

The British Museum Catalogue of Medieval Tiles —a Review, incorporating the Irish evidence

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The publication, in 1980, of this magnificent, two-volume *Catalogue* was the culmination of more than thirty years of research by Mrs. Elizabeth Eames on the tile collections in the British Museum.¹ Although it may not be immediately apparent, this *corpus* of decorated tiles and the splendid analysis that accompanies it has a particular relevance to the study of the archaeology, art and architecture of the medieval period in Ireland. Decorated pavements, as a fashion in floor covering especially in religious houses, was introduced into Ireland sometime in the thirteenth century, and a study of the Irish tiles focuses attention, almost immediately, on its sources in the tile industry of Anglo-Norman England and Wales. Hence the value to the student of medieval Irish archaeology of this catalogue of the British Museum's collection of tiles which includes the collection of the ninth Duke of Rutland and contains representative examples from both these islands.

The tiles in the British Museum are loose (*i.e.* removed from their original pavement positions) but in many medieval buildings both large and small throughout England portions of tile pavements survive *in situ*, and recent excavations at sites like Norton Priory in Cheshire, Old Warden Abbey in Bedfordshire, and Danbury in Essex, have revealed new and exciting finds of colourful pavements and tile kilns. Many of the English tiles and pavements were recorded or collected by antiquarian enthusiasts, such as was the Duke of Rutland. A great deal of evidence was lost, however, during the later nineteenth century and in the early decades of this century when many of the impressive English and Welsh abbeys were simply cleaned out during the course of conservation works. The work by Elizabeth Eames on the British Museum collection, begun in the late 1940s, and the ongoing efforts of the English tile census, sponsored by the Society of Antiquaries of London under the direction of Mrs. Eames, has, however, helped to redress the balance.

But what of the situation in Ireland and what has happened to the legacy of decorated tile pavements bequeathed to us by our medieval forbears? Tiled pavements or portions thereof were known to have survived in some of our major medieval cathedrals and churches at the beginning of the nineteenth century, *e.g.* at Christ Church and St. Patrick's in Dublin, St. Canice's in Kilkenny, and at Cistercian abbeys like Mellifont, Co. Louth, and St. Mary's, Dublin. In the course of restoration and maintenance works these pavements were, however, disturbed and, in most instances, lifted so that all we have today are a few original tiles re-laid amongst the Victorian replicas or transferred to the collections of the National Museum. Little or nothing was recorded of the arrangement of the tiles in these pavements as found, and but rarely were illustrations of some of the designs published.² Even less is known of the tiles that came to light during the course of conservation works carried out on National Monuments in the care of the Office of Public

¹ Elizabeth S. Eames, *Catalogue of Medieval Lead-Glazed Earthenware Tiles in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum*, 2 vols., British Museum Publications Limited, London 1980. Price: £135.00 stg.

² See T. Oldham, *Ancient Irish Pavement Tiles*, Dublin 1840s, and W. Frazer 'Early Pavement Tiles in Ireland,' *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 23(1893), 357-366; 24(1894), 136-138; 25(1895), 171-175.

Works, and except for the interest and concern of Inspectors of National Monuments such as Harold Leask and Percy Le Clerc, who rescued some examples for storage or small displays, much more of this important archaeological material would have been lost.

