

*The editors of **Hungarian Archaeology** began a new column in its first issue of 2014, the purpose of which is to get experts and decision-makers in the fields of archaeology and heritage preservation to talk about the current topics and issues in the profession. The interviews appearing in our online magazine do not reflect the position of the editors – instead they would like to create an independent platform where various, at times differing opinions can be seen. It is our view that a discussion of this type is necessary, and that it should be conducted within Hungarian archaeology's own professional forums if we want the arguments to reach the community of archaeologists and the directors who oversee their activities in a form that is not distorted by politicians, business interests and the media. The subjects of the interviews naturally represent their own viewpoints, and we hope that through this a discussion will be initiated that will contribute to the revitalization of our profession.*

A TALK WITH SZABOLCS ROSTA

With the launch of this series of reports it was our goal for the subjects of the interviews to give us a look into what kind of organizational units there are in Hungarian archaeology, what kind of form these organizations take and what tasks they perform. We wanted to initiate a professional discourse, the objective of which was to discover whether in the midst of constant reorganization some kind of consensus still exists about the framework, the form and the professional requirements for performing specific archaeological tasks. In these reports we are making the attempt to allow the widest spectrum possible of the various types of institutions and organizational forms to be represented through the individuals interviewed. In this installment we have sought out Szabolcs Rosta, the director of the Katona József Museum in Kecskemét, one of the museums responsible for the archaeology of a region of Hungary.

The interview took place in August of 2014, when we thought – as did the subject of the report Szabolcs Rosta – that the major processes of reorganization affecting the profession had halted and the time for more minor legal adjustments had come. However, the government recently announced that again fundamental institutional reorganizations are to follow, and the legal regulations that define the framework for performing archaeological work will change. According to our information these changes are currently in the preparatory stages and will significantly impact the role and prospects of the museums with regional responsibility. Despite this, we still believe this talk is relevant, since it not only reflects on the day-to-day problems, but also on general issues affecting the profession that remain valid regardless of changes in the legal environment. For this very reason, in the future we would like to continue our series of interviews by hearing from experts working at other points within the institutional system.



SZABOLCS ROSTA
Director
Katona József Museum of Kecskemét

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Archaeolingua: How can we grasp the particular duties of those institutions formerly referred to as county museums and now called provincial museums, so in other words, the various museums with regional responsibilities and which are clearly significant elements in any system? What are the functions that these institutions perform?

SZABOLCS ROSTA: We are talking about a typical Hungarian story, depending significantly on the leaders and responsible individuals at the given institutions. It is determined by the individuals' way of doing things, their connections, their abilities, etc., and so due to this the nineteen county museums embody nineteen different systems of relationships with the various national organizations. For example, from the very first moment the Katona József Museum in Kecskemét placed a great deal of emphasis on its collaboration and joint work with the Hungarian National Heritage Preservation Center, as well as good relationships with investors and contractors.

You said that the nineteen counties operate in nineteen different ways in Hungary. This is clear and surely there have been efforts to change this. But at the same time we can say that for more than one hundred years one of the main organizing structures for archaeological work has been a system based in some manner on regional museums, whether in terms of scientific work, performing excavations or organizing and managing collections. Is there any kind of consensus about museums with regional responsibilities – no matter what we call them – performing the basic functions in the field of heritage preservation, and if so, in what way?

Sz.R.: This is precisely where I see the reason for the existence of the current Hungarian National Heritage Preservation Center. It simply specifies the framework, at least in terms of the major projects and the professional requirements related to these, and so in the end there is a unified policy. Therefore, it is not like five or ten years ago, when everyone really did enter into contracts in different ways. There is no doubt that the current preliminary archaeological documentation (PAD) system is not bad at all, at least not for us. Not so much in that it reduces the onus on us in some ways, but due to the fact that without doubt it provides in the end a unified system of considerations, on the basis of which these excavations must be performed. At the same time local knowledge is an outstandingly important element as well, which cannot be replaced by anything else, even the most modern technology. There are, after all, local characteristics, such as the movement of sand dunes here in Bács-Kiskun County, due to which we have found Árpád Period soil cultivation one meter deep or ground levels from the Late Middle Ages at three meters of depth. These factors are not necessarily taken into account in a national system; they require local knowledge as well.

