

THE TWO SIDES OF THE COIN

Experience of a museum-friendly metal detectorist

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For months, even years now, we have been hearing thought-provoking opinions and news about the forthcoming law on heritage protection, about metal detecting, voluntary museum work, and related archaeological issues. The more we approach the issues involved from various angles, the more thorough and reassuring the answers we can find regarding what is likely to be a long-term issue for archaeology in Hungary. In this article, I would like to share some thoughts on a detail concerning museums of all archaeological functions and the volunteers who have supported and assisted them in their work for many years, specifically the civilian metal detectorists working with museums, who participate in community archaeology programmes.

After 2015, a shift began to occur in the Hungarian archaeological/museum community. Many people attribute this to the change in legislation/stricter regulations on the use of metal detecting instruments at the time, and they may be partially right. The effect of the amendment brought many people closer to institutionalised archaeology and the museum sphere. We could also describe the phenomenon as leaving the grey



Fig. 1. Display case with finds of a museum-friendly metal detectorist in the exhibition “A River Runs Through It”, opened in the Ferenczy Museum Centre in March 2025

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(black?) area, stepping out of the shadows into the light. In doing so, these people gave up some things, but at the same time, they took on many. I was one of them.

The motivations were obviously manifold, including the fear of the consequences of the tightening of the law. I don't know how many of us have decided like me, but I don't know many metal detectorists, and none who have 'gone straight' eventually. Fear of legal consequences was not the reason for my change of attitude. The change in law was merely an occasion to wonder what the point was of collecting objects in a drawer and piling them up, divorced from their true meaning and interpretation, without really examining them myself after they had been removed from the ground.

Recognising the pointlessness of my private collection, I contacted the local museum, and to my recollection, I was the only new applicant to come into contact with the community archaeology programme that they had running for several years. I was alone in my decision, which meant that the tightening of the law—the legal narrowing of the operational framework for metal detecting activity—was in itself virtually ineffective. Those who wanted to carry out their activities legally already found a way to museums, while others—like myself—had not used a metal detector for years; however, the quietest majority continued to search for metal finds illegally, without a licence.

Eventually, it was changing our attitude that worked very effectively in my case and in the case of those who had been working with the museum for years, and was able to motivate us in the right direction and to lure us to the side of meaningful and scientifically profitable research. Not the force of austerity, fear, or coercion, but reason. Pure reasoning led us to realise that what we had been practising was going nowhere. That what we loved so much—the search for tangible traces of history—could be pursued in a different, more systematic, less spontaneous way, but just as freely, even following individual research agendas (KOVÁCS 2024).

The community archaeology programmes of museums can provide and achieve something that the coercive force of law never can: a change of attitude towards archaeological heritage. In my case, and the case of others, I have seen that participation in field surveys and excavations, the knowledge and confidence gained, often 'takes the instrument' out of the hands of the metal detectorist, who begins to feel that there is more to it than treasure hunting and digging vertical holes. One could say that the perspective changes from vertical to horizontal. The volunteer no longer wants to find objects, but rather connections, and starts thinking in terms of coherent horizons—layers, if you like.

With this brief confession and self-reflection, I wanted to highlight that, unfortunately, legislative tightening alone will never achieve the desired result, which in our case would be to reduce, restrict, and eliminate the illegal use of metal detectors. A change of attitude is needed on both sides to achieve the greatest and most effective results possible in the common cause of heritage protection. Therefore, I believe that we must clearly see and emphasise whenever and wherever we can that heritage protection today has only two viable perspectives: The legislation either keeps open the possibility of individual research and fieldwork for a dedicated group of people, or it supports illegal metal detecting by restricting and removing this possibility.

In the former case, there is a chance to mitigate the damage and continue the race to save at least part of the archaeological relics of our past. The latter option, however, effectively entails supporting the scavenging of the material relics of the past at both the museum and legislative levels, thereby adopting a negligent approach to heritage protection. This may sound too arrogant and simplistic at first; however, I believe we only have these real alternatives, while anything else seems like a diversion and a glossing over of the point, causing unacceptable delay. I say this with some insight, gained by experience into the workings of both sides, as I do not doubt that the quicker and stronger will win this fight.

The second idea follows organically from the previous one and relates to the capacity of archaeological/museum institutions. A quick search on the largest online community site for the number of members in various metal detecting groups yields a figure of around 30,000—practically all of whom are believed to be illegal metal detectorists. Even taking into account the very likely overlap between the memberships of these groups, this is a depressing figure when compared to the few hundred or so 'museum-friendly' metal

detectorists.

This is the crowd that the museum sector, together with the few hundred volunteers, is struggling to cope with. If this capacity is further decreased, the fight will be even more unequal. Archaeologists, heritage workers, and the field of heritage conservation itself will be left in a precarious position if the legal framework starts to hinder those who transparently and enthusiastically support the work of museums.

Community archaeology is much more than the mere, more or less justified (or completely unjustified) collecting of archaeological objects; it also involves the running of a field (and theoretical) research background that can shed light on archaeological contexts that may not have been recognised due to a lack of capacity. There is a huge potential in the physical, intellectual, and temporal capacity represented by community archaeological volunteering, i.e., the individual research of volunteers, which has already been manifested in sensational finds, high-quality conference presentations, and publications, and which would be a waste to restrict or not utilise for the benefit of others.

It should also be clear that community archaeology, as a much-cited British example demonstrates, will not eliminate illegal metal detecting; however, it can have an increasingly powerful awareness-raising effect by bringing this alternative to the public consciousness.

Let us guard our common achievements together and avoid going backwards on our shared path!

REFERENCES

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