

# 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	Reykjavík	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?*

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.