

Enchaining arguments and fragmenting assumptions: reconsidering the fragmentation debate in archaeology

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the recent popularity of notions of fragmentation and enchainment in archaeology and aim to further the debate of these important approaches. Although we applaud the aims, and recognize the seductive power of these concepts, we suggest that there are a number of problems with the terms as they are currently used. By unpacking these expressions, we suggest these issues can be addressed and the vocabulary can continue to develop as a powerful tool for understanding materiality, exchange and personhood in the past.

Keywords

Fragmentation; enchainment; personhood.

Introduction

In recent years the connections between prehistoric people, places and objects have become increasingly articulated through the identification of deliberate acts of breakage, exchange and deposition of material items. This has been termed fragmentation. In both appraisal and critique of such studies the works of John Chapman (2000 *inter alia*) in particular have proven to be highly influential. As such, throughout the following discussion we return to these works and identify a number of common themes underlying studies of fragmentation in general. The power of Chapman's analysis is evident in the breadth of its application, including all stages of European prehistory (e.g. Gamble 2007; Rebay-Salisbury et al. 2010), as well as Roman Britain (Croxford 2003) and the Maya of Central America (Lucero 2008). His related concepts of enchainment and accumulation have also found use in other New World examples (e.g. Gillespie 2008: 128; Joyce 2008: 37; Mills 2008: 94; Mills and Walker 2008: 18). The efficacy of fragmentation, enchainment

and accumulation in these processes has fuelled a powerful interpretative shift, so much so that some authors have identified fragmentation as characteristic of, or an organizing principle for, particular periods, such as the British Mesolithic (Warren 2006: 31; see also Finlayson 2006: 168) and Late Neolithic (Thomas 2002: 46). Although of different intellectual heritage, fragmentation has also been identified as central to the Early Modern period of Europe in the development of anatomy (Hillman and Mazio 1997; Sawday 1995; cf. Robb and Harris in prep) and in modern medical technologies (Rabinow 1996; Strathern 1992a, 1992b). This is clearly a potent way of thinking about the world.

Ideas pertaining to fragmentation appear to hold currency in contemporary approaches to material assemblages and in many contexts may both signify, and be integral to, the production of distinct social relations and identities in the past. As prehistorians working in Britain we acknowledge the significance of fragmentation analysis. It offers a powerful tool for treating parts of objects in their own right, as well as provoking us to consider issues of personhood anew. However, we contend that the evident potency of such analysis requires careful deliberation, particularly where generalized characterization is the resultant product. This latter point is quite the contrary to the aim of much of Chapman and Gaydarska's (2007) analysis. In this paper we want to further a debate around questions of *fragmentation* and *enchainment*. We contend that within a number of analyses of fragmentation there is an underlying commonality that, in spite of their differing terminologies, broadly corresponds with Chapman's thesis of social relations connected by enchainment. Building on, but diverting from, Jones' (2005) and Fowler's (2004, 2010) arguments about this topic, we suggest that, while the identification of fragmentation as a deliberate process closely linked to identity construction is enormously valuable, a number of questions remain about its historical contingency, relationship to context and universality. As Chapman and Gaydarska explicitly recognize, the connection between enchainment and fragmentation emerges through social practice, and the challenge faced by archaeologists 'is to refine the links between persons and things for each specific cultural context' (2007: 203). Drawing upon this key point, we go a step further to question whether the broader links between fragmentation, enchainment and relational personhood are as secure as is often presumed. The strongest arguments for these connections have emerged through specific contextual applications (e.g. Chapman 2000; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007). Elsewhere attention to context is less distinct and, more worryingly, some arguments for a connection between fragmentation and enchainment dissolve the complexity necessitated for such an analysis. This paper, then, is a plea to think carefully about how we use these important concepts in particular times and places. To help with this process, we aim here to provide background to the terms, and to outline and unpack some of the problematic assumptions within them. In the spirit of the debates issue of *World Archaeology*, our argument will necessarily be pointed and curtailed; detailed empirical exploration of these issues must await another occasion.

