

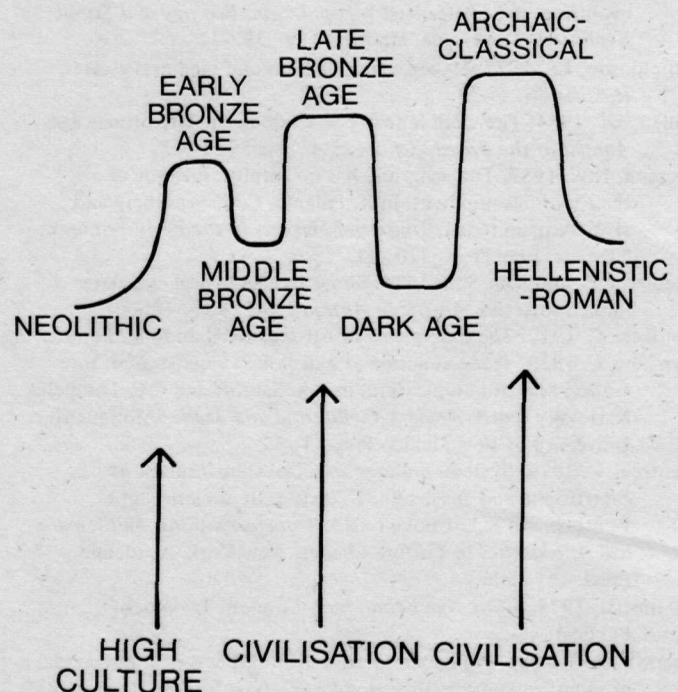
## Chapter 13

**Settlement patterns,  
land tenure and  
social structure:  
a diachronic model<sup>1</sup>**  
John Bintliff

*Changes over time in settlement behaviour and land-use strategies in prehistoric and early historic Greece are linked to parallel socio-economic developments, in particular to the rise and elaboration of ranking, via known and inferred patterns of land tenure. In situations of population pressure, 'achieved' statuses based on landed wealth are converted to 'ascribed' formal rank, through such mechanisms as the 'client' system and 'cargo' redistributive system, typical for recent peasant societies. Parallels with Roman and Saxon society are drawn, and lead to a reinterpretation of Celtic society in the pre-Roman period.*

I began this area of research with a set of archaeological observations on settlement numbers for the prehistoric and ancient periods in south-central mainland Greece, considered (as in the pioneering study by Colin Renfrew, 1972a) to relate to population fluctuations (fig. 13.1). The peaks are periods of high culture or civilisation (fig. 13.2), early bronze age, late bronze age or Mycenaean, and classical Greece. This is not a surprising finding in itself. But seen in the field over several hundred sites, more archaeological and geographical detail can be added,<sup>2</sup> taking modules of 2½–5 km radius (fig. 13.3): a patterning not just in number but in size of sites appears. In neolithic times our archaeological

Fig. 13.1 and 13.2. Population fluctuations during the prehistoric and ancient periods in south-central mainland Greece (fig. 13.1); periods of high culture/civilisation during the prehistoric and ancient periods in south-central mainland Greece (fig. 13.2).



