

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 Staatssammlung 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 palmata* worn over a *tunica talaris*, while the *toga contabulata* 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).⁶ 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.⁷ It is apparent from the mould that the image

- 1 See D. P. S. Peacock, F. Bejaoui, and N. Ben Lazreg, "Roman pottery production in Central Tunisia," *JRA* 3 (1990) 59-84; and M. Mackensen and G. Schneider, "Production centres of African red slip ware (3rd-7th c.) in northern and central Tunisia: archaeological provenance and reference groups based on chemical analysis," *JRA* 15 (2002) 121-58.
- 2 See the fundamental studies by J. W. Salomonson, "Spätromische rote Tonware mit Reliefverzierung aus nordafrikanischen Werkstätten," *BABesch* 44 (1969) 4-109; id., "Kunstgeschichtliche und ikonographische Untersuchungen zu einem Tonfragment der Sammlung Benaki in Athen," *BABesch* 48 (1973) 3-82; and works cited in the next note.
- 3 J. W. Salomonson, "Late-Roman earthenware with relief decoration found in Northern-Africa and Egypt," *OudMed* 43 (1962) 65-66, pl. 19 3a-b; Carthage Museum inv. 47.31; a similar fragment is in Utrecht: J. W. Salomonson, *Het verhaal bij het materiaal* (Utrecht 1980) 29-31, pl. 5b; and another large rectangular plate (43 x 31 cm), decorated with the same consul placed between the seated figures of Peter and Paul, appeared recently at auction in London: Bonham's, *Antiquities*, 7 November 2002, lot 413.
- 4 W. F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der 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, *Thesaurus veterum diptychorum*, vol. 1 (Florence 1759) 129-30, pl. 2.
- 5 Inv. 1988, 3002; H as preserved: 11.6 cm; W: 9.3 cm. J. Garbsch, "Zwei Model und eine Patrizie für Mittelfelder spätantiker nordafrikanischer Tontabletts," *BayVorgb* 54 (1969) 243-49; and J. Garbsch and B. Overbeck, *Spätantike zwischen Heidentum und Christentum* (Munich 1989) 85-86, no. 28; Mackensen and Schneider (supra n.1) 151, SMIT no. 2, fig. 22.8, notes that chemical analysis demonstrates that the Munich fragment was produced at Sidi Marzouk Tounsi in central Tunisia.
- 6 H: c.10 cm; W: 9.2 cm; Th: 0.5 cm.
- 7 H as preserved: 11.5 cm; W: 10.5 cm; Th: 1.0 cm.