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Cyprianus Plebi Cartagini Consistenti and the Origins of Donatism

JESSE HOOVER

Due to its strong condemnation of *traditores* within the church, the pseudo-Cyprianic letter *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* has long been considered a late Donatist forgery. Such a diagnosis has largely sidelined the letter from serious academic consideration beyond supporting the Augustinian claim that the Donatists were willing to alter the Cyprianic corpus in order to advance their cause. In this article, I will offer both an English translation of this short document and a new interpretation as to its origin. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is not, I argue, a Donatist forgery, but rather a misattributed early witness to the origins of the Donatist-Caecilianist schism.

INTRODUCTION

Despite repeated attempts to claim the legacy of Cyprian of Carthage during his long struggle against the Donatist communion, on several occasions Augustine was willing to recognize that the third-century bishop and martyr's rebaptismal theology may well have differed radically from his own. It was "not impossible," Augustine was sometimes prepared to concede, "that Cyprian might have understood baptism in a different way than the truth upheld by the church both before and after him."¹ Such admissions, however, are rare; more often, Augustine's first line of attack is to question whether Cyprian truly advocated rebaptism at all. When writing against the Donatist Cresconius in 405, for instance, Augustine begins by raising the possibility of forgery: "Let us assume, therefore, that Cyprian truly

1. Augustine, *De baptismo contra Donatistas* 3.7.10 (CSEL 51:204): "[N]on fuisse impossibile, ut de baptismo Cyprianus aliquid aliter saperet quam ueritas postulabat, quae ab ecclesia et ante illum et post illum retenta est."

had a different doctrine—if it really is true that the writings which you believe work in your favor were actually written by him . . .”² Elsewhere, Augustine concedes to Vincent, the leader of a Donatist splinter-group, that “Cyprian is found to have held other ideas concerning baptism than is contained in the norm and practice of the Church.”³ However:

It is, nonetheless, not inappropriate that we should think with regard to such a man that he corrected his view, and it was perhaps suppressed by those who were all too pleased by this error and did not want to be without so great a patron. And yet there are some who claim that Cyprian certainly did not hold this view, but that it was made up and attributed to him by bold liars.⁴

Augustine’s accusation that Donatists may have forged those elements of the Cyprianic corpus hostile to his view is likely a rhetorical strategy—after all, he admits in the very next sentence that “we nonetheless do not deny that Cyprian held this view”⁵—but it is effective. By questioning the authorship of the text in question, he can throw his opponents’ basic pre-suppositions off-balance before turning to his main argument.

The claim that Donatists had fabricated parts of the Cyprianic corpus for their own ends, however, seemed at least partially justified in 1899, when the Italian priest and future cardinal Giovanni Mercati identified one of Cyprian’s more obscure letters, *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*, as a Donatist forgery. His argument was simple: despite its attribution to the third-century bishop of Carthage in the *incipit*, the letter’s anachronistic preoccupation with the classification and condemnation of *traditores* marked it as a product of a later age. “Given that the language, the ideas, and the spirit of the letter are essentially Donatist, and the ignorance of earlier Christians of the idea of *traditores*,” Mercati reasoned, “who

2. Augustine, *Contra Cresconium grammaticum et Donatistam* 2.31.39 (CSEL 52:399): “[Q]uamdiu aliter sapuit Cyprianus, si scripta eius esse constat quae pro uobis proferenda arbitramini . . .”

3. Augustine, *Epistula* 93.10.38, trans. Roland Teske in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 2.1 (New York: New City Press, 2001), 399 (CCSL 31A:195): “Cyprianus autem sensisse aliter de baptismo, quam forma et consuetudo habebat ecclesiae.”

4. Augustine, *Epistula* 93.10.38 in Teske, *Works of Saint Augustine* 2.1, 399 (CCSL 31A:195): “Non incongruenter tamen de tali uiro existimandum est, quod correxerit et fortasse suppressum sit ab eis, qui hoc errore nimium delectati sunt, et tanto uelut patrocínio carere noluerunt. Quamquam non desint qui hoc Cyprianum prorsus non sensisse contendant, sed sub eius nomine a praesumptoribus atque mendacibus fuisse confictum.”

5. Augustine, *Epistula* 93.10.39 in Teske, *Works of Saint Augustine* 2.1, 399 (CCSL 31A:195): “Nos tamen . . . non negamus illud sensisse Cyprianum.”

would be foolhardy enough to deny that this—undoubtedly falsified—letter should be attributed to a Donatist?”⁶ “*Is fecit cui prodest*,” he concluded, “it really would have been an immense advantage to the Donatist party if St. Cyprian had written a similar letter. Then the question of the *traditores* would have already been decided half a century before their rise, resolved by the greatest and most revered bishop of the African church up to that point.”⁷ It was a persuasive argument: in the few times it has been mentioned since in academic literature, *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* has generally served as a proof-text supporting Augustine’s claims of Donatist fakery.⁸

In this article, however, I would like to offer an alternate interpretation of the letter’s origin: *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*, I submit, is not in fact a Donatist forgery at all. Rather, it is a valuable and hitherto-unrecognized witness to the origins of the Donatist-Caecilianist schism, its attachment to Cyprian more likely the result of later misattribution than deliberate falsification. By reclaiming this document as a proto-Donatist composition, we will gain a better understanding of the theology and motives of the anti-Caecilianist party at the outset of the schism.

CYPRIANUS PLEBI CARTAGINI CONSISTENTI: TEXT AND TRANSLATION

Given the lack of sustained academic interaction with this relatively short text, I will first offer an English translation of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* alongside the Latin original before proceeding to substantiate

6. Giovanni Mercati, “Un Falso Donatistico Nelle Opere di S. Cipriano” in *Rendiconti del Reale Istituto Lombardo di scienze e lettere*, 2.32 (Milan, 1899), 994: “Il linguaggio, i concetti e lo spirito della lettera essendo quello de’ Donatisti, e nell’antichità cristiana ignorandosi affatto altri che per cagione de traditori . . . sarà egli temerario pensare che questa lettera, indubbiamente falsificata, si debba appunto a qualche donatista?” The article was also reprinted in *Studi e Testi* 77 (1937) 268–78.

7. Mercati, “Falso Donatistico,” 994: “*Is fecit cui prodest*, anche qui occorre dire; e davvero sarebbe stato immenso il vantaggio, che da una simile lettera di s. Cipriano avrebbe ricavato il partito donatista. La questione dei traditori sarebbe già stata risolta mezzo secolo prima che sorgesse, e risolta dal più grande e venerato vescovo della chiesa africana esistito fino allora.”

8. See, for instance, Wolfgang Speyer, *Die Literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum* (Munich: Beck, 1971), 267–68 (“Für Donatisten lagen Fälschungen auf dem Namen Cyprians von Karthago nahe. Ein pseudocyprianischer Brief, der sich als donatistische Trugschrift erweisen läßt, ist auch noch erhalten”), and G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, Vol. 1 (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1983), 118: “The forgers of the third of these letters were Donatists who cherished Cyprian’s works; cf. Augustine, *Contra Cresconium* 2.32.”

my argument. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is an odd document. Written in decidedly idiosyncratic Latin—“almost unintelligible,” in Otto Bardenheuer’s estimation⁹—it has survived only in a single manuscript. BnF lat. 1658, likely copied in the late fourteenth century, first appears among the collection bequeathed to the Collège de Foix by Cardinal Pierre de Foix in 1440 before being transferred to its current residence in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 1680.¹⁰ The manuscript tradition transmitted by BnF lat. 1658 is unique, but exhibits significant parallels with the Veronese manuscript group and the tradition represented by München Staatsbibliothek Clm 18203, both of which seem to be based on early Cyprianic collections of African origin.¹¹ In his introduction to the manuscript traditions underlying the Cyprianic corpus, therefore, C. F. Diercks follows Mercati in positing that BnF lat. 1658 “likely derives from an essentially African (Donatist) archetype from around the fourth century that often agrees with V.”¹² *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is found near the middle of the manuscript, sandwiched between Cyprian’s Letter 55 and Letter 57.¹³

The letter was first included in a critical edition of Cyprian’s works by Étienne Baluze in 1726, who later expressed doubts as to its authenticity but left the question open to future scholarship.¹⁴ Baluze’s text was then

9. Otto Bardenheuer, *Geschichte der altkirchlichen literatur*, Band 2 (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), 504 (“einem fast unverständlichen Latein”). See also Mercati’s assessment (“Falso Donatistico,” 988): “L’A.—un vero concioncellone letterario—una un vocabolario e una grammatica tutta sua particolare.”

10. See John Warwick Montgomery, *The Libraries of France at the Ascendancy of Mazarin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 250n409, and Léopold Delisle, *Le cabinet des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque impériale*, tom. 1 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1881), 507.

11. See CCSL 3D:816–18; 819–20 (μ), and 741n5 (V).

12. CCSL 3D:817.

13. The placement of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* between these two letters is likely intentional. Both *Epistula 55* (to Antonianus) and *Epistula 57* (to Cornelius) deal with the question of the lapsed; indeed, *Epistula 57* is an announcement of the decisions of the 256 Council of Carthage on the question of rebaptism.

