

A medieval floor tile from Fleet, Lincolnshire

Alan Vince

A fragment of medieval decorated floor tile from a site in Fleet (WLSF01, context 154). The context is thought to be of 12th century date and includes large, unabraded fragments of 12th-century pottery. Glazed, decorated floor tiles were first introduced into England in the late Anglo-Saxon period. Tiles of this date have been found at St Paul in the Bail church, Lincoln, which seems to have been refounded as a private chapel in the mid/late 10th century, and at All Saints Pavement, York, which is thought possibly to have had minster status in the late Anglo-Saxon period. There is less evidence for the production of glazed, decorated floor tiles in the post-Conquest period until the second half of the 12th century. Tiles of this date are of two types: plain glazed or slipped then glazed tiles, often cut into geometric shapes (tile mosaic) and plain, glazed tiles decorated in relief (relief tiles). Both types appear to have been introduced by various religious orders for use in their monastic churches and there is little or no evidence for their use in parish churches or in private chapels or secular contexts.

The fragment is about one quarter of a square tile, probably about 110mm square and 18mm thick. There is a white mortar on the underside and sides and a single possible triangular stabbed key on the base (9x8x10mm). The two surviving sides have both been knife-trimmed and bevelled. The tile has been painted with white slip, then struck with a die showing an eight-petalled flower, possibly with another motif occupying a corner. The fabric is oxidised and contains abundant rounded quartz grains up to 0.5mm across and sparse larger rounded grains up to 2.0mm across. The larger grains are water-polished whereas the smaller ones have a matt surface. Sparse subangular fragments of iron ore also occur. The fabric is poorly mixed and there are lenses of inclusionless clay, demonstrating, probably, that the quartz sand was deliberately added temper.

The tempering material includes grains derived from the lower Cretaceous, which outcrops to the north and south of the Fens (and in pocket within the Fens, as at Ely). It is unlikely, however, that it could be obtained at Fleet itself. A potential source for the tile is Bawsey, in Norfolk. This production site lies in an area which potentially includes lower Cretaceous strata, unless they are masked by Quaternary deposits. This site, however, operated in the 14th century and is not known, or suspected, to have been operating earlier. Furthermore, it is likely that 12th-century floor tiles would have been produced on site and only used at that site.

There is no evidence that a major 12th-century religious house ever existed at Fleet and therefore the likelihood is that the tile came from the parish church. The tile, then, would date to the later medieval period but could have remained *in situ* for some time, perhaps even to the end of the medieval period, before being discarded. A deposition date on or after the 14th is therefore likely.

Assessment

If this tile is indeed of 12th-century date then it is a highly unusual find and should be published. This would involve a full description of the fabric using a thin-section and illustration of the design. However, if, as seems more likely, it is actually an intrusive 14th-century find then it is of less importance. To determine whether or not the tile is from the Bawsey tilery its fabric should be compared with that of known Bawsey products.

Costing

Task	Cost
Thin-section production and report	£21
Illustration	£10
Obtaining a sample of Bawsey tile	£10.50
Thin-section production and comparison of Bawsey and Fleet tiles	£21
Publish report preparation	£21
Grand total	£84 plus VAT = £98.11
