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# Damaris (Acts 17:34) and an Aristocratic Family from Sparta

*Neglected Epigraphic Evidence on the Name of a Female Disciple*

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## Abstract

This article surveys epigraphic evidence for Damaris, Damares and Damari(o)n to show that these are distinctively Spartan or Laconian names. It rejects the hypothesis that Damaris is a Lukan construction from Homeric δάμαρ (wife) or a typical name for a courtesan. Positively, it suggests that the woman named Damaris in Acts 17:34 could be imagined as a member of the Voluseni family, a prominent Spartan family connected with the Athenian elite. Finally, it examines the rhetorical force that a recognizably Spartan name could have in the narrative of Acts.

## Keywords

Damaris – Acts – epigraphy – Sparta – Athens

Among those who believe after hearing Paul's famous Areopagus speech in Athens, the author of Acts singles out two individuals by name: Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris (Acts 17:34).<sup>1</sup> While Dionysius has attracted much scholarly attention because of his high social status, which is implied in the label "Areopagite," scholars usually note about Damaris only

1 Codex Bezae omits the line *καὶ γυνὴ ὀνόματι Δάμαρις*, either consciously or due to an *Augensprung* from the first to the second *καὶ*; it adds *εὐσχήμων* to the reference to Dionysius. Codex Laudianus adds *τίμια* after *γυνή*. For a discussion of the manuscripts and an excellent survey of the reception history of Damaris, cf. J.W. Childers, "A Reluctant Bride: Finding a Life for Damaris of Athens (Acts 17:34)," in *Renewing Tradition: Studies in Texts and Contexts in Honor of James W. Thompson* (ed. M.W. Hamilton, T.H. Olbricht, and J. Peterson; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007) 207–235.

that her name is virtually unattested in Greek. A few studies have explored in more detail the little information that the narrative supplies about her: the origin of her name, her presence as woman in an Athenian court, and the possibility that she is to be counted among the philosophers who brought Paul before the Areopagus. In this article, I will review these studies and then survey ancient epigraphic evidence for a Spartan family with Athenian connections, in which the male name Damares occurs in several generations. I will consider the possibility that Damaris was a member of this family, and explore how a recognizably Spartan name contributes to the rhetoric of the narrative of Acts.

### 1 What's in a Name? Previous Scholarship on the Construction of Damaris

In 1999, David Gill published an article on Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris in which he questioned the historicity of these individuals. According to the prevailing consensus at the time, their names were taken from tradition and were perhaps the only details in the episode of Paul's stay in Athens which the author did not invent. Against this consensus, Gill suggested that also the names were "plausible inventions by the author to illustrate and lend particularity to his point that a few Athenians, but prominent ones, were converted to Christianity by Paul's speech."<sup>2</sup> They were part of the general Athenian local colour which has made this episode of Acts so famous.

Indeed, in the case of Dionysius, Gill's case works quite well. After all, Dionysius is a very common Athenian name, and his designation as an Areopagite reflects the setting of Paul's speech in the renowned Areopagus court. Although these considerations do not provide positive proof of the invention of Dionysius, they provide a plausible explanation why an author, wishing to add some vividness to his narrative by including two individuals, would come up with Dionysius the Areopagite. His name and function is as stereotypical as that of Rhoda, the slave girl (Acts 12:13), or of Lydia, the Lydian woman from Thyatira (Acts 16:40).<sup>3</sup>

With regard to Damaris, however, Gill's arguments are less persuasive. After a lengthy discussion of Dionysius, he only notes that the name of Damaris is very rare, joining Colin Hemer in the conclusion that her name is "apparently

2 D.H. Gill, "Dionysios and Damaris: A Note on Acts 17:34," *CBQ* 61 (1999) 484.

3 On Lydia, see for example E. Ebel, *Lydia und Berenike: Zwei selbständige Frauen bei Lukas* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012); A. Gruca-Macaulay, *Lydia as a Rhetorical Construct in Acts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016). Eva Ebel argues in favour of Lydia's historicity, Alexandra Gruca-Macaulay interprets her as a rhetorical construct of the author.

