

Developing Trust Through Participatory Archaeologies?

On the Importance of Playing to Our Strengths

Harald Fredheim 

I enjoyed reading Marte Spangen's keynote on participatory archaeology for heritage preparedness, which engages with many ideas that have been central to my own research and that of close colleagues over the past few years. Spangen's productive focus on the specificities of the Norwegian context, through Sámi archaeology and the Russian border, is an instructive example of what Celmara Pocock and Siân Jones have termed the power of the periphery to contest the centre (2018). She uses these specificities to present a timely critique of participatory ideals, yet does perhaps still fall prey to the participatory critic's trap of perpetuating cycles of critique and naïve hopefulness (Graham 2025). In this response, I will discuss Spangen's critique of participation as a spectrum of power-sharing/goodness, invite further consideration of heritage and archaeology's potential to facilitate trust-building interpretive encounters and question whether archaeologists actually have the skills and motivations to 'move on from data collection' and instead focus on being 'significant social and political mediators in a complex democratic discourse.'

Over the past year, I have been collaborating with colleagues at the University of York and Mahidol University to study participation in British,

Department of Archaeology, University of York, United Kingdom
harald.fredheim@york.ac.uk

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Norwegian and Thai heritage contexts (Fredheim et al. 2025). As part of this work, we have used the definition of participatory practices from the Museum Association's *Power to the People* framework: 'museums and communities working together as equal partners' (2018:3). In defining participation as a collaboration between equal partners, this definition evokes typologies of participation, which, as highlighted by Spangen, rank discrete levels of participant agency. Within these typologies, greater levels of participant agency are positioned as being inherently 'better' (cf. Cornwall 2008; Onciul 2015). In our research, most of the collaborations that museum staff highlighted cannot be described as being 'between equal partners'. Yet, by being transparent about their intentions and mindful of participants' needs and motivations, these collaborations do in many cases build trust over time. This ebb and flow of agency through different stages of a partnership mirrors the experiences of our Thai collaborators. They have developed trusting relationships with Karen and Lawa Indigenous communities in northern Thailand through a range of collaborations spread over many years, where the degree of agency held by each party has varied across discrete activities (cf. Cusripituck & Yamabhai 2023; Yamabhai et al. 2021).

Trust is a central theme in much research on participation, but the trust that is developed between partners in long-term collaborations is, I would argue, a slightly different phenomenon to more general levels of trust in society that contribute to maintaining democratic discourse. I think it is worth attempting to disentangle different participatory dynamics and the distinct dimensions of trust they may engender. In her text, Spangen notes that the relationship between Sámi and the Norwegian state is different to that of most other Indigenous peoples around the world, due to the long history of interaction and the devolved powers of the Sámediggi, the Norwegian Sámi Parliament. Another context I have been reading a lot about recently is New Zealand, which is distinctive for its 'bicultural' approach, epitomised by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. While Sámi museums in Norway are governed by Sámi and funded via the Sámediggi (Aikio 2021), much has been written about how museums in New Zealand have attempted to navigate the distinct Māori (Indigenous) and Pākehā (settler) approaches to caring for and interpreting collections within shared institutions (cf. Butts 2006; McCarthy 2011; Tapsell 2011, 2017). At Te Papa, this has given rise to new concepts such as *Mana Taonga*, which recognises the living relationships between collections and their cultures of origin, resulting in a dynamic where the museum's 'interpretive authority [is contingent on] its connectivity and meaningful relationships with the communities of origin' (Shorch & Hakiwai 2014:197; cf. McCarthy et al. 2013:8, Tapsell & Arawa 2017). By contrast, Spangen notes that while the 'establishment of a Saami CHM body marked a formal transfer of power

[...] in practice, power still rests with a small number of professionals within the Saami community'. Comparing different Indigenous approaches to heritage is understandably beyond the scope of Spangen's piece, but I would have loved her to delve a bit deeper into the specificities of the distinct relationship between Sámi and archaeology in Norway and how it has impacted trust within the Sámi community, and between Sámi and Norwegians or the Norwegian state. For example, has the creation of distinct Sámi institutions for archaeology and heritage increased or decreased levels of trust? In my mind, this discussion would add to the specificity of what we might learn from the case of Sámi archaeology in relation to using archaeology to promote democratic discourse.