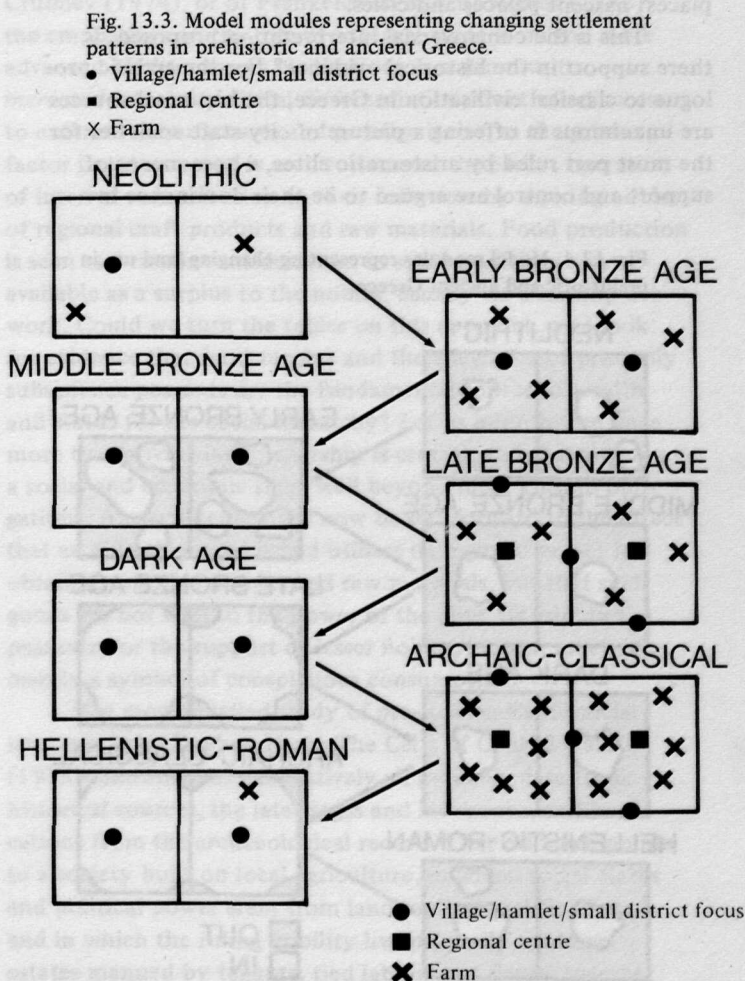
palimpsest suggests a loose scatter of hamlets, and low population, leading to the high culture of the early bronze age with a very dense scatter of farms and hamlets together with some district foci – a simple settlement hierarchy, high population; followed by a decline of population in the middle bronze age associated with nucleation into hamlets and villages; then by mature Mycenaean times a vigorous expansion of population, with the nucleated settlements blossoming into regional centres, surrounded by a network of lower settlement levels; another serious decline in the Dark Ages, low population and a loose scatter of nucleated hamlets, until the Late Geometric/Archaic revival of population leading into the Classical civilisation, with central places surrounded by a network of villages, hamlets and dispersed farms; finally a decline in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Again, this is not a very surprising picture of the complex spatial organisation of civilisations, and its contrary in periods of less complex or vigorous local culture.<sup>3</sup>

The impetus behind these *population* expansions is variously interpreted – new cultigens such as the olive, the effect of novel iron tools, or the simple stimulus to produce more surplus by a burgeoning elite. But consider the orthodox explanations of these cyclical periods of complex and rudimentary *social* and *settlement* structure: they stress internal and external trade and exchange, and regional servicing, while surpluses for these purposes are obtained via the often unclearly stated allegiance of the peasant to the elite. Perhaps we are offered a kinship obligation, a social pyramid surmounted by a paramount chief, and from this leadership a further supportive following is attracted by the provision of redistributed prestige objects or raw materials, or regular feasts.<sup>4</sup>

Let us approach this issue in an entirely different fashion, by turning to ancient Greek and Roman civilisation, and in particular their social systems and their economy as admirably analysed by Finley (1973), Jones (1964), Hopkins (1978) and Andrewes (1977). The dominant theme of their writings is that the central source of wealth, status and political power in the ancient world lay in control of agricultural produce, and in the most direct way via the ownership of large private estates. Private land and the control over dependent labour or sharecropping tenants provide for the maintenance of the dominant ruling elite, together with its luxuries, and by definition landholding controls the right to power and decision-making: government offices are conditional upon high property qualifications.

