CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LAND, LABOR AND ECONOMY
IN SOLONIAN ATHENS:
BREAKING THE IMPASSE BETWEEN
ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY.

Sara Forsdyke

Lin Foxhall has recently drawn attention to the gap between historical reconstructions of the crisis of Solonian Athens and the evidence of archaeological survey. While historians continue to posit increased demands on the productivity of the land as a major cause of the social disruptions of the Solonian period, archaeological survey reveals no sign of the intensification of agriculture until the classical period. This paper aims to reexamine the evidence of regional surveys to reassess the question of what light the material record can shed on sixth century Attic land use. I will argue that although the survey evidence discredits historical models of a full-fledged intensive agricultural regime in archaic Greece, a more flexible model of modest intensification is still compatible with survey evidence. I begin with a summary of current historical interpretations, and then turn to the question of what archaeological survey can and cannot tell us about archaic land use.

Historical explanations of the Solonian crisis

Current historical explanations of the Solonian crisis argue that the twin forces of population growth and new market opportunities led to a breakdown of traditional relations of reciprocity between elites and masses in the late seventh and early sixth centuries. In earlier times, elites provided both leadership and economic aid in times of need to poorer members of the community. In return, the masses granted elites privileged social and political status. By the late seventh century,

2 Evidence for traditional reciprocity of this kind in the archaic period can be found in various social rituals in which the rich were required to host the poor, attested for example at the festival of Cronus (cf. Accius Ann. 2.7) and in the songs that young
however, elites were ignoring their customary obligations to the masses in favor of the unrestrained pursuit of personal profit. According to this argument, elites and a group of increasingly wealthy non-elites began to expropriate common, private, and previously uncultivated land in order to increase agricultural production for market-trade. The relative abundance of labor caused by population growth allowed the wealthy to ignore their traditional obligation to ensure the well-being of the poor and place increasing demands on the labor of the poor. In extreme cases, the wealthy enslaved the poor, or sold them into slavery abroad in order to appropriate their lands. The increased labor required to work land more intensively and bring new land into cultivation was acquired from the growing population of Attica and through the purchase of chattel slaves.

This historical model is based largely on three types of evidence:

1. archeological evidence (mostly non-survey);
2. literary sources (especially Solon’s poems);
3. comparative examples from modern agrarian societies.

I will first review the contributions of each of these types of evidence to the main points of the historical model outlined above, before turning to the challenges presented by the evidence of survey archaeology to this model.

The evidence for population growth is primarily based on the increased quantity of settlement and burial evidence in several regions of Greece (including Athens and Attica) beginning in the tenth century. While there has been a great deal of debate about the relation between archeological record and population size, a general consensus seems to have been reached on two points. First, despite short-term and regional fluctuations, there was steady population growth throughout Greece.