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How Quickly Should Public Benefit Come From Archaeology? Availability, use and influence on society: Results of the Estonian salvage and metal detector study

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Summary

This paper explores the idea of excavation being only the first stage in communicating the benefit of archaeology to the public. The role of museums, social media and scientific publication are all important, as are the support from private developers and the personal role of the archaeologists themselves. The use of social media can be positive but this paper also details problems with metal detectorists groups, some of which are not acting responsibly.

1. Introduction

In 1980, an Estonian puppet animation '[Väleik Vibulane](#)' about the life of Stone Age people appeared on TV. Two boys from a tribe of mammoth hunters went to find fire, because their tribe was unable to light fire. After many adventures, they reached a tribe of farmers, where they learned to make fire, bore a hole into a stone, make pottery and use a wheel (Figure 1). As someone who studied Stone Age archaeology, while reviewing the film I discovered how scholarly inaccurate it is – Palaeolithic and Neolithic were hopelessly mixed and the references to Estonian Stone Age material culture were extremely stylised. However, to my surprise, I have to admit that the description of the everyday life of the Stone Age as depicted in the animation has become deeply rooted into my subconscious and affected my thoughts about the period.



Figure 1: Frames from the animation "Välek Vibulane" ([Tallinnfilm 1980](#)). The stone axes with a bored hole depicted on the first frame came to use on the territory of Estonia together with the Battle Axe and Corded Ware culture (Johanson [2006](#), 100–101) about 3000 BC (Kriiska [2000](#), 75). On the other frame one can see pots decorated with comb impressions and pits and dimples, these pots had conical (not flat) bottom in Estonia; the first vessels with a flat bottom came with Corded Ware, but their ornamentation is dominated by cord impressions, notches, grooves (Kriiska [2000](#), 64–70).

During my 15 years of work in heritage management, I have constantly held discussions with owners, developers, people from municipalities, and state institutions, who manage land where archaeological heritage is situated (Kadakas and Lillak [2019](#), 52). Together with my colleagues from the National Heritage Board, I explain daily the significance of archaeological heritage, values of preservation, and the necessity of study before the excavation. Often the owners raise questions: why is it necessary to do the fieldwork; what benefit can be expected from the excavation of these specific settlement layers; or from studying inhumation burials from the Christian period? Given the context of the personal example presented at the beginning of this article and the discussions in my everyday work, there is a reason to ask: how quickly should public benefit of archaeology appear and how quickly in fact does it appear, if at all?

In this article I will give an overview of the present situation of archaeological research in Estonia – mostly salvage work and metal detecting – and how the results of research are introduced to the wider audience in the national and local media, museums, and further in art and literature. Based on my experience I describe how archaeology is seen by Estonian society. Finally, I will discuss how much general public benefit occurs or could occur during archaeological fieldwork.

2. Situation of Defence Management of the Archaeological Heritage in Estonia

The Heritage Conservation Act of Estonia (HCA [2019](#)) follows the principles of the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage, adopted in 1992 (CoE [1992](#)): the maintenance of an inventory of archaeological heritage, the mandatory reporting by a finder of a chance discovery, to ensure that excavations are carried out



only by qualified persons, and that archaeological heritage is reflected in planning policies etc. (Kadakas [2017](#)).

The National Heritage Board goes through over 500 development plans a year for projects that concern archaeological heritage. Archaeological field studies are required and carried out where necessary. Since 2019, owners have received partial financial compensation for the designated research (HCA [2019](#), § 48). At present, it is up to 1000–1500 euros for one project, sufficient in the case of small watching briefs but not enough to cover larger excavations.

