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*Fagfællebedømt artikel

* Peer reviewed Paper

Will there be a next Nordic TAG?

Reflections on theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries today

The first meeting in Nordic Theoretical Archaeology Group (Nordic TAG) was held in 1985. The – so far – last meeting in Nordic TAG was held in Copenhagen in 2015. At this meeting, the theme was “the Next 30 years in Theoretical Archaeology” – or in other words the aim was to discuss in which direction theories in the archaeological discipline will develop and especially what new theories, methodologies and perspectives might influence the field in the future. Tragically – or prophetically – no meetings have been organized since then. Now almost five years later we must ask: what is the future of Nordic TAG, and what does the lack of it tell us about the development of theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries today?

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Nordic TAG was established with inspiration from the already existing British Theoretical Archaeology Group. The aim was to promote a common debate and discussion of issues in theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries, particularly among young researchers in archaeology. Since 1985, meetings have been organized on a regular basis but often with several years in between (see table 1). However, at the meeting in 2011 at Stiklestad, Norway, it was decided to increase the frequency of meetings and have a meeting every year, which was accomplished in the following years. The organization of Nordic TAG has always been rather loose with no established institution behind. Instead, appointments about future meetings were made from meeting to meeting, and the responsibility of Nordic TAG changed hands between different groups of organizers. But in 2015, no one signed up to organize the next meeting.

Reasons for the fading initiative in relation to Nordic TAG can be manifold. Maybe a yearly meeting was too often? Maybe work life has changed over the last 35 years and there is less resources to plan large conferences? Maybe other foras has been taking over? Maybe focus in theoretical archaeology has changed? Maybe there is no longer need for a specific Nordic place to meet? Or maybe there are other obvious reasons? In order to explore a possible future of Nordic TAG, we have asked five archaeologists - one from each of the Nordic countries – to share their personal views on the following four questions:

- *Where do you personally find inspiration for new theoretical perspectives in archaeology?*
- *In your experience, what characterizes theoretical archaeology in your home country today?*
- *Where do you find common features – if any – in the development of theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries?*
- *Do you see a future for Nordic TAG?*

Year	Meeting	Town	Country
1985	I Nordisk TAG	Elsinore	Denmark
1987	II Nordic TAG	Umeå	Sweden
1990	III Nordic TAG	Bergen	Norway
1992	IV Nordic TAG	Helsinki	Finland
1997	V Nordic TAG	Göteborg	Sweden
2001	VI Nordic TAG	Oslo	Norway
2003	VII Nordic TAG	Uppsala	Sweden
2005	VIII Nordic TAG	Lund	Sweden

Year	Meeting	Town	Country
2007	IX Nordic TAG	Aarhus	Denmark
2009	X Nordic TAG	Stiklestad	Norway
2011	XI Nordic TAG	Kalmar	Sweden
2012	XII Nordic TAG	Oulu	Finland
2013	XIII Nordic TAG	Reykjavik	Iceland
2014	XIV Nordic TAG	Stockholm	Sweden
2015	XV Nordic TAG	Copenhagen	Denmark

Table 1: A complete list of the meetings in Nordic TAG

Theory

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Where do you personally find inspiration for new theoretical perspectives in archaeology?

I must admit that my own personal involvement in theories in archaeology now seems to fluctuate much more than it did previously. A good way to put it would perhaps be that my present involvement with research is more often resting on a need-to-know level than on a nice-to-know immersion in theoretical debates. In my day-to-day work situation, my inspiration mainly rests on my own solitary reading of journals and discussing specific matters with project collaborators or the networks and study groups I am already part of.

In your experience, what characterizes theoretical archaeology in your home country today?

Mainly that it plays out as a private operation, in the sense that there is little opportunity to actually discuss theoretical matters in any structured collective setting, at least not in any larger and regularly recurring setting. Of course, you can comment on other people's articles, make replies and such, but the more direct way of debating theoretical matters with colleagues face-to-face is rather limited.

I am not fully aware of the situation at the universities, but my feeling is that there is a constant but rather low-intensity theoretical discussion going on here. In the museum world, where I reside, the environment for debate is even more limited. Furthermore, the debate that is taking place, in universities and museums alike, seems very much tied up with external partners – mainly from the English speaking parts of the world. But because Danish archaeological research is continuously having to rely more and more on external funding, both private and public funds, we actually see a more distinct involvement with articulated and specific theoretical platforms. That is, especially the public funds invest a lot of their review programme in evaluating how well integrated the theoretical grounding of the project is with the day-to-day life of the project. So, in the cases of the larger externally funded projects, theoretical debate and critique seems to be flourishing. However, larger projects tend to have a very specific agenda, wherefore exchange of theoretical ideas in between ongoing projects still is rather limited.

