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Method

Archaeological object interviews as a method to study and engage with finder-collectors

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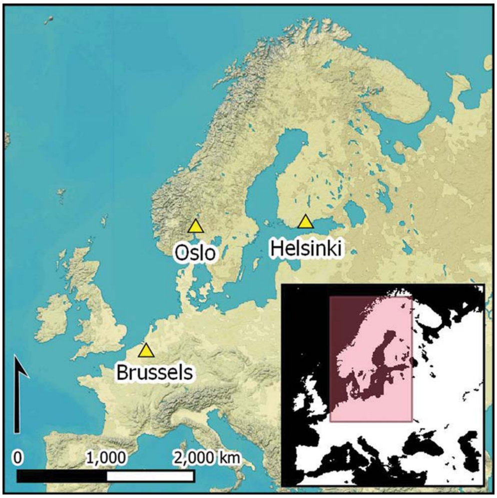

The activities of metal-detectorists and other finders and collectors of archaeological objects are increasingly of interest for researchers in archaeology and related disciplines. In this methods article, the authors introduce semi-structured archaeological object interviews—inspired by the object interview in sociology—as a means of observing the meanings and biographies that finder-collectors create for, and with, the objects in their stewardship. The challenges and opportunities for researchers using this method are explored and the authors offer reflections from in-the-field experiences with finder-collectors in Flanders, Finland and Norway.

Keywords: North-west Europe, archaeological object interviews, metal detectorists, home collections, displays

Introduction

Collecting is a common social behaviour in many cultures. In this article we present the method for archaeological object interviews conducted in Flanders, Finland and Norway with avocational metal-detectorists. We suggest that metal-detectorists can be defined as 'finder-collectors', because many of them not only find but also collect and curate objects which (in the jurisdictions where we carried out our research) they can legally own. Some finder-collectors have large private collections or even 'home museums' consisting of thousands of objects of varying ages; however, we know very little about how these individuals interact with the objects in their possession and the stories behind each discovery (but see Moilanen 2023).

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The object interview involves discussion of a set of chosen objects while engaging with those objects during the interview. In our pilot studies, these objects were pre-selected from their own collections by the 10 interviewees. The object interview method has been developed by sociologist Sophie Woodward, who has used this approach with diverse objects and assemblages, from so-called clutter (Woodward 2021) to pairs of jeans (Woodward 2016). It is a material method that incorporates the objects within the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, and it allows the study of the entanglements between people and things (Figure 1). Researchers using this method can also study how people engage with objects during the interview itself.

Objects that become closely connected with a person's own narrative can be considered 'charged' objects (Doel 2021: 38); objects that have emotional or "affective charge" (Figlerowicz *et al.* 2016: 165) may become connected with particular memories, represent a professional or other identity, or have other complex personal meanings. The added 'archaeological' aspect of finder-collectors' objects also, arguably, charges the objects, not only through their meanings within the stories and identities of the current owners but also due to the histories (both known and imagined) associated with the objects through their archaeological pasts. Many finder-collectors value archaeological objects for the tangible connections that they provide to past people and societies (Winkley 2016: 196–7), and so we expect this dynamic,

Figure 1. The Norwegian finder-collectors Klaus Edler (left) and Eirik Ulvatne (right) talking about their finds (photograph by Anna Wessman).

which is distinct to archaeological objects, to make an intriguing additional element in our interviews.

Archaeological objects may change their meaning and/or possess multiple meanings over their lifespan. Accordingly, meaning is defined through the interactions and negotiations between objects and people (Hurcombe 2007: 41). This means that the primary focus of an object's biography can be its journey through the sociocultural sphere. Small finds discovered by metal-detectorists are portable and thus more mobile in contrast to many other types of cultural heritage. The existence of small finds is always embedded in a multitude of contexts, with tensions surrounding their roles, uses and meanings (Hahn & Weiss 2013: 2).

We tested the object interview methodology with archaeological objects. We were curious as to the implications in applying this ethnographic approach to archaeological objects in private collections. As a method, object interviews offer a potential means to respond to previous conclusions that the holders of private collections often desire for the survival not only of the archaeological information that they have collected, but also "of personal memories attached to those collections" (Daubney 2022: 5). Here, we focus on the multi-sensory experience of the objects and their interactions with their finder-collectors.

