During recent years, increasing interest has been shown in New Testament textual criticism. While the relevance of Greek or Coptic manuscripts is increasingly appreciated in New Testament exegesis, pre-Vulgate Latin manuscripts, called the Vetus Latina, or “Old Latin,” continue to lie in the shadows. Together with the new director of the Vetus Latina Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Bauer of the University of Erfurt, Germany, our Vetus Latina project envisions an edition with annotations of the Old Latin texts of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. This ecumenical project belongs to the Vetus Latina Institute, founded in the abbey of Beuron in 1945, where scholars from Germany, the Vatican City, and Great Britain work together. The eventual goal is the collection and critical edition of all remnants of Old Latin translations, including manuscripts and citations in Church Fathers. Currently, scholars are working on the Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline Letters. Peter Härlin of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, one of Germany’s premier newspapers, writes: “What happens here is not simply a great scholarly enterprise with subscribers on all continents and in dozens of countries. It is the most fascinating excavation that can be imagined. The information that comes to light reflects the time of its origin more clearly and truly than anything that could otherwise be excavated. What a time it was! These were the centuries in which the West took root.”

What is the Vetus Latina?
The Vetus Latina, or “Old Latin Bible,” also called the Vetus Itala, comprises a diverse collection of Latin biblical texts used by Christian churches from the second century on. As Christianity spread in the Roman Empire and Latin replaced Greek as the common language of the church, an array of Latin Bible translations emerged, usually uncontrolled by any church authority and frequently inaccurate. Latin translations are first found in North Africa and then in Spain, England, Gaul, Italy, and Germany. In Rome itself, churches changed in the course of the third century from Greek to Latin. Whereas the Old Latin Bible encompasses all unauthorized versions of the Bible translated into Latin, the Vulgate presents a standardization of different forms of the Old Latin promulgated under Pope Damasus († 384) and the theologian Jerome († 419). And whereas the Vulgate is the end result of several revisions, recensions, and editions, the Old Latin Bible preserves several versions and is older than the Vulgate and many Greek manuscripts. These Old Latin manuscripts reflect the early struggle for a proper understanding of the biblical texts. Augustine, Jerome’s contemporary, made this comment: “Translators from Hebrew into Greek can be numbered, but Latin translators by no means. For whenever, in the earliest years of the faith, a Greek manuscript came into the hands of anyone who happened to have a little skill in both languages, he made bold to translate it forthwith” (*De Doctrina Christiana* II: 11). Augustine’s advice to readers is to give a preference to the Itala, “which is more faithful in its renderings and more intelligible in its sense.”
It started in North Africa...
Alongside the known 49 manuscripts, we find probably the first reference to the Old Latin translation in a brief remark made by Tertullian (150-220) mentioning the *libri epistulae Pauli viri iusti*, the collected letters of Paul in Latin. The most important citations come from Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage († 258). Cyprian tried to make a translation to the Greek text that did not make significant changes. Like all Old Latin traditions, Cyprian’s text was not standardized and was therefore subject to numerous modifications. Especially important are editions of Cyprian produced in Carthage and Rome. The vocabulary and translation techniques used by Cyprian differ from later text versions and can usually be identified. It is thus possible to distinguish two groups of the Old Latin Bible: an African text, more closely related to Cyprian, and a European text. (We use “African” in the Roman sense, referring to central North Africa.) The two oldest *Itala* manuscripts, Codex Bobiensis (k) and Codex Palatinus (e), are clearly basic to the African tradition. These two manuscripts, however, possess a later layer of readings from the so-called European texts. The two layers are reflected in different dialects, an African and an Italian, and can also be distinguished by the later use of specifically “Christian” terms, like for example *baptizare*, “to dip in water,” instead of *tingere*, “to dye, wet,” or *diaconus* “deacon” instead of *minister*, “assistant, helper.” The African substrate cannot, however, be reconstructed mechanically. One approach to disentangling the African from the European text involves comparing the Vulgate and other European text forms. The core group of manuscripts for the European text consists of manuscripts b (4), ff. (8), and I (17), all probably from about 350-380 CE. Later manuscripts, mostly from the sixth century CE and from several countries, exhibit mixed texts from the African and European traditions.