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Edited by:

Timothy Howe ✦ Edward Anson ✦ Michael Fronda
David Hollander ✦ Joseph Roisman ✦ John Vanderspoel
Pat Wheatley ✦ Sabine Müller ✦ Alex McAuley
Catalina Balmaceda ✦ Charlotte Dunn



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Contents of volume thirty-one

Numbers 3-4

- 70 Timothy Doran, *Nabis of Sparta: Heir to Agis IV and Kleomenes III?*
- 92 Christopher Tuplin, *The Great King, his god(s) and intimations of divinity. The Achaemenid hinterland of ruler cult?*
- 112 Michael Kleu, *Philip V, the Selci-Hoard and the supposed building of a Macedonian fleet in Lissus*
- 120 Denver Graninger, *Late Argeads in Thrace: Religious Perspectives*

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Nabis of Sparta: Heir to Agis IV and Kleomenes III?¹

Timothy Doran

Abstract

Sparta's tyrant Nabis (r. 207 – 192 BC) has been pilloried by ancient commentators for his activities. Modern scholars have largely accepted these ancient views. Yet Nabis' efforts are best seen as attempts to counteract Sparta's population crisis that had started in the fifth century BC, just as Agis IV and Kleomenes III had done. His difference from their program was that he radically broke both from traditional Greek notions of the importance of descent-groups, and from the Spartans' previous cultural policy of preserving the putatively pure eugenic bloodlines of the families comprising its body of full citizens, the Spartiates. This divergence is a significant, if under-examined, reason why Nabis' contemporaries portrayed his reform efforts negatively, contributing to his downfall. It also caused later writers to view Nabis' efforts harshly, resulting in a contemptuous neglect of this fascinating if chequered individual and his efforts.

Ancient Writers on Nabis

Nabis came to power in a period of unprecedented chaos in Sparta. Narratives of his reign have been reconstructed in several modern scholarly works.² If we take the blackening of his reputation by ancient writers with a grain of salt, many of his actions can best be understood as earnest attempts to address Sparta's social problems.³ His early years of power can be recovered in outline only.⁴ He became king after Makhanidas died at Mantinea in 207. He may have been descended from the Damaratos of the Eurypontid family who fled Sparta and joined Darius I.⁵ Whatever the means of his ascent, between 207 and 205, he began his reforms in Sparta. He had undoubtedly learned from the mistakes as well as the successes of Agis and

¹ Gratitude is owed to the several scholars who read and commented on earlier (sometimes far earlier and quite different) drafts of this work, hence improving it, including Emily Mackil, Erich Gruen, Stan Burstein, Walter Scheidel, Kenneth Wachter, Choi Chatterjee, Afshin Matin, Kittiya Lee, the two anonymous reviewers of *Ancient History Bulletin*, and several others. Their kindness in reading it and offering suggestions should not inculcate them in all of its points and arguments, and all errors are mine.

² His reign: *E.g.* Chrimes 1949, Mossé 1964, Berve 1967, 408-411, Oliva 1971 III.6, Shimron 1972 chapter 4 (essential), Texier 1975, Piper 1986 chapter 6, Cartledge and Spawforth 1989 chapter 5, Thommen 2003 chapter 16 (a brief but clear narrative mostly focusing on foreign policy), Birgalias 2005, Thommen 2014 chapter 8 (economic).

³ Birgalias 2005, esp. 139-140.

⁴ Texier 1975, 16-20.

⁵ Walbank, *Historical Commentary on Polybius* 2, 419, who points us to Livy 32.38.3, 34.31.3, Diodoros 27.1, Syll. 584. Nabis was *euergetes* and *proxenos* at Delos: see SIG (3) 584. Texier 1975, 40; Thommen 2003, 195.

Kleomenes.⁶ He then made a series of attempts on Arkadia, now part of the Akhaian Federation. In 198, Philip V of Macedon saw fit to make an alliance with Nabis, marrying his daughters to Nabis' sons. With Philip's blessing, Nabis took Argos in 197, presumably to hold it until Philip could take control over it.⁷ There Nabis embarked on an ambitious program including the cancellation of debts, the redistribution of land, nationalizing the property of the wealthy and redistributing it (presumably to the non-wealthy).⁸ At some point in these years Nabis took control of several cities in Crete, and of perioikic towns, especially on the Lakonian coast, such as Gytheion.⁹ On Delos he was revered as a benefactor and savior.¹⁰

The uniformly hostile nature of ancient writings on Nabis' career and person is striking. A passage from Polybios effectively and representatively conveys the venomous tone:

Nabis, tyrant of the Lakedaimonians, being now in the third year of his reign, ventured upon no undertaking of importance ... but employed himself in laying the foundations of a long and grinding tyranny. He destroyed the last remains of the old Spartan nobles; drove into banishment all men eminent for wealth or ancestral glory; and distributed their property and wives among the chief men of those who remained, or among his own mercenary soldiers. These last were composed of murderers, housebreakers, footpads, and burglars. For this was, generally speaking, the class of men which he collected out of all parts of the world, whose own country was closed to them owing to their crimes and felonies. As he put himself forward as the patron and king of such wretches, and employed them as attendants and bodyguards, there is evidently no cause for surprise that his impious character and reign should have been long remembered. For, besides this, he was not content with driving the citizens into banishment, but took care that no place should be secure, and no refuge safe for the exiles. Some he caused to be pursued and killed on the road, while others he dragged from their place of retreat and murdered. Finally, in the cities where they were living, he hired the houses next door to these banished men, wherever they might be, by means of agents who were not suspected; and then sent Cretans into these houses, who made breaches in the common walls, and through them, or through such windows as already existed, shot down the exiles as they stood or lay down in their own houses; so

⁶ Berve 1967, 408 emphasizes Nabis as "wesentlich radikaler und tyrannischer" than Machanidas. Thommen 2003, 195 notes, "Nabis hatte Kleomenes' Reform miterlebt und daraus gelernt, vor allem auch, was die Festigung der eigenen Macht betraf. Er plante eine radikalere Umstrukturierung der Bevölkerung, die über die Sicherung des Militärverbandes hinausging." ("Nabis had experienced and learned from Kleomenes' reform, especially the consolidation of his own power. He planned a more radical reorganization of the population, which went beyond securing its military organization.")

⁷ Argos had been part of the Akhaian Koinon at the start of the Second Macedonian War in fall of 200, then left when the Koinon had begun to assist the Romans against Philip V, since Argos was particularly friendly with the Macedonians. The Argives pushed out their Akhaian garrison and invited in one from Philip. Philip, busy, then invited Nabis to install a garrison. If Philip desired Nabis to fend off the Akhaian Koinon and the Romans from Argos, this hope was dashed when Nabis made an alliance with Rome and (at Flamininus' behest) a truce with the Akhaian Koinon in winter of 198/7, even giving troops to Flamininus in 197 against Philip, apparently desiring a firm and indefinite possession of Argos: Eckstein 1987, 215. Gruen 1984, 445ff, Texier 1975, 50f.

⁸ Livy 32.38.

⁹ Crete: Livy 34.35.9. Gytheion: Livy 43.29.2-3.