14. The 1726 version of Baluze’s *Sancti Caecilii Cypriani . . . opera* (Paris) includes *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* on pp. 167–68 alongside two other letters “which are observed among the letters of Cyprian found in certain older books” (167: “tres epistolae quae sequuntur inter epistolas Cypriani reperiuntur in quibusdam libris antiquis”) without further comment. It is the 1758 edition which first contains a warning about their authenticity: “Although I do not claim that these three letters are by Cyprian, I felt that I should include them here, since they are numbered among Cyprian’s letters in certain ancient manuscripts. Let the scholars examine them.” (400: “Quamvis nolim praestare has tres epistolas esse Cypriani, putavi tamen debere me illas edere in hoc loco, quia referuntur in quibusdam veteribus libris epistolarum sancti Cypriani. Viri docti illas examinabunt.”)

adopted into the *Patrologia Latina*, which appended the warning that it “not only differs excessively from St. Cyprian’s style, but also from his era, since it was written against the betrayers of the holy scriptures, who are first encountered under Diocletian.”¹⁵ An emended version by Guilelmus Hartel appeared in 1871 under Cyprian’s spurious works in CSEL 3.3,¹⁶ while Mercati’s critical edition, which was the first to identify *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* as a Donatist forgery, came out in 1899. Following Mercati’s revision, no new edition of the letter appeared until 1989, when it was translated into French by Jean-Louis Maier.¹⁷ The most recent critical edition of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini* may be found in CCSL 3C, where it appears in Appendix III following Cyprian’s genuine correspondence.¹⁸ In translating this letter into English, I have followed the Latin text found in CCSL 3C, though I have also consulted the original manuscript BnF lat. 1658 and Maier’s French translation.

[Incipit ad plebem
Cartaginis]

CYPRIANUS PLEBI
CARTAGINI CONSISTENTI
AETERNAM IN DOMINO SALUTEM

[Here begins “To the People
of Carthage”]

CYPRIAN TO THE PEOPLE
LIVING IN CARTHAGE:
ETERNAL SALVATION IN THE LORD!

1. Gratias quidem agimus deo patri et domino Iesu Christo, qui uos adunatos atque in conuenticula restituit. Propter quam rem memorauimus et scriptum beatissimorum martyrum atque confessorum uolumus ad consilium nostrum seruare. Iubet desuper maiestas atque spiritus sanctus, cuius in nobis gratia testis est salutaris. Nam cum tractaret de traditoribus, iubet tam in euangelio quam in apostolo, tam in psalmis quam in prophetis et ceteris scripturis: *scrutamini*. Quo scrutato a nobis, inuentis ab iis qui scripturas sanctas tradiderunt non mereri eos congreudi consilium nostrum, id est

1. We are truly grateful to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who have united you and restored you to your churches. Because of this, we have both recounted and sought to preserve the writings of the most blessed martyrs and confessors in our council. Indeed, the divine majesty and the Holy Spirit, who within us witnesses to the grace of our salvation, commands this from on high. For when he discusses the *traditores*, he commands—both in the Gospel and in the Apostle, as much in the Psalms as in the Prophets and in all the other scriptures—“search [them].”¹⁹ Having searched them, we

15. PL 4:817: “Non modo a S. Cypriani stylo nimium differt, sed etiam ejusdem aetatem non sapit, cum aduersus sacrae Scripturae Traditores, primum sub Diocletiano notos, scripta sit.”

16. CSEL 3.3:273–74.

17. Jean-Louis Maier, *Le Dossier du Donatisme 2* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1989), 194–98.

18. CCSL 3C:640–43.

19. As the text indicates, there are a number of citations in the Old Latin translations of the Bible which use some form of the verb “scrutare” when inciting readers

consilium salutare. Nemo est enim qui hoc consilium congregiatur . . . non caelestem spectet. Ac propterea memorauimus ut ii qui taliter scripturas tractauerunt ad statum plebis et iudicium ab ipsis porrectum . . . nec aliqua actio ab ipsis promi, sed nec etiam ad statum sacrificii neque plebis esse proximi: qui utique iam dudum derelicta plebe, nudata altaria, prompta sacrificia.

2. Merito haec memorantes cum maestitia atque dolore animi profici teste ad Dominum quod debuimus statuere: quam omnes disceptationes et dissensiones et haereses et scandala auerant ne ulterius prouocent se homines seu minus fidei seu scripturis leues sint et lectores, id statuimus atque statuto nostro recedi nolumus, ut si qui tradidit praepositus huic plebi mereantur antistitem administrantem altari ac corpore integro. Iis uero iussimus a quibus et sacrificium offerri iubemus.

Merito praeceptis iis obtemperari debet nec aliud fiet quam statim euangelica uox sincera cata Iohannem loquitur. *Nolo*, inquit, *de manibus uestris sacrificia, quia non uenistis ad me cum hostia munda*. Qui utique hostiam mundam non offert, hostia de manibus

have found²⁰ that those who handed over the holy scriptures do not deserve to join our council—the council, that is, of salvation. For no one may join this council . . .²¹ does not consider heaven. Therefore we have stated that those who handled the scriptures in such a way . . . to the place of the people and to the judgment which they themselves put forth,²² nor should they be allowed to perform any [sacrificial] act, nor should they even come near the place of sacrifice or of the people, since they, abandoned long before by the people, left the alters unprotected, left the sacrifices in full view.

2. Rightly recounting these things with sorrow and grief, our hearts bear witness to the Lord about what we have decided: so that all debates and quarrels and heresies and scandals dare not gather to themselves more readers or people of little faith and [those who are] fickle with regards to the scriptures; we have made our decision, and we will not rescind it: if a leader of these people handed over the scriptures, they deserve a priest who is able to oversee the altar and the whole body. Indeed, we have already given this command to those whom we have directed to offer the sacrifice.

It is right that they obey these commands, and not do anything other than what is clearly laid out by the sound voice of the Gospel according to John. Here is what he says: “I do not want sacrifices from your hands, because you do not come to me

to “search” the Scriptures, including Psalm 118[119].2, John 5.39 (which uses the precise form “scrutamini”), Acts 17.11, and 1 Peter 1.10.

20. A difficult passage, of which I have given the gist. Baluze conjectured “inuentum est” instead of “inuentis ab is,” (*Sancti Caecilii Cypriani . . . opera* [1726], 167), while Mercati amended it to “nobis in unum conuenientibus” instead of inuentis” (Mercati, “Falso Donatistico,” 989).

21. BnF lat. 1658 indicates a lacuna at this point with a line.

22. Another difficult passage: While not indicated in BnF lat. 1658, a lacuna is conjectured by CSEL, Maier, and CCSL based on the present near-unintelligibility of the sentence.

eius non ascendit. Nam iterum legimus: *in principio erat uerbum et uerbum erat apud deum et deus erat uerbum*. Qui per uerbum finctionem finxerunt dare res inhabitabiles apud illos seu ueras scripturas sanctas seu finctas qui dat uocem et qui dat desideria proxima, qui utique finget tradere supplebit traditionem.

3. Merito negantes uolumus interim ueniam habere confitentes patres. Nam qui dicit se scripturas non habere, utique paratus fuit et torqueri, quorum exempla habemus. Tertio negauerunt, et sacramentum non tradiderunt. Hi autem qui nec interrogati obtulerunt interim usque ad statum consilii laici communicabunt. Uerumtamen in statum consilii quod scriptura sancta promouerit secundum sententiam fixam sanctis et amicis Dei suppleri uolumus, cum iam testes et proximi aliquid iam dudum statuerant nostri antecessores. Ob quam rem necesse est nos testibus consentire complecti et supplere.

Opto uos in Domino semper bene ualere.

Amen. Deo gratias.

[Ad plebem Cartaginis explicit]

with a clean offering.”²³ Therefore, if someone does not present a clean offering, that offering will not ascend from his hands. And again we read: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and God was the Word.” Those who, by a fake word contrived to give useless things to them, whether the actual holy scriptures or their counterfeits; those who claimed to give them up and those who offered something similar to what their interrogators desired; those who, in other words, pretended to hand them over, have committed an act of *traditio*.

3. Nevertheless, it is our wish—with good reason—that those who denied [that they had the scriptures] should be pardoned: they are confessing fathers.²⁴ For we know of instances in which people said that they did not have the scriptures, and they were certainly also prepared to undergo torture. Three times they denied [that they had them], and did not hand over the Mystery. On the other hand, those who offered up the scriptures without being questioned should be restricted to the place where the laity assembles from now on. In confining them to this place, we are seeking to enforce the holy scriptures, following the decisions established by the saints and friends of God—since our predecessors, who are now eye-witnesses and close [to God], had already adjudicated these matters a long time ago. Therefore, we must join these witnesses and both embrace and enforce [their decision].

I pray that you may always remain strong in the Lord.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

[here ends “To the People of Carthage”]

23. An odd statement, as this quotation is not found in John, but rather appears to be a deformation of Malachi 1.10–11.

24. Another difficult passage: See Maier, *Le Dossier du Donatisme* 1 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1987), 197n22.

THE TRADITIONAL CONSENSUS

As I mentioned earlier, the inauthenticity of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* was quickly recognized. It was Giovanni Mercati's subsequent identification of the letter as Donatist in origin, however, that brought it to the attention of the academic world. Mercati's basic argument, as we have seen, revolved around the letter's sharp opposition toward *traditores*. Such terminology implied a relatively narrow chronological window—i.e., the Diocletianic persecution and its aftermath—and suggested a clear milieu: the Donatist church in North Africa. “Who other than them would take the time to conceive and compose such a letter?” Mercati asked, “I really don't know; and though I have troubled myself to imagine alternative hypotheses, I have never managed to shake what the first reading of the text made clear to me.”²⁵

But the letter was a poor forgery, according to Mercati, its failures manifold and obvious. Other than the Bible itself, “no writings were more widely known [in Africa] than those of Cyprian.”²⁶ But Cyprian's distinctive writing style had nothing in common with the pseudonymous letter, which according to Mercati “knew nothing of culture nor art . . . not even the opening salutation conforms to Cyprian's usual greetings!”²⁷ Even more damning was the author's notorious attempt to link a barely recognizable distortion of Malachi 1.10–11 to the Gospel of John, in striking contrast to the third-century bishop's strong familiarity with the Christian scriptures.²⁸ Such deficiencies, Mercati concluded, accounted for the letter's utter

25. Mercati, “Falso Donatistico,” 995: “E a chi mai, fuori di loro, poteva sovvenire di concepirla e di comporla così . . . Io veramente non so; e per quanto abbia cercato rendermi ragione d'altra possibile ipotesi, non sono mai riuscito ad uscir fuori di quella che fino dalla prima lettura mi si presentò.”

