CONTROL OF LAND AS A POWER ISSUE BETWEEN THE GENTILICIAL ARISTOCRACY AND CITIZEN-SOLDIERS IN EARLY ROME

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Introduction

Among the various complex and often debated aspects of Early Roman history, one particularly significant issue is certainly the organization and exploitation of arable land. The answers given to this question can substantially shape our understanding of other key dimensions of Early Republican Rome, including its social structures and political institutions. In tribute to the immense and foundational work of Professor Attilio Mastrocinque, a scholar of exceptional erudition and wide-ranging interests, always open to re-examining established views, we have chosen to explore this very topic. After reviewing the main ancient and modern interpretations on the matter, we will argue that the period between the first secession of the plebs (quickly followed as a consequence by Sp. Cassius' first agrarian law in 486 BC) and the division and distribution of *ager Veientanus* in 393 BC may be understood as a prolonged transitional phase from a model of clan exploitation based on *occupatio* and relying on agrarian gentilicial dependents to a model of civic exploitation based on private property and relying on citizens emancipated from clan tutelage.

1. Land distribution and lex agraria *in the Early Republic: ancient and modern interpretations*

The question of land division has been a recurring issue in Rome since the very beginnings of the city. Romulus is thus credited with introducing the *haeredium*, which set the size of the plot of land that a citizen could own privately and pass on to his children as an inheritance at two iugera (about 50 ares) (Varr. *RR* 1.10.2: *bina iugera quod a Romulo primum diuisa dicebantur uiritim, quae heredem sequerentur, heredium appellarunt*)[1]. Two particularly conflictual moments subsequently punctuated agrarian history: the first at the beginning of the Republic, during the so-called "conflict of the orders", and the second at its end, initiated by the Gracchi reforms.

It is widely recognized that the later literary sources recounting these events present a relatively uniform interpretation, projecting onto the older events the anachronistic characteristics of the more recent ones. As a result, some modern scholars have expressed reservations about the historical reliability of certain aspects of the Early Republican agrarian conflict, suggesting that the narratives have been so extensively reinterpreted through the lens of later events that it becomes challenging – even, according to some, nearly impossible – to identify elements that can be confidently attributed to the earlier period[2]. Nowadays, however, it is considered that, despite the significant reworking of the accounts that have been passed down to us, we should not conclude that the facts they relate are "anhistorical"[3].

That said, the details and implications of agrarian issues in the early Republican era remain complex and open to interpretation[4]. A close examination of the sources suggests that the situation is even more intricate and multifaceted than it might initially appear. First of all, there is a striking contrast between Livy's definition of an "agrarian law" – it was said to have "always been the instrument of sedition of

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[1] See also DH 2.7.4 and Voigt 1869; Hermon 1978, p. 25; Ziolkowski 1999, p. 373.

[2] See Gutberlet 1985, pp. 40-72. The episode of Sp. Cassius has attracted particular attention from this point of view, as the parallels with the Gracchan period have been emphasized many times: see, among others Gabba 1964 and Forsythe 2005, pp. 193-195.

[3] Cornell 1995, p. 270; Briquel 2000, p. 183. The term "anhistorical" is borrowed from Gutberlet 1985, pp. 3-5.

[4] See in particular the stimulating reflections of our *honorandus* on this subject: Mastrocinque 1999.

the tribunes of the plebs" (Liv. 6.11.8: *agrari<ae> leg<es> quae materia semper tribunis plebi seditionum fuisset*), a view characteristic of the opponents of the Gracchi – and the fact that most of the actual measures for land distribution were taken on the initiative of patricians or consuls, who were moreover generally in conflict with their peers, making agrarian law appear to be also an instrument used by the elites in their competition for power[5].