In a wider frame of reference, I believe that another venue to a large extent has taken over the role of providing theoretical inspiration. I here refer to the yearly meetings under European Association of Archaeologists. At least from a Danish standpoint, it is clear that the annual EAA meetings are now the main platform where Danish researchers from both the museum, heritage and university sectors present their novel ideas, receive feed-back as well as get inspiration for new theoretical directions. In fact, the EAA meetings is often the place where I encounter the most of my Danish colleagues, and to some extent also our Scandinavian counterparts. However, the fact that EAA has taken over from Nordic TAG just seem to underline that explaining your ideas and present them to other researchers in an open forum also really enables you to refine your own theoretical argument – a practice that most researchers should and do value.

Where do you find common features – if any – in the development of theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries?

I think that today's researchers are quite well informed on the work of their Nordic colleagues, when it comes to the discussions of their own main period of research; Late Neolithic flint-knapping, warrior elites of the Migration Period and what have we. But if we are to truly debate theoretical matters should we not be able to break down the boundaries of archaeological categories? It was (and hopefully still is) one of the trademarks of the Nordic TAG meetings, that the theoretical discussions were in the foreground and the foremost reason why we met; not a defined period of interest. So, I think there are common trends within the archaeological periods we each work with, but the overarching theoretical discussion, seems to be having a hard time making its way to the main stage.

Another important 'problem' seems to be the increased focus on the natural sciences and how they are beginning to almost serve the right to present 'hard facts' about prehistory. I constantly work with natural scientists, and they are fully aware of the dangers of presenting preliminary un-theorised results based on their analysis. And it is indeed an easy pitfall to make.

However, the public demand for ‘rewriting history’ in combination with the rising pressure within public archaeological institutions to keep publishing regularly often leads to conclusions based on analytical results and less so on theoretical contemplation. Cross-disciplinary research is here to stay and we certainly need it, but at the moment theoretical awareness seems to be the underdog. More so, since we within archaeological academia currently witness a rather unconcealed denomination of a research hierarchy, where the natural sciences and methodological developments are viewed as having more force and greater truth-value than theory has, when interpretive breakthroughs are made (e.g. Kristiansen 2017). A definition that *per se* appoints one branch of research as potentially more essential than others seems a dangerous path to follow. I mean, how are we to understand urbanism, early kingships, transfer of technological knowledge and other complex social mechanisms that are so deeply anchored in our archaeological research history if not through theorization?

On the other end of the spectre, I also sense a rather strong and growing counter-movement, where some of the basic tenets of archaeology, such as typology, correspondence analysis or GIS-statistics are constantly challenged and to some extent also understood as restraining theoretical progress – at least in the sense that unrestrained theory in itself can be regarded as an archaeological driver (e.g. Sørensen 2019). Personally, I find both branches to have solid value for improving our understanding of prehistory – which I take to be the core of archaeology – as well as figuring out human interaction with our material world. In a (perhaps unfitting) manner, we might say that the natural sciences and methodology provide the building blocks of the past, while theory enable us to build the house.

A noticeable point here is that this kind of discussion is actually the kind that would be very interesting to continue under the umbrella of a Nordic TAG meeting. Not least, since both *Norwegian Archaeological Review* as well as *Current Swedish Archaeology* seem to be at the forefront internationally when it comes to publishing the debates concerning the different standpoints on the collaboration between the natural sciences and the humanities. If already on the agenda of Scandinavian scholars and journals alike, why not take advantage of the situation?

Do you see a future for Nordic TAG?

The short answer is yes. I really enjoyed the meetings, and I have always felt that they worked especially well for the graduate, post-graduate and Ph.D.-students. The atmosphere was very relaxed. There was also a genuine interest in presenting the more ‘fringy’ types of theoretical standpoints and lively debates followed most of the presentations. But perhaps I am biased, because the last meeting I attended (and my fourth) was the one in Stiklestad, where things changed a bit. The new road with annual meetings might have strained the theoretical energy a bit too much, and perhaps also the economy behind and personnel arranging the meetings. The high rate of meetings also coincided with a continuous trend where the Universities (at least in Denmark) were decimated and the field archaeology was privatized in our neighbouring countries. Perhaps the more mundane responsibilities, such as teaching or evaluating district plans, took too much time off from getting deeper involved with the theoretical development in the world of archaeology.