unparalleled.”<sup>4</sup> Gill suggests that the author has constructed the name from the noun δάμαρ (“female spouse”) plus the feminine name termination -ις. “It is just the right *kind* of name for the context. Δάμαρ is an old-fashioned, poetic word, and so the name Damaris is calculated to sound ancient and respectable—like Areopagus.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, “there is no reason to believe that Luke did *not* invent the name.”<sup>6</sup> As a parallel, he refers to the slave girl Photis in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, apparently constructed to reflect the main character’s Latin name Lucius. Clare Rothschild builds on his argument, suggesting a Lukan interest in the etymology of the name Damaris.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the derivation of Δάμαρις from Δάμαρ, denoting “wife,” is already suggested in the 13th-century Byzantine lexicon of Pseudo-Zonaras.<sup>8</sup> However, this etymology is debatable. Below, we will survey evidence for individuals named Damaris or Damares. The fact that the feminine and masculine form occur side by side, makes a derivation from a noun with the meaning “wife” unlikely. Gill’s hypothesis can be dismissed alongside the derivations from Egyptian *T’-mr* (J. Gwyn Griffiths) or from Hebrew Tamar (William M. Furneaux).<sup>9</sup> Rather than speculating on the construction of this name, the epigraphic evidence for her name deserves more detailed analysis than has been given to it.

## 2 A Woman Present in Court: A Courtesan?

More than a century ago, William Ramsay commented on Damaris:

One woman was converted at Athens; and it is not said that she was of good birth, as was stated at Beroea and Thessalonica and Pisidian Antioch. The difference is true to life. It was impossible in Athenian society for a

4 C.J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) 232. Quoted in Gill, “Dionysios and Damaris,” 487. Strangely, Keener refers to the same page from Hemer’s book for his statement that the name is “not symbolic; it is uncommon, though attested.” C.S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014) 3:2678. In fact, Hemer provides a number of attestations for closely related names and calls into question the commonness of the name Damalis; he does not give any evidence for the attestation of Damaris.

5 Gill, “Dionysios and Damaris,” 487.

6 Gill, “Dionysios and Damaris,” 487.

7 “Damaris is an extremely appropriate name for a prostitute convert to Christianity insofar as the name reflects an emphasis on marriage over extra-marital affairs with courtesans.” C.K. Rothschild, *Paul in Athens: The Popular Religious Context of Acts 17* (WUNT 341; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 97.

8 Cf. Childers, “Bride,” 209.

9 Cf. the discussion in Childers, “Bride,” 209–210.

woman of respectable position and family to have any opportunity of hearing Paul; and the name Damaris (probably a vulgarism for *damalis*, heifer) suggests a foreign woman, perhaps one of the class of educated *Hetairai*, who might very well be in his audience.<sup>10</sup>

The thesis that Damaris is a vulgarism for Damalis goes back to Hugo Grotius (1583–1645),<sup>11</sup> but has been called into question by Colin Hemer, who demonstrated that the name Damalis is just as rare as Damaris.<sup>12</sup> Ramsay is right to note that it is not an Athenian name. It is questionable, however, whether her presence in court (rather than in the inner rooms of an Athenian house) can be taken to indicate that she was a *ἑταίρα*. In classical Athens, *ἑταίραι* participated in the social activities of the elite men as both sexual and intellectual companions.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the most recent and most thorough defence for the interpretation of Damaris as a courtesan, Clare Rothschild interprets her as part of a depiction of Athens informed by classical literature rather than reflecting Roman Athens of Paul's day.<sup>14</sup> However, the philosophers present in Athens are from the schools that dominate the philosophical scene in the first century (especially in Rome).<sup>15</sup> The presence of a synagogue is another feature that would induce ancient readers to envisage Roman Athens rather than classical Athens. Roman Athens presented itself to its visitors as the living heir of classical Athens,<sup>16</sup> but it is likely that under the influence of Rome, elite women had more freedom to appear in public than in classical Athens. Of another female character in Acts, queen Berenice, it is known that she presided as judge in Roman courts.<sup>17</sup> Berenice is probably an exception in this regard, but it is not unlikely that prominent women would attend a hearing of Paul in the Areopagus court. At least, Damaris' presence in the court does not

10 W.M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (New York: Putnam, 1909) 252. Ramsay's view is repeated almost verbatim in B. Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 532–533. Craig Keener refers to Witherington for the possible derivation of Damaris from Damalis, but is more skeptical regarding the possibility that she was a *ἑταίρα*. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2678–2680.

11 H. Grotius, *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum* (9 vols.; Groningen: Zuidema, 1828) 5:163. Cf. Childers, "Bride," 209.

12 Hemer, *Book of Acts*, 232. BDAG, s.v. *Δάμαρις*, also refers to this page.

13 Cf. C.A. Faraone and L.K. McClure, *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

14 Rothschild, *Paul*, 94–106.

15 Cf. L. Scornaienchi, "Paolo, Luca, Cicerone: Il dibattito sulla natura della divinità e la citazione di Arato di Soli in Atti 17,28," *Protestantesimo* 63 (2008) 210.