General procedure and research ethics

We followed standard ethical protocols for research involving human subjects. For interviews carried out in Flanders, the Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Antwerp screened the research proposal and associated procedure (for example, concerning data storage and contacting informants). For interviews conducted in Norway, the recommendations of the Norwegian Research Ethics committee were followed. The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK's guidelines (2021) for working in human sciences were followed for the Finnish interviews. In all three countries, participants were provided with an information sheet that detailed the goals of the project and what would happen to the data generated. Participants were also asked to sign a form to provide consent for the recording of interviews and photographing of objects for the purposes of analysis and publication, and to indicate that they were aware of the research aims and their right to remove themselves and their data from the project at any time. Interviewees in Flanders were offered the chance to see the transcribed scripts of the interviews, while the Finnish and Norwegian interviewees were allowed to read the manuscript of this article to see how their quotes have been used. In all cases, interviews were anonymised, except for Figures 1 and 2, for which the finder-collectors specifically asked to be named.

For the interviews carried out in Flanders, funding was available for a masters-level university student to transcribe the interviews (which were in both English and Dutch). The student signed a confidentiality agreement in which they promised not to share the transcripts with anyone else or to discuss the contents. They destroyed their copies of the recordings and transcripts after they had finished their transcription work.

All of the interviews were recorded using dictaphones. In advance, all interviewees were asked via email to select three to four objects from their personal collections to discuss in

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the interview. The interviewees were free to decide which objects to choose, with no preference indicated by the interviewer (such as object categories, age, material, etc.). These objects were then photographed during the interview. In some instances, further photographs were taken of the larger collection, for example to document display cases or storage practices. The Norwegian interviewees sent photographs of their home collections and displays after the interview, as well as giving their consent for us to use them in publications. One Flemish interviewee also sent images of more objects in their collection, including links to records of objects in MEDEA (an online platform for the sharing of metal detection finds and knowledge, available at https://www.vondsten.be/). The interviews in Finland took place in either Finnish or Swedish, and during the interviews in Norway the interviewer asked questions in Swedish, and the interviewees responded in Norwegian as both languages are mutually intelligible. In Flanders the interviewer asked questions in English, but the interviewees had the option to respond in Dutch if they preferred.

Ownership of archaeological objects raises debate regarding the ethics of privately owning archaeological objects (Mauch Messenger 1999). However, such a debate is beyond the scope of this article, and our archaeological object interviews were conducted within jurisdictions where metal-detecting is legal and we made sure that the finder-collectors were indeed the legal owners of their objects.

Sourcing interviewees

The number of interviews was low for this pilot project, so interviewees were sourced primarily through personal connections and acquaintances who were either already known to us as researchers or introduced via our colleagues. Issues arising from the non-random nature of this snowball sampling approach—including the low likelihood of obtaining a representative sample—have previously been discussed (Sharma 2017: 752). However, for the purposes of this exploratory study this was not considered a problem. Almost all our interviewees were men (nine out of 10). This concurs with demographic data from other studies of avocational metal-detectorists in northern Europe, where the majority of detectorists are male (e.g. Thomas 2012).

Interview procedure

Our interviewees were initially contacted by email. In this email, interviewees were asked to select the objects they wished to talk about and to suggest a meeting place, for example at home, at a public place such as a cafe, or at the university (in the case of the Flemish interviews, funding was available to compensate travel costs although in the end this was not needed). In practice, the majority of the archaeological object interviews took place in finder-collectors' homes or in a university office (with one online interview, see below for discussion of the impact of space).

Interviews follow various formats, with the most common being structured, semi-structured or unstructured. We decided to follow a semi-structured format because, while such interviews are "focused on a core topic to provide a general structure, the semi-structured interview also allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds" (Magaldi & Berler 2020: 4825). In practice we found that a handful of questions relating to what the finder-collector had brought to discuss and why, what the object(s)

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meant to them and what memories the object(s) evoked, were sufficient to allow the interviews to evolve naturally with finder-collectors; follow-up questions often arose organically during the interview. The transcribed interviews were separately coded and analysed manually using the software Atlas.ti and Nvivo. The results were discussed and compared at length, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of the methodological approach.

