

23 *amictorium* and *mamillare* – ‘top’ and breast-band (pl. 25.4)

1. *amictorium*

2. *mamillare*

The following two garments are only known to us thanks to Martial. Martial liked writing about the female breast, and he expected that his male readers enjoyed hearing about it. For this reason, he included three different dress items for the bosom in his *Apophoreta*: the *fascia pectoralis* (B 22), the *amictorium*, and the *mamillare*. He simultaneously used these words to show his poetic craftsmanship by talking about the same subject in various ways. As in the case of the *fascia pectoralis*, the eroticism of the descriptions is more important than the dress items themselves as material objects.

Even though we have very little on these articles of clothing, their mention by Martial (who generally writes about realistic scenes) shows that Roman women had several options for covering and shaping their breasts. The dichotomy between large and petite breasts and the appropriateness of different articles found in Martial also shows that cup size and how to manage different busts in a practical or erotic context was a concern in Antiquity. Large breasts required a more sturdy material, and small breasts could be accentuated by how they were wrapped.

23.1 *amictorium*

The *amictorium* is perhaps more prominent than the meagre evidence would make us think. It could be the ‘bikini’ worn by the young women depicted in the Piazza Armerina, who appear in many travel catalogues advertising the beauty of Sicily.¹ In one of Martial’s epigrams, an *amictorium* speaks and expresses its fears, giving the poet occasion to explore different forms of the female breast:

Mart. 14.149

*mammosas metuo, tenerae me trade puellae,
ut possint niveo pectore lina frui.*

I am afraid of women with big bosoms. Hand me over to a tender girl so that my linen may enjoy a snow-white breast.

The poem shows that the *amictorium* was made of linen. Like the *fascia*, it was worn directly on the skin. The function of both garments is thus similar, but there must have been a difference between them. This could have been the cut or the usage. The

¹ Cf. p. 695.

fascia was just a strip of cloth wrapped around the breasts. The *amictorium* may have been somewhat broader and a slightly fitted garment. Moreover, it may have had a different social usage: the *fascia* was an undergarment, whereas the *amictorium* may have been a visible garment. The word could have designated a garment similar in form and function to what is called a bikini top today, as worn by the women of Piazza Armerina as sportswear. However, we have no way of settling the issue, since we only have the short epigram by Martial as a literary source.

23.2 *mamillare*

The *mamillare* is not made of cloth, but of soft leather. For this reason, the epigram in Martial’s *Apophoreta* that mentions the article does not stand next to poems on other garments, but on sandals (*soleae*). Like in the case of the *amictorium*, Martial focuses on the different sizes of female breasts:

Mart. 14.66

*taurino poteras pectus constringere tergo:
nam pellis mammas non capit ista tuas.*

You could have constricted your bosom with an ox-hide. For this leather can’t hold your breasts.

Martial emphasizes the material of the *mamillare* with an allusion to Virgil’s *Aeneid*.² Like Dido, who marked the space of future Carthage with an ox-hide, the female addressee of the poem should wear a stable bra and not a *mamillare* because she has large breasts. It is difficult to see what the *mamillare* looked like. It may have been a leather brassiere worn as a special garment and not as underwear. But as with the *amictorium*, we have too little literary evidence to make a determination.

² Verg. Aen. 1.368: *taurino quantum possent circumdare tergo*.