

Participatory Archaeology for Heritage Preparedness

Addressing the Wicked Problem of Anti-Democratic Discourse

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In an era of rising authoritarian and anti-democratic movements globally, participatory archaeology needs to move beyond self-congratulatory ideas about its inherent goodness and take seriously archaeologists' potential role as social and political mediators in a complex democratic discourse. The challenge lies in resisting both external and internal pressure on democratic discourse, while maintaining an inclusive, democratic and multivocal debate about heritage, identity and belonging. Drawing on experiences from Indigenous and particularly Saami archaeology, participatory archaeology in Scandinavia can become more self-reflexive and purposeful. Our subject's strength is that it provides specified and tangible topics and arenas for democratic discourse, building social cohesion by discussing and tolerating diverse perspectives. The aim should not be consensus about heritage and the past but dissensus and communities of disagreement. Such an approach contributes to a cognitive heritage preparedness that transgresses the preservation of predefined physical heritage values, constituting a 'small win' to the 'wicked problem' of sustaining open, accountable and transparent discussions in the face of totalitarian narratives and aggressive "alternative facts".

Keywords: participatory archaeology, Indigenous archaeology, Saami archaeology, democratisation, wicked problems, small wins, clumsy solutions, heritage preparedness

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Introduction

Archaeology and heritage have always been employed to promote political agendas. In the current tense political situation of the world, an increasing number of these agendas are authoritarian, expansionist and anti-democratic. In contrast, archaeologists have worked for decades to establish practices that are inclusive, multivocal and democratic, including participatory archaeologies. In this keynote, I suggest that these practices should be reconsidered as not only important shifts in how heritage is done, but potentially vital contributions to the protection of democratic states and values. I further claim that, to this end, Scandinavian archaeology must adopt a bolder stance and dare to matter – even dare to be explicitly political. In this context, participatory archaeology can benefit from the example of Indigenous archaeology in general, and Saami archaeology in particular, with its focus on specific social and political aims and fostering of critical, self-reflexive debates about the purpose, methods and challenges of collaborative efforts.

While the debates about and implementation of participatory approaches in archaeology are quite limited in scope in all Scandinavian countries, I will centre my discussion on the situation in Norway. Participatory archaeology has received relatively little attention in Norway so far. Where it is discussed, engaging with communities or non-professional partners is generally perceived as democratic and ‘good’, and participation is typically described as the engagement of people in archaeological investigations in order to educate them in our professional opinions about the past and as voluntary labour (Myrvoll 2010a:80). The archaeology of Saami pasts and heritage has included more pronounced aims of involving non-professionals in active knowledge production. This field has also been more contested and sometimes criticized for being too political. At present, however, we face a global political situation that actualizes precisely the democratic and political dimensions of archaeology.

So, what can archaeology contribute? It has recently been proposed that archaeology, through a ‘small wins’ approach, can be part of the solution for ‘wicked problems’. Wicked problems are complex, often intractable issues where attempts to rectify them can risk creating new or worse problems (Schofield 2024). Participation in archaeological and heritage contexts can itself be defined as a wicked problem (Rosetti 2022:21–22), with its complex entanglements with today’s politics, as well as multiple stakeholders, historical, legal and administrative frameworks, and the danger of (unwittingly) reducing good intentions of empowering participants to tokenism that covers up prevailing power relations (Niklasson & Hølleland 2018:18; Smith 2025; Viita-aho 2025:80–82). These complexities mean that

it is vital for archaeologists to understand the political context in which they operate (Schofield 2024:233) and to acknowledge that participation is thoroughly situational and based in historical power dynamics and forms of governance.

In the following, I will argue that purposeful and self-reflexive participatory approaches in archaeology can contribute to a ‘clumsy solution’ (Verweij & Thompson 2006) to the wicked problem of maintaining an open and democratic debate about the past, identity and belonging in the face of an increasingly anti-democratic discourse. By providing tangible points of departure for collective reflection and discussion, this kind of archaeology might even foster a cognitive heritage preparedness vital to resisting an undermining of our democracies.

Wicked problems, small wins and clumsy solutions

Over the last decades, it has become clear that social, political and environmental problems are not simple cause and effect issues that can be rectified with singular solutions. The complexities of the challenges we face, the ‘mess’ we are in, can only be approached with equally complex strategies. Attempting to control these ‘postnormal times’ is futile, but we can navigate through them by acknowledging that the multitude of problems we are facing simultaneously cannot be solved in isolation. Diverse perspectives are essential for understanding and steering through these wicked problems, managing them with creativity (Sardar 2015, as cited in Schofield 2024:28–29), and hopefully establishing sustainable approaches that can last into the future.

The term ‘wicked problem’ was articulated in a 1960s US multidisciplinary seminar that aimed to solve social system problems. Many definitions have later been proposed, of which a relatively simple one is that wicked problems are complex, intractable, open-ended, and unpredictable. Unlike tame problems, where you identify, for instance, a technical problem and find a solution to this, wicked problems are characterised by the difficulty of defining both what the exact problem is and any possible solution. Instead, solutions can only be evaluated after their effectuation, and then only subjectively in terms of whether they were ‘good enough’ or merely created new problems. Thus, solving wicked problems is often portrayed as a one-shot operation involving potential risk (Alford & Head 2017:397; Churchman 1967; Conklin 2006; Schofield 2024:16–19).

