A 17th-century delftware tile group from 31 James Street, Covent Garden WC2

John Brown

Introduction

Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. carried out an excavation during the remodelling of the basements of 31 James Street between the 28th of January and the 5th of February 2002 (JST02). This identified the presence of a Middle Saxon pit and a well, features reported on elsewhere.[1] Post-medieval remains at the site comprised an 18th-century cesspit and a brick surface. The Lothbury Property Trust Company Ltd funded the excavations.

A substantial assemblage of delftware tiles, which was recovered from the backfilled cesspit, could be divided into four groups. The first comprised two examples of polychrome floor tiles, which probably date from the late 16th to the first half of the 17th century; the remaining three, comprising blue and white tin-glazed wall tiles, date from the second half of the 17th to the early 18th century. One depicts classical motifs of mythological sea creatures, the next biblical scenes, and the last comprises a small group of miscellaneous tile fragments where themes were not identified (not discussed here). Pottery found in association with the tiles provided a date range of 1550 to 1700, with a deposition date of the second quarter of the 17th century.[2]

The tiles were examined using the London system of classification. More than 60 sherds were counted representing at least 33 individual tiles. Some pieces could be fitted together to allow reconstruction of complete dimensions. In addition there were pieces with at least two quantifiable dimensions. Apart from the floor tiles that showed signs of wear, the tiles generally had unabraded breaks, suggesting primary deposition. The tiles came from the backfill of a brick-lined cesspit, constructed of purple-red bricks (Museum of London fabric 3032). This fabric is common in London from *c*. 1664, particularly following the Great Fire of 1666, up until the first half of the 19th century. Dimensions were 226–227 by 95–108 by 64–67mm. The brick samples were unfrogged, with uneven bases, suggesting a late-17th to 18th-century date. This corresponds to the development of Covent Garden from the mid-17th century onwards.

Initially tin-glazed tiles were imported from the continent, but with the arrival of Flemish and Dutch potters, 'floor' tiles began to be produced in England from the late 16th century.[3] The manufacture of tin-glazed wall tiles began later, in the second half of the 17th century.[4] During this period Dutch tiles were imported in large numbers to meet demand, although an import ban was imposed in 1672.[5] Many designs were copied from the Dutch, until the mid 18th century when English tiles began to develop a more distinctive repertoire of their own.[6]

Tiles were formed by rolling out flat, even slabs of clay that were cut into rough squares. These were then placed within a (usually) wooden frame, and trimmed to produce a perfect square. After partial drying, tiles could be rolled out again and trimmed square a second time with the aid of a wooden board. On imported Dutch and earlier English tiles, pins were often inserted to locate the board. Tile 'blanks' would then be fired at around 1000°C. After the initial firing, a base coat of liquid tin-glaze, usually white, would be applied and a design would be obtained by pricking through a square piece of paper to form a stencil, *spons* in Dutch. This would be placed on the tile blank and dusted with charcoal to produce an outline.[7] The colour glaze would then be traced over this in a powder form and the tile re-fired at a lower temperature, about 600–800°C, during which process the powder glaze would fuse with the liquid slip, a process referred to as *glost* firing.[8]

Glaze colours were produced using various mineral oxides: cobalt (blue), manganese (purple), ochre (brown), antimony (yellow), iron (red) and copper (green). A mixture of lead and tin oxide was used for white, usually the base glaze. Tiles were commonly produced alongside

pottery wares, although dedicated kilns were not unknown.[9]

Group 1: Dutch polychrome floor tiles

The first group identified in the 31 St James Street assemblage consisted of two polychrome floor tiles, thought to be of Dutch origin, dating from the late 16th to the first half of the 17th century. Both have similar, though not identical, floral designs of tulips within a central diamond. The design of the larger tile (Fig. 1) is picked out in green, yellow, blue and purple colours on a white body, with a matte finish. The corner motifs are very crude 'fleur de lis'. The smaller tile has a similar design, but the down-hanging flowers have been omitted, probably due to constraints of space. Tiles with this design are paralleled by de Jonge where they are dated *c.* 1600–1650.[10] Blue and White (?English) versions of the single tulip motif are illustrated by Hutchinson.[11]

The fabric is a greyish-yellow buff, soft, silty clay with reddish-brown streaks and occasional elliptical lenses up to 14mm. Inclusions also comprise occasional rounded quartz up to 0.1mm and dark red iron oxide up to 0.2mm. The dimensions for the tiles are approximately 132–134mm square and 13–17mm in thickness. Both tiles show pinholes in the surviving corners. The larger tile retains a pink sandy lime mortar on the base, and must have been used in a floor.