Might we envisage a similar society, at least for Mycenaean and Archaic times, in which the ruling elites, betrayed archaeologically and historically, arose and were maintained by private dominance of land? Could we hypothesise that most peasants were tenants or labourers for these landowners, and that the supply of food surplus that fed the elite and its followers, supported their craft sectors and exchange relationships, came from the private wealth of a landed elite? Finally, were such a structure to be argued for

Mycenaean and Archaic society, could we find any archaeological trace of it? Let us return to our model Greek landscape. I believe the populations of these modules were supported predominantly by local food production. Therefore, the cyclical alternation of population seen here must reflect *intensification* and *deintensification* of land use. In periods of low population, large areas of the module went out of permanent cultivation (fig. 13.4). So the contrasted nucleation and dispersion of population must relate to a cyclical shift from, on the one hand, small infield round the low population centres, surrounded by extensive outfield, to, on the other hand, a vigorous pushing back of outfield to minimal proportions and a massive intake into intensive cultivation of the outer lands. Could this very conversion of the outfield be a major force in the rise of very complex stratified society? Let me suggest that middle bronze age and Dark Age hamlets communally controlled the infield land, with chieftains and 'big men' making more effective use of the outfield (perhaps notably with stock) and with larger than average infield holdings. Some of this wealthier peasantry stimulated the intake of the outfield into intensive use, by economic support for poorer peasants who became



sharecroppers in the new intake. Thereby some of the chiefs/ 'big men' became major landholders, with a large and growing body of peasant tenants.<sup>5</sup>

But how does this *economic* elite rise to *political* authority? In Roman government, we see the virtual restriction of official roles to those able to cover the expenses of the job, the costs of public feasts, assistance to the needy of the community and to the maintenance of community facilities. An excellent parallel can be found amongst Latin American peasant societies, in the Cargo System.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the dependence of a major part of the populace on the land-owners in a patron-client relationship would be a powerful factor in concentrating community authority into the hands of the few. With communal dues being amalgamated with private wealth, the politico-economic nexus would be complete. Historically, such a transition as is here postulated, from wealthy peasant class to district political elite with hereditary privileges, has been eloquently documented for medieval communities in the Pyrenees by Lefebvre (1963). In a further stage of development, our local ruling families integrate with those of adjacent districts, from whence regional dynasties arise, higher levels of central people living in equivalent central places; finally, regional networks inter-connect via nodal royal families in supra-regional central places: nascent palaces and cities.<sup>7</sup>

This is the controversial interpretation proposed: is there support in the historical evidence? For the archaic prologue to classical civilisation in Greece, the historical sources are unanimous in offering a picture of city-state societies for the most part ruled by aristocratic elites, whose means of support and control are argued to be their dominance in

ownership of productive land. The importance of trade, warfare and industry for archaic Greece, as for the ancient Greco-Roman world in general, is minimal in comparison to this fundamental connection between class, power and the land.<sup>8</sup>

What of Mycenaean civilisation? That expert on the Mycenaean archives, John Chadwick, offers this interpretation (fig. 13.5) of Mycenaean landholding: apart from large estates assigned to the King and his chief ministers, the land is split fairly equally, at least in one district for which we have a total record, between private and state land. The private land is owned by a numerous class of local nobles, comparable to a squirearchy, and from their ranks it seems provincial governors are chosen. Half of them sublet to a yeoman peasant class, who are believed to be men of substantial incomes. The importance of local estate owners in running local government and regional troop contingents could well reflect, in Chadwick's view, a preceding period in which each region was far more independent and run by the chief landowners as petty chiefdoms. Public land is assigned to a number of people, often high-ranking, under some obligation, probably for fulfilment of official duties. But most of it, in our one complete district, is tenanted out to a group called 'slaves of the deity' who are apparently the majority of the population of that region.<sup>9</sup> Two things are striking: firstly, virtually all the land is owned by the nobility, either by private inheritance or by virtue of their role as officials. Secondly, what about the poorer peasantry, a class that on calculations from the archives and estimates from archaeology of population density, should have been in the majority? There are grounds for seeing it as a serf population, possibly represented by the term used for the majority of state tenants - 'slaves'.

