

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE SZENT ISTVÁN KIRÁLY MUSEUM IN SZÉKESFEHÉRVÁR Assessing the Challenges and Achievements of the Past Five Years

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Our previous paper, published in the Summer 2021 issue of Hungarian Archaeology, presented the cooperation between the Szent István Király Museum in Székesfehérvár and volunteer metal detectorists between 2013 and 2019, as well as the results achieved during the first year of the Community Archaeology Programme established in 2020. Over the past five years, the number of our volunteers doubled; by June 2026, approximately 160 registered members were participating in the programme. Coordinating, supervising, and training volunteers involved in virtually every archaeological field project of the museum requires considerable additional effort from our archaeologists, alongside their statutory archaeological duties and other professional responsibilities. The achievements presented below clearly demonstrate, however, that this investment has yielded significant benefits for heritage protection, archaeological research, and the public engagement of archaeology.

Keywords: *volunteer, metal detecting, Fejér County, Roman villa, Avar cemetery, medieval church*

UNCHANGED OBJECTIVES AND PROTOCOL

When establishing the Community Archaeology Programme of the Szent István Király Museum in Székesfehérvár, our primary objective was to safeguard archaeological sites that form part of Hungary's national cultural heritage, particularly from damage and destruction caused by illegal metal detecting. We believed that bringing together archaeology enthusiasts, both those with and without metal detectors, and integrating them into the museum framework could provide a partial solution for identifying, protecting, and preserving our archaeological heritage.

An important aim was to ensure that our volunteers, especially museum-affiliated metal detectorists, gained a thorough understanding of the complexity of archaeological work. By acquiring essential knowledge, including field protocols and the recognition of common artefact types, they would be able to pursue their hobby responsibly. Participation in metal-detecting surveys and public lectures alone is insufficient for this purpose. Volunteers also need opportunities to actively assist professional archaeologists during excavations by participating in excavation work and contributing to the primary processing of archaeological finds, particularly their registration and documentation. While developing our programme, we drew inspiration from the community archaeology initiative coordinated by the Community Archaeology Association in Pest County.

The operation of our programme has been regulated by a protocol introduced in March 2020. It is managed by a group of archaeologists working in the museum in addition to their statutory archaeological and curatorial duties. Volunteers may join the programme by submitting a completed and signed application form to kozossegi.regeszet@szikm.hu (Szücsi & Kiss 2021, 89–96).

PROGRAMMES AND RESULTS (2021–2026)

Topographical research and its challenges

One of the greatest challenges facing the programme is the regular, systematic, and thematic organisation of archaeological topographical surveys. The museum does not have sufficient human resources to appoint

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a dedicated coordinator responsible solely for organising and directing county-wide archaeological survey work. Consequently, such investigations are generally conducted on an *ad hoc* basis rather than within a structured medium- or long-term programme.

A notable exception was the cooperation agreement concluded in 2023 between the Hungarian National Museum and the Szent István Király Museum to carry out the National Archaeological Topography project in Fejér County. With the active participation of volunteers, archaeological surveys began in the Iváncsa and Adony regions, leading to the identification of several previously unknown archaeological sites. Although the project initially produced promising results, its momentum later declined due to coordination and capacity constraints.

Volunteers have also played a key role in identifying new archaeological sites. One of our volunteers, Csaba Molnár, systematically analysed satellite imagery and identified hundreds of previously unknown potential archaeological sites across Fejér County. Most of these are burial sites, which provided the impetus for launching the “Cemeteries from Space” project of the Hungarian National Museum National Archaeological Institute. The project’s first archaeological excavation to verify remote-sensing data was carried out in 2025 at Seregélyes-Balogi-dűlő (Fejér County) with the assistance of volunteers from the Szent István Király Museum in Székesfehérvár. However, due to the museum’s limited professional capacity, the field verification, documentation, and official registration of these sites have progressed much more slowly than their discovery.

Excavations at Csákberény – Queueing up to explore the Avar Period

Following the successful community archaeology excavations conducted at Csákberény–Orondpuszta in 2019–2020 (SZÜCSI & KISS 2021, 91, 94; SZÜCSI 2020, 1–11), rescue excavations and subsequently planned research excavations were launched from 2021 onwards at another Avar-period cemetery discovered approximately one kilometre away, in the area known as Arató-szérű (SZÜCSI 2025, 263).

The landscape had previously been heavily modified during an abandoned golf course development, which, as became evident during the excavation, had destroyed several dozen graves. As the site could possibly be designated as an area for future earthworks, the archaeological investigations were continued at Arató-szérű instead of Orondpuszta.

