

ARCHAEOLOGY IN MISKOLC DURING A PANDEMIC

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In the first quarter of 2020, the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, similarly to other areas, fundamentally shook the museum sector, including archaeology, since contacting each other, welcoming visitors, negotiating with investors, working in the field together, exchanging expertise on research and object processing are all important parts of our everyday work. We tried to react quickly to the situation. It was clear that we needed to increase our online presence, since for an indefinite period of time this would remain the only way of keeping in touch with our regular guests, with our volunteers, and reaching a new layer with the promotion of archaeology. In addition, we had to solve the safe conditions for working in the field, since it was soon proven that investments would continue despite the pandemic situation. Below, we give an insight into how the Archaeology Department of the Herman Ottó Museum in Miskolc handled the situation. Not from the viewpoint of scientific breakthroughs, but from the more personal aspects of everyday life.

Keywords: communication, digital content creation, online archaeology, community archaeology, investment, museum life

ANTECEDENTS

In February 2020, we unsuspectingly prepared for our professional trip to Poland to meet with our colleagues from Krosno, Trzcínica and Kraków, with whom we have a good relationship thanks to our previous traveling exhibitions. We wanted to gather inspiration and exchange expertise for the concept of our future archaeological display storage, which was still being planned at the time. After we came home from the short trip, reviewing the day-to-day swelling of the red spots on the COVID map and discussing the more and more threatening situation became an integral part of the morning coffee. We celebrated International Women's Day in the museum without friendly hugs, but still among our colleagues, not thinking that a new chapter in our lives would begin a few days later.

The field season has not really started yet. Aside from a few archaeological observations, we were dealing with a series of documentation tasks. Thus we were perplexed about the situation when the director's instruction arrived: we have to work from home for an indefinite period of time. What should we take home, what should we do about the investments and the related explorations? The all-new situation has fundamentally shaken the entire institution: how can a community space operate if the community "has to stay at home"? How can the small, clockwork-like museum structure continue to work if the gears cannot come into contact?

WHAT'S NEXT?

In the end, we have been able to develop the new system with surprising speed, in which everyone was able to continue their current tasks. The upcoming period was marked by a telephone alert chain, online discussions, and increased e-mail traffic. A new series of thematic blog posts of the Archaeology Department of the Herman Ottó Museum also started with the title of „[Kedves korona naplóm - #HOMeOffice](#)” [My Dear Corona Diary - #HOMeOffice] (on the model of our previous series „[Kedves Ásatási naplóm](#)” [My Dear Excavation Log]). Its purpose was twofold: on the one hand, it gave a glimpse into the working conditions brought about by the new situation, and on the other hand, it was somewhat therapeutic for all our staff to

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be able to write about how they cope with the joys and sorrows of working from home, and even the [archaeological approach to quarantine kitchen](#) appeared.

We have always been trying to be present online. We regularly blog about our current work and events, we use Instagram and Facebook, and we upload videos to our YouTube channel. With the start of the quarantine period, it became clear immediately that we needed to further increase our digital presence, since it would remain the only way to keep in touch with those people who we normally meet in person several times a year, during our excavation inspection walks and on the occasion of community and archaeological events.

We tried to act quickly and restructure our [columns](#) to create a regular and easy-to-follow content flow. It was also important that the distribution of topics would allow our staff to complete the task without much hassle, since besides being entertaining, professionalism was equally important. And maybe it's no secret that our "[MacGyver skills](#)", generally used in archaeology, also came in handy in online content creation, meaning we also dealt with the related graphic works and video edits ourselves. In a situation in which we were confronted with the lack of available tools for the new type of task - as it was not needed before - good problem-solving skills were a must.

Of course, we didn't reinvent the wheel. Over the last two years, it has become clear how much more emphasis we need to put on an up-to-date online presence in the future as well. It is well illustrated by the international project of the DigVentures non-profit organization, called [Archaeology At Home](#). It was an online public archaeological programme, in which 11.000 enthusiasts from 90 countries participated, and which won the prestigious European Heritage Awards.

From a global point of view, there were also undeniable benefits of this period. Professional courses, workshops, conferences and lectures became available from our living room. We certainly could not have attended these under average conditions.

Thanks to our hard work, on a smaller scale, we were able to delight our followers with fresh content on a daily basis. Of course, the structure was continuously polished and formed, and by the beginning of 2021 we were able to contribute with our content to the specific topics of each month, together with other departments and in accordance with the whole museum communication. This is how posts were made on the "[pandemic wear](#)" of [plague doctors](#), on the [carnival customs of the Middle Ages and Early Modern times](#) or on [beehive stones](#) in connection with Pollinator's day. But let's not rush so far ahead!