In conclusion, in the archaeological survey data for late prehistoric and early historic Greece, we are possibly witnessing the spatial correlates of socio-economic and political changes of vital importance to the rise and maintenance of highly stratified societies.

To what extent can this process be seen elsewhere, if

Fig. 13.4. Model modules representing changing land use in prehistoric and ancient Greece.

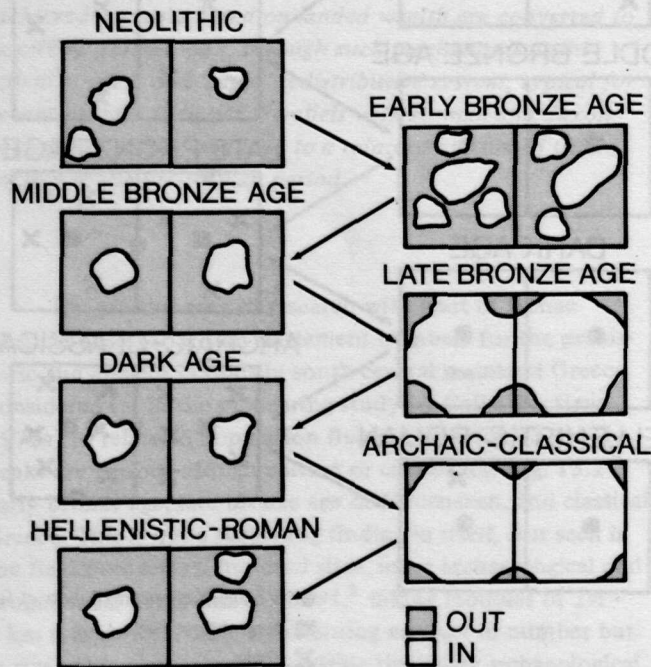


Fig. 13.5. Mycenaean landholding (after J. Chadwick).

### MYCENAEAN LANDHOLDING

- TEMENOS : KING'S ESTATE  
CHIEF MINISTER'S ESTATE
- KEKEMENA : PUBLIC LAND
- KTIMENA : PRIVATE LAND

we question orthodox explanations for the inception of pronounced political strata in complex societies?

The development of the Roman republic, then that of the empire, represents the story of a society in which power and decision-making remained in the hands of an elite defined by landholding qualifications (fig. 13.6).<sup>10</sup> This oligarchy pursued single-mindedly its own interests, military prestige and booty, in a succession of wars of conquest, by manipulating the majority of the populace, who were excluded from effective power by landowning inequalities. This land-based power was consolidated through the late republic by the virtual swallowing up of the landscape into large private estates, at the expense of the independent peasant smallholder. He was removed from the land by compulsory service in the wars of conquest, where he went as cannon-fodder to distant colonies, or, returning, became a tenant on the estates or swelled the urban poor. He was most frequently replaced in the countryside by slaves from the wars. The local land-based power was exported with the growth of empire to form new, but regionally rooted, provincial power strata along similar lines. In the late Roman period landholdings revert to an Archaic pattern, with the tying of peasantry to great estates and the corresponding decline of agricultural slave labour. Under this 'colonate' system the bulk of the peasantry were reduced both in law and achieved fact to the status of serfs. The continuity of

