

Rebaking the Case for Participatory Archaeology as Cognitive Heritage Preparedness

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I wish to thank everyone who read and commented on my keynote on participatory archaeology as a contribution to heritage preparedness in the face of the wicked problem of anti-democratic discourse. The responses provide food for thought and a welcome opportunity to ‘rebake’ my suggestions and arguments, which Harald Fredheim compares to delicious-looking but underbaked cinnamon buns. In the space available here, I cannot address every point raised, but I will elaborate on a selection of them in the hope of inspiring further debates, or bake-offs, around these crucial issues in the times ahead.

Fredheim is entirely correct that my thinking on this topic remains a work in progress, and I therefore welcome John Schofield’s broader contextualisation of my text in his comment. Schofield’s book *Wicked Problems for Archaeologists* (2024) was an important source of inspiration during the writing of my keynote, so it is unsurprising that we agree on the principal points of how archaeologists may address the wicked problem of anti-democratic discourse. To further the discussion, I draw attention to his

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mention of ‘super-wicked’ problems as characterised by additional complicating factors such as the absence of a central authority capable of coordinating a solution. Although presented only as an example, the question of authorities serves to highlight how situational, complex and unpredictable (super-)wicked problems and their potential solutions can be. Concerning anti-democratic discourse and heritage preparedness, the typically slow or lacking response of central authorities in Ukraine over decades appears to have forged what, in times of crisis, can be seen as a fortunate ability to initiate effective informal and private initiatives for heritage rescue (Vonnák & Jones 2025). In an ongoing debate about whether to establish a governmental Psychological Defense Agency in Norway, similar to the existing one in Sweden, military experts stress that such an agency cannot substitute for our collective responsibility to identify and resist manipulations of democratic processes and public discourse (Seip 2025; Sivertsen & Buvarp 2025). Thus, solutions in some situations may depend on central authority, while its absence, though not ideal in itself, can result in unforeseen benefits in other contexts. In all cases, the complementary actions of individuals and communities can be equally decisive and represent necessary small wins of preparedness and resistance.

My keynote presented participatory archaeology as one potential contribution to such small wins. By participatory archaeology, I do not mean only explicitly communal projects but any archaeological undertaking that engages non-professionals in discussions and the co-production of knowledge about archaeological issues. As pointed out by Charlotta Hillerdal, any concrete participatory efforts must be articulated through practice in locally embedded contexts. My central claim, however, is that all such encounters have the potential side effect of enabling people to discuss tangible issues in constructive ways. The label ‘participatory archaeology’ is not merely my preferred term for community-based research, as Hillerdal suggests; it also signals that such meetings may involve people who do *not* initially perceive themselves as a community or as a coherent group with obvious common denominators – aside from, presumably, a shared interest in the past. It is through discussion around this shared interest that archaeology, I argue, can help foster tolerance and communality, if not consensus, across social and ideological divides. Contrary to Hillerdal’s dismissal of such ‘communities of disagreement’ in the context of totalitarian regimes and her assertion that building preparedness for the future does not ‘respond to the violence of the present’, I contend that creating such spaces for disagreements, such pockets of trust and dialogue, is precisely one form of contribution archaeology can make to resisting, or resistance within, such grim situations.

Alongside Schofield (2024:297), I recognize that a small wins address can seem unambitious to those who prefer more activist approaches, yet

there need not be an opposition between these choices. Hillerdal's wish to 'join the resistance' seems to assume that a resistance always exists in a joinable form. In practice, resistance has to be defined through a process that requires precisely the kinds of dialogues and mediation I think archaeologists can productively contribute to. If we are to pursue articulated aims when addressing a reality of opposing interests, they need to be framed in more specific terms than 'against climate change' or 'for social justice'. And if the resistance is to go beyond tokenist interventions, articulation will have to involve co-creation with fellow citizens who potentially, or even likely, disagree on the particulars (Verweij & Thompson 2006). My claim is that practising such discussions and co-creation on archaeological questions constitute a pertinent and practical contribution.

My keynote also introduced Saami archaeology as a potential source of inspiration for participatory archaeology more broadly. This was to suggest that Saami archaeology is a field in which collaborations have been tested and discussed over time, leaving us with relevant lessons for how to effectuate participation in other contexts. Carl Gösta Ojala's comment also emphasises the importance of the Saami perspective in archaeology and archaeological thinking, highlighting complex social and political issues in Sápmi, including land rights conflicts, colonial legacies, and decolonisation. Concerning participation, I concur with Ojala that museums can offer valuable insights into inclusive practices.¹ Local museums are especially important points of access for engaging wider publics, in Saami contexts and beyond (as illustrated by Fredheim's example from his project partners in Thailand). I also agree with Ojala's, Charina Knutson's and Mattis Danielsen's calls for stronger integration of Saami archaeology into archaeological teaching and practice – supported by increased resources (Spangen et al. 2020:10–11; Spangen 2025).