16 F. Frazier, "Athènes historique, Athènes éternelle: Le regard de Plutarque sur la ville et ses monuments," *Euphrosyne* 44 (2016) 80.

17 Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.1.19.

necessarily imply that she is characterized in the narrative of Acts as a courtesan. Also, the text does not suggest that she accompanies Dionysius in any way; it only informs the reader of a number of individuals who follow Paul, and provides the name of a man and of a woman from among these individuals as being particularly noteworthy.

### 3 Dionysius and Damaris among the Philosophers?

Another possibility is that Damaris is to be reckoned among the philosophers who brought Paul to the Areopagus. This is argued by Ivoni Richter Reimer, as part of a feminist-theological exegesis of the women mentioned in Acts.<sup>18</sup> She argues that Damaris' independence and her association with the Areopagus identify her as a philosopher. Indeed, since philosophers take Paul to the Areopagus to present his teaching, the reader may well assume that the response to Paul's speech is the response of the philosophers, and that Dionysius and Damaris are to be reckoned among them. Such a reading enabled a fifth-century Christian Neo-Platonist to write under the pseudonym of Dionysius Areopagita. Moreover, the school of Epicurus in particular was famous for its female disciples—a reputation linked in the ancient sources with a critique of Epicurean hedonism, which allowed Epicurus to indulge in lavish dinner parties with an abundance of food, drink, and women.<sup>19</sup>

However, the narrative does not emphasize the adherence of Dionysius and Damaris to the group of philosophers who brought Paul before the Areopagus—and with good reason. The author of Acts does not seek to incur the favour of the philosophers for the school of the disciples of the Lord. The philosophers are introduced as exemplary representatives of the Athenians, who “devoted their leisure to nothing else but to say or to hear something new” (17:21). This reflects not only the stereotype of Athenians as curious busybodies,<sup>20</sup> but also a Roman stereotype of philosophers as people who retreat from their duties in public life to spend their time disputing the teaching of other philosophical schools.<sup>21</sup> The author of Acts depicts Paul as a far

18 I. Richter Reimer, *Frauen in der Apostelgeschichte des Lukas: Eine feministisch-theologische Exegese* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992) 254.

19 P. Gordon, “Remembering the Garden: The Trouble with Women in the School of Epicurus,” in *Philodemus and the New Testament World* (ed. J.T. Fitzgerald, D.D. Obbink, and G.S. Holland; NovTSup 111; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 221–244.

20 Cf. P. Gray, “Athenian Curiosity (Acts 17:21),” *NovT* 47.2 (2005) 109–116.

21 Cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 12.2.9, 26–27; Philo, *Mos.* 1.21–29; A.J. Malherbe, “Not in a Corner’: Early Christian Apologetic in Acts 26:26,” in *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 155–158.

more dignified speaker than the philosophers who scorned at him as a rook (σπερμολόγος, Acts 17:18)<sup>22</sup> and who misunderstood his message because they apparently regarded Jesus and Resurrection as deities (plural).<sup>23</sup> With regard to Dionysius, the author of Acts is much more interested in his social position, which is reflected in his membership of the ancient aristocratic class of the Areopagites, than in his philosophical allegiance. The same must be true of Damaris: she is to be ranked among the “noble women” who show their interest in Paul’s teaching throughout the book of Acts (cf. Acts 17:12, immediately preceding the Athenian episode).<sup>24</sup>

In sum, it cannot be ruled out that Dionysius and Damaris are to be envisaged among the philosophers who brought Paul before the Areopagus, but the narrative emphasizes their social status rather than their belonging to the philosophers.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4 Epigraphic Evidence for Damaris

In biblical scholarship, it has been asserted time and again that the name Damaris is not attested elsewhere in ancient sources.<sup>26</sup> However, already in 1932, A.M. Woodward published the findings of excavations at the Acropolis of Sparta, which included a group of Hellenistic black-figure vases dedicated as votive offering by a certain Damaris (SEG XI, 669ab). Seven fragments contain

22 Cf. M. Dunlop Gibson, *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha (c. 850 A.D.): In Syriac and English*, vol. 4: *Acts of the Apostles and Three Catholic Epistles* (Horae Semiticae 10; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) 27; C.K. Rowe, “The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition,” *NTS* 57 (2010) 37; J.W. Jipp, “Paul’s Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16–34 as Both Critique and Propaganda,” *JBL* 131 (2012) 571.

23 Cf. P.-H. Menoud, “Jésus et Anastasie: Actes xvii, 18,” *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 32 (1944) 141–145. For a different interpretation, cf. e.g. J. Zmijewski, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg: Pustet, 1994) 639.

