

Introduction: Contemporary Archaeological Approaches to Inequality

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Societies in both the past and the present often show at least some levels of inequality. Inequality can be understood in various ways, but more often than not, it is determined as a hierarchical structure in society, which manifests itself as unequal access to resources and power (Price and Feinman 2010). There have been several publications, journal special issues and books on the archaeology of inequality, and on the various ways in which we can access information about inequality in the past (Paynter 1989; McGuire and Paynter 1991; Cerasuolo 2021; Green *et al.* 2023). For instance, in 2010, the journal *Current Anthropology* published a special issue on inequality in pre-modern societies, and in the introduction, the volume editors (Bowles *et al.* 2010) recognised three different types of wealth disparity: material, relational and embodied. The first is what archaeologists most often study; while the latter two are of course important as well, they are perhaps not as easily reached archaeologically. A special issue on inequality was also published in *World Archaeology* in 2022, in which the contributors examined not only the deep past, but contemporary inequalities as well (Dezhamkhooy 2022). In the introduction, Randall McGuire (2022) describes his understanding of inequality, and emphasises the word ‘power’, ‘not as a thing or a quantity, but rather as a relationship between humans’ power to do and to have power over’. Raffield *et al.* 2024 (following Hayden 2018: 5; Ames and Grier 2020: 1043) also point out that inequality is often ‘intangible’ (in that it involves knowledge and relationships, not just material wealth), shedding light on inequality in Iron Age Scandinavia. Arponen *et al.* (2016) emphasise the significance of a so-called ‘capability approach’, and point out that inequality exists if ‘individual ranking begins to affect the individuals’ and groups’ critical capabilities and access to critical goods’. Arponen *et al.* (2016) apply Amartya Sen’s idea (1989) that inequality is first and foremost about ‘what we are able to do and be’. Galtung (1969) has termed a similar understanding of inequality

‘structural violence’ (see Raffield *et al.* 2024 for an archaeological application of the concept).

One of the newest ways in which to discuss inequality in archaeology is through economics and economic inequality, such as through the use of Gini indices to examine inequality based on graves, using values such as gender, grave goods, burial pit sizes, height, physique, health and the locations of individual burials (e.g. Grossman 2021; see also McGuire 1983; Smith *et al.* 2014; Kohler *et al.* 2017). The results of Grossman’s analysis suggested that Early Neolithic and Early Medieval societies displayed rather low social inequality, whereas the Early Bronze Age and especially Iron Age displayed signs of high social inequality. The Early Medieval period was especially tumultuous, and Scheidel (2017) has pointed out that inequality has a tendency to lessen at times of catastrophe and increase in stable times. Likewise, Green *et al.* (2023) have determined that megasites built in high-growth conditions were more egalitarian, whereas sites with low economic growth often feature highly hierarchical communities. Economics has indeed increasingly begun to dominate contemporary conversations on wellbeing and quality of life in the present day. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that archaeologists partake in these discussions and bring out viewpoints from ‘deep history’ – and also from varied angles in the more recent past, as the archaeological case studies in this volume underline.

Gender has of course been one of the most studied aspects of inequality in archaeology. Four decades ago, in 1984, Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector’s trailblazing paper ‘Archaeology and the Study of Gender’ brought to the fore the emphatically existing androcentric bias in archaeology. Their critique claimed that women were marginalised in archaeological research since interpretations of the past were conducted from an androcentric perspective, making women of the past passive and voiceless objects.

Consequently, archaeologists had projected the gender stereotypes of the modern Western world onto the past in their research (Conkey and Spector 1984). The feminist critique of Conkey and Spector resulted several publications of research about gender in the field of prehistorical and historical archaeology during the 1990s. The collection of essays in the volume *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (1991), edited by Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey, and the publication *Those of Little Note: Gender, Race, and Class in Historical Archaeology* (1994), edited by Elizabeth M. Scott, concentrated on making women and their gender roles, as well as their identities, more visible in archaeological contexts seen through the feminist lens (see also Donald and Hurcombe 2000). In this volume, Hyttinen, Matila, Kelloniemi and Seitsonen (Chapter 2) examine gender inequality and gender roles archeologically in the framework of the post-war Nordic welfare state. Research shows that gender biases, in the other words traditional expectations and preconceptions for both women and men, produces prevailing inequalities difficult to detect in the structures of the modern society.

