A lost consular diptych of Anicius Auchenius Bassus (A.D. 408) on the mould for an ARS plaque

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During the 4th, 5th and 6th c., prolific workshops in N Africa, many of which were located in central Tunisia,1 produced redware pottery and lamps in a wide variety of shapes with stamped and applied mould-made decoration. Among the more remarkable items produced were large circular and rectangular dishes, which copied the shapes and decoration of silver plate distributed by imperial officials on celebratory occasions.2 As noted by J. W. Salomonson,3 some rectangular dishes have as their central motif a standing consul, in pose, costume, and setting strikingly like the depiction of the consul Flavius Felix (A.D. 428) found on an ivory diptych in Paris (fig. 1).4 On these plates, the image of the consul was usually crudely retouched or embellished with additional decorative stamps. In 1988, the Prähistorische Staatsammlung in Munich acquired a fragment of a redware plaque showing a more sharply impressed image of the same consul (fig. 2).5 The fragment is not part of a vessel but rather a plaque imitating the shape of an ivory diptych, including its gabled top decorated with egg-and-dart moulding. The consul, lightly bearded, stands facing frontally within a doorway before two drawn curtains, grasping in his right hand a mappa held against his chest, and in his left hand a sceptre surmounted by three busts. Above the head of the consul is an architrave bearing traces of an inscription. Like Flavius Felix, this figure is clothed in a tunica palmaea worn over a tunica talaris, while the toga contubernalis is wrapped around his neck and shoulders, pulled over his left shoulder, and draped over his left arm.

Another fragment (now in a private collection), broken from a plaque of identical shape to the Munich example and made from the same mould, supplies the lower half of the diptych (fig. 3). The lower left corner is preserved, showing the consul’s right foot, but the lower right corner is missing. The lower half confirms the similarity to the Felix diptych.

A fragment of the original mould, which preserves the upper half of the diptych, survives, also in a private collection (figs. 4a-b). The mould is made of the same red clay and is itself shaped like a diptych, including the gabled top.6 It is apparent from the mould that the image

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3 J. W. Salomonson, “Late-Roman earthenware with relief decoration found in Northern-Africa and Egypt,” Oudhedei 43 (1962) 65-66, pl. 19a-b; Carthage Museum inv. 47.31; a similar fragment is in Utrecht: J. W. Salomonson, Het verhaal bij het material (Utrecht 1993) 29-31, pl. 50; and another large rectangular plate (43 × 31 cm), decorated with the same consul placed between the seated figures of Peter and Paul, appeared recently at auction in London Bonhams’ Antiquities, 7 November 2002, lot 413.

4 W. F. Volbach, Einführung in die Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters (3rd edn., Mainz 1976) 30, no. 2, pl. 2; for the other wing of the diptych, now lost, see Antonio I. Gori, Tarsius uetereum diptychon, vol. 1 (Florence 1959) 129-30, pl. 2.

5 Inv. 1988, 302; H as preserved: 11.6 cm; W. 9.3 cm; J. Garbsch, “Zwei Model und eine Patrice für Mittelfelder spätantiker nordafrikanischer Tontablets,” Baugesch 54 (1989) 243-49; and J. Garbsch and B. Overbeck, Spätantike zwischen Heidentum und Christentum (Munich 1999) 85-86, no. 28; Mackensen and Schneider (supra n.1) 131, SMT no. 2, fig. 22.8, notes that chemical analysis demonstrates that the Munich fragment was produced at Sidi Marzouk Tunisi in central Tunisia.

6 H: 0.10 cm; W: 0.12 cm; Th: 0.5 cm.

7 11 as preserved: 11.5 cm; W: 10.5 cm; Th: 1.0 cm.

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