#HOMEOFFICE AND ITS CIRCUMSTANCES

Melinda Miskolczi and her husband, Szabolcs Honti were the first victims of the quarantine situation, about a week before the full home office status was announced. My colleague took part in a conference of the German Castle Association (Deutsche Burgenvereinigung) on 6 March, just one day after the Northeast Regional Archaeological Conference in Hungary. After she returned, at the suggestion of the management, she voluntarily [quarantined herself for two weeks](#) from 8 March. Soon, we all followed.

The sudden situation called for quick solutions. In the absence of a laptop, as part of the "moving", I was forced to take home my office desktop computer with institutional contribution. Someone did have a laptop, but in the absence of a (sufficient) desk, he had to create an impromptu work surface, using tools like an ironing board (*Fig. 1*) or an 18-roll pack of toilet paper. There were those who struggled with their children, or their cat or rabbit spread itself out on the documentation. We had to

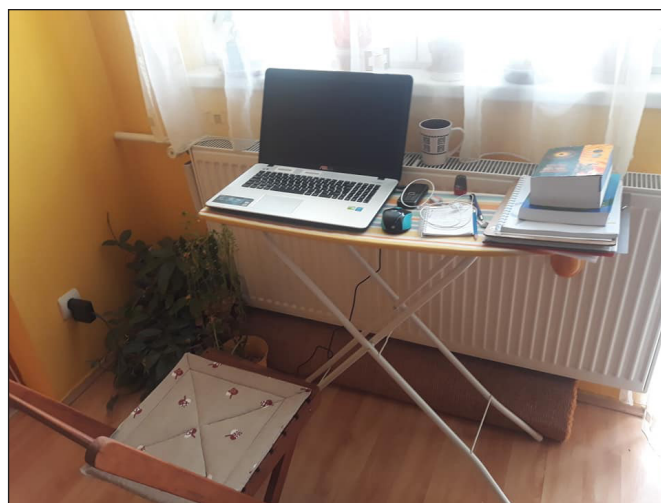


Fig. 1. Variations to an impromptu work surface (photo by Melinda Miskolczi)

learn to schedule our time wisely, as we often found ourselves in the flow for 10–14 hours on the 8-hour workday in our solitary.

At the same time, the institutional management and human resources also faced a not so small task, since they had to take quick steps to arrange the legal background and organization of work of the home office during quarantine. They had to develop a liveable and well-traceable method, which resulted in regular record-keeping and submitting a number of documents to a deadline on our part. An order was made to be working from home, and we kept a detailed, daily work diary of the tasks currently performed, which was collected on every Friday by the leaders of the work groups, and then forwarded to the administrator of the given repository. The administrators forwarded these together to the employment manager, who processed the data. The workers were organized into small teams, like on excavations. The project/excavation managers were responsible for distributing and monitoring the weekly tasks of their staff. In fact, everyone did the same as in the office, but at home.

FIELDWORK

We soon realized that we have nothing serious to fear regarding fieldwork. Albeit at a slower pace, but the investments certainly continued. Moreover, as we have seen, they jumped significantly after the first wave: we received a total of 129 inquiries during 2020-2021. The lives of the field teams changed mostly in that they travelled to the sites wearing masks and used a hand sanitizer more often.

In the spring of 2020, at the start of the pandemic, we were doing the fieldwork carefully, as we did not foresee what to expect. For a short period of time, investments also stalled or started more slowly than in previous years. Our work was almost entirely involved geophysical surveys, for the purpose of site diagnostics, to determine a mining field here and there. The work was done by a permanent team of 4-5 people who always moved together, thus reducing the risks. During the summer, when restrictions were relieved a bit, the teams taking care of the tasks of the gradually restarting investments and the excavation works concerning the mines surveyed in the spring, mixed more.

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY

Our Community Archaeological Programme celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2020, which was also reported in the summer issue of Hungarian Archaeology ([BAKOS 2020](#)), and in connection with which we announced a Voluntary Training Programme from January. The first time proved to be extremely popular, with great interest, but the pandemic cut off opportunities to continue.

The organization of all programmes planned with civilians has been also determined by the current epidemiological regulations. As a result, we were unable to carry out our usual weekly, fortnightly research sessions and processing of museum finds together. The topics of our column entitled *Miskolci régész enciklopédia* [Encyclopaedia of Archaeologists in Miskolc] partly filled the lack of educational opportunities. With this, we wanted to offer brief, substantial information with recommended reading and learning opportunities for all those interested.

Instead of the dynamic and varied activities with our volunteers so far, forced inaction has taken over. However, this provided a good opportunity to take stock of the experience of previous years, to think about how we can proceed better and more effectively, and how we can adapt to the situation if the restrictions are relaxed.

In 2020 and 2021, our volunteers were only able to take part in a few research projects - partly institutional and partly joint with the Eötvös Loránd University - in very small numbers, but we tried to provide opportunities for everyone. From this year onwards, we hope to be able to work with our volunteers more and more actively and in increasing numbers again, as we are preparing with completely new opportunities.