While I see real value in learning from Indigenous approaches to archaeology and heritage, I also think we should be cautious of directly transferring models for understanding participatory dynamics between different contexts. Research on participation in colonial and post-colonial contexts has cast into sharp relief the inherently contested nature of heritage and the power-dynamics that come into play when professionals and publics collaborate. Yet, most citizens in Norway, New Zealand, Sweden or the UK do not view archaeology and museums as sites of contestation for their own self-determination. As Tara Johnson-Comerford at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts told me last December as part of my research on participation:

I don't think everybody is ready for participation. That takes quite a lot on you personally ... I think sometimes there's a sector move to go everything participatory and actually what that does is – it doesn't clearly identify how much of an investment you have to make emotionally and personally in that, and understanding that actually, some people just want to have a nice time (quoted in Fredheim et al. 2025:28).

Non-participation, a reluctance, apathy or active refusal to participate in heritage processes, is arguably an equally important challenge to managing the power-dynamics when publics do wish to participate. Here, transparency in our professional practices, or limited and contained forms of participation may be more effective in fostering the interpersonal and social dimensions of trust that promote democratic discourse. I am reminded of Nicole Deufel's work on dialogic and agonistic heritage interpretation (2017) and participatory interpretive techniques at museums, such as the 'Kitchen Conversations' programme at the Tenement Museum in New York, where visitors discuss contemporary issues around a kitchen table with strangers at the end of their visit (Abram 2007), and the experiments of the EMOTIVE project that invited dialogue within and between groups of visitors to heritage sites (Perry 2019). While Sara Perry draws on the work of Christina Fredengren (2016) to argue convincingly for the potential of

archaeology to ‘enchant’ both professionals and publics, she has also noted significant barriers to realising this potential, maintained by entrenched workflows, data structures and attitudes within the archaeological discipline (Perry 2019, Perry et al. 2025). Some of these challenges appear to mirror Spangen’s reflections on the challenges of imposing established archaeological ontologies and database structures on Sámi archaeology, while others have also featured prominently in Sadie Watson’s research on maximising public benefit from development-led archaeology in the UK (cf. Watson 2023, 2024; Watson & Fredheim 2022). It is also worth noting that, anecdotally, both seasoned professionals and undergraduate archaeology students are often heard making disparaging remarks about public-facing and interpretive work not being ‘real’ archaeology (cf. Perry et al. 2023:155–156). Coupled with the increasingly polarised societies we live in, infused with bad-faith actors, nefarious disinformation campaigns, social media platforms fuelled by outrage and clickbait, resulting in declining levels of trust in institutions and ‘experts’, the problems facing the realisation of archaeology as a vehicle for promoting democratic discourse truly are ‘wicked’ and should not be underestimated.

Spangen’s call for Scandinavian archaeology to ‘move on from data collection and the aim of engaging people in perceived “good” and “healthy” activities’ is provocative. If I were to be provocative in return, I might argue that the call for archaeologists instead to focus on ‘embracing and developing our roles as significant social and political mediators in a complex democratic discourse’ feels a little under-baked – evoking the delicious-looking yet slightly raw cinnamon buns for sale at Oslo Lufthavn Gardermoen. Archaeologists are specialists in many things, but I would argue that facilitating open and democratic discourse that builds trust is not necessarily one of them. I’m also not convinced this is what most professional archaeologists, archaeology students or publics want us to be either, but perhaps this is precisely why we need provocative keynotes, and ‘small wins’. There is exciting work happening in this space. Like Spangen, Watson argues that in some cases, particularly at less archaeologically significant sites, more value can be realised from development-led archaeology through community-focused interventions rather than traditional archaeological data gathering (2023). Colleagues of mine here in York have also been involved in developing a participatory heritage ecosystem impact assessment in Cambridgeshire, drawing on models developed with Indigenous communities in North America (Hoffmann et al. 2025). The work by Perry and colleagues on creating meaningful, reusable archaeological data with local communities (Perry et al. 2025) prompts the appealing idea that archaeologists could collect data differently, engage people in good and healthy activities *and*

develop our role as significant social and political mediators. I certainly share Spangen's vision for an even more socially relevant archaeology, but I do think it's important that we play to our strengths.

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