Another element demonstrating the complexity of agrarian issues in the early Republican era is the legal status of land. As several researchers have already shown, the situation was far from being limited to a simple opposition between public and private land[6]. In a society with a strong agro-pastoral economy[7], transhumance and pasture lands must first be considered[8]. But most important of all, in a society characterized by still-influential clan structures, is the existence of a category of lands that were neither truly public nor truly private, but managed in common. The exact nature of their status is debated and not easy to define[9]. This could be arable land that the clans appropriated (or "occupied"), as much as their members could cultivate (*quantum colere poterat*) or hoped to be able to cultivate (*quantum in spem colendi*)[10]. These appropriations were part of an accepted customary practice known as *occupatio*, which was later misappropriated to enable wealthy landowners to seize (this time on a personal basis) public land adjoining their own estates, an abusive practice denounced in particular by the Gracchi and their successors and a source of much social tension. So we can understand easily how late literary sources were able to misunderstand older realities and anachronistically project their contemporary interpretations onto them.

In the Archaic period, customary *occupatio*, far from being a problematic practice, was in fact at the very heart of gentilicial agrarian exploitation. Thus, when the Claudii settled in Rome and the Senate granted them land south of the Anio, it was to the gens Claudia that the land was granted, as collective property, and not to any particular individual, even a patrician (Liv. 2.16.3-5: *Attius Clausus […] ab Inregillo magna clientium comitatus manu Romam tranfugit. His ciuitas data agerque trans Anienem*). This vision of things, based on a few evocative clues and on the extrapolation of practices and concepts already recognized at the individual level to the level of the *gens* and the clan, nevertheless gives rise to several reservations[11]. These are

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5 See Meunier 2024, pp. 48-50, 159-167.

6 On the origins of private property, see Diósdi 1970; Capogrossi Colognesi 1988, p. 263 sq; Smith 1996, p. 192; Roselaar 2010, pp. 21-22; Lanfranchi 2011. Archaeology even seems to attest to the existence of small individual properties as early as the 6th century BC. (see Cifani 2009).

7 Even if the agro-pastoral dimension was fundamental to the economy of archaic Rome, this should not obscure the fact that this economy was diversified and that crafts and trade also made a significant contribution to it: see Bradley 2020, pp. 192-210, and Cifani 2021, pp. 206-209. However, as Cifani 2021, p. 193, cautiously points out, it must be borne in mind that "our knowledge of the Roman economy in the fifth century BC is still limited by the scarcity of archaeological contexts compared to the previous century". According to Armstrong 2016, pp. 148-163, the 5th century BC was precisely a period of change in the economy, which began a gradual transition towards a land-based economy favouring agricultural wealth.

8 On the important role of transhumance in military-agrarian history (if only in the choice of location and size of colonial settlements designed primarily to control transhumance routes), see Hermon 2001, p. 175.

9 There are many works on this subject, and scholars are far from unanimous. Among others, we refer to Capogrossi Colognesi 1980 and Capogrossi Colognesi 1986, Serrao 1984, p. 54 sq, but also to Hermon 2001, in particular the first part of the book, pp. 19-140, dealing with the connection between clan and land. See also the discussion in Smith 2006, mainly the chapter «The patricians and the land», pp. 235-250. Terrenato 2007 and Terrenato 2011 gives even greater importance to clan management of the territories than is generally accepted, as he considers that the clans retained a fairly strong influence well beyond the archaic period. It should be borne in mind that the expression *ager gentilicius*, usually used to designate the territory controlled by the clans, is not ancient and was coined by the Moderns (see Smith 2006, p. 240, and Hermon 2001, pp. 68-72). Finally, see Humm 2023, esp. pp. 151-157, who argues with erudition and conviction for the existence of lands commonly occupied and exploited by the *gentes*.

10 Tibiletti 1948 and Hermon 1994 have undoubtedly helped to shed light on the importance of custom in agrarian history, but they tend to consider customary practices at the level of individuals rather than clans, whereas these practices – and in particular occupation *in spem colendi* – appear to have been fundamental to the gentilicial system from the very beginning, and seem to be an essential key to understanding the conceptual evolution of agrarian history.

