

## Roof tile fragments from the Isle of May

John di Folco\*

Through the kindness of Mr R Allan, one of the lighthouse keepers on the Isle of May (NO 659991), a number of fragments of rectangular, flat glazed and unglazed roof tiles have been made available for examination. They were recovered from within the ruined chapel building and from rabbit burrowings approximately 40 metres to the SE of the building which is probably part of a medieval kitchen midden (RCAMS 1933, 15-6). Those retrieved from the building were found lying loose in the oven at the S end or had been used as pinning in the random rubble at the N end and from the circular tower stump at the SW corner. While no complete example was found, the largest piece has lateral dimensions of 220 mm.

Both types are of a coarse sandy pink and grey buff fabric. The body clay is thickly intermingled with numerous small quartz inclusions. A number of pieces have been fully oxidised in firing but most have a reduced grey sandwich core. They are 12 to 13 mm thick. Although generally flat in appearance a number of fragments have an undulated upper surface with shallow roller indentations which indicate a similar manufacturing process to the ridge tiles from the Perth High Street excavation. There is evidence of a slight throw-off at the lateral edges or of an

\* 151 South Street, St Andrews, Fife

upturned rim of clay on to the upper surface resulting from pressure in the mould, both of which would serve to channel water towards the centre of the tile. Faint traces of scraping are visible on the upper surface of some pieces. Four of the 35 fragments have nibs flush to the upper rim for attachment to roof battens. The nibs have not been knife-cut but are roughly moulded and trimmed at the junctions. A number of pieces have mortar adhesion on the under and upper surfaces for firmer bedding and to stop lateral movement. These features would indicate a simple contiguous tegulated pattern with overlap at the joints from the course above.

The glazing is irregularly applied in large patches and ranges from light, dark green, amber and yellow thinning to clear; no slip has been used. The glaze has a fresh appearance and is lightly streaked and speckled indicating the presence of iron oxide either in it or in the body clay. On one fragment it has blackened and bubbled from over-firing. The tiles have been single fired.

No excavation has been carried out on the site and no stratigraphic or contextual evidence is available which might accurately establish dating and provenance. Both Richardson (1929), whose work remains the most comprehensive Scottish study on the subject of tiles, and Dunbar (1966) draw attention to the existence of flat roofing tiles of 12th- and 13th-century date from ecclesiastical sites at Melrose, North Berwick, St Andrews, Inchcolm and the Isle of May and it is within this general period that the recent finds may be assigned on the basis of typological similarities.

As regards provenance three alternatives deserve consideration. To date only one tile kiln has been discovered; at North Berwick in 1908 and partially excavated by Richardson in 1928 (Richardson 1929). The output of the tilery was large, consisting mainly of embossed floor tiles. It was noted in the construction of the kiln that whinstone spalls and roofing tiles had been built in horizontal beds over the arched openings. The use of roof tiles in this way may well point, as was found at Meaux (Eames 1961, 143), to a site which had different sequences of kilns for roof and floor tile production separated only by a short time span. It is also likely that local kilns served by itinerant tilers were set up to meet specific projects. In the case of the Isle of May such a kiln would, both from scarcity of fuel and clay, be necessarily shore-based. McRoberts (1976, 66) has claimed that the *ustrinae* built by prior James Bisset within the precincts of St Andrews Cathedral to which the priory on the Isle of May had been disposed since 1273–9, would include a tile kiln, but he offered no archaeological evidence to support his thesis.

The Isle of May nib tiles are to be viewed in the wider context of the significant extension recently created to the previously exiguous corpus of material on medieval ceramic roof furniture by the yield from the Perth High Street excavation where glazed ridge tiles, flat unglazed roof tiles, unglazed peg tiles and an anthropomorphic finial were recovered. Together they are a clear confirmation both in the instance of the secular, burghal buildings and the smaller ecclesiastical one of a roof covering comparable to the more sophisticated of English examples and of a richness and variety hitherto unsuspected.

## REFERENCES

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