

Nabis and the helots

Larisa PECHATNOVA¹

Abstract. *This paper explores the policy of the Spartan king Nabis towards the helots. Attention is drawn to the significant differences between the social politics of Nabis and the earlier reforms of the kings Agis IV and Cleomenes III. The author concludes that Nabis followed a completely new principle of Spartan citizenship formation. He liberated a number of helots and made them full citizens. However, Nabis was not able to overcome the helotry entirely, although he sought to abandon this type of slavery. Nabis, having accepted helots and foreigners as full members of the civil community, created a completely new type of citizens whose loyalty lay not so much with the state as with him personally. The radical social reforms of Nabis abolished the archaic principles of citizenship formation at the very moment when the Lycurgan Sparta finally disappeared. It became a monarchy of Hellenistic mould.*

Rezumat. *Autoarea explorează politica regelui spartan Nabis față de hiloți. Ea își îndreaptă atenția către diferențele semnificative dintre politica socială a lui Nabis și mai vechile reforme ale regilor Agis al IV-lea și Cleomenes al III-lea. Autoarea ajunge la concluzia că Nabis a urmat un principiu complet nou al formării cetățeniei spartane. El a eliberat un mare număr de hiloți și le-a conferit cetățenie deplină. Cu toate acestea, Nabis nu a făcut să dispară întru totul această categorie, deși a căutat să abandoneze acest tip de sclavaj. Nabis, acceptând hiloții și străinii ca membri cu depline drepturi în comunitate, a creat un tip complet nou de cetățeni a căror loialitate nu era atât față de stat, cât în raport cu persoana lui. Reformele sociale radicale ale lui Nabis au abolit principiile arhaice ale formării cetățeniei chiar în momentul în care Sparta lycurgică a dispărut. Ea a devenit o monarhie de tip elenistic.*

Keywords: helots, civil rights, Spartan citizen, Sparta, Nabis, Polybius, Livy.

In this paper, I set out to reconsider the existing historical testimonies that shed light on the liberation of the helots in Nabis' time. The fragmentary, and contradictory, nature of the evidence at hand makes this task somewhat challenging — a problem well reflected in the existing scholarship. There are quite a few articles which directly address the topic of helotry in Nabis' time, and they are far from new. My main task is to evaluate Nabis' reforms targeted at the creation of civil society, which, for the first time in the historical record, included a significant part of former helots. I will also suggest that, in the Hellenistic period, the social status of the helots had already changed and helots had become similar to 'classic' slaves in

¹ St. Petersburg State University, Institute of History, Russia; email: l.pechatnova@spbu.ru.

certain respects. In all likelihood, they had already been turned into objects of trade and could be freed from slavery by their private owners, rather than the state, as had been the case in earlier epochs (Ephor. ap. Strab. VIII. 5. 4, p. 365; Paus. III. 21. 6).

I should probably begin by pointing out once again that studying a topic related to Nabis' policy toward helots is a rather complex task for a number of reasons. First, the Hellenistic era in the Spartan history is quite a 'dark' period which is only scantily covered in sources (except perhaps that of the reign of the kings Agis IV and Cleomenes III). Second, the Spartan helots, who always remained in the shadow of a society obsessed with secrecy, extremely rarely feature in the narrative historical tradition. Remarkably, however, the well-known exception is the reign of Nabis (207–192 BC). Helots featured on Nabis' agenda, which is reflected in the sources and has helped the scholars to assess both the quantitative and qualitative changes introduced by Nabis into the previous structures of the Spartan polis. For the first time in the history of Sparta, the reforms affected the largest group of the Spartan population – the helots. However, despite the availability of sources, their fragmentary, problematic and ambiguous nature prevents us from gaining reliable insights and keep open a whole range of paths of historical investigation.

In what follows, I will offer my re-evaluation of the existing tradition on Nabis and helots and will start by providing an overview of the crucial scholarly literature.

Polybius and Titus Livy are our main sources on Nabis' reforms. Further comments are to be found in Diodorus, Pausanias, and Plutarch. But this apparent abundance is illusory, since it has long been proven that all the authors who mention Nabis had Polybius' work as their source².

