

SITUATION REPORT ON METAL DETECTING. PROPOSALS FOR AN OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF RESPONSIBLE METAL DETECTING

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The 1st National Community Archaeology Conference, a forum for summarising the results of cooperation with the civil sector (especially metal detectorists) and methodological systematisation, was held in Hungary in the autumn of 2021 (RÁCZ & MAG 2021). Analysing the presentations of the second national conference held two years later (BAKOS 2023), we can conclude that in just two years, the number of cooperation projects supported by museums has doubled, many new actors have emerged in the field of community archaeology, and heritage institutions have adapted to the new trends (Fig 1). However, besides rejoicing at the evident professional successes, a striking difference of opinions has emerged in the accompanying debates and roundtable discussions about the legitimacy of metal detecting, especially of unsupervised fieldwork and the institutional background of programme organisation. In light of the forthcoming Heritage Protection Act, I would like to reflect on the new challenges surfacing in the context of this explosively spreading hobby. This paper is not my mere private opinion but an official statement by the Community Archaeology Association's board and members; it was developed based on a decade of experience in programme organisation and a thorough discussion of the respective matters of principle. Following a consultation, we also sent an abbreviated version of this statement to the Deputy State Secretariat for the Protection of Historic Monuments at the Ministry of Construction and Transport in April 2024. The aims of our initiative and the proposals presented below are to promote a more engaged professional dialogue on metal detecting and address the problems associated with it.

Keywords: community archaeology, metal detector survey, metal detecting, legislation, current state of affairs



Fig 1. Participants of the second National Community Archaeology Conference, Visegrád, September 2023 (photo by László György)

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COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY AND METAL DETECTING

Community archaeology programmes provide a framework for ethical or museum-affiliated metal detecting in Hungary. The participants of these programmes are typically, but not exclusively, members of grassroots initiatives and locally organised communities interested in the history and values of a particular place and adapted to local conditions; this connection makes them practicable. The cooperation between enthusiasts and professional archaeologists in community archaeology programmes has already yielded spectacular results,² benefiting both the museums and the civil society. For museums, working with volunteers means utilising outer resources for archaeological research, as they may assist with excavations and museum work and contribute with material resources and manpower to heritage conservation. Field programmes yield finds of outstanding importance, opening up new horizons for research. Archaeologists and museologists have been exploiting the potential of community archaeology, and the number of studies on finds or assemblages of outstanding importance found with metal detectors has been increasing constantly. However, the most important gain of the growing popularity of community archaeology programmes is the significant increase in the transparency of metal detecting and the parallel reduction of illegal activity.

In some community archaeology initiatives, activities with volunteers are reduced solely to metal detecting. However, an ideal community archaeology programme goes beyond that, integrating metal detecting into a more complex work (*Fig 2*). With a well-conceived strategy, the range of activities can be broadened, and complex research programmes can be developed. In my experience, most hobby metal detectorists are engaged because of the field adventure and the joy of finding rather than to loot archaeological sites and plunder elements of cultural heritage. If archaeologists provide a regulated framework for this, their activities can be channelled into the museum sphere. Museum-affiliated metal detecting is not just about collecting archaeological artefacts but also about contributing to running the research infrastructure of a museum, as volunteers can devote a huge amount of physical and intellectual capacity to heritage protection, as demonstrated by the presentations some of them gave at previous Community Archaeology Conferences.

Volunteering opportunities are organised along broadly similar principles across the country and all have a *raison d'être*. There are, however, huge differences in the attitude of the institutions behind them and the ways they support these programmes. The stance of the management in many museums is unclear, and this has a crucial impact on the effectiveness of the respective community archaeology initiatives. The legal framework regulating metal detecting is interpreted and applied differently, and as there is only superficial communication between these programmes, the locally formed practices vary by county. The dangers of this dissimilarity in approach and practice became apparent shortly after Government Decree 496/2016 [XII. 28.] was issued (RÁCZ 2017).



