HUNGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGY
E-JOURNAL • 2025/1 – SPRING
www.hungarianarchaeology.hu

SCHRÖDINGER'S SABRETACHE PLATE

Nándor Rácz[1]
Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 14 (2025) Issue 1, pp. 45–50.

The 'Metal detectorists' Facebook group in Hungary has more than 18,000 members. On average, fifty metal detectorists per county have a museum contract, which means that currently, the finds of less than 5% of the people swinging a metal detector may enter the scientific circulation. As a founding member of the Community Archaeological Association, I confront this issue daily. The opinions and personal experiences I have gained working with the Association have led me to respond to some key questions.

Fig. 1. Great obscurity. Metal detectorists on a foggy day (photo by Nándor Rácz)

There are no exact figures, but I can give you an idea of the scale of the problem: the Pest County Community Archaeology Association's metal detecting section, comprising around fifty people, has found and brought in over 30,000 objects to the museum for processing. If metal detectorists with no museum connections collect finds at a similar rate (probably more), then more than 600,000 metal objects in Pest County alone and over 7,000,000 across the country have lost their archaeological context and, thus, most of their interpretive potential. Not to mention the financial loss to the nation.

Let no one be in any doubt, a significant proportion of the remaining 17,000 metal detectorists are still regularly in the field. And while museum-friendly detectorists are forbidden by law and by their contracts to search registered archaeological sites, these people are bound neither by law nor by contract or moral principles. Moreover, they specifically seek out sites of historical importance in the hope of success and a find. Many of them not only research the terrain but also old maps, databases, archives, and local oral legends with almost scientific skill.

Moreover, when a metal detectorist finds something 'valuable', it gives them such positive feedback that nothing will stop them from going out to similar places with more and more experience and preparation, or the same place with even more determination, as long as they can.

One of the typical stories is when two good friends, by their own account, found a rare denarius of Otto (King of Hungary in 1305–1307), which they were able to sell for HUF 6,000,000 at the time. The scientific community might have sat back in satisfaction, for what a rare success it is to process and publish such a curiosity. But not these two good friends! As they had other motives, they rented the land from the owner, searched it thoroughly, and then, not wanting to wait for the slow help of agricultural work, paid a tractor driver to plough the plot regularly. Success was not lacking, and more of this iconic coin with 'pigeons' were found. However, economic principles and market laws gave the finders a bit of a headache, as they could sell the second coin for only HUF 4,000,000, the third for only HUF 2,000,000, and so on.

To make things worse, one should not think only of the valuable find material of highlighted and loved historical periods. In Hungary, all finds from before 1711 are considered of archaeological interest; therefore, a significant portion of the metal objects from the last 314 years—often classified as 'worthless' and treated accordingly—end up in a plastic bucket in the garage corner. How will our descendants won-

[1] Community Archaeological Association, racz.nandor@icloud.com

Fig 2. Gajus Scheltema, former ambassador of the Netherlands and, while in office, a frequent participant in community archaeology programmes. The photograph was taken upon identifying a prehistoric site from satellite images (photo by Nándor Rácz)

der that the traces of settlements, road networks, church sites, battlefields, the last horseshoe pins and ammunition shells from the wars of independence and the two World Wars have magically disappeared because the ever-expanding group of metal detectorists—ignorant, untrained, and out of control—regularly vacuums up almost the entire country.

I have been using a metal detector on a weekly basis, with minor interruptions, since 2009–2010. I

Fig. 3. "If no one wants it, the devil will take it." Eighteenth-century kreutzers (krajcár in Hungarian) from a site colloquially called Krajcáros (photo by György Tóth)

Fig. 4. The uppermost 30 centimetre, the layer that contains most of the finds discovered by metal detectorists and is usually removed by heavy machinery in large-scale excavations (photo by Nándor Rácz)

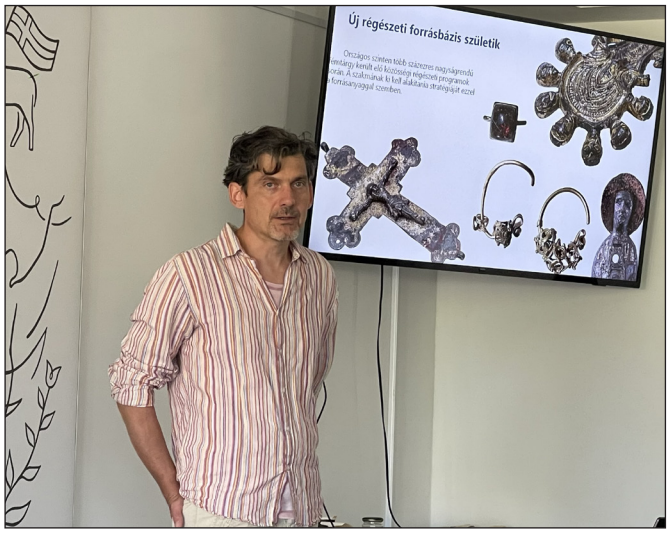

Fig. 5. A presentation by Tibor Ákos Rácz at a programme of the Community Archaeology Association, where he discussed a new archaeological 'knowledge base' (photo by Nándor Rácz)

