Introduction

Along trade routes, in cities, and in courtly environments, the medieval world was surprisingly cosmopolitan. While visual cultures mingled comfortably along the silk roads and on the shores of the Mediterranean, medieval England has sometimes been viewed – by both medieval and more recent writers – as isolated.[1] When art historians have seen connections between medieval England and other cultures, such connections were generally to nearby kingdoms, predominantly France. Indeed, historical and art historical links between England and France (and other European countries) are well supported. In this Element, I introduce new evidence to show that when we look beyond the canonical fields of architecture and manuscripts, the current understanding of England's visual relationship to the rest of the world is at best incomplete. I argue that in shifting the focus away from well-known artifacts like architecture and manuscripts to less prestigious objects such as floor tiles and textiles, a new network of connections becomes visible between medieval England and the world beyond Western Europe. As I show, the so-called Chertsey combat tiles, molded ceramic tiles of rare high quality depicting secular subjects made around 1250 and found at Chertsey Abbey in Surrey, were informed by both historical and material engagement with Islamic and Byzantine worlds.[2] Aspects of the Chertsey tiles' visual program connect to iconographic motifs – including royal lion hunts and the Parthian shot, which recur along the silk roads and reappear as far away as medieval Japan – that visually define the English as militarily successful and divinely approved rulers and heirs to the traditions of empire.[3]

Some of the Chertsey tiles' iconographic motifs, like lion hunts and mounted kings and soldiers within roundels, also occur on luxury silks made in the eastern Mediterranean by Islamic and Byzantine craftspeople. Imported silks may have been foundational in inspiring the visual language of the Chertsey combat tiles, and such silks regularly appeared alongside and offered complementary visual language in the same spaces in which the tiles were appreciated. Another Element has laid out the global investments of textiles in the Middle Ages and the prestige and high financial value of luxury medieval silks.[4] Islamic and Byzantine silks were among the most significant carriers of combat iconography in medallions, and imported silks bearing the same motifs as the

[1] English writers from the sixth century to the thirteenth spoke of themselves as living at the edge of the world: Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, 16–23. A sense of isolation is reflected in the scholarly term for this field of medieval art history: "Insular art."
[2] See Section 1 for references for the Chertsey tiles.
[3] Hu, "Global Medieval at the 'End of the Silk Road'," 182–183.
[4] Blessing, Shea, and Williams, *Medieval Textiles across Eurasia*.

Chertsey combat tiles – armed knights on horseback and men fighting lions – are witnessed in thirteenth-century English royal and ecclesiastical collections.[5] Imported textiles were regularly hung on walls and covered furnishings in English interiors, and they were also tailored for use in English dress.

While architecture, architectural decoration, and furnishings are often considered separately in scholarship, for medieval visitors, these different elements of a well-appointed interior were perceived as part of an ensemble. When accompanied by silks bearing comparable iconography in an interior space, the tiles would have operated as parts of an experiential whole, as different visual expressions but assembled from the same components: men and horses and lions in combat, set within roundels arranged in a grid ("medallion") pattern, interspersed with foliate patterns.

Realizing that the history and material productions of Islamic and Byzantine worlds are foundational in at least some expressions of medieval English authority has both historical and contemporary implications. First, the gradual expansion of England into a global empire is fully consistent with these early evocations of global destiny and reach. This Element then provides a prologue to the long tale of the English empire and colonialism that plays out across later centuries. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this Element serves to counter long-lived popular mythologies about English isolationism that drive contemporary political impulses. White nationalism has incorporated ideas of Arthur and the English Middle Ages within the problematic fantasy of an island nation which is, always has been, and always should remain independent.[6] My work, grounded in an earlier historical moment, provides a necessary counter-narrative that shows the English have relied for many centuries upon ideas and materials from outside their borders in order to define their sense of authority, history, and future.

