

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE JÓSA ANDRÁS MUSEUM IN NYÍREGYHÁZA

JUDIT RESZLERNÉ JÁNOS¹ – ZSOLT KÖRÖSFŐI²

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The Jósa András Museum has a long tradition of involving people interested in archaeology in everyday work. That has many benefits for the museum. Thanks to the helpers with a good knowledge of the area, the Archaeology Department in the county has “more eyes”; thus, we may be notified about activities that we would normally only learn about afterwards. Volunteers multiply our hands and feet, which comes in handy during fieldwork, and, speaking of body parts, the archaeologist, sometimes tired of the daily tasks, also benefits from the company of a volunteer with a devoted heart and true soul. The relationship between the museum and – to quote our founder, András Jósa – the people practising the “sport of archaeology” has changed many times since the foundation of the institution.

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At the dawn of archaeology, mainly wealthy and influential people supported archaeological work in the county – sometimes with money and sometimes by donating finds. Later, it became a ‘mass sport’, with ordinary people bringing in finds and providing data on a particular site. It is important to emphasise that the relationship was not limited to the reporting of finds; museum enthusiasts were often involved in excavations.

The world has changed dramatically in recent decades, affecting not only the life of museums but also the network of contacts mentioned above and the interest of non-professionals in heritage protection. Whereas not so long ago, museum-goers were mostly local patriots interested in the history of their locality, as well as mechanics, engineers or simple workers of the local agricultural co-operatives, who became infected with a love for archaeology upon discovering their first finds, today mostly metal detectorists contact us. The typical volunteer (as they are now called) starts with a hobby, often collecting World War relics and militaria, and gradually develops an interest in archaeology.

The process described is not unique to Szabolcs: similar changes have occurred in other museums in Hungary and their collection areas. However, the ways metal detectorists are involved in the archaeological work are unique for each institution. Since the 2014 amendment to the Heritage Protection Act, it has been possible to apply for a metal detector permit for hobby use, which – in our opinion, rightly – requires a cooperation agreement with the local museum. Previously, this activity could not be carried out by anyone, or only illegally, due to a lack of regulation; however, once the legal framework was established, more and more people wishing to use their metal detectors contacted the Jósa András Museum. Over the years, a group of about twenty people has been formed from those who have obtained a licence to use a metal detector in



Fig. 1. Metal detector survey preceding the excavation in the path of the future M49 motorway rest area in Kocsord: the “core team”

¹ Archaeologist, Jósa András Museum, e-mail: reszlerne.judit@josamuzeum.hu

² Archaeologist and Head of Department, Jósa András Múzeum, e-mail: regeszet.osztalyvezeto@josamuzeum.hu

Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County (*Fig. 1*). This number fluctuates greatly with the years, incorporating, in our experience, a small group of metal detectorists working in our collection area. We welcome law-abiding metal detectorists, but contrary to national trends, we do not promote this activity or elevate it above, or even on par with, excavation. We are happy to include metal detecting in our daily work, which has become a compulsory part of our excavations. For many years, metal detecting was carried out for us by a single service provider under contract, to whom we were indebted for the many valuable discoveries. We had planned to introduce this new type of volunteer work while maintaining the previous practice, but the combination of the two has led to tension at several points. We wanted to maintain this relationship by opening up to community metal detecting. Unfortunately, the idea did not work out, and eventually, the new system completely replaced the old one. However, one of the lessons of the past few years is that openness and trust must be given to all.

Since metal detectorists cannot obtain a permit for independent research on an archaeological site, we offer them the opportunity to participate in archaeological excavations, surveys, and field collecting trips. This collaboration is a win for both parties, as non-professionals can discover objects they would otherwise not have had the chance to find, and the museum becomes enriched with several new metal finds. Metal detectorists are now part of the regular staff of our excavations. However, this is not only an opportunity but also somewhat of an obligation for those who wish to apply for their licence in the county: they must attend at least four such occasions a year to obtain the museum's approval of their next licence.

Our volunteers are very different: the youngest is 16, and the oldest and newest is 74; we also have volunteers who have no metal detectors but just love to walk in nature and are interested in archaeology. Thus, the circle of museum-friendly metal detectorists has grown into a group of museum enthusiasts. They have very little in common also in terms of occupation: there are farmers, taxi drivers, tunnel diggers, woodcutters, and representatives of a wide range of other professions amongst them. This diversity is an asset; their

dissimilar life and work experience has been helping them (and us) in various situations. We all benefit from their network of contacts; many of our members have joined us by personal invitation (*Fig. 2*).

Over the past few years, we have developed some priorities for organising community archaeology programmes and events. This ranking is primarily territorial, the areas where our most active volunteers live and which they visit frequently having been the primary targets of the joint field events. Currently, the Archaeology Department of the Jósa András Museum has only four archaeologists in a county with 3,621 registered archaeological sites; thus, our volunteers are a great help in monitoring the sites, not to mention the discovery and research of new ones. They know the lands of their settlements very well, visit them frequently, and report to us as soon as they see traces of illegal activity or damage to archaeological sites they know (for comparison, in the neighbouring [Hajdú-Bihar County](#), twelve archaeologists are responsible for 3,832 sites, while in the other neighbour, [Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County](#), also twelve archaeologists deal with 2,557 sites).