was fortunate enough to meet some archaeologists early on who, despite the obvious problems, saw the potential in metal detecting and metal detectorists. Three colleagues and I were involved in the exploration of the findspot of the Bugyi–Felsővány sabretache plate and the community archaeology project, one of the first, to develop from it (Füredi 2012).

The site was excavated with the help of civilians and local collaboration at low cost. The results included the *in situ* discovery of the sabretache plate, for which we have been awarded a Secretary of State's award for the protection of cultural heritage. On the recommendation of professional archaeologists, a fifth metal detectorist was awarded the Schönvisner Prize (given by the Hungarian Archaeological and Art Historical Association) for organising the excavation of a site at Dabas within the framework of a community archaeology project. The finds we had collected up to that point, together with all data on the respective sites, were handed over to the relevant museums. Subsequently, various museums launched community archaeology programmes; I participated in those in Pest and Bács-Kiskun counties, and I am a founding member of the Community Archaeology Association. I worked with more than twenty archaeologists in different places and projects across the country.

Fig. 6. "It isn't worth coming back here until the next deep ploughing." Tracklog and finds of an intensive field survey (by Nándor Rácz, Zoltán Kovács, Gábor Viski)

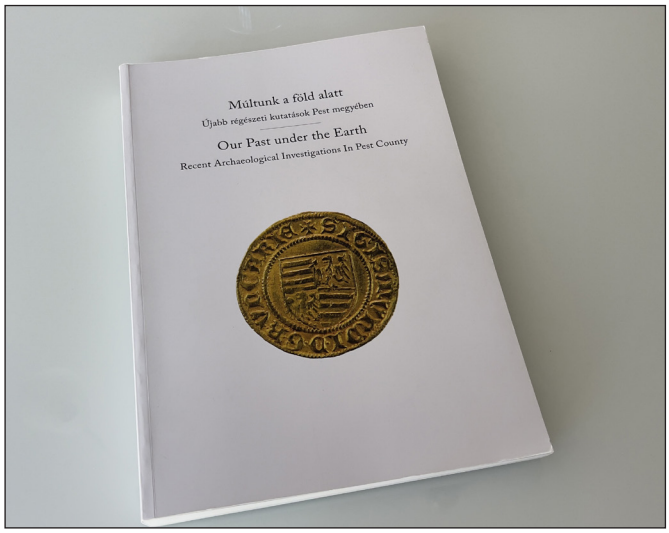

Fig. 7. Our Past Under the Earth: Recent Archaeological Investigations in Pest County, edited by András Rajna (2014). The volume includes a report on the early community archaeology excavations at Dabas. The cover features a fifteenth-century gold florin from Dabas, part of a hoard originally believed to contain 53 coins—of which only two made it to the museum, while the rest were sold by illegal metal detectorists (photo by Nándor Rácz)

Fig. 8. Fragments of crosses found with metal detectors, on display in the exhibition dedicated to Abbot Uros of Pannonhalma Abbey in 2024. The finds discovered by metal detectorists can contribute immensely to both culture and scientific research (photo by Nándor Rácz; Rácz B. 2024)

Based on this experience and in the belief that I had gained sufficient insight, I participated in several joint efforts with archaeologists and metal detectorists to draw the attention of national policymakers to the problem and the need for effective regulation. In the past, I would have accepted a total ban as an immediate solution to the situation, but now, drawing from my own experience, I have to admit that neither the museums nor the authorities are in a position to enforce a ban on metal detecting.

In Serbia, not only is the use of metal detectors banned and punishable by imprisonment, but even their importation into the country is prohibited. Illegal metal detectorists take this serious risk for one reason or another, and the strict ban channels a significant proportion of the finds towards the path of least resistance—to be taken outside the country's borders. Thus, the strict measures implemented to protect Serbia's historical heritage have the opposite effect than intended. Although occasionally, a few detectorists are caught and punished, not only the find contexts of the artefacts but also the vast majority of the finds themselves become lost to the country. In Hungary, of course, cases of illegal detector use-related criminal prosecution are even rarer, and the metal detector is always returned to the person prosecuted.

