

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECTS IN COUNTY PEST Reflections on an Exhibition in the Ferenczy Museum Centre, Szentendre

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A description and discussion of the exhibition “Treasure hunt adventure science – Community archaeology projects in Pest County” opened in Szentendre in June 2021 has already been penned by Tibor Ákos Rácz, the exhibition’s curator in Hungarian Archaeology (RÁCZ 2021b). Our study offers a view from the outside: how two professional archaeologists interested in and committed to community archaeology and museum displays saw the exhibit. It is not our intention to address all professional issues or to offer a description of the finds moving from one display case to the next, but rather to focus on and discuss at greater length the points that most appealed to us.

THE SPREAD OF COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY IN HUNGARY

In 2019, Tibor Ákos Rácz defined community archaeology in County Pest as “research activity conducted jointly by the public and representatives of the archaeological profession with the goal of learning about and salvaging our cultural heritage” (RÁCZ 2019, 150). The exhibition open through January 31, 2022, presents the results of this wide-ranging and manifold activity conducted for over a decade. The exhibit is staged in the renovated section of the Ferenczy Museum Centre of Szentendre, in the six halls and corridors of the Pajor manor house that had previously mainly been the venue for artistic and design exhibitions. Tibor Ákos Rácz, the exhibition’s curator, was assisted in the organisation and mounting of the exhibition by 39 fellow archaeologists and members of the Community Archaeology Association registered in spring 2019.

Several community archaeology projects have been launched across Hungary during the past few years. Quite happily, this initiative has been taken up not only by large central institutions such as the Hungarian National Museum (HNM Community Archaeology Project), the Castle Headquarters Integrated Centre of Regional Development Ltd. and the Institute of Archaeological Sciences of the Eötvös Loránd University, but also by several regional and local museums (to mention but a few: Debrecen, Gyula, Hódmezővásárhely, Keszthely, Nagykanizsa, Miskolc, Pápa, Szeged, Székesfehérvár, Szekszárd and Veszprém). We may confidently assert that up to December 2021, several community archaeology projects directed by strongly committed archaeologist were launched in most counties of Hungary, whose activity was outlined through presentations and posters as part of the conference organised jointly by the Ferenczy Museum Centre, the Community Archaeology Association, the Association of Hungarian Archaeologists and the Association of Hungarian Archeologists and Art Historians in November 2021.³ This meeting was a continuation of the conference “Community archaeology models in Hungary”, held behind closed doors, organised by the Institute of Archaeological Sciences of the Eötvös Loránd University, The Association of Hungarian Archaeologists and the Castle Headquarters Integrated Centre of Regional Development Ltd. in 2019, the first on this subject.⁴ (The two year’s gap between the two events was due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.)

Many museums have seen their collections and exhibitions enriched by archaeological finds excavated with the help of enthusiastic volunteers (see, e.g., an article in the current winter issue of *Hungarian Archaeology*).

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³ <https://www.femuz.hu/kozossegi-regeszeti-konferencia-program/> (Last accessed: January 5, 2022).

⁴ <https://www.btk.elte.hu/content/kozossegi-regeszeti-modellek-magyarorszagon.e.4010> (Last accessed: January 5, 2022).

ology: Cs. ANDRÁSI et al. 2021), and several temporary exhibitions have been dedicated to showcasing these finds. For example, a travelling exhibition of salvaged finds toured the cities of County Békés in 2016 (BÍRÓ & RÓZSA 2017). The series of exhibitions “Treasures along the roads” put together by the Laczkó Dezső Museum of Veszprém presented the recent finds acquired by the museum that had been brought to light as community archaeology investigations: the hoard found at Takácsi in summer 2019, followed by the liturgical objects of the Árpadian Age found in spring 2020.⁵ The mini exhibition “Our hidden heritage” in the Hungarian National Museum in 2020 displayed to visitors the Late Bronze Age hoard discovered at Kesztölc and a late sixteenth-century shield ornament found in the Esztergom area.⁶

Nevertheless, the exhibition mounted in Szentendre can be regarded as the first truly ambitious one created with a view to academic standards. The exhibition reaches well beyond previous initiatives by highlighting countless examples of how the joint activity of archaeological professionals and volunteers as well as the presentation of the results in accordance with the standards of an academic report (cf. the already cited articles about the conference and the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: KULCSÁR 2021; RÁCZ 2021b) points beyond the activity of amateur metal detectorists engaged in an enjoyable pastime, which essentially marked the start of community archaeology.

