III

SURVEY ARCHAEOLOGY AND DEMOGRAPHY
REGIONAL FIELD SURVEY AND THE DEMOGRAPHY OF ROMAN ITALY

Robert Witcher¹

Everyone knows that the models which inform most of the demography of the past decade are illusory, images of population which have never in fact existed, but are good to think with (Golden 2000: 32).

I. Introduction

Regional field survey has identified tens of thousands of settlement sites around the Mediterranean;² the potential significance of this evidence for demographic reconstruction has long been discussed.³ This article considers some of the key debates concerning the demography of Roman Italy from the perspective of archaeological field survey. First, it addresses the question of whether or not the results of survey archaeology reveal the supposed decline of the peasantry during the second century BC; specifically, it examines the republican settlement evidence of the South Etruria survey. Second, it considers a demographic model of the early imperial suburbium⁴ and evaluates its working assumptions; in particular, it considers the significance of this suburban population for the wider debate about the size of the early imperial population of Italy as a whole—the ‘high’ vs. ‘low’ counts. Finally, two models are developed to explore the implications of these high and low population figures for our assessment of the significance of the archaeological evidence; they imply two very different reconstructions

¹ I would like to thank the Leiden group, especially Luuk de Ligt and Rens Tacoma, for the invitation to speak at the conference and for making the event both productive and enjoyable. I am also grateful to all the conference participants for their stimulating questions and comments. Elizabeth Fentress and Andrew Wilson kindly shared forthcoming papers. Thanks also to Alice Hiley and Tony Wilkinson, with whom many of the ideas were discussed, and to the anonymous reader who provided insightful comment. Any errors are my own responsibility.
³ Bintliff and Sbonias (1999).
⁴ Witcher (2005).