Knutson and Danielsen further highlight the importance of administrative and financial frameworks to participatory approaches, pointing out that most archaeological projects today are development-driven. In Sweden, such projects are commercial, which constrains resources for Saami participation in the absence of a legal framework that promotes it. Comparable structural limitations arguably restrict participatory efforts in development excavations more broadly, although the Indigenous dimension accentuates the problem. Saami contexts certainly raise distinct concerns, as exemplified by the aggression evident in land-use disputes such as the Härjedalen case described by Knutson and Danielsen. They express concern about mak-

1 Participatory approaches and citizen science in museums is the topic of my ongoing national network project SAMMEN FF, see <https://www.khm.uio.no/forskning/prosjekter/sammenff/> (Research Council Norway no. 349576).

ing Indigenous archaeology an arena for practicing democratic discourse because it risks ‘exposing Indigenous peoples to harmful or hostile opinions’. I share this concern. My argument does not frame Saami archaeology as a forum for radical opinions or abuse. Rather, I suggest that Saami and other Indigenous experiences provide important guidance for developing participatory processes that are carefully designed to meet their intended purposes. These experiences also underscore the need to attend to the concrete social, political, and economic implications of archaeological practice.

Clearly, resources to strengthen Saami participation in archaeological endeavours are also necessary. Knutsson and Danielsen describe the costs of participating in archaeological contexts as a Saami individual, or rather as a representative or, at times, simply a token of ‘Saaminess’. Besides being counterproductive for building both knowledge and trust, being cast in exoticized and secondary roles is understandably taxing and infuriating. I am glad this debate provided an opportunity to flag this problem. I would add to this that we need to involve and cultivate greater consciousness about Saami perspectives beyond contexts that are perceived as explicitly Saami. Obviously, Saami people are not only experts on Saami culture but fellow citizens. Acknowledging this more explicitly may help mitigate tendencies to exotify and facilitate identification of both shared and divergent interests. It may also counter the tendency to frame concepts such as resilience and (heritage) preparedness through uniform messages that assume homogenised meanings across national populations – an approach that risks reproducing colonial logics (Kuokkanen & Sweet 2020; Lindroth et al. 2025). The current situation in Greenland (Adler 2026; Bryant 2026) poignantly illustrates how the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous populations and other minorities, grounded in full recognition of their citizenship rights and epistemic contributions, is not merely a matter of redressing historical atrocities but constitutive of our current democracies.

Knutson and Danielsen further call for informed and genuine engagement with Saami history, culture and participation among the relatively small number of staff in the Norwegian Sámediggi cultural heritage administration as a condition for sustaining trust and legitimacy. This concern intersects with Harald Fredheim’s question of how the establishment of distinct Saami institutions for archaeology and heritage has shaped levels of trust within Saami society, between Saami and non-Saami Norwegians, and between the Saami and the Norwegian state. As Fredheim correctly observes, addressing this enquiry requires disentangling the multiple levels of inclusion, participation and trust discussed in my keynote.

Although this merits further discussion, participatory archaeology can, in my view, deliver small wins against anti-democratic forces by cultivating competence, trust and tolerance at the local scale. The transfer of authority

over political and administrative heritage decisions offers a complementary route for nurturing trust and tolerance more broadly across a national population. Yet, these levels intersect, and Saami and non-Saami attitudes to both Saami cultural heritage management, the Sámediggi and the state depend on many crossing influences. Trust in Saami cultural heritage management has not been investigated as such, but evidence indicates that the Saami in Norway generally express higher levels of trust in state governance than in the Sámediggi – a pattern that may reflect both the Sámediggi’s political output and the practices of its administration as the implementing body (Falch & Selle 2022). Trust in the Sámediggi nevertheless varies within the Saami population, shaped by differences in expectations, experiences and individual identity (Nilsson & Möller 2017; Bergmann 2025). At the same time, the Sámediggi retains a unifying quality in that it is broadly acknowledged to advocate Saami rights and interests within the wider framework of Norwegian state governance (Falch & Selle 2022).

Thus, questions of trust are complex, and political science studies of general trust – often based on electoral participation and attitudes towards the Sámediggi political system and Norwegian state governance – do not necessarily address the issues raised by Knutson, Danielsen and Fredheim. These concerns warrant further investigation, likely using different methodologies from those employed in the research cited above. Even so, it is difficult to see how the findings would undermine the importance of involving a diverse range of people in heritage and archaeology in Saami contexts, as well as in other contexts – particularly if these practices are to contribute to community building and heritage preparedness by facilitating an open and democratic discourse on identity, belonging and the past.

Several respondents question the realism of this objective, pointing to its practical difficulty (Ojala), and that archaeologists are reluctant to act as political actors (Knutson and Danielsen), or arguing that such engagement lies outside archaeologists’ core expertise or interest (Fredheim). I would suggest, however, that this is not a matter of choice: archaeologists already function as social and political mediators through the projects we bring into the world. Not every archaeological project needs to be explicitly participatory, and participatory modalities may be adopted to different degrees. Nonetheless, all archaeological projects affect individuals and communities in one way or another. By recognising this fact and purposefully exploring participatory possibilities, we may be able to nudge our projects so that their potential positive effects are more likely to be realized.

Crucially: taking the social impact of our work seriously does not preclude enjoyment. On the contrary, enthusiasm, curiosity, and humour can be effective ways of creating pockets of trust and dialogue. I remain confident that participatory archaeology has the potential to contribute to such

small wins and thus foster cognitive heritage preparedness in the face of anti-democratic discourse.

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