

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE KUNY DOMOKOS MUSEUM IN TATA How the exhibition entitled *What Lies Beneath Our Feet* has come to life

ANNA GYÖRI-PÓRSZÁSZ¹

Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 12. (2023) Issue 4, pp. 53–56.

On several occasions in the past, the professional collective of the Kuny Domokos Museum was embarrassed by metal detectorists associated with the museum; as a result, the institution's doors have been closed to volunteers. However, there was a demand from the museum-loving community to be involved in the museum's life, and we had to respond positively. Therefore, we decided to develop a conditional volunteering policy, taking into account but not depending on past events. At the same time, although professionals have been facing similar difficulties, community archaeology initiatives have been launched in several institutions throughout the country, further strengthening the trust between archaeologists and enthusiasts. The primary aim of creating the Friends of the Museum programme was thus to enable its members to enjoy their hobby of metal detecting in collaboration with the museum. This cooperation resulted in the exhibition entitled "What Lies Beneath Our Feet" – Community archaeology in Komárom-Esztergom County.

Keywords: community archaeology, exhibition, Tata, Kuny Domokos Museum

People have always been interested in their past, and this desire to learn more about it grows stronger from time to time. An archaeologist's task is not only to know the age of objects, the circumstances in which they were found or the exact location of a site but also to pass on and demonstrate their knowledge and to give those interested the opportunity to get closer to the(ir) past. However, in Hungary, community archaeology has often been mis-equated with metal detecting – a misunderstanding that should be corrected. Volunteering is not necessarily about collecting findings on field trips, although some people do not delve more into the possibilities. The joy of finding things always gives a euphoric feeling, but it can also lead to excesses, and some excesses have consequences. Volunteering is a trust-based relationship between the museum and the history enthusiast, but it is difficult to get it back on track once that trust is shaken.

A big dilemma has been for me whether it is worth elaborating upon why things went wrong and why a certain scenario, instead of another, played out at the time. Many colleagues believe we should not talk about past mistakes because judging our predecessors is not our place. I absolutely agree, but I also believe facing common mistakes and not repeating them is essential for progress. As people in most institutions, we do not speak about the mistakes we have made because we are ashamed of them. But to improve, one must face past decisions and their consequences – not to point out the faults of the system or individuals in past events but rather to cast a light on the problems to correct them and to avoid them in the future. This paper dwells on the past because past events are important in developing community archaeology today.

A major problem for museums is insufficient time to review their collections. It can take several years to complete a full revision using current methods. The frequent moving of collections from one storage facility to another adds to the problem. The significant increase in the number of land development projects resulted in museum collections growing rapidly with many finds; also, archaeologists spent most of their time on the field, gleaning important information about our past. However, not all museums could keep the increasing pace, often developing a negative image and becoming labelled old-fashioned, outdated, and unreliable. Negative criticism of museums, pinpointing loss of objects or theft, is not unknown to the ones working there. However, it is also important to note that institutions did not have a security infrastructure suitable for protecting their collections in the past. It is not easy to trace the way of artefacts when they are moved in the tens of thousands, but our museum, like others, is trying to find a way to do that. We are revis-

¹ Kuny Domokos Museum in Tata, e-mail: anna.porszasz@gmail.com

ing the archaeological collection and repackaging and classifying all finds that have not been inventoried yet. This might help to end the accusations of unreliability we face daily.

Due to the activities of certain volunteers, there has been an atmosphere of mistrust in and around the Kuny Domokos Museum. Our colleagues attempted to contact volunteers several times but have been disappointed as many of those abused their trust, causing many problems in the early days when regulations were poor or nonexistent. This experience eventually led to the institution closing its doors to volunteers. In addition to the loss of trust, lack of capacity also played a role in the decision: today, when individual interests have become more important than the community, it is very difficult to manage a so-called “community space” and strike a good balance between meeting the individual needs of participants, equal treatment, and maintaining professional quality. That is why we decided to make the rules of volunteering conditional. We are fortunate to have developed a community that is not just looking out for individual interests. Our volunteers not only take part in field events but also help with storage and guarding tasks in their spare time or even participate in the construction of an exhibition (*Fig. 1*). The exhibition presented here is the result of our joint work.

The basic concept was to show the friendly relationship shared, besides the collective of our museum and the volunteers working with us, by the teams of the Hungarian National Museum, the Tatabánya Museum, the Klapka György Museum in Komárom, and the Balassa Bálint Museum of the Hungarian National Museum by putting on display artefacts from the 20th century up to the present day which represent the community in some way. The people featured in the exhibition (Jenő Petrovics, Ödön Kállay and György Lenhardt) played an important role in the life of our museum, as their research laid the foundations for building the archaeological and historical knowledge of the county. The exhibition also had the undisguised aim of presenting archaeology and making it interesting for those unfamiliar.