¹⁰ Delos: IG 11.4.716, a proxeny and euergetes decree. *SIG* (3) 584. Homolle 1896.

that there was no place of retreat, and no moment of security for the unfortunate Lacedaemonians.¹¹

Along with these accusations comes a stranger and even more objectionable one: Polybios writes that Nabis “gave the property and wives of these men [of the Spartiates killed or exiled] to the most eminent of other men, and to his mercenaries.”¹²

Livy does use familiar terminology when he has Philip V think of Nabis as a tyrant: Philip plans to cede Argos to “Nabidi ... Lacedaemoniorum tyranno.” Livy subsequently states that Nabis, upon seizing Argos, stole the most prominent citizens’ money and tortured and flogged them, then canceled debts and redivided land, *duas faces novantibus res ad plebem in optimates accendendam*: “thus lighting two torches with which revolutionists could inflame the commons against the nobility.”¹³ In another passage, Livy has Flamininus call Nabis “a tyrant, the most savage and lawless that ever lived” and starkly accuse Nabis of massacres, imprisonments without the prisoners’ right to communicate with people outside, of failing to allow open Assemblies in Argos or Lakedaimon, of putting Roman citizens to death, of promoting piracy, and several other crimes.¹⁴

Diodoros’ 27th book describes Nabis and his followers with disapproval as well. This book, which we have only in fragments, was almost certainly influenced by Polybios’ description:

28.1. Nabis, the tyrant of Sparta, put to death Pelops, the son of the late king Lycurgus, who was at this time still a boy. This was a measure of precaution lest when he came of age the youth, emboldened by his noble birth, should someday restore his country's freedom. Nabis personally selected and put to death those Lacedaemonians who were most accomplished, and gathered from all sides hirelings of the basest stamp to defend his régime. As a result, temple-robbers, thieves, pirates, and men under sentence of death streamed into Sparta from every direction. For since it was by impious deeds that Nabis had made himself tyrant, he supposed that only by such men could he be most securely guarded.

2. Nabis, the tyrant of Sparta, devised many forms of punishment for the citizens, in the belief that by degrading his country he would enhance his own position. Indeed, when a knave comes to power he is not, I think, likely to bear his good fortune as a mortal should.¹⁵

And in Pausanias, Nabis is personally a temple-robber, a particularly odious accusation in the ancient Mediterranean world. Pausanias writes,

When the Lacedaemonians were rid of Cleomenes there rose to power a tyrant Machanidas, and after his death a second tyrant arose in Nabis. As he plundered human

¹¹ Polybios 13.6.1-9. Translation Evelyn S. Shuckburgh, with light clarifications by me.

¹² Polybios 13.6.3.

¹³ Livy 32.38. Translation Evan T. Sage.

¹⁴ Livy 34.32, a passage in which, admittedly, it is in the Romans’ best interest to blacken Nabis.

¹⁵ Diodoros 28.1-2 translated by Russel M. Geer.

property and robbed temples alike, he amassed vast wealth in a short time and with it raised an army. This Nabis seized Messene ...¹⁶

One may think that Polybios' tone arises from Nabis' attack on Megalopolis, Polybios' hometown.¹⁷ Yet Polybios is not the only historian to write this way about Nabis. The discourses against Nabis written by Diodoros, Livy, and Pausanias are unusually severe as well, and included accusations of tyranny. Could they all simply have been parroting Polybios? Yet Livy presumably also had Roman sources to use. If non-Polybian sources existed, this weakens possible arguments that the animosity found in all post-Polybian historical accounts simply mimicked Polybios' attitudes. And finally, harsh tones, whether in Polybios or later writers, do not invalidate the veracity of specific claims. The mere fact that a claim is expressed stridently does not permit us to dismiss it altogether.

The ancient writers' unforgiving descriptions are unlikely to appear only because of the invasion of Megalopolis. As we have seen, Nabis' actions offended many who had no special allegiance to Megalopolis. We must seek further causes. A promising one appears in Livy's statement that Nabis manumitted slaves.¹⁸ Such an act was generally an abomination to the class of persons who wrote history.¹⁹ Yet surprisingly, Livy lets Nabis rationally, eloquently, and idealistically defend his freeing of slaves by recalling ancient Spartan customs of equalization, contrasting them with Roman rule by the few.²⁰ Thus, Nabis' manumissions were no anomaly. Rather, they were a variation of the earlier helot-enfranchisements – typically occurring after loyal military service – that had been attempted several times before in Sparta in the face of Spartiate population shortage.²¹

One option in interpreting these charges is that, rather than believing that Nabis' policies created the opprobrium of the ancient authors, it is the opprobrium that created some of their accusations, such as the forced marriages that will be discussed below. This stance is worth attention. Some scholars have followed it. For example, Polybios asserts that Nabis possessed an iron maiden, a spiked metal torture machine that squeezed its victims.²² Chrimes dismisses the tale altogether:

The story of the instrument of torture, made in the likeness of his wife Apega, which Nabis used to extract money from his victims, sounds too fantastic to impose on the credulity of any but the most ignorant, but it has contributed to the general legend

¹⁶ Pausanias 4.29.10-11. Translation by W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod. This presumably follows Polybios' words in 13.6.4: οὔτοι δ' ἦσαν ἀνδροφόνου καὶ παρασχίσται, λωποδύται, τοιχωρύχοι.

¹⁷ See Polyb. 4.81.13; and as Oliva 1971, 274 note 2 lists, 13.6.1 – 5; 13.6.6 – 10, 17; 13.8.2, 13. Kennell 2003, 90 discusses Polybios' bias against Nabis. Birgalias 2005 discusses whether Nabis should be labeled a tyrant.

¹⁸ Livy 34.31.14 – 18.

¹⁹ On general attitudes of antique historians toward slaves and freeing them, there is Hunt 1998.

²⁰ Livy 34.31.14 – 18. Texier 1974; Birgalias 2005, 142 sees Livy or Nabis-via-Livy critiquing one-man rule in Rome.

²¹ Kennell 2003 argues that those freed were slaves, but not Helots. But see Asheri 1977, 27 and Cartledge and Spawforth 1989, 63f, Chrimes 1949, 33f.

²² Polybios 13.7.

none the less, and it is now difficult to escape from the impression that Nabis was a mere robber chief and a monster of cruelty.²³

But the sort of blanket dismissal that Chrimes gives here may well be injudicious. While the iron maiden may strike some moderns as bizarre, it hardly stands outside of historical plausibility, as any scholarly investigation into the history of torture will make dolefully clear. The methodology followed here will be first to distinguish between things presented as facts and rhetorical blackening, and to ignore rhetorical blackening; and second, to cautiously accept what our sources say unless they seem to break laws of physics, in which case rejection has a firm foundation, or unless they contradict other sources, in which a closer historiographical examination is prudent, or unless truly convincing arguments have been made against them, based on ancient evidence.

To attribute this stance of cautious acceptance to credulousness and ignorance based upon a hunch as to whether a torture device is realistic in a world that regularly tortured slaves is itself hasty and incautious. Exaggerations occur in our sources, but to declare something as definitely false requires either faith or proof, not hunches, and the burden of proof normally should fall upon those who declare the falsity of attestations in our limited corpus of evidence.

Modern scholarship seldom takes such harsh tones against Nabis as our ancient sources do, usually attempting more balance. But the relevant and interesting question here is not tone, nor whether Nabis was “depicted perhaps unjustly by Polybius as a sadistic tyrant as well as an extreme demagogue,” nor whether horror or approval are more appropriate.²⁴ It instead concerns the nature and specific content of some of Nabis’ reforms, most specifically his forced marriages and his decisions about whom to enfranchise, and how these were conceived of, and were intended to replenish, the genetic commonwealth of Sparta’s full citizen class. Before seeing Nabis, we must look at the context in which he arose, including the reforms of Agis IV and Kleomenes III shortly before Nabis’ reign, and the problems in Sparta that these addressed.

