

# Professional–Collector Collaboration

## Global Challenges and Solutions

Suzie Thomas , Anna Wessman , Bonnie L. Pitblado , Matthew Rowe ,  
and Bryon Schroeder

### ABSTRACT

This introductory article foregrounds the articles in this special issue, “Professional–Collector Collaboration: Global Challenges and Solutions,” complementing the special issue “Professional–Collector Collaboration Moving beyond Debate to Best Practice,” also published in *Advances in Archaeological Practice*. The articles that we introduce here cover examples and case studies from European settings such as Norway, the Czech Republic, England, Wales, Finland, and Belgium—places that have been exploring how to respond to the challenge of working meaningfully with collectors and finders of archaeological artifacts, especially metal detectorists. These are joined by examples from Australia, Mexico, Uruguay, and even the United States, in the context of handling—at first glance—problematic collections originating from elsewhere. The articles are diverse in their settings and the challenges they describe, but they point to the need for participatory and democratic approaches to archaeological heritage and the different publics that engage with it.

**Keywords:** collaboration, legislation, best practices, cultural heritage

Este artículo introductorio enfatiza los artículos en esta edición especial “Colaboración entre profesionales y recolectores: Desafíos globales y soluciones”, complementando la edición especial “Colaboración entre profesionales y recolectores, ir más allá del debate a la práctica adecuada”, también publicada en *Avances in Archaeological Practice (Avances en la práctica arqueológica)*. Los artículos que presentamos aquí abarcan ejemplos y estudios de caso de unos entornos europeos como Noruega, la República Checa, Inglaterra y Gales, Finlandia y Bélgica, lugares que han ido examinando cómo responder al desafío de trabajar significativamente con recolectores y descubridores de los artefactos arqueológicos, sobre todo los buscadores de metales. Estos se acompañan por unos ejemplos de Australia, México, Uruguay e incluso los EE.UU., en el contexto de manejar a las colecciones, a primera vista problemáticas, que origen de otro sitio. Los artículos son diversos en cuanto a sus entornos y los desafíos que describen, pero indican a la necesidad por enfoques participativos y democráticos al patrimonio arqueológico, y los públicos distintos que se interactúan con ello.

**Palabras clave:** colaboración, legislación, prácticas adecuadas, patrimonio cultural

Debates concerning the status, relevance, and ethical stance of artifact collectors, and whether archaeologists and other heritage professionals should seek to engage them, are present in most parts of the world. The *Advances in Archaeological Practice* special issue “Professional–Collector Collaboration: Moving beyond Debate to Best Practice,” published in February 2022, presents examples of engagement and dilemmas that such activities pose for archaeologists within the context of the United States (Pitblado et al. 2022). In this special issue, we expand the discussion to the global level, with articles from Europe, Central and South America, and Oceania.

Articles in the earlier issue discussed at length the collectors with whom engagements occurred, emphasizing that there is a spectrum of responsibility and responsiveness in avocational practices.

As discussed elsewhere (e.g., Pitblado 2014:387; Thomas 2016:143), this continuum is often conceptualized as featuring so-called professional looters (those who illegally remove artifacts for profit and feed the antiquities market) at one extreme, and fully responsible hobbyists who share information with archaeologists and the authorities and follow best practices at the other.

As the archaeological profession strives for a more open and democratic approach that not only acknowledges but also understands the perspectives of those outside the professional structures, we find many parallels across the world. But there are also differences, such as the robust formalized responses to hobbyist enthusiasts (e.g., metal detectorists) in many countries in Europe and the application of an amnesty in Australia (Viduka, this

*Advances in Archaeological Practice* 10(3), 2022, pp. 245–248

Copyright © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Society for American Archaeology. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the same Creative Commons licence is included and the original work is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use.

DOI:10.1017/aap.2022.20

volume) and Cyprus (Hardy 2014). In such cases, collecting may not only be legally permitted, but the local and national heritage infrastructures have sometimes been adapted to formally incorporate the input of hobbyists into official heritage management and archaeological research. This may not feel to some like an ideal solution, but we urge readers to approach the articles in this volume with an open mind and a willingness to consider that there are a variety of ways to approach heritage challenges involving different sectors of the public.

A central focus of this issue is what might be considered the next steps in collaboration: moving from individual person-to-person best collaborative practices and case studies to what can work in terms of *policies, protocols, and legislation* being implemented and evaluated in different countries. If successful, this can ensure that collector-generated data becomes part of the formal scientific and humanistic record. This kind of collaboration has been practiced successfully in some parts of the world, such as northern Europe, for several decades already. Consequently, the issue is considered either more or less sensitive in different countries, with a sliding scale of willingness to accept and work with nonprofessional hobbyists that is often situational to the local social, legal, and cultural settings.

Protocols are a core focus of the article by Elizabeth Marlowe. Taking the Society for American Archaeology's "Statement on Collaboration with Responsible and Responsive Stewards of the Past" (Society for American Archaeology 2018) as a starting point, Marlowe explores its implications for unprovenanced antiquities currently in the USA that originated elsewhere in the Classical world. As she notes, the many differences between collecting objects originally from the USA versus those imported from other countries suggest that a distinct framework may be needed for developing appropriate responses to the challenge of dealing with unprovenanced or poorly provenanced objects collected internationally. In the context of university museums as refuges for these problematic objects, she presents suggestions for best practices with which the objects can be researched and used for teaching in an appropriate manner.

The theme of citizen science and public participation recurs in this issue, as demonstrated in several of the articles discussing work in Europe and in the Australian case presented by Andrew Viduka. Charting how the management of underwater cultural heritage management has become increasingly professionalized in the decades since the 1940s, Viduka also overviews a 1993 amnesty intended to encourage private individuals to bring forward (eventually, tens of thousands of) objects collected from what are now protected shipwreck sites. The Australian government currently provides management for not only the artifacts in museums and other institutions but also those remaining in private possession.

Examples from Mexico and Uruguay show how not only finders of archaeological material but also those who actively collect such material can have meaningful relationships with students and professionals. Rafael Suárez, Maira Malán, and Elena Vallvé chart the changing attitudes of professionals toward private collectors. Once considered a problem with "useless" collections as far as research was concerned, in more recent times, private collectors have been recognized as one of the many groups of nonacademic stakeholders for Uruguayan cultural heritage. This is leading to

changes in legislation as well as possibilities for updating the ways in which the next generations of archaeology students are educated.

Natalia Martínez-Tagüeña, Guadalupe Sánchez, John Carpenter, Luz Alicia Torres Cubillas, and Leopoldo Vélez discuss challenges and opportunities for engaging with collectors in Sonora, Mexico. They note a history of unequal relationships between professionals and the state, and others, including not only collectors but also local museums and descendant communities. They advocate a "solidarity archaeology" model, which is more inclusive and respectful of the many stakeholders of and perspectives on Mexican archaeological heritage. They focus on a pilot proposal to be implemented between the INAH Sonora and Indigenous communities, collectors, and local museums, as well as the experiences of the Comcaac Community Archaeology Project. As they note, collectors have experiential knowledge, and if included in projects, they can become allies and archaeological stewards.

In Europe, metal detecting is a popular hobby. Professional archaeologists therefore need to understand what it is all about, despite any personal feelings it may arouse. In fact, extensive research has previously been done about hobby metal detecting as a practice, detectorist motivations (e.g., Axelsen 2021; Dobat 2013; Dobat et al. 2020; Immonen and Kinnunen 2020; Thomas 2012; Wessman et al. 2016; Winkley 2018), and the scientific value of detecting finds (e.g., Martens 2016; Robbins 2013; Trier Christiansen 2019).

Building on that work, several of the articles in this special issue address this form of artifact seeking. Although the majority of finds are from plowed soils, they may nevertheless have scientific value (e.g., Fredriksen 2019; Wessman and Oksanen 2022). Indeed, the many digitized databases of metal-detected finds that already exist in Europe and their widespread use in academic research projects testify to the value of metal-detected finds when reported and recorded to a usable standard. There are certainly long-term challenges for storing and sharing these data (with transnational infrastructure initiatives such as ARIADNEplus seeking solutions for aggregating them [<https://ariadne-infrastructure.eu/>]). Challenges likewise remain for the conservation and storage of the finds themselves (particularly the ones that remain in private ownership), as well as their movement, potentially over international borders. These challenges are also, however, opportunities for future research directions and for seeking co-creative solutions that involve all stakeholders.