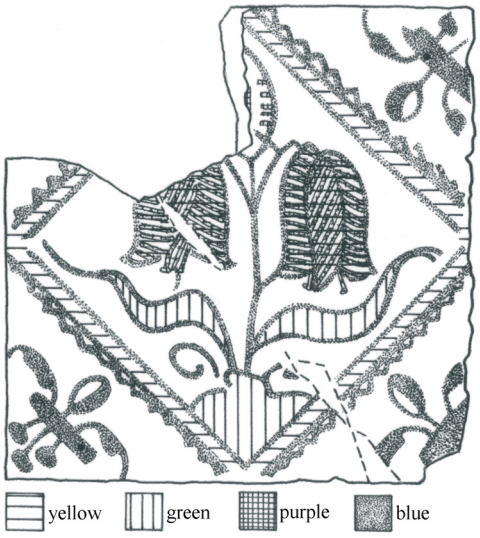

Fig. 1: Dutch polychrome floor tile (scale 1:2)

Group 2: mythological sea creatures

Altogether 16 individual tiles were recognisable in this group, depicted in blue and white glaze with 'ox-head' corner motifs and no border. Where visible, pinholes occupy two diagonally opposing corners. Dimensions varied slightly but all of the tiles measured between 126–129mm square and 9–11mm in thickness.

The glaze often has a very slight blue tinge, a glossy sheen suggesting a relatively high lead content, characteristics associated with English, rather than Dutch tiles.[12] The backs of the tiles are rough-textured, which is also characteristic of English tiles.[13] However, most tiles show crazing, common in Dutch tiles, and corner motifs are closely paralleled in Dutch designs of the second half of the 17th century.[14] Consequently there remains the possibility of a Dutch origin.

The fabric is a cream, fairly hard sandy fabric with occasional to moderate quartz up to 0.5mm, occasional light red iron oxide up to 1mm, with few fragments containing occasional clay streaks or lenses (similar to Museum of London fabric number 3064). On balance the tiles are thought most likely to be English in origin, though given the early date it may be that there was little variation from Dutch motifs at this stage.

The subject matter of sea creatures was one of several new themes that became popular by the mid-17th century.[15] The most common representations in this group are those of mermen or 'Tritons' (Figs 2b, 2c, 2d, 2e) including one example depicting a triton and a mermaid armed with swords (Fig. 2a). Fig. 2b shows a stylistically different treatment for the sea, with a more matte finish and more brilliant white glaze, and may be of Dutch origin, but it still appears to be of the same fabric group. One tile (Fig. 3b) is readily identifiable as Venus, riding a shell chariot pulled by swans, with her son Cupid riding behind, all three elements being attributes of Venus.[16] The remaining tiles show mermaids or cherubs mounted on sea monsters or in one case a 'sea horse' (Fig. 3a). Although there are similarities between the designs, none are duplicated, and the impression is that the group may have formed a composition with the figure of Venus possibly as a central element to a common theme.

