

Secular Games

Susan Bilynskyj Dunning

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.5781>

Published online: 07 March 2016

This version: 26 October 2017

Keywords: ludi, Ludi Saeculares, Saecular Games, Secular Games, Ludi Tarentini, saeculum, Campus Martius

Subjects: Roman Myth and Religion

Updated in this version

Text and bibliography updated. Keywords added.

The Ludi Saeculares were a religious performance held at Rome from the Republic to late Empire that came to be connected with the arrival of a new age or *saeculum*. The earliest celebrations included sacrifices and theatrical games (*ludi scaenici*; see *ludi*) at an altar by the Tiber in the Campus Martius; this location was called the Tarentum. In later centuries, new rituals were added to these older elements as the Ludi Saeculares came to be connected with the creation and legitimization of imperial dynasty and authority.

The Republican Ludi Tarentini

The Republican predecessor of the Ludi Saeculares was a cult associated with the Valerian clan (see *gens*): a legend concerning their foundation describes how a legendary figure named Valesius instituted the first *ludi* and sacrifices to chthonic deities, Dis Pater and Proserpina (see Persephone), in thanksgiving for the miraculous cure of his three children at the Tarentum (Val. Max. 2.4.5. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0675%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D4%3Asection%3D5>>, Zos. 2.1–3). Another account identifies the consul P. Valerius Poplicola as the founder of such rites in 509 BCE, in return for divine aid in a time of illness or conflict (Verrius Flaccus in Festus, *Gloss. Lat.* 420, Plutarch, *Publ.* 21). In 249 BCE, during the First Punic War (see Punic Wars), the cult at the Tarentum passed from the Valerii to the oversight of the *decemviri* (later *quindecimviri sacri faciundis*, who had consulted the Sibylline Books (see Sibyl) in response to prodigies. Varro calls this new civic rite the Ludi Tarentini, and records that the Games were to be repeated in one hundred years (Censorinus, *DN* 17.8, cf. Cardauns 1968, 59). This repetition was accomplished in 146 BCE, during the Third Punic War, according to contemporary historians (Cassius Hemina, L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, and Cn. Gellius in Censorinus, *DN* 17.10–11).

Sources for the Republican Ludi Tarentini survive in a fragmentary state, with discrepancies in chronologies likely due to a Valerian desire to manipulate dates in an attempt to connect the rites to famous ancestors. Attestations of rites at the Tarentum in 509 and 348 BCE, for example, correspond to dates for treaties between Rome and Carthage, and may be an attempt (perhaps by Valerius Antias or an earlier source) to fabricate tradition by associating the Valerian consuls in those years, P. Valerius Poplicola and M. Valerius Corvus, with rites that secured Rome's interests against its rival. Records of a *lectisternium* held in 348 BCE (Liv. 7.27 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00091756>) may have also contributed to later accounts of the Ludi Tarentini being held in that year. Antias assigns a date of 149 BCE to the Games of the Third Punic War, allowing for a perfect span of one hundred years from 249 BCE (Censorinus, *DN* 17.10), but contradicting the earlier accounts of Hemina, Piso, and Gellius. There is no evidence that the Ludi Tarentini were held or planned a hundred years later, in the 40s BCE.

The Ludi Saeculares of the Imperial Period

Augustus was the first to associate the Ludi Tarentini with the change of a *saeculum*, thereby capitalizing on Roman fascination with the ending of ages and rise of prominent dictators in the 1st century BCE. With the assistance of an expert on legal and religious matters, Ateius Capito (2), Augustus appropriated the Tarentum rites from the Valerii, prominent supporters of his regime, and rewrote their chronology to legitimize his Secular Games of 17 BCE as the fifth in a series dating back to the early Republic held according to *saecula* of 110 years. Important members of the Valerian clan were rewarded by their inclusion in the college of *quindecimviri* (see M. Valerius Messalla Messallinus), which continued to oversee the planning of the Games in consultation with the Sibylline books, which were edited and moved to the temple of Apollo on the Palatine. The Sibylline oracle for Augustus's Ludi Saeculares is preserved in Phlegon, *Mir.* 37.5.2-4 and Zos. 2.6. Thereafter, at least one member of the Valerian clan appeared in the college of *quindecimviri* in years in which the Secular Games were held, although members did not occupy seats continuously throughout the imperial period. Thus, Augustus moved the former family cult from civic control to the newly created imperial sphere, in which the fortunes of the emperor's family and their relationship with the gods were intimately linked with the welfare of the Roman state.

To create the Ludi Saeculares, Capito and Augustus merged the Ludi Tarentini with other types of Republican religious performances, producing a ritual sequence more complex than any other in Rome. The resulting Ludi Saeculares were a radical transformation of the old propitiatory rite into a celebration of the end of civil wars, the return of traditional morals (cf. the *leges Iuliae* of 18-17 BCE; Hor., *Carm. Saec.* 19-20 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2008.01.0537>), and the advent of a new age concurrent with the establishment of Augustus's dynasty. The festival was held over three nights and days from May 31-June 3, but new deities and locations were incorporated: Augustus performed nocturnal sacrifices of black victims at the Tarentum for the Moerae, Eileithyiae (see Eileithyia), and Terra Mater (see Tellus); and Augustus with his heir, Agrippa, offered daytime

sacrifices to Jupiter and Juno on the Capitoline and Apollo and Diana on the Palatine. Other ritual elements included the distribution of purificatory materials to Roman citizens, theatrical games, supplications to Juno offered by matrons, *sellisternia*, and the performance of the *Carmen Saeculare*, Horace's hymn to Apollo and Diana, by a choir of boys and girls after the third day's sacrifices. The *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* who oversaw the Games kept detailed written records of the rites, which were also inscribed on stone and bronze at the Tarentum; this *Acta* inscription (CIL VI 32323 [<http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?id_nr=EDR080573>](http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?id_nr=EDR080573)), along with coins commemorating the Secular Games (e.g., RIC I².340 [<http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18202474>](http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18202474)), enabled Augustus to create a ritual model to be followed by later emperors.

Claudius revised the chronology of the Games to allow them to be held during his reign in 47 CE; he reconciled Augustus's 110-year *saeculum* with 100-year *saecula* calculated from the foundation of Rome. In all other respects, Claudius's Games followed Augustus's model, including his emphasis on dynasty through the participation of his two heirs Nero and Britannicus, and the public, epigraphic display of the *Acta* inscription (CILVI 32324-32325 [<http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?id_nr=EDR130199>](http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?id_nr=EDR130199), 32336), but he competed with Augustus by linking his celebration with the neglected office of *ensor*, which he assumed in 47 BCE to expand Rome's sacred boundary (see *pomerium*). Ancient authors either mocked Claudius for holding the Games too early (Plin., *HN* 7.159 [<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/instance.00095577>](http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/instance.00095577); Suet., *Claud.* 21.2 [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00207589>](http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00207589); Zos. 2.4), or they criticized Claudius's policies by looking forward to the *saeculum* of the next emperor (Sen., *Apocol.* 1.1, 3).

Domitian's Secular Games of 88 CE, on the other hand, were perceived to be legitimate despite the later memory sanctions issued against the unpopular emperor. This approval was in part due to Domitian's adherence to the Augustan *saeculum* of 110 years, and in part due to his close imitation of the Augustan ritual model, heavily advertised in his massive coin issue of 88 CE (e.g., RIC II.1².613 [<http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18211518>](http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18211518)). The *Fasti Capitolini* recorded in Domitian's lifetime state that his *Ludi Saeculares* were the sixth in their series, ignoring Claudius's Games of 47 CE. Domitian's emulation of Augustus is indicative of general Flavian tendencies to legitimize their dynasty, established after civil war, by claiming to restore the Republic and Augustan traditions of empire. Domitian also strove to surpass Claudius by assuming the role of *ensor* "in perpetuity" in 85 CE. Tacitus emphasized Domitian's fidelity to the Augustus model, as well as his own role as *quindecimvir* in planning the Games, which may have helped to ensure their positive reception (*Ann.* 11.11 [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00126383>](http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00126383)).

Antoninus Pius celebrated Rome's nine hundredth birthday in 148 CE (*Aur. Vict.*, *Caes.* 15.4), following the chronology set by Claudius, but it is not clear if he designated this festival as "Ludi Saeculares." Censorinus and Zosimus do not include any celebrations from Antoninus's reign among their lists of the Secular Games. It may be that Antoninus chose to avoid the

negative connotations surrounding Claudius's games as departures from the Augustan model; coins from his reign contain legends proclaiming the arrival of a new *saeculum*, but they do not explicitly mention the Ludi Saeculares.

Septimius Severus included references to a new *saeculum* in coins and inscriptions at the beginning of his reign (e.g., *RIC* IV.1.181a [_<http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18203776>](http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18203776)), which indicate planning from an early date for his celebration of the Ludi Saeculares in 204 CE. Severus's Games, like those of Domitian, emulated Augustus's ritual sequence while striving to outdo his predecessors: his *Acta* inscription (*CIL* VI 32326–32335) provided far more ritual details than Augustus's and named more participants, including women, children, and actors. The bond between imperial dynasty and the new age was performed more explicitly than ever before: through the religious performances presided over by Severus; his wife, Julia Domna; and their sons, Caracalla and Geta. Romans could situate themselves within a community headed by the imperial family who performed the Secular Games on behalf of all Romans for the arrival of the Severan *saeculum*.