In the course of the 1954-56 excavations at Mellifont Abbey, supervised by Liam de Paor, a considerable collection of tiles, all from disturbed layers, came to light, and a selection were later displayed on the floor of the Chapter House. Subsequently, a number of the designs were published in the excavation report.³ In 1971 the present writer undertook a small excavation for the Office of Public Works at Swords Castle, Co. Dublin, the summer residence of the Archbishops of Dublin in early medieval times. Here, in a small oratory within the castle precincts, the remains of a tile pavement was recovered *in situ*, containing both two-coloured and line-impressed tiles. This important find was fully recorded⁴ with the assistance of Mrs. Eames who gave generously of her knowledge and expertise. The years 1972 to 1975 saw further significant discoveries at the Augustinian Priory of St. Mary, Kells, Co. Kilkenney,⁵ and at the Cistercian Abbey of Duiske, Graigue-namanagh, also in Co. Kilkenney. At the latter site the small excavation, directed by John Bradley and Conleth Manning,⁶ uncovered portion of the early pavement, some five feet underneath the modern floor. It is evident from this investigation and other discoveries made during the recent restoration works that the great church of this Cistercian Abbey was originally paved with a magnificent tiled floor composed of two-coloured (inlaid) and plain tiles. Much of this pavement apparently survives *in situ*, hopefully to be recorded in the future and thus enable a comprehensive assessment of all the tile arrangements and designs.

With the emergence of these new discoveries to add to the existing finds, the need for a comprehensive catalogue of the Irish medieval tile types and designs was realised. This task was undertaken by the present writer in collaboration with Mrs. Eames,⁷ and over the past few years both the old and the recent assemblages of medieval tiles have been examined, drawn, and classified. With the publication of the British Museum *Catalogue*, which includes the major collection of source material for Ireland, the Irish tile *corpus* can now be completed, and the result readily compared with that for the British tiles.

The British Museum *Catalogue* presents us in volume 1 with a comprehensive list of every decorated tile in the collection, and eight coloured plates, while volume 2 is given over to illustrations of over three thousand tile patterns arranged according to the similarity of design. Volume 1 also contains a lengthy and very important introduction in which the English medieval tile industry is fully discussed under the various headings of technique, centres of production, chronology, etc. We have, therefore, for the first time, a modern, up-to-date assessment of the most comprehensive tile collection in existence in

³L. de Paor, "Excavations at Mellifont Abbey, Co. Louth", *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 68,C(1969), 109-164. For some recent discoveries see R. Stalley, "Mellifont Abbey: A Study of its Architectural History," *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 80,C(1980), 335-340.

⁴See T. Fanning, "A Medieval Tile Pavement from Swords Castle, Co. Dublin", *Med. Archaeol.*, 19(1975), 205-209, and T. Fanning, "An Irish Medieval Tile Pavement: recent excavations at Swords Castle, County Dublin", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 105(1975), 47-82.

⁵Publication forthcoming by the present writer. For a preliminary report see T. Fanning, "Excavations at Kells Priory, Co. Kilkenney", *Old Kilkenney Review*, 25(1973), 61-64.

⁶J. Bradley and C. Manning, "Excavations at Duiske Abbey, Graigue-namanagh, Co. Kilkenney", *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 81,C(1981), 397-426.

⁷The compilation of the tile corpus was aided by the granting of a joint fellowship from the Royal Irish Academy and the British Academy.

these islands—the fruit of many years of patient study and analysis. Undoubtedly, there will be corrections in the future to portions of this analysis, especially in the establishment of more precise dating, something which Elizabeth Eames will be the first to acknowledge. Nonetheless, this *Catalogue* will undoubtedly stand for a long time as the definitive work of reference.

The catalogue has a small number of entries relating to Irish tiles which came into the British Museum via the Rutland collection or were acquired in the latter part of the last century. They are all of the line-impressed variety, except for one example of a relief tile from St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin, and another unusual specimen containing the inscription "Carigfargus 1615". This late example of a relief tile, probably an import from North Devon, was one of a number manufactured for Sir Arthur Chichester's new Renaissance style mansion at Joymount, built on top of the ruins of the Franciscan Friary at Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim. It was interesting to see some fragments confirming their use on the site itself turning up in the recent excavations directed by the late Tom Delaney, together with some line-impressed tiles from the earlier Friary. There is also a reference in the *Catalogue* to an unusual find from Kells Priory of a pseudo-mosaic tile with polychrome glazing.