György Lenhardt, a former conservator in the museum, worked on countless artefacts; besides, his private collection – donated to the museum by his heirs – contains pieces of national importance (mostly lime-encrusted pottery). We even learned through his work about, among other things, the Hungarian Conquest Period cemetery excavated by Alán Kralovánszky in Dunaalmás.

The gravestones found in February 2023 on the outskirts of Szákszend are amongst the highlights of our exhibition presenting the results of community archaeology work. Saving the stones would not have been possible without the help of volunteers and museum enthusiasts. Had we not acted in time, the two gravestones, dating from the 2nd–3rd centuries AD, would probably not be part of the museum’s collection today. A similar find had disappeared in our county before (but fortunately, it too has become part of a public collection in the end). In this case, as it was not possible to transport the gravestones to the museum on the day of discovery, our volunteers guarded them there until the evening. Our precaution was confirmed, as several cars passed in this time in the otherwise extremely low-traffic area (*Fig. 2*).

The so-called rotating or moving display case, designed to show new artefacts from time to time, is a prominent feature of the exhibition. It has allowed



Fig. 1. The exhibition under construction (photo by Anna Győri-Pórszász)



Fig. 2. Gravestones from Szákszend, transferred to the museum with the help of our volunteers (photo by Anna Győri-Pórszász)



Fig. 3. Gold treasure from the National Museum (photo by Anna Győri-Pórszász)



Fig. 4. Finds from Dunaalmás (photo by Anna Győri-Pórszász)

us to display more artefacts than with conventional showcases. The first of these, courtesy of the Hungarian National Museum, is an extremely valuable Roman horse head armour piece, followed by a Roman gold treasure, which has not been on display for the last three decades (Fig. 3). At the request of the Friends of Vitány Castle (*Vitány Vár Baráti Kör*), the most emblematic items from the site, the finds excavated at Bodajk as part of the community archaeology programme of the Szent István Király Museum in Székesfehérvár, and some Hungarian Conquest Period finds from Dunaalmás are also among the exhibited items (Fig. 4).

Another showcase contains finds from the collection of the Kuny Domokos Museum from Héreg-Jásdi dűlő. Most artefacts were collected before the 1980s, and all finds were intended to be transferred to Tatabánya after the 1990s. Teams of the museums in Tatabánya and Tata have started authenticating research on the site, while both museums and the one in Esztergom are involved in the processing of the thousands of finds donated by a metal detectorist to make sure that this vast record becomes available for the scientific community.

The excavation in Dömös involving the unearthing of a beautiful Roman site (thanks to the kindness of the land's owner) was an outstanding community project by the museum in Esztergom. Initiatives of this kind are important for everyone, as in many cases, institutions do not have the financial support to carry out planned excavations – that is why we are happy to have enthusiasts and volunteers who can help us with the

fieldwork; however, it is important not to give the impression that we are obliged to support them. The aim is for everyone to have a good time while working together. These collaborations should not just be about the volunteer giving something to the museum or the archaeologist giving something to the volunteers. It is a joint cause with boundaries, so if the volunteer decides to provide an excavation with workers, that is their decision and not another person's claim. However, the volunteer should not expect to have an archaeologist start working on what they are interested in immediately. That is particularly true in the case of a rural museum, where archaeologists are not necessarily allowed to work on their own "love projects", but are required to do their mandatory tasks. In such cases, it is useful to have the help of volunteers to assist the busy archaeologist. Finding a balance, a natural environment in which professionals and volunteers feel comfortable is important.

We hope that the cooperation in Tata, both with museums and volunteers, will be fruitful in the future. We have many plans to implement, but despite the fast-paced world, we are progressing in a normal and thought-through way to ensure everyone is satisfied.

We would like to locate new and old sites through field trips, carry out rescue excavations where necessary, and create exhibitions in the county to raise awareness of archaeology and emphasise the importance of science and the museum. We aim to use our contacts network to reach out to people who have not been interested in culture because people can only identify if they know who they are – and the knowledge of their past is an essential part of that.

We are grateful to our volunteers for their help.

REFERENCES

Rózsa Z. (2023). Egyéves a Nemzeti Régészeti Intézet Közösségi Régészeti Osztálya. *Magyar Régészet* 12:2, 47–50.

<https://www.police.hu/hirek-es-informaciok/legfrissebb-hireink/zsaru-magazin/visszaszereztek-masculus-ellopott-sirkovet>