As with all cooperations, the volunteer programme has its challenges. We accept those who



Fig. 2. Planned excavation at Szabolcs-Prokop-Szabolcsi-dűlő with the participation of our volunteers (13.11.2023)

commit to the obligations but cease cooperating with the ones who break their promises, and no longer support them in obtaining their permits. Our members cannot use the metal detector on their own initiative outside the agreed framework. Of course, they can help each other in their respective licensed areas, but they must not believe that the museum is providing an alibi for them to enrich their collections or property. Unfortunately, there have been examples of that – there have been lessons to be learned, including that even the most circumspect cannot avoid all pitfalls.

Since volunteers regularly lend a hand in our research and excavations, our archaeologist and GIS expert colleague Zoltán Toldi Jr has developed a QGIS database for them to facilitate the recording of locations and other data of the finds recovered. The cloud-based database can be used on a smartphone in the MerginMaps app; currently, Toldi Jr and our first four volunteers are working on improving it. A photo of the object, a simple description, and a serial number, including the date of finding and the code of the finder, accompany each point on the map. This information, together with the EOV (a projection system for the Carpathian Basin, commonly used by civilians) coordinate of the findspot and the name and ID number of the site (if these are available), is also added to the record of the artefact for identification. Of course, if the find is of archaeological interest (which is not always possible to decide on the spot), it is provided with a standard tag during processing. If the find has been recovered from an archaeological feature, it is given a standard tag with the feature's ID. Metal detectorists usually monitor the removal of the topsoil and may survey the site 2–3 times before excavation, saving a great deal of stray finds for posterity.

Some non-archaeological artefacts are also kept, including coins, medals, and jewellery, which fit into the historical collection of the Jósa András Museum. During our research, we also uncover seals of various ages and “nationalities”; these, as important sources of trade history, are also collected.

In addition, metal objects not carrying any historical information can be used for museum education purposes. Recently, the staff of the Archaeology Department have received several requests to participate in family days, camps, and events in small villages, where the “archaeologist's sandpit” and metal detecting are real sensations, especially among children (*Fig. 3*). Some requests arrive via our volunteers who also help at the events. Unfortunately, as the museum has been closed for renovation since the beginning of 2022, we have not been able to show the new acquisitions in years. In 2021, we produced a chamber exhibition – organised and written by our volunteers – presenting some new finds.

A few arbitrary examples of our current joint research:

Thanks to intensive field surveys over the past winter, a Roman Imperial Period Sarmatian settlement and a Germanic cemetery have been discovered at Közép-halom-dűlő on the outskirts of Ibrány. The site was found by our volunteers from Ibrány, and we carried out, based on their reports, several joint field inspections. These yielded, among others, several Roman coins, clothing accessories, a bird-shaped metal object's fragment with inlay decoration, and a fragment of a Germanic animal brooch with garnet inlays (*Fig. 4*).

Thanks to the activity of a volunteer from Tiszavasvári, the systematic surveying of the outskirts of the settlement is now in an advanced stage. First, the field west of the Fehértó nature reserve area was surveyed, resulting in identifying a new site comprising relics from the Roman Imperial and Avar periods. Besides, pastures and ploughlands south of the settlement have also been included in the survey. It will take a long time to fully explore the very rich lands of Tiszavasvári, which certainly hold more surprises.



Fig. 3. Family Day in Nagykálló: young volunteers documenting



Fig. 4. Fragment of a brooch with a stylised animal head from Ibrány



Fig. 5. Buckle fragment with the depiction of Pegasus from Szabolcs

One of our most recent micro-regional research projects is related to the municipality of Szabolcs, most of the inner areas and outskirts of which were systematically surveyed this spring. The fieldwork was carried out with the help of our volunteers, although it is more accurate to say that they formed the core of the team; besides, for two days, we were joined by members of the Community Archaeology Department of the Hungarian National Museum. As a result of the fieldwork, several sites' extent were clarified, numerous beautiful and unique finds were unearthed (*Fig. 5*), and a new Hungarian Conquest

Period cemetery between Szabolcs and Tímár was identified. We intend to carry out a partial excavation of this cemetery this autumn – naturally, with the participation of our volunteer community.

Our common cause is to discover and preserve the county's archaeological record. Despite the current regulation and the penalties that can be imposed, several illegal metal detectorists work in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County without being noticed by the police, the field rangers, the heritage protection authority, or the nature conservation guard service. The location of archaeological sites cannot be kept hidden from the public; they are available and can be accessed by anyone viewing land development plans or the land register database. Time will tell how people will use this knowledge – abiding by the law and serving the interests of the community or working solely for themselves.