Another problem is that the Nordic TAG organization is inherently fluid – who is currently taking care of the continued life of the meetings? Who do you address if you have enquiries regarding Nordic TAG? The hand-over of this responsibility at the Copenhagen meeting seemed not to actually have taken place, and the organization has accordingly become a sort of an administrative ghost.

So, the lesson learned from Stiklestad to Copenhagen could perhaps be that a biennale rather than annual meetings is a more sustainable structure to choose. It would be a shame if the Nordic TAG meetings should vanish altogether. On the other hand, it is hard to pick up the baton after this long a lapse, but hopefully some institution out there has the energy to make the Nordic TAG engine run again. It would indeed be interesting to see if the meetings could be revitalised. Answering these questions here, certainly made me awfully aware of the need for an independent forum for debating theoretical archaeology.

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Theory

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Where do you personally find inspiration for new theoretical perspectives in archaeology?

When discussing theory in archaeology I think it is important to point out that it appears in many forms. Some books, theses and articles are theory-driven, that is, based on a theory to which a material is applied or where theory is explored to understand a given dataset. Other texts present a particular theory, generally based on the writings of other theorists, exploring its potential for archaeology. There are also texts that simply employ more or less complex theory without making a fuss about it, and finally, there is the main bulk of archaeological texts in which theory is implicit in the sense that all archaeology is based on some general theory of how the world works.

I also believe it helpful to distinguish between “small” and “large” theories to some extent. Anthropology and sociology generally deliver the large and broad theoretical perspectives such as the ontological turn, perspectivism, practice theory etc. Then there are the theoretical “tools” in the form of concepts (e.g. ‘actant’, ‘binder’, ‘object itineraries’ etc.). The grand theoretical perspectives are important, but in my experience, the concepts are the true gems of theory. For me, the inspiration for both types often begins with a vague pattern or relations in an archaeological material that calls for new perspectives. I also find much inspiration from reading contemporary anthropology and ethnography. The journal *HAU* is a particular favourite with its many high-quality debates and articles. Among the archaeological journals, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* stands out because of their broad, global field and explicit focus of applied theory. Last, but not least, informal networks of colleagues and students are a great source of inspiration to find, elaborate and employ new theory and concepts.

In your experience, what characterizes theoretical archaeology in your home country today?

It is not an easy task to characterize theoretical archaeology in Sweden today. To begin with, the situation today is quite different to the times of the first Nordic TAG meeting in 1985. The emphasis on theory in Swedish archaeology very much coincides with the development of the post-processual movement. The last fifteen years, however, that interpretative tradition has been reassessed and progressed towards realist perspectives. The questions have changed from what material culture means to what it does to people. Somewhat contradictory, various meta-archaeologies that focus on contemporary issues such as heritage and ethics has increased during the new millennium. Archaeology allegedly also experience a third scientific revolution because of the impact of ancient genetic and isotope research. The degree of theoretical focus depends very much on the field of research and to some extent on which time period that is concerned. For example, meta-archaeological approaches are generally explicitly theoretical while discussions on DNA and isotopes rarely engage with theory. The old polarization between university and contract-led archaeology is, however, less evident today in Swedish archaeology.

To get a less subjective perspective, a quick glance at the PhD-theses produced during the last ten years can prove informative. It is far from a perfect measure of the status of theory in archaeology but may suffice here. At Uppsala, Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Lund, there has been an average of close to two theses annually the last ten years. All doctoral theses include theory at some level but only a few explicitly engage with theory. At Stockholm and Gothenburg just over a third can be considered theoretical, while only a fourth in Lund and Uppsala. However, this difference is partly

because of more theses in Stockholm and Gothenburg concern meta-archaeological themes, which are almost non-existent in Uppsala and Lund. The interest in theory in prehistorical archaeology seems quite stable over the period and do not indicate any substantial changes.

Where do you find common features – if any – in the development of theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries?