The Spartan Citizen Population Crisis, Agis IV, and Kleomenes III

Nabis’ reforms crucially and significantly differed from those of his predecessors. To understand the differences, it is necessary to review the problems towards which their actions were aimed. Nabis’ reforms responded to events and processes that had begun a quarter-millennium before his reign. A terrible earthquake in the 460s BC killed a large number of Spartiates.²⁵ After this, the population of full citizens in Sparta – that is, the Spartiates – entered free-fall and never recovered.²⁶ This posed a grave problem for Sparta, which prided

²³ Chrimes 1949, 35.

²⁴ Rawson 1969, 93.

²⁵ Thoukydides 1.101.2. Diodoros 11.63. Pausanias 8.8.8, 4.24.5-6. Plutarch *Kimon* 16.4. Luraghi 2008, 183-188.

²⁶ Note Herodotus’ mention (at 7.234.2) of 8,000 Spartiates for 480 BC, Aristotle’s (at *Pol.* 1270a 30ff) fewer than 1000 for his own time, and Plutarch’s 700 families for the mid-3rd century BC (*Agis* 5.6). New Spartiates were not created (*en masse*, at least) before Kleomenes to replace persons demoted from the Spartiate caste. New births were not sufficiently replacing those dead from war deaths, old age, and disease. Causation for this drop is

itself on its skilled citizen heavy infantry, and provoked various institutional responses over the next centuries. Although Spartiate attitudes of exclusivity meant that enfranchising people into the Spartiate class was unlikely to be a popular move among the existing members of that class, it was clear that staffing Sparta's army was absolutely necessary as a *sine qua non* of national existence.²⁷ Aside from simply using perioikoi as part of the Spartan army, we can see a history of more serious attempts to address the problem beginning with the semi-enfranchisements of helots into something like perioikic status, with the creation of the *Brasidaeioi* in 424 BC and continuing with the *neodamodeis* immediately after this.

In such a demographic crisis, the existing population of Spartiates needed to be preserved rather than undergoing disenfranchisement, which was the penalty customarily leveled against Spartiates committing various acts outside of Spartan ideals. Hence there appears an easing of normally harsh demotions for surrender and cowardice in battle at Sphakteria in 425 BC and after the devastating loss at Leuktra in 371.²⁸ Yet little in the way of serious or active effort to address the population problem occurred for over a century after Leuktra. According to our fullest extant source, Plutarch's *Life of Agis and Kleomenes*, the population continued to shrink in the third century, with the "have-nots" bitterly resenting the "haves," and with civil tensions high.²⁹

In response to Sparta's economic disarray and demographic problems came the reformer kings Agis IV (r. 245 – 241 BC) and Kleomenes III (r. 235 – 222 BC) and their radical structural changes in the organization of the state. The two kings planned and carried out (respectively) enfranchisements into the Spartiate caste of selected foreigners and *perioikoi* and gave them land donated by or seized from land-rich members of the Spartiate caste. These efforts resulted in a Spartan military, political, economic, and cultural renaissance.³⁰

Certain elements of the selection processes for persons newly permitted into the citizen body, and the debates surrounding all of this, are significant. Plutarch states that Agis had selected candidates for citizenship from those of the *perioikoi* and *xenoi* who were "especially appealing in terms of their physical form."³¹ And Agis' party's ouster of his royal colleague relied upon an appeal to notions of purity and xenophobia consistent with older Spartan ideas about caste and bloodline.³² Kleomenes retained much of Agis' focus but made some concessions to exogenous political conditions and expectations, taking a more moderate stance by which he enrolled what Plutarch calls the "most powerful" of the foreigners into the Spartiate caste along with the "most appealing" of the *perioikoi*.³³ This resulted in a citizen body

discussed Figueira 1986, Hodkinson 2000; the latter emphasizes demotion from the Spartiate caste due to the inability to pay dining-club dues. Much attention belongs on Sparta's extreme wealth polarization but also to Spartiate under-reproduction: Spartiate customs such as late marriages and certain sexual practices were not conducive to the large family sizes necessary in the sort of high-mortality (due to endemic disease) pre-industrial demographic regime of which Sparta is a typical example.

²⁷ Sparta's lack of monetization would make hiring a mercenary army impossible until Persian subsidies kicked in, and these were irregular.

²⁸ Plut. *Agesilaos* 30.4.

²⁹ Plutarch's account is examined in Doran 2017 with references to other scholarship and ancient sources.

³⁰ Narrative in Cartledge and Spawforth 1989, 38 – 58. Cf. Thommen 2003, 195-199.

³¹ *Agis* 8.2. Doran 2017, *passim*.

³² *Agis* 10.2-3. Doran 2017.

³³ Plut. *Kleom.* 10.6, 11.2. Doran 2017.

large enough and strong enough to attract Ptolemaic backing and to permit a series of military successes for Kleomenes III and to create a great efflorescence of Spartan power.

A Contrast in Reforms

In retrospect, Nabis can be fairly regarded as a great modernizer of Sparta, as Cartledge has noted.³⁴ Nabis' modernization of the Spartan system (both in terms of laws and practices) contained several elements that normalized it in respect to contemporary Greek state practice. His reforms included Sparta's first organized form of taxation; the creation of a Spartan navy enhancing the prospects of maritime activities such as normal trade and (presumably) regular income therefrom;³⁵ the completion of city-walls and an improved water supply; securing Gytheion as a naval base;³⁶ and the creation or revival of ties with Crete. Naturally one of Nabis' largest concerns, a concern also foremost to Agis and Kleomenes, was how to replenish the population of full citizens of Sparta, reduced by the centuries-old process of *oliganthropia*, and also by recent war deaths.

However, important differences also distinguish Nabis' reforms from those of Agis and Kleomenes, particularly his procedures of selection for Spartan citizenship versus theirs. An analysis of these provides a window into the substantial differences in Nabis' goals for the Spartan state. Agis and Kleomenes, at least according to Plutarch, carefully selected individuals to enter Sparta's citizen body, and among their criteria are an interesting pair of words: *χαρίεντες* and *χαριέστατοι*. These terms suggest not only wealth and but also good looks. Kleomenes, "by filling up the citizen-body with the most appealing (*χαριέστατοι*) of the *perioikoi*, created four thousand hoplites."³⁷ Might a term like *χαριέστατοι* suggest "most elegant" hence "wealthy" and simply be shorthand for something like "men of the wealth class high enough to afford weapons and armor"?

This possibility is heavily weakened by Plutarch's description of Agis' plan a little earlier, which clearly asserts that a bodily, physical attractiveness is meant. Plutarch says that Agis' plan was that the Spartiate citizen rolls were "to be filled up from the *perioikoi* and foreigners, however so many as had shared in the upbringing characteristic of free men, and were *especially appealing in terms of their physical form* (*χαρίεντες ἄλλως τοῖς σώμασι*) and at the peak of their age."³⁸ This is not strange for Sparta. Such ideas in earlier Spartan culture are pointed to in a significant section of Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans*, where he describes additional reproductive opportunities permitted to Spartiates who were not only admirable in

³⁴ Modernizer: e.g. Cartledge 2002, 249f.

³⁵ *SIG* (3) 584 (Delos), Chrimes 1949, 35; Livy 35.12.7. Livy 34.32 has Flaminius accuse Nabis of piracy. By 189, Sparta departed from its previous autarky to the point that it needed a coastal market for foreign trade and imported goods: Livy 38.30.

