

St Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, had a tremendous impact on the shape and the fortunes of the culture of the West. For scholars, the preserved corpus of his correspondence (consisting of over 300 letters written in 386-430) is both a blessing and a challenge. The bishop of Hippo was by no means a solitary thinker writing in a vacuum. On the contrary, he vigorously participated in contemporary controversies and elaborated on his conceptions in polemics, which in fact recurred throughout the whole of his episcopacy. His letters testify convincingly to that participation, for they often served as the principal medium of debate in the controversies.

Tom Standage in one of his recent publications proposed a flamboyant but apt comparison of ancient letter writing to the social media of today, which was based on the public character of letters and the relative speed with which they influenced the audiences. Writers of such stature as that of Augustine could expect (and did expect) that their letters would be copied, in their entirety or in fragments, or read publicly and as a result impact on the views of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. Well before becoming bishop, Augustine became a hero of popular imagination. Coming from the humble village of Thagaste, in a remote North African province, insignificant in the eyes of the Romans, born into a family of modest means, he nevertheless - owing to his talents and the support from his friends - rose to hold the professorships in rhetoric in Carthage, Rome and, eventually, the prestigious post of the imperial rhetorician in Milan. The world, in which rhetorical training was incomparably more appreciated than it is today, admired the immense success of Augustine and anticipated even greater accomplishments during his career at the imperial court. Augustine, however, decided to quit: he received baptism, became a monk and, finally, a bishop. Even so, his excellent rhetorical skills and authority guaranteed that his episcopal voice was heard and easily recognizable across the empire: it shaped the late antique Christian culture. During his episcopacy, Augustine held disputes with pagans, heretics (Manicheans, Arians and Pelagians) and schismatics (Donatists). As a former professor of rhetoric, Augustine purposely applied a vast array of persuasion techniques, especially as his readers were very well versed in the theory and practice of judicial and demonstrative speeches, as well as with philosophical polemics. This is why the research on the rhetorical strategies used in his polemical writings is so important: it calls for an overarching analysis and deserves a thorough study.

The strategies for constructing a polemical situation seem to be the most important and interesting among the other particular problems emerging in the preliminary stage of research. St Augustine evidently drew on the classical culture in devising his means of expression which would capture the goodwill of the debaters. On the one hand, he insisted on establishing and maintaining his image of authority and, on the other, constructed rhetorical portraits of his adversaries. Also, assimilating the Christian polemic to the practices of judicial rhetoric or the philosophical agon played an important role in persuasion. The proposed research project will produce a multifaceted and comprehensive publication concerning the art of persuasion as it emerges from the polemical letters of St Augustine.