

## COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOPOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN THE CATCHMENT AREA OF THE MUSEUM OF SOPRON

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*Community archaeology has become very popular in the past few years in Hungary. Initially only seen as little more than legal metal detecting, the movement has grown out of infancy and has become a basis of several major research projects by today. The use of the labour force represented by volunteering enthusiasts is diverse and varies by institutions. This article presents the past few years and results of the Community Archaeological Programme of the Sopron Museum.*

**Keywords:** Sopron, community archaeology, metal detector survey

### COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY – A MODEL IN SOPRON

Our museum has always been open to initiatives by civil partners but, until the end of 2017, there was no organised collaboration with the civil sphere. The *ad hoc* joint work consisted of reporting new findings and, occasionally, conducting small rescue excavations. The author laid the foundations of the programme presented below following examples from Western Europe in the last months of 2017, thus the conditions for cooperation could be developed in 2018.

The year 2018 was spent organising and inventorying the finds brought to the museum before the programme started and authenticating the newly discovered sites. Mainly that latter made us realise that volunteers exploring sites by themselves is an uneconomical way of research, as it requires at least two field trips, doubling the burden represented by documentation-related tasks for archaeologists. The considerably increased workload inflicted on experts by the conservation, inventorying, and management of the incoming find material also necessitated quick action in updating the workflow of collaboration. In the new structure, the creator of the programme coordinates the exploration of new sites, while fieldwork is mainly carried out by a local expert of the period (prehistory: Dr. Attila Mrenka, Roman Period: Dániel Kovács, Middle Ages: Ágnes Font). The management of the incoming finds is a task of our field technician and collection manager, Krisztina Balassa.

To improve the work structure by eliminating duplicate work, a more extensive and comprehensive research framework had to be developed by the end of 2018. Two target regions have been selected for this programme: the Amber Road area and the Ikva Valley (up to the Fertő Coast). The most important tasks pinned were to clarify the internal chronology and extent of the sites in these areas, to verify the related topographical data and, above all, to record their condition. The primary goals in the case of the Fertő Coast were complemented by the surveying of the possible areas of settling, i.e., those with no known sites but a location indicating possible archaeological interest.

Volunteers have been expected to learn the basics of site exploration on field, leaving the accompanying archaeologist with more time for professional work during metal detecting trips, and, thus, significantly increasing their effectiveness. Volunteers can suggest specific research areas within the target regions: their considerable local knowledge makes it much easier for them to obtain valuable information compared to museum experts and represents a huge advantage for the programme. It is a bit like the early years of archaeology in the second half of the 19th century, although made in a certainly more professional way.

During field trips, each participant independently records the coordinates of the finds and the path taken. We always collect all (pottery and metal) finds of archaeological interest regardless of exploring a new site or a known one, partially to counter the strong negative impact of illegal metal detecting activity, the extent which in our region is above the country's average.

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The results of research in 2021–2022 show that, despite the difficulties, the metal detecting branch of community archaeology can not only produce an amazing number of new finds but also an invaluable amount of information on the actual condition of the sites.

When researching a micro-region, we always strive for completeness. This means not only researching data archives and available literature, completed by fieldwork, but also collecting all available information from local people on possible sites. The results achieved by the programme will be published both online and in the printed press, thus fostering a sense of ownership of their cultural heritage among local residents. Another important element of the programme is to provide local young people with an opportunity to learn about archaeology, including creating opportunities for children with special educational needs to participate in excavations.