As mentioned in the Valletta Convention ([1992](#), preamble, 3, iii), metal detecting influences the preservation of archaeological heritage. Estonia has imposed a system of certificates for using metal detectors. To qualify for a certificate, one has to go through special training where cultural/archaeological heritage and the system of protection is introduced (including how to recognise features in the landscape, typical find materials and contexts, as well as information regarding firearms, explosive devices and war graves). One has to send a notification before going into the field and later present a fieldwork report, which should include information about the fieldwork locations and finds (HCA [2019](#), § 29). It is possible to get a (monetary) award for presenting the discovered artefacts (HCA [2019](#), § 28) and the number of people metal detecting for valuable historical artefacts is enormous compared to the number of academic scholars. According to the national registry of cultural monuments (KMR), 30 archaeologists have a certificate of competence (However, the number of people with an education in archaeology is bigger: in 2014 there were 121; DISCO [2014](#), 18), but there are c. 500 certificates for use of a metal detector. Based on the size of the social media groups of metal-detector enthusiasts, the real number of detectorists is much larger e.g. the Facebook group 'Eesti detektoristid' has about 2400 people, but this also includes archaeologists and people who just take an interest.

Based on my professional experience, I would divide the detectorists into two major groups: those who follow the rules in principle and those who act illegally. The first group includes many serious local history enthusiasts, who want to learn about the earlier history of the area, are sincerely interested and cooperate with archaeologists e.g. [Ajakihid](#). The illegal detectorists see detectorism as a profitable source of (extra) money from the state: if the state wants the artefacts, it should pay for them. As workers of the NHC we register signs of illegal activities when inspecting the protected areas, but local people also speak about detectorists who act under cover of night. In a few cases, in cooperation with police, it has been possible to catch the looter(s) ([Kretova 2018](#)), but usually they remain unidentified.

3. Popularisation of the Process and Results of Archaeological Studies

In the new HCA effective since 1 May 2019 it is defined that: 'An archaeological monument is the remains, thing or set of things of human activity and other traces which indicate the multiple layers of time on a cultural landscape and which provide scientific information on the history of mankind and human relations with the natural environment. An archaeological layer is an important part of an archaeological monument (HCA [2019](#), § 11).'



Archaeological study and popularisation of results are necessary for deeper understanding of the temporal layers of cultural landscape. Most of the field studies are salvage works (Russow *et al.* [2019](#), 9–10), which are done as fast as possible with limited resources. Usually, the archaeologist has neither the time nor the knowledge to do press and publicity; the state Heritage Board has no resources for this either. A few commercial companies have accounts on social media, with c. 400 followers e.g. [Arheox OÜ](#). More interesting finds (both artefacts and structures) from current excavations are introduced in social media posts, although presentation of finds from different periods does not provide a synthesised narrative to the public. However, based on the comments on the pictures, it can be said that information about archaeology presented like this arises positive feelings in the observers. The only journal of archaeology for the wider audience of Estonia has about 1000 online followers, including journalists. This page introduces information about current fieldwork in Estonia, and research articles by Estonian scholars, as well as exhibitions and events ([Tutulus](#)).

More significant and long-lasting salvage excavations (about 15-20 per year) almost always attract the attention of both local and national media. In most cases the story is presented as news (what the archaeologists discovered) and/or as a problem (if and how much it will hinder the construction work). This is understandable, because the larger excavations usually take place in towns, where construction work often disturbs everyday life. Usually the prior work done by the NHC is not referred to, including any previous knowledge about the studied area, and why and for what reason the field research was required.

Every year, a scholarly collection of articles describing the fieldwork results of the previous year is published, ([Archaeological Fieldwork in Estonia](#)) is mostly in English and aimed at specialists both at home and abroad. The articles seek to present the primary results of fieldwork, some with detailed analysis and synthesis. To the Estonian-speaking audience, knowledge about archaeology is communicated through media; the above-mentioned journal *Tutulus* or the collected articles from local museums. These articles synthesise the results, explain the context, and enable the reader to understand the historical sites and events. Besides the written output the archaeological discoveries also result in museum exhibitions, whereby in addition to permanent exhibitions thematic temporary exhibitions are produced, concerning a particular region or topic of history.

4. The Question of Money

During everyday communication with landowners, developers, hobby metal detectorists and journalists, i.e. people who do not work in the field of heritage, a rather ambivalent attitude towards archaeology can be observed. On the first moment of direct contact with archaeology, e.g. finding artefacts or learning about the requirement to carry out field study, everything is reduced to two questions: why does the research cost so much, and how much money could I get for this artefact?