26. Mercati, “Falso Donatistico,” 995: “[D]opo le divine, scritture più conosciute e diffuse di quelle di Cipriano, quanto perchè lo stile culto e la lingua eletta del santo non erano i modelli più propri ad essere imitati.”

27. Mercati, “Falso Donatistico,” 995: “[C]ontraffatti pur grossolanamente da chi non aveva nè coltura nè arte. Nemmeno nella salutatione a principio seppe uniformarsi all'uso cipriano!”

28. Mercati, “Falso Donatistico,” 995: “Che dire poi della supino ed audace ignoranza, per cui attribuisce proprio al notissimo principio dell'evangelo di s. Giovanni un passo liberamente, citato non si sa se da Malachia o da Esaia (1), o dall'uno e dall'altro insieme?” It is worth noting that Cyprian quotes from Malachi 1.10–11 in *Ad Quirinum* 1.16 in order to demonstrate that the Jewish sacrificial system was no longer valid, though his text differs significantly from *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*: “Non est mihi uoluntas circa uos, dicit Dominus, et sacrificium acceptum non habeo ex manibus uestris” (CSEL 3.1:50). Interestingly, Augustine preserves a form of the passage slightly closer to the wording found in the letter in *Contra aduersarium legis et prophetarium* 1.20.39: “Non est mihi uoluntas in uobis, dicit

failure to make an impression in the Donatist-Caecilianist debate: after its disastrous appearance, likely “welcomed by the Catholics with laughter,” Donatist leaders would surely have “cast this weapon, which tended to harm rather than help their cause, far away from them.”²⁹

Mercati’s basic case regarding the origins of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* was revisited by Jean-Louis Maier, who wrote a critical introduction to the letter to accompany its French translation in the second volume of *Le Dossier du Donatisme*, published in 1989. Maier largely agreed with Mercati regarding the text’s ideological background, but sought to locate its original milieu with greater precision. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*, Maier believed, was an artifact from the early fifth century, written by a Donatist author in the aftermath of the disastrous 411 Conference at Carthage. Maier substantiated his thesis by linking the letter thematically to the famous narrative of the Abitinian martyrs, which despite its subject matter is almost certainly a product of the post-Conference environment.³⁰ Maier’s evidence was circumstantial: the council’s decision to condemn the *traditores* in concordance with “the decisions established by the saints and friends of God,”³¹ for instance, is paired with the Abitinian martyrs’ sealing “with their own blood the verdict against the traitors and their associates, rejecting them from the communion of the church,”³² while another footnote claims that the council’s appeal to the Holy Spirit parallels the actions of the Abitinian martyrs, whose judgment “is also presented as a work of the Holy Spirit.”³³ Such a late date

Dominus omnipotens, et *hostiam* non accipiam *de* manibus uestris” (CCSL 49:71). Mercati is likely correct in discerning that the author also seems to have conflated Malachi 1.10–11 with portions of Isaiah 1.11–12 (compare Cyprian, *Ad Quirin.* 1.16 [CSEL 3.1:50]: “[H]olocustomata arietum . . . *nolo*. Quis enim exquisiuit ista *de* manibus uestris?”).

29. Mercati, “Falso Donatistico,” 995: “A risate dovettero i cattolici accogliere la comparsa in battaglia di questo miserabile campione . . . molto probabilmente questi stessi, e certo poi i loro capi intelligenti, se non per vergogna, almen per prudenza avranno buttato da un canto l’arma, che finiva per tornar loro d’offesa, anzi che di vantaggio.” Indeed, as Mercati notes (995), the letter is never alluded to in the Donatist-Caecilianist debates of the late fourth or early fifth centuries, despite Augustine’s accusations that Donatists had falsified other parts of the Cyprianic corpus.

30. Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 1:57–58.

31. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 3: “[S]ecundum sententiam fixam sanctis et amicis Dei.”

32. *Passio sanctorum Datiui, Saturnini presbyteri et aliorum* 2, trans. Maureen Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 29 (Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 1:62): “[S]ententiam in traditores atque in eorum consortes qua illos ab ecclesiae communione reiecerant cuncti martyres proprio sanguine consignabant.”

33. Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 2:195n14: “La prétendue sentence des martyrs d’Abitinae est aussi présentée comme l’oeuvre du Saint-Esprit.”

of composition also neatly answers why the text is not mentioned in the history of the controversy: it was simply composed too late to be an effective polemical weapon.

With one exception, discussed below, Mercati and Maier remain the only two scholars to have interacted with *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* at any length, and their basic argument regarding the text has been overwhelmingly accepted. In virtually all academic writings that mention the work, *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is described as a Donatist forgery written in the early fifth century, and its primary importance in the world of early Christian studies lies in its ability to support the Augustinian claim that his opponents were willing to alter the Cyprianic corpus in order to advance their cause.³⁴

CRITIQUING THE CONSENSUS

In my research, I have found only one cautious dissent from the prevailing paradigm. Examining the letter's virtually unique use of the term "sacramentum" to denote the text of the Bible in their 1924 publication *Pour l'histoire du mot "Sacramentum" I: Les Anténicéens*, Joseph de Ghellinck and Georges Lebacqz observed that while Mercati's appeal to forgery was certainly plausible, there was another explanation for the letter's Cyprianic attribution: the title *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* might simply have been "the result of a copyist's error."³⁵ Perhaps, they speculated, the letter was originally "an official report of a [Donatist] council transmitted in the form of a letter by one of its attendees and attributed by clerical error to the great bishop of Carthage."³⁶ Due to the nature of their project, however, they did not pursue the matter further.

In the remainder of this article, I would like to explore the feasibility of de Ghellinck and Lebacqz's tentative solution to the question of *Cyprianus*

34. See, for example, Bardenhewer, *Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur* 2.504; Speyer, *Die Literarische Fälschung*, 267–68; Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, 1:118; and Brent Shaw, *Sacred Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 69n14: "The composition is most probably of late fourth- or early fifth-century date. The attribution to Cyprian was made, obviously, in order vicariously to claim the authority of the founding father of African Christianity."

35. Joseph de Ghellinck, Émile de Backer, Jean Poukens, and Georges Lebacqz, *Pour l'histoire du mot "Sacramentum" I: Les Anténicéens* (Louvain, 1924), 300n1: "Mgr. Mercati est d'avis que la fraude est intentionnelle; nous le croyons volontiers, mais l'attribution cyprianique peut aussi provenir d'une erreur due au copiste."

36. Joseph de Ghellinck et al., *Pour l'histoire du mot "Sacramentum,"* 300: "[R]elation officieuse d'un concile transmise sous forme de lettre par un des membres et attribuée par une erreur de copiste au grand évêque de Carthage."

plebi Cartagini consistenti's origin. To restate my thesis in more detail, I believe that *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is a document dating from the beginning of what we might call the Donatist-Caecilianist schism, though neither name would have been appropriate at the time, and that it preserves the actual record of a proto-Donatist deliberation on the question of *traditores*: the letter's attribution to Cyprian is almost certainly not original to the text. In order to substantiate this hypothesis, I will therefore need to address two related concerns: first, why the content of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* ought to be divorced from its title, and second, why the letter should be dated near the beginning of the Donatist schism rather than to the aftermath of the 411 Conference at Carthage, as Maier claims.

So what reasons do we have for claiming that *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is the lost record of an ancient council rather than a deliberate falsification? To begin, we may echo Mercati's own assessment: if the letter is indeed a forgery of the kind Augustine alludes to in *Epistula* 93 and *Contra Cresconium*, it is a poor one. For a document that allegedly sought to appropriate Cyprian for the Donatist side, the letter makes little effort to imitate the real Cyprian's style or historical milieu. Mercati calls it a "miserable specimen, armed with only the bare name of St. Cyprian." He continues, "If only it had been able to disguise itself in garments that bore even a little resemblance, . . . not even the opening salutation conforms to Cyprian's usual greetings!"³⁷ Jean-Louis Maier, too, castigated the author of the letter for his catastrophic failure to imitate the Carthaginian bishop's scriptural allusions: "What would Cyprian say if he saw attributed to him here as a citation from the Fourth Gospel a mixture of Malachi and Isaiah? This confusion is a new witness to the author of our letter's lack of culture."³⁸

We might indeed attribute these gross divergences from the real Cyprian's literary style to a "lack of culture" on the part of the alleged forger if the letter's content contained any allusion to the North African bishop and martyr. But Cyprian is never mentioned within the main body of the letter, nor does the author make any attempt to fit the council he describes

37. Mercati, "Falso Donatistico," 995: "[M]iserabile campione armato del nudo nome di s. Cipriano. Avesse egli almeno almeno saputo camuffarsi con vesti alcun poco somiglianti . . . Nemmeno nella salutatione a principio seppe uniformarsi all uso cipriatico!"

38. Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 2:196n19: "Que dirait Cyprien s'il voyait qu'on lui attribue ici comme citation du quatrième Évangile un mélange de Malachie et d'Isaïe? Cette confusion est un nouvel indice du manque de culture de l'auteur de notre lettre."

into a third-century milieu. In fact, were it not for the fact that Cyprian's name appears in the *incipit*, there would be little reason to view *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* as pseudonymous in nature. The letter's failure, in the eyes of Mercati and Maier, to live up to Cyprian's high stylistic and exegetical standards might simply indicate that it was never intended to bear the name of Cyprian in the first place.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate why the absence of biographical details about Cyprian's life poses a problem for a pseudonymic interpretation of the letter is to compare *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* with a known Donatist counterfeit. *Ad Damasum Papam*, which purports to be a letter by Jerome of Stridon to Pope Damasus I, was identified by Donatien De Bruyne in 1931 as a likely Donatist forgery on both linguistic and thematic grounds.³⁹ The letter begins by denouncing the Caecilianist bishop of Carthage, Restitutus, as an Arian heretic; it then proceeds to subtly undermine Damasus's own claim to theological legitimacy, asserting that "because of what is taught in the churches by almost all the bishops in your provinces . . . we suspect something else from your silence."⁴⁰ Even the eastern regions where Jerome is allegedly staying are not immune from the taint of heresy: "During the era of the demented Constantine, Arius was unable to have his wish fulfilled. But what can we do if such errors are taught in the church of Ephesus, if we can't have faith in these people? . . . We were afraid even to shake their hands."⁴¹ Specifically Donatist concerns are never mentioned—but the letter's attempt to undermine both Caecilianist and transmarine claims to orthodoxy, the presence of several well-known "Africanisms" within the text, and the author's characterization of Constantine as "demented" point to a likely origin within that communion.⁴² Jerome, at least, is clearly not its author.

And yet the letter *Ad Damasum Papam* goes to great lengths to identify itself as Hieronymian. The author references Jerome's early love of pagan philosophy and rhetoric and subsequent rejection of it, his quarrel

39. See Donatien De Bruyne, "Une lettre apocryphe de Jérôme fabriquée par un Donatiste" in *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 30 (1931): 70–76.

40. *Ad Damasum Papam* (PLS 1.303): "[E]t in tuis prouinciis, id est in Italia, pene omnes episcopi in ecclesia docent . . . aliud suspicemur de tuo silentio."

41. *Ad Damasum Papam* (PLS 1.303): "Temporibus dementissimi Constantini de Arrio contigerit ut uoluntatis suae effectum non haberet. Quid ad nos quoniam Ephesi ecclesiae talia docebant et fides in ipsis habitare non potuit . . . Eis manus iungere timuimus."

42. De Bruyne, "Une lettre apocryphe," 71–72. While the letter likely originated in Donatist circles, my broader point still stands even if it comes from some other anti-Carthaginian, anti-Roman axis, such as the Luciferians.

with Rufinus, and his eastern sojourn (though the reference to Ephesus is odd).⁴³ Biographical details like these lend credence to the forged letter's main point, i.e., that a highly influential theologian within the opposing communion had condemned Restitutus, Damasus, and the rest of the transmarine world on grounds of heresy. We recognize *Ad Damasum Papam* as a forgery not only on the strength of its overarching message, which is antithetical to the real Jerome's views, but also because of the attention it pays to personal and geographical details about its alleged author's life in order to support its mythos. The success of the letter is predicated on the identity of its supposed writer. Notice the contrast with *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*: if it is true that, as Mercati argues, the letter was composed so that "the question of the *traditores* would have already been decided half a century before their rise, and resolved by the greatest and most revered bishop of the African church up to that time,"⁴⁴ why is Cyprian never named outside the title?

In fact, *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* likely does contain an oblique allusion to Cyprian himself, but it does not fit within the paradigm of a forgery. Near the end of the letter, the council defends its decision to restrict repentant *traditores* to the laity by appealing to "our predecessors," who "had already adjudicated these matters a long time ago."⁴⁵ Both Mercati and Maier interpret this phrase as a far-fetched attempt to, in Maier's words, "ground the condemnation of *traditores* even earlier than the mid-third century!"⁴⁶ Far-fetched it certainly sounds—so long as we view the text through the lens of forgery. But if we allow for the

43. Pagan philosophy: "[D]eploring the eagerness I had acquired in childhood . . . according to which I followed the works of the dialecticians, the rhetoricians, and the philosophers." (PLS 1:304: [D]olens studium ab infantia . . . quaesitum de quo dialecticos et rhetores et philosophorum"). Rufinus: "Or perhaps you don't know that such audacity should be punished, just like the deception of Rufinus was revealed under our pressure and, moved by shame, he left the snares of the devil and returned to wisdom?" (PLS 1:304: "Aut forsitan ignoras talia praesumi uindicanda sicut Rufini fraus nobis cogentibus patefacta est et uerecundia ductus a diaboli laqueo respuit?"). Eastern sojourn: "Each time that we've stayed in this province, they taught those errors and I asked them the rule of faith . . ." (PLS 1:304: "Quotiens accolae fuimus in ipsius prouincia et talia docebant et petii ab eis fidei regulam . . .").

44. Mercati, "Falso Donatistico," 994: "La questione dei traditori sarebbe già stata risolta mezzo secolo prima che sorgesse, e risolta dal più grande e venerato vescovo della chiesa africana esistito fino allora."

45. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 3: "[A]liquid iam dudum statuerant nostri antecessores."

46. Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 2:197n26: "Le pseudo-Cyprien entend faire remonter la condamnation des traditeurs même plus haut que le milieu du III^e siècle!" See also Mercati, "Falso Donatistico," 994.

possibility that the letter is a record of an actual council, then the mention of “predecessors” who demoted bishops who had compromised in the face of persecution to lay status has a fairly obvious referent: Cyprian himself. In a council called in Carthage in 254/256 to deal with the question of whether the lapsed Spanish bishops Felix and Sabinus, “defiled by idolatrous certificates and enslaved in conscience by their abominable crimes,”⁴⁷ could retain their former clerical positions, Cyprian and his colleagues answered in the negative:

Men of such character are incapable of presiding over the Church of Christ, nor is it right that they should offer sacrifices to God. And this is especially so since some time ago now our colleague and fellow bishop, Cornelius . . . joined with us and with every one of the bishops throughout the world in decreeing that it was indeed possible for men of such character to be admitted to do penance but that they were to be debarred from holding clerical office and episcopal rank.⁴⁸

Interpreting the “predecessors, who are now eyewitnesses and close [to God]” as a reference to Cyprian in general and the 254 Carthaginian council in particular is a far more natural reading of the text than accusing the author of fabricating a pre-Cyprianic genealogy.

WHEN WAS *CYPRIANUS PLEBI CARTAGINI CONSISTENTI* WRITTEN?

It is therefore unlikely, in my opinion, that *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is a deliberate forgery. But when was it actually written? In this section, I will argue on both theological and linguistic grounds that the letter most likely belongs among the earliest strata of what would later become the Donatist communion.

47. Cyprian, *Epistula* 67.1.1, in ACW 47:21 (CCSL 3C:447): “[L]ibellis idolatriae conmaculatos et nefandorum facinorum conscientia uinctos.” The exact date of the council is disputed. For a defense of the 254 date, see Geoffrey Dunn, “Cyprian of Carthage and the Episcopal Synod of Late 254,” in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 48 (2002), 230–37, while arguments for the 256 date are summarized by G. W. Clarke in *Letters of St. Cyprian*, 142–44.

48. Cyprian, *Epistula* 67.6.3, in ACW 47:25–26 (CCSL 3C:457): “[M]anifestius sit eiusmodi homines nec ecclesiae Christi posse praeesse nec deo sacrificia offerre debere, maxime cum iam pridem nobiscum et cum omnibus omnino episcopis in toto mundo constitutis etiam Cornelius collega noster . . . decreuerit eiusmodi homines ad paenitentiam quidem agenda[m] posse admitti, ab ordinatione autem cleri atque sacerdotali honore prohiberi.”

Theological Milieu

By the time of the 411 Conference at Carthage, the Donatist church had become notorious for its insistence on rebaptizing converts from other Christian sects. Indeed, much of the struggle over who could rightly lay claim to Cyprian's legacy centered around the third-century bishop's support for the practice.⁴⁹ We encounter such battles on numerous occasions in the writings of Augustine, who often sought to relativize Cyprian's authority—"writings of this sort," he maintained, "are to be distinguished from the authority of the canonical books"⁵⁰—before asserting that, at any rate, Cyprian's willingness to maintain communion with those who disagreed with his views on the matter contrasted sharply with the Donatist communion's current stance.⁵¹ Here too, as we have seen, belong accusations of forgery: "By his authority you occasionally try to support the repetition of baptism," Augustine reproaches Macrobius, his Donatist counterpart in Hippo, in a typical example, "although that council or those writings, if they are really his and were not, as some think, written under his name and attributed to him, contain his great love for unity."⁵²

Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti, however, is not about rebaptism. Instead, it focuses on penitential issues: whether those who had denied that they had the scriptures in their possession ought to be punished, how to deal with bishops who had offered sacrifice, whether handing over fake texts made one a *traditor*. These are archaic concerns, applicable only to those who had lived through the Diocletianic persecution; while the validity of their baptism was unquestioned (because administered prior to the rift), their actions were not. This emphasis on penance rather than rebaptism is paralleled by other documents that date to the early years of the schism. The oddly-titled *Sermo de passione sanctorum Donati et Advocati*, for instance, which was likely written prior to the Macarian persecution,⁵³

49. Examples of Donatists referencing Cyprian's views on rebaptism are found in Augustine, *Epistula* 93.10.36, *Bapt.* 2.1.2, and *Cresc.* 1.32.38 and 2.32.40, among others.

