Since the Reformation, the early history of the Roman primacy has been a matter of emotional debate as well as of earnest study. Certain texts have been the object of intense scrutiny in the process. Among patristic works, the writings of Cyprian have remained a special locus of contention. His view of the role of Peter and his use of the phrase "the chair of Peter" in particular have fascinated generations of scholars and polemicists alike. In this essay, I will argue that Cyprian's view of Peter as the source and font of unity in the Church is still basic to the ecclesiology of the fourth century African author, Optatus of Milevis, and is still operative, albeit in a more vestigial fashion, in the anti-Donatist polemic of Augustine. Their use of the list of Roman bishops in such polemic derives ultimately from Cyprian's view of Peter's role as symbol of unity in the Church and is less directly concerned with Roman primacy than most commentators have usually presumed.

The lists of bishops found in certain early Christian documents have been of interest for several reasons. Those investigating the origins of the monarchical episcopate seek to determine if the names given are historical. They try to clarify the functions of those called episkopoi at the end of the first century. The idea of succession preoccupies others. Succession lists furnished one of the cornerstones for Eusebius in constructing his Church History. It is clear that in the second century, the monarchical episcopate, joined with the claim to apostolic foundation for certain sees, became a key element in elaborating a defence against Gnosticism.

Though Hegesippus spoke of making a diadoche of the bishops of Rome, when his text was cited by Eusebius, no list was given. It was left to Irenaeus to pass on the earliest list still extant. He argued that someone seeking to know the teaching of Jesus should go, not to the Gnostic
masters, but to the Christian communities historically founded in the first century by the Apostles. He stressed that while there were a good number of such communities, especially in the east, for the sake of brevity, he would give only the list of the bishops of the outstanding community of apostolic foundation, Rome. The significance of his argument as well as of the list itself have long been debated. Apart from the list, the meanings of certain words such as principalitas have been the occasion for much research. In recent decades principalitas has been widely accepted as linked to the idea of “nobility or prestige of origin”, referring, of course, to the founding of the Roman church by Peter and Paul and not simply an indication of priority, historical or hierarchical.1

Irenaeus’ work in turn is usually considered to have been the foremost influence on Tertullian as the latter formulated his attack against heresy in the De praescriptione haereticorum. Seekers after truth, such as the Gnostics claimed to be, are invited to make better use of their time and curiosity by consulting their local see of apostolic origin. While he refers to bishop lists as part of his argumentation, Tertullian, unlike Irenaeus, did not actually give any. He did, however, introduce the notion of the “chair” of the Apostles, a term that will become more vital in the writings of Cyprian. Similarly, his use of principalitas in De praescriptione 31.1 may also be revelatory of how Cyprian uses a related word in his letter 59.14.2

As is well-known, in his Montanist period, Tertullian limited the Petrine privileges to Peter personally, denying that such powers were passed on to any successor or group of successors such as the bishops of the institutional Church. The position against which Tertullian is arguing seems to be the belief on the part of some that Peter functioned as the representative of the Church. What he received from Christ was meant for the Church, of which Peter was the symbol.3

Cyprian

The next great African author after Tertullian was Cyprian. Today, most scholars agree with the conclusions of Maurice Bevenot4 that in chapter four of the De unitate ecclesiae, Peter, because he is temporally the first to receive the authority that Christ gives to his Church, becomes for Cyprian the symbol of the unity of the Church. The Church is and must remain one because of the oneness of Peter at its origin. “...Ut unitatem manifestaret, unitatis eiusdem originem ab uno incipientem