Outcomes

We chose different methodological paths for these interviews with the intention of testing different approaches. While four interviews took place in the homes of the finder-collectors (in the space of the collections), one interview took place online (during the Covid-19 pandemic), and one took place in an office space, and thus away from the finder-collectors' home sphere. Interviews involved either a single interviewee or a pair of interviewees, and in some cases the interview took place in the home of one interviewee while another interviewee was also present. The different dynamics of single and paired interviews and their possible impacts on the approach are explored below.

The space

Although the sample size is small, our results show that space is extremely important in the way interviews play out; finder-collectors react very differently depending on the environment in which they are interviewed. Conducting an interview in someone's home is naturally a different experience from being in an office space or online. The atmosphere is more intimate in a home environment and it allows the researcher to make observations on the behaviour of the finder-collector and on use of space, artistic visions, etc.

When the interview took place in the collection's location (usually the home of the finder-collector), it seemed to be easier for both the interviewer and the interviewee to 'get lost' in the collection and the displays. This meant that the discussion was often disrupted and moved beyond the initial selection of objects for discussion (Figure 2). In some of the pair interviews, if the interview location was the home of one finder-collector, their companion expressed jealousy and frustration at not having the rest of their collection at hand to discuss or show in the same way. Within the home setting, there was also a clearer emotional aspect to the objects and entanglement of the interviewee with their collection was more apparent. An interview in someone's home was more personal and often included having lunch or a drink together after the interview. The online interview that took place via Zoom was perhaps more efficient in comparison to home interviews, because the interviewee could be more out-of-context and more reflexive. Moreover, it was possible for the interviewers to follow the structure of the interview question sheet more closely. Similarly, when the interview was conducted outside of the home, the discussion tended to focus only on the specific objects the finder-collectors had chosen to bring with them (although references were often made to the collections at home).

In the office setting, it was not a given that the finder-collector would show up with only three or four objects; for example, at an interview in Norway, one finder-collector brought a much larger box of objects. This may reflect difficulties in choosing only a couple of (favourite) objects, or perhaps the desire to take the opportunity to discuss some objects with a

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Figure 2. During the interview at the home of Wim de Sutter, the conversation inevitably developed to view larger selections of his personal collection (photograph by Suzie Thomas).

professionally trained archaeologist. This was an interesting insight into the interview process. Finder-collectors sometimes struggled to separate being at the centre of study themselves from seeking a professional opinion about a given object. This dualism of being seen as both an interviewer and as a vocational archaeologist with expert knowledge was especially apparent for Anna Wessman, who holds a professorship in Iron Age Archaeology and is originally from the Nordic region, while Suzie Thomas, as a Heritage Studies professor and also a foreigner to the region of the interviews, was seemingly met with fewer assumptions that she would have relevant artefact knowledge.

Individual and pair dynamics

Two of the archaeological object interviews involved only one finder-collector (one in Flanders and one in Finland), while four interviews were carried out with pairs of finder-collectors (two in Flanders, one in Norway and one in Finland). This apparently affected the ways in which the different interviews progressed.

The pair interviews often involved interesting discussions, not only between the interviewer and the interviewees but also between the interviewees, who actively took part in the discussions and compared their objects, sometimes asking each other questions. Several

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times during the interviews, one of the pair would comment or give a positive or encouraging opinion of the other's objects. Additionally, on several occasions objects had been selected for discussion because they included a back-story that involved both interviewees, or because something about the object illustrated something about their friendship. For example, one object selected in Flanders was highlighted specifically because the interviewee's detecting partner had not been present at the time of its discovery. As they discussed their thoughts when looking at this object:

> *And what makes it also special is that every time I see it, it reminds me how good it is to have a friend. And if he's not there, I was alone when I found it* (Flemish finder-collector no. 4).

Interaction with the objects

As mentioned above, in individual interviews conducted in the home of the finder-collector, the proximity of the interview to the rest of the collection meant that the discussions moved beyond the objects that had been selected for the interview itself. On the one hand this led to a deeper contextualisation of the collection as a whole, but on the other hand made it difficult for the interviewee to remain focused on the selected interview objects.

It became evident to us that the archaeological objects and the stories behind their discoveries were incredibly important to their finder-collectors. Many of our interviewees touched and caressed the objects while talking about them.

> *It is somehow incredible to have such an old object in your hand and to think about who has once worn this. What did these objects once mean to their owners? Where was it made and by whom? This we will never know…* (Finnish finder-collector no. 2).