Fig 2. Museum-affiliated metal detectorists and archaeologists of the Pest County Museum working together to rescue a Mongol Period hoard at Jászkarajenő in November 2017 (photo by Attila Károly Nagy)

² The aim of this opinion article is not to provide an exhaustive review of the literature on community archaeology or metal detecting. The background of the standpoint expressed here is based on the Pest County Community Archaeology Programme, presented in detail in the study volume and catalogue (RÁCZ 2021a) published in connection with a major community archaeology exhibition (RÁCZ 2021b). For basic information, we also recommend the analysis by Krisztina HUDÁK (2016) and studies published in the community archaeology section of the Hungarian Archaeology Online Magazine (LASZLOVSZKY & WOLLÁK 2020).

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF MUSEUMS IN MANAGING METAL-DETECTING

Illegal metal detecting has been a problem in heritage protection for decades. Not addressing this problem is a major neglect of duty by the museums and their managers. Speculation around the forthcoming legislation is rife, and the idea of a stricter regulation of metal detecting is often raised within the profession and in the press. However, metal detecting does not require rigour, but attention. Without a clear legal interpretation, consistent professional practice, and increased control, neither stricter legislation nor liberalisation will reduce illegal metal detecting. Controlling field activity would be a task for law enforcement; however, past experience shows that it is not working effectively, while the most we archaeologists can do is repeatedly draw the attention to the presence and dangers of illegal metal detecting. Heritage institutions, on the other hand, can contribute to the integration of law-abiding metal detectorists and the reduction of illegal activity through well-planned community archaeology programmes.

That museums refrain from metal detecting in their collection areas is especially harmful because it does not deter illegal players, and thus, metal detecting remains invisible in these territories. Let no one have any illusions: where metal detecting is banned, there is an illegal presence (what is more, there can illegal detecting really flourish). Institutions that refuse to cooperate with metal detectorists often also decline to work with other volunteers. It is patently absurd for volunteers to travel hundreds of kilometres to participate in community archaeology programmes because the local museum does not let them contribute to their excavations or museum work. Many institutions have chosen a comfortable, elitist solution: they work with a single or a few selected volunteers who are considered trustworthy and do not respond to any other demand or invest energy into the integration of new players. This practice places barriers in the way of well-intentioned but unqualified enthusiasts; it is discriminatory and discourages volunteers or downright encourages them to seek opportunities away from their homes or, in the worst case, engage in illegal activities. New applicants who have never used a metal detector before and become socialised with museum enthusiasts and archaeologists from the start have the greatest potential because they will likely follow the practice taught to them instead of a morally often questionable ideology typical of most metal detecting-related social media platforms.

We must adopt a strategy that makes us beneficiaries, not victims, of this social demand and the phenomenon deriving from it. The only effective way is through education, cooperation, and integration. Trust must be placed in museum enthusiasts who are willing to cooperate, even if it is initially a burden for the local archaeologists. The energy invested pays off many times in professional and heritage conservation successes. Integration can be achieved through educational programmes and lectures promoting science, where candidates can broaden their professional knowledge and acquire insight into the methods and aims of archaeology. Integration does not mean that all applicants must be immediately granted rights. Unfortunately, there have been cases when non-professionals, given a contract without any pre-screening or probation period, abused the trust placed in them—typically metal detectorists with a disreputable past who only wanted to use this opportunity to legalise their illicit activities.

It is my strong belief and experience (RÁCZ 2017; 2019) that the best way to prevent the looting of sites is to encourage community archaeology. By increasing the number of museum supporters, a critical mass can be reached that will drive out illegal metal detectorists from the respective areas. Local communities must be made interested in keeping the archaeological sites in their locality under their control.



Fig. 3. Museum-friendly metal detectorists help digging on a rescue excavation. Ceglédbercel, October 2021 (photo by István Kudó)

REDUCING ILLEGAL METAL DETECTING

Neither the authorities responsible for the protection of cultural heritage nor law enforcement agencies or museum archaeologists can sufficiently monitor all endangered archaeological sites and track illegal metal detecting. By inspecting sites on a regular basis, volunteer metal detectorists working with museums can help curb illegal activity through their commitment and knowledge of the terrain; for that measure, they must be allowed to operate on the field independently.

