

## **Doctoral (PhD) theses**

### **The Acquisition and Collection History of the Antiquity Collection of Frigyes Déri**

–

### **Examining an antiquity collection using historiographical and ethnographical tools**

József Dénes KOVÁCS

Supervisor: Tamás GESZTELYI, Prof.,

Dr.



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of History and Ethnography

Debrecen, 2023

**Content:**

I. Choice of topic ..... 2

II. The structure of the thesis..... 3

III. Methodology ..... 5

IV. Presenting the results as theses ..... 7

V. Publications in the topic of the thesis ..... 11

VI. Presentations in the topic of the thesis ..... 12

VII. Exhibition from the Déri Frigyes antiquity collection..... 12

## I. Choice of topic

Through decades of hard work, Frigyes Déri, founder of the Déri Museum, created a unique collection, the jewel of which is the antiquity collection. It was his favorite and so it is no surprise that this collection was always open to the public between 1930 and 2010 (not counting three shorter periods).

Thus it is surprising that in the past 100 years, the collection of Frigyes Déri could not take its rightful place in the Hungarian museum scene. It is a general experience that apart from a narrow audience of museologists, historians and art historians, the wider museum scene has no idea what treasures can be found within the Déri Museum. In the 21st century, it became widely recognized in the field of museology that the research of the acquisition and collection history of art pieces in public collections is an important scholarly task, which curators are encouraged to do.

Thus the choice of topic was influenced by a number of subjective and objective factors, the three most important of which are the following: (1) the collection is not well researched, (2) museological shortcomings, (3) the discovery of such written sources that could potentially lead to significant scientific results.

1. Part of the Greek-Roman-Etruscan collection is somewhat well known from an art history standpoint, particularly among researchers of antiquity. The complete and thorough acquisition and collection history of the Greek-Roman-Etruscan collection is still missing, however, from the field of history and museology. Furthermore, based on the Diary of János Sőregi, it can categorically be said that the Antiquity collection has a unique collection history that is different from the history of the rest of the Déri collection. Based on records from the archives and the former director himself, the pieces of the Antiquity collection had, both literally and figuratively, been on the warpath.
2. Museological inadequacies mostly appear in the inventory of the collection (the lack of repository registry, infrequent revisions, out-of-date records). However, it is important to note that the Antiquity collection of Frigyes Déri was never assigned a competent museologist, thus there had been no one who would prepare and coordinate scientific research of the entire collection. Since 1930, the only exception to this was János György Szilágyi, who worked in the Déri Museum for a short time.

3. In the preparation phase, many written sources and documents were discovered that would later shape the structure and content of this thesis. These documents have incredible value from a local historical and museum historical standpoint. Despite this fact, they are still not widely known and have not been fully researched to this day. Some of these documents are the purchase log of Frigyes Déri, his personal correspondence and the diary of former director János Sőregi. These documents and their important roles are fully shown and substantiated in the thesis.

The aim of this PhD thesis, in line with the choice of topic, is to process, categorize and digitize the Antique collection of Frigyes Déri, which is one of the most significant source in the study of ancient history in Hungary. Although I am not a scholar of ancient history, my aim in the study of the modern history of the Greek-Roman-Etruscan collection is to museologically contribute to the research of ancient history.

## **II. The structure of the thesis**

While choosing the topic and preparing the research documents, the main objective was to find answers to the following questions:

- How an internationally significant antiquity collection is created?
- What options were available to display the collection?
- What happened to the collection?
- What was the attitude towards the antiquity collection within the 20th century museological scene?
- What options were available to research and study the collection?
- What tools does museology as a complementary discipline have to support the research of ancient history?
- When can a collection be considered fully researched from a museological standpoint?

Considering the above questions, the thesis was structurally divided into six main chapters.

