CHAPTER FOUR

ANICIUS AUCHENIUS BASSUS, AFRICAN RED SLIP WARE, AND THE CHURCH

Annewies van den Hoek

THE OBJECT

Some years ago a remarkable rectangular ceramic panel of North-African type appeared at auction in London. The object made its way to Boston (pl. 15a, figs. 1–2), where it was in the collection of Cornelius C. Vermeule III, who placed it on loan at the Museum of Fine Arts. The technical term in English to describe the fabric of this kind of ceramic is “African Red Slip Ware”—abbreviated ARS. The term was coined by John Hayes, a scholar who has made the basic classification of these wares. In Italian this ceramic is termed “terra sigillata chiara” or “light terra sigillata,” to distinguish it from “terra sigillata,” its counterpart in Italy and Gaul. The latter has a deep-red color and a high-gloss surface, while the African variety is less shiny and light orange in color.

The object has the rectilinear shape of a lanx, which is a large-size rectangular platter commonly produced in ARS, but this object does not show

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1 See Bonhams, Antiquities, 7 November 2002, lot 413. According to the auction house it came from El Djem (ancient Thysdrus), Tunisia, where it had been acquired in the late 1970s.
2 After the death of Dr. Vermeule, the object was sold at auction and thus has passed to another private collection in the area. See Northeast Auctions, Portsmouth, NH, 13 March 2010, lot 374.
3 For an introduction see John J. Herrmann, Jr. and Annewies van den Hoek, Light from the Age of Augustine: Late Antique Ceramics from North Africa (2nd ed.; Austin: Institute for the Study of Antiquity and Christian Origins of the University of Texas at Austin, 2003); see also http://www.lbjlibrary.net/join-us/past-events/2004/exhibit-ancient-art.html (consulted 7 August 2013).
other characteristics of a lanx: a deep floor, elevated borders, and a low foot. At first glance the unusual object, whose dimensions are $43.5 \times 31.5 \times 7.5$ cm., looks like a large tile. It is mold-made and shows three figures on its front side. In the center stands a Roman consul, identified by his senatorial costume (toga worn over a tunic and boots tied with long straps) and his consular attributes (the *mappa* and the scepter). The *mappa* was a piece of cloth wrapped into a ball. The emperor or magistrate would drop the cloth as a signal to start the games, and in late Roman iconography it became one of the principal consular attributes. The consul appears in a rectangular frame, in whose upper part are curtains that have been pulled aside. He is flanked by the apostles Peter and Paul who are seated on thrones or high-backed chairs with footstools. The apostles wear the mantle (*pallium*) and tunic of Greek philosophers and sandals rather than boots. Peter has a short beard and holds a book. Paul is balding and has a long beard. Both gesture with their right hands in a manner suggesting speech. A rectangular frame of vine tendrils encloses the three figures. These images were made from stamps pressed into the mold that was used to cast the rectangular object. Rectangular indentations around the figures probably reflect the outer contour of the stamps. The figures were then touched up with a pointed tool such as a knife or stick.

The clay of the object (henceforth “cover”) has the typical red-orange color of ARS but is rather coarse and loose in texture. The lower right side shows a crack and substantial restoration. A picture provided by a previous owner shows that two sections are missing: the lower right corner, including the left leg and the right foot of the apostle Paul, and a small section of the upper-right corner (fig. 3). In spite of its matte texture, the cover should be considered African Red Slip Ware, since all three figures and the vine frame are known from other works in ARS.\(^5\)

The underside of the object is closed on three sides by broad flanges (fig. 2). One side is left open—the one above the heads of the figures—but a pair of low ridges separated by a groove run along this edge. Part of the

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