

## METAL DETECTORISTS AND VOLUNTEERS IN TRANSYLVANIA

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*Metal detectorists and their role in archaeological research is a topic that divides the Romanian professional community. Whether it is about the prosecution of illegal treasure hunters or, in lucky cases, successful collaborations between professional archaeologists and metal detectorists, few colleagues cannot recall at least one story. This paper presents the most typical situations and problems through positive and negative examples, in addition to a brief summary of the general legal framework and the research conducted by the Mureş County Museum.*

Who are the metal detectorists operating in Transylvania, and why did they get into this hobby? According to a study from 2022, there are about 22,000 registered metal detectors in Romania (PRUNEAN 2022). This number is slightly lower than the number of the members of the largest dedicated community site (DETECTIEMETAL, 22,958). Interviews given to online newspapers have also revealed that the social background of metal detectorists is very diverse (GANCIU 2018). Most of them go out to the field in their spare time, besides regular day jobs, and often in groups. Some are motivated by an interest in history, others by the experience delivered by a place or the time spent outdoors. Contrary to popular belief, many people say that they have not got engaged with this hobby to get rich, nor do they know of anyone who has made fabulous fortunes from metal detecting.

In Romania, it is relatively easy to obtain a metal detector licence. All you need to do is register the instrument with the police after you buy it from a registered dealer. With no criminal record, it is almost automatic for a Romanian citizen over 18 to have a licence for the registered detector after paying a symbolic fee. At the same time, several laws regulate where and how these devices can be used; however, archaeologists believe these are not strict enough.

The [law](#) (Law no. 182 of 25th of October 2000 on the protection of movable national heritage), which came into force in October 2000, was intended to address the phenomenon of illegal metal detecting, a growing problem since the late 1990s. Just like in the neighbouring countries, the legal loophole has also been exploited in Romania, where the so-called ‘treasure hunters’ caused irreversible damage to archaeological sites. One cannot estimate the number of the finds which ended up in private collections, primarily outside the country. Perhaps one of the most famous examples are the dozens of Dacian gold bracelets and thousands of *koson* coins found between 1999 and 2000 by metal detectorists on illegal excavations. The items of the two assemblages were sold on the black market, and the Romanian state has managed to recover only very few items (GANCIU 2018, 441).

According to the law, private and legal entities without a permit are prohibited from using metal detectors or other devices and carrying out research or any kind of intervention that may affect or damage the archaeological sites. The law, therefore, stipulates that it is strictly forbidden for everyone but archaeologists to use metal detectors at registered archaeological sites, and such illegal activities are punishable by imprisonment (Article 73). Any find discovered accidentally must be reported to the local authorities within 72 hours, and the finder receives prize money as a reward (Article 48). The Office of Cultural Heritage Protection ensures that the findings become part of a museum collection. The finder may receive up to 30–45% of the estimated value as compensation for valuable finds. In Romania, there are 24,158 registered sites, 9,292 of them in Transylvania. However, one of the main shortcomings of the [online database](#) of sites is that their exact location and extent are not marked on the maps. Thus, many detectorists raise the problem (and not without being at least partially right there) that without exact information, it is very easy for them

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Fig. 1. The Dacian mould from Sarmizegetusa Regia (source: Replica Hunedoara)

ever, several questions arose about the exact circumstances of the discovery in no time: why did Brylynskei go out with his son and his son's friends to clear away the tree that had fallen on the road instead of seeking help from the security guards working at the site (PETAN 2016)? As time went on, the date and circumstances of the discovery of the mould started to vary depending on which party was interviewed by the press. In addition, several people claimed the reward, even before court (GUȚĂ 2020). Later, archaeological investigations in the area attempted to link the find with a context – perhaps a workshop – but found nothing. All the above have raised the possibility that the mould was not found where Brylynskei said but elsewhere, under different circumstances, and his story was nothing more than an attempt to make the find circumstances more acceptable. Obviously, anyone would be happy with the substantial finder's reward of this unique Dacian mould, estimated at almost € 114,000 (ZIARE.COM 2020).

The reward is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may motivate finders to turn in archaeological finds, while on the other hand, it spurs metal detectorists to loot known sites in the hope of a big find. According to a 2015 statement by Ernest Oberländer-Târnoveanu, director of the Romanian National Museum, the institution has spent €17,000 on rewards for metal detectorists (SANDU 2015). He also mentioned in the same interview that he believes this amount to be far less than the one the Romanian state had spent to buy back the Dacian bracelets and *koson* coins from foreign collections. As a result, his membership in the Chamber of Archaeologists was suspended for two years in 2017 due to several colleagues disapproving of him buying finds of unclear origin (MITU 2017).

