Fourteenth-century sword sheaths from Leiden city centre[1]

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Introduction

Although large numbers of medieval swords survive in museums and collections, these are rarely securely dated and, as individuals, they do not contribute to the understanding of long-term developments nor the manner in which changes were effected (Bruhn-Hoffmeyer 1954). Occasionally, scholars such as Oakeshott (1991, 2) touch on the potential of archaeological finds, but primarily in terms of actual swords in secure, dated contexts, such as tombs. However, indirect evidence provided by the leather sword sheaths is much more common and can serve to build up a picture of developments through time, the manner in which new forms were introduced, and the extent of sword ownership in specific communities. A large group of leather sword sheaths found in the centre of Leiden, the Netherlands reveals the variation in sword types in use in the town, as well as illuminating the transition from broad, primarily cutting, blades to the more cut and thrust blades of the early fourteenth century.

Circumstances and characteristic of the complex

In 1978-80 a new sewerage system was laid in Leiden, cutting a 2 m trench through the centre of the medieval city. There was no archaeological watching brief, but thanks to the co-operation on the City of Leiden Department of Public Works, the spoil was dumped separately, and amateur archaeologists were allowed to collect finds. Vast amounts

1 This contribution is a re-working of two articles previously published in Dutch (van Driel-Murray 1990 and 1992), and I would like to thank the editor for giving me the opportunity of presenting these finds to a wider audience. I am indebted to a large number of people for technical support based on my own drawings. The photographs were made by Fred Gijbels (Institute of Prae- and Protohistory (IPP) of the University of Amsterdam (now Amsterdam Archaeological Centre), the drawings were prepared by Bert Brouwenstijn and Ab Visser (also IPP) and re-worked digitally by Sara Shek (Archol. University of Leiden). I am also grateful to Gert Kortekaas, municipal archaeologist Groningen for giving permission to reproduce the sword in figure 11.

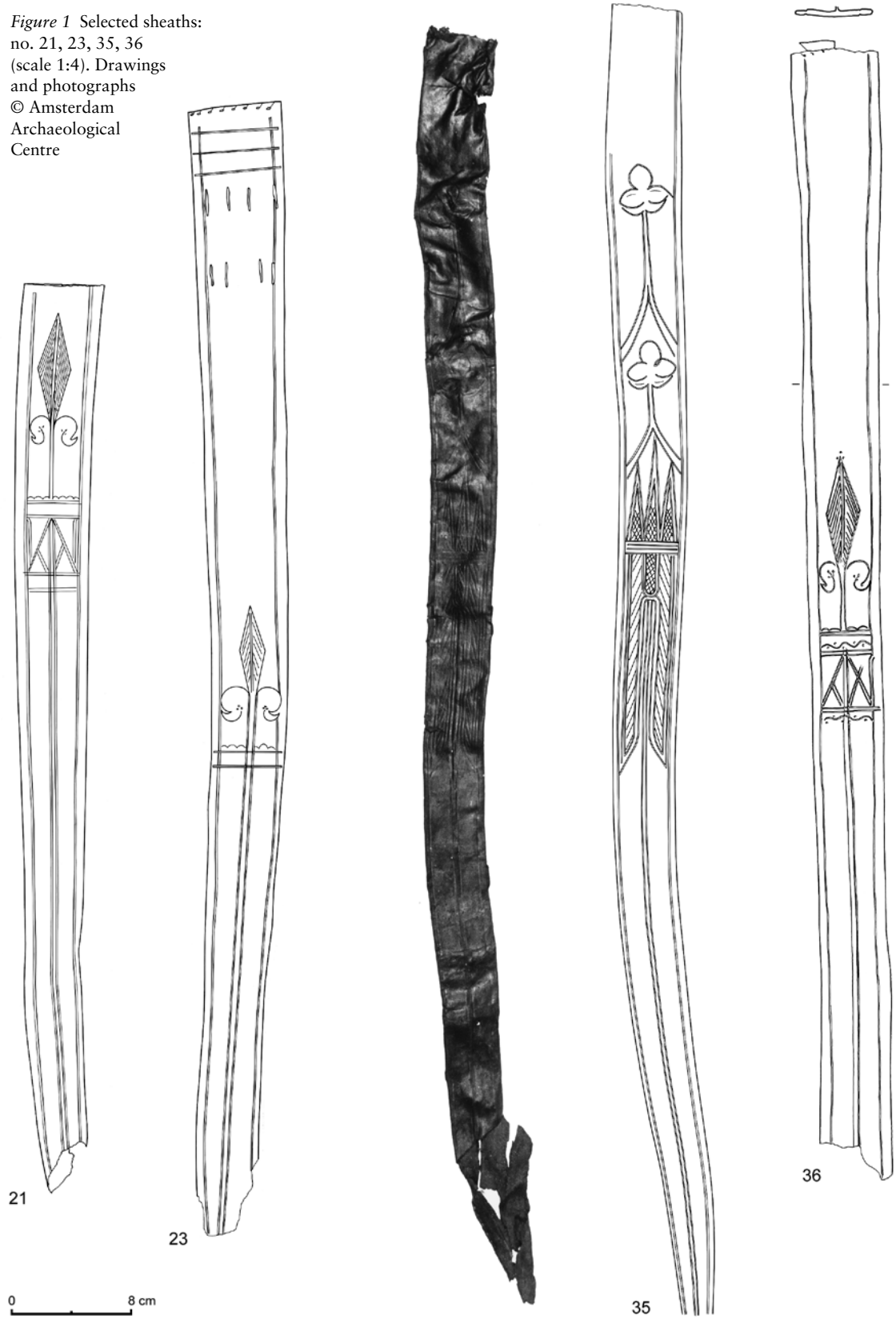

Figure 1 Selected sheaths: no. 21, 23, 35, 36 (scale 1:4). Drawings and photographs © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