The Chertsey combat series tiles are among the most admired medieval floor tiles made anywhere.[7] Yet they were unearthed as a pile of fragments, with no tiles in situ, and most broken into multiple pieces. They were found at Chertsey Abbey intermingled with fragments from two additional Chertsey tile series: the Tristan series, a group of roundels comparable in size to the combat roundels but depicting the Arthurian knight Tristan and surrounded by Anglo-Norman text, and the zodiac series, smaller roundels showing the signs of the zodiac and labors of the months, unaccompanied by text. While heretofore the British Museum had physically reconstructed two roundels from the Chertsey combat

[5] See Section 5 and, for more details, the forthcoming book Luyster, *English Bodies, Imported Silks*.
[6] Kim, "White Supremacists"; Albin et al., *Whose Middle Ages*; Ellard, *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, PostSaxon Futures*.
[7] See chapter 1 for references.

series tiles showing King Richard I the Lionheart (1157–1199) dispatching Saladin (1137– 1193), the sultan of Egypt and Syria (Figure 1), the remainder exist primarily as hundreds of fragments in museum storage drawers (Figure 2).[8] In 1980, British Museum tile curator Elizabeth Eames published hand-drawn black-and-white reconstructions of the images in each roundel and drawings of the fragments of Latin text.[9] However, the incredibly fragmentary nature of the Chertsey tiles has meant that their full impact has not been understood.

An international team which I led has recently completed a digital reconstruction of the entire combat tile program, including both images and lost Latin texts (Figure 3).[10] Our reconstruction reveals that the Chertsey combat tiles do

Figure 1 Roundels depicting Richard the Lionheart and Saladin, combat series tiles found at Chertsey Abbey, molds designed in the 1250s. British Museum 1885,1113.9051–9060 and 1885,1113.9065–9070. © The Trustees of the British Museum

[8] Loomis, "Richard Coeur de Lion"; Whatley, "Romance, Crusade," 190–191.
[9] Eames, *Catalogue*.
[10] Essential to our team were faculty, staff, and students at the College of the Holy Cross: notably Janis Desmarais, Martina Umunna '18, Neel Smith, and Therese Starshak '17. I am also most grateful to Beverley Nenk, ceramics curator at the British Museums, as well as Lloyd de Beer and Naomi Speakman, also medieval curators at the British Museum, for aiding me in accessing and thinking about the tiles in the British Museum collection. Emma Warren at the Chertsey Museum, Euan Roger at the National Archives (Kew), and individuals at Winchester Cathedral, the Guildford Museum, and the Chertsey Society have all kindly aided our efforts.

Figure 2 Fragments of Chertsey combat series tiles held at the British Museum, molds designed in the 1250s. Photos: Amanda Luyster

not simply portray what Eames called "a series of famous combats."[11] Instead they present a literary and learned compilation of Crusaders and lion hunters, including biblical heroes, fighting in the Holy Land alongside King Richard the Lionheart. This series of tile images and texts seems to have been an original composition, emphasizing Richard's victory in the Crusades and employing allusions to other kinds of heroic actions, ranging from lion hunts to juridical trials, many of which take on specific meaning in the context of the Crusades.[12] Because art depicting the Crusades made during the period when Crusades to the Holy Land were actively being pursued, c. 1100–1300, is surprisingly rare, this suggests that the Chertsey tiles are even more significant than scholars have previously recognized. While the tiles depict King Richard the Lionheart and his deeds in the 1190s, they bore contemporary import for the Crusading aims of the English king Henry III about sixty years later, around 1250. King Henry III was Richard's nephew, and Henry has previously been considered the patron of the Chertsey combat tiles. I explore the possibility that they were commissioned instead by Henry's queen, Eleanor of Provence, for the first so-called Antioch chamber in her rooms at Westminster Palace. In this royal setting, the combat

[11] Eames, *Catalogue*, 1: 144–146. [12] Luyster, *Bringing the Holy Land Home*.