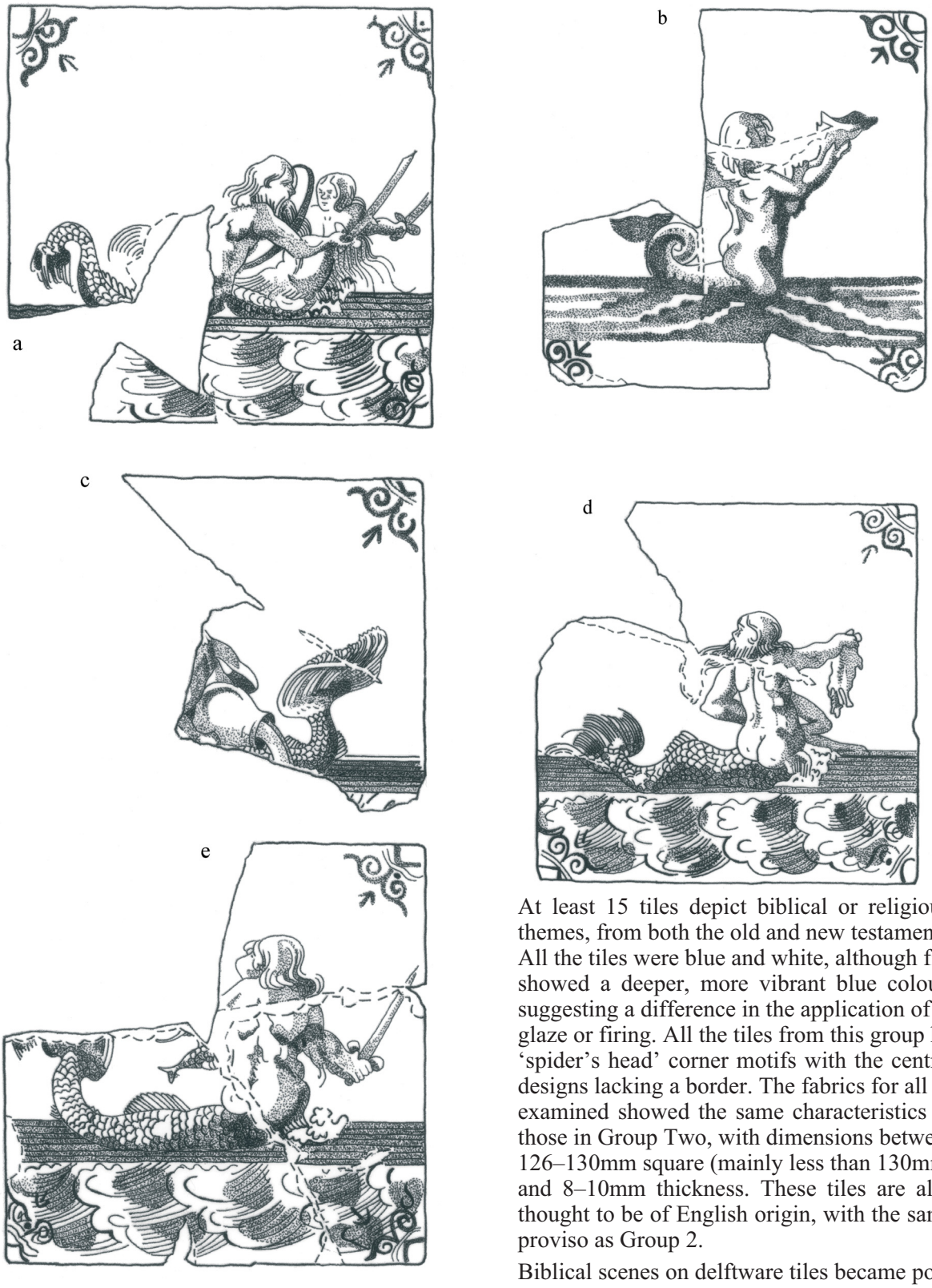

Fig. 2: nautical mythology tiles (scale 3:5)

At least 15 tiles depict biblical or religious themes, from both the old and new testaments. All the tiles were blue and white, although five showed a deeper, more vibrant blue colour suggesting a difference in the application of the glaze or firing. All the tiles from this group had 'spider's head' corner motifs with the central designs lacking a border. The fabrics for all tiles examined showed the same characteristics as those in Group Two, with dimensions between 126–130mm square (mainly less than 130mm) and 8–10mm thickness. These tiles are also thought to be of English origin, with the same proviso as Group 2.

Biblical scenes on delftware tiles became popular during the second half of the 17th century.[17]