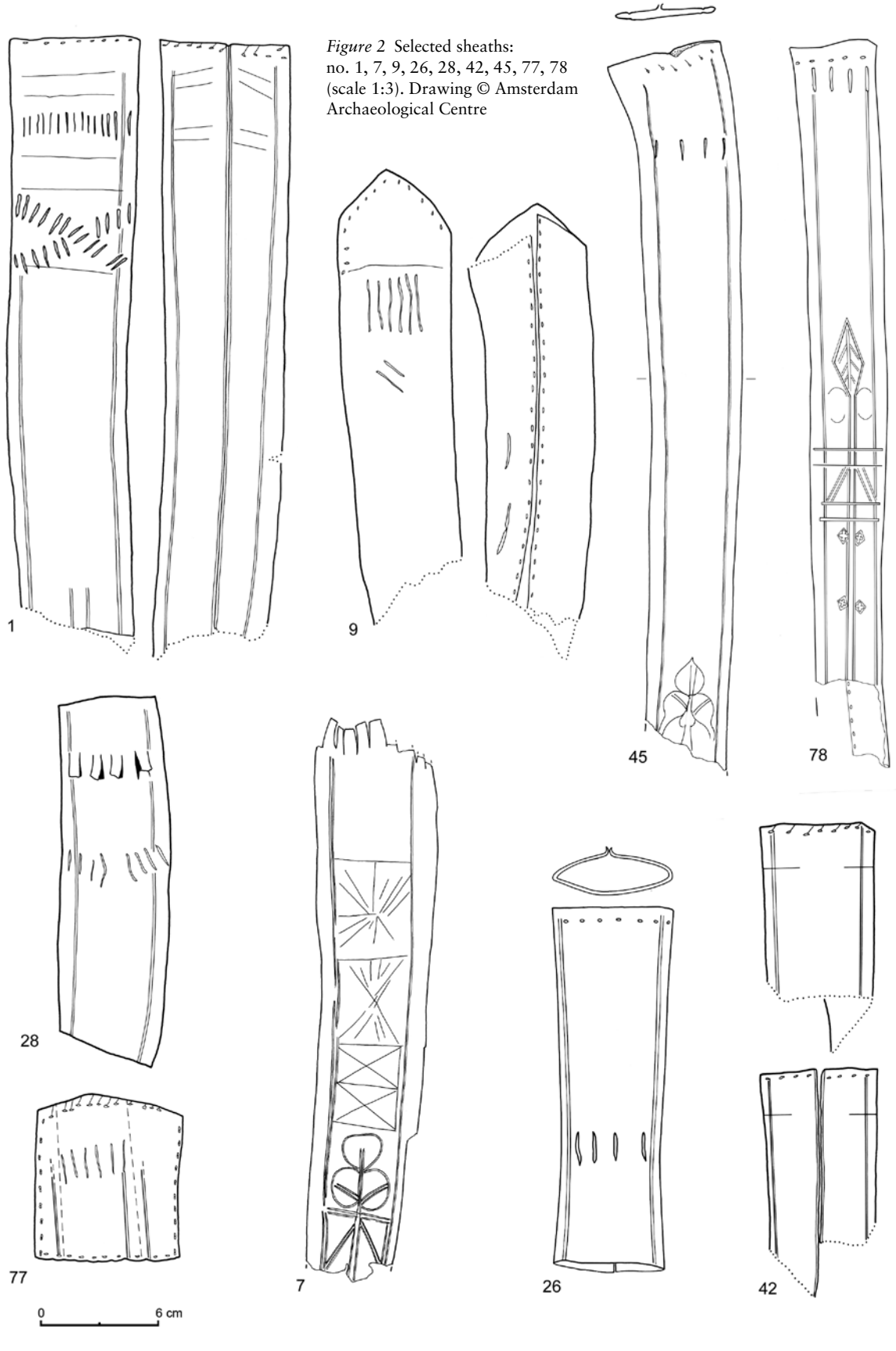

Figure 2 Selected sheaths: no. 1, 7, 9, 26, 28, 42, 45, 77, 78 (scale 1:3). Drawing © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

of household rubbish, pottery, butchery waste, metalwork and leather footwear were recovered from medieval dumps and land fill bordering the course of the river Rhine, but most noteworthy was a remarkable concentration of leather sword sheaths in the vicinity of the present-day Visbrug at the corner with the Maarsmansteeg (figures 1-3). Associated finds, such as a coin, two spurs, pottery and footwear, suggest a date for the deposits in this area in the first half of the fourteenth century (van Driel-Murray 1990, 169).

The 137 sword sheaths registered are but a fraction of what was originally present: only lack of manpower and constraints of time put a limit on what could be collected. The concentration in just this particular spot and nowhere else along the course of the sewer, as well as the uniformity in shape, decoration and manufacture, suggests that the majority of the sheaths were the products of a single workshop, made over a relatively restricted period of time. The sheaths were made of calfskin or cowhide, stretched over thin slats of wood (only a few of which were recovered) and stitched up the back. Occasionally the point of broader sheaths was neatly shaped by means of a stitched gusset (figure 3a-b). The majority of the sheaths have been cut and ripped off their wooden support, and it is likely that they were discarded when replacement leather covers were fitted to the swords: the chape and the wooden lining of the sheath will have been re-used (see figure 3b). Indeed the only metal chape in the complex was obviously discarded because it had been damaged by careless retrieval (figure 3c).