In this respect, current practice reflects an approach and practice varying by county. Of course, in an ideal case, an archaeologist is present during the metal detector surveys; but museums do not have sufficient capacity for organising field programmes for all volunteers who wish to search for metals, respond to all arising demands, and carry out the associated follow-up work (including conservation, inventorying, and documentation). However, well-trained volunteers are extremely useful for heritage conservation, as they are contracted to identify new sites on behalf of the museum and regularly inspect known sites, monitor changes in the extent of the registered sites, and report any damage, illegal activity, or unexpected discovery. The mapping, registration, and monitoring of sites in the national register is a basic task of archaeology. The argument against their independent work is that volunteers ‘exploit’ the sites in the country, leaving no metal finds for future generations. While such a statement may hold some truth, one must consider that the finds they recover are in an already disturbed context instead of one of archaeological value. During an excavation that starts with the mechanical removal of the topsoil, these objects are usually discarded; thus, metal detecting is a preventive measure. The argument against museum-affiliated metal detectorists and their work will be justified if mechanical soil removal is carried out in 10 cm layers under continuous monitoring with metal detectors. Besides, illegal metal detectorists are also out there, scavenging these sites and collecting objects unscrupulously; the finds they obtain disappear forever from the sight of heritage protection, while the finds recovered by museum-friendly detectorists, together with the coordinates of their findspots, end up in the museums. In addition, current agricultural practices, such as fertilisation and ploughing, are constantly damaging the find material. From a heritage conservation point of view, collecting these finds is more useful than subjecting them to further harm, even if it is impossible to restore and classify them all immediately. A museum’s volunteers not only monitor the sites but also drive out illegal explorers. With proper regulation, museum-affiliated metal detectorist groups can be organised into a heritage patrol service. Their work can be effectively assisted, but not replaced, by law enforcement agencies, conservation officers, field rangers, and hunting associations. Community archaeology alone will not completely eliminate the problem of illegal metal detecting, but it can significantly reduce its scope by offering a sustainable and viable alternative.

COOPERATION AND INTEROPERABILITY BETWEEN COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROGRAMMES

Carrying out heritage protection-related tasks with the help of museum-affiliated volunteers puts the burden of training, constant supervision, and follow-up on the museums which, individually and in the constant struggle of being short-staffed and financially limited, do not have the capacity to arrange these on a level that meets the required standards. However, the task could be carried out through a country-level coordination of community archaeology programmes. The museum network is the natural medium where the civil society can most easily connect to archaeological research, as it has national coverage. All county museums have archaeological research projects and professional expertise. Fieldwork is subject to an authorisation process regulated by law and can only be carried out by institutions with the right to lead excavations. Community archaeological programmes are, by definition, linked to local museums, which have research rights. The museum network can be the professional institutional backbone that controls volunteering in archaeology.

The problem is that the practice is different in each museum, or there is none at all. In order to establish good practice in Hungary, it is desirable to coordinate volunteer activity according to the same concepts and

procedures in all locations open to accept archaeology enthusiasts. One of the most important results would be to apply the same standards regarding the quality and composition of documentation in every county and programme. This would require museums to adopt a code of practice—developed based on a shared set of guidelines and defining the minimum professional standards—for community archaeological activity. Besides, it would be worth coordinating community archaeology programmes on an institutional level because most volunteers regularly visit more than one. For example, collaboration could have a visible impact on the organising of educational programmes by freeing museums from the burden of developing all presented materials all alone from scratch; instead, they could create and use a single shared package.

