

An Ethical Model for the Management of Metal-Detector Discoveries in the Context of Protecting Movable Cultural Heritage

Flavius Cristian MĂRCĂU
Lecturer PhD., "Constantin Brâncuși" University of Târgu Jiu, Romania,
flavus.marcau@e-ucb.ro

Abstract:

Over the last two decades, metal detecting has become a visible and growing component of the European heritage landscape, and Romania has experienced a similar expansion, with a significant number of artefacts entering museum collections through discoveries made outside systematic excavation. This development has intensified an enduring dilemma: while the recovery of objects may prevent loss or degradation, the extraction of finds without stratigraphic recording often entails an irreversible loss of archaeological context. In Romania, this tension is amplified by a relationship marked by mistrust between archaeologists, detectorists, and museums, and by the fact that the legally regulated discovery pathway frequently operates as a purely administrative sequence rather than as a coherent process of information recovery and trust-building. The present study proposes an applied ethical model adapted to Romanian realities, built on qualitative analysis of the normative framework, observation of institutional practice, and comparative reference to European experiences of integrating public discoveries into official heritage systems. The model shifts the emphasis from post-factum control to prior formation of responsible behaviour, advocating a museum-led familiarisation stage (approximately ten hours, optionally complemented by an applied practical module) as a procedural condition that introduces discoverers to the meaning of archaeological context, the legal reporting pathway, and minimal documentation gestures. By standardising simple recording practices and strengthening predictable institutional communication, the model aims to improve the scientific usability of finds, clarify the boundary between responsible reporting and illicit intervention, and consolidate the museum's role as mediator between community participation and archaeological knowledge production. The article argues that, in resource-constrained systems with complete but unevenly functioning institutional architecture, low-cost measures grounded in procedural coherence and participatory governance can significantly enhance the protection of movable cultural heritage.

Keywords: metal detecting; movable cultural heritage; archaeological context; museum mediation; participatory heritage governance; ethical model; reporting procedures; Romania; public archaeology; documentation standards

Introduction

Over the last two decades, metal detecting has become a constant presence in the European heritage landscape, and Romania has naturally followed the same trajectory. Whereas for a long time the discovery of archaeological remains was associated almost exclusively with systematic archaeological research carried out within controlled institutional frameworks, today the easy access to technology and the emergence of increasingly active communities of enthusiasts have visibly changed this reality. Consequently, a significant proportion of the objects that enter museum collections originate from discoveries made outside archaeological excavations, a situation that compels a reconsideration of the relationship between specialists, institutions, and metal-detecting practitioners.

This change is not only practical, but also conceptual. For archaeology, the context of discovery remains decisive because it allows the artefact to “speak” about the past beyond its materiality. An object removed from the ground without stratigraphic documentation loses part of the information it could have provided, such as its position, its association with other elements, and its relationship to structures or habitation layers. At the same time, the reality of recent years shows that numerous objects have entered the museum heritage precisely through the intervention of detectorists and, in some cases, have been saved from degradation, agricultural destruction, or far more aggressive clandestine interventions. The dilemma therefore takes shape between the loss of context and the recovery of the object, and simplified solutions—whether the demonisation of metal detecting or the minimisation of its risks—are not, in fact, real solutions.

Inevitably, this situation has generated tensions. These do not merely reflect a dispute between “specialists” and “amateurs,” but rather different ways of understanding how knowledge about the past is produced and how authority over heritage is distributed. For many detectorists, searching is a social practice—a form of recreation, a way of participating in history, or sometimes even a form of community belonging. For archaeologists, however, uncontrolled intervention risks turning heritage into a collection of objects detached from their story, while museums are most often the institutions that receive the final outcome of this encounter between passion and risk. In the absence of clear mechanisms for dialogue, this triad has frequently functioned on the basis of mistrust, the most visible effects being the uneven reporting of discoveries and the difficulty of integrating them into a coherent scientific circuit.

For this reason, an approach that remains exclusively within the legal or conflictual register is insufficient and unproductive. Regulations are necessary, but they do not, by themselves, generate cooperation, just as sanction cannot replace heritage education or the building of trust. What is lacking is a practical ethical framework capable of translating responsibility towards heritage into concrete and predictable behaviours: what should be done at the moment of discovery, how minimal contextual information can be saved, how an institutional pathway can be

constructed so that it is not perceived as hostile, and, ultimately, how the museum can function as a mediator between community and research.

The aim of this study is to propose an ethical model for the management of metal-detector discoveries, suited to the Romanian context and capable of overcoming the antagonistic logic that has frequently marked the relationship between archaeologists and detectorists. The approach does not seek either to minimise the risks associated with uncontrolled interventions or to idealise the role of finders, but to outline a framework in which responsibility for movable cultural heritage is shared and cooperatively assumed. The analysis of the significance of archaeological context, the examination of institutional tensions in Romania, the reference to European models, and the formulation of an applied proposal regarding the role of the museum in shaping and managing the trajectory of discoveries represent the main directions of the research.

Viewed in this way, metal detecting no longer appears as a phenomenon that merely needs to be controlled, but as a social reality that can be integrated ethically and institutionally. Insofar as it is accompanied by mechanisms of documentation, communication, and recognition, it can contribute to bringing the public closer to heritage without compromising the demands of archaeological research. In the absence of such a framework, tensions will continue to reproduce themselves, and movable cultural heritage will remain vulnerable not only through material losses but also through the irreversible loss of the information that gives meaning to the recovered objects.

1. Research Methodology

The present study is based on a qualitative approach, constructed at the intersection of the analysis of the normative framework, the observation of institutional practice, and ethical reflection applied to the field of movable cultural heritage. The topic did not require the use of quantitative instruments, but rather an understanding of how the trajectory of accidental archaeological discoveries actually functions and of the relationship between the actors involved in this process.

The starting point consisted in examining the legislation that regulates the regime of discoveries and the use of metal detectors, not with the intention of providing an exhaustive legal interpretation, but in order to follow how legal provisions are transformed into concrete practices (notification at the level of the local authority, the intervention of the county directorate for culture, and the integration of the object into the museum heritage). Within this framework, relevant examples from Romania—reflected in the specialised literature, in reports, and in the public communications of museums—were also analysed in order to observe to what extent cooperation between finders and institutions contributes to the preservation of archaeological information or, on the contrary, to its loss.

The perspective was complemented by a comparative reference to several European models for managing discoveries made by metal-detecting enthusiasts, not in order to propose a mechanical transfer of solutions, but to identify the principles of good practice that have made the transition from conflict to collaboration possible.

This comparison was intended to highlight which elements can be realistically adapted to the Romanian context without major legislative changes and without the creation of new institutional structures.

The central dimension of the approach, however, remains that of applied ethics. The analysis does not stop at describing an existing situation, but aims to formulate an operational model that capitalises on already functional mechanisms and introduces minimal interventions, yet with an effect on the behaviour of the actors involved.

2. Movable Cultural Heritage and the Significance of the Archaeological Context

In museum practice and in contemporary archaeological discourse, movable cultural heritage is no longer understood merely as a collection of objects valued for their age or rarity, but as a material form of memory. An artefact enters a collection not simply because it is “beautiful” or “old,” but because it can convey something about a community, a historical moment, a way of life. For this very reason, in archaeology the value of an object is not determined exclusively by its materiality, but by the context in which it was discovered: its position in the soil, its relationship to other remains, and/or the layer from which it originates. All these elements transform the object from an isolated piece into a historical document¹.

This emphasis on context is not the result of methodological formalism, but of experience accumulated over time. Every time an artefact is extracted without documentation, part of the information it could have provided is lost. This is not merely an abstract loss, but the impossibility of subsequently reconstructing the relationships between objects, the succession of habitation levels, or the function of a space. For this reason, for the archaeologist, context is not a technical detail, but the very condition of knowledge².

