



Debate Article

Archaeology's awkward allies

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Upon reading the debate piece by Thomas and Pitblado (2020), I am somewhat perplexed that we still need to justify the simple argument that avocational artefact collecting is not in *all* circumstances an immoral practice detrimental to the preservation and study of cultural heritage. Multiple journal debate sections and collections of papers have been devoted to metal detecting and artefact collecting in the past decade, illustrating the longevity of this debate (e.g. Gill 2010; Campbell & Thomas 2013; Huth 2013 (with responses in *Archäologische Informationen* 38 (2015)); Rodríguez Temiño *et al.* 2013; Rasmussen 2014; Deckers *et al.* 2016).

Admittedly, this sentiment reflects the perspective of an archaeologist working in North-western Europe, and benefiting every day from established collaborations with hobbyists. Despite this position, rooted in my regionally circumscribed work with metal detectorists and their finds, I hope that my remarks are of broader significance.

In some countries, such as the UK and Denmark, the contribution of metal detectorists has been acknowledged for decades. While it is easy to take such a cooperative atmosphere for granted, it is worth noting that in other countries, such as Belgium (Deckers 2019), a broad professional acceptance of metal detecting as a legitimate hobby, and the legal changes that codify it, have come about much more recently. Thus, Thomas and Pitblado's (2020) debate serves as a reminder that, however reasonable and nuanced their viewpoints and the Society for American Archaeology's (SAA) recommendations may seem, there are many who consider them highly problematic.

In that respect, the authors' contribution is commendable for bringing insights and experiences from both sides of the Atlantic to the attention of a broader audience. It is also timely. The extensive content-sharing and social interaction afforded by the internet, along with the growing mobility of people and goods, is globalising communities of artefact collectors (Thomas 2016), increasing the need for international coordination amongst heritage professionals.

Since the signing of the Valletta Treaty in 1992, the European debate over (ever declining) opportunities for public participation in archaeology has been conducted mainly within national boundaries. In many cases, the debate has become polarised between tolerance and prohibition. European archaeologists are a long way from reaching a consensus akin to the SAA's formal recommendations, even if several professional bodies have recently proposed comparable statements (Scherzler & Siegmund 2016; Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed 2016; Dobat *et al.* 2020).

Nonetheless, it is possible to move the debate forward, if two basic conditions are met. Firstly, and most obviously, we as heritage professionals must accept that others in society

may have interests in archaeological heritage that only partly coincide—or even clash—with our own. In negotiating these interests, the SAA recommendations provide a useful baseline: an openness to dialogue (responsiveness) and a recognition of the common good (responsibility). These are excellent principles for archaeologists and avocational collectors alike.

A second condition transcends the level of professional ethics and day-to-day, interpersonal interaction. As trained experts, we have a duty to help in the formation of legislation and policy regarding avocational heritage engagements. In doing so, we must be willing to challenge the ideological stances that often govern the debate. As Thomas and Pitblado (2020) argue, blanket, unfounded assumptions that confuse and conflate a wide range of motivations and behaviours are unlikely to form a sound basis for appropriate reactions to the phenomenon in legislation, policy and practice.

Instead, our responses must be grounded in fact. We are only now starting to understand the complex constellations of motivations and—more importantly in terms of potential impact—practices of detectorists and other collectors. With the rise of the internet and social media, new avenues of research on otherwise obscure but crucial aspects of metal-detecting and other avocational heritage practice have become available. These include the scale, intensity and nature of activities affecting the archaeological record both on and off the field, the motivations and socio-economic backgrounds of practitioners, and the structure of their communities (e.g. Karl & Möller 2016; Hardy 2018; Delestre 2019). Critical consideration of these, along with more traditional sources of information, is a precondition for the formulation of appropriate professional reactions.

Such data-driven responses will be inherently contextualised to the local situation. There is no one-size-fits-all model, no ideal solution to be adopted universally and certainly no 'liberal agenda' to impose. The variables are numerous and historically contingent, and a correct understanding of their correlations is essential: the backgrounds, motivations and practices of avocational collectors; the organisation and attitudes of the professional sector; the nature of the archaeological record, the physical landscape and land use (both historical and current); and the attitudes of the wider public, including minorities and special interest groups, towards archaeological heritage.

Archaeologists and policy-makers should continually assess the costs and benefits of knowledge gain, heritage management and public participation in archaeology. Preferably, this balancing act should be performed on empirical grounds, even if some factors, not least public participation, will always partly be an ethical and therefore political consideration. We should never lose sight of the fact that archaeology is not an end in itself; it has a role to play within, and exists by the grace of, contemporary society. It is important to remember that we have numerous potential allies, if we but reach out to them.

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