The application of uniform national principles does not mean centralised management. Community archaeology is typically a grassroots initiative, and managing it solely from above or at a central institution is simply not viable, as only local organisations have an active relationship with the respective communities, and local museums have already accumulated considerable experience in cooperation. A number of new community archaeology initiatives emerge across the country, all of which would benefit from a steady institutional background and a national protocol. To obtain that, professional archaeologists must be made aware of the benefits of volunteering and institution management motivated to collaborate. Due to its extensive collection area, complex professional profile, and large staff, the Hungarian National Museum seems the best choice for effectively supporting national-level cooperation, interaction, and communication between programmes and the development of educational programmes. It is key to achieving cooperation between county and national museums, and as part of that, the national institution should communicate its community archaeology programme to the regional museum in advance. The professional (Hungarian Association of Provincial Museums, Hungarian Association of Archaeologists, Hungarian Society for Archaeology and Art History) and civil (Community Archaeology Association) organisations can contribute to coordination with their programmes and proposals. It is also crucial that the upcoming generation of archaeologists learn about different forms of community archaeology as part of their university studies in existing courses and archaeological heritage classes but with a wider focus than today. Universities with an archaeology department can play a major role in organising volunteer educational and field research programmes.

PROPOSALS FOR AN OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF RESPONSIBLE METAL DETECTING

Community archaeology programmes ideally operate on a locally initiated and managed basis, but according to a national set of principles and protocol. Ethical metal detecting can be implemented within the framework of community archaeology programmes. Reducing illegal metal detecting can be achieved by providing qualified, trusted volunteers with credentials and licenses for independent fieldwork, as follows:

- Museums may integrate metal detecting into well-conceived community archaeology programmes, laying emphasis on the diversity of the programmes and education.
- Volunteers without a professional qualification (university degree in archaeology) can only carry out archaeological site reconnaissance and, thus, metal detector surveys unsupervised after mandatory training and in cooperation with the local museum or a museum with a national collection area.
- The cooperation is based on a contract with the local or a national museum. The contract has a national template.
- The mandatory training corresponds to archaeology assistant training or an equivalent museum education programme. The fact that the training has been completed is recorded in the contract.
- Metal detecting activities are still subject to compulsory declaration. The consent of the respective heritage protection authority depends on the justification of the research programme of the local or national museum, a living contract linking the participants, and the proper documentation of previous research.
- All metal detectors must be registered by the respective heritage protection authority.

- All contracted metal detectorists must be included on a comprehensive, public and accessible list.
- Fieldwork carried out independently must be documented in an authenticable way, following a national protocol.
- There should be more control over programmes than before, especially in the case of unsupervised field activities. The respective museum, the Excavation Committee, and the heritage protection authority should be responsible for supervising that the necessary field and follow-up documentation associated with metal detecting activities is completed.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The test of any community archaeology programme's success is how it handles metal detecting. It is irresponsible to allow it to go uncontrolled, and it is also irresponsible to prohibit it because that opens the door to abuse. Based on our experience, the best way involves close cooperation and controlled device use. The challenge metal detecting poses requires us to think and act systemically. Community archaeology programmes that have unfolded recently have not only exposed the shortcomings of the current system but also presented good practice. This has been a very long journey, during which the operational principles of community archaeology programmes have been formed, valuable knowledge has been accumulated, and professional results have been achieved. Addressing the problem is only realistic if the monitoring of sites is outsourced to well-trained and dedicated museum-affiliated metal detectorists organised into a heritage patrol service.

Representatives of the professional archaeological community now have the opportunity to make proposals to create a legislative environment that promotes ethical metal detecting. This requires urgent professional consultation on a national level. If archaeologists fail to develop a manageable, flexible protocol and present their unified standpoint to the decision-makers, there is a risk that the new law, with its rigid approach, strict requirements, and high administrative fees, will completely exclude enthusiasts from heritage protection. In fact, the question is no longer what danger is implied in allowing museum-affiliated volunteers, selected based on professional and moral criteria, to work independently on the field, but about the damage we are doing to our archaeological heritage by restricting them. By limiting the possibilities and freezing the current *status quo*, we are literally opening the field to illegal metal detecting.

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