³⁶ Livy 34.29. For Nabis' acts of modernization, see Birgalias 2005 (esp. 150); Kennell 2010, 178. In general, Berve 1967, 408-411 is crucial.

³⁷ Plutarch, *Kleomenes* 10.6. ἀναπληρώσας δὲ τὸ πολίτευμα τοῖς χαριεστάτοις τῶν περιοίκων ὀπλίτας τετρασχιλίους ἐποίησε.

³⁸ *Agis* 8.2. ἀναπληρωθῆναι δὲ τούτους ἔκ τῃ περιοίκων καὶ ξένων, ὅσοι τροφῆς μετεσχηκότες ἐλευθερίου καὶ χαρίεντες ἄλλως τοῖς σώμασι καὶ καθ' ἡλικίαν ἀκμάζοντες εἶεν.

terms of mind or soul (ψυχή) but also in terms of body or form (σῶμα).³⁹ Considering that this is the population of Spartiates who will provide future Spartiates out of their bodies, these phrases ring a distinctly eugenic chime. Whatever customs, rules, and laws the Spartiates created, good looks and fine form were highly valued, not merely skill in war or obedience to the Spartan state or its kings.

In contrast, Diodoros tells us that Nabis did precisely the opposite: ἐπιλεγόμενος (“exercising careful selection”), Nabis did away with the χαριστάτους of the Lakedaimonians.⁴⁰ If we take this by itself, this again may only indicate “the most elegant” in the sense of “the smart set,” that is, the wealthy and fashionable. Unlike the relevant section from Plutarch about Agis there is no *tois somasi* (“in respect to their bodies”) appended. However, Polybios more specifically wrote of Nabis that “he utterly destroyed the remaining men of Sparta, and drove into exile those who were greatly superior in terms of wealth or *splendor of descent*” (ἡ δόξη προγονικῇ, a phrase to which we shall return twice *infra*). The reference to descent might conceivably only reference a non-bodily splendor, but put together with these other terms, a eugenic meaning becomes rather hard to evade.⁴¹

Another curious reference to significant details in Nabis’ program deserves scrutiny. Diodoros says that the men whom Nabis intended to bring in as new citizens of Sparta “streamed in together from every place.”⁴² Kennell has plausibly argued that the “new men” in Sparta were to become full citizens, rather than a separate class like the *neodamodeis* of the classical period.⁴³ The homelands of many of these men were not restricted to Sparta, or even to Lakonia. Nor were they resident aliens who had been living in Lakonia for several generations (as we may think of some of Agis and Kleomenes’ carefully-selected *xenoi*⁴⁴) if they had only in Nabis’ era “streamed in together.” Polybios expands on this, describing Nabis’ band of followers with rough words:

καθόλου γὰρ τοῦτο τὸ γένος ἡθροίζετο πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐπιμελῶς ἐκ τῆς οἰκουμένης, οἷς ἄβατος ἦν ἡ θρέψασα δι’ ἀσέβειαν καὶ παρανομίαν.⁴⁵

For this *genos* was carefully collected from all over the inhabited world for this [purpose], men to whom the land that had nurtured them was forbidden because of their impiousness and habitual criminality.⁴⁶

On the one hand, Polybios may simply be using *genos* the way that Xenophon occasionally did, as a (not biological) group, such as the *genos* of philosophers.⁴⁷ On the other, the term *genos*

³⁹ Xenophon, *Lak. Pol.* 1.7.

⁴⁰ D.S. 27.1.

⁴¹ διέφθειρε γὰρ τοὺς λοιποὺς ἄρδην ἐκ τῆς Σπάρτης, ἐφυγάδευσεν δὲ τοὺς κατὰ πλεον πλούτῳ διαφέροντας ἡ δόξη προγονικῇ. Polybios 13.6.3.

⁴² ἔκ παντὸς τόπου συνέρρεον. D. S. 27.1.

⁴³ Kennell 2003.

⁴⁴ Plut. *Agis* 8.2.

⁴⁵ Polybios 13.6.4.

⁴⁶ I am assuming that καθόλου and ἐκ τῆς οἰκουμένης go together here.

⁴⁷ Xen. *Cyn.* 3.1.

very frequently indicates groups thought to be defined by heredity and biological descent. How could people streaming from all over the inhabited world possibly be thought of as belonging to one biological group? In this case, what is meant seems not to be a single biological group, but a grouping of persons from various places and various descents that are taxonomically identified by what they are not: that is, as not being from a putative Spartiate *genos*.⁴⁸

If our sources can be thought to possess a fundamental kernel of accuracy underneath their vitriol, then this feature, the enfranchisement of a mixed variety of foreigners, was not found in the revolution created by Agis and continued by Kleomenes. For it pitted Nabis and his men against the Spartiates themselves. For as we have seen, Polybios contrasts Nabis' men against actual Spartiates, or at least to actual Lakedaimonians, saying that Nabis "destroyed the remaining men from Sparta" (διέφθειρε γὰρ τοὺς λοιποὺς ἄρδην ἐκ τῆς Σπάρτης) and shortly after, that the exiled "Lakedaimonians" were harried by Nabis' men.⁴⁹ A Spartan king's usage of foreigners draws a sharp contrast between Nabis' objectives and those of Kleomenes III, who enjoyed excellent press in Plutarch's relevant *Life*, and (relative to Nabis' treatment) only moderately negative press from other sources. Nabis' efforts at regenerating the population of Spartiate citizens through foreign enrollment, although creative, failed to attract sympathy from contemporaries, garnering only opprobrium.

Nabis' Ideology and Earlier Spartan Norms

We can guess why this brought such horror: because in the pursuit of addressing Sparta's greatest problem, its low population of Spartiates, Nabis broke too far with certain ancient *nomoi* or cultural norms both of the Spartiates and even of the surrounding Greek world, particularly the older norms of the Greek aristocratic world, a cultural system of which the Spartan regime was only a (rather extreme) variation. A more gradualist approach to the enfranchisement of persons outside of old Spartiate families coupled with a greater reluctance to break respected *nomoi* could conceivably have turned Sparta into a more normal Greek state without the severe political and literary opposition that Nabis suffered.

This action can be recast as another of Nabis' significant acts of modernization mentioned earlier. In this case, we may see this aspect of Nabis' reforms as a "modernizing" abolition of the set of archaic (or purportedly archaic) *nomoi* that in essence preserved the bloodlines of families in the Spartiate caste – the Spartiate *genos* – and in Spartan royalty. His own marriage to a non-Spartan woman, Apega, broadcast his lack of investment in preserving these old customs. What we may view with irony is that Nabis' destruction of traditional Spartan ways was accomplished in the pursuit of strengthening the power of Sparta as a city by increasing its citizen numbers: that is, Nabis' efforts at population regeneration through enfranchisement and other means. This is the same goal sought a few decades earlier by Agis IV and Kleomenes III, but by methods that proved far less objectionable than those of Nabis.⁵⁰ Thus, certain key

⁴⁸ Scholars interested in Structuralism may see this as a kind of Structuralist binary "other" *genos*.

⁴⁹ Polybios 13.6.3, 13.6.9.

⁵⁰ Birgalias 2005.

reforms of Nabis can be seen as another attempt by a Spartan king to regenerate the long-faltering population of Spartan full citizens through enfranchisement. However, Nabis' attempt broke with the traditional aristocratically-minded sensibilities and practices that had long been at play in the set of customs comprising what we may think of as a kind of *de facto* Spartan population policy.

