# Can Indigenous Archaeology Really Teach Us How to Disagree Constructively?

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In her article, Marte Spangen highlights several significant perspectives on participation, preparedness, conflict, and democracy. Particular emphasis is placed on Indigenous issues and on the necessity of drawing upon both archaeological and Indigenous expertise in the production of knowledge. Sharing this view, we wish to formulate our comment jointly, allowing the comment itself to serve as an example of co-creation and participation. Mattis Danielsen is a Sámi based in Røros, Norway, with extensive experience of the Sámi cultural landscape. Charina Knutson is a Swedish archaeologist and heritage professional whose primary workplace is the desk.

Many archaeologists enjoy discussing participation – with other archaeologists. Projects and articles are often formulated *about*, but not necessarily *with*, the communities with whom collaboration is envisioned. Embedding ideas of participation is therefore an important task. Is the intended audience actually interested in taking part? On what terms? Who sets the agenda? Who formulates the research questions?

Within Indigenous archaeology, the need for collaboration between Indigenous peoples and archaeologists has been recognised for decades,

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with particular emphasis since the 1990s. The aim – as Spangen notes – has been to redress the imbalances in knowledge, power, and influence that are the result of colonial structures. In the process, archaeology has also become richer in perspective (Atalay 2012; Van Alst & Shield Chief Gover 2024; Howey et al. 2025).

Collaborative projects and Indigenous initiatives have also taken place in Sámi contexts in both Sweden and Norway. These have included, for instance, local Sámi communities applying for project funding to survey their traditional lands (see e.g. Norberg & Winka 2014), as well as research projects in which museums and/or universities have collaborated with local Sámi communities (see e.g. Barlindhaug 2013; Björck et al. 2021). Such examples align well with the form of participatory archaeology advocated by Spangen. In both types of projects, there is legal scope and practical flexibility to shape the work in ways that suit both the archaeologists and the local communities involved.

One problem is that such research projects remain few in relation to the proportion of archaeology carried out in connection with land development and planning processes. In both Norway and Sweden, development-led archaeology constitutes the majority of all archaeological projects.

In Sweden, development-led archaeology operates on commercial terms, within a framework of strict legislation and regulation. Projects are carried out within a triangle consisting of the developer, the County Administrative Board, and the archaeological company commissioned to conduct the work. Collaboration with additional partners is often regarded as complicated, time-consuming, and costly (Knutson 2024:184–190). If Indigenous participation in cultural heritage management is to increase, both legislation and practice must be developed to enable collaboration with local communities *also* within development-led archaeology.

In Norway, decisions concerning development-led archaeology of Sámi sites fall under the authority of the Sámi Parliament. This may appear to represent a step towards participatory archaeology and power-sharing, yet in practice the situation is more complex. The transfer of authority from the majority society to a minority or Indigenous people is seldom as straightforward as it appears on paper. As Spangen notes, 'in practice, power still rests with a small number of professionals *within* the Saami community' – referring to the fact that Sámi archaeology in Norway is now administered by a limited group of archaeologists within the Sámi Parliament.

However, for the system to function effectively and gain the trust of the Sámi community, the cultural expertise of this 'small number of professionals' within the Sámi Parliament must be substantial. There must be a fundamental understanding of the Sámi cultural landscape, which is rich, multifaceted, and exhibits significant regional variation. One does not need

to be Sámi to fulfil the task, but one should possess a genuine interest in Sámi culture and be prepared to draw upon Sámi knowledge holders to compensate for areas of limited personal experience.

If archaeologists' dialogue with local Sámi communities is limited or inadequate, it can lead to diminished trust in the Sámi Parliament's management of cultural heritage. Archaeologists risk losing legitimacy among the Sámi population, while the Sámi themselves risk being excluded from participation in the creation of their own history. Traditions and knowledge held by the Sámi, often transmitted orally and accumulated over generations, are thus at risk of not being preserved. In the most extreme cases, this can have negative implications for Sámi historical narratives, rights, and identity.