The volunteers of the Community Archaeology Association partook in several different types of archaeological work: in addition to instrumental site and find prospection, they also had ample opportunity to participate in research and salvage excavations as part of manifold educational projects where they received professional training and could engage in post-excavation work, too (cleaning, restoring and cataloguing the finds, post-excavation assessment work and finally museum display). The exhibition offers an insight into several research projects conducted with the collaboration of archaeology volunteers, such as the archaeological topography of the Ócsa Nature Reserve, the research excavation of the Árpadian Age and late medieval cemetery at Dabas and the investigations in the Nagyborzsöny area with the goal of mapping the relics of medieval mining.

The conference and the catalogue accompanying the exhibition have definitely made a major contribution to making this research direction part of academic discourse. Some of the more important milestones in this process were as follows (without any pretension at completeness): the publication of several articles on the illicit trade in antiquities (the thematic 2019 issue of *Határtalan Régészet*: FELFÖLDI 2019) and its direct connection with metal detecting activities (V. SZABÓ 2019), as well as articles on the positive impact of amateur metal detectorists cooperating with museums (HUDÁK 2016; RÁCZ 2019). The journal *Hungarian Archaeology* has published several articles on community archaeology since 2014, and has from spring 2020 devoted a special section to this field in each issue (LASZLOVSZKY & WOLLÁK 2020). *Töredékek*, a new journal published by the Castle Headquarters Integrated Centre of Regional Development Ltd., was launched in this vein: the first issue reported on how the finds discovered by metal detectorists has rewritten the history of Kopáncs, a village in County Békés (POMÁZI-HORVÁTH & RÓZSA 2021).

THE MOTIVATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The main motivation of the archaeologists participating in these projects is fairly obvious: in addition to contributing to the knowledge of local history, they also appreciate that volunteers are helping to protect endangered sites, and thereby they are ousting illicit treasure hunters to some extent. They can also be of assistance in daily museum work and thus whet the understandable appetite of local communities for

⁵ <https://www.idm.hu/hu/kiallitas/kincsek-utak-menten-takacsi-2019-10-12>;
<https://www.idm.hu/hu/kiallitas/kincsek-utak-menten-a-kozepkor-szentsege-2020-03-06> (Last accessed: January 5, 2022).

⁶ <https://mnm.hu/hu/kiallitasok/idoszaki/rejtozkodo-oroksegunk> (Last accessed: January 5, 2022). In the UK, for example, where community archaeology has a much longer tradition, the very first exhibition showcasing the finds brought to light on excavations conducted with volunteers in County Durham was only organised in 2015: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology.museum/whatson/details/?id=28453> (Last accessed: January 5, 2022). Some time later, an exhibition celebrating the work of archaeology volunteers was also staged there: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology.museum/whatson/details/?id=24121> (Last accessed: January 5, 2022).

learning of their past and becoming involved in unravelling it. The motivations of metal detectorists and the volunteers varied widely, and one of the exhibition’s tableaux focuses on mapping the many diverse reasons, which include the following: recreation, leisure activity, personal fulfilment, treasure hunting, direct engagement with the past, thirst for knowledge, financial gain, voluntary work, passion for collecting, local patriotism, passion for adventure and sense of community (RÁCZ 2021a, 15–16, Fig. 8).