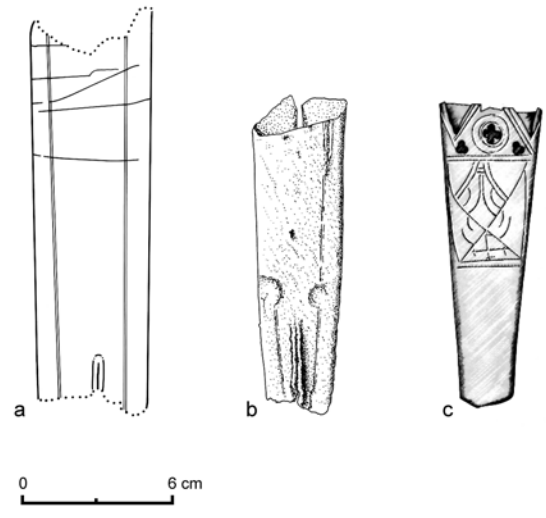

Figure 3 a and b Sheath tips with gusset and chape impression; c Brass chape (scale 1:3).Drawing © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

Most of the sheaths bear impressed lines along the edges from smoothing the leather firmly onto the wooden lining, and sometimes also follow the fuller down the centre. Only 28 examples were decorated using a limited number of motifs, roughly applied in various combinations and seemingly the 'signature' of a single workshop (figures 1-2). A few exceptionally worn sheaths display a slightly different combination of simple lines and pricks (figure 4a), and might have been older, or from a different workshop. The use of similar stamps on both sword and knife sheaths (such as figure 2 no. 78 and figure 4b) suggests that a sword sheath maker might occasionally also make knife sheaths: the converse need not be true, since the knife sheaths display a much greater variety of decorative techniques and motifs, none of which appear on these sword sheaths. Knife sheaths (asymmetrical blade, reflected in the sheath form) are also common along the entire length of the excavated trench, with no evident concentration of activity. These have been published separately (van Driel-Murray 1990, 196-201).

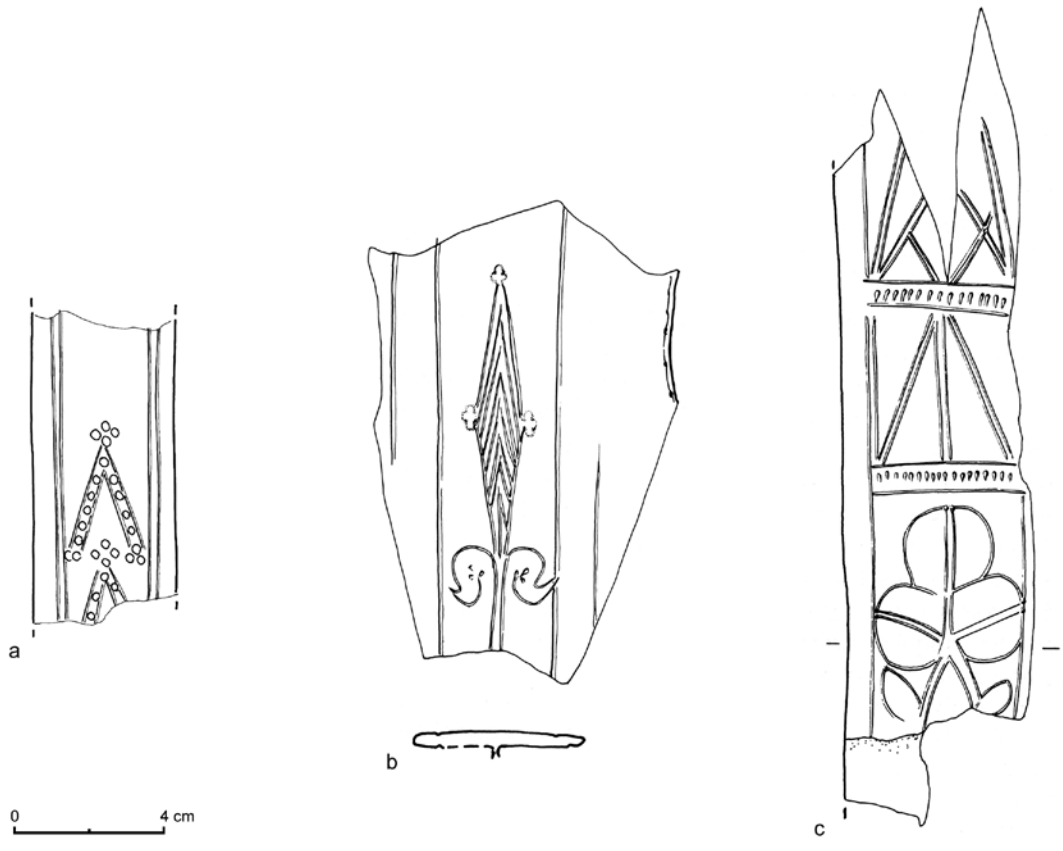

Figure 4 Decorative designs (scale 1:2). Drawings © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

The sheaths themselves could be divided morphologically into four main groups, based on blade proportions and the degree of taper to the point (figure 5):

Group 1: sheaths for broad swords with almost parallel sides and a blunt tip. The blade is 6 cm or wider at the top.

Group 2: sheaths for relatively short blades with a broad blade, slightly tapering to a blunt tip.

Group 3: sheaths for long, cut and thrust blades, with parallel edges at the top part, then narrowing to a point. Mostly of fine, smoothed calfskin.

Group 4: sheaths for narrow pointed blades, less than 5 cm wide at the top. Parallel edges narrow sharply to a point, which may be diamond sectioned.

In addition there are 13 dagger sheaths (symmetrical blade) as well as a very few indeterminate shapes.

