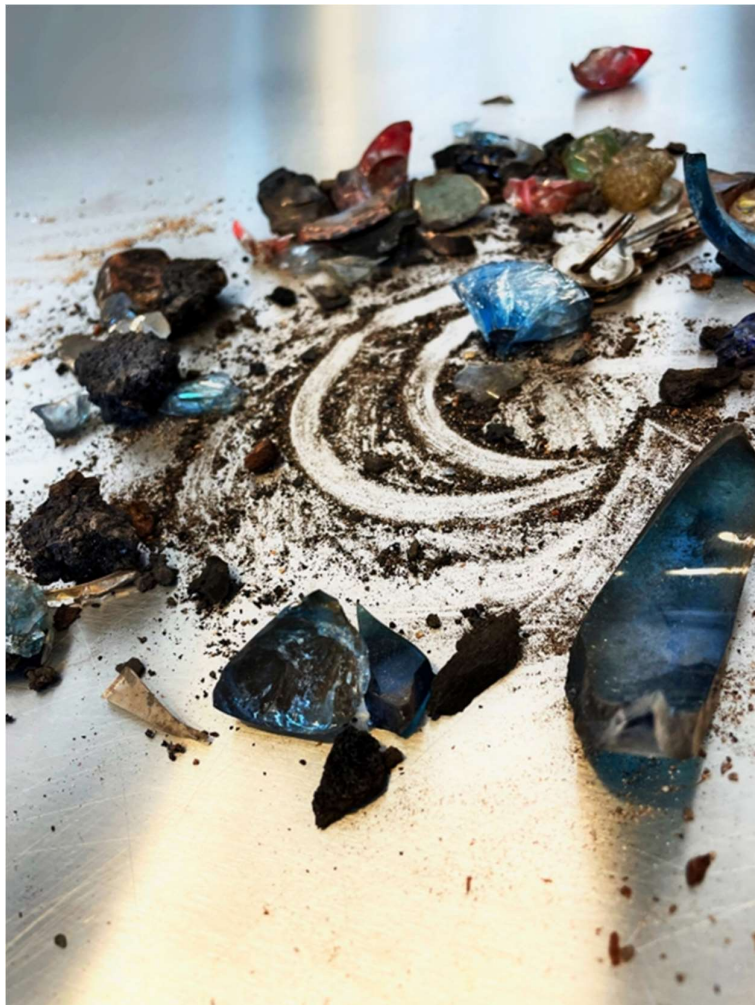


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What's the use of theory, anyway?

The need for a joint Nordic platform for archaeological theory has recently been reflected upon on the pages of this journal. Is there a need for a Nordic TAG? Are there issues that pertain to a particularly *Nordic* theoretical debate? And if so, why is it that this seemingly ideal venue tends towards hibernation every now and then? These questions will be discussed here, though not fully answered. Most importantly, however, with this short comment we are happy to inform you that the Nordic TAG will be returning this coming spring. Hosted jointly by the Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History and the Museum of Cultural History, both part of the University of Oslo, the aim is set for lively conversations and constructive arguments in late April 2022. We hope to see you there!

Is there a future for Nordic TAG?

This question was posed in this journal a couple of years ago (Beck *et al.* 2019). Then reflected upon by a group of distinguished colleagues, their generalised conclusion appeared to be that – yes, with the right structures in place, probably there is. Clearly, we, the authors of this comment, who also represent the organisers of the upcoming TAG conference, do see a future for this venue – both in the short- and long-term. After a 7-year long hiatus, Nordic TAG will, once again, be revived and the next conference will take place at the University of Oslo in late April 2022. Following this, we also hope that, with some structure in place, there will be a future for Nordic TAG in the decades to come.

The initial idea to revive the venue was born in conversation between two PhD students in the semi-open office-space inhabited by doctoral fellows at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. Why? The short answer: Because they missed an international yet close-to-home arena dedicated to theoretical musings, ponderings and exchanges, and, because conferences, when done right, can be both useful and fun. We expand on both points below, and loosely structure our thoughts around the questions first posed by *Arkæologisk Forum's* editorial board to five of our colleagues in 2019.

The future of theory

Archaeology – including Nordic archaeology – is becoming an ever more varied field of study. Narrowing down to the five authors of this comment, we cover a wide range of archaeological periods – from the

Neolithic to the contemporary – and branches, from human ecodynamics to the broader heritage field. Thus, our methodological and theoretical inspirations are equally diverse, which also is reflective of what we believe to be the very exciting current state of the archaeological field. For inspiration and collaboration, some of us look to other academic disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy, or the natural sciences, but also to the growing interdisciplinary fields of heritage research, the environmental humanities and the arts.

This diversity is sometimes referred to as the field's increasing fragmentation; risking to result in the formation of independent domains that simply mind their own business, so to speak, rather than converse across the trenches. This development has been claimed to culminate with the 'death of theory' (Bintliff and Pearce 2011; for critique of this claim see Thomas 2015), the end of the trench warfare between of grand paradigms that characterized the 60s/70s and 80s/90s. Indeed, the current segmentation between, on the one hand, the natural-*scientific* branches and, on the other hand, more *theoretical* humanistic approaches do oftentimes give this impression (see e.g. Kristiansen 2014; Sørensen 2017), where vocabularies and tool kits are becoming increasingly incompatible and discussions hence more challenging. While recognizing the reality of this divide, it may also be, as Julian Thomas (2015; see also Lucas 2019a) has pointed out, that time has come to reconsider our expectations of how archaeological theory evolves, and that the conventional Kuhnian historiography may not necessarily be the only model to explain this. In fact,

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thinking about the growing emphasis on inter-disciplinarity in academia during the last decade – not to mention the collaborative approaches needed in order to address and tackle current global challenges – the (claimed) fragmentation or segmentation of archaeology may also be among its greatest assets. Not only does it ensure that discussions are never-ending, but it gives us room to explore the same material, or similar ideas, in a myriad of ways – sometimes asking the same questions, but perhaps reaching different conclusions. Combined, the many iterations of archaeology, with all its “messy” results, may in fact offer us a more realistic picture of both past and present societies.