Volunteers participated already during the rescue excavation in spring 2021, and between 2021 and 2024, 40–60 civilian volunteers joined the annual excavation campaigns. The only year in which the participation had to be limited to ten volunteers was 2025. In that year, nearly thirty archaeology students from five universities and five secondary-school students completing community service participated, requiring the full attention of the professional staff.

Excavations were supported through grants from the National Cultural Fund in 2021 and 2024. In addition to the principal sponsors, Mayor Dr László Vécsei and the Municipality of Csákberény, numerous companies—including Útéppark Ltd., which provided mechanical earthmoving—and private donors, particularly László Szabó and Edit Beker, contributed to the project’s success.

In May 2021, financial support awarded by the National Cultural Fund enabled the opening of the temporary exhibition *The Key to Our Ancestors – The Avar Cemetery of Csákberény and Community Archaeology* at the Count Fülöp Merán Museum of Hunting and Forestry in Csákberény. During its nearly one-year run, the exhibition attracted 3,450 visitors. Our long-term objective is to establish a permanent exhibition at the same venue presenting



Fig. 1. Visit by a group of children with disabilities to the 2025 excavation at Csákberény–Arató-szérű (Photo: Dávid Nagy)

the excavations of the two Avar cemeteries, with particular emphasis on community archaeology and their scientific significance.

Scientific analysis of the 218 graves excavated between 2021 and 2025 is currently in progress. Initial results, including a new dating for wire jewellery that revises the previously accepted chronology of Late Avar period (SZÜCSI 2023, 212–214, 216–217; SZÜCSI 2026, 75–76, 90, Fig. 4), studies of multiple burials (SZÜCSI, LIBOR & LENCSES 2024, 293–315), and analyses of the burial customs and artefact assemblages, have already been incorporated into several published articles and into our monograph on the Avar period of the region (SZÜCSI 2025).

Excavations at Bodajk – The emerging story of a Roman villa estate

Research at the Bodajk–Proletár-földek site has been ongoing since 2019 to investigate the layout and development of a Roman villa estate and its associated cemetery, while documenting and rescuing a site gradually being destroyed by intensive agriculture.

From the outset, the project has been organised as a community archaeology initiative involving volunteers and supported by the local municipality. The results of the investigations conducted so far are providing an increasingly detailed picture of the history of the *villa rustica*. Field surveys, metal-detecting surveys, and geophysical investigations conducted in 2021 enabled us to define the site's extent, to identify the buildings belonging to the villa, including its irregular, multi-period main building, and to locate the associated cemetery (Kiss 2022a, 55; Kiss 2023, 102).

Planned excavations initiated in 2022 distinguished two construction phases within the villa. A 4th-century AD residential building with terrazzo and rammed-earth floors had been built onto several subsurface structures and earlier demolished foundations dated to the 2nd–3rd centuries AD.

The excavation of the cemetery began in 2021, and a total of 21 poorly preserved or looted graves were recovered by 2025. Although its full extent had been approximately determined, the complete destruction of some graves by agricultural activity makes it difficult to reconstruct the cemetery's original boundaries and determine the original number of graves. The cemetery dates to the middle and second half of the 4th century AD. One of its most remarkable burials belonged to an eight- or nine-year-old child wearing a military belt set (*cingulum militare*), an object symbolising military rank and office during the Late Roman period and suggesting the elevated social status of the deceased's family (KISS & LIBOR 2024).

A lime kiln and associated features discovered near the cemetery indicate industrial activities associated with the villa and were probably used to produce lime for 4th-century construction works.

The Bodajk project demonstrates that long-term, complex archaeological research programmes can be successfully implemented through community archaeology with the active participation of volunteers, making it possible to undertake research on a scale that would be difficult to achieve with institutional resources alone.



Fig. 2. Grave excavation undertaken jointly by archaeologists and volunteers during the 2025 research excavation at Bodajk–Proletár-földek (Photo: Nándor Agócs)

Excavations at Bakonykúti – Will there eventually be an archaeological presentation site for the medieval church?

The medieval church and nearby Roman-period building at Bakonykúti–Szentegyházi-dűlő were first excavated in 1884 by Countess Paulina Zichy. Prior to the recent planned excavations, volunteers carried out two metal-detecting surveys in 2021, while a geophysical survey directed by Máté Stibrányi successfully identified the church and the surrounding churchyard wall.

The objective of the subsequent excavations was to find the exact location of the 19th-century investigations and prepare the site, located beside Hungary's National Blue Trail, for future development as an open-air archaeological exhibition site.

Excavations led by Szabina Reich and Frigyes Szücsi uncovered the entire north-western side of the church in 2023. Two construction phases were identified within the single-nave church with a straight-ended sanctuary. During the later phase, the nave was extended by 5.4 metres towards the south-west (REICH 2023, 99–100).