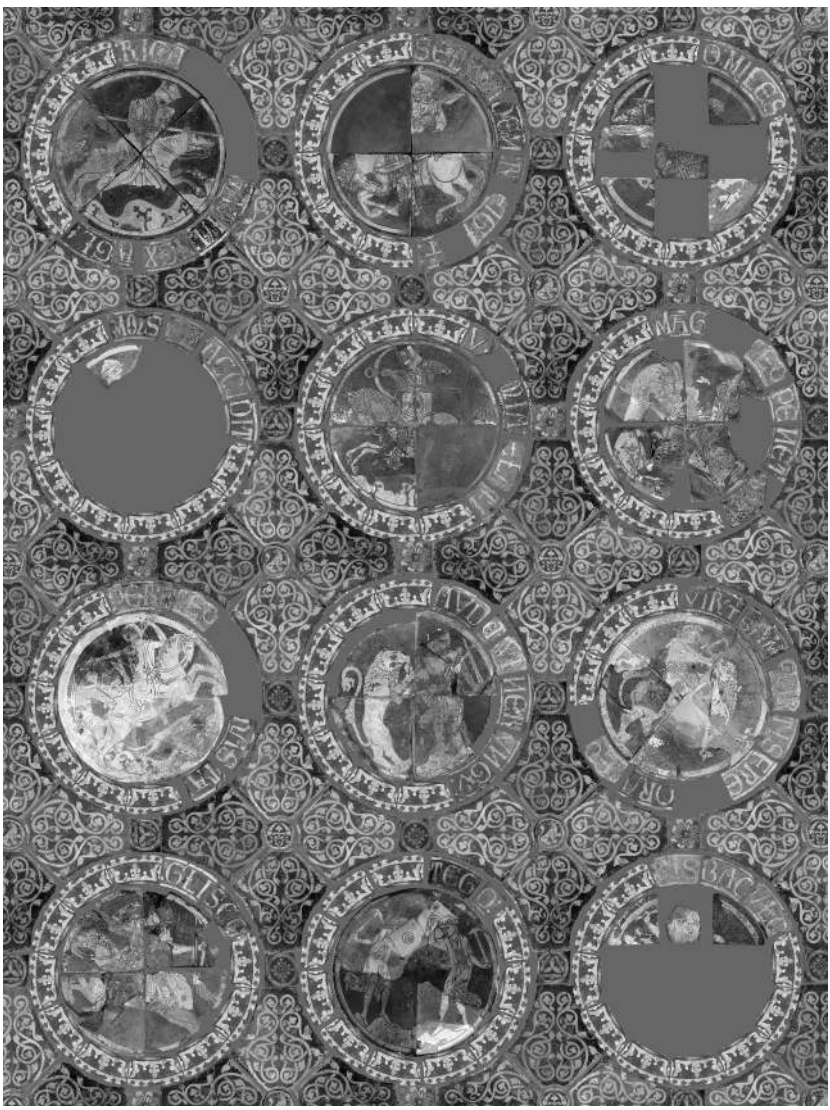

Figure 3 Photographic composite showing roundels surrounded by partial texts. Digital reconstruction of the Chertsey combat tile mosaic pavement as it could have looked when laid in the thirteenth century. © Janis Desmarais and Amanda Luyster

tiles would have served as positive publicity constructing Henry III as the typological heir of his uncle, the Crusading king Richard. Such an heir was desperately needed after the capture of the French king, Louis IX, in the spring

of 1250, during the Seventh Crusade. Louis' capture created a mid-thirteenth-century historical narrative in need of a new Crusader hero.

Our new reconstruction of the combat tile program also enables us to see the Chertsey floor tiles as witnesses to a thirteenth-century English fascination with Islamic and Byzantine textiles. Both the floor's "medallion" design and its iconographic motifs resemble luxury silks imported from Byzantium and Islamic lands (Figures 40–45). The production and weaving of silk, originating in Asia, had become part of Roman, Byzantine, and Sasanian cultures and was later adopted by nascent Islamic realms. Medallion-patterned silks made in Byzantine and Islamic workshops traveled and inspired local works in many places around the globe, especially along the silk roads, a phenomenon which previous scholars have explored.[13] Medallion silks bearing images of combats and roundels – expensive, technically demanding to weave, and portable – were also among the most prized souvenirs brought home by Crusaders returning from their time spent in West Asia and North Africa. I have identified examples of these textiles in English thirteenth-century inventories, affirming that they were present as artistic models in the time and place in which the Chertsey tile pavement was made.[14]

Until now, English interests in and imitations of medallion-style silks have remained largely unrecognized in scholarship. This is partly due to medieval art history's conventional focus on English architecture and English manuscripts, which show less substantial stylistic connections between England and the eastern Mediterranean than other media in the thirteenth century. And yet the Chertsey tiles convey an image of English political and religious superiority in the eastern Mediterranean through a visual composition (medallion pattern) carried by a medium (silk) originally created far outside England. Military and spiritual convictions did not, apparently, stand in the way of English recognition of the visual power and appeal of the cultural heritage of the lands they so fervently desired to control.