This begs the question, what do you think about the continuation of the archaeological topography work that has begun? Is it important that all this local knowledge that has accumulated in Hungarian archaeology to this point, the results of archaeological field surveys and the work on the site inventory not be lost, but instead continue? What is the situation in relation to this in Bács-Kiskun County?

Sz.R.: Bács-Kiskun County is one of the locations where there are quite a few blank spaces. There are some towns with extensive territories where we know of only one or two archaeological sites, although we know that there must be 300, 400 or 500 sites in that area. So the inventory of sites is dreadfully insufficient. As a matter of fact we have begun this work, and in recent years developments in geographic information systems have taken place here – both in terms of personnel and instrumentation – that have allowed us to re-identify old sites and find countless new ones. We are talking about a total of 4,000 archaeological sites.

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On the basis of what you said previously, this means that in addition to the geographic information system database, an environmental archaeology database also needs to be set up, since for example the sites can only be identified through coring and other methods due to the great accumulation of sand.

Sz.R.: This is very true. These are being prepared. In reality we are only talking about individual initiatives, because neither the museum in Kecskemét nor the other museums in the county meet the necessary personnel, financial and other conditions. We would need the contributions of a geographer, a botanist and other experts, even within the context of a temporary collaboration. Until the museum in Kecskemét is able to produce 65 million forints in revenue – and this is no secret, since the budget is public – we unfortunately do not have the funding for this.

There were two key words, the personnel and the financing. If we consider the personnel and technical requirements it seems that Kecskemét is in an essentially ideal situation in comparison to that of Hungary in general these days. After all there are numerous archaeologists working in the area, in contrast to counties where there are hardly any or where there have been hardly any for decades.

Sz.R.: This is true, but at the same time we lack the experts on the basis of whom we could employ any kind of modern predictive method, gather environmental archaeological data, etc. On top of all of this is the museum's range of duties beyond archaeological research, including the management and presentation of the collections. This complex range of duties would require a larger staff of experts that is qualified in a more diverse manner. In terms of the collections, the presentation of our results and their museum educational interpretation, Kecskemét fortunately has great traditions, and it is also a comfort that the travelling exhibitions that have come here in recent decades arrive with complete programs, which only need to be further elaborated by the experts in museum education, not the archaeologists. We have very good experts in museum education, and so the archaeologists do not need to worry about these tasks.

All this leads us to another question. The programs for these travelling exhibitions are clearly developed within the context of individual financing or grant money. What is the situation on the other hand with the basic financing? This is a particularly interesting issue considering that in the past couple of years the support for museums has come from different places in many cases.

Sz.R.: The amount of financing has changed, too. Yes, there have been cases where within 366 days three different sources for support have followed one another. There is no problem with the basic conception that the given institution should be managed by its town. However, with this the financial responsibility for maintenance was placed upon the local government, even though the state still continues to support the small museums in particular quite well. In other words, it cannot be stated that they have killed off the sphere of small museums. But at the same time at those museums where there is revenue – which are precisely the municipal museums with responsibility for a county – quite significant revenue requirements have really been set, since along with the authority for archaeological research the revenues from this have also remained with us. I see in this the fundamental problem that during the first transition the old, poorly functioning system was retained. The nineteen counties operated with nineteen different financing systems, and during the change in support the previous basic numbers were also taken over. What does this mean in practice? There are museums that for example operate with a staff of 160–180, essentially over-financed, with a relatively large number of personnel. This is while other museums in similar positions have one-third or one quarter the staff, and due to the lower financing they inherited they have no means to change this. For example, the museum in Kecskemét is the third smallest museum of this type, while it oversees the largest county in terms of territory, so in other words it inherited a very small museum staff. Just now we have boosted our staff from 42 to 47 and a half workers, but a municipal museum can only operate properly with 100–120 people, or in certain cases perhaps with only 80 people. So what happened wasn't that the new

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budget was developed taking into account historical and museum traditions on the basis of quotas, which the town would then have then supplemented if it chose to, but instead we inherited the old numbers, and so whoever inherited a low budget has no opportunity to increase it and thereby increase the staff.