I would assume that the situation in the other Nordic countries is not too different from Sweden although there are differences. In my very personal experience, archaeology in the other Nordic countries tends to be more prone to employ ethnography and textual sources than new theories. This is perhaps reflected in the distribution of the Nordic TAG meetings of which six out of fifteen have been held in Sweden. A quick look at a few Nordic journals publishing in English in the last ten years indicates that there indeed are differences but also common grounds. *Current Swedish Archaeology* (CSA) has a constant flow of theoretical papers that make up at least half of the content (not counting the keynotes). *Norwegian Archaeological Review* (NAR) also has a stable portion of theoretical texts although the percentage varies for each issue. The texts in *Danish Journal of Archaeology* (DJA) mainly focus on materials and method. The theoretical texts are very few and are published during the last two years which may indicate a change in orientation. *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* (FA) is not really comparable to the others because of its more narrow orientation towards the Stone Age of the North. Only a few articles are explicitly theoretical but are nonetheless evenly distributed over time. Of course, another selection would result in other figures (I did not find a comparable journal from Iceland). The theory employed in the papers of these journals span over the whole field of archaeological theory from processualism to new materialism. The lower amount of theoretical texts in DJA and FA can perhaps partly be explained by the rather large portion of meta-archaeological texts in CSA and NAR. Be that as it may, although all five journals frequently publish papers by authors from outside Scandinavia, it still reflects a persistent interest in theory in Nordic archaeology.

Do you see a future for Nordic TAG?

Only the future can tell how important Nordic TAG meetings are to Nordic archaeology. Although theory for theory's sake is much a thing of the past this does

not mean that there is no need for a dedicated forum for theory in Nordic archaeology. This is also evident from the latest conferences in Stockholm 2014 and Copenhagen in 2015 gathering 140 and 130 papers respectively. Still, no university seems willing to host a next Nordic TAG meeting. I believe that there are several reasons for this. One is probably found in the changed situation for both students and staff since the start of Nordic TAG. It is nowadays expected of a PhD-student to, besides the thesis, publish a couple of peer-reviewed articles and get international experience to acquire a future post-doc position. There is thus less time for students to do voluntary work which is required to run a TAG conference. The staff are also increasingly encouraged to publish and apply for external research grants which leave less time for arranging conferences with little merit points. New public management reforms, continuous evaluations, and an increasing bureaucracy at the universities (at least in Sweden) have increased significantly which leave less time for the core tasks (teaching and research). A similar situation is also the case for those working in contract-led archaeology that during the last two decades has required writing extensive proffers to get contracts.

Another reason is perhaps found in the globalization of archaeology. Researchers, masters and PhD-students in Sweden increasingly present and publish globally rather than locally. Although the internationalization of archaeology is generally a good thing, something is nonetheless lost in the process. Personally, I believe that one reason for holding specifically Nordic conferences is to provide a forum for discussion in Scandinavian languages. Even though most Scandinavians today are fluent in English, it is not the same as using the mother tongue. I understand that not all are comfortable with Danish/Norwegian/Swedish, but it becomes a bit strange when everybody at a session discusses complex theory in a foreign language. Moreover, if you are writing a presentation in English you might as well present it at a more international arena to enhance your CV.

On a more practical level, I assume that it would be useful if there was a formalized "package" to apply for each new meeting to make the process of hosting a conference more foreseeable. Potentially, future meetings could probably benefit from being planned further ahead than from one year to the next.

Theory

Considering the changed situation for students and staff I assume that a biannual system is more suitable for future Nordic TAG meetings. There have been long gaps between meetings before but it is certainly due

time to pick up where we left off to explore the new theoretical landscape after the post-processual era. A quick look at the list where the previous meetings have been held call upon the west to step up.

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Where do you personally find inspiration for new theoretical perspectives in archaeology?

Primarily reading. I tend to read quite widely outside archaeology and prefer reading books over papers. While some of the literature comes recommended by other archaeologists, the sources are as likely to come as a natural by-product of reading itself – you read one book or paper which cites another and so on. Sometimes following the trail leads you in some very strange directions but it is almost never dull. And some works are like the hydra, they sprout a plethora of directions to follow. A lot of it may never feed directly into my work but I think all of it has an impact at some level and is besides, now lying there waiting and who knows what fruit it may later bear – often years or decades afterwards. This happened recently for example when one of the concepts in Alfred Schütz's book the *Phenomenology of the Social World*, which I read while doing my PhD in the 1990s, was roused from latency in a paper on contemporaneity I published in *Archaeological Dialogues* in 2015, twenty years later. Sometimes the reading is informed by a particular issue that may have origins in an archaeological issue or from teaching; right now for example I have been writing a paper about 17th and 18th century coins from a site in Iceland and that has led me to read several different books on the theory of money by economists, sociologists and anthropologists and its relations to debt, credit and the connections between these and gift exchange and barter. There is a lot of recursivity and of course the more you read, the more connections you can forge between often diverse topics, including – or maybe especially – some you may have looked into years earlier. In a sense, I think theoretical innovation and creativity is sparked precisely by such kind of juxtapositions and connections, rather than say, directly applying something you read about by philosopher X.

