "Observations," 235–39.

32. "Not only do the *Carmina* reflect Eriugena's philosophical and theological concerns, but they contain precious information about his life and his reaction to contemporary history." Dutton, "Eriugena," 51. Also see Colnago, *Poesia e teologia*.

33. "Bacchus abest siccis Scottorum faucibus estu
Et ventres nostros morbida replet aqua."
Carm. XIX, 104, 1–2.

34. Questionable writings—such as the remaining fragments of a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew—and spurious works remain objects of study. See Sheldon-Williams, "List of Works," 66–98; Piemonte, "Distinctive Theses."

Assessments of Eriugena's Christology

Eriugena's works received positive commentary, as well as condemnations, in his own century,³⁵ and one can trace the influence of his ideas throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance in such authors as Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Aquinas, and, above all, Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa.³⁶ His thought—particularly in its idealist tendencies—also found resonances in the modern period, prompting H. von Schubert to write, “This Irishman has been rightly considered the initiator of an evolution which was not recovered until modern time. He holds a place between Plato-Origen-Dionysius and Spinoza-Fichte-Hegel.”³⁷ Today he finds admirers particularly among critics of onto-theology, who seek to recover the fruits of Christian apophaticism.³⁸

There exist, however, few assessments of Eriugena's Christology. While most general surveys of his work acknowledge the importance of Christ for initiating the return of all things, few delve any further into the nuances of his teaching. The resulting evaluations are mixed.

The strongest critics of his Christology generally focus upon four issues. First, they claim that Eriugena overlooks the historical Jesus in favor of his radically intellectualist view of reality. Marcia Colish writes, “For John, Christ acts as the redeemer of man less through what he did on earth than through what he was. As the incarnate God, the nexus between matter and spirit, Christ is the archetype of the creation and the means by which it returns to its divine source. For man this process of return is an essentially contemplative one.”³⁹ Eriugena's Christology, therefore, takes little account of Jesus's historical existence and the potential for Christian imitation of his life.

Second, his Christology lacks the rich sense of the effective synergism of the hypostatic union that one finds in such church fathers as Maximus the Confessor. While the reciprocity between the divine and human

35. The problem of glosses in the manuscripts of the *Periphyseon*—which may include annotations and additions from Eriugena himself—made the preparation of a critical edition a difficult challenge. See Greetham, “Jeauneau's Edition.”

36. See Moran, *Philosophy*, 269–81.

37. Quoted in Cappuyns, *Erigène*, 267.

38. Wayne Hankey, however, has been extremely critical of this “postmodern” retrieval of the Neoplatonic tradition. See Hankey, “Misrepresenting Neoplatonism”; “The Postmodern Retrieval.”

39. Colish, “Christology,” 138. Also see Duclow, “Dialectic,” 116.

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natures, united in the person of Jesus, is the basis for creation's deification⁴⁰ in Maximus, this notion seems to be lacking in Eriugena. This results in a form of monophysitism, in which created nature functions only as a passive framework for the return.⁴¹

Third, critics assert that Eriugena does not take into account the sacramental, ecclesial, and ethical dimensions of the Incarnation of the Word. This weakness makes him a traitor particularly to his Greek sources, which developed all of the dimensions of the Word-made-flesh.⁴² Thus, Eriugena's thought finds itself often tainted by gnostic tendencies.

Finally, his thought generally excludes the centrality of Christ that one finds in the Fathers. Though his "rather inchoate Christology"⁴³ acknowledges the importance of the Incarnation for the redemption of fallen creation, it does not see the *incarnate* Word as the basis for God's creative act itself. The Incarnation is not the central point for God's relation with the world.⁴⁴

This does not mean that Eriugena lacks his defenders. Numerous books and articles have touched upon his diphysite Christology,⁴⁵ his references to the sacraments and the church,⁴⁶ his understanding of the historical import of the Incarnation,⁴⁷ and even the centrality of the Incarnation

40. Deification—*θέωσις* or *deificatio*—is the traditional doctrine that man will be so perfectly united with the Creator that he will become "divine," without losing the integrity of his own nature. On deification in antiquity see Russell, *Deification*.

41. See Perl, "Metaphysics," 262–63; Meyendorff, "Remarks," 61.

42. See Colish, "Christology," 139; Duclow, "Dialectic," 116.

43. Carabine, *Eriugena*, 98.

44. This negative assessment is generally accompanied by a comparison with Maximus the Confessor. "In Eriugena, the doctrine of the Incarnation remains distinct from, although closely connected with, his Neoplatonic account of the world's procession from and return to God. It is rather in St. Maximus, the heir of both Neoplatonic metaphysics and Byzantine Christology, that we find the complete union, or rather identification of the two. Maximus offers, not only an idea of a 'cosmic Christ,' but a fully integrated Christological ontology, in which the mystery of Christ is itself the basis for understanding the metaphysics of the relation between God and world." Perl, "Metaphysics," 153. Also see Meyendorff, "Remarks," 61–62.

45. For instance see Ansorge, *Wahrheit*, 322–32; Cappuyns, *Erigène*, 363; Mooney, *Theophany*, 175–76; Rorem, *Eriugena's Commentary*, 146, 158–59.

46. For instance see McEvoy, "Reditus," 376; McGinn, "Eriugena Mysticus," 250; Walker "Eriugena's Conception," 157.

47. For instance see Jeuneau, "Themes," 20–21; Jeuneau, "Ambigua," 90; Moran, "Idealism," 76.

in his thought.⁴⁸ Yet these treatments are generally all too brief assessments lost within other arguments. Eriugena's Christology demands a closer examination and evaluation.

The Scope of This Book

This book examines the significance of the Incarnation in Eriugena's thought. On the one hand, it may be called a defense. His major critics have undervalued Eriugena's creative appropriation of the tradition, as well as the overall importance of the Word-made-flesh in his works. A proper assessment demands a wider examination of the sources—for instance, his poetry and scriptural commentaries—and a proper consideration of the Incarnation in the context of these sources. The understanding of the Incarnation that emerges from this study should adequately refute some of the harsher critiques that the Irishman has suffered.

On the other hand, this volume is a modest introduction. For those new to Eriugena, the Incarnation offers an excellent thematic entry into the world of this fascinating and stimulating thinker. For those who are already familiar with his thought, this book should provide a new perspective and, hopefully, inspiration for further research. It in no way purports to be the exhaustive or definitive study—the conclusion will indicate further important avenues for scholars. It lives in the hope that others will respond—positively and negatively—with renewed vigor toward the study of Eriugena's vision.

This book contends that, in fact, Eriugena's understanding of the Incarnation provides a form of free participation in God that includes the mystical appropriation of the historical life of the Word. In examining the Incarnation, one comes to see the importance of humanity's free, personal cooperation with God in the redemption and elevation of the cosmos. It has the following plan: first, an examination of embodiment and the flesh in Eriugena's thought; second, a consideration of his appropriation of the tradition in his treatment of the Incarnation; third, a summary of the "motives" behind the Word becoming flesh; fourth, a presentation of the anthropological basis for humanity's participation in the divine; and finally, a treatment of Eriugena's notion of *imitatio Christi*, rooted in the genuine historical and physical reality of the incarnate Christ.

48. For instance see Beierwaltes, *Eriugena*, 187; Carabine, "Virgins," 197; Jeauneau, "Pseudo-Dionysius," 148.