On the other hand, the reality of museum heritage shows that things are never quite so simple. A considerable number of the objects now held in collections come from chance discoveries, from interventions carried out outside systematic research, or from older recoveries for which documentation standards were different. Nevertheless, they continue to be studied, exhibited, and integrated into historical discourse. Typological analyses, comparisons with similar finds, or their inclusion

¹ Paola Davoli, „Papyri and Ostraca as Archaeological Objects: The Importance of Context”, in *Using Ostraca in the Ancient World*, Berlin–Boston, De Gruyter, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110712902-002>; Antonis Tsakalos, „Transforming Excavation Finds into Museum Exhibits: Examples from the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens”, in *The Actual Problems of History and Theory of Art*, 7, 2017, p. 180–189, <https://doi.org/10.18688/aa177-2-19>

²Brenda J. Baker, „Confronting Taphonomic Challenges from Excavation Through Curation of Human Remains”, in *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 32, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10816-024-09672-7>; G. Bruschi, D. Amadio, „Documentation of Archaeological Stratigraphic Units. New Digital Technologies Applied to the Burials in Sant’Andrea in Mombasiglio”, in *The International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.5194/isprs-archives-xxviii-m-2-2023-319-2023>.

in already known series confer meaning on them and make them useful for knowledge. The fact that museums also function on the basis of such pieces demonstrates that heritage value does not disappear completely once context is lost, even though it is inevitably diminished³.

This is, in fact, where the tension that runs through the entire discussion of discoveries made with metal detectors emerges. Between the recovered object and the lost context there is no relationship that can be resolved through a simple choice. In the field, situations are often far more nuanced: there are artefacts brought to the surface by agricultural works, pieces located in the plough soil, objects exposed to erosion or to clandestine interventions. In such cases, their recovery may genuinely mean saving them from disappearance. At the same time, the lack of initial documentation limits the possibility of integrating them into a complete historical narrative⁴.

From the museum's perspective, this ambivalence is a daily experience. Objects enter collections accompanied by different degrees of information. Some have exhaustive archaeological documentation, others only an approximate location, while some arrive without any data regarding the place of discovery. Each of these situations requires a different mode of work and a different type of exhibition discourse. In the absence of context, the curator is forced to resort to analogies, typological classifications, or comparisons, which allows the object to be valorised but reduces the capacity to construct a coherent story about the community that produced it⁵.

For this reason, the problem of context cannot be regarded exclusively as a technical matter reserved for specialists. It inevitably becomes a question of responsibility towards heritage. When an object is removed from the ground, it is not only information for the archaeologist that disappears, but also part of the museum's ability to convey an intelligible history to the public. Context belongs not only to research, but also to the educational and social dimension of heritage⁶.

At the same time, the experience of recent years shows that part of the information associated with a discovery can be saved even in the absence of a proper archaeological intervention. The exact location, the approximate depth, the type of

³ D. Stansbie, „Boundary Objects' in Archaeological Finds and Environmental Research", in *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.16995/traj.4335>.

⁴ I. Ogloblin Ramirez et al., „Investigating the Microarchaeological Record at Underwater Sites: Operating an On-Site Laboratory During the Antikythera Shipwreck Excavation", in *Journal of Maritime Archaeology*, 19, 2024, p. 385–406, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11457-024-09415-5>; J. Goff, B. McFadgen, N. Marriner, „Landscape Archaeology — The Value of Context to Archaeological Interpretation: A Case Study from Waitore, New Zealand", in *Geoarchaeology*, 36, 2021, p. 768–779, <https://doi.org/10.1002/gea.21864>.

⁵ Dorina Moullou et al., „Digital Tools for Data Acquisition and Heritage Management in Archaeology and Their Impact on Archaeological Practices", in *Heritage*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage7010005>.

⁶ Lukáš Bruha et al., „Reconstruction of Lost Cultural Heritage Sites and Landscapes: Context of Ancient Objects in Time and Space", in *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information*, 9, 2020, p. 604, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijgi9100604>.

soil, or the empirical observations of the finder are data which, if recorded and transmitted to the competent institutions, can significantly reduce the initial loss. This is not a substitute for systematic research, but the recovery of what can still be recovered⁷.

Viewed from this perspective, the relationship between movable heritage and archaeological context no longer appears as an irreconcilable opposition, but as a field in which responsible behaviour makes the difference. Between an object removed from the ground without any information and one accompanied by a minimum set of data there is a significant scientific distance. This distance is not determined by technology or resources, but by the existence of a culture of documentation and cooperation⁸.

Ultimately, the discussion about context leads to a conclusion that goes beyond the strictly disciplinary framework. The protection of movable cultural heritage depends not only on the intervention of specialists or on the existence of legal norms, but also on the capacity to build a framework in which all those who come into contact with archaeological remains understand what is lost and what can be saved at the moment of discovery. In the absence of such awareness, objects will continue to enter collections in a fragmentary manner, and their story will remain largely incomplete. In its presence, even discoveries made outside systematic research can become genuine sources of knowledge and can contribute to strengthening the social role of the museum⁹.

3. Metal Detectorists – Between Social Practice and Contribution to the Enrichment of Cultural Heritage

Around metal detecting, an oscillating discourse has developed over time, marked both by suspicion and by implicit recognition. On the one hand, intervention outside a controlled archaeological framework has been associated with the loss of context and with risks to archaeological sites. On the other hand, a considerable proportion of the objects that have entered museum heritage in recent decades were discovered by metal-detecting enthusiasts who operated outside systematic research but within the limits of the law. The evolution of the collections of certain county museums confirms this reality, their growth being directly correlated with the handover of discoveries made by detectorists. Some of the items that entered the

⁷ Lisa Börjesson et al., „Re-purposing Excavation Database Content as Paradata”, in *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.221>; E. Alby, V. Desbiolles, M. Lecocq, „Automatic Identification of Archaeological Artifacts on the Excavation Site”, in *ISPRS – International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*, 2020, p. 1347–1353, <https://doi.org/10.5194/isprs-archives-xliiii-b2-2020-1347-2020>.

⁸ M. Styk, N. Pažinová, „3D Reconstruction as a Form of Interpretation: Example of Excavation of the Medieval Peřuša Castle”, in *Interdisciplinaria Archaeologica*, 2020, p. 73–87, <https://doi.org/10.24916/iansa.2020.1.6>; Mari Arentz Østmo, „Artefacts from the 2011–2012 Excavations”, 2017, p. 513–526, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110421088-022>.

⁹ Lisa De Luca et al., „Identification of Social Status through Grave Goods Using a Biocultural Approach...”, in *Heritage*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage7080188>.

heritage—such as the Roman gold ring discovered at Deda-Bistra—are considered unique at the national level and have subsequently been valorised in both exhibition and scientific discourse¹⁰.

For most of those who use metal detectors, the activity does not begin with heritage in mind, in the academic sense of the term. It starts from an interest in history, from the desire to spend time outdoors, from the pleasure of exploration, or from belonging to a community that shares the same concerns. The experience of direct discovery—the moment when a signal becomes an object that has lain in the ground for tens or hundreds of years—creates a relationship with the past that is different from the one mediated through textbooks or exhibitions. It is precisely this dimension that explains why the phenomenon has expanded significantly in Romania, where more than 22,000 metal detectors are currently registered as legally owned, with active user communities in most counties¹¹.