Outlines of fragmentation

Chapman's (2000) original thesis, pertaining specifically to the Balkan Neolithic and Chalcolithic, argues that many of the incomplete items, such as pots and figurines,

recovered from specific contexts are the result of deliberate breakage, dispersal and deposition. Drawing particularly from models of Melanesian gift economies (e.g. Strathern 1988), Chapman argues that selected material fragments were used in social exchanges, linking objects to people and places with their own life histories. These fragments were recognizable for their mnemonic, metaphorical and metonymic references. This is the process of *enchainment*. Refits of fragments found within or distributed among various sites, sometimes considerable distances apart, are considered illustrative of such transactions. Connected with yet often in tension with enchainment is the process of accumulation. Here, objects are gathered into sets that generate social capital, but may be devoid of the connection and intimacy that enchainment engenders. Although accumulation is an important aspect of Chapman's argument, it has not seen as wide an application as ideas about fragmentation and enchainment; we therefore concentrate on these latter terms.

Criticism of Chapman's thesis has largely centred on taphonomic issues regarding intentional breakage and post-depositional factors affecting the recovery of fragment assemblages (e.g. Bailey 2002; Whittle 2001; cf. Fowler 2008, 2010). Response has been offered with further analysis of the Balkan material, including experimental studies of breakage and the examination of potential refits, which have provided essential empirical data for the argument in this context (Chapman 2004, 2007, 2008; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007). Nevertheless, healthy critique continues regarding the absence of statistical measures and whether there is sufficient deviation from randomness to show a link between deliberate fragmentation and enchainment (Last 2007). At the same time, with empirical support, the case for intentional fragmentation in the Balkans has been strengthened. Yet it is important to further consider the analytical strength of this link between fragmentation and enchainment, because this is a crucial part of the fragmentation premise that flows throughout the works alluded to in the introduction. It is also significant since these appear to presuppose a causal link between enchainment and a particular form of person referred to, after Strathern (1988), as a 'dividual'. This is a form of personhood that is constituted from the relations in which it is enmeshed, rather than prefiguring them. In this sense it appears to be a very different understanding of the self to that of the Western 'individual' (but see LiPuma 1998).

From fragmentation and enchainment to relational identity

As we noted in the introduction, both Chapman's terms and the associations they carry with them are being employed in an increasingly wide set of scenarios. For example, Clive Gamble (2007) has developed the argument that, far from being specific to Balkan prehistory, the concepts of fragmentation, enchainment and accumulation are central to the whole of hominin evolution and history (see also Chapman and Gaydarska 2010). Mainly concerned with the Palaeolithic, Gamble observes the creation of 'nets' of distributed fragments, and their accumulation into 'sets', and he argues that this is to be expected in 'all hominin societies' (2007: 144; cf. Knappett 2006). At least from the making of the very first stone tool, Gamble argues, human ancestors have fragmented objects, using them to create enchainment senses of identity. Fragmentation here is a process central to the whole of human existence.

In the light of this claim, it is unsurprising that fragmentation and enchainment should also have been identified as related processes in other prehistoric contexts. Furthermore, it may be argued that archaeologists *imply* enchainment in the majority of material fragmentation studies, even where the specific term is not directly appropriated. In a series of articles Joanna Brück (2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b) has sustained a detailed challenge to traditional arguments for the rise of the individual in the British and Irish Bronze Age by presenting a relational conception of the person that is ‘an inherently fragmentary, fluid and relational entity’ (Brück 2006a: 297). The Bronze Age self, Brück argues, emerges through the metonymic and metaphoric qualities of things. In the transformative processes of deliberate breakage or burning, fragmentation links objects and people through an imbrication of concepts of death and rebirth found in similar processes such as cremation and cooking, the destruction (or death) of houses through fire and the deliberate breakage of objects within graves. These objects are inalienable from the life histories of their production and producers, and the dispersal, mixing and reincorporation of these objects is found to allow ‘the definition of the self in relation to others’ (Brück 2006b: 84). Indeed, the exchange and deposition of object and body fragments in the European Bronze Age is being increasingly inferred (e.g. Bradley and Ford 2004; Gibson 2004; Woodward, 2002; Woodward et al. 2005). While Brück does not adopt the term enchainment we suggest that the challenge to clarify local and temporal variation remains paramount since the character of the relational self has reified a consistent link between fragmentation and enchainment.