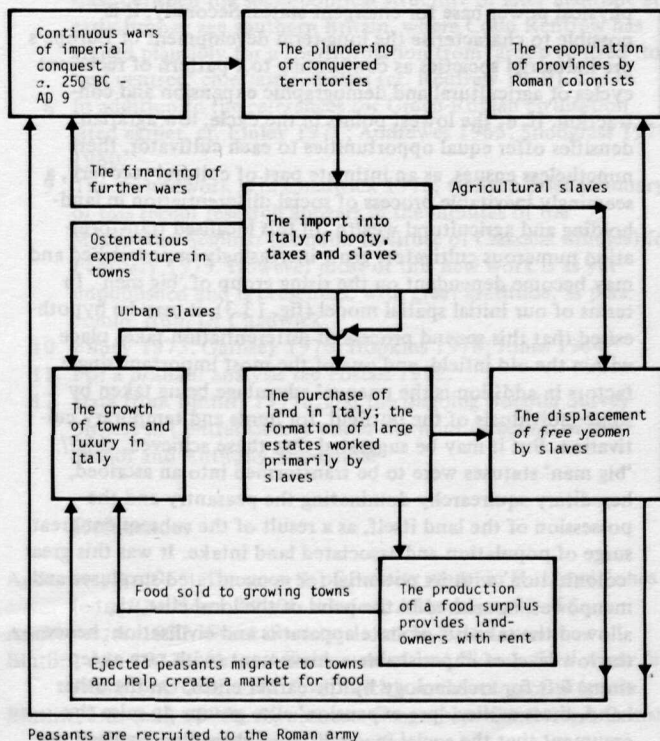
this social pattern in the eastern empire over the Dark Ages, and the suspected continuity in parts of the west such as Gaul and the Rhineland, are fundamental to the origins of mediaeval feudal societies in many regions of Europe. But further north and west we must assume virtually a complete discontinuity for the early Dark Ages, for example, in England. However, by mature Saxon times there seems to have occurred in these regions a rebirth of the process of gross landowning differentiation: for the sources, but only imperfectly the archaeology, indicate once again a highly stratified society founded on large estates and defined by a pyramid of landownership. From these two strands, one of continuity, the other of renewal, the mediaeval economy and its dependent socio-political system of land feudalism arose.<sup>11</sup> Professor Postan (1972) quotes with approval the words of Maitland: 'The estate became the state.'

In the light of the evidence presented hitherto for the primacy of landholding in late prehistoric and ancient Greece, and subsequently over most of Europe throughout the historical period till the high Middle Ages, are there other opportunities for application of the model? What of Celtic civilisation and its distinctive aristocratic society? In current views of the origins and development of this society, in particular specific studies of the social system such as that of Crumley (1974), or of Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978), the emphasis is on the role of external trade from the more advanced Mediterranean civilisations as a stimulus to increased internal political differentiation. Controlled access to external manufactures and prestige items, as the prime factor in this process, is seen to succeed the earlier operation of internal redistribution to their followers by aspiring nobles of regional craft products and raw materials. Food production is seen as a minor consideration, in some traditional way available as a surplus to the nobles, usually via a kinship network. Could we turn the tables on this approach, and look for evidence that food surplus and the allegiance of primarily subsistence peasants are the fundamental source of wealth and status for the social hierarchy? Let us hypothesise once more that private landownership is crucial, and that we are at a social and economic stage well beyond mere kinship obligations. An argument might now be put forward to the effect that an elite thus established utilises its regional power for obtaining prestige objects and raw materials, but that such goods are not vital to the power of the elite, its grip on the peasantry or the support of lesser nobles; indeed, much is merely a symbol of conspicuous consumption.

The most detailed study of pre-Roman Celtic social structure is by Daphne Nash: *The Celts of Central Gaul* (1975). She analyses exhaustively all available data from historical sources, the later sagas and law books, and indications from the archaeological record. That evidence points to a society built on local agriculture, in which social status and political power stem from landholding qualifications, and in which the ruling nobility live primarily off large estates manned by tenants, tied labour and slaves, together

Fig. 13.6. The growth of slavery in Roman Italy (after Hopkins 1978).

THE GROWTH OF SLAVERY IN ROMAN ITALY  
- a scheme of interdependence



with a share of the crops produced by their free client farmers. The lower classes are only semi-free; the wealthier peasant or yeoman class has a minimal say in political power. Real power resides within the nobility proper, and rests upon the labour and physical support of private armies of free, semi-free and unfree client and slave cultivators.