Gender inequality has also been studied archaeologically in the setting of early modern industry, such as mining camps and communities, which have been considered exclusively male domains. Research has demonstrated that women were indeed present in the mining households and furthermore had an important role in the operations of the mining communities (for instance Hardesty 2010; Lawrence 1998). Pacheco in this volume (Chapter 6) investigates female workers at Portuguese mines in the early twentieth century. She points out that the life stories of the marginalized and oppressed women working in the mines can be restored by analyzing different kinds of materialities, such as photographs, from the feminist perspective and by doing this to promote the multivocality of the past.

Since the 2010s archaeological research into gender has started to shift from the traditional gender binary (female–male) to non-binary genders, that is, the identities of intersex and gender-non-conforming people (Walley 2018; Power 2020; Moilanen *et al.* 2022; Pape and Ialongo 2024). Power (2020) has noted that archaeological discussions about gender diversity can be extremely beneficial and meaningful to non-binary activism as well as to non-binary people, because ‘this could significantly improve the lives of people who are marginalized because of their gender and/or sex, and increase public understanding and acceptance’. Though it is explicitly not discussed in this volume, it must be pointed out that such an agenda is emerging, and that archaeologists’ work can have important political influences.

Archaeological and heritage research is never performed in a vacuum, outside the surrounding social and political realities, including heritage and memory communities and other stakeholders. Archaeological work and interpretations, no matter how ancient or recent their

context is, can have various, and even unexpected and unintended, societal impacts which archaeologists and heritage professionals need to be aware of. These include, for instance, the application of archaeology and heritage, typically in twisted and purposeful forms, to current politics, especially by populists and (extreme) right-wing groups (Moshenska 2023).

Far-right and neo-Nazi groups in particular abuse archaeology and history when spreading their hate-infused agendas and underlining an imaginary unified (White) past, and draw inspiration from imaginary Norse, ‘Viking’ and Aryan iconography in their symbology and slogans (Fig. 1.1). Over the past two years, the approval and normalisation of these groups has grown alarmingly in Finland just as it has elsewhere, as more extreme right-wing and nationalistic ideas are increasingly openly represented in the parliament and government. This has taken place in tandem with open opposition to workers’ unions and rights by the right-wing political parties in the government (see Äikäs *et al.* 2024, and Chapter 5 in this volume, by Matila, Äikäs and Seitsonen).

Finland is indeed often mentioned as a model country and almost a utopian example of socialist success in the development of the Nordic welfare state, which took place rapidly in the decades following the Second World War (see e.g. Koivunen, Ojala and Holmén 2021). Prior to the war, the country had been largely agrarian and focused on primary production, as seen for instance in academic archaeologists’ primarily rural origins and working-class family backgrounds, as discussed by Matila *et al.* in this volume (also Äikäs *et al.* 2024). However, despite all the equalizing steps taken through the decades, at the same time quick urbanisation and structural changes have increased feelings of rootlessness and unequal treatment of people (see González-Ruibal 2008). This has taken place for example through gentrification that often aims at pushing out of sight and mind visible poverty and other unwanted elements, such as people whose lifeways or outlooks differ from the accepted views and norms of the dominant society (see e.g. Mullins 2006; Baram 2019; Marín-Aguilera 2024). The Nordic welfare states are no exception to these processes, and there are many difficult and conflicting legacies connected to the official social policies. Especially important in Finland are the ongoing developments, sparked already by the recession of the 1990s, that are now swiftly affecting and changing the sociopolitical environment in favour of more neo-liberal agendas instead of a social-democratic-based one. This is taking place simultaneously with a new rise of patriotism and (extreme) right-wing ideas, as the more extreme far-right ideologies are becoming more widely approved. It remains to be seen how these developments will affect the future of the welfare state. Thus, Finland can act as a test laboratory for the fluctuating equalities and inequalities within the temporal framework of a Nordic welfare state.