Contrary to this depiction of wicked problems, John Schofield has suggested that archaeology can contribute to solving a variety of wicked problems, such as climate change, health issues and social injustice, through a

‘small wins’ approach (Schofield 2024). He attributes this notion to Graham Hingangaroa Smith and Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s discussion on how we can decolonize and create meaningful space for Indigenous Peoples within the academy. They conclude that this ‘utopian vision’ is not won in a single spectacular event, but perhaps through small and incremental gains (Schofield 2024:31–32; Smith & Smith 2019:1098–1099). ‘Small wins’ thus refer to concrete outcomes of moderate importance that still create traction and can accumulate to bring about transformative change (Schofield 2024:32–35; Termeer et al. 2019:173; Weick 1984). A related term from behavioural science is ‘nudging’, describing how human behaviour, habits, and decisions are frequently influenced by apparently insignificant details that result in minor changes that over time can amount to substantial results (e.g. Taylor 2023).

This hopeful approach is not suggesting archaeology can save the world but that we can at least nudge it in the right direction. However, this entails that ‘we’, as a community or even humanity at large, agree on that direction. On a larger scale, perhaps we do, but part of many wicked problems is that people nudge in all sorts of directions. This may appear random and chaotic, but Marco Verweij, Mary Douglas and others have identified certain cultural structures that allow us to understand and even benefit from these opposing viewpoints. Using diverse approaches to the issue of global warming as an example, they describe how conflicting views on public policy issues (which are often wicked problems) are the result of people adhering to a limited number of fundamental forms of social organisation – egalitarianism, hierarchy, individualism, and fatalism. These basic convictions allow for specific and largely incompatible organising, perceptions and justifications of social relations and humans’ place in the world. Because people argue about policy issues from radically different premises, they will never agree, but each fundamental conviction brings certain elements of experience and wisdom to the discussion that are missed by the others. Each provides valuable contributions to the debate that may otherwise remain omitted, and, significantly, expresses how a (substantial) proportion of the populace thinks (Verweij et al. 2006). Even if these contesting opinions do not comprise a coherent set of values (cf. Shapiro 1988:1561), they represent complementary virtues. By creatively combining such opposing perspectives on what the problems are and how they should be resolved, we can reach compromises or ‘clumsy solutions’ to complex (wicked) problems that are more viable and lasting than ‘elegant’ solutions that assume we have to choose one definite answer (Verweij et al. 2006; Verweij & Thompson 2006).

In addition, both validating and challenging opinions have psychological and practical effects on mutual benevolence and intergroup relations

(Greville-Harris et al. 2016; Livingstone et al. 2024), which can arguably influence democratic discourse and social cohesion. As I will return to below, such validation of opposing opinions and values is both a challenge to and a part of solving the wicked problem of democratic discourse in the face of anti-democratic forces; while aiming to oppose an unwanted external pressure that can destabilise our communities, we need to build the democratic resistance of those communities by acknowledging opinions we do not necessarily agree with or find suitable. The latter position mirrors well-known issues of participatory and Indigenous archaeologies, although such contradictory attitudes and opinions and how to deal with them are not always explicitly scrutinised and discussed in these contexts.

Participatory and Indigenous archaeologies – good, bad or ugly?

Participation has emerged as a pivotal concept in European cultural policies over the past two decades, encompassing diverse strategies aimed at democratization and engagement beyond professional ranks (Bonet & Négrier 2018). This resonates with the 2005 Faro Convention, and its declaration that everyone has the right to benefit from and contribute to the enrichment of cultural heritage (Colomer 2023). Furthermore, participation or collaboration have been central terms in international discussions about the authorised heritage discourse and the power distribution between heritage professionals and Indigenous groups, communities, or ‘locals’ (e.g. Harrison 2013, cf. González-Ruibal et al. 2018; Smith 2006; Smith & Waterton 2009). In general, participation has been promoted as a particularly ethical way of practicing archaeology (e.g. Atalay 2012; Thomas & Lea 2014, cf. Fredheim 2020).

Opinions on what, exactly, this ethical participation should be comprised of are less unanimous. This has created something of a wilderness of labels and definitions of different archaeologies, including participatory or collaborative archaeology (Colwell-Chanthaphonh & Ferguson 2008:10; Kiddey 2020:24–25), public archaeology (Merriman 2004; Moshenska 2017; Svanberg & Wahlgren 2007), community archaeology (Marshall 2002; Kiddey 2020; Thomas 2017), and Open Archaeology (Milek 2018). This variety of terms demonstrates that the specific articulation of participatory archaeology in various contexts depends on aims, and theoretical and methodological preferences, as well as specific political, administrative and legal frameworks (Atalay 2012:49–50; Batory & Svensson 2020; Thomas 2017:15). What most approaches have in common is a wish to promote an archaeology that engages non-professional groups and indi-

viduals in archaeological practices to find out more about archaeological heritage, while also creating social ties and community empowerment (Thomas 2019:149–150).