The earliest known tiles from Irish medieval sites are some groups of two-coloured tiles with the pattern, frequently a fleur-de-lis or animal motif, displayed on the surface of the tile in a white clay and glazed so that the pattern showed up as yellow against the brown colour of the tile fabric (Fig. 1; nos. 1 and 2). Normally the two-coloured effect was achieved by stamping the pattern or design into the wet tile clay (the tile quarry) and inlaying the white clay before firing in the kiln. This two-coloured type of tile, sometimes referred to as the inlaid variety, is the only decorated tile type utilised in the pavement at Duiske Abbey, and other examples, also datable to the mid-thirteenth century, are known from Kells Priory, Christ Church, and St. Patrick's. Of particular interest to our Thomond readers was the discovery some years ago in the excavations at the site of the Dominican Priory in Limerick of an entire two-coloured tile among some fragments of plain tiles.⁸ Small two-coloured tiles displaying Lombardic-type letters are known from Duiske, St. Patrick's, and St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin.

Tile mosaic, using plain glazed tiles of various shapes and colours to form roundels and other geometric designs, is one of the earliest forms of decorative paving known in England and can still be seen today in the great Cistercian abbeys in Yorkshire, such as those at Fountains, Byland and Rievaulx. Some of these pavements are known to have been laid between 1230 and 1270, and were probably modelled on similar pavements in France where tile mosaic copied the earlier stone mosaic composed of relatively large pieces of coloured marble known as *opus Alexandrinum*.

Although no plain tile mosaic, as such, has been discovered on Irish sites, small quantities of other forms of mosaic paving embellished with either inlaid or line-impressed designs have been found, datable to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries. There are a few fragments of inlaid mosaic from Kells Priory and a small but very interesting group of tiles, shaped to form a roundel, from Balltinglass Abbey, Co. Wicklow—an early daughter-house of Mellifont. Here, some of the inlaid designs are of a figurative character depicting comic animal and human forms. We also possess a few pieces of line-impressed mosaic as loose finds from Swords Castle, Christ Church, and

⁸ Personal observation by the writer, courtesy of the excavator, Dr. Elizabeth Shee-Twohig, Dept. of Archaeology, University College, Cork.



