

Metal detecting in France

I have been interested in metal detecting since I was a kid, but never got round to it until 7 years ago. Although the prospect of digging up untold riches from the past always was an alluring prospect to me, several factors combined to keep treasure hunting in the realm of fantasy. First of all, at an early age I developed a unhealthy interest in women, cars and wine, which accounted for most of my free time and all of my disposable revenue. Secondly, and this is the most important point, everything I had read or heard indicated that treasure hunting was strictly forbidden in France. Detectorists, everyone said, were persecuted like heretics under the inquisition. Being a basically law abiding citizen I left it at that. Then , one day I walked past a metal detector shop, with a whole lot of machines of different sorts on sale, amongst a cunningly laid out exhibit of archaeological artefacts and ancient coins from all periods of antique history. This really just too much to resist. On inquiring, I was told that while it was perfectly legal to purchase a detector, it was strictly against the law to use one to search for objects of interest to history, prehistory, archaeology or art. As some people are apt to argue that even a foil chewing gum wrapper will be of the utmost interest to historians in some distant future, the authorities often consider that there is a de facto ban on the use of metal detectors. Further questioning revealed that using a metal detector on or anywhere remotely near a known archeological site was the shortcut route to a stay behind bars courtesy of the state, or at the very least, an un-enjoyable experience down the nearest police station. But what, I inquired, would happen if I claimed that I was searching for a tool or ring etc lost by the landowner or myself? This would depend, the salesman said, very much on what you happened to have dug up, and on how well known the site was. If you dig up anything good and get caught with it, you really get the book thrown at you. Likewise, if you make a good find well away from any recorded, known or suspected site, on virgin territory so to speak, you would like as not be accused of having made this discovery deliberately. It would be argued that the historical artefact that you dug up proved that the land was a site, and as it is just not on to dig things up on historical sites, your using the metal detector was a characteristic illegal act against the state and the national history. It appeared that whichever way you looked at the problem or went about it, using a detector would run you foul of the law, with ensuing heavy fine, and confiscation of both machine and finds. This all sounded like a very sticky wicket to me, but the salesman cleverly clinched the deal by telling me that it was customary to sum up the situation in the following manner: “it is strictly against the law to get caught”. A beautiful French saying no doubt in use since the Roman conquest! It seems the law is so cunningly worded as to be able to be interpreted as

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a blanket-ban on metal detecting wherever local authorities or law-enforcement officers feel inclined to persecute detectorists. Having said this, the law does provide for authorization to use a metal detector for searching for historical reasons, via a complex and seldom successful procedure which entails writing to the regional state representative. However, if you do get this permission granted, I have been told that anything you discover belongs to the French state, not the discoverer (or so an archeologist told me).

In the end, I just bought a metal detector and decided to take it from there. At the time there were four metal-detecting magazines on sale in France, so it appeared that in spite of the apparent dangers and complications, there were a lot of people out there digging little holes in the ground. All four specialized in treasure hunting and historical finds identification in a big way, and just reading them gave me the detecting bug in a bad way. I made an enthusiastic if cautious start. Two weeks of searching remote plots of land in a constant state of semi-terror produced the usual desirable collection of beginner's finds: nails, rusty wire, horseshoes, caps and ring-pulls, etc. Then came the first turning point in my career: I got caught red-handed by the mayor of my village.

Far from rounding a posse to hang me short and high from the village oak tree, the mayor turned out to be thoroughly enthusiastic, running around behind me like an excited child. I explained my legal-moral dilemma to him, and he unwittingly did a good impersonation of John Wayne, telling me that around her, *he was the law*. He then proceeded to show me the known archeological sites in the village, and spent an afternoon phoning around the various landowners to obtain search permission for me. Feeling slightly less criminal, I started to detect openly, making contact with farmers and people with useful knowledge as I went along. So far, I have never been refused search permission, even though one sweet old lady still misguidedly believes me to be a vermin catcher despite many explanations to the contrary. Every time she sees me in her vines, she comes out to inquire how many moles I've caught this time. I've given up trying to tell her exactly what I'm about, and I don't think my performance impresses her very much! As her vineyard happens to be one of my best sites, I live in fear that one day she'll kick me off her land as an incompetent.

After the mayor episode, with typical beginner's luck, it took me only a week to make my first significant find, stumbling upon a small scattered 15 th century cache of gilded jewelrey and silver-washed coins. I asked a delighted mayor what to do, and he strongly advised me to keep quiet about it to avoid any trouble!