Several of the traditional aristocratic customs that Nabis overthrew intertwined with a set of older *nomoi* that had existed for a long time in Spartan culture that were focused on heredity, presumably with the intent of preserving certain traits in a population group – in this case, the Spartiate population. Such ideas of human heredity were not unique to Sparta, but are fairly widely, if often in a less rigorous form, found throughout human societies worldwide. In Sparta's case, they were simply more concentrated than often found in the rest of Greece.⁵¹ Animating these older *nomoi* seems to have been the idea that the Spartan “genetic commonwealth” (so to speak) would better benefit without the contributions of several categories of person.⁵² These included purportedly weak infants, children unable to tolerate the *agoge*, and adult Spartiates diagnosed as cowards, as well as their sisters.⁵³ Another *nomos*, attributed to the archaic Spartan lawgiver Lykourgos regardless of its actual antiquity, prohibited intermarriage between Spartiates and non-Spartiates.⁵⁴ Another was a prohibition against Spartans living abroad lest they become infected by foreign ways.⁵⁵ In close connection to these customs were a few others. One, also attributed to Lykourgos and certainly from the classical period, allowed Spartiates considered exceptional of body and soul additional reproduction privileges outside of marriage.⁵⁶

The precise antiquity of all of these customs requires further explication for another article.⁵⁷ However, their embeddedness and hence importance in Spartan culture is attested by Lykourgos' supposed authorship of many of them.⁵⁸ What matters here is the fact that a tradition existed emphasizing Sparta as a state featuring purportedly antique Lykourgan customs focusing on human heredity. As mentioned, they appear in several places and times throughout ancient Greek culture, from ideas found throughout the Theognidean corpus and in Plato's *Republic*; but a number of literary passages attest to real applications in Spartan culture, which seems to have participated in this general Greek cultural syndrome, and then to have undergone an intensive development of it more than all Greek known city-states, for reasons deserving further scrutiny but beyond the scope of this article.⁵⁹ What is significant

⁵¹ Preus 1975 demonstrates deep interest in, and accurate knowledge of, heredity amongst Greeks. Cf. Theognis, e.g. *Elegis* 183–190. Plato, *Republic* 5.459–460, especially 460c, *Theaetatus* 149d.

⁵² I use the term “genetic” here to indicate not a knowledge of genes à la Watson and Crick but knowledge of, belief in, and even obsession with, heredity and the *genos*.

⁵³ Xen *L.P.* 9.5. Plutarch, *Lyk.* 16.2. Doran 2017.

⁵⁴ Plutarch, *Agis* 11.2. Doran 2017, 262.

⁵⁵ Plutarch, *Agis* 11.2. Doran 2017.

⁵⁶ Xen. *L.P.* 1.7–8.

⁵⁷ Figueira 2016 (essential) has persuasively challenged arguments that these traditions were all or even mostly invented late.

⁵⁸ Xen. *L.P.* 1.

⁵⁹ General Greek ideas on heredity: Preus 1975. Theognis, e.g. *Elegis* 183–190. Plato, *Republic* 5.459–460, especially 460c. *Theaetatus* 149d. Sparta, specifically: Xenophon, *Lak. Pol.* 1.7, 2, 3.3, 4.2–6, 9; 9.5; Plutarch *Lysander* 30.5, *Life of Lykourgos* 16.2. Further discussion of all of these: Doran 2017. Ojakangas 2016, 98. Treatments of

here is Nabis' actions, which rejected and destroyed this relatively solid set of (purportedly) ancient customs. His actions, combined with subsequent acts of the Akhaian general Philopoimen, effectively ended the older Spartan regime for the royal families of Sparta and the Spartiates, both ending the distinctive *nomoi* that had made the Spartan state so unusual, and exterminating the bloodlines of both the actual families constituting the Spartan diarchy and the Spartiate caste.

Ideas and Assumptions in Nabis' Reforms

Regardless of its objectionable nature, by arranging citizenship like this, Nabis did something quite novel: he broke the Spartan state free of the notion that it – as a corporate entity, or as an ethnic or civic identity – must be attached to a particular descent group, to a particular set of families. Whether deliberate or not, this represented a denial of traditional Greek ideas of the fatherland or *patris*. Specificity of descent was a feature of the conceptions of citizenship of ancient states in general – most certainly, as significant examples, both Athenian and Spartan notions of citizenship, as the Emperor Claudius would criticize as a limitation suppressing state growth centuries later.⁶⁰

Despite the reproach that literary sources cast upon him, Nabis may have been perceptive enough to see that a state did not permanently need to be composed of a specific group of families or bloodlines, but instead could be more simply a population occupying an expanse of territory with a major urban settlement. Whatever knowledge he may have possessed of Roman citizenship practices may well have influenced this understanding: his discussion with Roman dignitaries, as presented by Livy, can only strengthen the likelihood of this being the case.⁶¹ Further, in such a conception, this population did not need to consist of families who possessed a long history of their ancestors being included in the Spartiate caste, nor a long record of freedom as citizens, nor any specific bloodline or history of descent. This was a radical reconceptualization of the Greek state and Greek citizenship in general, and of Spartan state and Spartan full citizenship in particular.⁶² It contrasts sharply against the Spartan state's previous reluctance to bring non-Spartiates into the full citizen body, which had recognized (for example) freed Helots during the Peloponnesian War as *neodamodeis*, but never included them as full Spartiates.⁶³

Livy gives Nabis a remarkable speech for 197 BC. If we may assume that it is not pure fiction but based on an actual exchange, it demonstrates Nabis' intention to redistribute land,

eugenics written in the 21st century have now begun to contextualize usefully the histories and ideologies behind this vexed topic, rather than treating it too automatically as a “red flag” word. Lynn 2001, Agar 2004, Gillette 2007, Entine 2014, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy s.v. “Eugenics.”

⁶⁰ Tacitus, *Annales* 11.23-24; note also for this supremely important speech a supporting inscription, *CIL* 13.1668 col. 2.

⁶¹ Livy 34.31. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

⁶² In terms of Kennell's distinction (2003, 86f) between a *politeia* as a constitution and a *politeuma* as a body of citizens, this would be a *politeuma*.

⁶³ Mossé 1964, 322 can be read to see this as a kind of Hellenistic “modernization” congruent with Stoic utopian ideals.

his freeing of slaves, his awareness of Sparta's population crisis, and his presentation of Lykourgos as a sort of distant ancestor behind his efforts. "But my title of tyrant and my behavior oppress me, because I call slaves to freedom, because I bring the impoverished plebeians into fields," Nabis states.⁶⁴ The identity of these "plebeians" presents an interesting question. They may be members of the *hypomeiones* or "inferiors," that caste probably consisting of Spartiates who had been barred from Spartiate privileges due to cowardice (the *tresantes*), disinclination to marry, or inability to pay their dining club (*syssitia*) dues.⁶⁵ Very shortly afterward, Livy has Nabis demonstrate evident conscious thought about the population crisis and its solutions: Nabis states that under him "the population was augmented with freed slaves, and farmland was distributed to poor men."⁶⁶ Nabis-*apud*-Livy even connects this to the archaic reforms attributed to the ancient lawgiver Lykourgos (*noster legum lator*).⁶⁷ The fact that an Illyrian mercenary buried in Sparta in Nabis' time mentions on his tombstone the θεσμοθέτας Λακώνων may suggest perhaps that Nabis indeed thought of himself, and propagandized himself, as a neo-Lykourgos.⁶⁸

This fascinating connection, whether Nabis actually made it or not, holds one of the keys to understanding his revolution. On the one hand, Nabis' project may seem antithetical to the Lykourgan reforms.⁶⁹ For example, the freeing of helots or slaves may seem an irredeemably anti-Lykourgan move, a destruction of the social boundaries that separated the classes or castes in the ideal Spartan commonwealth.⁷⁰ The Lykourgan regime, after all, depended upon helot labor for the special lifestyle the Spartiates enjoyed. Yet the social and economic conditions under which Nabis operated were very different from those prevailing during Early Iron Age and Archaic Sparta. But on the other hand, the chief object of what we can make of the archaic "Lykourgan *kosmos*" as it is generally understood was surely the continuation and flourishing of a select population by whatever means were possible and seemed reasonable.⁷¹ The subjugation of Helots was vital to this purpose, and not an abnormal idea for the period in

⁶⁴ "... ceterum nomen tyranni et facta me premunt, quod servos ad libertatem voco, quod in agros inopem plebem deduco." Livy 34.31.11. Note Mossé 1964, 317.