This participation in the recovery of material memory has, in many cases, resulted in discoveries that have become reference points for research. The Byzantine hoard identified in Prahova County and handed over in its entirety to the authorities immediately after its discovery made possible not only the conservation of the pieces but also their rapid integration into a scientific circuit that contributed to the reconstruction of historical realities that were poorly documented for the north-Danubian space of the eleventh century¹². Similarly, the discovery of a Dacian hoard in Alba County led to the resumption of research in that area, the detectorist returning to the field together with archaeologists in order to identify the archaeological context. This shows that the initial intervention can, under certain conditions, function as a signal for subsequent systematic investigations.¹³

At the same time, the way in which this contribution is recognised often remains discreet. In many cases, the name of the finder appears only in administrative documents, without being visibly integrated into the public presentation of the object. This absence of symbolic recognition fuels the feeling of an asymmetrical relationship in which the handover of the discovery is perceived rather as an obligation than as a form of collaboration. Yet institutional experience shows that

¹⁰ Valuable archaeological pieces, discovered by 18 metal detectorists in Mures, showcased in 'The Enigmas of Treasures' exhibition, <https://agerpres.ro/english/2026/02/12/feature-valuable-archaeological-pieces-discovered-by-18-metal-detectorists-in-mures-showcased-in-the---1527442>, accessed at 3 february 2026

¹¹ Detectorismul, pasiunea a peste 22.000 de români care caută comori ascunse. Fenomenul a devenit foarte greu de gestionat, <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/alba-iulia/detectorismul-pasiunea-a-peste-22000-de-romani-2219998.html>, accessed at 3 february 2026

¹² Tezaur unicat în România, descoperit de către un pasionat de istorie cu detectorul de metale, în Prahova / Ce recompensă va primi bărbatul, <https://hotnews.ro/foto-tezaur-unicat-n-romnia-descoperit-de-catre-un-pasionat-de-istorie-cu-detectorul-de-metale-n-prahova-ce-recompensa-va-primi-barbatul-180632>, accessed at 3 february 2026

¹³ Județul Alba: Un tânăr căutător de comori a descoperit un tezaur dacic cu 116 obiecte de patrimoniu, <https://basilica.ro/judetul-alba-un-tanar-cautator-de-comori-a-descoperit-un-tezaur-dacic-cu-116-obiecte-de-patrimoniu/>, accessed at 3 february 2026

where the contribution of finders is made visible, voluntary reporting has increased and the relationship with the museum has become stable and predictable¹⁴.

It is important, however, not to regard metal detecting as a homogeneous phenomenon. Studies on the relationship between archaeologists and detectorists reveal significant differences in practices, motivations, and levels of collaboration, highlighting the existence of responsible and committed segments in the reporting of discoveries alongside others that are less cooperative¹⁵. Data derived from museum practice indicate that only a part of those who use metal detectors collaborate constantly with heritage institutions, and there are also situations in which discoveries are not reported, which limits both the recovery of the objects and the possibility of documenting their context. Analyses of reporting practices in metal-detecting contexts point to persistent problems related to underreporting and to the loss of information associated with the archaeological context¹⁶.

The merging of all these situations into a single explanatory category only blocks any form of dialogue and discourages precisely the segment that acts responsibly. Research on the dialogue between archaeologists and detectorists shows that generalising and conflict-based approaches reduce cooperation, while models based on communication and inclusion encourage responsible engagement¹⁷.

From the perspective of museums, the relationship with detectorists is inevitably an ambivalent one. On the one hand, there is the responsibility to protect sites and prevent destructive interventions; on the other, there is the opportunity to recover objects that would otherwise remain outside the scientific circuit. The experience of recent years shows that a relationship built exclusively on suspicion produces effects opposite to those desired, whereas institutional dialogue and the recognition of the contribution of finders stimulate reporting and improve the quality of the information accompanying the handed-over objects¹⁸.

Viewed in this context, metal detecting no longer appears as a marginal practice, but as the expression of a broader change in the relationship between society and heritage. The literature on public archaeology shows that the involvement of amateurs and communities reflects a structural transformation in the relationship between the public and heritage, in the direction of participation and the co-production of knowledge¹⁹.

¹⁴ Pieterjan Deckers et al., „MEDEA: Crowd-Sourcing the Recording of Metal-Detected Artefacts in Flanders (Belgium)”, in *Open Archaeology*, 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0019>.

¹⁵ Irmelin Axelsen, „Collaboration and Communication between Hobby Metal Detectorists and Archaeologists in Norway”, in *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, 10, 2022, p. 295–310, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2022.14>.

¹⁶ Ulla Kadakas, „How Quickly Should Public Benefit Come From Archaeology?”, in *Internet Archaeology*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.57.15>.

¹⁷ Ignacio Rodríguez Temiño, „Rational Grounds for Dialogue Between Archaeologists and Metal Detectorists in Spain”, in *Open Archaeology*, 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0011>.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*

¹⁹ L. Richardson, „A Digital Public Archaeology”, in *Public Archaeology*, 23, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.5334/pia.431>.

The desire to participate directly in the recovery of historical remains indicates a form of engagement with the past that cannot be ignored without the risk of pushing this interest outside the institutional framework. Analyses dedicated to the relationship between archaeology and metal detecting show that the exclusion or marginalisation of the practice does not eliminate the phenomenon, but may amplify tensions and increase the distance from heritage institutions²⁰.

Insofar as clear rules, communication, and a form of recognition of the role of the finders exist, the activity can become part of a broader process of recovering and valorising the past, and their contribution to the enrichment of movable cultural heritage becomes not only visible but also institutionally predictable. Studies on collaborative models in Europe show that where formal frameworks for cooperation and the recording of discoveries are created, the contribution of detectorists becomes systematic and integrated into the official heritage²¹.

4. Institutional and Epistemic Tensions between Archaeologists, Detectorists, and Museums

Over the last two decades, the relationship between archaeologists, detectorists, and museum institutions in Romania has developed in a context marked simultaneously by the need to protect cultural heritage and by the visible increase in discoveries made outside systematic research.

A relevant example of this ambivalence is provided by the recent evolution of the collections of the Mureş County Museum. The growing number of discoveries made by detectorists has led to a visible expansion of the collections, some of the items that entered the heritage being considered unique at the national level. At the same time, museum specialists have emphasised that only a part of the detectorists effectively collaborate with the institution, while many discoveries are made without the necessary documentation of their context, which significantly limits the scientific value of the objects²². This situation essentially expresses the core of the tension: the heritage is materially enriched, but informationally incomplete.

There are, however, cases in which collaboration has functioned in an exemplary manner, demonstrating that the opposition between the two paradigms is not inevitable. The discovery of the Byzantine hoard in Prahova County, handed over in its entirety to the authorities immediately after its identification, allowed the rapid integration of the artefacts into the scientific circuit and the initiation of research aimed at establishing the archaeological context. The objects became an important source for reconstructing the political and military relations in the north-Danubian

²⁰ Suzie Thomas, „Editorial: Portable Antiquities: Archaeology, Collecting, Metal Detecting”, in *Internet Archaeology*, 33, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.33.12>.

²¹ Pieterjan Deckers, Michael Lewis, Suzie Thomas, „Between Two Places: Archaeology and Metal-Detecting in Europe”, in *Open Archaeology*, 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0031>.

²² Comori descoperite în România cu detectorul de metale: 18 artefacte de mare valoare sunt expuse la Mureş, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/cultura/comori-descoperite-in-romania-cu-detectorul-de-metale-18-artefacte-de-mare-valoare-sunt-expuse-la-mures-777032.html>, accessed at 7 february 2026

area in the eleventh century, and the finder was rewarded in accordance with the law²³. Such an episode shows that, when trust and a clear procedural framework exist, metal detecting is no longer perceived as a risk factor, but as a partner in the process of heritage recovery.

In other situations, discoveries have even generated new research directions. The Dacian silver hoard identified in Mureș County led archaeologists to reassess the archaeological potential of an area where no Dacian habitation had previously been documented, opening the prospect for subsequent systematic investigations²⁴. Such cases indicate that metal detecting can, under certain conditions, function as an informal prospection tool capable of signalling the existence of previously unknown sites.

By contrast, there are also examples that have reinforced the reluctance of the archaeological community and have fuelled an exclusivist discourse. The discovery and trafficking of the Dacian bracelets from the Sarmizegetusa Regia area became, at a symbolic level, the strongest argument in favour of a restrictive policy, as they illustrated in their most extreme form the simultaneous loss of archaeological context and control over cultural goods. Their later recovery, through complex judicial and diplomatic efforts, could not reconstruct the scientific information lost at the moment of their extraction. This episode continues to function as a negative reference in professional memory and largely explains the difficulty of dialogue²⁵.

