

## Summary

In Roman conceptions of time, the *saeculum* became the longest fixed interval, calculated as a period of 100 or 110 years (as opposed to, e.g., a *lustrum* of only five years; cf. “census”). The term originally indicated a “generation” or “lifetime,” but greater significance developed through its association with the Ludi Saeculares (Secular Games), which were performed to celebrate the advent of a new *saeculum* in Rome. Through the Secular Games, the emperor advertised his role in establishing his dynasty and ushering in an age of peace; emperors who wished to capitalize on this expression of authority made official references to the *saeculum* in coinage and inscriptions if they were unable to hold the Games during their reigns, thus creating a close link between the *saeculum*, imperial families, and political control. In Late Antiquity, the Christianization of the empire led to other usages. Because of its association with political power, the *saeculum* came to signify “the present age of the world,” in contrast with an eternal, heavenly realm; it could also be applied to a new, Christian era.

**Keywords:** saeculum, Ludi Saeculares, Saecular Games, Secular Games, Ludi Tarentini

**Subjects:** Roman History and Historiography, Roman Myth and Religion

## The *Saeculum* in the Republic

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Surviving evidence for Republican conceptions of the *saeculum* is derived from Varro, who composed a treatise on the subject, *De saeculis* (Serv. *Aen.* 8.526 <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0053%3Abook%3D8%3Acommline%3D526>>). Censorinus preserved Varro’s distinctions between natural and civil *saecula*: natural *saecula* vary in length, being the longest span of human life in a generation, while civil *saecula* are calculated from the foundation of a city.

This distinction is obscured in Varro’s description of the Etruscan concept of *saecula* (see Etruscans), in which the first *saeculum* begins with a city’s foundation and ends after divine portents reveal the death of the oldest person born on its founding day. Varro recorded that Etruscan contemporaries believed that their nation had entered its eighth *saeculum* and would perish in the tenth (Censorinus, *DN* 17.7–16 <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/censorinus.html>>). The precise relationship between the Roman and Etruscan *saeculum* is unclear, but Varro also associated the passing of *saecula* with the Roman nation: he described an augur named Vettius, who interpreted the twelve vultures that appeared at the foundation of Rome as signifying that the city would endure for twelve hundred years (*DN* 17.20). At least

one Republican historian, L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, seems to have referred to a chronological system of *saecula* calculated from Rome's foundation (DN 17.19; F 38 FRHist). Other Latin temporal terms (*aetas*, *aeuum*, *tempus*) were used from the Republic onwards in the sense of an "age" or "era," but they were never strictly defined as set intervals, nor did they carry the same religious and political significance as the *saeculum*.

## The End of the Republic

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Roman fascination with the idea of the "end of an age," sometimes identified as a *saeculum*, appears frequently in texts that describe the political upheavals of the 1st century BCE. Plutarch recorded that in 88 BCE, some Etruscans told the Senate that various portents had indicated that a change to a new generation (γένος) was imminent; this was connected with Sulla's rise to power (Vit. Sull. 7.2–4 <<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0007.tlg033.perseus-grc1:7>>). The "Prophecy of Vegoia" warned that the eighth *saeculum* was coming to a close (Grom. Vet. 1.350 <<https://books.google.com/books?id=3MAbAAAAIAAJ&oe=UTF-8>>); this passage is either a translation of an Etruscan text into Latin from the 1st century BCE, or a work from the Imperial period. In other sources concerning the 1st century, such as Cic., Cat. 3.9 <<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0474.phi013.perseus-lat1:3.9>> for 63 BCE, and Cass. Dio 41.14 <<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0385.tlg001.perseus-grc1:41.14>> for 49 BCE, the authors described numerous signs of political change and turmoil, without explicitly identifying these phenomena as omens presaging a new *saeculum*.

Stronger references to a new *saeculum* at the end of the Republic are associated with Octavian's ascendancy at Rome. Vergil portrayed the star or comet that appeared during Julius Caesar's funeral games in July 44 BCE as a sign of a new era without using the term *saeculum* (Ecl. 9.46–47 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00087960>>). In his commentary on Vergil, Servius connected the comet with a story of an Etruscan haruspex who claimed that the portent foretold the arrival of a new *saeculum*, which Augustus recorded in his autobiography (Serv. Ecl. 9.46 <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0091%3Apoem%3D9%3Acommline%3D46>>). Augustus later used the comet to advertise both Caesar's divinity and the arrival of the new age: by 17 BCE, three coins issued by M. Sanquinius for the celebration of the Secular Games bore the bust of Caesar on the obverse or reverse, with the comet above his brow (e.g., RIC 1<sup>2</sup> 338 <<http://smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18207790>>).