⁶⁵ *Hypomeiones*: Xen. *Hell.* 3.3.6. On *Hypomeiones*, cf. e.g. Lazenby 2012 (1985), 22-25; Hodkinson 2015, 23. However, if the barriers of the castes were sanded down in the general disarray of Sparta's Hellenistic period, the system may have run sufficiently amok by this point to make the class distinctions murky, the rights of some classes less distinct.

⁶⁶ *ad multitudinem servis liberatis auctam et egentibus divisum agrum attinet.* Livy 34.31.14.

⁶⁷ Livy 34.31.16-18. [16]: "Sed si nunc ea fecissem, non dico 'quid in eo vos laesissem aut vestram amicitiam violassem?,' sed illud, me more atque instituto maiorum fecisse. [17] Nolite ad vestras leges atque instituta exigere ea, quae Lacedaemone fiunt. Nihil comparare singula necesse est. Vos a censu equitem, a censu peditem legitis, et paucos excellere opibus, plebem subiectam esse illis vultis; [18] noster legum lator non in paucorum manu rem publicam esse voluit, quem vos senatum appellatis, nec excellere unum aut alterum ordinem in civitate, sed per aequationem fortunae ac dignitatis fore credidit, ut multi essent, qui arma pro patria ferrent." There is no evidence that Nabis freed *all* the slaves or ended *all* slavery; Strabo says (8.5) that helotry lasted until the supremacy of the Romans.

⁶⁸ Steinhauer 1992, 242-3 and footnotes there. Cf. Texier 1974, 197.

⁶⁹ Shimron 1972, Cartledge and Spawforth 1989, 70.

⁷⁰ Shimron 1972, 96: "the chief object [of the Lykourgan regime] was the perpetual subjugation of the Helots."

⁷¹ Here the notion of the "genetic interests" of this group may be apposite: generally, Salter 2007.

which the ancient Spartiate domination of the helots was devised and effected.⁷² But we may guess that at root, Lykourgos' objective was the continuation and flourishing of a defined, select citizen group, not subjugation of another group for the sake of subjugation. Seen this way, some of Nabis' ideas, such as his equalization of property in Argos, can indeed be conceptualized as Lykourgan in spirit. Our poverty of sources does not tell us explicitly that Nabis conducted a property-equalization at Sparta, but he may have, or may have intended to. And unless we believe wholeheartedly that no moment existed in the Archaic era in which some outside persons were allowed to become Spartiates, we cannot call Nabis' efforts completely un-Lykourgan, only hasty – or, at worst, promiscuous.

Seizing Women and Forcing Marriages

Perhaps the most objectionable of Nabis' actions harmonized with his equalization of goods, flattening of caste-borders, and population manipulation. This is the forcing of marriages between his opponents' wives and daughters and men whom he wished to favor, mostly non-Spartiates. Polybios writes that Nabis “gave the property and wives of these men [the Spartiates killed or exiled] to the most eminent of other men, and to his mercenaries.”⁷³ These wives will presumably have been wives of (or female members of the same circles to which belonged) those men who were described as superior in terms of wealth or splendor of descent (κατὰ πλεον πλούτῳ διαφέροντας ἢ δόξῃ προγονικῇ, discussed *supra*) since in human affairs, status often marries status. But in another passage, Polybios tells of slaves marrying their female masters: “having expelled the citizens, he set free the slaves and married them to the wives and daughters of their masters.”⁷⁴ Here the slaves, presumably house slaves and perhaps also Helots, are elevated.

How did all of this look “on the ground”? We can only dismally imagine. As to women refusing to marry, this would be difficult if their husbands were dead or exiled, or had abandoned them, or their land was confiscated. Survival would leave them few choices. Steinhauer (1992, 243), in discussing the epitaph of the Illyrian mercenary Plator buried in Sparta and married to a woman who was almost certainly a Spartiate aristocrat, eloquently words it this way:

The inscription provides proof not only for those human bonds which, in those difficult times, were forged between the young aristocratic women and the foreign husbands they were obliged to choose from among the mercenaries by Nabis but also, and most

⁷² Cartledge 1979 (2002), 83f sees the helots subjected before chattel slavery existed in Greece.

⁷³ τὰς δὲ τούτων οὐσίας καὶ γυναῖκας διεδίδου τῶν ἄλλων τοῖς ἐπιφανεστάτοις καὶ τοῖς μισθοφόροις; Polybios 13.6.3. Walbank's *Historical Commentary on Polybios* (*ad. loc.*) gives not “of the most eminent of other men” for τῶν ἄλλων τοῖς ἐπιφανεστάτοις, but “the chiefs of those who were left.” “Of other men” seems to be more sensible, contrasting with the men who had been married to these Spartiate women.

⁷⁴ ἐκβαλὼν τοὺς πολίτας ἡλευθέρωσε τοὺς δούλους καὶ συνώκισε ταῖς τῶν δεσποτῶν γυναῖξιν καὶ θυγατράσιν: Polybios 16.13.1.

importantly, for the substantial changes in the very social and ideological base of the city which the Spartan revolution had as its long term consequence.⁷⁵

In assessing the state-level motivations for this policy, on the one hand we cannot ignore that Sparta's *nomos* of female inheritance provided a non-sexual incentive for these marriages: slaves, mercenaries, and other supporters of Nabis may have gained at least partial control over concrete property through marriages to these women.⁷⁶ On a base level, the phenomenon may remind us of Walter Scheidel's stark arguments about the ultimate fruits of empire and power: reproductive success and its proxy, sexual opportunities with females.⁷⁷ And finally, we cannot elude that theme so prevalent in Spartan demographic history: the troubles faced in in the pursuit of maintaining a high Spartiate population, due to earthquake deaths of the 460s BC, disenfranchisement, reproductive customs leading to low birthrates, and the largely impermeable nature of the Spartiate caste.⁷⁸ For it is these problems that led to the promotion of select Helots during the Peloponnesian War into the class known as the *Brasideioi* and *neodamodeis*, a promotion designed to maintain Spartan military strength, hampered as it was by the Spartiate population shortage in the fifth century BC. However, as we have seen, in Nabis' case, very different methods seem to have come into play than those used earlier to fill out the Spartan army in the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

Comparanda aid contextualization. Rather than singling Nabis out for special opprobrium, it should be noted that expulsions of husbands and forced marriages of wives have many parallels in the ancient world, in both reality and in ritual, culture, and mythology. There is the mention of marriage by *harpagē* or snatching amongst the Spartiates in Plutarch; almost certainly ritual in nature, but enshrining a motif of kidnapping wives.⁷⁹ Herodotos' history begins programmatically with his account of famous abductions of women, and these acts are threaded throughout his history.⁸⁰ The story of the Danaids as in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Maidens* involves a forced marriage, and this has been argued to be a reference to an event in Argos discussed below.⁸¹ A Roman comparandum, perhaps useful or at least interesting to ponder, is