My approach is informed by the idea of the "glocal," a word coined to reflect the insistent and even structuring presence of the global within local contexts.[15] Rather than seeing global and local as antithetical, the term glocal recognizes that these

[13] Canepa, "Textiles and Elite Tastes"; Gasparini, "Sino-Iranian Textile Patterns"; Blessing, "Draping, Wrapping, Hanging"; Anderlini, "Dressing the Sacred"; Gasparini, *Transcending Patterns*; Blessing et al., *Medieval Textiles across Eurasia*.

[14] See Section 5. In addition, I am currently completing a book project, tentatively entitled *English Bodies, Imported Silks: The Impact of Islamic and Byzantine Textiles in Gothic England*, with further details.

[15] The sociologist Roland Robertson brought the term "glocalization," a portmanteau of globalization and local, to the attention of the English-speaking world in the 1990s. Glocalization attends to the presence of the global within the local. See Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity"; Robertson, "Glocalization."

spheres depend upon and indeed partly construct each other. The medallion-style images of kings, lions, and combats on the Chertsey tiles are informed by the transregional distribution of silks; the widely distributed silks are actually only used and understood in local environments, including abbeys and palaces along the Thames. The global always only appears in local circumstances.

Planting our feet on English soil and then taking a global perspective, one that extends beyond France or Western Europe, enables us to see previously unrecognized connections to and distinctions from foreign artifacts, like medallion textiles. The connection is that medieval English men and women were also fascinated by collecting, gifting, and imitating medallion textiles with images of combats. The distinction is that the patron of the Chertsey tiles chose to commission a work in local ceramic rather than imported silk, in a design which adopts but also subtly distorts patterns found on medallion silks. The rationale behind this decision is examined in the conclusion: I suggest that silks held both positive (luxurious and imperial) and negative (foreign and feminizing) associations in England. Therefore, manufacturing a silk-derived design in practical ceramic could thus reference the luxurious and imperial connotations of silks while avoiding suggestions of hubris or excess.

The designer of the tiles made a single combat motif the focus of each roundel, while in some woven designs the combat motifs are doubled across axes of symmetry within each roundel. The Chertsey tiles also show a separation into individual roundels of motifs that are often conjoined in a single roundel in medallion textiles: kings on horseback, the Parthian shot, the lion hunt, and war. The separate roundels of the Chertsey combat series were nonetheless designed to be understood as a single program. Finally, the clothing and appearance of the protagonists represented on the Chertsey roundels suggest their Western European (probably understood as English) identity. Their clothing, armor, hair, and other markers of cultural identity differ from those represented on imported textiles, whose protagonists would have read as more or less "foreign." These decisions made by the Chertsey tiles' patron and designer make sense when understood in the light of local concerns: available technologies and capabilities surrounding ceramic tile production, ideas about the suitability of silk, and the political utility of proposing the English king as a successful leader of the Crusades in the 1250s.

Much of art history is constructed around a canon of objects which has remained, significantly if not entirely, unchanged over multiple decades. If we want to tell a new story, one in which medieval English and European cultural creations are heavily impacted by events, stories, and objects from outside their own geographical boundaries, we need to anchor ourselves within a different collection of objects. The Chertsey tiles provide a rich and flexible example for generating new global art historical narratives.

1 The Reconstructed Program: Battles in the Holy Land

State of Research

From at least the nineteenth century, the Chertsey tiles, with their 10-inch roundels showing lions and heroes, have been among the most admired medieval floor tiles in England. They have been called the "high-watermark" of medieval tile manufacture and "one of the finest, if not the finest, inlaid pavements in existence."[16] The eminent scholar of medieval tiles, Christopher Norton, maintains that they are "justly famous; as well as being some of the earliest two-color tiles in Europe, they are also incomparably the finest, both technically and artistically, and they have no known parallel on the Continent."[17] The Chertsey tiles have also appeared in a variety of publications on medieval topics, from literary to archaeological to historical in subject.[18] Some authors have proposed that they are significant not just within the limited realm of ceramics but that they are "among the finest examples of medieval art in Britain."[19] Indeed the tiles were included in the well-known exhibition of English medieval art "Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200–1400," held in 1987–1988 at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.[20] The roundels depicting the duel of Richard and Saladin (Figures 4 and 5) have drawn attention in recent exhibitions in Germany, the United States – including an exhibition I curated in spring 2023 – and elsewhere due to their fine and appealing drawing style and Crusading themes.[21]