## The Creation of the *Ludi Saeculares*

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While Piso demonstrated that the longevity of the Roman state was associated with *saecula* as early as the 2nd century BCE, there are no conclusive examples of the *saeculum* being linked to religious performances during the Republic. Censorinus's limited evidence for the *Ludi Tarentini*, following Valerius Antias (F 22 FRHist) and Varro (DN 17.8), indicates that these *ludi* were to be repeated once every hundred years after they came under state supervision,

but this interval is not specifically described as a *saeculum* in either Republican source. Given Varro's expertise on the *saeculum*, it would make sense for him to have applied the term to the hundred-year interval of the Ludi Tarentini if it had actually been in use during the Republic.

The character of the Ludi Tarentini was greatly altered when, for the first time, Ateius Capito and Augustus applied the concept of the *saeculum* to the chronology of their performances. The rite would be renamed Ludi Saeculares ("Secular Games") to emphasize the new significance of the *saeculum* to its celebration. It was found useful to reinterpret the *saeculum* as an interval of 110 years to establish a new chronology for the Secular Games that would still acknowledge their mythical origins as a Valerian cult. The traditional sequence of dates for previous celebrations of the Games was relatively even: 509—348—249—146/149 BCE, but the Augustan sequence situated the first two Games in the consulates of Valerii (456, 346 BCE), skimmed by the next two traditional dates (236, 126 BCE), and overlooked 46 BCE, when no celebration of any kind occurred. This new chronology for the Secular Games superseded all previous references to their chronology: the Augustan dates appeared in the *commentarii* of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* and were duly noted by Censorinus (DN 17.10–11  [<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:stoa0275.stoa027.perseus-lat1:15.1>](http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:stoa0275.stoa027.perseus-lat1:15.1)).

Promotion of the Augustan *saeculum* was not limited to official documents and coinage from the Secular Games. Poets alluded to Augustus's new age (Hor., *Carm.* 4.6.42  [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00074876>](http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00074876); Ov., *Tr.* 1.2.103–105  [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00087983>](http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00087983)) and contributed to the formation of an imperial rhetoric of a new *saeculum*, which began to appear in official inscriptions such as that on an altar from Gallia Narbonensis (CIL XII 4333  [<http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD063725>](http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD063725); see Narbo) and the *Res Gestae* (CIL III 774  [<http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/edcs\\_id.php?s\\_sprache=en&p\\_edcs\\_id=EDCS-36700005>](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/edcs_id.php?s_sprache=en&p_edcs_id=EDCS-36700005)). After the death of Augustus, this *saeculum* rhetoric was not to be found in any source until the reign of Claudius.

## Claudius's Saeculum

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In order to hold the Secular Games in 47 CE, Claudius redefined the length of the *saeculum* as a span of one hundred years, beginning with the foundation of Rome in 753 BCE. According to this new reckoning, *saecula* would have begun in 653, 553, 453, 353, 253, 153, and 53 BCE; some of these dates fall close to those of Ludi Tarentini held by tradition or in fact in 348, 249, and 146/149 BCE, which would have brought Claudius's sequence of *saecula* more in line with the Ludi Tarentini than the Augustan records of the *quindecimviri*. Claudius may also have attempted to merge his system with a modification of Augustus's chronology, with his Games initiating a sixth *saeculum* of 110 years, counted from sacrifices performed at the Tarentum by P. Valerius Poplicola in 504 CE.<sup>1</sup> This decision to reckon each age from the city's foundation echoes Varro's description of the Etruscan *saeculum*. Thus, the new *saeculum* may be connected both with Claudius's antiquarian studies, which included a history of the Etruscans (Suet., *Claud.* 42.2  [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00207589>](http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00207589)) and also his assumption of the office of  *censor* in 47 CE.

Claudius advertised the *saeculum* change even outside of the city of Rome: the Senatus Consultum Hosidianum from Herculaneum (*CIL* X 1401 [http://www.edr-edr.it/edr\\_programmi/res\\_complex\\_comune.php?id\\_nr=EDR150492](http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?id_nr=EDR150492)), which dealt with construction regulations and was dated to September 47 CE, described the arrival of a new *saeculum*. Criticism of Claudius's innovation appears in several sources from this period: Plin., *HN* 7.159 <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0978.phi001.perseus-lat1:7.68>; Suet., *Claud.* 21.2 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00207589>; and Sen., *Apocol.* 1.1, 3 <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1017.phi011.perseus-lat1:1>.