In the scholarly literature, the king³ Nabis is usually considered as the spiritual successor of Spartan kings Agis IV and Cleomenes III⁴. In general, this view is correct, except that Nabis went a long way away from his predecessors in his policy towards helots. It should be remembered that the reforms of Agis and Cleomenes virtually failed to affect the helots as a large social group. The two kinds did not see them as object of their reforms and consideration of them did not really enter their decision-making process. It was only the financial and military urgency that forced Cleomenes to draw on the helots' material resources for replenishing the treasury. Shortly before the battle of Sellasia in 222 BC, he had liberated a relatively large group of helots—six thousand people—and had charged each of

² HADAS 1932, 74; OLIVA 1971, 274 f.

³ The fact that Nabis officially received the title of king (*basileus*) is confirmed in reliable, if scanty, sources, including epigraphy (IG XI. 4. 716=Sylloge³. 584). There are also coins with his name and royal title. However, in the tradition deriving from Polybius, which hostile to him, Nabis is typically called tyrant rather than king. Nabis, Polybius believed, was undoubtedly a tyrant. Therefore, in the surviving fragments, the Achaean historian only calls Nabis a tyrant, and his rule is referred to as «a long and grinding tyranny» (XIII. 6 – Henceforth translation by E. S. Shuckburgh)

⁴ HADAS 1932, 76; EHRENBERG 1935, 1473; JONES 1967, 161; OLIVA 1971, 279; BIRGALIAS 2005, 144; FORNIS 2016, 3 ff.

those five attic minae⁵ (Plut. Cleom. 23. 1). This transaction gave Cleomenes the significant gain of 500 talents. However, we should keep in mind that six thousand helots are only a small part of their total number⁶. Comprehensive manumission for the purpose of multiplying the number of citizens was of course out of question. I agree with those scholars who believe that Cleomenes, having freed some of the helots, pursued very limited goals and decided not to extend such practice to all the Laconian helots⁷. This was a measure caused only by a military crisis and the need to replenish the state treasury — a tactical maneuver in fact. We must admit, however, that before Cleomenes, to the best of our knowledge, such a large group of helots had never been freed in exchange for money⁸. This became an important precedent, soon to be followed on a much larger scale by Nabis.

Despite Polybius' extremely harsh opinion of Nabis' reforms, one can understand from the Philippics of the Achaean historian that Nabis radically changed the entire structure of Spartan citizenship by rejecting the former Lycurgan principles of his recruitment. First, like Cleomenes, he began to grant land and civil rights to foreign mercenaries (Polyb. XIII. 6. 3–4). In this manner, he sought to increase the number of new citizens who were loyal personally to him and not connected by family and friendly ties with the 'old' citizenship. Polybius is self-consciously emphatic about the radicalism and danger of such social reforms for the Achaean elite. He refers to Nabis as a patron «of murderers, housebreakers, footpads, and burglars» (XIII. 6. 4). But, as M. Hadas has correctly noted, Polybius' words that Nabis surrounded himself with scoundrels only are merely a value judgement⁹.

Secondly, following Agis and Cleomenes, Nabis took certain measures in favor of the vast numbers of impoverished citizens (*hypomeiones*)¹⁰. He entered into an open conflict with the privileged minority and went far beyond the more tentative approaches of earlier kings. Nabis turned to terror and intimidation of ones and sent into exile the others (Polyb. XIII. 6. 3–10; XVI. 13. 1). Through this 'purge', he probably sought to eliminate real or potential political opponents and seize their lands for redistribution among poor citizens, mercenaries, and helots.

⁵ While this is a rather high price, it is still within the norm for the ransom for slaves in other regions of Greece (KENNELL 2003, 85).

⁶ Within the ancient tradition there is almost no direct evidence regarding the number of helots. The idea of their huge number comes from Thucydides, who calls Sparta together with Chios the states with the largest number of slaves (VIII. 40. 2). In the modern scholarship it has become customary to understate the total number of helots rather than to exaggerate it. The consensus seems to be that the total number of helots was about two hundred thousand or less. For a review of scholarly opinions, see: OLIVA 1971, 53, n. 3; FIGUEIRA 2003, 198 ff.