The activities generated by these motivations operate along a broad spectrum from the looting of sites and the creation of private collections to self-education and learning as well as collaboration with heritage institutions, registration and presentation of data and finds, and independent research. The impact and outcomes of these activities range from the illegal (livelihood crime, illicit trade in antiquities, building illegal collections) to the creation of new values (acquisition of new skills, birth of friendships and micro-communities, useful pastime, enrichment of heritage protection with new data and finds, new research results). The growing number of positive outcomes increases the chances that the collaboration with the increasing cadre of volunteers will to some extent oust and prevent illicit activities.

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY THROUGH THE LENS OF AN EXHIBITION

A set of guidelines published in 2019 providing useful advice on how to engage the public in Hungarian museum activities accords an important role to community archaeology, and also offers a detailed overview of the benefits that can be reaped by both the museum and the participating communities and individuals in the course of collaborations of this kind (ARAPOVICS et al. 2019, 143–146). It highlighted the role of community archaeology in community cohesion and in reinforcing the connection of participants to the immediate and broader area of their place of residence. In one of his writings, Péter György noted that municipal museums play a crucial role in the never-ending process of forging a community from the inhabitants of a city (GYÖRGY 2021). Community archaeology, one pathway to the future, appeared as an important element



Fig. 1. Detail of the exhibition (Photo: B. Deim)

of engaging the public with archaeology in a debate piece on mid-range archaeological strategy in Hungary (RACZKY et al. 2021, 243).

How and to what extent does the temporary exhibition in Szentendre live up to these expectations? There is a general consensus that one essential element of any exhibition design is to determine the target audience for whom it is intended (WAIDACHER 1999; VASÁROS 2010, 25) since the targeted audience will determine how and in what format the exhibition will communicate its message. Yet, the current conceptual consensus is that an exhibition should basically address the public at large, should seek to serve more sophisticated visitor needs and be accessible to all (BROUWERS 2015). Tibor Ákos Rácz apparently seconds this opinion because, as he put it, the research findings can be of interest not only to the archaeological community, but to the broader public as well (RÁCZ 2021a, 7). The museum's collection was enriched by some 20,000 metal artefacts – including coins – during the course of various community archaeology projects. Obviously, only a small selection of these finds and their archaeological contexts could be showcased, but even so, some 2000 pieces are exhibited in addition to two outstanding coin hoards. The exhibition essentially displays the museum's new acquisitions (RÁCZ 2021b, 82), which, to cite its curator, has both its advantages and disadvantages. The exhibition halls are thematised: the interlinked halls present a major hoard, the new findings of the excavations on the county's prominent sites from the Conquest period and the time of the Mongolian invasion of 1241, the other excavations conducted in conjunction with archaeology volunteers and the fabulous treasure found on the Danube bank at Érd (*Figs 1–3*). The last hall resembles an open



Fig. 2. Detail of the exhibition (Photo: B. Deim)



Fig. 3. A display case of the exhibition (Photo: R. Bácsi)

storage room displaying the recovered metal finds brought in to the museum in rigid typological order. The organisers provided an extra hall with the main components of an archaeological excavation for the purpose of extra-curricular education, providing thereby an opportunity for acquiring and practising the necessary skills as part of an interactive game with a museum educator.

It would appear that the main organisational principle of the display concept was how the artefact had been found and that these were the units complemented with the interpretations based on the assessment of the finds. In line with the exhibition's title, the main emphasis is on the discovery of treasure, on the story of the discovery and on how the assemblages can be fitted into the general archaeological narrative.