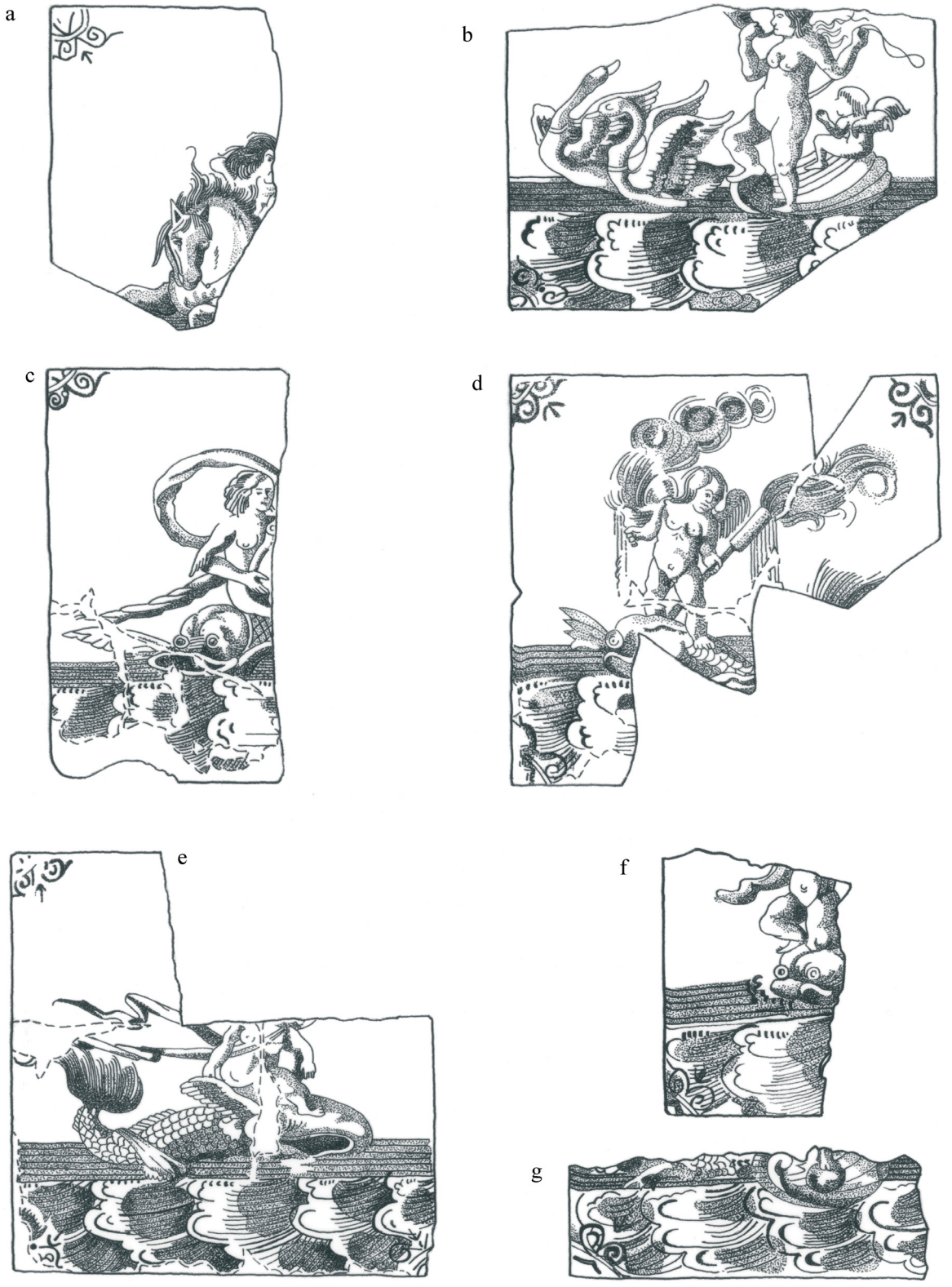

Fig. 3: nautical mythology tiles (scale 3:5)