But besides reading, I would be lying if I also did not say that what was happening in the discipline or wider academia at the moment does not have an influence; ineluctably one is guided by contemporary streams and directions. Some of this comes from attending conferences like Nordic TAG, and some from workshops or informal conversations with colleagues; and some, from reading current archaeology books or journal papers of course. But as one gets older, I think these influences become less relevant – or maybe I have just become more reclusive! Either way, a little distance and detachment from theoretical fashions is never a bad thing. But more importantly somehow, working with theory in relation to concrete problems relating to a site or material is in many ways the most satisfying; *making theory work*. And in this sense, the inspiration for theory could be said to come from the archaeology itself.

In your experience, what characterizes theoretical archaeology in your home country today?

This is a harder question to answer. Icelandic archaeology is a small field and the community of archaeologists, equally small. I am not sure one can even identify an explicit or distinct genre of theory in Icelandic archaeology. Thirty or forty years ago, one might have suggested that theoretically the focus was all about the relation between history and archaeology and especially the relation of written sources to material culture – this because all archaeology in Iceland is effectively historical archaeology (there is no pre-history). It was about releasing archaeology from the 'handmaiden to history' narrative and while these issues still surface now and again, they no longer have the force they once had. Today, there is no similar axe to grind for archaeologists, no common cause for the discipline to debate or rally around. However, this is not to say there is no theory here and like anywhere, some

archaeologists are more theoretical than others. But due to the low numbers of practitioners, one would almost be better off characterizing the theoretical position of those handful of individuals most active in theory than trying to capture any general features of the discipline at large. All one can say is that most of the key contemporary issues and ideas are circulating here, from new materialism to climate change and sustainability.

In lieu of an extended discussion on the state of theory in Iceland, I will use this opportunity to reflect more generally on what I see as the current condition of theory in archaeology in general – or at least within north-western Europe. For I feel the nature of theoretical archaeology may be changing in ways that almost make the term itself redundant. The days of grand theories or paradigms, like processualism and postprocessualism have long passed and even though there remains almost a need to characterize theory in terms of some -ism (e.g. new materialism) or ‘turn’ (e.g. ontological), like many others I think this is unnecessary and in fact potentially unhelpful insofar as it maintains an aura of theory as somehow exceptional, separate from the rest of archaeology. However, one has to be careful in not throwing the baby out with the bathwater; unlike some archaeologists who have proclaimed that such shifts mark the death of theory, I think it rather signals a new way of doing theory – one more closely embedded in particular archaeological situations or contexts. Indeed, it is especially important to maintain the value of theory at a time when ideas of data-driven archaeology are emerging, which threaten to throw us back to an earlier era of naïve empiricism – if that ever even existed (or disappeared!). So the point is not that theory is dead – it’s just undergoing a metamorphosis. And this should not be mistaken as a paradigm change but rather as an emergence into a post-paradigm era, as the recent 2019 EAA meeting in Bern called it, in labelling its conference theme ‘Beyond paradigms’.

At the same time, quite what a post-paradigmatic archaeology is, is not easy to define. We can say what it isn’t: grand theory, major schools and -isms competing for theoretical hegemony. On the other hand, many of the concepts and ideas that grew out of the ‘paradigm period’ remain active and important and one way to characterize theory today is as a loose constellation of concept metaphors, as described by the anthropologist

Henrietta Moore for her discipline. I think this is what John Robb means when he refers to the difference between ‘high church’ and ‘low church’ theory. To some extent, this also resonates with the shift from strong to weak theory articulated by Olsen and Pétursdóttir in their recent paper on theory in the *Journal of Social Archaeology*. But whereas for Moore or Robb, the shift is about loosening the straightjacket of a grand theoretical system so that important ideas can adapt to particular disciplinary contexts and problems, for Olsen and Pétursdóttir it is about loosening the straightjacket of theoretical discourse itself, so it can be attentive to the materiality of things.

Both of these are useful ways to think about the directions in which theory is developing, but for me, there is a nagging feeling that there is still more going on here. That there is an insoluble paradox that we need to get around before moving on. On the one hand, we need theory – it is a powerful force of creativity and critique which in many ways keeps the discipline moving forward. On the other hand, simply retaining the term or idea of theory, somehow seems to preserve a sense of it as separate from ... well, what? I suppose the most common antonyms of theory are data or practice. But whatever the opposite of theory is, it follows theory like a shadow. Back in the 1980s, we told ourselves that theory and data are mutually constitutive, just as now, we argue that theory *is* practice (and vice versa). But somehow saying this does not dissolve the distinction. Is this necessarily a problem though? Some would say not, but I think it is, to the extent that it can act to polarize the discipline into those who think archaeology needs theory and those who think it does not. In short, the paradox is this: how can we dissolve the distinction between theory and data/practice without also proclaiming death of theory?