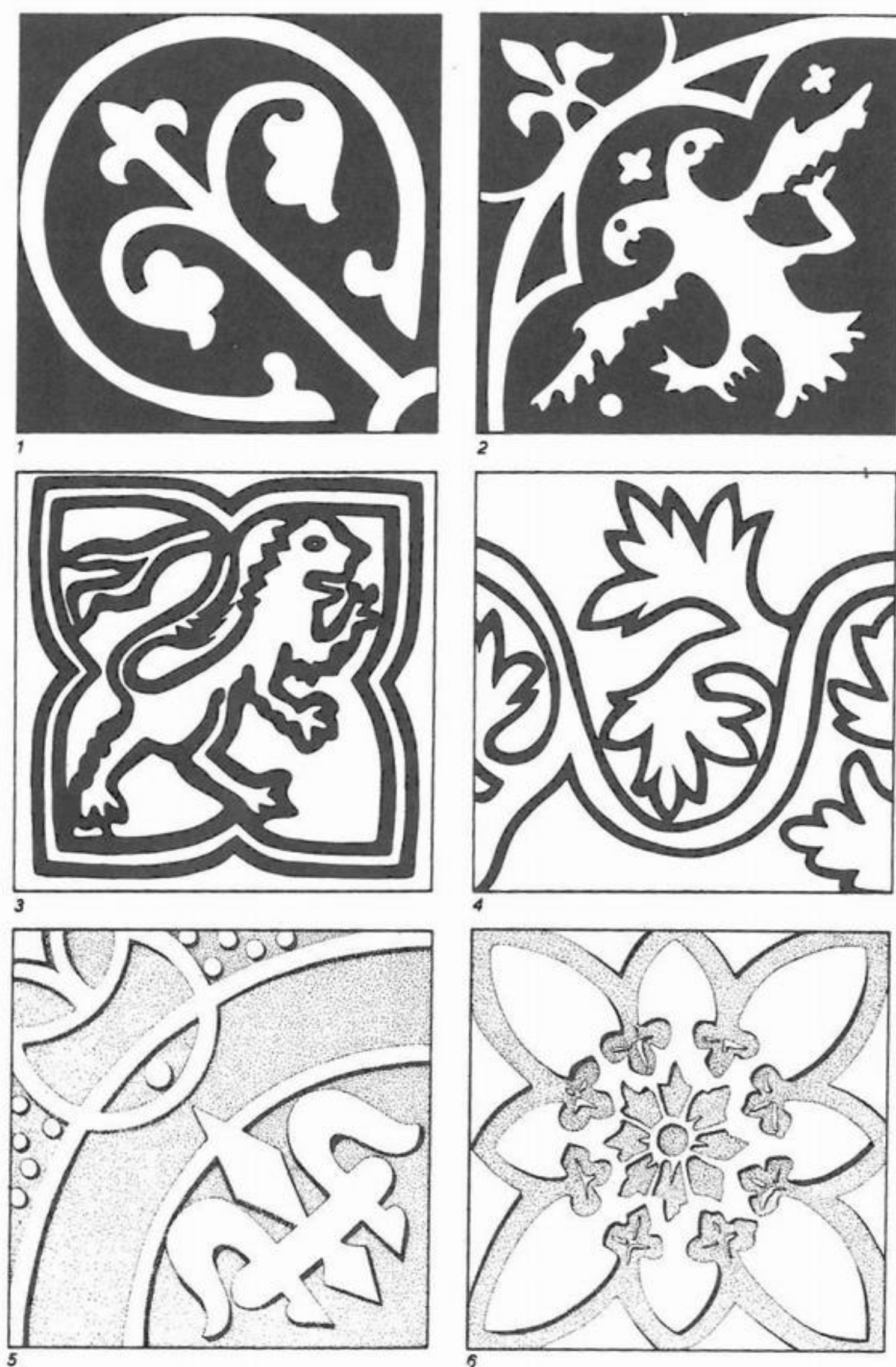


Fig. 1. Nos 1 and 2. Two-coloured (inlaid) tiles.
 Nos. 3 and 4. Line-impressed tiles.
 Nos. 5 and 6. Relief tiles.

Lusk Church, Co. Dublin, a type of tile securely dated in England to the first half of the fourteenth century. These mosaic shapes were normally stamped with simple motifs such as the sexfoils and rosettes displayed on the Swords tiles.⁹

During the second half of the fourteenth century, when tiles were being mass-produced in England, such simple stamps were replaced and line-impressed decoration became the fashion. On tiles manufactured by this method, the entire pattern was impressed into the tile by a single stamp and the tile quarry glazed and fired. The stamps, possibly made from metal, could be used many times over on the normal 12cm. square tile. Line-impressed patterns produced in this manner could be used singly as at Swords Castle or a number of patterns could be combined to make up a nine-tile design.¹⁰ By the fifteenth century such tiles were increasingly popular and patterns like the lion rampant and the vine-leaf scroll (Fig. 1; nos. 3 and 4) are known from many Irish sites. Indeed, from a perusal of the old finds, and as suggested also by the more recent discoveries, it would appear that in the fifteenth century where a church or religious house in Ireland was provided with a tiled pavement, the pavement was composed, in the main, of line-impressed tiles.

Tiles decorated in relief were fashionable in Ireland by the end of the fifteenth and in the early sixteenth century. In such tiles the pattern was stamped in relief (Fig. 1, nos. 5 and 6), sometimes quite high relief with moulded surfaces. As with the line-impressed type, these tiles were in one colour, with the various glazes providing whatever polychrome effect that was required in the pavement itself. Some of the relief patterns are quite elaborate, and others display heraldic shields and devices. A number of tiles discovered in the last century at Bective Abbey, Co. Meath, and Great Connell Abbey, Co. Kildare, carry the shield and motto of the Kildare branch of the Geraldines, and the pavements at these religious houses were probably commissioned as a result of the patronage of Garret More Fitzgerald or his son Garret Óg.¹¹ Some of the relief tiles, like the examples from Howth Abbey and Artane Church, Co. Dublin, are almost twice the normal size and the high relief design on these specimens, *e.g.* that depicting a soldier in Tudor-like armour,¹² confirms the rather late dating for this type.