⁷ FUKS 1962, 165 f.; OLIVA 1971, 52 ff.; 260; CARTLEDGE, SPAWFORTH 2002, 64.

⁸ L. Piper thinks that the Helots had the opportunity to buy their freedom already at the beginning of the 4th century BC. In my opinion, there is not enough ground to maintain that statement (PIPER 1984-1986, 75–88).

⁹ HADAS 1932, 76.

¹⁰ On the *hypomeiones*, see: PECHATNOVA 2014-2015, 6–21.

Thirdly, Nabis directly engaged with the helots in his reforms. In Laconia, they were the only significant human resource that Nabis could use. *Inter alia*, in 207 BC, shortly before Nabis came to power, Sparta had been practically depopulated, having lost all her army. In the battle of Mantinea, a great number of Spartans had perished (up to four thousand people), and even more had been taken prisoners (Polyb. XI. 18. 10; Plut. Phil. 10). More importantly, however, apart from the physical diminishing of the number of citizens in course of numerous wars, for a long period a process of marginalization of citizens in Sparta had been underway¹¹. Thus, by the time of Nabis, helots were indeed the only sizeable social class that could replace former citizens in the Spartan army.

Nabis introduced the liberation of the helots into his social program¹². All the sources at our disposal, especially Polybius (XVI. 1. 1) and Livy (XXXIV. 29. 9), clearly and unambiguously confirm that Livy reports Nabis' speech delivered before the Roman commander Titus Quintius Flamininus (195 BC), in which the Spartan king evokes the "slavish" theme a number of times. Nabis admits that he called the slaves to freedom and endowed the poor with land (...*quod servos ad libertatem voco, quod in agros inopem plebem deduco* — XXXIV. 31. 11), but in his defense states that his main goal was multiplication of the number of citizens (*quod ad multitudinem servis liberandis auctam* — XXXIV. 31. 13). Liby frames Nabis' speech with notable sympathy rather than with condemnation. Granted, Livy did not approve of the social innovations of the Spartan king, but, unlike Polybius, he did not burn with hatred towards Nabis.

Polybius, no doubt, perceived the liberation of the helots as part of the tyrant's policy aimed at changing the social structure of Spartan citizenship through reliance on «murderers, housebreakers, footpads, and burglars» (XIII. 6. 4). This policy was unacceptable for the Achaean elite. However, alongside Polybius' invectives picturing Nabis as a pathologically cruel tyrant pursuing his enemies everywhere, «so that there was no place of retreat, and no moment of security for the unfortunate Lacedaemonians» (XIII. 6. 5–10), and

¹¹ By the 3rd century BC Sparta, due to the huge imbalance in the distribution of land between the rich and the poor, as well as the problem of debt, found itself in approximately the same situation in which most of the Greek states had been in the archaic period. The main problem for Sparta was the catastrophic decline in the number of full citizens. According to Plutarch, by the time of Agis IV «... there were left of the old Spartan families not more than seven hundred, and of these there were perhaps a hundred who possessed land and allotment; while the ordinary throng, without resources and without civic rights, lived in enforced idleness, showing no zeal or energy in warding off foreign wars...» (Agis 5. 6–7 / translation by B. Perrin).

¹² Together with most other scholars (OLIVA 1971, 271; TEXIER 1974, 194; CARTLEDGE, SPAWFORTH 2002, 69 f.; KENNELL 2003, 90), I believe that the word "slave" (δοῦλος, οἰκέτης, or servus), whenever it is used in sources in contexts dealing with Nabis' reforms, is equivalent to the word "helot" (εἰλωτός), while admittedly neither term covers a neatly defined phenomenon. Because of the ambiguity and *double-entendre* often seen in the terms as used by Polybius (XVI. 13. 1) and Liby (XXXIV. 31. 11; XXXVIII. 34. 6), we cannot say with complete certainty that it was exclusively helots who were freed by Nabis rather than slaves of the 'classic' type, who probably would also be present in Sparta.

as a ruler who gathered around him «a number of bad characters in Sparta» (XVI. 13. 2), there are fragments that shed light on specific processes on the ground taking place in Sparta. Below I adduce the most important fragment which, apart from declarations, offers valuable factual material. According to Polybius, Nabis «drove the citizens into exile, freed the slaves, and gave them the wives and daughters of their masters...» (XVI. 13. 1).