Chapman’s (2000) connection of fragmentation to enchainment also pertains to a relational character of the self in the Balkan Neolithic and Chalcolithic which, as previously stated, is underpinned by a reading of anthropological conceptions of Melanesian dividuality whereby the person is manifest through a nexus of relationships. In response, Andrew Jones (2005: 195) has voiced concern over a ‘Melanesian flavour’ in accounts of the European Neolithic, noting the existence of, and potential for interpretative engagement with, other forms of relational personhood, notably in South America. Nevertheless, Jones’ (2005) account also identifies a link between fragmentation and enchainment for the Neolithic of south-east Europe and central Europe, although it is important to note that fragmentation and enchainment are carried out in different ways in each region (see Jones 2005: 204, 206, 211). Likewise, practices of fragmentation are again detected in the Neolithic of north-west Europe (Jones 2005: 212–14). In each of these cases a generalized sense of relational personhood is produced and it is difficult to detect how the different models of anthropological personhood Jones discusses produce different understandings when applied to archaeology. Thus, while there is strength in Jones’ argument for a need to ‘examine different ways of relating in different historical contexts’ (2005: 216), the main premise of the critique is ultimately weakened by the employment of the same language and underlying correspondence as that of Chapman, the principal object of his critique.

Unpacking fragmentation

The works explored above represent fascinating engagements with fragmentation and relational personhood, and, as noted in the introduction, these concepts are gradually

being employed elsewhere in a wide range of contexts. Indeed the pace at which the language of fragmentation is being picked up and utilized suggests we should consider some of the assumptions underlying its application. For example, either implicit or explicit within these approaches is the idea that fragmentation = enchainment and that enchainment = individuals, and indeed that the reverse applies. Neither equation, we suggest, is particularly straightforward. While the links between these processes have been demonstrated eloquently in particular examples (e.g. the Balkans) the attempt to raise this to the state of a 'general theory' (Last 2007) is problematic precisely because these dynamics are not universal, as we discuss below.

Does fragmentation = enchainment and vice versa?

The elision of fragmentation with enchainment is central to many of the approaches to fragmentation in archaeology, yet it is not something that would be readily recognized by anthropologists. For example, in Melanesian ethnographic studies (the key source material for ideas of enchainment), this process is absolutely *not* linked to the fragmentation of objects (Fowler 2004: 67–9, 2008: 51). The most famous examples of all, Kula objects, far from being fragmented tend to grow in size as they acquire biographies and fame (Fowler 2004: 67). Indeed, as Strathern (1988) makes clear, the kinds of exchanges in highland New Guinea that lead to enchainment need not, in fact, involve any object at all.

Outside the Melanesian examples, other engagements with objects also produce enchainment without fragmentation. For example Kirtsoglou (2004) traces how same-sex lovers in Greece use pairs of objects to enchain relations between them. Here it is in carrying two complete identical objects, rather than fragmenting a single one that people materially instantiate their intimacy. To what extent, then, can fragmentation and enchainment be automatically linked? In our view, Chapman equivocates on this point. On the one hand he acknowledges that enchainment and fragmentation are 'not necessarily a consequence of each other' (2000: 37), and concurs with Fowler that fragmentation is absent in Melanesia (2007: 58; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007: 6). Yet at the same time throughout the Balkan examples, and in the multitude of cases traced around the world (see Chapman and Gaydarska 2007: ch. 5), fragmentation and enchainment are always linked to one another (Chapman and Gaydarska 2007: 6; Gamble 2007: 137).

The ethnographic evidence clearly shows, however, that enchainment does not require fragmentation; does the reverse apply? Does fragmentation usually or always lead to enchainment? Chapman acknowledges that this connection is not universal, noting, for example the absence of enchainment in medieval fragmentation (2000: 39), but simultaneously emphasizes its ubiquity. Notably in a recent article and in conjunction with Gaydarska, he declares that '*enchainment is the best, and sometimes the only, explanation for deliberate fragmentation*' (2008: 188; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007: 203, emphasis added). Chapman and Gaydarska clearly argue that enchainment takes different forms in different places. Nevertheless, as the above quotation illustrates, they consider the most appropriate interpretation for fragmentation, when identified through the material record, to be the production of enchainment, when identified through the material record, to be the production of enchainment, however these might be defined (see also Chapman and Gaydarska 2007: 9).