The whole system was at an extreme point of stress by the Roman conquest: the peasant majority lay under a crushing weight of obligations to the elite. Nash finds Caesar's *Commentary* to this effect totally in harmony with the evidence from all other sources, and, significantly, they argue for such a system being in operation as far back as early La Tène times. The origin of this peasant oppression she places securely within an indigenous process of gross differentiation in landholding, as I would. If this model is highly plausible for La Tène times, with a high level of Mediterranean influence, surely it is even more relevant for Hallstatt Celtic society with its lower levels of external contact? So might we look once more at the neglected importance of the indigenous rather than the over-emphasised exogenous factors creating striking social stratification in Celtic Europe?

Finally, one further insight can be added to the overall analysis offered in this paper (returning to fig. 13.4). Is there any significance to an intensification of land use followed so systematically by a reversion to a different order of use? Let me suggest, following recent discussions on demography and carrying capacity, that the level of totally secure food extraction, or population carried, relative to the total conceivable carrying capacity (a ratio which ethno-historic analogues are beginning to indicate at around 30%), is reflected in our 'low' population periods, whilst the massive land intake of our climax civilisations pushes far beyond this. Preliminary analyses for classical Greece<sup>12</sup> suggest that the level of actual population to potential carrying capacity was as high as 80%, arguably a dangerous over-exploitation seen in the long-term. Mycenaean analyses are being processed. Are the seeds of decline for both civilisations perhaps already visible here, creating a marginal situation merely precipitated by internal conflict, external pressures, or climatic fluctuations? Precisely this sequence *can* be demonstrated for mediaeval western Europe, where expansion into the outfield and marginal lands under the feudal aristocracy brought economic ruin, and was largely responsible for the collapse of feudal society itself.

#### Notes

- 1 This essay is a brief summary of a much longer and more detailed study on the same theme, shortly to be published. It can therefore only suggest the nature of the evidence available to support these wide-ranging and, I hope, provocative statements and hypotheses.
- 2 Some relevant basic data can be found in the publication of my Ph.D. thesis (1977a), and the volume I edited entitled *Mycenaean Geography* (1977b), but much is still in preparation; see also Snodgrass 1977.
- 3 The indications of a serious decline in settlement numbers and

overall population in southern Greece, on the basis of archaeological survey results for the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, are very much as expected from a study of contemporary sources. Amongst these, Strabo, and most especially Pausanias, offer a depressing catalogue of abandoned lands and run-down towns. Of course both periods were dominated by civilisations within which southern Greece formed a provincial limb. But archaeology and history combine to show us that with the decline of the vigorous regional states of the fifth to fourth centuries BC, the area in general undergoes a rapid economic and political regression, to reach a new nadir by the early imperial period.

- 4 To take the prehistoric fluctuations, for example, this list is representative of the chief factors held to explain cultural and population take-off in standard textbooks by Vermeule (1964), Renfrew (1972b; 1973) and Warren (1975).
- 5 Clearly by later middle bronze age and early Mycenaean times elites are indicated by tumuli, shaft graves and mansions, and even if the archaeological evidence for Geometric/Archaic times seems to reflect a more abrupt rise of élites coinciding with the population expansion towards the end of that period, semi-historical legends agree on the earlier importance of kings and hence at least a strong individual status distinction. So for both Mycenaean and Classical civilisational origins a degree of differentiation existed prior to the explosion of settlement and massive conversion of the outfield. I would like to offer two distinct and complementary explanations for these early examples of social distinctions: firstly, to suggest that middle bronze age mainland Greece and dark age southern Greece were primarily composed of numerous tribal groupings of small independent, and uncentralised communities, each recognising for limited purposes a tribal leader or 'king'. Such a figure had his prime function as war-leader and possibly as key performer of tribal ritual. Here might be sought the origin or such precocious phenomena as the Mycenae Shaft Graves, or the semi-historic kings of the Dark Ages, all before the tangible evidence for civilisational take-off in terms of settlement numbers and the rise of the palaces and towns that were to form the physical power base for emergent states. Secondly, it is possible to characterise the long-term development of Europe's pre-industrial societies as conforming to a pattern of recurrent cycles of agricultural and demographic expansion and contraction. If, at the lowest points in the cycle, low agrarian densities offer equal opportunities to each cultivator, there nonetheless ensues, as an intimate part of cultural recovery, a seemingly inevitable process of social differentiation in landholding and agricultural wealth. In this localised transformation numerous cultivators grow increasingly impoverished and may become dependent on the rising group of 'big men'. In terms of our initial spatial model (fig. 13.3), it may be hypothesised that this second process of differentiation takes place within the old infield, and one of the most important single factors in addition is the unequal advantage being taken by some individuals of the outfield, for herds and temporary cultivation. But it may be suggested that these achieved, chief/'big man' statuses were to be transformed into an ascribed, hereditary squirearchy dominating the peasantry and the possession of the land itself, as a result of the subsequent great surge of population and associated land intake. It was this great 'colonisation' with its potential for concentrated surpluses and manpower, nourished in the palm of the local elite, that allowed the take-off of state apparatus and civilisation; hence the low level of imperishable achievement (with rare exceptions) left for archaeology by the earlier elites. On the other hand, these earlier, 'pre-expansion' elite groups do raise the argument that the social inequalities of these two civilisations

