

A THIRD LATE SAXON FLOOR TILE FROM LONDON

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INTRODUCTION

Archaeological excavations at 10 Gresham Street in the City of London during 1999–2002 revealed the only complete late Saxon polychrome relief floor tile found in London (Casson *et al* 2014) (Fig 1).¹ The tile, which is made from a distinctive greyish white fired sandy clay (MOLA fabric 3244),² was found in a pit fill with early Surrey Ware (ESUR) pottery dated to 1050–1150.³ It has a simple raised decorative design comprising four lenticular-shaped elements set within a circle. The design on this tile differs from the only other two tiles of this type known from London, from Westminster Abbey and from the Guildhall Yard excavations *c.*140m to the east (Betts *et al* 1995, 165) (Fig 2). All three tiles date to the mid-10th to mid-11th century.

The Gresham Street tile was intended to be completely glazed but the tilemaker seems to have experienced difficulty applying the green glaze and this is largely missing from the tile's surface. The intended colour scheme would have comprised green glaze in the centre and in each corner. The lenticoid-shaped elements have two brown and two yellow glazed areas. The tile measures 150 by 148mm, with a variable depth of 19–24mm, and each edge is slightly bevelled near the upper surface with a more pronounced bevel approximately half way down the tile side. The base has 12 semi-circular keying marks.

Despite the tile's poor quality, wear marks on the raised ribs separating the different coloured glazes indicate the tile was laid horizontally as flooring. The same, or at least a very similar design, is present on the Saxon tiles from Winchester (Backhouse *et al* 1984,



Fig 1. Late Saxon polychrome relief floor tile from Gresham Street showing decoration and keyed back (scale 1:3)

136), Bury St Edmunds (Gem & Keen 1981, 21), and Coventry (Stokes 1986, 31). Other Anglo-Saxon tiles are known from St Albans, Canterbury, Oxford (Biddle & Kjolbye-Biddle 1988), Peterborough, Lincoln (Kemp 1994, 26), and York.

SOURCES AND PARALLELS FOR THE GRESHAM STREET TILE

Based on their distinctive pale sandy clay it has long been believed that the Saxon tiles found in London were made at Winchester (Betts *et al* 1995, 165). This has recently been confirmed by chemical analysis of the tiles from Westminster Abbey and Guildhall Yard (GYE82).⁴ This shows that the London tiles and the Saxon Winchester tiles share the same chemistry as two Winchester clay samples, thus 'indicating a Winchester origin for all these tiles'.⁵

The proximity of the Gresham Street site to Guildhall Yard suggests both tiles may have come from the same floor (Fig 2). The majority of polychrome relief tiles found in

Britain have been found near or on the sites of major late Saxon churches, so it seems probable that they were used to decorate floor surfaces around principal altars or shrines. It is believed that the Guildhall example was probably one of a batch of tiles used in the church of St Lawrence Jewry, either in the masonry building of *c.*1070 or its timber predecessor (Bowsher *et al* 2007, ii, 391–4). It is also possible that the nearby church of St Alban's Wood Street (established by 1077–93) is of Saxon origin (Cohen 2002). St Alban's church is close to the probable site of a Saxon royal palace, which was apparently mentioned in a document of 1017 (Vince 1990, 55). It has also been suggested that the eastern gatehouse of the Roman fort on the Aldermanbury street frontage might have been reused as part of this palace (Bowsher *et al* 2007, ii, 353–4). Therefore, the churches of St Alban and St Lawrence Jewry, plus the adjacent royal palace are all possible sources for the late Saxon floor tile found at Gresham Street (Fig 2).

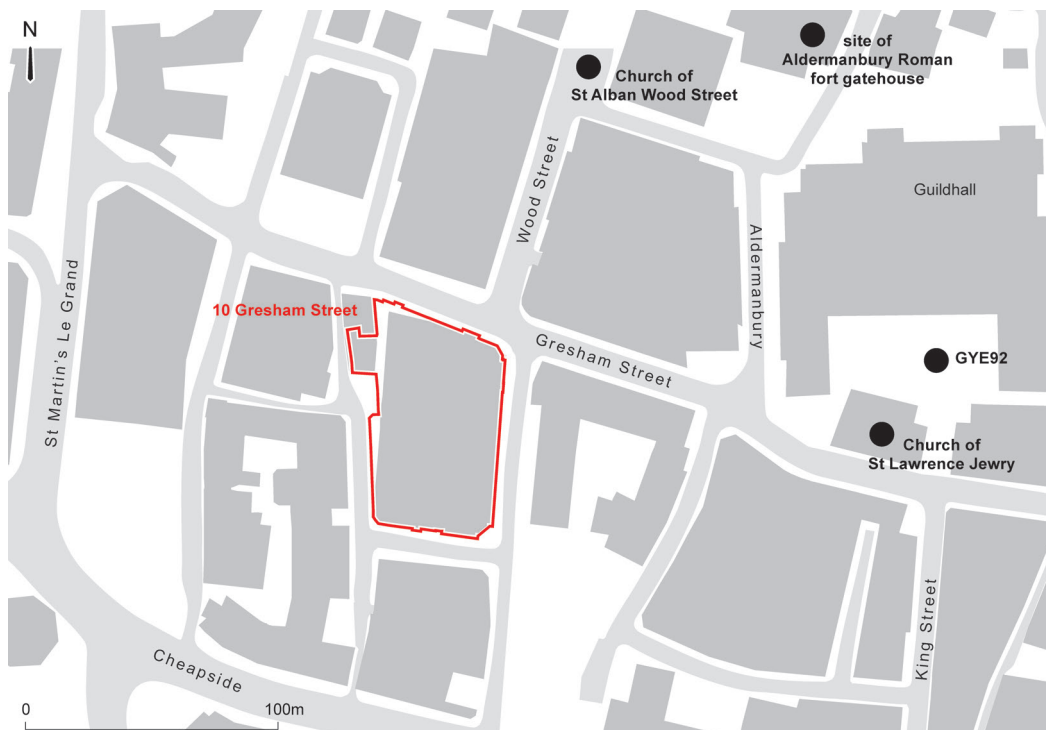


Fig 2. Location of the City of London sites mentioned in the text

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NOTES

¹ Site code GSM97, context [910], accession <120>.

² *Post 1992 Museum of London Code Expansion Building Material, LAARC 2007* source: www.museumoflondon.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/DBB-COD2D-C459-43 (accessed December 2012).

³ Details of the post-Roman pottery code cited are available from the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) and are also posted on: www.museumoflondon.org.uk/.../post92mol_post_roman_fab_form.pdf (accessed December 2012).

⁴ Inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry (ICP-AES).

⁵ M Hughes, pers comm, January 2012 (Winchester fabric 1). Part of a Royal Archaeological Institute funded research project undertaken by M Hughes and K Barclay.

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