This paper does not aim to clarify the social and economic history of second-century BC Italy. Such a project certainly cannot be carried out merely through the examination of a text. Instead, I intend to examine Appian’s account of the background to the reform of Tiberius Gracchus, the history of public lands that is contained within it, and its relationship to the historian’s depiction of the lex Sempronia agraria of 133 BC. This brief narrative displays features that are rare in classical historiography. The author set out in apparently objective terms a well-defined course of social and economic developments, he identified processes and motives that appear realistic, and he gave to developments consequences that follow naturally from the history he had just laid out. Perhaps for these reasons, his account has long attracted the attention of scholars interested in the social and economic history of republican Italy.

My study, then, is primarily historiographical. It does, however, have implications beyond the interpretation of a text. Appian’s account occupies a central place in many modern reconstructions of Roman economic and social arrangements, especially with regard to public lands. Students of the Gracchan reform have examined intensively the sources either to ascertain their reliability as evidence or to identify the texts that lie behind them. Appian’s history and Plutarch’s biography of Ti. Gracchus, the chief sources for the reform, have often been the object of these investigations. However, studies often focus primarily on depictions of the political maneuvers of Ti. Gracchus and his opponents; and investigators have devoted relatively little attention to the accounts of a crisis beyond examining individual points within them. Here the apparent assumption has been that Appian’s and Plutarch’s accounts are either transparent or present no great difficulties other than in matters of detail, where error may serve as an explanation for

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1 For studies of Appian as an historian see Gabba (1956); Hahn (1982); Goldmann (1988); Gowing (1992); Brodersen (1993); Magnino (1993).
2 See most notably Cardinali (1912); Fraccaro (1914); Carcopino (1928); Gabba (1956).