

STELLA'S "DECEM PUELLÆ."

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MARTIAL makes one of his epigrams to turn upon a joke, the meaning of which has never been satisfactorily explained :

"Quod nutantia fronte perticata  
Gestat pondera Masthlion superbus ;  
Aut grandis Ninus omnibus lacertis.  
Septem quod pueros levat vel octo,  
Res non difficilis mihi videtur ;  
Uno cum digito, vel hoc vel illo,  
Portet Stella meus decem puellas."<sup>1</sup>

"I don't think it so wonderful a feat if Masthlion carries great weights upon a pole balanced on his forehead, or if big Ninus holds out seven or eight boys at once upon his outstretched arms, when my friend Stella can carry *ten girls* upon a single finger, either this one or that."

That the allusion is to a *ring* is evident enough, but in what sense this same ring was the equivalent to ten girls is the question to be answered. Raderus, an old commentator on Martial, quoted by Selmuth in his additions to the "*Antiqua deperdita et Nova reperta*" of the famous jurist Pancirollus, supposes the ring to have been set with a "Nature picture" of such a group, similar in kind to the celebrated agate of Pyrrhus, which also contained *ten* figures—Apollo and the Muses nine, each with her proper attribute, accurately depicted by the hand of Nature. This ingenious explanation of the old scholiast would have satisfied every requirement of the case (for such a wonderful production were certainly a suggestive theme for an epigrammatist), had it not been for another piece by the same hand, inspired beyond all doubt by the same remarkable jewel, and which proves that the question is not of *one* but of *several* gems, which for some sufficient cause were entitled "The Ten Maidens."

"Sardonychas, smaragdos, adamantas, jaspidas, uno  
 Versat in articulo Stella, Severe, meus :  
 Multas in digitis [digito?], plures in carmine gemmas  
 Invenies—hinc est hæc, puto, culta manus."<sup>2</sup>

Now, if Stella wore all these precious stones "upon one finger-joint," and was able to "turn them all about at once"—for that is the true force of "versat" in this connexion, it is a necessary consequence that all these gems were set in one and the same ring. The term "versat" may equally be taken as evidence that they were not set in a "cluster" upon the head of the ring, as is the modern fashion, but at *equal distances* around its whole circumference : so that each in turn might be brought into view by the revolution of the hoop upon the finger, when the wearer desired to display all their beauties.

But now, supposing this explanation to have so far met the requirements of the case, the most curious point of all remains to be determined—what "Ten Maidens" go together in the ideas of those times of sufficient importance to receive such high honours from a man, himself a poet, and, what was more to the purpose with his *clientela*, a most liberal patron of other poets? And fortunately the question is answered by another of his literary dependents, the Neapolitan Statius, whom, by the way, Martial himself never names, but evidently often hits at by a side-blow amongst the envious and malignant rivals of whom he is constantly complaining. Statius in one place introduces—

"Aonias *decima* cum Pallade divas."<sup>3</sup>

implying that the goddess of Wisdom made up the number of the Aonian choir to *ten* ; and again, in his "Epithelamium of Stella and Violantilla," he brings in the same mystic number by means of a very far-fetched prosopopœa. Moving the Muses "to descend from Helicon, and wave their nine-fold torch" at the wedding feast, he goes on :—

"Quas inter, vultu petulans Elegeia propinquat  
 Celsior assueto, divas que hortatur et ambit,  
 Alterneum futura pedem : *deinamque* vocari  
 Se cupit, et medias fallit permixta socores."

Now, as Elegiac poetry was the special department of Erato, Statius must have had some very cogent reason for

<sup>2</sup> V. 11.

<sup>3</sup> I. IV. 20.

inventing a *tenth* Muse to represent that department in the festal choir. All these efforts seem to point to some well-known connexion between this new Mæcenas and some particular *ten* maidens ; and that these ten maidens were in some way symbolized by the ring he wore as his badge with so much ostentation, is a fact placed beyond all doubt by the joke of Martial.

The first explanation that presents itself is that this ring was set with gems, each engraved with the figure of a Muse as usually represented. For this we have the precedent of that tasteful Mint-master at the close of the Republic, Pomponius *Musa*, who has immortalized himself by his set of denarii, each bearing one of the nine sisters at full length, to be recognised by her proper attribute ; and with her head for obverse, similarly distinguished ; the family likeness in the ladies being too strong to allow of our identifying them by their looks alone. In those simple-minded times, Pomponius had felt no scruple to make up their number to ten by the addition of a vigorous "Hercules Musarum," arrayed in lion's hide, and twanging the lyre as he marched at their head ; but under that great stickler for propriety, the Censor Domitian, the lusty god had evidently been discharged from his office of their guardian, and his place given to that ancient maiden Minerva, as obviously the most fitting president of a Ladies' College.