Between these two types of situations—exemplary collaboration and destructive intervention—most everyday practices take place. The discovery of coin hoards in Argeș or Giurgiu by enthusiasts who notified the authorities and left the investigation to specialists shows that there is a significant segment of the detectorist community that internalises the norms of heritage protection and accepts the role of the academic environment in the interpretation of discoveries²⁶. Nevertheless, the institutional perception often remains marked by the logic of the negative exception, while positive examples are integrated more as particular cases than as arguments for redefining the relationship.

²³ Tezaur unicat în România, descoperit de către un pasionat de istorie cu detectorul de metale, în Prahova / Ce recompensă va primi bărbatul, <https://hotnews.ro/foto-tezaur-unicat-n-romnia-descoperit-de-catre-un-pasionat-de-istorie-cu-detectorul-de-metale-n-prahova-ce-recompensa-va-primi-barbatul-18063>, accessed at 7 february 2026

²⁴ Tezaur dacic, găsit în județul Mureș cu ajutorul unui detector de metale, <https://tvrinfo.ro/tezaur-dacic-gasit-in-judetul-mures-cu-ajutorul-unui-detector-de-metale/>

²⁵ Brățările dacice de aur, <https://www.mnir.ro/bratarile-dacice-de-aur/>; Filmul recuperării brățărilor dacice din aur, <https://pressone.ro/filmul-recuperarii-bratarilor-dacice-din-aur/>; Augustin Lazăr, despre brățările dacice: „Comunitatea științifică serioasă nu are niciun fel de dubii cu privire la autenticitatea lor”, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/augustin-lazar-despre-bratarile-dacice-comunitatea-stiintifica-serioasa-nu-are-niciun-fel-de-dubii-cu-privire-la-autenticitatea-lor-2763853>, accessed at 12 february 2026

²⁶ Descoperire spectaculoasă în Argeș. Comoara găsită de doi bărbați cu detectoare de metale, <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/comoara-din-secolul-xviii-gasita-in-arges-mii-de-monede-otomane-erai-ascunse-in-patru-ulcele-de-lut.html>, accessed at 12 february 2026

From an epistemic point of view, this tension reflects fundamental differences in the production of knowledge. Archaeology builds its authority on methodological control and on the comprehensive documentation of context, whereas detectorism values the experience of discovery and the recovery of the object as such. The museum stands between these two logics, as the institution that receives the artefact but depends, for its interpretation, on the information provided by archaeology. In the absence of genuine dialogue, each of these positions tends to close itself within its own system of legitimation, and heritage becomes the terrain of a symbolic competition for authority.

The tension is not only a professional one, but also one related to the social role of heritage. The increase in the number of detectorists and the public interest in discoveries show that the past is no longer perceived as a field reserved exclusively for specialists. The desire for direct participation in the recovery of historical remains expresses a form of engagement with heritage that cannot be ignored without the risk of pushing this social energy outside the institutional framework. At the same time, the requirements of archaeological research cannot be relativised without affecting the quality of the knowledge produced.

At this point it becomes clear that the existing tensions are not the result of an absolute incompatibility, but of the absence of a stable model of cooperation. The examples from Romania show that, where there is trust, clear procedures, and mutual recognition, detectorists contribute to the enrichment of heritage and to the identification of new research directions.

Within this equation, museums have the capacity to become the space in which these differences of perspective can be mediated. They can transform the moment of handing over an artefact into an act of cooperation and into the beginning of the documentation of context; they can offer public recognition to the finders and integrate these stories into the exhibition discourse. Insofar as they assume this active role, museums are no longer merely passive beneficiaries of discoveries, but actors capable of transforming a conflictual relationship into a participatory model for heritage management. Viewed from this perspective, the tensions between archaeologists, detectorists, and museums do not represent an impasse, but rather the expression of a transition towards a different way of understanding heritage—not as the exclusive domain of specialists, yet neither as a space for uncontrolled interventions, but as the result of a shared responsibility.

5. European Models for the Ethical Integration of Metal-Detector Discoveries

Taken as a whole, the European experience suggests that the tension between metal detecting and archaeology is not an inevitable given, but rather the result of a deficit in institutional architecture and in a culture of cooperation. In those states where metal detecting has been pushed exclusively into the sphere of prohibition, the practices do not disappear; instead, they tend to retreat into informal spaces that are difficult to monitor, and heritage loses precisely what might have been saved: reporting and documentation. By contrast, where the authorities have accepted the

phenomenon as a social reality and have built mechanisms for its integration, the emphasis has gradually shifted from conflict to responsibility, and discoveries have begun to enter a circuit that serves both conservation and knowledge. In this logic, the detector as a technical object is not the real stake, but the ethical framework within which it is used: what is searched for, where it is searched for, what is done with the discovery, and how it is transformed into public and verifiable information.

The British model is often invoked precisely because it provided a pragmatic response to a reality that could no longer be ignored. The Portable Antiquities Scheme was conceived as a mechanism for recording discoveries made by the public, operating in parallel with the legal regime of “treasure,” and its role quickly went beyond that of a simple database. The network of specialists working with finders, the cataloguing infrastructure, and the orientation towards heritage education produced a change in tone: the detectorist becomes a source of data, but also an actor who learns—through repeated contact with the institution—what responsibility towards context, protected sites, and proper reporting means. This is not a “romanticisation” of the hobby, but a public policy strategy aimed at saving archaeological information in an environment where part of archaeology is already located in the plough soil and therefore in a vulnerable zone. The fact that the PAS operates under the coordination of the British Museum and is integrated into the national logic of managing discoveries explains why it can, in the long term, produce effects of normalisation and increased trust²⁷.

If in the United Kingdom the emphasis is placed on recording and on institutionally supported voluntary collaboration, in Denmark we encounter a different but equally relevant philosophy: ethical integration is based on the idea that objects of archaeological interest belong to the community, and that the community simultaneously recognises its duty to reward responsible behaviour. The Danefæ system, administered by museum institutions and by the National Museum, introduces a form of moral contract between the state and the finder: the object is treated as public heritage, yet the finder is not automatically transformed into a suspect, but into a collaborator, and the reward also depends on the way the discovery has been protected and on the quality of the information provided. In recent years, this model has become visible through the increase in the number of reported discoveries, which shows that well-calibrated incentives can produce predictable behaviour and, above all, can move the practice into the sphere of cooperation rather than the avoidance of authorities. In ethical terms, Denmark illustrates a simple but essential idea: responsibility is not requested only through constraint, but also through a coherent form of institutional recognition²⁸.

²⁷ The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) is managed by the British Museum and records archaeological finds discovered by the public, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/national/treasure-and-portable-antiquities-scheme>, accessed at 12 february 2026

²⁸ Payment of the treasure trove reward, <https://en.natmus.dk/sales-and-services/museum-services/treasure-trove/payment-of-the-treasure-trove-reward/>, accessed at 15 february 2026

A third model, particularly useful for discussions about institutional modernisation, is the Dutch one. Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands (PAN) proposes a solution that appears at first sight to be technical, but which has a very clear ethical core: making the discovery reportable and intelligible through an accessible digital infrastructure and through a culture of recording. PAN functions as an online system for documenting discoveries made by the public, with an emphasis on data standardisation, georeferencing, and the integration of information into a research circuit. Such a solution has two important effects: on the one hand, it reduces dependence on informal relationships between the finder and a particular specialist, and on the other hand, it transforms reporting into a gesture that is easier to perform, less intimidating, and easier to verify. Moreover, the fact that PAN has accumulated a very large volume of recorded discoveries within a relatively short period has shown that the public can participate substantially in the production of archaeological data if there is a credible platform, clear rules, and a culture of cooperation. At the ethical level, PAN is a lesson in how the social energy of a hobby can be redirected towards the public interest without the need for punitive rhetoric²⁹.

