

# Production centres of African Red Slip ware (2nd-3rd c.) in northern and central Tunisia: archaeological provenance and reference groups based on chemical analysis

Michael Mackensen and Gerwulf Schneider

African Red Slip (=ARS) ware, which was produced from the last third of the 1st c. A.D. onwards, belongs to a group of red-slipped fine wares (conventionally included within the "sigillata" category) of major importance in mid- and Late Roman times, distributed not only regionally but throughout the Mediterranean basin and adjoining provinces of the *Imperium Romanum*. Nearly every archaeologist working on mid- and Late Roman sites around the W Mediterranean finds himself confronted with ARS ware, famous in antiquity as high-quality table ware. This characteristic fine ware was produced in large quantities by efficiently-organized production centres with rationalized manufacturing processes. Today it is an important means of dating stratified deposits as well as of tracing supra-regional trade patterns. In terms of provenance, ARS ware can be attributed not just generally to *Africa Proconsularis* and *Byzacena*, but also to narrower regions or even to specific pottery-making centres in N and central Tunisia, thereby allowing for differentiated conclusions concerning its distribution. The increasing range of traded ARS ware, including its supply to more distant provinces such as Syria or Egypt, is also to be noted.

However, a precondition for the analysis of the history of trade of ARS ware during the second half of the 2nd and the 3rd c. is classification of the fabrics, which point to different production centres. The plain vessel-forms (partly decorated with bands of rouletting) have to be classified no less precisely, as do those with appliqué or mould-made relief decoration. The relief or stamped decoration of ARS ware allows an assessment of the craftwork of individual potters and workshops or of whole production centres. Moreover, it provides an insight into the comprehensive repertoire of allegorical, mythological, profane and Christian imagery and its dependency on other arts and crafts such as toreutics (bronze and silver vessels), ivory objects or glass vessels.

The classification of chronologically sensitive ARS vessel-forms is generally feasible, with J. W. Hayes' catalogue of chronologically grouped forms (1972) still serving as an irreplaceable handbook.<sup>1</sup> While at that early date Hayes could not be aware of most of the major centres of ARS ware production located in modern Tunisia (except for Oudhna<sup>2</sup> and Henchir es-Srira<sup>3</sup>), he managed to provide precise and comprehensible descriptions of the different fabrics.<sup>4</sup> Based on those, he presented groups of forms which he considered to belong together and, taking into account their distribution, suggested their respective provenances from certain regions in *Africa Proconsularis* and *Byzacena*.<sup>5</sup> However, he did not classify the fabrics he distinguished nor did he take on the terms used by J. W. Salomonson<sup>6</sup> and A. Carandini<sup>7</sup> to subdivide a system originally put forward by N. Lamboglia (comprising terra sigillata chiara A, C and D), with a nomenclature such as sigillata chiara A<sup>1</sup> and A<sup>2</sup>, A/D, A/C (the so-called el-Aouja ware), as well as C<sup>1</sup>, C<sup>2</sup> and C<sup>3</sup>.

Carandini and his collaborators in the *Atlante delle forme ceramiche I* (1981) further refined those fabric-classifications; in addition, they established transitional wares<sup>8</sup> still, however,

1 Hayes 1972, 18-211.

2 P. Gauckler, *BAC* 1897, 454-59.

3 Stern 1968.

4 Hayes 1972, 287-92.

5 Ibid. 295-98.

6 Salomonson 1968, 89-97, 109-13 and 120 f.

7 *Ostia I*, 28-37.

8 *Atlante I*, 19 f., 52 f., 58-60, 141 f., 144, 147 f. and 156 f.