1. The first chapter is concerned with presenting the research materials and the completed professional tasks. The reasons for choosing the topic is explained and the framework of the thesis is defined, just like the methodological tools of museology. Furthermore, I present the most important private documents and their authors, which is arguably the most important part of this thesis.
2. The second part is concerned with presenting the acquisition history of the Antiquity collection (1912-1924). Based on the correspondence and purchase log of Frigyes Déri, recreate and analyze the known details in the founding of the collection, and the circumstances of the purchase transactions. I aim to give a detailed picture of the collector's purchasing habits and commercial connections and the chronology of the founding of the collection. The results of the research are compiled in Appendices I and II.
3. The first determinable phase of the collection history falls between 1916 and 1938. In the third chapter, I present the major milestones of the Antiquity collection in this period: the decision making process and its circumstances leading up to the founding of the museum; the questions arising after the death of Frigyes Déri concerning his legacy, and the solutions; the most important events relating to the founding of the museum, such as electing the first director of the Déri Museum and the creation of the first Antiquity collection.
4. The second stage of the collection history falls between 1939 and 1944, which was the most critical period in the history of the Antique collection (and the Déri Museum). It was during the Second World War when the Greek-Roman-Etruscan collection came closest to complete destruction. Although there have been challenges during the past 90 years, there have been no other period when the pieces of the collection were exposed to so many dangers (bombing, fire, seizure, looting, inadequate storage) than during these years.  
In this chapter, based on archive records and the writings of János Sőregi, I aim to recreate the events concerning the collection from the protective preparations to the Soviet occupation.

5. In the fifth part, I present the history of the Antiquity collection from the Second world War to the present day. In the sub-chapters, I aim to present the history of the Antiquity collection between 1945-2010; use archive data to show the history of the pieces transferred to Budapest; present the initial research done on the collection and the possible directions for future research.
6. The last major part of the thesis is the Catalog presenting the pieces of the Antiquity collection.

### **III. Methodology**

For this thesis, I used written and material historical sources. For the written sources historical, for the material sources museological research methodology and tools were used.

#### 1. Analyzing written sources

The analyzed written sources can be divided into two categories: official and personal records. Regarding the official documents relating to the Déri Museum, the following were used:

- Reports of the Déri Museum 1921-1933
- Yearbooks of the Déri Museum 1934-1972
- The material in the Déri Museum archives related to museum history (from 1974)
- Official documents (1920-1974) found in Déri Museum MNL, Hajdú-Bihar County Archives (hereafter: MNL, HBM Archives)
- Editions of the *Debreceni Képes Kalendárium*, edited by museum officials between 1920 and 1948 (Lajos Zoltai and János Sőregi)

The official documents were categorized and analyzed from two standpoints. First, I aimed to present the chronological framework of the Antiquity collection to the fullest extent from a museum history approach. Second, I aimed to confirm or refute the history of certain ego-documents using these records. During this process, I managed to confirm a number of claims in the Sőregi Diaries using archive data.

The second group of the written sources are so called *ego-documents*. The genre of these records are quite varied, as there are personal letters (the correspondence of Frigyes Déri),

personal purchase logs (the purchase log and proto-catalog of Frigyes Déri) and personal diaries (the Debrecen Diaries of János Sőregi) among them. These are all quite valuable sources concerning the history of the museum and the era, yet they are not that widely known. Analyzing them, I aimed to collect data that are not found in other historiographical works. I also used the ego-documents complimentary to the official records and to illuminate unknown parts of the collection history.

## 2. Analyzing material sources

Processing the entire collection began with full revision, during which all pieces were digitized. The complete revision of the Antiquity collection was finished in the beginning of 2018. The new photos of the pieces are stored in an inventory both digitally and on paper. We also created a digital copy of the description cards of Szilágyi.

The next step was the collection of the documents necessary for the repository registry. We collected and categorized the official documents of the past 40 years, and I started the research of the Déri collection related documents in the HBM national archives. (During this process, the list of the pieces transferred to Budapest during WW2 was discovered.)

As a result of this work, we are able to participate in the digitization process concerning the entire museum. As part of this project, the inventory data of the pieces are constantly being recorded to the HUNTÉKA, MANDA and EUROPEANA platforms.

## **IV. Presenting the results as theses**

The desired results of the thesis were determined as follows:

- To present, as fully as possible, the history of the Antiquity collection and its pieces from a museum and cultural history standpoint.
- To develop a research methodology, using which the history of the entire Déri legacy can be studied.
- To create a catalog that contains all published scholarly references to the pieces, uses the results of the archive data studies, presents the latest photographs of the pieces and documents the practical museological work.
- To eliminate any museological shortcoming regarding the collection by opening and keeping up-to-date a repository registry, conducting revisions and digitizing written documents.