11 Roselaar 2010, p. 24. Cornell 1995, p. 286, had already expressed his scepticism as to whether the clans could have managed an agrarian estate; on the basis of the few surviving extracts from the XII Tables, he prefers to see the *familia* as the level of social group jointly exploiting an agrarian estate, while specifying that it is the *paterfamilias* who is the legal owner of the estate in question (and that there is therefore no collective ownership as such). Cornell warns, however, that a great deal of uncertainty remains: "the background to this is not easy to understand, because of our ignorance of the nature of landholding in early Rome" (pp. 268-269).

due to an understandable methodological caution, insofar as we have practically no reliable and explicit information on how the land was managed in early Rome. However, we do not believe that this should rule out the possibility of collective land use by social groups broader than the *familia*. All the more so as this was a widespread form of organization in traditional societies: on this point, anthropology can help address the failures and shortcomings of literary sources and provides a more plausible and reliable insight into the structural aspects of archaic Roman and Latial societies[12]. The possibility that such a form of land use did in fact exist in early Rome in turn raises two major issues. The first concerns the modalities: were these lands divided into lots distributed individually to the various clan members, were they cultivated in common, or should we consider a more complex system, involving a mixture of practices? The second issue concerns the chronology: the situation has undoubtedly evolved over time and with the evolution of society itself, but what was the state of affairs in the Early-Republican period, in other words, at the time when agrarian laws followed one another in a context of major social tensions? Given that literary sources are often shaped by tendencies to retrospectively reinterpret events through ideological, political and narrative lenses, the scope for interpretation for modern scholars remains relatively broad. This interpretive flexibility is correlated with another important issue and depends on the answer that each scholar gives to it: the precise nature of the gentilicial and clan component in early Roman society[13]. How were the clans organized (were they centralized social structures with an internal social hierarchy, or were they more like networks whose members were linked by relatively loose ties)? What power and influence did they really wield? These questions are still being debated and significantly impact how we understand the status of land during this period and the legitimacy of claims concerning its distribution.

2. "Agrarian dependence" in archaic Roman society

One angle of approach that may help to shed some light on the situation is the question of agrarian dependence (also known, perhaps exaggeratedly and somewhat misleadingly, as "agrarian servitude")[14]. In many archaic societies of the Mediterranean area, there is evidence of the existence of a category of people with an intermediate social status, "halfway between slaves and clients"[15]. These were the rural dependents, who cultivated certain lands and derived income from them in exchange for the payment of a defined portion of the land's produce to members of the elite, to whom they might also have obligations in terms of labor (corvée)[16] or military service (as part of "private" armies or clan militias).

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[12] An example of an anthropological comparison (concerning land tenure systems in pre-colonial societies in sub-Saharan Africa) can be found in Humm 2023, pp. 152-153.

[13] The question of how to define the "clan" in Rome is a vast one, and the bibliography on the subject is immense. There are almost as many definitions as there are scholars interested in the question, and multiple dimensions come into play (historical, sociological, anthropological, historiographical, etc.). Moreover, the clan as an institution has undeniably evolved over time: consequently, the definition of the clan given at the turn of the 6th and 5th centuries BC will necessarily be different from that given to the clan at the end of the 4th century BC or even the 3rd century BC. It is obviously not possible within the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive presentation of possible definitions and discussions on the subject. See Smith 2006, esp. pp. 65-113, and pp. 299-335, Petraccia 2014, Berthelet 2015, pp. 55-70, Armstrong 2016, pp. 69-72, Terrenato 2019, esp. pp. 43-51, the various contributions in Di Fazio and Paltineri (eds.) 2019, and Bradley 2020, pp. 239-243 and 283-287. In this article, we will consider the clan as, *a minima*, a wider social group than the *familia*, whose level of cohesion and internal organization is precisely under discussion here (the possible existence of an *ager gentilicius*, the ways in which it was managed and the way in which private property was gradually imposed are all elements that have a significant impact on the definition of the clan and on the way in which this definition needs to be adapted according to the period we are talking about).