If Polybius' account is to be believed, the inevitable conclusion is that Nabis rendered helots, who had formerly belonged to the class to exiles, not only free people, but also full citizens (Spartiates) and gave them the kleroi taken away from their former owners. He also granted them the right to marry Spartan citizens — more specifically, the wives and daughters of all those who had been sent into exile. These two aspects—the repossession of the kleroi and the marriages with Spartan women—turned the former helots into full citizens.

This interpretation is indirectly confirmed by Livy, who calls all freedmen “ascribed to the Lacedaemonians” (*Lacedaemoniis adscripti*) (XXXVIII. 34. 6). I can also invoke N. Kennell's authority who has convincingly shown that the Latin version—*Lacedaemoniis adscripti*—is the translation of the Greek phrase οἱ προσγραφέντες πρὸς τοὺς Λακεδαιμονίους. In his opinion, «from the epigraphical parallels, it is clear that the phrase carried no connotation of inferior or separate status with it beyond that of belonging to a group of newly-enrolled citizens»¹³.

Scholars typically read Livy's *Lacedaemoniis adscripti* as evidence that Nabis did not only liberated helots, but also granted civil rights to them¹⁴. Thus, according to J.-J. Texier, «ils (les hilotes) devinrent *Lacedaemoniis adscripti*, c'est-à-dire membres de la communauté lacédémonienne à part entière, avec évidemment certains devoirs, militaires et fiscaux notamment, mais aussi avec tous les droits que cela conférait»¹⁵. They were no longer Spartiates in the older sense of this word, of course. As a matter of fact, Nabis created a new social group — citizens answerable personally to him, a class which included elements with a range of social origins: *hypomeiones*, foreign mercenaries and, finally, former helots. The latter were most likely the largest group among new citizens. This community created by Nabis was quite different from the one formerly structured according to the Lycurgan pattern. I suggest that the social place of the former Spartiates, the remnants of whom were destroyed or expelled by Nabis, was taken over by the new citizens whose rights no longer directly depended on the observance of the previously binding requirements (ownership of land, state education /*agoge*/ and participation in public dinners /*syssitia*/). I do not wish to follow, however, J. Ducat who argues that the integration of the helots liberated by Nabis was only partial and that, as a result, they formed a separate group (like *neodamodes* had

¹³ KENNEL 2003, 93 f.

¹⁴ OLIVA 1971, 281, n. 3; BIRGALIAS 2005, 146, n. 27.

¹⁵ TEXIER 1974, 196.

earlier)¹⁶. I am inclined to agree more with those scholars who think that Nabis, in his quest for similarity with Hellenistic monarchs, intended to make the rights of all citizens—both new and old—equal, therefore overthrowing statuses and former hierarchies¹⁷. According to the Spanish historian S. Fornis, «Nabis, granting land and civil rights to the helots, disturbed the social and economic structure of the Lacedaemon state»¹⁸.

It is probable that by the time when Nabis had engaged in the liberation of the helots, they already had gone some way from being helots of the ‘old type’, i.e. communal slaves who would belong to the entire community *in corpore*. They had long been the private property of Spartan “latifundists” — the few wealthy citizens who had monopolized the land and seized power. The *kleroi*, together with the helots, passed into the hands of the well-propertied citizens, including women, through various economic transactions (will-making, gifts, mortgages, dowries, etc.). This process was in full swing already in the fourth century BC and reached a truly tremendous size by the middle of the third century BC, that is, by the time of Agis IV (Arist. Pol. II. 6. 11–12, 1270a; Plut. Agis 5. 6–7). That is probably why Nabis took the trouble to expel the richest landowners and redistribute the confiscated *kleroi* between the former helots. In this manner, he made them free people and taxpayers.