The final celebration of the Ludi Saeculares was held under Philip I in 248 CE, following Claudius's chronology to celebrate Rome's millennium. It is difficult to determine how closely Philip modelled his Games on the Augustan ritual sequence, but his games and sacrifices were described as "Ludi Saeculares" on his coins and by ancient authors (e.g., *RIC* IV.3.19 [_<http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18209968>](http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18209968); *Hist. Aug.: Gordiani Tres Iuli Capitolini* 33.1–3), who do not criticize him for following Claudius. Literary and numismatic evidence for Philip's Games suggests that they may have been held at the traditional location, the Tarentum, but it is unclear whether or not they incorporated the customary sacrifices. Philip's celebration was most memorable for the diverse animals used in the beast hunts and displayed prominently on his coinage.

Cessation of the Ludi Saeculares

After Philip, the use of certain coin legends during the 3rd century CE has led some scholars to assume that later emperors such as Gallienus held Ludi Saeculares (cf. *RIC* V.1.656 [_<http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18200678>](http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18200678)), but such arguments are misinterpretations of reused coin types and the growing popularity of references to the *saeculum* to bolster imperial authority. Constantine I failed to hold the Secular Games in 314 CE, a major break with tradition that caught the attention and criticism of later historians sympathetic to traditional Roman religious practice (*Aur. Vict., Caes.* 28.2). Constantine's lack of interest in the Ludi Saeculares was likely due to many factors: the chaos of his early reign, his absence from Rome and attention to Constantinople, and his sympathies with Christianity. For the historian Zosimus, the cessation of the Games disrupted the continuity of Rome and led to a decline in its fortunes. The Ludi Saeculares were never revived: references to Honorius holding the Ludi Saeculares in 397 or 404 CE derive from a Renaissance misunderstanding of a panegyric of Claudian (*Sex. Cons. Hon.* 388–392).

Primary Texts

Buongiorno, P. "I commentarii dei Ludi Saeculares del 47 D.C. Nota di aggiornamento." *Epigraphica* 73 (2011), 139–146.

Diehl, E. "Zu den neuen Acta ludorum saecularium septimorum des Jahres 204 n. Chr." *SPAW* 27 (1932): 762–791.

Mommsen, T. "Commentarium Ludorum Saecularium Quintorum et Septimorum." *EphEp* 8 (1899): 225–309.

Moretti, L. "Frammenti vecchi e nuovi del Commentario dei Ludi Secolari del 17 A.C." *RPAA* 55/56 (1982–1984): 361–379.

Pighi, G. B. *De ludis saecularibus populi Romani Quiritium*. 2d ed. Pubblicazioni dell'Università cattolica del S. Cuore, 5th ser., Scienze filologiche 35. Amsterdam: Shippers, 1965.

Lindsay, W. M., ed. "Festus: De verborum significatu." In *Glossaria Latina*, vol. 4, 93–467. Paris: Société Anonyme d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1930.

Rapisarda, C. A. *Censorini De die natali liber ad Q. Caerellium*. Bologna: Pàtron, 1991.

Schnegg-Köhler, B. *Die augusteischen Säkularspiele* <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110234206.186>>. *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 4. Munich: Saur, 2002.

Bibliography

Dunning, S. B. *Roman Ludi Saeculares from the Republic to Empire*. PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2016.

Feeney, D. *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Gagé, J. *Recherches sur les jeux séculaires*. Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1934.

Lichtenberger, A. *Severus Pius Augustus: Studien zur sakralen Repräsentation und Rezeption der Herrschaft des Septimius Severus und seiner Familie (193–211 n. Chr.)*. *Impact of Empire* 14. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011.

Nilsson, M. P. "Saeculares ludi, Säkularfeier, Säkulum." *RE* iA, 2 (1920): 1695–1720.

Panvinio, O. *De Ludis Saecularibus Liber*. Venice: Officina Erasmiana, 1558.

Rantala, J. *The Ludi Saeculares of Septimius Severus: The Ideologies of a New Roman Empire*. London: Routledge, 2017.

Scheid, J. "Déchiffrer des monnaies: réflexions sur la représentation figurée des Jeux séculaires." In *Images romaines: actes de la table ronde organisée à l'École normale supérieure*,

24–26 octobre 1996. Edited by F. Dupont and C. Auvray-Assayas, 13–35. Études de littérature ancienne 9. Paris: Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 1998.

Smith, C. *The Roman Clan: The gens from Ancient Ideology to Modern Anthropology* <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511482922>>. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Sobocinski, M. G. "Visualizing Ceremony: The Design and Audience of the Ludi Saeculares Coinage of Domitian <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3764/aja.110.4.581>>." *AJA* 110.4 (2005): 581–602.

Taffin, P. *De veterum Romanorum anno seculari, eiusque potissimum per ludos seculares celebritate, eorumque chronologia, liber singularis in 2 partes distributes*. Tournay: Adrian Quinqué, 1641.

Taylor, L. R. "New Light on the History of the Secular Games <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/290509>>." *AJPh* 55.2 (1934): 101–120.

Weiss, P. "Die 'Säkularspiele' der Republik, eine annalistische Fiktion? Ein Beitrag zum Verstandnis der kaiserzeitlichen Ludi saeculares." *MDAI(R)* 80 (1973): 205–217.

Related Articles

Campus Martius

ludi

saeculum