Commentary One
Archaeology and its discontents

I. Background

The preceding chapter was originally written in some haste as a result of an invitation from Michael Bentley to fill a gap in the coverage of the Routledge Companion to Historiography. Writing it gave me an excuse to bring my reading of British archaeological theory up-to-date (to the mid-1990s) and to articulate my views on precisely how the two disciplines might be brought together. The speed with which it was written, and the constraints of space led, as Matthew Johnson has rightly commented, to it being 'over-simplified in parts'.

On the whole, the chapter does not appear to have had significant impact or attracted much response. That it has slipped under archaeologists’ radar is unsurprising; it is aimed at historians, and archaeologists would derive little benefit from a potted and simplified narrative of their discipline’s theoretical developments. It is reprinted here to set the remainder of the book in a historiographical and methodological context. It might bring the second half of the chapter, on the relationships between history and archaeology, and the methodological


suggestions therein, to the attention of archaeological as well as historical readers. I want to use this ‘commentary’ to consider further the relationships between history and archaeology and to discuss other writing on that topic, primarily that which has appeared since chapter 1’s publication. In this context, the concentration on the early medieval period is less problematic and the remainder of this commentary will generally be devoted to the same period. As will become clear, the past decade has left me less sanguine about the possibilities of meaningful dialogue between archaeologists and historians. Previous extended discussions of the relationships between history and archaeology have usually been written by archaeologists. A detailed response by an historian is long overdue.

There are two or three principal areas where the chapter might have been improved. With more time I might have made use of examples from a spatially and chronologically less restricted range of contexts. The account of the development of theory is also too Anglo-centric, or at least Anglophonic, and too linear. Other countries’ archaeological traditions have developed in different ways and at different times, sometimes in ways that parallel the British experience; sometimes shaped (in both areas) by close cooperation (as with Scandinavian archaeology); but often in quite distinct fashions. Theoretical developments have taken place in varying ways not only in different countries but, within those geographical units, in the archaeologies of different eras. French prehistoric archaeology, for example, has a very different, stronger theoretical tradition from that of the Merovingian era (which has pretty much no tradition of self-reflexive theory at all). This means that the relationships between documentary historians and archaeologists are sometimes rather different, and not always to archaeology’s advantage as we shall see. Sometimes, even when, methodologically, archaeology challenges the primacy of the written sources far less than in Britain, confrontational and unhelpful relations between the disciplines nevertheless exist. One may however hope that the absence of a ‘messy divorce’ such as happened in Britain might allow more fruitful interdisciplinary methodologies to emerge more easily.

Another area where I would ideally have written the chapter differently, were I composing it in 2009, concerns the idea of archaeology as text. In chapter 6 and commentary 4, below, I subject my earlier thoughts on the textual metaphor to some critical scrutiny and there is no need to anticipate those comments here. Suffice it to say that, unlike other critical archaeological commentators on the idea, my