The distinction between participation and dissemination is not razor sharp, since including school children and others in archaeological work with the aim of educating them is also a form of participation. However, such efforts are usually about ‘us’ teaching ‘them’ how they should understand archaeology and the past. While there is nothing wrong with disseminating expert knowledge to non-professionals who are eager to learn about our research, a participatory activity or study, in my opinion, is where non-archaeologists are actively involved in the archaeological knowledge production and discourse. Participatory approaches can still cover a very broad spectrum of archaeological activities (Colwell-Chanthaphonh & Ferguson 2008), from simple data gathering and analyses to more ‘radical’ collaborations, in which people from outside of the profession contribute to project goals, design, execution, analyses, and/or output. All approaches along this spectrum have their use and value, but it is the radical version that has frequently been promoted as particularly good, ethical and genuine, not least when discussing Indigenous archaeology.

INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGY

The term Indigenous people is defined in a variety of ways, but following the ILO 169 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989 it points to groups and individuals identified as descendants of people inhabiting land before western colonisation or modern national borders were established and who retain some social, economic, cultural and political institutions that are distinct from those of a majority population (ILO C169 1989, Article 1b). Importantly, (and a qualification that is often misunderstood) Indigenous people are not necessarily identified as the first people ever to have inhabited an area of land, though they may be the descendants of such pioneering groups.

While archaeologists in several parts of the world have been working closely with such Indigenous communities for a long time, Indigenous archaeology was articulated as a specific approach in the 2000s (Nicholas 2010b), following which a substantial body of literature on the subject has emerged (e.g. Atalay 2006; Colwell-Chanthaphonh & Ferguson 2008; Hillerdal et al. 2017; Nicholas 2010a; Nicholas 2024; Ojala 2022; Silliman 2008; Smith 1999; Smith & Wobst 2005; Watkins 2000). Internationally, Indigenous archaeology has developed alongside general collaborative archaeology (Colwell-Chanthaphonh & Ferguson 2008), and it is frequently described as an archaeology with, for, and by Indigenous people (Silliman 2010:218). This may define it as a form of participatory or com-

munity archaeology, and these approaches apply overlapping methodologies and considerations. However, Indigenous archaeology has a different socio-political background, context, premise and effect. While not a unified approach, it constitutes a movement of critical archaeology that challenges and aims to transform traditional archaeological and heritage management through decolonization and the empowerment of Indigenous groups. A fundamental concern within Indigenous archaeology has been the legacies of colonialism in archaeology and the impact of these legacies on descendant communities. Another aim has been to encourage the participation of Indigenous scholars and practitioners in all aspects of archaeology from field work to academic research, and to incorporate Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies into archaeological theory and practice (Atalay 2006; Ojala 2022:121–122; Nicholas 2010a; Nicholas & Watkins 2014). In part this has taken the form of activist archaeologies for social and environmental justice (Atalay 2016).

Common denominators across various Indigenous contexts include the direct involvement of archaeology in crucial issues for current descendant communities. In contrast to other minority rights, which often focus on intangible cultural aspects, internationally articulated Indigenous rights include self-determination and rights to land and water. Disputes over these aspects are contentious matters in which Indigenous archaeology has been given a decisive and political role, often to determine Indigenous presence into the deep past where historical sources are lacking or severely biased by hegemonic colonial interests (Knutson 2024:54; Ojala 2022:126). So even if participatory archaeologies in general can have social impact, Indigenous archaeologies often relate to more fundamental stakes.

Karen Milek suggests that if her Open Archaeology is realized, it would eradicate what are currently seen as distinct archaeological fields, for example collaborative, community, or Indigenous archaeology (Milek 2018:41). This mirrors George Nicholas' call for an end to Indigenous archaeology (Nicholas 2010b). I completely agree that the segregation of various archaeologies based on what are really intersected aspects of human identities and societies should be abandoned (Spangen 2025). However, Indigenous archaeology is not entirely comparable to participatory archaeologies, and its specific socio-political contexts would not be well served by a blurring of this as just another collaborative approach. That said, if archaeology is to contribute to maintaining a democratic discourse in the current politically strained situation, all participatory approaches may have something to learn from the debates about aims, methods and results in Indigenous archaeology. These discussions interlace with an emerging focus on impact, and how to define communities, ethics, power relations and voluntariness.

(WHAT) ARE PARTICIPATORY AND INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGIES GOOD (FOR)?