24 Cf. S. Matthews, *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

25 Likewise Keener, *Acts*, 3:2680.

26 Still in 2012, in a monograph dealing with the individual believers in Acts 16:6–18:18, François Lestang repeats the claim of David Gill, that “le nom de la femme, Damaris, est rare; il n’est pas attesté en tant que tel dans les sources classiques.” F. Lestang, *Annonce et accueil de l’évangile: Les figures individuelles de croyants dans le deuxième voyage missionnaire de Paul (Ac 16,6–18,18)* (EBib 63; Paris: Gabalda, 2012), 165. Childers mentions SEG XI, 669ab and 903 (following BDAG, s.v. Δάμαρις), but does not discuss IG V,1, 1302 and 1304. Childers, “Bride,” 210.

(part of) the phrase *Ἀνέσθηκε Δαμαρίς τᾷ Ἄσσιναίαι*,<sup>27</sup> meaning (in Laconian) “Damaris dedicated [this vase] to Athena.” The vase fragments are dated by Woodward on the basis of the handwriting to the middle of the third century BCE.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Athena had a temple dedicated to her at the northwest end of the Spartan Acropolis. Woodward comments on the name Damaris:

The dedicator’s name is hitherto unknown at Sparta, though other names formed from the root *δαμ-* are common there. It is presumably a woman’s name, and it is not impossible that the bearer in this instance was connected with the Eurypontid royal line, of which more than one member bore the name Damaratos.<sup>29</sup>

Woodward correctly derives the name from the root *δαμ-* (a cognate, via German, of modern English “to tame,” cf. *δαμνήμι*, “to tame, subdue, conquer”).<sup>30</sup> The noun *δαμάλης* derives from this root, attested as an epithet of Eros in the active sense of “tamer” and as a noun for young bulls in the passive sense of bulls “still to be tamed.”<sup>31</sup> *Δάμαλις* is the female form of *δαμάλης*, attested as a female personal name and as a noun with the meaning “young heifer.” Another derivative from this root is *δαμαῖος*, “tamer,” an epithet of Poseidon,<sup>32</sup> and *δαμασάνδρα*, “subduer of men,” an epithet of the moon.<sup>33</sup>

Several Spartan kings from the Eurypontid dynasty have (-)*δαμ-* as element in their name, with kings named Archidamos, Zeuxidamos, Anaxidamos, Damaratos, and Eurydamidas.<sup>34</sup> As in the epithets of Eros, Poseidon and the moon, these names derive from the active sense of the root *δαμ-*, connoting strength and domination. In this light, *Δάμαλις* is best regarded as a female form of the male name *Δαμάλης*, “tamer.” It is a name that connotes strength,

27 The fourth fragment contains the name Damaris in full; on the basis of this fragment, the name can be reconstructed in the other fragments. The caution of the BDAG on the reconstruction of the inscription seems unwarranted (BDAG, s.v. *Δάμαρις*). A.M. Woodward, “Excavations at Sparta, 1924–27: II. Votive Inscriptions from the Acropolis,” *ABSA* 30 (1928) 243.

28 Woodward, “Excavations,” 243.

29 Woodward, “Excavations,” 243.

30 R. Beekes and L. van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (2 vols.; Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series 10; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 1:301.

31 Beekes and van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary*, 1:301.

32 Beekes and van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary*, 1:301.

33 TLG, s.v. *δαμασάνδρα*.

34 F. Stähelin, “βασιλεύς,” *PW* 3,1 (1897) 67–70. Cf. Pausanias 3.2–10, where the names are spelled in Attic form, with *η* instead of *α*.



rather than resemblance to young cows. By analogy, Δάμαρις is to be considered a female form of Δαμάρης, with a similar meaning.

More important than the etymology of the name, however, is its connection to Sparta. Almost all inscriptional evidence concerning the names Δαμάρης and Δάμαρις points to Sparta and the surrounding region of Laconia, as I will show below. Indeed, the first alpha signals that it is not an Attic or Ionic name: in the Attic dialect, the name would be Δημάρις.<sup>35</sup> The connection to Sparta may also be significant for the narrative of Acts.