The HCA stipulates the precautionary principle as the general main principle in the field of organising protection (HCA [2019](#), § 3, 43) and preventing the destruction of heritage (§ 33), i.e. it is in the public interest to keep the *status quo* as regards the landscape. Therefore, it is the obligation of the person who wants to develop a site to pay for all expenses. It has been observed during direct communication with landowners that despite this, the requirement to pay for archaeological study is seen as unjust. It is understandable; if the polluter pays principle seems unjust for a private person who



wants to join his or her house to the water or sewer mains, it is also the case that the owners of large developments think that if public interest is behind the necessity for archaeological study, then the public should pay 100% for it as well. One does not act as part of the society while using private property, although cultural heritage is for everyone, and therefore is also everyone's responsibility (Council of Europe (Faro Convention) [2005](#), article 4).

Based on my everyday experience of contact with hobby metal detectorists, I can say that in the case of well over half of the detectorists, land owners and people just standing by, it is usual to try to figure out the monetary value of the artefacts. Calculating the value of 'movables' with cultural value on a monetary value scale is a simplified interpretation of the Property Law, which creates a feeling of incommensurability in this conflict of value between the archaeologists and hobbyists.

As mentioned, after imposing the requirement of fieldwork or the discovery of artefacts from the ground, all other values will be overshadowed by the topic of money. In this conflict, the HCA should guarantee that the heritage values are taken into account or are even given advantage. Such a beneficial HCA can be sustained only with the support of the wider audience and the decision makers (MPs). In order to maintain support, archaeological heritage and its research as public and general benefit should be evident. Public support for the requirement of excavation before development can only be sustained with the help of continuous popularisation of the fieldwork results.

5. Professionalisation of the Fields of Heritage

During the last two centuries, what was initially a hobby of the Enlightenment Period has become the scholarly study of archaeology. Researchers specialise in regions, periods, groups of archaeological material, types of sites or technologies, among many others. The result of specialisation and professionalisation has led to a deeper scholarly understanding, but at the same time, the field is moving away from the general public. It brings respect but also disbelief and suspicion (why should we pay for something that we do not understand?).

Besides archaeology, heritage management has also become more professional and a discipline in its own right. Here again the professionalisation has brought with it a movement away from the general public, with the values described by professionals often not understood, e.g. the owners and developers often find it difficult to understand why restoring a ruined building is not allowed; why should the new be distinguishable from the old, etc. The more complicated the field becomes, the harder it is to keep the general public informed; the arguments become more complicated and are difficult to follow without the background knowledge, causing distrust.

Museums, which in Estonia are the main communicators of archaeological knowledge, have also been in constant development. In the professionalisation of museology, a shift in the opposite direction to that of archaeology and heritage management can be observed, with the main focus of museology (at least in the second half of the 20th century) being active movement towards the (local) people. Museums have been developed into strong regional centres of culture and entertainment, encouraging study



and question, and offering a "wow" experience. Referring to the concept of the three socio-technical stages of culture, concerning the creation of social and economic values by Pier Luigi Sacco, it could be said that the museums of Estonia are in culture stage 2.0, and some probably in 3.0. It means that stage 1.0, where museums were considered to be temples of knowledge, has been passed. Currently the museums are going through the stage of being a place of entertainment, to become a platform for the community (Sacco [2018](#)). This also offers an opportunity for archaeology: to bring the communities closer to the apparently incomprehensible heaps of soil, complicated typologies, or new knowledge about the life and activities of predecessors, with the help of the natural sciences.

6. Archaeological Heritage as Public Benefit During Field Study

Despite the fact that archaeological heritage is a part of heritage management, with close connections to cultural landscape, property and income/expenditure, it is not possible to understand this type of heritage without scholarly research. It means that the role of the specialist in contextualisation of heritage and description of values cannot be underestimated.