As sources are scarce and difficult to interpret in unambiguously, offering an estimate of the actual scale of Nabis’ manumission is challenging. Some scholars believe that only one group of helots was freed from slavery: they could be the helots who had formerly belonged to the wealthy aristocratic Spartans and whom Nabis had expelled¹⁹. This, however, would not have been a particularly extensive group of helots, and it is hardly likely that Nabis would limit himself to them only. His active foreign policy required a permanent source of soldiers to draw on. It is much more likely therefore that all those helots that the Spartans needed were granted freedom. It would seem their numbers would be quite big. This interpretation is corroborated by Liby’s report. In his account of the urgent recruitment of troops conducted by Nabis in 195 BC, Livy mentions, alongside the Cretan mercenaries, «ten thousand of his own countrymen along with the rural guards...» (*decem milia popularium cum castellanis*

¹⁶ J. Ducat, in an attempt to prove that the ex-helots did not become full citizens, rejects Polybius’ account of the helots’ marriage with Spartan women on the grounds that the fragment of Polybius in the 16th book (13.1) contradicts to the fact that in the 13th (6. 3), where the wives of exiles are said to marry not slaves but supporters of Nabis and his mercenaries. The version in offered the 13th book seems more plausible to J. Ducat, since Polybius, as the French scholar believes, not being an admirer of Nabis, could deliberately distort the picture by replacing helots with foreign mercenaries (DUCAT 1990, 171 f.). In fact, it is possible, and a similar metamorphosis sometimes happened (Xen. Hell. III. 5. 12; Isocr. IV. 111). In this case, however, I do not find Ducat’s arguments convincing. Polybius exaggerated and negatively assessed all the initiatives of Nabis, of course, but he did not tamper with the facts themselves. The two Polybius’ are not, therefore, mutually contradictory. Rather, they in their own ways complement the general picture of the granting of land to the new citizens of different origin.

¹⁷ TEXIER 1975, 35; MENDELS 1982, 93; BIRGALIAS 2005, 146, n. 27.

¹⁸ FORNIS 2016, 5.

¹⁹ See particularly PIPER 1984–1986, 85 ff.; BIRGALIAS 2005, 144 f.

agrestibus in armis habuit — XXXIV. 27. 2). In a further passage in the same chapter, however, Livy talks about the massacre which the rebels in the city suffered at Nabis' hands and explains that “*castellani, agreste genus*” (villagers living in fortified settlements) and “*ilotae*” (helots) are the same population group (27. 9). Hence, Nabis could easily recruit a large “public” army, diverse in its composition. His army would include several thousand new citizens and a certain number of helots, for whom the military service probably guaranteed freedom and citizenship.

Apparently, in response to the military need Nabis was freeing one group of helots after another and calling them into the army. Most likely therefore, there was no manumission *per saltum*, and the process of helots' liberation continued throughout the reign of Nabis. The defeat of Nabis in 195 BC, which he suffered from the combined forces of the anti-Spartan coalition led by Flamininus, as well as the early death of the king in 192 BC, put an end to his actions for the liberation of the helots. Admittedly, this process never reached completion, and in Sparta, after a decade of revolutionary transformations, there were still a number of helots. That is probably how one can understand Liby's testimony that in 195 BC Nabis, in a besieged city and fearing the flight of disloyal helots to the Romans, turned to terror, the usual practice for a tyrant: «Then some of the *ilotae*, rural people who had been country-dwellers from remote antiquity, were charged with trying to desert, driven with whips through all the streets, and put to death. By thus inspiring fear he stunned the minds of the crowd and prevented any attempt at revolution» (XXXIV. 27. 9). Perhaps Nabis' misgivings about helots were justified. However it may be, Strabo maintains that «Perioeci and also the Helots, at the time when Sparta was under the rule of the tyrants, were the first to attach themselves to the Romans», something for which already as «the Eleuthero-Lacones got a kind of republican constitution» (VIII. 5. 5. p. 366)²⁰.