## MAIN RESULTS OF THE PROGRAMME

### *Sopron–Várhely*

The pilot and current flagship project of the programme is the systematic research of Sopron-Várhely. The site registered as Várhely covers two high plateaus, the Várhely and the Áfonya-hegy (Cranberry Hill) north of that. Their eastern boundary is wedged by the Madár-árok (Bird Ditch). The site has been known since the last quarter of the 19th century (BELLA 1888). Until the mid-1930s, intensive research was carried out in the area, the history of which was summarised by Gyula Nováki (NOVÁKI 1955). No documentation was made of the early excavations, so only the finds, only partially conserved and inventoried, are available for study today. The excavations led by Erzsébet Patek in the 1970s gave new impetus to research. The summaries of her results (PATEK 1972; 1974; 1975; 1976; 1983), relevant until today, clarified the relationship between the cemetery and the cemetery wall system.

Her conclusions, however, are of limited applicability in areas inside the enclosure. As an investigation of the vast area within the ramparts, covering some 40 ha, was well beyond the possibilities of the museum staff dedicated to prehistoric archaeology, we decided to investigate it via field walking trips and instrumental surveys within the frame of our Community Archaeology Programme (Fig. 1).

The highly protected nature conservation area represented by the site is also important for forest and wildlife management, a popular destination for nature tourists, and serves as a study forest. Consequently, research there is fundamentally influenced by concerns of nature conservation. To keep things rolling, we have been consulting with rangers of the Nature Conservation Guard Service of the Fertő-Hanság National Park on field twice a year. Fieldwork schedule has been adapted to the vegetation cycle of protected plant populations (surveyed for almost two seasons) (Fig. 2). It would be practically impossible to carry out any scientific work in this area without an active contribution by the Tanulmányi Erdőgazdaság Zrt. (Educational Forestry Ltd.) managing the area; for example, the time of the clearance works scheduled

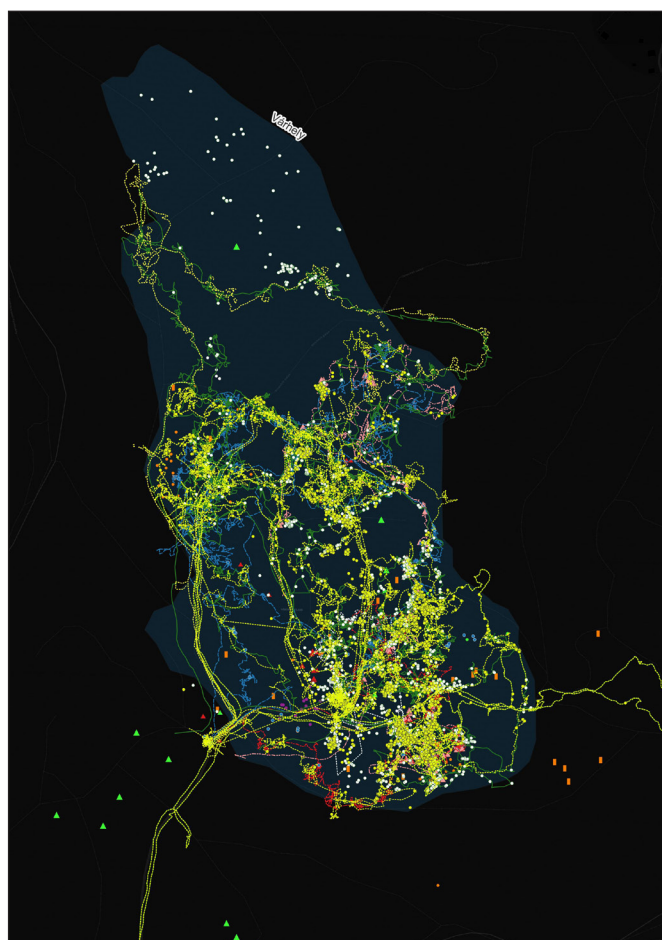


Fig. 1. Find distribution map of Sopron-Várhely  
(created by the author)





*Fig. 2. Metal detector survey on Várhely, carried out outside the vegetation period (photo by the author)*



