Editorial   **Open Access**

Pieterjan Deckers*, Michael Lewis, Suzie Thomas

Between Two Places: Archaeology and Metal-detecting in Europe

Abstract: Since the Valletta Convention (1992), the debate concerning non-professional archaeological metal-detecting in Europe has been conducted largely at the level of individual legislations. Papers in this Topical Issue take stock of current knowledge of and attitudes towards metal-detecting across Europe; its nature and impact as well as the policies and approaches that arise from it within professional archaeology and heritage management. With this collection of papers, the editors aim to stimulate a more unified debate and, ultimately, a common understanding of ethics and best practices in relation to metal-detecting that transcends national and jurisdictional boundaries in Europe.

Keywords: metal-detecting; public archaeology; heritage management

Metal-detecting is a consideration for archaeologists across Europe (and beyond), whether the activity is suppressed, ignored or engaged with, and whether archaeologists like it, or not. The approaches made by different countries' in their policies and laws towards metal-detecting are intriguing, primarily because they are so diverse (see e.g. Yáñez; Karl)[1]. The Valletta Treaty of 1992 represents the last time a debate within Europe on this issue resulted in consensus: since then, most approaches have been inherently insular, with little regard for, or consideration of, the cultures, practices or traditions of neighbouring territories. It is also the case that heritage laws across Europe are not universally understood, recognised or respected, and understanding of what comprises 'ethical' or 'responsible' behaviour with regards to metal-detecting and metal-detected artefacts differs. Evidently, this is not just a dichotomy between amateurs and professionals. Opinions and attitudes vary significantly both within the metal-detecting community and amongst the various disciplines (archaeology, numismatics, art history) and vocational contexts (academia, heritage management, museums) in the professional camp.

This Topical Issue stems from debate at a session on metal-detecting titled 'Metal Detecting in Context: new focus in an old debate?' at the European Association of Archaeologists' conference in Glasgow in 2015, and subsequent discussions between the guest editors on how best to bring archaeologists across Europe together to discuss this issue in a rational and productive way.

Admittedly, the guest editors and several of the authors in this Topical Issue hold what may be considered a 'liberal' standpoint on this issue, with systems in place in their respective countries that actively try to

[1] All references are this volume, unless stated.

*Corresponding author: Pieterjan Deckers, Department of Art Studies and Archaeology, Brussels Free University, 1050 Brussels, Belgium, E-mail: pdeckers@vub.ac.be

Michael Lewis, British Museum, London, United Kingdom

Suzie Thomas, Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, Museology. University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 59, 00014, Finland

engage and work with the metal-detecting community for the benefit of archaeology. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that one particular solution does not fit all countries or regions, as there can be good reasons for differing laws regarding heritage management. As the Topical Issue demonstrates, there is also sound reasoning for more prohibitive standpoints concerning non-professional metal-detecting and other artefact hunting (Lecroere; Rodriguez Temiño; Yáñez; Makowska, Oniszczuk & Sabaciński). That said, there are general areas where it is hoped that a consensus can be found even across such widely different contexts and points of view, for instance concerning the usefulness of the metal detector as an archaeological tool, common understandings of best practice in dealing with detector users and detected artefacts, and a need to engage more effectively with the public's desire to do archaeology. This Topical Issue should therefore be considered a starting point, where the authors of the individual papers have highlighted how they see the issue in their jurisdictions and in light of their experiences. They have been asked to be open about the problems associated with metal-detecting, as well as the opportunities that dialogue between archaeologists and the public can bring.

A critical problem that this volume hopes to help mitigate is the overall lack of knowledge, amongst heritage professionals and policy-makers, of the practices, motivations and socio-economic backgrounds of the detecting community, and how these aspects vary across Europe (Thomas). In recent years, a small number of studies have started to shed light on this issue (Thomas 2012, Rasmussen 2014, Winkley 2016), and in this volume several others (Dobat & Jensen; Deckers et al.; Wessman, Koivisto & Thomas) contribute to this growing field of enquiry. One important conclusion from this is that the detecting community is not as homogeneous as often thought. While some detectorists may be acting from a largely historical interest and are keen on collaboration with professionals, there is no doubt that others are less so inclined, may operate largely for financial motivations, and work from a different understanding of ethics and priorities than archaeologists. On this side of the spectrum, the issue of looting, often more generally conflated with any detecting activity, comes into play as a serious problem. Thus, in addition to data, new definitions (see Thomas and Lecroere) and methodologies are needed to analyse this diversity and formulate appropriate policies and ethical guidelines.