[14] On agrarian servitude, see in particular Savunen 1993, p. 159, and Hermon 2001, pp. 32, 156-158.

[15] Andreau, Descat 2006, p. 55.

[16] Lerouxel 2015.

Although present elsewhere, notably among the Etruscans[17] and even in Athens[18], this social category does not appear clearly in Rome, even though it is highly probable that it existed there, and that archaic Roman society was no exception. We have therefore suggested in previous works that this category of agrarian dependents should be found among the so-called *nexi* in Rome[19]. Disappeared in the 4th century BC with the abolition of *nexum*, they represented a social reality that was no longer understood by the Romans of the late Republic, and were erroneously considered "debt slaves", due to an equally erroneous and anachronistic connection between the royalty (in kind, labor or military service) they owed to powerful clan chiefs in exchange for the cultivation of certain lands, and fiduciary debts owed to wealthy creditors[20].

If, as we suggest, we change the way we perceive *nexi* and the social reality they represent, this may have meaningful implications for our understanding of 5th-4th-century Roman society, particularly in relation to land distribution and its modes of use. The attested presence of a substantial class of agrarian dependents supports, in a more concrete way, both the significance of clans in the social and institutional framework of early Republican Rome and the plausibility of the gentilicial model of land exploitation. This model, often treated as a theoretical construct, may reflect a historical reality: a system in which *nexi*, as agrarian dependents, neither truly slaves nor entirely free, permitted to occupy and cultivate land in exchange for dues to their patrons, played a foundational role.

However, it is worth noting that the period under discussion here appears to have been one of crisis and growing tension surrounding the institution of the *nexum*: the years 495-493 BC are associated with what ancient sources such as Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus describe – albeit with considerable emphasis and anachronistic detail – as a significant uprising of the *nexi*, which culminated in what is traditionally known as the first secession of the plebs. We had previously proposed that this latter event might be interpreted as a major step in the emancipation of the gentilicial dependents and as a major challenge to the authority of the clans, insofar as it was only then that the *nexi*, as gentilicial dependents, joined the plebs (in other words, the social body of hoplites forming the backbone of the army of the city, who belonged to no particular clan). From this perspective, the so-called first secession of the plebs could arguably be seen, first and foremost, as a secession of gentilicial agrarian dependents. Their involvement may have played a decisive role in shaping the plebs into a key and politically significant social body, while the conflict of orders that began precisely at that moment and continued throughout the following

[17] Dionysius of Halicarnassus calls them "Penestes" (Πενέσται) (DH 9.5.4), by comparison with a social category in Thessaly that seemed to him very close (see Heurgon 1959; see also Frankfort 1959, pp. 18-21, who links the "Penestes" described by Denys to the "etera" found in Etruscan sources). However, Benelli 1996, followed by Cerchiai 2017, p. 619, and Marcone 2017, p. 1192, warn against over-interpreting Dionysius' testimony: the word used by the latter does not refer to a legal status sanctioning a form of slavery, but to a "type of bond between lower and ruling classes that characterizes various societies and is not typical of Etruscan society alone", an interpretation that corresponds even more closely to the representation we have of *nexi* in Rome. See also Amann 2017, pp. 188-189, who warns against over-generalizing given of the rare and scattered indications in ancient literature.

[18] Through a careful rereading of the Constitution of the Athenians by the pseudo-Aristotle, Flament 2020 shows that the "indebted" freed by Solon's *seisachteia* were in reality modest (but not necessarily poor) citizens occupying a parcel of land in exchange for a royalty (μίσθωσις, equivalent to about one-sixth of their production as their appellation of hektemors indicates) paid to a small number of mighty aristocrats.

[19] Meunier 2021 and Meunier 2022.