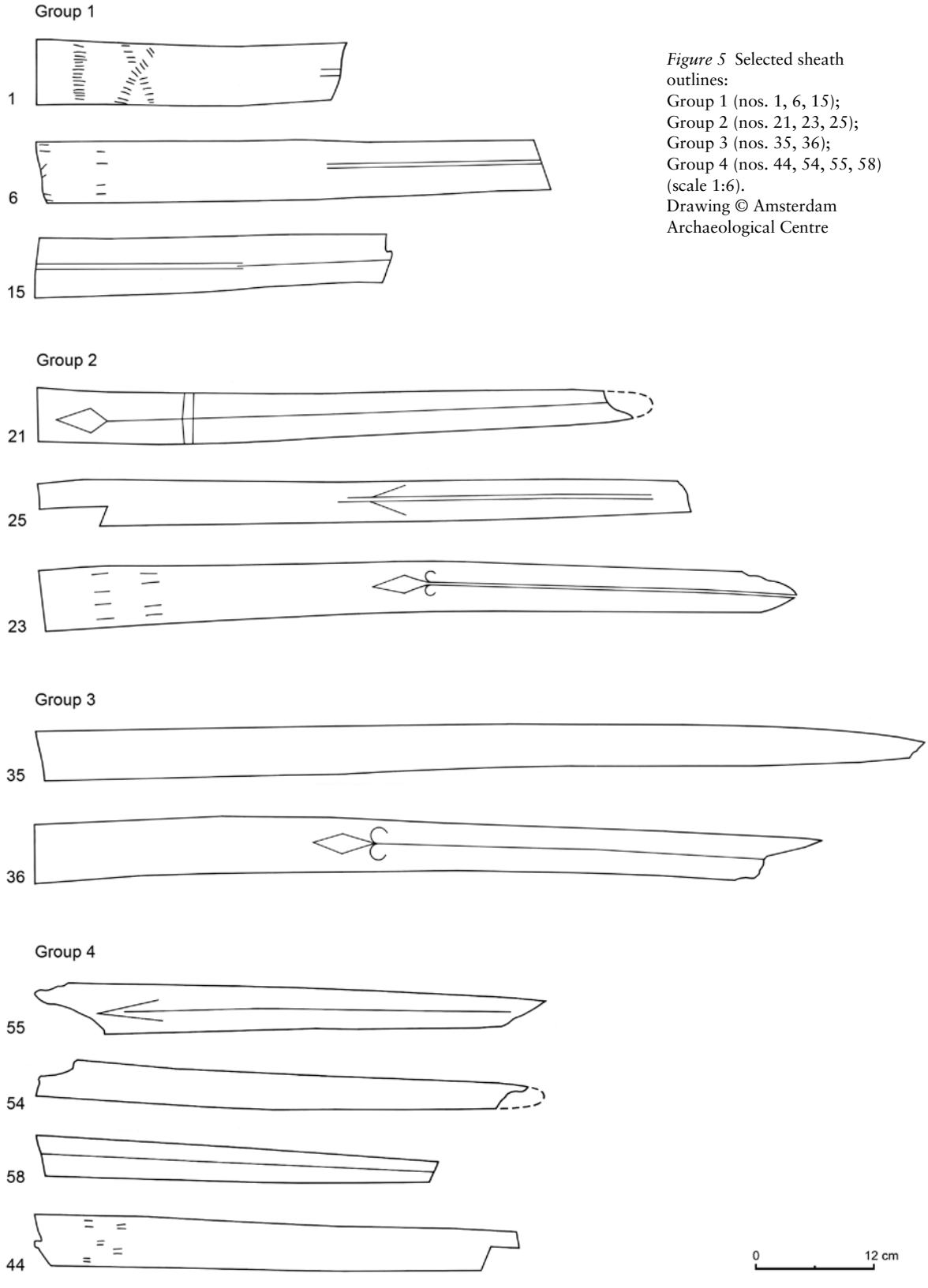

Figure 5 Selected sheath outlines:
Group 1 (nos. 1, 6, 15);
Group 2 (nos. 21, 23, 25);
Group 3 (nos. 35, 36);
Group 4 (nos. 44, 54, 55, 58)
(scale 1:6).
Drawing © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

Discussion

Comparison with existing classifications of swords was hampered by the general focus on pommel or cross-guard (quillon) forms, but equally serious is the lack of blades from well-dated contexts (Bruhn Hoffmeyer 1954). Ewart Oakeshott was the first to regard the sword as an entity, with pommel and cross guards subordinate to the primary function as a weapon. This focus on blade proportions as the basis for classification proves to be by far the most serviceable approach for archaeological purposes (figure 6). Though Oakeshott was painfully aware of the pitfalls in the dating and attribution of individual weapons, each with its varied

