

A SWORD OF ABOUT 1500 FROM THE THAMES

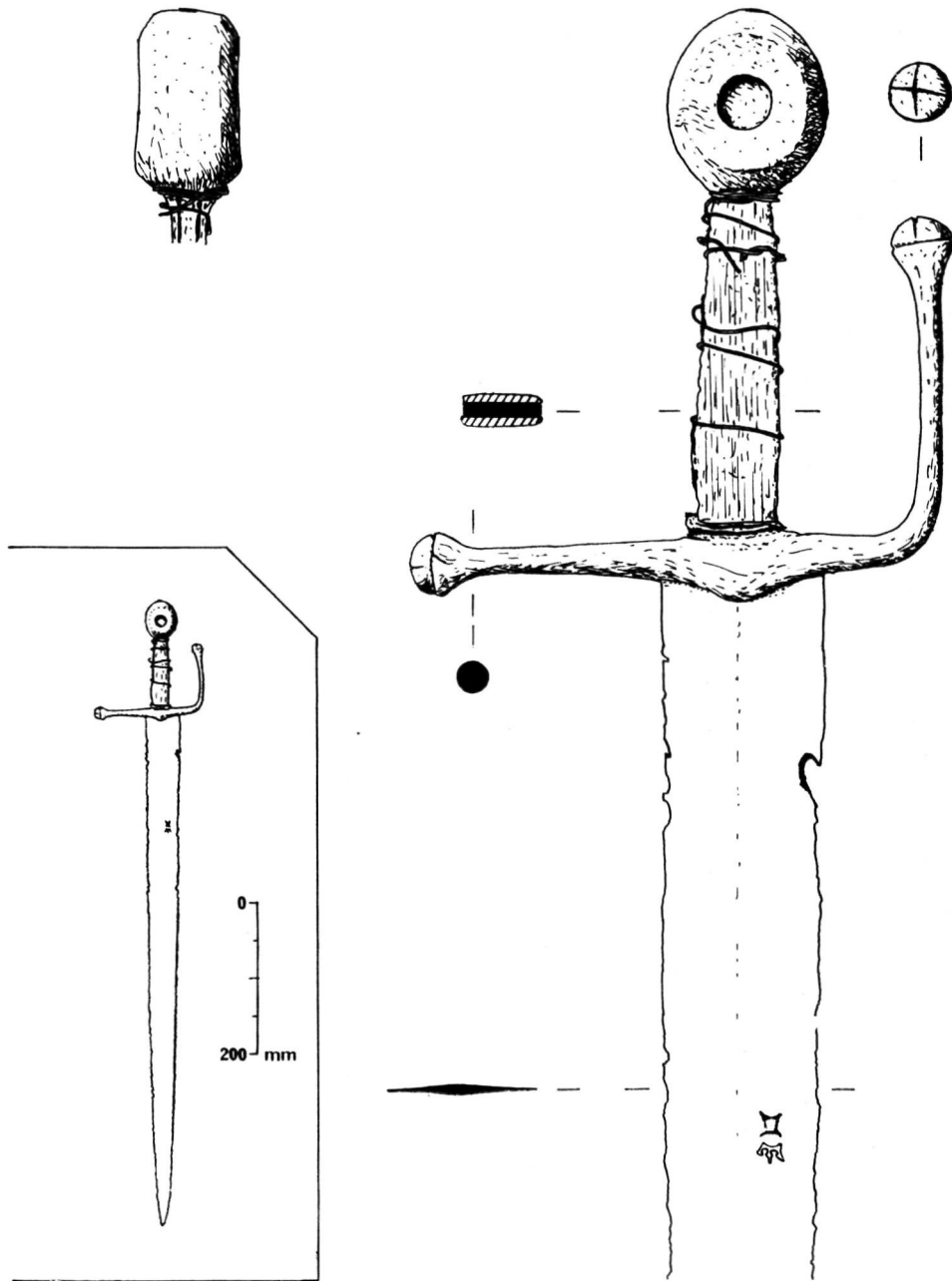
BY JOHN CLARK

During the construction of a new river embankment wall east from Blackfriars Bridge in 1969-70 the excavation of a series of cofferdams uncovered in the silt of the river-bed opposite the site of Paul's Stairs a large concentration of knives and daggers, together with a sword and a buckler.¹ Although these workmen's finds can hardly be regarded as a stratified group, they seem to have found their way into the river, presumably hurled from Paul's Stairs, over a fairly limited period. The knives include both early 16th century types and others with shoulders forged in one piece with the blade and tang, a method of manufacture that seems to come in about the middle of the century; very few need be much later in date than that. The buckler (Guildhall Museum accession No. 25526) belongs to the first half of the 16th century, while pottery found in the area by workmen was largely of the end of the 15th and first half of the 16th century.

