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The future of Nordic TAG?

Every new generation of archaeologists defines its own needs

In 'Arkæologisk Forum' 41, the question was raised by a number of colleagues: will there be a next Nordic TAG (Bech et al. 2019). My answer as to why there have been no Nordic TAG meetings since Copenhagen five years ago is quite simply because no one among the present younger generation felt the urge to organize one. If they increasingly see their identity linked to a larger international theoretical and archaeological community, such as the EAA, then there will probably not be another Nordic TAG.

Ten years ago I made an overview of the Nordic TAG conferences for the Trondheim/Stiklestad meeting in 2009, nearly 25 years after their start in Helsingør (Kristiansen 2012). I observed that Nordic TAG was created as a response to the needs of my generation, whose roots went back to the formation of the Nordic Contact Seminars for archaeology students formed in 1969, first meeting Bergen 1970. Just like the earlier Nordic Archaeology Meetings had been created by a previous generation to serve their needs but faded away during the 1990s. After Trondheim/Stiklestad Nordic TAG seemed revived by a new generation, creating annual meetings, but only to last until Copenhagen in 2015.

The answer as to why there have been no meetings since Copenhagen five years ago is quite simply because no one among the present younger generation felt the urge to organize one. Why is that? Conferences arise from a need to meet and exchange vital information, as well as building networks. In an age of network building one should therefore expect expanding rather than fading needs for a Nordic conference tradition. But conditions have changed during the last 15 years. We have had the Nordic Graduate School operating during this period to establish connections and networks among Nordic graduate students/junior researchers, and we have the Nordic Bronze Age conferences, as well as other specialist conferences. In addition, international conferences, such as EAA, are perhaps considered more important than maintaining a Nordic tradition? Finally, we live in the age of skype meetings, and some may feel that travelling to conferences to meet physically is perhaps not so necessary any longer. To me nothing can

replace personal meetings and the socializing aspects of creating personal bonds. But all things taken together suggest that needs are changing in archaeology, possibly linked to the way we communicate, perhaps also linked to what is considered to provide academic prestige.

An analysis of participations and contributions from Nordic archaeologists at recent EAA meetings since 2015 might provide part of an answer. I flipped through participant names for the 2017 meeting in Maastricht and found 140 Nordic names. It more or less corresponds to the number of participants in Copenhagen. Likewise, we have seen the formation of an Association of Critical Heritage Studies with bi-annual meetings, which has attracted quite a large following, and which has perhaps less of a Nordic focus. For Nordic TAG to stay relevant it must be able to catch up with new trends, such as critical heritage studies, but it must also remain attractive to archaeologists outside academia in museums and in contract archaeology. And if there is only money for one larger conference each year, then EAA is probably the more attractive choice.

I enjoyed the reflections from my five colleagues about the why question, there is much to agree with, but practical obstacles are not among them. You always find a way – economically and timewise – if you are dedicated to organizing a conference. To me the answer is simple – what cannot stand must fall, and everything has its time. Whether or not there will be a continuation, like TAG in the UK, really depends on the need for an institution like Nordic TAG among a younger generation of archaeologists. It is their future that is shaped by the absence or presence of a Nordic

forum for archaeology. If they increasingly see their identity rather linked to a larger international theoretical and archaeological community, then there will probably not be another Nordic TAG.

However, Nordic TAG did experience a similar 5-year pause, before it was rejuvenated by a new generation of mostly PhD students that organized a comeback meeting in Gothenburg 1997 with 230 participants. So, perhaps there is hope that PhD students once again may do the job.

References

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