Finally, the Flemish region (Belgium) is relevant because it offers an example of integration through licensing, training, and administrative reporting procedures. Here, the central idea is that the practice of metal detecting is not left entirely in the informal sphere, but is connected to a set of conditions: authorisation, reporting through digital tools, and the possibility of evaluation and even suspension of the right to practise when rules are violated. Beyond the bureaucratic aspect, this approach has a clear ethical logic: the detectorist is treated as an actor who can participate, but participation is conditioned by the observance of standards, and heritage institutions assume the role of making the rules intelligible and applicable. The merit of this model lies in its attempt to create a sphere of responsible practice through education and compliance, reducing the grey area between hobby and destructive intervention³⁰.

Beyond the differences between these models, they share a common denominator that is worth retaining: each of them seeks, in its own way, to transform the discovery from a private event into a public good, without humiliating or demonising the finder. Ethical integration does not mean eliminating risks completely—which would be unrealistic—but building mechanisms through which risks decrease, reporting increases, and the information associated with the discovery is preserved as much as possible. This is precisely where the stake for the Romanian context lies: there is no single solution, but there is a shared lesson confirmed by different experiences. When institutions choose to work with social reality rather

²⁹ The Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-archaeological-practice/article/portable-antiquities-of-the-netherlands/0C4BDF2C64454B1E85B15FD2924E9BE8>, accessed at 15 february 2026

³⁰ Archaeology in Flanders, <https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue58/7/full-text.html>, accessed at 15 february 2026

than against it, movable cultural heritage gains not only objects, but also data, cooperation, and a more robust form of public legitimacy.

Within the framework of this article, these European models are not invoked in order to propose a simple “import” of solutions, but to show that the tensions between archaeologists, detectorists, and museums can be managed through institutional architectures that place at their centre an ethics of responsibility: responsibility towards context, towards reporting, and towards the public interest of heritage. Against this background it becomes possible to formulate a model of our own, adapted to Romanian realities, in which the county museum can play the role of mediator and the detectorist can be treated as a partner conditioned by clear rules, rather than as a presence that must be excluded a priori.

6. The Foundations of an Ethical Model for the Management of Discoveries

Any discussion of an ethical model applicable in Romania must begin with a simple fact: the legal framework exists and is, in broad terms, functional. The trajectory of a discovery is clearly established—the notification at the level of the local authority, the intervention of the county directorate for culture, and the handover of the object to the museum—yet in practice this circuit often remains a merely formal one, within which information about the context is lost and the relationship between the finder and the institution ends at the moment of transfer. The problem, therefore, is not the absence of regulation, but the lack of a logic capable of transforming this sequence of steps into a coherent process of data recovery and trust-building, a situation characteristic of heritage systems in which governance remains predominantly administrative rather than participatory³¹.

The first foundation of such a model is the recognition of the role of local administration. The town hall is, in most cases, the first institution with which the finder comes into contact and the place where it is implicitly decided whether the reporting experience will be discouraging or predictable. When there is a clear procedure, a designated contact person, and a rapid mode of communication with the county directorate for culture and the museum, notification is no longer perceived as a risk but as a natural stage. In the absence of these elements, the legal obligation remains a mere formality, and the finder does not understand what follows after the object is deposited. In heritage governance literature, such procedural clarity is directly linked to the development of institutional trust and public participation³².

A second essential element is the rethinking of the legal reporting deadline. In its current form, it functions rather as an administrative pressure. In an ethical model, this interval becomes the moment in which the minimum information about

³¹ L. Smith. *Uses of Heritage* (1st ed.). Routledge, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203602263>; Emma Waterton, Steve Watson, *Heritage and Community Engagement*, Taylor and Francis, New York, 2013

³² C. Neal, . *Heritage and Participation*. In: Waterton, E., Watson, S. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565_22

the discovery can be saved: the exact location, the conditions in which the object was found, and any observations regarding the layer or association with other materials. This is not about conducting an archaeological documentation proper, but about recording data that only the finder can provide at that moment. In their absence, any subsequent intervention by specialists starts from zero, and the scientific value of the find is significantly diminished, as repeatedly emphasised in the literature on provenance and the loss of archaeological context³³.

The clarity of institutional roles represents another foundation of the model. The county directorate for culture is not merely an administrative link, but the institution that triggers the procedures for protecting the area and coordinates the specialised intervention. In practice, however, for the public this institution remains almost invisible. The finder does not know who comes to the field, who evaluates the situation, or what happens next to the object. The lack of this transparency fuels mistrust and turns the entire circuit into an impersonal process. A functional ethical model requires that the trajectory of the discovery be not only legal, but also intelligible to the person who goes through it, in line with current approaches to participatory heritage governance³⁴.

In this context, the role of the museum becomes essential. Although it appears at the end of the circuit, the museum is the institution that can give meaning to the entire process. When the finder receives feedback regarding the evaluation of the object, sees how it is conserved, and understands its place within a historical narrative, the handover is no longer perceived as a loss. In the absence of such feedback, the relationship ends at an administrative point and produces neither trust nor willingness for future collaboration. This interpretative and mediating role of the museum has been widely discussed in the context of the participatory turn in museology³⁵.

Another element that must be taken into account is the reality of limited resources. A viable ethical model cannot presuppose new structures or complicated procedures, but simple and easily applicable instruments. Heritage management studies have repeatedly shown that, in resource-constrained systems, procedural coherence is more effective than structural expansion³⁶.

Perhaps the most important foundation, however, is the change in perspective regarding the finder. In strictly legal logic, the finder is the person obliged to report a discovery. In an ethical logic, he or she becomes the first witness to the

³³ Andres Siegfried Dobat, „Between Rescue and Research: An Evaluation after 30 Years of Liberal Metal Detecting in Archaeological Research and Heritage Practice in Denmark”, in *European Journal of Archaeology*, 16, nr. 4, 2013, p. 704–725, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1461957113Y.0000000041>

³⁴ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, London–New York, Routledge, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108857>

³⁵ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London–New York, Routledge, 2000, <https://doi.org/10.4324/978100312445>

³⁶ Erica Avrami, Randall Mason, Marta de la Torre (eds.), *Values and Heritage Conservation: Research Report*, Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute, 2000, http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/values_heritage_research_report

archaeological context. This shift does not imply granting the status of specialist, but recognising that there is a moment when the information depends exclusively on that person. This perspective is consistent with the experience of the Portable Antiquities Scheme and with recent studies that conceptualise metal detectorists as stakeholders in knowledge production rather than as external actors³⁷.

7. The Proposal of an Ethical Model for Managing Discoveries Made with Metal Detectors

If the foundations discussed earlier concern the way in which the legal framework already in place can be made functional, the present proposal addresses the moment when this trajectory begins, namely the stage prior to entering the field. The experience of recent years shows that a significant part of the problems related to the loss of archaeological context is not the result of an intention to circumvent the rules, but rather of the fact that the discoverer comes into contact with vestiges without having the necessary points of reference to understand what an archaeological site means and which minimal gestures can preserve information³⁸. At this point, ethics can no longer be conceived merely as a reaction to an already produced situation, but as a form of familiarisation that precedes action.

In the current system, the authorisation for the possession and use of metal detectors is issued by police structures following a procedure that verifies the legality of the device and the identity of the applicant. From an administrative point of view, this procedure is correct, yet it does not involve any contact between the future user and heritage institutions, nor does it transmit any information regarding responsibility towards cultural heritage. A clear dissociation is thus created: the detectorist is technically authorised, but lacks any reference points regarding the appropriate conduct in the event of a discovery.