In addition to the vase fragments found at the Spartan Acropolis, the diminutive form of Damaris, Δαμάριον, occurs in a Roman era inscription from Oitylos, in Laconia, sixty kilometers south of Sparta (IG V,1, 1304). The same name, but contracted into Δαμάριν, was also found in this place, both on stelae later integrated in church buildings (IG V,1, 1302).<sup>36</sup> A third (second-century CE) inscription from Asopos, another Laconian town, was transcribed by Walther Kolbe, the editor of this volume of *Inscriptiones Graecae*, as Δαμαριλι? χαίρει (IG V,1, 972; SEG XI, 903). However, according to Marcus Tod, the proper reading is Δάμαριν χαίρει, as in the inscription from Oitylos.<sup>37</sup>

Two other inscriptions contain parts of names that could be reconstructed as a form of Damaris. A votive offering in the sanctuary of Apollo Hyperteleatas, in Phoiniki (Laconia), reads — — — — — ἀν]έθεκε | Δαμαρ — — —.<sup>38</sup> And an inscription from 223/222 BCE mentions a [Δ]αμάριος (genitive case, perhaps short for Δαμαρίωνος) in Milete.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding the male name Δαμάρης, a query in the online *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* shows that thirteen of the twenty results are assigned to Sparta, and two to other places in Laconia.<sup>40</sup> Many of these are dated to the first century BCE and the first two centuries CE. On the basis of these inscriptions, Antony Spawforth has reconstructed the genealogy of the Voluseni family, in which the name is especially frequent. Since daughters were frequently named after their grandfather with a female form of his name, the Damaris

35 The diminutive form Δημάρι(ο)ν occurs nine times in inscriptions. Cf. <http://clas-igpn2.classics.ox.ac.uk/name/Δημάριν> and <http://clas-igpn2.classics.ox.ac.uk/name/Δημάριον>.

36 The inscriptions can be consulted online at <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/text/31728> and <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/text/31730>. For the original publication, cf. E.S. Forster, "South-Western Laconia: Inscriptions," *ABSA* 10 (1903) 171.

37 M.N. Tod, "A Survey of Laconian Epigraphy, 1913–1925," *ABSA* 26 (1923) 112.

38 A drawing of the inscription can be found in M. Farace, "Il santuario di Apollo Hyperteleatas," *Epigraphica* 75 (2013) 41.

39 G. Kawerau and A. Rehm, *Das Delphinion in Milet* (Milet 3; Berlin: Reimer, 1914) 192. Cf. P.M. Fraser and E. Matthews, *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, vol. 1; *Aegean Islands, Cyprus, Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 113.

40 Cf. <http://clas-igpn2.classics.ox.ac.uk/name/Δαμάρης>.

of Acts could be imagined as an otherwise unattested female member of this family. I will explore this possibility below, after a survey of the history of the Voluseni family.

## 5 Patterns of Personal Names in the Voluseni Family

The oldest discernible member of the Voluseni family is a Damares who occurs on a coin as a patronym. The bronze coin, issued in the second half of the first century BCE, names as the authorizing magistrate an ΑΡΙΣΤΟΚΡΑΤΗΣ ΔΑΜΑΡΕ[ΟΣ]: Aristocrates, the son of Damares.<sup>41</sup> It shows that this Damares (I) belonged to the Spartan aristocracy in the first century BCE. Aristocrates fathered another Damares (II), who conceived two children: Statilia Timosthenis, probably named after her maternal grandfather Timosthenes, and Lucius Volusenus Aristocrates. Since Timosthenis' child Lamprias died in the forties CE at the age of eighteen years, Timosthenis must have been born around the beginning of the common era.<sup>42</sup> Timosthenis is mentioned on an inscription at the Asclepeion of Epidauros, together with her husband and son, without the Roman cognomen Statilia, which implies that this family received Roman citizenship later in life. The full reference to Timosthenis in this inscription is (in translation) "Timosthenis, daughter of Damares the Lacedaemonian, wife of Timocrates." In an inscription on a statue for Statilia Messalina, the third wife of Nero, her name is mentioned as Statilia Timosthenis; by this time (66–68 CE), she would have been in her sixties, "a *grande dame*, no doubt, of local society."<sup>43</sup>

Statilia Timosthenis' brother appears in an inscription as Lucius Volusenus Aristocrates (IG IV<sup>2</sup>,1, 681), having apparently also been granted Roman citizenship through patronage of a certain Volusenus.<sup>44</sup> His son appears in the epigraphic record as L. Volusenus Damares, who married a woman from the prominent family of the *Memmii*, Memmia Damocratia. They gave birth to a fourth Damares.

The most informative evidence about this family comes from several inscriptions related to the death of Lamprias, the son of Statilia Timosthenis. His death is lamented in several inscriptions at Epidauros, set up by embassies

41 On the reconstruction, cf. A.J.S. Spawforth, "Families at Roman Sparta and Epidauros: Some Prosopographical Notes," *ABSA* 80 (1985) 216.