I continued in this semi-authorized manner for two years, and then struck gold in the form of beautiful, almost mint 6th century Merovingian gold coins. This was to prove the second turning point in my career as a treasure hunter. Here I was, with boxes filled with artefacts, partefacts and coins galore, and now, to cap it all a spectacular find of some historical import. I didn't want to keep my collection stashed away in shoes-boxes, and I most definitely did not want to run the risk of selling my gold on the black market for a rip-off price. What I really wanted was for all my finds to be registered so that the information about the village history wouldn't be lost. The merovingian coins I wanted to go on show in a museum. I decided to turn myself in, and wrote a plausibly honest letter to the authorities, explaining my predicament. I had legally purchased a metal detector, and in spite of all my efforts, was continually stumbling on forbidden fruit. Couldn't we reach some sort of agreement whereby we could work together in some manner? I didn't detail my finds, of course, I'm not that silly. I received a reply by return of post, inviting me to an appointment in the lion's den. I duly turned up with a rather small and unimpressive selection of finds. When I emptied the shoe-box onto the desk, there was a shocked, ominous silence. I was asked to wait while the chief archeologist discussed matters with the conservation officers. I imagine that they were seriously contemplating putting a bullet into my neck, and billing it to the family. Eventually, they returned and gave a very stern lecture on my misdeeds and the dangers of ignorant amateurs disturbing archeological strata, etc. In the end, they agreed that I could continue my criminal activities, as long as I submitted a report and allowed them to study anything of interest I should dig up, and also show them all my sites. This seemed as good a time as any to come clean, so I revealed how much I had actually found, and showed them a gold tremissis. Their eyes popped out of their heads, but in the end, I was left to walk free. Needless to say, I was overjoyed. I could now legally detect, with a proper legal letter to prove it to anyone.

The other detector users I have met over the years are either always prepared for the quick getaway and semi-paranoïd to the point of running over the sites rather than carefully searching them, or the very worst sort of cynical night-hawks, the type who do considerable damage to sites.

So what about actual detecting? Well, some of the afore-mentioned detectorists have been at it for a number of years, and have found an awful lot of stuff. However, there is so much buried history here that they have hardly grazed the surface, except on the very well known and richest sites. So much remains to be discovered and dug up that it's very hard not to make a lot of decent finds, ranging from bronze-age up to modern times, if you know what you're doing. That is, if

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you can tell a good site from the surface pottery sherds and materials, and if you are really familiar with your detector. My personal interest is in celtic to 8th century, artefacts more than coins. I've been fortunate to make some pretty fabulous finds, covering almost every sort of period artefact imaginable: celtic, roman, merovingian and Carolingian silver and gold coins. Complete and well preserved artefacts : buckles and plates, keys, rings of all sorts, fibulas, knives, silver ingots, ex-voto of various sorts. You name it, I've been lucky enough to have dug up most of what I dreamed of. Except a hoard of roman gold, of course, but I haven't given up hope yet! The incredible thing is, it all comes from the immediate vicinity of the small village I live in, in South-West France. The land is part vineyards, part woods, part pasture, part cornfields, so it's metal detecting all year round. I go over the same sites regularly, awaiting the turn of the plough or for some considerate body to dig a trench or pond. I've changed machines regularly, all equipped with different sizes and types of search-heads. This has really increased my finds rate. My latest detector is a high-frequency French machine with optional sound discrimination, and I wouldn't change it for anything now I'm used to it. This one really delivers for me! The village in question isn't even particularly rich in terms of settlement throughout the ages, it is just that it is virtually untouched detector-wise compared to the UK for example. Add to this the fact that France was much more heavily colonized by Rome than England, and legal situation apart, you have a detectorists dream.

A big problem for me is the corroded state of a lot of my bronze finds, as the soil conditions are not very kind. This is where it would be nice to be in a country where detector-users are well organized into clubs, and expertise in cleaning, restoration and conservation readily available/

Although not my main search target, medieval sites abound, and I have made some good random finds, the best a hoard of 67 15th century coins from the grounds of a small chateau where I suspected there was a roman site. This may sound like a lot of boasting, but it isn't really: I know people who have had the skill and perseverance to find much more and much more spectacular stuff than me.

So, let's suppose you are not French and have heard of the possibilities over here. You could be planning a quick trip to raid a couple of sites and make good finds. I can only recommend that you contact a reputable club, or go detecting with someone who knows the ropes and is on the level with the authorities. Otherwise, you will likely as not end up some unsavoury creek without a paddle, in very serious trouble. As to taking finds out of the country when you depart, forget it, the

risk is just too great, the penalty too high. If you come to live here, one way round many of the difficulties is to join a local historical society, if they'll have you.

Marcel Durand

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