50. Augustine, *Epistula* 93.10.35, in Teske, *Works of Saint Augustine* 2.1, 398 (CCSL 31A:193): "[H]oc genus litterarum ab auctoritate canonis distinguendum est."

51. Augustine, *Epistula* 93.10.36.

52. Augustine, *Epistula* 108.3.9, trans. Roland Teske in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 2.2 (New York: New City Press, 2003), 73 (CCSL 31B:72): "Cuius auctoritate aliquando repetitionem baptismi confirmare conamini, cum illud concilium uel illa scripta, si uere ipsius sunt et non, sicut aliqui putant, sub eius nomine conscripta atque conficta, ipsa contineant, quantum dilexerit unitatem."

53. Proposals for the date this martyrological sermon was given vary. Given that the sermon appears to presuppose a peaceful setting (*Passio sancti Donati* 1: "Instruction

locates the sin of the Caecilianists in their pride: “[The Devil] took away their humility, the only way to tame the anger of an indignant God, and he substituted pride . . . promoting the idea that the lapsed, the deserters of heavenly sacraments, could illicitly hold ecclesiastical office again.”⁵⁴ A similar focus on penance also appears in a snippet of the original council called by Secundus which deposed Caecilian in 312, preserved in the fifth-century work *Contra Fulgentium Donatistam*. Here, we hear that Marcian, a proto-Donatist bishop, had claimed that “*traditores, thurificatores*, and those who stand condemned by their schism cannot remain in the Church of God, unless they are reconciled to it through penance, making their cries publically.”⁵⁵ Such a position is not found among Donatists of Augustine’s era, who did not believe that contemporary Caecilianists could abjure their schismatic allegiance through penance alone.

Locating the letter near the beginning of the schism also allows us to make sense of its odd and unelaborated reference to “readers”—*lectores*—as potential conduits of sedition: “so that all debates and quarrels and heresies and scandals dare not gather to themselves more readers or people of little faith and fickle with regards to the scriptures.”⁵⁶ We learn from the court records in the *Gesta apud Zenophilum* and elsewhere that *lectores* were sometimes targeted by state officials during the persecution due to the fact that they often kept the scriptural codices in their houses.⁵⁷ This

is even more necessary when there is no obvious contention on an issue,” in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 52; Dolbeau, “La ‘Passio sancti Donati,’” 256: “Magis enim necessarior instructio illis est ubi professa hostilitas non est”), the most likely scenario, following Schaferdiek (“Der *Sermo de passione*,” 177) is that the sermon was composed sometime between the end of the Constantinian repression in 321 and the beginning of the Macarian persecution under Constans I (c. 347).

54. *Passio sancti Donati* 2 in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 54 (Dolbeau, “La ‘Passio sancti Donati,’” 258): “Ablata humilitate qua sola possent iram Dei indignantis mitigare insinuataque superbia . . . posset ualidius tenere lapsos illicite rursus honores ecclesiasticos usurpantes quam tunc tenuerat sacramentorum caelestium desertores.”

55. *Contra Fulgentium* 2.24 (Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 2:284): “Ita turificati, traditores, abhorrentes deo manere in ecclesia dei non possunt, nisi, cognito ululatu suo, per paenitentiam reconcilientur.”

56. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 2: “Quam omnes disceptationes et dissensiones et haereses et scandalia auferant ne ulterius prouocent se homines seu minus fidei seu scripturis leues sint et lectores.”

57. See the *Gesta apud Zenophilum* 3–5 (Appendix 1 in Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam*), noting especially Paul the bishop’s claim to the curator Felix that “the readers have the codices” and Felix’s subsequent command to “show me the readers or send to them” (trans. Mark Edwards in *Optatus: Against the Donatists*, [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997], 153; CSEL 26:186: “[S]cripturas lectores habent . . . ostende lectores aut mitte ad illos.”). *Lectores* are also summoned before the curator Magnilianus in the *Passio sancti Felicis episcopi* 1.

is an aspect of the early schism often brushed over by later Donatists, who tended to focus their ire on *trahitor* bishops, but a detail we would expect to find in a document dating from that era.

Linguistic Background

Other elements characteristic of early Donatism—but crucially, *not* of either Cyprian or the Donatist church of the late fourth or early fifth centuries—are linguistic in nature. One noted by de Ghellinck and Lebacqz, and particularly convincing to me, occurs at the conclusion to the letter. As can be seen above, the council ends its missive with the words “Deo gratias”—“thanks be to God.” Within the North African ecclesial world of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, however, this was not a neutral phrase. Rather, it was an identity-marker, a shibboleth that divided Donatists from their Caecilianist rivals. Donatists appear to have eschewed the phrase “Deo gratias” as Caecilianist terminology, preferring instead the alternate exclamation “Deo laudes”—“praise be to God.” This is, at least, the state of affairs portrayed to us by Augustine: “They presume to rail at us because our brethren, on meeting people, say, *Deo gratias!* ‘What’s that—*Deo gratias?*’ the heretics ask. Are you so dull that you don’t know what *Deo gratias* means? Anyone who says *Deo gratias* is giving thanks to God You find in our *Deo gratias* an excuse for derision, but people find in your *Deo laudes* a cause for weeping.”⁵⁸

While we ought to be careful about pressing Augustine’s dichotomy too far,⁵⁹ Donatist sources also attest to the linguistic divide. In the Caecilianist rendition of the *Acta proconsularia sancti Cypriani*, a contemporary account of the bishop’s trial and martyrdom, Cyprian responds to the proconsul’s sentence of death with the words “Deo gratias.”⁶⁰ “He accepts

58. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 132.6, trans. Maria Boulding in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 3.20 (New York: New City Press, 2004), 180 (CCSL 40:1930): “Hi item insultare nobis audent, quia fratres, cum uident homines, Deo gratias dicunt. Quid est, inquit, Deo gratias? Itane surdus es, ut nescias quid sit, Deo gratias? Qui dicit: Deo gratias, gratias agit Deo . . . uos Deo gratias nostrum ridetis: Deo laudes uestrum plorant homines.” Other places in which Augustine characterizes the phrase as a Donatist slogan occur in *Petil.* 2.65.46, *Epistula* 108.5.14, and *Sermo* 313E.6.

59. We find, for instance, that Augustine’s own congregation, upon witnessing the miraculous recovery of an epileptic, shouts “Deo gratias! Deo laudes!” (*De civitate Dei* 22.8).

60. See *Acta proconsularia sancti Cypriani* 4 (in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. and trans. Herbert Musurillo [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972], 172): “Et decretum ex tabella recitauit: Thascium Cyprianum gladio animaduerti placet. Cyprianus episcopus dixit: Deo gratias.”

the sentence, and quite rightly says ‘Thanks be to God,’ because he has quite rightly confessed Christ,” Augustine would comment in a sermon celebrating his martyrdom: “How insane can you get, you Donatists, you rabid dogs! *Thanks* be to God. They say they are celebrating Cyprian’s birthday; their ‘*Praise* be to God’ is a cry all Christian people dread.”⁶¹ But Donatists had their own version of Cyprian’s martyrdom account. In a redaction of the *Acta* contained in a Donatist collection of Cyprianic materials, Cyprian responds very differently to the proconsul’s proclamation: “*Deo laudes.*”⁶²

It does not, therefore, seem likely that that a Donatist writing in the highly-charged aftermath of the 411 Conference at Carthage, as per Maier’s dating of the text, would conclude a pseudo-Cyprianic letter with the phrase “*Deo gratias.*” Perhaps, however, the author was trying to imitate Cyprian’s distinctive writing style by including the phrase? This, too, seems improbable: the Carthaginian bishop’s contested final words aside, “*Deo gratias*” is not common within the Cyprianic corpus. Indeed, de Ghellinck and Lebacqz flatly state that “*Deo gratias* is not . . . Cyprianic”: as a statement of exclamation or farewell, it simply does not appear in Cyprian’s authentic letters.⁶³

Where does this leave us? It is unlikely that Maier is correct in dismissing “*Deo gratias*” as “the addition of a later copyist,”⁶⁴ given that an official

61. Augustine, *Sermo* 313E.6, trans. Maria Boulding in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 3.19 (New York: New City Press, 2003), 114 (PLS 2:620): “O insani Donatistae! O rabidi! Deo gratias. Cypriani celebrare se dicunt natale; deo laudes ipsorum omnes viri Christiani formidant.”

62. For the text, see the *Passio Cypriani* in Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 1:123–26. The generally accepted view is that the Donatist redactor has changed the wording in order to spare Cyprian the use of “Caecilianist” terminology, but cf. Alden Bass, “The *Passion of Cyprian* in the So-Called ‘Donatist Dossier’ of Würzburg M. p. th. f. 33” in *The Use of Textual Criticism for the Interpretation of Patristic Texts: Seventeen Case Studies*, eds. Kenneth Steinhauser and Scott Dermer (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2013), 209–32, who argues that “*Deo laudes*” was in fact the original reading and was changed to its current form by later *Caecilianist* editors. Either way, the interpolation buttresses Augustine’s claim that the two phrases served as identity markers within the rival communities.

63. De Ghellinck et al., *Pour l’histoire du mot “Sacramentum,”* 300n1: “[L]e *deo gratias* ne l’est pas . . . cyprianique.” The words “*deo gratias*” appear twice elsewhere in the Cyprianic corpus, but only as part of a larger phrase: *Mort.* 25 (“et tu non *deo gratias agis*”) and *Ad Demetr.* 26 (“*agentes deo gratias semper*”).

64. Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 2:194: “On n’invoquera pas le «*Deo gratias*» final pour trancher la question, car nous pensons qu’il s’agit d’une adjonction de copiste.”

explicit occurs only after the phrase.⁶⁵ Instead, I propose that its presence in *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* offers us a valuable clue as to the letter's true origin. As we have just seen, the phrase appears as a Caecilianist identity marker by the late fourth century. But it was not always so controversial. Indeed, "Deo gratias" boasted a long pedigree within the North African martyrological tradition, beginning with the Scillitan martyrs and the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitas*.⁶⁶ As we have already seen in Cyprian's *Acta*, it was a statement of defiance in the face of death, and of hope in a future resurrection. It is not surprising, therefore, that the phrase is also found within martyrological *acta* relating to the Diocletianic persecution, including Felix of Thibiuca, Crispina of Tebessa, and, significantly, Tazelita and Hilarianus from among the famous Abitinian martyrs, later appropriated by the Donatist communion.⁶⁷ More immediately parallel to the council described in *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is the appearance of "Deo gratias" at the conclusion of the council of Circa in 305, headed by the same Secundus of Tigisi who would later elect Maiorinus in place of Caecilian.⁶⁸ *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*'s casual use of the phrase in its own doxology fits comfortably into this milieu, in sharp contrast to the linguistically-polarized atmosphere of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

65. As seen above, BnF lat. 1658 concludes *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* with the words "Ad plebem Cartaginis explicit."

66. See *Passio Scillitanorum* 17 (Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 88): "Uniuersi dixerunt: Deo gratias"; and the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitas* 12.7: After Perpetua and Saturus reach paradise in the latter's vision, Perpetua states "Thanks be to God, that joyous as I was in the flesh, I am now more joyous here" (Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 120): "Deo gratias, ut, quomodo in carne hilaris fui, hilarior sim et hic modo."

67. See the *Passio sanctae Crispinae* 2.4 (Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 306: "Crispina respondit: Benedico Deum qui sic me de manibus tuis dignatus est liberare. Deo gratias!") and *Passio sanctorum Dativi, Saturnini presbyteri et aliorum* 5 (Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 1:66: "At contra gloriosissimus Tazelita martyr media de ipsa carnificum rabie huiusmodi preces Domino cum gratiarum actione effundebat: Deo gratias") and 15 (Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 1:84: "Ingentique cum gaudio Hilariani auditur dicentis: Deo gratias"). I accept Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri's argument ("Note agiografiche," in *Studi et Testi* 65 [1935], 4–6) that the *Passio Saturnini* contains an original core narrative later embellished by a Donatist editor around the time of the 411 Conference at Carthage, particularly in its opening and concluding sections. The appearances of "Deo gratias" in the account are thus likely indigenous to the original martyrology rather than a later Donatist addition.

68. "Et omnes responderunt: deo gratias." The minutes of the council at Circa are preserved in Augustine, *Cresc.* 3.27.30 (CSEL 52:435–37).

Another use of terminology that appears incompatible with both Cyprian and fifth century North African polemical warfare can be found in the opening sentence of the letter. “We are truly grateful to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” the author writes, “who have united you and restored you to your *conuenticula*.”⁶⁹ *Conuenticula*, which I have translated above as “churches,” is an odd word to use if the author is attempting to imitate Cyprian. While the third-century bishop does use the term twice in his writings, its meaning is uniformly negative. “For it is not we who have left them, but they who have left us,” Cyprian charges his opponents in *De unitate ecclesiae*, “and by setting up *conuenticula* in opposition and thus creating new sects and schisms, they have cut themselves off from the source and origin of the Christian realities.”⁷⁰ Similarly, in *Epistula 59* Cyprian excoriates those who “have set up for themselves outside and beyond the church [*ecclesiam*] and in opposition to the church a *conuenticulum* for their lawless faction.”⁷¹

Clearly, *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is not trying to echo Cyprian’s use of the term. Yet neither is it likely that the letter is reflecting fifth-century norms. While occasionally used in a neutral sense as a synonym for *ecclesia*, the implied diminutive present in *conuenticulum* encouraged a more negative connotation: *conuenticula*, or “little assemblies,” were places where *heretics* met, in opposition to the “great church” spread throughout the nations.⁷² This was especially true in ecclesiastically-riven North Africa. Optatus, for instance, uses the term *conuenticulum* in his attack on Parmenian to describe the place where Donatists worshipped

69. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 1: “Gratias quidem agimus deo patri et domino Iesu Christo, qui uos adunatos atque in conuenticula restituit.”

70. Cyprian, *De unitate ecclesiae* 12 in ACW 25:54–55 (CCSL 3:258): “Non enim nos ab illis, sed illi a nobis recesserunt et, cum haeresis et schismata postmodum nata sint dum conuenticula sibi diuersa constituunt, ueritatis caput adque originem reliquerunt.”

71. Cyprian, *Epistula 59*.14.1 in ACW 46:81 (CCSL 3C:361): “Foris sibi extra ecclesiam et contra ecclesiam constituisse conuenticulum perditae factionis.”

72. See the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* 4.844–45, s.v. “conuenticulum”: “[S]aepe cum contemptu dictum, apud ecclesiasticos praecipue de haereticis.” Prominent examples of the term’s use in a derogatory sense include Ambrose, *Ep. ex. 1*; Lucifer of Calaris, *De non conu. 5*; Jerome, *Lucif. 3*; and Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* 26.69. A likely explanation for the term’s pejorative reputation is its appearance in Psalm 15[16].4 in many of the *Vetus Latina* traditions: “Non congregabo conuenticula eorum de sanguinibus” (“I will not join in their assembly of blood”). Authors who call attention to this negative connotation include Arnobius Junior, *Psal. 15*; Eucherius, *Instr. 1*; Jerome, *In Psal. 15, Tract. Psal. 15*; and Augustine, *Psal. 15.4–5*.

when in Rome.⁷³ *Conuenticula* are referenced by Augustine far more often, almost always in contrast to *ecclesiae*: they are the “obscure and hidden” places inhabited by Manichaeans, Tertullianists, and Jews who plot the church’s downfall.⁷⁴ Above all, the term is applied to Donatist basilicas and other places of worship. “*They have destroyed what God made perfect,*” Augustine charges the Donatists, quoting from Psalm 10[11], “Where have they done that, if not in their *conuenticula*, where instead of feeding milk to little children and those who do not know the inner light, they kill them instead with poison?”⁷⁵

Indeed, by the late fourth century the negative connotations of the word had been enshrined in the legal vocabulary of the state. Anti-heretical legislation targeting Manichaeans, Eunomians, and other “heretics,” for instance, do not seek to shut down *ecclesiae*, but *conuenticula*.⁷⁶ More relevant to our immediate concerns, Donatist churches are also referred to as *conuenticula* in legal documents of the era. At the conclusion of the 411 Conference at Carthage, for instance, the imperial legate Marcellinus ordered that “the *conuenticula* of the Donatists in every city and region must be immediately closed.”⁷⁷ Similar edicts characterizing Donatist churches as *conuenticula* were promulgated in 412 and 414 by Honorius and Theodosius II.⁷⁸

Indeed, Donatists themselves were known to deploy the term against their opponents. In the bitter condemnations of the Abitinian martyrs against the *traditor* Mensurius and his deacon Caecilian (likely appended to the original narrative in the wake of the 411 Conference by a Donatist

73. Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 2.4 (CSEL 26:39): “Sic speluncam quamdam foris a ciuitate cratibus saepserunt, ubi ipso tempore conuenticulum habere potuissent: unde Montenses appellati sunt.”

74. See Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.10.23; *De moribus ecclesiae* 2.19.69; *Epistula* 118.12; *Contra epistolam Manichaei* 3.4 (Manichaeans); *De haeresibus* 86 (Tertullianists); *Epistula* 138.7 (Jews).

75. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 10.6, trans. Maria Boulding in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 3.15 (New York: New City Press, 2000), 166 (CCSL 38:79): “*Quae perfecisti destruxerunt*. Ubi, nisi in conuenticulis suis, ubi paruulos et interioris lucis ignaros, non lacte nutriunt, sed uenenis necant?”

76. See *Codex Theodosianus* 16.2.37, 16.4.4, 16.4.5 (unnamed assemblies); 16.5.7.3 (Manichaeans); 16.5.10 (Tascodrogitae); 16.8.20 (Jews); 16.5.58.5, 16.6.7 (Eunomians); 16.5.57 (Montanists).

77. *Gesta collationis Carthaginiensis*, “Edictum cognitoris” (CCSL 149A:178): “Donatistarum conuenticula in omnibus ciuitatibus et locis prohibere contendant.”

78. *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.52.5: “ecclesiis eorum vel conuenticulis” (412); *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.54.6: “si permiserint in isdem praediis conuenticula haberi” (414).

editor), for example, we find the true church, the “ecclesiam martyrum,” explicitly contrasted with the false church of the Caecilianists, a “conuenticula traditorum.”⁷⁹ My point is this: by the early fifth century, the term *conuenticula* was not a positive way to describe one’s own churches, and Donatists were well aware of it.