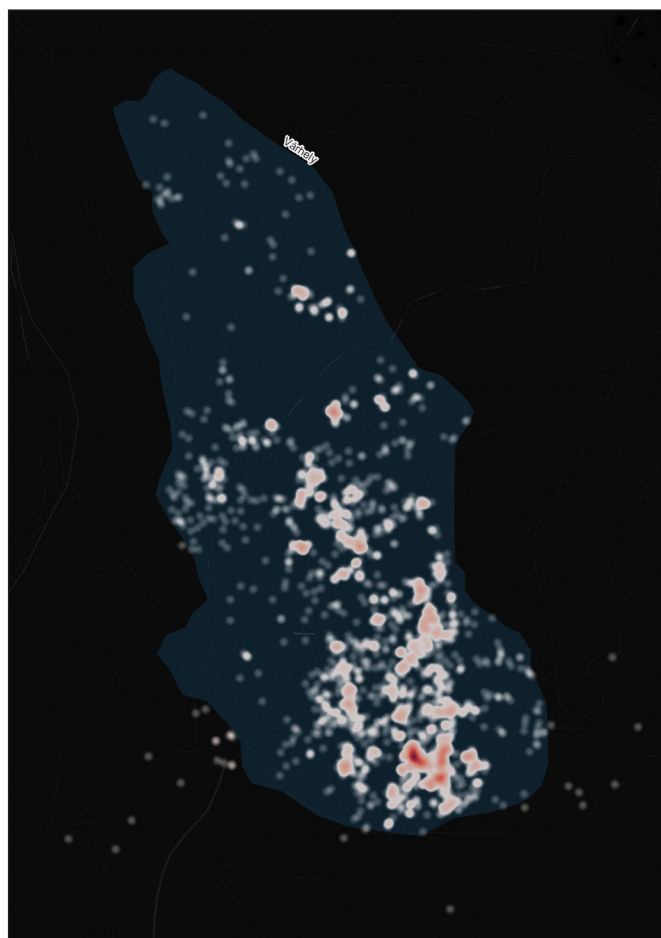
*Fig. 3. Early Iron Age bronze figurine, a find yielded by the research in Várhely (Sopron Museum ID 49/2022) (photo by Krisztina Balassa)*

in the forest management plan and required for us to access the site (especially the area of the tumulus cemetery) has been discussed on joint meetings.

Permanently covered areas with dense outgrowth, entirely non-accessible or only at times but offering extremely limited conditions for observation even then, represent another limiting factor. Particular attention had to be paid to the leaf litter. Although one could find several leaf-free patches of various sizes every day time had to be taken to understand their dynamics. For these reasons, the forest can essentially only be surveyed effectively immediately after winter, before bud break, at the end of summer before leaves start falling in the autumn, and until the onset of ground frosts.

The discovery of the first idol from Várhely (Fig. 3) in a part of the site that, having been covered by shrubs and mulberry bushes, had been impassable for many years, marks the success of this method. After comparing the obstacles posed by the vegetation with terrain conditions, we have decided to walk the site following a circular path, so that the circles of survey days and periods overlap to eliminate the distorting effect of vegetation and make research less demanding physically. Besides, a circular path corresponds with the terraced structure of the site, recognised for the first time during our surveys.

During instrumental survey trips, all finds have been collected and identified separately. Their IDs consisted of the initials of the finder and a serial number (the numbering starting with the day). The results we then recorded in QGIS, where each participant and their path are identified with a unique colour and symbol. The resulting scatter plot shows internal structures of the site that previous research could not reveal (Fig. 4). We can speak of distinct metalworking zones and a find material composition varying per terrace, outlining a picture akin to



*Fig. 4. Heat map marking intensively used areas on Várhely based on find distribution (created by the author)*



Smolenice–Molpír (MÜLLER 2017, 561). That site, located on the eastern side of the Little Carpathians near Nagyszombat (today: Trnava, Slovakia), could have been a regional centre (MÜLLER 2017, 565) like Várhely. Based on its internal arrangement and division, the Smolenice–Molpír settlement today seems to be a good analogy to Várhely.

