Tile

Place of origin: Chertsey Abbey (made)
Date: 1290-1300 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Inlaid earthenware
Museum number: C.8-1918
Gallery location: Medieval and Renaissance, Room 10c, case 7

Public access description
This tile was once part of a highly decorated floor at Chertsey Abbey, Surrey. Pavements of decorated ceramic tiles were a medieval innovation, adding richness and splendour to great churches. They were used subsequently in secular contexts, including castles and royal residences. The tilers working at Chertsey during the second half of the thirteenth century produced work that was both decoratively and technically of the highest quality.

Here the design was created by inlaying white decoration into the surface of the tile. The subject matter for the tiles at Chertsey was varied but included scenes related to the signs of the zodiac and the labours on the months. The creature depicted on this tile may be related to signs of the zodiac, although an identification with Scorpio is uncertain. Chertsey Abbey was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1537. Excavations in the nineteenth-century uncovered traces of its former glory and the skill of the craftspeople who worked there.

Descriptive line
Tile of red earthenware, inlaid with a design of a fantastic creature, Chertsey Abbey, about 1290-1300

Physical description
This tiles now consists of seven pieces which once made a complete square. A fragment is missing from the left vertical edge of the tile. The decoration has been created by inlaying white clay into the surface of the main body of the tile. There are two circular bands of white clay that delineate a roundel. At the centre of the roundel is a fantastic creature with four legs, a pronounced spine and a long tail. The creature is apparently depicted as if seen from above and looks to the left. The border between the two bands includes eight identical motifs of curling foliage equally spaced. The corners bordering onto the edge of the outer circle is also filled with a pattern of scrolling foliage.

Dimensions
Height: 19.8 cm, Width: 19.8 cm, Depth: 3.7 cm maximum, Weight: 2.78 kg with slate backing

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Object history note
This tile belongs to a series of smaller pictorial tiles with the scenes depicted in roundels. This tile bears strong similarities with other tiles associated with Chertsey Abbey that depict the labours of the month and signs of the zodiac. A previous V&A object label, following Eames (1980) suggested that the creature 'possibly represents Scorpio'. There is a similar tile in the British Museum collections (Eames 1980, Catalogue No. 9200-9203. Designs 564 and 573). Eames admitted that the identification with Scorpio (covering the months October to November) was uncertain (Eames 1980, p169 and p149).

Historical significance: Eames notes that the work of the Chertsey tilers was 'decoratively and technically better than that of any other medieval tilers known in France and England. She speculates that the designs were drawn by one of the king's painters, based on manuscript illustrations, and that the designs were then carved into wooden blocks by a master carver.

Historical context note
The Benedictine Abbey of St Peter at Chertsey was founded in the seventh century. On the 6th July 1537 Chertsey Abbey was surrendered by the Abbot, John Cordrey, and the history of the Abbey as a living institution came to an end. Production of tiles for Chertsey seems to have begun round 1250 and continued for most of the thirteenth century. Earlier tiles included individual pictorial roundels. Here the roundel, and its border pattern, are not separate pieces of ceramic, but are part of one single tile. The pattern has been defined with white inlaid decoration. The tiles from Chertsey Abbey in Surrey form part of a groups of related tiles which include those still in-situ in the Chapter House of Westminster Abbey, as well as sites founds at Winchester, Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire, Halesowen in the West Midlands and other sites.

Many of the tiles from Chertsey have a particularly intricate inlaid design. Unlike most medieval inlaid tiles they were probably moulded, rather than stamped with the design, before the white clay was inlaid. This was a time-consuming process. The wet clay was probably pressed into moulds, rather than the design being stamped into leather-hard clay.
Manwaring Shurlock (1885) gives an account of the recovery of some of the tiles from the site of the Abbey. He records that tiles from Chertsey were exhibited by Mr Wightwick in 1787 (1885, p7) reflecting antiquarian interest in the Middle Ages. He notes that in 1852 Mr Samuel Grumbridge uncovered many tiles whilst searching for building stone on the Abbey site. In 1861 further excavations took place which uncovered more fragments of tiles. Shurlock speculates that tiles in complete condition were probably removed at an early date, whilst those that were damaged during the depredation of the Abbey buildings were left in-situ. Very little of the Abbey buildings survive above ground.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129390/tile-unknown/