Solon’s world was a simple place. For him, there were only two social
groups: ‘the people’ (dêmos) and ‘the leaders of the people’.¹ The leaders
were ‘greater and superior in force’; they ‘had power and were admired
for their wealth’.² Although Solon criticised this ruling class for its greed
and hybris, he referred to it in time-honoured fashion as ‘the good men’
(aghôi, êsthloi), while calling their lower-class victims ‘the bad men’
(kakoi, deiloi).³ He was no more specific when, in defence of his reforms,
he claimed that he had liberated ‘the people’ from ‘slavery’, and had
given ‘bad man and good man’ equality before the law.⁴

Later accounts agreed that a sharp dividing line ran through early
Athenian society between a few rich and powerful ‘notables’ (gnôrimoi)
and the ‘enslaved’ masses, and they fleshed out this picture with a range
of colourful status terms not attested in the fragments of Solon’s own
work: the ‘well-born’ (eupatridai) on one side, ‘sixth-parters’ (hektêmoroi)
and ‘dependants’ (pelatai) on the other.⁵ At the same time, the Athenians
were divided into four—rather than two—property classes, called, in
descending order of wealth, ‘five-hundred-medimnoi-men’ (pentakosiomed-
imnoi), ‘horsemen’ (hippeis), ‘yoke-men’ (zeugitai) and ‘hired men’ (thêtes).⁶

Modern studies usually assume that the highest two property classes
corresponded to the elite while the ‘yoke-men’ and ‘hired men’ consti-

¹ dêmou hégemones, fr. 4.7; cf. fr. 6. I am very grateful to Josine Blok, André Lardinois,
and the conference participants for exceptionally stimulating comments on my paper,
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attempt to tackle the property classes (van Wees 2001) and forcing me to re-think almost
every issue.

² Fr. 37.4–5: 3.

³ Fr. 34.8–9; cf. 13.39. Solon’s conventional social distinctions: Mitchell (1997); Os-

⁴ Fr. 36.1–20. For a complete text of this fragment, see the Appendix to this volume.

‘Sixth-parters’ and ‘dependants’: Ath. Pol. 2.2–3; Plut., Solon 13.4.

⁶ See esp. Ath. Pol. 7:3–4; Plut., Solon 18.1–2; Pollux 8.130.
tuted the masses. The few who rank the ‘yoke-men’ instead with the upper class of ‘good men’ assume that these formed a very wide ‘elite’, comprising up to half of the population. Either way, the zeugitai end up being regarded as a broad middle class consisting largely of independent working farmers and hoplites who amounted to a third or more of Athens’ citizen population.\footnote{Rosivach (2002a) 36: ‘The evidence suggests (and most modern scholars assume) that the main socio-economic gap in Athens fell between the hippèis and the zeugitai, and that the zeugitai should be grouped with the thétes below them’. Thus e.g. Andrewes (1956) 87–89; Forrest (1966) 168–174; Starr (1977) 126; Donlan (1997) 45–46; Stanley (1999) 84–91, 205–210. Morris (1987) 94, 197, 206, and Bintliff, this volume, conceive of an elite of agathoi up to 50% of the population, including hoplites. For zeugitai as a ‘middle’ class, see also e.g. Hanson (1995) 112; Raafflaub (1997) 55; Wallace (1998) 16. For zeugitai as part of the elite, see Foxhall (1997) 130–131; van Wees (2001).}

Yet this is not how ancient scholars interpreted the situation. For them, the ‘yoke-men’ belonged to the elite, and the masses were entirely confined to the lowest property class, the ‘hired men’. According to Aristotle, Solon reserved all political offices for ‘the notables and the rich: the pentakosimenedimnoi and the zeugitai and a third property class, the so-called hippas’, and in doing so simply continued existing ‘aristocratic’ practice.\footnote{Arist. Pol. 1274a16–22, and 1273b36–74a2.} Plutarch took a very similar view and explicitly identified the common people with the thétes.\footnote{Plut. Solon 18.1–2, and 13.4.}

Besides these statements, we have only two indications of the status of the ‘yoke-men’, and these diverge wildly: their name appears to suggest that they are working farmers, while the property qualifications attributed to them by classical sources suggest that they are leisured landowners. I hope to show that we must accept the implications of the property qualifications, as Aristotle and Plutarch did, and conclude that the ‘yoke-men’ ranked with the greedy elite, rather than with the exploited masses—which has dramatic implications for our understanding of archaic Athenian society and Solon’s reforms.

\emph{An agricultural hierarchy: the names of the property classes}

Our only clue to the ancient understanding of the term ‘yoke-men’ comes from Julius Pollux’ Onomasticon, which noted that ‘those who kept a span of oxen paid a certain zeugésion tax’, a tax which—rightly or wrongly—had been mentioned a few lines earlier as paid by the