Although Sámi archaeology in Norway faces its own challenges, it nevertheless upholds Indigenous peoples' rights to manage their own cultural heritage to a greater extent than in Sweden. In Sweden, there is no clear avenue for Sámi participation in development-led archaeological processes, as the Sámi Parliament in Sweden has no mandate to work with cultural heritage. Here, the only opportunities for participatory archaeology lie either in relying on the goodwill of universities and museums, or in attempting to secure project funding from foundations and project structures where decisions are ultimately made by the majority society. It goes without saying that participatory Indigenous archaeology in Sweden is exceedingly limited.

Discussing archaeology, with its material and often ambiguous traces, can be a suitable field for those wishing to develop their argumentative skills and become comfortable with disagreement. Yet – as Spangen also points out – much more is at stake for Indigenous peoples than for others, since discussions of Indigenous archaeology profoundly affect their current social and legal standing.

We are therefore concerned that Indigenous archaeology may be an ill-suited arena for practicing democratic disagreement, as the exercise risks exposing Indigenous peoples to harmful or hostile opinions. In a 'post-truth' era, efforts to work in partnership to bring Indigenous perspectives into public view can expose Indigenous populations to bullying, aggression, and hostility (Atalay 2020).

In western Härjedalen, Sweden, the longstanding historical presence of the Sámi in the landscape has been questioned by the Härjedalen Party. They claim that reindeer-owning Sámi did not arrive in southern Norrland until 'as late as the 18th century', and that the Sámi people themselves are responsible for the colonisation of land that was claimed by mountain farmers (Larsson & Tapper 2025). In a well-mannered, academically framed world, such views could be countered with archaeological scientific evidence, and indeed they have been, for example by Jonas Monié Nordin,

Ann Kristin Solsten, and Anders Hansson (Aronsson 2024; Solsten 2024; Aronsson 2025). Yet the substantive debate has not progressed even a millimeter, while the Härjedalen Party's assertions continue to spread among those in the region who feel disadvantaged by state policy. We would hope for, but cannot see, how this could contribute to a 'clumsy solution' to the situation.

Co-creating archaeology in northern Fennoscandia and fulfilling Spangen's vision places high demands on all of us. Above all, it requires that tomorrow's archaeologists are prepared in two areas.

The first is a foundational knowledge of Sámi archaeology and respect for Sámi cultural expertise. When our colleague, archaeologist and historian Ann Kristin Solsten, is invited to conferences and projects, she is often the only participant with Sámi expertise, which makes the role both exposed and demanding. In project contexts, she has at times felt like a 'token', with Sámi perspectives insufficiently integrated throughout the entire process.

Mattis, who has worked for many years in both documentation and knowledge dissemination, finds that his Sámi cultural expertise is often sought in contexts where cultural heritage is discussed, yet frequently only as a kind of garnish or bonus experience. For example, a university archaeology program might invite Mattis for a half-day field excursion in the Sámi cultural landscape, while the rest of the curriculum contains no Sámi elements. In this way, the perception of Indigenous cultural heritage as something exotic and secondary – treated as an optional extra – is reinforced and reproduced.

It is therefore imperative that Sámi archaeology becomes an integral part of archaeological education in the Nordic countries, especially given the high mobility of archaeologists, who are expected to be able to work across a variety of cultural landscapes.

The second area requires archaeologists themselves to develop a deeper understanding of, and gain more practice in, conflict management and mediation.

For participatory archaeology to become a space in which we can cultivate heritage preparedness, we must train ourselves to engage in difficult discussions, encounter people acting emotionally, and have the courage to speak up when boundaries of racism and populism are crossed.

Archaeologists in the Nordic countries generally shy away from seeing themselves as political or activist actors. They have no desire to be public figures – they have chosen the work because they love archaeology. They prefer to see themselves as neutral researchers presenting neutral facts for others to interpret (Harlin 2019; Knutson 2024:151–157). It is therefore a long road to motivate archaeologists as a collective to act as 'social and

political mediators'. In a world marked by rising tensions, security threats, and polarization, how can we hope to inspire archaeologists to step into the line of fire?

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