Where do you find common features – if any – in the development of theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries?

This is also a difficult question for me to answer – being an Englishman in Iceland, I probably have a very skewed and biased image of this issue. While for example I can certainly see the influence of Swedish theoretical archaeology in Iceland, on the whole I am not sure there is a distinctly Nordic flavour to the theory here. Indeed, I am not even sure I *could* characterize a specifically Nordic theoretical archaeology (or a British one for that

Theory

matter). Part of the problem may be because of the changes to theory I mentioned in the previous section, where theory is much more dispersed and problem- or material-based, rather than linked to paradigms or movements. In such a terrain, commonalities based on broad regional location would seem to be somewhat unlikely and while such factors may have played a role in the early decades of the emergence of theoretical archaeology in a country, over the past decades I wonder if such factors still have any relevance. Having attended both British and Nordic TAG's I cannot say I have observed a huge difference in the kinds of theory being presented there. But I should also admit I have not been a regular attendee at either conference so once again, my judgement is highly partial.

Do you see a future for Nordic TAG?

Based on my answer to the last question, I suppose the answer might be no – if by a Nordic TAG, one means a conference which somehow showcases distinctly Nordic theory. But then the same would apply to the British or North American TAG's. The question for me then

becomes whether a Nordic TAG just happens to be a theoretical conference held in a Nordic country – and if so, then I see no reason for it not to continue. On the other hand, if it is simply that, maybe a European TAG would be a more intriguing option, especially in a post-Brexit era! In the end, I suppose all that really matters is whether conferences like the Nordic TAG need to remain on our agenda; personally I think they are an important place to have focused discussions on theory, to experiment and especially to allow younger scholars to showcase their work in an environment friendly to theory and innovative thinking. Perhaps such conferences sustain the ghettoization of theory; certainly there is no lack of theory at more general conferences such as the EAA so maybe the argument for a special theory conference is becoming superfluous. And yet there remains something important about the smaller scale of TAG conferences and their explicitly theoretical focus that can enable the kind of interaction that larger conferences might prohibit. In the end, I have no clear vision on this – but for now, at least, I can see the value of keeping TAG alive.

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Where do you personally find inspiration for new theoretical perspectives in archaeology?

Let me answer this question by taking my recently published monograph on Nordic hunters' rock art as an example. Here, I heavily rely on Lévi-Strauss' basic concept of wild thinking and animals "as good to think with". This might sound like a theoretical exercise of the 1990's. I have, however developed my concepts through what I see to be a fresh approach to his anthropology. This I developed through a combination of the original writings of Lévi-Strauss with recent commentary literature of his works. Moreover, the basic Lévi-Straussian approach could not be used unless it was brought in dialogue with the so-called ontological turn in anthropology, a turn associated with names like Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold. As I see it, the most important power of theory is generally found in "old theory". Master thinkers like Marx, Lévi-Strauss and de Beauvoir – *and many others* should not be regarded

outdated; but as briefly illustrated, the concepts of old masters must somehow get in dialogue with recent anthropological/ sociological/ feminist and phenomenological advances; this way they must be used within the frames of status quo of the theoretical field of study. My short answer to this question is: I find inspiration from a combination of a wide range of theory, "old" as well as "new".

In your experience, what characterizes theoretical archaeology in your home country today?

Theoretical archaeology is not so much characterized by theoretical discussions, and neither "pure" theoretical contributions. Rather, it seems we have come into a phase in which our concern is the applicability of theory. This is theory made into analytically operative concepts, in other words theory-as-method. Most PhD-theses have a theoretical chapter; however, and perhaps unlike earlier, the direct application of theory

is a requirement. To make a reference back to the first question, my use of Lévi-Strauss' myth-theory to understand rock art led to the creation of the concept of the *moteme*; this concept brought the empirical material onto a formula that in turn produced a corpus of data that interpretation could be based upon.

Theory today is really theory-as-method, or theory-as-applied. Aside of this specific use of theory we experience the great success of a number of scientifically based methods, for instance analyses of aDNA, isotope and diverse statistical methods, like the modelling of 14C-dates. These have created stunning results and an insight into prehistoric "facts" that only a few years ago were seen to be unachievable.