Examining the answers found to the previously presented main questions, and the success rate of the above presented main goals, it can be generally stated that the most important result of this thesis is presenting the 1912-2022 history of the Antiquity collection to the fullest extent. During the research, I managed to discover and study such sources that helped illuminate a number of historical “blind spots” and allowed me to make such claims that can be considered novel in the field of museology and historiography.

It is important to stress that these results allow for the preparation of another, more wide-ranging research. The results can also provide useful help in other researches with culture historical significance, i.e. The study of the Déri and Sóregi legacy.

In the following, I am presenting the itemized results.

### **1. New data for the fields of historiography and museology for acquisition and collection history related researches**

One of the shortcomings of the Hungarian museum history related researches is the lack of in-depth acquisition and collection history researches regarding the significant public collections. Although there have been studies published regarding the history of certain significant legacies or museum collections in the past few years, these publications can be considered isolated occurrences. In my view, this thesis manages to contribute new data to researches

concerned about the history of Hungarian cultural heritage. The most important results in this regard are the following:

- Exploring the mostly Vienna based antique art trade as it related to Frigyes Déri between 1912-1924.
- Presenting the international legacy consolidation after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary.
- Presenting the culture policy factors behind the transfer of the Déri legacy and the founding of Déri Museum.
- Presenting the history of one of the most significant public collections outside Budapest during the Second World War, with special regard to the Antiquity collection.
- Exploring the history of the ancient art pieces that went missing during the Second World War.
- Presenting the post Second World War history of the Antiquity collection by contrasting official documents and reports with personal documents.

## 2. Study and use of personal documents in the thesis

I consider it an important result of the thesis that I discovered and used such unknown or little known written sources that can thus become an integral part of historiography. Created in the first half of the 20th century, these personal documents contain information that help us understand the contemporary culture and the museum scene. Furthermore, they proved to be invaluable in complementing official documents (reports, logs) chronologically and historiographically in a way the latter ones are just unsuitable to do so. The most important ego-documents used in the thesis are the following:

- **Purchase Log.** The most important source documenting Frigyes Déri's activity as an art collector is his Purchase Log. This booklet contains practically all information regarding the art collection activity between 1912-1920, due to which the log is not just an important source of the acquisition history of the Déri legacy, but can also be considered a rare treasure of Hungarian museology.
- **Proto-Catalog** Due to his love of art pieces and an inherent affinity for precision,

Frigyes Déri created a Catalog of his collection in 1921. The Proto-Catalog is the document Frigyes Déri kept for personal use. It is special because the clean sheets bear handwritten notes and marks primarily by Frigyes Déri, but also from later museum director János Sőregi. Déri recorded the post-1921 purchases similar detail that can be seen in the purchase log, thus the acquisition history of the collection can be traced up until his death in 1924. The Proto-Catalog was only known to a handful of museologists in the past decades, so its discovery and publication is of museum historical importance.

- **The Correspondence of Frigyes Déri** In a Budapest antique shop's auction in 2005, the Déri Museum managed to acquire part of the correspondence of former state secretary, Elemér Czakó. Most of the letters dated between 4 January 1920 and 13 June 1923 were written by Frigyes Déri. These letters constitute significant part of the thesis, as they provide a clearer picture of Frigyes Déri's collection activity. Complementing the Purchase Log, and the Proto-Catalog, these letters also contain information on art piece purchases and provide valuable insight into the difficulties of contemporary art collection and storage.
  
- **Debrecen Diary** The currently 42 editions long Debrecen Diary of János Sőregi is an invaluable source for the research of Hungarian cultural history. This thesis heavily relies on the writings of the former museum director. They contain such museum and culture historical data that cannot be found in other works and thus are very important to studying the history of the Antiquity collection. As the author was not just an acquaintance of the museum founder, but also followed the history of the legacy throughout his life, his writings commemorate the events shaping said history.

### **3. The results regarding the study of antiquity**

As one of the most notable domestic public collection on ancient culture, the Antiquity collection of the Déri Museum can count on the distinguished attention of the study of antiquity. Thus it is important to emphasize that this thesis aims to provide support for said field in the study of ancient material sources found in public collections. It was also an objective to strengthen the ties of museum enthusiasts to the study of antiquity, present the

latest research results to the public and to show how the material sources of the ancient world become integral part of cultural history in the modern age. By presenting the process of ancient art collection, exploring the over 100 year history of the material and creating the Collection Catalog, I feel I managed to achieve these goals, in line with the will of Frigyes Déri, who primarily created the collection for cultural and educational purposes.