⁷⁵ Οὔτε πατέρα θρινκαία τὸν ἔξοχον, οὔθ' ὁ Λακῶνων[ν],
Πλάτορα, θεσμοθέτας μέμψεται εἰν' Αἰῖδος,
ἀμφοτέραις πολέεσιν ἐπεὶ πλέον ἢ πάρος εἶχον
κῦδος ἐν ὑσμίναις ὠγαθὸς ἀγάγετο.
Ὅλβιε παῖ Σακόλα, τίν' δ' ἄλγεε κοινός+ Ἀριστο-
νίκᾳ ἐπὶ θρωϊσμῶ δειμα πόνδε τόδε,
ὄφρα καὶ ἐξ Ἀχέροντος ἀρείλθῃ γῦα διήνας
[μ]ικρὸν ἀπὸ σώας εὐνίδος ἦτορ ἔχοις. Steinhauer 1992, 239.

⁷⁶ Cartledge and Spawforth 1989, 70. Sparta's *nomos* of female inheritance: Aristotle, *Politics* 1270a20. Cf. the formulation in Asheri 1977, 29: "Sous les tyrans donc, entre 227 et 181 av. J.-C., les citoyens, les maîtres formels, les maris avaient plus d'une fois changé: seules les femmes étaient restées inamovibles, unique élément de continuité dans la tourmente de l'époque."

⁷⁷ Scheidel 2009.

⁷⁸ Hodkinson 2000.

⁷⁹ Plut. *Lyk.* 15; cf. Hdt. 6.65. Link 2004 (essential).

⁸⁰ Hdt. 1.1-4, 1.2, 1.3.1, 1.4, 2.114, 3.2, 6.16.2, 6.32, 6.138.

⁸¹ Asheri 1977, 31-32 believes this to reference the Argive situation in 494 (discussed in the text *infra*).

the canonical yet puzzling story of the abduction of and marriage with the Sabine girls in Livy.⁸²

Historic examples are several. There are the slaughters of captured cities' citizens and the enslavement of their wives and children in the cruel and ubiquitous Greek custom of *andrapodismos*.⁸³ Several Greek tyrants ordered (or are believed to have ordered) forced marriages; and we know of events like the elevation of slaves and "perioikoi" at Argos after the Argive hoplite class had been killed by Kleomenes of Sparta at the Battle of Sepeia in 494 BC.⁸⁴ And an imperfect yet instructive parallel may be marriages that Alexander the Great imposed between some 80 – 100 of his elite Macedonian officers and Persian women at Sousa, together with marriages occurring between his rank-and-file soldiers and their Eastern girlfriends.

This last example is particularly instructive. In the cases of both Alexander and Nabis, previous origins of homeland (*patris*) and bloodline were weakened. Although Badian's old characterization of Alexander's intention as the creation of "a new ruling class of mixed blood, which would be free of all national allegiance or tradition" may be exaggerated, nevertheless Plutarch had said something along similar lines, namely that Alexander, "by mixing into a loving *krater* their lives and ways and the marriages and customs, ordained that all should reckon the inhabited world as their fatherland."⁸⁵ It is hardly implausible that Alexander, if he planned for the continuation of the empire that he had won rather than having only a "flash in the pan," wished to "breed" a generation of mixed Eastern and Greco-Macedonian men for leadership. Considered in this light, Nabis' actions may seem less pathological and more far-seeing, despite their objectionable nature.

Moreover, Nabis' efforts might have experienced more positive regard over the next centuries if he had not suffered such harsh criticism early on and if his attempts at rule had been more successful. Despite Nabis' intentions or lack thereof regarding the loosening of the notion that the concept of the *patris* required specific descent-groups, and despite the forced marriages' depredatory nature toward Spartiate females, the marriages possessed a reproductive logic deeper than simply rewarding and fostering loyalty amongst the men whom he had brought in and promoted.

A purpose seems clear. New children would be created from these unions. The exiles, executions, and war-deaths of Spartiate males meant that the supply of eligible males considered to be of eminent stock (again, διαφέροντας ἢ δόξῃ προγονικῇ) was low in Sparta, although the lacunose and impressionistic nature of our sources prevents quantification. A

⁸² Cicero *de rep.* 2.12-14, Livy 1.9-13, Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. Rom.* 2.30-47, Ovid *Fasti* 3.167-258, *Ars Am.* 1.101-34, Plut. *Rom.* 14-20. Although possessing similar elements such as concerns about population, the Sabine abduction legend is early enough to have accreted its own constellation of aetiological importance, and features such issues as blood-ties with the Sabines and other nearby towns formed after the abduction. Brown 1995; Frascchetti 2002, 44-6.

⁸³ Those classicists interested in evolutionary psychology and/or "Big History"-type perspectives in the *longue durée* of comparative human behavior may also be reminded of analogous behavior among our close relatives, namely primates' frequent attacks against other primate groups, killing the males and children but taking the females in estrus to mate and reproduce with them. Generally, Wrangham and Peterson 1996, especially Chapter 7.

⁸⁴ Asheri 1977 is essential and perceptive.

⁸⁵ Badian 1964, 201, quoted in Green 1991, 448. Plut. *de Alex. Fort.* i: ὥσπερ ἐν κρατῆρι φιλοτησίῳ μίξας τοὺς βίους καὶ τὰ ἥθη καὶ τοὺς γάμους καὶ τὰς διαίτας, πατρίδα μὲν τὴν οἰκουμένην προσέταξεν ἡγεῖσθαι πάντας.

gender imbalance among more established members of the Spartiate caste certainly seems to have occurred at this juncture.

The slow entry of demography into the study of the “Classics” obligates us to think about fertility rates here.⁸⁶ It is quite likely that many women and girls of the most eminent aristocratic Spartiate bloodlines would have been reluctant to marry persons without similar credentials.⁸⁷ Under such unsettled conditions as this – with great numbers of high-ranking Spartiate males being expelled – these women might never have married, or may have refrained from marriage, or married late. In demographic terms, this would likely have grievously lowered the (traditionally already low among Spartiates) total group fertility rate and hence (also already low) future population of the Spartan citizen body, despite the new men brought in to supplement it. Nabis’ importation and elevation of other males, and his encouragement or coercion of Spartiate females to marry them, solved this demographic shortfall, regardless of the morally distasteful nature of these actions.

Seen in this way, these actions were an attempt to regenerate the Spartan citizen population biologically. The children of the unions with foreigners would be half-Spartiate, thus partially redeeming (in some way) Nabis’ non-traditional admixture of foreignness into Sparta’s full citizen caste. The ex-wives of those he destroyed and exiled would be not the playthings or slaves of Nabis’ eminent remaining men, elevated slaves, and mercenaries, but rather their wives, just as the Sabine women became legal wives of the Romans who seized them. It is in this action that Nabis’ program seems the most pathological in terms of sexuality while simultaneously logical in terms of the maintenance of the size of the citizen population.

