Connecting Past and Present

The Ethics and Politics of Archaeology in Sápmi

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Marte Spangen invites us to think critically about the possible roles of archaeology in a society characterized by complex problems and conflicts. She raises many important issues that need to be discussed among archaeologists.

In my response, I will focus on archaeology and heritage, and debates on land and cultural rights, in Sápmi – which is my main field of study. As an archaeologist working at a university, Uppsala University, I will also focus on the roles and responsibilities of universities. In my view, there is a great need to discuss the ethics and politics of archaeology and heritage management in Sápmi.

My response will focus mainly on the situation in present-day Sweden, although it is essential to keep in mind that Sápmi stretches across the current state boundaries. These boundaries are basically colonial constructions, but they have had and still have a large impact on notions of history, identity and belonging in Sápmi. They are also of great importance for heritage management, as the legislative frameworks differ in the different countries.

Archaeology in Sápmi has often been considered as a more controversial and political activity than archaeology in the southern parts of Sweden,

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Norway and Finland, with connections to conflicts over land and cultural rights. Debates on Sámi archaeology illustrate the complexities of interrelations of archaeology, identity, heritage and politics – and highlight the need to discuss power dynamics in archaeology and heritage management.

Archaeology can play an important role in the much-needed critical examination of colonial histories and relations in Sápmi, offering new perspectives and dimensions (Ojala & Nordin 2015). Archaeology can also contribute to decolonization movements in contemporary society. By opening up the field of study and engaging with people and communities, archaeology can be a positive, transformative force in the contemporary world.

Internationally, there has been much discussion on what is often called Indigenous archaeology. In recent years, more discussions have also taken place in Sweden, concerning Indigenous archaeology in Sápmi (Knutson 2024). Indigenous archaeology can be described as a movement of critical archaeology, challenging and transforming traditional archaeology and heritage management, aiming to work towards decolonization and the empowerment of Indigenous groups (Atalay 2006; Nicholas & Watkins 2024; Ojala 2022). Proponents of Indigenous archaeology have promoted alternative ways of doing archaeology, with a strong focus on the development of collaborative and participatory methodologies, and community-based and community-initiated research. In these approaches, power relations, participation, representation, archaeological ethics and Indigenous rights have been central themes.

Native American archaeologist Sonya Atalay (2006:302) writes in her seminal work Indigenous Archaeology as Decolonizing Practice, that a decolonizing archaeology 'must include topics such as the social construction of cultural heritage, concerns over revitalization of tradition and Indigenous knowledge, issues of ownership and authority, cultural and intellectual property, and the history and role of museums, collections and collecting'.

Indigenous archaeology thus entails a much wider engagement and commitment than in traditional archaeology and heritage management, involving many current social, cultural and political issues and debates.

However, I agree with Spangen that, no matter how important the ambitions are, it is still important to think critically about collaborative and participatory archaeology. We need to continuously ask difficult questions about community collaboration and representation. What is a community? Who defines it? Who speaks? Who is allowed to speak, who is not allowed to speak? Who has the power to speak on behalf of others? And what is collaboration? What does it entail, and how can it be evaluated? How can we envision positive community collaboration, and how can we avoid supporting extractive and exploitative practices and relations?

As archaeologists, we need to better understand heritage processes, the importance of the past in the present, and the complex and varying ways of relating to the past and valuing remains from the past in the present. This is important in, for instance, current debates on Indigenous cultural rights, and demands for repatriation of Sámi heritage and Sámi ancestral human remains in collections.

In debates on Indigenous cultural rights, discourses on human rights and international law play an important role. One important document is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) from 2007, which contains several paragraphs dealing with cultural rights of Indigenous peoples, including "the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains" (UNDRIP, Article 12.1).

UNDRIP is increasingly referred to in heritage discourses in Sweden. How to understand and implement these points in archaeology and heritage management is something that we need to consider and discuss in all fields of archaeology, in contract archaeology, research, museums and university education.

In my view, there is a need for archaeological perspectives on current issues. For instance, there are deep historical roots of many current conflicts over land rights, and archaeology can play a role in examining these roots (Ojala & Nordin 2015). Archaeology has also been part of court cases dealing with land right conflicts in Sápmi, with archaeological arguments and archaeological experts in court proceedings – which creates a very challenging work environment (Brännström 2020; Ojala 2009; Vogels 2025).

Opening up archaeology and engaging and cooperating with people outside of academia, for instance with community experts, such as local and traditional knowledge holders, can enrich archaeology and heritage management. But archaeological expertise can also contribute to local community processes, cultural and identity revitalization.

Museums and other heritage institutions can be important arenas to help archaeologists to connect with people outside of academia. Archaeology can learn from the museum world. Internationally and nationally, many museums are exploring and developing new relations, especially in reviewing their own histories of colonial and imperial collecting and possible futures of contested collections, in repatriation and cultural revitalization processes. This is also the case in Sámi contexts, where Sámi museums and cultural institutions have important roles in cultural revitalization and the development of Sámi perspectives on heritage management (Nylander 2023).

Universities also need to deal with their difficult histories, such as connections with racial research, colonial and extractive collecting, especially in Indigenous contexts. This includes examining and engaging with the history of the discipline of archaeology. How can we deal with our discipline's difficult academic past and heritage? Serious critical engagements with histories of archaeology will make us better prepared to deal with current and future challenges.

In my view, university teaching is central to discuss the challenges raised by Spangen. This is an arena where we can discuss futures of archaeology and heritage management, social and cultural engagements, and the ethics and politics of archaeology. What are we teaching our students? What do we consider to be important? What do we want our students to learn? We also need to talk with our students about the existential dimensions of archaeology and the engagement with the past and the people of the past.

Spangen rightly emphasizes the complexities involved and the difficulties of evaluating how collaborative and participatory approaches actually work. Doing this kind of work is not a simple task. As it is about opening up archaeology and engaging with living communities and cultures it will always be dynamic, contested and difficult. Furthermore, we should consider how we value practical community-based, collaborative and participatory work – which takes much time and effort – in academic records and merits.

Another central issue that I want to raise concerns communication within archaeology. How do we communicate and talk with each other, across the borders of the increasing number of subfields and specialties of archaeology? Do we listen to each other, although we might have different starting-points, interests and opinions?

Facing the complex and contested issues of history, identity and heritage – in Sápmi and elsewhere – we need manifold perspectives and experiences and we need to collaborate, inside and outside of the archaeological field. The borders of archaeology are constantly shifting and the field is in constant flux. New challenges will appear and old ones will continue to haunt us. We need to be flexible, but we also need to understand that the past matters to people in different ways, that there are rights and responsibilities, and that archaeology can empower people as well as cause damage and pain.

In my view, archaeological perspectives and engagements are needed in today's society, for a wide range of reasons, some of which have been mentioned in Spangen's text and in this response. It is about decentering the present, and the human arrogance which causes so much trouble, in order to help us to prepare for the future. Engaging with society and fac-

ing complex societal problems forces us to rethink, reconnect, act and find new paths forward.

After all, we need each other. We need to communicate across the borders of the different sub-disciplines that exist in archaeology, listen to each other and together try to understand the power and potential of archaeological approaches and their complex entanglements with people, communities and cultures/natures.

Can we do it? Maybe. At least we must try our best.

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