are merely developments from the claimed establishment over Greece of an alien and superior race, respectively in early middle bronze age and early dark age times, over indigenous peoples. There is a growing tendency, to which this author subscribes, to doubt the arrival of a conquering elite in the first case quoted. With the Dark Age, on the other hand, there is little doubt that there was a major population incursion into Greece, of the Dorians, and by historic times it is quite clear in a number of states that the economy is run on a master race-serf race, Dorian-Indigene basis (e.g. Sparta, Thessaly). But the same general pattern of aristocratic-serf society is equally widespread amongst states where the arrivals were wholly or partially integrated with the indigenes, or states where the arrivals made no recorded impact (e.g. Athens, Arcadia). All in all, then, there would seem to be a much broader process in action, involving the internal differentiation of social groups on the basis of the dynamics of landholding. The established existence of an elite may indeed be a result of ethnic dominance, though more commonly its origin should be sought in earlier, less pronounced landholding differences; but in any case the *crucial* element is the manipulation by that elite of the process of colonisation of the outfield.

- 6 Cf. Vogt 1969. However, R.M. Adams has kindly pointed out (pers. comm., August 1980) that a complicating factor with the historical Mesoamerican Cargo System is its additional function of preventing external, non-native, individuals from assuming local government roles.
- 7 The rise of a landed elite, and its internal differentiation into a graded hierarchy of regional and finally inter-regional inter-dependence, will, in this model, have resulted in the breakdown or replacement of the simpler preexisting tribal structure of villages and war-leader/ritual leader. A socio-political transformation of this nature has indeed often been claimed for dark age/archaic Greece on the highly fragmentary indications gleaned from the critical study of myth, epic and later historical tradition (cf. now Snodgrass 1980). It is tempting to speculate on an application of this model to the inferred contrast between the socio-political structure of later neolithic and early bronze age southern Britain, where Colin Renfrew has argued plausibly for a transformation from 'group centred' to 'self centred' chieftain societies (cf. Renfrew 1979).
- 8 In addition to the references for Greco-Roman civilisation cited earlier, cf. Finley 1971; Andrewes 1965; Snodgrass 1979, 1980.
- 9 The groundwork is in Chadwick 1976, whilst a brief summary of this recent research appears in the minutes of the Mycenaean Seminar (London Institute of Classical Studies) for February 1979. However most of this new work is as yet unpublished and is presented, with great gratitude, as pers. comm. from Dr Chadwick.
- 10 Finley 1973; Garnsey 1976; Hopkins 1978; Jones 1964.
- 11 For a brilliant analysis see Postan 1972.
- 12 Data from Bintliff 1977a, and the ongoing Boeotia Survey project in Central Greece under the joint direction of the author and Anthony Snodgrass.

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