The introduction of a familiarisation stage carried out by the county museum prior to obtaining the authorisation – or, where this is not procedurally possible, within a flexible interval immediately afterwards – would represent a minimal intervention with structural effects. This stage could take the form of a periodically organised meeting, in an open and accessible format, with a total duration of approximately ten hours, sufficient for the transmission of essential reference points. It would not take the form of a course in the classical sense, would not involve formal assessment, and would not lead to professional certification, since its aim is not the training of specialists but the initiation into a field that entails public responsibility.

The structure of such a meeting would follow several fundamental directions: familiarisation with the notion of heritage and with the role of the institutions that manage it; the recognition of elements that may indicate the existence of an

³⁷ Andres Siegfried Dobat, „Between Rescue and Research: An Evaluation after 30 Years of Liberal Metal Detecting in Archaeological Research and Heritage Practice in Denmark”, in *European Journal of Archaeology*, 16, nr. 4, 2013, p. 704–725, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1461957113Y.0000000041>

³⁸ Suzie Thomas, „Archaeologists and Metal-Detector Users in England and Wales: Past, Present and Future”, in Richard Skeates, Carol McDavid, John Carman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public Archaeology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 60–81.

archaeological site; the understanding of the importance of the discovery context; the presentation of the legal trajectory of reporting and handing over the find; and the explanation of the object's subsequent path once it enters the museum. In this way, the discoverer enters into a direct relationship with heritage for the first time, not merely as a legal framework, but as a cultural and scientific reality.

In order for these reference points not to remain at a purely theoretical level, the model may be complemented, wherever institutional resources allow, by an additional practical module of a similar duration. This component would not be oriented towards archaeological excavation itself, but towards practising the minimal gestures that preserve contextual information. The simulation of a discovery, the correct way of photographing the context, the recording of GPS coordinates, the completion of a simple discovery record, or the analysis of case studies based on finds already integrated into museum collections are sufficient to transform theoretical information into reflex behaviour³⁹. The optional character of this component preserves the flexibility of the model and prevents it from becoming a rigid procedure, while at the same time offering the possibility of building a deeper relationship between detectorists and museum institutions.

The absence of formal evaluation remains essential, as it shifts the emphasis from the idea of control to that of participation. When participation in this stage becomes a procedural condition rather than a test of competence, it is no longer perceived as a barrier, but as an introduction to a field that implies public responsibility. The museum no longer appears only at the end of the process, as the place where the object is handed over, but as the space in which the relationship begins.

For the continuity of this process, the familiarisation stage may be accompanied by minimal supporting materials – a synthetic, predominantly visual guide and a simple discovery recording sheet – which can later be used in the field. These are not bureaucratic instruments, but practical reference tools that enable the internalisation of a set of simple gestures: marking coordinates, photographing the location, noting the approximate depth, and describing the conditions of discovery. These gestures are not imposed as technical obligations but become reflexes of responsible behaviour.

The integration of the museum at this early stage changes the logic of the entire circuit. The discoverer who has gone through such a process will understand why intervention must stop when a relevant object is found and will perceive the notification of the local authorities as a natural continuation of a process already underway. In this way, the legal obligation is transformed into an assumed gesture, and the data accompanying the object become incomparably more valuable for research.

³⁹ B. Komoróczy, „Archaeology, Metal Detecting, and Citizen Science in the Czech Republic”, in *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, 10, nr. 3, 2022, p. 322–335, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2022.15>

At the same time, the proposed model produces a much clearer distinction between legal detectorism and destructive practices. Once there is a predictable trajectory, direct contact with the institution, and a shared set of reference points, those who choose to operate outside this framework can no longer invoke lack of knowledge. The difference between responsible behaviour and illegal intervention becomes visible and easier to manage, allowing institutional resources to be directed towards areas of real risk.

From an institutional perspective, this proposal does not require major legislative changes nor the creation of new structures. County museums already have the role of managing movable heritage and possess the specialists capable of supporting such an initiative. The periodic organisation of these familiarisation meetings, in cooperation with cultural directorates and police structures, would transform an administrative procedure into a process of forming a culture of heritage.

Participation in this process may also generate a symbolic benefit for the discoverer: access to information regarding the trajectory of the find after its handover, the possibility of learning about the results of the research, or the inclusion of the discoverer's name in the public circuit of heritage valorisation. In this way, responsibility no longer appears merely as a legal obligation, but as a form of belonging to a process of knowledge and cultural interpretation⁴⁰.

At the symbolic level, the effect is as important as the procedural one. The detectorist no longer enters into a relationship with the museum only at the moment of handover, but before the first field survey. The museum is no longer perceived as a distant institution, but as a partner that explains, provides reference points, and integrates the discovery into a broader narrative. Responsibility towards heritage thus becomes a direct experience, not merely a juridical formula⁴¹.

Viewed as a whole, the proposed ethical model does not add an additional level of control, but creates the conditions for the already existing trajectory to become functional. By introducing a familiarisation stage of approximately ten hours, complemented, where possible, by a practical applied component, by using minimal documentation tools, and by building a direct and constant contact between discoverers and institutions, the discovery ceases to be an isolated event and becomes part of a coherent process. In the Romanian context, where the infrastructure exists but functions in a fragmented manner, this shift in logic represents a realistic solution and, at the same time, a way of transforming existing tensions into a stable framework for cooperation.

8. Applicability of the Model within the Romanian Cultural Heritage System

Any theoretical proposal remains fragile if it cannot operate within the concrete conditions of the system for which it is designed. In the Romanian case, the

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges*, London–New York, Routledge, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203371015>.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*

applicability of an ethical model for managing discoveries made with metal detectors does not primarily depend on legislative change or on the creation of new institutional structures, but on the capacity to render coherent what already exists. The institutional trajectory is clearly regulated, the network of county museums covers the entire territory, and the cultural directorates have the role of coordinating specialised interventions. Paradoxically, this existing but unevenly used infrastructure makes possible the implementation of a model based on simple procedures and a unified operational logic. The central problem is therefore not the absence of a legal framework, but the lack of procedural coherence, a situation characteristic of heritage systems in which governance remains predominantly administrative rather than participatory⁴². In this sense, the Romanian case demonstrates that heritage protection in resource-constrained systems depends less on normative expansion and more on the functional integration of existing actors⁴³.

A first level of applicability is the administrative one. The current differences between counties are not generated by the normative framework, but by the ways in which it is implemented. There are situations in which the notification of a discovery triggers a rapid and coordinated intervention and others in which the institutional circuit remains unclear, and contextual information is lost between administrative levels. The introduction of a standard reporting form and the designation of contact persons at the level of local authorities do not require significant additional resources, yet they transform a formal procedure into a predictable mechanism. Once the discoverer knows what to do and what follows after notification, reporting ceases to be perceived as an impersonal obligation and becomes part of a coherent process. In institutional terms, this shift produces measurable effects: it reduces the time spent on subsequent clarifications, increases the quality of the data accompanying the objects, and allows interventions to be directed towards areas of real archaeological risk.

The applicability of the model also depends on the way in which the involvement of museums is conceived. Given that most of these institutions function with limited staff and resources, the proposal cannot rely on complex programmes or activities that duplicate existing tasks. The familiarisation stage must remain punctual, periodically organised, and based on a stable and easily transmissible content. In the medium term, its effect is not an additional burden on museum activity, but a reduction in the time required for later administrative mediation and

⁴² Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, London–New York, Routledge, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108857>; Laurajane Smith, „*Uses of Heritage*”. London, Routledge, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203602263>; Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, eds. „*The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*”, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565>

⁴³ Erica Avrami , Randall Mason and Marta de la Torre, eds. „*Values and Heritage Conservation: Research Report*”. Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute, 2000. https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/valuesrpt.pdf

an increase in the scientific usability of the finds. From this perspective, the model operates as a low-cost institutional efficiency mechanism⁴⁴.

