Sermons, Audience, Preacher

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1 Introduction

The sheer number of sermons by Latin patristic preachers makes them a major body of evidence for the historians of Late Antiquity. More than 800 sermons of Augustine are preserved out of a total of 8,000 he probably preached.¹ A recent estimate suggests that in North Africa alone, during the four decades of Augustine’s episcopate, some five million sermons were preached.² No historian would deny the importance of sermons as evidence, but a critical review of what sermons are evidence for is long overdue.

The first part of this chapter addresses some issues that have bogged down the use of sermons by historians: date, location, and composition of the audience. Though they should not be neglected, these issues are less important for a proper use of sermons than is most often realized. Indeed, as is described in the second and third parts of this chapter, a major paradigm shift has taken place over the last 20 years. From an approach that uses sermons as a source of historical information has arisen one that considers sermons in themselves as historical evidence.

2 Preliminary Matters: Date, Location, Audience

A first task facing historians who want to use sermons as evidence is that of dating them. Though in some cases it might be enough to consider globally the period during which a preacher was active,³ in others it is helpful to establish a more precise date. As Hubert Drobner writes about Augustine’s sermons: “A firm date can be established only by either a securely dated testimony from

¹ See Drobner, “The transmission of Augustine’s sermons”, p. 98; 4,500 according to Mandouze, Saint Augustin, pp. 599-615; see Shaw, Sacred Violence, p. 417 n. 46.
² Shaw, Sacred Violence, p. 412.
³ Most preserved sermons were preached by bishops, so that the dates of their episcopacy provide both a terminus post quem and a terminus ante quem; on the extension of the responsibility of preaching to priests, see Olivar, La predicación, pp. 537-45.
outside or a reference inside a sermon that can doubtlessly be connected to an outer securely dated fact.”⁴ Needless to say, this is very rarely the case: according to Drobner, none of Augustine’s *Sermones ad populum* can be dated in this way.⁵ One needs not share Drobner’s general skepticism about the other methods used to date sermons.⁶ His caveat, however, is a useful reminder for historians not to build too many hypotheses on top of hypothetical dates.⁷

Another preliminary piece of information that historians need to consider is location. In particular, location matters for determining the audience. As I will discuss issues related to audience below, let it suffice for now to point to the obvious difference between Augustine’s regular audience in Hippo Regius and the audience he faced in Carthage, where he preached quite often, or in any of the other cities where he was invited to preach. Location by default is the bishop’s seat. Other locations need to be firmly established in the manuscript tradition or in the sermons themselves.

Finally, the question of the makeup of the audience is a delicate, albeit important, one. In 1989 Ramsay MacMullen opened a critical discussion about the social composition of the body of listeners to the sermons that are preserved. He pointed out that the assumptions about life, such as ownership of slaves, made by 4th-century preachers match those of the well-to-do.⁸ He also noted that urban churches were not big enough to accommodate any large proportion of the population.⁹ MacMullen radicalized the positions defended in his 1989-paper in following publications to the point of sustaining the idea of the existence of two churches, the church of the preachers representing only 5 per cent of the population.¹⁰ Philip Rousseau brought some nuance to the

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⁵ Drobner, “Chronology I”, p. 212.
⁷ In particular, historians should not use the dates compiled for Augustine’s sermons by Verbraken, *Études critiques* or tabulated in Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages* with no further consideration of how the dates were established. Maier/Perler, *Les voyages de saint Augustin* remains in many cases a more reliable tool as dates are determined in relation to Augustine’s travels.
⁹ MacMullen, “The Preacher’s Audience”, p. 510.
¹⁰ See MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism* and MacMullen, *The Second Church*. 