The focus on participation over the last 20 years has fostered important changes and initiatives in archaeology, but there are some tropes that can be questioned. There has been a growing criticism of the rather self-congratulatory idea that working with communities or the public is inherently good and ethical (Ellenberger & Richardson 2019; Fredheim 2019, 2020; Kiddey 2020; Niklasson & Hølleland 2018; Smith 2025; Smith & Waterton 2009:13–14). Archaeologists that involve non-professionals in their efforts can do good work, but to evaluate ‘goodness’, we need to define it. Schematic definitions of participatory archaeology approaches tend to align good or beneficial outcomes with the amount of power transfer from ‘experts’ to ‘non-experts’ (e.g. Guilfoyle & Hogg 2015), often referring to Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of participation (Arnstein 1969). Originally devised to describe public participation in planning processes in the US, her analysis is an interesting critique of various types of tokenism, whereby citizens are involved under a guise of participation but do not influence the decision-making in any significant way. Similarly, insistent talk of ‘co-operation’ has been criticised for masking an inherent asymmetry in all archaeological endeavours and disguising a patronising and colonialist attitude to ‘locals’ (González-Ruibal 2009, 2010; Olsen 1991). However the collaborations are labelled, they often fail to produce anything other than an imagined power redistribution, while in reality they are reproducing the dominant heritage discourse (Knutson 2024:117; Niklasson & Hølleland 2018:18; Rico 2017; Smith 2025; Spangen 2016:225).

Equating the level of power transfer and public influence with goodness in a participatory archaeological project overlooks the intended aim of the effort and does not measure whether said effort has a positive or wanted effect. If the intention is unclear, it will also be difficult to measure its success, with efforts resulting in participation for participation’s sake or a box-ticking exercise (Kelty 2017). To my mind, this risks the unethical use, or waste, of people’s time and resources.

Furthermore, a focus on power transfer indicates simplified ideas about experts and non-experts as two monolithic and dichotomic entities. In reality, various identities and community affiliations are often interlaced, and communities can be fragmented and multivocal due to internal disputes, power relations, and competing attitudes, politics, and motivations (Kiddey 2020:31–32; González-Ruibal et al. 2018:508; Van Dyke 2020:49–50). In Indigenous contexts, the non-expert ‘People’ tend to equal Indigenous communities. Not only frequently perceived as distinct homogenous units, they are also commonly conceptualised as a homogenous Indigenous com-

munity across the world. ‘Indigenous’ appears as shorthand for people that are inherently disenfranchised, in harmony with nature, of animistic convictions, and protective of their ancestral past. There are even notions of Indigenous people having unconscious knowledge about particular meanings of archaeological finds and cultural heritage, from long before their own time and context, that will mystically reoccur when the individual is confronted with these physical remains (e.g. Domanska 2018; Harris & Cipolla 2017:2; Milek 2018:38–39, cf. González-Ruibal 2019; Spangen 2016). While usually well meant, these perceptions construct specific expectations of what Indigenous participation in archaeology should look like. Of course, the knowledge, skills, resources and interests among Indigenous ‘People’ are as diverse as anyone else’s.

These variations substantiate the critique of broad claims to be working with communities or ‘the People’, as they overlook or undercommunicate the specific selection of people that get involved (González-Ruibal et al. 2018). Participation can be limited by socio-economic and cultural status, as well as money, time and emotional cost (e.g. Burström 2014:105; Fredheim 2020:8; Spangen 2016:224; Ween & Riseth 2011). Active marginalization by other community members can also be an issue (Byrne 2012:29), as well as simple disinterest or a feeling of not belonging in a certain context (Fredheim 2019:42–43). Yet, professionals have tended to ascribe non-participation to a ‘wrong’ attitude based on ignorance. Revealingly, those who do volunteer tend to see themselves as providing a service, while professionals, though acknowledging them as resources, also see the volunteers as lucky beneficiaries due to the perceived inherently ‘good’ components of archaeology and community work (Fredheim 2020). As volunteers frequently include people who are more interested in recognition from peers and experts than monetary gain (Axelsen 2021:168–169), this can result in exploitation of volunteers, potentially feeding into a token economy that takes advantage of their willingness to work for social rewards rather than pay (Gilge 2016:205).

In line with the trope of volunteers as beneficiaries, archaeology and heritage is also claimed to be sources of well-being (Burnell 2022; Dobat et al. 2020; Dobat et al. 2022; Hodder 2010; Pattinson et al. 2023; Smith et al. 2022). The healing power of heritage work has remained a trope since the 1970s, and although it can be argued in certain contexts (Schanche 1993), assertions that involvement in archaeological efforts promote better physical and mental health are largely based on self-reporting and interviews (e.g. Dobat et al. 2022; Pattinson et al. 2023). It is probably unimportant to the participants themselves if their improved health is due to the fresh air, physical activity, social networks, meditative activities, or to the archae-

ology or cultural heritage as such, but it is problematic to claim that archaeology has inherent health and healing benefits.

In summary, participatory archaeologies and work with communities cannot be seen as inherently positive but instead pose a range of challenges that vary between contexts. While these approaches can be both socially and scientifically beneficial, I claim that participation should not be seen as intrinsically valuable and that we should not uphold a systematic correspondence between power transfer and success. The ability of archaeology to add constructive contributions to communities and society at large depends on clear and transparent aims, ethical considerations concerning who participates and on what conditions, and a continuous critical and self-reflexive scrutiny of whether our efforts bring us closer to these described goals. This means recognizing the context-specific and multilayered aspects of each archaeological intervention, stretching across a continuum of voluntary, non-expert engagement versus expert control.