The Chertsey combat tiles have had an impact even on nonmedieval scholarship, educational materials, and popular culture. For instance, the Richard and Saladin tiles open an inquiry into the Crusades in the web-based "Teaching History with 100 Objects," completed in 2015 and supported by the UK's Department for Education, which draws from museum collections across Great Britain and Northern Ireland.[22] And in February 1997, the Britpop band Kula Shaker rather unexpectedly used the Chertsey tile showing Richard the

[16] Loomis, *Illustrations*, 15; Wight, *Mediaeval Floor Tiles*, 103.
[17] Norton, "The Luxury Pavement," 20.
[18] Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane*, 27–29; Camille, "Gothic Signs and the Surplus," figure 8; Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 173, 232, 237.
[19] Greene, *Medieval Monasteries*, 86. [20] Alexander and Binski, *Age of Chivalry*.
[21] Luyster, *Bringing the Holy Land Home*. Some of the material in this chapter was also presented, in an abbreviated form, in that exhibition catalogue. The exhibition website, including recorded lectures, conference presentations, and interactives, can be accessed at https://chertseytiles.holycross.edu.
[22] http://teachinghistory100.org/about/. The abbey of Chertsey is also used in a classroom activity created by the National Archives: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/chertsey/.

Figure 4 Digital reconstruction of Richard the Lionheart and proposed reconstruction of surrounding text. Chertsey combat series tile, molds designed in the 1250s. Eames design 466. © Janis Desmarais and Amanda Luyster

Figure 5 Digital reconstruction of Saladin and proposed reconstruction of surrounding text. Chertsey combat series tile, molds designed in the 1250s. Eames design 467. © Janis Desmarais and Amanda Luyster

Lionheart as the cover of their release of "Hush," which peaked at No. 2 in the United Kingdom.[23]

Despite the Chertsey tiles' widespread appeal, we know little about them. The tiles were mold-made, and they seem to have been used at multiple sites, although Chertsey is by far the most significant findspot. Nearly all of the tiles were discovered in a pile of broken pieces at Chertsey Abbey; the medieval tile floor may have been destroyed during the sixteenth or seventeenth century.[24] Tiles from the Chertsey combat series were also discovered under the steps at Winchester Cathedral. In both instances, the tiles seem to have been laid in the second half of the thirteenth century. However, it is generally agreed that the original tile molds were likely to have been a royal commission c. 1250 under the patronage of King Henry III of England or his queen, Eleanor of Provence, for a floor at Westminster Palace.[25] Henry III and Eleanor were known for their patronage of fine floors, from the extraordinary Cosmati pavement at Westminster Abbey to the subtly hued tiled floor of the queen's chamber at Clarendon.[26] The Chertsey tiles' quality, secular theme, and drawing style have been convincingly connected to certain tiles that survive in the Westminster Abbey chapter house, which was completed under the patronage of Henry III.

Despite the popularity of the Chertsey combat tiles, scholarship has presented no new interpretations of their significance since 1980. Study of the tiles has been limited by their damaged condition and by meager documentation. Until the completion of our digital reconstruction, scholars interested in the iconography of the Chertsey tiles had to rely on the black-and-white drawings published in Eames' 1980 catalogue, which are still used in the British Museum's online catalogue as the identifying "head shots" for most of the tile fragments.[27] These drawings represent the summation of many years of work on behalf of Eames and her assistants, who had travelled the country looking for fragments. Each drawing incorporated iconography from all of the fragments of each design known to Eames. Due to the highly fragmented state of the tiles, these drawings provided an essential waypoint in deciphering the pavement. However, like all hand-drawings, they are susceptible to various forms of subtle distortion and human error.[28] And while Eames reconstructed the images in each roundel, she did not attempt to reconstruct the text or link any of the text

[23] I am grateful to Jim Peters of the British Museum for bringing this album cover to my attention.
[24] Rob Poulton, pers. comm. Mar. 2023 and Poulton, *Archaeological Investigations*.
[25] Alexander et al., *Age of Chivalry*, 181; Eames, *Catalogue*, 1: 163–164; Morrison and Hedeman, *Imagining the Past*, cat. no. 54, note 12; Lethaby, "Romance Tiles," 78–79; Keen, "Chapter House."
[26] Eames, *A Decorated Tile Pavement*; Carpenter, "King Henry III and the Cosmati Work"; Grant and Mortimer, *Westminster Abbey: The Cosmati Pavements*.
[27] Eames, *A Decorated Tile Pavement*. [28] Hoffman, "Between East and West."