[20] Bernard 2016, pp. 321-324, has a slightly different interpretation of *nexum*: according to him, systemic indebtedness is an integral part of the economic model of small landowners, who obtain the means they need in exchange for their labour power, which would enable them to remain owners; it is this form of exchange (labour in exchange for property) that the term *nexum* would designate, and not the punitive status induced by a default in payment. However, this interpretation does not consider the clan component of archaic Roman society. As for Humm 2023, p. 178, he argues that it was by becoming owners of plots of land previously held by the *patres* of their clans that the gentilicial dependents became *nexi*. At the time of the change of ownership, they would have had to go into debt to these same *patres* to pay them compensation, which would explain why they are presented as debt slaves. However, this interpretation implies that the gentilicial dependents changed their status of dependency: previously, they would have constituted a quasi-servile (and relatively mobile) workforce at the free disposal of the *patres*, before being attached to a plot of land acquired as property in return for debt (and they would only have been called *nexi* in this second phase). Of course, our sources are too unreliable and too few in number to offer us an unequivocal answer, but in the context of a traditional society and by comparison with the pre-Solonian situation in Athens, it seems more convincing to consider that these dependents were already attached to the plots of land they cultivated, while owing the *patres* various payments and services (share of the harvest, military service in the militia, labour power, etc.), following a principle very similar to serfdom (which was then referred to as *nexum*).

two centuries can thus be interpreted as the ineluctable process of the decline of clan structures and the emancipation of gentilicial dependents in the context of the formation and consolidation of the city and its institutions. A process which, far from having been completed at the end of the regal period at the end of the 6th century BC, as is often assumed, would in fact have continued into the early Republican period.

3. Stages in the emancipation of gentilicial agrarian dependents

The identification of *nexi* with gentilicial agrarian dependents, along with the interpretation of the first secession and subsequent events as a gradual process of emancipation from clan structures, invites a reconsideration of how we understand land distribution in the 5th and 4th centuries BC. The earliest agrarian laws that stirred Roman political life (starting with Sp. Cassius' proposal in 486 BC, shortly after the first secession) might plausibly be viewed as attempts to acknowledge *nexi* rights to the land they were already occupying and cultivating, in exchange for dues to mighty clan patrons. Given the scarcity of available land at the time (with Roman territory confined to the *ager Romanus antiquus* and no significant conquests made until the capture of Veii), it seems difficult to imagine that the agrarian laws of the 5th century BC aimed to allocate land that was already entirely "occupied" and used (not by wealthy patricians in private ownership, but by clans and their dependents) to poor urban plebeians (a surely anachronistic view of things). In the 5th century BC, the only land granted to plebeians who were not already occupying or cultivating it appears to have been through the foundation of colonies[21]. These very limited distributions, however, were driven primarily by strategic and military considerations and were not especially welcomed by the plebeians, who saw them as a way for the patricians to prevent the passing of agrarian laws that were supposed to legitimize their possession of the land they were occupying[22]. Overall, it appears that the broader issue at stake during the 5th century BC concerned the gradual weakening of the influence exerted by powerful clan leaders (an influence analogous to that exerted by the *basileis* in Athens before Solon's *seisachteia*) over arable land. This transformation would have supported the emancipation of gentilicial agrarian dependents, fostered their integration into the plebs, and strengthened the hoplite class and its economic foundation, crucial for sustaining a robust civic army capable of withstanding continuous threats from the Aequi and Volsci. Nevertheless, patrician opposition appears to have been substantial, and our sources suggest that this resistance was largely effective. As a result, the patricians succeeded in keeping control of the situation and limiting the aspirations of the plebeians and agrarian dependents, since none of the agrarian laws of this period were ultimately implemented.