Matila, Äikäs and Seitsonen explore in their chapter (Chapter 5) the socio-economic backgrounds of 279

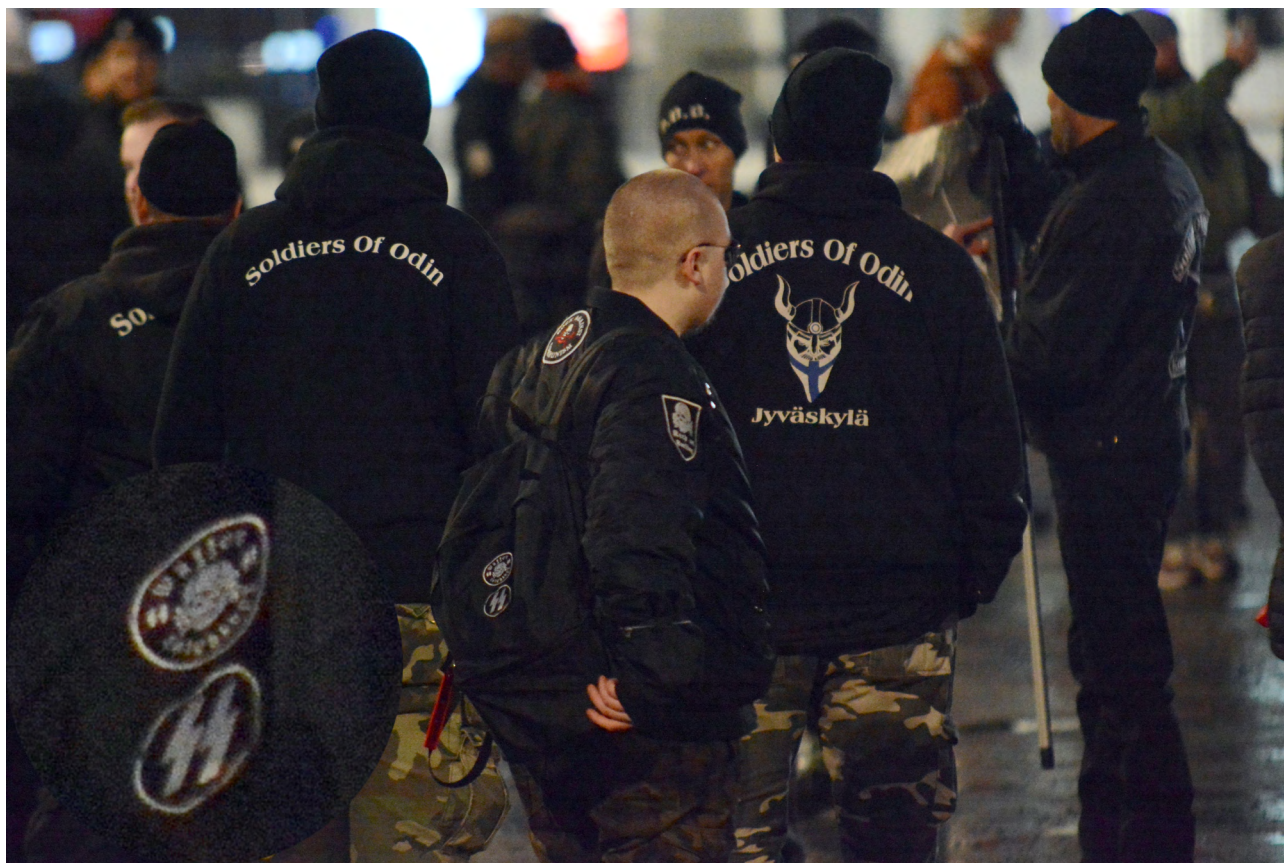


Figure 1.1. Finnish Independence Day procession by openly far-right groups in Helsinki on 6 December 2019, including members of the extremist and neo-Nazi groups Soldiers of Odin, the Nordic Defence League, Blood and Honour, the Alliance of Nationalists and Der Dritte Weg. Photo: Sören Kohlhuber, Finnish Heritage Agency, CC BY 4.0. The most recent similar torch procession was organised by extremist groups on 6 December 2024, and again Nazi iconography and salutes were a highly visible part of the event.