While the sheer volume of the exhibited finds might seem overwhelming at first sight, it does drive home the point of what is one of the main missions of community archaeology, namely that the activity of archaeology enthusiasts leads not only to the discovery and recovery of sensational finds that would quite certainly be of value on the illicit antiquities market, too, but also that the small, strongly worn and fragmented pieces found in high numbers would be no more than an incoherent mass of artefacts without the specialised knowledge of archaeologists. The curator's message is quite clear, and the exhibition addresses both the professional community and the public. Archaeology enthusiasts have a two-fold expectation: to participate in the discovery and salvaging of the cultural heritage as well as to encounter the artefacts them-

selves. Strolling among the display cases, enthusiasts of public archaeology can re-live the excitement of discovering their treasures and proudly point out and show off the finds they discovered to their family and friends, who are thus indirectly also drawn into community archaeology. In this sense, the exhibition has a very personal aspect to it: displayed beside each artefact is not only the object's designation, but also the finder's name. The corridor leading to the exhibition halls presents the members of the team, some of their stories as well as their losses – some members of their community are sadly departed and thus the exhibition also honours their memory.

The creation of the exhibition and its catalogue were both the fruit of a happy collaboration extending well beyond the institutional framework, involving the participation of museums and research institutes, university lecturers and researchers as well as archaeologists specialising in various periods. Members of various community archaeology groups had partaken in the excavations conducted in other counties, represented by the items loaned from six regional museums.

Although the exhibition is principally intended for the Hungarian audience, its excellent structure and design makes it accessible – and enjoyable – for non-Hungarian professionals, too, as personally observed by one of the article's authors, who accompanied students from Lebanon, Turkey and Georgia attending the archaeological heritage course of the Eötvös Loránd University. Guided by its curator, the students were able to immerse themselves in the exhibition's major themes. Although they were disappointed with the lack of English texts, their response to the exhibits was to seek connections and parallels between the finds from Hungary and the archaeological assemblages they were familiar with, and they also expressed their appreciation for the teamwork between the museum's professional archaeologists and the cadre of volunteers, which provided the necessary professional background to the projects that formed the exhibition's backbone.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It seems to us that the exhibition has fulfilled its goal of showcasing its new acquisitions and celebrating the community without whom the artefacts would never have come to light. The finders could share the joys of treasure hunting with their family and friends, and they also received important feedback that their activity and enthusiasm are indispensable to salvaging the archaeological heritage. This appreciation and joy was palpable at the opening (*Fig. 4*) and the presentation accompanying the November conference.

The exhibition is simultaneously a strong community-building force, affirming that it was worthwhile to get up on misty daybreaks, to trudge through mud and walk countless miles under the blazing sun.

The museum's elegant spaces and the coolness of the display cases celebrate the finds and their finders, without whom the exhibition could hardly have been created, and who will remain essential to Hungarian archaeology in the future – and it is high time that museums receive the necessary support and funding both on the local and the national level. The projects conducted by the museum and the association are also



*Fig. 4. Opening of the exhibition
(Photo: R. Bácsi)*



Fig. 5. Billboard of the exhibition on the outskirts of Szentendre (Photo: B. Deim)

testimony to the new research findings in the wake of research conducted in collaboration with archaeology enthusiasts and volunteers. We have not mentioned the challenges raised by community archaeology or the difficulties involved such as the burdens imposed on archaeologists who liaison with the volunteer sector or the lack of funding and professional personnel to deal with the primary and final assessment of the immense number of finds brought in to museums. Nevertheless, we hope that our article has highlighted the many potentials of community archaeology for expanding the arena of archaeology for both archaeology enthusiasts and professional archaeologists, as well as for decision-makers.

The exhibition has been a huge success among both the professional archaeologists involved in this work and the participative volunteers, and the academic benefits of this activity will no doubt be convincing for those who still harbour some doubts.

By supporting the creation of the exhibition and the programme of associated events (*Fig. 5*), the museum's leadership has demonstrated that embracing community archaeology has many benefits for the discipline, leading to the proposal that the Vaczek Villa in the area of the Roman Lapidary could be put to use for this purpose. The chairman of the Cultural, Educational and Civilian Committee of the local council of Szentendre voiced a similar supportive attitude in his welcoming address at the conference dedicated to this theme.

Although the exhibition in Szentendre closes at the end of January, there are plans for it to be staged in Székesfehérvár, where it will be enlarged with the community archaeology projects and find assemblages from County Fejér.

RECOMMENDED READING

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