This, the most ready solution of the difficulty, is, however, absolutely upset by the fact that one of the gems named by Martial is the *diamond*, a stone which the ancients, so far from being able to engrave, were always forced to employ in its native condition, and the mastery of which was the greatest triumph of the lapidary's art at the Revival. The *emerald*, too, was at this time, says Pliny, "spared by the common consent of mankind for the sake of its beauty, and not allowed to be scratched by the engraver." Though *four* stones only are specified by the poet, the ring doubtless contained as many different kinds as there were personages to be symbolized ; because to name the remaining six consecutively, besides taxing the metre beyond its powers, would have made the lines simply ridiculous. But a tolerably certain guess may be hazarded here. The other gems then in highest esteem, and therefore most likely to have been selected to appear in this glorious company, were

the opal, sapphire (*hyacinthus*), spinel, Oriental topaz, almandine, and pearl. Each Muse must have had a particular stone in the set consecrated to her for some fanciful reason, but readily appreciated at the time by all who looked upon it, just as our "regard" rings convey their meaning by the juxtaposition of a ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby again, and diamond. No traces, it is true, appear in Pliny of precious stones being consecrated to particular deities, except in the case of the "Solis gemma" and the "Selenites," yet there is the strongest reason to suspect that the mediæval astrologers and divines gave to each of the zodiacal signs, and of the Apostles, his proper gem, either following some classical authority, or else the prescriptions of the Magi, perpetually quoted by Pliny for all superstitions connected with the precious stones; or perhaps going upon the precedent of Aaron's breast-plate, in which each of the Twelve Tribes was represented by a gem of its own. Philostratus, again, may give us a little help in this difficulty, where he tells how Iarbas the Brachman gave Apolloneus of Tyana a set of rings for the days of the week, which secured him in never-failing health; although unluckily he does not add the manner in which the influence of each day was represented—whether by a *segil* cut on the stone or by the *species* of the stone itself—yet the gift coming from the fountain-head of all such fancies, the latter was probably the case. If so, the connexion of gem with day may have followed the same rule as that laid down by the old alchemist, Petrus Arlensis, in his directions for making "planetary rings," where Sol gets the diamond or the sapphire, Luna the crystal, Mercury the loadstone, Venus the amethyst, Jupiter the carnelian, Saturn the turquoise. For further authority in this matter may be cited the "Prosa" of the early Norman poet Marbodius upon the building-stones of the New Jerusalem, showing how each sets forth a particular virtue in the Christian character—the jasper *Faith*, the sapphire *Hope*, the emerald *good works*, &c. Perhaps, therefore, Stella's imagination, guided by chimeras like the above, had discovered in the colour or quality of the gems in his ring something analogous to each department over which the Aonian Sisters presided. It is obvious that the almandine would match well with Melpomene's "sceptred pall," the topaz with Thalia's "saffron-coloured sock," the

emerald with the hopefulness of Erato. It were idle to pursue further similar coincidences with the characters of all the rest. But there can be no question that Minerva, as the special patroness of the reigning prince, at once took possession of the *diamond*.

The solution now offered of this long-disputed question was lately suggested to me by the sight of a ring in the well-furnished cabinet of Mr. Franks, presenting many peculiarities that at once called to my mind the most salient points in Martial's allusion. This ring, which by Mr. Frank's obliging courtesy we are permitted to re-produce, is



Gold ring, with precious stones alternating with the letters of the name ISATVS.

of solid gold, of equal width throughout, cut into ten sides; each presenting in pierced work one letter of the name ISATVS, alternating with a small precious stone<sup>4</sup>—a sapphire, a balass ruby, an emerald, a garnet, &c. Bearing in mind the innumerable superstitions connected with these gems in the popular belief of Roman times (so frequently laughed at by their recorder, Pliny), we cannot but believe that each of these gems was put in the place it occupies for the purpose of insuring some particular blessing to the wearer.