Hence, the idea that we are once more experiencing a phase of incompatible competing paradigms, only to culminate in the domination of one, is possibly outdated. Indeed, theory-as-paradigm may very well be dead (cf. Bintliff and Pearce 2011), but archaeological theory and theoretical debate has far from perished. Just consider the current discussions about archaeology’s role in research on and reactions to climate change (e.g. Hudson *et al.* 2012; Edgeworth *et al.* 2014; Kintigh *et al.* 2014; Pétursdóttir 2017; Riede 2017; Boivin & Crowther 2021; Lane 2021), heated debates on the pros and cons of aDNA and Big Data (e.g. Kristiansen 2014; Frieman & Hoffman 2019; Ion 2019; Sørensen 2017), or about the ethics of post-humanism and thing agency (e.g. Ribeiro 2016; Sørensen 2016; McGuire 2021; Olsen & Witmore 2021; Van Dyke 2021). Theoretical debate in archaeology may be different from what it has been before, but it hasn’t run out of steam. Quite the opposite.

In that regard, we believe Ingrid Fuglestedt (2019:22) touches upon something important when she, in the mentioned discussion about the future of Nordic TAG, stated that theory in today’s archaeology mostly takes the form of ‘theory-as-method’, or as applied. A parallel claim is made by Gavin Lucas in the same discussion when he explains that: “... *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*” (Lucas 2019b:19, emphasis added). These perspectives could probably be explained in different ways but referring to concrete problems – we imagine – is an important clue. Not only so with reference to archaeology’s identity as a “discipline of things” (Olsen *et al.* 2012), but more importantly with reference to

current and concrete global challenges – economic, social, environmental – and the growing concern, particularly among young scholars and students, that action must be taken: words must be exchanged with work and theory, thus, must be transformed from the *abstraction* to the *concretization* of problems.

On a somewhat related note, it is also clear that there is a growing call for democratizing the archaeological field, which is likely to influence the archaeological field across the world in years to come. Various stakeholders, such as interest groups and indigenous peoples, are entering and contributing to the field, claiming their rights and voicing their opinions. Although archaeologists often are the officially appointed custodians of a country’s national and local heritage, it is clear that we alone should not, and cannot, decide the fate and treatment of all kinds of heritage – or indeed the very understanding of what counts as heritage. This is not an argument for *every* opinion having equal weight, but rather that we need to take on the challenges involved in a more open dialogue on heritage value and uses (cf. Hølleland & Skrede 2019). Heeding the seminal work by Laurajane Smith (2006), we believe that archaeology’s role in theory-building could be of significance here. Its fluid and “fragmented” nature means that there is indeed room for multi-faceted, and even contradictory, world-views and perceptions.

What’s the use of theory, and TAG?

So, the nature of theoretical discussion and articulation in archaeology has indeed changed, perhaps also the very understanding of what theory is and does (e.g. Edgeworth 2012; Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2018). Rather than dwelling on what is lost or has perished we are quite optimistic. In fact, it is through the claims made by Fuglestedt and Lucas that we carve out the theme for the upcoming Nordic TAG: “What is the use of theory?” The increasing diversity – or fragmentation – of the archaeological debates creates a demand for a revived Nordic TAG where the Nordic research environment can come together and discuss past, present and future theoretical approaches, frameworks and innovative ideas, where we seek to challenge our own practices and perceptions. Thus, we welcome contributions that explore, answer and illustrate the use of theory within all variants and branches of the archaeological field. The rapid increase of methods

rooted in the natural sciences and data applications also implore the development of equally sophisticated theoretical frameworks. Similarly, the way we approach our research questions needs to be founded on a theoretically informed basis.

In an increasingly digital research environment, a trend that has been amplified by the ongoing covid-19 pandemic, with what often seems as an over-abundance of conferences and other meetings, a Nordic venue for theoretical development and debates may seem superfluous. Yet, we have also experienced how rigid digital meetings often leave little room for the smaller comments and useful sidetracks that emerge organically at in-person conferences. Also, we cannot dismiss the importance of the social gatherings outside the formal program, which is really where networks are made and collaborations are formed.

As pointed out by Mads Dengsø Jessen (2019:16), the “inherently fluid” nature of Nordic TAG is a likely culprit for its frequent pauses of varying lengths. This is a challenge we aim to overcome by establishing a Nordic steering committee. Its main responsibility will be to ensure that there is a plan for future conferences – someone in place to take over the torch – as well as to ensure a certain archiving and communication of knowledge, events, skills, people etc. Since the committee members are elected and appointed for two or three years, it will also, we hope, be a democratic and diverse team, which, given that theoretical inspiration comes in waves, shifts or turns, is arguably best served by a continued influx of new people.

We look forward to finding you in Oslo!

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