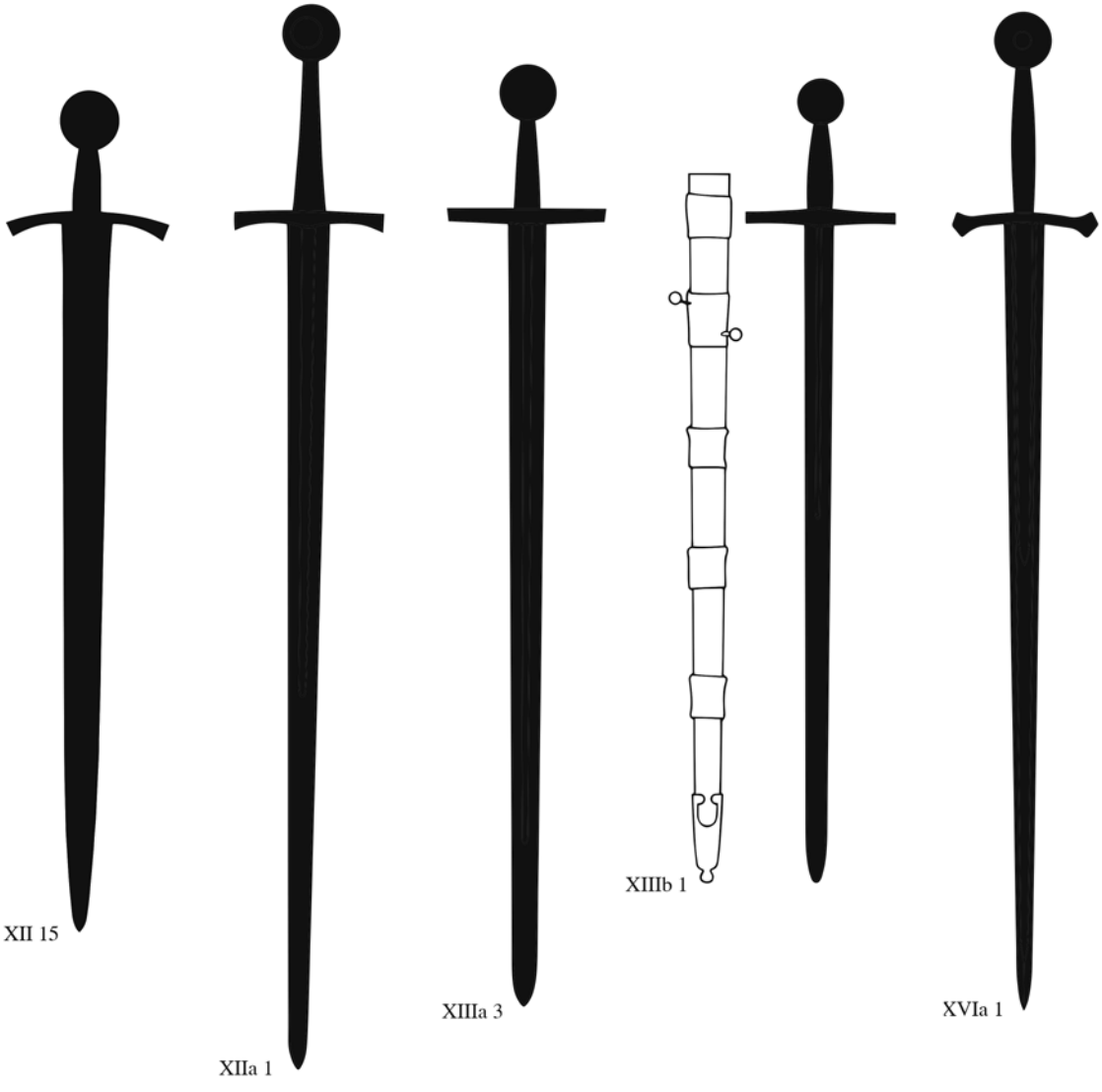

Figure 6 Sword blade shapes after Oakeshott (scale 1:8). Drawing © Sara Shek (Archol. University of Leiden)

history (which he describes with verve: 1991, 7), dated examples – chiefly from graves – form the backbone of his typology (Oakeshott 1981; 1991). Using these as models, the leather sheaths from Leiden were found to correspond to a small number of Oakeshott's types (1991, xiii-iv), and this was confirmed during a visit to the Royal Armouries, Tower of London, where the sheaths could be 'fitted' to the swords actually featured in his descriptions. Though at first there was some difficulty in classifying Group 2 and Group 3 sheaths, the introduction of the sub-category XIIa in 1991 allowed all four archaeological sheath groups to be related to a specific type of sword blade (Oakeshott 1991, 89).

Group	Type	Date	Number
Group 1	Oakeshott XII	1200-1325	16 (+ 4 possible)
Group 2	Oakeshott XIIIb	1290-1340	14
Group 3	Oakeshott XIIa	1300-1400	9
Group 4	Oakeshott XVIa	1290-1340	16

Type XIIa comprises rather large swords, which match some of the best preserved and longest sheaths of our Group 3 (figure 1 no. 35 and 1 no. 36). Of the 23 grip covers, five are longer than 17 cm (figure 9 no. 7), thus supporting Oakeshott's contention that the 'Grete Sword' or 'Espée de Guerre' was already an important component of early fourteenth-century equipment. The occurrence of sheaths for broad, parallel edged swords together with those for narrower, more tapering blades illustrates the transition from the heavier, wide blades of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries to the narrower, more pointed blades of the fourteenth century, a transition which is also revealed in the suspension method.

Slits in the upper part of the sheaths indicate that the sword belt was threaded through in a typically late thirteenth-early fourteenth century fashion, comparable to two surviving swords from Spain (Herrero Carretero 1988, 36; Oakeshott 1991, 70) and also shown on British brasses (figure 7a and b). French and English knights seem to have favoured buckle fastenings while in north and central Europe they preferred to tie the belt, as is depicted on the figures in Naumburg Cathedral (figure 7e). The majority of sheaths are of the laced type in various combinations with a wider collar, of which the strap shown in figure 8d is an example. This is the only possible sword belt in the complex, but since many of the depictions of the belts in the Codex Manesse are white in colour (Walther and Siebart 1988), as indeed are some surviving belts (such as that of Francesco della Cerda, figure 7b), they may have been made from tawed skins, and would not, therefore, have survived in the damp conditions that have preserved the vegetable tanned sheaths in Leiden. The slits tend to be irregularly placed, not following a consistent arrangement (van Driel-Murray 1990, afb. 12). There is also some (scanty) evidence for the use of metal fittings, in particular on Group 3 sheaths (figure 2 no. 42). The change to metal