An important argument in favour of applicability is provided by the profile of the detectorist communities in Romania. Numerous significant discoveries have been voluntarily handed over to museums, which indicates the existence of a real willingness to cooperate. What is missing is not good faith, but a stable framework capable of transforming individual gestures into predictable practices. In the absence of such a framework, collaboration remains dependent on personal relationships or favourable local contexts. The institutionalisation of an initial contact with the museum and the clarification of the trajectory of the discovery create a common operational basis for all actors, regardless of regional differences. This shift from personal mediation to procedural interoperability represents one of the main structural gains of the proposed model.

The applicability of the model is equally reflected in the quality of archaeological research. At present, a significant number of objects entering public collections lack information regarding their location and conditions of discovery, which limits their integration into broader analytical frameworks. The systematic recording of minimal data – coordinates, approximate depth, observations regarding the stratigraphic context – does not require costly interventions, yet it can orient future research and signal areas with archaeological potential. In this way, detectorism ceases to be perceived exclusively as a parallel practice and becomes, indirectly, a form of non-invasive prospection that can contribute to the planning of systematic investigations, an approach increasingly discussed in relation to collaborative and community-based archaeology⁴⁵. This transformation has direct implications for the relationship between professional archaeology and non-institutional actors and aligns the Romanian case with current debates on participatory heritage governance⁴⁶.

A significant role also belongs to local administration, which, although it represents the first link in the legal circuit, often remains the least actively involved in heritage management. The clarification of its responsibilities and its integration into a rapid communication chain with the cultural directorate and the museum would transform it from a merely formal intermediary into an effective actor in heritage protection. This does not imply the attribution of new competences, but the operational activation of existing ones. In terms of governance, this represents a shift from fragmented authority to institutional interoperability⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

⁴⁵ Andres Siegfried Dobat, „Between Rescue and Research: An Evaluation after 30 Years of Liberal Metal Detecting in Archaeological Research and Heritage Practice in Denmark”, in *European Journal of Archaeology*, 16, nr. 4, 2013, p. 704–725, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1461957113Y.0000000041>.

⁴⁶ Emma Waterton, Steve Watson (eds.), *Heritage and Community Engagement: Collaboration or Contestation?*, London–New York, Routledge, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315875064>.

⁴⁷ Emma Waterton, Steve Watson (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565>.

The model also has a direct impact on public perception. When discoveries made by enthusiasts are transparently integrated into the museum discourse and presented as the result of cooperation, a significant change occurs in the social representation of heritage. The museum is no longer perceived as a distant institution, and the discoverer is no longer seen as a marginal actor. This proximity has concrete consequences for the degree of responsibility towards archaeological sites and for the willingness to report discoveries. In this sense, the model functions not only as an administrative mechanism, but as an instrument for the gradual construction of a participatory heritage culture⁴⁸.

At the same time, the model does not diminish the need for firm intervention in cases of legal infringement. On the contrary, the existence of a functional trajectory and of a culture of cooperation makes the distinction between responsible behaviour and illegal intervention much clearer. Control institutions can thus direct their resources towards situations of real risk, while the relationship with the community of legal detectorists moves from the logic of generalised suspicion to that of structured partnership.

Under these conditions, the applicability of the model does not depend on the scale of the changes it requires, but on its capacity to introduce a coherent operational logic into an already existing system. The institutional infrastructure, the legal framework, and the willingness to cooperate are present realities. What is missing is the procedural integration of these elements and the gradual construction of a shared heritage culture. The Romanian case therefore demonstrates that, in systems characterised by limited resources but complete institutional architecture – a situation typical for many Eastern European contexts – the protection of cultural heritage can be significantly improved through low-cost measures based on procedural coherence, institutional interoperability, and the inclusion of non-institutional actors in a participatory governance model.

In this perspective, the proposed ethical model acquires a relevance that goes beyond the national context. It offers a transferable framework for heritage systems in which the legislative structure is already in place but functions unevenly, and in which the main challenge is not the creation of new mechanisms, but the coherent activation of existing ones. Its effects can become visible within a relatively short time, both in the quality of the movable heritage entering public collections and in the transformation of the relationship between institutions and communities.

Conclusions

The issue of discoveries made with metal detectors has, in the Romanian context, been placed between two discourses that have communicated with difficulty: one centred on the protection of archaeological context and the risks of uncontrolled interventions, and the other built around the real contributions of discoverers to the enrichment of movable heritage. The present analysis has shown

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges*, London–New York, Routledge, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203371015>

that this opposition is not structurally inevitable. Given the existence of a clearly defined legal trajectory and a complete institutional infrastructure, the main difficulty is not normative in nature but procedural. The principal contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the effective protection of heritage depends on the operational coherence of existing mechanisms and on the integration of non-institutional actors within a functional ethical framework, rather than on the expansion of the legislative framework.

The proposed model shifts the emphasis from post-factum reaction to the prior formation of responsible behaviour, through the introduction of a familiarisation stage with heritage and the minimal standardisation of discovery documentation. In this way, the administrative circuit of handover is transformed into a process of recovering archaeological information, and the relationship between the discoverer, local administration, the cultural directorate, and the museum gains coherence and predictability. The direct effect is twofold: an increase in the scientific value of the objects entering public collections and a more efficient orientation of control interventions towards situations of real risk.

The implementation of the model does not require major institutional restructuring or significant additional resources, but the coherent activation of already existing structures. From this perspective, detector earlierism ceases to be perceived exclusively as a source of risk and becomes, indirectly, a form of non-invasive prospection capable of contributing to the identification of areas with archaeological potential and to the planning of systematic research. At the same time, the museum consolidates its role as a mediator between research and community, and responsibility towards heritage becomes a socially distributed practice rather than an exclusively institutional attribute.

The relevance of this model extends beyond the national framework. Romania represents a typical example of systems with a complete legislative architecture but fragmented functioning, characteristic of a significant number of Eastern European states. In such contexts, heritage protection can be substantially improved through low-cost measures based on procedural coherence, institutional interoperability, and participatory governance. In this sense, the proposed ethical model offers not only a solution adapted to Romanian realities, but a transferable framework for the cooperative management of movable cultural heritage in similar systems.

REFERENCES

Alby, E., V. Desbiolles, M. Lecocq, „Automatic Identification of Archaeological Artifacts on the Excavation Site”, în *ISPRS – International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*, 2020, p. 1347–1353, <https://doi.org/10.5194/isprs-archives-xxliii-b2-2020-1347-2020>.

Arentz Østmo, Mari, „Artefacts from the 2011–2012 Excavations”, 2017, p. 513–526, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110421088-022>.

Avrami, Erica, Randall Mason, Marta de la Torre (eds.), *Values and Heritage Conservation: Research Report*, Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute, 2000, http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/values_heritage_research_report; https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/valuesrpt.pdf.

Axelsen, Irmelin, „Collaboration and Communication between Hobby Metal Detectorists and Archaeologists in Norway”, în *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, 10, 2022, p. 295–310, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2022.14>.

Baker, Brenda J., „Confronting Taphonomic Challenges from Excavation Through Curation of Human Remains”, în *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 32, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10816-024-09672-7>.

Börjesson, Lisa et al., „Re-purposing Excavation Database Content as Paradata”, în *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.221>.

Bruha, Lukáš et al., „Reconstruction of Lost Cultural Heritage Sites and Landscapes: Context of Ancient Objects in Time and Space”, în *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information*, 9, 2020, p. 604, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijgi9100604>.

Bruschi, G., D. Amadio, „Documentation of Archaeological Stratigraphic Units. New Digital Technologies Applied to the Burials in Sant’Andrea in Mombasiglio”, în *The International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.5194/isprs-archives-xxlviii-m-2-2023-319-2023>.

Crooke, Elizabeth, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges*, London–New York, Routledge, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203371015>.

Davoli, Paola, „Papyri and Ostraca as Archaeological Objects: The Importance of Context”, în *Using Ostraca in the Ancient World*, Berlin–Boston, De Gruyter, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110712902-002>.