Where do you find common features – if any – in the development of theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries?

The phase we are in, i.e. the theory-as-method is a healthy development within our discipline, and one to be expected after the theoretical advancements within archaeological theory during the last decades of the twentieth century (processual and post-processual archaeology). We currently experience the glory days of methods, and I think these days will last for a long while. The heydays of method is, however, not only a common feature of the Nordic countries, but concerns archaeology generally.

"Pure" theory has a different standing today. Even if I have colleagues that go deeply into theory, I really do not see any common developments of theoretical archaeology in the Nordic countries at all. I apologize, if this only reveals my ignorance. I sense some kind of theory exhaustion, and perhaps an attitude signaling that theory in itself has minor value. Of course, this tiredness could not come, unless theory did play a part prior to the phase we are in now. So, if there is a common trait more or less uniting the Nordic countries, it would be that we did have a post-processual theoretical discussion. We should not forget though that several regional disciplinary communities never took note of the post-processual explorations into theory.

Do you see a future for Nordic TAG?

I hope there is a future for Nordic TAG, and for several reasons. Our glory days of method, I wish could be combined with a renewed interest in theory. This combination could lift the study of prehistory to new

heights. As I see it, the 1990's represent the culmination of theoretical advancements in archaeology; even if some, in my opinion led to dead ends, others never got fully explored and neither utilized.

One basic rationale of archaeology is the understanding of stability and change in deep history. We operate with long time spans; simultaneously, and thanks to the astonishing results produced by the mentioned scientific methods, we are able to access single moments of pre-history. Thus, one example of an un-utilized theoretical treasure is the concepts belonging to the Annales school of history. This viable theoretical apparatus provides us with concepts that opens the gate to understand temporalities of different paces, or frequencies, i.e. the 'longue durée', of 'conjunctures' and 'events'. I see promising possibilities for the combination of this kind of theory especially when used in combination with advanced modelling of settlement and / or demographic development figures coming out of the methods connected to the summation of 14C-dates. The potential of the Annales-schools is but one example; relevant theory available to the archaeologist have several unused treasures. Archaeology has come to an advanced stage, but has potential to come much further if we succeed in taking advantage of the advances of theoretical knowledge that was developed and explored during the last two decades of the 20th century.

Another reason to cultivate theory in archaeology concerns politics and outreach. The more accurate we can record the events of prehistory, the more vulnerable it is for political abuse. Theory and only theory can help us create well-founded discussions and interpretations of social processes. In other words, theory is a prerequisite to understand complex social and ethnic processes and theory is thus essential to communicate our results to the public and to prevent misuse.

Lastly, we should not forget that archaeology also is to pose questions that never can be answered. However, such discussions have a value in themselves, as it brings parallel scenarios of what might have happened. If we only concern ourselves with procedures that provide hard-core facts, prehistory soon becomes a poor and grey place. A viable theoretical discussion is the only way of preventing our getting there.

Theory

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This reflection on the current state of, and need for, Nordic TAG comes from somebody who has always had a somewhat uneasy relationship with conferences. I basically didn't go to conferences until some years after I had obtained a PhD and the last few years, I have mostly avoided conferences again. While I have never been particularly active on the conference front, I do have experience of a wide variety of meetings in the 2000s and 2010s, ranging from World Archaeological Congress and the annual meetings of the European Association of Archaeologists to a host of smaller conferences, such as Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory. The last Nordic TAG meeting I went to was the Stockholm meeting in 2013, the second last before the hiatus that has now lasted for several years.

I would think that there are several reasons to the quiet life of Nordic TAG, but I do not think that it has to do with diminished interest in archaeological theory and thinking. Instead, I would identify a range of other reasons for the seemingly lacking interest in organizing and/or attending to Nordic TAG, some of which have to do with the spirit of academia nowadays and others, perhaps, with the profile of the conference itself. Conferences like EAA attract a large number of attendees and are very general in scope – there seems to be something for everybody, irrespective of one's specific interests, and it is therefore easy to go to them routinely, almost like an annual ritual. Nordic TAG has, to my recollection, been general in scope although perhaps focusing mainly on the Nordic world, which could in some eyes make it look peripheral. It is not big and general in the same ways as EAA for instance, but at the same time it does not appear to have a clear enough (thematic) focus; the 'theoretical' should presumably be an important element of Nordic TAG, but I am not sure how clear this focus has really been.