GOOD AND BAD PATCHES

Looking back over two years, it is difficult to count the number of ups and downs we have experienced, not only as the waves of the virus arrived, but also spiritually, and in relation to work and private life.

In the downward-curving phase of the first wave, we met excitedly at the first departmental meeting which was held outdoors on Calvary Hill behind the main building (Fig. 2). In addition to strict work-related topics, we tried to analyse the advantages, disadvantages and lessons of the situation. Sitting under the blossoming fruit trees, the pleasant spring sun filled us with hopeful feelings. We were confident that we would get through the situation soon and everything could go back to normal. Sure, it didn't happen that way, but we have managed to adapt well since then.

We slowly returned to the museum in early summer. Entering the hallway, I was struck by the “old scent” from the building's warehouses, which



Fig. 2. *Departmental meeting on the side of the Calvary Hill of Miskolc, 2020 (photo by Gabriella Kertész)*



Fig. 3. I. *Open-air Archaeological Gathering at Miskolc, Archaeology Day 2020 (photo by Benedek Baranczó)*



Fig. 4. *Filming of our own documentary for Archaeology Day 2020 (photo by Gabriella Kertész)*

I missed dearly. We shared the quarantine experiences continuously interrupting each other. Soon, within the scope of Archaeology Day, we welcomed guests again, albeit in small numbers, to our “Régész Terasz” [Archaeologist Terrace] programme (Fig. 3), where we presented our homemade documentary in a screening discussion-like manner (Fig. 4). In this, we presented the diversity of archaeological tasks through the performed work in the area of the gravel mine in Nyékládháza, and how we get from contracting, through site survey to the period of observations and excavations. It was a good feeling to see interested faces again and discuss the arising issues. By this time, the system of field work had already developed. Then the restric-

tions came again in the autumn, and we tried to overcome the ordeal routinely.

We have been through a period with many cancellations. In 2021, we had to postpone the 10th Jubilee Northeast Hungarian Regional Archaeology Conference, which we definitely did not want to organize without the opportunity for face-to-face meetings. This year, however, we will make up for it! We cancelled the usual team-building, year-end events, when we could have broken out of the busy everyday life to celebrate our results together. Although, we also have successes behind us. The Community Archaeological Education Programme - albeit with only two occasions - continued in 2021, and we have already held the first day of education in 2022, with really positive feelings (Fig. 5). On the occasion of Archaeology Day, we took an excursion



Fig. 5. Programme of the 1st Open School of Community Archaeology (photo by Marcell Balogh)

“in the courtyard of the White Friends and beyond” in the area of the Pauline Monastery in Bükkzentlélek and active field seasons ended with exciting results.

A Copper Age gold treasure, which was unearthed from the Bükkábrány mine in 2020 and exhibited last year under the title “Ábrány aranya” [Gold of Ábrány], got huge media attention.

At the end of 2020, we came up with a new “hybrid” column that got the title of “észLELET” [ARTIFACTS]. We wanted to create a type of chamber exhibition that would benefit both museum visitors and those who can only follow our events in the digital space. Thus, every three weeks, a new find or group of finds is displayed in our small museum showcase, about which we post a longer report, nice studio photos and a short - about one minute long - visually engaging film on our blog. This is a collaboration with also the Association of Hungarian Archaeologists’ “*A hét műtárgya*” [Artefact of the Week] section, in which on every third week, the presented artefacts are ours. The finds are typically chosen from research of the past decade, but there are also some older unique pieces.

At the same time, our biggest background work was planning our future visible storage and turning the plans into tenders. Not only the staff of the Archaeological Department worked on the selection of the objects and the planning of the display method, but the restorers and museum educators of our institution also put in a lot of work, as well as our tender writer who finalized the application. For the time being, we are excitedly waiting for the outcome.

SUMMARY

The last two years have brought many lessons in all respects. We had to face new challenges that we would not have imagined in our dreams, even though we have to admit that unexpected situations are not uncommon in archaeology. We learned a lot. About ourselves, our boundaries, our creativity, and each other. About the fact that physical distance is not an obstacle to being able to work together as a team with undiminished energy, but at the same time we can miss the morning museum rituals, the opportunity to meet each other, and connecting with civilians.

We have discovered a myriad of new tools and opportunities to make online communication better, more appealing, and more diverse, and to help set a new direction for the future.

Despite the difficulties, we can be proud of many achievements and successes. Based on the results of the NEMO survey conducted during the epidemic, we can see that all institutions have experienced similar problems in the last two years, but everyone was trying to get through it with a slightly different tool. It is important to share our experiences in this regard and to draw the conclusions, which can help to develop and maintain a more modern structure even after the pandemic situation has passed.

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