The fate of the new citizens of Nabis after his death in 192 BC was decided by Philopoemen, the strategos of the Achaean League, who conquered Sparta in 188 BC. *Inter alia*, he dismissed the mercenaries of Nabis from military service and expelled all those whom the Spartan king had made citizens. According to Liby, «it was first ordered... that the slaves whom the tyrants had freed—their number was large—should depart before a designated day; if any of them remained the Achaeans were to have the right to seize, carry off and sell them». Livy's mentioning of those people twice in the same chapter is noteworthy. In the first instance, he calls them «the slaves whom the tyrants had freed» (*quae servitia tyranni liberassent*) and explains that «their number was large» (*ea magna multitudo erat* — XXXVIII. 34. 2). In the second, he refers to them as “ascribed to the Lacedaemonians” (*Lacedaemoniis*

²⁰ The communities of the Perioeci, united in the alliance of “the Eleuthero-Lacones”, almost certainly took in their ranks those helots who fled away from Nabis as Romans were approaching. This process could also have contributed to the disappearance of the *heiloteia* as a social institute (KENNELL 2010, 278).

adscriptos)²¹ and explains that «*ita enim vocabant qui ab tyrannis liberati errant*» (34. 6). Livy thus comments on the future of those «ascribed to the Lacedaemonians»: «...the slaves whom the tyrants had freed... should depart before a designated day; if any of them remained the Achaeans were to have the right to seize, carry off and sell them» (*urbe excessisse et in agros dilapsos... comprehendere id genus hominum et vendere iure praedae placuit. multi comprehensi venierunt*) (34. 6–7).

Plutarch's input is about the same: «...in the case of those who had been made citizens of Sparta (πολιται τῆς Σπάρτης) by the tyrants, he [Philopoemen – L.P.] removed them all into Achaia...» (Philop. 16. 4 / here and below translated by B. Perrin)²². Plutarch provides no clue as to the number of ex-helots interned in Achaia. He does, however, give indication of the number of those who refused to leave Sparta and were sold into slavery as punishment. There were three thousands of those «who would not obey him and were unwilling to go away from Sparta. These he [Philopoemen – L.P.] sold into slavery, and then, as if to mock their fate, erected a portico in Megalopolis with the money which they brought» (Philop. 16. 5–6). It follows from Plutarch's text that the «three thousand who... were unwilling to go away from Sparta» also refer to citizens.

The only source that uniquely identifies these three thousand sold into slavery with the former helots is the antiquarian Pausanias. According to him, «Philopoemen... sold some three thousand Helots» (VIII. 51. 3 / translated by W.H.S. Jones). Although Pausanias is not a perfectly reliable source, in this particular case we should not ignore his testimony. Like Plutarch, he may have derived the number he gives from Polybius. This, of course, are the same three thousand that Plutarch also reports (Philop. 16. 5–6). I would suggest that people who refused to leave Sparta were probably the ones who most valued their new status and social benefits. They were owners of vacant land plots who had acquired the wives and daughters of their former masters alongside the land (Polyb. XVI. 13. 1).

Unfortunately, there is only one exact figure that we have at our disposal: three thousand new citizens who did not obey Philopoemen's orders. Livy, referring to the number of all «slaves whom the tyrants had freed who... should leave Laconian territory...», speaks rather

²¹ K. Chrimes (CHRIMES 1952, 40) has offered a witty, if somewhat arbitrary interpretation of the expressions “castellani agrestes” and “Lacedaemoniis adscripti” (XXXIV. 27. 2; XXXVIII. 34. 6) as a Latin version of the Spartan term “neodamodeis”, which, she believed, must have stood in the Greek original. This is, would be a gross anachronism, as neodamodeis was a phenomenon that had had place during the Peloponnesian War and the Spartan Hegemony (421–370 BC) and which we should not to speculatively project forth to later epochs, as is done by K. Chrimes and W. Robins. P. Oliva rightly describes similar analogies as «pure fiction». For the debate between P. Oliva and B. Shimron, K. Chrimes and W. Robins, see: OLIVA 1971, 167 f., 280; SHIMRON 1966, 1–6.