This 'peripheral' – indeed maybe even a bit relic-like – character of Nordic TAG may discourage an interest in it in the present-day academic world where, we are told, all scholarship should be 'top', 'world-leading', 'highest ranking' and so forth, which can look like a mismatch with a conference of a Nordic focus. Nordic TAG, then, could be considered to have something of

an identity crisis and might benefit from reinventing or clarifying its scope and profile. I for one believe that there is a need for an event like Nordic TAG for various reasons that I will get back to shortly.

Personally, I have serious reservations about big conferences, such as EAA, which to me appear cacophonous, literally and figuratively. I prefer smaller and more tightly (and thematically) focused meetings that have the potential to be more inspiring and useful than general big ones. Preparing conference papers and going to conferences takes time and if there is one thing that is in short supply – again under the pressure to produce 'highest ranking' scholarship – it is time. Nowadays, I am much more likely to skip conferences than to attend them and the occasional conference that I choose to go to, I pick based on how interesting and relevant it looks to me, not on what is the biggest or has the highest profile.

It would make sense that 'theory' was a visible element of Nordic TAG although I don't have any concrete ideas about how this should be done. I wouldn't want any theory-policing or censors judging what is or is not 'theoretical enough' to fit the scope of the conference, and I also certainly don't see Nordic TAG as a conference focusing only on some abstract 'high theory'. Perhaps it would be possible and useful, for instance, to explicitly welcome explorative and idea-driven papers that could be about work in progress to be discussed in the spirit of workshop-type setting?

British and American scholarship has, at least seemingly, dominated theoretical discussion and approaches in archaeology for several decades while Scandinavian scholars have made significant contributions to the very formation of modern scientific archaeological thinking. In the view of Nordic archaeology, the situation is problematic if theoretical thinking is merely imported and applied to Nordic settings. Colonialism is a good example. The (historical) archaeology of colonialism has tended to centralize 'Atlantic world' perspectives whereas the forms and experiences of colonialism that the Nordic world has been and is entangled with can potentially become

more or less skewed if simply cast on the Atlantic models of colonialism and colonial relations. Indeed, new or alternative theoretical perspectives on a range of broad and globally relevant issues could be developed from a Nordic viewpoint. There is perhaps still a tendency to see and think large-scale past processes and socio-cultural-environmental phenomena – such as Neolithization and modernization for instance – from the perspective of elsewhere than the Nordic world. Assessing such processes from a theoretically informed manner in a Nordic perspective could help to reconsider their character, workings and dynamics in new or alternative ways, which would also make them of a wider currency beyond the specific geographical, historical and cultural Nordic domain.

Indeed, there is a host of more specific topics that have attracted interest in discussions of archaeological theory over the 2000s, and that ‘naturally’ overlap with Nordic pasts, cultures and experiences. At the same time, there are fault lines within the Nordic world that could productively be assessed within the context of Nordic TAG. There is, for instance, a long-standing division or a boundary between SW and NE parts of Fennoscandia, with the former manifesting affiliations to the European sphere while the latter manifests rather different cultural trajectories, including millennia-long continuities in lifeways and cosmologies.

It is due to these and many other reasons that the Nordic world comprises an excellent arena for exploring the nature and dynamics of myriad prehistoric and historical phenomena and processes, such as change and continuity, boundaries and borderlessness mobility,

and movement, cultural encounters, and state formation. On a slightly more abstract theoretical side, the Nordic world through millennia is an excellent place for examining topics such as ethnographically informed approaches to the past, direct historical approaches, the relationship between the modern and non-modern, and relational ontologies and epistemologies. I have found many of these themes appealing to myself over the 2000s. My own theoretical awakening, as an MA student, begun with the work of Ian Hodder and was boosted by the writings of Alfred Gell and Tim Ingold, and I continue engaging with their works even today, although I see them quite differently now than in the early 2000s. In the last years, however, I have drawn inspiration and approaches primarily from (human) geography, heritage studies, and the study of popular culture – and admittedly, not so much from archaeology as such.

Theoretically and otherwise, archaeology has become a highly dispersed field, with diverse specialisms, which would appear to underline the need for a forum to discuss theoretical matters also in relation to the specific problematics related to particular regions and how they are nested in the yet wider world. Likewise, the rapid develop of natural-scientific analytical methods over the last several years, and fascination with the opportunities they provide (however well informed or misinformed), with the real and apparent insights that they promise to provide into the past, appears to have created a gap between ‘scientifically’ and ‘culturally’ oriented archaeological approaches. This further underline the need for dialogue for which Nordic TAG could provide a fruitful setting.

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