42 Spawforth, "Families," 216.

43 Spawforth, "Families," 217.

44 Spawforth suggests that it may have been L. Volusenus Catulus, a senator under Tiberius. Spawforth, "Families," 217.

from the cities of both Sparta and Athens. The Spartan inscription relates the fame of Lamprias' ancestry, descending from ancient families of various Greek *poleis*.

[...] the late Titus Statilius Lamprias having departed in the prime of his life, son of Timocrates and Timosthenis, in whom the nobility of Greece especially find a common descendant: from Athens, the most honoured race of Herald's (Κηρύκων), from which the most noble men function as Torchbearers, have come to his divinity, both because of him and of the others in kinship with him. And from Epidauros, the race of Einachids; from Argos, the race of Perseus and Phoroneus; yet from Lacedaemon his most ancient ancestors were Heracles and Lysandros. It was not long ago that he mingled with their many children, having woven together the prominent houses of the *polis*. Of them all, he himself was the most brilliant individual, in beauty of body and in the virtues of the soul excelling the measure of his age.<sup>45</sup>

The Athenian inscription was initiated by a Timosthenes, whose name suggests that he and Statilia Timosthenis shared the same (Athenian) grandfather. This implies that Damares (II), the Spartan father of Timosthenis, married an Athenian woman, the aunt of the Timosthenes who initiated the decree of consolation for the death of Lamprias. The Athenian decree likewise emphasizes the dignity of his ancestry.

It has happened that Lamprias, son of Timocrates, has come to his end prematurely in Epidauros. He was a young man, decent and wise and with every virtue, in the prime of his life, according to the dignity of his ancestors' glory adorned with noble birth, also in Athens, being a descendant from ancient and prominent men, priests and priestesses of the god who gave the city its name, and from houses of initiating priests and torchbearers. He was not only adorned with nobility and splendour in Athens,

45 IG IV<sup>2</sup>,1, 86, ll. 8–16: – ca. 25 – τελευταίος Τίτος Στατείλιος Λαμπ[ρ]ίας ἐν [άλικίαι] με[θεσ]-  
τώ, υἱὸς Τειμοκράτους καὶ Τειμοσθενίδος, εἰς ὃν ἂ τὰς Ἑλλάδος εὐγένει[ι]α ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα συν-  
διαπ[ε]ίπ[τ]ει· ἀπὸ μὲν Ἀθηναίων τὸ ἐνδοξότατον Κηρύκων γένος, ἀφ' οὗ δαδουχοῦσιν οἱ εὐγενέ-  
στατοι, εἰς τὸν θεῖον αὐτοῦ παραγέγονεν, [κ]αὶ δι' ἐκείνου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων συγγενείᾳ εἰς τοῦτον·  
ἀπὸ δὲ Ἐπιδαύρου τὸ Εἰναχιδῶν· ἀπὸ δὲ Ἄργους τὸ Περσέως καὶ Φωρωνέως· ἀπὸ γε μὴν τὰς  
Λακεδαιμόνων παλαιοὶ μὲν αὐτοῦ πρόγονοι [ι] Ἡρακλῆς καὶ Λύσανδρος, οὐ πρό πολλῶν δὲ χρόνων  
ἐκέρασε ταῖς πολυτεκνίαις τοὺς πρώτους τὰς πόλιος οἴκους εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ συνυφήνας, ὧν ἀπάντων  
ἐναργέστατος ἦν ὁ εἰδιώτας αὐτός, κάλλει τε σώματος καὶ ταῖς τὰς ψυχῆς ἀρε[ι]ταῖς ὑπερβάλ-  
λων τὸ τὰς ἀλικίας μέτρον.

but also in the most renowned and noble cities of Greece, in Lacedaemon and Argos and the sacred city of Epidauros, he did not come second to any house. Moreover, he was honoured with the greatest citizenship, that of the Romans, known among all humans. Therefore, it has seemed good to the council and the *demos* to set up a statue of him on the Acropolis, and in Eleusis in the sacred court for the goddesses, where statues of his ancestors are also set up, and in Epidauros, the sacred city, in the sacred precinct of Asclepius. The statues will have the inscription: “The Council of the Areopagus, and the Council of the Six Hundred, and the People: For Titus Statilius Lamprias, son of Titus Statilius Timocrates, because of excellence.”<sup>46</sup>

The hypothesis of the kinship between Timosthenes and Timosthenis was first advanced by Friedrich Hiller von Gaertringen, the editor of IG IV<sup>2</sup>,<sup>1</sup> and supported by Antony Spawforth.<sup>47</sup>