Several initiatives and cases have yielded promising results in recent years. One of these is a discovery made in 2013 in the northern part of the country by a metal detectorist: most coins in the silver coin hoard of almost 47,000 pieces were issued by Murad II. The treasure is now part of the collection of the Romanian National Museum (Fig. 2). For his exemplary behaviour, the lucky finder was awarded € 9,000 from the special fund of the prime minister. According to some archaeologists, similar rewards and sensationalist reports only encourage metal detectorists to grab more archaeological finds out of their contexts (SANDU 2015). In some cases, national museums have been spending more money on buying these objects than field research conducted by qualified archaeologists (GANCIU 2018, 444). It is a vicious circle, as museums pay these huge sums to finders to ensure that the finds do not end up on the black market.



Fig. 2. 47,000 Turkish coins (source: Decât o Revistă)

Fortunately, there are also positive examples of detectorists and museums working together. The Pro-Detectie Association, founded in 2014, whose members do metal detecting in their spare time, has signed a cooperation agreement with the National Museum of History and Archaeology of Constanța. The aims of the agreement included enabling the museum's archaeologists to be informed of new discoveries before the finds are removed from their contexts and keeping detectorists updated on new archaeological protection zones. This formal cooperation was a precedent in the country, as no museum had ever worked with a similar NGO. As the association's guidelines include expecting its members to comply with the law, the likelihood that the finds yielded by this collaboration come from a not-yet-registered site has been much higher.

Several positive experiences and examples of successful collaboration can also be cited from the activity of the Mureș County Museum. Also involving metal detectorists, the Petőfi Literary Museum, the Military History Museum of Hungary, the Mureș County Museum, and the Institute of Archeological Sciences of ELTE has been researching the battlefield of the 1849 Battle of Albești (Fehéregyháza) for several years now. They have identified the positions of the Hungarian and Austro-Russian armies (PIM 2019); the results were exhibited in the Petőfi Literary Museum in Budapest in 2019.

In 2010, Pop Iuliu Cristinel, a metal detectorist collaborating with the Mureș County Museum on several occasions, found a Roman gold ring inlaid with semi-precious stones, weighing almost 28 grams, which he handed over to the authorities within the time determined by law. That was not the only time Pop brought artefacts to the museum. He always documents the artefacts he finds on his metal detector surveys as professionally as he can before extracting them from their original context. His field observations made possible the identification of a Roman watchtower in Vătava, now included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List as part of the Limes of Dacia.



Fig. 3. Archaeologists from the Mureș County Museum documenting a recently discovered spearhead (Mureș County Museum)

The museum became part of another success story last October. A metal detectorist preserved *in situ* the bronze spearhead he found and notified the museum's team about the discovery, so they could professionally excavate and document it (Fig. 3). Similar examples can also be cited from the recent past of other museums. For example, last year, the National Union Museum of Alba Iulia cooperated with metal detectorists in two different cases. After discovering a few Roman coins, they reported to the museum that their instruments indicated a much higher metal concentration; thanks to them, archaeologists could excavate and recover the two related hoards professionally (PANU 2022). During the press interviews, the archaeologists of the museum kept emphasising how important such examples are in the communication between museums and detectorists, especially as the institutions mostly only receive finds already removed from their original contexts. It is also important to note that news tends to focus on the financial value of the finds and their discovery (also emphasised by using words like 'treasure') and not on whether the lucky finder did anything to make sure that the scientific value of the find is also preserved. Such biased reports are also a reason why the number of detectorists doing things the right way is minimal; another might be that currently, there is no programme in any Romanian museum aimed at integrating them.

Only a few of the thousands of Transylvanian sites are guarded by security services, which cannot come as a surprise considering that some of them extend to several hectares and are often located in relatively isolated, hard-to-reach places. But even if the site is near a village or town, it is not certain at all that the locals would do anything to protect it against looting, not to mention they might be the actual ones doing it. This is because local people rarely have any attachment to their archaeological heritage: on-site information panels are scarce, and the museum responsible for the area usually has no capacity to educate them about the importance of protecting archaeological heritage.

Albeit we know of occasional initiatives, currently, there is no association in Transylvania or Romania with a mission to build and maintain collaboration between metal detectorists and museums. Because of the negative examples presented briefly, the relationship between the parties is characterised by a high degree of mistrust. This should definitely change, as several successful large-scale research projects involving volunteering enthusiasts have been carried out abroad. The methods of the organisations like the Association of Community Archaeology in Hungary can serve as an example of how to successfully involve volunteers in archaeological research in Romania.

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