Finnish archaeologists, to find that many in fact come from rural, working-class and non-elite backgrounds (also Äikäs *et al.* 2024). This counters, interestingly, the results of similar analyses from English-speaking areas, where education has been noted to be highly hereditary and tied to rather privileged backgrounds, including in archaeology, which of course in turn affects the kinds of themes that are studied and published (see e.g. Heath-Stout 2020; Morgan *et al.* 2022; Ribeiro and Giamakis 2023). At present, the education sector in Finland, as in many other places, faces challenges as right-wing governments slash welfare funding, and it remains to be seen what the effect eventually will be on Finnish archaeology.

In Portugal, the second country from which our contributions mostly stem, the far-right Chega party was able to secure 58 seats in the Assembly of the Republic in the 2025 elections. The chapter (Chapter 7) by Sequeira and Pacheco examines ways in which archaeologists could make their heritage efforts more inclusive so as to benefit local communities, which can prove important in the face of such politics. Sequeira and Pacheco's chapter is essentially a rallying cry for activism in Portuguese archaeology to fight the academic elitism of the discipline and for the need to step down from the ivory tower to better engage and communicate with the general public.

Inequality is often also intersectional with gender, race and/or class, as the chapters in this volume point out. Racialization, marginalization and elitism have been, and still are, part of archaeology's own heritage as a field of science, despite recent steps taken in more multivocal directions. However, as Beatriz Marín-Aguilera (2024: 1693) has recently argued, 'archaeology inherits the coloniality embedded in the neoliberal multicultural project ...', and otherness and different-looking people are permitted in the mainstream 'as long as they do not challenge the neoliberal political and economic project'. In our view, (activist) archaeology's mission should indeed be to underline 'racism, land dispossession, brutal extractivism, state violence and extreme inequalities' (Marín-Aguilera 2024: 1693), and to try to find ways to reconcile and exhibit those experiences in both past and present. In her chapter (Chapter 8), Hudson explores the role of Indigenous identities, and the historical rootedness of concepts such as Mayan or Aztec in Western colonialism and archaeology.

Especially important to the study of (in)equality from archaeological and material culture perspectives are the experiences of those communities that tend to be marginalized and silenced in society, and who do not get their voices recorded in official documents, such as workers,

women, refugees or homeless people (Kiddey 2017; Seitsonen *et al.* 2017). Ylimaunu in his chapter (Chapter 4) sheds light on the deep historical roots of some of these issues, by focusing on Finnish labour struggles of the early twentieth century. Similarly to Pacheco, he also utilises photographs as a means of getting to a more personal and emotive reading of labour struggles. Archaeologists have indeed increasingly started to research the experiences and everyday lives of various subordinate communities in recent decades (e.g. Bánffy 2013; Kiddey 2020; Nordin *et al.* 2021; Zimmerman and Welch 2011).

This volume arose from an interdisciplinary and international conference session, ‘Archaeologies of Inequality: Implications for Societal Change’, that the editors organized at the Nordic Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference in March 2024 in Turku, Finland. The purpose of the conference session was to explore novel ways of approaching issues of inequality and how to tackle them in archaeological research and work. We especially hoped to get some novel practical perspectives on and solutions to what we consider a heinous problem that needs to be addressed more in the scholarly work. The questions explored by the various authors through the following chapters include, for instance: (1) What are some of the impacts that archaeological knowledge production can have on various groups who have experienced and may experience the effects of inequality in a society?; (2) What are best practices for archaeologists to bring out the inequalities of the past and the present?; (3) How can the different (often sidelined) communities themselves participate in making their experiences visible?; and (4) What kind of long-term impacts can archaeology have

on different societies and the ways in which they are perceived by others?