Several countries/regions have developed (or are developing) digital recording systems for public finds; notable are Denmark (Dobat & Jensen), England and Wales (Lewis), Flanders (Deckers et al) and the Netherlands (NWO, 2016). The primary aim of these recording systems is to collate data to advance archaeological knowledge; thus recognising that finds outside an archaeological context, that is (normally) to say from the plough-zone, are an important source for assessing otherwise undiscovered sites, and amassing data that can be used alongside other sorts of (normally stratified) archaeological information, as well as enabling hitherto unexplored strands of research. It is of note is that these areas are in a common geographic zone (the North Sea area, including the Nordic countries – also see Gundersen, Rasmussen & Lie; Wessman, Koivisto & Thomas) where metal-detecting is largely tolerated (Sweden and Ireland are exceptions here). However, the liberal model is by no means perfect, since it is clear that many detectorists in those areas still prefer not to co-operate with archaeologists, continue to work outside best practice guidance, or even fail to recognise the authority of law (discussed in Lewis). As Ferguson notes, even detectorists who are keen to contribute to archaeological knowledge may not always provide information in an optimal way for archaeologists, presenting us with questions concerning the variance between perspectives and methodological norms within the metal-detecting community compared to the archaeological one.

Turning to central and eastern parts of Europe, leisure metal-detecting is largely illegal or restricted - although there are exceptions such as Estonia and Hungary where metal-detecting is permitted under license (Ulst 2010; Ujhelyi 2016). However, the local laws governing such restrictions and reporting of public finds can be ignored, or not enforced (e.g. Musteaţă 2014). From an archaeological perspective, therefore, there is a great loss of information about the past, but often little will from or capacity by the authorities to do much about that. In southern Europe (including here France and Spain – see Lecroere; Rodriguez Temiño; Yáñez) metal-detecting is typically strongly regulated and, in practice, prohibited for those outside archaeological profession. Although there is little objective, quantifiable information, social media (particularly online forums) and anecdotal evidence suggest that looting in some areas is prolific.

In some ways, the seemingly entrenched conflict between tolerant and restrictive attitudes is already starting to crumble. Several authors in this issue, often speaking from years or even decades of experience, take a critical stance towards the approach prevailing in their own country. Thus, Rodriguez Temiño underlines the importance of increased social engagement within Spain's relatively hierarchical system of heritage management, while authors from countries which have less restrictive legislation concerning metal-detecting and other activities (Lewis; Ferguson; Gundersen, Rasmussen & Lie) highlight the potential adverse effects of supporting and encouraging public engagement with archaeology on the preservation of heritage or the quality of scientific data.

Given the arguable failure of European archaeologists to have a joined-up approach towards metal-detecting (within the confines of local law), this incipient critical reflection is crucial, since many of the borders across Europe are fluid, particularly within the European Union and (especially) the Schengen Area (Thomas). This has resulted in the loss of archaeological knowledge, as well as damage to the historic environment, with finders not being properly advised of their responsibilities and obligations under foreign laws - whether that is prohibitive, or not. Take for example Belgium (Deckers et al), where Flanders has an entirely different ethical and legal framework for dealing with metal-detected finds than Wallonia, and also that of neighbouring nations Denmark (Dobat & Jensen) and Sweden (Lehorst 2013), which are equally diverse. In both cases, would detectorists from the neighbouring jurisdiction, and archaeologists engaging with them operate within their understanding of the other's law, or within their own ethical framework or norm of working?

Metal-detected artefacts, too, are increasingly traded across Europe. Whereas this trade, seemingly mostly involving detectorists, private collectors and small-scale middle-men, should not be conflated with the illegal trafficking of cultural heritage from conflict zones and other problematic world regions, it too raises important questions that need addressing through a cohesive, European policy. Archaeologists across Europe generally recognise that small finds data, whether from stratified contexts or not, is a vital component of the archaeological record, and that these finds should be recorded, curated and preserved, and the information about them shared. Even in countries which prohibit metal-detecting there is a recognition that public finds (in these cases those that are discovered purely by chance, rather than through prospective searching) have a role to play in archaeology, but there is little in the way of a common mechanism to share this information to advance knowledge on a pan-European level. Those with a liberal approach to metal-detecting might pragmatically argue that the data of finds discovered by metal-detectorists is more important than the source (i.e. non-professionals) (Bland 2005), though for other archaeologists, particularly those operating within a more prohibitive sphere, there is clearly an ethical issue in making use of this data; especially in terms of how that impacts on the preservation of the past and the historic landscape in its widest sense. In essence, is it better to have some data than none at all, even if that had (somehow) damaged the archaeological value of land? Some might argue that the archaeological value has already been destroyed by agriculture, however farming and land use varies across Europe, as does its impact on archaeology.