I also consider the re-discovery and digitization of the description cards of János György Szilágyi an important achievement from an ancient history standpoint.

#### **4. The Collection Catalog.**

We managed to create a catalog that contains all published scholarly references to the pieces, uses the results of the archive data studies, presents the latest photographs of the pieces and documents the practical museological work. This had been an ongoing project for over 100 years, started by the will of Frigyes Déri and supported by classical philologist Nándor Láng after the opening of Déri Museum.

#### **Museology as a complementary discipline of history**

In the study of the Greek-Roman-Etruscan collection, museological tools and considerations played a significant part. In accordance with this, I consider museology as a complex complementary discipline that *“must aim to undertake the clarification of the creation, function and history, in short: source value, of material historical sources.”*<sup>1</sup> I hope that I managed to prove the indispensable role of museology in the study of material historical sources, securing its place among the complementary disciplines of history.

---

<sup>1</sup> „vállalkoznia kell a ránkmaradt tárgyi emlékek mint történelmi források születése körülményeinek, történelmi funkciójának, fennmaradása történetének, egészében: forrásértékének tisztázására.” Glatz, Ferenc: Újkori muzeológia mint történelmi forrástan és kultúrtörténet. Századok 112. (1978) 1. sz.139– 140.

## V. Publications in the topic of the thesis



UNIVERSITY of  
DEBRECEN

UNIVERSITY AND NATIONAL LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

H-4002 Egyetem tér 1, Debrecen  
Phone: +3652/410-443, email: publikaciok@lib.unideb.hu

Registry number: DEENK/403/2022.PL  
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: József Dénes Kovács  
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of History and Ethnology

### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

1. **Kovács, J. D.:** Újabb adatok Déri Frigyes antik műgyűjtéséhez: A Vásárlási Napló titkai.  
*Debr. Déri Múz. évkv. közlésre elfogadva (-), 1-28, 2022. ISSN: 0418-4513.*
2. **Kovács, J. D.:** Kincs, ami nincs?: Sőregi János feljegyzései a Déri Múzeum II. világháborúban eltűnt műtárgyairól.  
*Debr. Déri Múz. évkv. 89, 133-148, 2018. ISSN: 0418-4513.*
3. **Kovács, J. D.:** Bombák árnyékában: A Déri Múzeum viszontagságai 1939-1945 között Sőregi János Naplójában.  
*Debr. Déri Múz. évkv. 88, 171-185, 2017. ISSN: 0418-4513.*
4. **Kovács, J. D.:** "Kérem tudatni": Sőregi János szerepe a Déri-gyűjtemény Debrecenbe kerülésében (gyűjteménytörténet, 1924-1925).  
*Debr. Déri Múz. évkv. 87, 111-121, 2016. ISSN: 0418-4513.*
5. **Kovács, J. D.:** A Déri Múzeum antik gyűjteménye: Gyűjtéstörténet.  
*Debr. Déri Múz. évkv. 85, 87-100, 2014. ISSN: 0418-4513.*

#### Other journal articles (1)

6. **Kovács, J. D., Hajdú, Z.:** A Déri Múzeum időszaki kiállításai 2016-ban: Az Antikvitás arcai.  
*Debr. Déri Múz. évkv. 88, 187-190, 2017. ISSN: 0418-4513.*

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

29 August, 2022



## VI. Presentations in the topic of the thesis

**2013** – „*A Déri Múzeum Antik-gyűjteménye*” – [The Antiquity Collection of the Déri Museum]

PhD candidate conference, Doctoral schools of History and Ethnography, University of Debrecen

**2018** – „*Rejtőzködő kincsek – A Déri Múzeum Antik-gyűjtemény*”

– [Elusive treasures - The Antiquity Collection of the Déri Museum] Déri-day conference, Debrecen, Déri Múzeum

**2021** – „*Egy láthatatlan gyűjtemény – a Déri Múzeum ókori műremekei*”

– [An Invisible Collection - The Ancient Art Pieces of Déri Museum] Night of the Museums, series of lectures, Debrecen, Déri Múzeum

## VII. Exhibition from the Déri Frigyes antique collection

**2016** – „*Az Antikvitás arcai*” – [Faces of Antiquity]

Curators: Zsigmond HAJDÚ, Dr; József Dénes.KOVÁCS