By analogy of the relation between Timosthenes and Timosthenis, one could imagine that the Damaris of Acts 17:34, if historical, was a granddaughter of one of the Spartan men named Damares. Damares (II) would be the most likely candidate. His marriage with a woman of the Athenian elite would explain the presence of Damaris at the Athenian Areopagus in Acts 17:34. If she were his granddaughter, she would have been a generation younger than Timosthenis, being in her twenties or thirties at the time Paul visited Athens. One can easily imagine such a woman to have gained a prominent position in a Christian community in Athens, worthy of remembrance when the book of Acts was written at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century.<sup>48</sup>

46 IG IV<sup>2</sup>,1, 84, ll. 26–38: ἐπειδὴ συμβέβηκεν Λαμπρίαν Τειμοκράτους ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ πρὸ ὥρας τελευτήσαι, νεανίαν κόσμιον καὶ σώφρονα καὶ πάσῃ ἀρετῇ ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ ἡλικίᾳ τοῦ βίου κατ’ ἀξίαν τῆς τῶν προγόνων δόξης κεκοσμημένον εὐγενεῖαι τε τῇ Ἀθῆνῃσιν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχαίων καὶ πρώτων ἀνδρῶν, ἱερέων καὶ ἱερειῶν τῆς προσωνύμου τῆς πόλ[ε]ως θεοῦ καὶ ἱεροφαντικῶν καὶ δαδουχικῶν οἴκων γνήσιον ὑπάρχοντα, οὐ μόνον δὲ τῇ Ἀθῆνῃσιν εὐγενεῖαι καὶ λαμπρότητι κεκοσμημένον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἐνδο[ξο]τάταις καὶ εὐγενεστάταις τῆς Ἑλλάδος πόλεσι, Λακεδαιμόνι καὶ Ἀργεῖ καὶ τῇ ἱερᾷ Ἐπιδαύρῳ οὐδενὸς οἴκου δεύτερον γενόμενον, πρὸς τε τούτοις τετειμημένον τῇ μεγίστῃ καὶ παρ’ ἅπασιν ἀνθρώποις διανομασμένη Ῥωμαίων πολιτεία :: δεδόχθαι τῇ βουλῇ καὶ τῷ δήμῳ· ἀναθεῖναι αὐτοῦ ἀνδριάντα ἐν ἀκροπόλει καὶ ἐν Ἐλευσεῖν ἐν τῇ ἱερᾷ αὐλῇ ταῖν θεαῖν, οὐ καὶ τῶν προγόνων αὐτοῦ ἀνάκεινται, καὶ ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ τῇ ἱερᾷ ἐν τῷ τεμένει τοῦ Ἀσκληπιοῦ τὴν ἐπιγραφὴν ἔχοντας· ἢ βουλῇ ἢ ἐξ Ἀρείου πάγου καὶ ἢ βουλῇ τῶν ἑξακοσίων καὶ ὁ δῆμος Τίτον Σταταεῖλιον Τίτου Σταταεῖλιου Τειμοκράτους υἱὸν Λαμπρίαν ἀρετῆς ἔνεκεν.

47 IG IV<sup>2</sup>,1, p. XXI.

48 For a similar act of “historic imagination” with regard to Dionysius the Areopagite, cf. D.A. Evans, “The First Christians of Athens,” *Australian Biblical Review* 68 (2020) 40–53.

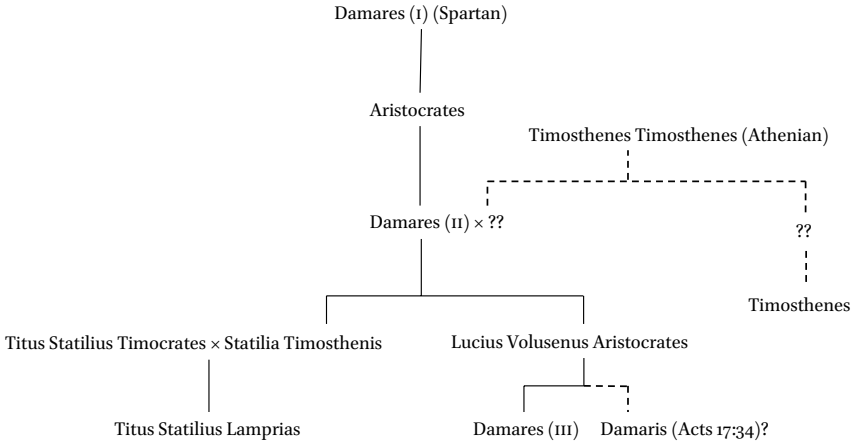


FIGURE 1 Family tree of Damaris (dotted lines represent hypotheses)