The same ring throws light upon another curious point of dactyliology, which, without such assistance, might have remained for ever undecided. In a very interesting inscription, found at Alicante, and published by Montfaucon (Plate 136), a certain pious old lady, Fabia Fabiana, dedicates to an unnamed goddess, apparently Isis, in honour of her grand-daughter, besides a large quantity of plate, all the contents of her jewel-box. This comprises, besides bracelets, anklets, and several rings, "on the little finger two, set with diamonds," on the next finger one "annulus polypsephus," with emeralds and a single pearl. This last was not what is now called a "cluster ring," where the head is formed by a single stone, surrounded by others in a circle,

<sup>4</sup> The second letter of the name is the cursive S, which came into use in later Imperial times. It is found on a large gilt bronze ring from Richborough, in the Library of Trin. Coll. Cambridge. The

name ISATVS looks like that of a Romanised barbarian; but there can be no doubt it is merely a proper name, and contains no further mystery.

that fashion being of modern origin and dating only from the Renaissance. For if cluster rings had been worn in ancient Rome, imitations of them would infallibly be met with amongst the innumerable specimens preserved of *ornamental*, as distinguished from *signet* rings, in base metal set with precious stones in paste. It will be observed that this "annulus polypsephus" has all the stones in it of one and the same species—that is, emeralds: the single pearl, so specified, must therefore have been introduced for some special purpose; perhaps to mark the commencement of a legend, which, upon the authority of the ring now before us, we may reasonably conjecture alternated its letters with the emeralds. And this interpretation of "polypsephus" is further supported by the ring found amongst the Roman remains at the back of the Mansion House (1860-1), and figured in this Journal (vol. xix. p. 172). Its pattern may best be described as a series of nine connected bosses, formed out of the solid gold of the circlet, each holding a precious stone—a blue spinel, an emerald, a sapphire, a garnet, &c. Here again we meet with the significant number *Nine*, probably in this case, also, chosen with reference to the nymphs of Helicon. At this late period of the Empire all the names and numbers of the old mythology were taken in a talismanic sense. We find the Three Graces frequently engraved on loadstone, accompanied with legends that plainly tell the reason for their being so honoured in an utterly graceless age. It is but reasonable to infer that the companionship of the Muses brought with it similar blessings to their protégées, and that the wearer of such a talisman would expect from it more material advantages than merely—

"To hear the Muses in a ring  
Aye round about Jove's altar sing."

The same idea was carried down in the traditions of the jewellers' craft far into the Middle Ages. The prettiest example of the sort that can be adduced, is a ring found at Higham, near Norwich, and figured in this Journal (vol. xx. p. 172). This, however, is set with but a single stone, a ruby; the place filled by the others in the antique "polypsephus" is here held by small raised quatrefoils, dividing the words of the two inscriptions, or "posies." The shank being of triangular section, the two external sloping sides

are thus inscribed—AMOR VINCIT OMNI, and IE SUI ICI EN LIV.; declaring plainly enough the purpose of the jewel, a love token, or perhaps an espousal ring.<sup>5</sup>

These actually existing examples of the "annulus polysephus," with its studied variety of precious stones, agree too closely with the poet's hints (so far as they go), to leave much doubt in my mind as to the real character of the subject of the two epigrams. They show the possibility of its being a ring set round with gems of ten different species. That the title of the "Ten Maidens" could be most appropriately applied to the Muses and their governess Minerva, seems put out of doubt by the pointed expressions of Statius—a person also honoured with the patronage of the owner of the famous jewel, and who has evidently some very cogent reason for swelling the regular number of the Nine up to *Ten*, in verses dedicated to the same patron. That precious stones were amongst the most acceptable offerings to the powers divine, appears from numerous passages in ancient writers, the most striking of which is to be found in Lucian's description of the temple of the "Syrian Goddess."

That Stella, a professed votary of the tuneful sisters, should have secured their favour by dedicating a gem to each, was therefore only the following an established usage, but that some laudable ingenuity was displayed by him in the attribution and combination in one ornament of the gems so dedicated, may be set down as a fact from Martial's making the same ornament the subject of his verse.

The "Ten Maidens" finds an echo in the "Three Brothers" and "Twelve Mazarines," celebrated in lapidary annals, though titles given for a different cause. The "Three Brothers" were the great rubies that guarded the famous diamond of Charles the Bold in his pendant jewel, equally matched in size and colour, true "tergemine." The "Twelve Mazarines" were the largest crown diamonds of France, which the tasteful Cardinal had ordered to be re-cut in the *rose* pattern, invented under his auspices.

<sup>5</sup> The motto of Chaucer's Prioress.  
"And thereon henge a broche of gold  
full shene,

On which was first ywritten a crowned  
A,  
And after, AMOR VINCIT OMNIA."