In what follows, I will turn to Norway where, despite a wave of interest in in the 1990s and early 2000s to engage people in fieldwork and meetings between professional and local knowledge systems (e.g. Brekmoe 2004; Krogh 1999; Myrvoll 2010a; Nilsen 2003; Pramli 1999; Solli 1996), there has been little critical debate about participatory archaeology. However, collaboration and participation have been important integrated elements in *Saami* archaeology since its naissance in the 1980s, with the articulation of specific aims for this practice and the identification and discussion of a series of challenges already established in the 1990s. Some of these reflections and experiences might serve as learning points that can further the development of participatory archaeologies in Norway and Scandinavia into more critical, self-reflexive and influencing social and political practices.

The Saami and their archaeology

Indigenous archaeologies are bound together by the fact that Indigenous groups across the world share histories and experiences of violence, oppression, assimilation, and discrimination, as well as the erasure of culture, language, history and heritage – histories that have had and still have consequences for their existences (Ojala 2019:182). Yet, critiques have pointed out that Indigenous archaeologies have been dominated by the experiences and present situations of groups of native descentance in English-speaking settler colonial nations like the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (González-Ruibal 2019). Considering the relatively prominent role the Saami have had in the international Indigenous movement, there has been limited international attention to the archaeology of this Indigenous group

in Scandinavia (though see e.g. Bayliss-Smith & Mulk 1999; Mulk 1994, 2024; Schanche 1994; Ucko 2001). This may be related to the distinctive history and development of Saami archaeology, particularly in Norway.

Unlike the situation in settler colonial nations, the Saami have always lived alongside culturally diverse neighbouring groups in the vast region from the Kola peninsula in the northeast to Mid-Sweden and South Norway in the southwest, engaging in a range of subsistence strategies, including reindeer herding in various forms, hunting, fishing, agriculture, crafts and trade (e.g. Bergman 2018; Hansen & Olsen 2014; Kuusela et al. 2020; Nordin 2023; Spangen in press; Wang 2023). As Saami society was considered to be of a static nature, their cultural heritage remained a topic mainly for ethnography instead of archaeology until the mid-20th century (Hansen & Olsen 2014:1–6). However, various researchers and explorers investigated Saami cultural heritage sites in the 19th and 20th centuries, frequently intruding on sacred sites and graves, in part to obtain skeletal material for physical anthropological studies (e.g. Hallström 1922, 1932; Schanche 1994, 2000). Along with strong assimilation politics (known as Norwegianisation and Swedification) and an earlier history of forced Christianisation in the 17th and 18th centuries (e.g. Minde 2003a; Rasmussen 2016; Rydving 1995), these experiences have made research on Saami pasts politically and emotionally sensitive, resonating with synonymous situations for other Indigenous groups worldwide.

Historical circumstances have resulted in political and legal frameworks for Saami self-government and archaeology in Norway that are quite unique compared to Indigenous groups elsewhere. Saami archaeology was articulated in the late 1970s and 1980s as part of a broader Saami political and cultural awakening (Brantenberg 1985; Minde 2003b; Schanche & Olsen 1985). The political controversies surrounding the government plans to exploit the Alta-Kautkeino river/Áltá-Guovdageaineatnu in Finnmark for hydroelectric power production raised awareness in the Norwegian population about the long-term oppression of Saami culture and rights. The hydroelectric dam was eventually built, but the Saami gained a political momentum that led to the establishment of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament – the Sámediggi – in 1989. Norway was also the first country to ratify the ILO Convention 169 in 1990, acknowledging the Saami as an Indigenous people. In the other countries with a Saami population, Saami rights, archaeology and cultural heritage management have developed differently due to other political, administrative and legal frameworks (Knutson 2024; Ojala 2009), which is why I limit my discussion to the Norwegian situation.

The Sámediggi is an elected body but legitimised through Norwegian law and funded by the Norwegian government. Still, the transfer of a range of responsibilities and funds to the Sámediggi radically changed the relation-

ship between the Saami and the Norwegian state (Falch et al. 2016:130). In 1994, the Sámediggi assumed responsibility for the Saami cultural heritage management (from now CHM), which was important for the cultural revival and the principle of self-government, but also as part of the transferred authority within land-use planning (Falch 1998:36). Much like county archaeologists, the Sámediggi archaeologists record Saami heritage sites and handle planning and building cases as well as making statements on applications for research excavation and other endeavours that will affect Saami heritage sites in an administrative territory stretching from Finnmark to Innlandet counties.

In short, already by the 1990s, the Saami in Norway had gained a level of self-government over Saami archaeology and CHM that was unprecedented for Indigenous groups at the time, fulfilling the subsequently articulated goals for Indigenous archaeology of being by, with and for the Saami, as well as achieving the common success measure of substantial power transfer. However, this has not resolved all challenges, as both internal and external mediation have remained necessary to address conflicting interests, oppositions, and ongoing controversies.