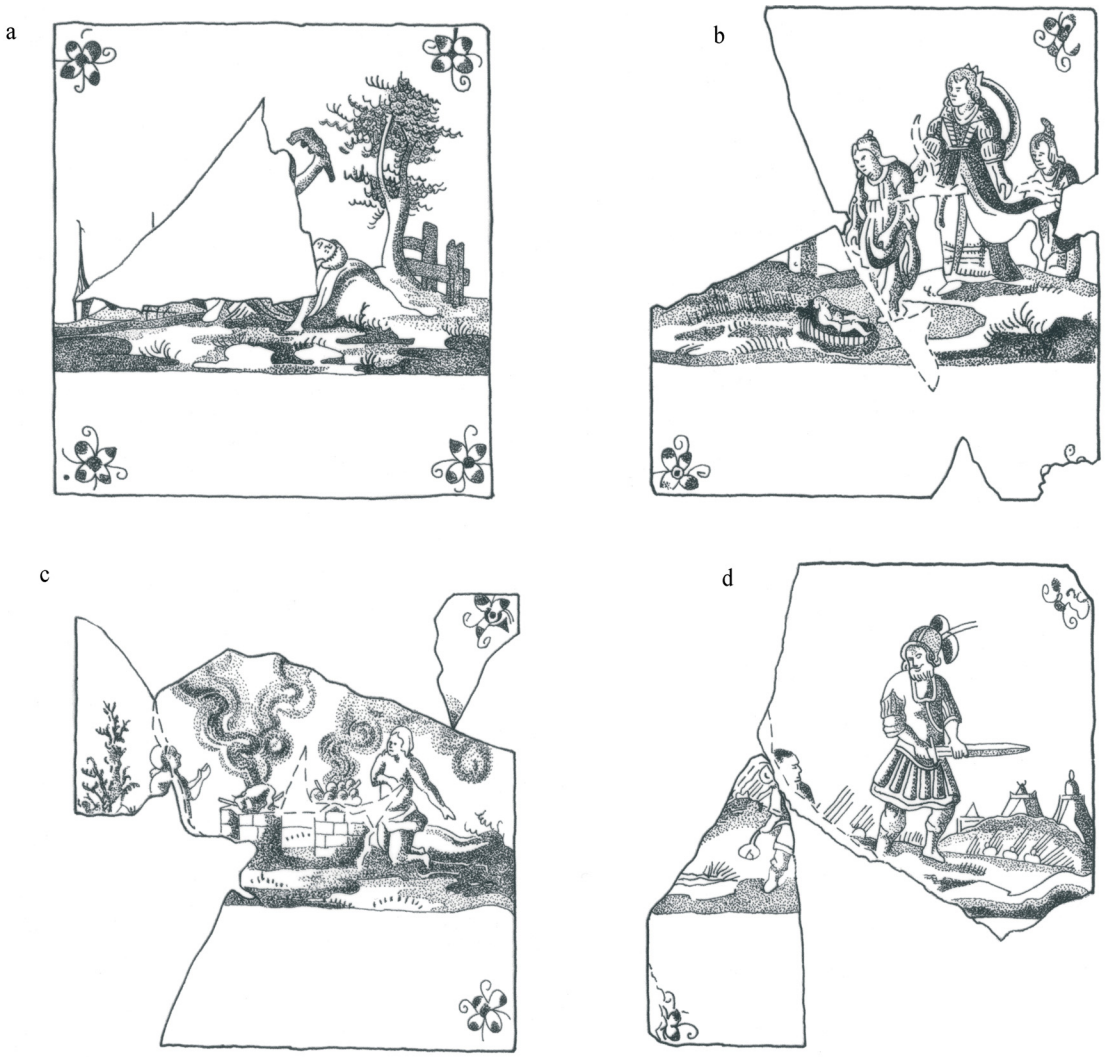

Fig. 4: Biblical tiles (scale 1:2)

Some of the themes are readily identifiable. Old Testament subjects included two tiles representing the story of Cain and Abel. One depicts Cain and Abel offering sacrifice to God (Fig.4c: Genesis 4:4). Following the rebuttal of his sacrifice Cain then kills his brother Abel. In some versions Cain uses an ass's jawbone as shown in Fig. 4a (Genesis 4:8).

The discovery of Moses in the basket by the Pharaoh's daughter (Fig. 4b), that of David versus Goliath (Fig. 4d: 1 Samuel 17:49) and the image of Pontius Pilate (Fig. 5e) are depicted with the figures wearing anachronistic clothing and armour.

The subject matter for Fig. 5d is not certain, it may represent the temptation of Eve, as the figure on the left appears to be a devil, possibly with a snake in the centre, wrapped around the tree. Alternatively this element may be part of the cross of Jesus. Likewise the identity of the bearded man reclining (Fig. 5f) is also uncertain, although the book the male is leaning on may represent an attribute of one of the Gospel saints. It may also represent a theme such as 'The Dream of Joseph'.[18]

Two tiles depict a woman drawing water by a well. In the first (Fig. 5a) she bares her breasts, an attribute associated possibly with the harlot in the story of the 'Woman of Samaria'.[19] However she holds a shepherd's crook, as does the other figure, and the scene may be that of Rachel and Jacob watering Laban's sheep (Genesis 29:9–30). The

second tile shows a camel train in the background, identifying the story with that of Rebecca and Eliezer (Genesis 28). The remaining biblical tiles appear to represent the story of Jesus (Fig. 6). The only identifiable element from these is that of the daughter of the woman of Canaan (Fig. 6c). The woman supplicating, and pointing to the dogs that form the basis for the story's metaphor, suggest this is the mother asking Jesus to cure her daughter possessed of evil spirits. Jesus at first refuses, saying that bread intended for children should not be given to dogs. The woman counters by saying dogs eat the scraps that fall from their master's table (Matthew 15:21–28).