In this vein, Irmelin Axelsen's article addresses metal detecting in Norway. Currently, metal detectorists are treated very differently depending on the personal attitudes of local heritage managers. Without a national system, collaboration might therefore become unequal, which is not fair. Consequently, Axelsen argues for more formalized collaboration between heritage managers and the metal-detecting community.

This also goes for group detecting events, both small and larger ones, which are often called "rallies." In their article, Anna Wessman, Pieterjan Deckers, Michael Lewis, Suzie Thomas, and Katerijne Nolet adopt a pan-European approach to the challenge of group metal-detecting events in England, Flanders (Belgium), and Finland. There are obvious challenges with such detecting events when it comes to finds recording and to covering the costs

of conservation of the objects. Therefore, there is an urgent need for strategies, guidelines, and recommendations not only for the heritage management but also for those organizing these events.

In addition to mitigating the risks of lost data and damage to archaeological sites, several projects in this special issue have investigated and even deployed solutions using principles of citizen science to encourage responsible collectors and to demonstrate the informational value of positive engagement with hobbyist artifact searchers. One way to investigate this is by doing research using written surveys.

Balázs Komoróczy, for example, discusses a questionnaire-based survey he conducted in the Czech Republic in 2017. Although Czech laws are still restrictive toward metal detecting, the survey suggests that the majority of professional archaeologists consider metal-detecting finds to be scientifically important and that they believe that cooperation with metal detectorists is necessary, beneficial, and acceptable. Professional opinions are crucial when it comes to developing new digital tools for metal-detecting finds, such as the “Portal of Amateur Collaborators” created in South Moravia in 2020.

Antonia Davidovic-Walther’s article focuses on citizen science and the collaboration between archaeologists and metal detectorists in Germany. Taking a theoretical approach to first define this relationship between the knowledge production of professionals and volunteers, her article then describes the results of ethnographic fieldwork and a questionnaire survey. She uses these insights to provide examples of best practices as well as recommendations for future policies.

## MOVING FORWARD

The collection of articles presented in this special issue not only shows the diversity of legislative and political settings in which engagement between archaeologists and collectors and finders of artifacts occurs but also demonstrates that—to differing extents—engagement with such groups and individuals is already taking place. In some cases, initiatives are very new and are starting out at a grass-roots level. Elsewhere, articles build on and discuss longer-established systems for engaging with finders of artifacts, sometimes supported by state investment through dedicated personnel, and responding to varied legal frameworks.

The question of ownership also has an impact in some of these cases. Whereas some countries, such as England, only exercise state (or, in this case, Crown) ownership of certain categories of artifacts as defined by law, in other cases, the obligations of the state toward artifacts are more established than in the United States, where in some states, vast swaths of land (and the artifacts contained therein) remain in private hands. Whether this affects the capacity of cultural heritage managers and decision makers to negotiate terms of best practice with artifact hunters and collectors is worthy of further discussion.

All the projects described show people working together to address challenges, and in many cases, solutions are not yet fully realized. Further research, education, and communication are therefore needed. This goes not only for the heritage managers

and archaeologists but also for members of the public. It is important that both parties understand and learn from each other.

Nonetheless, these articles also show that many of the debates and questions raised, for example, in the United States, have a global relevance. As we see from these submissions, there is no one way of responding to collectors and other nonprofessional groups, yet it is always possible to do so ethically and respectfully and in consideration of both the people involved and the archaeology itself. However, it is important that we overcome reactionary responses to private collecting and nonprofessional activities. We should not forget that professional archaeology was once built and developed by hobbyist and amateur archaeologists.

Participatory heritage goes beyond the obvious power-related questions of “Who owns the past?” to a more inclusive and democratic way of collaborating and engaging with different stakeholder groups.

## Acknowledgments

The guest coeditors of this special issue would like to thank all of the contributing authors, who have so generously provided their expertise, experience, and insights.

## Data Availability Statement

This introductory text is not based on original data.