It is not possible to get a public benefit that everyone can understand, from every salvage excavation episode, during the fieldwork alone. During the last 10 years about 90%, in some years even 99%, of the total excavations have been salvage excavations, 75% of which take place in towns or medieval centres such as churches and castles (Figure 2). Because of this, the salvage archaeologists cannot work often in e.g. Stone Age or Early Metal (Bronze) Age sites and keep themselves updated with the research problems of a particular period or monument type. The archaeologist responsible for a salvage excavation may lack the 'big picture' about every period. Minimal analysis is done during the salvage works, so the essence of the site may only be revealed later, when a specialised researcher analyses the collected material. If the salvage archaeologist lacks deeper knowledge about the potential of a particular site, an interview given from the trench may give the public an impression that the decision by the Heritage Board to demand the archaeological study is not warranted and justified.

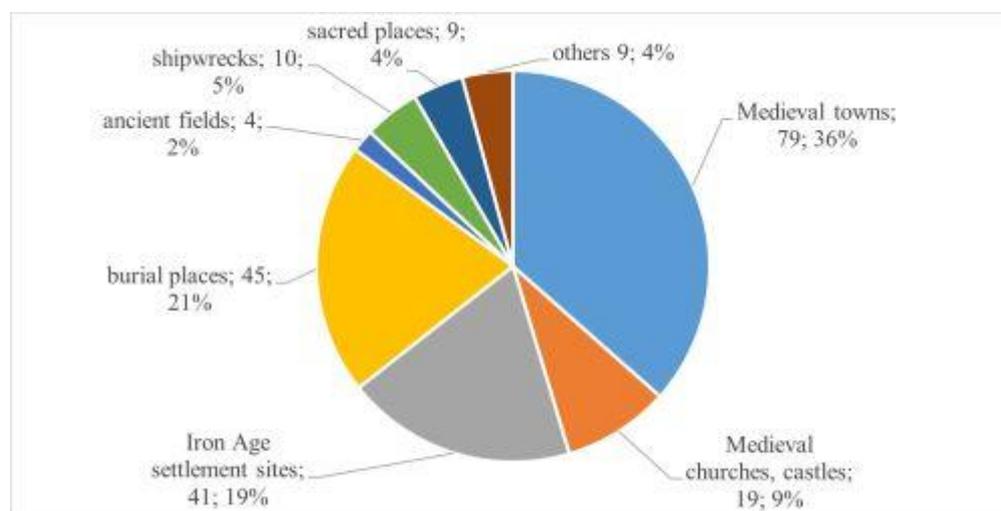




Figure 2: Division of types of archaeological heritage studied in 2019. Source: National Heritage Board, Estonia

Many field studies take place on sites where there is almost no archaeological material that the wider public would recognise. Until the 13th century the building traditions of Estonia did not include lime mortar, with timber, thatch, straw, clay and dry wall used at this time. Very early horizontal beam structures started to dominate, which leave almost no traces in the soil compared with post constructions. Therefore, the traces of prehistoric settlement are very faint in the landscape. Only artefacts, burned stones, working and food remains mark the cultural layer and, when lucky, one can find traces of a fireplace (Figure 3) or 3-4 stones that mark a house foundation. Many villages of Estonia have been situated in the same place for at least 1000 years. Therefore, the earlier settlement structures are often disturbed by later ploughing or construction work. Often only a few sherds of pottery relate to settlement of the Bronze or Early Iron Age within a later settlement site. If the salvage archaeologist is not able to distinguish the Early Metal Age artefacts, he or she will obviously not notice their potential. Often a single sherd of pottery is not diagnostic, and only a synthesised study can tell us whether we have a settlement pattern of single farmsteads or villages, or if there are any peculiarities of coastal and inland settlements etc.



Figure 3: A supposed fireplace from 10th-17th c. in a settlement site of Viira on the island of Muhu. The stratigraphy of the soil layers cannot be understood without learning archaeology. Photo: Rivo Bernotas.