When entering the community archaeology movement, volunteers usually do not know each other. It takes years to develop a relationship of trust based on direct relationships, behaviour, and attitudes. The resulting network of a community that strives for quality and results is the most effective safeguard against the lasting damage to archaeological heritage. Besides, a new 'knowledge base' (as Tibor Rácz called it) has been created in several museums in Hungary from the findings of community archaeological programmes. This also holds for research on the Mongol invasion (Laszlovszky–Rácz 2020).

This knowledge base is accessible. Besides the finds themselves, it includes novel information on connec-

tions and parallels, which are unknown to professional archaeologists, existing only in the free network of relationships between metal detectorists and community archaeologists ('citizen science'). This knowledge is channelled into scientific works, where it is consolidated and transformed into scholarly findings, through questions posed by curious and dedicated archaeologists in community forums. I believe that not only is it a crime not to live with these possibilities, but also that the ones who should be addressing this problem but hesitate, turn their heads away, or expressly forbid working with metal detectorists, actively cause harm to our shared cultural heritage. The enthusiasm of the finders led to the discovery of a shallow grave containing the sabretache plate and kaftan ornaments, which had been dislodged by ploughing, around it.

It is a mistake to believe that near-surface finds will wait for being properly excavated—that is, that they are in a good place in the ground until an archaeologist opens a trench to get them. That the next sabretache plate, in better or worse condition, but will be there eventually.

Its existence, its discovery, depends only on whether we look for it. It will not be there. If someone else opens the box before us, we no longer have to wonder—as Schrödinger did—whether the cat inside is alive or dead.

If we didn't take good care of this box and someone else opened it before us, we wouldn't know anything about what was in it or its condition. To be more precise, it now appears that volunteers under professional supervision are attending to one box, but no one is attending to the seventeen others.

Many people are unaware of it, so it is essential to emphasise that community archaeology volunteers with a museum contract are not automatically entitled to use a metal detector. For example, the procedures developed and used in the Community Archaeology Association do not allow members to use a metal detector for two years from the date of entry and require participation in a minimum of twelve programmes per year. A continuous track must be recorded during all surveys, all findspots must be recorded in a specified coordinate format, a field record must be kept, and a form must be completed for all finds. The finds should then be packed suitably to ensure that the artefact and all associated data remain together, thus making them suitable for scientific processing. These conditions and the consequences of violation must be explicitly agreed upon in a contract.

However, volunteers often go beyond their contractual commitments. In the last five years, we have organised and delivered at least a hundred (public) presentations, participated in at least as many field research and exploration projects in Hungary and abroad, and appeared in the press and on television countless times. The finds and their context, discovered within the framework of community archaeology programmes, have been published in printed and digital books and articles. One of us presented the first scientific article written by a museum-friendly metal detectorist, detailing the findings of his own research on medieval ironworking (Kovács 2024).

It is essential to note that the primary aim of community archaeology is to organise a community of amateurs interested in researching the past. However, these amateurs are amateurs only in the field of archaeology—in their own fields, they are at least as professional and productive as archaeologists and museum professionals.

Professional organisers of the community archaeology movement must channel this professionalism into the activities organised by museums to incorporate the resources offered by amateurs, as well as their commitment.

I would like to leave you with an important thought to conclude this reflection. It seems necessary to introduce the concept of 'finder'. Institutions running community research programmes should endeavour to ensure that, when an artefact, site, or other object of interest is discovered, the finder is acknowledged, at least by their name being mentioned. In professional publications, for example, it is essential to mention the author of a photograph in the image caption, and they also have certain rights. Neither the photograph, nor the publication nor even the scientific finding drawn from a discovery would exist without the finder, whose role is, therefore, at least equivalent to that of the photographer, may even be more important. Accordingly, this issue should be handled in a regulated and uniform manner, even in legal regulations.

We love what we do—and we do it well. Seize the opportunity that shared work unlocks!

References

Füredi Á. (2012). Honfoglalás kori tarsolylemez Pest megyében. A Bugyi-Felsőványi 2. sír. *Archaeológiai Értesítő* 137:1, 207–234.

Kovács Z. (2024). History behind a name: Nagykovácsi, an ironworking village. Traces of ferrous metallurgy between the medieval villages of Kovácsi and Solymár. *Hungarian Archaeology* 13:1, 75–84. https://doi.org/10.36338/ha.2024.1.5

Laszlovszky, J. & Rácz, T. Á. (2020). Research using metal detectors at the battlefield of Muhi. Community archaeology, battlefield investigation and related methodological issues. *Hungarian Archaeology* 9:4, 71–81. https://doi.org/10.36338/ha.2020.4.7

Rácz, B. (2024) Abbot Uros and his work. Temporary exhibition in the Benedictine Abbey of Pannonhalma, 27 April–11 November 2024. *Hungarian Archaeology* 13:3, 71–75. https://files.archaeolingua.hu/2024O/Upload/Racz_E24O.pdf