²² Livy, and Plutarch, and Strabo (VIII. 5. 5. p. 365) use the word “tyrant” in the plural, apparently borrowing it precisely in this form from Polybius. For Polybius, all the Spartan rulers who fought with the Achaean League were tyrants, regardless of their official title and real actions.

in terms of an abstract idea of large and small quantities, and describes their numbers as a “great multitude” (*ea magna multitudo erat*) (XXXVIII. 34. 2). A figure much greater than three thousand apparently stands behind this sort of phrasing.

A whole constellation of sources, therefore, bear witness to that fact that Nabis did indeed set free a considerable number of helots — but not their entirety, however. He did not dismantle helotry as a social institute; still, he set in motion the social mechanics of mass liberation of helots. Whatever the case, during the Roman rule, there was no more heiloteia (as this is arguably how one can understand Strabo's rather vague chronological remark that «the system of Heilote-slavery... continued... to the establishment of the dominion of the Romans» (μέχρι τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἐπικρατείας — VIII. 5. 4. p. 365; cp. IX. 1. 20; 2. 39).

The majority of historians support this well-established scholarly perspective. Thus, according to B. Shimron, «Nabis did not completely destroy heiloteia, and its continuation after 195 and very probably long after Nabis may be assumed to be a historical fact»²³. P. Cartledge also believes that helotry in one form or another survived the reign of Nabis²⁴.

Following the scholarly consensus, I would consider the liberation of the helots as a revolutionary change which was part of the general legislative package of Nabis. Here are some conclusions which a number of senior scholars have reached regarding the question of helotry. According to A. Toynbee, Nabis reduced the number of helots to such an extent that helotry ceased to be a serious social and political problem for the Spartan state²⁵. P. Oliva is of a similar opinion: «...even if Nabis did not abolish helotry, the changes he made in the social structure of the Spartan population were sharp and far more radical than the reforms of Kleomenes in his day»²⁶. P. Cartledge called the emancipation of helots «the death-blow he (Nabis — L.P.) dealt to Helotage, a truly archaic form of servitude... It was all of a piece with what for want of a better word I can only describe as Nabis' concerted 'modernizing' of Spartan society and economy as a whole»²⁷.

Some scholars have even argued that Nabis destroyed helotry as an institution. I would in particular quoted J. Texier, the author of the monograph on Nabis: «Il n'est donc pas interdit de penser que, du fait des réformes opérées par Nabis, l'hilotie se trouva abolie en tant que type archaïque de dépendance, et que le terme hilotie, continuant d'être employé par habitude, commodité ou méconnaissance des nouvelles réalités profondes de Lacédémone, ait dorénavant désigné—en fait—une tout autre chose»²⁸. However, the tradition about the existence of helotry after Nabis does not confirm Texier's excessively radical conclusions.

²³ SHIMRON 1966, 3.

²⁴ CARTLEDGE, SPAWFORTH 2002, 64.

²⁵ TOYNBEE 1969, 203.

²⁶ OLIVA 1971, 282.

²⁷ CARTLEDGE, SPAWFORTH 2002, 64.

²⁸ TEXIER 1974, 199.

Let us sum up the results of the above discussion. First, I would like to stress that Nabis, having made full members of civil society out of slaves and foreigners, created a model of the state which was entirely different from that of the classical Spartan polis (the latter had been constructed according to the Lycurgan model). The radical reorganization of the civil structure was a complete breakaway from the policies of Nabis' predecessors, even if, in his rhetoric, he proclaimed a wish to become their successor. Drawing on the previously extra societal or semi-assimilated types of population—foreigners, helots and Hypomeiones—Nabis accomplished the task of an almost entire renewal of the civic body and created a novel type of citizens who would be loyal not so much to the state as to him personally. This was to become particularly evident in the unwavering loyalty of new citizens towards Nabis. It was most likely mercenaries and former helots who gave unconditional support to Nabis; they were also the ones who benefited most from his reforms. They formed the core of his army²⁹.

Their personal loyalty to Nabis continued to manifest itself even after the death of their benefactor in 192 BC. The new citizens massacred all the murderers of Nabis — a group of Aetolians led by Alexamenus (Liv. XXXV. 36. 9–10). We do not possess any hard evidence of conspiracies or riots directed against Nabis. If there had been such, these, of course, would have been reflected in our sources. Polybius and Livy, who portray Nabis as a cruel and ruthless tyrant, would most likely have mentioned such facts³⁰.

