1 Introduction

It is a truism of Christianity that it originated in the Greek-speaking eastern Roman empire and, through missionary activity and the networks of the Jewish diaspora, spread from its point of origin in the Roman province of Palestine towards Rome and the Latin-speaking West. This raises an interesting question about the origins of Latin preaching. Did the practice of preaching arise independently within the western Roman world or is it a tradition brought across from the East that subsequently developed its own characteristics and trajectory? This then gives rise to an associated question: to what degree can we trace cross-influence? These and similar questions we will attempt to answer in this chapter. Where did Latin preaching come from? What is it? That is, what are its defining characteristics? Who preached? How did individual sermons survive? In the larger picture, how did the historical events of the 4th to 7th centuries influence the development of Latin preaching and its survival? And, of equal importance, how has the preaching in Latin of this era been studied? What resources for exploring Latin sermons and their preaching currently exist?

2 The Emergence of Preaching in Latin

As early as the mid-2nd century AD, Justin Martyr, writing from Rome, refers to oral instruction as a regular part of Sunday worship, indicating that this instruction followed and was based on the reading of both early gospel accounts and the Old Testament prophets.¹ A key component was exhortation to the listeners to follow the instructions in those writings. But Justin was writing in Greek and, just as the “apostle's recollections” and the books of the prophets were at this time circulated only in Greek,² it is likely that the proto-

¹ Justin Martyr, First Apology 67, 3–4, ed. Marcovich, p. 129.
² The primary version of the Old Testament Scriptures used in Christian worship and exegesis in the first centuries AD was the Septuagint.
sermons to which Justin refers were delivered in Greek as well. We should therefore not assume that when Christianity and its worship arrived in the western half of the Roman empire, where the dominant language was Latin, preaching in Latin automatically occurred. In origin Christianity was a Judeo-Hellenistic religion that, when it arrived in Rome, North Africa and other regions of the West, was foreign and we should expect that it took some time for Christian practices to take on indigenous characteristics and to adapt themselves to a distinctly different cultural world. As Olivar points out, Hippolytus was still preaching in Greek in Rome in the 3rd century, while some Roman bishops continued to preach in Greek into the second half of the 4th century, with perhaps presbyters, rather, preaching in Latin in smaller communities. The first surviving works in Latin that can be identified clearly as sermons do not appear until the middle of the 4th century, although there is some argument that a highly rhetorical discourse Aduersus Iudaeos attributed to Cyprian that originated in Rome in the late 2nd or early 3rd century, was both originally composed in Latin (as opposed to translated from Greek) and can be categorized as a sermon. Since Olivar finds evidence of both local preaching in North Africa in the mid-3rd century and of an attachment to worship in Latin in the genuine writings of Cyprian, even though none of his sermons survive, we should suppose that preaching in Latin was taking place in some regions or local communities in the Roman West by the 3rd century AD, but that this development was not uniform and was influenced by local factors.

That Cyprian was a trained orator and, prior to his conversion, a teacher of rhetoric raises another issue of importance for how we view the emergence of Latin preaching, namely to what extent the sermon is a uniquely Christian development, on the one hand, and how much it was shaped by the rhetorical traditions that existed in the Graeco-Roman world, on the other. Despite claims to the contrary, both by modern scholars and by patristic preachers

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3 Olivar, La predicación, p. 266. Although there have been minor developments since 1991, when he published his detailed analysis of Christian preaching from its origins to the late 6th century, Olivar’s work remains authoritative.

4 Van Damme, Pseudo-Cyprian. For discussion see Olivar, La predicación, pp. 266-67. On the problems of defining a work as homiletic, particularly at this early period, see Mayer, “Homiletics”, pp. 570-72. The work is listed by Dekkers/Gaar, Clavis, p. 21 under pseudo-Novatian.

5 Olivar, La predicación, pp. 267-71.

6 That Christianity in its early centuries was a network of idiosyncratic small groups not representative of the wider community is a point made by Rousseau, The Early Christian Centuries, pp. 129-31.