COLLABORATION AND CONTROL IN SAAMI ARCHAEOLOGY

The establishment of a Saami CHM body marked a formal transfer of power and control to Saami people in Norway and was an important recognition of Saami autonomous rights to define their own heritage. But in practice, power still rests with a small number of professionals *within* the Saami community. From the beginning, collaboration with local individuals and groups was an important way of mitigating this. Local experiences and knowledge were integrated into the daily archaeological work through interviews, involvement, and participation to build knowledge and reach good solutions in individual cases. The overall aim was that participation should contribute to cultural engagement, cultural consciousness, and a self-determined cultural development (Falch 1998:36–37). Traditional knowledge about landscape use and conceptualisations has been particularly emphasized, both as a source of information about cultural heritage sites and landscape use and as inspiration to conceptualise archaeological interpretations that are in line with a Saami cultural perspective (e.g. Barlindhaug 2013; Ljungdahl & Norberg, 2012; Schanche 2004; Skandfer 2001, 2009).

Yet, the overall organisation of the Saami CHM is adopted from and integrated with the national Norwegian CHM, so that the ethnopolitical significance is balanced with legal requirements and the needs of planning authorities as well as scientific considerations. This has led to some controversies where local interests have not always been heard. Already in the

1980s, several projects employed local Saami people in recording cultural heritage sites, but there have been disputes about these recordings, in some cases concerning whether to make the partly sensitive information available through national databases and in others relating to the lack of resources to do so (Spangen 2016:113–114). Another issue has arisen surrounding the question of how to incorporate Saami cultural heritage sites and interview information into digital recording systems, and how the ontologies of these systems shape our knowledge production (Myrvoll 2010b). These issues illustrate how a transfer of power is far more complicated than simply transmitting elements of decision making.

In fact, the Saami CHM focus on collaboration and respect for local knowledge was not just shaped by autonomous Saami preferences, but emerged, in part, as a reaction to the focus in majority Norwegian CHM on protection issues and dissemination to those of less knowledge. The Saami approach involved a concern with active listening and receiving of knowledge. Paradoxically, the need to emphasise contrasting cultural values in a Saami CHM, led to these values being indirectly defined by the majority society (Schanche 1993:58–59). In addition, a persistent scepticism in the Scandinavian archaeological community, as well as being called into court cases about land rights where archaeological ‘proof’ of Saami presence is requested, have forced researchers in Saami archaeology to argue again and again that Saami presence in the past can, indeed, be traced archaeologically (Brännström 2020, see also Niezen 2017 for a general discussion on how Indigenous heritage is shaped by legal processes). This has made Saami archaeology prone to a certain strategic essentialism (Spivak 1988) that initially led to the construction of an overly consistent and uniform Saami culture and ethnicity in the past (criticised early on by Schanche 1993 and by Olsen 2001) in opposition to the central myths and stereotypical archaeological expressions of Norse, Norwegian, or Scandinavian past culture and ethnicity. These pressures have also had direct consequences for the categorisation of Saami archaeological remains by, for instance, accentuating rituals and spirituality in interpretations (Spangen 2013, 2016, 2017).

The articulation of a Saami past was further affected by how cultural heritage work served as an important grieving process for the Norwegianised generation of Saami that fronted the cultural revival in the 1970s and who tended to prioritise preserved (recent) local traditions. However, as early as 1993, Saami archaeologist Audhild Schanche warned about the ways in which an understanding of traditions and the past as forged by this 1970s Saami elite might not be relevant to the next generation Saami. Instead, Schanche suggested, the Saami society might need to acknowledge that their history included elements that were not in concurrence with the central myth constructed claiming Saami past societies and culture to be, for

example, inherently egalitarian and peaceful (Schanche 1993:60–62). Such popular myths continue to affect Saami societies today. For instance, the 1970s ethnopolitical movement forged a stereotype about the strength and social power of Saami women in contrast to women's positions in surrounding Nordic communities. These depictions were based on, among other things, an entirely speculative notion of past Saami societies as matriarchal and have served to suppress discussions about women's rights in Saami societies (Bäckman 1982; Eikjok 2000; Kuokkanen 2007:23; Spangen 2025).

Several of these experiences are of interest for a discussion about how to develop valid participatory archaeologies. Firstly, even radical power transfer only shifts power relationships within communities and does not remove the need for continuous conscious inclusion of multiple voices. Secondly, the healing effect of validating someone's past, can risk barring the right to (re)define the past and heritage for other groups within that community, including younger generations. Thirdly, a transfer of power to define one's heritage does not remove systemic frameworks and external influences that continue to impact the articulation of that heritage. Fourthly, this shift of power has a flipside, as promoting participation and local voices should not equal abandoning professional expert knowledge, which offers important insights into variation and change in the past. Fifthly, and importantly in the present context, external pressures risk narrowing and consolidating a template of an essentialist past. Thus, in a situation where democratic research and knowledge-based narratives about the past are under pressure, it is crucial, if challenging, to maintain an open, multivocal discussion of critical questions and reinterpretations.

Participatory archaeology for democracy and heritage preparedness?

