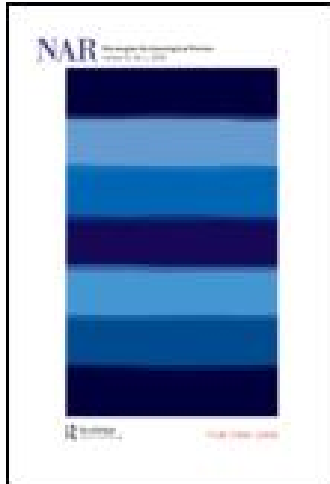


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Comments on Josephine Munch Rasmussen: 'Securing Cultural Heritage Objects and Fencing Stolen Goods? A Case Study on Museums and Metal Detecting in Norway'

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Comments on Josephine Munch Rasmussen: ‘Securing Cultural Heritage Objects and Fencing Stolen Goods? A Case Study on Museums and Metal Detecting in Norway’

METAL DETECTING IN NORWAY RECEIVES LONG OVERDUE ATTENTION

SUZIE THOMAS

As has been seen over the past decade, the research of metal detecting as a hobby has begun to develop like never before. By this, what I mean is research in terms of looking beyond the archaeological impact of metal detecting (while not ignoring this important aspect), in order to analyse the individuals themselves and to begin to understand the different drivers that motivate metal detecting enthusiasts.

In presenting perspectives derived from a selection of interviews and from information shared through social media, within the context of Norwegian legislation and with reference to studies carried out elsewhere, Rasmussen provides a key contribution to this growing body of literature. Recent research on the characterization of metal detecting, as well as its wider impacts, has included studies on the UK (e.g. Thomas 2012, Ferguson 2013), Estonia (Ulst 2010), Denmark (Dobat 2013) and very recently the Netherlands (van der Schriek and van der Schriek in press 2014) and Finland

(Immonen and Kinnunen in press 2014) to name a few European examples. This article, introducing for the first time such a study carried out in Norway, represents an important and timely addition to the metal-detector user research discourse.

Commentators on the state and scale of metal detecting in other countries have noted that at times there is a lack of statistical data to support or dispel claims made by groups opposed to the metal-detecting hobby (e.g. Gransard-Desmond 2013 on metal detecting in France). It is perhaps also a minor drawback within this article that estimations are not given for the number of metal detectorists active within Norway. It may be that current estimates are too vague to include or, perhaps more likely, that research is still needed to ascertain these numbers. Personal experience in research has shown that estimating numbers, especially taking into account individuals belonging to more than one metal-detecting club (or conversely to none at all), means that even official estimates can be problematic and abstract in the extreme (e.g. Thomas 2012, p. 58). Nonetheless, quantitative research into the possible number of active detectorists, in Norway but in other European countries too, would be welcome for many reasons. A connected question to explore

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further on the back of Rasmussen's paper is whether the increased number of finds that she reports as coming to Norwegian museums via metal detectorists indicates an increase in people taking up the hobby or merely an increased rate of finds reporting among existing detectorists.

Rasmussen does note, interestingly, that many detectorists may be active across the national borders within Scandinavia. She suggests that this means that they may have a more intimate knowledge of the different legislation in place in the different nations – arguably leading to a greater awareness of these differences in law among sections of the metal-detecting community than can be seen among professional archaeologists working in these countries. This is an interesting point, and reflects a scenario comparable to that noted on different sides of the England-Scotland border. Although both (at the time of writing at least) part of the UK, Scotland has a different legal system and quite different laws concerning the recovery of and responsibility for portable antiquities. However, it has also been observed that objects that should be reported under Scottish legislation are not since they would not legally need to be declared in England or Wales, indicating a lack of distinction, among some finders at least, between the two separate systems (Campbell 2013). This difference of course reinforces that detectorists as a whole are not a homogeneous group that hold the same ideas and values (or the same degrees of knowledge about, for example, the law). This in turn further highlights the value of knowing more about the hobby and its nature within different regional and national contexts.

Another tantalizing observation made in Rasmussen's article concerns the tendency of many detectorists to differentiate between what they perceive as responsible detecting (here 'cultural heritage rescue') and the prevalence of nighthawks and 'lonely wolves' as irresponsible examples. Nighthawks, as characterized in metal-detecting discourse both among one another and in discussions with archaeologists, seem to be abstract threats,

not only to the wider cultural heritage, but, crucially, also to the reputation of metal detecting as a whole. In my own research in the UK, I have been told anecdotally of people who indulge in nighthawking by other metal detectorists (these are never named to me, but seem to be known to the detectorists with whom I speak). Often the primary concern of my informants has not been the threat posed to archaeology, but rather the damage being done to the reputation of their hobby by such people.