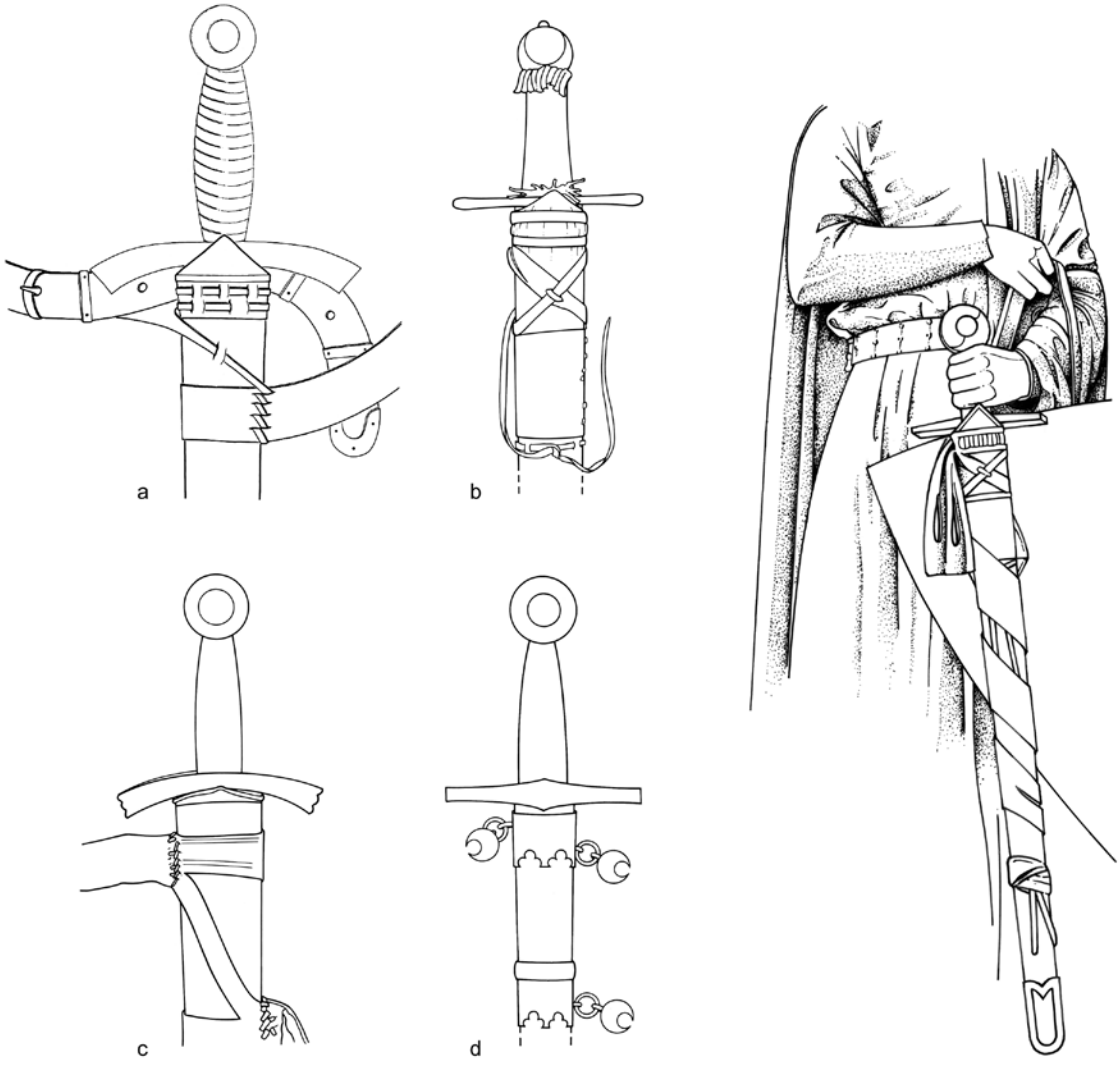

Figure 7 Suspension arrangements. Drawings © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

a From brass of Sir John D'Abernoun (†1277)

b Fernando de la Cerda, Burgos (†1275)

c Sancho IV, Toledo Cathedral (†1298)

d Can Grande della Scala, Verona Cathedral (†1329)

e Graf Eckhardt, Cathedral of Naumburg, ca. 1260

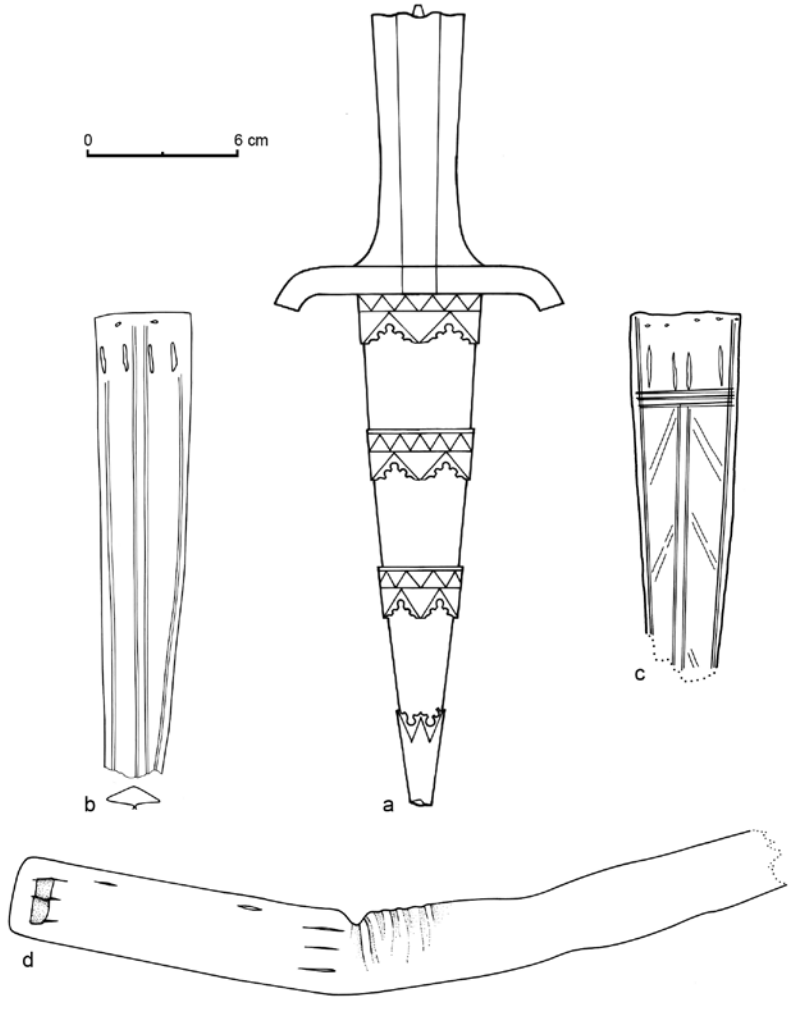

Figure 8 a Dagger with sheath fittings; b and c Dagger sheaths; d Laced belt (cf. figure 7a) (scale 1:3). Drawings © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

hook and ring suspension seems to have been complete by 1330 (figures 6 and 7d) suggestive of a date in the earlier fourteenth century for most of the sheaths in the complex. The sheaths are quite evenly distributed over the different sword types: if this is a single-event deposit, this would reflect the variety of sword forms in current use, but it is perhaps more likely that the deposit represents a gradual transition from about 1300 to 1330, with older weapons still in use as new types were being introduced.