The peculiar legends of the Partheniai from eighth-century BC Spartan myth-history offer a sort of mirror image, fittingly distorted, to Nabis’ act.⁸⁸ Two main mythical strands describe them. In one, the Partheniai were thought to be the children of Spartiates who had refused to fight in the First Messenian War – hence, purportedly tainted by cowardice, which Spartiate dogma seems to have considered hereditary.⁸⁹ In the other main tradition, while older Spartiates warred against the Messenians, their younger brothers were sent back to Sparta to impregnate Spartiate wives.⁹⁰ In this version, the Spartiate wives had observed that the Spartiates were reproducing at a lower rate than the Messenians were. The wives feared that Messenian philoprogenitiveness would eventually ensure military defeat for Sparta if nothing were done to match the Messenian reproduction-rate. Thus, the children of the younger Spartiates and their older brothers’ wives became known as the Partheniai. The Partheniai were then deprived of rights and accused of conspiring with helots, and next were expelled from mainland Greece, and finally established the polis of Taras, modern Tarentino in Italy,

⁸⁶ On demography’s entrance into Classical studies, cf. Holleran and Pudsey (ed.) 2011, especially the Introduction (1-13).

⁸⁷ This is the common practice of homogamy, analogous to and continuous with assortative mating practices. Assortative mating: the literature is extensive. Thiessen and Gregg 1980, is a good start.

⁸⁸ Partheniai: Aristotle *Pol.* 1306b29, Strabo 6.3.2-3, Cf. Paus. 10.10, 3.12. Hall 2007, 111 – 114.

⁸⁹ The fifth-century historian Antiokhos of Syrakousai, fr. 13, *apud* Strabo 6.3.2. On cowardice, Xen. *L. P.* 9.5. καὶ τὰς μὲν προσηκούσας κόρας οἶκοι θρεπτέον, καὶ ταύταις τῆς ἀνανδρίας αἰτίαν ὑφεκτέον, γυναικὸς δὲ κενὴν ἐστὶν οὐ περιπτέον καὶ ἅμα τοῦτου ζημίαν ἀποτεϊστέον. The Spartan rule punishing not only cowards from the breeding pool but their sisters is extreme; sisters are not targeted in this manner elsewhere in ancient Greek history as far as I know. This suggests that heredity and eugenics formed a strong focus in Spartan culture.

⁹⁰ Ephoros fragment 216, in Strabo 6.3.3. Cf. Aristotle *Pol.* 1306b29.

whose early settlement is datable archaeologically precisely to the putative time of the First Messenian War.⁹¹

Contrasting Nabis' program and the Partheniai legend will help us more clearly see the character of Nabis' reversal of Spartiate traditional mores. In the case of the Partheniai, the children of these unions were exiled: cowardice, or a birth that seemed illegitimate, was apparently thought unfit for someone to be a Spartiate. In Nabis' program, it is the children of these unions – unions in which Spartiate women were compelled to marry elevated helots or slaves, mercenaries, foreigners chosen without any recorded concern for physical form, or remaining Spartiate supporters of the man who would do this – who were intended to form the bulk of the next generations of full citizens at Sparta, and thus to provide the hereditary material for Sparta's citizens of the future. This insult to traditional Spartiate *nomoi* may be reasonably seen as a great fall from the old Spartiate aristocratic and (we may fairly say) eugenic ideology.

Conclusions

This article has surveyed the attempts at population manipulation by one Spartan king in the Hellenistic period in the face of Spartiate cultural forms, many of which, throughout Spartan history, were animated by cultural norms that aimed toward the maintenance of some ideal of purity of the Spartiate lineages. Nabis' efforts rejected the notion of hereditary ties to the Spartan polis and heredity of the Spartiates in general, and responded to exogenous pressures to “modernize” and normalize Sparta, that is, to make it become more similar to surrounding Greek states in the Hellenistic period.

Clearly, the Spartan kings Agis IV and Kleomenes III had seen that Sparta's disarray could be alleviated only by radical structural changes in the organization of the state. They respectively planned and carried out enfranchisements into the Spartiate caste of selected foreigners and *perioikoi*. These efforts successfully effected a military revival and a Spartan renaissance, which could have secured a position of considerable power among the Greek leagues and Hellenistic kingdoms of the period. While Agis' plans had highly concerned with replenishing the citizen body with those of the *perioikoi* and *xenoi* who fit specific ideas of wealth and bodily appearance, Kleomenes made some concessions to exogenous conditions and expectations, and held a more moderate stance toward the notion of purity of Spartiate lineages.

Nabis' modernization of Sparta to Hellenistic norms by such acts as the building of walls, continued issuing of coins, and enhancement of maritime trade was matched by what appears to be his abandonment of the state-protected set of *nomoi* that had previously been thought of as part of Spartiate citizen identity.⁹² These old *nomoi* were perhaps seen as an archaic holdover of privilege no longer conducive to social cohesion or economic success at Sparta, and this view of them may have been quite accurate.⁹³ Few selection principles are recorded for Nabis'

⁹¹ But note Meier 1998, 137-141.

⁹² Trade and coins: Kennell 2003. Walls: Livy 34.27.

⁹³ Texier 1975, 36 thinks more in terms of compromise than modernization.

acts of enfranchisement, and his only act of directed reproduction was one that contradicted and negated traditional Spartiate *nomoi*. A waning of the traditional, protection of Spartiate bloodlines also seemingly ran parallel to a blurring or downright erasure of caste distinctions in the Spartan state during the Hellenistic period, from the socio-economic turmoil in Agis' day to the breakdown of divisions between *hypomeion* and Spartiate and *perioikos* and slave or helot in Nabis' era. Later, the final destruction of the peculiarly Spartiate educational system known as the *agoge* by Philopoimen would only complete the process.

Thus, Nabis abandoned the unique array of reproductive and heredity-focused customs characteristic of Spartan society, including the protection of Spartiate bloodlines. He accelerated the process of erasure of caste distinctions visible in the earlier Hellenistic period. He enfranchised a wide and miscellaneous assortment of persons including foreigners and helots and created in this way an aggressive army that allowed a wider sort of empire, including Argos and some cities on Crete. He expelled Spartiates insufficiently loyal to him and forced their wives to marry mercenaries and slaves; this action seems to have been intended to reconstitute a class of full Spartan citizens. This led to the dismantling of the remains of the ancient aristocratic Spartiate cultural and demographic regime. His rule proved unsustainable and ran into the opposition of the Akhaians and Rome, opposition which finally crippled a good deal of what remained unique about the Spartiate system by killing, enslaving, and ejecting many Spartiates and by extirpating the *agoge*. Under Roman domination, Sparta, although retaining some museum-like displays of its former ferocity and culture, came to resemble in many respects other Hellenistic and Roman cities in terms of its funerary customs, its lack of a distinctive military ethos, its magistracies, and its citizens' involvement in commerce.

Unsurprisingly, Nabis' enfranchisements were coextensive temporally with Sparta's expansion into something resembling a small empire. His rule over Argos and cities in Crete could not have occurred without a force far larger than the remaining individuals from venerable Spartiate bloodlines. And this is true for all of Sparta's expansionist ventures. Sparta's efflorescence of power under Nabis runs parallel to what had occurred in Brasidas' and Lysander's era in the Classical period, and in some respect to Kleomenes' reign and even to Agesilaos' invasion of Asia: all involved the promotion of masses of non-Spartiates to expand Spartan military capabilities. These actions are to be contrasted with Sparta's existence as (in political theory terms) a "status quo" state before the Peloponnesian War, when Spartan soft imperialism in the sixth and much of the fifth century had been more constrained by an isolationist ideology. It is no surprise that in all periods of aggressive Spartan "revisionist state"-type imperial expansion, demographic enhancement through enfranchisement of various sorts had occurred.⁹⁴

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⁹⁴ "Revisionist" vs. "status-quo" states: Eckstein 2006.

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