## Competing Interests

There are no competing interests to the best of the authors’ knowledge.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Axelsen, Irmelin  
2021 What’s the Deal with Old Things? An Explanatory Study of Attitudes and Practices towards Certain Old Things among Archaeologists and Metal Detectorists in Norway. PhD dissertation, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, Oslo.
- Dobat, Andres  
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* 16:704–725.
- Dobat, Andres, Pieterjan Deckers, Stijn Heeren, Michael Lewis, Suzie Thomas, and Anna Wessman  
2020 Towards a Cooperative Approach to Hobby Metal Detecting: The European Public Finds Recording Network (EFPRN) Vision Statement. *European Journal of Archaeology* 23:272–292.
- Fredriksen, Caroline  
2019 Pløyelagsfunn i skjæringspunktet mellom forskningspotensial og forvaltningsprioriteringer: Fokus og holdninger i diskusjonen om privat metallsøking i Norge. *Primitive tider* 21:63–79.
- Hardy, Samuel  
2014 Threats to Cultural Heritage in the Cyprus Conflict. In *Heritage Crime: Progress, Prospects and Prevention*, edited by Louise Grove and Suzie Thomas, pp. 81–104. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, United Kingdom.
- Immonen, Visa, and Joonas Kinnunen  
2020 Metal Detecting as a Social Formation: A Longitudinal Study from Finland. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 20:313–334.

- Martens, Jes  
2016 Pløyejord som kontekst: Metalløkning, forskning og forvaltning. In *Pløyejord som kontekst: Nye utfordringer for forskning, forvaltning og formidling*, edited by Jes Martens and Mads Ravn, pp. 13–22. Portal and Cultural History Museum, Oslo.
- Pitblado, Bonnie L.  
2014 An Argument for Ethical, Proactive, Archaeologist–Artifact Collector Collaboration. *American Antiquity* 79:385–400.
- Pitblado, Bonnie L., Matthew Rowe, Bryon Schroeder, Suzie Thomas, and Anna Wessman  
2022 Professional–Collector Collaboration: Moving beyond Debate to Best Practice. *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 10:3–9.
- Robbins, Katherine  
2013 Balancing the Scales: Exploring the Variable Effects of Collection Bias on Data Collected by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. *Landscapes* 14:54–72.
- Society for American Archaeology  
2018 SAA Statement on Collaboration with Responsible and Responsive Stewards of the Past. Electronic document, <https://www.saa.org/quick-nav/saa-media-room/news-article/2018/08/01/statement-on-collaboration-with-responsible-and-responsive-stewards-of-the-past>, accessed July 19, 2022.
- Thomas, Suzie  
2012 Searching for Answers: A Survey of Metal-Detector Users in the UK. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 18:49–64.  
2016 The Future of Studying Hobbyist Metal Detecting in Europe: A Call for a Transnational Approach. *Open Archaeology* 2:140–149.
- Trier Christiansen, Torben  
2019 Metal-Detected Late Iron Age and Early Medieval Brooches from the Limfjord Region, Northern Jutland: Production, Use and Loss. *Journal of Archaeology and Ancient History* 24:12–16.
- Wessman, Anna, Leena Koivisto, and Suzie Thomas  
2016 Metal Detecting in Finland - An Ongoing Debate. *Open Archaeology* 2:85–96.
- Wessman, Anna, and Eljas Oksanen  
2022 Metal-Detecting Data as Citizen Science Archaeology. In *Oodeja Mikalle: Professori Mika Lavennon juhlakirja hänen täyttäessä 60 vuotta / Odes to Mika: Professor Mika Lavento's Festschrift as He Turns 60 / Оды Мике: Юбилейный сборник посвященный 60-летию профессора Мики Лавенто*, edited by Petri Halinen, Volker Heyd, and Kristiina Mannermaa, pp. 268–277. Monographs of the Archaeological Society of Finland, Helsinki.
- Winkley, Felicity  
2018 Talking to Metal-Detectorists in the Field: A Methodology for Analysing Motivations and Attitudes to Landscape. *Public Archaeology* 15:186–213.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Suzie Thomas** ■ Antwerp Cultural Heritage Sciences (ARCHES), Universiteit Antwerpen, Antwerp, Belgium ([suzie.thomas@uantwerpen.be](mailto:suzie.thomas@uantwerpen.be), corresponding author)

**Anna Wessman** ■ Department of Cultural History, Bergen University, Bergen, Norway

**Bonnie L. Pitblado** ■ Department of Anthropology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

**Matthew Rowe** ■ School of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

**Bryon Schroeder** ■ Center for Big Bend Studies, Sulross State University, Alpine, TX, USA