Smaller, symmetrical sheaths covering only the blade (thus implying the presence of cross-guards) are regarded as belonging to daggers (figure 8). They are closely related to the sword sheaths in shape, manufacture and decoration, and suggest a military set consisting of sword, dagger, and, occasionally a 'baselard-like' short sword. Such weapons are all represented in the hands of the knightly class in the Manesse Codex, and

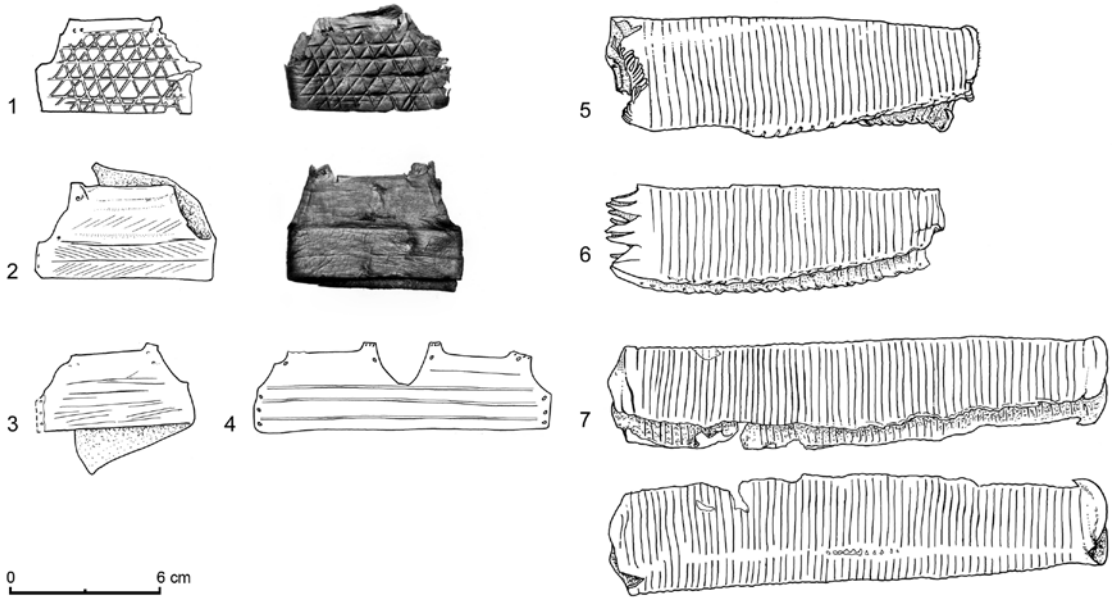

Figure 9 1 – 4 Leather rain-guards; 5 – 7 Leather grip covers (scale 1:3). Drawings © Amsterdam Archaeological Centre

indicate that short swords were in regular use as a side weapon already in the early fourteenth century, passing into civilian use later on: it is only then that city ordinances begin to take an interest in curbing weapon ownership (Walther and Siebart 1988, taf. 15, 28)

Associated leather accessories

Other leather accessories belonging to the sword and found together with the sheaths are 23 ribbed grip covers (figure 9 no. 5-7) and four 'rain-guards' (figure 9 no. 1-4), little leather caps covering the join of the grip and quillons and sometimes, but not always, fitting over the mouth of the sheath. Rain-guards do not become common on depictions until well after 1350, but this association suggests that both they, and the long handled swords, were already in use long before artists began to record them. Sheaths of the thirteenth and very early fourteenth century are commonly depicted with a triangular top, but here only two examples display this feature (figure 2 no. 9), as does the sheath of the earlier sword from Groningen described below (figure 11). These particular specimens can be closely paralleled elsewhere in northern Europe (e.g. Groenman-van Waateringe 1988, 98ff; Schnack 1998, abb. 20). However, irregular stitching at the mouth of other sheaths – if not simply from a beading – could imply the attachment of a separate triangular flap, such as shown on the sword of Sancho IV of Castile (figure 7c). No such pieces were identified, but conditions were not conducive to the recovery of such small leather items.

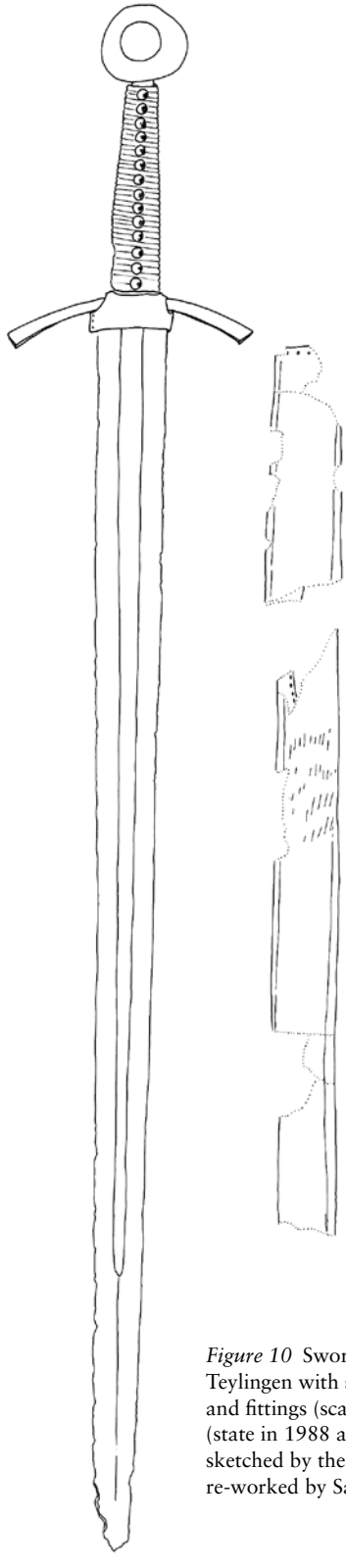

Figure 10 Sword from Teylingen with sheath and fittings (scale 1:5), (state in 1988 as sketched by the author re-worked by Sara Shek)