The situation changed, however, with the capture of Veii in 396 BC. As soon as the vast and rich territory of the Etruscan city fell into Roman hands, the plebeians planned to relocate half the population to the site of Veii, which the patricians tried to prevent by sending a colony to Vitellia, in accordance with their previous practices (Liv. 5.24.4-9)[23]:

> Romae interim multiplex seditio erat, cuius leniendae causa coloniam in Volscos, quo tria milia ciuium Romanorum scriberentur, deducendam censuerant, triumuirique ad id creati terna iugera et septunces uiritim diuiserant. (5) Ea largitio sperni coepta, quia spei maioris auertendae solatium obiectum censebant: cur enim relegari plebem in Volscos cum pulcherrima urbs Veii agerque Veientanus in conspectu sit, uberior

[21] These are the colonies at Ardea in 442 (Liv. 4.11), Labicum in 418 (Liv. 4.47.6) and Bola in 414 (Liv. 4.49.11).

[22] The senators' intention was clear when they decreed Labicum's colonial deduction (Liv. 4.47.6).

[23] Translation by B.O. Foster (Loeb Classical Library). The plan for a significant proportion of the Roman population to emigrate to Veii in the wake of the Gallic sack has raised many questions among scholars. From a historiographical point of view, Livy's account of the episode was undoubtedly designed to highlight Camillus' character: by opposing the division of the city and giving priority to the reconstruction of Rome, he was assuming his role as the second founder of Rome, between Romulus and Augustus (see Mineo 2006, pp. 231-232). This Livian narrative re-elaboration should not, however, obscure the existence of an earlier annalistic tradition, still perceptible in Plutarch, in which Camillus was much less present, a sign of an underlying historical substratum, the interpretation of which remains unclear. Terrenato 2019, pp. 112-119, has convincingly suggested that this proposed emigration was one of the consequences of the absorption of the inhabitants of Veii into the Roman population after the destruction of the city, some of whom would have wished to relocate, in some way, to the site of the city that had disappeared and to recover at least some of the confiscated land, which was now part of the *ager publicus* and had to be redistributed.

> ampliorque Romano agro ? (6) Vrbem quoque urbi Romae uel situ uel magnificentia publicorum priuatorumque tectorum ac locorum praeponebant. (7) Quin illa quoque actio mouebatur, quae post captam utique Romam a Gallis celebratior fuit, transmigrandi Veios. (8) Ceterum partem plebis, partem senatus destinabant ad habitandos Veios, duasque urbes communi re publica incoli a populo Romano posse.

> "At Rome, meanwhile, there were disturbances of many sorts, to quiet which the senate had voted to plant a colony on the Volscian frontier, and to enroll for that destination three thousand Roman citizens, to each of whom a board of three, appointed for the purpose, had proposed to assign three iugera and seven-twelfths. This donation men were disposed to spurn, regarding it as a sop intended to divert their hopes from greater things: for why should the plebs be banished to the Volscian country, when the fair city of Veii and the Veientine lands (more fertile and extensive than those of Rome) were there in plain sight? The city, too, they preferred to the City of Rome, whether for situation, or for the splendour of its public and private buildings and its places. Nay, they even mooted the plan, which certainly had a great following later, when the Gauls had captured Rome, of migrating to Veii. For the rest, they intended that half of the plebs and half of the senate should dwell in Veii, regarding it as possible for the Roman people to inhabit two cities with a common polity."

The colonial deduction in Vitellia is noteworthy in that, for the first time, the size of lots authorized for private ownership exceeds the *haeredium* (2 iugera) to reach three iugera and seven twelfths. This development may suggest a certain loss of control of the situation by the *patres*. If we consider that land management had until then followed a gentilicial model, with plots occupied and cultivated by rural dependents in an increasingly intense quest for emancipation, we might better understand the reason why a significant number of plebeians contemplated leaving their city. The resulting anxiety among the *patres* and patrons is equally understandable, as such a shift could have posed a serious challenge to the socio-economic system underpinning their influence and preeminence. While it is plausible (as suggested by the terms of the emigration project mentioned by Livy) that they, too, would certainly benefit from the Veian territory, a large and unregulated migration of their dependents to less closely controlled lands would naturally have been a source of concern. Within response to this situation, and as the prospect of a colonial foundation in Vitellia proved to be insufficient, the *patres* took the initiative to supervise the distribution of the Veian territory themselves, in a decision that marks a major step in the evolution of Roman social structures (Liv. 5.30.8)[24]:

> Adeoque ea victoria laeta patribus fuit, ut postero die referentibus consulibus senatus consultum fieret, ut agri Veientani septena iugera plebi dividerentur nec patribus familiae tantum, sed ut omnium in domo liberorum capitum ratio haberetur.