Two examples suggest that an alternative account may be drafted (and see Fowler 2008: 52, 55). First, during the historical period, one of the characteristic processes of Early Modern Europe was the development of a particular context of fragmentation: anatomy. Through the dissections of Vesalius and others, alongside natural philosophers like William Harvey, the body became increasingly fragmented in certain contexts and in modes of understanding through the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Sawday 1995; Tarlow forthcoming). Whereas a permeable conception of personhood, one where the body was at the mercy of a variety of external flows and forces, predominated through the medieval period and into Early Modern times (Floyd-Wilson and Sullivan 2007), anatomy was one of the key techniques (alongside others including new forms of discipline at home and in society (cf. Elias 1969; Foucault 1977; Johnson 1996)) that led to a new, bounded, sense of personhood emerging.

To generalize, the body, previously understood as a microcosm of the world, now emerged as something more like a machine, a whole but with definable parts each with a specific function (see Robb and Harris in prep. for a full discussion). While not the individualism of Late Modernity (marked out by the celebration of difference) these bounded, replicable, wholes are recognizably not *dividual*. The act of fragmenting the body through anatomy did *not* lead to either enchainment or *dividual* understandings of personhood within these contexts. On the contrary this form of fragmentation is precisely contingent, Strathern argues (1992b: 156), on a conception of personhood that is not evident in Melanesia. This is not to say that aspects of relational personhood cannot be seen in the Early Modern period, but that these did not emerge from acts of fragmentation.

Similarly the increased physical fragmentation of the body in modern medical technologies, with the ability to separate organs, cells and DNA from singular bodies has not produced a new emphasis on enchainment (though there is undoubtedly an undercurrent of this in popular discussions of organ transplantation (Rabinow 1996; Sharp 2000)). Instead, increasing emphasis is being placed on the *bounded individual*. Nowhere was this clearer than in the aftermath of 9/11 where extensive efforts were made to reunite the dispersed fragments of bodies with their individual, social identities (ap Stifin 2008). Such an effort both depended upon (and ironically was hindered by) the body's permeability and ability to fragment, yet celebrated a very *individual* sense of personhood. What seems clear here is that, while enchainment is a powerful concept for analysing personhood, it is neither universal nor does it depend upon the physical process of fragmentation. Thus, although Chapman's notion of enchainment certainly owes much to Melanesian ethnography, it is transformed through its combination with fragmentation by the time it is deployed in an archaeological context (*contra* Jones 2005). This does not invalidate a connection between enchainment and fragmentation, but it does question whether we should accept uncritically the direct linking of the two to create a universal model.

Does enchainment = dividuals and vice versa?

The examples above indicate that we cannot be certain that practices of fragmentation lead to processes of enchainment. Nor is the outcome of fragmentation necessarily a

dividual or relational sense of personhood. How, therefore, can we characterize the relationship between enchainment and the production of dividuals? It is clear that enchainment produces a relational sense of personhood, one that contrasts with many of our *assumptions* (cf. LiPuma 1998) about modern individuals. Yet is it sufficient to use this connection to argue for a generalized sense of relational identity in the past, one we might call dividual? Or do we need to be more specific about the different types of personhood at play in the world? Again, reference to Chapman's work offers an example of these challenges. The issue here is the creation of a 'sliding scale' between a broadly Melanesian form of dividual and a generalized sense of individuality, whereby the former is understood as relating through practices of enchainment and the latter through accumulation. In this instance personhood is disclosed as a floating signifier that moves between these two poles (Chapman 2000: 145–6; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007: 6, 182).

While we take Chapman's point (following LiPuma 1998) that *all* societies including our own have aspects of both dividual and individual personhood (see also Jones 2002: 161–2), we find the simplicity of a sliding scale (or a tension) between two polar opposites unhelpful. Instead we suggest it is more appropriate to consider multiple forms of both dividual and individual modes of personhood, constituted through different historical and material contexts (cf. Fowler 2004, 2008). Such an approach may provide an alternative to viewing personhood as a direct outcome of both fragmentation and enchainment. This, we argue, is necessary because the existing fragmentation model is at once over-generalized (in reality dividuality can take many different forms) and overly specific (as it relies on a single mode of expression).

In contrast, consider Fowler's (2004, 2008, 2010) work on modes of personhood. Rather than developing a simple opposition between dividuality and individuality, Fowler aims to identify different modes of personhood that can be constructed through different kinds of practice. Specifically he develops two particular models of dividual personhood that we discuss here: permeable and partible (Fowler 2004). The former, drawing on the work of Busby (e.g. 1997) in a south Indian context, suggests personhood emerges through flows of substances, particularly between co-residents (Fowler 2004: 31–3). The latter, drawing in particular on Strathern's work in Melanesia, views dividual personhood as the outcome of exchange relations where parts of people (or clans) can be objectified and externalized and then separated from the person (Fowler 2004: 25–31). This latter form of personhood is much closer to Chapman's notion of enchainment, but neither of Fowler's concepts *depends* upon fragmentation, though both may include it. Indeed the same is true of the homologous person (a third type of personhood developed more recently by Fowler (2008)).

Alongside these distinct forms of personhood (as well as those outlined by Jones (2005)), it is clear that many different kinds of relational personhood can be identified in both the past and present. Moreover, it is demonstrable that aspects of personhood can vary in the *same* context. For example, Sherry Ortner (1995) showed that different visions of personhood coexisted among shamans and Buddhist priests in Nepal, and that, according to context, both relational and individual elements could be identified. Likewise, in different contexts in the past, it may be possible to identify settings in which specific material practices produced varied modes of personhood (Harris 2006). Indeed the recognition that modes of personhood change through time, whether from one form of

relationality to another or toward more individualistic instantiations (something Chapman traces in the Balkans) *depends* upon the ability of different modes to coexist.

Enchainment can therefore lead to modes of relational personhood that may or may not be situated along a continuum between dividual and individual. The range of different forms of personhood and the complexity with which these intertwine in specific times and places, however, indicates that we need to work with the archaeological material to demonstrate the variety of potential personhoods that exist, both those that are connected to enchainment and those that are not. It is not the act of comparison across contexts that is problematic, but the supposition that only two modes of relating (dividual/individual) will suffice. Furthermore, where dividuals are identified through processes of enchainment, we need to ask: what kinds of dividuals are these and how do they change through time? Crucially, distinctive forms of personhood emerge in different historical contexts, and we need to understand both how fragmentation, where identified, could be caught up in processes that lead to different modes of personhood, and how enchainment *itself* can lead to multiple, and potentially contrasting, forms of relational identity (Fowler 2008: 52).

Parts and wholes

It seems clear then that there is no necessary link between fragmentation and enchainment, or between fragmentation and dividuals, nor is it enough simply to equate enchainment with the production of generalized relational senses of personhood. Indeed this latter point is entirely consistent with Chapman and Gaydarska's (2007: 203) intentions for the broader fragmentation project. To be sensitive to historical context, to avoid colonizing the past with new generalizations, we need to allow our material to provoke us to say something different about past people's identities. In this regard the final issue that we will unpack here within the concept of fragmentation is the relationship between parts and wholes, particularly in response to Chapman and Gaydarska's statement regarding the 'unpalatable truth that all objects were designed and created to be whole' (2007: 15). This is an enormously complex issue; we can only begin to address it here.

The relationship of part to whole is not as straightforward as archaeologists tend to assume (Strathern 1992c). From a perspectivist standpoint Strathern has noted that 'what is part and what is whole will depend on where the actor is, the culture he/she belongs to, and the period in history it is' (2004: 7–8). In her analysis of Melanesian personhood, there is no whole to which the part relates; instead what we have is a myriad of parts that emerge through their relationships with one another (see also Fowler 2010). Hence, while Strathern (e.g. 1992a, 1992b) has used the language of fragmentation to describe aspects of Western social relations it is absent in her analysis of Melanesia (Borić with Strathern 2010; Strathern 1992b: 157). Why is it safe to assume, therefore, that the objects we encounter in prehistory were ever 'designed' to be whole? In some cases an object may have been produced as inherently (and perhaps abstractly) incomplete with a focus on absence being the intent (Bailey 2007). What if we considered the relations from which a pot was formed: the flows that tied it to the source of the clay, the generations of potters who had developed a particular form, the animals who generated the milk which it held

(Harris 2009)? From this perspective it is difficult to see how a 'part' and a 'whole' pot are so very different from one another. As Gosden (2009) has recently argued, people and materials bring out each other's character through 'webs of connection' in particular cultural contexts.

Is a complete pot a full pot or an empty one? Why would one be considered 'complete' and the other not? Does the context of a pot change whether it is 'whole' or not? Might a pot only be whole or complete in a house or in a grave, but not in a midden say, regardless of whether it meets our arbitrary standards of structural integrity? We would suggest it might be worth considering the fragment as empowered by the practice of enchainment, not as a singular entity but as an organ (Haraway 2008: 249–64) that facilitates the production of a *social effect*. It is neither part nor whole, but an integral element in a connective flow incorporating a range of other substances (Brittain 2004; Fowler 2008; Thomas 1999). From this perspective we are required to re-orientate ourselves away from relationships between part and whole, and instead proceed towards the work fragments do in *their own right*. Enchainment is one such practice *but is not exclusive*. We need to begin to consider whether objects in particular times and places were ever designed to be whole, or conceptualized as such, or whether we are better off thinking of them as always tied into ongoing transformations. Additionally, further consideration of the issue of fractals – parts formed relationally at different levels of analysis, whereby the same mode of relations apply whether looking at the fragment, the pot, the person or the clan – may suggest another way forward (see Fowler 2008, 2010). The point is not to replace one generalization (e.g. parts always refer to wholes) with another (e.g. parts never refer to wholes) rather to recognize that it is the relationship between the two that is precisely dependent on historical context.

Issues of scale

In discussions of historical context, the issue of scale is crucial. For the scale of hundreds of millennia it could well be reasonable to detect important similarities in practices such as fragmentation. It may be quite right, therefore, to consider fragmentation as a key practice in human lives (e.g. Gamble 2007). The challenge is to identify how this changes as the scale of analysis decreases. Different kinds of fragmentation and different patterns of identity formation will be visible to us depending on the geographic and temporal scale in which we hold an interest. Scale alters perspective. Variation in scale from a single artefact to the regional deposition of a type of artefact, for example, will produce different details and observable outcomes. Whereas an argument for broadly relational personhood as the product of fragmentation may be acceptable for large geographic and temporal scales, such as continents or millennia, we would argue that analyses of fragmentation at a local scale, or between multiple scales, could identify quite different and specific forms of personhood. As Chapman and Gaydarska (2007: 203) have emphasized, characterizing a period through practices of fragmentation is a starting point for further debate, not an end in itself. The aim must be to avoid turning fragmentation into a black box term, in which it is both the process and the explanation.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that in many archaeological contexts deliberate fragmentation of bodies and objects plays a crucial role in how people understand identity, landscape and materiality. This is a seductive premise, and the works explored here demonstrate its potential. What is at issue is the manner in which the fragmentation perspective is uncritically employed to generalize about a single type of action (fragmentation) leading via a single form of practice (enchainment) to a single mode of personhood (dividual/relational). Furthermore we need to consider precisely how to articulate the relationships among parts, if we are to heed Strathern's warning that 'it will no more do to shift into the vocabulary of fragmentation because of Western awareness of transnational parochialism than it was ever appropriate to export awareness of nation states or possessive individuals' (1992b: 92). We need to be careful about the way we use these approaches, ensuring that we are sensitive to the scale at which we pose these questions as well as to their historical context.

Most important, we must recognize the enchainment of our own arguments, be aware of the concepts we import and employ and consider their consequences for our analysis. In looking at the material conditions of past personhood, we should be asking just how fragmentation, enchainment and accumulation work as conceptual processes, rather than imposing them as pre-existing analytical frameworks on a material repertoire. How did they help to constitute identity in the time and place under investigation? What kinds of personhood did they produce for the people whose remains have been excavated? Through specificity we can further the exciting potential these analyses have for identifying structures of difference in the past.

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