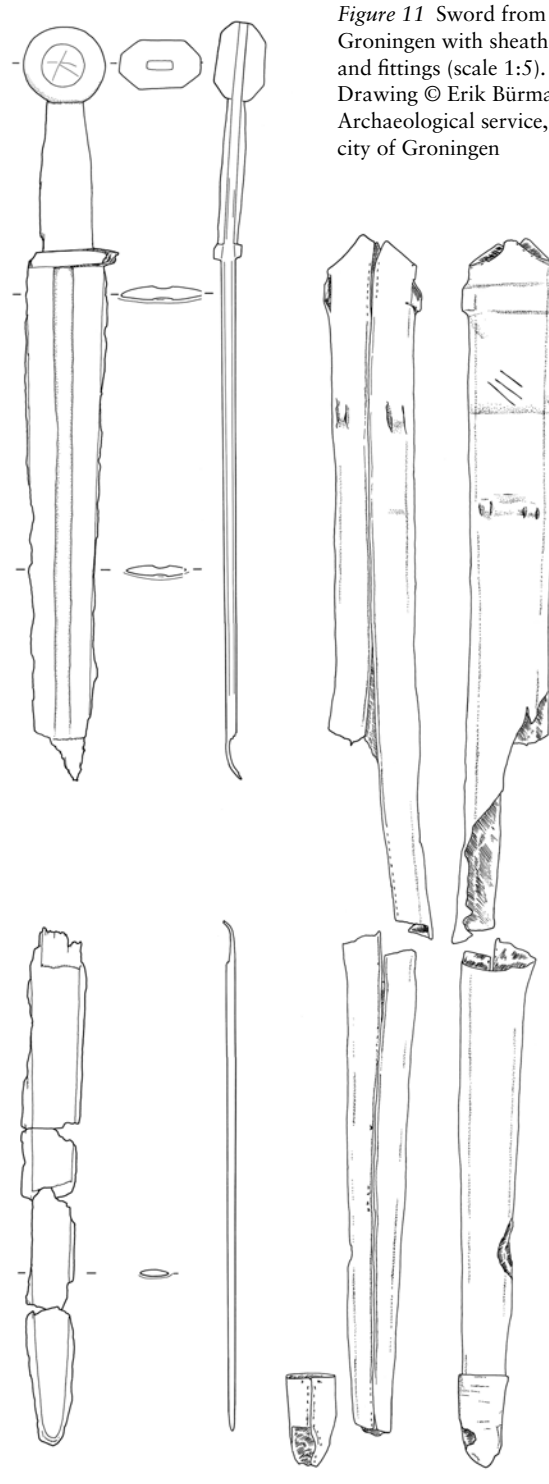

Figure 11 Sword from Groningen with sheath and fittings (scale 1:5). Drawing © Erik Bürmann, Archaeological service, city of Groningen

Other excavated examples from the Netherlands

Since the association of weapons with their sheaths is so very infrequent it is worth drawing attention to some excavated specimens from the Netherlands. From a different stretch of the sewer trench in Leiden, and associated with fourteenth-century pottery, comes a complete dagger with rather heavy iron cross guards and a wooden hilt (figure 8a). The leather of the sheath is decorated all over with closely scored cross-hatching, and fitted with copper alloy reinforcements, similar in design to the chape mentioned above (Bitter 1992, 62). In the absence of further information on associations it is unclear whether this 'loss' was accidental or deliberate. The intentional deposition of swords in prehistory and the early Middle Ages is widely accepted, but for later periods too, there is copious evidence for the special status of sword blades, and the reluctance to allow them to pass into inappropriate hands. Oakeshott makes a strong case for considering most weapons from wet contexts as 'ritual depositions' (1991, 14-15). In the case of a sheathed sword from the moat of Teylingen Castle, some 10 km north of Leiden, this was probably a foundation deposit. When found this was complete with its wood-and-leather grip, a rain-guard and the wood-lined leather sheath, but most of the organic fittings have since decayed (figure 10). The ribbed leather-covered grip was studded with brass pins on both sides (Hallewas 1985, afb. 17).Though the sword cannot be dated stratigraphically, it is a clear example of Oakshott's XVI, more developed than the blade shapes from Leiden. This sheath was undecorated and without suspension slits, though to judge from an area displaying a metallic sheen, the sword was slung from metal collars. A sheathed and deliberately broken up Type XII sword from Groningen (figure 11) has, unusually, a leather chape and displays suspension slits arranged around the imprint of the leather collar, comparable with figure 7b and pretty well identical to a late-thirteenth century sheath from Rotterdam (van Driel-Murray 1997, afb. 137.9). Considerable effort went into striking off the cross guards and breaking the sword in two, before it was cast into a possible moat in front of a thirteenth-century stone house. Here the suggestion is one of disgracing a family honour (van Driel-Murray 2000). Both these swords were intentionally buried together with their sheaths, but in many more cases, leather has certainly been removed unrecorded during restoration, and it is to be expected that more individually excavated weapons were originally deposited complete with fittings.

The significance of the group

The quantity of sheaths recovered in Leiden suggests a fair number of swordsmen refurbishing their weapons and although it would be unwise to speculate as to the background of the finds, Leiden was the seat of the Count of Holland, and the early fourteenth century was a time of confusion and conflict. Although leather sheaths for quite large bladed knives have been found elsewhere in the town, no comparable sword

sheaths have come to light, and it does look as though this was a specialist sheath-maker, operating in a specific historical context. Archaeological finds have a significant role to play in the study of medieval arms and armour, providing much better dating evidence than depictions in manuscripts or on tomb stones, the attribution of which is not always certain. The collection of sheaths from Leiden preserves the crucial transition of several specific features: from broad more rounded-tipped swords to slim, pointed weapons, from triangular sheath openings to the use of rain-guards, from laced suspension to leather or metal collars, revealing the varied appearance of weaponry on display in the town at a time of rapid change.

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