

# English Sgraffito Ware Tile based on the Tring Tiles

Festival of the Passing of the Ice Dragon

March 18, AS XL (2006)

Barony of the Rydderich Hael

This piece is square ceramic tile featuring sgraffito decoration made in a class taught by Oksana Goncharova of the East Kingdom. My documentation on materials and technique is largely a restatement of Lady Oksana's excellent class handout.

## Sgraffito Ware

According to Lady Oksana, the name *sgraffito* comes from the Italian verb *sgraffiare*, meaning "to incise." This aptly describes the technique, whereby an overlying layer of slip is incised to reveal a contrasting layer below.

The earliest surviving sgraffito objects come from China and date to the 10<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The technique spread westward into Islamic regions and Byzantium, where it peaked in popularity in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Trade brought sgraffito ware and knowledge of the technique as far west as England, where the Tring Church tiles were produced in the 14<sup>th</sup> century



12<sup>th</sup> c. Byzantine sgraffito plate

## Sgraffito technique

Red earthenware clay is rolled out as a slab and cut to size. The clay is allowed to become firm, but not dry, a stage referred to as "leather hard." In the simplest method, one layer of white slip is painted over the upper surface of the tile and allowed to set. A cartoon is placed over the slip and is lightly traced, leaving a depression in the slip beneath. The cartoon is removed, and the slip is incised to reveal the red clay below. A simple gouge may be used to create lines, or entire areas may be removed.

In a more complex method, developed in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, two layers of differently colored slip were painted onto the tile. Careful regulation of the depth of the incisions would selectively reveal either the underlying layer of slip or the clay below.

## Firing

In the Middle Ages, the incised leather hard tile was painted with lead glaze, and the entire piece was fired once, effectively firing the clay and the glaze at the same time. Modern ceramicists fire the clay and slip first in a bisque firing. Then the clear glaze is painted into the fired tile, and the piece is fired a second time.

Lead glaze turns slightly yellowish when fired. Modern clear glaze remains perfectly transparent. To give the effect of period lead glaze, Lady Oksana tinted the slip with a slightly yellowish cast.

### **The design**

I chose a cartoon from among those supplied by Lady Oksana, depicting a scene from one of the Tring Tiles.

The Tring Tiles, now housed at the British Museum, were originally installed at The Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Tring, Hertfordshire, England, circa 1320-1330. Their excellent condition supports the belief that they were likely installed as a frieze on the chancel wall, rather than used as floor tiles. The tiles were removed from the church during a 19<sup>th</sup> century renovation. The British Museum owns eight tiles, of what must have been a larger number in the series. The scenes depict, in the manner of a comic strip, events in the childhood of Christ. Although the canonical Gospels do not give any detail about Jesus's childhood, stories of his upbringing were popularly told in the Middle Ages, and may have their origins in the apocryphal Infancy Gospels.



#### **Tile No. 6**

The cartoon provided by Lady Oksana was inadvertently reversed while making the tile, resulting in a mirror image of the original.

The original measures 32.5 cm X 16.2 cm. My tile measures 15 cm X 14 cm, and is therefore about 90% the size of the original.

### **Materials and method**

**Method:** The tiles provided by Lady Oksana had already been rolled out, cut to size and painted with slip. I transferred the design from the cartoon to the tile, and etched the design using a wire gouge. When the etching was completed, the tile was collected by Mistress Honnorria of Thescorre who bisque fired it and clear glazed it.

**Clay:** Red earthenware clay to which grog has been added. The grog helps the clay to dry more evenly and warp less. Earthenware clay is a “low fire” clay, meaning that it can be fired at a lower temperature than other clays. Earthenware clay was the most common clay used in the Middle Ages.

**Slip:** Clay that has been mixed with water to a creamy liquid consistency.

**Glaze:** Modern clear glaze was provided by Mistress Honnorria.

### **Bibliography: Primary**

Oksana Goncharova, “Sgraffito Ware” (Susan Calafrafrancesco, 2005)  
Hellenic Ministry of Culture, “Byzantine Glazed Ceramics” [URL: [www.culture.gr](http://www.culture.gr)]  
The British Museum, “The Tring Tiles” (WWW: The British Museum, 2006) [URL: [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk)]

“This Is Tring” (WWW: 2005) [URL:  
<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/tadra.secretary/website/index.htm>

**Bibliography: Secondary**

These sources appear in Lady Oksana’s article

- Cosentino, Peter, *The Encyclopedia of Pottery Techniques*, (Quarto Publishing, 1990)  
Evans, Helen C. and Wixom, William D., ed., *The Glory of Byzantium*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997)  
Eames, Elizabeth S., *English Tilers*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992)  
Fournier, Robert, *Illustrated Dictionary of Practical Pottery*, (A & C Black Publishers, 1992)  
Girogini, Frank, *Handmade Tiles*, (Lark Books, 1994)  
Papanikola, Demetra, Fofa Mavikiou and Ch. Bakirtzis, *Byzantine Glazed Pottery in the Benaki Museum* (Athens, 1999)  
Papanikola-Bakirtzis, Demetra, Eunice Dauterman Maguire, and Henry Maguire, *Ceramic Art from Byzantine Series*, (Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1992)  
Papanikola-Bakirtzis, Demetra, ed., *Everyday Life in Byzantium* (Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2002)  
Piccolpasso, Cipriano, *I Tre Libri Dell’ Arte Del Vasaio, 1524-1579 (The Three Books of the Potter’s Art): A Facsimile of the Manuscript in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London* (Scolar Press, 1980)  
Van Lemmen, Hans, *Decorative Tiles Throughout the Ages*, (Moyer Bell, 1997)  
Watson, Oliver, *Ceramics from Islamic Lands*, (Sheikh Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, 2004)