### 6 The Rhetorical Force of Damaris' Name in the Narrative of Acts

The historical reconstruction given above must be considered putative at best. However, the significance of recognizing Damaris as a distinctively Spartan name, connected with prominent Spartan families, goes beyond questions of historicity. It imports into the narrative the reputation of Sparta as an archaic, conservative, well-ordered society. The rhetorical force of including Damaris among Paul's disciples in Athens aligns well with the reference to Dionysius the Areopagite. Dionysius belonged to a legendary class of wealthy Athenian magistrates, embodying the reputation of the stern Areopagus council. Alongside him, Damaris represents the Spartan elite, likewise proud of its ancient pedigree. In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Socrates contrasts the Athenian contempt of their elders with the Spartan reverence for age and praises the obedience of the Spartans to their laws.<sup>49</sup> This obedience, the conservative mentality, and the courage of the young, created the "legend of Sparta" that persisted throughout antiquity and beyond.<sup>50</sup> Together, Dionysius and Damaris represent values that are at odds with the characterization of the Athenian philosophers in Acts, who are engaged only in seeking after novelties.

If the author of Acts is indeed capitalizing on the reputation of Sparta, he makes a move which the author of First Maccabees had made before him,

49 Xenophon, *Mem.* 3.5.15–16.

50 E.N. Tigerstedt, *The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity* (3 vols.; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965).

echoed in Second Maccabees and in Josephus.<sup>51</sup> First Maccabees contains a correspondence between the Jewish high priest Onias and the Spartan king Areus, in which they emphasize their kinship through their shared ancestry from Abraham. The authenticity of this correspondence has been debated. Most probably, the correspondence is forged in a claim by the Jews/Judeans to be culturally on a par with the famous ancient culture of the Spartans, which they traced to their legendary lawgiver Lycurgus just as the Jews traced their culture to Moses.<sup>52</sup> It was attractive for Jews to present themselves as an *ethnos* tied through kinship to the respected *ethnos* of Sparta. Possibly, the author of Acts likewise evokes the reputation of Sparta when he refers to a woman with a characteristically Spartan name.

Still, the text does not emphasize Damaris' Spartan provenance. Whereas the author identifies other characters by their origin (for example: Lydia from Thyatira; Aquila and Priscilla from Pontus), Damaris is identified only by her name. "A woman with the name Damaris." Only her name is apparently relevant to the narrative. But the attestation of Damaris among aristocratic families from the renowned polis of Lacedaemon explains what this name connotes: alongside Dionysius the Areopagite, the name of this woman not only alliterates well with the name of Dionysius, but also depicts her as a woman of aristocratic dignity and status,<sup>53</sup> one of those foreign residents in Athens to whose presence the author of Acts has alerted the reader in Acts 17:21.

## 7 Conclusion

In this article, I have contested the assertion that the name Damaris has no ancient parallels. Furthermore, I have argued that the parallel appearance of the personal names Damares (male) and Damaris (female) speaks against a derivation of Damaris from δάμαρ (wife). Then, I have shown that these names are attested particularly in Sparta and the surrounding region of Laconia, where they appear as names of members of prominent families.

What these observations imply regarding the text of Acts 17:34 depends on more general assumptions regarding the narrative of Acts. On the one hand, the author of Acts may have inserted a "Damaris" in his narrative because this

51 Cf. 1 Macc 12:19–23; 2 Macc 5:9; Josephus, *A.J.* 12.226–227; 13.167.

52 Cf. E.S. Gruen, "The Purported Jewish-Spartan Affiliation," in *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016) 153–166.

53 John Calvin already suggested that Damaris must have been a woman of some renown, since Dionysius is also mentioned because of his rank. Cf. John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, ad locum.

name had a connotation of Spartan elite dignity. On the other hand, if the text reflects a historic individual in the early Christian community of Athens, this individual may have belonged to the Voluseni family reconstructed by Anthony Spawforth.

Finally, my observations regarding the name Damaris support the idea that she is mentioned alongside Dionysius because of her social status. She is to be envisaged primarily as an elite woman, rather than as a courtesan or a philosopher. The support of her and other noble women served to show that Christians were not adherents of a pernicious superstition, as Roman authors such as Tacitus, Plinius and Suetonius thought, but followed a respectable way of life that did not contradict the customs of Roman society (cf. Acts 16:21).<sup>54</sup>

Later tradition would domesticate Damaris as wife of Dionysius and speak of her only in relation to her famous husband—alleged author of Neoplatonist treatises and martyr under Domitian. The story of her reception history in relation to Dionysius is fascinating, but it detracts from the way the text depicts these two independent individuals: a man and a woman whose social standing made them noteworthy among those who followed Paul and believed his message.

54 Matthews, *First Converts*.