> "And so greatly did this victory [i.e. the rejection of the proposal to emigrate to Veii] rejoice the Fathers, that next day, at the instance of the consuls, a decree was passed by the senate, that seven iugera of the Veientine land should be apportioned to every plebeian, and not alone to the heads of families, but so as to reckon in all the free-born members of the household, that with such a prospect before them men might be willing to rear children."

This decision is crucial and innovative in several respects[25]. Firstly, the allocation of land under private ownership had previously been documented primarily within the context of colonial foundations, which themselves pursued strategic objectives – namely, the front-line defence of a contested territory. The extension of the principle of viritan allotment beyond the colonial framework, and on a scale as substantial as the *ager Veientanus*, appears to mark a pivotal moment and a point of no return, accelerating the end of agrarian dependence and the gentilicial mode of land management. All the more so as the size of the lots had never been so large. Until then, settlers had only been granted plots equivalent to the *haeredium*

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[24] Translation by B.O. Foster (Loeb Classical Library).
[25] Bernard 2016, pp. 324-334, discusses in detail the major changes that would have affected the Roman economy following the annexation of the *ager Veientanus*, but again overlooks the gentilicial and clan aspects.

(two iugera, i.e. around 50 ares)[26]. A notable departure from this standard was proposed in the case of Vitellia, where the allotments were increased to three iugera and seven twelfths, possibly in an effort to preempt demands for a more comprehensive division of *ager Veientanus*. Although the size of the estates granted in the Veian territory may seem modest by later standards, it certainly marks a considerable leap forward in the recognition of private property, a legal framework increasingly favoured over *occupation*. This preference can be interpreted as part of a broader social evolution: from a clan-based society structured around patronage, Rome was gradually emerging as a city of emancipated citizens. While *occupatio* tended to reinforce the bonds of dependence, private property had the potential to mitigate them, as it established clearer, individual rights over landownership. While clientelist ties remained (and continued to shape Roman social dynamics throughout Roman history), *nexum* and the state of serfdom it implied were now relegated to the status of an obsolete institution destined, in time, to disappear.
Livy is not the only person to have passed on information about the distribution of the *ager Veientanus*. Unfortunately, we no longer have the corresponding part of Dionysius of Halicarnassus' work, but Diodorus of Sicily considered it appropriate to record his own version of the senatus-consult in his *Historical Library* (Diod. 14.102.4):

> Τούτων δὲ πραχθέντων Ῥωμαῖοι τὴν τῶν Οὐεξίων χώραν κατεκληρούχησαν, κατ' ἄνδρα δόντες πλέθρα τέτταρα, ὡς δέ τινες, εἴκοσι ὀκτώ.
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> "As these events unfolded, the Romans divided up the Veians' territory, granting each citizen four plethra, or, according to others, twenty-eight."