Significance of the subject matter

Initially, Dutch tiles concentrated on abstract designs, in many ways influenced by Spanish and Moorish motifs; however, by the mid-17th century figurative scenes had become popular. The Group 1 assemblage reflects the adaptation of these earlier motifs, while retaining the vibrancy and colour of 16th-century tiles. The popularity of Chinese porcelain from the late 16th century influenced tile makers, who adopted blue and white as the principal colours for their wares in the 17th century, yet used these colours on an increasing range of subject matter. The use of classical mythology in the Group 2 tiles for example reflects the increasing interest in Classical art and architecture in Britain during this period, of which Inigo Jones, the architect involved with the initial development of Covent Garden, was a leading proponent. The exuberant imagery of the nautical scenes echoes the arrival of the English Baroque in the second half of the 17th century, a style that delighted in elaborate decoration of both exterior and interior and the *bon viveur* of the Restoration lifestyle.

The use of biblical tiles as a decorative feature could also be viewed as a public expression of worship, and interestingly the allegory implied in many of the identified scenes seems to concentrate on ideas of struggle against oppression (David vs. Goliath, the story of Moses) tolerance of others (Jesus and the Canaanite woman) and the retribution of God (Cain and Abel). Set against the backdrop of mid-17th-century England, when the country was torn apart by the religious schisms of the Civil War, execution of Charles I, the Restoration and subsequent retributions against the regicides, these themes seem wholly appropriate. Indeed the tile depicting Pilate washing his hands as Christ is led away almost parodies Charles' treatment at the hands of his judge and jury. Interestingly there seem to be no obvious representations of the Virgin Mary, who may have been considered too much of a 'catholic' icon at this time. The rise of Puritanism in the second half of the 17th century may possibly have provided a motivation for the removal of tiles with subject matter not considered suitable by puritanical members of the community, but it may just be that the tiles were out of fashion by the beginning of the 18th century, when the Covent Garden area had become less desirable.

Conclusions

The collection probably represents material associated with the development of Covent Garden during the 17th century, beginning with the construction of a piazza complex in the 1630s by the architect Inigo Jones. During the 17th century the area was one of the most desirable places of residence in London, although by the 18th century it fell somewhat out of fashion with the wealthier citizens and became more bohemian in character. The tiles discussed above give an indication of the appointment of the residences during the area's heyday. During this period the production of tin-glazed tiles in England was in its infancy, and it is possible, considering the style of the corner motifs in group two tiles particularly, that the tiles were Dutch imports. However, most of the characteristics indicate English origin, though considerably influenced by Dutch tradition. The choice of subject matter may have been simply a matter of fashion and aesthetic, but it is tempting to read between the lines and see the themes of the biblical tiles as reflecting the religious and social conflicts of the period.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd staff: Dr Frank Meddens for proof reading and editing, Michael Miles for the illustrations, Chris Jarrett for the pottery dates.