The emotional bond between objects and their owners has been noted by other researchers (Moilanen 2023: 2), and objects that had not already been on display in their homes were brought out for the interview from places where they were kept carefully wrapped and stored.

In a few cases the interview objects had also been studied by archaeologists, or had been on loan for museum exhibitions, and this was always a source of immense pride for the finder-collectors. At the same time, finder-collectors could also express disappointment concerning artefacts that they felt were of archaeological importance but that had not been included in exhibitions and collections or given what they felt would be sufficient attention by heritage managers and researchers.

> *… they* [*museums*] *get so much good stuff that the 'bad' stuff just gets put aside … And they think it's not important. But those are things that should be seen by the public* (Flemish finder-collector no. 5).

As a general observation, we did not feel as though the archaeological object interviews that we carried out were interviewer led. In many ways the interviewees constructed the interviews themselves, moving naturally between different themes and aspects that they wanted to discuss with us. The semi-structured approach meant that interviewees often presented us with information that we may not have asked about in a more structured setting. This was especially true with pairs, where interviewees sometimes took on the role of interviewer towards each other.

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Discussion and conclusions

Archaeological object interviews build upon an innovative ethnographic method from the social sciences to offer an accessible and—we would argue for the participants (and ourselves)—an enjoyable means for uncovering rich qualitative data concerning the nature of relationships between finder-collectors and the objects that they steward. Of course, it could be suggested that a more freeform and less formal (i.e. not being recorded nor consented for research) version of archaeological object interviews is already taking place on a fairly regular basis between archaeological professionals and the public in some circumstances. Finds liaison officers (FLOs) in recording programmes such as the Portable Antiquities Scheme in England and Wales, and Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands, necessarily interact informally and amicably with metal-detectorists and other finder-collectors in order to record and discuss their archaeological discoveries.

As we have discussed above, various circumstances surrounding the archaeological object interviews, such as the number of finder-collectors present in the interview, the location of the interview and even to some extent the way in which the interviewer is perceived by the finder-collector (for example as an expert, as an outsider—culturally or socially—or as a person already known to them) may affect the way in which the interviews play out. This is true of all interview-based research and may be useful to study further in the context of FLOs and other public-facing archaeologists to identify more clearly the impacts of different locations, familiarity between the finder-collector and archaeologist and other variables. A clearer grasp of these variables and their impact can then assist in creating best practices or training in this method for archaeologists, helping to improve outreach activities and garner deeper understandings connected to particular objects.

From a theoretical perspective, integrating both archaeological and post-archaeological biographies may shed light on how we understand archaeological objects through the affective processes that become associated with them. Although we are unable to interview the original collectors, archaeological object interviews may also provide insights into how antiquarians, whose collections later became the foundations of many museums, constructed relationships with the objects they uncovered. Studying correspondence from these periods could also identify biographical and affective aspects of antiquarian-object relationships. A greater understanding of how objects become charged for certain individuals, and perhaps also communities, could further contribute to more effective interpretation in museums and other media (both physical and digital), as well as addressing social issues such as mental health, and seeking better alignment between personal and societal needs attached to archaeological objects.

We tested the archaeological object interview method outlined above with a specific type of stakeholder in regard to archaeological heritage—finder-collectors. We also tried to limit the interviews to just a handful of archaeological objects pre-selected by the finder-collectors, with varying levels of success. In the future, it would be valuable to record these interactions on video because so much of the visual expressions and body language during our interviews is now lost. This would also enable the researcher to concentrate on active listening (Seidman 1998).

It would be informative to carry out archaeological object interviews with other types of stakeholders, such as museum curators or conservators (perhaps selecting objects from their

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institutional collections rather than private collections), field archaeologists and even community members with a particular connection to a certain archaeological object (e.g. local residents or Indigenous and other descendent communities). Private collectors who are not finder-collectors would also be an interesting group to interview. Their means of obtaining their collections—through financial transaction rather than personal discovery in the field—may have an impact on how they relate to the archaeological objects in their possession. As we have argued elsewhere, "communication undertaken with humility, empathy, and deep respect" (Pitblado *et al.* 2022: 7) is an essential ingredient not only to fostering closer collaboration with diverse stakeholders that own and care for archaeological objects, but also to augment our understanding of the multiple meanings that such archaeological objects have, including gaining insight into their post-archaeological biographies.

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