The historians that positively assess Nabis reforms typically consider him as an innovator who managed to implement of coherent program of modernization of the Spartan society and economy. Thus, according to P. Cartledge, «like the boost his policies gave to artisanal and trading activities, it encouraged a more open, flexible, market-oriented social formation»³¹.

Upon the foundation of the new civil class he had created Nabis planted a new political regime which was monarchical in its essence. This came to a dramatic clash with traditional constitution of Sparta but was close to the models of his time — the constitutions of the Macedonian rules. As has been noted in scholarship time and again (including the most recent research)³², in the social sphere Nabis carried out deeper reforms than those of his predecessors — the Spartan kings Agis IV and Cleomenes III. Radical social reforms of Nabis abolished the archaic principles of the formation of citizenship, and with them, at last, Lycurgan Sparta passed away, having turned into a monarchy of the Hellenistic type.

²⁹ PIPER 1984–1986, 86 f.

³⁰ FORNIS 2016, 11.

³¹ CARTLEDGE, SPAWFORTH 2002, 64.

³² BIRGALIAS 2005, 150; FORNIS 2016, 3.

References

- BIRGALIAS, N. 2005. Nabis: un prince hellénistique? *Gerión Anejos* 9, 139–151.
- CARTLEDGE, P., A. SPAWFORTH 2002. *Hellenistic and Roman Sparta: A Tale of Two Cities*. 2nd ed. London–New York.
- CHRIMES, K.M.T. 1952. *Ancient Sparta. A Re-Examination of the Evidence*. Manchester.
- DUCAT, J. 1990. *Les Hilotes*. Athens–Paris.
- EHRENBERG, V. 1935. Nabis. In: *Real Encyclopädie der Altertumswissenschaft* XVI, 32, 1471–1474. Stuttgart.
- FIGUEIRA, Th. 2003. The Demography of the Spartan Helots. In: N. Luraghi, S.E. Alcock (eds). *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures*, 193–239. Cambridge.
- FORNIS, C. 2016. La basileía “revolucionaria” de Nabis. *Sociedades Precapitalistas* 5(2), 1–19.
- FUKS, A. 1962. Agis, Cleomenes, and Equality. *Classical Philology* 57(3), 161–166.
- HADAS, M. 1932. The Social Revolution in Third-century Sparta. *The Classical Weekly* 26(10), 73–76.
- JONES, A.H.M. 1967. *Sparta*. Oxford.
- KENNEL, N. 2003. Agreste Genus: Helots in Hellenistic Laconia. In: N. Luraghi, S.E. Alcock (eds). *Helots and Their Masters in Laconia and Messenia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures*, 81–105. Cambridge.
- KENNEL, N. 2010. *Spartans. A New History. Ancient Cultures*. New York—Oxford—Chichester.
- MENDELS, D. 1982. Polybius and the Socio-economic Revolution in Greece (227–146 BC). *L'antiquité Classique* 51(1), 86–110.
- OLIVA, P. 1971. *Sparta and Her Social Problems*. Prague.
- PECHATNOVA, L. 2014–2015. Zum Problem der sozialen Widersprüche in Sparta (Die spartanischen Hypomeiones). *Novyj Hermes* 7, 6–21.
- PIPER, L.J. 1984–1986. Spartan Helots in the Hellenistic Age. *Ancient Society* 15–17, 75–88.
- SHIMRON, B. 1966. Nabis of Sparta and the Helots. *Classical Philology* 61(1), 1–6.
- TEXIER, J.G. 1974. Nabis et les Hilotes. *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 1(1), 189–205.
- TEXIER, J.G. 1975. *Nabis*. Paris.
- TOYNBEE, A. 1969. *Some Problems of Greek History. III. The Rise and Decline of Sparta*. London.



© 2018 by the authors; licensee Editura Universității Al. I. Cuza din Iași. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons by Attribution (CC-BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).