The following eight chapters approach the issue of inequality from various perspectives and in differing ways, with five case studies from European contexts, some with connections to the American continent through immigrant workers, and one from Mesoamerica. The geographical distribution of these awake mental images of the heritage of European colonisation and the slave trade, some of the paramount and enduring sources of global-level suffering, inequality, racialisation and marginalisation. In the extreme corners of these case studies (Fig. 1.2), at the northernmost end we have the long-term heritage of the Finnish tar-makers and bourgeoisie producing and providing tar for (slave-)shipbuilding in Europe (Ikäheimo 2021), then the western European ships sailing on their set routes from Portugal, Great Britain and elsewhere, between Europe, the African continent and the Americas at the western extremity of the vicious colonial triangle.

Indeed, the primary inspiration and driver behind this volume was an ongoing Finnish contemporary archaeological project carried out by University of Oulu researchers in the area of Vaakunakylä, Oulu (funded by the Kone Foundation, <https://vaakunakyla.wordpress.com/>; Chapter 2 by Hyttinen, Matila, Kelloniemi and Seitsonen, and Chapter 3 by Kelloniemi). Vaakunakylä was a working-class neighbourhood formed in the post-war decades that soon became marginalised and stigmatised by outsiders and eventually destroyed by the expansion of the city in the 1980s. The neo-liberal processes behind this are good examples of land dispossession, gentrification,

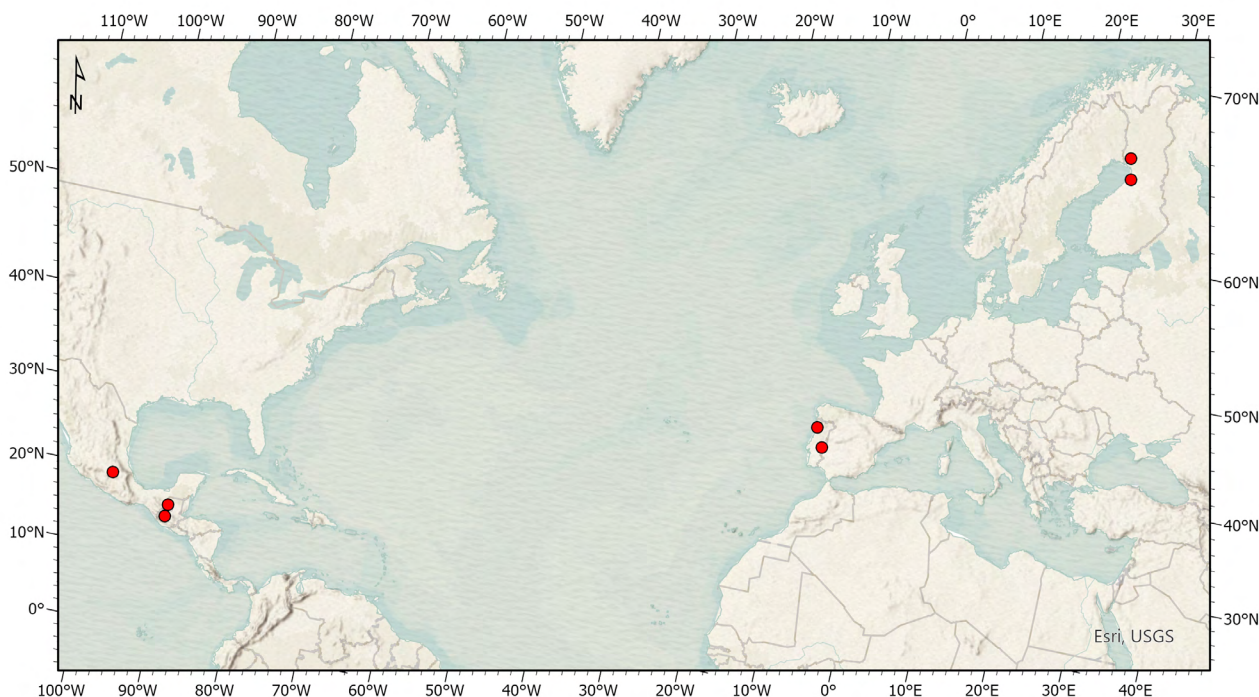


Figure 1.2. Map of the case study locations. Background: Esri, USGS.