It is, therefore, unlikely that *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*’s positive reference to *conuenticula* dates to the late fourth or early fifth centuries. There is, however, a brief time period between the time of Cyprian and the era of Augustine in which we find an alternate interpretation of *conuenticula* within North African sources. Unsurprisingly, this era coincides with the general period of the Diocletianic repression and its aftermath. Arnobius of Sicca Veneria, author of a polemical treatise written in 303 in response to the outbreak of persecution under Diocletian, mentions *conuenticula* as a general synonym for church buildings: “Why,” he asks the persecutors, “have our writings deserved to be given to the flames? Why should our *conuenticula* be savagely torn down? In them the Supreme God is prayed to, peace and forgiveness are asked for all magistrates, armies, rulers, friends, enemies.”⁸⁰ A similarly positive portrayal of *conuenticula* is found in the writings of Lactantius—four times in *De mortibus persecutorum*, and once in the *Divinae institutiones*. When defending the relatively mild repression under Constantius, for instance, Lactantius notes that while he “allowed the *conuenticula*—that is, the walls, which can be rebuilt—to be pulled down, he kept safe the true temple of God, which is located in humans.”⁸¹ Once again, we find that *conuenticulum* for Lactantius describes the physical structure of a Christian church, very much in line with *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*’s note of thanks that Christ has “restored” the faithful to their *conuenticula*.⁸²

We even have evidence that at least some Donatists utilized the word in this sense during the first half of the fourth century. The earlier-mentioned

79. *Passio sanctorum Datiui, Saturnini presbyteri et aliorum* 22 (Maier, *Dossier du Donatisme* 1:89).

80. Arnobius, *Adversus nationes*, 4.36 in ACW 8:407 (CSEL 4:171): “Nam nostra quidem scripta cur ignibus meruerunt dari? Cur immaniter conuenticula dirui, in quibus summus oratur deus, pax cunctis et uenia postulatur magistratibus exercitibus regibus familiaribus inimica.”

81. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 15 (CSEL 27:2): “Constantius . . . conuenticula id est parietes, qui restitui poterant, dirui passus est, uerum autem dei templum, quod est in hominibus, incoluue seruauit.” The other four examples come from *De mort.* 34, 36, and 38, and *Divinae Institutiones* 5.11.

82. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 1: “[U]os . . . in conuenticula restituit.”

Sermo de passione sanctorum Donati et Advocati is a sermon delivered in memory of several victims of Constantine's suppression of Donatist churches between 317 and 321. Its denunciation of Caecilian and those allied with him is searing: "Who denies that such deeds have the children of the Devil as their authors? Who calls the authors of the actions Christians, except the person who wishes to excuse the Devil himself or disavow Christ the Lord?"⁸³ But it is the language used to describe the alleged atrocities that interests us here: "homes are encircled with battle standards; at the same time, threats of proscriptions are launched against the rich. Sacraments are profaned; crowds are bedecked with idolatry; holy *conuenticula* are transformed into splendid banquets."⁸⁴ We do not know precisely which ecclesiastical structures the author is referring to in this passage, or even in which city they are located, but they are explicitly Donatist sites, and the reference (*conuenticula sacra*) is clearly positive.

We thus have three writers of African origin during the early years of the fourth century—one of them Donatist—who differ from both Cyprian and later North African writers in their positive portrayal of a *conuenticulum* as a synonym for a church. The use of the term by *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* fits naturally into this era, which is precisely what we would expect if it is not a forgery, but rather the record of a council which took place in the immediate aftermath of the Diocletianic persecution. It seems difficult to imagine that a Donatist forger around the time of the 411 Conference at Carthage would use such a term to refer to the true church, as per Maier, given its conspicuous variance from Cyprian's own diction and the deeply negative connotations it held in legal and polemical texts of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

WHAT WAS CYPRIANUS PLEBI CARTAGINI CONSISTENTI'S ORIGINAL SETTING?

If I am correct in identifying *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* as the authentic record of an ancient North African council rather than a

83. *Passio sancti Donati* 4 in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 55 (Dolbeau, "Passio sancti Donati," 259): "Quis talia uel filiis diaboli auctoribus gesta negat uel facti auctores christianos appellat, nisi qui aut ipsum diabolium excusatum uelit aut de domino Christo aliter sensit?"

84. *Passio sancti Donati* 3 in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 55 (Dolbeau, "Passio sancti Donati," 258–59): "Circumdantur uexillationibus orationum domus; proscriptionum minae praetenduntur diuitibus; profanantur sacramenta, superinducta gentilitatis caterua, conuenticula sacra fiunt lutulenta conuiuia."

Donatist forgery, how did the letter acquire its superscription? The most likely possibility was that it was indeed originally addressed “to the people of Carthage” (*ad plebem Cartaginis?*) as a cover letter from the council whose rulings it records. If this was the case, it would not have been difficult for a later copyist to associate the clearly pre-Constantinian letter with the famous third-century bishop and martyr, especially given the fact that a number of other letters within the Cyprianic corpus are records of conciliar decisions.⁸⁵ Indeed, Cyprian was often used as a proxy name for early North African texts of uncertain origin, such as *De rebaptismate*, a tractate advocating the validity of rebaptism, the typologically-oriented *De montibus Sina et Sion*, and *De singularitate clericorum*, a text possibly attributable to a Donatist author.⁸⁶ Many anonymous Donatist texts have survived under similar misattributions, including an anonymous pastoral handbook, attributed in one manuscript to Jerome,⁸⁷ a set of sixty Donatist sermons attributed to “the Latin Chrysostom,”⁸⁸ and a sermon likely

85. See Cyprian, *Epistulae* 57, 64, 67, 70, and 72. An excellent overview of the seven known councils convened by Cyprian may be found in J. Patout Burns and Robin Jensen, *Christianity in Roman North Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 386–87.

86. For the attribution of these properly-anonymous texts to Cyprian, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, vol. 2: The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1975), 367–71. For a discussion of *De rebaptismate* in its third-century context, see Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 297–307, and for *De montibus Sina et Sion* and its connections to the Donatist movement, see Eugenio Romero Pose, “El tratado ‘de montibus Sina et Sion’ y el donatismo” in *Gregorianum* 63.2 (1982), 273–99. In *The Bible in Christian North Africa* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 82–86, Maureen Tilley assumes Donatist authorship of *De singularitate clericorum*; however, cf. Hugo Koch, *Cyprianische Untersuchungen* (Bonn, 1926), 426–72 and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 372. *De singularitate clericorum* appears to have been associated with the Cyprianic corpus only around the twelfth century (see Adolf von Harnack, *Der pseudocyprianische Traktat de singularitate clericorum* [Leipzig, 1903], 5–6).

87. For more information about the *Compendium*, see Richard Rouse and Charles McNelis, “North African Literary Activity: A Cyprian Fragment, the Stichometric Lists and a Donatist Compendium,” in *Revue d’histoire des textes* 30 (2000), 211–24. Its attribution to “sancti Hieronimi presbyteri” is found on p. 299 of the manuscript *St. Gall Stiftsbibliothek* 133, digitized online at <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0133/299>.

88. See François Leroy, “Vingt-deux homélies africaines nouvelles attribuables à l’un des anonymes du Chrysostome Latin (PLS 4) [Vienne O.N.B. Ms. Lat. 4147],” in *Revue Bénédictine* 104 (1994), 127–28; Leslie Dossey, *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 165; and Alden Bass’s recent dissertation, *Fifth-Century Donatist Catechesis: An Introduction to the Vienna Sermon Collection ÖNB M. LAT. 4147* (Ph.D. diss., Saint Louis University, 2014).

dating from the Macarian era, somewhat oddly preserved under the name of Optatus of Milevis.⁸⁹

It is also possible that the entire superscription “Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti” was added at a later date in an attempt to imbue the originally-anonymous text with Cyprianic authority. If such a scenario is correct, then perhaps we are once again dealing with a question of forgery, albeit on a far more limited scale than Mercati’s claims. I find this second possibility less likely due to the lack of evidence of intentional tampering elsewhere in the letter and the fact that it is never mentioned in Donatist or Caecilianist polemic. Nevertheless, given its singular appearance within what is likely an ancient Donatist collection of the Cyprianic corpus⁹⁰ as well as its specific location within that manuscript amid a cluster of other letters which deal with the question of the lapsed, we must leave open the possibility of deliberate manipulation.

Such questions about the letter’s original title are relevant to another line of inquiry: what was the original milieu of the council it describes? Internal evidence allows us to date *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* sometime soon after the cessation of persecution in Africa—likely around the time of Maxentius’s restoration of church property sometime between 308 and 311,⁹¹ given that the opening lines of the text mention that the audience has recently been restored to their churches (“in conuenticula restituit”).⁹² This would place the council sometime after, for instance, the meeting that took place in Cirta under Secundus in 306, which is described by Optatus as having met in a private home “since the churches had not yet been restored.”⁹³ We also know that the council’s condemnation of *traditores* was precipitated by specific events. The assembled bishops are

89. *In natali sanctorum innocentium*. See Alberto Pincherle, “Un sermone donatista attribuito a s. Ottato di Milevi,” in *Bilychnis* 22 (1923), 134–48 and Francesco Scorza Barcellona, “L’interpretazione dei doni dei magi nel sermone natalizio de [Pseudo] Ottato di Milevi,” in *Studi Storico Religiosi* 2 (1978), 129–40.

90. As mentioned above, BnF lat. 1658’s parallels with the Veronese manuscript group and München Staatsbibliothek Clm 18203 hint at its likely African origin. A specifically Donatist milieu is implied, though not necessarily proven, by the inclusion of the letter itself: it is difficult to see how “Cyprian’s” condemnation of *traditores* would have been allowed to pass unchallenged into a Caecilianist collection of his letters.

91. On the question of when restitution began to be implemented in North Africa, see Bernhard Kriegbaum, “Die Religionspolitik des Kaisers Maxentius” in *Archivum Historiae Pontificae* 30 (1992), 44–49.

92. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 1.

93. Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 1.14 in Edwards, *Against the Donatists*, 14 (CSEL 26:16): “[P]ost persecutionem apud Cirtam ciuitatem, quia basilicae necdum fuerant restitutae, in domum Urbani Carisi consederunt.”

well aware that “debates and quarrels and heresies and scandals” are already present within the community; it is in order that the malcontents may not “gather to themselves *more* readers or people of little faith and capricious with the scriptures” that they have issued their ruling.⁹⁴

Given such internal evidence, I argue that there are at least two plausible avenues by which we might reconstruct the letter’s original setting. If *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is truly anonymous—that is, if the entirety of the superscription is a later addition—then it is quite possible that we have in our possession the cover letter for an otherwise unknown North African council which met in order to condemn a local bishop (or bishops) accused of being a *traditor*. We know that such accusations occurred outside of Carthage in the immediate aftermath of the Diocletianic persecution. When Silvanus was elected bishop of Cirta in 305, for instance, we hear of crowds reacting with cries of “Silvanus is a *traditor!*”⁹⁵ Another bishop of uncertain provenance, Maenalius, allegedly feigned illness in order to avoid a potentially damning confrontation with his people over the crime of offering incense.⁹⁶ The picture offered by Optatus sixty years later, though highly partisan, is telling: “apart from a few catholics, all had sinned and among many an admitted wrong was like the picture of innocence.”⁹⁷ My point is that if the Carthaginian audience is not original to the letter, we need not assume that references to “debates and quarrels” over *traditores* necessarily refer to the developing schism over the validity of Caecilian’s consecration. The letter may instead represent the local concerns of an anonymous African council, whose provincial nature may be hinted at in its idiosyncratic Latin and misattributed scriptural citations. If so, then it may preserve for us valuable insights into the wider nature of the struggles taking place within North Africa over the issue of *traditio*, one of which would later metastasize into the classic divide between Donatist and Caecilianist.

On the other hand, if the geographical element of its superscription is at all original, *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* naturally invites an

94. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 2: “[Q]uam omnes disceptationes et disensiones et haereses et scandalia auserant ne ulterius prouocent se homines seu minus fidei seu scripturis leues sint et lectores.”

95. The incident is recounted in the *Gesta apud Zenophilum* 16 (CSEL 26:194): “Zenophilus v. c. consularis Saturnino dixit: ‘Traditorem clamavit Silvanum?’ Saturninus dixit: ‘Utique.’”

96. See Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 1.13.

97. Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 1.20 in Edwards, *Against the Donatists*, 19 (CSEL 26:22): “[P]raeter paucos catholicos peccauerant uniuersi et quasi imago fuerat innocentiae inter multos nefas admissum.”

association with the city of Carthage and thus a closer link with the origins of the schism which would ultimately lead to two rival communions in North Africa. The letter is pointedly not addressed to a particular bishop or even the clergy of the city; rather, it relates its message directly to the *plebs*. When combined with the letter's express statement that *traditor* bishops should be stripped of their positions,⁹⁸ it is hard to avoid the implication that the council does not accept the validity of the bishop of Carthage. Which bishop? It is possible that Mensurius is intended, given the letter's denunciation of "those who pretended to hand [the scriptural codices] over" as *traditores*,⁹⁹ an action that Mensurius explicitly defends in his letter to Secundus of Tigisi,¹⁰⁰ but the time frame implied by the recent restoration of the churches to the congregation¹⁰¹ and the concern over developing "heresies and schisms" make it more likely that *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* is referring to Caecilian's contested accession.

I would like, therefore, to raise the intriguing possibility that the council whose decisions *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* reports ought to be associated with the Numidian delegation, led by Secundus of Tigisi, which descended upon Carthage in response to requests for intervention by members of the Carthaginian clergy and *seniores*.¹⁰² These seventy bishops would later gather in council to rule Caecilian's election invalid and elect Maiorinus in his place.¹⁰³ To be clear, I do not think that the council whose decisions the letter preserves corresponds to this latter event. While lost to us today, both Donatists and Caecilianists had access to the *acta* of this council, as evidenced by appeals to it during the 411 Conference at

98. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 3: "On the other hand, those who offered up the scriptures without being questioned should be restricted to the place where the laity assemble from now on." ("Hi autem qui nec interrogati obtulerunt interim usque ad statum consilii laici communicabunt.")

99. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 2. The condemnation in full: "Qui per uerbum functionem finxerunt dare res inhabitabiles apud illos seu ueras scripturas sanctas seu finctas qui dat uocem et qui dat desideria proxima, qui utique finget tradere supplebit traditionem."

100. See Augustine, *Breu. coll. Don.* 3.13.25.

101. In Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 1.17–18, Mensurius appears to have been summoned to Rome prior to the restoration of liberty to the Christians in Carthage by Maxentius. He died before returning to Carthage, and Caecilian was elected to succeed him.

102. Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 1.19, mentions that the request for Numidian intervention came from Carthage itself and implies that it originated among members of the Carthaginian presbyterate and council of *seniores*.

103. See Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 1.19. Augustine clarifies that there were approximately seventy bishops in attendance (*Epistula* 43.5.14). Optatus assumes that all were of Numidian origin, but we cannot be sure.

Carthage¹⁰⁴ and a chance quotation preserved in the anonymous *Contra Fulgentium Donatistam*.¹⁰⁵ Augustine's brief summary of it in *Breviculus collationis cum Donatistas* reveals that the council was primarily a detailed case against Caecilian and his three consecrators, who are mentioned by name.¹⁰⁶ *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*, which limits itself to condemning specific actions rather than people, is unlikely to have functioned as a cover letter for this council.

Instead, I propose that *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* may be a cover letter for a preliminary council called by Secundus and the Numidian bishops *prior* to their arrival in Carthage. We have no direct evidence for such a meeting in our sources, but its existence is not unlikely. The sending of a delegation of seventy bishops to Carthage alongside Secundus was hardly an ad hoc event, given the enormous logistical difficulties involved in feeding and housing such a number of bishops without the resources of the official Carthaginian church, which was largely under Caecilian's control.¹⁰⁷ Both the sheer number of bishops involved and the appointment of an interim administrator of the Carthaginian church in order to avoid a schism while investigating such claims indicate that Secundus and his fellow bishops had already agreed on the penalty due to *traditor* bishops and were prepared to hold a council deposing Caecilian should he or his consecrators prove guilty of *traditio*.¹⁰⁸ Almost certainly, then, the Numidian bishops had already met in council in response to requests for adjudication by elements within the Carthaginian presbyterate and *seniores* before making their journey to Carthage. Sending a preliminary letter to Carthage which detailed the Numidian council's general intentions, but deliberately refusing to mention names until the actual facts of the matter could be ascertained, would be natural—and would explain the origin of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* quite well.¹⁰⁹

104. See Augustine, *Breu. coll. Don.* 3.26.

105. *Contra Fulgentium Donatistam* 2.24, quoted above.

106. See Augustine, *Breu. coll. Don.* 3.26; for the names of the consecrators themselves (Novellus of Tyzica, Faustinus of Tuburgo, and Felix of Abthungi), see Augustine, *Coll. Don. post. gest.* 38.

107. Hence the importance of Lucilla's financial resources as discussed in Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 1.19 and Augustine, *Epistula* 43.9.26 and *Sermo* 46.39.

108. See Augustine, *Epistula* 44.4.8.

109. At the risk of appearing anachronistic, I will note that such a pattern of preliminary council—cover letter—judicial council is precisely the sequence of events that characterized another North African division nearly a century later. For what follows, I am dependent on Augustine, *Cresc.* 4.7.8. At the request of *seniores* who were scandalized by the recent ordination of Primian to the episcopate at Carthage, forty-three Donatist bishops met in council to deliberate the matter. Their initial conclave decided in favor of the *seniores*: Primian was condemned for, among other

CONCLUSION

As I noted at the outset of this paper, Augustine is sometimes willing, for the sake of polemical expediency, to suggest that certain parts of the Cyprianic corpus had been altered by overzealous Donatists in order to better align with their beliefs. Modern scholars have been able to find little evidence to support such a claim, which even Augustine admits is rather tenuous, with the sole exception of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti*. In this article, however, I have sought to prove that *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* was not composed as a pseudonymous document—however it was that Cyprian’s name came to be attached to the letter in later years, it was not part of the original text.

The letter’s importance certainly does not lie in any elegant turns of phrase or deft exegetical skills—indeed, after thorough analysis of the author’s first reference to the “sound voice of the Gospel according to John,”¹¹⁰ I have been unable to find any close parallels to the verse he proceeds to quote in the various Old Latin renditions of the Bible, nor can I offer any particular reason why that verse, whose closest counterpart is in Malachi 1.10–11, is attributed to the apostle John. Rather, the significance of *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* lies in its provenance: what we have before us is likely the cover letter of an ancient North African council that took place shortly after the cessation of the Diocletianic persecution. Whether it is a relic of an anonymous North African regional council or the opening salvo in a schism that would divide the Christians of Africa for the next century, the letter preserves for us a rare window into the mindset of a group of North African Christians who would, in all probability, later side with the Donatist cause.

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things, “substituting other bishops for bishops still living,” “introducing unchaste persons into the communion of saints,” and violently attacking those who undermined his claims, including the assembled bishops themselves. “Nevertheless,” as Augustine tells it, “even then they did not dare to make a definitive judgment, contenting themselves with making a preliminary sentence in order to permit him, if he felt that his cause was defensible, to present himself to the next council in order to respond and justify himself.” (CSEL 52:508: “Et sic nondum audentes ultimum praecipitare iudicium, sed quodam praeiudicio consulentes, ut ei, si causae suae fideret, sequenti celebriore concilio respondendi seque purgandi”) It was only after Primian’s refusal to accept the legitimacy of this preliminary injunction that a later council met at Cebarsussa and pronounced a definite sentence of divestment.

110. *Cyprianus plebi Cartagini consistenti* 2: “[E]uangelica uox sincera cata Iohanem loquitur.”