Further excavations in 2025, directed by Veronika Berek and Frigyes Szücsi, uncovered the south-eastern side of the church. The earlier excavation trench of Paulina Zichy was probably identified, and a rectangular ossuary containing a large quantity of human remains was excavated in the centre of the church.

Several burials were uncovered within the extension, including one containing fragments of a 15th – 16th-century female headdress ornament. Based on the excavation and metal-detecting finds, the church and its cemetery were used continuously from at least the 12th century AD until the late 15th century AD.

The investigations have provided all scientific information necessary for establishing an archaeological exhibition site. However, the planned land exchange between the municipality and the landowners was unsuccessful, preventing access to funding for an exhibition site on privately owned land.

Investigations at Kincsesbánya – The treasure of the community and the community of the treasure

The first archaeological survey of the Kincsesbánya–Vaskapu-hegy site took place in 1997 under the direction of György Terei, after which the site remained unexplored for many years (TEREI et al. 2011, 67). The



Fig. 3. Visitors at the open day viewing the 2023 excavation at Bakonykúti



Fig. 4. Volunteers working at the Kincsesbánya excavation site in 2025

research resumed in 2024 with two metal-detecting surveys that yielded numerous significant finds (REICH 2025, 125–128). The most remarkable discovery was a hoard of 779 silver denarii concealed in the late 13th century, during Ottokar II's 1273 campaign against the Kingdom of Hungary.

Encouraged by these results, planned excavations were conducted in 2025 by opening three trenches at the archaeological site. The structure previously interpreted as a small fortification has been proven to be a medieval church surrounded by a walled cemetery instead. Archaeological evidence indicates continuous use of the church and cemetery from the 12th century until the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries.

In addition to programme volunteers, members of the local association (Vaskapu Vár Baráti Kör),

led by our colleague Máté Ilku, actively participated in the project. Besides assisting in archaeological investigations, they are constantly maintaining the site. The Vaskapu Hill project provides an excellent example of the vital role that committed local communities and community archaeology volunteers can play in preserving archaeological heritage.

Rescue excavations – Archaeological emergency responses

A museum-affiliated volunteer metal detectorist reported evidence of illegal looting at the Roman-period site of Székesfehérvár–Rác-szérűk in 2022. The participation of community archaeology volunteers enabled an immediate response and rapid archaeological investigation of the damaged area. The rescue excavation was complemented by metal-detecting surveys and geophysical investigations, allowing the extent of a Roman villa estate dated to the 2nd–3rd centuries AD to be refined and the remains of a large rectangular building—probably the villa’s main building—to be identified. Stratigraphic observations revealed several construction phases (Kiss 2022b, 53).

Also in 2022, two reports were received concerning human remains uncovered during groundworks on Kálvária Hill at Bodajk. One of them was submitted by a registered member of our Community Archaeology Programme. Rescue excavations at the site identified a previously unknown medieval cemetery, most probably surrounding a church (SZÜCSI 2022, 44). Radiocarbon dating of two human bones suggests that the cemetery was used throughout the 11th and 12th centuries AD for at least one and a half centuries, thus providing evidence for the existence of the as-yet undiscovered church dating to the early Árpadian Age. The earliest dated burial most probably belonged to an individual who died between AD 994 and 1028, making this person a contemporary of King Saint Stephen. This result is especially intriguing in light of a local tradition recorded as early as the late 17th century, which claims that Saint Stephen founded a chapel at this location.

CONCLUSION

The volunteers participating in our Community Archaeology Programme have developed into a vibrant museum community actively contributing to nearly every stage of archaeological work. They spend their free time among like-minded people while learning, preserving heritage, and supporting meaningful archaeological projects. Through direct collaboration with professional archaeologists specialising in different historical periods, they gain first-hand experience of our shared archaeological heritage.

Alongside these achievements, the programme continues to face significant challenges. Sustainable operation is hindered not only by limited institutional capacity but also by the fact that the professional and social value of community archaeology is not always fully recognised or supported. In the long term, this may restrict the programme’s opportunities for further development.

Without attempting to provide an exhaustive account, this paper has sought to demonstrate the contribution made by the Community Archaeology Programme of the Szent István Király Museum to heritage protection, archaeological research, and public engagement. The following outcomes, such as the identification of hundreds of archaeological sites from satellite imagery, the collection of extensive topographical information through systematic metal-detecting surveys, the community excavations of the Avar cemeteries at Csákberény, the Roman villa at Bodajk, the medieval churches at Bakonykúti and Kincsesbánya, numerous rapid-response rescue excavations, the scientific and public lectures and publications, museum exhibitions, and the strengthening of both local and national identity through these projects, have all been made possible by the continuous operation of our Community Archaeology Programme since 2020.

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