structural city-driven violation, and forced displacement of the area's disadvantaged and marginalized working-class inhabitants. In recent years the site has been examined through intersectional perspectives on inequality and marginalisation, in which class, difficult history associated with the site's Nazi past, and the neo-liberal understanding of quality of life defeated the residents' own desire and petitions to stay in Vaakunakylä (Matila *et al.* 2021; Seitsonen *et al.* 2024; Matila *et al.* 2025). Hyttinen, Matila, Kelloniemi and Seitsonen discuss the Vaakunakylä materials specifically from a feminist angle. Kelloniemi, on the other hand, takes one specific finds category, the Finnish Alko, state-monopoly alcohol bottle tops, and views working-class alcohol culture and consumption.

The authors of the different chapters approach and examine inequality, marginalization and class issues through both contemporary and recent-past archaeologies, as the focus is mostly on issues related to contemporary living heritage and connected issues, but with deeper links to longer nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical continuities (chapters by Hyttinen, Matila, Kelloniemi and Seitsonen; Kelloniemi; Pacheco; and Ylimaunu). The chapters with a contemporary archaeology and heritage focus take perhaps more traditional archaeological approaches to the issues of inequality and marginalization, and work to make both archaeologists and, through them, the public more aware of these issues and their material manifestations. Rodney Harrison (2011: 160) has illustratively described the role of contemporary archaeology as a 'mediation of the past as a creative engagement with the present and future', that has the potential to address a range of major global challenges, including those rooted in capitalism and colonialism, that have profoundly influenced the world over the past centuries, and continue to do so (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001; Holtorf and Piccini 2011; Schofield 2024). This capacity underlines the potential social relevance of contemporary archaeological and heritage work in the twenty-first century (e.g. González-Ruibal 2008, 2016; Seitsonen *et al.* 2017; Kiddey 2020).

What is novel about this volume is the variety of materials used and the focus on contemporary twentieth- to twenty-first-century inequalities. Also, while Eurocentrism is an outdated view in archaeology, there are still European contexts unfamiliar to the study of inequality. The contributions in this volume also examine academia and researchers themselves, specifically archaeology and archaeologists, who have not always worked in the favour of the wider public but have rather stayed in their own ivory tower examining materialities and traces of the past, devoid of any connection to the local populations whose heritage they are discussing. Thus, the theme is approached also through the archaeologists' own (class) backgrounds and their interactions with other (heritage) communities and various stakeholders (chapters by Matila, Seitsonen and Äikäs (Chapter 5); Sequeira and Pacheco (Chapter 7); Hudson (Chapter 8)). It is important to be cognizant of the myriad class and social issues that we as archaeologists face in our work, and of our own (often

privileged academic) position within the power structures of our societies (e.g. Kiddey 2020). Issues of inequality are multifaceted and complex, and archaeologists themselves are in many ways embedded in the inequalities of society. Some of the chapters also suggest potential practical solutions for what archaeologists can do to counter their own privileged position in a given society regarding the people and heritage communities whose past, present, and sometimes also future, they study.

Most of the chapters in this volume are somehow wrapped up in contemporary capitalism and its interlinkages with people's experience of inequality. In capitalism, inequality is often treated as natural, based on each individual's personal capabilities and aspirations. All the volumes illuminate how the past is entangled in the present, and how inequality manifests in the everyday lives of people – inequality has very concrete consequences, affecting for instance one's ability to earn a living from the work that they do. Some chapters in this volume call for more active approaches and activist archaeology as a solution to counter the unequal treatment of people. It remains to be seen what the future of the discipline is and whether the scientific and knowledge-based solutions archaeologists often have to offer will actually work to lessen inequality – if that is what society, and also our own discipline, wants as a whole.

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