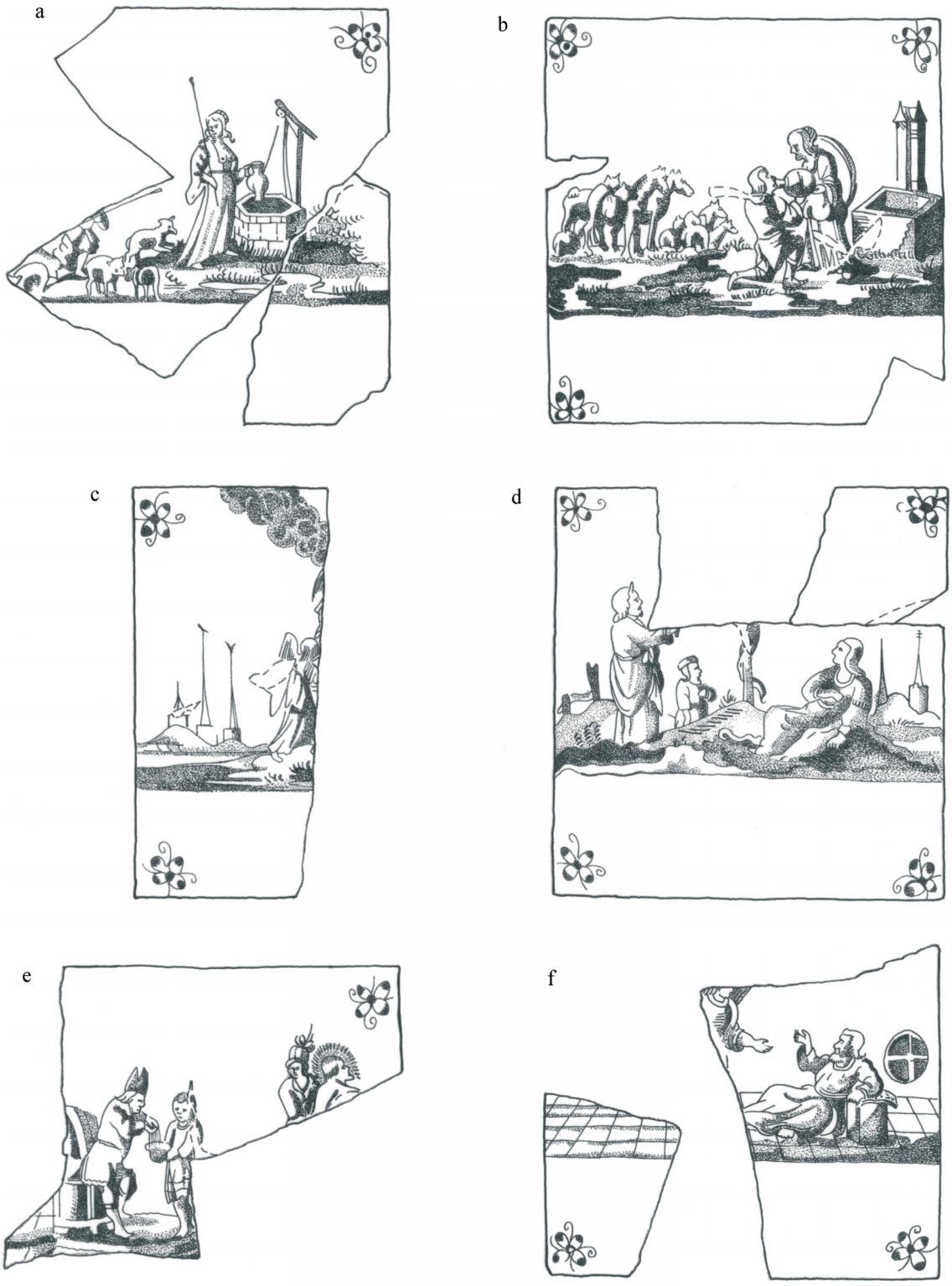

Fig. 5: Biblical tiles (scale 1:2)