Exploratory netnographic research, with which I am currently involved in Finland and parts of Russia, echoes Rasmussen's own monitoring of Norwegian social-media sites, and throws up countless examples of detectorists claiming that their 'rescuing' of objects from the ground somehow foils the more nefarious plans of the 'black diggers', looters and materialistic collectors. As with Rasmussen's observations, it seems that in these cases, from early findings at least, these villains also 'appear to be a largely fictional construction, a scapegoat on which disagreeable issues and cases can be blamed' and 'are pleasantly invisible and do not speak back'. The nighthawks and black diggers (or black archaeologists) on which all is blamed are normally a faceless enemy. This, of course, is not to say that nighthawking does not exist. Illegal use of metal detectors for extraction of archaeological objects has been researched and documented (e.g. Oxford Archaeology 2009). However, as Rasmussen remarks, the perception among detectorists and others as to what nighthawking actually is, and the grey areas between espoused behaviour and actual behaviour, is probably more complex than first appears.

Another interesting observation made is on the idea of legitimizing aspects of the metal-detecting hobby through engagement with museum professionals and others. This not only validates the activity of metal detecting itself as an accepted means of removing archaeological material from the ground, but also adds legitimacy to the objects which are

found in that way. Within the context of England and Wales, and the Portable Antiquities Scheme through which many objects that are not protected by law can be recorded voluntarily, my own concerns are that registering an object on the Finds Database essentially provides a 'provenance' to the piece. By this, I mean that Finds Database number information appears from time to time in the 'Provenance' section of auction catalogue lot descriptions. This indicates in turn that for some there might be a market-oriented incentive for recording finds, although it is not possible to verify in most cases whether the find spot recorded is a true one or one provided to obfuscate wrongdoing (such as trespass on private land or on a Scheduled Monument). Although I have yet to carry out an empirical study on this, I would suggest the creation of provenance data for increasing market value as an addition to the reasons Rasmussen gives in her article for potentially creating false provenance data.

I have perhaps, in reflecting on this article, appeared to come down on the side of the sceptics with regard to metal detecting. I must note too that detecting can also perform a rescue function in the context of agricultural activity, supporting the researchers also cited by Rasmussen in this context. In the late 1990s, Darvill and Fulton (1998) identified threats such as deep ploughing, natural erosion and mineral extraction as posing a far greater threat to archaeological remains in England than the activities of metal detecting. I also believe that meaningful engagement with the metal-detecting community is essential.

In my concluding remarks, I must express my enthusiasm on seeing this article and my gratitude to the author for carrying out this research. I have already alluded in my response to the growing corpus of work relating to different countries, and also to the gaps of knowledge still within this. It seems to me that we are rapidly approaching a stage where a network should be established for researchers interested in understanding and documenting the nature, scale, ontologies and

interactions of the metal-detecting hobby with archaeological heritage and archaeologists. Different laws, as well as different cultural and social norms, impact on how the hobby is both perceived and expressed. This affects all areas, from the extent of crime against heritage carried out by (real or imagined) nighthawks (or 'black archaeologists' as they are nicknamed in such as Finland and Estonia: respectively, Seitsonen and Kunnas 2009, p. 60; Ulst 2011) through to the nature of the relationship between these hobbyists and the heritage professionals in museums, archaeological services and other locations. Such a network of interest at a European level would give us, probably for the first time, an opportunity to establish (and maintain) reliable data concerning numbers of metal-detector users, to identify the extent of transnational activity (including both searching and trading) and to reveal, based on robust research, best-practice models that can respond and adapt to different national and regional scenarios. Perhaps the discussion invited by the *Norwegian Archaeological Review* in response to this article is the next stage in finding such a network. As someone who has devoted a lot of their academic research and time to understanding the metal-detecting community, I anticipate innovative research and stimulating discussions to continue into the foreseeable future. A coordinated and collaborative approach to this research seems logical, and necessary.

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- and perceived her article as a deliberate attempt to sabotage what many see as constructive developments in the relationship between detectorists and archaeologists over the recent years. The Norwegian Association for Metal Detecting (Norges Metallsøkerforening, hereafter NMF) does not share such views. On the contrary, we find that the author raises important and relevant questions, such as:
- How can one explain the tensions often referred to between professional archaeologists and hobby detectorists when criminal statistics suggest that crime involving private metal detecting is practically non-existent?
- How can we progress from discussing detectorists as being either altruistic rescuers of cultural heritage objects or simple treasure hunters, to a more constructive debate on the hobby's applicability as part of the recipe for rescuing cultural heritage objects?
- Lastly, and this will be our focus in this commentary: could it be that archaeologists in cultural heritage management positions, in their quest to reach a broad set of politically directed objectives, too often apply a lenient and pragmatic approach when handling finds from detectorists? Do archaeologists deliberately avoid prosecuting potential offences even if they suspect wrongdoings? Would such practices, at least to some extent, explain the lack of prosecutions?

ON ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE AND EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE

MARTIN MESICEK

Rasmussen's article became the subject of lively debate in social media and in the metal-detecting community at large after its publication. Some accused the author of being biased against private metal detecting,

These are all under-studied questions, overshadowed by the often polarized debate 'for or against' metal detecting, that qualify for further investigations. While most previous attention to metal detecting has focused on finds in general and the potential benefits of including metal detecting in field research (Andersen and Nielsen 2010, Fabech and Näsman 2012, Jacobsen 2013) or investigating the background of or efficacy of different regulatory schemes in particular countries (Bland 2005, 2009, Fincham 2008, Svensson