

PROJEKTY

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Who Owns an Archaeological Find? Exhibition on the Protection of Archaeological Heritage at the National Museum of Lithuania

The new exhibition on the protection of archaeological heritage “Heritage: for me, for society, for the State?” opened in the Old Arsenal of the National Museum of Lithuania on June 16, 2023. The curators of the exhibition, Sigita Mikšaitė, Dr Povilas Blaževičius and the architect Gabrielė Černiavskaja, are pleased to be able to present a topic that has not yet been discussed in Lithuanian museums, even though it has become more and more relevant in the spheres of archaeology and heritage protection over the last decade. The exhibition aims to address the public concerning the illicit import and export of cultural goods, the illegal raiding of archaeological sites and the underground market for looted relicts. State ownership of undiscovered cultural heritage is established by the Constitution: The Republic of Lithuania exclusively owns the depths of the earth, as well as historical, archaeological and cultural objects found there. While the State is able to acquire movable cultural heritage objects which are to be exported according to the rules approved by the Government, and it is forbidden

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Photo 1. The exhibition „The heritage: for me, for society, for the state?“, 16 June 2023 – 10 June 2024

Author of the photos: Evaldas Vailionis, National Museum of Lithuania

to sell cultural properties from the collections of national, state and municipality museums at any auction or to offer them to antique shops, potential movable cultural heritage assets can only be entered into the Register of Cultural Heritage and acquired by the State with the permission of the owner. The legal framework to submit accidental archeological finds within 7 days is often not just aimed at discoveries by farmers, landowners or metal detector enthusiasts, but also exploited by the would-be sellers, sometimes after falling under suspicion. Currently it is deemed more important for the excavated objects to reach museums, even without exact information on where they have been excavated, so a legal loophole for the “finders” to submit their discoveries and thus avoid legal persecution still exists. It is regrettable that Lithuania is frequently an intermediate stop between Scandinavia, Eastern and Western Europe for the illegal shipment of cultural goods, including several archaeological finds. However, a certain surprising change is also underway: Lithuania itself is increasingly becoming the final stop for the illegal trade in valuables. When it comes to collecting, people sometimes do not even think about what can and cannot be given away or received legally. Therefore, it is necessary to appeal firstly to the consciousness of the general public: if the treasure gain is deemed exclusively “yours”, when whose loss is it when artifacts disappear into the black market? Who is affected by the damage to the perception of the history and identity of an entire nation?

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These issues are all covered by the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the Republic of Lithuania has become a member of the Subsidiary Committee of the Meeting of States Parties to the 1970 Convention just this year. Despite these recent news, this exhibition is the result of many years of cooperation between the National Museum of Lithuania and the Department of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, as well as with the specialists of the Customs of the Republic of Lithuania, the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania. The mediation of these important institutions and international legislation for the protection of cultural heritage enables the museum to safeguard many illegally or accidentally discovered movable cultural heritage objects.



Photo 2. The exhibition „The heritage: for me, for society, for the state?“, 16 June 2023 – 10 June 2024

Author of the photos: Evaldas Vailionis, National Museum of Lithuania

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The idea to compile an exhibition on this topic arose after discovering how many and what types of archaeological artefacts have been permanently stored in the vaults of the Archaeological Department of the National Museum of Lithuania after court decisions to prevent illegal trafficking. During the initial research in the museum's archaeological repositories, the number and variety of confiscated finds, the history of their arrival to museum, and the scale of the crimes involved were all surprising. It became clear that these stories needed to be brought into the light of day and that it was necessary to educate the public by communicating the importance of preserving cultural heritage and to present the basic principles of the legal system with respect to cultural goods, the extent of illegal finds, trade and smuggling, the civic actions of people, and the valuable finds that have been discovered by accident and brought to museums.

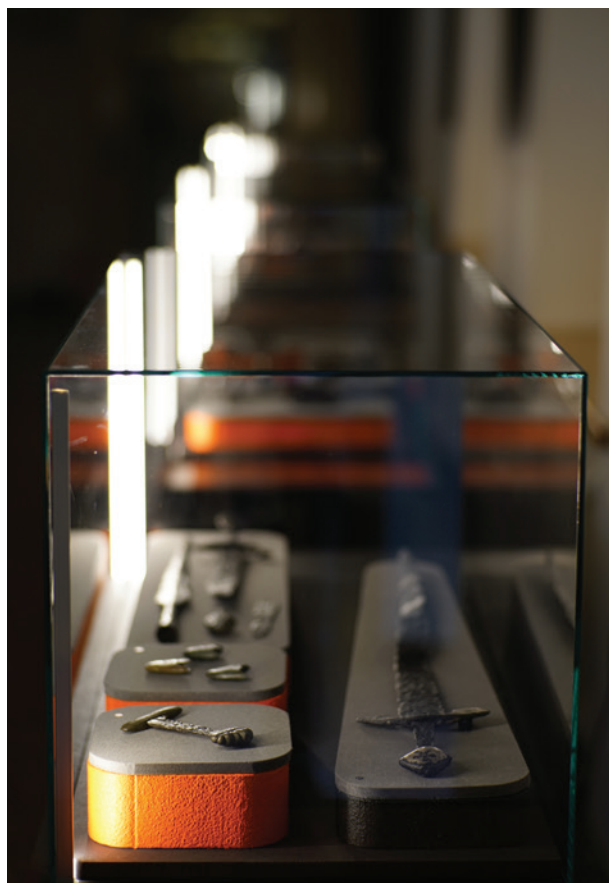


Photo 3. The exhibition „The heritage: for me, for society, for the state?“, 16 June 2023 – 10 June 2024

Author of the photos: Evaldas Vailionis, National Museum of Lithuania

This new museum exhibition aims to raise visitors' awareness by telling the stories of how each object came to be in the museum and providing not only the relevant information on criminal activities and their damage, but also demonstrating practical examples of good civic behavior. The aim is to emphasize that illegal activities foster the development of the black market, illegal excavation activities, and damage to the state and its history. In differently colored showcases, the most valuable or interesting exhibits submitted and donated to the Department of Cultural Heritage or museum are separated from illegally acquired and confiscated valuables. The visitor of the exhibition can compare cultural relics and behaviors directly; unfortunately, cases of wrongdoing outweighs good practice. The showcases are complemented by information boards with the most relevant topics, aimed at visitors – what to do after finding an archaeological relic, whether it is allowed to excavate at all, whether it is legal to use a metal detector, and if the person who brings the find will be punished. They also mention the various issues and aspects that heritage specialists, museums and archaeologists face when trying to persuade people to cooperate with them for heritage preservation.

In order to create a dialogue with visitors, the exhibition avoids implementing a harsh tone or frightening lectures, leaving it up to the individual to decide who owns the common past that we all share and that can only be (re)created through our joint efforts. Meanwhile, the curators of the exhibition set the aim of encouraging more effective cooperation between people and institutions in preventing the destruction of archaeological cultural monuments and the trade in archaeological finds, and emphasize the need to educate not only schoolchildren, young people, or the staff of customs, post offices, and other institutions involved in the control and transportation of parcels, but also the wider community.

Additional information:

Organizer

National Museum of Lithuania

Curators

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Architect

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Partners

Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO

The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania

Customs of the republic of Lithuania

Lithuanian Airports