Despite its brevity, this note provides further details on the size of shared lots. Diodorus even offers his reader two different figures. Neither of these (i.e. four or twenty-eight plethra) corresponds to the Livian version; however, upon closer examination, the three figures taken together may not be entirely unrelated, since 4 x 7 = 28. This numerical correspondence is striking enough to merit consideration, even if one remains cautious about drawing definitive conclusions from it. A clarification in Livy's text quoted above could provide a possible solution: not content with authorizing the division of the Veian territory, the Senate added that the distribution of lots would not be limited to *patres familias*. Their (male) children living under the same roof were also permitted to benefit from the distribution. This detail, though seemingly minor, is in fact quite notable, particularly because it appears to be unique among attested agrarian measures. From this perspective, it might be suggested that the explicit inclusion of *liberi* in this case indicates that until this date they had not been granted rights to land possession, and that private property was a privilege reserved for *patres familias*. Things changed with the *senatus consultum de agro Veientano*, and the link between the three variants of the tradition can be explained in the light of this change. It could be hypothesized that the lots were indeed of seven iugera (about 3.5 ha), but that the total size of a *familia*'s possessions was limited to twenty-eight iugera (about 14 ha), i.e. four lots, one for the *pater familias* and three for the *liberi*. Although the *liberi* were now entitled to *possessio*, they were still dependent on the *pater familias* (as they lived *in domo*, according to Livy). Their lots therefore fell *de facto* within the family domain managed by the *pater familias*, and this arrangement appears to echo, on a more modest scale, certain mechanisms of the gentilicial system. Consequently, the reason for a double limitation (per owner and per *familia*) might be understood as a response to two interrelated goals: on the one hand, to limit the clan-based management of lands, and on the other, to maximize the number of soldiers able to equip themselves with the panoply at their own expense (since extending the right of possession to the *liberi* made it possible to considerably increase the number of hoplites that each *familia* could provide, and

[26] See for example the Labicum colony (Liv. 4.47.7): *Coloni ab urbe mille et quingenti missi bina iugera acceperunt*. As a lot of this size is too small to support a citizen-hoplite and his family independently, this implies that the colony also had collective lands cultivated by all settlers for the benefit of the community. On the question of the small size of the lots distributed to the settlers, see Pelgrom 2008, pp. 358-367, and Pelgrom 2012, pp. 86-90.

thus the military power of the city). The double limitation, then, may be seen as a pragmatic attempt to strike a balance between these competing objectives.

Conclusion

Throughout this contribution dedicated to magister Attilio Mastrocinque, we have endeavoured to shed light on the underlying dynamics of the long-running agrarian conflict in Roman society. In the course of our investigation and reflection, it emerges as a plausible hypothesis that the numerous proposals for agrarian laws between the *rogatio Cassia agraria* of 486 BC and the senatus-consult *de agro Veientano* of 393 BC may not have primarily aimed at distributing land to impoverished plebeians, but rather at legitimizing private ownership of land already occupied and cultivated by the agrarian gentilicial dependents (to be identified with the *nexi*), in order to reinforce their gradual emancipation from the clan tutelage – a process that arguably began with the first plebeian secession. Long thwarted by patrician resistance, this process was accelerated by the capture of the Etruscan city of Veii, which led to the first distribution of new territories (outside the colonies) and the triumph of private property over *occupatio*.

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ABSTRACT
This article re-examines the agrarian conflicts of early Republican Rome, proposing a reinterpretation of land distribution as a socio-political process primarily concerned with the emancipation of agrarian dependents from gentilicial control, rather than the redistribution of land to impoverished urban plebeians. Between Sp. Cassius' proposed agrarian law of 486 BC and the senatorial decision concerning the ager Veientanus in 393 BC, the Roman state appears to undergo a transition from a clan-based system of land exploitation – grounded in customary occupation (occupatio) and reliant on dependent rural labourers (nexi) – to a civic model privileging private property and citizen autonomy. Drawing on comparative anthropology, archaic legal practices, and a critical reading of literary and annalistic sources, the study argues that nexi were not debt slaves in the classical sense, but rather agrarian dependents linked to clan lands by customary dues and service obligations. Their gradual emancipation, catalysed by the first secession of the plebs, corresponds with the weakening of clan authority and the parallel rise of a property-owning hoplite class. This process culminates in the viritane distribution of the Veientine territory, the first instance of large-scale land privatization outside a colonial context. The inclusion of liberi in the allotment scheme suggests a structural reconfiguration of Roman society, aiming to expand military capacity while limiting clan-based land control. In redefining the agrarian question as a power struggle between aristocratic patronage networks and emergent citizen-soldiers, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of Rome's early republican transformation.