The recent escalation of war and violent conflict in the vicinity of Scandinavia has heightened political awareness of the role of cultural heritage in times of crisis. Recent government reports on total defence in both Sweden and Norway include provision for the protection of cultural heritage and cultural life in such situations (Ds 2023: 34:301, NOU 2024–2025: 9:89–90). Academic discussions have so far focused primarily on voluntary civil efforts to safeguard pre-defined, valuable built heritage (Jærnes & Taylor 2022; Jærnes et al. 2023:31; Jærnes et al. 2023), but heritage preparedness is increasingly framed in terms of cultural and cognitive resilience and social cohesion (Vonnák & Jones 2025). I suggest that this requires the shifting of attention from the presumed universal value of certain monuments (cf. Solli et al. 2011) to an acceptance of sometimes incommensurable opinions on

heritage value and the past. The aim of heritage discussions cannot always be to reach consensus or compromise but perhaps rather to encourage the active listening and dialogue that is the foundation and strength of a democratic public discourse that is currently challenged by multiple aggressors.

THE CURRENT STATE OF HYBRID UNREST

Anti-democratic movements have gained power in the US and many European countries (Latona 2025; Muirhead & Rosenblum 2024), while Russia pursues totalitarianism and aggressive expansionism (Aikman 2025). The Arctic and the north, where Norway borders Russia, are zones of particular interest and potential conflict. Symptomatically, a majority of all Russian nuclear warheads are placed on the Kola Peninsula near Murmansk, some 100 km from Norway (Persen et al. 2022), and Russia has recently shown renewed strategic interest in Svalbard (Jakobsen 2025). Civil aircrafts in northern Norway have experienced critical GPS jamming that can be traced to Russian territory for years, so frequently since 2022 that it has become an unwanted ‘new normal’ (Brekke 2025; Furunes 2018; Svendsen 2024).

Russia has long used memory politics and cultural heritage sites to further ideological agendas (e.g. Malinova 2019). In eastern Finnmark, WWII monuments have been co-opted for “patriotic memory tours” – thin veneers for infiltration and propaganda (Myklebost 2024). International fake news campaigns include bizarre but persistent claims about Norwegian Child Welfare removing children from Russian and other foreign mothers over trivialities, only to place them with families allegedly rife with devious sexuality and incest, supposedly due to the Norwegian population’s Viking roots (Aas et al. 2015; Jentoft 2014; Norman 2016; Pavlíková & Mareš 2020:593–594; Sønsteby 2012).

A pro-Russian party ‘Freedom and Justice’ (*Frihet og rettferdighet*, FOR) was founded ahead of Norway’s general election in September 2025. It came to public attention after filling the Oslo subway with posters against Ukraine aid on Constitution Day, an action funded by a partly Russia-based Norwegian billionaire (Drabløs & Foss 2025; Støyva et al. 2025; Valvik et al. 2025). The Police Security Service (PST) warned that Russia might also attempt to influence the Sámediggi election, which was run alongside the general election. The aim was not to achieve a specific outcome but, instead, to amplify existing tensions (Trosten 2025). These tensions include fierce debates in northern Norway about Saami rights, identity, their *urheimat* and their legitimate status as an Indigenous people. Discussions involve prolific newspaper pieces and blog entries with speculative interpretations of history and archaeology, as well as allegations of scientific misconduct, branding academic researchers, in particularly at UiT in Tromsø as “crooked” (a strictly limited sample includes Gabrielsen 2015;

Hellesvik 2022a, 2022b; Handegård 2023; Leijon 2018; Sirkka 2018; Valdermo & Bakke 2024). The rhetoric has become increasingly aggressive in recent years (Knutson 2024:380) and reflects a broader rejection of expert knowledge and an international rise in unchecked opinion (Andersen & Tellman 2018; Clarke & Newman 2017; Nichols 2024).

Hence, we experience both external and internal pressure that affects discussions about heritage, belonging, identity and the past. If social cohesion and democratic discourse is our aim, we have to oppose anti-democratic and anti-factual narratives while building the internal ability to co-exist across our differences. This includes allowing for, if not accepting, opinions and statements we disagree with.

TRUST, DISSENSUS AND COMMUNITIES OF DISAGREEMENT

Norwegian society is famously held together by world-record levels of trust – trust in the state, various institutions, the media, and each other. Destabilising this trust would be an obvious way to create social unrest. Even small local communities often harbour a range of different opinions on any given topic. These differences can potentially be exploited to serve external agendas of destabilising social cohesion and political debates through the amplification of internal oppositions. Opposition to an anti-democratic discourse that dismisses logical reasoning or reliable facts, consequently depends on preserving and building trust as well as understanding, handling the incommensurable mess of opinions within our democracies and insisting on an open, democratic and inclusive debate.

It has been argued that reactionary populism, described as anti-liberal attitudes to identity politics alongside liberal attitudes to economic policies, should be opposed through critical knowledge production in archaeology (González-Ruibal et al. 2018). I agree that we, as academics, should continue to produce reliable research, take to task speculative and populist misrepresentations of archaeology and the past and expose the ideological undercurrents of fake facts, not least for the purpose of public education (Spangen 2022; Spangen & Solheim 2023). However, the effect of this on the actual reactionary populism is dubious, as political and ideological attitudes have relatively little to do with knowledge alone, and substantially more to do with intuitive emotions and fundamental moral values (Enstad & Finseraas 2024; Haidt & Joseph 2004; Graham & Yudkin 2022; Verweij & Thompson 2006). Simply opposing attitudes with provocative facts is unlikely to have a transformative effect; indeed, it is more likely to encourage further opposition (Hall 1987).