Increasingly, archaeologists have to consider the public impact of their work and the opportunities archaeology can provide for social engagement, connecting to wider agendas concerning public archaeology and the multifaceted perspectives therein. This is particularly important where archaeology is financed through public money, and therefore has to have a wider public impact. What then are the opportunities for finders, including metal-detectorists, to get involved in archaeology, and/or develop their interest in the past? If it is the case that metal-detectorists have a genuine interest in the past, and also wish to contribute to knowledge – as several of the aforementioned studies attest – then might there not be opportunities to engage them (and indeed other members of the public) in archaeological fieldwork? There are many examples of metal-detectorists working alongside archaeologists within an archaeological remit across Europe. It is a regular occurrence in countries (such as Denmark and the United Kingdom) with a long tradition of amateur archaeology (e.g. Dobat 2013; for a particular striking example see Haldenby and Richards 2016). Examples can also be found even in countries where hobbyist detecting is not usually permitted (see Makowska, Oniszczuk & Sabaciński concerning such collaborations in Poland).

Nonetheless, there lacks a pan-European approach on what is the best way to utilise the metal-detector as an archaeological tool, and who has the best skills to use it. Best practise is learnt over time, and in fact evolves through time, so it may be argued that the public should be at least consulted on what is reasonable and possible within the resources, skills and technological opportunities available.

Ultimately, regardless which side of the debate one adheres to, no-one challenges the basic principle that archaeological heritage is a finite resource of public interest. Perhaps the crucial issue is therefore how the heritage profession positions itself as the managers of the archaeological resource. This ties into the continuing debates over where power lies, in terms of who controls the decisions made about management of cultural heritage (Thomas). Here, it can be sensed, that some archaeologists feel there is a threat to the profession from spirited volunteers (Karl). Therefore, in addition to considering factual elements of metal-detecting 'sociology' and the archaeological record in order to construct a fruitful policy regarding the detecting phenomenon, heritage professionals need to strike a balance with broad implications: are they principally there to protect the archaeological record from damaging intrusions of an unqualified public, or to enable and guide people's rightful engagement with their common heritage? Whereas few would argue in favour of either of these options in exclusion of the other, evidently in many respects non-professional metal-detecting will continue to be a topic for study and debate in Europe for many years to come.

Bibliography

Bland, R. (2005). A Pragmatic Approach to the Problem of Portable Antiquities: the experience of England and Wales, Antiquity, 79 (304), 440–447.

Dobat, A.S. (2013). Between Rescue and Research: an evaluation after 30 years of liberal metal detecting in archaeological research and heritage practice in Denmark, European Journal of Archaeology, 16(4), 704–725.

Haldenby, D., & Richards, J.D. (2016). The Viking Great Army and its Legacy: plotting settlement shift using metal-detected finds, Internet Archaeology, 42. http://dx.doi.org/10.11141/ia.42.3

Lehorst, M. (2013). A way to balance societal needs in law: Suggestions for new regulations on the use of metal detectors in the Swedish Heritage Conservation Act. In A. Langerlof (Ed.), Who Cares? : Perspectives on Public Awareness, Participation and Protection in Archaeological Heritage Management. (pp. 15-17). Budapest: Archaeolingua.

Musteaţă, S. (2014). Archaeological Heritage Crimes in Romania and Moldova: A Comparative View, in L. Grove, S. Thomas (Eds.), Heritage Crime: Progress, Prospects and Prevention. (pp. 71-80). Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

NWO (2016). PAN: Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands. http://www.nwo.nl/onderzoek-en-resultaten/onderzoeksprojecten/i/20/26420.html (accessed 23 December 2016).

Rasmussen, J. M. (2014). Securing cultural heritage objects and fencing stolen goods? A case study on museums and metal detecting in Norway, Norwegian Archaeological Review, 47(1), 83-107.

Thomas, S. (2012). Searching for answers: A survey of metal-detector users in the UK, International Journal of Heritage Studies, 18(1), 49-64.

Ujhelyi, N. (2016). The Relationship Between Archaeology and Metal Detecting in Present Day Hungary. Budapest: Central European University unpublished MA dissertation.

Ulst, I. (2010). The problems of "black archaeology" in Estonia, Eesti Arheoloogia Ajakiri, 14(2), 153-169.

Winkley, F. (2016). The Phenomenology of Metal Detecting: Insights from a Unique Type of Landscape Experience, Papers from the Institute of Archaeology, 25(2), Art. 13. http://doi.org/10.5334/pia.496