THE TEXT OF PROPERTIUS 2.24B.12

This poem is one of those Propertian passages in which almost everything has been under discussion. Firstly, Escaligero placed these lines after the elegy 2.23.8; later, Baehrens pointed a gap affecting the lines preceding this passage. After this, Camps considered that this passage constituted a new elegy with the first lines missing, whereas other scholars, all of them with different attitudes to the text, assume that this passage is just the natural conclusion to the preceding elegy.

+ + +

\[
\text{et modo pauonis caudae flabellæ superbæ}
\]

\[
\text{et manibus dura frigus habere pila}
\]

\[
\text{et cupid iratum talos me poscere eburnos,}
\]

\[
\text{quaque nitent Sacra uilia dona Via.}
\]

\[
a peream, si me ista mouet dispendia: sed me
\]

\[
\text{dominae iam pudet esse iocum!}
\]

Prop. 2.24b.11-16

‘And she wants fans from the superb tail of a peacock / and to feel in her hands the coolness of a hard ball; / and she wants me to obtain, furious, ivory dice / and all the glittering bijouterie in the Sacred Way. / May death take me if the waste disturbs me, but / it is embarrassing to be the toy of a treacherous mistress.’

After the presentation of two motifs frequently associated and very common in the erotic Roman elegy, the presents of love and the avaricious mistress (ll. 11-14), the text concludes with an exsecratio. The line under discussion is the pentameter \( \text{et manibus dura frigus habere pila} \), and more specifically, the phrase \( \text{dura . . . pila} \). The scholars who have studied this poem agree, at least implicitly, that there is a metonymy in which the abstract expression \( \text{dura pila} \) stands for another more concrete. The identification of such a concrete thing has been the object of study of critics. Enk interprets this phrase as a \( \text{pila crystallina} \), a crystal ball used by women during the summer time to cool their hands down. However, he himself admits the non-existence of a parallel text that may support this interpretation. Besides, Enk offers two other possible explanations, although they are also rejected. According to the former, \( \text{dura pila} \) would substitute \( \text{crystallus} \), that is, a precious stone set on a ring; this hypothesis is backed by the parallel text in Prop. 4.3.52, \( \text{crystallusque meas ornet aquosa manus} \). According to the latter, \( \text{dura pila} \) would substitute \( \text{sucinum} \), that is, an amber stone that emits an agreeable smell when rubbed; this hypothesis is backed by the parallel texts in Mart. 5.37.11, \( \text{quod sucinorum rapta de manu gleba} \); Mart. 11.8.6, \( \text{sucina virginea quod regalata manu} \) and Plin. N.H. 37.30, \( \text{Proximum locum, in deliciis, feminarum tamen adhuc tantum, sucina optinent . . .} \).

In this way, most of the specialists on Propertius have followed Enk’s proposal, accepting then that \( \text{dura pila} \) makes reference to a crystal ball. The translators have also assumed this interpretation, although Paganelli
and, above all, Ramírez de Verger have also suggested in footnotes that it may refer to a precious stone that would give off cold due to its big size. Finally, since there are no parallel texts that support the idea that dura pila represents a crystal ball, Richardson identifies dura pila with an amber stone held by women to cool their hands down using as evidence the same parallel texts that Enk mentioned to reject the same hypothesis. From our point of view, these interpretations present two anomalous elements: (a) in a metonymy, between the term in absentia and the one in praesentia there exists an obvious referential relationship which is apprehended immediately, but this is not the case in Prop. 2.24b.12, and (b) none of the interpretations suggested can explain the term frigus in the same line, since neither does crystal give off cold in the hot season nor can a precious stone emit cold; besides, amber only exhales its perfume when hot, therefore it cannot cool hands down, as is well expressed in Mart. 11.8.6, sucina ... regalata.

Indeed, it seems that the interpretation of dura pila has been conditioned by the noun frigus, but whereas some scholars have taken as their point of reference the previous line, and have assumed that dura pila is pila crystallina—influenced by the meaning of flabella, the fans women used to refresh themselves—, others have turned to the following lines, more specifically to the uilia dona, identifying then dura pila with some sort of jewel. However, we think that the most accurate interpretation of this line is to identify dura pila with an amber ball, and this conclusion may be inferred from the following facts:

1. The same definition of amber, since in the first entry of electrum the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae reads: “sucinum: genus resinae pretiosae in lapidem duratae”.

2. The enumeration of different munera amoris, since in this text Propertius lists, line by line, some love presents: complements—flabella—, perfume—dura pila—, ornamental objects—talos eburnos—and jewellery—uilia dona. After this enumeration, an exsecratio to the poet’s avaricious lover and to his own condition as serus amoris closes the poem.

3. A wrong transmission of the line due to the term frigus. We have already mentioned that in a metonymy, the identification of the elements implied must be evident, not only because of their referential relationship but also because of the linguistic context. Precisely the linguistic context makes us think that frigus is the element distorting this identification. In this way, if we observe Propertius’ modus scribendi closely, we notice that when he means ‘cold’ he always uses the adjective frigidus, and when the term frigus is used he means ‘winter’, and, thus, the presence of the word frigus in this poem is extremely weird. In the same line of thought, we consider the reading frigus a mistake in the scribal transmission of the Propertian text and, therefore, suggest a new reading: sucus, ‘juice’, instead. This assumption is based on criteria of a varied nature which lead to the same conclusion: