Commentary: Materializing Assemblages

Chantal Conneller

This contribution contrasts 'Assemblage theory' with more traditional archaeological understandings of the term 'assemblage'. It is argued that the flat ontology of assemblage theory is productive, particularly in relation to scale, enabling archaeologists to describe their own materials more precisely. However, more traditional 'assemblages', perhaps as a result of the more restrictive view they provide, should not be neglected, as they generate particularly archaeological perspectives and effects.

The grouping of past material residues together as assemblages has a long history in archaeology (Joyce & Pollard 2015). This may be one reason that the variously Deleuzian/DeLandan/Bennettian assemblages which contributors to this volume draw upon are gaining such a purchase: these theories makes explicit the value of our current practice, but also extend archaeology's own concept in interesting and productive ways. How, then, do the assemblages of what might be termed 'assemblage theory' differ from more traditional ways in which this term has functioned? Lucas (2012, 193–4) has outlined two of the most common definitions of assemblage: the first is a collection of objects associated on the basis of their depositional context, such as a pit deposit; the second a collection of one 'type' of object, such as a lithic assemblage. As Lucas points out, both definitions are interdependent: the combination of different object 'types' is key in the characterization of the pit assemblage, just as the artefact assemblage is always spatially delimited, usually at the level of the site. What differs is the relative emphasis placed on space or type (Lucas 2012, 195).

While we can see that these types of assemblage are related, in practice they have tended to be treated in different ways and, often, by different sorts of archaeologists. The emergence of the concept of structured deposition (Richards & Thomas 1984) and subsequent work (Garrow 2012) has brought this type of assemblage into the realm of archaeological theorists; the typological assemblage, by contrast, is the remit of artefact specialists, and often found in the pages of the site report. A further contrast might perhaps also be traditionally drawn between the two through different emphases on the role of past and present actors: a depositional assemblage implies intentionality of those who deposited it and as such is defined by past act(s). Typologies, by contrast, as Sørensen (2015, 86) outlines, have often been viewed purely as an analytical device, a means for organizing and comparing archaeological data in the present; furthermore the spatial element of typological assemblages is usually defined on the basis of present boundaries (the excavated area) rather than past understandings of space. Finally, we could say that these assemblages operate on different temporal scales: the depositional assemblage represents an archaeological event; the typological assemblage is usually time-averaged and used to inform on broader-scale processes, such as tradition and temporal change.

In contrast to more traditional archaeological assemblages, neatly ordered by space or type, Deleuzian assemblages are decidedly heterogeneous arrangements of things, brought together in non-hierarchical relationships (flat ontology); here various things, parts of things, energy, concepts, etc., might temporarily coalesce. Contributors to this volume successfully draw on these insights to dissolve the key theoretical and methodological distinctions between depositional and typological assemblages. They do so through making apparent the process whereby all assemblages are generated. Papers by A. Jones, Fowler and Crellin describe how acts of differentiation and repetition govern the production of both types of assemblage: acts of deposition around a pit or a grave cite similar past events, but also produce new

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assemblages through novel accumulations of people and things. Acts of making similarly produce recurrent forms through citation of previous acts of making. As Fowler outlines, our own archaeological practice operates in the same way, reproducing received typologies as part of our own analysis, but at the same time modifying them in the light of new knowledge. As a result, typologies emerge through an assemblage of past and present action.

Such insights allow contributors in this volume to move between an analysis of depositional and typological assemblages, and through this to a consideration of issues of scale. Andy Jones, for example, examines a traditionally spatially constrained assemblage, that from the Monkton Up Wimborne pit circle and shaft complex. Yet, crucially, objects in this assemblage are also part of bigger and/or different assemblages, referencing, through decoration, other materials and practices elsewhere, making these part of a typological assemblage of decorated chalk objects. This nuanced consideration of issues of scale is a major feature of this volume. This is explicitly brought to the fore in Harris' paper, but this play with scale is common to most of the papers. Scales can be nested: so Fowler considers successively a single beaker, a type of Beaker, the type 'Beaker' all as assemblages in which the original beaker participates—but at the same time a single beaker will participate in all of these assemblage, cross-cutting scales. This represents a major difference between assemblage theory and the more traditional archaeological concepts of assemblage, which are formed of equivalent things (made equivalent either through their spatially proximity, or their typologically similarity) and which are related at a single scale. Theories are only useful insofar as they allow us to make better descriptions of our own materials, and these papers reveal the complexities of archaeological assemblages, their contingency and multiple, nonlinear temporalities, a complexity usually concealed by the 'arborescent' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004) ordering imposed by traditional archaeological concepts of assemblages.

I would, however, like to conclude with an appeal to the value of arborescent ordering and of the constraints imposed by the analysis of more traditional archaeological assemblages and the specific perspectives these generate. I am a lithic specialist—my assemblages are what might be termed 'typological assemblages', though in essence they are differentiated from other artefact assemblages not by typology, or form, but through the raw material deployed. This is an important point, for it is this relationship of material, technology and form—particular to each material/technological articulation—and the way these are refracted as archaeological remains that give the lithics or pottery or metal-working specialist their particular perspective.

While typology is an important part of studying stone tools, in general the vast majority of a lithic assemblage is made up of manufacturing debris, whose shapes, rather than representing forms or types, are the materialization of an interaction between socialized gestures and the evolving form of the parent nodule. Studying lithic assemblages is, therefore, immediately to confront the space and time of the technological process. Given that the debris of this human/material interaction generates a focus on technology, it is no coincidence that the *châine opératoire*—a concept now widely applied (e.g. Coupaye 2009)—evolved as a theory to understand lithic assemblages. By contrast, pottery production generates few waste products; manufacturing traces inhere within a finished object, which is thus, as Fowler points out, already an assemblage (clay, temper, techniques). Pottery is more brittle and breakable than flint, and is generally recovered from archaeological sites as fragments of finished objects. We can perhaps also then see why theories of fragmentation (e.g. Chapman 2000) have emerged in relation to pottery assemblages, rather than lithics, though these fragmentation theories too have also had wider application.

As I have outlined elsewhere (Conneller 2011), the material categories of the analyst may not always have been shared by past people. However, this does not mean they are not useful. The creation of boundaries, however artificial, can have a productive effect, in that they bring into view particular kinds of connection and non-connection that get missed in approaches that 'follow' too far. An important part of assemblage theory is then the disconnections—a forced 'cutting of the network' in Strathern's (1996) terms, which in itself creates particular sorts of assemblages. The analyst-material-technology assemblages created by the particularities of the history of our discipline have important and productive affects, and very different theories, methods, even ontologies, are created through an engagement with particular materials and technologies. Just as 'there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, [there are] rhizomatic offshoots in roots' (Delueze & Guattari 2004, 20). Sørensen (2015, 93) has argued, in relation to typology, that we need to engage critically with our central concepts; as part of this we should not forget traditional archaeological assemblages, the work that these do and the affects they have.

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Chantal Conneller is Senior lecturer at the University of Manchester, where she has worked since 2005. She was previously a lecturer at Bangor University. She specializes in the European Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, and has directed excavations at Star Carr since 2004, as well as excavations in Jersey, North Wales and Cambridgeshire. She became interested in Deleuze while working on lithic assemblages for her PhD in the 1990s, and has developed this approach in her book *An Archaeology of Materials* (Routledge, 2011).

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