So, there is a great need to supplement this base budget through project funds or large investments. Is the museum able to increase the staff of experts involved in archaeology based upon these various projects?

Sz.R.: This is not typically so. In these cases we instead work with sub-contractors or with short-term contracts. However, the latter are not ideal at all from the point of view of the experts either, because it doesn't provide them with any security. The creation of a national "mobile" group of experts, perhaps within the framework of the National Heritage Preservation Center, could represent a solution, but presently how the tasks that arise within the projects are completed differs from museum to museum.

To what extent is this connected with the technical background? The question always arises whether the museums should develop their own technological bases at large excavations or see to these tasks with the technical assistance of some kind of central institution. Presently it is as if we are seeing the combination of two systems.

Sz.R.: Presently every museum constructs its own technical basis, or at least attempts to retain it. This is not a problem, a basic amount of equipment is needed (off-road vehicles, GPS devices, metal detectors, etc.) just like anywhere in the world. These are essential tools even for field walks not associated with large projects. Whether they should have geophysical devices, well that's another matter. These aren't necessarily required at every museum, in my view they aren't a necessity at all because they would not be able to make use of or maintain them. We have a very good relationship with the various departments of natural sciences at the University of Szeged, with whom we perform joint projects. There are a few companies in Hungary that perform aerial photography, and there is no need for more. I think that there should be a geographic information specialist at every museum, because it is a fundamental need to be able to integrate the new results into their own system. However, there is no need for them to have their own surveyor or equipment. It is a proper and cost effective solution if the institution commissions a trusted specialized private company for the work.

In connection with this a problem that has been on the surface arises again: the coordination of the various archaeological activities. To the present day there still isn't an organ within Hungarian archaeology that really oversees this. Despite the efforts of a national organization, previously the Field Service for Cultural Heritage (KÖSZ) and now the National Heritage Preservation Center, to develop a set of geophysical and other devices, there is a lack of an overview for what activities are needed where in the country, and how to distribute these devices so that everyone profits from them.

Sz.R.: I think that the present set up would provide the opportunity for further steps, if everyone would know that now the situation is stable or for at least a little while and the institutional structure will not change further. There would be a local museum with regional authority that would have sufficient financing and staffing to see to the constant duties. In every case where tasks that have large personnel and technical needs with little warning – usually in connection with a project or a program based event – it would be able to work out a program together with a central institution that has a concentration of these types of devices and professionals (for example the National Heritage Preservation Center).

How united are the provincial institutions? How typical is it that provincial museums work together?

Sz.R.: That is a very sensitive issue. It isn't even precisely defined where the boundaries for the collection areas of which institutions are. This needs to be taken care of. The find materials related to an excavation should go to the small museum in the given collection area. After all, why are there museums in Kiskunfélegyháza or Kiskunhalas if the objects found on the border of Kiskunhalas don't go there? Let's say there is a five year transitional period, when it is important due to the investment, then the finds should be at the county museum, but afterwards they must hand it over to the local one. The museums must understand in general that times have changed, which everyone can notice for themselves. This sphere cannot be revitalized by petty feuds and putting personal interests in the forefront. The situation can only be resolved through compromise by both (or however many) sides. The professional policies must reflect the "complexity" of archaeology. They must define the framework more delicately and with more patience, genuinely involving the most important and constructive institutions, as well as other stakeholders, and they must be filled with professional content. I hope that this can come about in the near future, or more precisely it must come to pass, because numerous measures have triggered just the opposite result of what the lawmakers would have liked. The system will refine itself, but for this the goodwill of the various parties towards one another is absolutely necessary in the future.