With the exception of a few pieces from the excavations at Trim Castle, Co. Meath, and Carrickfergus Castle, Co. Antrim, all the known Irish medieval tiles are from religious establishments. There are no examples from other secular buildings, such as the famous Canynges pavement from Bristol now displayed in the British Museum (vol. 1, Plate VII), or the pavements from the town houses of some wealthy merchants discovered recently in the London excavations. The Irish contexts are mainly Cistercian monasteries, but not exclusively so, and the large quantities of both two-coloured and line-impressed tiles from Kells Priory show that the Augustinian Canons were also acquainted with this form of comfort in floor covering. We have seen, too, that even the mendicant friars were not adverse to this fashion, particularly in towns such as Limerick, Drogheda and Carrickfergus. The pavements in many instances were probably confined to the sanctuary areas of the church and any mosaic element limited to a roundel and its associated shapes in front of the altar. Other important areas in the monastery, *e.g.* the Chapter House—as may have been the case in St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin¹³—or the prior's residence were

⁹ T. Fanning, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 105(1975), 64, fig. 23.

¹⁰ As relaid in the Chapter House at Mellifont and depicted from St. Patrick's in T. Oldham, *op. cit.*, fig. 13A.

¹¹ W. Frazer, *op. cit.* 1893, fig. 1:2.

¹² See T. Oldham, *op. cit.*, p. 4, frontispiece fig. 5.

¹³ P. J. Donnelly, *Remains of St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin*, Dublin 1886, p. 5.

sometimes provided with tiled floors. The earliest Irish ecclesiastical buildings to be furnished with pavements may well have been the two cathedrals of Christ Church¹⁴ and St. Patrick's¹⁵ in Dublin, the architecture of which is almost totally English in style. Tiles have also been found loose in a number of the medieval parish churches in the Dublin area, and in the large and obviously wealthy parish churches in ports like New Ross and Youghal.

With the Dissolution of the monasteries in 1540-41, the manufacture and provision of medieval tiles in Ireland probably came to an abrupt end. Unlike in England, we have no evidence for a continuation of the tile industry after the destruction of the monastic houses. The relief tiles from Carrigfergus are later imports, and the few fragments of blue-and-white-coloured seventeenth century tiles from Mellifont are Dutch or Italian imports. Such Renaissance-type tiles may have been wall tiles rather than pavement tiles and utilised at Mellifont in the portion of the monastic buildings refurbished by the Moore family after the Dissolution.

The distribution pattern of the Irish sites where tiles have been found is of particular significance (Fig. 2). It shows clearly that tile pavements were almost exclusively laid down in the religious houses located in the Norman-held areas of Leinster, Ulster¹⁶ and Munster. There are no tiles, either loose or *in situ*, from any of the excavated medieval monastic houses in Connacht, such as Ballintober, Co. Mayo, or Clontuskert, Co. Galway. As of now, the most westerly site producing tiles is the Dominican Priory in Limerick, already referred to, which, after all, was a Norman town during the period in question. (Some tiles from Kilmallock, Co. Limerick, previously considered to be floor tiles,¹⁷ are now realised to be roof tiles.) It would appear that in the Gaelic territories, even if the monastery was sufficiently wealthy to afford it, this latest fashion in flooring was not adopted. This phenomenon may not be merely a reflection of cultural differences but may also reflect the personal nature of the tile industry. Many pavements in Ireland as well as in England were probably commissioned as a result of direct personal contact amongst the higher orders of the ecclesiastical nobility, and such contacts were particularly strong between the Norman foundations on both sides of the Irish Sea. Even Mellifont, originally an Irish foundation and the mother-house of the Cistercian Order in Ireland, did not enjoy the luxury of a tiled pavement until it came under Anglo-Norman influence in the latter half of the thirteenth century. During this period the paviours or tile masters probably came over from England as a result of such contacts. They brought with them the tools of their trade, their stamps and also their pattern books containing the foliate, geometric and heraldic designs common to the new, imported Gothic art style.