That does not mean we should give up nudging towards democratic discourse, but the aims and methods of our efforts may have to be somewhat redefined. The strength of archaeology in this context is that our discus-

sions can evolve over very concrete issues and materials rather than abstract principles. In conversations with Trump voters in 2016, George Saunders noted that talking about political topics with specific (constructed) protagonists in mind, opened up possibilities for mutual respect, trust, and understanding. His aim was not, however, consensus (Saunders 2016; Tringham 2018:61). Considering the conclusions above concerning the unlikelihood of general agreement on any complex issue and the potential benefits of heterogeneity of thought, it may be a more viable and valid goal to generate ‘dissensus’, where multiple and contested perspectives invite participants into further dialogue (Lynch & Alberti 2010). Even when two knowledge categories are in direct conflict, a ‘contradictory conversation’ may lead to interesting results (Beck & Somerville 2005:477; Tringham 2018:61–62). Such discussions in ‘communities of disagreement’ give participants practice in articulating their opinions and promoting them in constructive ways, which is a better tool to further democracy than the (untenable) idea of fostering a common value system across a diverse population (Bettum 2021:56–57; Iversen 2014). The use of archaeology in such efforts offers a chance to develop understandings of our physical surroundings in a way that can supply people with repertoires of knowledge and vocabularies of co-belonging across group and individual variations. This kind of ‘worlding’ is not only an opportunity to explore multiple strands of future-making (Harrison 2020) but an engagement that has immediate effect on dialogue and interaction.

As participatory archaeologies are fundamentally about dialogue and mutual respect and learning, without necessarily adopting each other’s knowledge uncritically (Skandfer 2001:120; Stutz 2018:54), our discipline should be ideally situated to contribute to this maintenance of democratic discourse. In some cases this may include ‘radical trust’ – collaborations in which the power of definition and control of the process and results slips entirely out of the experts’ hands and allows a variety of non-expert voices to dominate (Lynch & Alberti 2010). In other cases, some level of expert moderating may be needed, for instance to avoid harmful confrontations and results or to ensure that subdued (subaltern) voices are heard and given the necessary room for and support in joining the conversation (Bettum 2021; Bettum & Özcan 2018). As mentioned above, the mere acknowledgement of opinions impacts social behaviour and intergroup relations (Greville-Harris et al. 2016; Livingstone et al. 2024). A crucial point is that we, as experts, with the power to initiate such projects, and with ourselves as part of various communities of interest, cannot limit our interaction to people we agree with, like or deem worthy, important or valuable (cf. Kiddey 2020:26). Participatory archaeology is not about promoting all opinions uncritically (González-Ruibal et al. 2018:507–508); equally, it should

not be about pushing our own agendas of ‘mending’ these opinions. Participation and democracy are about enduring differences and oppositions, and participatory archaeology can contribute to strengthening this ability.

FUTURE PREPAREDNESS

In the 1970s–1980s, there was a shift from emphasising how knowledge about the past should build the identity of the nation to how it should build the identity of the individual. During this shift, cultural heritage sites were presented as a solution for the imagined insecurities of individuals in the population and were prescribed as a sort of therapy to create security, identity, and belonging (Berkaak 1992:49; Schanche 1993:56; Skandfer 2001:119). This intended use of cultural heritage has been criticised for connecting a sense of cultural identity to something so old that it would appear to be natural and therefore evident, non-disputable, and difficult to change. Instead, it has been suggested that we should focus on ‘future preparedness’ (*framtidssberedskap*), utilising prognoses, various scenarios, and cultural variations to avoid ‘future shock’, while also gaining awareness of the many possibilities we have to shape our own culture and society (Johansen 1989:236–239). Recently, there have been similar calls for an archaeology that strategically exercises a future-oriented position and promotes a way of thinking that foresees and pre-shapes this future by participating with knowledge building and constructing various scenarios of the future (e.g. Domanska 2018; Holtorf & Högberg 2021).

Audhild Schanche has pointed out that to the Saami population and communities, developing their identity *is* part of a future preparedness (Schanche 1993:62–63), while also discussing that the past may not be or mean the same to everyone in that society. I would say this holds true for many groups and individuals in our diverse national populations, but that social cohesion does not depend on a unified heritage identity. Acknowledging and validating different views of what is important about the places we live and the pasts we inevitably live with, whether through expert opinion, local interpretation or a combination of perspectives, can enhance belonging and community cohesion across variations, as well as training our tolerance for discussion and diversity. This can build the ‘heritage preparedness’ we need in the face of essentialist heritage narratives and anti-democratic, totalitarian approaches to the past. Consequently, I call for more self-reflexive and purposeful participatory approaches in Norwegian and Scandinavian archaeology, approaches that move on from data collection and the aim of engaging people in perceived ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ activities, towards embracing and developing our roles as significant social and political mediators in a complex democratic discourse.

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