Salvage studies are always carried out with a limited budget. The developer wants the field study to take place as quickly and smoothly as possible, so that it will not hinder the construction process. Therefore, the activities provided for the public also have to be limited. It can happen during development that the developers do not want any publicity about the discovered heritage, e.g. when new residential houses are being built on top



of a former cemetery. In the case of other types of heritage, there are many examples where the developer has initiated publicity, getting positive advertising for its business. In Tallinn in 2015 a development company, Metro Capital OÜ, popularised the discovery and field study of a medieval ship, and a construction company, YIT AS, organised several events in 2018 during the field study of a suburban dump site with exceptionally well-preserved medieval artefacts

(see <https://www.yit.ee/ettevottest/uudised/2018/pressiteade-vaike-patarei-jahu-krundi-ajaloolised-leiud>).

As mentioned by the archaeologist Tõnno Jonuks at a seminar organised by NHB for archaeologists on 31 January 2020, on sites where publicity cannot be done for the reasons mentioned above, the personality and attitude of the archaeologist can still create a positive impression. The knowledge will reach the community through personal contacts and can create a positive background to understanding the necessity of the field study. Some 200–250 field study episodes take place in Estonia in a year; two-thirds of these are various minor watching briefs – laying of powerlines, pipes for water and sewage (Russow *et al.* 2019, 12). Such works often last 1 or 2 days, or a week or two in the case of major pipelines. During such a time, an archaeologist probably meets 3–10 people, who can learn what is being studied and why. Jonuks said at the seminar that the impression about the work of the archaeologist depends very much on the personality of the archaeologist and on how he or she positions him- or herself compared to the developer and construction workers: is he or she a member of the team, who has to find good solutions to allow the construction work together with the necessities of archaeology, or is he or she only the Big Scholar, bored by the lack of spectacular finds, with a patronising attitude to the construction workers, which does not help to develop a good public image of archaeology. With personal contacts, during one year Estonian archaeology can reach to 1000–2000 people, who perhaps would talk about their experience to another 10 people (friends, family). This way about 20,000 people in Estonia may hear something about archaeological heritage each year, which comprises about 1.5% of our population. Is it few or many?

7. Conclusion

If we look around, the influence of cultural heritage on our everyday life can be observed. Historical sources, including archaeological sites and artefacts, provide people with employment. We see elements of heritage, including archaeology in art – from handicraft to high culture. Via literature and films based on history, we study our story of becoming human and also describe present-day life.

If we were to take archaeology as a scholarly discipline out of the interpretative and educational process of archaeological heritage, we would fall back to the early times of archaeology, the amateur collectors of curiosities. We have gained a lot of knowledge during the last centuries thanks to the professionalisation of archaeology; we have learned to see and contextualise cultures and features long gone. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the local communities would abandon such a potential to gain deep and content-rich knowledge. If archaeological excavations have taken place in the area and it has been broadcast on news, with an exhibition by the local museum with related activities, then it can be seen how local people start to see their area with new eyes, and the interest in ensuring monuments are preserved, maintained, tidied and looked after starts to develop. Archaeological field study is one of the first 'links in the chain' in the



process of understanding the archaeological heritage; the public benefit for the heritage community appears only when one looks at all such pieces as a whole.

In order that people consider the archaeological heritage as a natural and undetachable part of landscape, understand and appreciate the essential values of it, the awareness of history has to grow considerably. In Estonia the media and the archaeologists work to achieve this, although it is mainly the contemporary museums who are successful, working actively with the marketing of history and engagement with the public. Based on the knowledge and experience obtained, other kinds of culture are created, from literature and films to computer games. Every such element brings the awareness of the values of history closer to people.

It is not possible to measure the benefit of every single archaeological field study for the public. It is the job of archaeologists to mine 'raw material', which is 'refined' through synthesis by specialised scholars, popularised by museums, and 'finished' by the creators of culture, from artisans to directors of films that become cult classics. The more we know about history, the more meaningful culture we can create, as Estonian art historian Villem Raam once said. Then future generations could possibly be content with us, as I am content with the creators of the animation 'Välek Vibulane', thanks to whom I possibly studied archaeology.

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