Amongst the tile groups identified in the British Museum *Catalogue*, the Wessex group seems to be the best claimant as the ultimate source for the earliest two-coloured tiles from Ireland, viz. the tiles from Kells Priory, Christ Church and Duiske Abbey. Tiles of this Wessex group, from Clarendon, Winchester and westwards to Glastonbury and Cleve Abbey in Somerset, provide us with the closest parallels, and also tiles from a number of sites in southwest Wales, such as Tintern Abbey. This probable contact with the tile

¹⁴ G. E. Street, *The Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, commonly called Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin*, Dublin 1886, pp. 145-147.

¹⁵ See T. Oldham, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ For notice of the tiles from Downpatrick Cathedral see *An Archaeological Survey of Co. Down*, Belfast 1966, p. 272.

¹⁷ T. Fanning, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 105(1975), 80.

**MEDIEVAL
PAVEMENT
TILES**



Fig. 2. Distribution of medieval pavement tiles in Ireland.

industry on both sides of the Bristol Channel corresponds with the established links shown by the medieval pottery and the known importation of Dundry stone for building purposes.¹⁸

There is some evidence in the tile fabrics at Kells and Duiske, and also in the occurrence of wasters at both sites and at St. Canice's,¹⁹ that a native Irish tile industry may have emerged in the Kilkenny area as a result of the introduction of this new fashion in flooring.

In later times, particularly in the fifteenth century, when line-impressed tiles were in vogue, the closest analogies for the Irish designs are to be found in North Wales and more especially in the Chester area at monasteries like Norton Priory, Runcorn, and other sites around the mouth of the River Dee. Some of the line-impressed patterns at Mellifont and Swords have almost identical parallels at Norton Priory,²⁰ and recent finds at Drogheda tend to confirm this connection.²¹ The medieval trade with Chester and the North Welsh coast is well documented for this period, both in the historical and archaeological record. Again, there is some tentative evidence, largely from waster material, for a local tile industry in the Drogheda area, and future excavation in that town, or within the precinct of a monastery such as Mellifont, could yet reveal the remains of a tile kiln on Irish soil.

Finally, in congratulating Mrs. Eames on her monumental work and the standard she has set for other scholars, it should be stated here that the publication of the Irish tile *corpus*, although comprehensive, will not attempt the detail of the two-volume and necessarily expensive format of the British Museum *Catalogue*. The Irish publication will be along the lines of a descriptive inventory of tile types and designs, indexed according to sites and patterns, preceded by some introductory material. The fieldwork involved will be completed shortly, so the writer would welcome any information that members of the Thomond Archaeological Society might have of medieval tiles from the area. It would seem rather strange in a region where Anglo-Norman influence was so strong that the Dominican Priory in Limerick should be the only site producing evidence for a decorated tile pavement.

¹⁸ D. M. Waterman, "Somersetshire and other Foreign Building Stone in Medieval Ireland", *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 33(1970), 63-75.

¹⁹ J. Graves and J. G. Prim, *The History, Architecture and Antiquities of the Cathedral Church of St. Canice, Kilkenny*, Dublin 1857, pp. 77-78.

²⁰ J. P. Greene, "Norton Priory", *Current Archaeology*, 31(1972), 216.220.

²¹ Personal observation by the writer, courtesy of the excavator, P. D. Sweetman, of the National Parks and Monuments Branch of the Office of Public Works.