SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC ‘CRISIS’ OF THE SECOND CENTURY B.C.

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One of the most interesting debates conducted by ancient historians in recent years concerns the development of the Italian population during the last two centuries of the Republic. On the one hand, there are the so-called low-counters, who reckon with a free Italian population of roughly 4 million in the time of Augustus. On the other hand, we have the high-counters, who think that there were more than 13 million people of citizen status in 28 B.C. and who estimate the free and unfree population of early-imperial Italy at approximately 15 million.1

Since these two rival scenarios imply very different interpretations of the demographic and agrarian ‘crisis’ lying behind the Gracchan land reforms, the importance of this debate for those who are interested in the history of second-century B.C. Italy does not need to be underlined. Most of the low-counters have tended to accept the picture of inexorable demographic decline that is found in Appian and in Plutarch.

Against this the high-counters have argued that the last two centuries of the Republic witnessed very fast population growth, the average annual growth rate being in the order of 0.5 or 0.4 per cent.\(^2\) If this is correct, we must give up the notion that the Gracchan land reforms were intended to remedy a shortage of military recruits caused by a steady decline of the free country-dwelling population.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate some of the strengths and weaknesses of the high count and the low count models. Since I will be using some of the preliminary results of a larger research project on the history of republican Italy during the second century B.C. which will not be completed before 2009, I do not aim to come up with any definitive answers. Rather, my primary aim is to stimulate discussion by raising some questions to which no satisfactory answers seem to have been given so far.

I would like to begin with some of the scanty quantitative data that have been preserved in the literary tradition. The most important of these are the census figures for the period 264–69 B.C. As is generally known, the last figure before the start of the Hannibalic War, referring to 234 B.C., is roughly 270,000. Thirty years later, in 204 B.C., the number of male citizens registered by the censors had dropped to 214,000, partly as a result of heavy casualties but also because the *cives sine suffragio* of Campania were no longer included.\(^3\) During the 35 years that follow we observe a rapid rise to approximately 335,000 in 164 B.C., and then a slow decline until 130 B.C. Finally, we see a sudden jump to almost 400,000 in 124 and 114 B.C.

According to the low-counters, these figures give at least a rough idea of the development of the citizen body during the third and second centuries B.C. This is not to say that those who subscribe to the low-count model agree on every point of detail. In fact, there is substantial disagreement concerning demographic developments between 164 and 124 B.C. According to many low-counters, the downward trend in the census figures during these 40 years is real in the sense that it reflects

\(^2\) For the higher percentage see Lo Cascio 1994, op. cit. (n. 1), 170, and Scheidel 1996, op. cit. (n. 1), 167. The lower growth rate is implied by his revised estimate of the size of the free Italian population in 225 B.C., for which see Lo Cascio and Malanima 2005, op. cit. (n. 1), 9.