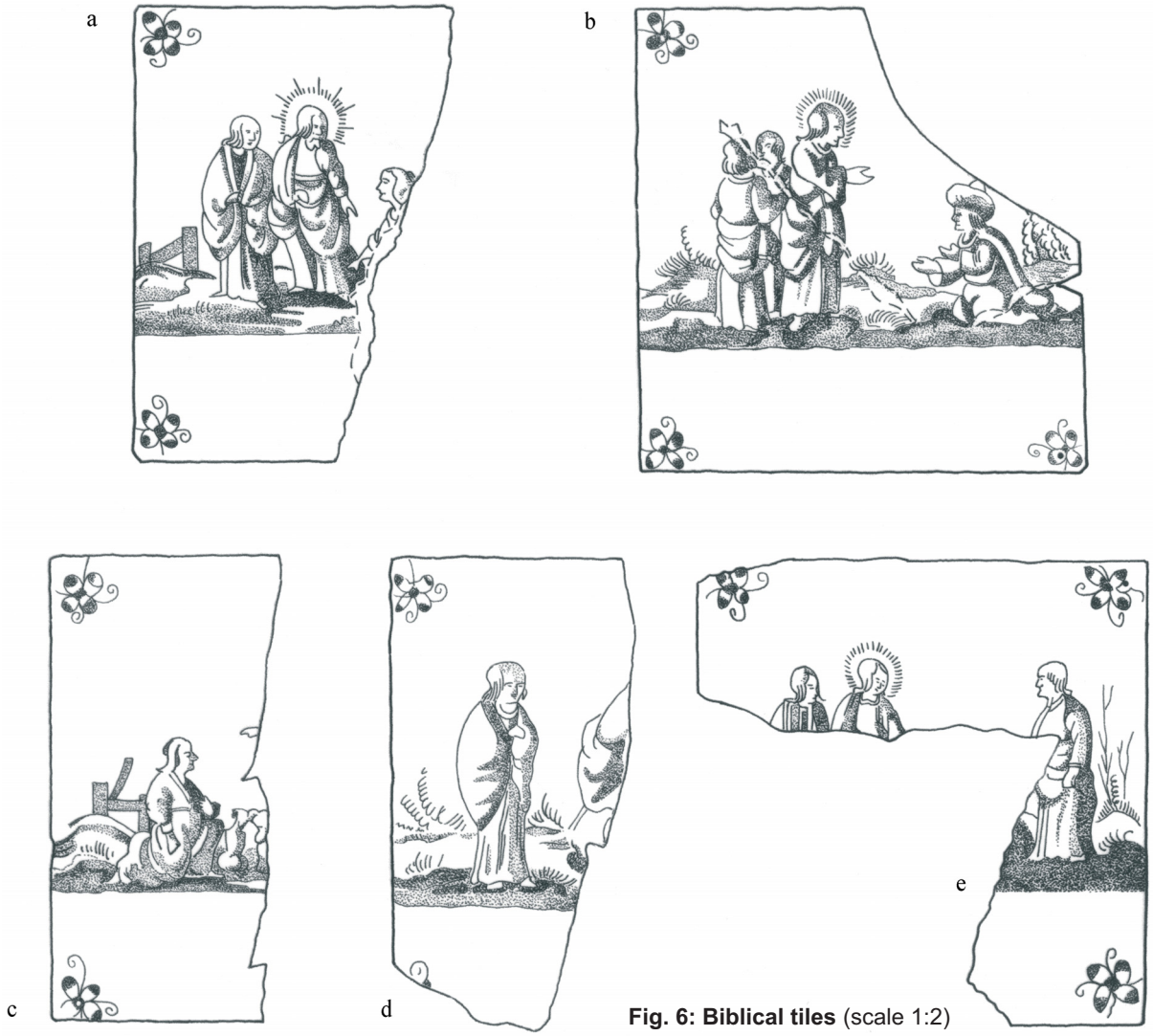

Fig. 6: Biblical tiles (scale 1:2)

Thanks also to the Lothbury Property Trust Company Ltd. for funding the excavations.

1. J. Leary *Tatberht's Lundenwic: Archaeological excavations in Middle Saxon London*, Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd Monogr 2, (2004).
2. C. Jarrett, *pers. com*m.
3. J. Horne *A Catalogue of English Delftware Tiles*, catalogue of an exhibition held in Church Street Kensington, London, (1980) 1; Smith, T.P. 'Tin-glazed wall tiles', in Tyler, K. 'The Hermitage Pothouse' *Post-medieval Archaeol* **33** (1999) 153–155.
4. Smith, *op cit* fn. 3, 153.
5. H. Van Lemmen *Delftware Tiles* (1986, reprinted 1998) 19.
6. *Op cit* fn. 5, 22.
7. *Op cit* fn. 5, 4.
8. J. Pluis *De Nederlands Tegel: decors en benamingen 1570-1930* (1998).
9. F. Britton, *London Delftware* (1987) 61.
10. J. De Jonge *Nederlandse Tegels* (1971) 38.
11. M. Hutchinson 'Edward IV's Bulwark: excavations at Tower Hill 1985' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **47** (1996) 101–144, 132 fig. 18.8.
12. *Op cit* fn. 5, 22.
13. *Smith*, op cit fn. 3, 154.
14. *Op cit* fn. 5, 11.
15. *Ibid.*
16. S. Carr-Gomm *The Dictionary of symbols in Western Art* (1995) 220.
17. *Op cit* fn. 5, 11.
18. J. Hall *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (1996) 178.
19. *Ibid*, 344.