The sword illustrated here (Guildhall Museum accession No. 24819) seems to belong to the same period. Its blade is short (only 680 mm) rather crudely made, of plain diamond section, with a mark, a crowned Lombardic A, on each side; the copper inlay of this mark survives only in the crown on one side and in one of the points of the crown on the other. The same maker's mark appears on a sword in the London Museum,² which has been dated to the second half of the 15th century, though there the crown and the letter A appear as separate marks. The sword-grip is of oval section, consisting of two wooden plates originally bound with brass wire, some of which survives, to the flat tang, which is slightly off-set from the centre-line of the blade. The pommel is of wheel-form (R. E. Oakeshott's type H),³ with a small circular hollow in each face presumably to take an inlaid plate of precious metal or enamel. Although this form of pommel first makes its appearance in the mid 13th century, it remains common until the early years of the 16th century, appearing for example on another sword found in the Blackfriars area and dated to the late 15th century, which is in the London Museum.⁴

In the form of its cross-guard the sword presents an unusual feature. The guard is drawn out to a point over the blade; its arms are of circular section, swelling to knobs, the end of each incised with a cross. Thus far the guard (a variant of Oakeshott's Style 11)⁵ is in general similar to those on a number of 15th century swords, among them another from the Thames in the London Museum.⁶ However, one arm of the guard on the Blackfriars sword is longer, and thinner, than the other, and is bent at a right-angle parallel to the grip, to form a rudimentary knuckle-guard. There seems to be no close parallel for this feature, although fairly crude knuckle-guards do appear on swords in the late 15th century and are not uncommon in the 16th century — one in the Tower Armouries, for example, may be late 15th century,⁷ while a rather similar one was found on the site of the Battle of Wakefield (1460); these two, however, both have single-edged blades, and hilts of very different appearance from the Blackfriars example.

The form of the guard seems to reflect the change by which a sword, previously the weapon of an armoured knight, whose steel-gauntleted hand required no more protection than a simple straight cross-guard would give, became a more common weapon which might be carried for his own defence by any citizen of London, like the young man with sword and



J.A.C.

Sword from the Thames at Blackfriars. Hilt and upper part of the blade, showing the maker's mark ($\frac{1}{2}$); inset: the complete sword ($\frac{1}{10}$)

buckler in the well-known group of Elizabethan citizens shown in the foreground of Braun and Hogenberg's London map of 1572. A type of hilt found on knightly war-swords in the 15th century has been adapted during manufacture — perhaps as an experiment by an individual sword-smith — to offer some protection to the bare hand of a rather humbler user, and is thus a precursor of the complex open hilt, with side-rings, *pas d'âne* and knuckle-bow, of the mid and late 16th century. Although such simple swords could go on being made for many years, the Blackfriars sword seems to fit well into this transitional period at the end of the 15th century, or the early years of the 16th century.

NOTES

¹ *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*, 23.1 (1971), p. 11.

² Accession No. 36.213; *London Museum Medieval Catalogue* (1940), p. 37, Fig. 5, No. 5.

³ R. E. Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry* (1964), p. 96.

⁴ Accession No. 36.164/1; *op. cit.* in Note 2, p. 37, Plate IV.

⁵ *Op. cit.* in Note 3, p. 118.

⁶ Accession No. 39.142; *op. cit.* in Note 2, p. 37, Fig. 6.

⁷ Accession No. IX-144. I am extremely grateful to Mr. R. E. Oakeshott, and to Dr. A. Borg of the Armouries, H.M. Tower of London for their advice on this and other parallels to the Blackfriars sword.