#### *Fertőszentmiklós and its surroundings*

The Ikva Creek, running south of the Fertő-Mellék Hills, represented not only an excellent (and so far unfortunately little-researched) east-west corridor (like the Drava-Sava Region or even the Rába Valley; see PATEK 1983, 113), but it also drained the Sopron Basin (a depression composed of elements of different geological origins), thus creating a direct geographic link with the Lajta Basin (ÁDÁM 1985, 41). Based on



Fig. 5. Fragment of a terra sigillata vessel found during the preparation of research in Fertőszentmiklós (photo by the author)



Fig. 7. The coins recovered from the settlement indicate long settling (photo by Dániel Kovács)



Fig. 6. Systematic research in the outskirts of Fertőszentmiklós (photo by Dániel Kovács)



Fig. 8. Artefacts of the bronze depot after removal (Sopron Museum Inv. no. 2021.6.1–30) (photo by the author)

its flood discharge per width, the Ikva is even larger than the Répce River (SOMOGYI 1975, 320), thus, an extremely important environmental factor in our region.

The fertile plain, we assumed, was suitable for settling already in the earliest Roman times: favourable geographic conditions, some presumed prehistoric antecedents, and an important ford between the eastern bank of the Fertő Lake and the marshlands of the Hanság all pointed that way (Fig. 5).

As a result of research conducted based on this assumption, we and our volunteers carried out first a metal-detector-aided survey, then an excavation in a 1st-century AD Roman cemetery. Upon extending the research area, we also identified a Roman *villa* on the outskirts of Fertőszentmiklós, with coins from the 2nd century AD and later, but traces of intensive settling only between AD 280 and AD 350 (Figs. 6, 7). In addition to the Roman remains, Hungary's first torque depot, dated to the end of the Early/start of the Middle Bronze Age, was discovered with the help of a local resident (Fig. 8).

### *Middle Age sites*

Systematic fieldwork on medieval settlement history only gained substantial impetus in recent months. One of the most significant results thus far has been localising the church of Himod, an old debt of the author of these lines. While the settlement is first mentioned in historical sources in AD 1408, archaeological finds testify of diverse communities having settled in the area from prehistoric times. Another special feature of the research on Himod is the large body of detailed information provided by written records on the history of the church and the settlement, which, together with the results of non-destructive archaeological research, enable a comprehensive, interdisciplinary study of the area. Thanks to the intensive metal detecting teamwork, a number of finds have been recovered from the site.

## SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME

Besides archaeological results, we consider it most important to create and shape the social environment in which the long-term preservation of cultural heritage elements is possible. The rapid publication of our achievements in a way accessible to a wide public brought about a welcome increase in the number of our members. The aim of our regular weekly blog-like writings on the largest social media outlets is to provide an entertaining insight into the everyday of archaeology. We use feedback to constantly revise the structure of the programme. Besides striving for reaching as broad an audience as possible, our guiding principle is to bring future generations into direct contact with the artefacts of the past and the discipline of archaeology exploring them. This is particularly important when it comes to children with special educational needs, as the combination of a shared past serving as a base of identity and a community experience are essential for children's social development.

Thanks to the contact web built in the past five years, we have attracted not only enthusiastic volunteers but also generous supporters. Thus, not only the excavations in Várhely were made possible by community efforts (thanks to Zoltán Gögh and the Krav Maga SC Sopron) but we also had opportunities to promote the programme on several events. Of course, none of this would have worked without our volunteer site explorers, whose contribution shall be thanked, and names presented here: the oldest members of the team, Tibor Fábián, Attila Kocsis, Csaba Deák, Attila Kónyai; and also Norbert Pála, Zoltán Tóth, Béla Kontli, Attila Pálovics Endre, László Fülöp, Csaba Bakó, Attila Kocsis Jr., Sándor Tóth and Róbert Bencsik.

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