Deckers, Pieterjan et al., „MEDEA: Crowd-Sourcing the Recording of Metal-Detected Artefacts in Flanders (Belgium)”, în *Open Archaeology*, 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0019>.

Deckers, Pieterjan, Michael Lewis, Suzie Thomas, „Between Two Places: Archaeology and Metal-Detecting in Europe”, în *Open Archaeology*, 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0031>.

De Luca, Lisa et al., „Identification of Social Status through Grave Goods Using a Biocultural Approach...”, în *Heritage*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage7080188>.

Dobat, Andres Siegfried, „Between Rescue and Research: An Evaluation after 30 Years of Liberal Metal Detecting in Archaeological Research and Heritage Practice in Denmark”, în *European Journal of Archaeology*, 16, nr. 4, 2013, p. 704–725, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1461957113Y.0000000041>.

Goff, J., B. McFadgen, N. Marriner, „Landscape Archaeology — The Value of Context to Archaeological Interpretation: A Case Study from Waitore, New Zealand”, în *Geoarchaeology*, 36, 2021, p. 768–779, <https://doi.org/10.1002/gea.21864>.

Harrison, Rodney, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, London–New York, Routledge, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108857>.

Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London–New York, Routledge, 2000, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003124450>.

Kadakas, Ulla, „How Quickly Should Public Benefit Come From Archaeology?”, în *Internet Archaeology*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.57.15>.

Komoróczy, B., „Archaeology, Metal Detecting, and Citizen Science in the Czech Republic”, în *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, 10, nr. 3, 2022, p. 322–335, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2022.15>.

Moullou, Dorina et al., „Digital Tools for Data Acquisition and Heritage Management in Archaeology and Their Impact on Archaeological Practices”, în *Heritage*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage7010005>.

Neal, C., „Heritage and Participation”, în Emma Waterton, Steve Watson (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565_22.

Ogloblin Ramirez, I. et al., „Investigating the Microarchaeological Record at Underwater Sites: Operating an On-Site Laboratory During the Antikythera Shipwreck Excavation”, în *Journal of Maritime Archaeology*, 19, 2024, p. 385–406, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11457-024-09415-5>.

Richardson, L., „A Digital Public Archaeology”, în *Public Archaeology*, 23, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.5334/pia.431>.

Rodríguez Temiño, Ignacio, „Rational Grounds for Dialogue Between Archaeologists and Metal Detectorists in Spain”, în *Open Archaeology*, 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0011>.

Smith, Laurajane, *Uses of Heritage*, London, Routledge, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203602263>.

Stansbie, D., „‘Boundary Objects’ in Archaeological Finds and Environmental Research”, în *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.16995/traj.4335>.

Styk, M., N. Pažinová, „3D Reconstruction as a Form of Interpretation: Example of Excavation of the Medieval Peřuša Castle”, în *Interdisciplinaria Archaeologica*, 2020, p. 73–87, <https://doi.org/10.24916/iansa.2020.1.6>.

Thomas, Suzie, „Editorial: Portable Antiquities: Archaeology, Collecting, Metal Detecting”, în *Internet Archaeology*, 33, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.33.12>.

Thomas, Suzie, „Archaeologists and Metal-Detector Users in England and Wales: Past, Present and Future”, în Richard Skeates, Carol McDavid, John Carman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public Archaeology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 60–81.

Tsakalos, Antonis, „Transforming Excavation Finds into Museum Exhibits: Examples from the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens”, în *The Actual Problems of History and Theory of Art*, 7, 2017, p. 180–189, <https://doi.org/10.18688/aa177-2-19>.

Waterton, Emma, Steve Watson (eds.), *Heritage and Community Engagement: Collaboration or Contestation?*, London–New York, Routledge, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315875064>.

Waterton, Emma, Steve Watson (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565>.

Surse online (accesate în 2026)

„Valuable archaeological pieces, discovered by 18 metal detectorists in Mureș, showcased in ‘The Enigmas of Treasures’ exhibition”, <https://agerpres.ro/english/2026/02/12/feature-valuable-archaeological-pieces-discovered-by-18-metal-detectorists-in-mures-showcased-in-the—1527442>, accesat la 3 februarie 2026.

„Detectorismul, pasiunea a peste 22.000 de români care caută comori ascunse. Fenomenul a devenit foarte greu de gestionat”, <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/alba-iulia/detectorismul-pasiunea-a-pest-22000-de-romani-2219998.html>, accesat la 3 februarie 2026.

„Tezaur unicat în România, descoperit de către un pasionat de istorie cu detectorul de metale, în Prahova / Ce recompensă va primi bărbatul”, <https://hotnews.ro/foto-tezaur-unicat-n-romnia-descoperit-de-catre-un-pasionat-de-istorie-cu-detectorul-de-metale-n-prahova-ce-recompensa-va-primi-barbatul-180632>, accesat la 3 februarie 2026.

„Județul Alba: Un tânăr căutător de comori a descoperit un tezaur dacic cu 116 obiecte de patrimoniu”, <https://basilica.ro/judetul-alba-un-tanar-cautator-de-comori-a-descoperit-un-tezaur-dacic-cu-116-obiecte-de-patrimoniu/>, accesat la 3 februarie 2026.

„Comori descoperite în România cu detectorul de metale: 18 artefacte de mare valoare sunt expuse la Mureș”, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/cultura/comori-descoperite-in-romania-cu-detectorul-de-metale-18-artefacte-de-mare-valoare-sunt-expuse-la-mures-777032.html>, accesat la 7 februarie 2026.

„Tezaur unicat în România, descoperit de către un pasionat de istorie cu detectorul de metale, în Prahova / Ce recompensă va primi bărbatul”, <https://hotnews.ro/foto-tezaur-unicat-n-romnia-descoperit-de-catre-un-pasionat-de-istorie-cu-detectorul-de-metale-n-prahova-ce-recompensa-va-primi-barbatul-18063>, accesat la 7 februarie 2026.

„Tezaur dacic, găsit în județul Mureș cu ajutorul unui detector de metale”, <https://tvrinfo.ro/tezaur-dacic-gasit-in-judetul-mures-cu-ajutorul-unui-detector-de-metale/>, accesat la 7 februarie 2026.

„Brățărilor dacice de aur”, <https://www.mnir.ro/bratarile-dacice-de-aur/>, accesat la 12 februarie 2026.

„Filmul recuperării brățărilor dacice din aur”, <https://pressone.ro/filmul-recuperarii-bratarilor-dacice-din-aur>, accesat la 12 februarie 2026.

„Augustin Lazăr, despre brățărilor dacice: «Comunitatea științifică serioasă nu are niciun fel de dubii cu privire la autenticitatea lor»”, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/augustin-lazar-despre-bratarile-dacice-comunitatea-stiintifica-serioasa-nu-are-niciun-fel-de-dubii-cu-privire-la-autenticitatea-lor-2763853>, accesat la 12 februarie 2026.

„Descoperire spectaculoasă în Argeș. Comoara găsită de doi bărbați cu detectoare de metale”, <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/comoara-din-secolul-xviii-gasita-in-arges-mii-de-monede-otomane-erau-ascunse-in-patru-ulcele-de-lut.html>, accesat la 12 februarie 2026.

„The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) is managed by the British Museum and records archaeological finds discovered by the public”, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/national/treasure-and-portable-antiquities-scheme>, accesat la 12 februarie 2026.

„Payment of the treasure trove reward”, <https://en.natmus.dk/sales-and-services/museum-services/treasure-trove/payment-of-the-treasure-trove-reward/>, accesat la 15 februarie 2026.

„The Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands”, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-archaeological-practice/article/portable-antiquities-of-the-netherlands/0C4BDF2C64454B1E85B15FD2924E9BE8>, accesat la 15 februarie 2026.

„Archaeology in Flanders”, <https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue58/7/full-text.html>, accesat la 15 februarie 2026.