## Imperial *Saeculum* Rhetoric

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After Claudius, references to a *saeculum* change associated with a new dynasty appeared increasingly throughout the imperial period in a variety of media. Evidence for *saeculum* rhetoric was initially confined to the reigns of emperors who celebrated the Secular Games, even to the very years in which they were held. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, the use of *saeculum* diverged from the Games when emperors who desired to connect their reigns with Rome's sacred chronology were unable to hold the festival without diverging from the Augustan or Claudian sequences. The Secular Games could not retain their significance if held too frequently, while *saeculum* rhetoric could be divorced from its ritual context to create formulas for indicating imperial authority in time.

*Saeculum* rhetoric highlighted emperors' establishment of new dynasties and power to secure prosperity for the empire: typical inscriptions begin with the formula "in the most blessed *saeculum* of our lord N" (e.g., *ILAlg* I 2048 [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/edcs\\_id.php?s\\_sprache=en&p\\_edcs\\_id=EDCS-04000812](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/edcs_id.php?s_sprache=en&p_edcs_id=EDCS-04000812)), and coin legends often proclaim the "felicity of the *saeculum*" (e.g., *RIC* 4.1.181A <http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18203776>). This official rhetoric should not be confused with descriptions of a "Golden Age" (cf. Verg., *Aen.* 8.321 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00087975>), which remained essentially a literary phenomenon only loosely associated with the Secular Games or imperial power before appearances in coins and monuments of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. One exception is the reference to the Golden Age on a coin issued by Hadrian for his Parilia celebrations in 121 CE (*RIC* 2.136 <http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18204693>); the reverse may bear an image of a personification of Aion or the *saeculum*.

The use of *saeculum* rhetoric occurred initially in literary sources, and was rare in coinage and inscriptions. Antoninus Pius may have celebrated Rome's nine hundredth birthday in 148 CE following the pattern set by Claudius, but did not explicitly call the festival "Ludi Saeculares" in references to the *saeculum* on coinage, perhaps to avoid Claudius's fate. The later Antonines used *saeculum* references in an increasingly formulaic style, culminating in Septimius Severus's use of *saeculum* rhetoric in coins and inscriptions at the beginning of his reign, which looked forward to the Secular Games of 204 CE. After Severus, *saeculum* rhetoric was adopted into common Imperial usage, even in years and reigns when the Games were not held.

Philip I held the last Secular Games in 248 CE to celebrate Rome's millennium and was not criticized for following Claudius's chronology, indicating that the departure from Augustan tradition became respectable with time. After Philip, *saeculum* rhetoric in coinage issued during the chaotic 3rd century CE was almost completely dissociated from the Secular Games to express the emperor's power to achieve security and stability.

## Christianity

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The dissociation between the Secular Games and *saeculum* rhetoric permitted emperors sympathetic to Christianity to define their reigns as new ages of peace and prosperity. Constantine I's failure to hold the GAMES in 314 CE was a major break with tradition, but *saeculum* rhetoric (often praising the arrival of a "Golden Age") flourished in imperial court literature (e.g., Optatianus Porphyrius, *Carm.* 19.2 <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/porphyrius.html>>; Symm., *Or.* 2), as well as in coinage (e.g., *RIC* 7.185 <<http://ww2.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18228572>>) and inscriptions (e.g. *AE* 1948, 37 <<http://inslib.kcl.ac.uk/irt2009/IRT467.html>>). This new rhetoric portrayed the emperor as a central figure in the establishment of a Christian age. The decline of numismatic *saeculum* rhetoric in later centuries is contrasted with its continued use in epigraphic formulas into the 5th century CE, whereas the last use of *saeculum* rhetoric on imperial coinage appears during the reign of Gratian in the latter half of the 4th century CE. From the 3rd century CE onwards, a new kind of rhetoric emerged in literature and in private funerary monuments that pitted the present *saeculum* against a Christian conception of an afterlife or eternity (e.g., Tert., *De spect.* 15 <<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:stoa0275.stoa027.perseus-lat1:15.1>>; August., *De ciu. dei* <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/august.html>> 12.13-19, 14.9, 15.1, 16.26; *CIL* V 6266 <[http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/edcs\\_id.php?s\\_sprache=en&p\\_edcs\\_id=EDCS-05101423](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/edcs_id.php?s_sprache=en&p_edcs_id=EDCS-05101423)>).

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## Notes

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1. See Timothy D. Barnes, "Aspects of the Severan Empire, Part I: Severus as a New Augustus," *New England Classical Journal* 35.4 (2008): 251–267.

### Related Articles

calendar, Roman

religion, Etruscan

religion, Roman

Secular Games

time-reckoning